

Is There a Future for Christian Religious Education in Irish Post-Primary Schools?

The Irish State is committed to ensure that all children, in accordance with their abilities' should have 'formative experiences in moral, religious and spiritual education',¹ while maintaining due regard for the rights of the child and their parents to freedom of religion. This holistic approach to education allows for the inclusion of Religious Education as a legitimate activity of the State.

Within the context of the new Junior Cycle, the recently published Specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education² offers a real opportunity for the Catholic community to look at the provision of Christian Religious Education (CRE) in Catholic post primary schools.

The new Junior Cycle

The Irish National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has taken an integrated approach towards the new Junior Cycle, which replaces the Junior Certificate programme. Traditionally, learning was centred on a series of independent subjects with their own aims and course objectives. With the new Junior Cycle, this approach has dramatically changed. The *Framework for Junior Cycle* is based on a set of 8 principles, 24 statements of learning and 8 key skills, describing what all Junior Cycle children should learn.³ This provides a structure for schools to design their own Junior Cycle curriculum. The Junior Cycle curriculum that a school provides must honour the 8 principles, meet all 24 statements of learning, and cultivate the 8 key skills in a way that honours its characteristic spirit and meets the learning needs and interests of its students.⁴ This implies lots of flexibility for individual schools. For many, Religious Education has a significant role to play in the provision of such a curriculum.

Religious Education in the new Junior Cycle

The learning paradigm of the Junior Cycle is very different from that of the old Junior Certificate. During Junior Cycle, the vast majority of students will learn through:

- A number of subjects or a combination of subjects and short courses that are broadly aligned with Level 3 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Religious Education has been developed as one of these subjects.
- An area of learning called Wellbeing: The *Framework for Junior Cycle* makes provision for wellbeing both as a principle and a curricular subject. According to the accompanying

¹Notes

Government of Ireland, *Charting our Education Future: White Paper on Education* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1992), p. 50.

² National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Ireland. *Specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education* (Dublin: NCCA, 2019).

³ Department of Education and Skills (DES), Ireland. *Framework for Junior Cycle* (Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, 2015).
<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Framework-for-Junior-Cycle-2015.pdf>

⁴ Department of Education and Skills (DES), Ireland. Circular 0024/16 (Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, 2016).
https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Archived-Circulars/cl0024_2016.pdf

Guidelines for Wellbeing ‘student wellbeing is present when students realise their abilities, take care of their physical wellbeing, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and have a sense of purpose and belonging to a wider community’.⁵ Currently, schools are obliged to provide a minimum 300 hours of timetabled wellbeing for children over the course of the 3 year programme. From 2020 that provision will increase to 400 hours.

· Other Learning Experiences. This includes participation in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities such as team sports, choir, school musical, Gaisce Awards and BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition.

All of these can be documented in the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) that is issued to students on completion of Junior Cycle.

Schools have discretion to decide what combination of subjects, short courses and other learning experiences will be provided for in their three-year programme. The vision and flexibility of the *Framework* permits a Junior Cycle where for some schools, Religious Education will be a subject; for others it might take a different form. It allows for a situation where for example the patron of a school or a collective of patrons might design a short course(s) in Religious Education that might be more formative/catechetical in nature. Religious Education learning and activities can also form part of Other Learning Experiences.

According to the Wellbeing Guidelines, elements of wellbeing learning or activities could take place in Religious Education, including once-off events, such as school retreats.⁶ Wellbeing also provides an important lens through which aspects of RE might be understood and experienced.

The Junior Cycle programme designed by any school should be informed by the *Framework*, the particular learning needs and interests of the students and must reflect the characteristic spirit of the school.⁷ Provision for any aspect of the programme, including Religious Education, should be governed by these parameters. Characteristic spirit here refers to the school’s mission and vision statements, and to the living out of the school’s founding intention and its re-articulation in a contemporary context by trustees, stakeholders and members of the school community.⁸ In other words, the new Junior Cycle allows for an RE programme that honours the Catholic characteristic spirit of a school.

Schools with a Catholic characteristic spirit, have a right and a responsibility to provide RE in the Christian tradition.⁹ To do this, they need an intentionally rich programme, inclusive and welcoming of those from other faith traditions and worldviews, encouraging deeper ecumenical and interreligious engagement as students mature. Ideally such a programme would lie within the parameters of the Specification so that in Catholic schools, Religious Education remains a subject examinable by the state with the same credibility and resources as Religious Education in schools under state patronage.

⁵ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Ireland. *Guidelines for Wellbeing in Junior Cycle* (Dublin: NCCA, 2017), 17

⁶ *Guidelines for Wellbeing*, p.50.

⁷ Circular 0024/16.

⁸ Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference. *Religious Education and the Framework for Junior Cycle* (Dublin: Veritas, 2017).

⁹ Ibid.

Catholic schools have diverse populations. Not all students or their families wish to take CRE. It is always a right that students can opt out. In such cases, a school may decide to offer an alternative programme.

Religious Education as a Subject in the new Junior Cycle

Like all subjects in the new Junior Cycle, Religious Education follows the approach and requirements of the *Framework*; like all subjects, it is designed according to a set of specifications.

The role of the NCCA, on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills, is to put in place a Religious Education specification that is appropriate for all students, whether or not they have a particular religious commitment. In other words, this is a state syllabus, designed for students of all faiths and none, believers and non-believers alike. The specification describes the aims of Religious Education as follows:

Religious Education aims to develop knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values to enable young people to come to an understanding of religion and its relevance to life, relationships, society and the wider world. It aims to develop the students' ability to examine questions of meaning, purpose and relationships, to help students understand, respect and appreciate people's expression of their beliefs, and to facilitate dialogue and reflection on the diversity of beliefs and values that inform responsible decision-making and ways of living.¹⁰

As an instrument of the state, the Specification for Religious Education is written to accommodate all worldviews – religious and non-religious. As far as the state is concerned, a school can determine if it provides the subject at all or if it is to be mandatory or optional for any particular class group or year. For Community and ETB schools, including those under the joint patronage of a Catholic authority,

Religious Education, where it is offered by a school, must be delivered in the timetabled class periods without any religious instruction or worship of any religion forming any part of class activity. This means that any practice or material that would introduce religious instruction or worship cannot be used in the future. Religious Education will be subject to inspection including its delivery according to this circular.¹¹

The implications for schools under such patronage are serious indeed. The Bishops' guidelines of 1999 point out that the Religious Education of Catholic students in second-level school should always seek to support and inform their faith.¹² *Share the Good News: The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* advises that Religious Education should always support the faith life of the Catholic student, 'strengthening the harmony between what is

¹⁰ *Specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education*, p.7.

¹¹ Department of Education and Skills (DES), Ireland. Circular 0062/18 (Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, 2018), p.3.

¹² Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. *Guidelines for the Faith Formation and Development of Catholic Students* (Dublin: Veritas, 1999).

known, who one is becoming and how one lives one's life.'¹³ This priority, so central to Catholic Religious Education, is not and cannot be reflected within the aim of Religious Education as a state subject. The state draws a definite distinction between Religious Education and faith development, or any type of learning into a faith community; the Christian view sees Religious Education and faith formation as intertwined.

Religious Education and the Catholic School

Currently, about 50% of post-primary schools in Ireland are voluntary secondary schools; most of these are under the patronage of Catholic dioceses, religious orders or trust bodies. The remainder are under the patronage of other religious denominations or Educate Together. Catholic schools have many opportunities to foster faith formation beyond formal Religious Education. The focus here is on Religious Education as a hallmark of the Catholic school and essential expression of its ethos.

Catholic schools build upon the foundation provided by family first and parish, and work collaboratively with parents/guardians in the Religious Education of their children. *Share the Good News* outlines an educational vision for the Irish Church where the home, school, and parish have differing and connected roles.¹⁴

Schools with a Catholic characteristic spirit, whose founding intention is based on and engages with the Catholic faith, have a right and a responsibility to provide RE in the Christian tradition, open to other faith traditions and none, using pedagogies and approaches appropriate to the Guidelines for the Faith Formation and Development of Catholic Students from the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference.¹⁵

Catholic Religious Education consists of two distinct but complementary dimensions, namely an educational dimension and a faith formation dimension.¹⁶ This is explained well in the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*. The first dimension, is a form of Religious Education which focuses on the teachings and values of the Catholic Church: 'It enables children to learn skills of spiritual, moral and religious literacy which informs their minds and enhances their understanding of Christian faith, enabling them to develop an informed, mature response to God's call to relationship.'¹⁷ Certain learning outcomes in a CRE curriculum reflect this first dimension.

The second dimension, faith formation,

'forms children's characters in the virtues and values of Jesus; supports their faith development, and helps them to experience what it means to be a member of the Church community called to witness to Jesus in service of others (SGN 39, 101). In the context of the Catholic school, Religious Education is part of and completed by

¹³ Irish Episcopal Conference. *Share the Good News: The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 2010), #38.

¹⁴ Ibid., #91-98, 100.

¹⁵ *Religious Education and the Framework for Junior Cycle*, p.14.

¹⁶ *Share the Good News*, #38, 39, 99, 100.

¹⁷ Irish Episcopal Conference. *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 2015), p.14.

other forms of the ministry of the word (catechesis, liturgical celebration, social justice activities etc.).¹⁸

Further learning outcomes in a CRE curriculum reflect this second (faith formation) dimension. This dual dimensional approach underpins many contemporary CRE curricula and programmes. The Credo series, now operational in Catholic High Schools in the United States, is one example. Completed in 2017, this theology curriculum is now being used in some 250 U.S. Catholic High Schools across a number of dioceses. Credo, like similar programmes, is written to a Curriculum Framework for Young People of High School Age.¹⁹ The introduction to every Credo chapter includes a short list of ‘Learning Outcomes’ and ‘Faith Formation Outcomes’.

Alone, the state specification for Religious Education does not and cannot accommodate this approach. As an instrument of the state it does not and cannot prioritise one religious tradition or worldview over another and it does not have a faith formation function. This is the crux of the matter.

The Guidelines for Religious Education in a Catholic Primary School Context offered by the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* are helpful when imagining Catholic Religious Education in second level schools; the principles are the same for Catholic Religious Education at all levels. For instance

Catholic Religious Education entails true freedom

- The Catholic school respects and supports the right of parents/guardians to withdraw their children from Religious Education.

Catholic Religious Education is theocentric

- The mystery of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is the centre of the curriculum.

Catholic Religious Education as a divine pedagogy

- Religious education must remain faithful to God’s Revelation and Church teaching must be presented in its fullness, not fragmented or impoverished.

Jesus Christ is ‘at the centre of all teaching for Christians’

- The person of Jesus has priority at each and every stage of the curriculum.

The Church’s liturgy is an essential element of Catholic Religious Education

- Children become familiar with short responses and parts of liturgy by experiencing and using them.

The experience of prayer is integral to Catholic Religious Education

- Jesus is presented as the model for prayer.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). *Doctrinal Elements of a Curriculum Framework for the Development of Catechetical Materials for Young People of High School Age* (Washington D.C, USCCB, 2008).

Catholic Religious Education develops ecumenical and inter-religious awareness and respect for the cultures and religions of others

• Catholic teachers do not present all religions as the same or as equally valid but reflect the reality of Christianity's relationship to other world religions, whereby some are considered to be closer to Christianity than others.²⁰

Any Christian Religious Education programme needs to reflect these principles. The state specification is not designed along these lines. That is not the role of a state syllabus. The challenge for the Catholic community is to design a CRE framework and ensuing programme, reflective of these principles, for young people of Junior Cycle age. Both the vision of the Junior Cycle and flexibility of the specification allow for such an approach.

Catholic Religious Education at work

Good Christian Religious Education is not insular or inward looking. It highlights the importance of understanding and appreciating the richness of major religious traditions, and of engagement with the secular response to human experience. Open to all students regardless of their commitment to any particular worldview, it can help to educate them for life in an increasingly diverse society.

Critical evaluation is essential, especially of the shaping influence of culture on people's thinking, spirituality and behaviour. A good Christian Religious Education programme is robust, lively and engaging, emphasising spiritual experience rooted in the Christian but also other religious traditions. For example

- Outreach and immersion programmes in social justice
- Positive and varied experiences of prayer
- Pilgrimage
- Meaningful reflection
- Good Liturgy – with music and active participation.

The work of good Religious Education teachers across the country demonstrates the appeal of this type of experience and its contribution to the holistic development of students.

Catholic Religious Education needs an intentionally rich Catholic programme, open to learning from other faith traditions, and ways of engaging positively with the world, and at the same time, Catholic in pedagogy and in content. This is separate but related to the curricular subject that is Wellbeing. This also needs a lot of thought and attentive planning. Wellbeing in Catholic schools should be interpreted through a Christians lens.

Assessment

All subjects in Junior Cycle will follow the overall assessment approach suggested by the *Framework for Junior Cycle*; that is, students present for two Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs) in second and third year and for the externally assessed, state-certified Assessment Task and Final Assessment at the end of third year. The *Framework* outlines how this

²⁰ *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*, pp25-29.

approach seeks to recognise and value the different types of learning that take place in schools, and allow for a more rounded assessment of the educational achievements of each young person.

In their document *Religious Education and the Framework for Junior Cycle*, the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference suggest that the Framework for Junior Cycle's assessment model might also serve Religious Education in an alternative way:

schools and students may decide to have two CBAs in RE in second and third year but no externally assessed, state-certified examination at the end of third year. In this latter approach students will still be recognised for their work in RE as part of their JCPA under 'Other Areas of Learning.'²¹

Alternatively, an episcopal-certified terminal examination might replace the state certified examination. The administration of such an examination might fit with the role of the Diocesan Advisor.

Conclusion

The state specification is not a framework for a Religious Education appropriate to Catholic students or Catholic schools. That is not the aim or role of a state specification. But within the context and vision of the new Junior Cycle, it does provide both opportunity and challenge to the Catholic community to act decisively to establish its own framework especially for the second level schools of which it is patron. Going forward, students and their families will want to be clear about the depth and breadth of any RE programme. It will serve everyone well if Catholic schools are very clear about what they are offering.

²¹ *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*, p.16.