Encountering Children in a Curriculum for Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics- A Review

An Educational and Child's Rights Perspective

NCCA

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Introduction

A key recommendation of the *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* (Coolahan et al, 2012) was the development of a curriculum for Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics for all children. This was a recognition that an important aspect of a child's education involves learning about and understanding the lives, values and traditions of friends, classmates and members of the wider community. In Irish schools a child's sense of their identity and belonging is nurtured through experiential learning, the creation of inclusive school environments and positive relationships between the child and their teacher. Such learning may already take place in subjects such as Social, Political and Health Education, the patron's programme and indeed across elements of the entire primary curriculum. However, to ensure that every child has the opportunity for such learning and to ensure that the good practices which already take place in schools are recognised and supported the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) are developing a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics.

This paper was developed by the NCCA to review how a curriculum for Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics could meet the educational needs as well as the rights of all children in primary schools. It describes some of our understandings of the child and childhood by examining children's rights and contemporary educational approaches. This paper, along with some other research material, will contribute to the development of a consultation paper which will inform our consultation process. In turn this consultation process will play a key role in the development of Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics.

So, what is ERB and Ethics? ERB helps children to know about and to understand the cultural heritage of the major forms of religion and belief traditions which have been embraced by humankind, fostering a respect for and recognition of religions and beliefs in society, integral for living in a diverse democracy (ODIHR, 2007). Education for ethics involves a complex process of considering what is right and wrong by posing questions, through philosophical enquiry, such as what one ought to do. Education for ethics involves fostering ethical behaviour within young people. Within Western thinking, the study of ethics is not just about the provision of information, it is deeply concerned with character formation and human development (Coolahan et al, 2012).

Part one of this paper looks at the contribution children can make to a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. It does this by examining our evolving ideas about children and childhood. Part one plots the evolution of Children's Rights legislation from the early 20th Century to the modern day; while providing commentary on the representation of children in such legislation. To come to an understanding of the

role children have in a curriculum for ERB and Ethics, this paper builds on and extends the ideas from a child's right perspective to focusing on our understanding of the child from an educational perspective.

This paper presents the child as a *capable*, *confident*, *curious* and *caring* individual who actively participates in and contributes to their culture and education. The dualism between the child's role in society and the reflective impact society has on the child is highlighted as a particularly important consideration in the learning process. The child's ability to actively engage in and shape the educational process, in partnership with the adult, encourages a sense of identity with and belonging to their families, their schools and their communities; as active participants in these spaces.

Part two of this paper considers some possible considerations for schools with the introduction of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics. The considerations are outlined in areas such as school context, teacher development, the patron's programme and intercultural education, among others. Part two attempts to map out some of the sensitivities and complexities the development of an ERB and Ethics curriculum give rise to in an Irish context.

Part 1: Encountering Children: A Child's Rights and Educational Perspective

The terms of reference for the Forum's Report are *'to recommend adaptations to the existing system so that it might achieve a better balancing of rights with greater inclusivity and diversity'* (Coolahan et al, 2012, p. 7). Balancing the rights of the child with the increased diversity of Irish classroom is a challenge faced by an ERB and Ethics curriculum. Although all of the curriculum respects the rights of the child, a curriculum for ERB and Ethics should forefront the child's right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in Irish primary schools. This section examines the evolution of children's rights from the early 20th Century to the modern day, before drawing links to an educational perspective of an inclusive curriculum.

Perspectives of Childhood

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) defines the term child as *'any human being below the age of eighteen years, unless under the law applicable to the child, majority[1] is attained earlier.'* As of 2012, 31.44% of the world's population was under the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2014). When we speak of children we are speaking of almost a third of the world's total population.

There have been a variety of perspectives when it comes to how society has viewed and interacted with children over the years. Plato and Kant described children as *'difficult to handle'*, *'irrational'* and *'unruly'* needing *'rigorous ethical training'* (Hamilton & Cairns, 1961). Kant believed they required an education *'not for the present, but for a possibly improved condition of man in the future'* (Kant, 1803, par. 15). Others such as Rousseau and Locke stated that children are naturally wise, just and good (Bloom, 1979), and are ready to be *'moulded with all the skills and discoveries of the human and natural sciences'* (Wall, 2010, p.27). More recent emerging theories recognise children as social actors who actively participate in (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998) and co-construct their knowledge, identity and culture (Dahlberg et al, 1999, p.48) with peers and adults. Childhood is seen as a time when children make sense of their environment through active interaction with it. In this context the role of adults is to interact with children as co-learners who negotiate, challenge and guide.

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[1] The **age of majority** is the threshold of adulthood as it is recognized or declared in law. It is the chronological moment when minors cease to legally be considered children and assume control over their persons, actions, and decisions, thereby terminating the legal control and legal responsibilities of their parents or guardian over and for them. Most countries set majority at 18. However, there are some exceptions. Saudi Arabia (8 for female, 14 for male); Iran (14 for females); Guinea Bissau, Bolivia, Cuba (16); North Korea, East Timor, Gibraltar (17); Algeria, Botswana, South Korea (19); Japan, New Zealand, Thailand (20); Egypt, Kuwait, Zambia (21).

It could be argued that all these views co-exist to some degree in society today. While some in society engage with the child as a miniature adult or an 'adult-in-training', others interact with them as beings with rights and status by virtue of being a child.

In fact, there is no one single way of viewing or engaging with children given the complexity of interdependent relationships and circumstances that shape and are shaped by the child:

> *Every human life is both singularly other and constructed by shared communities. There are as many childhoods as there are children. Children are each absolutely distinct. They are participants in not only families and cultures but also entire societies and global systems. (Wall, 2010, p.6).*

Each child is faced with a unique set of conditions. These are shaped by factors such as family dynamics and relationships, cultural norms and societal expectations, geographical location and political climate, economic resources and basic living amenities, prevalent government policies and religious custom. Each child responds and relates to these conditions in a very distinct way drawing on its own inner resources.

International Declarations and Conventions on Children

A glance over major international children's rights agreements in the last century sheds light on how the global society wishes to protect, provide for and encourage participation of children. Initially the emphasis was to provide for and protect children, acknowledging their vulnerability and need for care.

The *League of Nations' 1924 Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child* stated that humanity *'owes to the child the best that it has to give.'* It recognised and affirmed for the first time the existence of rights specific to children and the responsibility of adults towards them. In recognising the child's right to development, aid, relief and protection the declaration also called for an upbringing that instils a sense of social responsibility. The focus in the Declaration's five articles was specifically on *'providing for the child.'*

The 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), in acknowledging the *'inherent dignity'* and *'the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family'* (Preamble, par.1), subsumed the rights of children into the wider rights of all human beings. Only two articles make specific reference to children. Article 25.2.3 states *'motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.'* While Article 26.3 mentions that *'parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.'*

The 1959 *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* established the ten fundamental principles of children's rights. It recognised the child as a human being who must be able to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially, with freedom and dignity. The declaration protected the child from any form of neglect, cruelty, discrimination and exploitation, entitling the child to receive free and compulsory elementary education that would promote among other things the child's *'sense of moral and social responsibility, and to become a useful member of society.'* It called for children to be brought up in a *'spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples, peace and universal brotherhood.'* While this declaration provided for and protected the rights of the child, it was not legally binding; its significance lay in its statement of general principles and intent.

The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20th November 1989 offered an integrated and holistic approach to the rights of children. It called for a rights-based approach to children's issues rather than a welfare-based approach. The CRC brought together economic, social and cultural rights along with political and civil rights. The rights are all seen as necessary for the full and harmonious development of the child's personality and inherent to the dignity of the child. The rights are not ranked in order of importance; instead they interact with one another to form dynamic parts of an integrated unit (Children's Rights Alliance, 2010). Of particular significance in this convention are the following:

- the convention must be available to all children without discrimination of any kind (Article 2)
- the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children (Article 3)
- every child has the right to life, survival and development (Article 6)
- and the child's views must be considered and taken into account in all matters affecting him or her (Article 12).

For the first time, through its initial 41[2] articles, children were granted *'participation'* rights in addition to *'provision'* and *'protection'* rights. Participation rights do not provide aid or protect from harm but grant children the right to actively shape their own worlds for themselves. The CRC grants children an active voice through the right to be heard (article 12), to freedom of expression (article 13), to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (article 14), to freedom of association and assembly (article 15), to privacy (article 16), and to access to appropriate information and mass media (article 17).

Article 12 gives children the right to participate in decision-making processes that may be relevant in their lives and to influence decisions taken in their regard. It affirms that children are full-fledged persons who have the right to express their views in all matters that affect them. It argues that those

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[2] Articles 42 to 54 deal with compliance, monitoring and implementation of the CRC

views be heard and given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity. Article 12 essentially recognises the potential of children to enrich decision-making processes, to share perspectives and to participate as citizens and actors of change (UNICEF)[3].

Article 14, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, states that children have the right to think and believe what they want and to practise their religion, as long as they are not stopping other people from enjoying their rights. The convention respects the rights and duties of parents in providing religious and moral guidance to their children. It supports children's right to examine their beliefs, but it also states that their right to express their beliefs implies respect for the rights and freedoms of others (UNICEF)[4].

Article 17, the right to information, is essential for children's participation to be relevant and meaningful. Children should be provided with the necessary information about options that exist and the consequences of such options so that they can make informed and free decisions. Participation cannot be effective or genuine if children do not have the opportunity to understand the consequences and the impact of their opinions (UNICEF)[5].

Ireland and the Rights of the Child

The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which became a legally binding instrument in September 1990, was ratified by Ireland in 1992. The Irish Government has made significant progress on a policy level in guarding safe of the rights of children, providing for their welfare, and encouraging the advancement of child participation and consultation in policy formulation.

In the year 2000 the Irish Government in its 10-year plan, *The National Children's Strategy*, stated as its vision:

> *In Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential.[6]*

The strategy specified in its goals that:

- *Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.*

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[3] UNICEF, http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Right-to-Participation.pdf
[4] UNICEF, http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf
[5] UNICEF, http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Right-to-Participation.pdf
[6] The National Children's Strategy, http://www.dcya.gov.ie/documents/Aboutus/strat.htm

- *Children's lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services.*

- *Children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development.*[7]

In the years following, Ireland set up the *National Children's Office* (2001), the *Comhairle na nÓg* (local youth councils) and the *Dáil na nÓg* (youth parliament) to encourage the active participation and consultation of children in the development of local services and policy. The first Minister of State for Children was appointed in 2002, the first Ombudsman for Children in 2004, and Ireland submitted its second Report to the UN Committee on the *Rights of the Child* outlining its progress on what it was doing to protect the rights of the child in 2005. In 2006 as part of *Towards 2016 – Ten-Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement*, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs was envisaged. This was officially established in June 2011 and Ireland appointed its first Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

Despite the progress made, the *Children's Rights Alliance* have commented:

> *The realisation of children's rights is an uphill battle. We develop good policies for children's services and supports, but continue to fail to deliver on these commitments, particularly in the area of child protection and care.* (UNCRC, 2010, p.4)

In November 2012 the Children's Referendum approved[8] the *Thirty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Children) Bill* 2012, which proposes:

> *The State recognises and affirms the natural and imprescriptible rights of all children and shall, as far as practicable, by its laws protect and vindicate those rights.*

The most comprehensive reform of child protection, early intervention and family support services ever undertaken in Ireland was the establishment of the Child and Family Agency in January 2014[9]. It is now the dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. The *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020* which was launched by the Government in April 2014, sets as its vision for Ireland:

> *…to be one of the best small countries in the world in which to grow up and raise a family, and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled; where their voices are heard and where they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and in the future (p.1).*

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[7] The National Children's Strategy, http://www.dcya.gov.ie/documents/Aboutus/strat.htm

[8] While turnout was low (33.5%), the majority of voters (58%) voted in favour of the referendum proposal (Referendum Results, 2012) The positive result of the referendum awaits implementation due to the ongoing legal challenge which is currently under appeal to the Supreme Court and is due for hearing at the end of 2014.

[9] Child and Family Agency, http://www.tusla.ie

The Children's Rights Alliance has raised concerns in its *Report Card 2014*, awarding a 'B' grade in the areas of children's constitutional rights, education and protection from abuse and neglect indicating an improvement on previous years. The continued progression of the rights of children and our evolving understandings of their contribution to culture and society confirms this is a developing space within which a curriculum for ERB and Ethics will contribute.

The Rights of the Child and considerations for the Irish Education System

Ireland being a pluralistic, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society requires that children be able to access education in a manner which reflects their cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious beliefs (Children's Rights Alliance, 2014, p. 47).

> *It is becoming increasingly clear that a better understanding about religions and beliefs is needed…it is important for young people to acquire a better understanding of the role that religions play in today's pluralistic world. The need for such education will continue to grow as different cultures and identities interact with each other.* (OSCE/ODHIR, 2007).

Ireland is a changing society, and *'its increasing diversity brings with it demands for choice in the provision of education which reflects that diversity'* (IHRC, 2011). In its report, the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC), called on the Government to increase diversity of school type in Ireland in order to meet its human rights obligations.

Article 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* acknowledges everyone's right to education, including free and compulsory education at elementary level, and provides that education should be directed to *'the full development of the human personality'*, to *'the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms'*, promoting *'understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups.'* The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stated education should *'maximise the child's ability and opportunity to participate fully and responsibly in a free society'* (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001).

Speaking in June 2012, the then Minister for Education and Skills, announced that the Advisory Group to the Forum's Report believed that all children should have the right to receive Education about Religion and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, and recommended the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics for all children that can supplement existing religious education programmes. The Minister has requested NCCA to explore with education partners and religious interest groups the development of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics (DES, Press Statement, 2012).

A curriculum for ERB and Ethics that recognises the capability of the child, including the child as a curious and an active participator, and stimulating the child to be caring and responsible towards

others and the environment would encapsulate the five aims of education as outlined in Article 29 of the *United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child*, namely:

(a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential

(b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations

(c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own

(d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin

(e) The development of respect for the natural environment

Developing a curriculum in ERB and Ethics which promotes and endorses Article 29 is undeniably challenging. It is recognised that attempting to develop a completely neutral and objective curriculum is an impossibility (Bruner, 1996), and indeed this is not what is called for in Article 29. What is called for is a curriculum that is fair, accurate in regards of representation and balanced in the context of freedom of religion, belief and ethics.

ERB and Ethics: How Children Learn

Much has changed in Irish society and in our understanding of how children learn and develop since the '99 curriculum was published. In 2009, a new *Early Childhood Curriculum Framework—Aistear* (NCCA) was published for all children from birth to six years. Both Aistear and the Primary Curriculum were informed by the research of their time. However much had changed in the intervening decade. The relationship and comparison between Aistear and the '99 curriculum can be seen in their representations of the child.

The '99 curriculum presents a holistic view, recognising the uniqueness of the child '*as it is expressed in each child's personality, intelligence and potential for development'* (1999, p. 6). Aistear builds on this view describing children as *'competent and confident learners'* who are *'curious and resilient explorers'* able to make choices and decisions, and who learn with and from each other at home, in school, and in their communities (NCCA, 2009, p. 5). Both Aistear and the '99 curriculum express a vision which celebrates the uniqueness of children as young learners and the importance of providing experiences which are relevant and meaningful to them.

The call for children to be brought up in a *'spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples, peace and universal brotherhood'*, as outlined in the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (1959) places emphasis on children to be brought up in a *'caring'* environment. A curriculum for ERB and Ethics intends to build upon the understandings of both the '99 curriculum and Aistear while extending this vision to include children as *'caring'* individuals.

a. How Children Learn-A Sociocultural Approach

Research and development have highlighted the cultural and social nature of children's learning whereby children learn, not in isolation, but with and within their family, neighbours and community (French, 2007). Through these different relationships children learn about and from their world. Trust, respect, love, and care are at the heart of relationships which enable children to grow, learn and develop.

This sociocultural perspective takes account of the central role of social interaction in shaping learning. Sociocultural theories also consider culture and cultural influences as centrally important to learning (NCCA, 2014, p. 42). Shared activities and shared talk are essential contexts within which learning occurs. Bruner argues that:

> *…you cannot understand mental activity unless you take into account the actual setting and its resources, the very things that give mind its shape and scope. Learning, remembering, talking and imagining: all of them are made possible by participating in a culture.* (1996, p. x-xi)

A child's agency in their active participation in culture and in the educational process is seen as particularly important in the learning and development of the child.

The development of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics will recognise that children build a sense of identity with and belonging to their families, their settings and their communities; and that they are active participants in these spaces. Within these spaces they learn from others, but also think about and learn from the effects of their actions and words.

b. How Children Learn- Considerations for ERB and Ethics

As referred to in the Forum's Report, the development of an ERB and Ethics curriculum provides opportunities for children to develop knowledge and understanding of alternative religions and beliefs (to that of their school's denomination); and to provide ethical teaching to children (Coolahan et al, 2012, p. 92). Taking the view of the child as a *'competent and confident learner'* (NCCA, 2009, p. 5), coupled with the image of the child as an active participant in their culture and educational process,

as proposed by the sociocultural approach above; a question may be raised as to what we can expect from the child's participation in a curriculum for ERB and Ethics?

Through their engagement with and contribution to a curriculum in ERB and Ethics children will relate to, and connect with, children of different faiths and beliefs. Children will actively participate in inter-belief conversation, share ideas about the world and promote relationships and friendships with children of different belief backgrounds. Through a child's reflection on their own beliefs and values, and those of others, they will grow in respect for themselves and others. Children's active engagement in education for ethics will contribute to their awareness of the complexities of human behaviour and promote development of skills and dispositions required to live and contribute in a positive way to a diverse society. Children will actively develop a respectful tolerance for the right to hold a particular belief or attitude; they will nurture a sensitivity to the diversity of religions and beliefs as an element contributing to the richness of society. Children will engage in and promote communication and dialogue between people of different cultural, religious and belief backgrounds; they will help combat prejudice and stereotypes which are barriers to intercultural dialogue (Council of Europe, 2014, p. 4).

Through engagement with the processes, outlined above, children's active engagement with an ERB and Ethics curriculum will also contribute to the development of inter-cultural school communities, where people of all faith backgrounds are recognised and respected. Many of the features above often happen as a by-product of other educational processes, the introduction of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics will forefront these features and draw attention to their importance in the lives of young children.

c. How Children Learn- From Learning 'about' Religion to Learning 'from' Religion

The limitations of language are generally accepted by those working in the field of Religious Education (McGrady, 2013). The emergence of the title *'Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics'* is an example of the contested nature of terminology. In the case of ERB, the debate focuses on the word *about* and the epistemological approach it advocates. *'Education about'* could be construed as a cold dissection of the content rather than an inquiry-based, sociocultural exploration of the subject matter that will ultimately enrich the lives of children; as is proposed by this paper.

The Chairperson of the Advisory Group, was uneasy with the term also. Speaking at the launch of the book *Towards Mutual Ground (2013)* Prof Coolahan stated:

> *Neither did the Advisory Group see ERB as 'information' about religions. In fact, we were uneasy with the word 'about', but it was part of the official ERB term. We saw it as 'education' and 'learning' on religions in the true sense of education. If it was just 'information' for young*

> *children it would be counterproductive. Hence, we suggested that the NCCA, in conjunction with stakeholders and teacher education expertise, would advise a truly 'educational' programme for ERB.* (Coolahan, 2013)[10].

It is argued that when done poorly, teaching about religion can lead to a very shallow learning, positioning the learner outside the learning experience (Dillion, cited in Byrne & Kieran, 2013, p. 78). It has been highlighted that *'the risk of missing the life experiences of children and young people is very real, therefore limiting the impact of education in Religious Education on the values and attitudes they form'* (Dillon in Byrne & Kieran, 2013, p. 72). When learning about religions and beliefs is taught by a teacher who is fair and balanced in their respect to both the content and the purposes of ERB they give their pupils the confidence to live out their own faith, or non-faith, and to respect and value the perspectives of others.

All children have the capacity for some degree of understanding of religions regardless of their own religious commitment (Council of Europe, 2014, p. 22). There are tools from a variety of academic disciplines that can enable students to develop an understanding of religions and the perspectives of religious people. The techniques required involve not only the acquisition of knowledge, but also the development of skills and appropriate dispositions and attitudes. Such techniques are not only used in attempting to understand the language and experience of others, but also in developing self-awareness on the part of children in relation to their own current assumptions and values.

In summary the child in a curriculum for ERB and Ethics is viewed as a *capable*, *confident*, *curious* and *caring* individual. The child's ability to actively engage in and shape the educational process in partnership with the adult is encouraged. Through *'participating in culture'*, shared talk and shared activities children will build a sense of identity with and belonging to their families, their settings and their communities; as active participants in these spaces. Through these processes the child will come to a deeper understanding of themselves, their world and their place and role in it.

The considerations for schools of introducing a curriculum in ERB and Ethics as outlined above is discussed in the remainder of this paper.

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[10] Coolehan, 2013, http://www.materdei.ie/launchof_towardmutualground

Part 2: ERB and Ethics and Considerations for Schools

In light of developments in child's rights legislation and the educational perspective presented above, this section underlines some possible considerations for schools in the successful implementation of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics. Some of these considerations are explored under the following headings:

- School setting and ethos
- Teacher development in ERB and Ethics
- The patron's programme
- Children who opt-out of the patron's programme
- Intercultural education.

This section represents an initial exploration of the considerations outlined above. Further discussion of these will take place during consultation and engagement with patrons, parents, teachers, partners in education, the wider public and children.

School Setting and Ethos

The introduction of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics may have different implications for schools depending on their ethos. It is important to state that the ethos, mission statement and vision statement of a school should be cognisant of developments in child's rights legislation, as outlined above. The diversity of children from a range of religions and cultures is widespread across all school settings in Ireland and the implications outlined for one school setting may also be applicable to another school setting.

School Ethos

The ethos of a school can be understood as the intentional pursuit towards an educational aspiration. As a school strives towards its aspiration unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons, values and perspectives arise in a school environment; these are often referred to as the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum relates to the important messages that are conveyed to all those who enter the school, whether as teacher, visitor, parent, or child, by the physical and social environment of the school (NCCA, 2004, p. 32). Inclusive schools are characterised by learning environments that reflect and show pride in the language, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity that characterises our school

communities. As such, they provide a support for the positive self-image of all children irrespective of their ethnicity, culture or religion; as well as reinforcing the normality of diversity for all children.

The integration of knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, dispositions and values across the curriculum provides the learner with a coherent and rich learning experience. It is also more likely that appropriate attitudes, dispositions and values will be developed by children if these are integrated within all subjects and within the whole life of the school. The NCCA guidelines for *Intercultural Education in the Primary School* (2004) state:

> *Intercultural education should be central to all aspects of school life. It should be reflected in the hidden curriculum of the school, as well as in school policies and practices and the teaching of curriculum content.* (NCCA, 2004, p. 22).

The introduction of an ERB and Ethics curriculum, further underlines an awareness and the importance of both the visible and hidden practices of a school community in the construction of inclusive school environments.

The Multi-denominational Setting

An ERB and Ethics curriculum has a valuable contribution to make to the education of children in a multi-denominational setting. It can play a significant role in the prevention of religious intolerance in a multi-denominational setting, since it can allow children to reflect on their unexamined values and assumptions, helping them to break down possible stereotypical views of religious traditions and beliefs (Hull, 2001). This is not to suggest an ERB and Ethics curriculum can be completely neutral, as Bruner notes *'pedagogy is never innocent'* (1996, p. 63).

All curricula and programmes, regardless of their content, commitment of the teacher or the ethos of the school should be taught as objectively, critically and pluralistically as possible (Renehan, 2014, p. 82). Thus what is called for, in the case of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics, is fairness, accuracy of representation and balance in the context of freedom of religion, belief and ethics. For this reason, primary school teachers should be aware of their own personal convictions and should be sensitive to the diversity of religions and beliefs within their classroom and school community.

The Denominational Setting

Some commentators on the Forum's Report (Coolahan et al, 2012) are concerned with the role ERB and Ethics will play in a denominational school setting whose mission is to educate children in a given faith tradition (Conway, 2012, O'Brien, 2012, O'Connell and Meehan, 2012, Van Nieuwenhove, 2012). The focus of the concern is whether a curriculum in ERB and Ethics will undermine or erode the chosen ethos of the school and its ability to communicate faith-based education to children.

Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics is in no way intended to encompass the educational requirements of a denominational religious education programme. Having said this it does play a very valuable role in Religious Education in denominational schools, understood by Kieran (2011) *'as a broad category which includes education about religion and which has a strong transmissive and faith formational element'* (p. 54). ERB and Ethics does not promote personal belief in a given set of religious values and does not foster any particular religious or belief system. In the promotion of tolerance, equality, liberty and respect, ERB and Ethics has the capacity to function within a denominational school context by acknowledging the inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethical issues affecting Irish society (Renehan, 2014, p. 83).

The educational focus in denominationally managed schools should continue in the faith tradition it professes. This does not mean that the religious and belief systems taught as part of the ERB and Ethics curriculum should be neglected, ignored or discouraged. Once again the need to be aware of the teacher's own personal convictions and the need to be sensitive to the diversity of religions and beliefs within their classroom and school community is necessary.

Teacher Development in ERB and Ethics

The development of teacher competence and efficacy in teaching about religions and beliefs is no small task (Ofsted, 2013, p. 9). The challenges of facilitating elements of an ERB and Ethics curriculum, such as inter-belief conversation, and the ability to treat concepts of the curriculum at a deep level in order to avoid a superficial treatment of religions are substantial.

Grimmitt (2000) outlines the implications for teacher development of adopting a socio-cultural and constructivist pedagogy of Religious Education. He states that while constructivism highlights the necessary involvement of the learner in the construction of knowledge, it would be inappropriate if teachers' theological assumptions were the major determinant of their response to the constructivist challenge of Religious Education teaching. Effective learning is *'dependent upon relating the process of teaching to how pupils, coming from a wide range of social, cultural, and religious backgrounds, learn'* (2000, p. 226). The pedagogical principles supported by a socio-cultural approach to teaching *'are a direct challenge to any process of teaching which over-relies upon the use of a simple transmission model of knowledge'* (2000, p. 226).

It is necessary in this model for teachers to develop reflexivity, constantly checking and adapting their own knowledge to ensure that it meets the needs of children.

as teachers they need to subject their own religious knowledge to the same processes of deconstruction and reconstruction that constructivism advocates as a basis for pupils' learning (Grimmitt, 2000, p. 226).

This requires a great deal from a primary school teacher who has a range of curriculum areas to teach during the school day. The reflexivity and self-awareness proposed requires active and in-depth reflection on the part of the teacher.

The knowledge base of teachers on world religions, beliefs and ethics would seem necessary to teach ERB and Ethics to a high standard. There is no doubt that teachers will need upskilling in the content of ERB and Ethics. There is also a need to focus on communicative strategies for classroom discussions in the areas of ERB and Ethics. The facilitation of inter-belief conversation requires a great deal of skill on behalf of the teacher.

A number of questions arise in relation to the development of teachers in the areas of ERB and Ethics, these include: How should the State organise training of teachers that will result in meaningful change in primary classrooms? How will training for teachers take account of the diverse communities of primary schools? How will such training support the teacher, and the school, in meeting the needs of their school community? The answers to these questions will be considered through consultation and engagement with educational partners and stakeholders.

The Patron's Programme

Traditionally in primary schools the patron has provided a programme to be taught as part of the curriculum area of Religious Education. The patron's programme is generally a religious education programme, although there is an example of an ethics programme, which includes some religious education, in some multi-denominational schools. The Forum's Report (Coolahan et al, 2012), when discussing the positioning of ERB and Ethics alongside current patron programmes, states:

…where programmes, already in existence, provide for some ERB and Ethics, the proposed NCCA programmes can be supplementary and the amount of the new programmes provided may be flexible within existing timetable provision (p. 92).

The intention of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics is to enhance and extend children's learning in regards to religious and ethical education. The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector (Coolahan et al, 2012) further recommends that:

Each Patron Body will have a duty to examine its provision in this field in the light of the ERB and Ethics programmes and will need to satisfy the State Inspectorate that appropriate provision in this field is made available. The proposed ERB and Ethics programmes are in no sense intended to supplant faith formation education in denominational schools. (p. 92)

It would appear from the Forum's recommendation that in due course a curriculum developed by NCCA in relation to ERB and Ethics may become incorporated and embedded into future patron programmes. With this in mind there would seem to be a natural space for NCCA to work in partnership with patrons in developing a curriculum for ERB and Ethics.

Children who opt out of the Patron's Programme

Conscience or opt out clauses are common in many European jurisdictions where denominational religious education takes place. They have generally been regarded as an appropriate legal safeguard for rights of parents who wish their children to be brought up in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions. In the Irish context this has proved challenging in primary schools. Much of the provision for those who opt out is locally arranged and varies across primary schools (Coolahan et al, 2012). In many cases the resources are not available for alternative provision and opting out can become synonymous with working quietly in the corner of the room while the Religious Education lesson proceeds.

Often those children opting out of Religious Education are not involved in the learning of valuable life lessons and ethical principles that occur during this time in denominational schools. Concern for those children who opt out of RE was highlighted in the Forum's Report:

> *The Advisory Group has a particular concern for those children who do not participate in religious programmes in denominational schools. They may go through their primary schooling without any ERB and ethical education. For these children, the proposed programmes in ERB and Ethics are of central importance.* (Coolahan et al, 2012, p. 92).

Furthermore opting out of RE can result in a child feeling left-out and isolated from their peers. The development of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics is intent on improving the educational experience of these children and will contribute to their inclusion.

Intercultural Education and links to ERB and Ethics

Religious Education has an important role to play in the intercultural education and policies of schools (Council of Europe, 2008). ERB as a part of the broad understanding of Religious Education can contribute to such school policies of intercultural education and inclusion. Intercultural education involves being open to, interested in, curious about and empathetic towards people from other cultures, and using this heightened awareness of otherness to engage and interact with others and act together for common purposes. It also involves evaluating one's own everyday patterns of perception, thought, feeling and behaviour in order to develop greater self-knowledge and self-understanding (Byram, 2009, p. 6).

Seven characteristics of intercultural education are described in the Intercultural Education in the Primary School document (NCCA, 2005, p.23):

- Intercultural education is for all children

- Intercultural education is embedded in knowledge and understanding, skills and capacities, and attitudes and values

- Intercultural education is integrated with all subjects and with the general life of the school

- Intercultural education requires a real-world focus

- Language is central to developing intercultural competences

- Intercultural education takes time

- The school context is important in facilitating learning

Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics in an intercultural context is seen as contributing to education for democratic citizenship and the full development of the child (Byram, 2009). Similarly, inter-faith dialogue is recognised as an important dimension of intercultural dialogue. The ERB and Ethics curriculum will promote and help manifest the ideals of intercultural education through the policies devised and upheld by the school community.

Concluding Remarks

How can a curriculum in ERB and Ethics support the child in reaching his/her potential? Our answer to this question is shaped by whether we view children as under-developed adults who are passive recipients of care and in need of civilization (becomings) or individuals in their own right who actively participate in shaping and interpreting their world by giving it meaning (beings). It is coloured by whether we engage with children as adults-in-the-making, focusing on them as who they might become, or as capable contributors focusing on who they are and what they have to offer now. It is conditioned by whether we respect the voices of children and give credit to their experiences or not.

This paper has set out to describe some of our understandings of the child and childhood by examining children's rights and contemporary educational approaches. It presents a vision of the child as a *capable*, *confident*, *curious* and *caring* individual who actively participates in and shapes their culture and learning. The impact of this vision on the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics is two-fold. From a child's rights perspective, a curriculum in ERB and Ethics must recognise that children have the right to be heard (article 12), to freedom of expression (article 13), to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (article 14), to freedom of association and assembly (article 15), to privacy (article 16), and to access to appropriate information and mass media (article 17) (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). While from an educational perspective a curriculum in ERB and Ethics must recognise children as *'participants in culture'* who are capable of contributing to and shaping their learning in ERB and Ethics.

Part two of this paper highlights some of the considerations for the introduction of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics for Irish primary schools. Five areas were outlined as areas for consideration: *School setting and ethos, Teacher development in ERB and Ethics, The patron's programme, Children who opt-out of the patron's programme, Intercultural education*. The areas highlighted are in no way intended to be exhaustive or final, instead they are intended to stimulate discussion around the implications for primary schools in relation to a curriculum for ERB and Ethics.

The introduction of the curriculum is a new development for the Irish education system, for this reason the need to listen and consider the voice of those working in the field is great. Further investigation of these considerations will be made during consultations involving patrons, parents, teachers, educational partners, the wider public and children. The ability to address these considerations and minimise unintended side effects for primary schools will depend on the effectiveness of engagement with the aforementioned partners in education.

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