Consensus making, brokerage and compromise: The process of curriculum design in Ireland as evidenced in the development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics.

By

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctorate in Education is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed:

Patrick Sullivan

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Date: 1st July 2018

Dedications

This work is dedicated to my family who have guided and supported my prolonged education.

To Rose, the whirlwind who fills every room (and especially the classroom) with her infectious enthusiasm and lust for life. My father, Paddy, the lifelong learner whose considered views on all things political are always well measured and rarely wide of the mark. My siblings Jill, Barry and Elaine whose bond and mutual support knows no bounds. And to Zara, the baby (now 18), the glue that held our family together when we were most in need of it!

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Abstract

Consensus making, brokerage and compromise: The process of curriculum design in Ireland as evidenced in the development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics

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This study considers the process of curriculum design in the Republic of Ireland through a case study of the development of the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) proposed curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics for primary schools. This thesis contends that by examining the process through which curriculum is developed, one can better understand the influences that shape it. The research approach is situated within the qualitative paradigm and uses semi-structured interviews to examine the role played by the executive of NCCA, trade unions and school management bodies in the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. What emerges is a complex landscape of power relations, vested interests and influential partners in education.

The research presents a new understanding of the partnership approach to curriculum development; one that includes both formal and informal dimensions of negotiation, brokerage and compromise. It also demonstrates that different partners are required to participate at different levels depending on the perceived risk and complexity of the curriculum development in question. While an effective partnership is built upon a foundation of relational trust and confidence, the research presents instances of breaches of trust when brokering agreement. A major finding of the research is the extent to which the conception of ERB and Ethics as a politically-mandated curriculum presupposed certain conditions that positioned the interests of the state against the interests of school management bodies. In essence this resulted in the curriculum development space becoming another arena for negotiations between religious denominations and the State to be played out in the public domain. Evidence of the strategic use of overt and covert dimensions of power by both the state and the Catholic Church are presented, displaying a level of protectionism on both sides. The research also presents a duality of roles played by both the NCCA executive and the policy elite in the negotiation and brokerage of curriculum. What emerges from the research is a clear but challenging path for curriculum development in Ireland centring around the development of a shared understanding of partnership and built upon a set of shared values regarding what a state primary school curriculum should provide for our children.

The research unearths the balancing act performed by negotiators of curriculum as they actively manage the expectations of their partners. The duality of roles as both brokers and developers of curriculum places them in a challenging position when dissenting voices call developments into question. The power struggle between partners has been evidenced throughout the research and is often a proxy for wider societal discourses. Participation is further hampered by significant barriers which prevent partners reaching the collaborative partnership and co-leading spaces of the Partnership Participation Matrix, required for high-risk and complex curriculum developments.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This study considers the process of curriculum design in the Republic of Ireland through a case study of the development of the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) proposed curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics for primary schools. The research examines the perceptions of those directly involved in the process of curriculum design, unearthing a complex landscape of power relations, vested interests and influential partners in education. What emerges, among other things, is the importance of context, personal and professional relationships, and the critical role played by the 'policy elite' (Lilleker, 2003; Griffiths et al, 2009).

Chapter 1 outlines the aims and rationale for the research, as well as the researcher's personal journey and positionality. It continues by introducing a concept of curriculum that has informed this work, before providing some contextual information about the subjects of the study: the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics. Finally, the structure of this dissertation is presented.

This thesis has at its core a belief that by examining the process by which curriculum is developed, one can better understand the influences that shape it. In this deconstruction the social and political context are important factors (Pinar, 2004). Many commentators on education reference Larry Cuban's analogy that 'if society has an itch, schools get scratched' (1990). Often educational policy in western democracies is driven by a shared belief that most people have about education. This belief generally centres around the promotion of social mobility, creating national cohesion and harmony, and the formation of responsible citizens. This enduring faith in education to overcome the ills of societies has impacted greatly upon the agenda of curriculum reform around the world. Such reforms have often been criticised as being politically, rather than educationally, motivated with many calling for educators to maintain their professional dignity by reasserting their commitment to the intellectual life of the field (Pinar, 2004, p. xi).

An example of such reform in the Irish context is the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics, as was politically mandated by former Minister for Education and Skills Ruairí Quinn, TD, arising from the report on the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector (Coolahan et al, 2012). The development of this curriculum is an attempt to address the reality of diversity in Irish classrooms and is seen as a step towards making Irish classrooms more inclusive and accepting of children of minority belief systems. This research examines the role played by the executive of the NCCA, trade unions and school management bodies in the development of this curriculum and is entitled: *Consensus making, brokerage and compromise: The process of curriculum design in Ireland as evidenced in the development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics.*

1.1 Aims and rationale of the research

The research aims:

- To investigate the partnership model of curriculum design in Ireland.
- To investigate the roles of leaders in curriculum development and the 'policy elite' in negotiating and finalising curriculum.
- To explore potential opportunities and challenges of the partnership model of curriculum design for the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

Researchers in the past have called into question the use of the partnership model employed by the NCCA as an effective means of curriculum design (Granville, 2004; Gleeson, 2004). Particular concern has been voiced regarding the influence of the 'policy elite' in brokering a 'cosy consensus' among the partners in education. This research, while mindful of such discourse, intends to examine the partnership model by engaging with the 'policy elite' involved in the brokering process. Lilleker (2003, p. 207) notes 'elites can be loosely defined as those with close proximity to power or policymaking'. The research uses the term 'elite' to refer to high-profile personnel who have access to specialised knowledge and power and provide valuable policy information.

Currently there is no state curriculum provision for children attending Irish primary schools to learn about religions, beliefs and ethics. The value of such learning has been highlighted by the Council of Europe (2014) and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (2007), as well as a number of researchers (Erricker et al, 2011; Grimmitt, 2000; Jackson, 1997, 2000, 2014). The development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics aims to ensure that every child has access to structured, coherent and incremental learning in this area, and to ensure the good practices that already take place in schools are recognised and supported through the curriculum (NCCA, 2015a).

In the context of the development of a state curriculum concerning religions, beliefs and ethics, an obvious systemic factor is the unique composition of the Irish primary school system, with 96% of primary schools owned and managed by faith-based organisations. Furthermore, the legislative foothold (Education Act, 1998, sections 15 2-b and 30 2-d) pertaining to the right of patrons to develop, implement and monitor religious programmes which currently occupy the religious education curriculum area, into which the proposed curriculum may be entering, is a contested space.[1] Add these conditions to the already-overloaded Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 2008b) and the task gives rise to additional sensitivities over and above the general cut and thrust of debates about curriculum change in Ireland. The research contends that through an examination of a particularly-contested

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[1] The patron's programme refers to the programme or curriculum developed by a patron to underpin and promote the ethos of their schools. The Education Act, 1998 recognises the legal right for patrons to design, supervise, implement and teach their programmes. For the majority of patrons, their programme addresses the area of religious education.

curriculum area one can gain insight into the workings of the partnership approach, as well as the motivations and vested interests of those involved in the development of the national curriculum.

1.2 The researcher and the research

I have been fortunate to have a rich and varied experience in education, punctuated with professional achievements as well as setbacks. As a mainstream class teacher, I endeavoured to provide a nurturing and enriching experience for every child under my care. As founding principal of Ard Rí Community National School (CNS) I developed and articulated a vision of primary education, persuading prospective parents to enrol their child in a school without a building, teachers or Board of Management. In my role as Education Officer with responsibility for ERB and Ethics, I led the development of ground-breaking proposals and co-ordinated the largest consultation in NCCA history. Currently as Director of curriculum and assessment in the NCCA, I lead and contribute to multiple projects including ERB and Ethics, the *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile*, the *Goodness Me, Goodness You!* programme for Community National Schools (CNSs) and the redevelopment of the entire primary school curriculum.

As a reflective and conscientious professional I recognise the value and necessity of academic enquiry in the progression of the education sector. Undertaking a Masters in Educational Leadership in Maynooth University, I examined the role of school leaders in enacting the patron's programme for CNSs. My dissertation was entitled *A Pathway to Pluralism–Opportunities and Challenges for Community National School Leaders in the Implementation of the Multi-Belief Programme 'Goodness Me, Goodness You!*

My philosophy of education is heavily influenced by a children's rights perspective with the principles of inclusion, equality and agency at its core. My commitment to these principles has led to many interesting encounters and engagements with individuals and organisations who, while for the most part agreeing that these principles are important, often hold other values above those of the child. Despite these tensions, I managed to work successfully with individuals and groups from across the spectrum of education, negotiating ways forward towards a shared vision of education.

It was through these engagements that I became interested in the role the partnership model plays in policy development in Ireland. Much lauded by politicians and influential organisations, and informed by previous studies (Gleeson, 2000; 2004; 2012; Granville, 2004; Sugrue, 2004), I question the premise upon which partnerships are built. For example, that through a consensus-building approach, the best outcomes will arise. For me, the question that surfaces is 'best outcomes for whom?' In terms of curriculum development, one may assume the answer to this question to be 'the child'. However, it is my contention that this may not be the case. Hence, if 'the child' is not the answer, then 'who'?

As an insider researcher, the author has unparalleled access to key individuals, research artefacts and relevant literature; providing the basis for a thorough investigation of the research questions. The author, as a complete member and full participant (Adler and Adler, 1987) has an opportunity to acquire genuine and authentic understanding rather than reconstituted understanding. As an insider the researcher understands the defined case intimately; the sensitivities surrounding it; its complexity and has access to the key personnel involved.

1.3 A concept of curriculum used in this research

While curriculum theory itself is complex, in its simplest terms it can be described as 'the set of stories that one generation chooses to tell the next' (Looney, 2014, p. 17). A nation's curriculum then can be seen as an agreed set of stories or an autobiography. The strengths and weaknesses of the autobiographical process are well documented (Gusdorf, 1980; Benstock, 1988). In contrast to the diarist who may record daily experience without concern for continuity, the autobiographer must distance themselves from him or herself, 'in order to reconstitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity' (Gusdorf, 1980, p. 35). While memoirs can be used as a 'revenge on history' (1980, p. 35), autobiographical remembrance is said to be performed for its own sake. The object of autobiography is not to report the events of an individual's life—that project belongs to the historian or biographer—for Gusdorf, the point of autobiography is to reveal the author's effort 'to give the meaning of his own mythic tale' (p. 48).

On a national level, in giving meaning to one's own mythic tale, the dangers of narcissism and egoism can be tempting. Indeed, national curricula often have the potential to present a narrative based in nationalism, creating:

> the illusion of truth being on the social surface, when it is nearly axiomatic that the stories we tell ourselves mask other, unacceptable truths. What we as a nation try not to remember… we must teach what the cover stories hide, exposing and problematizing the "hidden curriculum". (Pinar, 2004, pp. 38-39)

In the Irish case, these unacceptable truths may include our interpretation of our fight for independence, the romanticising of the Irish culture, the abuses of power in the early to mid-twentieth century, the place of women in Irish society, perpetual disadvantage and child poverty, and the role religion has played in Irish life.

In exposing and problematising the 'hidden curriculum', William Pinar (2004) asserts the concept of *Currere*. Pinar likens the situation in America to an educational 'nightmare', where educators have been reduced to domestic workers, instructed by politicians to clean up the 'mess' left by politics, culture, and history (p. xi). Pinar laments the involvement of right-wing politicians in educational matters resulting in a loss of academic freedom and an anti-intellectualism among the teaching profession as

they convert schools into businesses which are fixated on the bottom line: 'test scores' (p. xiii). Such reform, in his view, has rendered the classroom a privatised sphere in which children and their teachers are, simply, to do what they are told. Pinar pushes beyond just seeking truth; for him it is also about seeking justice and a form of 'educational confession' (p. 39) that will cleanse the autobiographical story of a nation. Thus, to awaken from this 'nightmare', Pinar reveals a process by which educators can reclaim their classrooms, as civic spaces, through the autobiographical method of Currere.

Currere asks educators to slow down, to re-enter the past, and to meditatively imagine the future. This personal reflection enables educators to be aware of their submergence in the present and the forces that are acting upon them. Pinar calls for a deeper investigation of the past and possible future, where educators must become 'temporal': living simultaneously in the past, present, and future. In this method, returning to the past (the 'regressive') and imagining the future (the 'progressive') must be understood (the 'analytic') for the self to become 'expanded' and mobilised (in the 'synthetical' moment). Pinar refers to this process as autobiographical in nature and draws attention to its liberating force:

> Such an autobiographical sequence of ourselves as individuals and as educators might enable us to awaken from the nightmare we are living in the present. (2004, p. 5)

This process of self-study requires educators to interrogate their present and historical contexts, developing a form of cultural criticism that enables educators to reclaim their space. For Pinar, without reclaiming intellectual freedom, education ends; students are indoctrinated, forced to learn what the test-makers declare to be important (p. 10).

Through participation in the Professional Doctorate the researcher identifies with this sense of 'temporality': occupying the spaces within/between the past, present and future. Indeed, the research too has been shaped, in part, due to this sense of connection with the historical context (past), present conditions and the imagined future. As the research progressed, the 'thick descriptions' provided by participants may be viewed as the 'educational confession' required to awaken and emerge from our present 'nightmare' and envision a hopeful future.

The following sections provide background information about the two key elements under investigation: the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics.

1.4 The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Curriculum design in Ireland has been described as a mysterious process (Mulcahy, 1981; Coolahan, 1981). Since the establishment of the NCCA as a statutory body in 2001, efforts have been made to shed light on a previously-veiled process. Nonetheless many teachers and school leaders continue to express a similar sentiment to that of the author of the exerpt below:

> Who are the members of NCCA? Do they know how things are done in Ireland? Do they read the daily papers?... They are like First World War generals… not knowing anything about front line conditions. (Letter to The Irish Times, 2nd February, 1999, cited in Granville, 2004)

However, as Granville remarks, 'One of the hallmarks of the NCCA is its representative composition, designed specifically to remove divisions between "generals" and the "frontline troops"' (2004, p. 68). This section introduces the NCCA and provides some background information on the structure of the organisation alongside some commentary on the processes it employs.

1.4.1 The establishment of the NCCA

The Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) was initially established in 1984 for a two-year period, to be replaced by a statutory Board in 1986. Its final report, *In Our Schools,* was intended to be 'a starting point for the statutory Board.' (Hyland, 1990, p. 11). However due to developments at cabinet level, a new Minister for Education, Patrick Cooney, was appointed and the impetus to establish the CEB on a legislative footnote waned (Hyland, 1990). In September 1987, Mary O'Rourke, the new Minister of Education, disbanded the CEB and formally established the NCCA on 7th November 1987. The Minister for Education's press release on the occasion of the launch of the NCCA on December 8th, 1987 prioritised the implementation of the new unified system of assessment and certification which will replace the existing Intermediate and Group Certificate examinations, to be known as the Junior Certificate. Speaking at the launch of the new Council, she stressed the importance of a good working relationship between the Council and the Department of Education and Skills and called for active participation of the Inspectorate in the NCCA Course Committees.

The NCCA was made a statutory body in July 2001, as legislated in the Education Act, 1998. Its brief was to advise the Minister for Education and Skills on matters relating to:

> …the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools and the assessment procedures employed in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum. (Government of Ireland, 1998, 41.1 a, b)

Granville points out that the establishment of the NCCA is best understood by the specific history of curriculum development in Ireland; an international pattern of educational restructuring; and in the evolution of Irish economic and social planning (2004, p. 68). The emergence of the NCCA as an advisory body can be viewed as a significant repositioning of influence from the centre to a sister organisation, portraying a level of transparency while the centre maintains control and power of the system. While this repositioning is now a common feature of many developed countries, in Ireland it is the social partnership model that has greatly influenced this repositioning, as well as public policy and economics in the late-twentieth century.

The NCCA is a representative structure, the membership of which is determined by the Minister for Education and Skills. It has 25 members, all of whom are appointed for a three-year term. The members represent teachers, school management bodies, parents, business interests, trade unions, and other

educational interests. Other members include representatives of the Department of Education and Skills, the State Examinations Commission, a nominee of the Minister for Education and Skills and of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The Minister appoints the non-executive Chairperson. Interestingly, unlike other state Boards who build stipulations into their codes of conduct relating to expressing sectoral interests in meetings, Council members of the NCCA are not bound by the same constraints. Instead Council members are encouraged to bring their sectoral interests to bear in deliberations on curriculum and assessment, perhaps the only statutory standing forum in which this takes place. A full list of the NCCA's partners in education are outlined in Appendix E.

The Council is enabled in its work through the supportive structures, also representative in nature, which include Boards and Development Groups, as outlined in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Structure of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
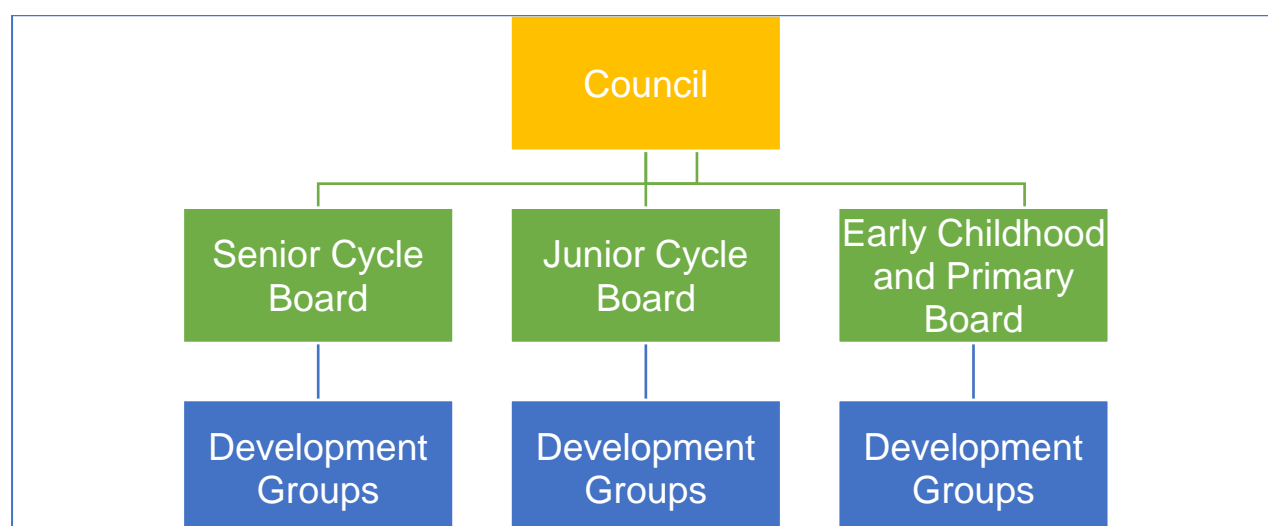
The NCCA has a full-time executive staff, led by a Chief Executive. The total number of staff tends to be between 30-40 individuals, with approximately 20-30 individuals working on curriculum development and the remainder working in corporate services for the organisation. Education Officers are generally seconded teachers recruited on grounds of their expertise in a specific curriculum area or subject. Seconded contracts vary in length, but typically a seconded teacher may be with the organisation for between 2-5 years. A tree-map of the organisation is in Appendix G of this research.

Each year the NCCA develop and publish their plan of work. The plan is organised under five strategic goals, these are: Curriculum and Assessment; Engagement and Networks; Knowledge and Research; Communications and Profile; and Governance and Corporate Services. Funding for the NCCA is by way of a grant from the Department of Education and Skills. An outline of Council's strategic goals is provided in Appendix F.

The emergence of the NCCA has been likened by Granville (2004) to that of the French Revolution. In sum, he outlines three stages:

> The initial years of audacious ambition… followed by the pragmatic search for survival, stability and respectability under the Directorate. This in turn reverted to traditional autocracy, imperial strength and confidence… (Granville, 2004, p. 88)

In Granville's analysis the NCCA's predecessor, the CEB, proliferated new and ambitious ideas. Concepts such as curriculum re-alignment and learning experiences proved the richness of this new and exciting organisation. As the NCCA began to mature, Granville characterises the organisation as establishing credibility in the power game of education (Granville, 1995). The establishment of the NCCA as an independent statutory body in 2001 ensured its place in the Irish education landscape.

Granville's analysis draws attention to the significance of the partnership model employed by the NCCA in both the political and symbolic frames. The representative committee structure means that the NCCA is constantly in the process of group activity where conflict is often a factor. In such a context, 'power is central to the process and the intensity of the conflict is a function of the authority of the NCCA itself' (2004, p. 85). As such, it is argued that the NCCA continuously works in a state of conflict. On a grand scale this has been evident in the industrial relations disputes regarding the new junior cycle. On a more modest scale, conflict between interests of differing partners are brokered at committee level. Thus, for the most part, the operation of the NCCA through a political frame has great benefits for the central powers of the Department of Education and Skills, as conflict is negotiated by its sister organisation through the process of curriculum design before advice is issued to them.

However, as Granville warns, this is not to say that such a process evokes ownership by teachers or successful implementation in schools. The NCCA has the power to establish the educational rhetoric however this does not guarantee the realisation of the espoused ambition (2004, p. 86). Granville asserts that the work of NCCA deals with 'questions that cannot be answered, problems that cannot be solved' (2004, p. 87). The curriculum will never be 'developed' nor will it ever satisfy the political imperative it is often called to; instead it is the process of development that is important, rather than what is produced. The representative nature of the Boards and Development Groups provide a basis for 'ownership' by these partners. For Granville, this is exemplified in the workings of the NCCA Boards and Development Groups stating that:

> They become not simply official instruments of national education formulation, but also theatres of action, negotiation and diplomacy wherein the education partners act out dramas of conflict and conciliation… (Granville, 2004, p. 87)

However, as Granville alludes, the symbolism of the partnership approach can also be used to delay and obstruct curriculum development; a feature of negotiations regarding a curriculum in ERB and Ethics which is further described in this research.

1.5 Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics in the Primary School Curriculum

The need to respond appropriately to increased diversity within Irish primary schools was a key recommendation of the report on the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector

(Coolahan et al, 2012), hereafter referred to as the 'Forum's Report'. Following the recommendations of the Forum's Report, the Minister for Education and Skills requested a curriculum for ERB and Ethics be developed by the NCCA for all national schools in the Republic of Ireland.

The context in which the proposed curriculum for ERB and Ethics is being developed is complex. A systemic factor is the composition of the Irish primary school system, with 2,989 of the 3,115 primary schools in Ireland (96%) under the patronage of religious authorities. Furthermore, the strong legislative foothold (Education Act, 1998, section 15 2-d, 32-d) pertaining to the right of patrons to develop, implement and monitor programmes relating to the ethos of their schools occupies the religious education curriculum space into which the proposed curriculum is proposed to be entering. Add these conditions to the already 'overloaded' primary curriculum space (NCCA, 2010a, p. 16) and the task that emerges is challenging.

In the majority of primary schools in Ireland (96%) the approach to religious education is of a denominational or faith-based nature. In *Share the Good News: The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2010) the Catholic Bishops contend that 'In the Catholic school, building on the academic preparation and professional expertise of its religious educators, religious education will never simply be a general study of religions, their history, traditions and customs' (p. 57). In contrast to a purely phenomenological approach, Catholic religious education encourages Catholic students and others to engage with religious questions from within the context of their own lived religious faith. In addition, religious education has a formational aspect 'allowing students to become aware of and respond to the transcendent dimension of their lives' (p. 58). The *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum* (2014) has among its objectives the need to 'prepare young children for living in contact with other Christians and people of other religious faiths, affirming their Catholic identity, while respecting the faiths of others' (p. 18). It is evident that denominational religious education in this context is not solely concerned with the faith formation of Catholic children, but also in preparing them for living in a diverse society.

The development of the curriculum is further complicated by the ambitions outlined in the Forum's Report for a curriculum that is for 'all' children, regardless of religion or belief, in the state and one that may be 'supplementary' to existing patron programmes (Coolahan et al, 2012, p. 111). The development of a religious education curriculum for 'all' children that is also 'supplementary' to existing patron programmes, many of which are taught through a faith lens (and only appropriate for the children of the same faith background as the school), is a particularly complex, if not impossible, task. Furthermore, the politically-mandated nature of the development pre-set certain conditions for curriculum negotiation within which the NCCA and their stakeholders had to operate, adding to the complex nature of the development.

In the subsections that follow, the concepts of ERB, and ethical education, are overviewed and discussed.

1.5.1 Education about Religions and Beliefs: an understanding

Religious education (RE) holds a unique position in the Irish primary school curriculum. It is listed as one of twelve subjects in the Primary School Curriculum (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p. 40). However, the NCCA has not been involved in developing a curriculum for RE in primary schools. The development of RE programmes has, to date, been the responsibility of the various patron bodies. The 1999 Primary School Curriculum notes that the Department of Education and Science:

> recognises the rights of the different church authorities to design curricula in religious education at primary level and to supervise their teaching and implementation.' (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p. 58)

Furthermore, RE is unique as the patron programme is entitled to a 'reasonable amount of daily teaching time' (DES, 1998, section 30, 2b). It is notable that no other curriculum area or subject is entitled to a *daily* provision of time. It may be argued that the composition of the primary education system, with the resulting prevalence of denominational religious education, has resulted in an under-developed understanding of what Education about Religions and Beliefs entails for the Irish context.

Outside Ireland, it has been well documented that the landscape of religious education in Europe is fragmented, diverse and highly contested (Kuyk et al, 2007; Jackson et al, 2007; Coolahan et al, 2012). In the last decade, there has been progress towards finding common understandings of what religious education is in the European context and how it can contribute to the lives of citizens (e.g. ODIHR, 2007). Perhaps the most significant contributor to the discourse at European level and in progressing a common understanding of religious education is Professor Robert Jackson of the University of Warwick. The University of Warwick's work and Professor Jackson's contributions were influential in the development of the NCCA's proposals for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

Jackson is chiefly concerned with the provision of religious education developed by the state for state schools. His evolving understanding of religious education is set against the background of an increasingly-globalised world, the perceived erosion of the autonomy of the nation state and within the wider debates about modernity and post-modernity (Jackson, 2007). Progressing from the theories of Ninian Smart (1967), Edwin Cox (1967), and Cantwell Smith (1978), Jackson's concept of religious education is concerned with 'understanding' and learning 'about' and 'from' religion rather than learning 'in' a religion. In this way he is not grounded in the confessional or faith formation tradition of denominationally-based religious education/instruction but in more ethnographic processes of education.

For Jackson, religious education in a state school 'should take account of the plural situations in which we all live, whilst avoiding the imposition of a particular ideology of pluralism onto children' (2007, p.

17). He contends that by examining the relationship between individuals' accounts of and questions about personal identity, children can come to a deeper understanding of religion in society and in their personal experience. This integration of the personal and social provides a lens in which religious education is not

> defined by a fixed body of knowledge (although the development of knowledge and understanding is a crucial ingredient), but as a series of existential and social debates in which pupils are encouraged to participate, with a personal stake related to their own developing sense of identity. (Jackson, 2007, pp. 17-18)

Jackson's emphasis on dialogical and discursive approaches calls for children's active engagement in religious education. Through this engagement, learning is internalised by the child and interpreted from their perspective. Much like the Dutch scholar Wilna Meijer (1995), Jackson's approach involves a conversational process in which children from all belief backgrounds continuously interpret and re-interpret their own understandings of their world and their beliefs. This approach, due to its inclusive nature, has impacted significantly upon religious education policy in state schools across Europe and is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

1.5.2 Ethical education: an understanding
Internationally, there has been a growing interest in the ethical and moral development of children and how this is achieved when not premised on religious doctrine. This section focuses on children's ethical and moral development. Ethical/moral development is a process through which children develop appropriate attitudes and behaviours towards other people in society, based on social and cultural norms, rules, and laws. According to Crul (2012):

> Ethics is the philosophical study of morality. It is concerned with the ends that we ought to choose and the considerations that should govern those choices, as well as with the kinds of people we should strive to be. Ethics is less interested in how people actually behave than with how they ought to behave. It seeks to understand the basis of moral obligation and the nature of 'the good'. (Crul, 2012, p.3)

Children's cognitive development is heavily influenced by social and cultural factors through their relationships with others. Children's thinking develops in dialogue with significant others, usually parents and teachers. Adults help children learn how to think by scaffolding or by supporting their attempts to solve problems. According to Crul (2012), there is an important difference between teaching ethics through inquiry and teaching it didactically in the school context. In the case of the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics, the inquiry aspects of ethical education were highlighted as a proposed model for teaching and learning in this area (NCCA, 2015a).

Over time, several theoretical approaches to the moral development of children have evolved. Although many of the theories associated with moral development are contested and have been subject to critique, each theory in its own way has contributed towards the understanding of a child's development. Writing from a cognitive developmental perspective Piaget (1965) distinguished between two types of morality:

a morality of constraint (or heteronomy), and a morality of cooperation (autonomy). The first type of morality is characterised by the child's respect for parents or other authorities and the rules they prescribe, and obedience to such rules. According to Piaget, heteronymous morality develops before autonomous morality which is characterized by mutual respect among peers or equals. It is also associated with conformity based on identification with shared goals and concern for the approval of others. Piaget noted that, although the two types of morality are age-dependent, the autonomous type becomes more dominant than the heteronymous type of morality over time. While Piaget's observation that children think differently from adults has encouraged new approaches in research on the mental development of children, his 'stage' theory has been subject to considerable criticism.

Contrary to Piagetian theory, a child's development does not always follow a predictable path. Children possess many abilities at an earlier age than Piaget suspected (Wood, 2008). Recent theory of mind research has found that 4- and 5-year-old children can have a sophisticated understanding of their own mental processes as well as those of other people. Furthermore, Piaget underestimated the role that parents and other significant adults play in children's cognitive and moral development (Reimer, 1993; Powers, 1988; and Speicher, 1994).

In contrast, Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) viewed moral development from a constructivist perspective. Kohlberg argues that the process of gaining moral maturity occurs over time if conditions support it. According to this view, a child's moral maturity relates to the way a child thinks about concepts such as rights, equality, and justice; over time and through a variety of social interactions, children tend to develop their own view of these and other concepts. Thus, their sense of morality is constructed through their own thinking about their experiences and through dialogue with others (including significant adults) about the meaning of these experiences (Nucci, 2001). Subsequent authors have criticised Kohlberg's theory, noting that his sample only included males (Gilligan, 1982) and that he draws on Western, urban, intellectual (upper class) understandings of morality, while misrepresenting others (Crain, 1985). Gilligan's critique of Kohlberg's work is based on her contention that morality concerns much more than justice and examined the gender differences in moral development. She noted that girls are more concerned with care, relationships, and connections with other people than boys (Lefton, 2000). Thus, in Gilligan's theory of care she hypothesised that as younger children, girls are more inclined towards caring, and boys are more inclined towards justice (Lefton, 2000). Gilligan suggests this difference is due to gender and the child's relationship with the mother and that the central moral problem for women is the conflict between self and other.

Influenced by Kohlberg's work, Bronfenbrenner (1979) explored the moral development of children but without separating development into distinct stages. He believed that many ethnic, religious, and social groups often have their own rules for moral behaviour. His research found five moral orientations, regardless of culture, social group, or developmental stage. The types of moral orientations included:

self-oriented morality (self-gratification); authority-oriented morality (right or wrong being determined by an external authority); peer-oriented morality (right or wrong being determined by peers); collective-oriented morality (the goals of the group over-ride individual interests); and objectively-oriented morality (guided by universal principles, not dependent on individuals or groups). Bronfenbrenner noted that while type 1, self-orientated morality, is found among children (and some adults) in all cultures, type 5, objectively-orientated morality, is found in relatively few people in any culture. The differences between types 2, 3, and 4 are more a matter of cultural characteristics (e.g. conservative cultures) than of development. In most cases, a change in moral orientation is associated with participation in the family and other social structures as people start considering the needs of others over their own individual needs.

Broader perspectives on children's development, such as that of Bronfenbrenner, emphasise the way in which children construct their ideas and learn about the world through their social interactions (Smetana, et al, 1999). Research from the social domain theory perspective focuses on how children actively distinguish moral from conventional behaviour based in part on the responses of parents, teachers, and peers (Smetana, 1997). As children move into adolescence, peers and peer groups often assume a stronger influence on their moral development (Buhrmester, 1996). While peer influence becomes increasingly evident in the growing-up process, parents still continue to influence their child by acting as role models and instilling values and beliefs. Some authors argue that parents have the ability to either facilitate or hinder their child's moral development through their use of disciplinary methods and their consistency in showing affection. The emotions and behaviours children learn from their experiences in the home are likely to affect the type of moral relationships and understandings they form as they grow (Recchia, 2014; Malti and Ongley, 2014).

1.5.3 ERB and Ethics: current developments

A consultation on proposals for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics, began on November 3rd, 2015 and finished on March 31st, 2016. During this time, the NCCA received a record number of responses, highlighting public interest in developments in this area of education. The consultation highlighted support for the inclusion of learning that relates to ERB and Ethics in the primary curriculum such as fostering skills, dispositions, knowledge and understandings of religions, beliefs and ethics that enable children to engage positively with the world in which they live; respect for those from other traditions; and the development of meaningful relationships with their peers.

Several contextual factors also emerged which directly impact on what had been proposed in ERB and Ethics. These include the provision of the Education Act, 1998 in relation to the rights of the patron body; the structure of the primary education system—with 96% of schools under denominational patronage; and schools' experience of curriculum overload and the associated challenges of teaching and learning across the whole primary curriculum. Given the contextual factors outlined as well as the redevelopment of the entire primary school curriculum, the work on ERB and Ethics is set to continue

in the context of wider curriculum development in the coming years, making it likely to be a number of years before its introduction in schools.

1.6 Structure of the dissertation

This introductory chapter presented the rationale, aims and questions upon which this thesis is founded. It outlined the concepts of curriculum which informs this work, and the role the NCCA play in the development of curriculum in Ireland. It concludes by presenting recent developments towards a curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

The thesis continues in the process of Currere by re-entering the past in *Chapter two: Our past and present- curriculum context in Ireland*. This chapter charts developments in Irish education since the 1800s in terms of school ownership and curriculum. It concludes by presenting an overview of patron programmes in Irish schools, which currently occupy the religious education space in which ERB and Ethics is proposed to coinhabit.

Chapter three: Surveying the terrain- a literature review, provides a framework informed by research for establishing the importance of the study, as well as providing a context to understand the findings of the research. Conceptions of curriculum processes, partnership and representation, trust risk and control, and participation are all explored. The chapter concludes with an example of the contested nature of religious education by examining exchanges between Prof Robert Jackson and Prof Liam Gearon in recent journal articles.

Chapter four: Negotiating the terrain- methodology chapter, begins by describing the epistemological stance used, situated within the interpretive paradigm. It explains why a qualitative case-study approach was taken for this study and locates the research questions within the paradigm. The chapter then focuses on the research instruments, sample population and stages involved in the data analysis. The chapter concludes with the ethical framework adopted.

Chapter five: Findings and discussion, examines the findings of the research by presenting six propositions across six themes including- the concept of partnership; representation; consensus building, power and protectionism; curriculum contestation as a proxy war; relationships, trust and risk; and the continuum of participation.

Finally, *chapter six: Conclusion* reviews the relevance of the research, its limitations, and implications for policy, practice and theory. It also includes some final remarks, which point to a suggested way forward for the NCCA and its partners in the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

Chapter 2: Our past and present: Curriculum context in Ireland

Examining the social process of curriculum design is likened to 'a form of social psychoanalysis' by Pinar (2004, p. 94). Pinar asserts that our awareness of the context of our experience enhances our ability to reposition ourselves as subjects who are capable of changing what we have experienced instead of remaining objectified by these experiences (pp. 57-58). The complexities of curriculum design in Ireland, and in particular the development of a contested curriculum such as ERB and Ethics, can be better understood by examining the context in which it is developed. It is important to understand the reforms and changes that have been undertaken by the state to appreciate the current landscape in which curriculum development in Ireland takes place.

Appreciating the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics as part of a wider reform agenda set by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) is important in the consideration of the context within which this research took place. Attempts by the State to move towards a more diverse patronage system suggest the need for change in the role of the Catholic Church in Irish education as evident in the recent debates regarding the ownership of, and admissions to, schools and the role religious education plays in state-funded primary schools. The visibility of such discourse in the public domain and the emotive arguments put forward by both sides give an indication of the relevance religion plays in Irish life (see appendix 3 for examples). The development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics in this context positions it in a very contested and fraught space.

One cannot understand the interface that takes place between church and state in modern contemporary Ireland with regard to the provision of primary and secondary education without an awareness of the historical context in which they developed (Coolahan, 1981). This section begins by examining how the structure of primary school patronage in Ireland has evolved since the establishment of the national system in 1831. This structure is significant as the rights afforded to patrons have a significant impact upon the realisation of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. It continues by providing an overview of the role religious education has played in national education policy and concludes with an overview of the patron programmes currently in use in Ireland.

2.1 Development of primary education in Ireland

The 1800 Act of Union bound Ireland more closely with Britain through a policy of cultural assimilation that precluded the teaching of the Irish language, history and aspects of Irish culture. Recently it has been argued that Britain, through successive governments, appeared to have been unable to make up its mind whether Ireland was a colony or a sister kingdom, part of its empire or its domestic sphere (O'Donoghue and Harford, 2010). Regardless the British state did take an active interest in education in Ireland. Indeed, Ireland was sometimes treated as a special case as outlined by Coolahan (1981):

> Ireland was frequently used as a social laboratory where various policy initiatives were tried out which might be less acceptable in England. (Coolahan, 1981, pp. 3)

By 1829, with Catholic Emancipation and the abolition of the penal laws, a growing confidence and assurance among the Catholic establishment was evident. The British state saw a national school system, under state control, as the best way forward. It was the intention of the state to operate a non-denominational primary education system wherein children of all denominations would be commonly educated in secular subjects and separately for doctrinal instruction, religious education. This intention is evident in the 14th Report of the Commissioners of the Board of Education (1812) which stated:

> the fundamental principle which should underpin such a scheme– "that no attempt shall be made to influence or disturb the peculiar religious tenets of any sector or description of Christians". (Hyland & Mihe, 1987, p. 64-65)

Lord Stanley, in his role as Chief Secretary of Ireland, adopted this stance and in 1831 founded the national school system. However, with suspicions of proselytism from all denominational groups, the concept of 'mixed-education' gained little support from the dominant educational stakeholders (religious orders) of the time. Furthermore, it has been argued that the British state while undertaking a massive 'civilising' process in Ireland realised, or were persuaded, that it would only succeed in subduing the Catholic majority if it cooperated with the wishes of the Catholic Church (Inglis, 1998). It was the gradual conceding of the control of education to the church which was to prove decisive in the moralisation of the Irish population. In other words, the church's state-sponsored project of civilising the Irish body through schools resulted in discipline, shame, guilt and modesty being instilled into the Irish Catholic population (Inglis, 1998), characteristics that were non-threatening to the prevailing colonial power of the time.

Some of the provisions of the Stanley Letter, as detailed in Lalor's doctoral work (2013, p. 20), did however have a lasting effect on the Irish education system particularly those aspects dealing with financial support from central government and the practice of autonomy being vested in local, usually denominational, management groups. Other elements concerned the role and responsibilities of the local management of schools. At this level, school buildings were often in the charge of local trustees and the patronage fell to individuals who took the initiative to set up the school in the first instance, usually the local clergyman. The manager was locally-based and typically a clergyman who hired and fired staff, distributed salaries and took responsibility for the general running of the school.

By the middle of the 19th century, the primary school system in Ireland had become in effect a denominational system. For children of differing denominations to that of their school, there was a principle of the conscience clause in operation, whereby:

> No child shall receive, or be present at, any religious instruction of which his parents or guardians disapprove. (Commissioners of National Education, Rules and Programme for National Schools, 1917, p. 3)

The provision for a separate system of primary schools controlled by local authorities were also abandoned as it had been found by The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Primary Education (Powis Commission) in 1870 that voluntary efforts had adequately met the demand for primary education in Ireland. The decisions of the Powis Commission had far-reaching implications for primary education in Ireland. Essentially it facilitated the dominant patrons of the time in having free reign within the primary education sector. The impact of this decision continues to be seen in the primary education sector today, indeed many of the issues addressed by the forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector (Coolahan et al, 2012) can be traced back to the decisions of the Commission. In recent times, increasing diversity among the Irish population, coupled with system wide inertia has led to a situation where an anachronistic *de facto* denominational education system is serving a multi-denominational school-going population.

With the emergence of the Irish state in 1922, a growing cultural nationalist ideology dominated education. The Irish form of nationalist ideology focused on the revival of the Irish language, culture, games and the consolidation of Catholic doctrine. Such nationalist ideology is exemplified by the insistence that Irish be used as the medium of instruction in infant classes, a measure that was later revised (Walsh, 2016, p. 6). At this time, the Catholic Church became the major power block in Irish society, controlling education, which was financially supported by the state with minimal interference (Akenson, 1996). The dominance of the church was reflected in the number of primary schools under their governance, as detailed in the table below taken from the Department of Education's report for the academic year 1923-1924. While the table details the number of 'Ordinary Schools' this in fact refers to schools under Catholic patronage.

Table 1: Breakdown of school type in 1923-1924[2]

Year 1923-1924	
Ordinary National Schools	5,268 (92.68%)
Convent National Schools	327 (5.75%)
Monastery National Schools	51 (0.89%)
Workhouse National Schools	5 (0.08%)
Model National Schools[3]	31 (0.54%)
Schools aided for Invalid, Blind or Crippled Children	4 (0.07%)
Total	**5,684**

In 1925, the Minister for Education, Eoin MacNeill, convened a conference to examine aspects of primary education. Regarding religious instruction, the Conference Report stated:

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[2] Information accessed from www.education.ie, Annual Statistical Reports 1923-1924 on 04/08/2016
[3] Model schools were established during the 1800s to facilitate teacher training. The Minister for Education and Skills fulfils the role of patron of these schools (Information accessed from www.education.ie, School Types on 04/08/2016).

> Of all the parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important … we assume, therefore, that Religious Instruction is a fundamental part of the school course … a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school. The teacher–while careful, in the presence of children of different religious beliefs, not to touch on matters of controversy–should constantly inculcate, in connection with secular subjects, the practice of charity … and other moral virtues. (Report and Programme presented by the National Programme Conference to the Minister for Education, p. 21)

As described by Kieran (2013, p. 296) 'religion and education were comfortable, if not always entirely compatible, bedfellows'. At this time of nationalist ideology, the emphasis on religious instruction positioned the dominant religion of the day in a place of great power within primary education. Religious instruction was taught as a discrete subject and reliant upon catechetics. It appears that there was little or no provision made for children of minority-faith groups and little questioning of the prevailing Catholic ideology of the time.

In an attempt to provide guidance and to regulate education, the 1932 Rules for National Schools state that all schools should be open to 'all children of all communions for secular instruction' and specify that secular and religious instruction cannot take place simultaneously in the 'same apartment' (DES, p. 40). It seems there was a desire to regulate aspects of religious instruction, from its timing and location within the school, to the recipients and personnel delivering it. One suspects this is to prevent inappropriate or unwelcome proselytism. While such regulations served to define the time and place of religious instruction lessons, no attempts were made to regulate the content presented during these times. The rules stress that the times for lessons must be publicly fixed and notified. At the beginning of all religious instruction classes, the teacher must display prominently a bi-lingual notice, supplied by the Department, containing the words *Teagasc Creidimh* (Religious Instruction) in the classroom. Likewise, at the commencement of secular classes, a notification containing the words *Teagasc Saoghalta* (Secular Instruction) must be displayed (Kieran, 2013, p. 238).

Little had changed in relation to the structure of the primary patronage system in the early twentieth century, and by the mid-twentieth century, denominational education was the dominant form of governance. The table below delineates the breakdown of school types in the academic year 1955-1956. Of the 4,871 national schools only 25 were outside the governance structure of religious orders. Of these 25 schools, there were 13 model schools, 11 special schools and 1 fosterage school.

Table 2: Breakdown of school type in 1955-1956[4]

Year 1955-1956	
Ordinary National Schools	4,290 (88.07%)
Convent National Schools	407 (8.35%)
Monastery National Schools	149 (3.05%)
Model National Schools	13 (0.26%)
Special Irish National Schools	11 (0.22%)
Fosterage National Schools	1 (0.02%)

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[4] Information accessed from www.education.ie, Annual Statistical Reports 1955-1956 on 04/08/2016

Total	**4,871**

The Catholic Church had immeasurable influence and power over the political and social trajectory of Irish politics and society throughout this time (Inglis, 1998). Ireland was seen internationally as a 'church' state. The dominant religion had a major say in social and political matters. Ireland had become an introverted and closed society, blinkered to diversity within society and obedient to the church (Fuller, 2004).

The *Investment in Education Report* conducted in conjunction with the OECD (1966), highlighted the deficiencies in the Irish education system, encouraging the Irish government to take an active role in education. The report became a catalyst for the rearrangement and reform of the school system. The report also recommended that the Department should establish a development branch for planning. The 'Rules for National Schools' (1965) state:

> The State provides for free primary education for children in national schools and gives explicit recognition to the denominational character of these schools. (DES, 1965, 4.4)

This was the first time in the 134 years of the national school system that the schools were formally recognised as denominational. Greater emphasis was placed on the integration of subjects, both secular and religious in the 1971 Primary Curriculum, ensuring that religious instruction permeated the entire school day. It is clear that there was little consideration for non-Christian children/families in state-supported schools in Ireland at this time, especially when statements from the Assistant Secretary of the Department Tomas Ó Floinn declared that:

> The purpose of education in a given society should reflect the philosophy of that society. Ours is a Christian society. We should have no apology to offer for an educational policy which consistently seeks to inculcate Christian values and principles. (New Curriculum for Primary Schools, An Múinteoir Náisiúnta, Vol. 14, No. 6, December 1969, pp. 5)

The increasing involvement of parents in school matters in the 1960s and 1970s had far-reaching consequences for how primary schools would be governed in the future. In 1975, the state advised the establishment of Management Boards and used financial incentives to encourage school participation in establishing boards. For the first time parents and teachers were involved in the management of the primary school, albeit in a minor capacity. It was during this time that a number of 'bottom-up' initiatives driven by parents to meet the needs of their children were seen. Such movements have contributed greatly to advancing system-wide change and is underpinned in law by the Education Act, 1998 allowing parents 'to send their children to a school of the parents' choice having regard to the rights of patrons and the effective and efficient use of resources' (p. 10).

A significant initiative was the foundation of three multi-denominational schools, namely the Dalkey School Project (1978), The Bray School Project (1981) and the North Dublin School Project (1984). Educate Together, a governing body for these schools was established in 1984. These schools were

founded on the basis of parental demand for a choice in school type in their local areas. The ethos of these schools states 'that every child is equally respected and has equal rights of access to the school regardless of social, cultural or religious background or personal creed, and where all children are educated together in an atmosphere of respect' (Accessed at http://educatetogether.ie/schools on 19/09/2016). This movement has gathered significant pace in recent decades, and in 2018 Educate Together are patrons of 81 primary schools and 9 post-primary schools. The role of parental involvement is also evidenced by the establishment of Gaelscoileanna in the 1970s. The Gaelscoileanna movement, through its patron body An Foras Pátrúnachta, established denominational, inter-denominational and multi-denominational naonraí for young children, and Gaelscoileanna for children of national school age, in line with the wishes of parents.

A newcomer to the national debate has been the establishment of the Community National School (CNS) model by Minister Mary Hanafin in 2008. Until 2016, the Minister for Education and Skills had been the patron of these schools, with the Education and Training Boards of Ireland (ETBI) having recently taken over their management. These schools are the state's attempt to provide education at primary level. While agencies such as Educate Together, Gaelscoileanna and the establishment of Community National Schools have brought some choice to the provision of primary schools; it is interesting to note the lack of change in the topography of the school landscape since the 1950s. While inter- and multi-denominational patrons are part of the educational landscape, they make up only 4.1% of Irish primary schools. The level of Catholic ownership of schools has largely remained unchanged despite the apparent political and public will for change. The primary sector remains dominated by denominational providers (95.94%), despite renewed and sustained calls for change in this area. While it may be argued that Catholic influence has waned within the realm of civic and legal discourse in recent times, it seems the traditional structures of educational provision are impervious to change.

Table 3: Breakdown of school type in 2016-2017[5]

Year 2016-2017	
Catholic	2794 (89.7%)
Church of Ireland	175 (5.6%)
Inter-denominational (Gaelscoileanna)	17 (0.54%)
Jewish	1 (0.03%)
Methodist	1 (0.03%)
Multi-denominational (CNS and Education Together)	109 (3.4%)
Muslim	2 (0.06%)
Presbyterian	15 (0.48%)
Quaker	1 (0.03%)
Total	**3,115**

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[5] Information accessed from www.education.ie, Data on Individual Schools 2016-2017 on 13/10/2017

From the overview above, it is evident that the issues of school patronage/governance and the educational rights of parents and children in Ireland have been the focus of considerable debate over a long period of time.

2.2 Curriculum development in the 19th and 20th centuries

Curriculum change in Ireland can be understood as 'an event' rather than a process. In this context curriculum reform 'events' are often associated with specific dates relating to the launch of an entirely new curriculum. While amendments and modifications may happen between these 'events', these dates represent significant developments in curriculum. Such dates include: 1900, 1924, 1971 and 1999. From 1900-1999, influences on the curriculum have evolved from colonial, to nationalist, to child-centred perspectives; each having a significant impact on the design, content and delivery of the curriculum in schools (Walsh, 2016). This section describes the four major curriculum reforms undertaken in Ireland between the 1900s and the 2000s.

2.2.1 The Revised Programme (1900)

In 1897, the Board of National Education established the Commission on Manual and Practical Instruction (CMPI), and its ensuing report concluded that a radical revision of the primary school programme was both necessary and desirable. The Commission's report was used as the basis for drafting the Revised Programme, with Dr. Starkie playing a major role in its development. According to Walsh (2007, p. 104), Starkie was a formidable character who alienated and antagonised key stakeholders in the process of implementation. Under his stewardship, the National Board was afforded a limited input into the developments and a gradual approach was replaced by a more directive form of implementation. Despite this, the Revised Programme was innovative in that it allowed flexibility to managers and teachers to align the programme to the needs of individual schools and localities. The child-centred philosophy of the Revised Programme was at variance with conceptualisations of children in earlier programmes, seeking to implement a broad and balanced curriculum using heuristic methodologies (Walsh, 2016, p. 4). In its development under Starkie, there was little effort to involve or inform the key stakeholders, namely teachers, managers, inspectors and parents about what would be involved in its implementation (Walsh, 2007).

While the Revised Programme was ambitious in both its scope and underpinning philosophy, an evaluation of the Irish school system in 1903 by an inspector from England, Mr F.H. Dale, found that the methods of instruction in schools had altered little from those utilised prior to 1900, with a focus remaining on mechanical accuracy as opposed to practical instruction (Dale, 1904). According to Walsh (2007), the Revised Programme fell short of the educational revolution it had aspired to invoke. It was heavily influenced by international jurisdictions and was not sufficiently contextualised for implementation in the Irish context. Key stakeholders were not kept informed or afforded a sense of ownership of the revisions, a serious omission considering that they had to translate the theory of the

programme into a practical reality. While conceptually well-devised, the Revised Programme lacked a strategic implementation policy and failed to provide an appropriate support infrastructure to ensure successful implementation.

2.2.2 The National School Programme (1922)

The 1920s saw a number of interesting changes in curriculum development. The Irish people had their first opportunity to design their own programme of education. In this post-colonial context and amid patriotic fervour, the overriding aim was to accentuate the differences between pre- and post-independence educational policies, focusing on the Irish language and Catholic religion as the main characteristics of this distinct identity (Walsh, 2016, p. 5). In this context, the first National Programme Conference in 1922 was initiated by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) in the lead-up to independence to frame a new programme for primary schools. This programme emphasised the Irish language, history and culture, in an attempt to transmit the cultural inheritance successive generations had been denied. Thus, subjects such as drawing, physical drill, manual instruction, cookery and laundry and elementary science were omitted as compulsory subjects from the programme (National Programme Conference, 1922). According to Walsh:

> its devisers erroneously believed the education system was largely responsible for the demise of Irish and that schools could simplistically instigate a social reform of the magnitude of the changing vernacular of an entire population, the majority of who spoke English and expressed no active desire to change. (Walsh, 2007, p. 215)

The programme was a radical departure from its predecessor, primarily framed along nationalist lines and taking less cognisance of the child's interests and abilities. The curriculum was pruned to ensure that adequate emphasis was placed on these elements. However, not only did the range of subjects become more restricted but the content and focus of many became decidedly Irish in orientation. This is exemplified by the insistence that Irish be used as the medium of instruction in infant classes, a measure that was later revised in line with the abilities and needs of the child (Walsh, 2016, p. 6). According to Ó Cuív, this provision was due to the influence of the Gaelic League, which was 'a vital force and its leaders had the sort of faith that moves mountains'. Furthermore, Walsh (2007) claims the prominent status afforded to witnesses such as Reverend Corcoran, and bodies such as the Gaelic League and the INTO highlights the influence individuals and organisations can have on educational policy at a particular point of time through a convergence of societal and educational factors.

The influence of the church on matters concerning the newly-emergent Irish state is also evident in the Irish Constitution (1937). The prevalence of religious references in the document is a consequence of the cultural and religious influences upon the authors of the time. An initial read of the preamble to the document reveals its theocentric orientation (Renehan, 2014):

> In the Name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority and to Whom, as
> our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred, We, the people of

> Éire, Humbly acknowledging all our obligations to our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ, Who sustained our fathers through centuries of trial, Gratefully remembering their heroic and unremitting struggle to regain the rightful independence of our Nation, And seeking to promote the common good, with due observance of Prudence, Justice and Charity, so that the dignity and freedom of the individual may be assured, true social order attained, the unity of our country restored, and concord established with other nations… Do hereby adopt, enact, and give to ourselves this Constitution. (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937)

The Constitution announces clearly the ideological position of the state and singles out the Roman Catholic Church as holding a special position, while also recognising minority religions. The implications for religion in education and the state's acceptance and protection of denominational interests become clear in Articles 42.2.4 and 44.2.6:

> 42.2.4 The State shall provide for free primary education and shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative, and, when the public good requires it, provide other educational facilities or institutions with due regard, however, for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation.

> 44.2.6 The property of any religious denomination or any educational institution shall not be diverted save for necessary works of public utility and on payment of compensation.

The rights of parents as the 'primary and natural educator of the child' (Article 42.1) and the endowment of the right to opt their child out of religious education (Article 44.4) made provision for an education that was intentionally inclusive of all religions. It becomes clear that in the provisions relevant to education 'the Constitution confers upon the State no direct role in the religious formation of citizens' (Williams, 2005, p. 42).

The Report of the Council of Education on the Function and Curriculum of the Primary School (1954) asserts that religious education:

> was not merely one of many subjects to be taught in the school: it was… the foundation and the crown of the whole educational process, giving value and meaning to every subject in the curriculum. (Hyland and Milne, 1987, p. 124)

The Function and Curriculum of the Primary School Report (1954) highlights the mono-denominational nature of the population of Ireland at the time and openly refutes Lord Stanley's (1831) previous claim of multi-denominational education when asserting that the 'undenominational principle' underlying this system of education is 'obnoxious to our people'. O'Donoghue and Harford observe that by the late 1960s, the church was:

> well entrenched in the schools in terms of the number of loyal Catholics administering and teaching in the schools for the majority Catholic population. (O'Donoghue and Harford, 2010, p. 328)

Perhaps the most significant endorsement of the role of religious instruction in primary schools is found in the Rules for National Schools (1965). Rule 68 states:

> Of all the parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important, as its subject-matter, God's honour and service, includes the proper use of all man's faculties, and affords the most powerful inducements to their proper use. Religious Instruction is, therefore, a fundamental part of the school course, and a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school. (DES, 1965)

The rule has become the subject of some commentary of late, not least with the recommended deletion of the rule as outlined in the report on the *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* (Coolahan et al, 2012, p. 80). The response from sectors of the Catholic Church was for a 're-articulation of the Rule'[6], with many drawing attention to the fact Rule 68 is not the only rule in need of revision; nonetheless the Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan, in circular 009/2016 rescinded the rule in line with the Forum's recommendation.

While minor curriculum modifications were made to the National School Programme both in 1934 and 1948[7], it remained the curriculum for primary schools until 1971. Despite the focus on the Irish language, the general weight of evidence points to poor progress in the Irish language within the school system, particularly its use as a teaching medium; as the expertise required to implement the programme in both languages proved overly-challenging for most teachers (Walsh, 2016, p. 6). While a number of studies and organisations called for reform of the curriculum (INTO, 1941; 1947; Church of Ireland, 1950), these were largely ignored by the Report of the Council of Education (Department of Education, 1954). This report generally supported the status quo and consolidated the stagnation in Irish education that had become prevalent by this time (Walsh, 2016, p. 7).

2.2.3 Curaclam na Bunscoile (1971)

The 1960s saw a revival in education in Ireland. Factors such as contact with international jurisdictions; the aspiration to join the European Economic Community; the advent of free post-primary education; the abolition of the Primary Certificate Examination; developments in communication and technology; increased economic prosperity; the presence of a young cohort of motivated politicians and the increasing aspiration of the attainment of equality of educational opportunity were critical in this new emphasis on education (Fleming and Harford, 2014). Furthermore, it has been argued that the deference and sensitivity towards the central role of the Catholic Church in education had begun to wane and politicians began to assert their role in education policy (O'Donoghue and Harford, 2011). There was also a growing realisation of the need to invest in education to allow Ireland to compete on an

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[6] Quote attributed to Drumm, 2012, source: http://www.rte.ie/news/special-reports/2012/0315/314761-schools/

[7] From 1934, the higher course in Irish was to be adopted in all schools and the lower course in English was to be studied by all pupils outside infant classes. In addition, English was no longer to be taught in infant classes where there was a teacher competent to teach through Irish and English became optional in first class. The Revised Programme for Infants introduced in 1948, was flavoured by the underlying principles and philosophies of the 1900 curriculum (Department of Education 1948, 1951). This broke from the prevalent concept of the young child within curricula from the 1920s and returned, in theory at least, to a more child-centred and activity-based ideology and approach.

increasingly international stage, and that education could act as a lever for social mobility and provide equality of educational opportunity for all (Coolahan, 1981).

From the late 1960s, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education came together and drafted a curriculum for primary schools. Following a pilot implementation in approximately 20% of schools, and further revisions, the curriculum was introduced in 1971. The Curaclam na Bunscoile proved to be a radical departure from the ideological position, content and methodology of its predecessor. This curriculum acknowledged that previously:

> Education was 'curriculum-centred' rather than 'child-centred', and the teacher's function in many cases, was that of a medium through whom knowledge was merely transferred to his pupils. (Department of Education, 1971, p. 15)

The curriculum was underpinned by the ideology of child-centred education, offering a wide range of subjects and encouraging discovery learning methods. While the core subjects of English, Irish, mathematics and religion remained, the relative focus on these subjects altered, with a greater emphasis placed on the English language. The inclusion of additional subjects such as music, art and craft, social and environmental studies and physical education allowed a greater focus on the aesthetic, physical, creative and emotional aspects of development. However, the curriculum's theoretical framework was weakly articulated and its principles were not clearly delineated. As Sugrue states, 'when data on actual practice are isolated from these studies teachers seem to endorse a child-centred rhetoric while practising a more formal pedagogical style' (1997, p. 25).

Walsh's (2016) analysis of inspectorate reports of the time describes improved attainment in the English language, social and environmental studies, music, and arts and craft., while the further decline of the Irish language characterised this period. Constraints to implementation included the large classes in which many pupils were taught; the material condition of schools in terms of facilities and resources; a mismatch between curriculum provisions and parental expectations; the predominance of small schools; the dearth of suitable resources and educational materials; poor provision for teacher in-service training; the weak link between primary and post-primary curricula and the lack of alignment between school design and proposed methodologies (Walsh, 2016, p. 11).

The Catholic Church's prevailing role in the primary education system and the centrality of religious instruction is reflected in the *Primary School Curriculum: Teacher's Handbook* (1971). Although no elaboration was made in relation to the rationale for including religious instruction in the curriculum, a significant declaration in relation to how the subject interacts with the entire curriculum was made:

> Separation of religious and secular instruction into differentiated subject compartments serves only to throw the whole educational function out of focus… the integration of the curriculum may be seen… in the religious and civic spirit which animates all its parts. (DES, 1971, p. 19)

The integration of religious instruction throughout all areas of the curriculum, clearly announced above, fore-fronted this teaching and approach to education in the primary sector, a feature of Irish education that continues to influence patron bodies, boards of management, principals and teachers today despite the emergence of a more diverse populace.

2.2.4 Education Act, 1998

The state's first attempt to legislate for education in Ireland was made with the Education Act, 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998). The enactment and commencement of the Act (1998) brought an end to the legislative lacuna within which education had been operating up to that point. The Act (1998) envisages a partnership approach towards educational policy, with the Minister of the day positioned as *primus inter pares*, although generally having the final say. This collaborative approach can be seen by the requirement to consult with the relevant stakeholders and the residual supervision over ministerial regulation retained by the Oireachtas.

The development of the Act was the culmination of events leading up to this point. The National Education Convention convened in Dublin in 1993, and gathered 43 stakeholders, including the Department of Education, to engage collectively on a wide spectrum of educational policy issues. The convention, as a response to the Green Paper *Education for a Changing World* (DES, 1992) had the aim of promoting dialogue and collective agreement among the various interest groups involved in Irish education (Renehan, 2014, p. 35). The work of the convention was consolidated into a report before eventually feeding directly into the Government White Paper on Education (1995).

The evidence of the state's attempts to legislate for an increasingly-diverse populace is reflected in the preamble statement of the Education Act, 1998: 'in the interests of the common good… [The state] respects the diversity of values, beliefs, languages and traditions of Irish society'. Cognisant of the increasingly-diverse Irish community the Act nevertheless recognises the right of patrons (96% of which are denominational) to design programmes to support the ethos of their schools. The Act includes the right to supervise, implement and teach programmes according to the belief systems of their faith tradition (Glendenning, 2007, pp. 327-8).

The Education Act, 1998, section 30 (2)(d) requires the Minister to ensure that a 'reasonable amount' of time is set aside in each school day for 'subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the school'. The recommendation by the NCCA in the development of the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) specified a half hour each day as being 'reasonable' for the teaching of patron programmes. This daily requirement makes the patron's programme unique in the primary curriculum as it has to be taught every day; no other subject is afforded such status.

A difficulty arises for those who are not adherents to the religion of the school and who do not wish to avail of religious instruction. Of course, the right for parents to opt their child out of such teaching is a

safeguard enshrined by the Constitution (Mawhinney 2006; 2007; 2012; DES, 1998); however, the provision for those who do opt out has been found to be 'unsatisfactory' by the Forum's Report (Coolahan et al, 2012, p. 82). Perhaps Glendenning points a way forward when considering the accommodation of a diverse populace and the need to:

> Find a more equitable balance between the constitutional protection of denominational right in education and the safeguarding of the rights of those who profess other religious faiths or who profess no religion. (Glendenning, 2007, p. 91)

Indeed, the increasing number of families in Irish society who do not have or do not wish to profess their faith is a recent phenomenon. Parents and children have a right not to be required to reveal their religious/philosophical convictions and not to be compelled to assume a stance from which it may be inferred whether or not they have such beliefs under the European Convention on Human Rights (Article 8). Any programme or curriculum that puts parents and children in a position that they must reveal, directly or indirectly, their religious convictions, falls foul of the negative aspect of Article 9 (freedom of conscience) and Article 8 (the right to private and family life) of the European Convention on Human Rights. This is an important consideration for both the introduction of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics and the procedures for opting children out of the patron's programme of the school.

2.2.5 The Primary School Curriculum (1999)

In response to the Report of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum (DES, 1990), a process began in 1990 to revise the primary school curriculum. This was conducted through a process of consultation and partnership, culminating almost a decade later in the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999). The NCCA partnership approach was operationalised by establishing twelve specialist committees, representative of educational stakeholders. The development of the curriculum focused on six curriculum areas, with two committees for each area: one for junior infants to second class and one for third to sixth class. While representation on these committees was wide ranging, Walsh (2007, p. 635) notes the numerical influence of the INTO, with four representatives forming one-third of the membership of each committee.

The curriculum reflected the thinking and aspirations of the National Education Convention on Education (1994) where the key to developing the curriculum was 'consultation and partnership' (Report on National Education Convention, 1994, p. 9) and is reflective of the espoused policy of the White Paper on Education, *Charting our Education Future* (1995) (Government of Ireland, 1999, p. 2).

The Primary School Curriculum has been described as *evolutionary rather than revolutionary* for two reasons: it was founded on its predecessor, Curaclam na Bunscoile (1971), and was developed through widespread engagement with the partners in education. A phased-approach to implementation was supported by the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP). Its purpose was to mediate the curriculum for teachers and to enable them to implement it in their schools. The core task of the PCSP

was to facilitate the professional development of whole-school staffs through in-service seminars and school-based planning days. Additionally, the Regional Curriculum Support Service (or Cuiditheoirí Service) was established as a central component of the PCSP. The cuiditheoirí offered their services to schools in a variety of ways, including visiting schools and advising teachers on the implementation of particular areas of curriculum strands; providing teachers with useful sources of information in relation to resources and teaching materials; and facilitating networking between schools. Overall, approximately 27.5 days of school closure were sanctioned to accommodate whole-staff attendance at seminars and to convene planning days for the phased introduction of the curriculum from 1999 to 2003.

The curriculum is presented in seven curriculum areas, some of which are further subdivided into subjects. These are: language: Gaeilge and English; mathematics; social, environmental and scientific education (SESE): history, geography and science; arts education: visual arts, music and drama; physical education; and social, personal and health education (SPHE). While religious education was named as a curriculum area in the 1999 curriculum the provision of this type of education 'remains the responsibility of the different church authorities' (DES, 1999, p. 40). The *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction* (DES, 1999) offers the following rationale for the inclusion of RE in the curriculum for all children:

> The spiritual dimension is a fundamental aspect of individual experience, and its religious and cultural expression is an inextricable part of Irish culture and history. Religious education specifically enables the child to develop spiritual and moral values and to come to a knowledge of God. (DES, 1999, p. 58)

Specific reference is made to the rights of parents to arrange for their children's education in a school whose religious ethos coincides with their own religious belief and to the relationship between the programme of RE offered in a school and the ethos of that school:

> It is the responsibility of the school to provide a religious education that is consonant with its ethos and at the same time to be flexible in making alternative organisational arrangements for those who do not wish to avail of the particular religious education it offers. (DES, 1999, p. 58)

The time framework in the curriculum, intended to help teachers and schools in planning the implementation of the curriculum, notes that all children should experience a minimum of 150 minutes of RE per week (i.e., 30 minutes per day) including children in infant classes, who have a shorter school day (DES, 1999, p. 70). In terms of international provision for the teaching of religious education, Ireland's provision is considered to be high (Grayson et al, 2014). Furthermore, findings from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study, which examined time allocated to subject areas for 9-year-olds, showed that after English, Maths and Irish, 'the greatest amount of time is spent on RE, averaging just over two hours per week' (McCoy et al, 2012, p. 91). The researchers reported that RE was the only subject for

which time allocation varied by class level, 'where greater time spent on the subject in second class is likely to reflect sacramental preparation' (ibid, p. 12).

The coupling of religious education to the patron's programme is a legacy of a denominationally-dominated education system. It is evident that the patron's programme has held a unique position in the Primary School Curriculum. Until recently, this curricular space has been ringfenced for denominational groups to instruct children in their religion, in a confessional manner. The recent developments in ERB and Ethics have been perceived by some as an attempt to erode this feature of the national curriculum.

2.3 Patron programmes: Religious, ethical and multi-belief education in Ireland

As per the Education Act (1998) a key responsibility of a patron involves the promotion of school ethos within and across the schools under its patronage. A feature of promoting school ethos is the teaching of religious education during the school day. Patrons have developed programmes that reflect and support the ethos of their schools. The relationship between the proposed ERB and Ethics curriculum and the patron's programme has been an area of contestation since the publication of the Forum's Report (Coolahan et al, 2012). How the proposed curriculum will 'supplement' the patron's programme is a key challenge, particularly since such programmes underpin an array of moral and ethical perspectives.

Table 4 provides an overview of the patrons' programmes currently in use in Irish primary schools. One of the most difficult challenges for anyone attempting to deal with the relationship between religion and education is that of language (Renehan, 2014, p. 2). As such the programmes below are categorised according to denominational and multi-denominational programmes. In many jurisdictions denominational schools are referred to as 'faith-schools', equally there can be ambiguity around the interchangeable terms of 'multi-denominational' and 'non-denominational schools'. For the purpose of this research, consistency is maintained with the Department of Education and Skills' use of denominational and multi-denominational education.[8]

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[8] The DES present three types of patronage: denominational, inter-denominational and multi-denominational. While three types of patronage structure exist only two categorises of patrons' programmes are used in schools: denominational and multi-denominational. https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Diversity-of-Patronage/Diversity-of-Patronage-Survey-of-Parents.html, accessed 24/08/2018.

Table 4: Denominational and multi-denominational patrons and their programmes

Denominational programmes	Multi-denominational programmes
Grow in Love (Veritas, 2014-2018)	Educate Together: *Learn Together Curriculum* (Educate Together, 2004)
Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist, Quaker: *Follow Me* (Board of Education of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland, 2004-2010)	Community National Schools: *Goodness Me, Goodness You!* (NCCA, 2008-present)
Jewish: *The Dublin Talmud Torah Jewish Studies*	John Scottus School Trust: *The John Scottus Philosophy* (John Scottus School, 1986-present)
Islamic: *Islamic Religious Education for Primary Level* (Islamic Foundation of Ireland, Yahya Al-Hussein, no date of publication provided)	

The four denominational programmes combined are taught in approximately 96% of schools, while the three multi-denominational programmes combined are taught in the remaining schools. The following section draws from the work of the NCCA (2015b) and provides a brief introduction to each patron's programme beginning with schools of a denominational ethos, followed by schools of a multi-denominational ethos.

2.3.1 Schools with a denominational ethos

Denominational schools with a Catholic ethos

Religious education in schools under Catholic patronage is determined by the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* which was published in 2014. This newly developed curriculum is the foundation upon which *'Grow in Love'* a recently developed programme for Catholic schools is based. The general aim of the new curriculum is *'to help children mature in relation to their spiritual, moral and religious lives, through their encounter with, exploration and celebration of the Catholic faith'* (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2014, p. 22). The 2014 curriculum replaces the *Alive-O* programme, which was developed in the 1990s and fully implemented in schools since 2004. The aim of the *Alive-O* programme was to foster and deepen children's faith while enabling children to become fully alive in the presence of God in themselves, in others, in the church and in all creation (Veritas, 1996, p. vi). The programme sought to evoke a response in children to the presence of God in their lives and promoted knowledge of the Catholic faith, liturgical formation, moral formation, teaching to pray and education for community life.

Denominational schools with a Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist and Quaker ethos

Denominational schools with a Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist and Quaker ethos use the *Follow Me* programme. As an agreed Christian curriculum, it is categorised as 'denominational' in

nature, as its teaching is that of a faith/Christian-based perspective. The programme was devised by developing and adapting materials from *Alive-O* and with reference to the Scottish and Northern Ireland guidelines for religious and moral education. The aims of the programme are to enable children to develop: a knowledge and understanding of beliefs; worship and witness of the Christian faith, and in particular of the Church of Ireland and other principal reformed traditions; to explore the biblical witness to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; to develop their own religious beliefs, values and practices through a process of personal search and discovery; and to develop an awareness of and a sensitivity towards those of other faiths and none (*Follow Me*, 2010, p. vii).

Denominational schools with a Muslim ethos

Denominational schools with a Muslim ethos use the *Islamic Religious Education for Primary Level* programme, as approved by the Islamic Foundation of Ireland. The programme does not explicitly detail aims or principles, however the teaching relates to nurturing an Islamic way of being and a deepening of the child's faith in Islam. The programme has three parts: Qur'anic studies, the Islamic religion (Deen) and Arabic language studies. The Islamic programme is delivered by part-time religious education teachers, with specialist knowledge in Islam.

Denominational schools with a Jewish ethos

Denominational schools with a Jewish ethos use the *Dublin Talmud Torah Jewish Studies Programme*. The aims of the programme are listed as follows: 'to cultivate a love for Jewish learning; to nurture a pride in being part of the Jewish people; to attain a proficiency in Jewish learning and practice by promoting and developing Jewish study skills' (School Handbook, 2014-2015, p. 11). The programme is delivered by part-time religious education teachers, with specialist knowledge in Hebrew studies.

2.3.2 Schools with a multi-denominational ethos

The multi-denominational space is occupied by three patrons (Educate Together, Community National Schools and the John Scottus School Trust). Patrons of these schools have devised multi-belief, ethical and philosophical programmes underpinning the ethos of their schools.

Multi-denominational schools: Educate Together

Educate Together, established in 1978, has developed *Learn Together* (Educate Together, 2004) which is a rights-based, ethical curriculum for their schools. The general aims of the curriculum centre around a fostering of knowledge and critical understanding of value and belief systems, providing children with the multi-cultural skills needed to enrich society, addressing issues of spirituality and morality, facilitating ethical decision-making, enabling children to participate in a democratic process and becoming informed, socially responsible and fair-minded citizens (Educate Together, 2004, p. 10). As *Learn Together* is a curriculum and not a devised programme of study, it is the responsibility of each

Educate Together school to develop their programme in line with the aims, principles, strands and strand units described in the *Learn Together* curriculum.

Multi-denominational schools: Community National Schools

Community National Schools, established in 2008, are developing a multi-belief and values curriculum called *Goodness Me, Goodness You!* (GMGY). The aims of the curriculum build on those of the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) and include, to enable children to:

- live a full life as a child and to realise their potential as a unique individual

- develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others, and so contribute to the good of society

- prepare for further education and lifelong learning

- be nurtured in their beliefs and values within the educational context of the school, as an intrinsic part of their living to the full, with the help of their family. (NCCA, 2015, p. 10)

The curriculum centres around four strands which are presented within an inter-disciplinary approach; *Story*- an arts-based approach; *We are a Community National School*- a values-based approach; *Thinking Time*- a philosophy based approach; *Beliefs and Religions*- an inter-belief dialogical approach.

The curriculum is currently under review and is being developed collaboratively between the NCCA, the Educational Training Boards of Ireland and the Department of Education and Skills.

Multi-denominational schools: John Scottus School Trust

The John Scottus School Trust, founded in 1986, has a philosophy-based programme promoting the search for knowledge and truth. The school has an ethos welcoming all faiths and religions and so considers itself multi-denominational (John Scottus School Trust Prospectus, p. 3). The programme draws on the great scriptures and literature from both eastern and western traditions. Themes are explored by all children at the same time, in a whole-school manner. Although the John Scottus School Trust have a philosophical policy for schools to follow, the programme has continually been revised and changed in line with the needs of the school community.

Implications for the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics

It is clear from the overview that there is a range of patron programmes used in Irish primary schools. There is clear variation in the epistemological approaches advocated in teaching across patrons' programmes, particularly between denominational and multi-denominational patrons. There is evidence of socio-cultural, Socratic, pluralist, human rights and faith-based approaches (NCCA, 2015b). The approaches supported by the patron's programme clearly have implications for the teaching of an ERB and Ethics curriculum. For instance, if the content of ERB and Ethics is taught through a faith-based

approach, this presents significant concerns for children who are not of that faith or world view. It is difficult to see how this approach can contribute to a national curriculum in ERB and Ethics; and yet, as is the ambition of the Forum's Report, the proposed curriculum is asked to consider the possibility of being 'supplementary' to such programmes (Coolahan et al, 2012, p. 111).

The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector

The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, hereafter referred to as the Forum, grew out of the realisation that there was 'a mismatch between the inherent pattern of denominational school patronage and the rights of citizens in a much more culturally and religiously diverse contemporary Irish society' (Quinn, 2012). The Forum attempted to explore the future and current adequacy of the primary education system in Ireland. The establishment of the Forum became a key commitment of Government in 2011, to ensure 'fairness in schools' (Kieran, 2015, p. 220).

The Forum took place within the context of an economic recession and so was requested to take into account 'current financial constraints within which the State is operating, the need for continued restraint into the future and the requirement in this context to make the maximum use of existing school infrastructure in catering for future demands' (Coolahan et al, 2012, p. 4). There was also a recognition from the Catholic Church that divesting school patronage to the state or other bodies may be an option for consideration (Martin, 2008)[9]. The terms of reference of the Forum was to ensure a more inclusive primary education system by making recommendations for adaptions to the existing school structure, not to re-design an educational system from scratch. The Forum consulted widely with stakeholders and took account of 215 written submissions from parents, patrons, teachers and the general public. Furthermore, the Forum held a number of open public meetings and working sessions which were broadcast live on the internet to ensure transparency. Following this widespread consultation, the Advisory Group published its report in April 2012.

Recommendations from the Forum related to the role of Religious Education in primary schools included the updating of the Rules of National School (1965). The Forum drew particular attention to Rule 68 and recommended the deletion of this rule. It was also recommended that Rule 69 (*parental right to opt their child out of religious instruction*) should be reframed in consultation with parents. In relation to denominational religious education, it was recommended that faith formation/religious instruction should be taught as a discrete subject and not integrated within and across the curriculum, as previously advocated in the Primary School Curriculum (1971). To ensure that all teachers and children have the basic standards of religious and belief literacy, it was recommended that a new curriculum be developed, namely Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics. The NCCA

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[9] Speaking Notes of the Most Reverend Diarmuid Martin, Archbishop of Dublin and Primate of Ireland at the Department of Education & Science conference: 'The Governance Challenge for Future Primary School Needs'. http://www.catholicbishops.ie/2008/06/27/speaking-notes-rev-diarmuid-martin-archbishop-dublin-primate-ireland-department-education-science-conferencethe-governance-challenge-future-primary-school-needs/

was charged with the task of developing this curriculum, for all children in the state, so that it would complement and support existing patron programmes in the provision of religious education (Coolahan et al, 2012, pp. 111-112). It is important to note that this recommendation marks the first state involvement with religious education at primary level in its history.

To summarise the recommendations related to this research, the Forum asserted that a curriculum in ERB and Ethics should be for all children; should be informed by international best practice; should pay particular concern to those children who currently opt out of the patron's programme; that ERB and Ethics would not replace the patron's programme but should be cognisant to current practice in these programmes and that patrons have a responsibility to ensure ERB and Ethics is provided for, in the manner outlined by the curriculum, to children attending their schools. These recommendations provided broad strokes within which the curriculum could be developed. They do not however indicate the level of complexity involved in the development of the curriculum. For instance, developing an ERB and Ethics curriculum that will complement and support six different patron programmes across denominational and multi-denominational perspectives is an obvious obstacle.

Attempting to become 'temporal' (Pinar, 2004), this section provided an outline of the historical and present contextual factors that act upon the researcher and the research. The next chapter attempts to explore the present more deeply by reviewing literature pertinent to the research.

Chapter 3: Surveying the terrain—a literature review

This chapter analyses the current literature on curriculum theory, design and the dual elements of ERB and Ethics. As outlined in the introductory chapter, this study identified the development processes employed by the NCCA as a critical element for investigation, partly because curriculum studies has been neglected in educational debate and research in Ireland. A prominent factor which motivated this research was the perceived gap or 'significant silences' in contemporary discourse surrounding curriculum change (Sugrue, 2004, p. 293). Through examining the literature which is currently in existence around the field of curriculum development, this literature review aims to illuminate many aspects of the research and embedded research questions identified earlier.

3.1 Curriculum theory

Dr Anne Looney, former-CEO of the NCCA, when engaging with public audiences often describes curriculum as 'the set of stories that one generation chooses to tell the next' (Looney, 2014, p. 17). This image embraces the technical (the anthology of stories), the process (the choice, revision and choosing again) and the practice (storytelling) perspectives. For the purposes of this research it is the curriculum design process—the choice, revision and choosing again—which is the focus of enquiry.

Since the 1950s, Ralph Tyler's approach to curriculum has dominated the field (1949). Tyler outlined a four-stage procedure for curriculum design: (i) the educational objectives should be established; (ii) the educational experiences necessary for achieving those objectives should be determined; (iii) those experiences need to be summarized effectively; (iv) it must be determined whether the original objectives have been met. For Looney (2014, p. 11) this technical view of curriculum continues to have influence and is particularly appealing to policy makers and to the comment lines of talk radio, when debate on a bewildering array of problems inevitably arrives at the seemingly obvious and simple solution to 'put it on the curriculum'. From Pinar's perspective (1998), the curriculum field is now in need of a new paradigm.

Pinar (2004, p. 38) draws attention to the importance of process in determining the stories which are chosen, stating that curriculum often 'hides other truths'. His concept of curriculum as a 'process of social psychoanalysis' in which the national story creates the illusion of truth being on the social surface, when often the stories we tell ourselves mask other, unacceptable truths. In the Irish case, these unacceptable truths may include our interpretation of past conflicts, the romanticising of the Irish culture, the abuses of power in the early to mid-twentieth century, the place of women in Irish society, perpetual disadvantage and child poverty, and the role religion has played in Irish life.

For Pinar, the educational task is to take the 'cover stories' we tell ourselves and unpack them (2004, p. 39). Pinar equates this unpacking of the acceptable version (the curriculum) of the nation's story with the search for truth. However, he pushes beyond just seeking truth; for him it is also about seeking

justice and a form of 'educational confession' (p. 39) that will cleanse the autobiographical story of a nation. In this conception of curriculum, it is not only a series of skills and content to be understood:

> it is a palimpsest to be understood, a complicated conversation among those persons and ideas present, past and yet to come. Such a conception of curriculum requires efforts to understand curriculum historically, politically, racially, gendered, phenomenologically, as postmodern, autobiographical, theological and international as well as institutional. (Pinar et al, 1995)

Ellis (2004) classifies curriculum as either prescriptive, descriptive or both. In this classification prescriptive definitions express 'what ought to happen, and [they often] take the form of a plan, or some expert opinion about what needs to take place in the course of study' (2004, p. 4). Under this category Glatthorn et al (2012) list several theorists including Bobbit (1918), Caswell and Campbell (1935), Dewey (1902), Gagné (1967), McBrien and Brandt (1997), Rugg (1927) and Tyler (1957). The prescription of curriculum can often reduce the process of education to a procedural undertaking within which the products of study are more important than the methods. Prescription in this way can often control not only what is to be taught or studied but also how and when it is to be done.

Within this paradigm, Bobbit (1918) applied a scientific management strategy to education. This strategy has its roots in Taylorism, a factory management system developed in the late 19th century to increase efficiency. This drive for efficiency was enabled by the evaluation of every step in a manufacturing process and breaking down production into specialised repetitive tasks. A new regime of curriculum development emerged; one that controlled what was taught, how it was taught and how it was measured. Educational objectives were used to delineate the content, procedures of instruction and evaluation of an instructional programme. In this concept of curriculum, the processes of 'schooling' take on a formal and industrious form, as Cubberley describes (1916, p. 338): 'our schools are, in a sense, factories in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life'.

In his vision of what curriculum constitutes, John Dewey takes a more global view than other prescriptionists, indicating that curriculum is 'a constant reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organised bodies of truth we call studies' (1902, p. 11-12). For Dewey, the curriculum or 'studies' is a formal representation of the successes of the human race as they 'embody the cumulative outcome of the efforts, the striving, and the successes of the human race generation after generation'. Curriculum therefore is the reflection of these successes and the organisation of these experiences in a systematic and coherent fashion.

 In the prescriptive, procedural concept of curriculum there is no admission of the uncertainty and 'unforseeability' (Biesta, 2013, p. 16), no acknowledgement that education in a democracy requires teacher and pupil discussion, collaboration, debate and indeed co-decision making. Jung and Pinar (2015) argue that working within this paradigm shifts the focus of the question of curriculum from *what*

knowledge is of most worth? —to the assessment question—*have pupils learned what others have demanded?* (p. 32). In the Irish case, the dominate role of assessment as 'the tail that wags the dog' (Dysthe, 2008) has been well documented, particularly at post-primary level with the high stakes Leaving Certificate examination. The same level of discourse around assessment has not been so evident in the case of primary education. Although in recent years, with the introduction of mandatory standardised testing in second, fourth and sixth class in literacy and numeracy; teachers have been reporting increased pressure on results, particularly as they are linked to the process of School Self-Evaluation (SSE) and the recently launched model for special education teaching resources for primary schools (DES, 2017).

Arguably in the Irish case, while the formal curriculum at primary level may be classed as descriptive, the expectation of school leaders, parents and in particular the inspectorate has resulted in a more prescriptive experience for the teacher and child. Aoki (2005) makes a helpful distinction between the curriculum-as-plan and the curriculum-as-lived-experience. In his view, the curriculum-as-plan has its origins outside the classroom- usually in a curriculum development agency or ministry of education- and it tends to be imbued with the cultural, political and educational assumptions of its developers. Curriculum-as-lived-experience acknowledges the uniqueness and immediacy of teachers' and children's lives. The tension between the planned and lived curriculum is where pedagogy lives and where teachers act. Aoki, while acknowledging the significant tensions in this space, sees the opportunity for pedagogy to cultivate an understanding of the official curriculum as experienced, studied, and reconstructed, in a process of Currere a term resurrected by Pinar & Grumet (2015) and discussed later in this chapter.

Furthermore, in the Irish case, Gleeson (2010) points to the prevalent belief among teachers and the Department of Education and Skills that curriculum is understood to be an 'anthology of subjects' (p. 93): what Trant (2002) referred to as a table of contents. This understanding, most prevalent among post-primary teachers, has been further reinforced through the Education Act, 1998 where curriculum is defined as 'instruction in recognised subjects'. This definition is in sharp contrast to the understanding of the White Paper, 1995 which outlined in its operating principles:

> The term "curriculum" encompasses the content, structure and processes of teaching and learning, which the school provides in accordance with its educational objectives and values. It includes specific and implicit elements. The specific elements are those concepts, skills, areas of knowledge and attitudes which children learn at school as part of their personal and social development. The implicit elements are those factors that make up the ethos and general environment of the school. The curriculum in schools is concerned, not only with the subjects taught, but also with how and why they are taught and with the outcomes of this activity for the learner. (p. 19)

Contrastingly, Crooks outlines that after the establishment of the NCCA, the focus was firmly on syllabus development, a situation in which 'policy-makers were interested in subjects alone, which

meant the interdisciplinary work was totally neglected' (1987, p. 21). In this scenario, the dominant understanding of curriculum is one of prescription of a set of syllabi to be delivered in classroom.

Contrary to prescriptive concepts of curriculum which focus on 'what ought to be done', descriptive definitions express 'how things are in real classrooms' (Ellis, 2004, p. 5) or the curriculum-as-lived-experience. Core to this understanding is the concept of educational experience (Glatthorn et al, 2012, p. 4). Under this category Glatthorn et al (2012) list several theorists including Brown (2006), Caswell and Campbell (1935), Haas (1987), Hopkins (1941), Huebner (1999), Silva (2009) and Tanner and Tanner (1995).

The flexibility of curriculum and autonomy afforded to the educational professional of the descriptive model of curriculum is evidenced in Thomas Hopkins' work when he states:

> The curriculum [is a design, made] by all those who are most intimately concerned with the activities of the life of the children while they are in school…a curriculum must be flexible as life and living. It cannot be made beforehand and given to pupils and teachers to install. It represents learnings each child selects, accepts, and incorporates into himself to act with, in, and upon in subsequent experiences. (Hopkins, 1941, pp. 12-13)

Hopkins' concern for the pupil is paramount in this conception of curriculum. Here the child is an active participant in education, engaging and shaping curriculum through their interaction and internalising of learning. The focus on what pupils can do with knowledge, rather than what they know is key differential in this paradigm. As Tanner and Tanner note, curriculum is

> the reconstruction of knowledge and experience that enables the learner to grow in exercising intelligent control of subsequent knowledge and experience. (Tanner and Tanner, 1995, p. 43)

The move towards what pupils can do outside of the school experience coupled with the growing concerns that schooling was not equipping children with the necessary competences and knowledge for life in a changing world, has aided the move towards the use of learning outcomes in curriculum development. As described by Spady (1994), learning outcomes are concerned with measurement of *things that learners could demonstrate beyond school*, rather than by an accumulation or average of things that could be demonstrated during their educational experiences.

The suitability of learning outcomes as a method of describing curricula is an ongoing debate (Donnelly, 2007). Critics maintain that defining learning in terms of outcomes is 'conceptually flawed, difficult to implement and downgrades knowledge' (Priestley and Sinnema, 2014), while advocates claim that defining learning in terms of outcomes places a focus on learning as an enabling process that helps learners acquire knowledge as they develop capabilities and attributes. In this way learning outcomes exert a pull rather than a push on the teaching and learning process (Tunstall and Maxwell, 2001; Maxwell, 2002; Fensham, 2002).

As Walsh (2016) indicates,

> the challenge for curriculum designers is to craft well-defined learning outcomes based on key knowledge and concepts that lead to learning processes which are focused on deep learning of a limited set of fundamental concepts, and to have valid assessment processes which have beneficial effects on teaching and learning and that act as enablers. (Walsh, 2016, p. 55)

The development of curriculum and learning outcomes can be considered as a process rather than a product. If the construction of learning outcomes is a complex non-linear interacting system, then an organising framework—the process of curriculum design—is needed that can act as a scaffold for their construction. It is this process, the social process of curriculum design, that is the concern of this research.

3.1.1 Currere and curriculum as a form of psychoanalysis

A serious concern of Pinar is that teachers rarely associate themselves directly with curriculum. Instead they perceive curriculum as a set of government documents and prescribed resources which must be implemented and delivered in classrooms.

In order for curriculum to become a 'lived experience' (Aoki, 2005), Pinar declares that schools must reclaim their educational purpose, which he feels has been hi-jacked by economic and political purposes. For him the point of school is 'understanding' (p. 187), in the broadest sense. Pinar links understanding of the relationships between academic knowledge; the state of society; the processes of self-formation; and the historical moment in which we live, have lived and in which our decedents will live. He extends this concept to understanding as informing our ethical obligations to care for ourselves and our fellow human beings, that enables us to think and act with intelligence, sensitivity, and courage in both the public sphere—as citizens aspiring to establish a democratic society—and in the private sphere, as individuals committed to other individuals.

Pinar calls for teachers to take back their purpose for themselves and their pupils. As teachers take hold of the curriculum as an opportunity for themselves and their students, as citizens, as ethical and spiritual persons, the curriculum 'as-a-lived-experience' changes as teachers and pupils 'engage with it, reflect on it, and act in response to it, toward the realisation of our private-and-public ideals and dreams' (p. 187). In this sense curriculum becomes a verb, an action, a social practice, a private meaning, and a public hope. It is an ongoing, if complicated, conversation. Pinar, describes this process as *Currere*—the infinitive Latin form of curriculum (2004, p. 4). In his conception, the method of *Currere* promises no quick fixes. On the contrary, this autobiographical method asks educators to slow down, to remember even re-enter the past, and to meditatively imagine the future. This personal reflection enables educators to be aware of their submergence in the present. Pinar calls for a deeper investigation of the past and possible future, not only intellectually, but in their character structure. In this method, returning to the past (the 'regressive') and imagining the future (the 'progressive') must be understood (the 'analytic')

for the self to become 'expanded' and finally, mobilised (in the 'synthetical' moment). Pinar refers to this process as autobiographical in nature, and draws attention to its liberating force:

> Such an autobiographical sequence of ourselves as individuals and as educators might enable us to awaken from the nightmare we are living in the present. (2004, p. 5)

The conception of curriculum here as something that educators must liberate themselves from, would seem to be rooted in a context of extreme political interference, with particular reference to the 'No Child Left Behind' policies in the United States. By linking the curriculum to student performance on standardised examinations, politicians have, in effect, taken control of what is to be taught—the curriculum. For Pinar, 'examination driven curricula demote teachers from scholars and intellectuals to technicians in service to the state' (2004, p. 2). Pinar cites Lasch (1978) to claim that because the external world is so controlled by such accountability teachers have 'retreated from a public sphere that no longer seems meaningful' (p. 3), and they have become overly-focused on the present rather than reflecting upon the past in order to re-imagine the future for education. For Pinar, that has led to educators abdicating the professional and ethical responsibilities to take control of what they teach. It seems without significant engagement with and interrogation of curriculum, teachers are doomed to continue to live and work in this educational 'nightmare'.

Pinar's psychoanalysis of curriculum is particularly concerned with questions of social justice and the exercising of power in the United States, noting that 'all cultural artefacts represent certain interests and further power for certain people' (p. 194). The context within which the cultural artefact (curriculum) is enacted is also highly significant, as Pinar notes in his analysis of the experience of the 'Deep South', as representing a place where it allowed the 'curricular embodiment' or reconstruction of a prevalent set of norms and attitudes (p. 94). Examples of the prevalence of practices such as lynching black males and enslaving black people as continuing in various forms well past the Civil War, as well as continued school segregation long after desegregation of schools was legally enforced in 1954, illustrate how 'place' plays a critical role in the enactment of curriculum.

In the Irish case, questions of equality and social justice have also been raised in recent years, some of which include:

- Sexual identity: while the Marriage Referendum in May 2015 heralded the recognition of gay and lesbian marriage in Ireland, the teaching of Relationship and Sexual Education (RSE) remains a challenge with a recent review called for by the Minister of Education and Skills, Richard Bruton TD. Teacher competence and confidence coupled with the prevalence of faith-based schools in Ireland are often referenced as resulting in a less than adequate provision in this area.
- Religious diversity: possibly the most 'in vogue' matter in primary educational discourse is the role of religion in schools and the patronage system. As 96% of Irish primary schools are faith-

based, the religious education that takes place in these is of a confessional and denominational nature. While this is appropriate for children of the same faith of the school, it is a significant barrier to the inclusion of children and families of different faith backgrounds.

- School admissions: As of September 2019, a baptism certificate will no longer be a criterion for enrolment in Catholic schools. Previously, Catholic schools held the right to select children on grounds of religious identity, underpinned by the Equal Status Act, 2000. Under the new measures from Minister of Education and Skills, Richard Bruton TD, while Catholic schools will no longer retain this right, minority faith schools (such as Church of Ireland and Muslim Schools) will continue to be allowed to select children on grounds of religious identity in the case of over-subscription.

- Teaching through a religious lens: currently under section 15 (2b) of the Education Act, 1998, all teaching in a faith-based school can take place from the perspective of the relevant church authorities. In this way, patrons have the power to augment any curriculum described by the state and present it in line with their faith perspective. The provision of this right to the patron has implications for all children who are not of the faith of the school, particularly when learning about sensitive issues, where church teaching has tension with or is in conflict with human rights.

These are only a snapshot of some of the major issues of justice and equality faced in our education system, others include educational disadvantage, special educational needs, English as an additional language and a teachers' right to non-traditional sexual identity and beliefs. For Pinar, these examples can be compared with the experience of the Deep South; while aspects of Irish society have made progressive steps towards inclusion and the recognition of human rights, our education system lags behind. While the author does not subscribe to or support many of Pinar's view about curriculum—particularly those that paint curriculum as something to be endured, negotiated and overcome; his concept of Currere can shed light on the process of curriculum design in Ireland. The work of the representative structures of the NCCA can be seen to enter into this autobiographical method of curriculum conception. The questions that arise from Pinar's method of Currere are commonly posed and responded to in the process of curriculum design. Particularly those relating to the past: what has gone before?; and the future: what do our children need to contribute to a world that does not yet exist? Indeed, given the representativeness of the structures of the NCCA, curriculum design in Ireland can be seen as a collective autobiographical process that is rooted in narratives of the past, and yet looking to the potentiality of the future with a view to developing a socially and educationally accepted curriculum.

3.2 Curriculum design processes

From universities, to state inspectorates, to ministries of education, to independent curriculum agencies the process and organisations involved in curriculum design varies greatly across the globe. The

location of the site of curriculum design often impacts greatly upon the processes of development. For instance, when located in universities, it may be argued this inhibits a connection to the school, the classroom and the realities of school life. While when located in ministries of education, it could be argued that political forces can be brought to bear. As Jenkins (2010) notes:

> Nothing appeals to a politician so much as the chance to rewrite a curriculum. He would not dare operate on a brain tumour or land a jumbo jet or design the Forth Bridge. But let him near a classroom, and the Jupiter complex takes over. He goes berserk. Any fool can teach, and the existing fools are no good at it. Napoleon might lose the battle of Waterloo, but he reformed the French curriculum. (Jenkins, 2010, found at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/nov/25/michael-gove-humanities-curriculum-reform, accessed on 05/02/2018)

This tension has been seen recently in Australia, as cited by Looney (2014), when a review of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Agency (ACARA) was called for by the Minister of Education, Christopher Pyne. In responding to the announcement of the review, the chair of ACARA, Professor Barry McGaw, wrote to the review team, defending the processes adopted by ACARA in work to date and the consultation and analysis undertaken. He opened the letter thus:

> The school curriculum expresses a nation's aspirations for its next generations. The curriculum must strike a balance between developing young people's understanding of their national history and culture and preparing them for a future that is increasingly global and largely unpredictable.
>
> What constitutes essential school learning will always be contested because behind it is a debate about what knowledge is of most worth. Curriculum stirs the passions–and that is a good thing. Curriculum is never completed. It is never perfect and should always be a work in progress. As responsible citizens, we are obliged to provide our future generations with the best possible learning opportunities and outcomes. (McGaw, 2014, cited in Looney, 2014, p. 9)

Looney acknowledges McGaw's letter for its efforts to reclaim curriculum-making it a public rather than a party-political project. This section on curriculum process provides an overview of power relations in policy development; the role of trust and control; the representative structures involved in curriculum development; and the engagement and voice of those involved.

3.2.1 Power relations in policy development

Most writers dealing with organisational behaviour cite Dahl's (1961) definition of power 'as the ability to make somebody do something that otherwise he or she would not have done'. In unpicking the complexity of the power dynamics at play, many theories have been furthered in recent times. Foucault's reflections on the power exerted upon individuals by the state through its use of social institutions has been a major influencer. While he does not provide a clear theory of power, he does present layers of understanding related to the exertion of power on populations. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1979) he discusses the period between 1757 and 1830, when the practice of torturing prisoners was replaced by close surveillance of them by means of the prison rules. Foucault interprets this change not as a humanising of punishment, as is commonly thought, but as a

more correct economy of power, that of disciplinary power. Although Foucault did not believe that disciplinary power spreads throughout society systematically, he estimated that most of the major social institutions are already infected by it, and hence the great similarity in the structure of prisons, factories, hospitals and of course schools. For Foucault, power is multi-directional and operates from the top down and from the bottom up, although it is at its peak when it is situated inside specific institutions such as schools, prisons or hospitals. Furthermore, no-one is outside the matrix of power, or above it. Thus it is not possible to attribute the totality of what happens in the dynamics of power to any personal strategic plan (Sadan, 1997). In other words, as power is all-pervasive it is impossible to attribute all that happens to a 'grand plan' or overarching agenda.

While Foucault makes significant contributions with his ideas and the spirit of what he says, his lack of theoretical structure is challenging for those developing theories in this field. For this research, the structured theory of John Garventa (1980) in examining the phenomenon of quiescence—the silent agreement in conditions of glaring inequality—is of relevance. In his work, Garventa found that the social elite makes use of its power principally to prevent the rise of conflicts in their domain. Thus an apparent lack of conflicts is identified as both a sign and a consequence of deliberate use of power mechanisms.

Building on the work of Steven Lukes (1974), Garventa presents three dimensions or faces of power: overt, covert and latent. In the overt arena of power relations, A's power over B is manifested to the extent that A can make B do something which B would not have done had it not been for A. The overt dimension of power may be investigated by means of observation of behaviour: who participates, who profits, who loses, and who expresses themselves in the decision-making process. This face of power relations is by far the easiest to identify as the mechanisms of power are relatively straightforward. In the covert dimension, power is exerted not only to triumph over the other participants in the decision-making process, but also to prevent decision-making, to exclude certain subjects or participants from the process (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). A study of power in the covert dimension should observe who decides what, when and how, who remains outside, how this happens, and how these two processes interconnect. Power resides here in the setting of agendas and the determination of whether certain questions will be negotiated or addressed. In this way power is mobilized through game rules which work in the favour of the powerful, at others' expense. Decision-making may be prevented by the threat of sanctions or the mobilisation of bias. The use of bias reinforces values, beliefs, ceremonies and institutional procedures which present a very particular narrative, which can act as a barrier to those outside of the elite.

The third, and most difficult dimension to identify in power relations, is the latent dimension- that of the *true interests.* Lukes (1974) explains that in this dimension, A ensures B does things that they would not have done by influencing, determining and shaping B's will. The elusive nature of this dimension

calls for an examination of the social myths, language and symbols that are used to obtain an advantage in power relations. The lines of communications and discourse on social legitimations develop around the dominant groups, and they are imbued into people's consciousness in the form of beliefs or roles. The indirect mechanisms of this dimension, it would seem, have a significant influence on the shaping of people's political perceptions, especially those belonging to powerless and highly-dependent groups (Sadan, 1997).

Garventa asserts that in order for there to be a challenge to the status quo, a shift in the power relations is needed: a loss of power by A or a gain of power by B. To do this B must overcome both the direct and the indirect effects of the third dimension. B must develop their own resources—both real and symbolic—to engage in a challenge. In other words, B can participate in a challenge in the first, overt dimension, only after successfully overcoming the obstacles of the second and third dimensions. To combat any challenge, A has a series of means with which to overcome the outcomes of the overt or covert conflict that B initiates. First, A can simply patronise B and remain aloof, thus preventing the very admission of the existence of the conflict. A can also interfere with each one of B's steps; A can interfere with their obtaining of resources and the development of their own abilities; they can incite against the opening up of issues, and can sabotage activities.

With the growth of the nation state throughout the 20th century in many western democracies the role played by A can be attributed to the state. While acknowledging the multi-directional nature of power, nonetheless in many instances the state wields significant power through its use of social institutions. As the Irish state emerged from colonial rule, a vacuum of power and authority was created which was filled for many generations by the Catholic Church. The prevalence and influence of the church in many aspects of Irish life throughout the 20th century has been well-documented in earlier sections of this thesis.

Much of the recent discourse surrounding societal issues such as the introduction of divorce, the Eighth Amendment, public funding of religious order hospitals, the baptism barrier in primary schools, the divestment of primary schools and the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics; can be seen as issues that are subject to covert, overt and latent power relations between church and state. In many instances, it could be argued that the state has challenged the church as evidenced in the cases of funding religious order hospitals, the introduction of divorce and progress on the repealing of the Eighth Amendment. This transition of power was made possible by the state developing its own narrative/bias of what Irish society should provide for its citizens. However, in terms of the educational arena and in particular the subject of religious education in schools, the state continues to be the subject of power from the church. Given the legislative foothold of the patron body in Irish education, the state is in the position of B in Garventa's model when it comes to divestment and religious education in primary schools. In these instances, it could be argued that the church has exhibited the defences of the elite

when challenged in Garventa's model by patronising and remaining aloof to the issues of the system; and by being obstructionist in the opening up of discussions on issues; and sabotaging efforts in order to keep the status quo.

3.2.1 Partnership and representation

Who should decide what schools teach? Who should determine the aims and values that underpin a curriculum? In the Irish case, the answer to these questions centres around models of partnership and a consensus-building approach. Indeed, in recent decades, this approach has been a feature across many western jurisdictions when developing national policy. Many of these cite the Copenhagen Centre's definition of partnership as:

> People and organisations from some combination of public, business and civil constituencies who engage in voluntary, mutually beneficial, innovative relationships to address common societal aims through combining their resources and competencies. (The Copenhagen Centre, 1999)

This approach to partnership involves a focus on horizontal relationships, which a particular emphasis on local interest groups and stakeholders. An agency is often created which is responsible for the achievement of specific outcomes and subject to various forms of accountability mechanisms. Such agencies develop networks of stakeholders and are often regulated by the state, through the definition of their role and responsibilities, similar to the work of the NCCA.

Against the backdrop of increasing level of state involvement in people's lives, the notion of compensatory legitimation through the use of partnership has been developed (Weiler, 1990; Jansen 1990; Persian, 1998). Granville (2004, p. 79) notes that the NCCA is a good example of 'negotiated governance' and has been very effective in the legitimatisation of top-down curriculum reform. Griffiths et al (2009) writing from their experience in Western Australia, outline the power relations involved in curriculum development through a partnership model during the mid-1990s to 2008. In their analysis, Griffiths et al (p. 205) examine the basis of a partnership approach, arguing that although discourses of 'policy partnerships' are increasingly evident in contemporary curriculum policy, they do not take sufficient account of embedded hierarchical power relationships. They cite Evans et al (2006), indicating that a partnership model (involving collaboration and consultation) might be seen as legitimation strategies which, in effect, operate as regulatory mechanisms for the state. Often partnerships can be used to present educational change as an organic development initiated at grassroots level, when in reality it is the state setting the agenda for change. Thus, discourses of partnership can be viewed as neoliberal strategies of governance that seek to devolve responsibility and accountability to the 'end user' (teachers and schools) whilst enabling the state to 'steer at a distance' through the specification of outcomes and subtle forms of regulation. Furthermore, this process has the added benefit of enabling the state to claim credit for the policies while at the same time deflecting blame for any potential negative outcomes to those at the lower-levels of the policy trajectory.

Griffiths et al (2009) describe themes that emerged during partnership arrangements which include: a lack of trust between interest groups; conflict over roles; the dominance of particular actors over policy processes; and cultural differences as well as power differentials between interest groups. A particularly interesting finding of their report describes how 'individuals who represented the *policy elite* were able to yield significant power over policy processes because of their positions within key organisations and their prior expertise' (p. 199).

In their critique of the Curriculum Council, Griffiths et al (2009) indicate that using subtly regulated consultation they exerted significant control over the development of the national curriculum. This control was exerted through its avoidance of negativity and dissent; through its selection of individuals to take part in the consultation processes; and through ignoring negative feedback (p. 203). This finding is particularly significant to this research and is discussed in chapter 5.

Partnership in the Irish context
As Looney (2004) notes, the rhetoric of partnership in the Irish context is perfectly exemplified by former-Minister for Education, Niamh Bhreathnach:

> The objective of this dialogue was to promote the articulation of the various viewpoints of the partners, to improve mutual understanding between sectoral interests and to identify areas of actual or potential agreement between the different groups. (Bhreathnach, 1996, p. 17)

The extent to which this rhetoric is matched in the reality of curriculum policy development is a source of contestation, as illustrated by Gleeson (2000a; 2010) and Granville (2004). The latter takes a relatively optimistic view and sees the Interim CEB and the NCCA as attempts to give ownership of the process of curriculum change to teachers and school management. While for Gleeson, the partnership approach provides the arena in which power relations can be brought to bear and illustrates the relative powerlessness of parents when compared to the power of the teaching unions, for example. Gleeson's view of partnership approaches is shared by that of Gewirtz and Ozga who suggest that such an approach can mask a 'policy elite' and a 'closed policy community' (1990, p. 47).

While the churches and the state can be viewed as the original Irish 'education partners', the origins of the modern partnership approach to policy development is rooted in the economic difficulties of the 1980s, when social partnership enabled a co-operative approach to collective bargaining and a stable work force. Evidence of the role social partnership plays in curriculum development can be traced back to the constitution of the Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB), the publication of a Green Paper on education entitled *Partners in Education* and the National Education Convention in the early 1990s. In the early days of the CEB, the question of representation on structures for curriculum development loomed large. While broad agreement was reached that the structures should represent the interests of various stakeholders in education, the nature of this representation was contested. Minister Hussey's initial proposal of a representative structure rather than a representational board was strongly

contested by the main sectoral interests, and in particular the teacher trade unions (Gleeson, 2000b). This resistance resulted in Minister O'Rourke's decision to establish the NCCA on a representational basis, thus memberships of the NCCA's Council, Boards and Development Groups were determined by proportional affiliation and not necessarily according to expertise. The representative structure of the NCCA continues to be unique, certainly among English-speaking education systems (Looney, 2014, p. 11).

In his thesis, Gleeson (2000a) outlines three issues that can arise in relation to the adoption of a partnership approach. First, he draws attention to power relations between the partners, indicating that the teacher unions in Ireland have a particularly strong foothold in the structures of NCCA due to its representational nature. This is exemplified with the teacher trade union of the primary sector having four representatives on Development Groups, while other educational partners have a single nominee, as illustrated in the table below.

Table 5: Composition of NCCA Development Groups at primary level

Organisation	Number of nominees
Catholic Primary Schools Management Association	1
Church of Ireland Board of Education	1
Department of Education and Skills	1
Foras na Gaeilge	1
Irish Federation of University Teachers (nominating from practitioner/teacher education)	1
Irish National Teachers' Organisation	4
National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education	1
National Parents' Council, Primary	1
Additional members recruited through advertisement	Up to 2

For Gleeson, the influence unions have on the work of the NCCA was illustrated best when in the first draft of the Education Act, 1998, the NCCA was omitted and the unions were the first to object. Indeed, Gleeson indicates that along with the management bodies, 'they effectively control the NCCA and its committees' (Gleeson, 2000b), and 'effectively exercise a veto over curriculum decision-making' (2010, p. 266). The dominance of sectoral interests in the deliberations of the NCCA is also exemplified by the view of Dr Ed Walsh, inaugural chair of the interim CEB and the NCCA, who saw the representative nature of the organisations as a 'millstone and an impediment 'to the well-being of the Irish community and development of curriculum for the next millennium' (cited in Gleeson, 2010, p. 269). For Walsh, two forces were driving Irish education: the teacher trade unions and the Catholic Church, which

both appear happy to create successive generations of young people who are not either motivated or skilled to create new enterprise or jobs…who are happy to sit back and wait for someone to offer them a job, or for the state to look after them. (Gleeson, 2010, p. 269)

The second issue addressed by Gleeson (2000), relates to the relatively-small educational community that is active in Ireland, resulting in the same individuals meeting frequently to discuss and negotiate their sectoral interests. For critics of the partnership model, this familiarity and the tradition of working towards a consensus creates the conditions for 'a cosy consensus' and compromise. In this way, policy can often be critiqued for 'tinkering around the edges' rather than addressing the big questions in Irish education. For Lynch (1989), an example of this lies with the reproduction of social inequality and the dominance of the middle classes arguing that education

> matters most to those who gain most from it presently, namely the middle classes. They have learned the educational formula by rote, it is in their interests that it does not change. As a power group the middle classes are well positioned to have their interests defined as public interest in education. (p. 124)

This was further highlighted by McKay, cited in Gleeson (2010, p. 270), who identified the NCCA as 'essentially middle class', and that did not always appreciate the problems of the working-class schools. In the context of developing a curriculum in ERB and Ethics, the lack of diversity with regard to religious belief or ethnicity could also be exampled as a weakness in the NCCA representative structures.

The question of a shared understanding of the common good is the subject of Gleeson's third issue. It is argued that the process of brokerage within the partnership model leads to a form of hegemony of the sectoral interests without due concern for educational opportunity and the common good. For Gleeson, evidence of attention to these fundamental social justice issues is sparse in Irish curriculum debate. The distraction of subject-specific 'turf wars', it is argued, takes focus away from the bigger picture issues in Irish society and the potential for curriculum to address these. According to Gleeson,

> the domination of the rational technical paradigm has allowed fragmentation and discontinuity to go unchallenged, while macro curriculum issues are neglected. (2000, p. 26)

Gleeson's critique of the early years of the NCCA raises serious questions of the partnership model; the voices represented; those who are voiceless and the neglect of addressing significant questions in Irish education. In response to some of this critique, Looney (2014) provides a considered view:

> Despite the shortcomings of the partnership and representative structure, the existence of the NCCA ensures that the political 'line of command' is at worse more dispersed, and at best entirely displaced by a deliberative process that represents a more public engagement with curriculum development and a view of curriculum as process. (Looney, 2014, p. 11)

Looney also draws on two recent developments in how the NCCA works (2014, p. 11). The first arises from the observation in the NCCA's strategic plan for 2012-2015 that other voices and other ways of working challenge how the Council is composed and how it works:

> The presence of urgent and diverse voices in the education debate challenges the commitment of the NCCA to consult as widely as possible and its capacity to offer advice that represents a consensus view. In addition, the composition of the council is likely to come under increasing scrutiny from two sources. First, voices not represented on the council are increasingly active in pursuing membership, and second, the ability of a group that works on a consensus basis to continue to deliver effective and meaningful change will be carefully monitored by advocates of different approaches. (NCCA, 2012, p. 7)

The tension between attempts to reach consensus and to consult and engage as widely as possible is acknowledged as a challenge in the face of criticism from those advocates of different approaches. The second significant development, per Looney, has been the practice of working directly with networks of teachers, schools, early years' practitioners and early years' settings as part of the curriculum process. This direct engagement, alongside the deliberate engagement with representatives and nominees, is an attempt to include curriculum as practice in the process of developing the national curriculum. Here, teachers and others who participate in networks are seen as agents of curriculum development, and their schools as contexts for innovation.

While examples have been provided of how the NCCA have attempted to address some of the criticisms presented by Gleeson and others, in the context of the current education system, the remit and scope of the NCCA's responsibilities and increased political influence, questions remain as to the success or otherwise of the organisation's ability to advance significant change and address some of the bigger educational questions in Ireland.

3.2.2 Trust, risk and control

Within a partnership model, the concepts of trust, risk and control would seem to be important in understanding the complexities of the relational processes involved. When referring to trust at an inter-organisational level, Eisner and White (2005) make a useful distinction between role-based trust and interpersonal trust. Interpersonal trust is the kind of trust we have in friends and family (Rempel, Holmes and Zanna, 1985) while role-based trust is specific to individuals whose role it is to assess, manage and communicate information about risk. In the case of role-based trust, 'it is not the person in the role that is trusted so much as the system of expertise that produces and maintains role-appropriate behaviour of role occupants' (Kramer, 1999, p.578).

As outlined by Eisner and White (2005), the literature on role-based trust is considerable and growing. The correlates that help increase role-based trust include: care, competence, concern, consensual (or shared) values, consistency, expertise, fairness, faith, honesty, knowledge, objectivity, openness, past performance, predictability, reliability and sympathy (Kasperson, Golding and Tuler, 1992; Maeda and

Miyahara, 2003; Renn and Levine, 1991; Siegrist, Earle and Gutscher, 2003). While this list may seem extensive, three dimensions have been identified by Peters, Covello and McCallum (1997) as knowledge and expertise; care and concern; and openness and honesty. As such we tend to have increasing amounts of trust for those who we believe know what they are talking about, care about the common good, and are open and transparent about their operations. While scientists and doctors tend to score quite highly on these dimensions, politicians and industry tend to score much lower, especially on the care and honesty dimensions (Eisner and White, 2005, p. 6).

The belief that trust takes time and effort to cultivate but can be lost in an instant is backed up by much of the research in this area (Barber, 1983; Burt and Knez, 1996; Dasgupta, 1988; Levi, 1998; Rempel, Holmes and Zanna, 1985; Rothbart and Park, 1986). Paul Slovic (1993) used 'trust asymmetry' to describe the fragility of trust, stating, 'it is typically created rather slowly, but it can be destroyed in an instant by a single mishap or mistake' (p. 677). At the heart of Slovic's work is the notion that people pay more attention to and are more influenced by negative information than positive. This 'negative bias' has received substantial support in the research and conceives trust as being easier to lose than gain because negative information is more attention grabbing, more powerful and often more readily available than positive information. A practical example of such is the increase in newspaper sales during times of crisis. Slovic (1993) suggests that it is because 'negative events often take the form of specific, well-defined incidents such as accidents, lies, discoveries of errors or other mismanagement. Positive events, while sometimes visible, are more indistinct. Eisner and White (2005) assert that 'if [policy makers] want to build trust, it might be better to outline the implementation of positive policies that effectively constrain behaviour over a series of events rather than trying to provide people with information about particularly positive instances of performance' (p. 12). Telling the story of the impact policy seems to be the important contributor to trust building here.

Das and Teng (2001) provide an overview of the perception of risk in strategic alliances. In their overview, relational risk is given prominence in inter-organisation alliances and is defined as 'the probability and consequences of not having satisfactory cooperation' between partners (Das and Teng, 1996). Relational risk arises with the potential for opportunistic behaviour in the course of working in partnership. Opportunistic behaviour can be exemplified as distorting information, appropriating resources, taking advantage of other partners, etc. The risk of conflict arises when partners have their own interests that are not congruent with those of the group, demonstrating a low commitment to producing common benefits (p. 3).

Social control or clan control has the ability to reduce discrepancies in the individual goals of organisations working in partnership (Kirsch, 1996). Social control is useful in highly-ambiguous circumstances, such as partnership models, as goal-setting is decentralised and evolving in nature. Through a consensus-making process, members become committed to the organisation and partnership

model; they develop a shared understanding of purpose which serves to strongly influence their behaviour with fellow partners. The use of social control can mitigate against relational risks through establishing shared understandings and values, thus reducing the risk of opportunistic behaviour.

Often social control has been believed to be detrimental to trust as regulation of behaviour implies a sense of mistrust (Argyris, 1952). However as proposed above by Kirsch (1996), the use of appropriate control mechanisms may increase trust as the objective rules and clear measures help to institute a road map for the successful workings of a partnership model. As social control is concerned with the development of shared understandings, values and norms, and not focused on specific behaviours or outputs (as in behaviour control and output control mechanisms) partners are relatively free to develop processes they prefer and set targets appropriate to their organisation. According to Ouchi (1979), social control is most appropriate in high-trust situations and also advances trust under these conditions. Partners influence each other's practice through regular meetings and communications, through culture blending and socialisations (Das and Teng, 2001, p. 14), developing an agreeable approach collectively.

From the research, it seems that trust and control working in tandem can reduce levels of perceived risk for organisations working in partnership. The implications for the NCCA and its education partners is the cultivation of a high-trust environment through the generation of high levels of relational trust alongside high levels of social control.

3.2.3 Participation

'Participation' can be thought of in two core ways: as specific activities that individuals engage in or in the broader purposes that participation is supposed to achieve (Schlossberg and Shuford, 2005). For the purposes of this research, the latter component—the broad notions of why participatory approaches are often pursued—is the focus. In particular, the use of participation and engagement for the purposes of policy development in national curriculum and assessment is of concern.

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969), frames participation in terms of citizen power. In this model, citizen participation is defined as 'the redistribution of power that enables the 'have not' citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future' (p. 351). Eight rungs of citizen participation that correspond to different purposes, ranging from manipulation of the public to citizen control of the decision-making process, are included in this ladder.

Figure 2: Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation
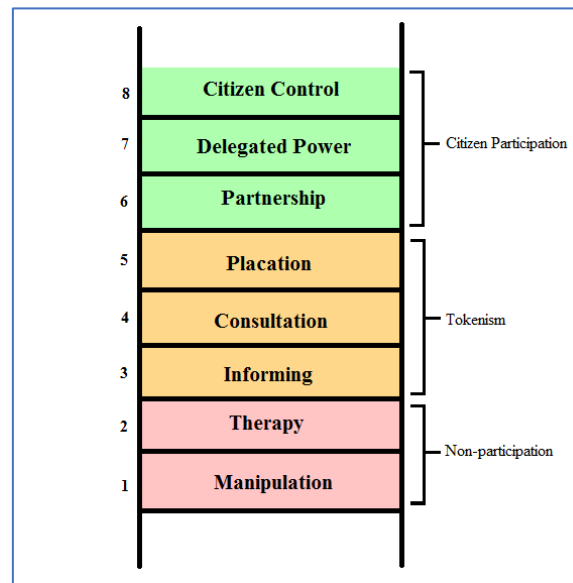
The bottom rung of the ladder is 'manipulation', where the purpose of a participation process is for those in power to remain in power by eliciting public support through education and public relations approaches. Rungs are also grouped into three subsections, representing different degrees of participation, including 'nonparticipation', 'degrees of tokenism', and 'degrees of citizen power'. Three concepts present in the NCCA's developmental processes can be placed on this ladder, that of 'informing', 'consultation' and 'partnership'. A limitation of this model may be that each step represents a very broad category, within which there are likely to be a wide range of experiences. For example, in the category of 'consultation' there could be significant differences in the type and quality of the consultative methods. The use of a ladder also implies that more control is always better than less control. However, increased control may not always be desired by the community and increased control without the necessary support may result in failure.

Wiedemann and Femers (1993) present an alternative ladder of citizen participation, which is more aligned with conceptions of public participation that are found within the mandates of large governmental agencies. On their ladder, public participation ranges from general education with little direct influence on decision making to public participation in the final decision-making processes. In this model the levels of participation range from the *public right to know* to *public participation in the final decision*.

Figure 3: Wiedemann and Femers' Citizen Participation Model
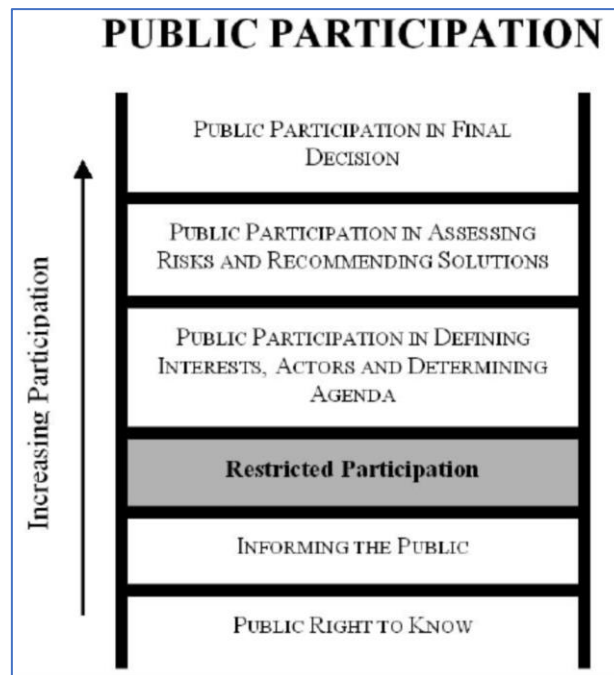
In such environments, as in the case of the NCCA, public participation is often a requirement of a decision-making process, although what constitutes public participation is often undefined. Such agencies may seek close consultation with knowledgeable experts or professionals in the field to inform, influence and shape new policies. Equally, agencies may prefer large-scale open consultations Dorcey (1994) calls for flexibility within these models and recognises that the nature of public participation can change over time and within a single decision-making process. In this way, certain public participation approaches may be necessary at the beginning of a process, while other public participation methods may be more appropriate toward the final stages. Connor (1988) and Jackson (2001) also echo the dynamism of participation. Community participation in decision-making processes has become a prominent feature of governance processes in western democracies. The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) defines community engagement as: 'Any process that involves the community in problem solving or decision making and uses community input to make better decisions.' The IAP2 outlines a spectrum of engagement from informing to empowering local communities in the decision-making process.

Figure 4: IAP2's Public Participation Spectrum

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Unlike Arnstein, this model of engagement does not assume a hierarchy of engagement; rather it is a spectrum that can be used depending on the impact of a potential development on participants. Within this model, the role of consultation is seen in the lower end of the spectrum, which raises questions on the emphasis the NCCA and other Irish government agencies place on this particular component of participation. The use of a spectrum makes clear the need to assess the potential impact of a development in order to inform the level of participation that is needed.

Les Robinson, working from the Australian context, has developed numerous training courses based on the principles of IAP2. He contends that matching the right level of participation to the needs of the agency, and the likely expectations of the public, is vital. This process helps to minimise conflict, control project risks and maximise the technical effectiveness of decision-making. Robinson (2002) presents the use of a public participation matrix to enable agencies to assess the levels of risk and complexity of a given development, informing decisions as to the appropriate levels of participation required.

Figure 5: The Public Participation Matrix (Robinson, 2002)
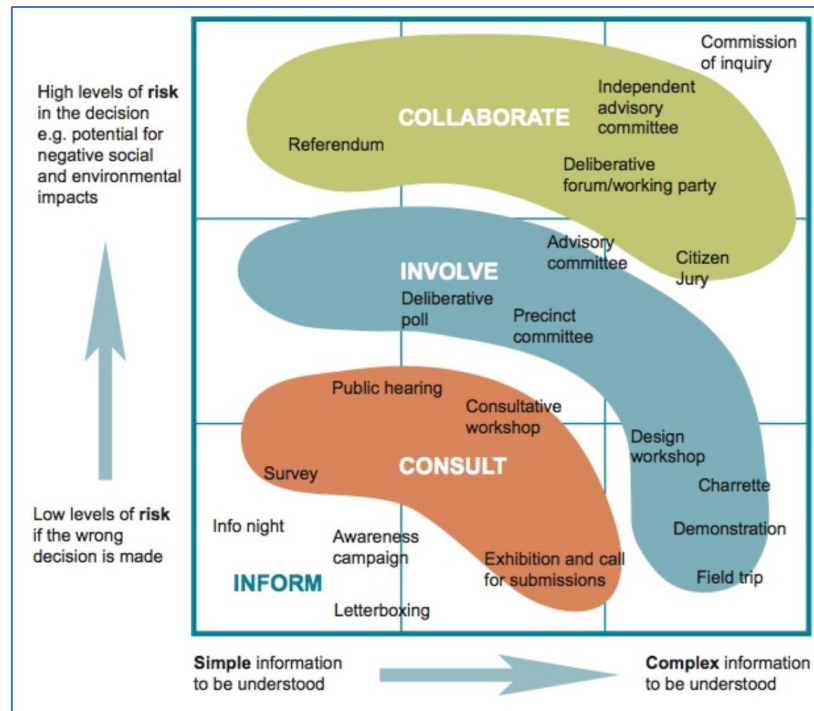
Robinson's model provides a dynamic framework which enables a fluidity of engagement depending on the complexity of the development and associated risk. The framework also suggests a responsiveness to decision making depending on a given set of circumstances. This model seems particularly appropriate for the needs of this research, and so an adapted version was used to prompt discussion during the data-gathering process, as referred to in Chapter 4. In the adapted version, an additional category was added, 'Co-lead'. The adaption was made in light of the partnership model employed by NCCA, which in some cases may go beyond a collaborative approach.

Figure 6: An adapted Public Participation model
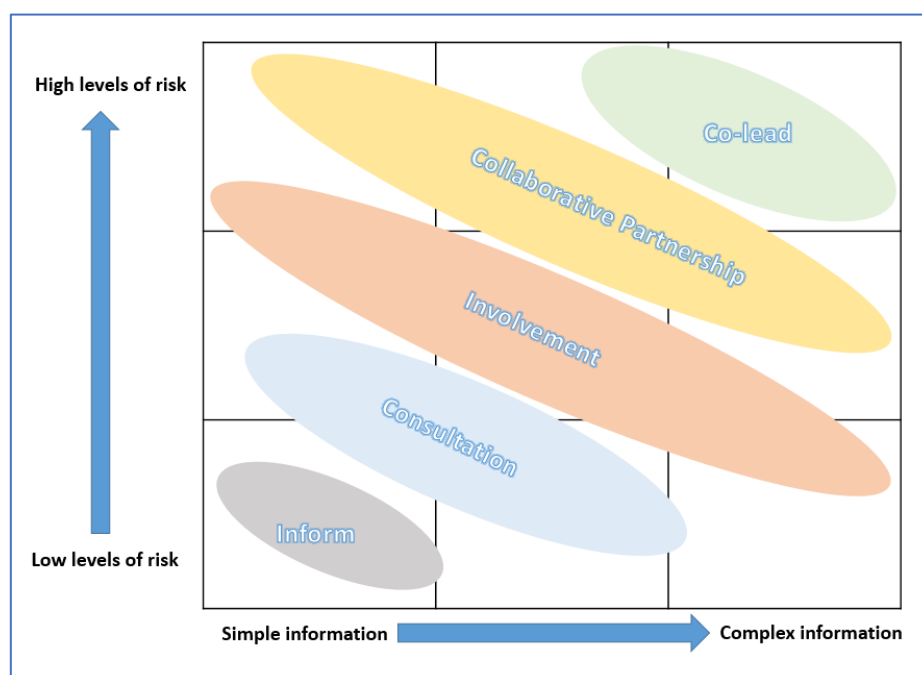
3.2.4 Engagement and voice

The positioning of teachers at the site of educational change is a critical one. Recognising that policy or curriculum development needs to be closely aligned with the experiences of children and teachers in classrooms is an apparent, yet far from accepted, concept. The NCCA document, *Leading and Supporting Change in School* (2010), emphasises 'teachers at the site of change' (p. 16). In this section three principles are described:

Teachers as key agents of change—this principle recognises the 'self-evident truth' that teachers are key agents in the change process. Yet, some evidence suggests that existing in-career professional development often place teachers at the receiving end of policy changes generated at national level. The NCCA indicates that, realising deep educational change can only happen through teachers and school management and their interactions and relationships with the learner.

Teachers experience conflicting expectation and fragmentation—this principle recognises that expectations of education authorities, of school management, of colleagues, of parents and of students of what is valuable and important in teaching and learning can differ radically. The perception and measure of a 'good' teacher, the acknowledgement and recognition of accomplishment and achievement in teaching varies across different audiences and ranges from the most educationally-idealistic at one end of the spectrum to the most utilitarian at the other.

Change is personal and professional—this principle outlines that realising lasting changes in teaching and learning can involve changing deeply-held beliefs about life and the world, and long established dispositions in relation to particular aspects of learning, education and society. Sensitivity to the essential connection between the personal and the professional in the lives of teachers is a key to the success of initiatives in the area of educational change.

A teacher's belief in their abilities to contribute, succeed, and make a difference is known as their sense of agency. Social cognitive theory tells us that learning and action are more likely to occur when the individual involved believes he or she has the capabilities to succeed. According to Bandura (1989), these beliefs

> function as an important set of proximal determinants of human motivation, affect, and action which operate on action through motivational, cognitive, and affective intervening processes.

And so it is argued that a teacher's sense of agency is a factor in the effective engagement with curriculum at local level. Possessing the belief that one can successfully influence the course of events within one's environment is the crucial element to actually being able to do so:

> Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties. Whatever other factors serve as guides and motivators, they are rooted in the core belief that one has the power to effect changes by one's actions. (Bandura, 2008b).

In the past, self-efficacy has been used interchangeably with agency and has been described as one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations (Bandura, 1977; 1997). It refers to the self, but may also apply in group situations where it is referred to as *collective efficacy*, a belief in the ability of the group to pull together and address shared problems. As a concept, self-efficacy differs from agency, as efficacy is a purely behavioural concept whereas agency is both a psychological and behavioural concept. Self-efficacy can be viewed as the behavioural component of agency. Some researchers believe that while the two concepts differ, they may work hand-in-hand. According to Bandura (1986; 1997), self-efficacy plays a central role in the exercise of personal agency by influencing thought patterns, emotional arousal and motivation.

The majority of definitions of teacher self-efficacy seem to focus solely on the activity of teaching (Berman and McLaughlin, 1977; Armor et al, 1976; Guskey and Passaro, 1994; Dellinger et al, 2007). When we consider the teacher as a professional involved in a myriad of professionally-related activities, of which teaching is but one, and across a range of contexts this understanding seems narrow in scope. A slightly broader understanding is provided by Bandura, when he states that teachers' beliefs in their efficacy 'affect their general orientation toward the educational process as well as their specific instructional activities' (1997, p. 241). And so, the research contends that a teacher's *orientation towards the educational process* is vital to understand if effective engagement with curriculum is to be realised.

A teacher's orientation is a vital component of teacher engagement in educational change and curriculum development. A teacher who is actively engaged, with a positive sense of self-efficacy in their profession is more likely to feel compelled to contribute to the debate and have their say during consultations on curriculum change. While a teacher who feels disengaged, with a negative sense of self-efficacy may not be so willing to contribute to such debates. And so the collective teacher self-efficacy *barometer* is an important measure for organisations developing new curricula.

3.3. Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics

An important reference point for the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics, as proposed in the Forum's report (Coolahan et al, 2012), was the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (ODIHR, 2007). The principles were designed to support an inclusive form of religious education for public of state schools and were informed by advisory council of experts on freedom of religion or belief. Among the experts you greatly influenced the work of the council was Prof Robert Jackson of Director of the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of Warwick and editor of the *British Journal of Religious Education*. Jackson's interpretive approach is one of three approaches presented and has formed much of the recent discourse in teaching about religions and beliefs in schools. The following sections outline his approach

to religious education and sets it in contrast to other scholarly views as an example of the contested nature of religious education.

3.3.1 The interpretive approach

Ethnography and representations of religions and beliefs

The 1980s saw the emergence of a conceptual approach to religious education in state schools in Britain. With the establishment of the Warwick Religious Education Project, Jackson's research focused in large part on ethnography and religious education. The focus of this research was on the significance of identifying concepts to support children's learning through interaction with stories, artefacts and technical terms relating to different ethnic and belief traditions. Jackson explains, 'these general concepts suggest areas where bridges can be made from pupils' experience of life to the experience of the children introduced in the story' (2000, p. 38).

This approach to religious education places responsibility on the representations of religions in appropriate stories or artefacts and technical terms. The work of Jackson and the team at Warwick University illustrates the importance of taking account of the diversity within religions in terms of beliefs and practice, in order to avoid dangerous stereotyping of religious traditions. The importance of context and the expression of the 'lived' tradition by real people and how this is interpreted by them becomes a significant feature in this context. Personalising the 'lived' experience of adherents to a religion or belief attempts to provide children with 'an accurate picture of a religious reality and a potential point of resonance' (Erricker et al, 2011, p. 30) for the child.

Reflexivity

It is clear through reading Jackson that he views the child as an autonomous individual who actively participates in the educational process. This view of the child recognises the importance of enabling them to develop a reflective, critical approach to religious education: 'there needs to be an approach to teaching that encourages reflection and constructive criticism' (2000, p. 135). This is explained through what Jackson terms as 'reflexivity'. Through this process, children are encouraged to reassess their understanding of their own way of life, make a constructive critique of religious concepts and interpret the learning as a result.

Although this image of the child has been an accepted portrayal across many domains of learning in the western understanding of education, it has not been accepted across all. Denominational religious education in Ireland is situated in a realist perspective of education. Through this lens it is assumed that all children participating in a lesson are of the same belief perspective, that they accept what is taught to them and that there is only one truth, as presented by the teacher and the religious education programme. The idea that one can critically engage with religious concepts and interrogate their meaning is a relatively new concept for many Irish primary school teachers and religious education programmes.

The image of the child in Jackson's work

Jackson gives considerable treatment to the processes through which children reflect upon, internalise and interpret their learning. From considering his work, an image of the child emerges upon which his educational theory is based. This view is based on a socio-cultural approach to education which views children 'as contributors of knowledge and experience, as critics and co-researchers; rather than simply as recipients of information' (Jackson, 2007, p. 21).

Jackson's work recognises that no learning can take place in a vacuum. Research in Ireland has highlighted the cultural and social nature of children's learning, whereby children learn, not in isolation, but with and within their family, neighbours, school and community (French, 2007). The educational context, including culture, beliefs, practices and the environment of learning, impacts greatly upon the child's development. In this approach, the social mediation of learning involves a collaboration or partnership between teacher and child; where children are viewed as co-constructors of knowledge and active participants in their learning.

In recognition of the evolving notions of children and childhood; it has been argued that current practices in religious education in Ireland, which are predominantly faith-based, may run the 'risk of missing the life experiences of children and young people… therefore limiting the impact of education in Religious Education on the values and attitudes they form' (Dillon, cited in Byrne and Kieran, 2013, p. 72). This view has been shared by religious educators (Hession, 2015; NCCA, 2015), who have been concerned with the traditional views of children as presented in primary school programmes. In the Irish context, there would seem to be a need to review the representations of the child in religious education and evolve this understanding to one that is more in line with concepts of the child as presented in the international research. Evolving the concept of the child as an active participant rather than merely a 'recipient of information' (Jackson, 2007, p. 21), religious education can help foster a sense of a child's identity and belonging by developing their self-awareness, self-confidence, self-esteem and, ultimately, their happiness.

3.3.2 The contested nature of RE and ERB—an example

An example of the contested nature of religious education is evident in the opposing views of Jackson and Liam Gearon. Gearon contends that religious education has been politicised and secularised as democratic societies attempt to respond to cultural diversity and seek to encourage tolerance. Furthermore, Gearon contends that government's interest in social cohesion has extended into the realm of *security* and so the classroom concerned with issues of citizenship and social cohesion has become the 'counter terrorist classroom' (Gearon, 2013a; 2014). Where Jackson and Gearon fundamentally disagree is in their understanding of what religious education is. Jackson's broad and inclusive concept, as described above, is set in sharp contrast to Gearon's understanding of the term, which is rooted in a theocentric understanding. Religious education as understood by Gearon is for the 'religious insider',

and is concerned intrinsically with initiation into 'the religious life' (Gearon, 2013b p. 48). For Gearon, 'religious education needs to be grounded in the religious life in order to address the critical moral and existential questions at the heart of the religious domain in human experience' (Gearon, 2014, p. 65). All other paradigms—psychological, phenomenological, philosophical, sociocultural and historical-political—emerged during the European Enlightenment and are rooted in 'paradigmatic disciplines', which themselves are inherently secularist (Gearon, 2013b, pp. 99–143). These competing paradigms have attempted to use religious education for their own ends, according to Gearon.

Gearon claims the research of RedCo and the publication of the Toledo Guiding Principles (ODIHR, 2007) are politically-driven mechanisms for the promotion of a secularist agenda in religious education. Furthermore, he suggests collusion between researchers involved in both projects and political funders:

> There are of course unexplored questions here about how sound the findings are of the research itself. This is not in any sense to question the academic integrity of the research, but the close congruence of funding by political institutions committed to diversity management and research findings, which provide ready-made pedagogical strategies to achieve these political goals, raises issues of independence between funding and findings. (Gearon, 2013, p. 36)

Here Gearon, manages both to suggest a collusive relationship between the funding body and the researchers while, at the same time, placing a question mark on the soundness of the research findings, while denying that he is doing this. There is also no recognition from Gearon that the priorities of political institutions may be in response to concerns from citizens, including teachers, parents and the wider public. Although educators should always be wary of being manipulated by politicians and others, Jackson's view is that support for research and/or development concerning studies of religions is a legitimate concern for bodies such as the European Commission, provided that researchers are enabled to work freely and openly in the pursuit of scholarly enquiry and liberal educational goals (2015, p. 362).

Gearon also presents Jackson's interpretive approach as a reductionist, secularist, and sociocultural paradigm based on Durkheim's sociology, solely using the testimony of children as its source material (Gearon, 2013, p. 131). Jackson, in his response to such criticism, refutes Durkheim's influence on the interpretive approach and asserts that:

> the approach is interdisciplinary, adapting and combining particular ideas on theory and method from ethnography, philosophy, religious studies and cultural studies, to offer students tools to understand and interpret religious language and experience of others, as well as facilitate their own personal reflections on that learning. (Jackson, 2015)

Jackson does not see the two approaches of religious education outlined above as mutually exclusive. He clarifies that neither the Toledo Guiding Principles, nor the RedCo project, ever claimed to nurture religion and that both acknowledge the validity of a 'nurturing' view of religious education within the context of the family and religious community (2015, p. 362). Furthermore, Jackson contends that an

individual's religious understanding can, in principle, contribute experience that facilitates understanding of another person's religious position. Similarly, an understanding of religious diversity can inform a person's religious understanding. Indeed, many who are involved in educating for religious understanding within faith communities regard it as important that learners have opportunities to develop an understanding of religious diversity (Byrne and Kieran, 2013).

Gearon has not been the only academic to question Jackson's approach to religious education. Matthew Thompson, writing from a religious perspective, sets out to criticise what he sees as '...the secular humanist foundation on which the UK Government's social and educational strategy is constructed' (2010, p. 145). Thompson singles out Jackson's work and deconstructs it 'as the same narrow, secular humanist world-view, with its distorting, reductionist approach to understanding religion' (2010, p. 151) in public religious education. Furthermore, Thompson claims that Jackson's work:

> receives disproportionately large establishment support and exercises disproportionately wide establishment influence partly because it is so compatible with and appealing to the establishment secularists who control education policy and funding. (Thompson 2010, p. 152)

Thompson's first charge against Jackson, relates to the secularist foundations upon which his approach to religious education is founded. As with Gearon, Thompson understands religious education as for the 'religious insider' and proposes that 'intellect plays a key yet necessarily secondary role to the heart in the quest for truth, goodness and righteousness' (2010, p. 158). This is an understandable position to hold as a believer in a particular tradition, however within academic debate Thompson's conflation of developments in religious education with the secularist agenda is weakened by his misinterpretation of Jackson's approach.

For instance, Thompson does not acknowledge the distinction made between *secularity* as a descriptive concept or social context and *secularism* as a normative anti-religious position as made by Jackson, in his seminal work, *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach* (Jackson 1997, p. 139). Thompson uses the word *secular* emotively, normatively and pejoratively; painting Jackson's work against the background of growing secularisation with a secularist agenda at the heart of it. It is interesting to note that Thompson does not refer to Jackson's own clarification on this matter:

> If justice and fairness are to be promoted through publicly-funded education, then the ideal form of religious education in state funded schools should be 'secular' but not 'secularist.'……Taking this stance with regard to religious education is fundamentally a pragmatic rather than an ideological one. It is perhaps the only way that one can be confident that different religions and philosophies are dealt with fairly in schools. (Jackson, 1997, p. 139)

Perhaps Thompson is confusing Jackson's idea of 'epistemological openness' with a secularising agenda (1997, p. 126). It could be argued that because an approach does not endorse an evangelising process does not mean it is a secularist approach to religion education. Indeed, Jackson's approach to

epistemological openness has been accepted as an important process in critical engagement with religious education. Furthermore, a contemporary of Thompson, Andrew Wright, has argued recently that Religious Education in the publicly funded schools of secular democracies, which include a range of religious and non-religious faith communities, needs to embrace an agnostic stance which is procedural and practical rather than ideological in nature (Wright, 2010). This view is very close to Denise Cush's idea of positive pluralism:

> Positive pluralism does not teach that all faiths are equally valid like the relativist, or all paths to the same goal like the universalist. It takes the differences and incommensurability of world views seriously but approaches them from a viewpoint of 'epistemological humility' or 'methodological agnosticism'. (1999, p. 384)

There is no doubt that the seismic shift in religious education in Europe has raised concerns from those teaching from a faith-based perspective. The idea of epistemological openness can be considered as at odds with the traditional realist perspective advocated by many faith educators. Indeed, many could argue that both approaches are completely incompatible. This would seem to be a reasonable stance to hold from a faith-based perspective, within which the aim of religious education is to deepen the faith of the child. For those from this faith-based perspective, a curriculum in ERB and Ethics is speaking a secular, liberal language when advocating an approach that does not attempt to deepen the faith of the child but aims to deepen their understanding of many religions and beliefs.

3.4 Conclusion

By surveying the terrain of curriculum development, what emerges is a contested space where trust, risk, participation, voice and engagement are important elements for collective curriculum development. These concepts become important considerations for the research, and may be a useful lens through which to analyse and organise the research data. The following chapter provides detail on the methodology of the research.

Chapter 4: Negotiating the terrain - methodology chapter

4.1 Introduction

Writing a methodology chapter for qualitative research is not as simple as one may assume, as Silverman (2000) asserts:

> the straightforward character of a quantitative methods chapter unfortunately does not spill over into qualitative research reports. At first sight, this simply is a matter of different language… But these linguistic differences also reflect broader practical and theoretical differences between quantitative and qualitative research. (p. 234)

Furthermore, Silverman's approach to qualitative research necessitates recognition of the contested theoretical underpinning of methodologies, the contingent nature of data chosen and the non-random character of the cases studied. In responding to the potentially obscure aspects of writing up qualitative research the author, in this chapter, intends to make explicit the theoretical assumptions underpinning the research and how the findings from the research can or cannot be extrapolated to other contexts. As such, this chapter begins by exploring the researcher's ontological and epistemological stance, outlining the rationale for adopting an interpretive qualitative approach. Holliday (2007, p. 53) has described some of the pitfalls of qualitative research: 'Qualitative researchers… can easily underestimate the need for detail in their description of procedure, thus overlooking an important aspect of the demonstration of rigour.' To avoid such pitfalls, the chapter continues by presenting a detailed description of the research design, before describing the data collection process, the analysis of data and the ethical framework used during the research.

4.2 Ontology and epistemology

As researchers try to define research questions; make sense of the information they gather and turn it into knowledge; they draw implicitly or explicitly upon a set of beliefs or epistemological assumptions called paradigms (Morrison cited in Briggs and Coleman, 2007, p. 19). In educational research, paradigms are often referred to as epistemes or traditions about how research evidence might be understood, patterned, reasoned or compiled. An episteme therefore is a thought pattern or a particular way of thinking and understanding. There are a number of research paradigms differing according to their ontology (nature of reality), epistemology (relationship between the research and what is being researched), axiology (role of values), rhetoric (language of research) and methodological assumptions (process of research) (Creswell, 2007).

The nature of reality, of what is real and not real are questions that relate directly to a person's ontology. The researcher comes to their task with a particular world view, that supports their understanding of reality and of how knowledge is created. The researcher believes that the social world is multi-layered

and complex, and can best be understood from the standpoint of individuals who are part of the ongoing phenomena being investigated. In this view people actively construct their social world, they are not 'cultural dopes' or 'passive dolls' (Garfinkel, 1967; Becker, 1970). Indeed, people are situated in fluid and changing contexts within which phenomena evolve over time and are richly affected by context. Interpretations of these phenomena differ in their understandings and perspectives, and so multiple interpretations of phenomena are evident. Any research that is underpinned by this ontology relies on the collection of multiple interpretations of reality.

Ontological assumptions directly give rise to epistemological assumptions that in turn define methodological considerations and eventually determine instrumentation and data collection methods (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2007). One's epistemology is literally a theory of knowledge of 'what is, that may be organized into different series of thoughts' (Taysum, 2010, p. 65) and should concern the principles and rules by which one can decide whether and how social phenomena can be known, and how knowledge can be demonstrated (Mason, 1996). The established, traditional positivist view of research argues that the social sciences are essentially the same as the natural sciences and are therefore concerned with unearthing universal laws regulating and determining individual and social behaviour. The interpretive view, however, while sharing the rigour of the natural sciences and the same concern of traditional social science to describe human behaviour, emphasises how people's experience of the world differs from each other. Researchers within the interpretive paradigm reject the notions of theory-neutral observations and the idea of universal laws. In this research it is understood that multiple, socially-constructed realities can co-exist and even contradict each other from the perspective of the participant. As such this research does not attempt to ascertain universal laws of curriculum design. Instead it is concerned with understanding the experience of those engaged in this complex social process while attempting to describe the process involved in the development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics. The research has the following aims:

- To investigate the partnership model of curriculum design in Ireland.
- To investigate the roles of leaders of curriculum development, members of the partnership model and the power brokers in negotiating and finalising curriculum.
- To explore potential opportunities and challenges of the partnership model of curriculum design for the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

As the interpretivist researcher tends to rely upon the respondent's views of the situation being studied and recognises the impact on the research of his/her own background and experiences (Creswell, 2007), the researcher did not stand removed from the research but instead was 'a respondent observer' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Through this 'social interaction' new knowledge has been created, in keeping with the interpretivist tradition.

The research aimed to give voice to those involved in curriculum design in Ireland in order to investigate the complexities that permeate throughout this work. In interviews with participants, the researcher

engaged with the practice of curriculum design, gaining insight from participants to an embodied sense of knowing that is grounded in the experience of curriculum design at national level. Participant's understanding of the process of curriculum design was illuminated by reflecting on their experiences, and participation in the research may have impacted on them in a positive manner as a result. This is a fundamental difference from the natural science researcher who uses a more 'mechanistic and reductionist view of nature' (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 17). Therefore, researchers who work within this paradigm do not generally begin with a theory as a backdrop to empirical research; instead they begin to develop a theory as their research progresses.

Indeed, the reciprocal nature of social interaction between researcher and participant ensures that the process has an impact on both the participant and the researcher. This is based on the premise that experiences are central to the interpretive approach and that the reality is not viewed as 'external phenomena waiting to be uncovered as facts but a construct in which people understand reality in different ways' (Morrison, cited in Briggs and Coleman, 2007, p. 24). As an individual engaged in curriculum design, the researcher is keenly aware of the impact upon him by the experience of others. This impact in turn modifies the researcher's perspective and the emphasis placed on certain aspects of the research questions. The acceptance of subjectivity, the use of reflexivity and an awareness of such impacts on the research allows for the researcher to assess and reassess, in a critically-conscious manner, the aims and emphases in the research (Bassey, 1995).
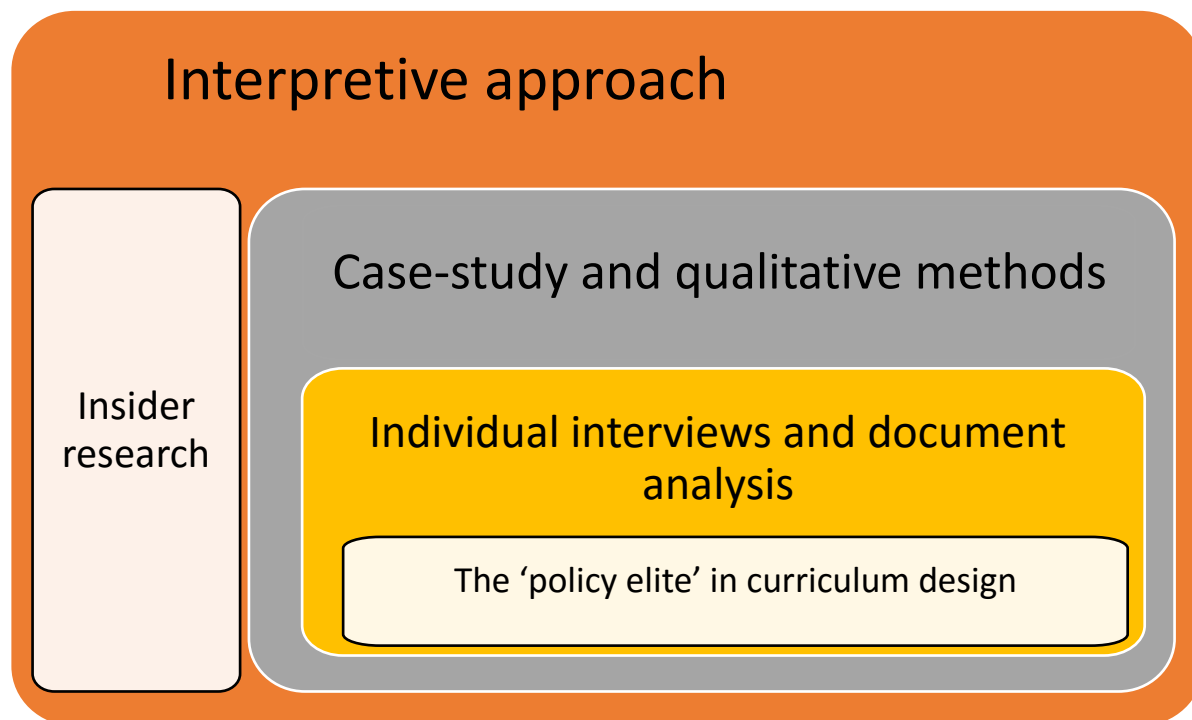
4.3 Research design

Within the interpretivist paradigm the choice of research design is influenced by considerations of sense making in context. Asserting that curriculum design is a complex social process (Pinar, 2007), as outlined in Chapter 3, coupled with the strengths of the interpretive approach outlined above, a qualitative case-study approach has been used in the research design. While sharing the theoretical assumptions of the interpretive approach, qualitative research is seen as a 'powerful tool' (Merriam, 2002, p. xv) and many researchers favouring the interpretivist approach tend to use qualitative methods. Qualitative methods do not focus on the production of objective and reproducible data but are concerned with meaning, and how it informs subjective understanding (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Unlike quantitative research that primarily concerns itself with techniques and instruments of obtaining data, qualitative research is concerned with the meaning of experience, language and symbol (Berg, 1995; Welman and Kruger, 2001). The researcher asserts that meaning is constantly constructed, experienced and revealed through the lens of interpretive frameworks (Romanyshyn, 1971; Packer and Addison, 1989).

Qualitative research is considered by Denzin and Lincoln (1998) as 'a field of inquiry in its own right'. Morse and Field (1996) argue that it is the primary means of constructing and examining theoretical foundations in the social sciences. With this in mind the figure below attempts to provide a conceptual

overview of the research design; acknowledging the researcher as an insider, situated within the interpretive paradigm, using a case study approach with qualitative methods and investigating the experiences of the policy elite in curriculum negotiation.

Figure 7: Overview of research design

4.4 Case-study research

A case study approach was chosen as it offers the potential of gaining access to rich sources of data and a deep understanding of the complexities of curriculum design in Ireland. Case-study research relies upon the researcher's argument, supported by multiple sources of data, to reach a conclusion as to the 'truth' of the research (Cryer, 2006, p. 79). Thus in keeping with the interpretive approach, different readers of the research may come to understand different 'truths'. In this case it could be generally assumed that the use of the partnership approach in the development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics results in a more considered and agreed upon curriculum. However, an understanding of the dynamics at play in this approach can only be understood by getting close to the process, gathering rich data and coming to understand the context within which it all takes place (Gillham, 2000, p. 2). According to Yin, 'case-studies have been done about decisions, programs, the implementation process, and organizational change' (2009, p. 29). Following Yin, this research examines the use of the partnership approach to curriculum development in Ireland, with specific reference to the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. The research does this by exploring the partnership approach from the perspective of the NCCA executive, members of the 'policy elite' of the Early Childhood and Primary Board (partners in educations) and the Chairpersons of the NCCA Council and Early Childhood and Primary (EP) Board. The research moves beyond generalised

investigations of curriculum development by exposing the realities that are embedded in specific lived practices of the curriculum design process in Ireland. The plan for such an undertaking is illustrated below according to Yin's model:

Figure 8: Designing the case-study

Designing the case-study	
The subject or 'phenomenon' under study	(a) Partnership approach to curriculum design in Ireland
The unit of analysis	(a) NCCA executive (b) The 'policy elite' of the Early Childhood and Primary Board (partners in education) (c) The chairperson of the Council
The context	The Irish education system
Illustrative types of theories	a) societal theories—theories of partnerships, secularisation and power dynamics b) individual theories—the interpretative approach, experiential theories
Single case-study design	'to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday commonplace situation' (Yin, 2009, p. 48)
The analysis of data	Data analysis must be linked to the original propositions and research questions in the case in order to reflect the purpose of the initial study

4.5 Qualitative interpretivist approach

Qualitative research is a 'powerful tool' (Merriam, 2002, xv) sharing the theoretical assumptions of the interpretive paradigm; hence, researchers favouring the interpretivist approach tend to use qualitative methods. The purpose of qualitative research is to understand 'social phenomena…..in a broad sense' (Wiersma, 2000, p. 13). Sarantakos (1993) identifies five characteristics of qualitative research: interpretive, naturalistic, communicative, reflective and qualitative. By interpretive it is meant that social interaction and the meaning that flows from it is based on interpretation. In this way the researcher seeks to understand the world from the participant's perspective 'by listening to or observing a person in a natural environment' (Miller & Alvarado, 2005, p. 348). Unlike more traditional positivist approaches to theory generation, qualitative-interpretive methods are characterised by their subjective nature. Indeed, this feature of the research approach has invited criticism, as findings are rarely generalizable or sufficiently objective in nature. While these criticisms may be valid, the focus of gaining depth rather than breadth of data yields rich and authentic evidence that may contribute to existing theory and provide 'food for thought' for comparing and contrasting with other contexts, as is the aim of this research.

4.6 Data collection

In case-study research, Yin outlines six common sources that may be considered in the collection of data. The strengths and weaknesses of each source are delineated, indicating that no one source has a complete advantage over the others. Indeed, many of the sources complement each other, providing differing perspective on the case study, and so researchers should strive to use various sources in the data collection process (Yin, 2014, p. 105). For this research, the sources of data collection involve document analysis and interviews with those involved in curriculum design in Ireland.

4.6.1 Documentation

As with a historian examining primary sources of information, the researcher must be cognisant of accuracy and levels of bias when working with documentation. In case-study research documentation is often used to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources. The use of documents in this research include:

- letters from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to their partners in education
- agendas and minutes of the Early Childhood and Primary Board and the NCCA Council
- written submissions to the consultation for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics
- published reports and studies from NCCA and their partners in education
- newspaper reports related to the development of ERB and Ethics
- social media commentary related to ERB and Ethics.

In examining this data, the researcher is aware of his role as a 'vicarious observer' (Yin, 2014, p. 108). Much of this evidence reflects communication between parties attempting to achieve objectives which are not that of the researcher, therefore consideration has been taken. Additionally, the researcher has been careful not to rely on internet sources for documentation, with the exception of some limited social media analysis. Through the selective use of only the most credible material, the researcher has mitigated against the over-reliance on documentation, ensuring the integrity of data collection from this source.

4.6.2 Interviews

Research has to demonstrate 'fitness for purpose' (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 460) and the prevalent use of interviews as a source of data in qualitative approaches indicates the legitimacy of this method. In planning the interview process the researcher was mindful of Kvale's seven stages of an interview investigation of thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying and reporting (1996, p. 88). Through surveying the literature, it seems interviewing is particularly appropriate to educational research. Seidman states:

> If a researcher's goal… is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry. (Seidman, 1998, p. 4)

The caveat provided by Seidman,'if not always completely sufficient', acts as a welcome reminder of the subjective nature of the interview process and considerations of bias or over reliance. Often in case-

study research, as Yin reminds us, interviews 'resemble guided conversations rather than structured queries' (2009, p. 110). This approach is useful to examine those working/participating in a particular setting/activity in an unobtrusive and nonthreatening manner. However, in line with the 'fitness for purpose' criteria set out by Cohen et al (2007) this research used a structured approach to interviewing.

Furthermore, the researcher's ontological and epistemological positioning suggests that people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality which the research questions were designed to explore. Interviews were a legitimate way to gather data as the researcher was able to interact with respondents, converse with them; listen to them; and gain access to their opinions and articulations.

The research sought to obtain the views and values of the respondents which have formed over time. The process provided an opportunity for respondents to reflect on their role in the partnership model of curriculum design in Ireland. The interview format enabled this as it is particularly useful for exploring complex and subtle phenomena.

The semi-structured interview questions emerged from the three research questions that guide this research and were grouped under three headings: The partnership model of curriculum design; Role of individuals and organisations involved; Opportunities and challenges in the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. The opening question was designed to enable the participant to 'settle into' the interview, and to collect statistical information on their experience in education to date. The final question of the interview enabled them to elaborate on a particular point or to comment on anything that had not been mentioned already. While there was a set running order of questions, the researcher was flexible in their approach, ensuring a consistent flow and conversational tone throughout the interviews. A sample interview schedule is found as Appendix A. All interviews were audio-recorded on a Philips Digital Recorder in WAV format and converted to MP3 format when uploading onto a laptop. The interviews were all transcribed within 96 hours of recording the data.

4.6.3 Partnership Participation Matrix
The research also developed and utilised a data collection tool called the Partnership Participation Matrix. Building on Robinson's (2002) work, as outlined in the literature review, this model provides a dynamic framework which enables a fluidity of engagement depending on the complexity of the development and associated risk. The framework also suggests a responsiveness to decision-making depending on a given set of circumstances. In the adapted version, used in this research, an additional category was added, 'Co-lead'. The adaption was made in light of the partnership model employed by NCCA, which in some cases may go beyond a collaborative approach.

The matrix was presented during interviews, explained and used as a stimulus for questions and discussion. It proved extremely useful in prompting insightful responses regarding the levels of engagement participants experienced through the partnership model. They were also asked about the

levels of risk and complexity associated with the development of ERB and Ethics, and other developments in the NCCA. This line of inquiry brought many conflicting statements and tensions to the fore, as outlined in Chapter 5.

Figure 9: Partnership Participation Matrix
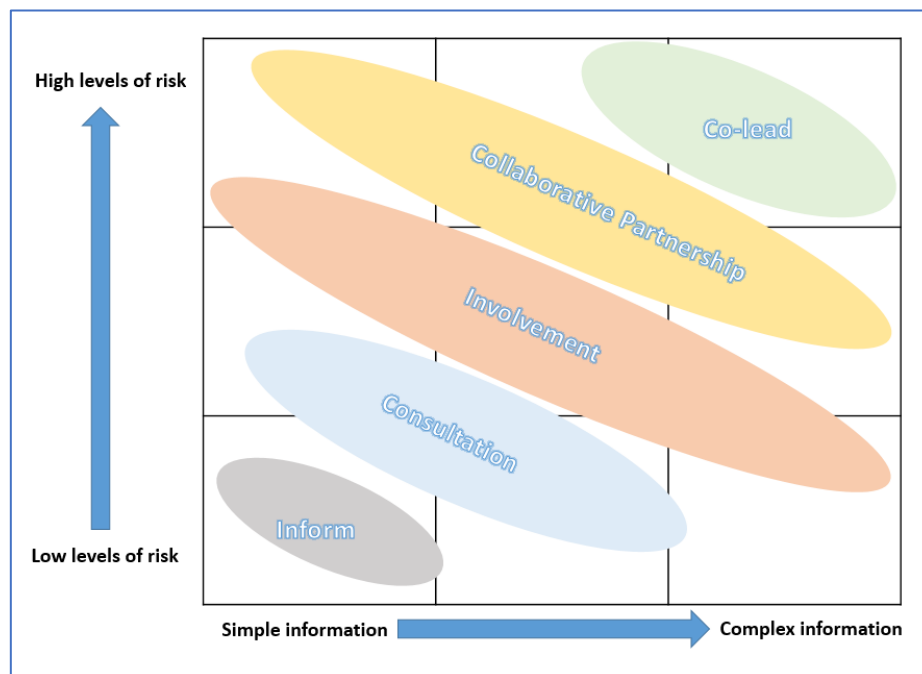
4.7 Sampling

> The secret to selecting any researchable interest is to isolate a particular perspective and vantage point. (Machi and McEvoy, 2009, p. 17)

The first step in preparing to collect case-study evidence for this research involved identifying those involved in curriculum development who can provide the richest data on the development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics. With this criterion in mind the research focused on two participant groupings:

- senior leaders of curriculum development (the NCCA executive)
- the 'policy elite' (key individuals and organisations in curriculum negotiation).

Initially, a 'volunteer sampling strategy' was considered (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 116) to recruit participants to the research from across the organisation of the NCCA and their Boards and Development Groups. However, in considering the sample, the researcher was mindful of Fletcher and Plakoyiannaki's advice that, 'Information rich cases are those from which the researcher can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose and investigated phenomena of the study' (2010, p. 837). As the phenomena being studied is quite specific and not a development that all development groups would have experience of, it was decided that a more targeted approach would be

appropriate. This decision discounted some sampling approaches such as snowballing, cluster sampling and convenience sampling. Instead, the researcher's prior knowledge of the case being studied enabled them to focus in on those who could yield the most insightful data and so a purposive sample was used.

Bryman (2008) observes that 'most writers on sampling in qualitative research based on interviews recommend that purposive sampling is conducted' (p. 458). For this research, purposive sampling is an appropriate method as there are only a limited number of primary data sources who can contribute to a study on the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

Figure 10: Overview of purposive sampling method
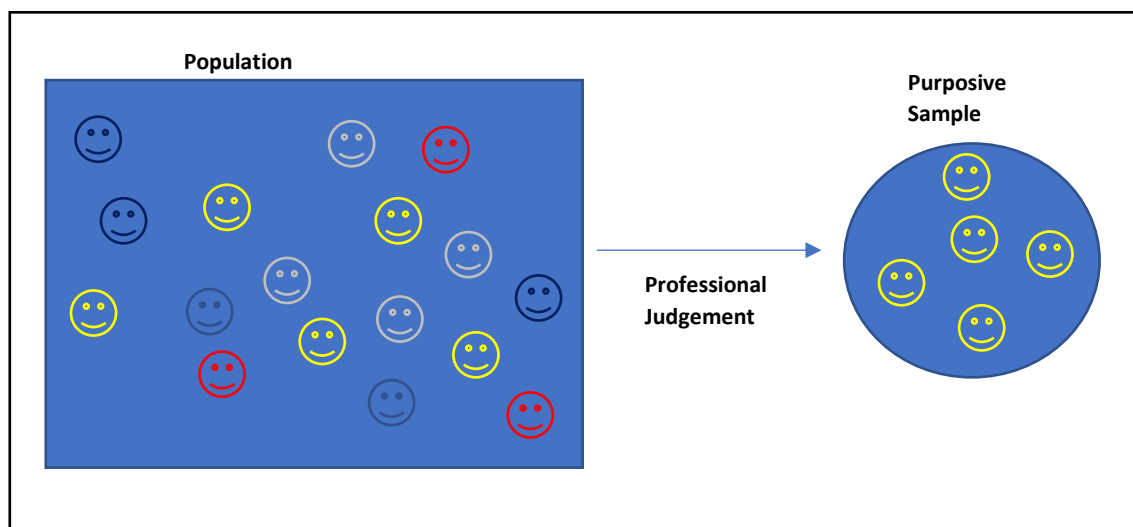
By focusing on the two participating groups, purposive sampling enabled the researcher to use their professional judgement and to focus on the quality of the participant rather than quantity of participants. Through collaboration with the research supervisor, consideration was given to the make-up of the sample mitigating against the over-reliance on the personal judgement of the researcher. The inclusion of each participant had to be rationalised to ensure their inclusion was appropriate for this sample.

A key decision was to use evidence from previous studies (Gleeson, 2000; 2004; 2012; Granville, 2004; Sugrue, 2004) to identify members of the policy elite in national curriculum developments in Ireland. Lilleker (2003, p. 207) notes 'elites can be loosely defined as those with close proximity to power or policymaking'. The research uses the term 'elite' to refer to high-profile personnel who have had access to specialised knowledge and power and provide valuable policy information. From experience and previous research, members of the policy elite were identified from three key partner groups: denominational school management bodies, teacher trade unions and the DES.

The final sample included ten names, from across the two participant groups. The sample represents a range of individuals from across the educational landscape, holding senior positions in their organisations, as outlined in Table 5 below. Each participant was selected because of their exposure to

and involvement in the development of ERB and Ethics. The category of the 'policy elite' received considerable attention in the selection of participants. Other than the NCCA executive, these individuals hold the greatest influence in determining the progression of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. This group includes the chairperson of the NCCA Council, the chair of the NCCA Early Childhood and Primary (EP) Board, the nominee from the teacher trade union Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) and the nominee from the school management body, Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA), as well as nominees from the Department of Education and Skills, including the Inspectorate. Each of the organisations selected have been previously identified as have a strong voice in decisions regarding our national curriculum (Gleeson, 2000, Granville, 2004, Walsh, 2007).

Table 6: Overview of the sample used in research

Criterion	Numbers interviewed	Organisations/Position in NCCA
Senior leaders of curriculum development	4	CEO, Acting CEO, Deputy CEO, Education Officer
The policy elite	6	Chair NCCA Council, Chair of NCCA Early Childhood and Primary Board, Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA), two nominees from the Department of Education and Skills

Each participant was contacted initially via email with an invitation to participate in the research. The email contained the plain language statement (Appendix B) and consent form (Appendix C) for the research. Once a participant indicated their availability to attend an interview, a list of possible dates was generated for their consideration. The location of the interview was decided upon by the participant, to ensure they felt comfortable and secure in their surroundings.

4.8 Fieldwork considerations

This section attempts to demonstrate 'proof of a rigorous research design' (Fink 2010, p. 144). Specifically, it attempts to provide evidence of Yin's four principles of data collection (2014, pp. 118-130): use multiple sources of evidence; create a case study database; maintain a chain of evidence; exercise care when using data from electronic sources. The use of multiple sources of evidence has been employed to strengthen 'converging lines of inquiry' in order to draw conclusions that are convincing and accurate. In this case, the use of the interpretivist paradigm enables the presentation of multiple realities of a given phenomenon and so the use of document analysis to place the participant's perspective in context ensures a depth of consideration to that person's experience. These sources of evidence enable a convergence of lines of inquiry to triangulate and corroborate the research findings.

The second principle is that the case study database is assembled as a comprehensive and readily retrievable source of information. In the organisation of data, this research kept separate the raw data collected from the gathering process and the generation of the thesis from this data, as recommended

by Yin (2014, p. 123). The raw data collection includes: interview recordings, verbatim interview transcripts, field notes and documents for analysis. As these sources were analysed, amended copies were transferred into another folder, separating them from their 'raw' form. This enables the researcher, or another researcher, to access the raw data easily and without bias.

Yin's third principle of maintaining a chain of evidence implies that the information presented to an external observer must be obviously reliable, traceable and that the conclusions derived flow from the research question, the data gathered/analysed and the conclusion drawn at the end of the case study. This has been achieved through the use of a critical friend and research supervisor.

Yin's fourth principle of data collection refers to the caution required when accessing data from electronic sources. In the information age, where everything is only a 'google' search away, Yin has called for the researcher to have diligence in cross-checking sources, and a healthy skepticism when considering social media commentary. The documents examined in the course of this research have been obtained from the primary generator of the document. Much of the document analysis is of NCCA documents or documents generated by their partners in education. Newspaper articles and commentary on social media have only been used to highlight the public discourse around developments ERB and Ethics, and not as primary sources of data.

4.9 Data analysis

The analysis of data gathered through interviews was processed by NVivo, a sophisticated computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), while the analysis of documents was undertaken on a text-based analysis approach. In working with both sources of data, the researcher drew on the five analytic techniques outlined by Yin (2014, p. 142-160), which include: pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models and cross-case synthesis.

4.9.1 Interview analysis

The process of data analysis requires that data be 'systematically organised, continually scrutinised, accurately described, theorised, interpreted, discussed and presented' (Ryan, 1996, p. 95). To support this process the researcher used CAQDAS to organise, code and enhance the analysis of the data. While CAQDAS took over the physical task of marginal codes, the data needed to be interpreted, coded and then retrieved during the analysis. While computer software packages 'do not actually decrease the amount of time you spend on [indexing and retrieval]' (Mason, 1996, p. 125), they do provide a valuable service in organising and securely housing all data during the analysis process. All qualitative data were transcribed and the transcripts of interviews, observations and field notes were entered into NVivo (QSR NVivo Version 11). Nvivo was chosen as it can act both as a depository for all data, while many simple and more complex searches can be automated. The interview data were coded and categorised using constant comparative technique: this facilitated the identification of similarities and differences, the grouping of data into categories and the development of propositional statements.

Figure 11: An overview to the approach of data processing through NVivo 11
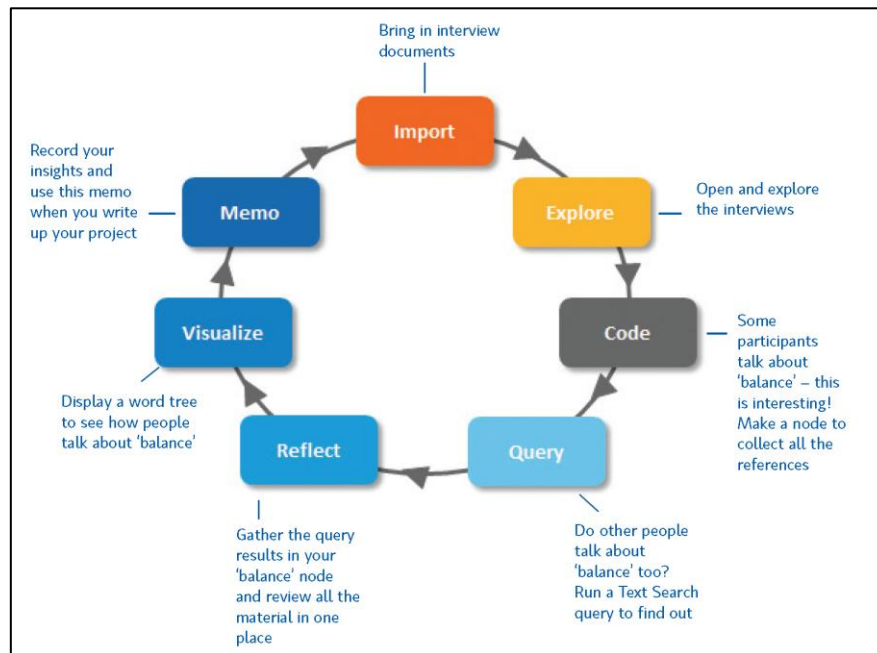
The screenshot below, taken early in the analysis phase, indicates the level of detail NVivo held. The initial 21 nodes that acted as organisers were eventually refined down to about half this number. Coding took the format of broad-to-narrow analysis and then expanding out again to gain an overall view of the themes developed. This reflects Yin's approach (2014, p. 171) to using CAQDAS which constitutes: compiling data (retrieving and tallying specific words and terms), disassembling data (moving methodically to a higher-conceptual level by assigning codes to like words and terms), and reassembling data (interpreting the relationships among codes, their combinations, and conceptually higher patterns).

Figure 12:Initial analysis phase through NVivo11

The use of thematic analysis enabled the researcher to identify, analyse and report patterns in data, along with the coding framework that emerged from the literature review. This process was informed by the work of Braun and Clarke (2006), which outlines a process of familiarisation with the data, before generating initial codes, searching for thematic consistencies, reviewing initial themes and producing findings and propositional statements. Following the generation of initial codes, the researcher shared his work with a critical friend, who undertook to review the initial codes ensuring consistency and validity.

4.9.2 Document analysis

The qualitative researcher is often faced with a trade-off between analysing a large amount of textual data at a cursory level and selecting (sampling) a small subset of that data for deeper analysis (Morris and Ecclesfield, 2011, p. 241). In the collection and analysis of documents for this case, the researcher has only selected the more relevant and authentic sources, the majority of which have been authored by either the NCCA or those participating in the research.

In the quest to ensure validity, the researcher has been mindful of the problem of bias in documentary analysis, selectivity, the document as being written for an audience that has purposes different from those of the researcher, attrition and selective survival (Cohen, 2006, p. 203). Scott (1990) suggests four criteria for validity and reliability in using documents: authenticity; credibility (including accuracy, legitimacy and sincerity); representativeness (including availability and which documents have survived the passage of time); and meaning (actual and interpreted). Figure 16 below provides an overview of the validity and reliability of each source for documentary analysis. In the course of the analysis the researcher relied most heavily on those sources that satisfied all four criteria as set out by Scott (1990). Sources that did not score so highly in this measure were used to provide contextual background rather than acting as primary sources of information.

Figure 13: Overview of criteria for validity and reliability of document analysis in research

	Authenticity	Credibility	Representativeness	Meaning
Letters from the NCCA to their partners in education	√	√	√	√
Agendas and minutes of Early Childhood and Primary Board and NCCA Council	√	√	√	√
Written submissions to the consultation for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics	√	√	√	√
Published reports and studies from the NCCA and their partners in education	√	√	√	√
Newspaper reports related to the development of ERB and Ethics	√	√	?	?
Social media commentary related to ERB and Ethics	√	?	?	?

Content analysis can be defined as 'the study of recorded human communications' (Babbie, 2001, p. 304). Coding is a central element of this practice, transforming raw data into standardised form. In this

way the approach attempts 'to preserve the advantages of quantitative content analysis as developed within communication science and to transfer and further develop them to qualitative-interpretative steps of analysis' (Mayring, 2000, p. 2). Mayring outlines nine steps to qualitative content analysis as: determination of the material; analysis of the situation in which the text originated; the formal characterization of the material; determination of the direction of the analysis; theoretically-informed differentiation of questions to be answered; selection of the analytical techniques (summary, explication, structuring); definition of the unit of analysis; analysis of the material (summary, explication, structuring); interpretation (2003, pp. 42-99).

In the course of content analysis, the research referred to Mayring's steps to ensure attention was paid to the process by which findings were extrapolated.

4.9.3 Triangulation

Triangulation has been defined as 'the combinations and comparisons of multiple data sources, data collection and analysis procedures, research methods, and/or inferences that occur at the end of a study' (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). Thus the use of multiple sources of data, rather than the reliance upon one perspective is required. All sources of data potentially have inherent weaknesses regarding the overall aims of a particular research and/or practical obstacles the researcher may encounter (Denscombe, 2003). In the case of this research, the research sample employed enabled the collection of multiple perspectives on the process of curriculum design. Most significantly the use of multiple sources of evidence led to 'converging lines of inquiry' (Yin, 2014, p. 119). By developing convergent evidence, data triangulation helps to strengthen the construct validity of the case study. In this research, with the employment of an interpretivist approach and the recognition of multiple realities to the process of curriculum design, triangulation is necessary to position the participant's perspective accurately in relation to others.

4.10 Ethics

In exploring the ethical issues of this research I have consulted the *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* published by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the Research Ethics Committee guidelines (https://www4.dcu.ie/researchsupport/research_ethics/guidelines.shtml), the university's policy on Conflict of Interest and the Code of Good Research Practice. The researcher began by examining BERA's guidelines on educational research and was mindful of having respect for the ethic of the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research and academic freedom.

The ethical approval process of Dublin City University helped facilitate ethical research by providing feedback on the research submission, ensuring any risk of harm was minimised and the principles of ethics were promoted. Moreover, the researcher found the process itself to be highly informative, bringing an integrity and rigour to the research process. As the research in question involved adult

participation, the ethical approval process was classified as 'expedited'. The ethical approval form submitted to the DCU ethics committee is found in Appendix D.

During the ethical approval process the researcher described the aims of the research, the questions it attempts to answer, the methodology to be employed, the sample selection and size, as well as numerous aspects of risk management that needed to be satisfied in the design process. The researcher maintains the participants' identities as confidential; this right being promised explicitly and applied to the collection of data during interviews. The use of the plain language statement and consent form supported participants in their decisions to take part. The aims of the research were clearly stated before any gathering of data. All participants fully agreed and were comfortable during the audio recording. No intimate or potentially discrediting information was sought and there was no risk of harm or exposure to physical or mental stress.

All interviews were transcribed and shared with participants to ensure their accuracy and to provide opportunity for amendments and adjustments in line with the wishes of the participant. The data obtained and the articulation of the findings have been consonant with the participant's right to dignity, welfare and privacy.

As an 'insider' engaged with the subject of curriculum development and having expertise in the area, considerations were made to limit the impacts of bias and partiality. As proposed by Brannick and Coghlan (2009):

> In the hermeneutic tradition, the researcher ideally enters the research site with few or no theoretical preconceptions. Whereas this condition never can be realized fully in practice, researchers are encouraged to avoid premature conceptualization or theorizing and instead are encouraged to let the key themes or concepts on which theory will be built emerge from the empirical evidence. (p. 64)

As an insider researcher, the researcher has access to key individuals, research artefacts and relevant literature; providing the basis for an thorough investigation of the research questions. As a *complete member* the author has an opportunity to acquire genuine and authentic understanding rather than reconstituted understanding, as the author is a full participant (Adler and Adler, 1987). Adler and Adler (1987) describe three types of membership roles in ethnographic field research: peripheral member, active member, and complete member. They argue that complete memberships embrace the native experience, enhancing the data-gathering process. Data gathering occurs through subjectively immersing in the role. Complete memberships have an opportunity to acquire genuine and authentic understanding rather than reconstituted understanding, as they are a full participant. While the 'insider' may fulfil their role with more ease than someone without the insights and expertise they possess; the researcher has paid close attention to potential biases of their previous experience and has approached the research with few theoretical preconceptions.

4.11 Conclusion

This chapter documents the philosophy, strategy, methodology and data analysis which underpins the research. It frames the research within an interpretative epistemology, one that is grounded in the experience of those participating in the research. The chapter outlines the key decisions undertaken during the design of the research including important ethical considerations. It forms the foundation upon which the following chapters should be understood.

Chapter 5: Findings and discussion

5.1 Introduction

This research examines the social process of curriculum design in Ireland which has been likened to *a form of social psychoanalysis* (Pinar, 2004, p. 94). In this psychoanalysis our awareness of the structure of our experience, which has been the focus of the data gathering, enhances our ability to reposition ourselves as subjects who are capable of changing what we have experienced instead of remaining objectified by them (Pinar, 2004, p. 57-58). This ability to emancipate ourselves from prevailing influences provides a frame within which propositions arising from the research are presented.

This chapter is organised under six themes: the Concept of partnership; Representation; Consensus building, power and protectionism; Curriculum contestation as a proxy; Relationship, trust and risk; and the Continuum of engagement in partnerships. Each theme is presented with evidence from the field, which when read in its entirety culminates in a proposition supported by the research. Each proposition presents an informed judgement regarding the nature of engagement between partners in education, associated actions which may support more meaningful engagement are presented in chapter six.

To ensure coherence the data is presented and discussed concurrently, and quotations have been extracted from interview transcripts and reproduced verbatim.

5.2 The concept of partnership

As noted in earlier chapters, the extent to which the rhetoric of partnership is matched in the reality of curriculum policy development is a source of contestation as illustrated by Gleeson (2000; 2010) and Granville (2004) and discussed in earlier chapters. This research unearths a new understanding of the partnership model. This understanding is broader than that of the original concept of social partnership and seems to have emerged as a response to aforementioned criticisms. As one participant from Group A explained:

> To me partnership is a very broad term that we use to try and encapsulate all of the different aspects of our work, both the very important work we do directly with stakeholders through our structures, but also the very important work we do outside those structures and bring into those structures as part of the conversation and the decision making that we take. (A3, partnership approach, ref 1)

5.2.1 Formal and informal structures of partnership

From the analysis of interviews, two distinct forms of partnership can be identified, namely formal and informal structures of partnership. The formal structures of partnership relate to Development Groups (previously Course Committees), Boards and the Council itself. These structures are set down in legislation and their composition has been long discussed and will be commented upon later in this chapter. However as referred to above these are not the only structures or processes the NCCA uses to

progress developments. The research has identified elements of the NCCA's work that combine to constitute informal structures and processes of partnership.

The first element relates to the establishment of school networks. Work with schools includes testing and trialling elements of a new curriculum or specification; informing implementation and supports required for school; collecting examples of children's learning; developing support material for teachers; and initiatives that share practice among schools. These are set up on a 'fitness for purpose' basis to inform developments and vary in size and composition, dependent upon resources available. Most recently a school network has been set up to support the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. In the brief for this work the purpose of the network is outlined as:

> to generate and highlight inclusive practices related to Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics. This work may build upon practices that already take place in schools such as those linked to the Intercultural Guidelines or may provide space for the development of new innovative practices. (NCCA, 2017a)

The notion of practice informing policy is well established and something that seems to be a feature of NCCA's work in this regard. Given the contested nature of the ERB and Ethics curriculum and the vested interests evident in the consultation findings on the proposal for the curriculum (NCCA, 2017a), working with schools may be seen as an attempt to circumvent some of the critical discourse. Rather than getting bogged down in hypothetical arguments, the NCCA's work with schools may be an attempt to gather concrete examples of ERB and Ethics in action.

The second element of informal partnership relates to the NCCA's work with researchers. This work traditionally remained within the realm of 'informing' developments, however in recent times NCCA has begun to work with researchers in a 'collaborative partnership' approach. In the development of ERB and Ethics, the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) was commissioned to undertake an audit of 14 jurisdictions in relation to their provision of religious, ethical and values education. Furthermore, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) was employed to analyse the data generated from the consultation questionnaire.

The third element of informal partnership relates to the processes of consultation. While regarded as an omnipresent of the partnership approach, this feature of curriculum development has increasingly become a significant aspect of the NCCA's work, as exemplified in the excerpt below:

> When I think of all the projects I've been involved on in early childhood and primary, none of them probably have needed the weight that was attached to the consultation that the ERB and Ethics needed… for me the consultation was critical, because while you go into the formal structures that we have, there are certain voices that absolutely have been louder than others but I suppose the balancing piece has been the weight of perspectives in the consultation… voices that we work hard to bring into the, I suppose the deliberate space, are that of teachers and children and parents. (A3, curriculum processes, ref 7)

The use of consultation as a key feature of curriculum development is not a new concept. However, the use of traditional and newly-established partnerships to promote engagement from teachers, parents, children and members of the public is something that has been harnessed in recent years. As exemplified in the consultation report (NCCA, 2017a) on ERB and Ethics, NCCA's partners were actively involved in promoting the consultation within their organisations. On occasion, this was despite resistance from within their organisation:

> There were other voices that perhaps were saying 'absolutely discourage engagement with a consultation process that has no business going into this area in the first place'… It was about encouraging this partnership approach. Saying to people 'Yes of course we should engage in this consultation process with a trusted partner'… I suppose the difficulty is too, like, when we think about the Catholic Church's perspective on anything as a partner in this process, it was important to remember is there isn't just one perspective (B4, partnership approach, ref 5)

Establishing partnerships with informal partners has enabled more engagement with schools and the collection of children's voices during consultations. It has also enabled an interface with advocacy groups for children and non-traditional interest groups including Barnardos, the Children's Rights Alliance (CRA), Equate Ireland, the Humanist Association of Ireland, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), the Islamic Foundation of Ireland (IFI) and the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO). These groups often engage in the NCCA consultation processes and spread awareness through their communications with their members.

The incorporation of an informal dimension of partnership into the curriculum design process has resulted in four interconnected and interdependent elements: research, consultation, deliberation and school networks. While deliberation encompasses the work undertaken by Development Groups, Boards and Council in their interrogation of the work and the advice being generated at all stages of development. Research, consultation and work with school networks are used to inform developments, provide feedback on draft material and to connect with the lived realities of school life.

While many have criticised the formal structures of the NCCA (Gleeson, 2000; 2004; 2012; Granville, 2004; Sugrue, 2004) arguing that the influence of teacher unions and other sectoral interests, including the Catholic Church, is considerable, it seems that in recent years considerable efforts have been made to broaden the concept of partnership and the voices represented in the processes of curriculum development. This is largely achieved through informal structures and activities employed by the organisation.

5.2.2 Brokerage and negotiation
The research indicates that working across the four elements of research, deliberation, consultation and school networks invites many perspectives and often competing demands from curriculum, as noted by a participant from Group A:

> This is what partnership means, it means that we will look at research, we will look at international benchmarking. We will deliberate in committees, we will consult publicly and we will use networks, and we might necessarily hear different things from all of those. And so now it's about brokering, now it's about bringing all of those together and brokering, if you like, a solution, a curriculum solution, that will work for Ireland at a particular time. And it does mean that there are people who are disappointed because what they said wasn't implemented. (A1, partnership approach, ref 3)

Brokerage is understood from a corporate context as putting two parties in contact for the purpose of achieving a mutually-beneficial transaction. Drawing on the data gathered, in the case of curriculum development this understanding can be broadened to incorporate the development and defence of a position in terms of curriculum negotiation. Often this position is based on research and informed by what can be enacted in Irish classrooms. In brokering an agreement among partners, alliances are formed with influential parties, often from a research background but equally from powerful partners in education. This brokerage is played out in the forum of the formal structures of NCCA, as well as in the more informal communications with influential parties (the policy elite) ensuring a progression of developments through the structures of NCCA.

For the NCCA executive, brokerage between the views formed by Council and the expectations of the Department of Education and Skills, or indeed the Minister of the day, can be challenging:

> As a person who in the first instance whose responsibility is towards the Council, you do have to get the balance right between your responsibility towards the Council as an entity because it is a decision-making entity and…. your connections back into the parent department… That's part of the job of a senior management team of an agency. (A2, relationship with DES, ref 1)

Speaking about a specific example of when the views of Council and the expectations of the Minister diverged, the same participant explained:

> There was a controversy over the poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh, and it came up in the Dáil and the Minister asked the NCCA to advise. And the NCCA Council took a view that the poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh should stay on the curriculum… that was not the answer the politicians wanted… So very quickly you had to make sure the political side knew what the board [Council] was going to say, but then taking responsibility for it yourself, like writing in the newspaper and explaining why the board had taken this decision. So, directing the flack towards yourself instead of the politician. And that earns trust. Because even on the political side then what people learn is you're not going to hang someone out to dry, you'll draw the flack on yourself if needs be. And that's sometimes what you've got to do. (A2, role of government/minister, ref 1)

In the role of broker, the senior management of the NCCA clearly become entangled in the political domain. Brokerage is not only a feature of their work with their education partners but also with their parent organisation, the Department of Education and Skills.

> ***Proposition 1****: The partnership approach has evolved into a broader concept than originally conceived and informs much of the NCCA's interactions with researchers, schools and external agencies. The inclusive nature of the NCCA's processes of partnership has brought greater complexity to the process of curriculum negotiation resulting in the NCCA becoming brokers of agreements among and between partners in education.*

The partnership approach has evolved in recent years. Much of this seems to be on a 'needs must' basis, depending on what is required at a given stage of a curriculum development and system readiness. However, this evolution may be equally in response to previous criticism of the partnership approach. Indeed, developments in the informal processes of the NCCA may be seen as a reaction to the assertion that a partnership approach leads to a loss of innovation in curriculum development. The work with networks of schools in particular seems to have been established to reflect innovative and progressive approaches to teaching and learning.

It seems that the wider engagement in NCCA consultation processes coupled with the work with innovative schools, and collaboration with researchers provide a foundation upon which advice may be formed whilst battling against the lowest common denominator approach. The processes outlined also seem to enable the NCCA, for the most part, to gain support for the proposed advice from its partners in education; although there are notable exceptions discussed later in this chapter.

5.3 Representation

As mentioned earlier the composition of the NCCA Development Groups, Boards and Council has long been a subject of comment and debate. Critiques highlight the white middle-class orientation of the formal structures (Lynch, 2005; Gleeson, 2010, p. 270), the dominance of trade unions (Gleeson, 2000; 2004; Sugrue, 2004), the privileged position of those inside the partnership model and the unwieldy size of Boards and Council (Granville, 2004). These critiques were also prevalent in this research. The number of people around the Council table was raised as an issue by one participant:

> [a] strength but it may be a slight disadvantage is that generally particularly given the size of council… a partnership doesn't necessarily have to have the kind of size that we have. But the particular kind of partnership structure we've gone for makes council quite an unwieldy body as a decision-making body of 24. (B1, representation, ref 2)

The lack of diversity was raised by a participant from Group A when referring to the case of ERB and Ethics:

> It is definitely the case that the NCCA structures do not… adequately reflect the diversity that needs to be heard in a context like the issues surrounding ERB and Ethics. (A2, consensus building, ref 5)

This concern was echoed by a participant from Group B when considering the lack of diversity on NCCA structures:

> The ERB is a very interesting topic… [as] a lot of the different perspectives that are out there are probably not reflected through the current partnership structure (B3, representation, ref 3)

While others acknowledged the powerful position unions hold in deliberations:

> Well I suppose I would be very aware and conscious of that some voices are stronger than others. In Ireland, we have very strong teacher unions, and those voices are very strong. (B6, representation, ref 2)

And a participant from Group A spoke about groups who are not represented on NCCA's formal structures:

> There are an awful lot of people out there who have very different views on the education system who would like their views to be heard but who have been voiceless. And these organisations, that have greater power and a bigger role obviously have a greater access to information and allow that information to be passed on. (A4, power dynamics, ref 1)

What emerges from the views above is the challenge of representation on partnership structures. Generally, partner organisations have been traditional partners who have represented a significant group of constituents. The challenge of having a diversity of voices on representational structures, while keeping the structure to a manageable size is an important consideration. Too many voices around the table make deliberations unwieldly, however it would seem important that minority groups have a forum in which to contribute their views and perspectives. Perhaps a more flexible and fluid understanding of partnership is an appropriate consideration given the diversity of communities that the national curriculum impacts.

While the research affirmed some previous assertions regarding the composition of NCCA structures, it also raised new considerations in relation to the assumptions of expertise of nominees and strategic nominations from partners.

5.3.1 The assumption of expertise and strategic nominations

One consideration is the assumption that nominees are coming to the Board or Council table with the experience and expertise required to engage fully in the deliberative space. This was described by a participant from Group A:

> The partnership model, is predicated on a number of assumptions and one of those assumptions is that when the stakeholders come to the table… there is an assumption… that that person, first of all, is an expert in whatever the area is. (A3, representation, ref 1)

This is a challenge recognised by the NCCA. In response, they provide nominating organisations with a guide when considering nominations which states:

> Ideally, any board or development group needs to have access to both expertise in the area under consideration and an effective interface with the teaching profession, the realities of classrooms and schools and the views of the education partners generally. Such a balance ensures that the representative structure of Council is consistently associated with high quality work, with the efficient and effective use of resources, with realism, relevance and responsiveness. (NCCA, 2012)

While the NCCA can provide guidance to nominating bodies, they cannot compel organisations to make choices based on their guidance; and while there is a code of conduct in place for nominees, there are no mechanisms in place to address issues that may arise with a nominee.

A participant from Group B drew attention to the amount of material generated for each meeting, the time it takes to read it, review what is being said and form a position on proposals. In her view, this acted as a barrier to engagement and often led to a surface-level treatment of material, particularly if the agenda item was not an area of interest for the nominee or their organisation. The participant recalled certain members highlighting grammatical errors or suggesting re-phrasing rather than engaging in a deep-level treatment of the philosophical underpinning of curriculum development (B4, criticisms of partnership, ref 5). The same respondent also drew attention to the deficits in her own expertise in early childhood and primary education:

> while I have expertise in religious education and ethos, my expertise in other areas is very limited and I don't say much to be honest. (B4, representation, ref 5)

Indeed, it seems that nominating bodies have been strategic when considering who they appoint to NCCA structures, and expertise is often not a determining factor. As is expressed in the following statement related to the developments in ERB and Ethics:

> I was appointed primarily because of concerns emerging around ERB and Ethics. And that is the reality of why I found myself sitting as a post-primary teacher among primary experts. (B4, participants experience, ref 1)

That nominees would represent the views of their parent body is the foundation upon which partnerships are founded, and so a by-product is that nominating bodies will be strategic in who they nominate to represent their views. In this context, the understanding of partnership presented above and the role of brokerage seems to be challenged by the potential for partner organisations to remain steadfast in their obstruction of developments.

5.3.2 One-way and two-way processes

To engage in the upper levels of the partnership matrix (collaborative partnership and co-leading) a considerable responsibility is placed on nominees and their organisations. From the guidance provided to nominating bodies, the NCCA outlines the responsibilities of the nominee as:

- commenting on, and contributing to, a range of draft documents
- ensuring that information on issues and developments is fed back to nominating organisations
- ensuring that the views/policy of the nominating body are brought to the discussion
- supporting consultation processes at key stages in the development process.

The research draws distinctions between two groups of nominees represented on NCCA structures. The one-way process of engagement is characterised by nominees engaging with the material generated by the NCCA and providing feedback during meetings. In this example, the nominee is often providing input based on their experience, be it educational or not, and generally representing their personal views on developments. In contested spaces of curriculum development, one-way processes of engagement can become challenging for the parent organisation, especially when their views or policies are not reflected in the nominee's contributions at Board and Council level. This was expressed by one nominee from Group B when explaining her nomination to NCCA structures:

> So, there was a sense of, to whom were those reps actually speaking?... How was that being fed through the Church into the Church's structures and into patrons, to the Bishops? (B4, partnership approach, ref 4)

Given that many nominees are practicing teachers or principals, a question as to when and how they feed back to their parent organisation is an important one. Who is their contact person in the parent organisation? What do they do with the information received?

This was recognised by a participant from Group A:

> [it's] a big ask of representatives and I think our experience has been that sometimes it can be such an ask that nominees are not… always representing the organisation's perspective, it's more a personal perspective. (A3, representation, ref 1)

In this scenario, the expertise and considered views of the parent organisation may not be brought to bear on curriculum developments. This has been evident in the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics when a new nominee was appointed to the EP Board after the development of the initial proposals on the curriculum went unchallenged by denominational school management bodies. The proposals which set out the underpinning principles and philosophy behind the ERB and Ethics curriculum had progressed through the EP Board and Council with little contestation. And so, when questions began to be raised by the newly-appointed nominee, who was reflecting the views of their denominational group, they were perceived as a 'lone voice', a situation which is detailed later in this chapter.

It seems that the most effective and influential partners work on the basis of a two-way process of engagement. This process is characterised by the nominee's connection to their parent organisation. In this case, they have access to and are influenced by senior members of their organisation, or indeed they are senior members themselves. These individuals are generally experienced and skilled in policy development and understand the *modus operandi* of the NCCA and the system at large. As a participant from Group B remarked:

> [It's]a two way communication in terms of the stakeholders bringing issues, feedback to the table but also hearing what the developments are and having an opportunity to think about them, reflect on them and to discuss them… [and the Union] would meet with the NCCA even just to tease out in more detail issues that might be of concern or of relevance to us, so that can be a more informal conversation than you would have around a table at a meeting. (B3, partnership approach, ref 1)

Within this two-way process, a nominee is attuned to the perspective of their parent organisation and can also bring their own experiences into the conversation. A participant from Group B succinctly sums up the duality of roles that impact upon their inputs to the EP Board:

> Okay, so you're an inspector but you're also a teacher, and a parent….I'd have experience as a principal, and I've experience now of going into the schools to inspect. You're bringing all of those amalgam of experiences with you to the role, to the person, to the voice that you bring to the Board meetings. (B6, participants role, ref 2)

Nominees operating within the two-way process of engagement have been pro-active in promoting their organisation's interests during the ERB and Ethics consultation, as demonstrated by a nominee from a denominational school management body:

> I remember very shortly after the consultation process was launched by NCCA we had a fairly top-level meeting with religious education experts… and from that then emerged the whole roll-out of the consultation process locally. The first way we did it was through the Diocesan Advisor structure… so I would have met DAs at various different meetings and encouraged them and provided them a briefing document on the whole process with suggestions as to how a response might be given… And the other approach we used was through icatholic.ie… I suppose because people found the issue so complex there was a sense that they needed guidance, so we would supply them with some briefing notes or some pointers… obviously you need to give your perspective. (B4, challenges ERB and Ethics, ref 6)

The effectiveness of this strategy is evident in the responses to the consultation on the ERB and Ethics proposals, with the majority of the 173 written submissions coming from a denominational perspective, very often with similar concerns and considerations expressed.

Proposition 2: *Strategic nominations and the lack of diversity emerge as two challenges for the formal structures of the NCCA. The research presents the two-way process of engagement as an effective model, enabling the views/policy of the partner organisation to be reflected throughout developments, mitigating against potential conflict.*

5.4 Consensus building, power and protectionism

Griffiths et al (2009, p. 205) argue that although discourses of 'policy partnerships' are increasingly evident in contemporary curriculum policy, they do not take sufficient account of embedded hierarchical power relationships. Their analysis describes themes that emerged during partnership arrangements which include: a lack of trust between interest groups; conflict over roles; the dominance of particular actors over policy processes; and cultural differences as well as power differentials between interest groups. A particularly interesting finding of their report describes how 'individuals who represented the *policy elite* were able to yield significant power over policy processes because of their positions within key organisations and their prior expertise' (p. 199). This finding is particularly significant to this research and is discussed below.

5.4.1 Consensus building

The levels to which the NCCA work towards consensus have been commented upon in the past with such commentaries highlighting 'a cosy consensus approach' and a prevailing conservativism (Gleeson, 2000; 2004; Granville, 2004). While brokerage has become a feature of the NCCA's work, as outlined previously, the aspiration to reach consensus is still the preferred method of decision making. A participant from Group B outlines the role consensus plays in deliberation:

> You see the NCCA is probably unusual in that it has almost written into its terms of reference it will have consensus and the membership [of Council] is very attached to consensus. (B1, consensus building, ref 2)

Although they continue to explain that while opposition can be reflected in the decision-making process of Council it cannot be obstructionist to developments:

> one of my roles is to make sure once we set out on something that we deliver it, you know in other words that the opposition of some… doesn't stymie the work (B1, consensus building, ref 2)

The quotes above refer to developments at junior cycle and indicate that when an impasse is presented by a partner and negotiations have been exhausted, developments continue. In the case of junior cycle, this resulted in the use of voting to pass developments for the first time in the Council's history. A participant from Group B explains:

> You can't get into lowest common denominator by consensus. Consensus may mean you drift a bit but you can't be about the lowest common denominator, you can't be into minority blocking any progress. (B1, consensus building, ref 3)

The opposition to junior cycle from the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) centred around the use of classroom-based assessment in the accreditation of the junior cycle programme. At times, the 'rules for engagement' become blurred, as expressed by a participant from group A:

> when there are major shifts going on in respect of power...people adopt very unexpected roles… it's almost an identity threat… that's not just curriculum changes, it's a major system reorientation. And ERB [and Ethics] is a major system reorientation. So, it's not just a threat to what I think teachers should teach, it's actually a threat to how I am connected into the whole school system. So, people… will not always play by the rules in those contexts because they feel themselves to be under threat. (A1, power dynamics, ref 1)

This was echoed by a participant from Group B who recalls attempts from a union to lobby others on Council to 'vote down' proposals:

> The union lobbied other unions. I know they lobbied. There were complaints into general secretaries in other unions that the other unions weren't lining up with them and that's the problem if you get into a party whip. It's one thing when people are taking their own organisation's view but when they are trying to bring others into it [the argument], that's different. (B1, power dynamics, ref 1)

The introduction of voting seemed to have raised tensions and anxieties among partners, as outlined by the a participant from Group B:

> I think there was a regression in terms of relationships. And, for instance, around the council table one never had a vote on anything. It was, you know, one argued, one listened, one moderated but I think we're liable to a situation where there was, because of a breach of trust, and then perhaps on the other side because of a sort of a stubbornness as it were to go and prove a point, that just relationships became more tense around the table and I think that that was a great pity. (B2, negative general, ref 1)

While voting became a feature of junior cycle work, this has not been a feature in the primary sector. This is not to say that curriculum developments have not been uncontested, particularly in the case of ERB and Ethics. When curriculum proposals address concepts such as religion, beliefs, values and ethics, and where these may differ from those of certain partners, tension inevitably arise, as expressed by a participant from group B:

> Where there are philosophical differences and differences in values. They're very difficult to work through when partners have a different perspective. So, I mean, there were very fundamental differences in perspectives in terms of what is religious education? What is its purpose? What is the Church already offering to Catholic schools by way of the patron's programme? (B4, consensus building, ref 2)

These fundamental questions were at the heart of the contestation related to a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. However, a participant from Group A was surprised that these had not been raised by the

denominational partner before the publication of the proposals. They recalled a bi-lateral meeting held as part of the consultation process in Maynooth, where reservations were expressed for the first time:

> I suppose it was then that I became acutely aware of their strong reservations about the content of the proposals and it was something that they voiced very strongly during that meeting. It was quite a surprise for me because it was something that hadn't really been part of the experience that we've had in the other meetings with other partners… What surprised me is that considering that they have been part of the Board and Council for many years… I was surprised that this was the first time that they had voiced such strong concerns, particularly if they were aware of these concerns previously. (A4, challenges ERB and Ethics, ref 5)

The experience of the member of the executive in this case may be due to the change in nominee from the CPSMA, which saw a move from a one-way process of engagement to a two-way process, as presented earlier. The position held by CPSMA during the consultation is well articulated in their written submission on ERB and Ethics and focused on several grounds, including: conflicting messages to children about religion; the role and place of the patron's programme in Irish schools; conflicting philosophical perspectives between ERB and Ethics and the Catholic programme, and an already overloaded curriculum.

When articulating opposition to developments in ERB and Ethics a participant from group B expressed feelings of isolation:

> That the consensus appeared around the table to be 'this ERB and Ethics is a really good thing. It's only going to be a good thing.' And that troubled me… So, I felt a little bit, I suppose, isolated in the position I held and that's difficult then. That partnership model is difficult when there's a perception perhaps that one voice is blocking, or one voice is proving difficult or one voice isn't playing ball. (B4, ERBE challenges, ref 6)

The examples provided above take place against the backdrop of increasing industrial relation issues and church/state power negotiations and indicate levels of contestation and engagement that are beyond 'a cosy consensus' approach to curriculum development. They also indicate that unlike previous assertions that management bodies 'effectively control the NCCA and its committees' (Gleeson, 2000b), who 'exercise a veto over curriculum decision-making' (2010, p. 266), the use of voting while noting dissent does not seem to veto developments.

5.4.2 Some voices are stronger than others

The influence of powerful bodies such as school management bodies, patron bodies and trade unions has been well documented in Irish educational research (Gleeson, 2000; 2004; 2012; Granville, 2004; Sugrue, 2004). The findings of the current research support these previous observations, as it is clear that some voices carry more influence than others. For a participant from Group B, this was a legacy of Irish society:

> It's just Irish society and the strength of, I'd say particularly the teacher unions… and then we have the culture of the Church being so strong here in the school system with regard

> to the patronage… so that's interesting because you wonder sometimes how balanced that
> is, with say the parent voice; and the child's voice. (B6, power dynamics, ref 2, 4)

Many participants emphasised that while all voices are important when developing curriculum and assessment advice, the level to which these are treated equally in decision making is an important consideration. While certain NCCA developments may include the voices of children during development, children are not represented on NCCA structures and so this voice can often be lost amidst the compromise and brokerage processes of curriculum negotiation. The same may be said of the voice of the general public.

The influence of the denominational school management bodies and trade unions emerged time after time during interviews. While both child and parent voices were mentioned as important considerations by participants, they also expressed that in the Irish policy context, formal institutions still hold a great deal of negotiating power. The influence of certain voices and the need for 'buy-in' from particular groups was recognised by the NCCA executive. Referencing the Inspectorate, trade unions, denominational school management bodies and the voices of parents as particularly important, a participant from Group A takes a pragmatic view:

> I mean there is no doubt that in your average development group or curriculum
> development structure there are differentials at play in terms of whose voices are
> viewed to be more significant than others. And whose voice you need to be behind
> something. (A2, consensus building, ref 4)

While another participant from Group A takes a more global perspective, expressing reservations regarding the representational nature of NCCA's formal structures:

> I mean we know that there is a huge amount of people who are disillusioned in Irish
> society… with what they see as the elites… who feel that these bodies don't represent
> them, that they no longer represent them. And maybe [the NCCA's] understanding of
> representative bodies reflects the 20th century understanding of democracy; maybe we
> need to start rethinking partnership. (A4, negative general, ref 3)

The levels to which the church and trade unions continue to represent the views of their members is an interesting consideration. While one can point to declining religious adherence and a perceived lack of engagement with trade union issues (low ballot turn-outs for example) these organisations continue to wield significant influence in policy development in Ireland.

5.4.3 Power and protectionism

As outlined in previous chapters, Garventa presents three dimensions or faces of power: overt, covert and latent. These three dimensions help clarify the power struggles that have emerged in the research. In terms of the development of ERB and Ethics, examples of overt dimensions may include representation on NCCA structures; submissions to the consultation process; the authorship of the ERB and Ethics proposals and contributions to public discourse through media reports (see Appendix I).

The representation of organisations on NCCA structures is in itself an articulation of the power these groups hold. They exercise this power through their contributions to curriculum development around the NCCA table. As evidenced earlier, the appointment of their nominees is often strategic in nature depending on the levels of risk involved. Protectionism has emerged as an important theme in this context:

> If I'm being really honest, I feel that my role there was to protect. So that I'm a protectionist and I imagine that there might be other people around that table who can take the same approach and I don't think that's a particularly healthy in a partnership. So, I'm protecting my space. You're infringing on our space, so we have to protect it. That kind of thing. (B4, challenges ERB and Ethics, ref 4)

In this articulation of overt power, the nominee is placed on the EP Board to protect the interests of their nominating body. This protectionism is also evident in the CPSMA's efforts to support their members to submit their views to the consultation process for ERB and Ethics by providing them with briefing notes.

The exercise of influence by the church through mobilising their networks of members to make submissions to the consultation for ERB and Ethics, many of which follow a similar structure and make similar arguments, is an example of overt power in action. The overt use of power is also seen on the side of the NCCA in the consultation process for ERB and Ethics. This is evident in the authorship and presentation of proposals; and in the analysing and reporting of findings in the consultation report (NCCA, 2017a).

It is clear that decisions were taken by the NCCA through their structures as to the philosophical underpinnings of the ERB and Ethics proposals, as evidenced in the excerpt below:

> The educational vision underpinning an ERB and Ethics curriculum is for an authentic pluralism and values education which enables both children and teachers in our schools to live in, and contribute positively, to our transforming, diverse society. (NCCA, 2015a, p. 20)

The proposals were also keen to forefront the issue of curriculum overload and time allocation as considerations for any future curriculum development, such as ERB and Ethics. In this way, NCCA pre-empted criticism from teachers and trade unions in this respect, thus mitigating against such criticism—an exercise of covert power. Furthermore, the proposals attempt to align themselves with perceived positive curriculum reform efforts, such as the development of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009a). The proposals were also supported by attractive information sheets for parents, an abridged version for teachers and a short explanatory video. The video (found at www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe) in particular presents the proposals in an upbeat and positive light.

Finally, the NCCA executive supported groups by meeting with them, presenting the NCCA's vision for the curriculum and encouraging them to make a submission. While in one light this process of

engagement can be seen as faciliatory, this research indicates that the expertise of the NCCA executive can be seen as a barrier to authentic engagement:

> I think because it's so expertise led, the space for partnership is, is increased by that at one level because people get to engage with some very serious pieces of study. In another sense, it's diminished because I think around that table what tends to happen is an acceptance of the expertise of NCCA and sometimes I think that veers into a kind of blind acceptance. (B4, criticisms of partnership, ref 1)

The overt expression of power through the actions outlined above are easy to identify as often they happen in the public domain. Covert and latent dimension are more difficult to identify although both have been evident in the case of ERB and Ethics.

In the covert dimension, power is exerted not only to triumph in the decision-making process, but also to prevent decision-making, to exclude certain subjects or participants from the process (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). In their critique of the Australian Curriculum Council, Griffiths et al (2009) indicate that by using subtly-regulated consultation they exerted significant control over the development of the national curriculum. This control was exerted through its avoidance of negativity and dissent; through its selection of individuals to take part in the consultation processes; and through ignoring negative feedback (p. 203). In terms of the development of ERB and Ethics, covert dimensions of power may include the rallying of support for a perspective, obstructing decision making and the exclusion or misrepresentation of dissenting voices in the process. The exercising of covert power is found in the research on both the side of the NCCA and the denominational school management bodies.

In the case of NCCA, within the formal partnership structures, the exercising of covert power can be seen in the management of the agenda, the orchestration of presentations and the commissioning of background research to support their views. The expertise and efficiency of the NCCA executive in the negotiation and brokerage space was remarked upon by all participants in the research. Examples include:

> Council itself depends a lot on the professional advice of the executive… the executive are probably in a better position to judge, I would have thought the executive are quite adept in my experience at manoeuvring its way around some of that [contestation]. (B1, NCCA executive, ref 3 and 7)

> I think we've become better at bringing the range of perspectives to the table, getting agreement from the outset whether that's through our Board or through our Council. (A3, NCCA executive, ref 1)

> And if it's not a consensus view sometimes decisions do have to be made, you have to leave it to your executive… but I think it's important that committees can trust the executive to reflect the thrust of the discussions and the views and to acknowledge where maybe there isn't agreement on something. (B3, NCCA executive, ref 1)

> A sense that NCCA… has been charged with a particular task and they do that task very well. And there's a sense of, not even I wouldn't say deference, but almost just a

really heightened sense of respect for the work that's done and not very many challenges of it really. (B4, NCCA executive, ref 3)

The picture presented places the NCCA executive as the leaders of curriculum reform, with members of the Council and Board taking their lead from the executive. This raises questions as to the level of interrogation that occurs during development processes. A participant from Group B raised such questions:

Personally, I would have a question—In the early stages of the development of the ERB and Ethics, who was asking the questions around the table?… was anyone saying 'Well, just a minute now, I'm just a bit concerned about what's here on page X. What's that saying from a philosophical perspective about schools and what's that saying about what we're about'? (B4, challenges ERB and Ethics, ref 11)

There would seem to be an inherent tension in the processes of curriculum development. As the NCCA executive is charged with the task of progressing developments, challenges emerge when one, or more, partners take issue with the developments. When one voice is contrary to the prevailing consensus how does the executive proceed with the task they have set out to achieve?

The exercising of covert power through bias for a pluralist approach to religious education is also evident. This bias, it could be argued, arise from the pre-conditions set down by the Forum's Report and the politically-mandated nature of curriculum development, discussed in earlier chapters. Such bias was also raised by those participating in the consultation for ERB and Ethics. The positioning of the proposals within an 'educational vision… for an authentic pluralism and values education' (NCCA, 2015, p. 20) clearly demarks the curriculum from the patron programmes of denominational schools. Such philosophical underpinnings of the curriculum were perceived as contradictory to the characteristic spirit of denominational schools and incompatible with the faith school context:

The NCCA is proposing that ERB and Ethics be taught from a secular, pluralist, world view which is incompatible with that of the Catholic-christian view. The Catholic-christian view believes a child is formed by their specific religious identity and the virtues and values espoused by them are therefore informed by a commitment to their Catholic faith. (Derry Diocesan Catechetical Centre, submission to ERB and Ethics consultation, 2016)

This view point was further emphasised by the submission of the Dublin Diocese:

We suggest that the curriculum as framed will be incompatible and unworkable, when the proposed curriculum is considered within the context of the Catholic vision of education which is rooted in its "Christian concept of life centred on Jesus Christ: he is the one who ennobles people, gives meaning to human life, and is the model which the Catholic school offers to its pupils". (Dublin Diocese, submission to ERB and Ethics consultation, 2016)

The consultation methods used by the NCCA were also called into question for their lack of objectivity. This was acknowledged by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) who undertook to

analyse and report on the responses to the online questionnaire. Under 'Limitations to the study' they remark:

> attitudinal questions were strongly skewed towards positive answers, possibly leading to a response bias… This aspect was criticised by some stakeholders who participated in the survey. (ESRI, 2017, p. 15)

Within written submissions the inherent bias of the proposals and consultation process were also called into question, as evidenced in the excerpts below:

> The online questionnaire for the consultation could hardly be described as 'objective' or 'critical'. The questions are very vague and no one could possibly disagree with many of the proposals–they appear self-evident, given the bias in the propositions. There is no effort at all to tease out any of the complexity of the issues involved. (Daniel O'Connell, submission to ERB and Ethics consultation, March 2016, p. 13)

> The questionnaires are not designed in an objective professional manner but are biased towards yielding positive responses to the proposals. (Éanna Johnson, submission to ERB and Ethics consultation, March 2016, p. 1)

> I believe the questionnaire issued was biased in favour of the introduction of this new subject as most respondents would agree with the statements provided therein. (Páraic Mac Lochlainn, submission to ERB and Ethics consultation, March 2016, p. 1)

> The NCCA consultation paper proposes an approach to religious education that is incompatible with the Catholic approach to religious education. It is underpinned by philosophical principles and proposes pedagogical approaches that would undermine the right to religious freedom of Catholic children. This is because the Catholic Christian worldview and the secular postmodern worldview (on which this proposal is founded) are grounded in fundamentally incompatible ontological foundations. (Anne Hession, submission to ERB and Ethics consultation, March 2016, p. 1)

> We could never favour an ethical influence in the lives of our children likely to cause them concern inappropriate to their age and stage of development or inconsistent with our Catholic faith and their spiritual development. We appreciate the NCCA does not want this either… but our concern here lies with unintended consequences as the consultation document appears to be bordering on a secular liberal approach to morality with limited concern for the common good. (Ballinasloe & District Council Knights of St. Columbanus, submission to ERB and Ethics consultation, March 2016, p. 3)

The use of covert power, seen here as an inherent bias in the proposals and consultation for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics, is also evident in the reporting on the consultation findings by the NCCA. As articulated by a participant from Group B:

> [Our organisation] would have problems with the overall tone of the report and the whole overall direction of it. There was a sense that the Church is the block… So, there was a sense that maybe there was a lack of respect for the Church and what the Church is trying to do for the good of pupils in our schools. And so obviously while changes were made to the document and that was appreciated, there was a sense that perhaps, the final report had a tone about it that was unhelpful. (B4, challenges ERB and Ethics, ref 8 and 9)

On the other hand, a participant from Group A indicated that the final report provides a balanced reflection of the views expressed during consultation:

> Well I suppose one of the key concerns is that the report is fair, that it is true to the voices as they were expressed during the consultation… Now there was a huge contribution to the consultation so that was a huge challenge given the diversity of voices that were heard. Certainly, this [the characteristic spirit of denominational schools] was possibly the biggest barrier in the development of the proposals as they are laid out… [and] I suppose there is an onus on the NCCA to report on things in a way that is fair to their partners and fair to the people who participate in the consultation in good faith. (A4, challenges ERB and Ethics, ref 11)

The divergent views of a partner in education and the NCCA executive member illustrates the dissatisfaction on both sides of the debate. For this school management body, this dissatisfaction is with the perceived lack of respect for their educational tradition, while for the executive it is the perceived obstructionist position of the partner.

It is evident here that covert power is exercised by the NCCA through the conduit of its executive to manage situations and orchestrate presentations and meeting agendas; through their negotiation and brokerage of a shared understanding of the philosophical underpinnings for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics; and through the bias of the consultation methods as presented in the online questionnaire.

The use of covert power methods is also evident from the school management bodies' response to the consultation process. As documented in earlier sections the school management body used their influence and membership to coordinate a concerted effort to influence the proposals for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. This is evident in the majority of written submissions received during the consultation process and in the interview with a participant from Group A, who described the first 'rally meeting':

> I remember very shortly after the consultation process was launched by NCCA we had a fairly top-level meeting with religious education experts… and from that then emerged the whole roll-out of the consultation process. (B4, challenges ERB and Ethics, ref 6)

The multimedia platform iCatholic (www.icatholic.ie) was used to promote opposition to the proposals in programmes such as *The contradiction in the ERB proposal for faith schools*, *Keeping Faith in Religious Education*, *Education about Religions and Beliefs in our Primary Schools* and *The right to*

opt into Religious Education.[10] The lobby group, The Iona Institute[11], was also prominent in the debate publishing articles with the following headlines: 'Why "Education about Religion and Beliefs" will present faith schools with a big problem' (10th November 2015); 'Bishops describe 'world faiths' curriculum as unworkable' (28th November 2016); 'Proposed cuts in religious education 'an attack' on Catholic schools' (26th July 2016); and 'Proposed ethics course for primary schools is relativistic in outlook' (19th November 2015)[12].

The use of covert power here through multimedia platforms, lobby groups and networks of advisors to schools is clear to see. On one hand, it could be argued that the school management body have acted as a genuine partner to support participation in the consultation process, ensuring that all sides of the debate are presented. On the other hand, there seems to be a clear agenda to obstruct and subvert the proposed development of ERB and Ethics through mobilisation and resources. This use of covert power methods during the consultation process for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics has resulted in a deterioration of trust among partners in education, as outlined under the section 'Relationships, trust and risk' below.

The third, and most difficult dimension to identify in power relations, is the latent dimension—that of the *true interests.* Lukes (1974) explains that in this dimension, A ensures B does things that they would not have done by influencing, determining and shaping B's will. Latent dimensions of power are often only evident through studies undertaken at a macro-level examining broad conceptual and abstract influences on a population's psyche. In terms of education, the 'hidden curriculum' is synonymous with the implicit norms and values of an education system, which relate to latent processes which shape the will and norms of those who developed it. In Chapter three, Pinar identifies the 'hidden curriculum' as the story that needs to be unravelled and exposed. Possible examples of potential studies into the latent dimensions of power may include: the impact of Catholic theology on the Irish psyche, the emergence of nation states and the prevalence of state institutions, or an examination of church/state power relations. Such studies may achieve what Pinar terms an *educational confession* (2004, p. 39), which not only seeks the truth behind latent forces but also seeks justice and a cleansing of the nation's autobiographical story.

Due to the complex nature of this dimension of power, which is in contrast to the specificity of the current research, a large-scale study is required to detail the particular power relations involved.

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[10] Programmes accessed on 10/07/2017 and found at:
https://www.icatholic.ie/keeping-faith-religious-education-livestream/
https://www.icatholic.ie/aqof_us_ep_17_ncca_erb/
https://www.icatholic.ie/right-opt-in-religious-education/
http://www.icatholic.ie/ncca-erb-contradiction-iona/
http://www.icatholic.ie/erb-livestream/
[11] The Iona Institute 'promotes the place of marriage and religion in society. Our starting point in debates about the family is that children deserve the love of their own mother and father whenever possible. We believe in publicily-funded denominational schools. We also promote freedom of conscience and religion.'
[12] All articles found at: http://www.ionainstitute.ie/. Accessed on 12/07/2017.

However, what does become clear is that due to the partnership approach employed by NCCA, the complexity of church/state relations, as well as relations with other partners, is evident throughout the development processes of curriculum.

> **Proposition 3**: *When a partnership model moves beyond consensus building to a position of brokerage, lone voices may emerge, leading to a regression in relationships and a loss of confidence and trust. The research presents school management bodies and trade unions as having significant power within the partnership structure. Overt and covert power dimensions are evident in curriculum negotiation processes.*

5.5 Curriculum contestation as a proxy war

The question of curriculum reform is rarely as straightforward as deciding what children should learn. In the case of ERB and Ethics for instance, while few would argue against children learning about religions, beliefs or ethics in primary schools, the curriculum proposals, because of the philosophical underpinnings, were nonetheless met with opposition from denominational groups. Curriculum contestation it seems is always subject to contextual factors which heighten or lessen the potential for conflict among partners in education.

In the research, all participants indicated the significant level to which context plays an important role in what can and cannot be introduced to the system. The NCCA executive place a strong emphasis on what is 'workable' for teachers, as outlined by a member of group A:

> I think it's also about workability and do-ability, will this actually work in the Irish context? And you could argue to some extent… that you then lose maybe the extent or the degree of how radical something is… which is probably one of the challenges or the downsides to the partnership approach. (A3, partnership approach, ref 2)

Another participant drew attention to the significant impact contextual features have on the development of ERB and Ethics to date, remarking:

> For me what is unique about the area of ERB and Ethics is the extent to which contextual factors associated with the curriculum… had a very significant impact on what you could do or what you could advise. (A2, challenges ERB and Ethics, ref 3)

While a participant from group B expressed the need for NCCA to consider the receptiveness of the system to proposed changes:

> And I think that is a challenge for NCCA. On the basis that sometimes the climate that's there can reflect a mood that might be a distrustful mood or a suspicious mood,

that emerges because of broader climates as well. And sometimes that has to be acknowledged in the process and sometimes it might mean slowing things down. (B3, considerations ERBE, ref 6)

The extent to which contextual factors influence developments is further outlined by a member of the NCCA executive who asserted that contestation in curriculum developments are often a proxy for much wider societal questions and debates:

> People's anxieties about curriculum and assessment, in my experience, are often proxies for something else… [often] passionate concern or convictions about the work of teachers, or those kind of things, can often be proxies for something entirely different. And while you do have to take what people say at face value, it can often be useful in progressing things if you realise that actually there's something else behind it… [contestation] can often be a proxy for something else that's going on in the education system… So, you have to watch and listen very carefully. (A1, power dynamics, ref 4)

In this context, the contestation around the introduction of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics can be viewed as a proxy for much wider concerns of secularisation and the decline of religion from the public sphere. As outlined in previous chapters, national debates relating to the role of religion in the educational experience of our young people have been ongoing. The declining influence of the Catholic Church in state agencies throughout the 20th century has been well documented (Inglis, 1998; O'Donoghue & Harford, 2010), yet today the sectors of health and education continue to be subject to church influence and ownership. As the state continues to assert its control and define its remit, the separation of powers is being played out through state and church agencies such as the NCCA and CPSMA. Figure 17 below attempts to illustrate the proxy war underway between state and church in relation to education.

Figure 14: Zones of conflict in state/church relations in education

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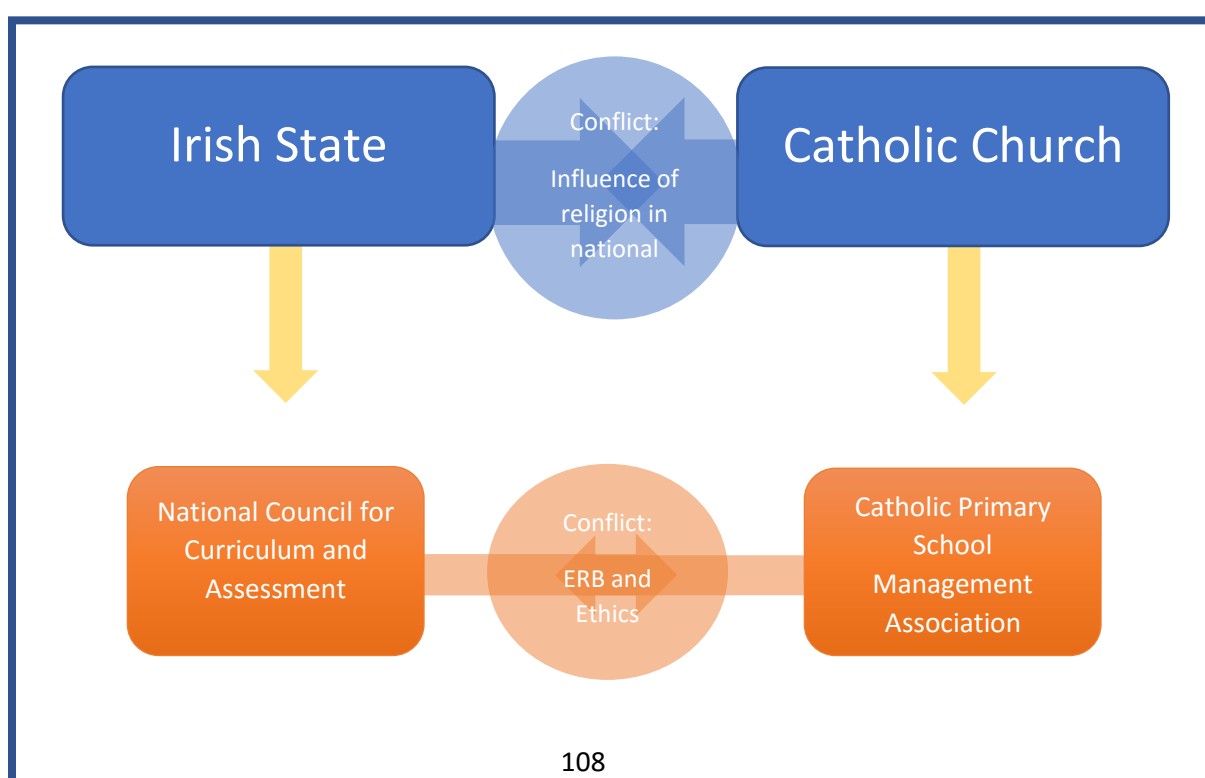
The level to which the NCCA through its development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics can address much larger questions of the role of religion in primary schools has been questioned by participants in the research:

> I think it came with the kind of baggage associated with the Minister's diversification agenda which probably coloured how it was perceived by some players within Council and maybe some players out there in the sector… I would have been concerned myself a bit that it almost came in a context that implied by developing this we could solve the problems of the structure of the system… the NCCA will magic up an ERB [and Ethics] curriculum that will solve all our problems. (B1, challenges ERB and Ethics, ref 3)

This assertion was echoed by a participant from Group A who remarked:

> Nothing quite surpasses the experience with ERB and Ethics because genuinely I think you can make a very strong argument that while the NCCA was very well placed to explore the possibilities, it was not well placed at all to actually do the job that was being implied in the possibilities. And what prevented it in real terms was the existing system of patronage within the primary schools. And the existence of the patron programmes and their response to the particular challenges that ERB and Ethics threw up… So that is unusual, that is quite unusual. (A2, challenges ERB and Ethics, ref 3)

These views were echoed by many participants in the research. In this context, ERB and Ethics can be viewed as collateral damage of the proxy war between state and church. While, in theory, a curriculum in ERB and Ethics can be viewed as a worthy addition to the primary school curriculum, without addressing the contextual factors of school ownership and the supporting legislation it seems the curriculum will continue to be stymied by the conditions of the system. From another lens, the request by the Minister to develop a curriculum in ERB and Ethics could be viewed as a tactic to increase public awareness of the concerns of the state and thus place further pressure on the church to devolve power in the primary sector. This form of latent power has been discussed earlier.

Proposition 4: Curriculum contestation is often a proxy for wider societal issues. On occasion curriculum is called to address structural or cultural issues, which often cannot be resolved by curriculum developments alone.

5.6 Relationships, trust and risk

The processes in which relationships and trust are nurtured and maintained between the NCCA and the policy elite is an important consideration in this research. Research has identified many correlates that support relationship and trust building. These can be largely classified into three dimensions of trust:

knowledge and expertise; care and concern; and openness and honesty (Peters, Covello and McCallum, 1997). In terms of trust we tend to have increasing amounts of trust for those who we believe know what they are talking about, care about the common good, and are open and transparent about their operations.

The research has exposed the processes in which the NCCA and their partners build and maintain their relationships. It has also uncovered examples of when relationships have been tested, trust broken and break downs in communication. Largely these have been the result of a lack of transparency, a loss of relational trust and weakened social control at significant stages of curriculum development. Losses of trust result in greater perceptions of risk by partner organisations and have directly impacted upon curriculum developments.

All participants acknowledged the importance of positive working relationships and the role of trust in the partnership model. The NCCA executive in particular spoke about the time and effort they give to establishing, nurturing and maintaining trusting relationships. A participant from Group A acknowledged the efforts of the executive in maintaining these:

> My experience is the executive are seen as trustworthy, they're respected and they're seen as authorities in their field. A lot of that comes from the relationship building, that we put a lot of time and effort and focus on. Where we build really strong relationships with our partners. (A3, power dynamics, ref 2)

A strong feature of the interviews with the executive was the emphasis they placed on listening to their partners, as exampled in this excerpt:

> So, my experience has been that one of the ways that we're able to do that [address contestation] is through the conversations we simply have with stakeholders. And again, I would say a lot of it is about listening and trying to really get to the kernel of what the concern is. Because sometimes it's not about the detail of the edits themselves, there could be something else behind it. So that's where listening becomes really important. (A3, consensus building, ref 7)

The function of listening to perspectives through representative structures also seems to serve a function in the cultivation of social control within the Council. While the voices of partners inform the development of curriculum, the partnership process enables the development of shared understanding and values:

> The fundamental idea in partnership and in having representative structures is that you listen, and you listen carefully to a range of voices, you do that because you think that those voices are representing some significant constituency. And that enables you to stay in touch with the work of that constituency at ground level and with their interests at ground level, and that provides a better basis, a more tangible basis, and more realistic basis for reaching shared understandings and consensus. (A2, consensus building, ref 1)

It was expressed that at times NCCA had to be seen to take some of the political heat in order to build trust with their parent organisation and the Minister of Education and Skills. An example of this was the matter of whether the poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh should stay on the Senior Cycle curriculum, as described in earlier sections. Evident here is the political terrain the NCCA executive operate within. On one side is the political will, concerned with public perception, and on the other the Council's will, concerned with educational outcomes and the interests of the partners' constituents. A participant from Group A also spoke about the potential of loss of trust in partnership models and the potential risks that occur:

> Trust is huge…..I think the NCCA is quite well trusted. If you are an organisation that isn't trusted or has lost trust or that has gone wrong- it can really go wrong. You can really get into a downward spiral if you lose both public trust and political trust. So, you have to also have the confidence of government that they'll give you the space to do the work, provided they believe that you're going to mind them, you're going to protect them in some way. (A1, partnership approach, ref 7)

Participants from Group A also acknowledged the importance of role-based trust, that partners are confident in your ability to deliver on their expectations:

> It means that when you sit at a meeting with a group of partners that above all else you know what you're talking about. You know the field….So trust comes from being knowledgeable. It comes from in very complex situations where people can't see a solution that you're able to propose creative solutions and persuade people that it's worth following….You need to protect your political masters and mind them and trust them and have them trust you. (A1, partnership approach, ref 7)

A potential zone of conflict emerges in this space of role-based trust (Das and Teng, 2001). The concern is not in the competency related to undertake curriculum development in a partnership approach but rather in the duality of roles the executive performs. This duality concerns on the one hand the decisions of Council, and on the other, the expectations of the DES:

> One of the big challenges in this context… [is that] members of the executive are working both as an executive and as almost kind of representatives of Council… So, in that context they're somewhere stuck between the needs of Council and the expectations of Council, on the one hand, and the needs of the parent Department on the other. And retaining the trust of the partners in terms of how you handle that relationship is very important. Because if the partners feel that your ultimate… loyalty is to the department rather than Council, you'll get a reaction along certain lines on particular policy initiatives and so on. So, it's one of the jobs that the leadership of NCCA has to be very conscious of to achieve the right balance between doing the job that is required by the policy that the Department is setting on the one hand, and doing the job that Council itself is prioritising on the other. (A2, power dynamics, ref 3)

The working relationship with the DES would seem to have high levels of trust, as exhibited by the following quotes:

> Another aspect of [the] partnership that is striking is how closely it [NCCA] works with the Department… which I think perhaps you wouldn't necessarily find if you were

looking at other advisory councils either in Ireland or indeed in other countries. (B1, relationship with DES, ref 1)

I would say the relationship we have with the Department is key… no relationship is without its challenges but we have a really good relationship with the Department, there is a lot of trust between the individuals. (A3, relationship with DES, ref 2)

This close working relationship may impact upon the delicate balance of the duality of roles performed by the executive. Questions as to whose interests the executive are serving—those of the Council or of the DES—have been raised in the research. A particular tension was experienced in the case of junior cycle reform. In this case, the NCCA executive seemed to have been caught between protecting the parent department/minister and the wishes of their Council, a situation created by the then-Minister Ruairí Quinn:

I think in terms of the stewardship of the second last Minister for Education there was a breach of trust and it related to the junior cycle and Junior Certification… that was damaging. I think it could have been handled much better. I think the Minister made a decision to go a lot further in relation to proposals on the Junior Cert and that they were handed then to NCCA to handle how that was going to be presented. And whilst it was clearly seen that it was a Ministerial decision I think the role that NCCA played in that in terms of presenting what the Minister had prescribed in relation to Junior Cert, was a breach of trust. And the price has been paid for that which is a great pity because maybe with a little more careful manoeuvring at that point everybody could have been kept on board. (B2, relationship with DES, ref 1)

The proposals referred to above relate to the method of assessment for the accreditation of the Junior Certificate. The Minister took the view that the assessment would be undertaken by teachers during the school year, as opposed to the previous centralised examination system. This was counter to the advice issued by Council to the Minister which created a significant tension in the partnership model, as a member of Council remarked:

it was tricky like, some of the Council members felt, 'Why weren't we out there criticising the Minister's proposals because they weren't the original NCCA proposals?' And if you were a truly independent body maybe that's what you should be doing. (B1, relationship with DES, ref 6)

The same participant elaborated, explaining the rationale for not involving the Council in the negotiations with the DES at the time:

For example we had our proposals on junior cycle, the Minister is thinking of doing something else with them, you could say: 'Fine Minister, you go off and think, we won't be involved'. But actually if we want the bulk of our proposals to be the essence of it, then in a sense we want it influenced… So, I think we were in an awkward position there… and you could argue we were in a space that we were slightly undermining the Council structure as such. (B1, examples used, ref 3)

This breach of protocol was acknowledged by senior members of the NCCA executive, each indicating the detrimental effect it had on relational trust with partners. There would seem to be a lack of

transparency in how the negotiations of the junior cycle took place at this point in time. The decision taken by the Minister coupled with the undermining of the Council decision-making processes contributed to extended industrial relations action by the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) that is still ongoing. The breaches of trust and lack of transparency in the decision-making processes presented a perceived loss of power and control of partners. The lack of care and concern and openness and honesty (Peters, Covello and McCallum, 1997) would seem to have created a high-risk environment in which one partner organisation, the ASTI, felt they could not participate.

The close working relationship between the NCCA and the DES coupled with the example of undermining the Council above, raises questions as to who is really setting the agenda and who is really making the decisions of the NCCA? In terms of agenda setting, it is clear from the research that the DES and the Minister play a major role in the prioritisation of developments. ERB and Ethics for example was a priority set by Minister Ruairí Quinn, TD. Where developments are mandated by Ministerial decree resources will flow, as explained by a participant from Group A when responding to the criticism of the length of time curriculum design can take:

> So, if the Department, for example, is driving something in particular and therefore wants something in place very quickly, then that in itself very often brings the resources that are going to be necessary. Both in terms of NCCA but also for the system to implement something. And therefore, you could find yourself in a situation where essentially all the key pieces that are needed to bring something from the beginning of the idea to implementation in the classroom are in place without maybe any doubt, without any questions being asked. (A3, relationship with DES, ref 2)

As an agency under the auspices of the DES, the NCCA are beholden to their parent organisation for resources, both capital and human. This places a certain weight of authority with the parent organisation and a significant control mechanism in the operations of NCCA. Through the allocation of resources and the use of political mandating, the DES and the Minister wield considerable power in the prioritisation of developments. The way in which this is negotiated between the DES and the NCCA is a point of interest. A participant from Group B explains that the close working relationship with DES has advantages in the agenda setting for NCCA:

> the close partnership [with DES] means that NCCA has quite a degree of influence in being a collaborator around the Department's early stage thinking but that probably requires the executive whether it's the CEO or whatever officer is liaising with the Department to be making a judgement of going beyond maybe their mandate. (B1, relationship with DES, ref 3)

This 'back channelling' enables the NCCA executive to understand the DES's expectations, what they will and will not accept and to make judgements as to the position Council may take in terms of their advice. A participant from Group A described the agenda setting as a mix between DES priorities and the strategic plans of Council:

The NCCA as an entity in itself, the Council itself, has a right and a responsibility to identify targets and to identify priorities that it feels it wants to act upon… And then the other big influence on the Council's agenda is the Department itself. Because like the NCCA is not, it can't separate itself from the political system. And the reality is that when the political system changes and a new Minister comes in, they usually have sets of priorities that they want to pursue. (A2, relationship with DES, ref 1)

While the priorities of the Minister are seen as driving factors of agenda setting, when it comes to the detail of the work, NCCA seem unrestricted in its deliberations:

By and large the NCCA enjoys absolute independence and confidence in terms of how it develops particularly specific curriculum areas… I mean the only interface with the political system usually comes at the level of request or imperative to work on a given area. But the actual detail of how you work on it and the advice that you generate, we're given a lot of free play, I think, in relation to that and our expertise is respected and presumed. (A2, relationship with DES, ref 1)

Returning then to the question of who sets the agenda, it seems the Council as an independent body has the autonomy to set goals and targets of areas of importance, while also responding to the political needs of the Minister of the day.

In terms of the development of ERB and Ethics, breaches of trust coupled with a weakened sense of social control and a perceived lack of respect has resulted in the deterioration of relationships between the NCCA and the denominational school management body. In all, two breaches of trust were described by a nominee of a denominational school management body in the course of the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics to date. The first involved the publication by NCCA of *An Overview of Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics Content in Patrons' Programmes* (NCCA, 2015b). The desktop report states its aims as to 'examine how patrons' programmes already contribute to learning about different religions and belief systems as well as the broad area of ethics' (p. 11) and acknowledges its limitations as:

the overview should not be viewed as representative of all the teaching and learning that takes places in a patron's programme. The overview did not include evidence from schools or classrooms and so the learning experience of children in the patron's programme is not documented. (NCCA, 2015b, p. 12)

In the view of the programme writers of the Grow in Love series, the description of the Catholic programme 'wasn't an adequate or a fair reflection of what was actually happening in Catholic Schools… that generated quite a degree of worry that the church's position wasn't really adequately reflected through that paper' (B4, criticism of partnership, ref 10).

The second breach of trust was in relation to the drafting process of the *Consultation on the Proposals for a Curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics: Final Report* (NCCA, 2017a). This publication outlined the consultation process on the proposals for ERB and Ethics as well

as the findings from across the consultation formats. The report outlined three contextual factors that obstruct the inclusion of ERB and Ethics into the Primary School Curriculum:

- curriculum overload
- the Education Act, 1998, sections 9(d), 15(2)(b) and 30(2)(b)
- the structure of the primary school system.

A participant from Group B, while acknowledging NCCA's openness to editorial changes, expressed disappointment with report:

> I think would be safe to say, would have problems with the overall tone of the report and the overall direction of it. That there was a sense that the Church was the block and that partnership doesn't work because there is a partner in this process that is holding on to something that doesn't make sense in our world anymore, that doesn't make sense in society. So there was a sense that maybe there was a lack of respect for the Church….And so obviously while changes were made to the document and that was appreciated, there was a sense that the final report had a tone about it that was unhelpful basically. (B4, challenges ERBE, ref 9)

Further frustration was expressed at the perceived lack of respect the NCCA displayed in the final report for the work of the Catholic Church generally:

> While [our organisation] really values the work of the NCCA… for what you're doing. Is that reciprocated? Is there a sense that the NCCA values what Catholic education is about? Understands what Catholic education is about and wants to support and help it grow in a partnership model? Or is it more that the NCCA believes that in some way the Church's approach to education is flawed and needs to be corrected? (B4, challenges ERB and Ethics, ref 14)

These breaches of trust and perceived lack of respect also highlight the lack of social control and shared understandings in relation to the purpose and goals of partner organisations. In this context, perceived risk is increased, and relational trust is affected, developing the conditions for conflict to arise.

Proposition 5: *The duality of roles performed by the NCCA executive places them in a precarious position with their partners in education. This position can result in a loss of social control, relational trust and an increase in perceived risk, which can stymie curriculum negotiations.*

5.7 Continuum of engagement in partnerships

The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) defines community engagement as: 'Any process that involves the community in problem solving or decision making and uses community input to make better decisions' (Ross, Baldwin & Carter, 2016). In the NCCA partnership model the 'community' can be seen as the education partners that form the partnership, engage in developments and inform decision making. The IAP2 outline a spectrum of engagement from informing to

empowering local communities in the decision-making process. As outlined in the literature review, Robinson (2002) builds upon IAP2's spectrum to present a public participation matrix that enables agencies to assess the levels of risk and complexity of a given development, informing decisions related to appropriate levels of participation.

This research further contributes to the work of the IAP2 and Robinson (2002) by adapting their models for an Irish context. For the purposes of this research IAP2's spectrum has been amended to include 'co-leading' as the highest level of participation, while the axes of Robinson's matrix have been developed further for the specific needs of the research as outlined in the following sections.

5.7.1 Levels of complexity

As evidenced in previous chapters and in the research findings, the process of curriculum design is complex. In the case of the development of ERB and Ethics, this process is exacerbated by the unique educational context within which the curriculum being developed. One participant clearly outlined the exceptional circumstances in which developments have taken place:

> For me what is unique about the area of ERB and Ethics is the extent to which contextual factors associated with the curriculum… had a very significant impact on what you could do or what you could advise. I don't think I could think of a comparable situation. (A2, challenges ERB and Ethics, ref 3)

Indeed, the development of the curriculum has been labelled 'a major system reorientation' (AL, power dynamics, ref 1) by another participant in the research. The complexity of the task at hand goes beyond the development of a single specification of a given subject (which may not require significant systemic change) and instead requires a 'reorientation' of what is understood by religious and ethical education in Irish primary schools.

In the Partnership Participation Matrix designed for this research, the 'y' axis indicates the levels of complexity, from 'relatively simple information' to 'complex information'. In this research, complexity is based on the levels of system reorientation required for the introduction of a curriculum development. Relatively straightforward developments, such as support materials for parents (i.e. tip sheets, explanatory videos), do not require the levels of complexity of a curriculum development such as *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009a), which required significant participation and engagement from the Early Childhood sector. From the examples provided in the research, one can rank these in order of complexity, depending on the levels of system reorientation required:

Table 7: Levels of complexity associated with recent curriculum developments

Level of complexity	Example
Low levels of complexity	-Support materials for parents -Assessment Guidelines for Primary Schools

Moderate levels of complexity	-Support materials for teachers (teacher guidelines) -Individual curriculum specifications (history, geography, SPHE, mathematics, Project Maths)
High levels of complexity	-High profile curriculum specifications (ERB and Ethics, Primary Language Curriculum, junior cycle Irish, senior cycle science) -Sector-wide curriculum developments (Aistear, junior cycle, proposals on a redeveloped Primary School Curriculum)

As illustrated in the Partnership Participation Matrix in Figure 15 below, in successful partnership models the levels of participation needs to increase as the level of complexity increases. For the majority of simple- to moderately-complex developments the processes of informing, consulting, involving and collaborating will ensure adequate partnership engagement, while the most complex developments require an element of co-leading with partners to ensure the progression of the curriculum. In terms of the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics, the research findings outlined earlier in 'Consensus building, power and protectionism', clearly identify that key partners were not in a co-leading role with the NCCA. Significant barriers to a partner's ability to co-lead developments have been outlined in 'Relationships, trust and risk', including a weaken sense of shared values and understandings (social control) coupled with numerous breaches of trust.

Figure 15: Partnership Participation Matrix
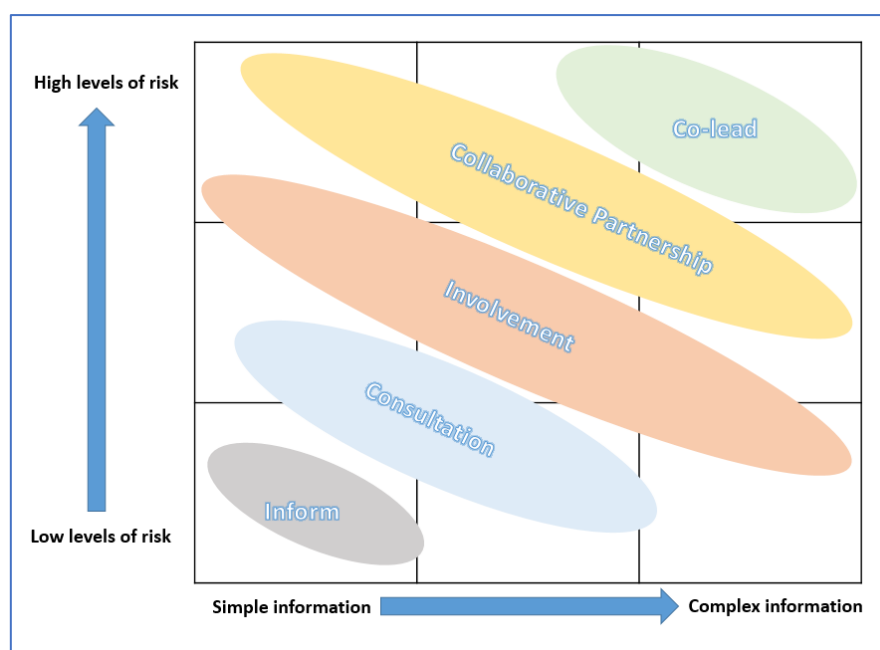
The research also called into question the level to which public consultation is meaningful in very complex developments. The NCCA's processes and structures are heavily weighted towards teacher engagement. The research seems to suggest that when developments require a major system reorientation, which often requires teachers to detach themselves from their everyday experiences, consultation is only useful to a point. This is reflected in Hord's work (1987), as she asserts that when

a change effort is in its early stages, teachers are very likely to have self-concerns (stage 1, informational; stage 2, personal). They will want to know more about the innovation, what it is, and how it is similar to and different from what they already are doing. These self-orientated concerns have been prevalent in responses to consultations on proposed curriculum developments in Ireland. Often proposals on high-profile curriculum developments at primary level are met with references to curriculum overload, lack of support in implementation, the need for professional development and the support for planning. This has also been acknowledged by Gleeson (2000) stating at post-primary level:

> Curriculum debate has been dominated by technical and political rather than emancipatory or critical concerns. It has been dominated by issues such as school-based assessment and control of the state examination system to the neglect of substantive, critical issues such as 'core curriculum', 'curriculum and culture', comprehensive education and relationships on the island of Ireland. (2000, p. 2)

This research contributes to the perspective that when curriculum developments are complex in nature, requiring a system reorientation, traditional modes of consultation need reconsidering. Unsupported teacher or public engagement with complex proposals is unlikely to provide the type of in-depth engagement and participation required to meaningfully inform curriculum change. While this research did not focus on the merits of alternative consultation processes, it does recommend more research to be undertaken in this space.

5.7.2 Levels of risk
The research findings indicate that risk is an important factor in relationships among partners. In the case of ERB and Ethics, the levels of risk are exacerbated by wider discourse around the role of religion in Irish society, as outlined in 'Curriculum contestation as a proxy war'. What becomes apparent is that the level of risk is associated less with the educational outcomes of young people and more closely associated with the perceived risk to the partner organisation. Thus, the motivation for engagement is less about what is best for children, and more about how proposed developments impact the partner organisations. Often this perceived risk is related to 'loss': a loss of control, power, prestige, status or reputation. Perceived risk also varies according to the partner's vested interest in an area of education. For instance, the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) or Joint Managerial Body (JMB), who operate in the post-primary sector, may perceive the risk associated with ERB and Ethics as quite low, while for both the INTO and CPSMA the associated risks are high, although for differing reasons.

When the levels of risk are high, as in the case of ERB and Ethics, people and organisations can 'adopt very unexpected roles… [and] will not always play by the rules… because they feel themselves to be under threat' (A3, power dynamics, ref 1). This has certainly been the case in ERB and Ethics, as evidenced in earlier sections.

From the examples provided in the research, one can rank these also in order of risk.

Table 8: Levels of risk associated with recent curriculum developments

Level of risk	Example
Low levels of risk	-Support materials for parents -Assessment Guidelines for Primary Schools
Moderate levels of risk	-Support materials for teachers (teacher guidelines) -Individual curriculum specifications (history, geography, SPHE, gathematics, Project Maths)
High levels of risk	-High profile curriculum specifications (ERB and Ethics, Primary Language Curriculum, junior cycle Irish, senior cycle science) -Sector-wide curriculum developments (Aistear, junior cycle, proposals on a redeveloped Primary School Curriculum)

The table above, coincidently, mirrors Table 6 on the levels of complexity associated with recent developments. Having information on both complexity and risk enables developments to be placed on the Partnership Participation Matrix, as in Figure 16 below.

Figure 16: Partnership Participation Matrix—levels of risk and complexity
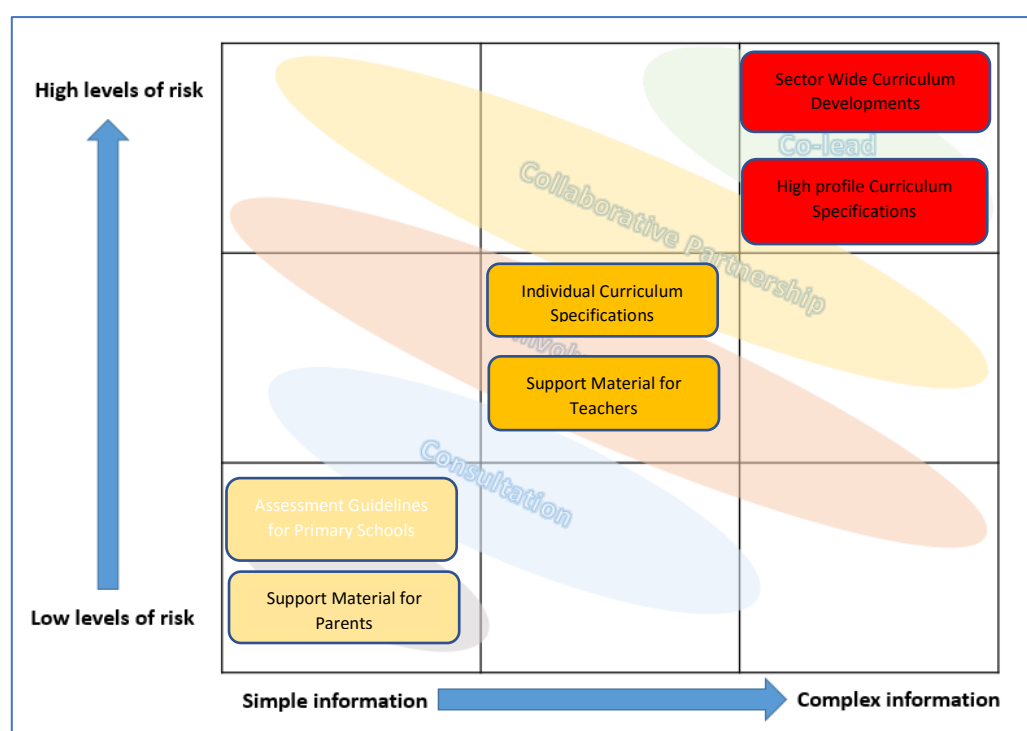
The proposition presented by the use of the matrix indicates that the levels of participation required change, depending on the levels of risk and complexity. As such high-risk developments, with high levels of complexity require a co-leading element to progress. This does not exclude participation across the spectrum during the development of the curricula in question, however it does recognise that as the levels of risk increase, so too must levels of participation from key partners.

While the matrix above places developments in an inclining linear pattern of both risk and complexity; it is unlikely that in real terms developments could be placed neatly into boxes such as low risk/low complexity, moderate risk/moderate complexity and high risk/high complexity. Indeed, depending on the stage of development, a proposed curriculum may have lower or higher levels of risk than presented

above. For example, early in the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics the perceived risk may have been quite low, given that proposals were embryonic and the sense that whatever was proposed would not impact on the characteristic spirit of denominational schools. However, as the proposals progressed towards providing a more inclusive form of religious education, the levels of perceived risk increased dramatically for denominational groups contributing to conditions within which conflict can arise.

5.7.3 Levels of participation through NCCA structures

Asserting that the levels of participation change depending on the levels of risk and complexity raises the question as to the different levels of participation NCCA structures can support. As remarked by a member of the senior management of NCCA, 'you can see on any given week there would be activities going on in the NCCA that you could usefully categorise under all of these [levels of participation]' (A1, continuum engagement, red 2). Figure 17 attempts to plot the levels of participation in curriculum development supported through the formal, deliberative structures of the NCCA.

Figure 17: Partnership Participation Matrix—structures of the NCCA
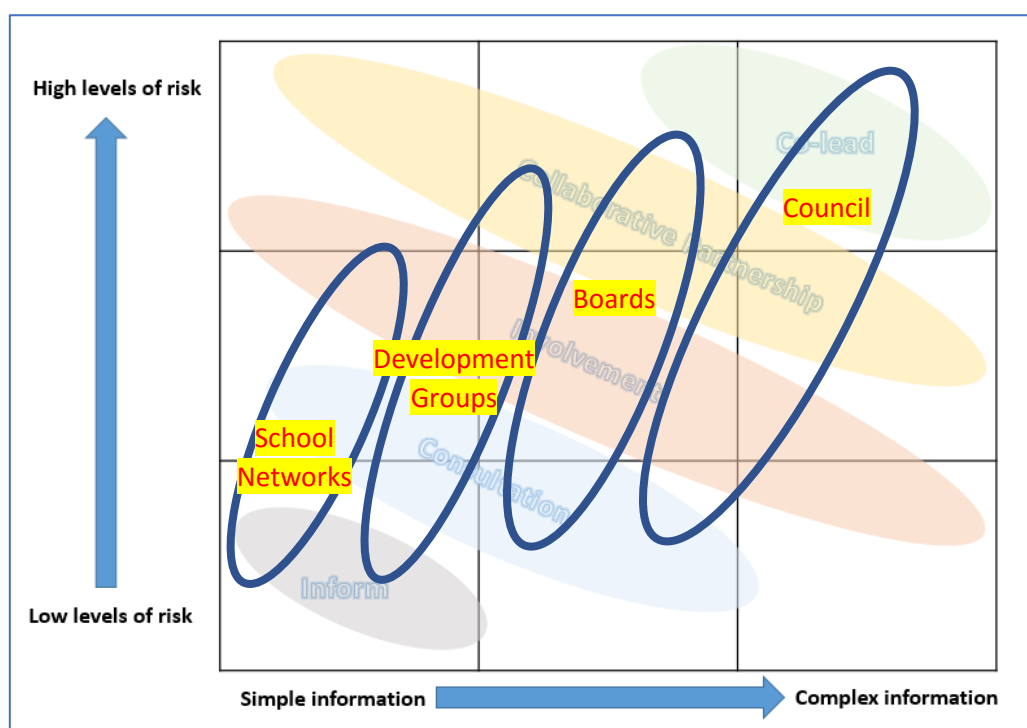
As presented above, each structure of the NCCA can support a number of levels of participation. Of course, this exercise is a generalised view of the levels of participation supported across NCCA structures and focuses on curriculum development and change at a system-wide level. So, while within the context of a specific initiative such as a school network, teachers may be co-leading on a piece of work that may contribute to curriculum developments this is not reflected in the matrix, as arguably it has limited impact on system-wide change. The matrix shows that school networks tend to operate between informing, consulting and involving schools in developments, while NCCA Boards operate in

the spaces of consulting, involving and collaborating. As the overarching structure of the NCCA, Council is presented as the only structure that can operate in a co-leading capacity with key partners in education.

Co-leading change in the education system requires a great deal of capacity from partner organisations. A partner's capacity to do so may be impacted upon—in varying degrees—by its relationship with the NCCA (trust); the associated risk of a project; the capacity of the partner organisation to participate (personnel and resources); the calibre of their nominee (expertise and strategic awareness); and whether the specific project aligns with the objectives or aims of the partner organisation.

In the case of ERB and Ethics, taking general account of the criteria set out above, it is possible to place partners from the EP Board on the matrix of partnership participation according to the level of participation required in order to progress the ERB and Ethics curriculum.

Figure 18: Partnership Participation Matrix—ERB and Ethics participation
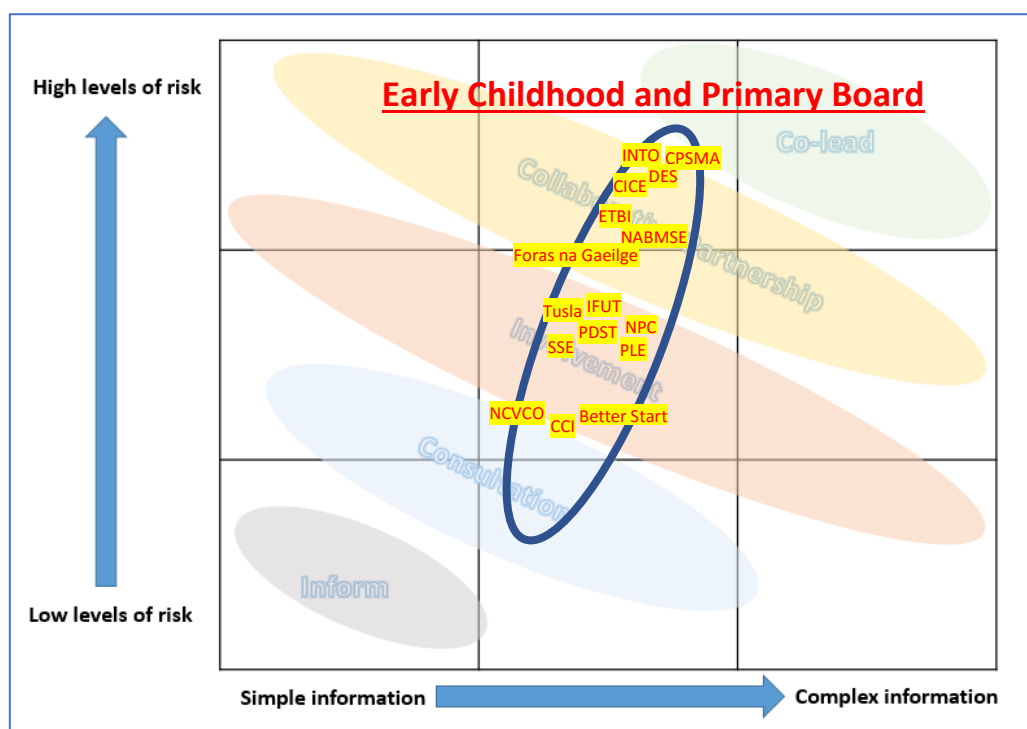
Three broad categories emerge from this exercise. The first category comprises the teacher union (INTO), management bodies (CPSMA, CICE, ETBI, NABMSE, and Foras na Gaeilge) and the DES. Their placement in this category, of collaborative partnership, reflects the potential risk for these agencies, the potential impact on the characteristic spirit of their schools and the legislative changes required for the introduction of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. The second category comprises support services (PDST, SSE, TUSLA) and teacher education institutions (IFUT, PLE) as well as the National Parents Council. This category reflects the reduced risk these agencies have exposure to, while also reflecting the influence these agencies have on supporting change in the system and the professional

development of teachers. The final category comprises mostly early childhood sector agencies who do not have a direct vested interest in the development of ERB and Ethics, but nonetheless provide valuable insight into children's early development and learning which is useful in a consultative capacity.

> *Proposition 6: the development of a complex curriculum requires greater levels of participation from the policy elite. The development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics lacked a co-leading dimension due to a weakened sense of shared values and understanding with partners exacerbated by numerous breaches of trust among partners in education.*

5.8 Conclusion

The research findings present the complexity at the heart of partnership models and have identified six propositions of the research.

Proposition 1	The partnership approach has evolved into a broader concept than originally conceived and informs much of the NCCA's interactions with researchers, schools and external agencies. The inclusive nature of the NCCA's processes of partnership has brought greater complexity to the process of curriculum negotiation resulting in the NCCA becoming brokers of agreements among and between partners in education.
Proposition 2	Strategic nominations and the lack of diversity emerge as two challenges for the formal structures of NCCA. The research presents the two-way process of engagement as an effective model, enabling the views/policy of the partner organisation to be reflected throughout developments mitigating against potential conflict.
Proposition 3	When a partnership model moves beyond consensus building to a position of brokerage, lone voices may emerge, leading to a regression in relationships and a loss of confidence and trust. The research presents school management bodies and trade unions as having significant power within the partnership structure. Overt and covert power dimensions are evident in curriculum negotiation processes.
Proposition 4	Curriculum contestation is often a proxy for wider societal issues. On occasion curriculum is called to address structural or cultural issues, which often cannot be resolved by curriculum developments alone.
Proposition 5	The duality of roles performed by the NCCA executive places them in a precarious position with their partners in education. This position can result in a loss of social control, relational trust and an increase in perceived risk, which can stymie curriculum negotiations.

Proposition 6   The development of a complex curriculum requires greater levels of participation from the policy elite. The complex development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics lacked a co-leading dimension due to a weakened sense of shared values and understanding with partners exacerbated by numerous breaches of trust among partners in education.

The associated implications of these propositions for practice, policy and theory are discussed in the concluding chapter.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This thesis examines the partnership approach to curriculum design in the Republic of Ireland. It uses the case study of the proposed curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics for primary schools to interrogate the model of partnership employed by the NCCA. The research engages directly with those involved in the process of curriculum design unearthing a complex landscape of power relations, vested interests and influential partners.

In exposing and problematising the hidden processes of curriculum development, the research adopted the concept of Currere (Pinar, 2004). Currere asks educators to slow down, to re-enter the past, and to meditatively imagine the future. This thesis has attempted to capture this temporality and concludes with this chapter by drawing out the implications for practice, theory and further research.

6.2 Relevance of the research

Researchers in the past have questioned the use of the partnership model employed in Ireland as an effective means of curriculum design (Granville, 2004; Gleeson, 2004). Particular attention has been paid to the influence of the 'policy elite' in negotiating a 'cosy consensus' among the partners in education. Research into the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the makeup of its Boards and Council, and the processes employed in its work, seems to have been 'in vogue' in the early 2000s. In recent years, little has been published on the organisation and its processes. Consequently, this research may inform and support the resurrection of interest in how curriculum is negotiated, and agreements related to curriculum policy brokered at a national level.

Arguably the NCCA, through the use of a partnership model, has become adept at 'negotiated governance' and effective in the legitimatisation of top-down curriculum reform (Granville, 2004, p. 79). While such partnership approaches prove useful in front-ending the negotiation process with the 'policy elite'; examining the processes through which this brokerage occurs is critical in order to grasp the significance of a national curriculum. By critically examining the negotiation of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics, this research furthers the understanding of power relations in a partnership model, while highlighting the influence of the policy elite, the centrality of trust and the impact perceived risk has upon developments.

The critical examination of the development of ERB and Ethics provides a cautionary tale for future curriculum negotiations. The challenges presented by having a curriculum politically-mandated with the aim of addressing a need (i.e. inclusive religious and ethical education) that is hampered by the legislative and structural (i.e. patronage system in Ireland) features of the system is one such cautionary lesson. Others include the integral role relationships, trust and risk play in curriculum negotiation.

This research can provide a foundation upon which further research may be conducted. The interpretative approach is useful in coming to an understanding of people's experiences, furthermore the conceptual process of Currere has equally contributed to the framing of the study, situating the findings in both their past and present context, while imagining a brighter future. This assembled framework could be used by others to conceptualise their qualitative or mixed-methods research.

6.3 Limitations of the research

The limitations of this research are clearly defined and evident through examination of the research sample and the size of the case studied. The research merely presents a snapshot of individuals' experiences at a particular point in time and on a particular curriculum development. From this perspective it could be argued that interpreting such data is limited at best, providing only a glimpse into the workings of curriculum negotiation in Ireland. The sample selected, while made on a fitness-for-purpose basis, captures but a minutia of experience of the many participants in curriculum development and negotiation. The preference to engage with the 'policy elite' and curriculum developers neglects the experience and insights from those who stand outside these groups, and who may have valuable contributions to make to such studies. And yet the data gathered from participants presents a rich and diverse experience that was incredibly reflective in both tone and nature.

Another clear limitation is the case itself: the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. From the outset this development did not follow the typical trajectory of curriculum development and was widely regarded as a special case by the system. The sensitive nature of the curriculum coupled with the fact that it was politically-mandated positioned ERB and Ethics in a contentious position. Thus, any study into this case must take account of the challenging position of such developments. Furthermore, by engaging with individuals on either side of the debate there seems to be a heightened sense of protectionism, which may not be so reflective of typical, less contentious, curriculum developments.

The research also examined the experience of those in the formal, deliberative structures of curriculum development. Given the new-found prominence of informal activities of curriculum development, research into the workings of these would be of great benefit. Despite these limitations the research has provided valuable insights which may have implications for both policy and practice.

6.4 A vision for the partnership approach in curriculum development

Currere calls us to re-imagine the future of education: the implications outlined in this chapter speak to a certain vision of partnership, one centred around meaningful and collaborative participation between partners. It is one where voices from across the educational and societal landscape have continuous opportunities to make meaningful contributions to national curriculum; where those who have been traditionally rendered voiceless are provided with a platform to participant in curriculum developments that affect them. This democratic, authentic and broad participation model enables teachers, parents and

children to identify themselves, their culture, their ethnicity and their beliefs in the national curriculum, thus making it a true reflection of the nation's story.

6.5 Implications for policy and practice

The research uncovered findings that impact on both the policy and the practice of curriculum design and brokerage. Six propositions are presented which can be broadly characterised as:

Proposition 1	The evolving understanding of the partnership approach
Proposition 2	Role and responsibilities a two-way process of engagement
Proposition 3	Relationships and power dynamics
Proposition 4	Curriculum contestation as a proxy
Proposition 5	The positionality of the NCCA
Proposition 6	Complexity, risk and levels of participation

The implications are presented with the intention to improve participation and engagement among partners. This section does not present an alternative model: instead it suggests ways in which the current model may be improved, re-orientated and better understood.

The partnership approach to curriculum design enables negotiations with partners to happen throughout the development cycle. By front-ending negotiations with partners, certain points of contention and sensitivities are discussed and brokered among the policy elite. This approach, in theory, provides for a smooth transition of policy into the system. While the findings endorse those of other studies into such models (Gleeson, 2000; 2004; 2012; Granville, 2004; Sugrue, 2004), it also adds to this body of knowledge by examining the attritional nature of the negotiation and brokerage process (as referred to in proposition 3 of the research). What has emerged is a complex web of power relations. Furthermore, the unique positionality of the NCCA as chief 'broker' between partners and the Department of Education and Skills, makes their credibility and relationships with their partners increasingly important (as illustrated in proposition 5). The research also indicates that effective partner models are founded upon effective participation; however many barriers to such participation are detailed including: capacity of the partner; strategic appointments; risk and complexity of development; weakened sense of social control; overt, covert and latent power relations; isolation; expertise of the NCCA executive, and proxy wars.

The research contends that in cases of highly-complex and risky curriculum developments, partners need to be involved at collaborative partnerships and co-leading participation levels (as evidenced in proposition 6). The following paragraphs attempt to provide guidance to support participation and to mitigate against such barriers to participation.

6.5.1 Credibility

The research points to times, during challenging negotiations, when the curriculum development agency and their partners have not 'played by the rules' and 'adopt[ed] very unexpected roles' (A1, power dynamics, ref 1). Proposition 5 indicates that this has led to a loss of social control, relational trust and an increased sense of perceived risk, which can stymie developments. The research suggests that positionality within partnerships is often ambiguous which can lead to a sense of suspicion of who is calling the tune and setting the agenda. Loss of trust can result from performing this balancing act and can leave a lasting residue of animosity among certain partners. The positionality of the NCCA is difficult to tie down. As a statutory body, partners may expect a stronger position taken by the NCCA on decisions that are less palatable to the DES and the Minister of the day. How autonomous an agency of the state can be when mediating between partners in education and the state is an interesting question raised by the research. The relationship between NCCA and their parent organisation seems to influence the perceived credibility of the organisation in the eyes of their partners. How the NCCA define this relationship into the future will influence the perception of the organisation and the levels to which they wish to participate in curriculum developments.

6.5.2 The role of values

Meaningful participation is established upon a foundation of trust. To support partners and to provide a framework within which trust can be nurtured, consideration could be given to the establishment of a set of core values. A set of values may demarcate an agency of the state from its parent organisation further strengthening its identity and ensuring consistent and ethical decision making. A values-based decision-making process may also mitigate against the lowest common denominator effect, a possible by-product of protracted negotiations. However, the proclamation of a set of core values may also pose challenges for an organisation in their role as a broker between partners with very diverse and at times conflicting values. Perhaps an agnostic stance to values is beneficial in this role. By not having a framework of values in place, it enables the broker to be flexible and creative with partners who may subscribe to values other than those of the organisation. Without proclaiming a clear set of values, it would seem important that the decision-making process is clearly defined and as transparent as possible to ensure public confidence.

6.5.3 The capacity of partners—a pragmatic approach

The time and commitment required from organisations to participate in a partnership can be considerable. The ability of partner organisations to have the number of nominees required and with the expertise in particular sectors or areas of education can vary greatly. Equally, as indicated in proposition 3 of the research, a partner's capacity to participate may be impacted upon by its relationship with the curriculum development agency (trust); the perceived risk of a project; and whether the specific project aligns with the objectives or aims of the partner organisation. The question arises whether partner organisations who may not have the capacity to participate to a high level should be afforded

the status of a partner organisation. Perhaps the creation of a second tier of partners could be established, which may be more reflective of their contribution.

Proposition three identifies the importance of having ethnic, cultural and socio-economic diversity in partnerships of national importance. Given the numerical size of NCCA's structures and nominees sitting on each it seems unlikely that any expansion of these could take place, even if this was desirable. One response may involve developing a second tier or panel of partners. This panel would be made up of organisations, who have national standing, but who do not have the capacity to be full members in all developments. Partners from this tier could participate through an elective or self-selecting approach for developments that are of concern to their constituents. As proposition six indicates, different partners are required to participant at different levels depending on the complexity and associated risk of the development. The use of the Partnership Participation Matrix would enable a 'fitness for purpose' approach, depending on the needs of the development and the potential impact it may have on the partners involved. These bodies would then become Contributing Bodies ensuring their voices are continued to be heard throughout the development process. An obvious implication of such a response is a reduced number of partners in education, full members, represented on a consistent basis, which may also response to criticism regard the size of Council and its supporting structures. This approach would enable partners to focus their efforts on projects that have a significant impact on their constituents, especially those of minority status in Ireland.

While it may seem counter-intuitive to increase participation by reducing the number of partners who continuously engage with the partnership model, if used in a flexible and in a responsive manner it may enable Contributing Bodies to participate more meaningfully in curriculum developments. The creation of a panel of Contributing Bodies to include the voices of minority groups would provide a mechanism for those who can be rendered voiceless during deliberations to be given a platform to have their say on matters that may directly impact their constituents.

Whether such a proposal would be looked favourably upon by either NCCA or their partners is questionable, as it is unlikely partners would opt to forfeit their full membership. However, a strategic question arises as to how to ensure the voices of the minority groups in Ireland are represented and can influence decision making processes that affect them.

6.5.4 Roles and responsibilities of partner organisations

The formal structures of NCCA are the only arena, underpinned by legislation, within which so many partners are involved in decisions on educational matters[13]. This reality can influence the contributions partners make to deliberations. Often the Council forum can be characterised by posturing, grandstanding and position taking on matters that are not so closely related to curriculum issues; some

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[13] While similar structures exist including those of the National Council for Special Education, the numbers involved are considerably less than those involved in the Council of NCCA.

of which include- national assessment arrangements, provision for professional development, teacher supply, and student/teacher ratios. The deliberation space then become highly politicised and can result in strategic appointments as documented in proposition three.

As outlined, the strategic appointment of nominees can lead to a deficit of expertise within committees, as well as a nominee with the aim of delaying and continually objecting to developments. An articulation of the role and responsibilities of partner organisations and nominees have on committees is an important consideration. In order for partners to participate in collaborative or co-leading roles of the Partnership Participation Matrix, their involvement must go beyond merely reflecting their organisation's position on developments. To reach the participation levels required for complex and risky curriculum developments, nominees need to support and lead the developments at a national level. Expectations of how partner organisations inform their constituents of developments, encourage involvement in consultations and support the capacity building for change on a national level need to be articulated.

The development of guidance material to partners when nominating individuals as well as a code of conduct is an important consideration here. As part of the code of conduct consideration may be given to measures for addressing strategic appointments. Such measures may include having to provide evidence of expertise in a given curriculum area or experience of working with curriculum. The research, through proposition three, uncovered that nominees who were nominated for strategic reasons, rather than their expertise, felt a great sense of isolation, leading to a regression in relationships and a loss of confidence and trust. The establishment of procedures to mitigate against strategic appointments may reduce the prevalence of protectionism, the isolation felt by such nominees and ensure an integrity to the contributions made by partners in curriculum negotiations.

A further development may be considered on a grander scale, which would involve a greater use of partnership structures in the decision making of the DES on educational matters. Such an approach would provide partners with the appropriate channels of communication for matters of concern, mitigating against such concerns, which may be unrelated to curriculum, hampering curriculum development processes.

6.5.5 Social control and trust
The use of social control can mitigate against relational risks through establishing shared understandings and values, thus reducing the risk of opportunistic behaviour. For Kirsch (1996), the use of appropriate control mechanisms may increase trust, such as having clear objectives and measures to institute a road map for the successful workings of a partnership model. Such an approach ensures clarity around the role and function of nominating bodies and their nominees. According to Ouchi (1979), social control is most appropriate in high-trust situations and also advances trust under these

conditions. The research recognises the crucial role played by trust in partnership models: a weakened sense of social control has had an impact on the relational trust among partners and the NCCA. Proposition 4 of the research outlines how the use of covert dimensions of power as well as breaches of trust have impacted greatly on the development of ERB and Ethics. Positions have now been taken, trenches have been dug and there seems to be little movement on either side. Extensive work will be required between partners if trust is to be cultivated in the future. Regardless of past behaviour, efforts will have to be made to address the trust issues that have emerged since the consultation on ERB and Ethics.

As outlined in both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, national debates relating to the role of religion in the educational experience of our young people have been ongoing. The research, under proposition 5, presents that as the state continues to assert its control and define its remit, the separation of powers is being played out through state and church agencies. What emerges is the importance of understanding the macro-societal and culture influences that shape and inform the views of the policy elite. While think-tanks and advocacy groups have the benefits of working independently; within a partnership model no development can be removed from the context into which it will be introduced. As such, contextual factors and discourse become influential and impact on what is achievable through curriculum reform.

6.5.6 Politically-mandated preconditions
In retrospect, the politically-mandated nature of the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics, set pre-conditions which exacerbated existing contextual factors. These conditions both asked the curriculum to be taught in such a way that it would be appropriate for all children, regardless of religion or belief system (i.e. in a critical, pluralistic and objective manner); while also asking it to be supplementary to the patron's programme of the school, which is generally a denominational religious education programme. Given the contextual factors at play, it becomes apparent that these conditions set parameters that resulted in unrealistic aims for the curriculum to meet.

The level to which curriculum can address structural issues, such as diversity of patronage, is extremely limited if possible. In this context, consideration should be made as to how an agency of the State responds to their parent organisation when directed to undertake such developments. In the case of ERB and Ethics, Council's concerns were communicated following the public consultation in the form of a letter to the Minister. While the consultation was held on proposals for a curriculum and not on the curriculum itself, they have damaged relations between NCCA and school management bodies. Whether Council's concerns would have been accepted at an earlier point in development is unknown, however this would have saved some of the more damaging discourse that was played out in the public domain. This raises questions as to the autonomy NCCA enjoy as a statutory body in their own right; to what extend can NCCA adjust and manoeuvre the pre-conditions set by the requests from their parent organisation and Minister?

6.5.6 The role of expertise in partnerships

The expertise and efficiency of the NCCA executive in the negotiation and brokerage space was remarked upon by all participants in the research. It also becomes clear from the data, that senior members of the executive are particularly skilled at managing sensitive situations and the resolution of conflicts. Even among the 'policy elite' there was a sense of deference to the expertise of the executive in matters of subject knowledge and specification. Such deference may lead to a sense of highbrow 'group think', ignoring the opinion of those less-equipped with the particular subject expertise. While the expertise of the developers is a prerequisite for curriculum design, it is important to acknowledge that such expertise is a powerful factor in convincing and influencing decision making. While the majority of the time such decisions may be well made, on occasion due to a deference to expertise it may be possible that expectations of curricula are overly-ambitious or underpinned by a philosophy contrary to that of some partners in education, as in ERB and Ethics. In both cases the result is a curriculum that is at best challenging to implement and at worst not fit for purpose.

6.5.7 Informal processes

Informal processes of curriculum development documented in this research seem to have emerged from previous studies into the processes of NCCA (Gleeson, 2000; 2004; 2012; Granville, 2004; Sugrue, 2004). Some of these can be understood as responses to previous criticisms of the process of curriculum design[14] and include collaboration with researchers, use of school networks to develop innovative practice, and including the voice of the student of curriculum developments. Others seem to have emerged in response to the needs of the current system and include use of school networks in trailing material, building relationships with influential organisations, hosting consultation events and seminars to build awareness of developments and collect feedback on proposals. While the research did not set out to examine these in detail, it concludes that engagement with these processes are considered important activities in curriculum design.

Given the recent prominence of these processes, it is notable that little information is found on such activities in the public domain. While the formal structures of the NCCA are well articulated in published material, the informal processes are only referred to in consultation report documents, strategic plans and within individual project webpages. It is understandable that those not directly involved in curriculum development have little sense of these activities. For curriculum development agencies involved in such activities, it would seem important then they are made visible throughout the work of the agency. As many of these activities engage directly with parents, teachers and children they may also increase public confidence and credibility within the education system.

Many participants expressed a desire for curriculum development to include the voice of minority groups or groups that often are not visible in policy-making processes. The inclusion of the voice of the

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[14] Previous criticisms include the length of time, lack of innovation, over reliance on committees and lowest common denominator of the partnership approach (Gleeson, 2000, Sugrue, 2004, Granville, 2004).

child was referred to as having the potential to impact greatly on informing and shaping curriculum developments. In recent years work has been undertaken, mainly through consultation processes, to include this voice, alongside the voice of the parent and teacher. While attempts to include these perspectives is a welcome development, little is known as to the impact of this work. Considering the political arena into which such perspectives are fed, to what extent, if any, do these influence the decision making of the formal structures of the NCCA? To what extent are the inputs from children acted upon? To answer these questions further research is required into the informal processes of the NCCA and their impact on decision making.

6.5.8 The partnership participation matrix

The complexity of roles undertaken by curriculum development agencies and the complex task of curriculum development confirms the multi-dimensional nature of the work. To support the curriculum developers in negotiating this highly complex and at times risky terrain the research has developed the Partnership Participation Matrix. The matrix is designed as a tool to support the risk assessment and the complexity of specific curriculum developments. It supports developers by identifying key partners and the levels to which they need to participate to ensure a successful development of curriculum. The use of the matrix does not intend to provide clear and concise answers; however, it enables developers to begin to think about how to involve and engage their partners at an appropriate level.

Figure 19: Partnership Participation Matrix
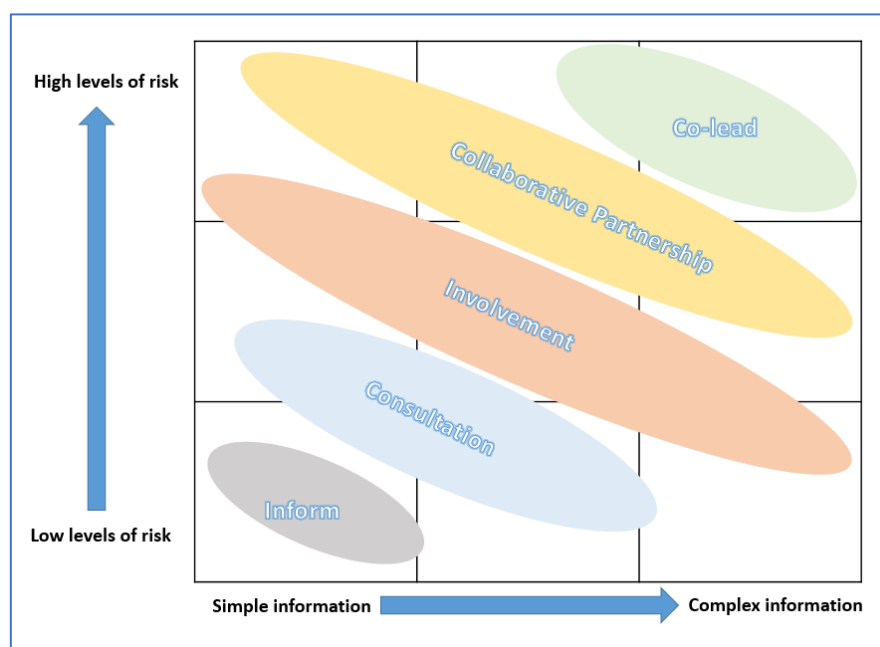
In the case of ERB and Ethics what emerges is that the policy elite needed to be participating at the levels of collaborative partnership and co-leading. Enabling partners to engage at this level of participation is not an easy task given the levels of protectionism presented to date, the use of strategic appointments to NCCA structures and the numerous breaches of trust on both sides. However, if the

curriculum in ERB and Ethics is to progress then it is essential that the policy elite are participating at a high level. The research suggests through strengthening a shared understanding and purpose of education, a stronger sense of social control can be supported and thus greater levels of trust and co-operation. To this end efforts to rebuild and support a shared understanding of what ERB and Ethics in a national curriculum should provide is required. Furthermore, as trust takes significant investment of time and co-operation, there appears to be no quick fix to the question of ERB and Ethics. Nonetheless the foundations should be laid to initiate a re-engagement between both NCCA and their partners on matters of religions, beliefs and ethics in Irish primary schools.

6.6 Implications for theory

The research findings validate as well as interrogate a number of theoretical perspectives. The research resonates with Pinar's conception of curriculum as a 'process of social psychoanalysis' (2004, p. 38) drawing attention to the importance of the process in determining the curriculum which often 'hides other truths'. The 'other truths' unearthed from this research includes the influence of the policy elite, and the school management body of the majority of primary schools in particular, in determining the national curriculum. For Pinar, in order for teachers to emancipate themselves from such forces they need to contextualise their experience, through examination of the past and present before re-imagining the future, in a process of Currere. This thesis, by utilising this process, confirms its validity as a useful construct for analysing the process of curriculum change.

Power relations permeate the process of brokerage. Overt and covert dimensions are clearly presented, while the latent dimension is more difficult to identify in this research. As latent dimensions refer to the influencing, shaping and determining the will of those subjected to it, a deeper examination of societal factors and influencers is required to make any significant statement on these. What is clear is an attempt to dis-entangle state control from the imperial authorities of denominational groups. As this power struggle endures, the research asserts that curriculum will continue to be a hostage to such fortunes and a proxy for wider societal shifts in power.

The belief that trust takes time and effort to cultivate but can be lost in an instant is backed up by empirical research in this area and is also a finding from this study (Barber, 1983; Burt and Knez, 1996; Dasgupta, 1988; Levi, 1998; Rempel, Holmes and Zanna, 1985; Rothbart and Park, 1986). This research contends that by encouraging a shared understanding and purpose among partners in education, greater levels of social control and trust can be developed.

Arnstein (1969) frames participation in terms of citizen power. In his model, citizen participation is defined as 'the redistribution of power that enables the have not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future' (p. 351). The research found that significant barriers to participation for minority groups exist. It is difficult to see how Arnstein's belief in the participation model can bear fruit given the composition of present structures of power.

Often minority groups lack the cultural capital to influence developments at a national level and so the lack of ethnic and cultural diversity engaged in curriculum developments could been seen as re-enforcing a reproduction of societies inequalities.

6.7 Implications for further research

This study suggests a number of possible themes for future research. The informal structures and processes of curriculum development emerged as significant activities that help shape and inform developments. While much research has examined the formal structures and processes, including this study, examination into informal activities will provide a deeper understanding of the processes of curriculum design and negotiation. Such research could also interrogate the effectiveness of these activities in mitigating against some of the previous criticisms of the partnership model. For instance, do these activities effectively represent to views and opinions of minority groups and are such contributions making an impact on the national curriculum.

Related to the present research is the question of 'what is lost' during the brokerage process. While the partnership approach seems to be quite successful in creating policy that transitions smoothly into the system, there is little understanding of how policy evolves and morphs during the development process. An analysis of the original proposals for curriculum, alongside the submissions during consultation and follow-up research, would further inform how policy is shaped and influenced during curriculum development.

This research adds to the body of knowledge on partnership models to policy development, however it cannot answer the question of whether what is developed through these processes is impacting positively on children's learning. While curriculum is only one factor in the learning experience of children, research into the perceived and actual impact of a new curriculum would inform future policy development processes. A key question could be whether the process of curriculum design in Ireland impacts positively on the learning outcomes of children.

6.8 The Partnership Model: A final reflection

The research reported on here asserts that a partnership approach to curriculum design has many potentially beneficial by-products. Some might argue that partnership is not sufficient for the changes that are required in education in Ireland, that confrontation or disruption outside a partnership model might be required rather than partnership in order to achieve real change. Partnership between the Department of Education, the NCCA and those with vested interests, they might say, is only likely to ensure continuity of policy and practice and militate against change.

The findings of the research project reported on in this thesis suggest that real change can take place through partnership even when there are disagreements, a lack of trust sometimes, and the feeling from minor players or even major stakeholders that they are not being heard. The research suggests that awareness and acknowledgement of the processes involved in partnership could strengthen such

processes and lead to stronger outcomes in the future. Through its deliberative processes partnership can forefront issues early in policy development supporting negotiation and a smooth transition of policy into practice. Partnership also has symbolic and political dimensions in which deliberation and negotiations are transparent. The right environment, we have seen, can build trust and confidence among partners and enable them to collaborate and co-lead developments. The discovery of a shared commitment to educational improvement, and of a coherent vision of the goals of education, can result from mutually inter-dependent work. Within such conditions partners can act as drivers of system wide change supporting teachers in adapting to same.

The research also highlights negative aspects of the partnership approach, when conditions are not conducive to meaningful participation. Obstructionism, protectionism, proxy wars and the exercising of power to undermine the partnership and any possible developments can come to the fore when everyone is not comfortable in their role or with the process. It is clear that breaches of trust, coercion, and a lack of shared values and vision for education, need to be worked through if a true partnership of the kind being envisaged here is to grow and continue to develop. It is often only by working through such issues that a partnership can become fully mature and innovative. Although there can be many questions to resolve in establishing and developing a fruitful partnership, as we have seen, this does not take away from the value of seeking to have key partners work together in creative ways. Even if a particular curriculum development project does not come to the results people might have expected, if well managed, it can still contribute to overall progress in the debate about the future of education policy.

The dissolution of the partnership model might still become a reality, but the implications would be considerable. A move away from a partnership approach in the sphere we have been considering might provide for greater involvement from individuals within the political sphere. Free from interference, policy development would no doubt become a smooth, uncontested process. It would however be prone to be driven by whatever orthodoxy held sway within the DES or the NCCA at a particular time. Such policy delivered to schools would not necessarily, however, have any impact in practice. It might lack the support of enabling bodies and organisations. At best any mildly contentious policy would be met with indifference. The questions of 'buy-in' and how to support change on a systemic level remains important. This reflection asserts that partnership, based on meaningful participation, offers the most attractive possibilities. This research offers new insights into the conversation that needs to take place continually in order to ensure that partnership is all it should be.

6.9 Concluding remarks

This research has added to the literature on the partnership approach to curriculum development in Ireland (Gleeson, 2000; 2004; 2012; Granville, 2004; Sugrue, 2004). It finds that while the policy elite still wield significant power during curriculum design processes, the informal processes of curriculum design have become influential and may have the potential to mitigate, to some extent, the possibility

of a single partner obstructing developments (proposition 1). Nonetheless the research finds that partners have been strategic in their appointments, actively stymying what are perceived as high-risk and complex curriculum developments (proposition 2).

The research unearths the balancing act performed by negotiators of curriculum as they actively manage the expectations of their partners. The duality of roles as both brokers and developers of curriculum places them in a challenging position when dissenting voices call developments into question (proposition 5). The power struggle between partners has been evidenced throughout the research and are often a proxy for wider societal discourses (proposition 4). Participation is further hampered by significant barriers which prevent partners reaching the collaborative partnership and co-leading spaces of the Partnership Participation Matrix, required for high-risk and complex curriculum developments (proposition 6).

To mitigate against some of these barriers, the research presents a number of implications for practice. In relation to the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics, the research asserts that if this is to become a reality in Irish schools the policy elite need to be in a collaborative partnership and co-leading role. To achieve this, trust and personal relationships need to be rebuilt and maintained in the coming years (proposition 3).

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview schedule

The interview schedule is organised across the three aims of the research:

- To investigate the partnership model of curriculum design in Ireland.

- To investigate the roles of leaders of curriculum development, members of the partnership model and the power brokers in negotiating and finalising curriculum.

- To explore potential opportunities and challenges of the partnership model of curriculum design for the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

The partnership model of curriculum design:

-The NCCA describe the model of curriculum development in Ireland as a 'partnership' approach. What is your understanding of this term?

> Do you agree with the NCCA in how they describe their approach? How does it relate to your experience in the development of curriculum?

-From your experience, what is the purpose of the partnership model employed by the NCCA?

> Is it to develop curriculum that is inclusive of a wide range of perspectives? Is it to aid the introduction of curriculum into schools? Or it is to demonstrate a certain level of transparency to the process of development?

-What role do you see the building of consensus playing in the development of curriculum?

> Is it a necessary approach, a realistic expectation or can consensus building act as a barrier to more radical and innovative developments, as has been described by previous researchers?

-What challenges arise from the use of this model of curriculum development?

> From your experience what challenges have arisen through the partnership approach employed by the NCCA?

-What opportunities does it present?

> From your experience, what opportunities have arisen through the partnership approach employed by NCCA?

Role of individuals and organisations involved:

-Describe what you see as your role in the process of curriculum development with the NCCA.

> Do you see yourself representing the views of your organisation or your personal views?

-In your experience, do you feel like your views are heard, considered and responded to by the NCCA?

Are there views of individuals/organisations which are considered more strongly than others? Who are these individuals/organisations? Why do you think their views are considered stronger than others?

-How would you describe your individual/organisation's relationship with the NCCA? What benefits are there for you/your organisation by participating in curriculum development by the NCCA?

Opportunities and challenges in the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics:

-ERB and Ethics has been described as a sensitive and contested curriculum development. What challenges has the development of the curriculum raised so far and how you feel the partnership model of curriculum development has helped/hindered these?

-Who are the key voices that need to be considered in the development of the curriculum? Are there key voices that are not represented by NCCA structures that may have a significant contribution to make to this area of development?

Do you feel as if there is adequate representation of the diversity in NCCA structures? What about minority faith groups or patrons such as Educate Together or the ETBI?

- How has the partnership model enabled the progression of the curriculum of ERB and Ethics?

What benefits has the partnership model provided for the progression of ERB and Ethics?

Appendix B: Plain language statement

Dear Colleague,

You are invited to take part in an important study into how curriculum is developed for primary schools in Ireland. The research is being conducted as part of a Professional Doctorate in Education, School of Education, in Dublin City University and its title is:

> *Consensus making, brokerage and compromise: The process of curriculum design in Ireland as evidenced in the development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics.*

Curriculum design in Ireland has been described as a *secretive* process for *insiders* only. Researchers in the past have called into question the use of the partnership model as an effective means of curriculum design, in particular the influence key players have in brokering a *cosy consensus* among the partners in education. The research intends to lift the veil on the structures and processes of curriculum design in Ireland and will describe the complexities presented by the current model of curriculum design for the development of the new curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

The principal investigating officer is Patrick Sullivan. Patrick is a former principal of Ard Rí Community National School, Navan, and has recently moved into the role of Director at the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Sandra Cullen. Sandra has been teaching theology at Mater Dei Institute since 2003 and was appointed lecturer in Religious Education in 2010.

Your involvement in the research will involve an audio-recorded one to one interview of between 30-40 minutes in length. The principal investigating officer will provide the interview schedule to you 48 hours in advance to ensure you have adequate time to reflect on your experience of curriculum development. It is hoped that the process of reflection will provide opportunity for personal learning for you as well as providing rich data for the research.

The information disclosed in the research will be coded and confidentially stored until the publication of the research in September 2018, at which point it will be destroyed. It is important to note that while confidentiality is guaranteed the data is subject to the same legal requirements as other research data, including those under the Freedom of Information Act (2014). Also significantly due to the small sample size of individuals involved in curriculum development in Ireland anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Upon publication of the research, participants and other interested parties will be invited to a presentation and discussion of the findings of the research. The research will then be disseminated to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the Department of Education and Skills.

Of course your participation in the research is voluntary and as such you can withdraw at any point during the research. If you wish to receive more information regarding the research, please contact Patrick Sullivan at 087-9884896 or by email at patrick.sullivan6@mail.dcu.ie. If you have concerns about the research outlined above and wish to contact an independent person, please contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie.

Finally, the research is being partly funded by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) as part of their commitment to staff professional development. As such, NCCA do not have any influence in the collecting of or the processing of data or indeed the reporting of the findings of the research.

I hope you look favourably upon my proposal.

Kindest regards,

Appendix C: Informed consent

Dear Colleague,

You are invited to take part in an important study into how curriculum is developed for primary schools in Ireland. The research is being conducted as part of a Professional Doctorate in Education, School of Education, in Dublin City University and its title is:

> *Consensus making, brokerage and compromise: The process of curriculum design in Ireland as evidenced in the development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics.*

The research intends to examine the structures and processes of curriculum design in Ireland and will describe the complexities presented by the current model of curriculum design for the development of the new curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

Your involvement in the research will involve an audio recorded one to one interview of between 30-40 minutes in length. The principal investigating officer will provide the interview schedule to you 48 hours in advance to ensure you have adequate time to reflect on your experience of curriculum development. It is hoped that the process of reflection will provide opportunity for personal learning for you as well as providing rich data for the research.

The information disclosed in the research will be coded and confidentially stored until the publication of the research in September 2018, at which point it will be destroyed. It is important to note that while confidentiality is guaranteed the data is subject to the same legal requirements as other research data, including those under the Freedom of Information Act (2014). Due to the small sample size of individuals involved in curriculum development in Ireland absolute anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

If you are happy to participate in the research and agree with the statement below, please provide your signature.

Informed consent

Please indicate by circling Yes/No your understanding of the research:

I have read the plain language statement (or had it read to me)   *Yes/No*

I understand the information provided   *Yes/No*

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study   *Yes/No*

I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions   *Yes/No*

I am aware that my interview will be audio recorded   *Yes/No*

I understand that I can withdraw from the process at any point   *Yes/No*

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research.

Participant's signature: _____

Name in block capitals: _____

Witness: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D: Ethical approval

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

DCU

Patrick Sullivan
School of Education

20th September 2016

REC Reference: DCUREC/2016/135

Proposal Title: Consensus making, brokerage and compromise: How the
process of curriculum design in Ireland provides
opportunities and challenges for the development of a
curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB)
and Ethics

Applicant(s):   Patrick Sullivan & Dr Sandra Cullen

Dear Patrick,

Further to expedited review, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this
research proposal.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project
has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage,
a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Donal O'Gorman

Dr Dónal O'Gorman
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

DCU Research & Innovation

Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath,
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Appendix E: List of NCCA's education partners

Department of Education and Skills	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Church of Ireland Board of Education	Education and Training Boards Ireland
Nominee of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs	Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland
Teachers' Union of Ireland	Irish Federation of University Teachers
National Parents Council Primary	National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education
Irish Business and Employers Confederation	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
National Parents Council Post-Primary	Foras na Gaeilge
Catholic Primary Schools Management Association	State Examinations Commission
Joint Managerial Body	Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools

Appendix F: NCCA strategic goals

The current Council was appointed and commenced its work in July 2015 and will continue until December 31st 2018. Its current strategic plan is outlined until 2018 and sets out important actions in Council's work across five strategic goals:

1. Curriculum and Assessment

To develop innovative curriculum and assessment for engagement, progression, quality, inclusion and continuity across sectors.

2. Engagement and Networks

To work with schools and other educational settings, teachers, practitioners, learners and others to build capacity for change and to inform curriculum and assessment development and implementation.

3. Knowledge and Research

To generate, use and share knowledge and research to support the development of curriculum and assessment advice and practice in schools and other educational settings.

4. Communications and Profile

To communicate, present and share the work and achievements of the NCCA to improve the profile of the organisation and its capacity to engage with others in leading and supporting educational change.
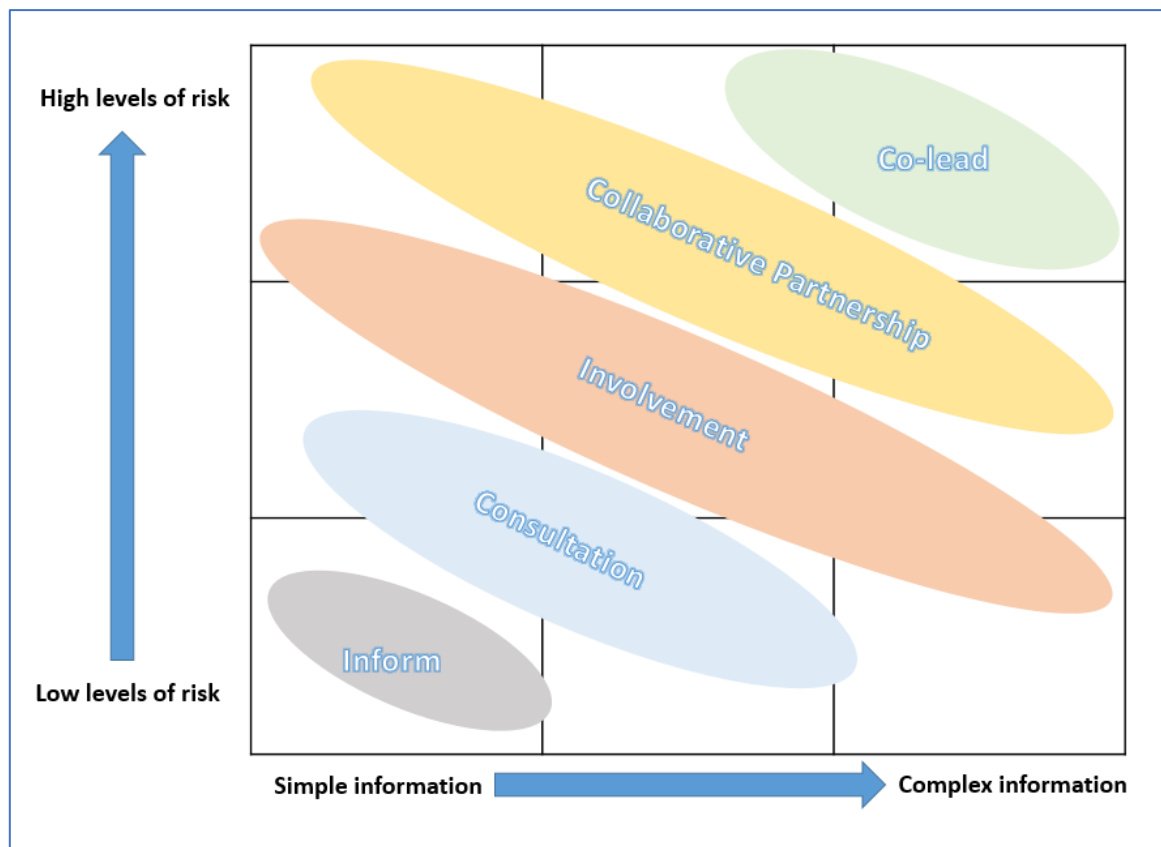
5. Governance and Corporate Affairs

To develop NCCA governance and organisational structures, processes, skills and competences to achieve the vision of the organisation.

Appendix G: The structure of the executive staff and corporate services of the NCCA as of September 2017
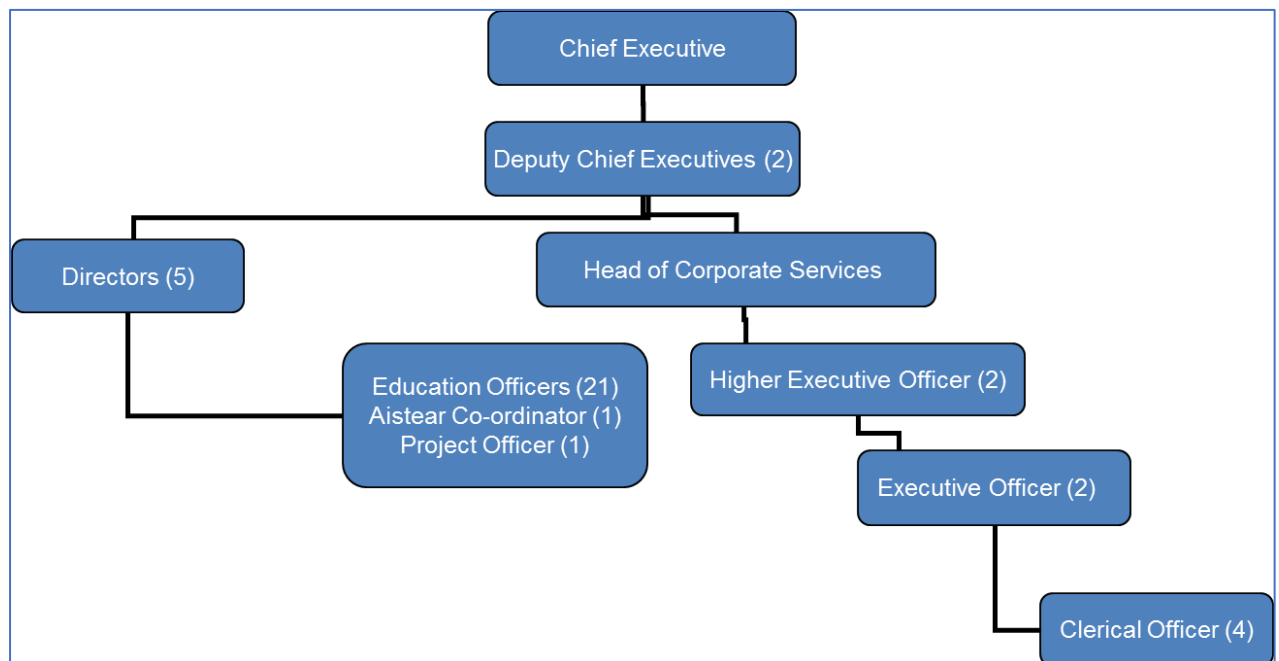
Appendix H: Partnership Participation Matrix

Appendix I: A selection of media reports on the development of ERB and Ethics

First State curriculum on beliefs is a game-changer

ANY renegotiation of boundaries between church and State is contentious. For the devout, trading a system that has served them well is tantamount to a surrender. For others, having to conform to something in which they do not believe is also unacceptable. For generations, religion, and the Catholic Church in particular, were central to life in Ireland.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has set out its consultation paper for children in all our 3,000 primary schools. Faith-based schools may well regard its proposals as a step too far. To be compelled to teach about world religions, encroaching on time available for instruction in the doctrine of their ethos, will brook resistance. Traditionally, it has been the preserve of the patron – still the Catholic Church in 90pc of cases – to make such decisions. There has been much talk of ceding control and of divestment, but the status quo has been slow to shift.

Recent years have been difficult for the Church. Many felt betrayed by a series of scandals and cover-ups. Such factors have resulted in a rebalancing of relationships. Tension has grown between the secular and the religious. Arguments are well rehearsed: An alternative to bad religion is not no religion, but better religion. Secularists would clearly go another route.

The debate is likely to become more heated before there is agreement. Whatever one's stance, the first ever State curriculum on beliefs and ethics in primary schools amounts to a game-changer. Engagement and conciliation will be central to managed change. While Gandhi once pointed out that "God had no religion", attacks on minority faiths have blighted the lives of millions across the world.

So few can argue that a better understanding of other religions is not beneficial. Ideally, there would be room for both approaches, but we are a long way from such a Promised Land.

Let's encourage children to share ideas about world religions

WHAT should children learn at school? How long should they spend learning it? And for what purpose? These are the questions that underpin debates about curriculum across the world. In Ireland, these debates tend to be dominated by the post-primary sector and debates about primary curriculum are rarer, or at least, much quieter.

In recent years, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has contributed significantly to those debates, and to those questions. The development of Aistear – the early childhood curriculum framework, sets a new direction for the experiences of children in infant classrooms.

The recently completed integrated language curriculum breaks new ground in connecting children's language learning across their first, second and other language contexts. The proposed new curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and ethics programme breaks further new ground in primary education.

Remarkably, there has never been a State curriculum in the areas of religions, beliefs or ethics for children attending primary schools.

Currently, religious and ethical education is provided by the patron's programme of the school, designed to underpin the ethos of these schools and which usually involves teaching from a faith-based perspective.

This teaching is entirely appropriate for children who practise and adhere to the same religion as the school patron. However, concern has been expressed for children of a different religion or belief background to that of the school, who may miss out on valuable learning in religions, beliefs and ethics.

The development of an ERB and ethics curriculum is intended to be for all children attending all primary schools. As such, it can be argued that the development and teaching of the proposed curriculum should be from an objective, critical and pluralist perspective as outlined in the Toledo guidelines on teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools.

In Irish primary schools, a child's sense of their identity and belonging is nurtured through experiential learning, the creation of inclusive school environments and positive relationships between the child and their teacher. Such learning can already take place in subjects such as social, personal and health education (SPHE), drama, the patrons' programmes and indeed across elements of the entire primary curriculum.

However, the development of an ERB and ethics curriculum will ensure that every child has access to structured, coherent and incremental learning in this area, and will support teachers and schools in the good practices that already take place in our primary schools.

In ERB and ethics, children can share ideas about the world, promoting relationships and friendships with those of different belief backgrounds. Through a child's reflection on their own beliefs and values, and on those of others, they can grow in respect for themselves and others.

The unique composition of Ireland's primary sector, coupled with current debates about school patronage, gives rise to additional sensitivities over and above the general cut and thrust of debates about curriculum change in Ireland. Furthermore, the question of time allocation for a new component of the primary school curriculum is an important consideration.

Teachers have described the curriculum as "overloaded", and have expressed concern for the quality of children's learning and engagement at school due to the constraints of time allocation in the primary curriculum.

The current guidelines on time allocation for teaching across the curriculum are outlined on a weekly basis.

Internationally, there are many examples of systems that take a different approach, from recommendations by month or by term, or even by school year, leaving flexibility to schools to make the daily and weekly decisions.

The NCCA's advice on time allocation across the entire primary school curriculum, including ERB and ethics, will be made to the Minister for Education and Skills in 2016.

While remaining mindful of such debates and considerations, it is important to focus on the central questions for curriculum development of what should children learn, and for what purpose. These questions are the focus of the consultation for the proposed ERB and ethics curriculum.

The consultation on the proposals for the proposed curriculum will run from autumn to spring 2016.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is actively seeking contributions from individuals and groups through a number of consultation formats. Information on the proposals and how you can contribute can be found at www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe

Patrick Sullivan is director of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Patrick Sullivan

Massive change now on cards for religion teaching

Kahterine Donnelly
Education Editor

THE teaching of religion in primary schools is facing its biggest ever shake-up with controversial plans for the first State programme in the subject.

Government education advisers have unveiled proposals for a ground-breaking Education about Religion, Beliefs and Ethics (ERBE) subject for all children, in all 3,000 primary schools.

The proposals would mean a cut in the amount of time allocated in schools to teach children about their own religion, certain to raise hackles within the Catholic Church.

Professor Eamonn Conway of the Mary Immaculate primary teacher training college has described the proposals as "bizarre".

He has questioned why "a faith-based school would be required to offer what is essentially a secularist understanding of religious faith" and said its introduction would "undoubtedly adversely affect religious instruction and a faith-based school's characteristic ethos."

The Catholic Church runs 90pc of primary schools and, like other patron bodies, it currently has the authority to devise it own religious education programme for its pupils.

Department of Education guidelines allow 30 minutes a day for such classes and, in denominational schools, such programmes revolve around teaching their own faith, including preparations for the sacraments.

The introduction of a new State curriculum on religion and ethics presents a fresh challenge about where it would slot into the schedule.

One option would be to eat into the existing allocation for religion teaching – meaning less time on Church teachings.

The alternative would be to take time from teaching other subjects such as English, Maths, Science and Irish.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has launched a consultation document on the issue, inviting all members of the public to offer their views, before it draws up final advice for the Minister for Education.

The NCCA plan has found favour with the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), although it acknowledged a key challenge would be to find space for the proposals in an already over-crowded curriculum. The INTO previously suggested a common religion programme for all children – with some separate religious instruction, perhaps for one or two classes per week.

Another option would be a common programme taught during school hours with separate religious instruction after school.

Proposals for the ERBE curriculum have been drawn up arising from a recommendation of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, which explored ways to cater for the increasingly diverse school-going population. This is the body that came up with a plan for the divestment of some Catholic schools to other patron bodies, which has been an exceedingly slow process.

Other key recommendations were concerned with how to ensure that schools that remain Catholic in ethos are truly inclusive of all pupils, regardless of their beliefs.

Patrick Sullivan, Director of Curriculum and Assessment at the NCCA, said a broad education about religion and beliefs helps children to understand the cultural heritage of major forms of religion, and did not nurture the belief or practice of any one. He said learning about ethics was important for all, but developing modes of ethical behaviour was vital to children's development.

According to the consultation paper, ERBE is not intended to replace the patron's programme in faith formation in denominational schools.

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The school year is already a crowded affair

Katherine Donnelly

THERE are 915 teaching hours in the Irish primary school year and 92.5 of them are allocated to religious, ethics and moral education.

It means that the average Irish primary pupil spends 10pc of his or her time on religion or ethics, second only to Israel – and twice the 5pc average across the developed world.

So, proposals from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) for the first ever State curriculum on Education about Religions, Beliefs and Ethics (ERBE) immediately raises questions about how to fit this in to what is acknowledged as a very busy school schedule.

The unique nature of the Irish primary schools system means that schools operate under private patronage – mainly the churches. It is the prerogative of the patrons to devise their own programme around religion, or complementary fields such as ethics, to support the ethos of their school.

In fact, the Education Act underpins that right, stating that the Minister for Education "must ensure a reasonable amount of time is set aside in each school day for subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the schools".

Under Department of Education school guidelines, that translates into 30 minutes a day, 2.5 hours a week, or 92.5 hours a year.

Primary teachers and principals argue that the curriculum is overloaded.

Initiatives in recent years, such as in the areas of literacy and numeracy, have piled extra demands on schools.

The same reports from the international think-tank, the OECD, that tell us that 10pc of time in Irish primary schools is devoted to religion, also reveal that time for foreign language teaching in Irish primary classrooms is negligible, compared with 6pc in other countries.

The 4pc of time devoted to teaching science at primary level in Ireland compares with an international average of 7pc.

In light of all the growing, and competing demands, the NCCA is separately preparing advice on how best to manage and allocate time for all subjects and as part of that work is looking at what happens in other countries.

The NCCA document on ERBE makes clear that it is not intended to replace the patron's programme, or faith formation in denominational schools.

If it is not intended to replace the patron's programme, then the question to be asked is: Should the proposed new State curriculum share the 92.5 hours per year currently allocated for the patron's programme? The alternative would be to take time from another subject: English, Maths, Science, Irish or PE.

Schools forced to cut Catholic classes

Katherine Donnelly
Education Editor

THE amount of time allocated in Catholic schools to teach children about their own religion is set to be cut.

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Department of Education guidelines allow 30 minutes a day for such classes and, in denominational schools, such programmes revolve around teaching their own faith, including preparations for the sacraments.

However, the introduction of a new State curriculum on religion and ethics presents a challenge about where that would slot into the schedule.

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Huge response to religion curriculum plans

Katherine Donnelly

PARENTS have reacted in huge numbers to plans for the first ever State curriculum on religious education and ethics in primary schools.

The move could see the time allocated for traditional religion classes in primary schools eroded in order to create space for the new subject.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) launched a consultation on the proposed Education about Religion, Beliefs and Ethics (ERBE) on Tuesday, and was immediately bombarded with visitors – mainly parents – wanting to express their views.

Within 24 hours of the consultation document being posted online, more than 500 questionnaires were completed.

This is a record level of response to an NCCA consultation and also the first time that parents have contributed to such an exercise in such large numbers.

The consultation process, which is open to parents, teachers and members of the public, will continue until next spring, following which the NCCA will provide final advice to the Minister for Education.

The new curriculum was recommended by the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism, which explored ways to improve diversity in the primary sector, where 90pc of schools are under the control of the Catholic Church,

The State curriculum is not intended to replace the religious or ethics education programme already provided by individual school patrons, such as the Catholic Church. But finding time for it presents challenges, and one option would be to share time with existing religion programmes, which are allocated 30 minutes a day.

The Council for Education of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Catholic Primary School Managers' Association (CPSMA) have called on all those involved in Catholic schools to participate in the consultation. Both bodies stressed that Catholic schools are inclusive.

Bishop Brendan Kelly, Bishop of Achonry and chair of the Council for Education, said the NCCA and the report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism both emphasised that ERBE was not intended to replace denominational religious education.

Bishop Brendan Kelly

Proposed world religions course is a response to a problem that doesn't exist

David Quinn

ONE would be forgiven for thinking that this Government has little time for religion, and even less time for the Catholic Church. It would protest very loudly against such a notion, of course, but consider the fact that it closed our embassy to the Holy See. It introduced our first abortion law. It redefined marriage and the family.

In passing our first abortion law, it told Catholic hospitals that they must perform abortions under its terms, regardless of ethos. Even countries with more liberal abortion laws than ours rarely do this. Spinelessly, the hospitals complied.

Our new version of marriage affords no protection whatever to those who do not wish to facilitate same-sex marriage on grounds of conscience.

The attacks on conscience rights and ethos are particularly obnoxious and are the mark of a State intent on imposing a particular vision of morality.

Add to this the continual attacks on the ethos and identity of denominational schools, whether they be Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Muslim or of some other religious stripe.

The admissions policy of faith schools are under continual attack. Faith schools are told they cannot serve their own faith community first at enrolment time, even though they were set up to serve their own faith community in the first instance.

The employment policy of faith schools is attacked. Their right to employ teachers who will not undermine the ethos of the school is being severely curtailed in the name of 'non-discrimination'. This, of course, can only make it much harder to maintain the ethos of faith schools. It attacks the rights of parents who want to send their children to a school with a given ethos.

The latest threat to the ethos of faith-based schools appeared this week and, as usual, it came disguised in the colours of 'inclusion', 'tolerance' and 'diversity'.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is to oversee the development of a new programme for primary schools called 'Education about Religion and Beliefs and Ethics' ('ERB and Ethics' for short).

The NCCA has invited submissions on the proposal. The Catholic bishops have encouraged people to take part in the consultation process.

The NCCA website tells us that the aim of the ERB portion of the course is to help children "to know about and understand the cultural heritage of the major forms of religion, belief traditions and worldviews which have been embraced by humankind."

This seems perfectly sound and sensible at first glance but several lines of objection come to mind.

Take ERB first. The NCCA website also informs us: "It (ERB) does not nurture the belief or practice of any one religion; instead it focuses on fostering an informed awareness of the main theist, non-theist, and secular beliefs, including key aspects of their cultural manifestations."

This causes an obvious problem to schools espousing a particular religious faith.

In one class, the pupils, in accordance with the wishes of their parents, will be receiving an education and formation in the faith of the school, but in their very next class those same pupils will be taught about religion in a completely different way.

That completely different way teaches them to distance themselves from their own faith. It teaches them to view religion from a sociological perspective and can easily teach pupils, even without intending it, to be agnostic about faith, to see the various faiths as equally true, or equally false.

To put it another way, in one class children will be learning about their religion in a way that assumes it is true. In another they will be learning, in effect, that it might or not might be true.

Some people might argue that this simply teaches them 'critical thinking'. In fact, it teaches them an implicit agnosticism. It teaches them implicitly that religion is purely man-made.

This badly disrupts the ability of a faith school to impart the faith as it chooses and as parents who take their own faith seriously would want.

From the point of view of a Christian school, Jesus is transformed from "the Way, the Truth and the Life", into "a way, a truth and a life".

As for the ethics section of the course, the purpose of this, according to the NCCA, is to encourage the "formation and the promotion of a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings, the importance of human rights and responsibilities, the place of justice within society, and the service of the common good."

Why does the NCCA and the Department of Education assume this cannot be done in religion class? All religions worth their salt are extremely concerned with moral questions. The very concept of human dignity is primarily a Christian concept, or at least a religious one. Atheism would have us believe that human beings are mere "meat machines", to quote MIT scientist Marvin Minsky.

The faith of our fathers is not enough for our kids

yet we fear the kids finding out
We are no longer a State of one faith, or even any faith, writes

Sarah Caden, and

IF they were paying attention last week, our primary school children would have received their first lesson in the place of religion in the world. The introduction to the curriculum of Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics is only at consultation stage and already there is war about it.

Teachers, who already fit the standard, allocated 30 minutes of religious education into the school day questioned what would suffer in the name of this new, additional module. Parents agonised over what matters more: what our children believe, or what's coming up, ultimately, in the exams. And some others questioned whether teaching about all religions is an unwelcome dilution of education in a child's own religion.

Different subgroups, for different reasons, all unsettled by the idea that the proposed ERB is a threat to primary school education as we know it. But what harm if it is? There's nothing particularly great about what we have at the moment. It pleases neither the old guard who hark back to the days when one's church was the word and law of the community, nor the new, who have to a great extent eschewed that while finding nothing of meaning to replace it.

Last week, the Department of Education proposed that in addition to the current 30-minute religious allocation, Irish primary schools should teach this ERB pro-gramme. It would educate children on religions of the world, it would explore ethics and morals, tolerance and discrimination.

It would, basically, teach religion in a less singular, one-truth style. Which is the ultimate threat to those who see this as an undesirable first step towards secularisation of our schools, even though it is actually extra time spent dwelling on the significance of religion rather than less.

The problem with religion in Ireland, however, is that it's an "our way or the highway" attitude. And in many ways, "their" way has lost a lot of the generation under 50. A lot of these would be the parents of today's primary-school children and what they are presented with, in particular in rural areas, is little or no choice in where they send their kids to school.

Many remain what you could call culturally Roman Catholic and they send their kids to Roman Catholic schools because they still believe in God if not the Church or because they don't see an alternative. They're the ones who get lambasted as *a la carte* Catholics; but they're the ones actually keeping these schools going, whether their hearts and souls are in it or not.

Is it too much to ask that our hearts and souls should be in the formation of our children's hearts and souls, though? If the parents aren't keeping the faith, then surely the teaching should be coming at the faith in a different way. Because we haven't lost the human desire for greater meaning, we've just lost a lot of faith in the one-truth way.

The problem, however, is that we have found nothing to replace it satisfactorily. Ethically and morally in Ireland, we remain fundamentally Christian, but we fish around fruitlessly for the comforts originally afforded us by the Church. Some turn to angels, some turn to self-help books, to liking and disliking on Facebook, to RIPing strangers online in order to feel part of a community. We seek meaning and connection everywhere and nowhere.

And, interestingly, we have found no satisfactory way of giving meaning to the vicissitudes of life for our children. Or, rather, none that consoles and comforts on matters of life and death like notions of heaven and the afterlife. Even if you think that heaven and hell and eternity are mumbo jumbo, you can't deny that they are part of a story with many variations that humanity has dealt in since the beginning of time.

What the ERB model proposes to teach is that all these efforts have validity, and are open to question, and herein lies the problem for some. If you teach them that there are lots of truths, then how can you teach them that one faith, their faith, is *the* truth? But maybe we've moved past needing such absolutes.

In teaching our children, as the proposed ERB might, how humanity has always struggled with notions of a greater power, a greater meaning, a greater purpose, we might well be doing them a greater service than was done for us in our early education. It might teach them what it means to be human, rather than what it means to be a Roman Catholic, a Protestant, a Muslim or even an atheist.

I have two children in primary school, and to a great extent, across the religious board, a lot of parents of Irish primary school children are play-acting at holding tight to the faith of the chosen school, and this is particularly the case in rural areas, where there is no choice of school to send your child.

In the cities, thanks to faith-based enrolment policies, parents are baptising children in a certain faith in order to secure primary school places, and performing first communion and confirmation in order to hedge their bets for secondary school.

It's not often that you hear a parent discussing the religious rituals from a belief point of view, but more commonly as a pragmatic move. Is that any lesson to teach our children, by example, about faith and the meaning of life? Or for that matter, ethics and morals.

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Religious bias of our schools is beyond belief

Broadside

Kitty Holland

A colleague, driving his unbaptised six-year-old daughter to school recently, was informed from the back seat: "God made this car, Daddy. My teacher told me God made everything in the world."

In an effort not to bruise her emerging thought processes while remaining true to his non-religious beliefs, he brushed it off gently. "Well, he didn't do a great job of it, sweetheart."

"I'll pray for a nicer one, Daddy," she reassured him.

A sweet story, perhaps, but it raises fundamental questions about freedom of thought in our national schools.

These pages have seen many stories charting the difficulties of parents of unbaptised children getting a school place for them when the vast majority of schools in their area are denominational and oversubscribed.

In December 2013 I wrote about my experience of trying to get a place for my unbaptised son in a school – any school – near our Dublin 6 home and of being rejected by all four despite having had his name down from the time he was an infant. In the case of the nearest, a little Church of Ireland school, my son (5) was described as "other", destined to be at the end of an admissions queue in which children's places were determined by 10 religion-based criteria.

In the end, an Educate Together school opened in the neighbouring postcode, and he is happily there.

More recently, Hindu couple Roopesh Panicker and his wife, Najamol, told how they were unable to get a place for their four-year-old daughter Eva in the local Catholic school in Cabinteely, Co Dublin.

When told they could not be assured of a place in 2016 either, because of the school's Catholic-first policy, they considered leaving Ireland. They are now campaigning for an end to the situation in which schools can prefer children of a particular faith when they are oversubscribed.

Eva did get a school place in the end, in a Catholic school, but a half-hour drive away, which upsets her and her parents, who would prefer her to go to the same local school as the other children on her road.

Minister for Education Jan O'Sullivan appears to share the Panickers' sentiments. In response to a query from my colleague Carl O'Brien on Monday, November 9th, she said that where schools were oversubscribed, they should be obliged to prefer children from their locality rather than preferring on religious grounds.

In an *Irish Times* poll last week, readers agreed; 85 per cent responded No to the question, "Should religion play a part in school admissions?"

The more this issue won't go away, the more bodies such as the Iona Institute say it is not an issue of religious discrimination directed at four-year-olds by tax-funded schools but is in fact about insufficient school places. It is, they point out, only an issue in 20 per cent of the 3,305 primary schools – that's about 660 – where demand exceeds supply.

This argument misses the point that, because the Catholic Church manages 90 per cent of our schools, and so exercises overwhelming power over admission to them whether the schools are oversubscribed or not, the potential to exclude amounts to religious majority rule.

Faith formation

In such a context it is perhaps little wonder we in the minority – atheists, Hindus, Muslims, lapsed Catholics, "other" – focus our energies on simply getting our children into the national school system, leaving to another day the battle over what happens to our four- and five-year-olds' minds once in.

It's worth looking at what is being taught to children in Catholic primary schools. The Catholic religious education programme Grow in Love is taught for 30 minutes a day in junior and senior infants. The programme's teacher manual reads: "The faith formation goals are longer-term goals that have to do with the children's developing relationship with God and with one another."

For those parents who believe assurances that their non-Catholic children can opt out of this instruction, the manual states: "It is assumed that prayer is part of the life of the classroom in a Catholic school, so children will pray every day." Catholic teaching is interwoven into the school day.

Dissenting voices

The voices of non-Catholic parents, who have no choice but to send their children to Catholic schools, will grow louder against this state-sanctioned indoctrination of their children.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is perhaps pre-empting this by proposing a new type of religious instruction for primary schools – on religion, ethics and belief. This process is at consultation stage, and the council will make recommendations in due course.

However, the reaction of some reveals just how jealously many would protect the special role of schools in the nation's "faith formation". Prof Eamonn Conway, of Mary Immaculate primary teacher training college in Limerick, described the proposed new subject as "bizarre", saying it would "undoubtedly adversely affect religious instruction and a faith-based school's characteristic ethos".

Many will argue that "faith formation" in schools is necessary to provide children with a moral and ethical compass. This atheist parent of two children wishes to reassure them that she provides a home where the ethos is one of respect for the beliefs of others, where the wonder, beauty and equality of every human being is rejoiced, where prejudice is not tolerated and where it is taught that behind every first impression or lazy stereotype is a person whose hopes, dreams and frailties are the same as our own.

You might almost call us Christian.

Teaching children about world religions and ethics could help counter Islamophobia

Aislinn O'Donnell

THE proposal for an Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics curriculum in primary schools has met with considerable resistance in some quarters. But could it help create a space for difficult conversations, including conversations about the causes of political violence, terrorism, conflict, war and alienation?

The proposal, from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), is an exciting initiative in Irish education, even though there are concerns that it is not viable in an already full primary school curriculum.

Some think that it will undermine the religious ethos of schools and others feel that all talk of religion should be kept out of schools.

Yet, positions at the extreme ends of the spectrum have tended to caricature the debates surrounding the teaching of ERB and Ethics in such a way that they refuse to face the richness and complexity of the history of humankind and of our contemporary world.

Often we don't think deeply about how we have come to hold the values that we hold.

In my ethics lectures with my students, I do not ask them to change their beliefs and values, but rather to explore them.

I ask them to consider how far their claim that 'everyone is entitled to their own opinion' might stretch in the face of racism or oppression, if they have responsibilities to others, whether there are limits to freedom of expression, or if there are principles that we might share in common as human beings.

I invite them to see that human beings have been struggling with the questions of how to live a good life and how we can live with others over millennia, and that there are better and worse answers.

Although it is important to understand that the debates about the patronage of schools and the introduction of this new subject area are separate issues, it is also important to acknowledge that Ireland is in the minority in the international arena, given the overwhelming percentage of primary schools under a religious ethos here.

Given the status quo (more than nine out of 10 primary schools are Catholic maintained), this draws into sharp relief our special obligation to provide an education that includes all our children and cultivates mutual understanding of their different traditions, stories, beliefs, perspectives and values.

A good education involves encountering the other, engaging in dialogue, learning about our histories, thinking more deeply about our values and beliefs, and being able to navigate the complexity of leading an ethical life, enabling us to live as fellow citizens in a pluralistic society, all of which will be features of a new curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

The Irish curriculum is one that is committed to the holistic development of the child.

And if it is to be an ethical curriculum, it means that all our children ought to have an understanding of the beliefs and values of others that extends beyond caricature and ill-informed ideas.

Entering into a dialogue with ideas and perspectives outside one's own tradition is part of becoming an educated human being in its deepest sense.

If we cannot bear this encounter with the views of others or if we see such encounters as threats, then what does it say of our relationship with our own traditions?

The introduction of this new curriculum is complex for other reasons.

The initial rationale, from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in its Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools, lay in a desire to promote tolerance, social cohesion and peaceful co-existence. However, given the broader context of new counter-terrorist legislation, such as PREVENT in the UK which has made it a statutory duty for a range of professionals – from crèche workers to healthcare workers and university lecturers – to prevent terrorism and to look for "indicators" of those at "risk of radicalisation", it has become more urgent to ensure that students and professionals do not resort to prejudicial judgments about others from fear or ignorance.

This discourse about radicalisation persists.

This is despite the fact that there is scant empirical evidence that ideology or even extremist ideas cause violence. Counter-radicalisation strategies like PREVENT risk making Muslims what Paddy Hillyard once called a "suspect community".

Yet, one ought to be educated about different beliefs, values and religions, not for reasons of security or as part of a counter-terrorist strategy, but because it is simply part of a good education and part of understanding the human story.

The extension of the ethical imagination is what seems so vital at a time of selective mourning and monolithic conceptions of Islam. The tragedy of the massacres in Paris is undergone daily by many others, including tens of thousands of Muslims, from Beirut to Baghdad who mourn and grieve their dead just as those in Paris do.

If our schools can do anything, perhaps with the help of this new ERB and Ethics curriculum, it will be to educate our students and help them to understand the diversity, complexity and richness of humanity's religions, values, and beliefs, the dissent and disagreement within traditions and philosophical worldviews, and the ways in which grief, pain, loss and love touch all of us.

This might counter the risk of Islamophobia in Europe and the increased potential for discrimination that we are witnessing.

It might allow for real dialogue.

It might help people make the critical distinction between understanding and exoneration or justification.

And this should be done as part of good and well-rounded education

'One size fits all' approach to RE studies is no substitute for diversity of patronage

Eamonn Conway

IT IS difficult to know what the problem is that the proposed primary curriculum subject 'Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB), and Ethics' is meant to solve.

Is it about inclusion? If so, it seems it's not going to work.

The recent case in Castletroy College, Limerick is salutary in this regard. Parents took their child out of a post-primary first year religion programme similar to the new course the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) wants to introduce to primary schools. The course wasn't faith formation, but the parents still wanted an exemption, and were entitled to it.

Atheist Ireland has already requested the NCCA to guarantee that their members will be entitled to exempt their children because the programme may offend their "philosophical convictions".

On the basis of how the NCCA wants the course taught, Christian parents have good reason to feel that their children should not be exposed to a methodology that is at best going to be agnostic about their faith. They might want exemptions too.

The NCCA consultation document is unclear on whether inclusion is the goal. It speaks about the importance of "inclusive school communities" yet under its stated aims it focuses on the development of self-respect, tolerance towards others, open mindedness and civic mindedness.

The problem here is that teachers and principals would rightly claim that they are already working hard at developing all of these in children, and find scope to do so in the curriculum as it stands.

When I was in a Christian Brothers school some 40 years ago we learned about various faiths. A proper Catholic education requires an understanding of other religious traditions.

The new Catholic RE curriculum specifically provides for this. As Pope Francis has said: "We have to bring up our young people to think and speak respectfully of other religions and their followers, and to avoid ridiculing or denigrating their convictions and practices." Atheism also raises important questions for Christians to reflect upon from the perspective of their own tradition and in an age-appropriate manner.

I know of no teacher in a faith-based school today who does not show welcome to a child from another faith community and who does not treat that child with respect.

The Inspector General's Report in 2013 found that there was a 95pc satisfaction rate among parents with regard to primary schools. An update on the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism (July 2014) found that what was needed was better awareness and communication to parents of how inclusive primary schools already are in practice.

The Department of Education and Skills has stated categorically that ERB and Ethics will be in addition to, and not in any way a replacement for, existing religious education. This will concern those who think religion should have less, not more, time in the classroom, although currently the only subject that gets less time in primary schools than religious instruction is PE.

It is unfortunate that the word 'inclusion' has become narrowed to refer to the issue of religious persuasion when other forms of exclusion remain of grave concern.

Illiteracy levels in Ireland are the same today as they were in 1994. One in six adults struggle to understand basic written information, and transfer from secondary to tertiary education is still determined largely by environmental and socio-economic factors.

Then there is the issue of how welcoming some schools are to those from working class backgrounds and the Traveller community. Significantly, an ESRI report noted that Catholic primary schools are "more likely" to have pupils from these backgrounds on their roll-books and that the "widest spread of nationalities was evident in Catholic schools".

Some 75pc of immigrants to Ireland are from Christian denominations, and often they are more committed to their Christian faith than Irish Catholics. Helping them to feel included would mean deepening our own religious commitment.

Recent speculation that more information about religious traditions might help tackle Islamophobia has no evidence behind it. Fanaticism and fundamentalism usually result from insecurity about one's own beliefs rather than confidence in them.

Factual information about religions and various worldviews, though helpful, are of limited value. The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism acknowledged this when it said: "Inter-faith and inter-cultural initiatives work best in schools where Catholic students and parents are most committed to their own practice".

Sincere commitment to one's own faith fosters mutual understanding, tolerance and acceptance of difference, and for families who wish it, faith-based schools should be allowed to play their part fully in their children's faith development.

A 'one size fits all' approach to RE curriculum is no substitute for greater diversity of patronage.

Freedom for religion and freedom from religion must go hand in hand. I agree wholeheartedly with Archbishop Diarmuid Martin: it is in no one's interests, and certainly not that of the mission of the Church, for children to be baptised for the wrong reasons, though there is no evidence that this abuse is widespread.

The Catholic Church is committed to divestment. The problem now is that schools already vacated and available to the State are not being turned over to other patrons quickly enough. This needs to be addressed urgently by the minister.

Father Eamonn Conway is Professor and Head of Theology & Religious Studies at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick

On the basis of how the NCCA wants the

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