

Primary Curriculum Review and Redevelopment

Stakeholder Seminar 1: Curriculum Purpose

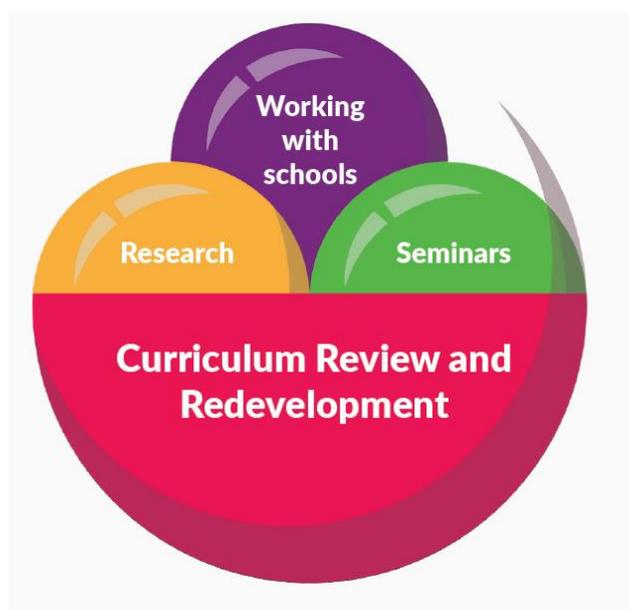
Contents

Introduction	3
Discussion 1	6
Purpose of a national curriculum	7
Priorities for primary education	7
The central purpose, aims and principles of the education system	8
A curriculum or a curriculum framework most appropriate for the Irish context	8
Discussion 2	9
Changes in society since the launch of the Primary School Curriculum (1999)	10
What society values for children and childhood	11
Expressing values in a redeveloped primary curriculum	11
Conclusion	12

Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is reviewing and redeveloping the primary school curriculum. We are working with teachers and early childhood practitioners, school leaders, parents and children, management bodies, researchers, and other stakeholders to develop a high-quality curriculum for the next 10-15 years. We need to ensure that a future primary curriculum can continue to provide children with relevant and engaging experiences that contribute to their childhood and their later years as adults. Taking account of contextual factors, the work involves a consideration of the purpose, structure and content of a redeveloped primary curriculum. There are three complementary strands to this work: 1) Working with schools, (2) Research and (3) Stakeholder seminars (see Figure 1). Each strand feeds into and helps shape the others and equally, each is informed by the others.

Figure 1: Three strands of curriculum review and redevelopment



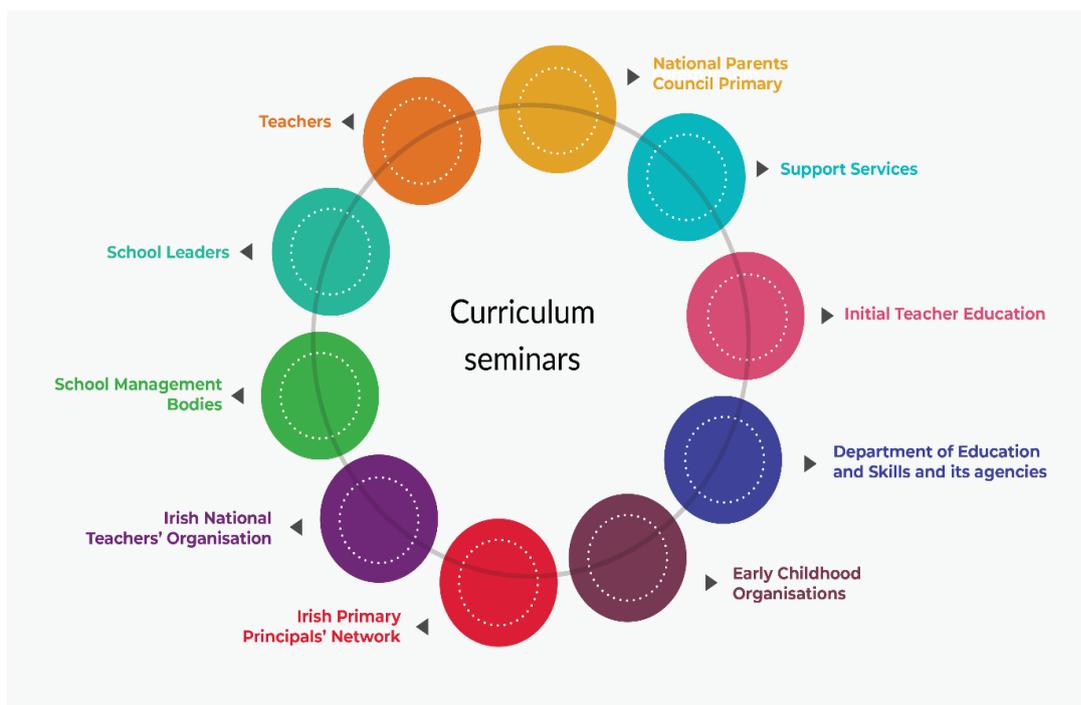
The NCCA's work draws heavily on research, and consequently national and international researchers authored a suite of short research papers on key aspects of a redeveloped primary curriculum. The research papers support engagement in the review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum. The research papers can be found in the primary section of the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie. We are also working with primary schools, post-

primary schools and preschools from across the country. Together, these represent the rich diversity of school contexts and form the Schools Forum.

The NCCA held five curriculum seminars between March 2018 and January 2019. Attendance was by invitation to the education partners and wider stakeholders (see Appendix 1) while many of the attending teachers, school leaders and early years practitioners were members of the Schools Forum (see Figure 2). The seminars gave participants opportunities to consider the key points emerging from the research papers, and to discuss and tease out these points from different perspectives. Each seminar included keynote presentations (see Appendix 2) focusing on important aspects of a primary curriculum. The five seminars were as follows:

- Seminar 1: Curriculum Purpose
- Seminar 2: Powerful Synergies
- Seminar 3: New Horizons
- Seminar 4: Enhancing Learning Journeys
- Seminar 5: Charting the Journey Forward.

Figure 2: Participants in the curriculum seminars



Primary Curriculum Seminar 1

Seminar 1 'Curriculum Purpose' took place on March 21st, 2018. The seminar's first keynote presentation was by Dr Thomas Walsh, Maynooth University. His [presentation](#) offered an analysis of the content and the structure of the Introduction Statement to the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999). Discussion 1 on the purposes of a national curriculum and priorities for primary education followed this keynote presentation. The seminar's second [keynote presentation](#) was by Dr Jones Irwin, Dublin City University. His presentation explored recent discussions on philosophies and aims of education as well as looking at a vision for curriculum. Discussion 2 on values in a redeveloped curriculum followed this keynote presentation.

The seminar discussions were an opportunity for participants to respond to and discuss the ideas in the presentations. They were framed around a set of guiding questions (see Appendix 2) with participants sitting at round tables to facilitate discussion and debate. Although there were points on which participants agreed, there was also some disagreement. The aim of the discussion was not to reach a consensus, but instead allow everybody to contribute and consider the views of other stakeholder participants.

What follows is a snapshot of the main themes which emerged during discussions with direct quotes from participants presented in italics.

Discussion 1

The discussion for Seminar 1 centred on Curriculum Purpose. The first discussion focused on purposes and priorities for a national curriculum at primary level. Participants responded to the following questions.

1. What are the purposes of a national curriculum? How can it best support the education of children in primary schools?
2. The table below delineates the priorities for primary education based on a consultation in 2012 (NCCA). What is your view on these? Are they comprehensive?

Primary priorities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop thinking, learning and like skills• Communicate well• Be well• Develop literacy and numeracy skills• Engage in learning• Have a strong sense of identity and belonging

3. Should the redeveloped curriculum set out the central purpose, aims and principles of the education system or focus only on the primary curriculum?
4. Is a curriculum or a curriculum framework most appropriate for the Irish context? How might teachers be best supported to use whatever flexibility is available within the redeveloped curriculum to allow for local adaptation to needs and contexts?

Four themes emerged from these discussions:

- Purposes of a national curriculum
- Priorities for primary education
- The central purpose, aims and principles of the education system

- A curriculum or a curriculum framework most appropriate for the Irish context.

Purpose of a national curriculum

Participants expressed views that a curriculum at a national level should clearly articulate a vision for education and clarify its underpinning values and priorities. It should provide a structure for learning, and provide some uniformity, clarity and coherence across the system regarding skills and competencies. It was agreed that the curriculum should enable children to think for themselves and to question the world around them; it should support the holistic development of the child and should do so with reference to national standards. Furthermore, it should be values-led and discharge a social responsibility to contribute to the development of citizens who are ready to meet the changes and challenges of contemporary society. There was a strong sentiment that in as far as possible, the curriculum should use simple, concise language and clear and consistent terminology. It was agreed that if the 1999 curriculum is to be replaced, then the redeveloped curriculum overview should provide a clear rationale for that development and specific pedagogical orientation. Participants emphasised the importance of the relationship between the teacher and the child and the need for this relationship to be placed at the heart of the curriculum. It was also highlighted that parents should be fully involved in the process of curriculum review through an intensive and widespread consultation. An absence of partnership with parents would impact negatively on societal understanding of what a curriculum is.

Priorities for primary education

Participants expressed the view that primary education should be concerned with the development and nurturing of the whole child; the curriculum should be child-centred and, as far as possible, child-led. The wellbeing of children should be an important consideration in any curriculum redevelopment. A revised curriculum *needs to have more about doing*; informal learning is hugely important and gives more scope for the promotion of child-directed learning. It was suggested that, literacy and numeracy skills, while important, are hardly overarching priorities. Children need to be taught critical skills to negotiate knowledge

and not be simply consumers of society. While *priorities need to be broad and overarching* and while society has, perhaps, shifted *from an age of achievement to an age of wellbeing*, *an effort to be inclusive of all priorities* can lead to a loss of clarity. It was suggested that, perhaps *identity and belonging should be the number one priority*, but then whose identity is being referenced, Irish or local? The absence of spirituality from the list was noted. Also, perhaps the *positionality of the Patron's Programme* might not be supportive of a curriculum designed by reference to these priorities.

The central purpose, aims and principles of the education system

There was sentiment that the curriculum should include an overview of the education system as a way of showing continuity, shared purpose and alignment across the system: *ultimately, the curriculum flows from the aims and values of the education system*. This would meet a *requirement for cohesion and connectedness across sectors* but without compromising the *uniqueness of the primary (school) space*.

A curriculum or a curriculum framework most appropriate for the Irish context

Most participants supported the view that the curriculum should be a framework as opposed to a prescriptive curriculum, but there were some caveats expressed. The discussion centred on school and teacher autonomy and responsibility, the appeal of freedom on the one hand, but some concern about an increased weight of responsibility for planning and implementation of an open-ended curriculum. There was some debate as to whether schools and teachers were 'ready' for such a significant departure from the current curriculum with its more clearly defined content. *We shouldn't jump suddenly from specified curriculum objectives to very open learning outcomes*.

While a *reductive curriculum (one that is very prescriptive) would de-professionalise and disable teachers... a curriculum framework should have clear statements of what the child needs to achieve at certain levels, to give teachers guidance*. Topic-based or *thematic approaches allow for greater levels of integration, lessening feelings of curriculum overload and offering more choice*.

Some considered an e-curriculum to be an excellent opportunity to have the core curriculum evolve as the needs of children and society change.

Discussion 2

The second discussion centred on values in a redeveloped primary curriculum. Participants responded to the following questions.

1. What have been the key changes in society since the launch of the Primary School Curriculum (1999) that impact teaching and learning in Irish primary classrooms?
2. What does society value for children and childhood?
3. Where should the values and moral purposes of a curriculum come from?
4. How should these be expressed in a primary curriculum?

Four themes emerged from these discussions:

- Changes in society since the launch of the Primary School Curriculum (1999)
- What society values for children and childhood
- The values and moral purposes of a curriculum
- Expressing values in a redeveloped primary curriculum.

Changes in society since the launch of the Primary School Curriculum (1999)

Responses concentrated on the impact of technology, changes to society and the school-going population, the challenge of inclusive education, and changes in the theory and practice of teaching and learning. Contextual factors in Ireland include: state funding of early childhood education; changes to policy and legislation regarding inclusion of children with special education needs; greater societal focus on gender equality; changing family structures and the erosion of traditional relationships between school and family; the widening gap between rich and poor; the emergence of wellbeing as an explicit area of concern for children and teachers; the perception that the school should take responsibility for solving social problems; the legal implications of all action within a litigation culture; the particular structure of the primary school system.

Communication technology means that children have access to information and to levels of connectedness that would have been unthinkable when the 1999 curriculum was being developed. Contributions here focused more on the dangers of this rather than its educational potential.

Irish society is more complex and diverse, and our world, globally and locally, is a more dangerous and challenging space in which to raise children. Curriculum development will need to look more closely than heretofore at the experience of childhood, at what it means to be a child growing up and learning today and into the future. Some responses supported the view that, as global connectedness has expanded dramatically, the world of the individual child has contracted, and their physical environment has become a smaller, more protected space.

There is a greater need for inclusion in primary classrooms in terms of language, race, ability and religion.

There continues to be a shift of rural to urban living and conceptions of identity in society has changed e.g., religious, gender, etc.

Childhood obesity and ill-health [have become] an issue for schools.

Our understanding of teaching has changed. A lot more emphasis on relationships and schools as communities of learning.

What society values for children and childhood

Much discussion focussed on what we in society ought to value. Education/curriculum needs to resist the values of a consumerist society and to liberate children from the over-protective instincts of their parents.

We need to listen to the voices of children when shaping the curriculum, to safeguard their right to authentic educational experiences. Society's values sometimes don't help matters.

The values and moral purposes of a curriculum

Some trends that were identified and discussed were:

- the importance of the school as an embodiment of values; the tension between perceived values of the curriculum and the values 'imposed' through patronage
- the importance of wide consultation informing the curriculum's moral purpose
- the importance of concurrent development of teacher agency and curriculum development to respect teachers and their professional roles in schools.

Expressing values in a redeveloped primary curriculum

Discussion returned to the importance of a clear curriculum overview: *the curriculum should announce itself in clear and accessible language...avoid technical language, less is more; however, it has to be academically robust.* The vision articulated in the overview *needs to leave space for elements that are difficult to measure such as love, hope, joy.*

Values articulated in the curriculum should

- be explicitly stated and coherent: *through the inclusion of human rights, the rights of the child, equality, citizenship education, responsibilities and commitment to inclusion...but not just as buzz words*
- *reflect a consensus outlining broad, agreed values such as respect, quality, holistic development of the child*
- recognise that in a pluralist society there are differing interpretations of these terms, so it might be best *to allow schools to express them in their own way.*

The *value of a curriculum framework...a broader system that caters for different types of engagement with education* was stressed. *Aistear* was felt to be significant in this regard: *in Aistear...values and principles are framed and outlined and...there is flexibility to implement these at both a local and national level. As a framework, the national curriculum redevelopment could learn a lot from Aistear.* However, high levels of support for teachers will be needed when switching to a framework.

Are learning outcomes the best way to articulate or embed values? Some questioned the merit of describing children's learning in terms of learning outcomes, and options here should be explored further:

- *a broader understanding of learning not just in terms of learning outcomes is considered important*
- *learning outcomes assist in setting out a purpose for the learning, the Primary Language Curriculum and the Draft Primary Mathematics Curriculum both describe children's learning in terms of outcomes...other domains of the redeveloped curriculum may have to reflect this*
- *teachers will need support in understanding what's expected from them.*

Conclusion

In overall terms, the participants welcomed the direction being set by the NCCA in producing robust academic research to support the process of articulating a rationale for a redeveloped primary school curriculum at this time. They appreciated the opportunity to participate in the review and redevelopment of the curriculum. While the purposes, values and principles of an education system and, specifically, of a primary school curriculum may be contested, all agreed that it would be necessary to articulate them in a concise and accessible way that will be relevant to teachers and broader society into the future.

The seminar's keynote presentations and panel discussion can be viewed [here](#). The panel of four principals and teachers identified strengths and challenges of the 1999 curriculum in their schools and responded to questions from the floor. The research papers are

accompanied with an online response form to provide further opportunities for responses to the research.

Appendix 1: Stakeholder Organisations invited to Seminar

An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta

An Forás Patrúnachta

Association for Drama in Education in Ireland

Association of Childcare Professionals

Association of Teachers'/Education Centres in Ireland

Autism Ireland

Barnardos Ireland

Catholic Primary Schools Managers' Association

Centre for School Leadership

Children's Rights Alliance

Church of Ireland Board of Education

Computers in Education Society of Ireland

Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Department of Education & Skills

DES Inspectorate

DICE Project

Dublin City University

Early Childhood Ireland

Early Years Education Policy Unit

Economic and Social Research Institute

Educate Together

Education and Training Boards Ireland

Educational Company of Ireland

Educational Research Centre

Foras na Gaeilge

Hibernia College

HSE Health and Wellbeing Division

Inclusive Ireland

Irish National Teachers' Organisation

Irish Primary Physical Education Association

Irish Primary Principal Network

Education Support Centres Ireland

Lifeways Ireland Ltd

Marino Institute of Education

Mary Immaculate College

Maynooth University

Migrants Rights Council Ireland

National Childhood Network

National Council for Special Education

National Educational Psychological Service

National Induction Programme for Teachers

Ombudsman for Children

PLÉ

Professional Development Service for Teachers

Royal Society of Chemistry

Safefood

Science Foundation Ireland

SPHE Network

Teachers' Union of Ireland

Teaching Council

The Ark

The National Disability Authority

Tusla – Child and Family Agency

University College Cork

University College Dublin

Appendix 2: Discussion Questions

Discussion 1

1. What are the purposes of a national curriculum? How can it best support the education of children in primary schools?
2. The table below delineates the priorities for primary education based on a consultation in 2012 (NCCA). What is your view on these? Are they comprehensive?

Primary priorities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop thinking, learning and like skills• Communicate well• Be well• Develop literacy and numeracy skills• Engage in learning• Have a strong sense of identity and belonging

3. Should the redeveloped curriculum set out the central purpose, aims and principles of the education system or focus only on the primary curriculum?
4. Is a curriculum or a curriculum framework most appropriate for the Irish context? How might teachers be best supported to use whatever flexibility is available within the redeveloped curriculum to allow for local adaptation to needs and contexts?

Discussion 2

1. What have been the key changes in society since the launch of the Primary School Curriculum (1999) that impact teaching and learning in Irish primary classrooms?
2. What does society value for children and childhood?
3. Where should the values and moral purposes of a curriculum come from?
4. How should these be expressed in a primary curriculum?

Appendix 3: Seminars and Keynote Presentations

Seminars	Keynote Presentations
Seminar 1: <i>Curriculum Purpose</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="523 1933 1299 2002">▪ Dr Thomas Walsh, Maynooth University - Review of the Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum (1999)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dr Jones Irwin, Dublin City University - Priorities and values of society
Seminar 2: <i>Powerful Synergies</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Professor Louis Volante, Brock University – Pedagogy and Meta-practices ▪ Dr Karin Bacon, Marino Institute of Education – Curriculum Integration ▪ Professor Emerita Carol McGuinness, Queen’s University – 21st century competencies ▪ Professor Dominic Wyse, University College London – The role of knowledge in curricula
Seminar 3: <i>New Horizons</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bernie McNally, DCYA - Context and policy developments in early years provision ▪ Dr Harold Hislop, DES - Current provision and future challenges in early years learning experiences ▪ Prof Emer Smyth, ESRI - Transition to primary education ▪ Dr Alejandra Cortázar, CEPI, Chile - Curriculum alignment and progression
Seminar 4: <i>Enhancing Learning Journeys</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dr Emer Ring, Dr Lisha O’Sullivan, Marie Ryan and Patrick Burke, Mary Immaculate College – Learning theories ▪ NCCA – Parents’ perspectives on a redeveloped primary curriculum
Seminar 5: <i>Charting the Journey Forward</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sharon O’Donnell – International primary curricula ▪ Prof Michael O’Leary and Dr Zita Lysaght, Dublin City University - Aligning assessment, learning and teaching in curricular reform and implementation

