

**Memo**

**From:** *Ian Murphy*

**To:** *Kevin McCarthy, Catriona O'Brien, Ursula Dunne, Pat MacSitríc, Pat O'Connor, Marie Griffin, Treasa Lowe David Campbell, Clare Moloney*

**Date:** *17 September 2008*

**Subject:** *Meeting to discuss the Religious Education programme with parents of children attending Scoil Choilm*

- Clare Moloney addressed two groups of parents – the parents of pupils in junior infants, followed by the parents of pupils in senior infants.
- There were about 35 parents present at the first meeting and 25 at the second meeting.
- Both meetings were characterised by animated discussions.
- In the course of the discussions a number of concerns of parents emerged. These concerns and the response to them are outlined below. The concerns are expressed in bold headings. Each concern is elaborated on, where necessary, in the paragraph which follows (regular font). The responses are printed in italic font.
- In addition to the report on the meeting, there is also a brief outline of a feedback from teachers of Scoil Choilm on the Religious Education. Finally, there is an attempt to summarise and draw conclusions from the two reports.

**Report on the meeting with parents**

**The programme was drawn up without insufficient consultation**

Some parents expressed disappointment at the absence of consultation until now. They said that consultation had been promised. They envisaged sitting around a table and planning the lessons together. They were surprised and disappointed to hear that a

programme for 8 lessons had been drafted without any reference to them. One parent expressed the view that the Religious Education programme was a “planned takeover” of the various religions in the school.

*It was pointed out that the immediate task for Clare Moloney was to provide a programme to guide the teachers in teaching the Religious Education for the first half term. This short time frame did not allow for earlier consultation. Furthermore, it would be impossible for a group of parents to draft a Religious Education programme. Drafting the programme called for a person with an understanding of and competence in Religious Education and curriculum development at primary level.*

### **What is the content of the Religious Education programme?**

Some parents expressed the view that it was important for them to be told what the content of the Programme is. If parents are expected to be the interface between what their children are being taught in the Religious Education lessons in school and what their own faith tradition teaches, it is important that they would know the contents of the Religious Education programme. In the absence of textbooks how will this information be conveyed to parents?

*Built into the Religious Education programme is a series of worksheets which will provide this information and assist parents in their task of mediating what their child is taught in school and suggesting questions that they can put to their child which will assist them in playing this role. The Religious Education programme will not for the present be published in textbook form. Interactive white boards are being provided to the schools to facilitate the teachers in teaching the programme. The publication of the programme in this format will enable changes to be made in the programme. Given, the pilot nature of the programme and the feedback from the various interested parties, we must envisage the programme as one that is subject to amendment.*

### **Are the stories and songs in the programme sufficiently eclectic?**

Parents asked if the words in the songs and the stories were drawn from sources which were representative of the different faith traditions in the school. One Moslem parent stated that there were many beautiful songs in the Islamic tradition and asked that these songs and stories should be incorporated into the programme. Some parents also expressed the fear that beliefs expressed in songs and poetry would be at variance with their particular faith tradition.

*It was pointed out that there will be a reference group made up of representatives of the different faith traditions represented in the schools. The role of the reference group will be to see that none of the faith traditions is undermined by the programme. Clare Moloney asked parents from other faiths to pass on to her songs and stories that might be appropriate.*

#### **Parents asked for greater clarity**

Parents expressed the view that the language used in the presentation was vague and unclear. They expressed disappointment that they were no wiser at the end of the meeting than they had been at the beginning. They wanted an answer to a series of practical questions.

*Parents were encouraged to ask the questions about the issues that concerned them.*

#### **Will children be taught separately, or grouped by faith tradition?**

Children in Scoil Choilm belong to different faiths. This should be recognised in what they are taught in Religious Education. Parents were led to believe from an earlier meeting that part of the programme would be taught to all the pupils together and that part of it would be taught along denominational lines.

*It is not considered desirable to separate children during the early years of their primary schooling. There will come a stage later in their primary education when teaching children in different faith groups will be justified by the needs within their religious practices. The preparation of children for sacraments within the Catholic faith is one such example. However, it is the intention to educate the children in Religious Education together, for as much of the time as possible, teaching them in denominational groups only when necessary.*

#### **Who will teach the Religious Education programme and who will train the teachers?**

Will Catholic teachers be teaching Religious Education to Muslim children and children belonging to the Pentecostal Church?

*For the most part, each class will be taught by its teacher. This is the normal practice in religious education in Irish schools. Clare Moloney will train the teachers in delivering the programme. It should be borne in mind that parents will have a vital role to play in fine tuning what is being taught in class to their own religious beliefs*

*and practices. It should also be remembered that there will be a reference group overseeing the programme. The main religious groupings represented in the schools will have a voice in the reference group.*

### **How much time will be allotted to Religious Education?**

Some of the Moslem parents in particular expressed surprise when told that 30 minutes per day would be devoted to Religious Education. They would have preferred that this time would have been devoted to other subjects on the curriculum and that Religious Education would be the responsibility of the family and the faith community to which the child belongs.

*It was pointed out that the time allocation for Religious Education was part of the primary school curriculum.*

### **Can parents opt to withdraw their children from the Religious Education classes?**

If parents disagree with the Religious Education programme or how it being taught may they withdraw their children from the programme?

*It seems premature to decide to withdraw ones child from the Religious Education programme when it is still in its infancy and so little is known about it. The role of parents and of the reference group should provide a guarantee for parents that their child's beliefs will not be compromised by the Religious Education programme.*

*Teaching Religious Education to a multi-faith group is an innovative and challenging undertaking. For all faiths it is a new departure from the traditional form of Religious Education. It would be unreasonable for any parents to expect that this new approach will be a mirror image of how they were taught religion, as children, in a denominational setting. In developing the Religious Education programme we are engaging in action research. Fundamental to action research is trying out ideas, making mistakes, learning from them and getting feedback. We need to be patient with each other and trusting in the integrity of one another.*

### **Will children be instructed about different faiths?**

Some parents expressed the wish for their children to be taught about different faiths. They expressed the belief that such an approach would help the child to understand and accept difference in the various faith traditions.

*Children in junior infants and senior infants are too young to benefit from such information. It is hoped that children will begin to understand and appreciate different faiths through being with children of other faiths. We will probably be teaching children about different religions at a later stage in the programme but at this stage it is difficult to say when or how.*

**Would it not be more appropriate to call the programme moral education rather than Religious Education?**

Religious Education has been the cause of division and war. Moral Education has a unifying effect as we all share a similar value system.

*It is true that all morality is based on love – of God and ones neighbour. This will be a central theme in the Religious Education programme. However, moral values are taught within a religious context; we cannot divorce them from that setting.*

**How will prayer be taught in Religious Education?**

Within each faith tradition there are different prayer formulae. How will these differences be respected while teaching the children to pray? How will the humanist perspective be catered for in teaching the children to pray?

*Initially, the emphasis will be on developing positive attitudes to prayer. Children will learn the value of silence and reverence. Prayer will grow out of their reflection on their experience. In the lesson on starting school, for example, children will be led to reflect on those that have helped them to come to school and will be encouraged to see this support as a reflection of God's love. Prayer of thanksgiving will be a natural outcome from this experience. For the humanists, reflection, being silent and being reverent also have a validity and meaning. Taking the example above, their gratitude will probably be expressed towards their parents and those who have helped hem to come to school.*

### **Discussion with teachers in Scoil Choilm**

On the day following the meeting between Clare Moloney and the parents, the teachers in Scoil Choilm who had also been present at the meeting gave a feedback to the principal, Treasa Lowe. This feedback was based on their experience of teaching

the programme to date and also on the discussion at the meeting, the previous evening. A number of the issues the teachers raised echoed sentiments that had been expressed by the parents in their meeting with Clare. They made the following suggestions:

- The language used in the Religious Education programme needs to be more simplified. The children's language level is quite elementary and this needs to be taken into account in developing the programme.
- Greater awareness should be shown of the international composition of the learners. This could be reflected in the use of names, for example. Rather than drawing on the names from an Irish cultural context, a greater effort should be made to draw on names that have a resonance with other national identities.
- The teachers would like to see a greater use of eclectic sources in developing the material for the programme. Currently, there is an over dependence on sources from "Alive O"
- Serious thought should be given to providing more information to parents about the content of the course and, if possible, providing an overview.

### **Summary & conclusions**

- It should be emphasised at the outset that there was a silent majority of parents at this meeting who are happy with the programme and were pleased to have the opportunity of hearing what and how their children are being taught in Religious Education.
- The meeting suggested a high level of interest among parents in their child's religious education. Although the discussion was lively and at times acrimonious, the meetings played a useful role in providing a platform for parents to air their concerns. The meetings also provided an opportunity for Clare Moloney and the school to clarify issues for the parents, relating to Religious Education.
- It may seem disappointing that some of the parents appeared to be suspicious, impatient and at times annoyed with the Religious Education programme, as presented; however these sentiments must be seen in context. From earlier

meetings, at which the Religious Education was discussed some of the parents came away with the belief that there would be regular and frequent consultation at all phases in the development of the programme. This was the first opportunity for the parents to be informed about the Religious Education programme, in any great detail. The parents come from a number of very different faith traditions and with quite different experiences of Religious Education and education methodologies. The new Religious Education programme is a direct challenge to the traditions represented among the parents. It is imperative therefore, as a means of helping parents to make this transformation from Religious Education as they have known it to Religious Education in a multi-faith context using educational methodologies, very different to those they are accustomed to, that they be prepared by regular communication and given the opportunity to provide feedback. Through explanation, discussion and feedback, the parents can be helped to ease themselves into the new paradigm of Religious Education for all faiths and none. If we wish to involve parents actively in the faith development of their children we must also engage them actively in understanding the nature of the change that they and their children are being asked to undertake.

- Although some of the parents had their fears and apprehensions resolved in the course of the meeting, there were also parents who left the meeting feeling dissatisfied and concerned. Some expressed the view that they had not been listened to. It is difficult to have an effective exchange of views with such a big group. One means of bridging this communications gap would be to meet with the parents committee in Scoil Choilm. Many of the most vociferous critics of the programme are on the parents committee. By meeting with a small representative group of parents, a more frank and free exchange of views could take place and listening by both parties would be facilitated. I suggest that more information should be given to parents about the contents of the programme. I also suggest that for the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the programme, at least, meetings between Clare Moloney and the parents should be held at least once every half term. Furthermore, I would favour the establishment of a communications channel between parents and Clare to enable the parents to suggest prayers, stories and songs from their own faith tradition for inclusion in the programme.

- Although we are emphasising the fact that the children will be taught together, particularly in the first years of Religious Education, we should also make it clear that it is our intention to invite religious leaders from the different faith traditions to the school. We should also make it clear that denominational education will be provided by teachers from that faith tradition whenever there is a need for such provision.
- A structure should be provided as soon as possible to facilitate frequent and regular feedback between the principals & teachers of the programme and Clare Moloney. This structure would also provide an opportunity for Clare to give guidance to the teachers in teaching the programme.
- In the course of the discussions, much emphasis was placed on the reference group and their role. It is important that the different religious groups represented in both schools would have their spokespersons in the reference group. The Dublin 15 Christian Community Church is strongly represented in both schools; is it represented in the reference group?
- The interactive whiteboards should be installed as soon as possible.