Religion & Education: Submission from Community National Schools

Religion & Education: Submission to the IHRC consultation from Community National Schools

Introduction

Contextualising this submission
This submission from the Community National Schools (CNSs) focuses on the issue of religion and education within a primary school setting. It uses the Religious Education programme in the Community National Schools as an example as to how many of the issues in this debate can be met. The Religious Education programme in the Community National Schools sets out to address the needs and expectations of different faith groups in a way that is equitable, economically sustainable, in harmony with the integrated curriculum and honouring the constitutional provision to protect and honour freedom of religion for all.

The submission concludes with some observations on the conference of November 27, the formulation of the template used in this discussion and the need for a more rigorous approach to terminology.

Note on terminology used in the response
The term “faith” is used in its broadest sense. It is used to include not only adherence to a particular religion with its doctrines, values and practices but also to include adherence to very fundamental values and principles such as the potential goodness of all human beings, the right to freedom and justice and the rule of law. When therefore, faith is used in the answers that follow in respect of pupils and parents it includes those who adhere to organised religions as well as those who do not. This broad definition of the word faith includes those who adhere to a particular religion, such as Muslims or Christians as well as those who define themselves as atheists or non-believers. In the broad sense of the word used in this document all are included. The terms “Religious Education” is also used in a broad sense to include all forms of value based or ethics based education irrespective of whether or not it is modelled on the tenets of an organised religion or presupposes the existence of a supreme being.

Religious Education in the Community National Schools

History and ethos of Community National Schools
The Community National Schools were started in 2008. There are now five Community National Schools in the country. They provide primary education to children of all faiths. They will come under the patronage of the V.E.C.s but while awaiting enabling changes in legislation, the Community National Schools are under the temporary patronage of the Minister for Education and Skills.

It is the policy of the CNSs to respect, celebrate and recognise diversity in all areas of human life. Children are taught and encouraged to view diversity as something which reflects the community from which the children are drawn. The schools endeavour to encourage the children committed to their care to have pride in what makes them different and a belief that difference, when respected and valued, gives strength and
vibrancy to the total school community and the wider community in which they live. Schools recognise the wishes of parents to have their children receive religious education or morality based education as an integral part of the school curriculum.

Religious Education in the Community National Schools
The Community National Schools are currently developing, on an action research basis, a multi-faith programme to cater for children of all faiths and none, within the normal school day. The name of this multi faith programme is "Goodness me! Goodness you!". The research work is assisted by a support system to ensure the widest possible consultation with all relevant interests – as outlined below.

The aim of the programme is to nurture children in living their life to the full in the context of their beliefs. The programme is based on the experience of the child and helps the child to reflect on his/her experience in a manner that is age appropriate. The multi-faith programme is timetabled every day of the week. A lesson usually consists of five teaching/learning episodes i.e. is the equivalent of a week’s teaching. The text for the programme is available in electronic form and is taught with the aid of the inter-active whiteboards. The use of this technology facilitates making changes to the programme and the incorporation of illustrations and music into the lessons. Each lesson begins with an introduction intended for the teacher. This introduction provides a contextual background for the lesson that is to follow and outlines the aim of the lesson and an explanation as to why this aim is important to the children at this time.

The methodology of the "Goodness me! Goodness you!" is child centred and activity and discovery based. There are three important building blocks used in "Goodness me! Goodness you!" They are :
Stories
Conversation
Contemplation
In structuring the programme, the aim has been to have children of all faiths taught together as often as possible. This is facilitated by the shared life values and practices of all beliefs. The part of the programme in which the children are taught/learn together is referred to as the Core Programme.

Differentiation into a number of groups can take place for about five minutes at the end of a teaching period to facilitate faith based contemplation for children belonging to the theist tradition and reflection for the children of the multi/non-theist traditions

In addition, for several weeks each year children are differentiated into various belief groups e.g. Muslims, Catholic and Humanist in accordance with the wishes of parents. During these Faith Specific Modules, the beliefs and practices appropriate to the relevant faiths are nurtured.

Delivery of the Religious Education programme.
For the most part, the teachers employed in the school teach the multi-faith programme. They are guided and supported in their work by the programme research officer. During the three or four weeks of teaching the faith specific modules, teachers are assigned to teach the various faith groups. As this teaching forms an
integral part of the programme, the themes, methodologies and content are developed and passed on to the teachers by the programme research officer as part of the programme development. The only exception to this is the faith specific teaching for the Muslim children. As much of the teaching and learning for this group, involves the learning of Arabic and as none of our teachers currently employed in the Community National Schools are competent in Arabic, it is necessary to use an external teacher, in consultation with the Imam and Muslim parents.

Support structures for the Religious Education programme

Central to the action research methodology is regular consultation and feedback with a variety of partnership groups: parents, teachers and curriculum and belief representatives from the various faiths represented in the schools. Each of these groups has made and will continue to make an important and valued input to "Goodness me! Goodness you!" As a consequence of the contributions from these groups, the programme is subject to ongoing change. The publication of the text in electronic form facilitates this.

Parents are encouraged to play an active and supportive role in the "Goodness me! Goodness you!" programme. By means of school/home link sheets, parents are informed of the content of the current lessons in "Goodness me! Goodness you!" and encouraged to engage with their children in adapting the themes and stories of the lessons to their own faith traditions.

A parents’ consultative group has been formed. This group is representative of the 5 Community National Schools and all the faiths of parents whose children attend the schools. Meetings with this group take place three times in the year. These meetings are intended to encourage feedback and comment on the programme, respond to queries and provide information.

The meetings with teachers take place about 5 times in the year. They are called “School Reflection Sessions”. School Reflection Sessions act as a vehicle for providing information and guidance to the teachers and also a platform for listening to the observations of teachers based on their classroom experience and hearing their suggestions for programme improvements.

Each school also has a multi-belief programme co-ordinator. The function of the co-ordinator is to provide a rapid and efficient link between the school and the Research Officer in relation to snags in the programme and also to collate teachers’ suggestions as to how the text of the programme could be improved.

The curriculum and belief support is achieved through a Reference Group which includes representatives of the main churches and belief groups – including Humanist and Buddhist perspectives, together with educational experts in the field of curriculum development and teaching of religion. The Reference Group meets about 4 times in the year. The members of this group are regularly updated on the programme, and are informed about the feedback from teachers and parents. They are invited to comment on the programme as it develops.
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The remit of the Reference Group is to:

- Provide expertise/advice as required on issues relevant to the primary school curriculum in areas of religious education/ pedagogy
- Support the ongoing development of a multi-faith religious education programme for the new Community National Schools

**Feedback on the multi-faith programme**

The programme is now in the third year of its development. The feedback to date from pupils, parents, teachers and the Reference Group has been very positive. Teachers report that children look forward to and enjoy the "Goodness me! Goodness you!" lessons. They particularly appreciate the interactive nature of the lessons, the stories that are central to them and the songs and poems that are integrated into most lessons. Teachers are highly impressed by the natural manner that children engage in contemplation – a regular practice within the programme. They state that the programme is child friendly and that its story based approach is particularly suited to children of this age.

Teachers and school management see the "Goodness me! Goodness you!" programme as a clear expression of the Community National Schools ethos. They appreciate the inclusive nature of the programme in the context of a school model that has inclusivity and nurturing of the moral, intellectual, spiritual and social capacities of each child at the heart of its ethos.

The meetings with parents of differing faiths also provide a very positive evaluation of the programme. Parents see the programme as nurturing the belief of their children while at the same time helping them to understand how much the different belief traditions have in common. They are pleased and reassured by the central role given to parents in the child’s religious education. They appreciate the multiple interpretations that can be drawn from the stories which are central to the programme. They have expressed the wish that the stories could be given to them so that they can read and discuss the stories at home with their children and help their children to explore and understand the stories in the light of their own particular faith perspective. A parents’ pack is being prepared to respond to this request.

The feedback from the Reference Group has also been positive. Many members see the new programme as unique in the world in that it aspires to provide Religious Education to children of all faiths and none in the same classroom, at the same time for most of the programme. They appreciate the value of stories as a means of nurturing children in their faith development. Members of the Reference Group have also commended the very modern methodologies used in the programme and the way in which the teaching and learning strategies are dovetailed with the objectives and teaching strategies of the revised primary school curriculum.

There has been some criticism of the programme on the basis that the children are divided for a number of weeks in the year in order to provide faith specific teaching. The proponents of this criticism point out that primary school pupils are too young to be divided on faith grounds.
One of the counter arguments to this criticism is that children in primary school are accustomed to being divided for a variety of purposes such as learning and language support, or for specialised school-based activities. It is important to note that children are already aware of faith differences between them. This is a reality they experience in their own neighbourhoods and the various sport and recreational activities in which they engage. Being in a school where different faiths are acknowledged, honoured and nurtured, gives them the confidence to realise that the unity with their peers which they experience in learning, playing and socialising together is not in any way undermined by the faith differences which they share. This is particularly so when one considers that the children of all faiths are taught together for most of the programme, as a group to the greatest extent possible, on the premise that their different faiths have so much in common.

The emphasis in the Community National Schools is on inclusivity and respect for the diversity of cultures present in our society and one of the central purposes of the new school model is to cater for this diversity within a single school setting.

**Pilot programme**

It is important to say that the Community National School model is being developed on a pilot basis in order to learn as much as possible from the group of schools established for this purpose. The pilot phase provides an important learning opportunity and its review will enable informed decisions to be made in relation to the wider use of this model of patronage in the future. The teaching staff and management of the new schools are central to the review process. Their engagement and feedback provides important insights as do those of parents, pupils and the local community, including local faith communities, together with neighbouring schools and other education partners. The practical issues arising in respect of the teaching of religion are an essential element of this and they are being carefully monitored and will be assessed as part of the review.

**Some concluding remarks on the consultation regarding religion and education**

**The template used by the IHRC in the consultation process.**

We would like to have used the template provided by the IHRC as part of its consultation process. However, there were a number of questions which propose two alternative but polar opposite solutions and are then followed by an invitation to respond with a “yes” or “no” answer. Questions 2b, 3a and 4b provide examples of this.

Furthermore, the template seems to place undue emphasis on the rights of those who want to opt out of denominational education. It is noted that the Constitution underpins freedom of religion and not freedom from religion. Therefore in any consideration of rights, due attention must be paid to both perspectives.

**The IHRC conference on religion and education**

The conference on Religion & Education, organised jointly by the IHRC and the Law School in T.C.D. was well organised and timely. It brought together academics and
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practitioners from a variety of backgrounds. We would like to congratulate the organisers on their initiative.

However, it was disappointing that the Community National Schools, one of the new patronage options at primary school level, were not invited to contribute to the appropriate session. Given, the current search for alternative education provision to cater for the growing diversity in the Irish population, it was regrettable.

As the most recently introduced provider of an alternative model of primary education, it is desirable that this model should be given a platform at such conferences. Given the inclusive nature of the Community National Schools, underpinned by the provision of a Religious Education programme for children of all faiths, their absence from the presenters at the conference was all the more regrettable.

The need for clarity around terminology in the debate on religion and education
In view of the growing diversity of faith perspectives in contemporary Ireland, debate on the subject of religion and education will continue. This is welcome. However, it is important that discussion should be underpinned by clarity of meaning in relation to key terms. Basic terms, such as Faith, Religion, Religious Education, Religious Instruction, Multi Faith, Multi Denominational, Inter Denominational and Non Denominational should all have an agreed meaning. To fail to clarify these terms and to get agreement on their meaning is to sow the seeds of confusion in the growing public debate and to confuse the issues for parents.