

Reviewing and Redeveloping the Primary Curriculum

Stakeholder Seminar 4: Enhancing Learning Journeys

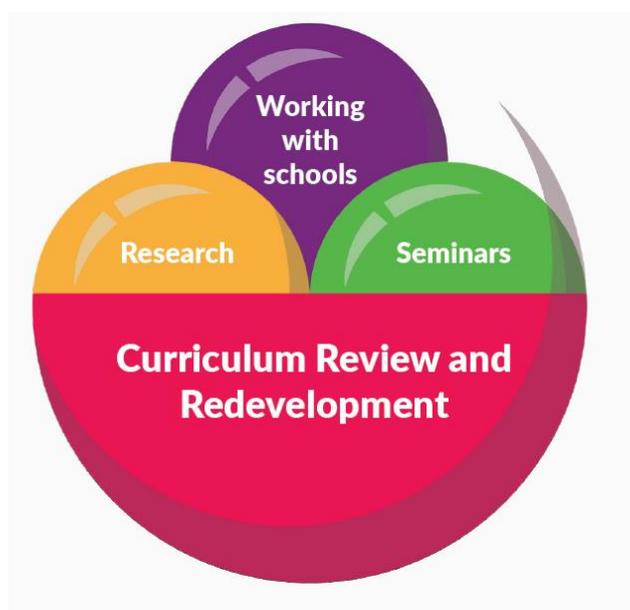
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Introduction

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) 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



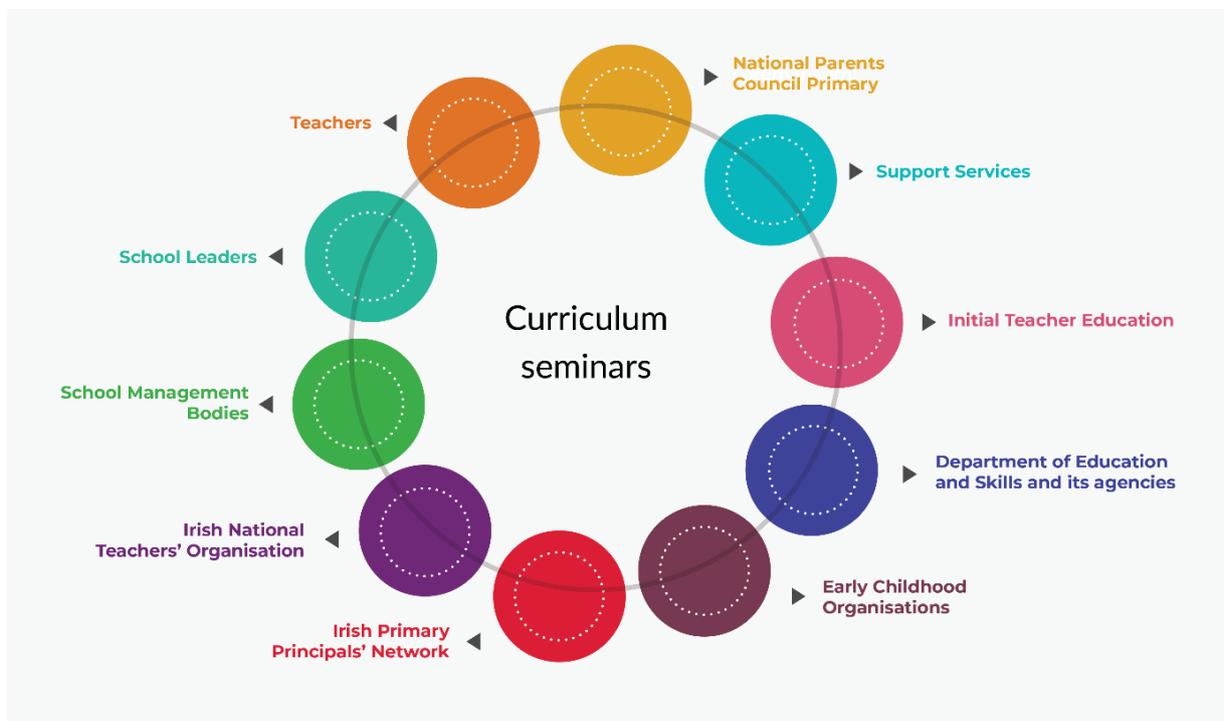
The NCCA's work draws heavily on research, and consequently national and international researchers authored a suite of short research papers on key aspects of a redeveloped primary curriculum. The research papers support engagement in the review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum. The research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



Primary Curriculum Seminar 4

Seminar 4 'Enhancing Learning Journeys' took place on November 29th, 2018. The seminar's [keynote presentation](#) was given by Professor Emer Ring, Dr Lisha O'Sullivan, Marie Ryan and Patrick Burke, Mary Immaculate College. Their keynote presentation looked at theoretical perspectives on children's learning and development and how these might contribute to a responsive pedagogy for a redeveloped primary curriculum. The second part of the seminar focused on the perspectives of parents on a redeveloped primary curriculum.

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, 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 in italics.

Discussion 1

The first discussion focused on theoretical perspectives on children's learning and development. Participants responded to the following questions.

1. What can a redeveloped primary curriculum do to help translate theories of children's learning and development into practice in a way that is helpful for schools?
2. Are some theories more essential and relevant in a redeveloped primary curriculum than others? If so, which and why?
3. How much detail and guidance should a redeveloped curriculum include on effective pedagogical approaches? What are the best ways of doing this in a curriculum?

- Translating theory into practice
- Suggested theories for a redeveloped primary curriculum
- Detail and guidance on effective pedagogical approaches.

Translating theory into practice

Noting the value of the keynote paper on theories of learning, participants felt that rather than offering separate treatments of theory and practice the curriculum would best meet this challenge by weaving theory and practice together into a series of key principles accompanied by examples of theory in practice. These might focus on areas such as: creating an optimum learning environment in the school; pedagogy; assessment in the primary school; a socio-constructivist approach to learning. Given the likelihood of additional demand on teacher intuition from a new outcomes-based curriculum, accessible and practical examples of good practice would be necessary, as in the online *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*. Collaboration between NCCA and PDST could help to disseminate high quality examples that would challenge aspects of current practice and show how classrooms might look into the future. The learning outcomes of the new *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile* have handed more power to teachers to decide how they want to structure learning, and teachers can adapt their practice more easily when the curriculum is framed like that.

While many practitioners said they would recognise their current practice in the learning theories, teachers would need to be well-versed to be able to draw on this knowledge, as *different theories will apply in different situations or contexts*. The curriculum could distil the body of knowledge in the discussion paper and re-present it in an accessible way for teachers and schools, thereby lessening demands on a busy profession and facilitating reflection at a whole school and individual level. The table from the discussion paper summarising the eight learning theories would be useful for schools and a version of this might be included in the introduction to a redeveloped curriculum. Also, the School Self Evaluation process was cited as having the potential to support real engagement with the theoretical underpinnings of curriculum.

Many participants felt it important that content knowledge specific to a discipline should be highlighted in the curriculum. *It is not always possible to teach content-specific knowledge if the focus is on thematic planning only.* Disciplinary content knowledge, explicitly delineated and sequenced, should be connected to the associated skills.

Discussion focused on teacher supports that participants felt were necessary for successful implementation of a redeveloped curriculum. Contributions at times reflected an uncertainty (or anxiety) about the degree to which a redeveloped curriculum would be modelled on the *Aistear* framework. It was felt that teachers lacking in confidence *would struggle with the autonomy offered by a curriculum framework.* Clarity would be needed especially in support materials for areas such as teacher planning.

Continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers and school principals would need to be broad and not just subject specific and should engage on the level of theory and practice. CPD needs to be inspiring, transformative and richer than previously. More flexibility and teacher agency would be welcome. This would enable maximum use of teachers' skill sets and enable schools to make informed choices about how best to transact the curriculum in their local context.

Parents need to be engaged too and need to be shown examples of the learning theories in practice with a view to helping parents and teachers interact. Parent respondents acknowledged the sometime disconnect between parents and teachers in relation to the bigger picture of how children learn. Support materials for parents were identified as a possible solution to this.

Narrow assessment practices need to be addressed in a redeveloped curriculum. Teaching and learning must come first. The group felt that it was good to see formal assessment, such as standardised assessment, being questioned. Some attendees felt that self-assessment should be framed as a competency rather than an assessment methodology.

Suggested theories for a redeveloped primary curriculum

All theories were considered important and relevant, some being more relevant at different times in a child's development and for different contexts. Secure attachments at home and in school, where the teacher is emotionally available to the child, are critical; motivation theory is very important for senior classes; a redeveloped curriculum needs to promote a love of learning; sociocultural theories would be particularly applicable in language learning. Metacognition and self-regulation—encouraging children to become independent learners and developing self-regulation of emotions—were felt to be critical to children's overall success in education. But it was felt that theory does not always translate into practice, and context was of vital importance. As presented in the discussion paper, the notion of a patterned mosaic would best support good practice. These principles and theories need to be illustrative rather than prescriptive, facilitating a responsive pedagogy. Despite the implicit criticism of Multiple Intelligences theory in the discussion paper, it was felt that this approach offers an opportunity to highlight interests or aptitudes of children, which can lead to making learning more enjoyable and relevant. The curriculum would need to illustrate what the theories it draws upon mean in the Irish context. Such theoretical perspectives might usefully articulate opportunities for playful and exploratory learning across the sectors by reference to *Aistear* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle*.

Detail and guidance on effective pedagogical approaches

Support materials on methodologies/pedagogies should be provided in a range of formats, online or in hard copy. The materials should not be too prescriptive and should allow for teacher autonomy. But there should be some form of pedagogical guidance, such as a list of strategies linked to the learning outcomes. In this regard, a glossary of pedagogical approaches for teachers and parents would be very useful. The materials should supply a rationale for the pedagogies, providing a cohesive theoretical underpinning, thereby allowing teachers to make conscious decisions about the pedagogies, not just choosing randomly from a menu.

It would be important to have videos showing good practice in an Irish context. The idea of a community of practice and schools sharing practice was suggested. *Seeing is believing. The videos used to support the new language curriculum are powerful and very valuable.* Examples from real school contexts encourage teachers to be open to new approaches and underline the importance of the local curriculum. Such examples could and should be an important part of a programme of sustained CPD providing professional space to collaborate at school level, where teachers get time together to observe each other and discuss the videos, rather than being in a room for a day of CPD. There is an opportunity for NCCA/PDST and the Initial Teacher Education Institutions to offer more in-school support for the redeveloped curriculum.

Finally, regarding assessment pedagogy, it was felt that too much attention is currently being given to standardised tests. Teachers need to be supported to reflect on assessment practices and the Inspectorate needs to be open to teacher autonomy in this regard. Assessment and learning both need to be continually linked; we cannot disentangle them.

Discussion 2

The second discussion focused on parental considerations for a redeveloped curriculum. Participants responded to the following questions.

1. What are your thoughts on the main themes, to date, emerging from the parents' focus groups?
2. What types of support materials should the NCCA consider developing to enable greater parental involvement and engagement in their children's learning?

The discussions were based on the findings of a series of 20 focus groups held with parents across the country. The findings were presented to participants prior to the discussions.

The following two themes emerged from these discussions:

- Main themes from the parent focus groups

- Support materials for greater parental involvement.

Main themes from the parent focus groups

Participants warmly welcomed the involvement of parents in the consultation process. That said, some felt that a more broadly-based engagement might have resulted in more positive soundings regarding Gaeilge and faith-formation in schools. The difficulty of reaching out to parents during a large-scale consultation was acknowledged. Yet that is not to deny the importance of clear communication with parents concerning the overall philosophy and values underpinning the redeveloped curriculum.

Positive dispositions (respect, confidence, resilience), the teaching of modern foreign languages, ethics and inclusion, digital learning, working collaboratively, were cited as some of the main discussion points from the focus groups. A desire for a move away from religious instruction to wider religious and moral education was noted as a stand-out from the feedback. Concern for the environment, connection to community, and the need for citizenship education were felt to be reflective of our changed society. Parents want their children to be good communicators and to be happy – desires that link well with the themes of *Aistear*. Parents recognised that it is important that the curriculum helps children to be ready for life but knowing how best to achieve that readiness is not without its challenges. An emphasis on Wellbeing in a redeveloped curriculum would be welcomed by parents. Some participants suggested that resilience was an issue for children, but that parenting had become very protective. Educating children for wellbeing would include ensuring that children develop greater levels of resilience.

Gaeilge emerged as somewhat contentious, being seen by some parents as still important, while by others, as being less so. Views were polarised around the pragmatic (its usefulness as a language), cultural significance (it is/is not part of our cultural identity), and linguistic (its contribution to our general language awareness). For some, the way Gaeilge is currently taught needs further consideration.

The local dimension of curriculum was reflected in the parent focus groups. Every community is different, and schools are already adapting to that. One parent spoke of a focus group

session in his school, how he had found it hugely valuable to hear a range of views. Thus, the importance of good discussion and mutual respect between home and school was highlighted.

Homework was seen to provide a natural link between school and home. Yet the exchange of views on the topic was something of an unfinished conversation. Some participants wondered whether a redeveloped curriculum could give guidance on this and not leave it to individual school policies as they differ so much in range and application.

Support materials for greater parental involvement

While much of the discussion focused on what schools might do more effectively in this regard, the emerging consensus was that the NCCA should include a range of materials aimed specifically at parents among the support materials for the redeveloped curriculum.

Materials might include:

- Information in accessible language on the vision and values of the curriculum
- Videos/podcasts on children's learning
- Videos where teachers model concepts and approaches, so that parents can see how children are learning
- Materials that promote communication between the home and the school, providing models of this process in action
- Advice for parents and schools on children's reports and on parent/teacher meetings

Some participants felt that the role of the National Parents' Council (NPC) could be extended, citing the existence of projects such as Partnership Schools Ireland, a collaboration between the NPC and the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), funded by the DES and currently working with some 40 schools. It was also suggested that NCCA should research more effective ways to disseminate information about the valuable resources for parents on its website. This would be especially important in the context of the consultation around and

launch of a redeveloped primary curriculum. All these things need shared approaches, and the NCCA should seek to collaborate with PDST, NPC, IPPN, and others in this regard.

Conclusion

Both discussions provided for in-depth engagement on key considerations for the process of redeveloping the primary school curriculum. In discussion one, participants highlighted the importance of the different theories of learning and development for curriculum redevelopment and for classroom practice. It was broadly felt that all the theories were significant, but perhaps some being more relevant at different times in a child's development and for different contexts. It was also proposed that the curriculum could play a role in supporting teachers to understand the theories that it draws on and their practical implication for the classroom.

The second discussion provided the basis for significant engagement in the priorities of parents in primary education. Some of the considerations to emerge from discussion were:

- The importance of Wellbeing in the curriculum
- The significance of developing positive dispositions towards learning
- The place of moral education and Gaeilge in a redeveloped curriculum
- The need to focus on local context.

The discussion also highlighted the need to ensure continued participation of parents in the process of curriculum development and suggested proposals for supporting this participation.

Appendix 1: Stakeholder Organisations invited to the 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 One

1. If there is one general lesson to be learned from the experiences of recent years, it is that in education, and probably in all other spheres too, theory and practice must go hand in hand and side by side if either is to benefit in any significant way. (Kelly, 2004)
 - a) What can a redeveloped primary curriculum do to help translate theories of children's learning and development into practice in a way that is helpful for schools?
2. Are some theories more essential and relevant in a redeveloped primary curriculum than others? If so, which and why?
3. The paper draws attention to the importance of a range of pedagogical approaches to enhance all aspects of children's learning and development. How much detail and guidance should a redeveloped curriculum include on effective pedagogical approaches? What are the best ways of doing this in a curriculum?

Discussion Two

1. What are your thoughts on the main themes, to date, emerging from the parents' focus groups?
2. What types of support materials should the NCCA consider developing to enable greater parental involvement and engagement in their children's learning?

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 ▪ Prof Michael O’Leary and Dr Zita Lysaght, Dublin City University - Aligning assessment, learning and teaching in curricular reform and implementation

