



# Quality assuring an ethical education curriculum for schools in Ireland

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## Abstract

The growth of multid denominational schools internationally has led to a greater emphasis on the provision of ethical education curricula in many countries as opposed to the more traditional provision of denominational instruction. One of the main providers of multid denominational schools in Ireland is Educate Together, an organisation which currently serves as a patron body for 95 primary and 19 s level schools, catering to over 30,000 students. In the early years of the 21st century, Educate Together introduced the Learn Together ethical education curriculum for its primary schools as a key component of the Educate Together model. This curriculum encourages students to meaningfully and critically reflect upon the world around them and focuses on questions of equality, justice, sustainability and active citizenship. While guidance documents, resources and professional development for teachers were provided to schools to support the delivery of the ethical education curriculum, until recently there was no established approach to its quality assurance. It is within this context that Educate Together developed a Quality Framework for its ethos, a key aspect of which is the ethical education curriculum entitled Learn Together. This involved the development of quality standards, and statements of effective practice for ethos, and the development of an internal school self-evaluation process. This research paper explores the development of the quality framework, and the self-evaluation process used by six schools in order to evaluate the delivery of their ethical education curriculum. Documentary analysis of key evaluation documentation from each of the participating schools was used to explore the practices utilised by schools in the delivery of the ethical education curriculum; the challenges schools identified and the improvements schools planned to implement in order to improve the delivery of the ethical education curriculum. The research highlights the multiple challenges in administering and providing an ethical education while also demonstrating the effectiveness of the school self-evaluation process in identifying and addressing these challenges.

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## Introduction

This paper explores the development of a quality framework for an ethical education curriculum which was implemented in a network of multid denominational schools in Ireland. The quality framework includes quality standards for the provision of the ethical education curriculum as well as an internal school self-evaluation process where schools gather data in order to evaluate their practice and as a result, develop an ethical education school improvement plan. Of significance, this is the first attempt to quality assure an ethical education curriculum for mainstream schools in Ireland, highlighting the lack of similar examples and the paucity of research on quality assurance processes for ethics education in international literature. The challenge of exploring quality in ethics education has been highlighted (ten Have 2017) and explored (Avci 2017, 2021). Research on the engagement of school stakeholders in the identification of enablers and barriers to the implementation of a Morality Education programme (Emambokus 2021) also informs the discussion. The current study aims to add to the literature of quality and quality assurance as such concepts relate to ethical education provision, particularly in its application to mainstream school settings.

Up to recent decades, Ireland was an almost entirely mono-cultural society and the school system was overwhelmingly owned and controlled by the Catholic Church. This situation has changed to a very significant degree, as is the case in schools across Europe (Mizzi and Mercieca 2021) in part because of the decline of the power of the Church and a dramatic change in the composition of the population, due not only to immigration but to the emergence of a large, ‘post-Catholic’ sector of the population (Bourke et al. 2020). These groups are demanding a reduction of the power of the Church in education, particularly, in the field of Religious Education, ethics and school ethos and has resulted in the establishment of multid denominational ‘Educate Together’ schools which, in place of Religious Education offer an alternative ‘*Learn Together*’ ethical education curriculum at primary level.

This paper examines the literature on the delivery of ethical education curricula in schools. It outlines the background to the establishment of Educate Together schools in Ireland, the development of the *Learn Together* ethical education curriculum, and the development of the quality framework for ethos in Educate Together schools, a key feature of which is ethical education. The research findings presented here include a documentary analysis of the evaluation documentation provided by 6 primary schools (students aged 5–13) each of which had completed a self-evaluation of the implementation of the *Learn Together* ethical education curriculum. Each school completed a self-evaluation report and 5 of the 6 completed a school improvement plan. The key research questions are as follows:

- (1) What practices are utilised by schools in the delivery of the ethical education curriculum;
- (2) What challenges did schools identify in the delivery of the ethical education curriculum;
- (3) What improvements did schools plan to implement in order to improve the delivery of the ethical education curriculum.

Due to time constraints the study does not explore the long-term impact of the quality assurance process in the schools involved as the implementation of improvements was due to take place in the academic year following the completion of the school self-evaluation process.

European nations have been evolving for several decades in the direction of increasing cultural and religious plurality. This has resulted in an increase in the provision of ethical education curricula as opposed to religious education to explore matters such as ethical or moral education. It is therefore timely to consider the use of a quality framework including a school self-evaluation process, in quality assuring the implementation of an ethical education curriculum in schools. The quality framework presented here together with a description of its implementation may provide a useful model of practice for other jurisdictions.

### **Ethical education delivery in mainstream schools internationally**

Values and attitudes are commonly incorporated into curriculum frameworks internationally, recognising that the use of knowledge and skills are informed by personal, social and societal values. The values and attitudes promoted by a range of international organisations indicate that increasingly, there is shared agreement on global values such as human dignity, respect, equality, justice, cultural diversity, tolerance and democracy (OECD 2019). According to Bourke et al. (2020) “*ethical education is synonymously known as values education, character education and moral education all pointing to very paradigmatic preferences or traditions in psychology, ethical theories, curricular objectives and pedagogies*”. Ethical education curricula in schools focus on promoting such values, fostering respectful attitudes towards others, positive formation of character, building capacity for moral judgement and applying such practices (Strahovnik 2018). Halstead (1996, p. 13) defined ethical education as ‘*principles, fundamental convictions, ideals, standards or life stances which act as general guides to behaviour or as reference points in decision-making or the evaluation of beliefs or action*’. It is clear to see the impact of these definitions when looking at the goals of ethical education in the EU (Centa et al. 2019a, b) and Australia (2005). These include:

- To promote ethical reflection in educational settings.
- To enable the examination and understanding of important ethical principles, values, virtues, and ideals via critical thinking and reflection.
- To explore different values and different moral viewpoints.
- To commit to fundamental human rights.

- To promote cooperation and collaboration between all stakeholders in learning environments.
- To reflect on how to situate the individual as an active member of local and global communities (Centa et al. 2019a; Government of Australia 2005).

The overwhelming suggestion is that this approach should be used in order to develop an understanding of the role of ethics on a community, national and international level, and how best to apply and evaluate this role (Arweck and Nesbitt 2004; Bosevska and Kriewaldt 2020; Centa et al. 2019a; Cherkowski et al. 2015; Thornberg 2016). The curriculum is the primary means for transmitting the school's values and expectations and for putting those beliefs into daily practice (Bosevska and Kriewaldt 2020). The literature strongly suggests that an active learning approach be taken to the provision of an ethical education curriculum. Active learning engages students as active participants in the learning process. It is a student-centred approach to teaching and learning, beginning with students and involving them in meaningful activities that support their learning. This is in contrast to a traditional teacher-led approach which places the teacher as the "expert" who disseminates knowledge, sets tasks and decides the entire learning process, without meaningful/significant input from students (Centa et al. 2019a, p. 11). Schwiesfurth (2015) sets out a check-list of observable activities in an active learning classroom, including: experiential learning; relevance of activities and assignments to students' lives; links from prior to new knowledge made meaningful; focus on application of knowledge in individually relevant ways; focus on higher-order thinking and problem-solving; student questioning is encouraged and respected; a wide variety of activities is evident; and multiple approaches to the curriculum accommodate learner diversity and choice.

Leadership within schools is also a key component of the successful provision of ethical education (DeRoche 2000; Otte 2015; Berkovich and Eyal 2020; Francom 2016; Cherkowski et al. 2015). The importance of having the school and the community it serves agree to the values that will underpin the school's ethical education program cannot be understated, and Principals play key roles in achieving this. The school leader must help school personnel, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders agree to the values and their definitions before they are taught in the school and reinforced at home and in the community (DeRoche 2000; Francom 2016). The principal must, therefore, be a major supporter and driver of the initiative in order to build the support and establish the ethics education initiative on a firm foundation. Cherkowski et al. (2015, pp. 2–4) state that the school leader "is a moral agent in that she or he serves a master purpose or cause on behalf of numerous constituents: the children, their parents, the state (justice, social services, education, health), the community, and the employing educational authority and that leaders can serve as aspirational models of ethical behaviour for other members of the learning community."

Along with methodology and leadership, taking a whole school approach to the provision of ethical education is regarded to be a key component in the provision of its delivery (Berkovich and Eyal 2020; Bosevska and Kriewaldt 2020; Goldberg et al. 2018; Jones and Bouffard 2012; Lewis et al. 2011; Purnell et al. 2020; Sahin 2019). Pearson and Nicolson (2000) stated that, if character education programs are

not integrated into the curriculum and if stakeholders do not collaborate, there is no buy-in for the program and it will not succeed. Berkowitz and Bier (2006) found that successful implementation of a character education program requires clear guidelines and expectations for all school personnel. Thus, a whole school approach aims to integrate skill development into daily interactions and practices using active learning methodologies that include all staff, teachers, families, and children (Jones and Bouffard 2012; Meyers et al. 2016), and a whole school approach to the implementation of ethical curriculum also requires the buy-in of stakeholders (Purnell et al. 2020).

Leadership within schools, including principals, counsellors, teachers, or other people designated to lead the school's character education program must be seen as practicing the values promoted in the program while helping others to do the same (DeRoche 2000). Teachers play an important role in this process (Sahin 2019). Halstead (1996) argues that a part of the implicit values education is teachers as exemplars. It is therefore crucial that teachers are aware of that notion and act as good role models in order to be more conscious, explicit, and qualified in their role as values educators (Thornburg 2016). A key aspect of this awareness raising is naming the curriculum and its principles via meta- or professional language. Meta-language is a professional language (i.e. a language that helps professionals reflect on their practice and make predictions and theoretical descriptions and explanations regarding their practice) (Colnerud and Granström 2002). Thus, professional development in the provision of ethical education is essential for teachers to be able to conceptualise their values, the values of the school, and their roles as models of good practice.

Another aspect of the successful application of a whole school approach is community and parent involvement (Centa et al. 2019a; Government of Australia 2005; Jarmuz-Smith 2011; Lewis et al. 2011, Lovat and Clement 2008). Input from staff members, parents, and the school's advisory committee should be incorporated into the definitions of the school's character education standards (Lewis et al. 2019). Parental and community involvement are considered critical because learning occurs across multiple settings and that collaborative and problem-solving partnerships with parents and the community ensure the greatest chance of student success. This underscores the importance of consistency across the contexts of school, home, and community (Jarmuz-Smith 2011). Feuerstein (2000) found that increased communication from the school naturally increased parent involvement: Just the small act of communicating with parents about the needs of the school motivated parents to become involved. The goal, then, is to provide concrete ways for parents to engage with the provision of the curriculum, and informing them about it is key to achieving this.

As can be seen, the literature points towards key roles for the pedagogical approach, leadership, role of the teacher, professional development, a whole school approach, and parental and community involvement as being key to the provision of ethical education in schools. All of these factors were central to the design of the *Learn Together* ethical curriculum early in the century.

## Educate Together schools and the *Learn Together*, ethical education curriculum

Educate Together schools emerged as a response to the prevailing conditions of Irish society and the state provision of primary education during the second half of the 1970s (Lalor 2013; Mulcahy 2006). The context of the 1970s was one where there was a burgeoning belief that, with accession to the EEC (now the EU), returning Irish emigrants, and a more educated population, Irish society was becoming more multicultural. This led to a sense among some parents that the Catholic dominated and controlled system did not cater to this move towards multiculturalism. These parents decided to establish their own multid denominational schools, which came to be known as Educate Together (Lalor 2013, Mulcahy 2006). As Ireland has continued to change, demand for multid denominational schooling has risen exponentially.

Educate Together's charter is comprised of the following four principles.

- Multidenominational schooling, in which all children have equal right of access and in which children of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds are equally respected.
- Co-educational schooling with a commitment to encouraging all children to explore their full range of abilities and opportunities.
- Child-centred schooling with new approaches to education practices.
- Democratically run schooling that involves the active participation of parents in the daily life of the school, while having due regard for the professional roles of teachers (Educate Together 2015).

As of 2021, there are 95 primary and 19 s level Educate Together schools catering to over 30,000 students in Ireland. The Educate Together ethos determines that ethical education '*focuses on questions of equality, justice, sustainability and active citizens*' (Educate Together 2011, 2015).

The ethical education curriculum for Educate Together schools was formally developed in 2004 and is entitled *Learn Together* (Educate Together 2011) and can be accessed at the following link: <https://www.educatetogether.ie/app/uploads/2019/02/Learn-Together.pdf> The title of the curriculum reflects the Educate Together motto "*Learn Together to Live Together.*" The curriculum aims to reflect the Educate Together ethos in a curriculum and as such it strongly promotes aspects of morality and spirituality, equality and justice, belief systems and ethical approaches to the environment. The programme also teaches about different religious belief systems, as well as teaching about atheism, agnosticism and humanism.

The mission statement of the *Learn Together* curriculum states that its purpose is to:

Promote a philosophy of education in which no child is considered an outsider, which promotes the fullest development of ability irrespective of gender, class or stereotype and which encapsulates this ethos in a democratic partnership uniquely combining the involvement of parents with the professional role of teachers (Educate Together 2011).

The Educate Together ethical education curriculum highlights the importance of delivering the curriculum in the context of a caring and inclusive school ethos (Educate Together 2011, 2015). The philosophy that underpins this curriculum is one whereby children are made aware of a sense of moral and ethical standards in the areas of honesty, respect, justice, integrity, trust and responsibility. The four strands that emerged as critical to the delivery of the Educate Together ethos at curricular level were:

- The Moral and Spiritual Strand.
- The Equality and Justice Strand.
- The Belief Systems Strand.
- The Ethics and Environment Strand (Educate Together 2011).

The aim of these strands is to nurture and develop in the children a caring and responsible approach to society.

The Learn Together curriculum reflects the broader literature of ethical education provision, in that it is informed by global values (OECD 2019) and its goals mirror those set out by Centa et al. 2019a, b). Educate Together promote active engagement of learners (Schwiesfurth 2015) in the delivery of the curriculum and an overall student-centred approach reflecting and incorporating the core Educate Together values as set out in its Charter. As such, the Learn Together curriculum is a key vehicle for transmitting the schools values and expectations and exploring how these values apply in the real world (Bosevska and Kriewaldt 2020). The Learn Together curriculum recommends a comparative approach to teaching about religions and beliefs attempt to provide ethics education without promoting one faith perspective over another. The curriculum is specifically designed to be an outline curriculum or framework as opposed to a detailed programme or teaching manual (McNamara et al. 2012). It utilises a spiral approach to curriculum design ensuring that students of all ages explore belief systems but to a more in-depth degree as they get older [National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2015]. The approach to delivery in Irish schools reflects the Integrative Ethical Education Model (Lapsley and Narvaez 2004, 2006). This approach combines the traditional character education focus with the rational moral education focus. It promotes the establishment of a caring relationship with students within a supportive environment, which supports students to move to greater understanding of ethical issues as well as greater autonomy.

An evaluation study of implementation of the Learn Together curriculum by McNamara et al. (2012) found that it was well regarded in schools, was perceived to embody the spirit and ethos of Educate Together and that it provided a flexible and relevant framework to underpin curriculum development in the area.

### **Quality assuring the ethical education curriculum in Educate Together schools**

“Quality assurance involves the systematic review of educational programmes and processes to maintain and improve their quality, equity and efficiency” (European

Commission 2017, p. 2). While approaches to quality assurance vary according to their purpose and context a number of common elements are evident in the literature. Common features of quality frameworks include quality standards (also referred to as quality indicators, evaluation criteria, and statements of effective practice), internal evaluation and improvement process; data gathering tools; resources to support improvement and an external evaluation mechanism (OECD 2013). Combined, these features offer a systematic approach to ensuring the quality of educational provision and provide educational organisations with an evidence informed approach for evaluating and improving the quality of the education provided. National quality frameworks, serving a national network of schools can help to clarify national expectations and promote consistency of process and practice.

In the 2019/2020 school year Educate Together commissioned the Dublin City University (DCU) Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection (EQI) to develop a National Quality Framework for Ethos in Educate Together Schools, including the ethical education curriculum which forms a core aspect of the school ethos. Following widespread consultation with key stakeholders, the quality framework was developed and is outlined in *Ethos SSE in Educate Together Schools: Handbook* (O'Brien 2020) the core aspects of which are as follows:

- The Educate Together Charter (for primary and post-primary schools).
- The ethos quality standards and statements of effective practice.
- The ethos self-evaluation process.
- Educate Together national supports for ethos

The implementation of the quality framework is also dependent on a number of school context factors which include:



Fig. 1 Quality framework for Ethos in educate together schools



- The centrality of the Educate Together ethos among members of the school community.
- The school organisational factors.
- Leadership of the SSE process

Together, these elements help to ensure that the Educate Together ethos underpins the values, beliefs and practices within all Educate Together schools. (Fig. 1)

The Educate Together Ethos Quality Standards are set out in Table 1 under six domains one of which is the domain of Ethical Education.

Each domain is further elaborated into statements of effective practice. As this study focuses on quality assuring the ethical education curriculum the detail of this domain is outlined in Table 2. This sets out the expectations for all Educate Together schools on the implementation of the ethical education curriculum and also provides a set of statements against which schools can evaluate their practice in this regard.

The statements of effective practice do not include an outline of the content to be taught nor does it specify the methodological approaches to be used, rather these are set out in the *Learn Together* curriculum document (Educate Together 2011). The nature of the standards and statements of effective practice outlined above are not “subject to measurement” but rather “represent certain general requirements or expectations regarding the attributes of the structure, process, and outcomes” (Avci 2021). The Quality Framework was piloted in twenty Educate Together schools in 2020, during which six primary schools selected to self-evaluate the Ethical Education domain, while the other fourteen schools evaluated other key domains as outlined in Table 1. Each of these schools evaluated the implementation of their ethical curriculum by gathering data from key stakeholders such as staff, students, parents and Boards of Management. Data was mainly gathered using surveys designed to establish stakeholder perspectives on the delivery of the ethical curriculum in the school. Each school collated a school self-evaluation report and a school improvement plan as part of their self-evaluation process.

### School Self-Evaluation (SSE)

Due to the fact that SSE is at the heart of this research, looking at what its goals are, and who is involved in the process is necessary. SSE is an internal process which aims to ensure quality, improve the teaching–learning process and increase school performance, and has been adopted as a key element of quality frameworks of mainstream education in many jurisdictions (Brown et al. 2020; Kurun and Cinker 2019; O’Brien et al. 2018; Sampaio and Leite 2017). SSE is considered a valid and reliable evaluation in the development of educational practices and the improvement of student learning at all levels. The concept of accountable use of public resources and improving the quality of education are also key considerations in this process (Brown et al. 2020; Kurun and Cinker 2019). Moreover, increasing expectations from schools, more educated parents, evidence-based decision-making, technological developments and looking after commercial interests in education are the factors

**Table 1** Educate together quality framework: domains and quality standards (O'Brien 2020)

Educate Together Ethos Quality Standards	
Domain	Standard
1 Equality	All students are afforded equality of esteem in all aspects of school life, where individual difference and diversity is recognised, mutually respected, and welcomed
2 Ethical Education	The Educate Together Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum is effectively planned and delivered in a collaborative, coordinated and cohesive manner
3 Child/Learner Centred	The school provides a child/learner-centred experience
4 Democratic Structure	Formal democratic structures operate within the school involving key stakeholder groups at various levels, for the benefit of the school and its students
5 Participation	The school promotes the participation of key stakeholders in the life of the school
6 Sustainable Practice	Sustainable practice is promoted across the school community

**Table 2** Educate Together statements of effective practice for Ethical Education

Domain 2: Ethical education	Statements of effective practice	Statements of highly effective practice
Standard: The Educate Together Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum is effectively planned and delivered in a collaborative, coordinated, and cohesive manner		
2(a) The Educate Together Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum is delivered as a fundamental aspect of the overall curriculum of the school and is promoted and monitored by the principal and board of management		The Educate Together Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum is <b>consistently and effectively</b> delivered as a fundamental aspect of the overall curriculum of the school and is promoted and monitored by the principal and board of management
2(b) Responsibility for the coordination of the Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum is established in the school. Training and resources are provided to support staff responsible for coordination		Responsibility for the coordination of the Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum is established in the school. Training and resources are provided to support staff responsible for coordination to <b>effectively carry out their role</b>
2(c) Members of the school community participate in local and national training/information events, including with other Educate Together schools, to develop the capacity of the school to implement the Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum. Teachers feel confident in their ability to plan for and teach the Ethical Education/ Learn Together curriculum		Members of the school community participate in local and national training/information events, including with other Educate Together schools, to develop the capacity of the school to implement the Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum. <b>On an ongoing basis</b> , teachers feel confident in their ability to plan for and teach the Ethical Education/ Learn Together curriculum
2(d) All teachers receive induction on the Ethical Education/ Learn Together curriculum		All teachers receive <b>comprehensive</b> induction in relation to the Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum
2(e) Teachers collaborate to develop a documented plan for the delivery of the Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum, including coordinated and cohesive planning for each year group (on an individual school or on a cluster basis). The plan incorporates all strands of the curriculum, outlining how they will be taught and assessed. The involvement of parents/guardians and other members of the community in the delivery is included as appropriate. The plan is shared with the school community		Teachers collaborate to develop a documented plan for the delivery of the Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum, including coordinated and cohesive planning for each year group (on an individual school or on a cluster basis). The plan incorporates all strands of the curriculum, outlining how they will be taught and assessed. The involvement of parents/guardians and other members of the community in the delivery is included as appropriate. The plan is shared with the school community, <b>its implementation is regularly reviewed to ensure that it is current and the plan is updated to reflect new developments and training</b>
2(f) In addition to timetabled classes, the implementation of the Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum is integrated into the overall curriculum of the school. The Ethical Education/ Learn Together curriculum is referred to at assemblies and other relevant events and activities of the school		In addition to timetabled classes, the implementation of the Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum is <b>consistently and purposefully</b> integrated into the overall curriculum of the school. The Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum is referred to at assemblies and other relevant events and activities of the school

**Table 2** (continued)

Domain 2: Ethical education	
Standard: The Educate Together Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum is effectively planned and delivered in a collaborative, coordinated, and cohesive manner	
Statements of effective practice	Statements of highly effective practice
2(g) The Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum is taught in an engaging and supportive learning environment, where students are encouraged to gain personal understandings, evaluate information, and respectfully articulate opinions. A range of quality resources are developed and used. Displays and images throughout the school promote the Ethical Education/ Learn Together curriculum and the related work of students	The Ethical Education/Learn Together curriculum is taught in an engaging and supportive learning environment, where students are encouraged to gain personal understandings, evaluate information, respectfully articulate opinions and <b>extend the learning beyond the classroom</b> . A wide range of <b>high-quality</b> resources are developed and used. Displays and images throughout the school promote the Ethical Education/ Learn Together curriculum and the related work of students

O'Brien (2020, pp. 12–13).

Word that differentiates effective practice from highly effective practice are indicated in bold type



**Fig. 2** The six-step school self-evaluation process (DES 2016a)

that have triggered the widespread use of SSE as the key improvement mechanism in many jurisdictions (OECD 2013).

As an improvement cycle, SSE typically involves gathering data that allows the school to judge how it is doing in relation to a specific area; to identify strengths and areas for improvement; and to develop and implement actions that lead to improvement. It is performed primarily by school teachers and management in collaboration with other school stakeholders such as parents, students and other members of the school community. It can take place at the classroom or school level and in Ireland the latter is the norm resulting in the development of whole school action plans which are implemented across the school (O'Brien et al. 2019). SSE was formally introduced in 2012 to mainstream schools in Ireland and is now a requirement for all recognised schools including Educate Together schools. This cycle of improvement is reflected in the six-step SSE process outlined by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in the School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016–2020 (DES 2016a, b, c, d) (Fig. 2)

The SSE process usually generates 2 key documents for the school. The first is an SSE Report, which sets out the data that the school gathered for the evaluation, and which stakeholders were involved. All schools gathered data for their SSE process using centrally prepared survey tools (for students, staff and parents) and focus group questions which were made available to schools to support the SSE process. Based on evidence arising from the data collected, the SSE Report outlines what the school is doing well in relation to the domain being evaluated and areas for improvement. A School Improvement Plan is then developed based on the areas for improvement. Within this document, schools typically set out targets and actions for improvement, using baseline data from the evaluation. The School improvement

**Table 3** School providing SSE report and school improvement plan

School participation						
	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6
School Self-Evaluation (SSE)	X	X	X	X	X	X
School Improvement Plan (SIP)	X		X	X	X	X

plan also sets out a timeframe for the implementation of actions and records how implementation of actions will be monitored and how impact will be measured.

## Methodology

The methodology used in this research is documentary analysis. On completion of the SSE process in each school, the key documents that recorded the evaluation and improvement plan for each school were submitted to the evaluation team as outlined in Table 3. In total, 11 documents were analysed. Six primary schools completed an SSE Report and five of these schools completed a School Improvement Plan (SIP) on the provision of their *Learn Together* curriculum. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), documentary analysis enables the researcher to obtain the language and words of participants and represents data to which participants have given attention. Bruan and Clarke (2013), and Cohen et al. (2018) go on to state that participant generated textual data can be a relatively quick way to generate data from a large, geographically dispersed group. They stated that people can participate in their own time and space, and the potential for standardization and verification can make it easier to analyse for patterns. However, Creswell and Creswell (2018) also stated that not all participants are equally articulate and perceptive, and some materials may be incomplete. Added to this, Braun and Clarke (2013) stated that there may be limited scope with data collection using document analysis, due to the lack of ability to probe participants or ask unexpected questions. This leads to the researcher having a comparative lack of control over the collection of data relative to interviews or focus groups.

Within this dataset, a thematic analysis of the SSE Reports and School Improvement Plans was undertaken in order to identify themes and patterns of meaning. Pre-determined codes were guided by the findings of the literature review in order to extrapolate the required data to address the research question (Braun and Clarke 2013; O'Brien 2020). Based on the key research questions outlined previously, the key themes that will be presented in this study are as follows:

1. Current practice.
2. Challenges.

### 3. Actions for improvement.

## Findings and discussion

Following completion of the SSE process, schools were asked to submit a copy of their SSE documents. All six schools made available an SSE Report. However, only five schools submitted a School Improvement Plan (SIP) (Table 3). The 6th school reported that they were unable to complete it at the time, due to the COVID19 pandemic which caused the widespread closure of schools in Ireland in the early part of 2020. The SSE Report contains data relating to current practice and challenges whereas the SIP contains data relating to planned improvements.

The data from the SSE Reports and SIPs found that the most commonly occurring themes are related to the *Learn Together* curriculum being delivered as a fundamental aspect of the overall school ethos and curriculum, parent and student voice and the presence of an engaging and supportive learning environment, communication related to and awareness raising of the *Learn Together* curriculum, access to quality resources, and the inclusion of professional development for teachers in their delivery of the *Learn Together* curriculum. All of these themes correlated with the standards for Ethical Education from the Ethos SSE in Educate Together Schools Handbook, and the following section highlights examples of how each school articulated their findings in relation to these themes, and how they related to the literature.

## Current practice

The findings related to current practice in the schools arose mainly from the SSE Reports. One of the key findings is the central importance of ethical education in the participating schools, with universal agreement on the importance of the *Learn Together* curriculum. When considering the proposed role of ethical education put forward by the Australian Government (2005), and the European Union (Centa et al. 2019a, 2019b), in relation to justice, equality, human rights, and as a general guide to behaviour in evaluating actions and beliefs, it is unsurprising that this component of the school curriculum is highly regarded. Within this context, school 1 stated that “the *Learn Together* curriculum is delivered as a fundamental aspect of the overall curriculum of the school”, and school 3 stated that “all the teaching and non-teaching staff think the *Learn Together* curriculum is highly valued in our school and is central to the Educate Together ethos of our school”.

The data also suggests that features of whole school planning that contribute to the delivery of the *Learn Together* curriculum is also an aspect of current practice, with three of the six schools expressing a belief that the *Learn Together* curriculum is effectively integrated into the overall curriculum of the schools (schools 1, 4 and 5). School 4 stated that “*Learn Together* is timetabled in all classes and integrated into the overall curriculum of the school”.

The importance and centrality of student voice in the implementation and evaluation of the *Learn Together* curriculum is indicative of active learning, whereby,

students are asked to take part in meaningful activities, and their experiences and opinions are respected and listened to (Centa et al. 2019a, b; Schweisfurth 2015). With this in mind, student voice had a strong representation in five of the six schools, all of whom stated that the majority of students have positive feelings towards the *Learn Together* curriculum, with the majority of students in school 2, 3, 4, and 5 stating that they learn something new and beneficial, and enjoy the lessons in the *Learn Together* curriculum.

Parents' opinions were also gathered in five of the six schools (schools 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6), and, similarly highlight their importance in the evaluation of the *Learn Together* curriculum. This is in keeping with Jarmuz-Smith's (2011) assertion that learning occurs across multiple settings and that collaborative and problem-solving partnerships with parents and the community is beneficial for students. The data suggests that parents have an overwhelmingly positive disposition towards the *Learn Together* curriculum. Indeed, school 3 stated that 92% of parents agreed "that the Learn Together Curriculum is as important as any other aspect of the curriculum in our school". Additionally, a majority of parents in three of the schools stated that the *Learn Together* curriculum was an important factor in sending their children to an Educate Together school (for school 2, 3 and 5 this figure was 67%, 78%, and 85%, respectively). This is an interesting finding in the context of the Irish state making attempts to provide parents more choice so as to fulfil the constitutional obligation to ensure parents are in a position to send their children to schools whose ethos is compatible with their personal beliefs.

Taking a whole school approach by demonstrating buy-in from the entire school (Purnell et al. 2020), the implementation of active learning by using assemblies to make statements about the values of the school (Arweck and Nesbitt 2004), and strong leadership through the support that needs to be given to ethical curriculum in order to build support for it (DeRoche 2000; Francom 2016) were all strongly represented in the data. With this in mind, the data from current practice suggests that aspects of communication and raising awareness were key findings, with all schools reporting that teaching staff believe that key principles of the *Learn Together* curriculum are referred to at assemblies, although to varying degrees (from 100% in school 3, to 46% in school 6).

## Challenges

All six schools stated that planning the curriculum across all year groups was a challenge for a variety of reasons. Schools 1, 3, 5 and 6 stated that there was not enough coordination throughout the school in terms of assessment, sharing knowledge, or curriculum strands, and that, consequently, the systematic and incremental delivery of the *Learn Together* curriculum was not well planned. In school 4, 30% of staff did not know the *Learn Together* curriculum was central to ethos or as important as other subjects. This is indicative of the role of leadership in ensuring standardisation of the curriculum and assessment, and of fostering collaboration, which were highlighted by DeRoche (2000), Francom (2016) and Cherkowski et al. (2015). They stated that school leaders act as moral agents for all of the stakeholders involved,



play a practical role in the acquisition, development and access to resources, and ensure consensus on the values that will underpin the school's ethical education. This lack of coordination and leadership, which was found in the participating schools, also compromises what Halstead (1996) argues is an implicit aspect of ethical education, i.e. teachers as exemplars. This requires teachers to act as good role models in order to be more conscious, explicit, and qualified in their role as ethical educators.

Another key finding from the data which was coded under challenges, related to communication, and demonstrates that this is also a key factor which impacts multiple aspects of the provision of the *Learn Together* curriculum. This is particularly true in terms of enhancing the role of parents in the delivery of the curriculum (Jarmuz-Smith 2011). Two schools stated that a significant minority of parents are unaware of the *Learn Together* curriculum (29% in school 3, and 39% in school 5), with school 2 stating that 72% of parents reported not knowing who was responsible for the coordination of the *Learn Together* curriculum. Indeed, school 5 stated that many parents 'would like to receive more information from the school regarding content of the curriculum, particularly online, and what is being taught during particular weeks/terms.' Indeed, a finding from school 3 regarding the amount of parents who are unaware of the *Learn Together* curriculum is that 'The conclusion of the SSE team is that while the whole school planning for *Learn Together* has been quite strong in the area of Belief Systems, a more structured approach to the delivery of the other strands throughout the school is now needed.'

The suggested relationship between access to quality resources, professional development, and teachers' confidence in the delivery of the *Learn Together* curriculum was another interesting finding that emerged from the data related to challenges in the SSE Reports. These findings correlate with the key role of leadership in terms of ensuring buy-in from teachers, the development and access to resources, and providing opportunities for collaboration (Cherkowski et al.2015; DeRoche 2000; Francom 2016).

### **Actions for improvement**

Unsurprisingly, all five schools have put forward actions for improvement related to communication, and these actions reflect the significant impact of good communication in the provision of the *Learn Together* curriculum. In this regard, school 1 has planned actions including: all staff registering for the *Educate Together Newsletter*, termly teacher meetings, a continuation of *Learn Together* themed assemblies, and all classes updating their *Learn Together* notice board monthly. School 3 planned to highlight the *Learn Together* curriculum throughout the school, make efforts to name the curriculum and its themes in school assemblies, communicate core values to parents through the Principal's weekly update, and update parents on the school website. School 4 and 6 are planning to share the whole school plan with the school community in a bid to increase awareness and importance of *Learn Together* curriculum. This will be supported by discussing a value of the month at assemblies,

displaying values on notice boards, and including information about the curriculum in the school newsletter. School 5 is planning to provide a copy of the whole school plan and *Learn Together* curriculum to all staff in the school, put a link to the *Learn Together* curriculum and the calendar for assemblies on the school website, and encourage teachers to have Ethical Education homework at least once a month so parents are aware of what is being covered. School 6 also plans to use their website to raise awareness of the *Learn Together* curriculum by putting a link to the curriculum on their homepage. All of these suggestions correlate with findings from Berkowitz and Bier (2006), who stated that ethical education should take prominent positions in newsletters, websites, classroom notice boards and school orientations, and can showcase students' character education activities at home and school.

Addressing access to and the quality of resources and professional development were also actions for improvement that all schools are planning to take. School 1, 4, 5, and 6 plan to organise their resources using a widely available online platform to make them more accessible for staff, with school 3 stating that they will provide resources suggestions and links for staff. Schools 1, 5, and 6 plan to categorise library books by core value to make it easier for students to engage with the curriculum.

Improving the development and implementation of a whole school plan was a strong theme in the actions for improvement data that was coded, and included improvements related to assessment, awareness, leadership, and curriculum integration. School 1 plans to include a more systematic approach to the assessment of the *Learn Together* curriculum while school 3 plans to ensure a more equal emphasis on all 4 strands of the *Learn Together* curriculum. School 5 plans to designate a member of staff as an Ethical Education Coordinator to facilitate the implementation of the whole school plan, while school 6 plans to update the *Learn Together* curriculum, provide a copy to all teaching staff, clarify timetabling and decide on a consistent name across the whole school to display visual and class timetables. Again, the importance of leadership in coordinating all of these improvements, and of professional development in clarifying good practice in terms of assessing the programs are fundamental to achieving these goals. The central roles of communication, teacher buy-in, parental involvement, and active learning are also worth highlighting.

## Conclusion

As indicated above Educate Together is a relatively new network of schools in Ireland and one of the first to introduce ethical education as a curricular subject in primary schools. Currently it controls almost 100 out of a total of nearly three thousand primary schools in Ireland. It has sought to develop an appropriate ethical education curriculum in order to provide ethical education for its multid denominational student population. Importantly, an increasing demand for a more secular approach to mainstream education is in demand, with increasing numbers of opting for a multid denominational model. Moreover, there is considerable pressure on Catholic schools to become more like Educate Together schools to cope with the far greater diversity of

children who must, for lack of any option, attend a Catholic school. In this context it was timely to develop a quality framework for ethos in Educate Together schools which includes a key focus on its ethical education curriculum, *Learn Together*. Given that SSE is a mandatory requirement for Irish schools as a key improvement mechanism, it makes sense that this improvement process would be applied in the quality assurance of the Educate Together Ethos and its ethical education curriculum. SSE allows for schools to gather data from its key stakeholder groups, to systematically evaluate data in order to make evaluative judgements and to identify and then implement improvements.

Overall, the findings indicate that there is a strong correlation between the emergent themes in the SSE Reports and SIPs and the dominant themes from the literature review, and that there are some similarities, yet meaningful differences throughout the six participating schools in some of the findings. The data from the SSE Reports suggest that students and parents' voice were consistently regarded as key elements in the evaluation of the *Learn Together* curriculum, and responding to their needs was a key driving force throughout the SIPs. The data also suggest that communication and whole school plans displayed substantial variation and overlap in their current practice and challenges within and across the schools, and consequently had strong representation in areas requiring more support and actions for improvement. The issues that arose within these themes are related to teachers, non-teaching staff, parents, students, coordination, assessment, curriculum and integration. This led to an equally diverse set of suggestions for areas requiring more support and actions for improvement. On the other hand, issues related to resources and professional development were more focussed in that the data exclusively related to access to quality resources and training. This led to more uniform findings in areas that need more support and actions for improvement.

In summary, the analysis of key SSE documents provide information about the common challenges experienced by schools in the implementation of the *Learn Together* curriculum as well as the actions that were identified by each school to address these challenges.

In terms of the overall Quality Framework, it can be argued that the quality domains, standards and statements of effective practice establish, for the first time, national expectations and a common language for schools in the Educate Together network, in terms of what their ethos may look like in practice. This article focuses only on one domain, ethical education. The Quality Framework provides schools with a mechanism to systematically evaluate the ethical education curriculum in their schools, identifying strengths and areas for improvement based on mainly perception data collected from key stakeholders. Prior to engaging in SSE, the six schools involved had never previously conducted a systematic evaluation of the implementation of the ethical education curriculum in their respective schools. The documents analysed as part of this research study indicate that schools demonstrated the capacity to conduct a collaborative SSE process involving a range of key stakeholders in each school. All six schools were able to analyse the data they had gathered in order to complete an Evaluation Report and five of the six schools demonstrated the capacity to document a School Improvement Plan including targets and actions for improvement.

The findings of this study suggest that school self-evaluation as an improvement process can be usefully applied to the evaluation of a schools ethical education curriculum. While it may appear that the study is promoting a culture of performativity often associated with quality assurance systems, a concern highlighted by Mizzi and Mercieca (2021), the low stakes accountability environment for schools in Ireland suggest that teachers engaging in the SSE process have little fear in terms of consequences arising from such internal evaluations. The authors recommend that the SSE process undertaken successfully by schools in this study may be relevant for all 114 schools in the Educate Together network in Ireland. Further, this approach may offer a model for developing an ethos quality framework for other networks of schools in Ireland and internationally.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

**Ethical approval** Ethical Approval from Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. All research was carried out in accordance with Dublin City University research ethics guidelines applicable when human participants are involved.

**Informed consent** Informed consent was obtained from all participants in this study.

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