

Reviewing and Redeveloping the Primary Curriculum

Stakeholder Seminar 5: Charting the Journey Forward

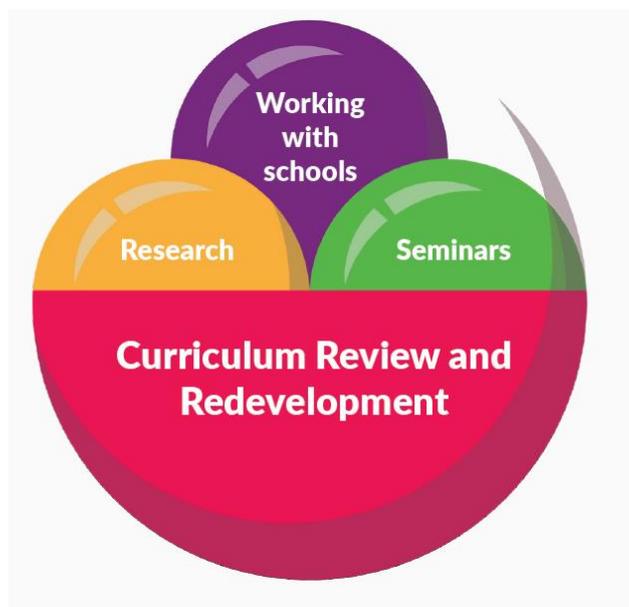
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Introduction

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



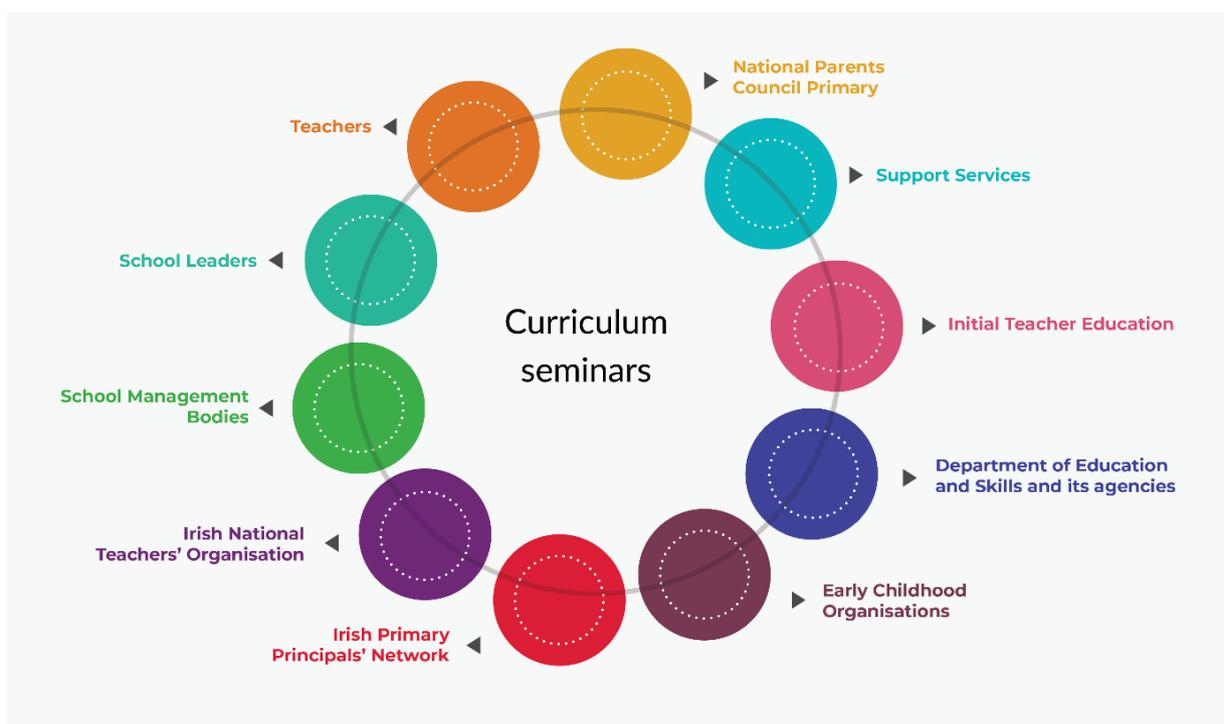
The NCCA's work draws heavily on research, and consequently national and international researchers authored a suite of short research papers on key aspects of a redeveloped primary curriculum. The research papers support engagement in the review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum. The research 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 5

Seminar 5 'Charting the Journey Forward' took place on January 31st, 2019. The seminar's first keynote presentation was by Sharon O'Donnell, Information and Education Specialist. Her [keynote presentation](#) looked at the content, breadth, depth and organisation of early years and primary curricula in eight different jurisdictions. Discussions on how the findings in the audit might inform the review of the primary curriculum followed this keynote presentation. Following this and based on these deliberations, participants engaged in a second discussion on the progression from an integrated curriculum model to subjects. The seminar's second [keynote presentation](#) was given by Professor Michael O'Leary and Dr Zita Lysaght, Dublin City University. Their keynote presentation explored aligning assessment, learning and teaching in curricular reform and implementation. Discussion on the presentation of assessment in a redeveloped primary curriculum then took place.

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 first discussion focused on early years and primary curricula in other jurisdictions and the lessons for the Irish context. Participants responded to the following questions.

1. How, if at all, can the findings presented in the audit inform the review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum:
 - Aims and purposes?
 - Coherence and continuity in content?
 - Overload?
2. What was particularly interesting about the structure and organisation of curriculum content for the
 - a) early years of primary school?
 - b) rest of the years of primary school?

Two themes emerged from these discussions:

- Implications for a redeveloped primary curriculum
 - Aims and purposes
 - Coherence and continuity
 - Overload
- Lessons for the early years and senior years of primary school.

Implications for a redeveloped primary curriculum

Aims and purposes

Stressing the importance of clear aims and values, participants noted the significant similarities in principles and values across the eight jurisdictions. Commonality across the jurisdictions included promoting the public good, emphasis on the active, self-directed learner, multiple pathways through the curriculum, and support for transitions. Some recognised the difficulty of assessing *how each of these curricula is lived out* and felt that a redeveloped curriculum would need to put forward a distinctly Irish vision that is cognisant of contextual factors and values.

For some, the aims, values and principles of the 1999 curriculum are still valid, so the key question is how to present (re-present) them in a redeveloped curriculum. This raises a further question about the nature of NCCA's redevelopment process: the extent to which it is about rethinking or re-presenting the primary curriculum.

There was support for the view that the principles of *Aistear* should be retained, and that wellbeing, and personal/social skills should traverse all areas. In addition, how the aims of a curriculum are presented is not a purely surface matter; it has implications for accessibility and usability.

Some argued that consideration of the child as a learner but also as a citizen, and recognition of the child's agency in learning was not fully developed in the 1999 curriculum. *The child is on a journey and the teacher is engaging in the process. And it's still a process, even after the curriculum is published.* In Singapore, for example, the presentation of desired outcomes for children provides a simple but meaningful vision of that journey.

Coherence and continuity

It was thought-provoking to see the jurisdictions that have a single curriculum spanning two or more sectors for connectivity and continuity. Some participants particularly liked the New Zealand model where the aims were similar or scaffolded across the age groups.

A redeveloped primary curriculum will need to recognise the implications of the preschool years, building on them and ensuring continuity. Currently, some children start school at a very young age and a small number do not avail of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme, leading to an age range of three years in infant (and subsequent) classes. To promote meaningful continuity the official school entry age should be raised to 5.

Explicitly linking early years' education and the first two years of primary school resonated with some. However, caution was urged against assuming that *Aistear* is embedded in primary schools and that good practice has been established nationally.

Greater alignment is needed in children's experiences across the sectors to reduce divergence in curriculum content. Junior cycle reforms are helping to address this; for example, *the junior cycle CBA in science enables autonomous learning and conversations about learning*.

Transitions from early childhood to primary and from primary to post-primary merit much attention, as it can be particularly challenging when children move from a holistic integrated system to a departmentalised system. Dialogue between teachers from primary and post-primary is vital. One participant referenced the School Excellence Fund which enables clusters of schools to work together on a cross-sectoral basis.

Overload

There was general agreement that overload is a significant problem in the system currently, the integrated intention of the 1999 curriculum never having been realised. Greater emphasis on integration would help to relieve overload, as would multidisciplinary learning. The practice in Finland of schools undertaking one multidisciplinary learning module each year was considered to be manageable and worthwhile for teachers in Ireland. Thematic teaching with overarching principles across the curriculum was also posited.

Some participants mentioned a need for the system to find a balance between centralised prescription and teacher autonomy. *If we go more towards teacher autonomy, it will require major time and shifting the mind-set. There is a real tension in deciding how much is centralised and how much is left locally.* However, reducing content might cause a shift from

curriculum overload to teacher overload, as teachers will be asked to become curriculum developers.

Providing more resources and exemplars for schools seeks to reduce overload. But, an overload of support materials can lead to a struggle for teachers who may be *looking for the answers*. To avoid an overload of resources (as reported in Scotland) NCCA and PDST will need to provide useful supports that are meaningful for teachers.

There is a danger of the curriculum being strangled by additional initiatives. External influences and initiatives— School Self-Evaluation, National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, health promotion—can interfere with schools' central mission of implementing the curriculum. *We need time to embed the curriculum and to have time to do this, we need to reduce initiative overload. If we do redevelop the curriculum, we need time to embed the change.*

Lessons for the early years and senior years of primary school

Some jurisdictions employ a common structure for presentation of learning outcomes, with accompanying support materials, across the education sectors. This was seen to bring a necessary continuity and consistency to a challenging process. The multidisciplinary approach (Finland) was seen to be valuable by those who felt that a redeveloped curriculum should allow for trans-disciplinary work.

Regarding cross-cutting concepts, some participants suggested that a new curriculum should emphasise competences, which could reflect the thematic learning foundation from *Aistear* and link in with the key skills framework from junior cycle. This would help to ensure a clear alignment between the primary and post-primary curriculum, facilitating more supportive transitions across the sectors. Consistent terminology—organisational pillars, domains of learning, desired outcomes, transversal competencies—would help achieve this continuity.

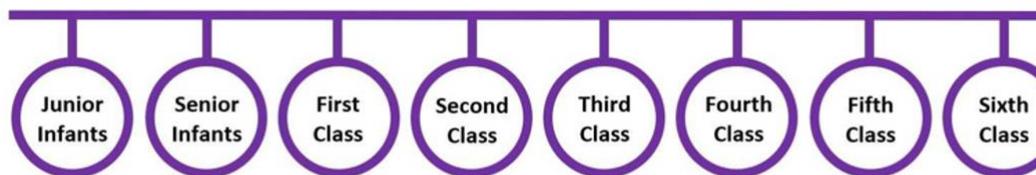
Finally, participants noted that some of the curricula shown in the review had complex layers and felt that this would be best avoided. The new primary language curriculum was a case in

point, it was felt, and a lack of appropriate CPD and mixed messages about the new curriculum had led to some teachers feeling overwhelmed.

Discussion 2

The second discussion focused on the progression from an integrated curriculum model to subjects in a redeveloped primary curriculum. Participants responded to the following questions.

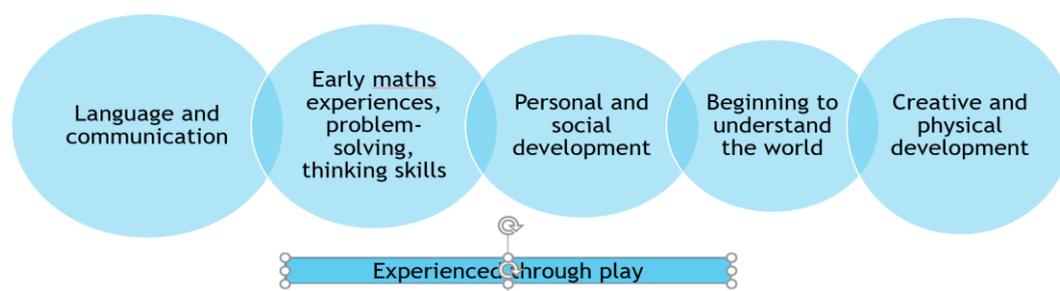
1. Table 3 (see Appendix 4) in the audit summarises the curriculum areas and subjects specified in the eight jurisdictions. The findings from the NCCA's consultation on curriculum structure and time signalled *...widespread support for an integrated curriculum for children in the early years of primary and the importance of retaining subjects, at least in the later years* (NCCA, 2018, p.75). Based on this, what would you identify as the high-level curriculum organisers (themes/curriculum areas/subjects) for the
 - a) early years of primary school?
 - b) rest of the years of primary school?
2. At what point during children's primary school experience do you see the natural progression from an integrated curriculum to subjects? Why this point?



Moving from an integrated curriculum to subjects

Consistency of terminology regarding themes or areas of learning is important, and an overarching aspirational statement is essential. Teaching, learning and assessment framed through *Aistear*'s themes would be a good starting point for the early years of primary school. High level organisers for the early years of primary might include: Language; Creativity – forms of creativity and expression; Our World – an environmental orientation with citizenship; Health and Wellbeing. The theme of Identity and Belonging was highlighted as developing a sense of self. Some felt that Wellbeing should be at the core of the curriculum across all stages. This model was favoured by many for its comprehensive, child-centred perspective, with the learning areas delineated as subjects as a child progressed through school.

Curriculum content: early years learning areas



Many contributions centred on the interaction of high-level organisers and pedagogy: subjects, but not taught discretely, could promote a multi-disciplinary approach guided by a thematic or competences perspective. Areas of learning with key learning outcomes was suggested as a possible model, with subjects being introduced for fifth and sixth classes. New subject titles might include 'World Studies' (history, geography, politics) and include looking at conflicts. There was a preference for subjects to remain as curriculum organisers at the end of the primary school to prepare children for the post primary school experience. *As long as junior cycle and senior cycle are subject-led, then the preparation (for post-primary) at the end of primary needs to focus on subject areas.*

The idea of three different stages was also mooted, bringing *Aistear* into the infant classes and having three years of play-based learning. A thematic approach up until 2nd class was proposed and, after that, a move into the subjects specifically. Some fears were expressed

that subjects might get ‘watered down’ as a result of moving towards themes or learning areas. There was broad agreement that subjects could be introduced at 4th or 5th class level, but not at the expense of integration. Some suggested that there are disciplines like maths that need discrete time and instruction: *you can’t integrate every subject easily and perhaps subjects such as maths need to be understood as specific domains*. Some participants felt that a change from one curriculum organiser to another in the middle of primary school could have a negative impact on teachers in terms of their confidence in moving from junior classes to the senior classes.

The phased introduction of the new curriculum in Wales—available to schools in 2020, but without a requirement for implementation until 2022—gives schools time and space to develop their understanding of the curriculum style, content and intent. NCCA’s work with the Schools Forum is important, so the new framework will be informed by their learning.

Discussion 3

The third discussion focused on aligning assessment, learning and teaching in curricular reform and implementation. Participants responded to the following questions.

1. What, for you, are the most significant messages in the paper for a redeveloped primary curriculum?
2. The paper highlights assessment as an essential element of effective pedagogy. If we are to avoid the misconception that assessment and pedagogy are separate entities, how should assessment be presented in a redeveloped primary curriculum?
3. What principles of assessment should be promoted to support a learning outcomes-based curriculum at primary level?

During the discussion participants engaged with all three questions posed in an interrelated manner. The section below provides a synopsis of the key messages that emerged from the discussion.

Key messages on assessment for the curriculum

A key message for participants was that assessment is not the same as evaluation. Assessment is an integral part of the teaching, learning process; the learner should be at the centre of our understanding of assessment.

The tripartite understanding of ALT (Assessment, Learning and Teaching) in the paper was welcomed as essential for teaching and learning, and the principles of assessment were welcomed. Assessment as learning rather than for or of learning was seen to represent a subtle but significant shift in teacher understanding. *Justification on paper shouldn't be the 'go to'*, there needs to be greater emphasis on organic assessments. Trust teachers to use organic assessment and to use their professional judgements to inform learning. *We need to validate the fact that teachers are constantly assessing and the nature of organic assessment needs to be acknowledged.* In addition, children need to be more directly involved in the assessment process.

Assessment needs to be integral to the new curriculum, aligned with the learning outcomes from the start, and not presented as an afterthought. However, the suite of assessment methods outlined in the Assessment Guidelines (NCCA, 2007) is still valid, and teachers have grown in confidence in their use of a variety of methods (portfolio work etc.).

Some participants identified the progression continua as assessment guidelines as such and saw them as indications of exactly what they, as teachers, must do. Others did not.

Strong feelings were expressed against a perceived over-reliance on standardised testing in that these tests are considered objective and evidential while alternative forms of assessment—requiring teachers to exercise judgements and discretion—are downgraded. Standardised tests *do not measure everything* and this needs to be clearly stated. The possibility that the NCCA Report Cards might unintentionally attribute too much importance

to the results to standardised tests was mooted. And the new SEN allocation model can be said to support such a perception.

The challenge of a cross-curricular or competences-based approach to assessment was recognised. It might lead to an absence of data in a context where data-informed decision-making is important (for NEPS, for example).

Again, the value of trialling and testing new approaches with teachers, in advance of formal implementation, was stressed.

Conclusion

Seminar 5 provided participants with the opportunity to consider the lessons for an Irish context of the structure and content of various international curricula. The international audit provided participants with a lens to consider questions related to the aims and purposes of a primary curriculum, coherence and continuity across stages and curriculum overload. Participants also considered when best to move from more integrated approaches in the junior years of primary to more subject-based approaches in the senior years based on international contexts.

Participants also engaged in an in-depth discussion on the role of assessment in the primary curriculum. Participants strongly reiterated one of the key messages of the research paper; that assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning with the learner at the centre. The perceived over-reliance on standardised testing and the current understanding of assessment within the system were raised as significant concerns that needed to be addressed in the process of redevelopment.

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

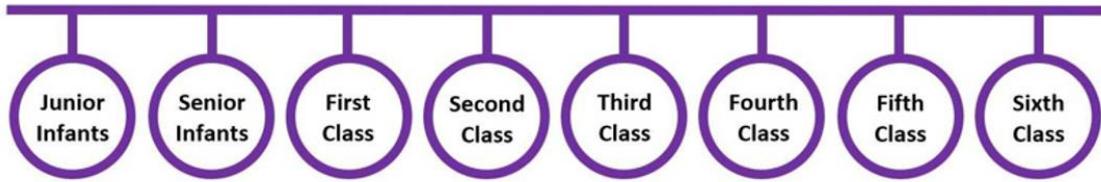
Appendix 2: Discussion Questions

Discussion One

1. How, if at all, can the findings presented in the audit inform the review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum:
 - Aims and purposes?
 - Coherence and continuity in content?
 - Overload?
2. What was particularly interesting about the structure and organisation of curriculum content for the
 - a) early years of primary school?
 - b) rest of the years of primary school?

Discussion Two

1. Table 3 (see Appendix 4) in the audit summarises the curriculum areas and subjects specified in the eight jurisdictions. The findings from the NCCA's consultation on curriculum structure and time signalled ...widespread support for an integrated curriculum for children in the early years of primary and the importance of retaining subjects, at least in the later years (NCCA, 2018, p.75). Based on this, what would you identify as the high-level curriculum organisers (themes/curriculum areas/subjects) for the
 - a) early years of primary school?
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2. At what point during children's primary school experience do you see the natural progression from an integrated curriculum to subjects? Why this point?



Discussion Three

1. What, for you, are the most significant messages in the paper for a redeveloped primary curriculum?
2. The paper highlights assessment as an essential element of effective pedagogy. If we are to avoid the misconception that assessment and pedagogy are separate entities, how should assessment be presented in a redeveloped primary curriculum?
3. What principles of assessment should be promoted to support a learning outcomes-based curriculum at primary level?

Appendix 3: Seminars and Keynote Presentations

Seminars	Keynote Presentations
Seminar 1: Curriculum Purpose	<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: Powerful Synergies	<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: New Horizons	<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 Enhancing Learning Journeys	<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: Charting the Journey Forward	<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

Appendix 4: Audit of the Content of Early Years and Primary Curricula in 8 Jurisdictions

Table 3: Primary curriculum learning areas

Finland National Core Curriculum (NCC) for Basic Education, Grades 1-6, ages 7-13	<p>Compulsory subjects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mother tongue and literature (Finnish or Swedish) • Second national language (Swedish or Finnish) • Foreign languages (must be taught from Grade 5, age 11+, but individual schools / localities may introduce earlier) • Mathematics • Environmental studies (includes elements of biology, geography, physics, chemistry, and health education) • Religion/ethics • History and social studies (must be taught from Grade 4, age 10+, but individual schools / localities may introduce earlier) • Music • Visual arts • Crafts • Physical education 	<p>Transversal competence areas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinking and learning to learn (T1) • Cultural competence, interaction and self-expression (T2) • Taking care of oneself and managing daily life (T3) • Multiliteracy (T4) • ICT competence (T5) • Skills for working life and entrepreneurship (T6) • Participation, involvement and building a sustainable future (T7)
France Cycle 2 curriculum, ages 6-9	<p>Subjects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • French • Mathematics • Foreign (or regional) language • Physical education • Art education (art and music) • Questioning the world • Moral and civic education 	<p>Domains of the socle commun, 6-16</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Languages for thinking and communicating • Methods and tools for learning • Forming one's identity and becoming a citizen • Natural systems and technical systems • Representations of the world and human activity
Cycle 3 curriculum, ages 9-11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • French • Mathematics • Foreign language 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical education • Art education (art, music, history of art) • Science and technology • History and geography • Moral and civic education 	
Cycle 3 curriculum, ages 11-12*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • French • Mathematics • Foreign language • Physical education • Art education (art, music, history of art) • Science and technology (includes physics and chemistry) • History and geography • Moral and civic education • Optional subjects 	
Ireland Primary Curriculum, ages 4-12	<p>Curriculum areas / subjects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arts education – broken down into: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Music, Drama, Visual arts • Language: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irish, English • Mathematics • Social environmental and scientific education (SESE) – broken down into: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History, Geography, Science • Physical education • Social, personal and health education (SPHE) • Religious education 	

