

PE1764/A

Scottish Government submission of 13 January 2020

As stated in the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) briefing note accompanying the Petition, Scotland's curriculum is non-statutory. Education authorities and schools have a high degree of autonomy on what is taught and how. Curriculum documentation at national level, in particular the Experiences and Outcomes documents and Benchmarks documents, provide a broad framework for schools to develop school level curricula and learning. It is important to consider themes such as evolution across more than one subject area. The curriculum, particularly in primary schools, which is the focus of the petition, will be delivered across subject areas as an integrated curriculum. The two curriculum areas of relevance to this petition are 'Religious and moral education' and 'Sciences'. Both curriculum areas are important and relevant in considering in how the topic of evolution is covered in primary schools.

Religious and Moral Education

There are a number of references to non-religious views within the religious and moral education (RME) Experiences and Outcomes document¹. For example, it states that RME should enable learners to "investigate and understand the responses which religious and non-religious views can offer to questions about the nature and meaning of life." The Experiences and Outcomes relating to the development of beliefs and values are particularly relevant. The document states that there should be "consideration of a range of spiritual traditions and viewpoints which are independent of religious belief." The first level experience/outcome within this theme (the level that would relate typically to children in P1 and P2) states "I am developing an awareness that some people have beliefs and values which are independent of religion." The second level (the level that would relate typically to children in P5-P7) states "I am developing my understanding that people have beliefs and values based upon religious or other positions".

Similarly, the RME Benchmarks document contains a number of references to non-religious perspectives². For example, the early level benchmark on belief states that the early level is achieved where the learner describes, discusses and expresses an opinion from a belief group independent of religion. The footnote to the benchmark provides Humanism as one example. Belief groups independent of religion are then referenced throughout the Benchmarks document across multiple levels of the Curriculum. This provides a context for learners to explore topics such as 'the development of life on earth' or 'how did life on earth begin?'

The RME Principles and Practice document reinforces these statements by stating that learning about RME can help children to "investigate and understand the

¹ Curriculum for Excellence: Religious and moral education – Experiences and Outcomes
<https://education.gov.scot/Documents/rme-eo.pdf>

² Education Scotland (2017) Benchmarks: Religious and moral education
<https://education.gov.scot/nih/Documents/RMEBenchmarksPDF.pdf>

responses which religious and non-religious views can offer to questions about the nature and meaning of life.”³

The national curriculum documentation provides significant scope for schools to develop school level curricula which explore non-religious and religious perspectives. While there are no specific references to evolution within the RME Experiences and Outcomes or the RME Benchmarks, this does not mean that evolution could not be referenced during learning and in relation to both a religious and a non-religious perspective. As stated below, evolution is covered in a more specific way within the science curriculum documentation.

Science

The SPICe briefing for the petition provides a comprehensive summary of the key Experiences and Outcomes and Benchmarks relating to evolution in the Sciences areas of the curriculum in schools, and quotes the following examples:

Experiences and Outcomes

“By comparing generations of families of humans, plants and animals, I can begin to understand how characteristics are inherited.” First Level, SCN 1-14a ⁴

“By exploring the characteristics offspring inherit when living things reproduce, I can distinguish between inherited and non-inherited characteristics.” Second Level, SCN 2-14b

“Knows that genetics is the study of inherited characteristics and that inherited characteristics are carried on genes and can sometime skip a generation.” SCN 2-14b

“I can identify and classify examples of living things, past and present, to help me appreciate their diversity. I can relate physical and behavioural characteristics to their survival or extinction.” Second Level SCN 2-01a

Benchmarks

“Begins to construct and use simple branched keys which can be used to identify particular plants or animals.”⁵

“Identifies characteristics of living things and their environment which have contributed to the survival or extinction of a species.

³ Education Scotland, Curriculum for Excellence: Religious and moral education – principles and practice <https://education.gov.scot/Documents/rme-pp.pdf>

⁴ Education Scotland, Curriculum for Excellence, Sciences Experiences and Outcomes <https://education.gov.scot/Documents/sciences-EO.pdf>

⁵ Education Scotland (2017) Benchmarks: Sciences <https://education.gov.scot/nih/Documents/SciencesBenchmarksPDF.pdf>

“Describes how some plants and animals have adapted to their environment, for example, for drought or by using flight.”

Senior Phase

Although the petition relates to the Broad General Education and in particular the primary curriculum, it is important to consider the education provided to children throughout their time at school including in the national qualifications available in the Senior Phase. The specifications for the following Senior Phase qualifications make specific reference to evolution:

- National 5 Biology⁶
- Higher Biology⁷
- National 5 Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies⁸
- Higher Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies⁹
- Advanced Higher Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies¹⁰

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Scottish Government’s view is that the current set of Experiences and Outcomes and Benchmarks for both science and religious and moral education provide sufficient scope for primary schools to cover evolution. We do not see a need for stand-alone theme of evolutionary studies to be added to the framework for the curriculum in primary schools. While there are no current plans to adjust the Experiences & Outcomes or Benchmarks, a wide range of issues will be considered as and when the curriculum document is reviewed in future years. It is for teachers, schools and local authorities to determine how best to deliver learning and teaching on any topic and subject, in line with the Curriculum for Excellence. We expect teachers to use their professional judgement, experience and understanding of their pupils to respond sensitively to complex and challenging issues. There will always be room for improvement in teachers’ understanding and confidence in aspects of the curriculum. The Scottish Government will therefore contact Education Scotland’s Senior Education Officers who lead on science and religious and moral education in order to advise them of the petition.

⁶ Available at: https://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/N5CourseSpecBiology.pdf

⁷ Available at: https://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/HigherCourseSpecBiology.pdf

⁸ Available at: https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/RMPSCourseSpecN5.pdf

⁹ Available at: https://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/HigherCourseSpecRMPS.pdf

¹⁰ Available at: https://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/AHCourseSpecRMPS.pdf