

Social and Environmental Education:

A Review of Research and Scholarship in Geography, History and Education about Religions and Beliefs in the Context of the Redeveloped Irish Primary School Curriculum

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Figure 4.1 Historical Enquiry Framework (HEF) © Caitríona Ní Cassaithe

Table 4.1 Key Concepts of Geography Education © Geographical Association

Abbreviations

CnB	Curaclam na Bunscoile
DoE	Department of Education (1924-1997 and since 2020)
DES	Department of Education and Science (1997-2020)
ERB	Education about Religions and Beliefs
GA	Geographical Association (UK)
HA	Historical Association (UK)
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education (England)
PCF	<i>Primary Curriculum Framework</i>
PSCG	Primary School Curriculum - Geography
PSCH	Primary School Curriculum - History
UN	United Nations

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Chapter 5

Education about Religions and Beliefs

Niamh McGuirk

This chapter provides a comprehensive review and summary of literature (1999-2023) in the area of Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB). Like the previous chapters, the review builds on the historical and current context and it explores the signature pedagogies, knowledge, concepts, skills, values for ERB education within SEE and the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (PCF).

5a Education about Religions and Beliefs

The inclusion of ERB in the proposed national curriculum as an integrated yet discrete component of SEE is an important curricular response to represent and to educate about the religious and belief identities in Irish society. This review draws on literature related to non-confessional, multi-belief, religious and non-religious philosophical worldviews education¹. The review is guided by the following definition;

Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB): ERB helps pupils to know about and to understand the cultural heritage of the major forms of religion, belief traditions and world views which have been embraced by humankind. It is not focussed on nurturing a belief or practice system of any one religion, instead it focuses on fostering an informed awareness of the main theist, non-theist, and secular beliefs including key aspects of their cultural manifestations. ERB aims to foster a respect, understanding and empathy for members of such religions, beliefs and world views (NCCA, 2015, p. 7-8).

Drawing on a range of research, evidence, reports and other literature, this chapter of the SEE literature review provides relevant information in relation to ERB's philosophical and educational conceptualisations and approaches. It will outline the curricular processes most suited to teaching and learning in this area and will detail how the literature conceptualises key ERB knowledge in relation to concepts, skills, values and dispositions.

¹ Although religious education and ERB is a topic of much consideration and debate and has a wide literature base, it is beyond the scope of this literature review to specifically address issues that may arise due to school patronage or ethos.

5b Education about Religions and Beliefs and the curriculum

Before the development of ERB-related learning outcomes as part of the SEE curriculum, it is pertinent to acknowledge that there are diverse understandings relating to this educational discourse. Religions, belief systems and worldviews cannot be neatly boxed into categories. Rather, they are complex social realities with fuzzy edges, permeable boundaries and, due to the complexity of cultural expression, the nature of traditions and practices can be contested (Jackson, 2019). As such, we are reminded to be critical of our use of the terms 'religion' and 'world religions' as depending on how the words are used and in which context, they have the potential to reify, objectify, essentialise and to 'other' (Benoit, 2021; Bleisch & Schwab, 2021; Jackson, 2019).

In certain countries, when it comes to teaching and talking about religions and beliefs in school contexts, there are two main types of approaches; confessional and religious studies/education (non-confessional) (Cush, 2007; Faas et al., 2016; Garreta-Bochaca et al., 2019; Latif, 2019). Firstly, a confessional or denominational approach focuses primarily on one specific religion or worldview and has the aim of religious instruction and faith-formation (Latif, 2019; Coolahan et al., 2012). In some contexts, including Ireland², a confessional approach can also be referred to as religious education (Faas et al., 2016). Secondly, a religious studies approach is non-confessional has a general goal of promoting knowledge and understanding of different religions, beliefs and worldviews³ (Cush, 2007; Franken, 2017; Freathy et al., 2017; Garreta-Bochaca et al., 2019; Ndlovu, 2014).

Recommendations from the Council of Europe and from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)/ Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) advocate teaching religious education in public schools in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner and if this approach does not underpin the curriculum, that an opt-out must be available for parents, guardians and caregivers⁴ (Jackson, 2014; OSCE/ODIHR,

² Due to the historical context in Ireland, the overwhelming majority (96%) of primary schools have a denominational ethos and approximately 90% of schools provide confessional religious education (Darmody & Smith, 2017; Fischer, 2016; Kieran & Mullally, 2021).

³ A worldview can be understood as 'an individual's frame of reference, held consciously and subconsciously, that evolves due to life experiences, enabling them to make sense of the world' (Flanagan, 2021, p. 320).

⁴ Research highlights the complex nature of opting out for children and their families and identifies a risk of marginalisation for those who chose to opt-out (Temperman, 2010). Research in the Scottish context reports minimal requests for opt out (Nixon, 2013) while research in Irish and Northern Irish schools outline that the process can prove problematic and at times, ineffective (Darmody et al., 2016; Mawhinney, 2007; Richardson Niens et al., 2013; Stapleton, 2020).

2007). In the Irish context wherein primary schools are primarily managed by patron bodies, provision for religious education (referred to as the Patron's Programme in the *Primary Curriculum Framework*) is the responsibility of the patron⁵.

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* (PCF) includes learning in ERB within the curriculum area of Social and Environmental Education (SEE) that 'supports children's awareness, appreciation, and understanding of the world through learning about the rich diversity of peoples: their experiences, cultures, religions, beliefs, and environments in different times, places, and circumstances' (DoE, 2023, p. 19). Through the lens and principles of the PCF and within the context of SEE, this chapter details pertinent educational philosophies and approaches to be considered when engaging in teaching relating to Education about Religions and Beliefs.

5c Educational philosophies

When considering curricula design, implementation and operationalisation, there are a number of educational philosophies to be taken into account. This section aims to provide a concise yet comprehensive overview of two of the most commonly employed; phenomenology and constructivism.

i Phenomenology: Learning about religions, beliefs and worldviews

A phenomenological approach attempts to present different religious and non-religious perspectives from the insider's point of view with the aim of fostering, in an academically impartial way, an understanding of and an empathy towards an individual's experience (Jackson, 2014; 2019; Teece, 2010). It employs descriptive and thematic approaches such as feasts and festivals, places of worship, and naming ceremonies, to support children to *learn about* religions, beliefs and worldviews, and it is aligned with a 'world religions' approach (Barnes, 2011; Ipgrave, 2013; Vallerand, 2018; Teece, 2010).

In a range of international contexts over the previous decades, forms of ERB have tended to draw on a 'world religions paradigm' or a 'world religions' approach which focuses on the study of discrete religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and

⁵ "There are a number of patrons' programmes in the Irish primary school system, reflecting the diversity of patronage. Some are denominational or religious, emphasising the place of children's faith, spiritual, and moral development in their lives. Some are ethical or multi-belief and values-based, and emphasise children's understanding of ethics and values and their application in the life of the child" (DoE, 2023, p. 19).

Sikhism (Jackson, 2019). Jackson (2019) highlights concerns about the potentially reductive impact of teaching in this way without first interrogating understandings and conceptualisations of religion(s). The phenomenological approach has been critiqued for being unable to truly offer an insiders' perspective, for failing to convey depth of religious commitment, for essentialising religious (and non-religious) beliefs and practices and for resulting in the potential to other (Barnes, 2011; Berglund, 2014; Jackson, 2014; 2019; Vallerand, 2018). In the classroom, this can lead to misrepresentation and to incorrect and ill-informed assumptions and discussions about religions, beliefs and worldviews and the role they play in peoples' lives and in society (Benoit, 2021; Revell & Christopher, 2021).

Thus, religions or belief systems 'should not be taken as referring to bounded and incontestable systems, but to the various constructions of each religious tradition made by different insiders and outsiders' (Jackson, 2019, p. 115). Although the approach has been critiqued, a variety of phenomenological methods are integrated into a range of other approaches.

ii Constructivism: Learning about and from religions, beliefs and worldviews

Although it has been argued that this approach has been distorted from its original philosophical basis in human development, the approach suggests that it is possible, in an objective and descriptive way, for children to derive personal understanding and meaning from learning about the beliefs and worldviews of others (Grimmitt, 1987; 1994; 2000; Hull, 2000; Teece, 2010). This involves learners being presented with (primarily) religious material and artefacts, hearing about their significance for particular individuals and groups, and then engaging in personal reflection on the material itself and how it relates to their own experience(s). As such, learners gain knowledge about a religion, belief or worldview, are supported to gain insight(s) into the meaning(s) behind such knowledge and are encouraged to reflect on the meaning(s) for the people for whom it is important and from a personal perspective.

Critiques of this particular form of *learning from* religions, beliefs and worldviews relate to the supposed inherent spirituality, sacredness or positive attribute(s) of the material, and to discrepancies in interpretations of the purpose of reflection; that is to say, whether it is to have a (spiritually) nurturing function for the learner or whether it is solely to enrich understanding of others' religions, beliefs and worldviews (Erricker et al., 2011; Jackson, 2019; Teece, 2010). Additionally, some learners may find no valuable or relevant learning in

their reflections on the experiences of others or some may disagree with the potential influence of another (religious or non-religious) worldview on individual perspectives (Teece, 2010; Jackson 2014). Notably, the original rationale for the approach was to create a 'synergetic relationship' between the worldview of the learner and the human experiences of those from a range of perspectives (Teece, 2010, p. 96).

The following section details forms of educational and pedagogical approaches that are commonly employed in primary classrooms. It first outlines the conceptual enquiry approach and the interpretive approach, and then provides information about the pedagogies the literature foregrounds as most appropriate for ERB-related teaching.

5d Processes of ERB: Pedagogical approaches

In some contexts such as Norway, due in part to some of the aforementioned concerns, there has been a move away from the *learning from* approach in order to respect and reflect human rights standards (Bråten, 2009; Skeie, 2012). In other contexts such as England, Scotland and Ireland, *learning about* and *learning from* is a common educational approach to ERB (Bråten, 2009; Faas et al., 2020; Robertson et al., 2017). Furthermore, this approach is endorsed by the Council of Europe⁶. Research has highlighted that children want and enjoy opportunities to learn and talk about religions, beliefs and worldviews in school and that this form of ERB gives them an opportunity to learn about individual worldview(s) and to also learn from peers in relation to their own worldview(s)⁷ (Åhs et al., 2016; 2019; Darmody et al., 2016; Jackson, 2012).

The interpretive approach and the conceptual enquiry approach are two widely used educational approaches that offer possibilities for ERB teaching in primary classrooms.

i The conceptual enquiry approach

In order to make sense of and give meaning to our world and the human experience, this pedagogical approach adopts the stance that learners' focus of enquiry ought to be

⁶ A guide exists to support educational professionals to understand and implement the recommendations from [Signposts: policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education](#) (Jackson, 2014). The guide aims to help teachers deepen their knowledge, skills and attitudes and to consider how ERB can be implemented in an appropriate and respectful way; [Signposts Teacher Training Module- Teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education](#) (Council of Europe, 2020)

⁷ From a critical realist perspective, this approach does not go far enough in creating educational opportunities for learners to question the nature of reality and of the truth claims being presented about religious and non-religious beliefs and worldviews (Wright, 2000; 2001; 2008).

constructivist and focus on key concepts from religions, beliefs and worldviews (Erricker et al., 2011). The conceptual enquiry approach contends that there are three types of concepts, a) those that are common to all experiences, regardless of religion, belief or worldview (e.g. celebration, belonging, remembering), b) those that are common to many religions and some beliefs and worldviews (e.g. worship, symbolism, ritual), and c) those that are distinctive to particular religions (e.g. Ummah/Islam, Trinity/Christianity, Rationalism/Humanism) (Teece, 2010). The approach is supported by a five-stage pedagogical methodology that has been implemented in ERB curricula (Erricker et al., 2011; Wedell, 2010). Learners share personal understandings and perspectives on the concept, relate it to their own and others' lives, and consider the value the concept may have for individuals who hold the concept in high esteem in their own religion, belief or worldview. Concerns about this approach relate to the risks of descriptive and explanatory reductionism as curricula are designed and implemented (Teece, 2010; Wedell, 2010). Educators are reminded to foreground the relationship between the concept under focus, its associated values and how it contributes to understanding the human experience for those in the associated religion, belief or worldview (Teece, 2010; Wedell, 2010).

ii The interpretive approach

As Jackson's (2019) interpretive approach involves learning new concepts and content and also requires thought and reflection from learners, he acknowledges that it shares some similarities with the *about* and *from* approaches. However, he contends that it is different. First, Jackson's conceptualisation is broader, more flexible and he considers religions, beliefs and worldviews not 'straightforwardly definable' (Jackson, 2019, p. 199). Second, more attention and consideration is given to the internal diversity of religions, beliefs and worldviews. Third, the interpretive approach takes into account the positionality and worldview of the learner in relation to the ERB material and acknowledges that it is not always possible to impose universal learning outcomes or to assume the same educational goals are achievable or appropriate for all learners. Lastly, the interpretive approach takes a less structured consideration of the place and process of reflection. Although this form of ERB does require thought and reflection from children, it acknowledges that how or when a learner will respond reflectively and reflexively cannot be anticipated (Jackson, 2019). The approach has three key principles; representation, interpretation and reflexivity (Jackson, 2011; 2019). Representation reflects the reality that religions, beliefs and worldviews are embedded in actions, behaviours and life-world practice(s). It acknowledges the complexity, internal diversity and varying ways in which religions, beliefs and

worldviews manifest in the lives of individuals, groups and in the religious or non-religious system(s) of belief themselves (Jackson, 2011; 2019). The principle of interpretation implies comparing and contrasting as a meaning-making process. While acknowledging the existing positionality and worldview of the learner, material is presented and the learner attempts to understand and empathise through an interplay of contrast and comparison between their own worldview concepts and experiences and those of the worldview under focus (Jackson, 2019). The third principle, reflexivity, relates to the impact of the new learning on the learner's previous understandings and values (Jackson, 2011; 2019). It is important to note that the goal is not for the learner to adopt new concepts or values from a different worldview to their own, rather for the learner 'to raise self-awareness and a critical examination of one's own assumptions' and for them to have 'opportunities for distanced, constructive criticism of the material' (Jackson, 2014, p. 28). Jackson contends that reflexivity activities can focus on a range of areas including self-awareness, similarities and differences, or can focus on how particular (personal or social) values may contribute positively to citizenship and intercultural understanding (Jackson, 2014).

To support a deeper consideration and exploration of the concept of religions and belief systems and the different ways they play out in people's daily lives, Jackson (2019) presents a three-level model comprising the relationship(s) between the individual, the group(s) they belong to and the wider (non)religious tradition. This allows space to connect individual experiences to social experiences, resist categorising and essentialising belief concepts and practices, and enhances the potential to reflect the internal diversity of religions and beliefs, within and beyond 'major world religions' and other secular philosophical worldviews (Jackson, 2019).

It is important to note that the aforementioned philosophical and educational approaches are not mutually exclusive and may draw from a range of methodologies. There are instances (in curricula, practices and contexts) wherein a range of pedagogies reflect a mix of approaches (Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2020).

iii Pedagogical approaches

While there is a place for teacher-centred teaching in ERB, the literature foregrounds the importance of student-centred pedagogies (Grimmitt, 2000; Jackson, 2014; Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2020; OSCE/ODIHR, 2007, Sierra-Huedo et al., 2020, Skrefsrud, 2022).

Experiential learning: In contrast with a focus on 'world religions' or 'knowledge acquisition', a student-centred focus to learning highlights the importance of the real-life experiences and perspectives of children (Ipgrave, 2004; Moulin, 2011; Skrefund, 2022; Thanissaro, 2012). Rather than presenting static curricular representation of religions, beliefs and worldviews that run the risk of reinforcing stereotypes and generalisations; creating a space for children to name and share their realities in relation to the new learning enhances the potential for a more authentic learning experience in ERB (Benoit, 2021; Ipgrave, 2004; Moulin, 2011). In line with culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2021), an experiential approach acknowledges and includes children's own backgrounds and identities. According to Jackson, an experiential approach to ERB employs pedagogies that 'should 'transcend the informative', engaging student attitudes by being affective as well as cognitive, providing opportunities for reflective exercises, creative expression and engaged action' (2019, p. 222). Research reports that learners like this approach. However, it should be noted that some children might be reluctant to name or share the religious, belief or worldview aspect(s) of their identities in school contexts (Isik-Ercan, 2015, Malone et al., 2021; Moulin, 2011). Furthermore, some report a dislike for the potential of being treated as a spokesperson for their (or their family's) religion, belief or worldview, for being labelled into categories that do not reflect their lived experiences, and for the potential to be on the receiving end of prejudicial attitudes from their peers (Åhs et al., 2016; Isik-Ercan, 2015; Jackson, 2014; Moulin, 2011). Bearing that in mind, and pending a 'safe(r)' and respectful space (see below), ERB can consider children as active learners, presenting knowledge and concepts that are enhanced with personal elements that offer deeper insights into religions, beliefs and worldviews and that can also challenge the idea that they are monolithic, homogeneous systems (Berglund, 2014; Jackson, 2014; Skrefund, 2022).

Dialogical and participative pedagogies: For ERB, it is argued that a plurality of methodologies and pedagogies is necessary and that, at times, some of these will be in tension (Freathy et al., 2019). Dialogical and participative pedagogies feature as well-suited to creating an active-learning environment that enables experiential and reflective learning and that fosters an understanding of and respect for diverse religions, beliefs and worldviews (Alberts, 2010; Cush, 2010; Geikina, 2013; Jackson, 2014; Lundie & O'Siochru, 2021, Mavroudis & Kondoyianni, 2022; Osbeck, 2019; OSCE/ODIHR, 2007; O'Grady, 2010; Smith et al., 2018). Dialogical and participative pedagogies can build knowledge through listening and interacting with people from different religious and secular convictions and

can foster skills such as empathy, multi-perspectivity, and reflection on personal beliefs and prejudices (Bråten et al., 2020; Jackson, 2014; Santoro, 2008). Some teachers and learners express a preference for dialogical approaches in the classroom (Morris et al., 2010; O'Grady, 2010). In creating a dialogical space, educators are reminded to keep a focus on the goal of the dialogue and that teacher instructions, activity type and the strategies used play an important role (O'Grady, 2010; Vrikki et al., 2019).

Teaching strategies and methodologies conducive to dialogical and participative pedagogies include story, texts, case studies, artefacts, visual images, virtual tours, videos, field-trips (to places of worship for example), visiting speakers, debate, dilemmas, scenarios, circle time, drama, questioning, Philosophy for Children (P4C) and community of enquiry (Cush, 2007; Faas et al., 2020; Freathy et al., 2019; Goodman, 2018; Lundie et al., 2021; 2022; Mavroudis & Kondoyianni, 2022; Osbeck, 2019; OSCE/ODIHR, 2007; Riegel & Kindermann, 2016; Robertson et al., 2017; Valk, 2007; Wintersgill, 2015; 2019).

5e Content of ERB: Key knowledge - concepts, skills, values and dispositions

This section outlines information relating to key ERB knowledge and concepts. It applies to teaching and learning in ERB, regardless of the philosophical or educational approach that underpins that teaching and learning.

i Moving beyond knowledge acquisition

In the literature associated with ERB, questions abound about both the nature and meaning of knowledge and central concepts, and about how they are conceptualised in relation to curricula. There is a move away from content knowledge acquisition and towards broader understandings of related concepts, ideas and key elements. Literature on the 'big ideas' in ERB corresponds with similar foci in a variety of curricular areas internationally, including geography and history (Cush, 2019). In research and related discussions, terminology such as 'deep learning' 'powerful knowledge', 'big ideas' and 'core elements' is commonplace (Bråten & Skeie, 2020; Cush, 2019; Freathy & John, 2019; Whitworth, 2020). This section outlines some of the key literature in this area and identifies some commonalities in the various conceptualisations of central 'knowledge' and 'content' related to ERB.

On the back of years-long collaborative research and deliberation, Wintersgill's (2017) *Big Ideas for Religious Education*⁸ presents six 'big ideas' considered crucial to understanding and situating concepts and content when educating about religions, beliefs and worldviews; 1) Continuity, Change and Diversity 2) Words and Beyond 3) A Good Life 4) Making Sense of Life's Experiences 5) Influence and Power 6) The Big Picture (see Appendix B for an overview). While recognising the value of Wintersgill's model, (2017) to support children 'to gain a holistic appreciation of interconnected, overarching, core ideas' within ERB, rather than 'engaging with an atomised (and necessarily exclusionary) body of content identified by either religion or theme', concerns remain. These include risks of reductionism, oversimplification and essentialism should *Big Ideas* be applied universally to religions, beliefs and worldviews (Freathy et al., 2019, p. 37).

Freathy et al. (2019) argue that *Big Ideas* can be augmented by including a consideration of and reflection on ERB's epistemological and methodological principles and issues, referring to this work as *Four Big Ideas about the Study of Religion(s) and Worldview(s) [SORW]*. They propose that ERB incorporates learning that i) acknowledges and explores the contested nature of religions, beliefs and worldviews, ii) includes reflective and reflexive engagement with learner identity and positionality and how it impacts an encounter with differing perspectives and worldviews, iii) recognises that the types of ERB methodologies and methods that are (and are not) used in the classroom have an impact on how the learner might engage (or not) in independent and creative thinking, iv) ERB can equip learners with the knowledge, critical thinking skills, and rights-respecting dispositions necessary for their life in the 'real world' (Freathy et al., 2019). In ERB, it is argued that it is necessary to foreground 'the relationship between the knowledge and the knower' (Freathy et al., 2019, p. 36). In other words, it is important to consider how children and teachers relate to new learning and also, which methods are used is significant and can impact the learning that takes place.

Following international educational policy trends, the recently re-developed ERB⁹ curriculum in Norway includes five 'core elements'; knowledge of religions and worldviews,

⁸ Documentation (including exemplars) exists to support teachers implementing Big Ideas into classroom contents in age appropriate ways. See [Putting Big Ideas into Practice in Religious Education](#) (Wintersgill et al., 2019).

⁹ The non-confessional curriculum, named 'Christianity, Religion, Worldviews and Ethics', is for a discrete compulsory subject at primary and lower secondary education. In the curriculum, Christianity receives a greater emphasis in order to recognise the Norwegian national heritage and this emphasis has been the subject of some academic critique (Bråten et al., 2020).

exploring religions and worldviews using different methods, exploring existential questions and answers, ability to adopt the perspectives of others, and ethical reflection (Bråten et al., 2020, p. 6). Within its conceptualisation of 'religions and worldviews', explicit reference is made to 'Christianity, indigenous religion, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, new religions, and secular humanism as a worldview' (Bråten et al., 2020, p. 4).

Commonalities exist with this curriculum and Wintersgill's *Six Big Ideas* and Freathy et al.'s *Four Big Ideas* in relation to broad understandings of the complex and contested nature of religions, beliefs and worldviews, the variety of ways people and communities conceptualise and practice belief(s), the need for multi-perspectivity, and the impact of ERB methods such as inquiry and reflection on learning processes. Additionally, in England, the proposed *National Entitlement to the Study of Religions and Worldviews* is aligned with Wintersgill's *Big Ideas* and also includes reference to the significance of methodology to ERB (Commission on Religious Education, 2018; Cush, 2019; Wintersgill et al., 2019).

ii Breadth, depth and balance

The literature reflects common concerns in relation to how content and knowledge is conceptualised, considered, chosen and subsequently taught in the classroom. There is consensus on the need for breadth, depth and balance in relation to what is presented to children in curricula so that it reflects local and global, historical and contemporary, and religious and secular worldviews. There is agreement that it must include personal, school and societal contexts, teachers' and learners' interests and concerns, sensitive and controversial issues and also, that it allows for progression in learning (Cush, 2007; Freathy et al., 2019; Robertson et al., 2017; Valk, 2007). Geikina argues that the 'most challenging task is to collect the most relevant texts, narratives and phenomena which would reveal the minimum of [ERB] content that can widely promote the development of religious competence' (2019, p. 85).

Rather than striving for engaging teaching methods and techniques to impart content knowledge (about rituals, feasts and festivals for example), in order to facilitate deeper learning, educators are reminded to focus on understanding, questioning, reflection, empathy, respect and on what is important and meaningful within the new learning (Cush, 2007; Cush, 2019; Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2020; Ofsted, 2013; Robertson et al., 2017). ERB provides key opportunities to support learners to explore the reasons why adherents to particular religions, beliefs and worldviews 'believe and do what they do', what that means

to them, and to explore 'how each learner might respond to this in their own lives' (Robertson et al., 2017, p. 326).

iii Skills, values and dispositions

While breadth, depth and balance of learning in ERB is important for children, it is just as important that this knowledge is accompanied by the skills, values and dispositions they will need to live as active citizens.

Valuing Human Rights: To foster understanding of and respect for peoples' right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, it is first necessary to understand the beliefs, religions and values of our friends, neighbours and fellow citizens (Cush, 2007). It is argued that ERB can foster positive dispositions to difference and reduce harmful misunderstandings and stereotypes when it is rooted in and advocates values such as human rights, democracy, respect (for self and others), justice and equality (Alberts, 2010; Jackson, 2019; Loobuyck et al., 2011; OSCE/ODIHR 2007, Santoro, 2008; Sooniste & Schihalejev, 2022; Valk, 2007; Zilliacus et al., 2016). Human rights education linked to ERB includes skills such as critical thinking, conflict resolution and empathy (Freathy et al., 2019; Skrefund, 2022; Waldron et al., 2011). Jackson (2019) argues that human rights should not be the sole justification for the inclusion of ERB in public schools.

Theoretical and empirical research emphasizes the role ERB can play in different yet related areas such as integration, citizenship, community values, social cohesion and solidarity, and intercultural understanding and competence (Åhs et al., 2019; Geikina, 2013; Latif, 2019; Giorda et al., 2014; Levitt & Muir, 2014; Moore, 2005; Sierra-Huedo & Fernandez-Romero, 2020; Valk, 2007; Zilliacus et al., 2016). In an appropriate respectful and 'safe space'¹⁰, the inclusion of ERB focused learning outcomes provides opportunities for children to share their perspectives on and experiences of religions, beliefs, worldviews, culture, society and life (Åhs et al., 2019; Loobuyck et al., 2011; Sierra-Huedo et al., 2020). Opportunities can be created to share accurate knowledge, to identify and correct misinformation and misconceptions, to challenge prejudices, and to develop respectful attitudes towards religious and non-religious worldviews (Cush, 2007; Loobuyck et al., 2011; Jackson, 2019).

¹⁰ The literature recognises that, due to the nature of some discussions, it may not be possible for the classroom to be entirely safe for all learners. Therefore, teachers are advised to strive for the creation of a safe(r) space with guidelines on what is considered acceptable and unacceptable in lessons, discussions and debate (Jackson, 2014; Iverson, 2019).

Religious [ERB] literacy skills: Research highlights the potential for ERB to support children to develop religious literacy skills or religious competence skills. Like the concept of religion itself, the notion of a form of literacy or competence in ERB is contested and there is no overarching consensus of what it might comprise (Smith et al., 2018). Moore's (2014) oft drawn-upon definition suggests that learners would have; 'a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place' (2014, p. 380).

Alongside an awareness of one's own and others' religions, beliefs and worldviews, literacy and competence in ERB entails the dispositions, skills and willingness to reflect on, communicate with and act towards people with different religious and non-religious convictions in sensitive and respectful ways (Geikina, 2013; 2019; Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2020; Moore, 2010; 2014; Smith et al., 2018; Sooniste et al., 2022; vom Brömssen et al., 2020). How ERB literacy is conceptualised can depend on school ethos and educational philosophies, and as such, ERB literacy is 'variously configured and reconfigured in terms of the context out of which they are prescribed in the curriculum' (vom Brömssen et al., 2020, p. 145).

Multi-perspectivity: One of the key intercultural and democratic skills involved in ERB is multi-perspectivity, which can be defined as 'the ability to decentre from one's own perspective and to take other people's perspectives into consideration in addition to one's own' (Barrett et al., 2013, p. 20). Fostering the children's capacity to recognise, understand and respect multiple perspectives is 'a cornerstone for democratic living' (Marks et al., 2014, p. 255). As such, teachers need the skills to create a safe(r) classroom environment wherein children feel comfortable sharing perspectives. Teachers also need skills to scaffold dialogue and debate in a fair and balanced way so that children think and engage critically without criticising their peers' religious and non-religious perspectives (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007).

The role of the teacher Preparation, sensitivity and reflection are needed on the part of the teacher to consider the internal diversity of religions, beliefs and worldviews so that no assumptions are made about how children (or their parents) conceptualise and practise their beliefs (Jackson, 2019; Hannam & Panjwani, 2020). Educators may hold stereotypical views

or unexamined biases about particular religions, beliefs and worldviews or they may not have sufficient knowledge (about religions, beliefs and worldviews or about the children's identities) to recognise or challenge stereotypes when they arise (Aronson et al., 2016; Jackson & Everington, 2017; Subedi, 2006). There is a call for teachers to reflect on their own religious or non-religious belief identity/ies and to consider any potential influence their positionality may have on their teaching (Estivalèzes, 2017; Flanagan, 2021; Nixon et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2017). The inclusion of children's religious and non-religious identities into formal and informal discussions and lessons can have a positive impact on their sense of belonging in a class or school. On the contrary, children who come from a minority religious background or who identify as agnostic or atheist may experience marginalisation should their identities remain unnamed or misrepresented (Aronson et al., 2016; Bryan & Bracken, 2011; Latif, 2019; Malone et al., 2021; Strhan & Shillitoe, 2022).

A safe(r) space: The research highlights the potential complexity of teaching and learning in ERB and suggests, for a range of reasons, that an 'absolutely objective, neutral and value-free' form of ERB is not possible (Freathy et al., 2019, p. 435; Åhs et al., 2019; Lundie et al., 2021). Educators are advised to minimize the risks of essentialising, sanitising and misrepresenting religions, beliefs and worldviews in order to avoid fostering misunderstandings (Smith et al., 2018). To support this, teachers are recommended to select reputable non-biased resources and content that is based on reason, that is accurate, bias-free, up to date, and that does not over-simplify complex issues (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007). In order to create a rights-respecting, 'safe(r) space' in the classroom that supports dialogue, the sharing of perspectives, listening, openness and respect, the teacher can, in collaboration with learners, devise a set of agreements or a charter that can be revisited each time ERB lessons and discussions are taking place (Åhs et al., 2019; Jackson, 2014; 2019; Iprave, 2004; Malone et al., 2021). A goal of a safe(r) space is for children to feel comfortable to openly share ERB-related views and perspectives without feeling that they might be ridiculed or marginalised (Jackson, 2014; Zilliacus et al., 2016). Research reports that learners 'appreciate skilful teachers who can both provide accurate information and manage discussions, which include significant differences in viewpoint, including secular humanism and other non-religious philosophies' (Darmody et al., 2017, p. 5).

5f Conclusion

This chapter has provided a review of the literature relevant to the inclusion of ERB learning outcomes in a SEE curriculum for primary schools in Ireland. It provided an

exposition of related educational philosophies and approaches pertinent to ERB and the curriculum. As Table 5.1 shows, ERB aligns strongly with the principles of the *Primary Curriculum Framework*. The chapter also outlined the curricular processes most suited to teaching and learning in this area and how the research conceptualises key ERB knowledge in relation to concepts, skills, values and dispositions. It also detailed important considerations relating to the role of the teacher when engaged in formal and informal ERB in primary classrooms. It emphasizes a need for comprehensive pre-service, in-service and continuing professional development to address practitioner knowledge, skills and confidence in this complex and often sensitive area (Eaude et al., 2017; Loobuyck et al., 2011; OSCE/ODIHR, 2007; Nixon et al., 2021; Robertson et al., 2017).

The ERB academic discourse is varied and complex. As such, when moving into 'the terrain of curriculum development, what emerges is a contested space where trust, risk, participation, voice and engagement are important elements for collective curriculum development' (Sullivan, 2018, p. 71)¹¹.

Table 5.1: Principles of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and Education about Religions and Beliefs

Principles	ERB
Partnership	In ERB, making connections with families and communities from all religious, belief and worldview backgrounds creates possibilities to reflect real-life experiences, understandings and practices. Such partnerships foster dialogue, connection and belonging, and can help challenge false information, stereotypes and negative perceptions.
Pedagogy	Appropriate student-centred pedagogies in ERB are active, experiential, dialogic and participative. These pedagogies, carried out in a 'safe' space, allow children to share and to listen to stories, experiences, perspectives and opinions. They are linked to people's lived realities and help foster respect, empathy, multi-perspectivity and reflection.
Relationships	Underpinned by human rights, ERB fosters respect for religions, beliefs and worldviews through affirming the identity(ies) of the child, their family and those in the local and wider community. Positive and quality relationships (school-child-home-community) impacts positively on engagement and builds a sense of belonging.

¹¹ The *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions in Public Schools* provides a comprehensive set of ten principles to be considered when developing an ERB curriculum in public schools (see Appendix A).

Transitions and continuity	<p>ERB builds on the <i>Aistear</i> theme of identity and belonging. It supports children to develop a positive sense of who they are and to feel valued and respected as part of a primary school community. ERB supports new and developing understandings of the religions, beliefs and worldviews of self and others. ERB also builds on the other <i>Aistear</i> themes of well-being, communicating and exploring and thinking. It does so by enabling children to develop the capacity to engage and respond with respect as they interact with others and as they make sense of the world around them. ERB enables children to name and share experiences, thoughts and opinions, and to express changing perspectives and understandings as they progress through primary school. This prepares children for the inclusive, engaging and participative principles of the Junior Cycle in post-primary school. ERB can provide a foundation for Junior Cycle Religious Education in relation to Statements of Learning 5, 6, 7, 8 and 11.</p>
Learning environments	<p>Children can become more engaged in learning when they see religious, belief and worldview identities affirmed and reflected in their environments. In ERB, field-trips and virtual tours to places of importance can further enhance understandings of the differences and similarities in how people make sense of and give meaning to our world and the human experience.</p>
Inclusive education and diversity	<p>ERB acknowledges and affirms children’s individual identities and creates a space for them to learn about the religious, belief and worldview identities of their peers, and of those in Irish society and beyond. ERB is underpinned by human rights, fosters respect, understanding and empathy and makes real-world connections to the children’s lives and experiences. ERB recognises that religions, beliefs and worldviews are internally diverse, context-dependent, and that there are multiple ways of having and expressing religious and non-religious beliefs.</p>
Engagement & participation	<p>ERB pedagogies are experiential and enquiry-based and as such, they encourage dialogue and participation. Through discussion and collaboration with their peers, children develop the intercultural and democratic skills of decision-making, critical thinking and conflict resolution.</p>
Assessment and progression	<p>In ERB, progression involves increasing levels of detail and understanding (from simple to complex topics), expanding awareness from individual to group, community, national and global contexts, and recognising links and connections across religions, beliefs and worldviews. Throughout primary school, children are developing and progressing their capacity to express and communicate stories, ideas and perspectives relating to religions, beliefs and worldviews.</p>

Appendix B

Toledo Guiding Principles

Key Guiding Principles

1. Teaching about religions and beliefs must be provided in ways that are fair, accurate and based on sound scholarship. Students should learn about religions and beliefs in an environment respectful of human rights, fundamental freedoms and civic values.
2. Those who teach about religions and beliefs should have a commitment to religious freedom that contributes to a school environment and practices that foster protection of the rights of others in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding among members of the school community.
3. Teaching about religions and beliefs is a major responsibility of schools, but the manner in which this teaching takes place should not undermine or ignore the role of families and religious or belief organizations in transmitting values to successive generations.
4. Efforts should be made to establish advisory bodies at different levels that take an inclusive approach to involving different stakeholders in the preparation and implementation of curricula and in the training of teachers.
5. Where a compulsory programme involving teaching about religions and beliefs is not sufficiently objective, efforts should be made to revise it to make it more balanced and impartial, but where this is not possible, or cannot be accomplished immediately, recognizing opt-out rights may be a satisfactory solution for parents and children, provided that the opt-out arrangements are structured in a sensitive and non-discriminatory way.
6. Those who teach about religions and beliefs should be adequately educated to do so. Such teachers need to have the knowledge, attitude and skills to teach about religions and beliefs in a fair and balanced way. Teachers need not only subject-matter competence but pedagogical skills so that they can interact with students and help students interact with each other in sensitive and respectful ways.
7. Preparation of curricula, textbooks and educational materials for teaching about religions and beliefs should take into account religious and non-religious views in a way that is inclusive, fair, and respectful. Care should be taken to avoid inaccurate or prejudicial material, particularly when this reinforces negative stereotypes.
8. Curricula should be developed in accordance with recognized professional standards in order to ensure a balanced approach to study about religions and beliefs. Development and implementation of curricula should also include open and fair

procedures that give all interested parties appropriate opportunities to offer comments and advice.

9. Quality curricula in the area of teaching about religions and beliefs can only contribute effectively to the educational aims of the Toledo Guiding Principles if teachers are professionally trained to use the curricula and receive ongoing training to further develop their knowledge and competences regarding this subject matter. Any basic teacher preparation should be framed and developed according to democratic and human rights principles and include insight into cultural and religious diversity in society.
10. Curricula focusing on teaching about religions and beliefs should give attention to key historical and contemporary developments pertaining to religion and belief, and reflect global and local issues. They should be sensitive to different local manifestations of religious and secular plurality found in schools and the communities they serve. Such sensitivities will help address the concerns of students, parents and other stakeholders in education.

(OSCE/ODIHR, 2007, p16-17)

Appendix C

Big ideas for religious education (Wintersgill, 2017)

Due to the depth of theorization of the 'Big Ideas', there is a risk that it would be reductive to condense the work. Thus, the following aims to provide a non-comprehensive overview:

1. **Continuity, Change and Diversity:** a multitude of diverse religions, beliefs and worldviews exist with interconnected patterns of beliefs, practices and values. As they interact and respond to new situations and challenges, changes and continuities manifest within and across those religions, beliefs and worldviews, through different times and contexts.
2. **Words and Beyond:** the beliefs, emotions, values, experiences and identities of individuals and communities can be communicated and expressed in a multitude of literal and figurative, and verbal and non-verbal ways.
3. **A Good Life:** different religions, beliefs and worldviews have differing (and at times similar) conceptualisations of what it means to live a good life or to be a good person. How individuals and communities interpret, provide guidance on and actualise those conceptualisations may differ within and across religions, beliefs and worldviews.
4. **Making Sense of Life's Experiences:** the experiences of individuals and communities are key in how religions, beliefs and worldviews are conceptualised and practiced. Religions, beliefs and worldviews can enable individuals and communities to understand life experiences, and can foster a sense of identity and belonging.
5. **Influence and Power:** religions, beliefs and worldviews interact with and influence a range of societal realms including the educational, cultural and the political. The scale of interaction and influence may vary over time and in different contexts and can have positive and negative impact(s) on individuals and communities.
6. **The Big Picture:** in order to have an overall understanding of reality, life and how and why the world is as it is, religions, beliefs and worldviews provide comprehensive accounts, sometimes referred to as 'grand narratives', that can come in the form of frameworks, key texts, life approaches, and traditions that are understood to be authoritative. Individuals and communities may interpret and actualise the accounts in a variety of ways.

Source: Cush, 2019, p. 98; Wintersgill, 2017, p. 15