



Educate Together

Towards an Ethical Education Curriculum Framework for Second-level Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

June 2014



AN ROINN DLÍ AGUS CIRT AGUS COMHIONANNAIS
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND EQUALITY



Executive Summary



Background

Educate Together has been involved in multi-denominational primary education for almost 40 years. The original schools were established as a response to the fact that all primary schools in Ireland were denominational at that time. The first Educate Together school, the Dalkey School Project was founded by a group of parents in 1978 who wished to have their children educated in a multi-denominational school. The decision to establish a multi-denominational rather than non-denominational school is explained by Mulcahy in her analysis of the Dalkey School Project. She makes it clear that while there was significant state unease around multi-denominationalism in the late 1970s, there was absolutely no possibility of a non-denominational school being countenanced (Mulcahy 2006).

As the number of Educate Together Schools increased, the core principles underpinning the schools became enshrined in a legally binding Educate Together Charter (1990). The Charter

‘affirms that children of all social, cultural, religious and non-religious backgrounds have a right to an education that reflects their individual identity whilst exploring the different values and traditions of the world in which they live.’ (Learn Together Curriculum, 2004)

The four core principles outlined in the Charter are that Educate Together schools are multi-denominational, co-educational, child-centred and democratically run.

Educate Together is now becoming involved in second-level education in response to demand from parents and students in Educate Together National Schools as well as others involved in education. (Taking the Next Step: A Blueprint for Educate Together Second-Level Schools, 2009). A Second-level Project was set up in 2007 to campaign for the establishment of Educate Together second-level schools. Three schools are opening in 2014, and a further five will be opening in 2015 and 2016. The three schools include a voluntary secondary school with Educate Together as sole patron, a community school in which it is co-patron with Louth Meath Education and Training Board (ETB) and a community college in which Dublin /Dún Laoghaire ETB is the patron working in formal partnership with Educate Together.

Educate Together places a strong emphasis on ethical education and adopts an ethical approach to all aspects of school life. The ethical education curriculum at primary level aims to support the development of students ethically, morally spiritually and socially in the context of inclusive schools (Educate Together, 2004 and 2011). It includes the study of main world religions but in line with

Educate Together's core principle of multi-denominationalism, it does not engage in 'faith formation'. There is a strong emphasis in the *Learn Together* curriculum on preparing students to become 'caring members of a multicultural society' (Educate Together, 2004 and 2011).

Educate Together wishes to place a similar emphasis on ethical education in the second-level schools in which it is involved, as patron, co-patron or as formal partner with another patron. It has been developing its approach to the Ethical Education Curriculum for some time (Blueprint for Educate Together Second-Level Schools, 2009). To further inform this development, it embarked on a research project, which included a literature review and a consultative process with a wide range of stakeholders. Students and parents were prioritised and within these groups, and a specific emphasis was placed on including the voices of Third Country Nationals (TCNs). This report is an outcome of the research project and includes a Case Study in Chapter 3 that captures the views of TCN students and parents who participated in additional focus groups that were carried out. As a way of ensuring that their voices would be heard in the research.

Key Findings

Educate Together adopts a broad and integrated approach to ethical education at primary level. The curriculum is delivered through the school ethos, is integrated across the curriculum and is allocated discrete school time. Taking account of this, the consultations also took a broad focus, for example, primary level students were asked what would make new second-level schools welcoming places, while other stakeholders were asked to identify the values that should underpin the Ethical Education Curriculum.

Welcoming Schools – Primary level Students (in both the original and in the case study focus groups)

The most important things to both sets of students were:

- Being welcomed personally by Principal and staff and being shown around
- Respectful relations between teachers and students and between students
- Being able to talk to a teacher if needing help
- Having a 'buddy' system
- Positive school atmosphere and school building reflecting a wide range of cultures and religions
- Strong anti-bullying policy and practice
- Not being put under too much pressure and not too much homework
- Learning supports when needed
- Ways that students can have a say
- Good facilities including cafeteria, lockers, technology and good quality books in the library
- Sports and PE and after school clubs and activities
- Equality of access to sport and use of playground/yard for girls

The students from TCN backgrounds placed a greater emphasis on liking the diversity of different religions and cultures in their current primary school and of learning about them. They also placed a

greater emphasis on the need for anti-bullying policy and practice in the new schools as well as the need for learning supports including language supports.

What they liked to learn and how

Both sets of students particularly liked art and other creative activities as well as Sport and PE. As stated, TCN students placed more emphasis on enjoying learning about different religions and cultures.

Students placed significant emphasis on active and interactive learning, 'learning by doing', and by 'going out to learn'. They liked group work and most liked team teaching. The teaching and learning methods they enjoyed included projects, research on the Internet, using computers, a games approach such as Maths4fun, and creative methods such as drama and art. They suggested a 'Maths4fun' approach to the teaching of Irish. They wanted less homework to allow more time for physical activity and doing things they enjoyed.

Ways of improving learning – views of second-level students

This group of students were far more interested in the *process* of learning rather than the *content*. Many were unhappy with the current teaching and learning approaches they had experienced. They were particularly critical of 'reading from the book', studying 'to the exam' and being told what to think. They proposed ways of improving learning as follows:

- Involvement in decision-making about what they learn
- Learn how to learn and learn critical thinking skills
- Learn from their peers as well as from teachers
- Greater use of peer mentoring
- Express opinions on topics that may differ from those of the teacher
- Less emphasis and value placed on academic learning and more on applied learning and learning by doing
- More emphasis on creativity and creative subjects
- Greater and more creative use of technology
- More opportunities to 'go out' and learn
- Greater use of active and participative learning
- More opportunities for physical activities
- More group and individual projects
- Use of individualised learning plans
- Mix students across ages, based on interests and capacities.

They also wanted less emphasis on examinations, more ongoing assessment and more opportunities for giving and receiving constructive feedback to and from teachers.

Case Study TCN Parents

A focus group was held with TCN parents as part of the second stage of the research. Their children attended an Educate Together Primary School. The aspect they liked most about the school was that it was multi denominational, where religions were explored and respected but children were not 'formed' into any religion. They also liked the atmosphere and felt welcome in the school.

In terms of the proposed new second-level school, they said that the most important thing was that :

'The school should have a clear policy on diversity, inclusion, respect. It needs to be there from the start'.

They wanted students to learn respect for all and develop an awareness of the dangers of bullying and stereotyping. They highlighted the need for teacher training to assist in creating a respectful and inclusive school.

They wanted 'an open door policy' for parents and events to facilitate parents from a range of backgrounds to meet and get to know each other. They also wanted supports for students, including access to a supportive teacher and or a counsellor. They also wanted support for the transition from primary to second-level, which they saw as particularly challenging for students.

Ethical Education

They wanted it to stress diversity, cultures and religions and build respect for these. They also wanted it to support 'home' values and beliefs linked to their culture(s). They indicated potential challenges to some of these, as their children become teenagers, for example, 'appropriate dress codes for girls'.

They thought ethical education was important because it would support students to:

- Understand family background and ideology
- Be prepared to face the real world, maintain dignity and respect in community and society
- Learn to respect others, be tolerant and have more harmony in the community
- Know their own identity
- Be able to stand up for themselves
- Know that all beliefs and non (religious) beliefs are respected
- Consider others.

They supported the proposed values outlined by Educate Together to underpin the Ethical Education curriculum but suggested a more explicit focus on anti- bullying and anti-racism.

They wanted Ethical Education integrated throughout the school and embedded in the ethos. They wanted it be taught, not just through books and in class, but through the community and through festivals and seasons.

All Other Stakeholders

What is Ethical Education?

Participants gave a wide range of definitions of Ethical Education. Most saw it as developmental and as forming young people into an ethical and or moral code based on a specific set of values. They stressed that students should explore various and different understandings and approaches as opposed to being told which one is right. Most felt the values would be the underpinning and guiding aspect. They also saw it as going beyond learning about aspects such as ethics, morality, religions and cultures, secular belief systems, environmental sustainability and global citizenship and believed that it must include elements of learning and development across all learning dimensions. These can be linked to UNESCO's four pillars of learning. These are: learning to know, to do, to be and to be with others. Educate Together (drawing on Makrakis) also favour adding a fifth pillar, that is, learning to transform self and society. Many elements mentioned by participants had this transformative aspect.

A number of themes emerged as to what participants thought Ethical Education is about, with the following outlining the strongest themes:

- Values and a values system
- Morals, morality, moral codes and notions of right and wrong
- Ethics, ethical perspective and ethical living
- Religions
- Cultures
- Belief systems including secular beliefs (and beliefs that predate Christianity)
- The environment
- The wider world
- The interconnectedness of human beings and the natural world
- Active local and global citizenship

Participants also mentioned, but less frequently, spirituality, philosophy and wellbeing.

Some saw challenges in the formation of students into certain values, on the basis that the specific values or the interpretation of them may conflict with home values. Most people who raised this did not suggest that values-based education should be avoided but that it required detailed communications with parents on the content and approach of ethical education proposed.

Why is it important?

There was very strong support for the inclusion of an ethical education curriculum, as distinct from religious education. Participants saw it as essential to the full and integrated development of students and particularly important at their stage of development.

This is summed up in this statement:

‘It is an essential and necessary component for fully integrated human development, for the individual and for societal and cultural contexts. Education without it would be impoverished.’

Ethical Education, values and a lived ethos

There was support for the values proposed (in the Draft Values Statement). It was suggested that a number of additional values be included, with a strong emphasis here on human rights, inclusion and care (linked to the value of respect already included). It was also suggested that the accompanying explanations needed to be expanded and deepened. It was suggested that equality should emphasise outcomes as well as access and that diversity should encompass a wider range of diversities.

The living of the values through the school ethos was seen as central to Ethical Education and that this was a key way to implement the ethical education curriculum. It was envisaged that the lived ethos would span all aspects of school life and be evident in them. The key aspects emphasised were recruitment of students as well as teachers; all relationships; school atmosphere (positive, respectful, caring, inclusive and free of bullying); teaching and learning approaches, curriculum development and a meaningful ways for a diversity of students and parents to input into the development and running of the schools.

It was also stressed that students and parents at school level needed to be involved in defining the values and ethos.

Curriculum Space

As well as being embedded in the ethos most participants thought that Ethical Education should be integrated across the curriculum including into specific subjects, as ethical questions arise in all aspects of human knowledge and activity. They saw challenges to an integrated approach because of the subject orientation of second-level schools. They also emphasised that teachers see themselves as subject specialists and may not be willing or have the capacity to include an exploration of ethical questions into their subject area. Most thought that teacher recruitment, teacher education and ongoing CPD as well as the provision of guidelines, resources and supports could address these challenges.

Most participants also wanted Ethical Education to have a discrete space to ensure it was visible and valued in the school. Many thought the best way to do this was through the development of a short course based on the NCCA template. (The inclusion of short courses is part of the current proposed Junior Cycle Framework.) A number of participants emphasised the importance of ensuring the short course would be sufficiently different from other courses that students may be studying, such as CSPE, SPHE and the current Junior Cycle Religious Education Syllabus. (studying the State RE Syllabus is only likely to arise in schools where Educate Together is not the patron.) Overall, participants believed that the reformed Junior Cycle, when implemented, could offer great opportunities for Ethical Education.

Teaching and Learning

What to learn

The areas of knowledge and understanding mentioned by participants relate to the areas highlighted as being at the core of Ethical Education (see above). They also put particular stress on skills, with a strong emphasis on critical thinking skills. They also highlighted skills in communication, conflict resolution, decision-making, based on a reflective ethical position informed by care for self and others as well as skills in coping and dealing with adversity and problem solving. They also wanted students to develop the skills required to be active global citizens. They wanted students to become confident, respectful, empathetic and compassionate young people who are self-aware, who appreciate diversity and the environment, and who are empowered and prepared to take action for justice and human rights, both locally and globally.

How to learn

As outlined above, very strong messages came from students on what approaches to teaching, learning and assessment they preferred. Most of the adults in the research also emphasised similar ideas.

These ideas stressed learning to learn, self directed learning, learning that takes account of the needs of individual students, active and participative learning, peer mentoring and student –to-student teaching and learning; as well as teachers as learners and as facilitators of learning. They favoured methods that promoted active and participative learning, such as group work, action projects, creative use of technology, use of games, art, drama, music, video and film. It was also proposed that students be given opportunities to learn by doing and by engaging with the community.

The need for CPD and support for teachers in the use of a wide range of active teaching and learning methods was emphasised. The need for learning supports for students was also highlighted, to ensure that all students could benefit from participating in the Ethical Education Curriculum as well as in learning in general.

Assessment and Review

As with the students, there was a strong emphasis on an ‘Assessment for Learning’ approach. Participants felt that this was more in keeping with ethical education. They favoured ongoing, school - based assessment, using a range of methods rather than end of term, end of year terminal examinations. Most felt that the proposed reformed JC approach would be positive for student learning and development if implemented. It was acknowledged that some teachers would need support to implement these approaches, as would students to participate in them.

Some felt it was important to carry out whole school reviews to assess the degree to which the Ethical Education curriculum was being implemented. It was envisaged that the impacts on students learning and development would also be captured through this approach.

Some Challenges

Challenges relating to values based education; integration across the curriculum and the use of different forms of assessment have already been mentioned. Another challenge concerned the

question of who would teach a short course, should this be offered. It was suggested that teachers with subjects such as philosophy, sociology and politics in their primary degree could be considered, as well as teachers with a background in CSPE and or RE. Overall, it was suggested that a commitment to Ethical Education as envisaged by Educate Together should be the prime determinant. It was agreed that opportunities for CPD in Ethical Education drawing on Educate Together's experience at primary level should be offered to teachers in the new schools. Educate Together is already aware of challenges to the delivery of the Ethical Education Curriculum at primary level, these are outlined in the literature review. Ongoing work to address these challenges can also inform second-level developments.

Implications of findings for the development of an Ethical Education Curriculum Framework

Overall, there was significant support for an ethical education curriculum at second-level. Most saw this as a distinct and autonomous curricular area although with linkages to other areas. Parents especially those from TCN backgrounds saw it as central to building respect for different cultures and religions. Others valued this aspect, but also saw it encompassing areas such as moral and ethical development, secular belief systems, environmental sustainability and active and ethical global citizenship. From the point of view of the stage of development of students, parents in particular, placed an emphasis on wellbeing and self-care.

The following summarises the key implications. These are framed as recommendations.

Defining Ethical Education and Naming and Embedding Values

- Include a clear definition of ethical education taking account of the emphasis highlighted by participants as well as drawing on Educate Together's knowledge and experience in this area and the research literature. This definition should forefront ethics and should specify the theorists that inform it and include radical, critical and feminist theorists.
- Ensure accessible communications with parents about the ethical education curriculum, the values underpinning it and the approach proposed, including that it will be embedded in the ethos.
- Take account of the potential impact of different patronage models on how the curriculum is shaped and implemented at school level and the implications of this including for teacher support. Also, take account of greater diversity in parents' reasons for school choice.
- Further, develop the values to underpin the curriculum and agree with co-patrons and partners so that the values can be used as a framework for discussions at school level. Involve parents and students in the process at school level. Take account of the values in all aspects of school development. Ensure that the school ethos, where Educate Together is patron or co-patron or partner, embodies the ethical education curriculum.

Teaching and Learning

- Take account of the fact that students placed more emphasis on *how* they learn as well as on the learning experience, over and above *what* they learn. They want learning to be enjoyable, meaningful and reflective.

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- Ensure the approaches contained in the framework reflect those outlined in the research. This will entail going beyond the use of active and participative methods to include more radical shifts in approach. Above all the approach should aim to support students to become self-directed learners as well as empowering and equipping them with critical thinking skills and other skills and dispositions needed to become reflective ethical individuals and global citizens.
 - Ensure that sufficient learning supports, including language supports, are provided to ensure a diverse range of students (including those with language and learning difficulties) can fully participate in and benefit from the Ethical Education Curriculum.
 - Take account of aspects particularly emphasised by students including interest in creative areas, as well as the use of creative approaches to learning and the use of technology. Also take account of younger students' emphasis on physical activity and sports.
 - Provide supports and CPD to teachers to support them to deliver ethical education.

Assessment

- Take particular account of the approaches proposed by students who emphasised the importance of on-going, constructive feedback to support their learning and development.
- Adopt an Assessment for Learning approach and include on going school-based assessment using a range of assessment methods. Minimise the use of end of year and terminal examinations.

Implementing Ethical Education

- Develop an implementation strategy in conjunction with the curriculum framework which outlines in detail how it is to be embedded in the ethos, integrated across the curriculum and delivered as a discrete curriculum area.
- Provide support to schools to develop a school level plan. Also provide guidelines, resources and CPD. Include support for the conduct of whole school reviews to assess the degree of implementation and its impact on students.
- Develop a short course to assist the delivery of the discrete aspect of the Ethical Education Curriculum. Use the NCCA template to assist this process and link the learning and learning outcomes to the Statements of Learning proposed for the reformed Junior Cycle.

Review and Evaluation

- As well as the whole school reviews mentioned earlier it is also proposed that an externally assisted formative evaluation process be put in place to inform the development of the Ethical Education Curriculum as well as monitoring its effectiveness.
- Draw up, in consultation with school level stakeholders, a set of performance indicators against which schools can measure progress. These need to reflect the depth and scope of the Ethical Education Curriculum. These are needed for the periodic school based reviews. The identification of the performance indicators could be part of the formative evaluation process.
- Discuss and agree with school-level stakeholders the purpose and aims of the evaluation, its structure, approach and scope as well key evaluation questions, key stakeholders, data

collection methods and the overall timeframe and key stages. It is suggested that the formative evaluation should cover the three years of the Junior Cycle.

Next steps

- Use the research report to inform the final development of the Ethical Education Curriculum Framework (an initial framework is included in the report).
- Expand the steering group to include local level representatives of co-patrons and partner.
- Involve school level stakeholders in the process of curriculum development, including students and parents.
- Develop an implementation strategy, including plans for teacher CPD and development of a resource bank
- Discuss and agree the externally assisted formative evaluation
- Develop a Junior Cycle Short Course