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A Sleight of Hand – Removal of Religious Education from the Primary School Curriculum

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– *Removal of Religious Education from the Primary School Curriculum*

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The state is planning to remove Religious Education as a subject from the curriculum in primary schools. This is one of the proposals contained in a consultation document entitled *Proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum* as outlined by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The aim of the consultation is to review and renew the current curriculum which was published in 1999. In very broad strokes, the curriculum for primary schools outlines the aims and objectives, learning principles, subjects to be taught and the time given to each subject. The overall aim of the curriculum is to celebrate ‘the uniqueness of the child, as it is expressed in each child’s personality, intelligence and potential for development. It is designed to nurture the child in all dimensions of his or her life – spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical’ (1999, p.6). The curriculum goes on to name subjects to be taught: Language (Gaeilge & English), Mathematics, SESE (History, Geography & Science), Arts Education (Visual Arts, Music and Drama), Physical Education, Social, Personal and Health Education and Religious Education. Each of these is given a weekly minimum amount of time. Religious Education is given 2.5 hours per week. This is about to change.

One aspect of the new proposals concerns time allocation in the curriculum. The NCCA has divided how time is to be used into two areas. One is called ‘Minimum state curriculum time’, this will be allocated 60 percent of school time. The other is called ‘Flexible time’ and this will account for 40 percent of school time. The ‘Minimum state curriculum time’ includes all the subjects currently on the curriculum except for Religious Education. There is no explanation or reason given for this elimination. There is

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no research or evidence provided from other countries by way of international best practice. It has been simply removed.

The second area, 'Flexible time' includes discretionary curriculum time, recreation, assemblies, roll call and do what is termed the patron's programme. This is the first time that this term has been used in the curriculum. The patron's programme is intended to replace Religious Education. Again, this is not stated explicitly but referred to implicitly. There is no reason or explanation given as to why Religious Education is being replaced by the patron's programme. While the 1999 curriculum requires each school to teach Religious Education, it leaves the content of what is taught up to each patron body. In the recent past, Catholic schools taught children Religious Education through the *Alive O* programme. Now there is a new Religious Education curriculum for Catholic schools (2015) and an emerging new programme, *Grow in Love*, which gives access to the content from the curriculum.

The suggested removal of Religious Education from the curriculum, along with the insertion of the patron's programme in Flexible time, raises a number of important issues. I would like to talk about three of them: the role of the state, the patron's programme and the introduction of Education about Religions, Beliefs and Ethics (ERB & Ethics) by stealth.

1. THE ROLE OF THE STATE

First of all, let us look at the trajectory of the relationship between the state and Religious Education in Ireland. In the Rules for National Schools (1965), the state believed that 'of all the parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important.' It was seen as being superior to all other subjects, something essential to the good education of children.

The 1999 curriculum, situates Religious Education one subject among others. The section on Religious Education states:

In seeking to develop the full potential of the individual, the curriculum takes into account the child's affective, aesthetic, spiritual, moral and religious needs...Religious Education specifically enables the child to develop spiritual and moral values and to come to a knowledge of God' (1999, p.58).

The state believed it was its responsibility to ensure that the spiritual, moral and religious needs of children were being catered for in whatever school type they attended. It even went so far as to claim that the 'spiritual dimension is a fundamental aspect of individual experience' (1999, p.58). This is in keeping with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which explicitly affirms that children have rights to spiritual development (see articles 17,

23, 27(1), 32(1)). The state laid out the broad vision for Religious Education, it was then up to each school type to implement it in a way that was in keeping with their particular ethos.

Now in 2017, the state is proposing the removal of Religious Education from the curriculum altogether. The pendulum has swung from one extreme to the other. The state has moved from claiming that Religious instruction (the old name for Religious Education) was the most important subject to not recognising it at all.

Further, the proposals make no explicit reference to the spiritual, moral or religious development of the child. Is it now the case that the curriculum will not necessarily take cognisance of the child's spiritual, moral or religious dimension of life? Will this be left solely at the discretion of the Patron? According to the 1999 curriculum, the spiritual dimension of life was a fundamental aspect of individual experience, it ensured access to moral and religious development – what has changed that it is not so today?

THE CENSUS AND SPIRITUALITY

Some might point to the figures of the new census (although these proposals were published before the census figures emerged) and say that we are becoming a post Catholic and secular country. In the new census, we are told that Catholics now make up 78.3 percent of the population, down by 3.4 percent. The Nones (those who do not belong to any religious tradition) have risen by 73.6 percent to almost 10 percent of the population. However, we need to be careful that we do not necessarily conflate the Nones with those who do not believe in God. This 10 percent can also contain people who do not belong to any religious organisation but would consider themselves spiritual. In an RTE exit poll on the day of the last general election (2016), it noted that 14 percent of the poll put themselves in the 'no religion' group. However, unlike the census, the RTE poll included some distinction within this category. Only 1 percent of the group said they were agnostic, 4 percent said they were atheist and 9 percent said that while they were 'not religious', they did consider themselves 'spiritual.' And so, references to the spiritual in the 1999 curriculum would seem to still hold today.

RELIGIOUS LITERACY

It is very difficult to understand why the state is absenting itself from requiring a basic framework for the religious literacy of its citizens. It would seem more important than ever, with the emerging proximity of diverging religious and secular worldviews that children have a chance to wonder about their own beliefs and that of their friends and the world around them in an educational

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environment. Children need help in finding language to name and understand what they believe, so that they can really appreciate and learn from others who inhabit different worldviews. Both the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR), along with the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (ODCE) understand that the teaching of religions and beliefs is very important in schools. They believe this will contribute to democratic citizenship, mutual respect, religious freedom and an appreciation of diversity within society. The vast majority of state supported schools across Europe teach Religious Education in one form or another. The point here is that it is the state, often in countries much more multi-cultural than Ireland, that have taken responsibility to ensure the provision of Religious Education for its citizens. The proposed removal of Religious Education from our curriculum suggests that religious belief, identity and practice are of no concern to the state to have them on the curriculum.

Further, this proposal will put the new primary curriculum at odds with the curriculum at preschool and the Junior Cycle. In the preschool curriculum, *Aistear*, spirituality, morality and religious beliefs are named as an important elements towards a holistic development. Then in second level, the *Framework for the Junior Cycle* (2015), students explore spirituality, morality and religious and secular beliefs. Why is it that the state is concerned with the spiritual, moral and religious beliefs of students at preschool and second level schools but now is withdrawing its interest at primary level? There is no explanation given in the document.

2. THE PATRON'S PROGRAMME

One might argue that the new proposals do not in effect require a change in what schools are doing at the moment and that Religious Education can be taught as part of the patron's programme. However, the removal of Religious Education as a distinct subject from the curriculum and the insertion of the 'patron's programme' surely sends a very clear message from the state as to the value of this subject area. It constitutes a steady undermining of the structural recognition given to Religious Education by the state. It is not difficult to see that in the everyday life of schools, the time given to the patron's programme will come under pressure. Its location in Flexible time, in reality, will mean that it will have to compete for space on the timetable.

I suspect that part of the reason that the patron's programme has been placed in flexible time, away from all the other subjects is an attempt to make it a discrete subject. This was a recommendation from the *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* (2012): 'Primary Curriculum should be revised to ensure

that, while the general curriculum remains integrated, provision is made for denominational Religious Education/faith formation to be taught as a discrete subject' (p.81). The Forum had a fear that that children who specifically opted out of Religious Education would be religiously educated, by stealth, through the other subjects. This is not the purpose of integration. That said, it is a complex issue, especially when you take into account the ethos of a school and how that should shape how children grow and learn together. However, the placing of the patron's programme as separate from the other subjects does appear to move in the direction of making it a discrete subject. This is problematic: is it the case that what happens in the patron's programme with regard to beliefs, spirituality, values, ethics, and particular issues – for instance, our responsibility to refugees, the environment, one another, those who are marginalised – is to be done in isolation from science, geography, history, etc.? Surely best practice ought to have subjects talk to and learn from each other?

3. THE INTRODUCTION OF EDUCATION ABOUT RELIGIONS, BELIEF AND ETHICS (ERB & ETHICS) BY STEALTH

A glaring contradiction at the heart of this consultation process relates to another consultation by the NCCA on the possible inclusion of Education about Religions, Beliefs & Ethics (ERB & Ethics) into the curriculum in primary schools. ERB & Ethics emerged as another recommendation from the *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* (2012). The authors were concerned about the satisfactory implementation of the opt-out arrangements from Religious Education classes in denominational schools and concluded that the human rights of children were not being properly appreciated or addressed. They also were concerned that children who opted out of Religious Education were being deprived of learning about religions and ethics in an educational environment. They recommended to the NCCA that they develop a curriculum in ERB & Ethics for all those opting out of Religious Education in denominational schools. But they also saw this curriculum as a standard against which current Religious Education programmes would be measured. These programmes would have to satisfy the State Inspectorate as to how they fulfil the principles contained in ERB & Ethics. The Forum did not see ERB & Ethics as supplanting faith formation education in denominational schools.

Through the NCCA, the state sought to include ERB & Ethics in primary schools. It said

It is widely accepted that knowledge of religions and beliefs is

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an important part of a quality education and that it can foster democratic citizenship and mutual respect, enhance religious freedom and promote an understanding of diversity. It has been highlighted by a number of scholars, and in light of the resurgence of religious conflict, that the need to learn ‘from’ religion is a key aspect of Religious Education (NCCA 2015, p.9).

So, the State sees no difficulty in trying to include ERB & Ethics on the curriculum while at the same time it is planning to remove Religious Education from the curriculum. This hardly makes sense, unless the real aim and long term goal is to create a space on the curriculum for ERB & Ethics at the expense of Religious Education. It is not clear why the NCCA disregarded the recommendation of the Forum Report. The Report did not recommend all children do ERB & Ethics, only those who had opted out of Religious Education. The NCCA has tried to argue that ERB & Ethics would make an important contribution to the primary school curriculum. But it does not seem to realise that Religious Education already makes this important contribution to the primary school curriculum in different types of schools across the state. Schools give children access to religious beliefs and learn from ethics according to their own characteristic spirit and by way of their own programmes.

ERB & ETHICS IS NOT THE SOLUTION

ERB & Ethics is a solution that doesn’t fit the problem. The legitimate concern on the part of the Forum and shared by many, is the experience of children who opt out of denominational Religious Education. The fear is that this accentuates differences, singling out children with various beliefs from others and depriving them of education where they can learn *about* and *from* religious traditions, worldviews and ethics. The solution proposed is a common programme for all, ERB & Ethics – no one excluded and all learning together. However, Atheist Ireland have requested that the NCCA ensure their members will be entitled to an exception from this programme as they did not think it would respect their philosophical convictions. Therefore, if ERB & Ethics was present in schools, some of the children who already opt out of Religious Education, and for whom ERB & Ethics was intended by the Forum, might also opt out of ERB & Ethics as well. And if they opt out of ERB & Ethics, we are back to the problem that the Forum identified in the first place – the singling out of children and depriving them of an education about religions and ethics. There are other consequences to this. In an attempt to respond to the

needs of a minority of children, the vast majority of children will end up doing more Religious Education than is taking place at the moment. It wouldn't be long before parents (and not unreasonably) would be expressing concern about the amount of time given to the patron's programme and to ERB & Ethics. And since the patron's programme is in Flexible time and ERB & Ethics is required by the state – it would be the patron's programme that would lose out.

CONCLUSION

How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time! It appears the proposed removal of Religious Education from the curriculum is another bite out of the faith based school system in Ireland. Any one of these bites – removal of Rule 68, the proposed amendment or repeal of Section 7 (3) (c) of the Equal Status Act 2000, the imposition of ERB & Ethics, making Religious Education/patron's programme into a discrete subject, removing Religious Education from the curriculum, placing the patron's programme into flexible time – may not be terminal to faith-based education. Taken together, they pose a significant threat to it. There is a trajectory to these changes and those who care about the survival of faith-based education need to wake up to the reality, that it is in a battle for its very survival.

Carrying our neighbour. Giving God's blessing to another is not dependent on greater holiness and even less on a greater self-composure at that moment. It is as though it were the reverse. Carrying (or attempting to carry) another person is not contingent upon the greater physical or spiritual strength of the man or woman who carries. A God of grace does not work in this way. Pain, grief and even near-desperation may be the elements that God will use for the genuine carrying and blessing of another person.

- + RICHARD CLARKE, *Shouldering the Lamb*, (Dublin: Dominican Publications) p.19.