

Reviewing and Redeveloping the Primary Curriculum

Stakeholder Seminar 2: Powerful Synergies

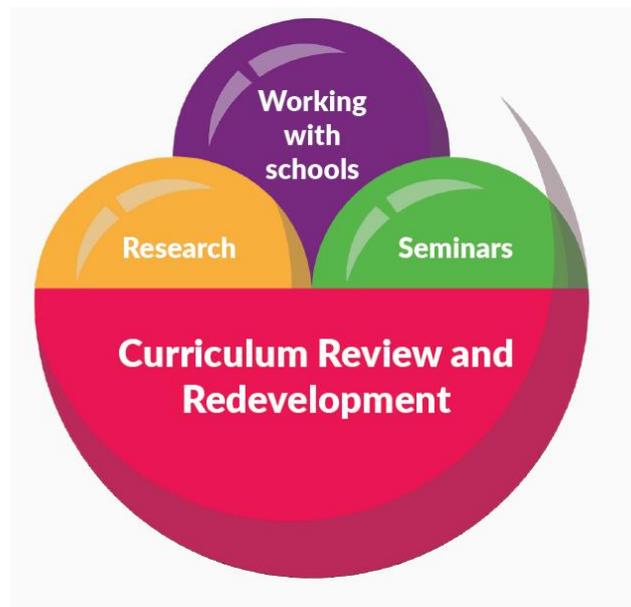
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Introduction

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) 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



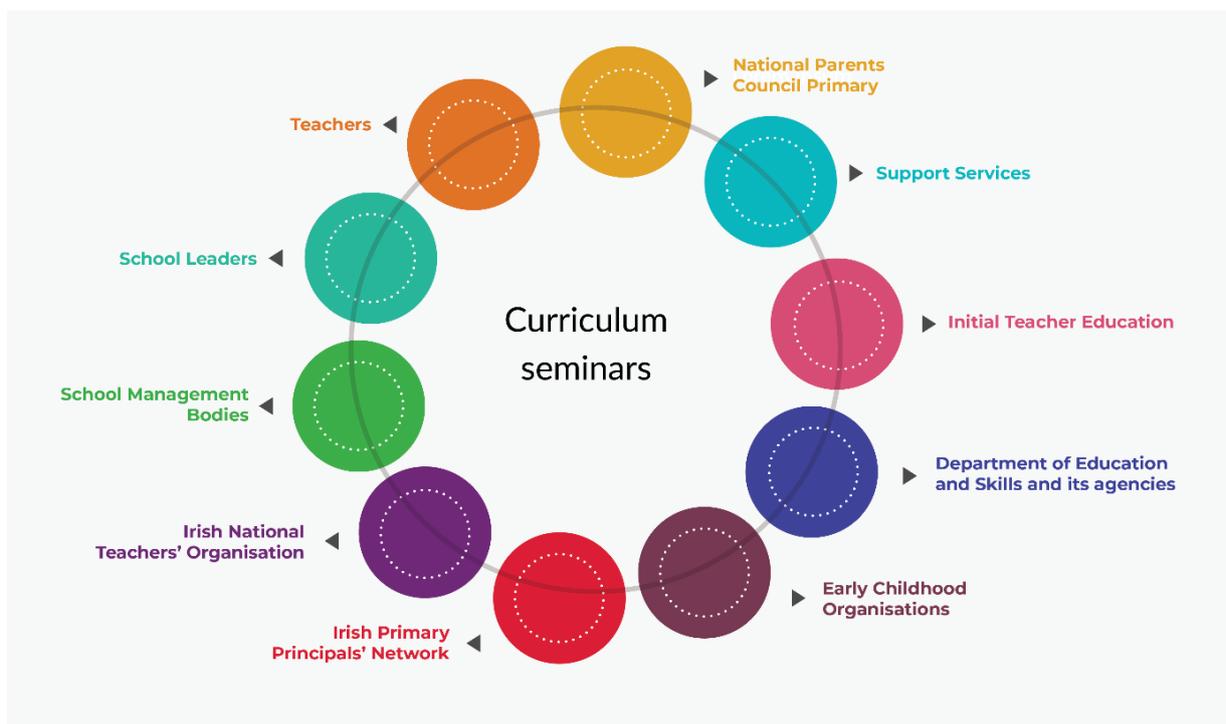
The NCCA's work draws heavily on research, and consequently national and international researchers authored a suite of short research papers on key aspects of a redeveloped primary curriculum. The research papers support engagement in the review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum. The research 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: Stakeholders who participated in the curriculum seminars



Primary Curriculum Seminar 2

The second seminar entitled 'Powerful Synergies', took place on May 17th, 2018.

The seminar included four keynote presentations as follows:

- [Professor Louis Volante](#) presented on key pedagogical messages across the curriculum
- [Dr Karin Bacon](#) presented on integration
- [Professor Emerita Carol McGuinness](#) presented on competencies
- [Professor Dominic Wyse](#) presented on knowledge.

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 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 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

Seminar 2 centred on Powerful Synergies and, as part of this, the first discussion focused on pedagogy in a redeveloped curriculum. Participants responded to the following questions.

1. What should pedagogy mean in a redeveloped primary curriculum?
2. Which pedagogies should a redeveloped curriculum prioritise?
 - 2.1 Do these change as the child moves through primary school? If yes, how?
3. How could a redeveloped primary curriculum support these pedagogies?
 - 3.1 What other support would be required to build the capacity of schools and teachers to develop powerful and innovative pedagogies?

- The meaning of pedagogy in a redeveloped curriculum
- Prioritising pedagogy in a redeveloped curriculum
- Supporting pedagogy in a redeveloped curriculum

The meaning of pedagogy in a redeveloped curriculum

Some participants felt that the term *pedagogy* can seem quite technical and that typically teachers' everyday talk is more about methods, but there was agreement that children must be kept at the centre of practice. There was general agreement that a curriculum should articulate clearly its overarching aims and values and its view of the child as learner, and the pedagogy/ies that inform teaching should reflect these. *Aistear*, it was felt, has made a positive contribution to the introduction of a play-based pedagogy and, as a result, play-based or game-based learning has become the norm in many infant classrooms. Yet, greater efforts could *be made to introduce playful pedagogies in the middle and senior classes*. We need to challenge the *perception amongst parents and even some teachers that unless it's table-top or book-based, it's not 'real work' ...there is a need to raise awareness of playful pedagogy as the child moves through the system*. There was not universal agreement on this, with one participant being of the view that *although Aistear can be effective, sometimes no learning is happening*. Nonetheless, the relationship between pedagogy and the overarching principles of the curriculum was seen to be key.

Prioritising pedagogy in a redeveloped curriculum

There was some reservation about a prescriptive approach to the types of pedagogies which teachers and practitioners could promote. The values of the redeveloped primary school curriculum should inform, guide and enable a greater choice of pedagogies. This question of choice echoes something of a general feeling articulated in discussions at the consultative seminars: a desire, on the one hand, to assert the professional autonomy of the teacher and

school, and a recognition, on the other, that teachers need their choices to be supported by guidelines and exemplification. Consultation with teachers about pedagogy was recommended. The Schools Forum could play an important role in innovation here, yielding important examples of good practice, including video evidence: *This would help teachers to keep up with new ideas...this is challenging for older teachers who see their teaching as working. It's important to follow best practice.* In this way teachers could become familiarised with innovate and diverse practice.

Supporting pedagogy in a redeveloped curriculum

The physical environment of the school was mentioned as having potential to support or inhibit pedagogy. Consequently, the process of redeveloping the curriculum would need to take careful account of the physical spaces in which learning happens.

Regarding pedagogy, the relationship between the playschool and primary school was seen by many to be a significant one, especially at the time of transition.

There should be more consistency in the transfer from early years settings to primary schools. There are very limited links to pre-schools, this needs to be addressed. The Aistear framework is a great start, but there are some teachers who haven't engaged with it.

Similarly, the point was made that in preparing children for the transition to post-primary school, dialogue about pedagogy between the sectors would be an important support. Curriculum development can promote such dialogue by ensuring that there is consistency across the whole system.

It was felt that school culture, including its assessment and reporting practices, is a very important determinant of pedagogy. Given that school context varies so much, the potential negative impact on pedagogy of an overloaded curriculum was highlighted. Some felt that a redeveloped curriculum that promoted thematic or project-based learning could make a positive impact on pedagogy. *At the moment, we have a very low trust model; an over-prescribed curriculum just becomes an accounting process.*

Teacher training was felt by some to be *part of the problem* perpetuating a narrow range of pedagogy...schools need to explore mentoring, coaching and modelling rather than more traditional methods. Another discussion group offered quite a different perspective stressing the value of connections between schools and ITEs:

...teacher placement could inform innovation in schools, why are they squeezed into a traditional school model when they have the creative ideas.....role of classroom teacher in supporting and feeding into the teacher education process. Can undergraduate teachers support more experienced teachers in effective pedagogies? Mutual learning?

Finally, it might be useful, it was felt, to identify appropriate pedagogies in the curriculum and to offer teachers a menu, so that they would have opportunities to choose without their feeling they have to do it all. Therefore, teachers would need guidance about purpose and choice.

Discussion 2

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

1. What is your understanding of curriculum integration?
 - 1.1 For children's learning?
 - 1.2 For teachers' planning, teaching and assessment?
2. In light of Dr Bacon's paper what understanding of curriculum integration should underpin a redeveloped Primary School Curriculum?
3. What are the challenges of curriculum integration for teachers' planning, teaching and assessment?
 - 3.1 How can a redeveloped Primary School Curriculum respond to these challenges?

Two themes emerged from discussions:

- Understanding curriculum integration in a redeveloped curriculum
- Challenges of curriculum integration

Understanding curriculum integration in a redeveloped curriculum

It was felt integration is a way to allow children to acquire deeper understanding and give them skills and insights across disciplines. Children need time to pursue their interests and to synthesise their learning, perhaps using longer blocks of teaching time could facilitate this more easily and readily for teachers. It was noted that most preschools have moved away from a set timetable. It is widely acknowledged that, (unlike the curriculum of 1971), because of its delineated subject content and the segmented nature of its suggested weekly time framework, the 1999 curriculum does not lend itself to meaningful curriculum integration. While the time allocation was to be a suggested guide, it has become the norm, and this has created a tension for teachers in planning for integration.

Some participants noted that they had simply been applying the term integration to a range of different models of integration. Thus, the importance of clear, consistent terminology was emphasised. A potential conflict of understanding was identified, namely Intradisciplinary versus Multidisciplinary versus Transdisciplinary integration. Maybe the solution is to offer a range of approaches built into the structure of the redeveloped curriculum so that decisions about integration can be taken at an individual teacher or school level, or is the curriculum to be fully integrated, blurring or removing boundaries between subjects?

Acknowledging some uncertainty about the difference between subjects and curriculum areas, it was noted that integration has always been central to practice in Irish primary schools. The most common form of integration currently used in Ireland is probably interdisciplinary where teachers organise the curriculum around common learning across disciplines. Examples of good practice in multidisciplinary/transdisciplinary and thematic approaches show how 'doable' this approach can be if embedded and supported properly in schools. A *continuum of possibilities*, a more gradual journey rather than a *big bang* approach

may be preferable for Ireland. A thematic approach could go a long way, but it needs to be authentic and relevant to the child and, while enabling teacher autonomy, needs to ensure a broad curricular experience for children, specifically with reference to visual arts, music and drama.

Integration as process, in a system that is focused too much on product, will not work. Teachers need to be trusted, and they need to be more assertive in explaining why they work in an integrated way. A broader discussion as to the purpose of assessment is required. What is measured gets valued, but not all learning through an integrated approach can be easily measured. Implementing an integrated curriculum every day would be a significant challenge which would require significant support. A need to rethink fundamentally how we structure a school day would be a necessary starting point, and there was overwhelming support expressed for flexibility regarding time and teaching.

Challenges of curriculum integration

Although challenging for written planning, meaningful curriculum integration is more enjoyable, holistic, fulfilling and fruitful for both the teacher and the children. There was a suggestion that integration is helpful in improving the quality of teacher practice and is more achievable when teachers are confident and develop their pedagogical and subject content knowledge.

Work at school level was considered very important. It was suggested that a key consideration in this was whether the outcome of the redevelopment process will be a Curriculum or a Curriculum Framework. The possibility of modelling a redeveloped curriculum framework on *Aistear* in the junior classes which would evolve and branch out into subjects was mooted. This supports the child in coming from an emergent curriculum which is child-led into an integrated space for learning with subjects becoming more prominent in the senior classes.

It was felt that an integrated curriculum would be a significant departure from current practice and such a change would need to be communicated clearly and in good time. There was some discussion around a perceived overreliance on textbooks by some teachers, which may obstruct professional teaching and promote a reductionist approach.

The view that during Initial Teacher Education student teachers receive a segmented curriculum from subject specialists was articulated quite frequently, while students on school placement may be encouraged to integrate learning without having a deep understanding of the principles of effective integration.

It was felt that children should have exposure to content that helps them to develop their Irish identity, become aware of Irish cultural traditions and heritage, and access a repository of knowledge that children growing up in Ireland should know. Teachers will need appropriate, ongoing professional support that is sensitive to local factors.

Discussion 3

The third discussion centred on knowledge and competencies in a redeveloped primary curriculum. Participants responded to the following questions.

1. What is knowledge?
2. What are competencies?
3. What kinds of knowledge are important for children during their primary school years?
 - 3.1 Are some kinds of knowledge more/less important at different points during the primary school years?
4. Should overarching competencies feature in a redeveloped primary school curriculum? If so which competencies? (5/6)

Early Childhood themes, Primary priorities, Junior and Senior Cycle key Skills						
Level 4	Senior Cycle key skills ⁶	Critical and creative thinking	Communicating	Information processing	Bring personally effective	Working with others
Level 3	Junior Cycle key skills ⁷	Managing information and thinking	Being Literate Being numerate	Communicating	Staying well Being creative	Managing myself Working with others
Level 2	Primary priorities ⁸	Develop thinking, learning and life skills	Communicating well	Be well	Engage in learning	Have a strong sense of identity and belonging
Level 1	Early childhood themes ⁹	Exploring and thinking	Communicating	Well-being		Identity and belonging

5. Are certain competencies more/less important at different points during the primary school years?

Two themes emerged from the discussions:

- Important kinds of knowledge for primary school children
- Overarching competencies in a redeveloped primary curriculum.

Important kinds of knowledge for primary school children

Teachers need to develop a child's understanding through learning, guidance and practice. Knowledge was deemed to be knowing the answer; understanding is having the knowledge and knowing how to use and apply it in different situations; it is not necessarily fixed. Children construct and co-construct knowledge through their interests, their rich learning experiences and sharing with their peers. However, a balance is needed between constructed and prescribed knowledge. Participants believed it was important to give children access to appropriate knowledge at each learning stage in their school lives. The question was posed as to whether the curriculum should prescribe such 'appropriate' knowledge (e.g. history topics) or whether schools and teachers should have autonomy in this? Yet, autonomy can be undermined by a reliance on textbooks where publishers ultimately determine the knowledge that is important.

Overarching competencies in a redeveloped primary curriculum

Motivating children to learn and giving them a love of learning is as important as imparting knowledge. Inquiry-based learning supports the development of soft skills, the skills of critical thinking and analysis being most important. The 1999 *Primary School Curriculum* was largely knowledge-based, but it also put skills to the fore. A purely skills-based curriculum can be too narrow in scope so perhaps competencies is more appropriate. It is very likely, though, that 21st century competencies will change over time, so the curriculum should avoid being too narrow in naming certain competencies. It was mooted that five or six over-arching competencies from early childhood to third level education would be sufficient and desirable. A redeveloped primary curriculum is an opportunity to "fill the gap" between the themes of

Aistear and Junior Cycle Key Skills. However, a redeveloped curriculum will need to be clear on what these look like at different points in a child's primary school experience, and what types of experiences are needed to develop them. Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy must be included along with wellbeing and global citizenship.

Children's wellbeing, resilience and the social and emotional aspects of children's learning and development are key factors. The creativity and expertise of teachers impacts on children from the earliest years. The role of parents in influencing the development of children's competencies also needs consideration.

It will be necessary to consider what implications these competencies will have for the design of our school buildings in terms of classroom layout, types of furniture and class size. Other policies (e.g., buildings, resources, CPD) will need to align with any curriculum redevelopment.

School leadership was considered central so that teachers are supported and affirmed for the work they do in translating and implementing the curriculum in their classrooms. Much conversation focused on the challenges of teaching principals in this respect.

Conclusion

Some general questions emerged from the discussions during the day, raising themes that might usefully be pursued as part of the ongoing work on the review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum:

- the degree of autonomy that might be desirable at teacher and school level
- how to strike the right the balance between knowledge and skills
- how knowledge is understood in the curriculum, and how pedagogy emerges from such an understanding
- how the child as a learner is understood and presented in the curriculum
- how best to lead and support change in schools and in the system generally

- how supports for implementation of a redeveloped curriculum are best developed and disseminated, including the most appropriate models for consultation and teacher CPD
- how to ensure that the curriculum development process is flexible and collaborative, one that generates clear outcomes and messaging for all involved.

Finally, discussion from all of the topics touched on the identity of the primary school teacher and, particularly as 'newer' areas such as wellbeing and learner competencies come sharply into focus, how viable it remains to lay so much that is new or unfamiliar at the feet of the teacher as generalist.

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 should pedagogy mean in a redeveloped primary curriculum?
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Discussion 3

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Level 2	Primary priorities ^a	Develop thinking, learning and life skills	Communicating well	Be well	Engage in learning	Have a strong sense of identity and belonging
Level 1	Early childhood themes ^a	Exploring and thinking	Communicating	Well-being	Identity and belonging	

5. Are certain competencies more/less important at different points during the primary school years?

Appendix 3: Seminars and Keynote Presentations

Seminars	Keynote Presentations
Seminar 1: <i>Curriculum Purpose</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dr Thomas Walsh, Maynooth University - Review of the Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum (1999) ▪ 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
Seminar 5: <i>Charting the Journey Forward</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sharon O’Donnell – International primary curricula

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Prof Michael O’Leary and Dr Zita Lysaght, Dublin City University - Aligning assessment, learning and teaching in curricular reform and implementation
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