



## ASSEMBLY DAY 2025

# A delicate balancing act: Developing curriculum-linked materials on the topic of Mother and Baby homes

## Session 1 Keynote inputs

Facilitator: Mella Cusack,  
National Council for Curriculum & Assessment



# A delicate balancing act: Developing curriculum-linked materials on the topic of Mother and Baby homes

## SESSION 1 KEYNOTE INPUTS

### Facilitator:

**Mella Cusack** has been active in the Ubuntu Network since its inception and is currently a member of Ubuntu's management committee. Since joining the NCCA in 2022, Mella has worked on JC CSPE, JC/SC SPHE, LC Climate Action and Sustainable Development, LC Geography and LC Politics and Society. She is leading on the review of the Intercultural Education guidelines and on ongoing resource development linked to controversial, emotive and sensitive topics. Mella has taught the CSPE and Politics and Society pedagogy module in DCU for many years, and previously worked with a range of NGOs, government bodies and departments as an education consultant.

### Overview:



This input will outline the journey involved in producing the NCCA's forthcoming resources on Mother and Baby homes. The act of balancing a diversity of needs in both the process and product are considered, with questions posed about the potential impact of engaging with this and other sensitive and emotive topics.

# Presentation

NCCA

## Mother and Baby homes

Mella Cusack  
 Ubuntu Dialogue Day, Maynooth University  
 15.01.25

NCCA **Resource development: Methodology**

Curriculum documents + Literature + Advice & feedback from survivors and academics = Junior Cycle History, CSPE and English Mother and Baby home materials

- Review of junior cycle specifications
- Guidelines on controversial topics
- Materials on historic institutions
- Commission reports
- Books and articles
- Survivor testimonies

CLANN Project and Tuam Oral History Project

Steps:

1. Planning meetings with CLANN & TOHP
2. Draft materials to wider group of survivors
3. Feedback on materials
4. Report to CLANN & TOHP on the integration of feedback

An Garda Síochána Junior Cycle

NCCA **Overview of the materials**

**HISTORY**  
 LOs: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 1.10, 1.11 & 2.0

**CIVIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EDUCATION (CSPE)**  
 LOs: 1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 1.5, 1.7, 1.9, 1.10, 1.11, 2.5, 2.12, 3.1, 3.3, 3.7 & 3.14

**ENGLISH**  
 A support for teachers who wish to design their own unit(s) of learning – includes a text list for teachers with books (fiction and non-fiction), drama, films/documentaries, podcast/radio, poetry, song, and survivor testimony.

**Appendix 1: Suggested Ideas for the CSPE CBA**

**Appendix 1: Suggested Ideas for History CBA1 and CBA2**

CLANN Project and Tuam Oral History Project

Lived experience  
 Incredible level of expertise and knowledge  
 Advocates and activists  
 Belief in the power of education

- as memorialisation
- as defence against human rights abuses

Schools - teachers and students

- Curriculum support for teachers
- Adaptable
- Mindful of:
  - inclusion
  - student voice
  - wellbeing

ME

Those who need the story heard

Those who will hear the story

An Garda Síochána Junior Cycle

**Integrated:**

- Why Mother and Baby homes?
- Survivor-centred
- Depicting women
- Class, disability, ethnicity, race
- Commission of investigation

**Required compromise:**

- Terminology
- "home" v. Institution
- Family separation system v. adoption/boarding out
- Number data
- Why Tuam?
- Perspective from the religious orders
- "It's time to stand up and tell the truth!"

**Architecture of containment**

Industrial schools, Magdalene laundries, Mother and Baby homes

**Activity 5: Responsibility**

...It is easy, but not very accurate, to dismiss what happened in child care in the past as belonging to a past that has nothing to do with us; to demonise individual nuns and clerics or whole religious orders and blame 'the Church' for what happened; to distance ourselves from it and exonerate ourselves. What happened was the collective responsibility of society.

Stair Stanislaus Kennedy, social worker, activist and writer

Church and State colluded to write the constitution, the contract by which every citizen in society is bound. Therefore responsibility ... lies with the Church and State regime, and not the Irish people. ... We, as a society, were consciously controlled by Church and State to behave in ways that were contrary to our nature. Laura Murphy, daughter of a Mother and Baby home survivor

NCCA **Activity 1 (CSPE U2): "...close to home..."**

*Where after all, do universal Human Rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world.*

Eleanor Roosevelt, member of the committee responsible for drafting the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR)

Video clip extracted from a film made for the Clann Project by Avondale Media Ltd.

NCCA **Activity 7 (History U3): The real world**

**Peter Muihyan with his foster mother, University of Galway, Asset Id 13656, Archival Record Id TOHP**  
<https://digital.library.uir.ie/galway/asset/13656>

**Extract from Mary Cunningham (2021), Oral Interview with Peter Muihyan, University of Galway, Asset Id 13671, Archival Record Id TOHP**  
<https://digital.library.uir.ie/galway/asset/13671>

I came out of St Mary's in Tuam at four and a half years of age. I remember that day clearly, but I have no memories, prior to that, of being in [the home]... It was 1949... February 1949 that I went out to the real world. I was boarded out [fostered] to a family that was approximately twenty miles from Galway. I was put into... the back of the ambulance. I couldn't look out the windows because the windows were high... It was scary. I had no one to talk to. I didn't know where I was going. We stopped at this house. It was a drizzly old day in the month of February – damp. I remember as I was going in at the back of the house, a two-storied house, to see the trees moving. I was scared of that because I hadn't seen anything like that before... Never saw trees moving in the wind like that. I went into the house anyway and there was a big fire down. There was a man and a woman there. The woman was in her seventies and her son was there, he was in his fifties. So that's who I was with – a farming community. ... I saw a dog then under the table and he wagging his tail. I was very scared then; I had never saw a dog before. He didn't bark, he was moving around, he was quiet, I had never saw an animal. When you think of the children today at four and a half and the amount they know.

"The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to walk through water without getting wet." – Dr Rachel Naomi Remen

Vicarious traumatisation can occur as a result of bearing witness to the trauma experienced by another person or people.

"It happens not only because you care about people who have been hurt, but because you feel committed or responsible to help." – Dr Laurie Pearlman & Dr Lisa McCann

– "disrupted or damaged spirituality" – Dr Laurie Pearlman

– "opportunity to deepen and expand our humanity, a kind of vicarious transformation" – Dr Laurie Pearlman

"It's not about feeling better, it's about getting better at feeling." – Dr Gabor Maté

An Garda Síochána Junior Cycle

Link to presentation: [HERE](#)



## Brief synopsis of discussion points raised:

- Curricular content developed for teaching in English, CSPE and History. Also TY. These are resources from which teachers will develop their own lesson plans from teacher autonomy and agency assumed.
- We would EXPECT an emotive response to this. Question teacher's readiness to engage, students readiness to engage. How do you manage such an emotive response?
- **Positive impact** – These resources **memorialize** a dark chapter of history, aiming to prevent its recurrence. Their endorsement by the NCCA highlights the importance of integrating these stories into education.
- **Balancing truth and sensitivity** – Survivors need their stories heard, but educators must navigate authenticity without overwhelming learners. There's a tension between the necessity of truth and what students can safely process - after all, **"school is supposed to be a happy place."**
- Mella shared she felt she didn't manage her emotions well -> Impact on the educator.
- When you do this work, you are not untouched. - "Vicarious Trauma", "damaged spirituality". People in the room may well have their own experiences of this.
- You can see it as a privilege - and it takes time to digest it so that you feel like a better human as a result.
- Getting the 'language registrar' right.
  - "home" - survivors objected to - this wasn't a home, it was an institutional establishment.
  - "unmarried mother", "illegitimate child" - survivors objected to
  - "adoption" - they suggested replacing with "family separation"
  - "women worked in the laundry" - to be replaced with "women were forced to work in the laundry"
- The church's voice in this. All voices needed to be heard. Sr. Stan speaking out in support of the church's role in this.
- Clip from Philomena Lee. Memory of her son being taken.



The NCCA's curricular response to mother and baby homes underscores education's role in addressing social injustices, sparking discussions on the purpose of education and teachers' roles.



History, CSPE and English are targeted as the JC specifications that may act as vehicle for this resource.



A key strength of this resource is its careful attention to development criteria—age appropriateness, editability, inclusivity (survivors and students), and teacher/student well-being.



The delicate need to balance the needs of survivors who need their stories to be heard and those JC students to hear the stories.



The delicate balance of the vicarious trauma (or real re-traumatizing ) of the educator and the trauma of the students.

## Testimonials



Mella's session about the mother and baby homes was really interesting about how to develop resources ensuring that the people impacted are involved....useful for how we can approach our resources going forward in relation to including those that we work with in different parts of the world and county programme staff

What I found particularly interesting was the balancing of needs for those who need their story told versus those who will hear the stories.



What stood out to me was creating safe space rather than giving strategies - how to foster that environment. Mother & Child homes - the challenges of creating resources, personal & community.

Something I intend to do is share Mella's resource with my CSPE students.



I would like to bring the new Mother and Baby Home resource from NCCA to the attention of School Management.