

# Education about RELIGIONS & BELIEFS & ETHICS



Consultation Information Booklet for Teachers



## Introduction

This information booklet for teachers outlines the proposals for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics for primary schools. The information below aims to answer questions teachers may have and to highlight some areas for consideration during the consultation process. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) recognises the constraints of time allocation for the introduction of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics. These will be considered as the curriculum is being developed. In the meantime we request teachers respond to the proposals for development of the curriculum as outlined in this booklet and online at [www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe](http://www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe).

### What is Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB)?

ERB helps children to know about and to understand the cultural heritage of some of the major forms of religion, belief traditions and worldviews in today's society. It does not seek to nurture the belief or practice of any one religion. ERB aims to foster a respect for, understanding of and empathy with members of different religions, beliefs and worldviews.

### What is Ethics Education?

The teaching of ethics includes the formation in and the promotion of a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings. It emphasises the importance of human rights and responsibilities, the place of

justice within society, and the service of the common good. These are essential to education for citizenship and the effective functioning of democracy.

### Who is this curriculum for?

It is for all children attending primary schools in the Republic of Ireland.

### What is the relationship between ERB and Ethics and the patron's programme?

Each school patron has a right to develop a programme that supports and contributes to the ethos of their school. ERB and Ethics is separate to these programmes and is in no sense intended to replace the patron's programme or faith formation education in denominational schools.

## Where will ERB and Ethics be located?

The development of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics is part of a new phase of work to develop the primary curriculum that includes the areas of Language and Mathematics. A key priority of curriculum development in these areas is the need to address, and ultimately to reduce, curriculum overload. The question of where to locate ERB and Ethics to avoid contributing to curriculum overload and to ensure the curriculum's visibility and value for teachers and children is an important element in this consultation. The challenges of time allocation will be taken into consideration and this issue is addressed later in this booklet.

## How can I contribute to the consultation?

You can complete our online questionnaire at [ncca.ie/consultation/erbe](http://ncca.ie/consultation/erbe).

Or submit a written response to:

*ERB and Ethics Consultation,  
National Council for Curriculum and  
Assessment,  
35 Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin 2.*

Or attend one of our consultation events which will be publicised on our website.

## For consideration:

**What is your hope/expectations for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics?**

# Rationale, Vision & Aims



## Rationale

### Why is a curriculum in ERB and Ethics being developed?

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 own identity and belonging is nurtured and valued through the creation of inclusive school environments and positive relationships between the child and their teacher. We now need to reflect these important practices in our primary school curriculum. Such learning may already take place in subjects such as Social, Personal and Health Education, the patron's programme and indeed across the entire school curriculum. However, to ensure that every child has the opportunity for such learning and to ensure the good practices that already take place in schools are recognised we are developing a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics.

## Vision

### What is the proposed vision for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics?

The vision for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics is for a pluralist and values education which can enable teachers to support children in our schools to live in and contribute positively to a diverse

world. The curriculum will seek to develop five key areas: *personal understanding, mutual understanding, character education, connection to the wider world* and *spiritual awareness*.

### How will this vision contribute to the lives of children?

Participation in ERB and Ethics will help foster a sense of identity and belonging in children by developing their self-awareness, self-confidence, self-esteem and, ultimately, their well-being. Children will share their ideas about the world, promoting relationships and friendships with those of different belief backgrounds. Their active engagement in education for ethics will contribute to their awareness of the complexities of human behaviour and promote the development of skills and dispositions required to live and contribute in a positive way to a diverse society.

### How will this vision contribute to teachers' practice?

The proposed ERB and Ethics curriculum will be founded upon a respect for teacher autonomy and professional judgement. The teaching of ERB and Ethics is required to be 'objective, critical and pluralist' and so this involves reflexivity from the teacher, checking and adapting their own knowledge to ensure that it meets the needs of children. Reflexivity and self-awareness require active and in-depth reflection on the part of the teacher. Through this reflection process it becomes

clear that teachers may be on their own educational journey, learning more about their personal convictions and assumptions; thus coming to a better understanding of themselves, their world and their place in it.

## How will this vision contribute to school ethos?

ERB and Ethics is a key element in developing, contributing to and supporting inclusive school communities. Inclusive schools are characterised by learning environments that reflect and show pride in the linguistic, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity that characterises the school community. Inclusive schools provide a support for the positive self-image of all children irrespective of their ethnicity, culture, belief or religion; as well as reinforcing the normality of diversity for all children.

## Aims

### What are the general aims of an ERB and Ethics curriculum?

The general aims of the proposed ERB and Ethics curriculum support those of the '99 curriculum, *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and the *Intercultural Education in the Primary School Guidelines* and can be expressed as supporting teachers to enable children to:

- develop self-awareness, confidence, personal beliefs and positive social identities

- have knowledge and understanding of how religious and non-religious worldviews have contributed to the culture in which we live, and continue to have an impact on individuals and relationships between individuals and their communities
- express comfort, empathy and joy with human diversity, use accurate language for human differences, and form deep, caring human connections
- recognise unfairness, injustice and inequality and understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities
- appreciate the impact of prejudice and discriminatory actions on others.



## What are the possible themes that could be explored in ERB and Ethics?

Possible themes that may be present in the curriculum are outlined in the tables below.

**Table 1: Possible themes for a curriculum in ERB**

| Class                        | Possible Themes  |
|------------------------------|--|
| Junior Infants-<br>2nd Class | Myself and my family   |
|                              | Family celebrations  |
|                              | Meaningful stories to me and others  |
|                              | My relationships with others   |
|                              | Important people of belief in my community   |
|                              | Places of cultural significance in my community  |
|                              | Belief systems: key figures and rites of passage   |
| 3rd-6th Class                | Believing: what people believe, humanity and the natural world   |
|                              | Celebrations: how and why celebrations are important in belief systems   |
|                              | Symbols: how and why symbols express meaning   |
|                              | Leaders and teachers: figures who have an influence on the beliefs of others; locally, nationally and globally |
|                              | Belonging: where and how people belong and why belonging is important  |
|                              | Worship, pilgrimage and sacred places  |
|                              | The journey of life and death  |
|                              | Belief systems: rites, values and beliefs  |

**Table 2: Possible themes for an Ethics curriculum**

| Class                        | Possible Themes   |
|------------------------------|---|
| Junior Infants-<br>2nd Class | Who am I?   |
|                              | Me and my community   |
|                              | Who I live with and surrounding families                    |
|                              | My friendships  |
|                              | How we like to be treated                                   |
| 3rd-6th Class                | Citizenship   |
|                              | Sustainability-social, environmental, cultural and economic |
|                              | Taking responsibility                                       |
|                              | Climate change  |
|                              | Equality and justice  |

## For Consideration:

**What would you like to teach children in ERB and Ethics?**



# Curriculum Features



## Curriculum Features

Knowledge and understanding of religions, beliefs and ethics are important elements of a quality education that fosters democratic citizenship, nurtures mutual respect, enhances religious freedom and promotes an understanding of diversity. This section proposes five key features of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics.

**Figure: The five features of curriculum development for ERB and Ethics**



## 1. ERB and Ethics are complementary yet distinct

For the purposes of curriculum development ERB and Ethics can be considered as two related yet distinct areas of education. While both contribute greatly to the development of respect, understanding and empathy towards others in society, each are significant areas of study in their own right, requiring different skills, knowledge and approaches in their teaching and learning.

For example, ethics education contributes to the development of autonomous individuals, capable of exercising critical judgment, while also fostering dialogue and community life in a pluralist society. On the other hand, ERB aims to foster a respect for, understanding of and empathy with members of all religions, beliefs and worldviews. Both nurture skills and dispositions required for young people to live and contribute in a diverse society.

## 2. ERB and Ethics are pluralist in nature

The educational vision underpinning an ERB and Ethics curriculum is for an authentic pluralism<sup>1</sup> and values education. A pluralist approach will offer an honest acknowledgement of the many value systems present in any diverse society and will recognise and respect the variety of worldviews.

ERB and Ethics will recognise the variety of understandings and expressions of religions and beliefs that are shaped by cultural and individual circumstances and experience. It will respect the diversity within religions and beliefs to avoid falling into the trap of broad generalisations or stereotyping.

## 3. ERB and Ethics will value the child as a curious, capable, confident and caring individual

The image of the child in the proposed ERB and Ethics curriculum is one of a curious, capable, confident and caring individual. The proposed curriculum will recognise the richness of each child's experience shaped by a unique combination of conditions which include, among others, family dynamics, relationships, cultural norms, societal expectations and religious customs.

While children bring their own ideas and beliefs about the world to ERB and Ethics, it is also an opportunity for them to experience the beliefs and the ideas of other children. Disagreement and tensions are features of human interaction and the proposed curriculum will promote active tolerance and respectful disagreement with those of opposing views. Children will be encouraged to grow in respect for themselves and others.

<sup>1</sup> Authentic pluralism fosters a culture that honours religious difference. It affirms the right of all human beings to believe and practice their faith, not only in their private lives but also in the public space. Authentic pluralism does not minimise religious differences by saying that 'all religions are ultimately the same' instead it encourages conversations and discussions across divides of difference.

#### 4. ERB and Ethics will recognise the role of teachers as nurturing children's dispositions

In a learning environment where children are active participants in and creators of knowledge, the teacher plays a key role in fostering positive dispositions in the classroom. Children develop these through rich interactions with teachers.

No subject or teaching is value-free. Therefore, teachers need to be conscious of their own convictions and beliefs and how these influence their approach to the teaching of the proposed curriculum in ERB and Ethics. It is essential that the classroom encourages secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships that value diversity among children and promotes the practice of inclusion. It ensures that the rights of all children are respected, protected and fulfilled, and allows for all children to be heard. In summary, the teaching of ERB and Ethics will be '*objective, critical and pluralist*' in nature.

#### 5. ERB and Ethics embody a child-centred pedagogy

ERB and Ethics recognises the child's ability to actively engage in and shape the educational process in partnership with the adult. In a child-centred pedagogy teachers facilitate the child's learning process, promoting tolerance and acceptance, nurturing respect, fostering dialogue and inviting the child to engage with the educational process. Though teachers' knowledge of the content remains important, interactive

techniques and collaborative learning play a prominent role.

Inquiry-based and constructivist pedagogies, which value philosophical inquiry with children, would seem appropriate for such teaching. These methods synthesise and balance the most important aspects of the study about religion, beliefs and ethics for children. These pedagogies, in combining learning about and learning from religions, beliefs and ethics would enable children to learn about themselves from engagement with the learning process.

Some suggested methods of teaching and learning for ERB and Ethics are detailed in the Figure below.

Figure: Suggested methods of teaching and learning in ERB and Ethics



## Time allocation for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics

The expanding curriculum has been noted as problematic in curriculum reviews. Teachers have described the curriculum as having too many subjects. As part of the Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life strategy the NCCA is required to advise on the time allocations outlined in the '99 Primary School Curriculum in 2016. NCCA are currently considering their advice and are influenced by research in the area highlighting the experience of teachers.

The advice to be issued on time allocation will be cognisant of the

experience of teachers while also taking into account the developments in the primary curriculum and appropriate learning experiences for all children. In the meantime we request teachers respond to the proposals for the development of the curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics as outlined in this booklet.

To find out more and to contribute to our consultation please visit [www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe](http://www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe).

**Figure 4: Considerations in the allocation of time across the Primary School Curriculum**



## For Consideration:

**Which of these methodologies/strategies do you perceive as being important in the teaching of ERB and Ethics? Choose up to 5.**

- Whole class discussion
- Thinking Time (Philosophy with children informal method)
- Debates
- Games
- Small group work
- External Visits
- Circle time
- Links with local community organisations/groups
- Pair work
- Practical projects
- Drama Education methods - role play etc.
- Visual arts
- Assemblies
- Media analysis
- Integrated/cross-curricular projects
- Connecting with parents and the community

### How can I have my say?

- You can contribute by visiting [www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe](http://www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe) where you can submit a questionnaire to our online survey.
- You can also send a written submission to:  
ERB and Ethics Consultation,  
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment,  
35 Fitzwilliam Sq., Dublin 2.
- Alternatively you can attend one of our consultation events which will be publicised on our website.





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