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The NCCA's proposed ERB and Ethics curriculum for primary schools: a critique

Executive Summary

1. This paper examines the compatibility of the NCCA's proposed new ERB and Ethics curriculum with the characteristic ethos or spirit of faith-based primary schools and the faith instruction that takes place in such schools.

The analysis is based on the NCCA's own understanding of its proposed course as exhibited by its consultation paper.

2. The paper argues that the NCCA's proposed new ERB component is virtually certain to conflict with the characteristic spirit of faith-based schools and faith instruction taking place in such schools.

3. The ERB component endorses constructivist and pluralist epistemologies, which entail that there is no objective truth, or at least no way of knowing objective truth. Such an approach to truth is incompatible with the realist epistemology presupposed and endorsed by all Christian denominations.

4. This paper also argues that the Ethics component will conflict with the characteristic spirit of faith-based schools and faith instruction taking place in such schools.

5. The Ethics component endorses the morality of secular liberalism wherein individual moral autonomy is considered an ultimate end in itself. Such an approach is incompatible with the emphasis Christian moral theology places on theocentric personalism, objective moral goods and norms, the virtues, and the harmony between the individual's good and the common good.

6. The NCCA assumes at the outset that its proposed curriculum is necessary to foster inclusivity, conscientious and critical thinking, and a sense of social justice. This completely overlooks the very great extent to which faith-based schools already achieve these aims.

7. The NCCA does not acknowledge the problem that faith-based patrons and parents of faith may have with its proposed course in relation to its compatibility with the characteristic spirit of faith-based schools and on-going faith instruction taking place in these schools.

8. On the basis of our analysis we cannot recommend to the patrons of faith-based schools the introduction of this curriculum in any of the ways suggested by the NCCA.

Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) recently launched a consultation paper on a proposed new curriculum for primary schools. The proposed curriculum has two component parts: a proposed “Education about Religions and Beliefs” (ERB) component and a proposed “Ethics” component.

This paper analyses how likely it is that each component part of the NCCA’s curriculum will be compatible with the current teaching of religion by primary schools with a faith-based ethos and, indeed, with the “characteristic spirit” or ethos of these schools. This analysis is based on the NCCA’s own self-understanding of its proposals as exhibited through its consultation paper.

Part I

The NCCA’s “ERB” component

Aims

Near the beginning of its paper the NCCA states that the proposed ERB component will contribute towards a faith-based school’s own ethos by “contributing to and supporting inclusive school communities” (p. 11 of the consultation paper). It goes on to state that 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” (p. 11). The NCCA thus seems to believe that this component is compatible with current religious instruction in faith-based primary schools, i.e. that their proposal will not in any way, directly or indirectly, undermine efforts by denominational schools to inform students about the faith that characterises the ethos of the given school.

The NCCA sees its proposed ERB component as a “pluralist” form of education (p. 10); it is to be taught in an “objective, critical and pluralist” manner (p. 11).

The aims of this “objective” and “pluralist” approach according to the NCCA are various and can be broken down into the following categories:

- (a) to realise students’ self-worth, to inculcate self-respect within students, and to develop students’ self-awareness and self-esteem (pp. 13, 15);
- (b) to enable students to grow in personal understanding and be empowered to make informed decisions (p. 13);
- (c) to enable students to develop good relationships with others and be sensitive to how their behaviour and ideas can impact on others (p. 13);
- (d) to encourage tolerance and understanding among students and to respect the religious freedom of others (pp. 13, 20);
- (e) to enable students to reflect on the precious nature of human existence and the importance of inner well-being (p. 13);

- (f) to enable students to reflect on the key questions of meaning and truth, and to develop and consolidate students' religious views (p. 14);

As an aside, it is not clear how the proposed ERB component is rationally related to pursuing any of (a), (b), (c) or (e). Further, it is false, and therefore open to rejection by stakeholders within denominational education, such as parents and patrons, to assume that each of aims (a) to (f) cannot be achieved within a faith-based religious education.

Types of objectivity

As the NCCA consultation paper itself recognises, “No subject or teaching is value-free” (p. 22). This holds for courses which self-describe as being “objective” and “pluralist”. For present purposes¹ there are two main ways in which a course on religion and its corollary pedagogy can be described as “objective” and “pluralist”:

- (i) the approach can bracket the truth claims of the various religions and worldviews with the intention of examining them sociologically and/or anthropologically and/or historically. We can refer to this as a procedural form of neutrality.

It is in principle possible for this approach to cohere with a faith-based approach to religious instruction, *but only if it the general teaching context makes it sufficiently clear that the course and its teaching do not in any way deny the truth claims upon which the school's characteristic ethos is based.*

Or

- (ii) the approach could view the various truth claims made by the religions and philosophies under discussion as basically equal in truth value. This would amount to what we can refer to as a substantial form of neutrality. Logically, since not all belief systems can be equally true, it follows that this approach amounts to an implicit scepticism or agnosticism concerning the very idea of religious truth. Paradoxically, then, in the very act of purporting to adopt a substantially neutral stance towards ultimate truth, this approach actually makes a specific claim about ultimate truth. This means that in reality this approach is anything but “neutral”.

The claim about truth this latter approach makes is one that contains a negative value judgment about the very idea of religious truth.

There is neither a practical nor a principled middle ground between these two approaches to “objectivity” and “pluralism” in religious education. Approach (i), if not appropriately contextualised according to the ethos of the given faith school will collapse into approach (ii) in the minds of students, teachers and parents. In other words, one approach or other will prevail: it is impossible to be conceptually neutral about “neutrality”.

¹ This paper examines “objectivity” in pedagogic approach primarily with reference to the concept of neutrality. This is not to deny that a pedagogic approach can be objective even while taking a substantive position in favour of some truth claim and against others, i.e. presupposing or proposing that a particular belief is objectively true. Faith-based religious education can reasonably purport to be objective in this sense. Nor is it to suggest that the proper approach to truth in the humanities is on the basis of the neutral methodology of the physical sciences. For instance, one cannot be neutral in relation to the question of whether or not God is relevant to one's life.

The meaning of the NCCA’s approach to objectivity

From examining the NCCA’s consultation paper there are very good grounds upon which to conclude that the NCCA is adopting approach (ii) to objectivity, i.e. a substantive or agnostic form of putative neutrality in relation to religious truth claims.

The NCCA states that its pluralistic approach to the subject matter “equally recognises the diversity of beliefs, values and aspirations of all religious and cultural groups in society” (p. 20) (quoting a previous NCCA document). In itself, “recognises” is an ambivalent term: it could mean “perceives” or it could approximate more to “endorses”. That the latter meaning is what is intended becomes clear with the next sentence, “Pluralism places value on a range of views rather than a single approach or method of interpretation of life” (p. 20).² The NCCA’s version of pluralism thus considers that “a range of views”, even when they involve mutually incompatible views, is more valuable than “a single ... interpretation of life”. No justification for the proposition is provided (if no single interpretation is to be recognised as true or valuable, why would a plurality of such interpretations be any better?)

The consultation paper goes on to endorse a constructivist epistemology whereby children “co-construct their knowledge, identity and culture with peers and adults” (p. 21) and generate their own meaning and knowledge (p. 24, footnote 3). The NCCA also invokes the idea of “epistemological pluralism” throughout its document, an approach to knowledge which, it says, recognises “the right to the existence of contradictory truth claims or worldviews” (p. 39). This entails that there is no objective truth, or at least no way of knowing objective truth. Constructivist and pluralist epistemologies are incompatible with the realist epistemology presupposed and endorsed by all Christian denominations (a point the NCCA itself seems to gesture towards (p. 29)³). In line with this, the concept of objective truth in religious matters is nowhere endorsed in the consultation document.

The NCCA itself seems inchoately to recognise that its version of pluralism is discordant with religious education as currently undertaken in faith-based schools. It acknowledges the “challenge” for teachers “who will be engaged in teaching denominational programmes and faith forming on the one hand; and teaching about religions and beliefs from a pluralist perspective on the other” (p. 23). It is in this context that the NCCA calls on teachers to be “non-judgmental” in relation to the truth claims of the belief systems under discussion (p. 23).⁴

² In a footnote on this page it is stated that “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.” (p. 20). Bearing in mind the context, this statement is best interpreted as addressing a strategy for peacefully accommodating religious differences rather than as affirming the validity of objective truth concerning competing religious and non-religious truth claims.

³ Here the NCCA draws a very sharp distinction between the two types of epistemologies.

⁴ A non-relativistic understanding of pluralism can accommodate both the idea of truth in religious matters *and* the importance of gaining a better understanding of religious truth through critical engagement with other worldviews. Notably, such critical engagement proceeds from a perspective already immersed in a worldview – “neutral” encounters with worldviews are practically and logically impossible.

The core issue

And yet the NCCA still proceeds as if its proposed ERB course is entirely compatible with current religious formation in faith-based schools, or at least as if the issue of whether it is or not is unimportant. The NCCA seems content to claim that the ERB course will contribute towards an inclusive school environment (p. 11). While it is true that inclusivity is a value shared by schools of a Christian ethos, it is neither the only value comprising this ethos nor an absolute “at-all-costs” value. Furthermore, inclusivity itself is neither univocal in how it can be understood and pursued, nor neutral as to its effects on other goods. So an agnostic approach to religious education would indeed foster a particular version of inclusivity within the classroom, but only by excluding from the classroom the truth of particular religious claims (such as the divinity of Christ or the existence of God) and, moreover, only by excluding from appropriate consideration the rights of religious parents to have their children formed in the faith while in a faith-based school.

The NCCA argues in its consultation paper that the ERB component is not intended to replace existing religious formation within denominational schools (p. 7). But the question is not whether the ERB component replaces current instruction, but whether it is compatible with it. The reality is that it is not compatible.

The NCCA simply does not engage in a sufficiently focused way with *this* matter; in fact, it seems somewhat uninterested in the question.⁵ But it is a vital question from the perspective of patrons and parents looking to not only maintain the integrity of religious instruction within faith-based schools, but also the integrity of the characteristic spirit or ethos of these schools.

Part II

The NCCA’s “Ethics” component

Aims

As with the proposed ERB component, the NCCA considers that the Ethics component will contribute to the school ethos by promoting “inclusivity” (p. 11). The consultation paper outlines a number of specific aims for the Ethics component. It will enable the child to:

⁵ The NCCA sidesteps the issue by stating that school patrons have a legal right according to s. 30(2)(d) of the Education Act 1998 “to develop a programme that supports and contributes to the ethos of their school” (p. 7). However, its proposal depends upon a mistaken interpretation of the Education Act, viz. that it requires or permits a school’s ethos to be confined to one discrete programme of religious instruction. But according to s. 9(d) of the Education Act a school shall “promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school”. Section 15(2)(b) further requires a Board of Management to “uphold, and be accountable to the patron for so upholding, the characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school, and at all times act in accordance with any Act of the Oireachtas or instrument made thereunder, deed, charter, articles of management or other such instrument relating to the establishment or operation of the school”. Several of the interventions and proposals coming from groups pressing for reform in this area also fail to take this matter sufficiently into account.

- (i) appreciate the importance of responsibilities as well as rights;
 - (ii) develop a sense of conscience and promote tolerance;
 - (iii) develop the skills necessary for good moral decision making;
 - (iv) understand the destructive power of discrimination, racism and bullying;
 - (v) develop respect for the environment;
 - (vi) think critically;
 - (vii) understand human rights, equality, culture, social justice and social inclusivity
- (p. 14).

Of course, many (if not all) patrons currently have aims similar to these and encourage pedagogic approaches which facilitate the meeting of these aims. There is no evidence to suggest that faith-based schools are not already doing a good job in this area. So it is difficult to see the need for another course to set and meet the same aims – the exercise would be highly repetitious (unless the NCCA proposes to introduce a different, thoroughly secularist approach to these matters in faith-based schools, but such a proposal would directly challenge the integrity of the schools’ characteristic spirit or ethos). Furthermore, independent research indicates that existing faith-based patrons are hugely successful at achieving genuine inclusivity within the classroom.⁶ Yet the NCCA’s consultation paper disregards this aspect to the reality of faith-based education in Ireland today.

The meaning of “pluralism” for the NCCA’s Ethics Component

A key to understanding the NCCA’s position on the teaching of Ethics is the concept of “pluralism”. In this sense the Ethics component to the proposed curriculum is similar to the ERB component. But there are differences regarding how the NCCA seems to understand the concept of pluralism in relation to the two component parts of the curriculum. As the first part of this paper indicated, pluralism in the context of the ERB component amounts to a substantially neutralist approach to belief systems generally, one which implicitly suggests that all belief systems are of equal truth value (in practice meaning that none are objectively true). Strictly speaking, this approach is not neutral in character, it is rather implicitly agnostic.

Pluralism in the context of the NCCA’s Ethics component takes a slightly different form, however. The NCCA does not suppose that all moral systems are fundamentally equal. Instead it takes a very definite stand in favour of an ethical system which promotes “a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings, the importance of human rights and responsibilities, the place of justice within society, and the service of the common good” (p. 37).

On its face no one could object to such an ethical system. Yet, as the NCCA acknowledges, no subject or teaching is entirely neutral or value-free (p.22), and there are many diverse and even incompatible ways of understanding the precise meaning of human dignity, human rights,

⁶ A 2012 report found that Catholic schools had an above average share of children from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds. It also found that Catholic schools were more inclusive than other schools when it came to enrolling traveller children and children with special needs. ESRI and Educate Together, “School Sector Variation Among Primary Schools in Ireland” (2012), pp. 35-41. In 2013 the Chief Inspector of schools found that 96% of primary schools, that vast majority of which are Catholic, cultivate an inclusive, child-centred ethos. Department of Education and Skills, “Chief Inspector’s Report 2010–12” (2013), p. 34.

justice, and the common good. The line of philosophical inquiry incorporating such diverse thinkers as Plato, Aquinas, Hobbes, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Arendt, Rawls and MacIntyre (to name but a few) is testament to this.

Two examples illustrate the point. Ronald Dworkin appeals to dignity and human rights in order to justify unrestricted access to abortion, whereas current and recent Popes appeal to the same two categories to argue on behalf of the inherent right to life of unborn children. As a second example, John Rawls bases the right to freedom of religion on the supreme political importance of equal autonomy, whereas *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Vatican II document that deals with the issue, bases the right on the duty to seek religious truth. The two different foundations for the right necessarily result in different conceptions as to the scope and application of the right, a point relevant to the NCCA's repeated claim that its proposed new curriculum will "help children develop an acceptance of the right to hold a particular belief or attitude" (p. 10).

For its part, the NCCA provides a fairly clear answer to the question of what ethical tradition its proposals belong to, "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" (p. 20). This is the ethics of contemporary secular liberalism, of thinkers like Ronald Dworkin, wherein self-reflective individual autonomy is seen as the primary good and the good which all other goods must serve.

In answering this question, it becomes clearer what pluralism means for the NCCA and why it is deployed in a slightly different manner in the respective contexts of ERB and Ethics teaching.

For religion, the NCCA's commitment to pluralism entails an agnostic neutrality, but for ethics, it entails a strong prioritisation of individual moral autonomy. The NCCA's invocation of a "pluralist epistemology", whereby there is a "right to the existence of contradictory truth claims or worldviews" applies to both ethics and religion. A strongly autonomist outlook as regards both religion and morality is proposed (p. 39).

Not all ethical systems are the same

In some very important respects, the NCCA's proposed course will almost certainly clash with faith education. The first part of this paper illustrates this in the context of the NCCA's approach to religion.

And in ethics too, the NCCA's approach is incompatible with some core elements of a faith-based ethics. The ethics of contemporary secular liberalism sees only one supreme good: the good of individual autonomy in moral decision making and in fashioning an authentic life for oneself. It reduces human dignity and human rights to autonomy and autonomy rights respectively, and interprets the common good as little more than the conditions necessary for genuine autonomy in moral choice. "Community" is considered good only to the extent that it does not constrict individual moral choice.

Christianity, as a very relevant example, has a different approach, one that recognises many diverse and equally important human goods, each contributing to human flourishing and reflecting the supreme goodness of God, in whose image we are made. Autonomy, while important, is not an end in itself. Christianity sees freedom as a

“freedom for” more important goods, rather than, as contemporary liberalism sees it, a “freedom from” objective moral norms that constrain autonomy, as well as freedom from any authority that defends these norms. For Christianity, the importance of autonomy rests in the prior importance and indeed duty of seeking what is good and true. True well-being consists both in the reasonable pursuit of the various human goods, which necessarily involves abiding by objective moral norms, and in the acquisition and practice of the virtues. True well-being extends far beyond a minimalist appreciation for autonomy. There is no clash between the individual good and the common good on this understanding.

Those secular liberals who have thought through these matters recognise that a specifically Christian understanding of ethics is fundamentally incompatible with some core elements of a thoroughgoing secular liberalism. The NCCA seem entirely oblivious to this (pp. 7, 29). Contrary to its assertion, it is not the case that the proposed Ethics component “can connect directly” with how character education, moral norms, and attitudes are understood by the programmes and ethos of faith-based patrons (p. 29).

Conclusion

In terms of the ERB component, there are very good reasons to believe that the NCCA’s version of “pluralism” amounts to an agnostic or strongly secular approach to religious truth claims. As such, the implementation of the component by a Christian patron would amount to a faith school teaching an agnostic version of its own ethos. And even if the version of pluralism inherent within the ERB component happens to amount to a procedural form of neutrality (one which is in principle compatible with the given faith perspective of the school), it will still be problematic. For the implementation of the component will have the negative side-effect of encouraging both students and teachers to assimilate, consciously or subconsciously, a strongly secularist perspective on religion *unless it is made sufficiently clear that the component in no way whatsoever denies the truths foundational for the school’s ethos*. In practice, this will be extremely difficult to ensure.

In terms of the Ethics component, no approach to the area can be “neutral”. The NCCA’s own ethos – as expressed through its consultation document – is clearly that of contemporary, secular liberalism. This being the case, parts of the proposed component necessarily diverge from what many patrons and parents would regard as a sound approach to moral instruction. Patrons and other stakeholders ought to be aware not only of express differences in ethical approaches between Christian teaching and secular liberalism, but also of similar terminology masking very different interpretations of the categories in question.

Hence each components of the proposed curriculum will almost certainly undermine both a faith school’s religious instruction *and* its characteristic spirit. The NCCA seems oblivious to the importance of the compatibility issue, a point which itself suggests a certain secular presupposition on its part. Since curriculum compatibility is such a fundamental issue for the integrity of a school’s ethos, it is largely irrelevant whether the NCCA proposes that its ERB and Ethics course be delivered in a discrete or an integrated fashion (pp. 30-31): both will undermine the ethos and religious instruction of a faith school.

A further issue, only briefly touched on in this paper, is also worth considering. There is very strong evidence to suggest that, contrary to what the NCCA seems to imply, faith-based schools have an excellent track record in fostering genuine inclusivity within the classroom. The proposed curriculum is therefore a serious and unnecessary threat to freedom of religion, freedom of association, and parental rights. The NCCA is proposing a solution for a problem it has not adequately defined, and the existence of which is has not sufficiently demonstrated. What is clear is that the proposed new course would, if implemented, inevitably put strain upon teachers and raise questions as regards rights under Articles 42 and 44 of the Constitution.

Postscript

We are making a written submission instead of filling out the questionnaire on the NCCA website. The reason for this is because it is apparent that the survey questions contained in the questionnaire do not follow good practice.

Aside from the fact that many of the survey questions involve a complex series of propositions which themselves contain ambiguous and poorly defined concepts, and therefore can be read in any number of ways,⁷ the questions are framed in a manner that inevitably leads to response bias. The socially correct answer to every question (other than those that request the respondent to prioritise choices from a list of options) is “yes”.

It seems clear that the NCCA intends to use the positive results from its survey as a political argument in favour of introducing the ERB and Ethics course. But this argument presupposes that the proposed course is both sufficient and necessary to achieve the aspirations inherent within positive answers to the survey questions. The survey could just as easily be framed to suit other narratives. One could take the explanatory blurb under the “Aims” and “Ideas” paragraph that precedes the survey questions, rephrase it in terms of a curriculum according to an explicitly Christian ethos, tweak the questions accordingly, and one would almost certainly get the same distribution of answers to the survey questions.

The survey is thus not a genuine and impartial search for knowledge; it functions merely as part of a political strategy. Therefore it does not provide any basis whatsoever for substantiating claims in regard to need or demand for this programme.

The construction of this survey of stakeholders in this manner is a missed opportunity, doing a disservice to the task undertaken by the NCCA and, regrettably, casting that body in a poor light.

⁷ Take for example the following proposition: “I would like my child to express empathy and joy with human diversity and form deep, caring human connections”. “Empathy”, “human diversity”, and “human connections” are each complex concepts with a range of philosophical meanings (some of which contain strongly secularist presuppositions). Furthermore, the proposition combines multiple sub-propositions. So we have no idea if the respondent is answering one, some, or all of the following:
“I would like my child to express empathy with human diversity”;
“I would like my child to express joy with human diversity”;
“I would like my child to express both empathy and joy (presumably at the same time) with human diversity”;
“I would like my child to form deep connections”;
“I would like my child to form caring human connections”;
“I would like my child to form deep (and) caring human connections”.

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