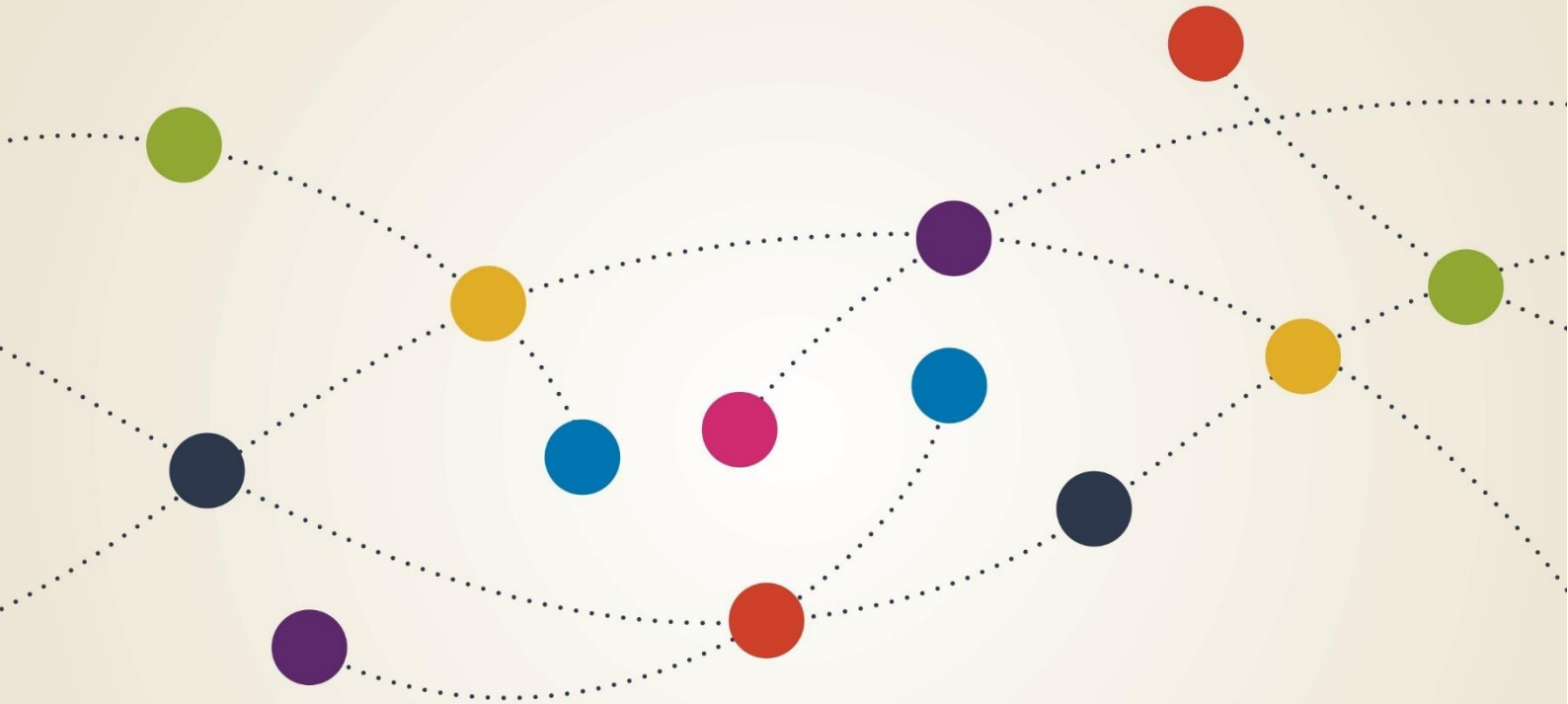

Proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum: For consultation

NCCA
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
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Introduction

September 2016 marked the 17th birthday of the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999). It was published after a decade-long process of development and deliberation and has since been the focus of curriculum research, review and evaluation. This research activity has not only provided insights into strengths of, and challenges with the curriculum but has also spotlighted the extent to which classrooms have changed in those intervening years. They are now more dynamic and busier places in which teachers support and respond to a greater diversity of learners, helping each to grow and develop. The last ten to fifteen years have also brought unprecedented technological advances changing the way we communicate with each other, the way we access, process and manage information, and the way we ultimately think about and view the world around us. This period has also seen significant change in social structures and institutions, increased prosperity followed by a significant period of recession and an emerging economic growth. These changed and changing circumstances impact both positively and negatively on children's experiences of childhood and families' experiences of life. But the last two decades have not only seen significant change in *who* inhabits classrooms and the *types* of experiences they bring with them; this period has also seen increasing demands being made of the curriculum by a changed and changing society and its expectations of the education system.

The 1999 curriculum was informed by research of its time—those were different times. It has provided a strong foundation for teaching and learning in primary schools. However, despite its extensive size—two books per subject and an introductory book—it was considered incomplete (Sugrue, 2004). Furthermore, while child-centredness was central to the vision for the curriculum, teachers noted *the emphasis on a theoretical rather than practical framework,* and highlighted the need for further practical support in using different teaching resources, organisational settings, strategies for differentiation, and ways to promote higher-order thinking skills (NCCA, 2008a, p.198). Some of these needs reflected the increasing complexity of teachers' work in supporting all children to learn and develop in classrooms with a greater diversity of learners. In response, the NCCA published guidelines to provide further practical support for teachers and schools on specific aspects of curriculum and assessment. Table 1 provides an overview of the suite of guidelines published since 1999.

Table 1: Guidelines published since 1999

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (guideline status for primary schools)	2009
Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools	2007
Exceptionally Able Students: Draft Guidelines for Teachers	2007
Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities	2007
Intercultural Education in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools	2005
English Curriculum: Additional Support Material	2005
English as an Additional Language: Guidelines for Teachers	2005
ICT in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Teachers	2004
Modern Languages in Primary Schools: Teacher guidelines	2001
Pilot project for modern languages in the primary school: Draft curriculum guidelines	1999

During this period, the Council also developed new online tools including the Curriculum Planning Tool (www.nccaplanning.ie), the Report Card Creator (www.reportcard.ncca.ie), the Aistear Toolkit (www.ncca.ie/aisteartoolkit) and resources for parents on a range of topics including *Early Literacy*, *Early Numeracy*, *Standardised Tests* and *School Reports* (www.ncca.ie/parents). Embedding videos, podcasts and online presentations in these materials helped to illustrate teaching and learning across the curriculum in a way that wasn't possible when the curriculum was being developed and introduced. While many of these supports were requested by teachers to help them unpack and implement the curriculum, the number and span of guideline documents has increased the overall volume of curriculum documentation with which teachers work, raising concerns about the feasibility of 'managing it all' as noted in the discussion document for the Irish National Teachers' Organisation's 2015 Education Conference: *materials continued to be prepared by the Department of Education and by the NCCA to support schools to meet their changing needs, and while useful, contributed to a sense of overload among teachers* (p.7). The volume of guidelines developed to help teachers work with the primary curriculum perhaps also highlights the depth and complexity of the 1999 curriculum in the context of teaching and learning in today's classrooms which are significantly different from those of seventeen years ago when the curriculum was published: *it [the curriculum] is a bit idealistic. It wants to fit every aspect of every subject for every student and that's just not possible* (INTO, 2015, p.20).

Through two reviews, teachers reported that curriculum overload—too much to do and too little time—was the greatest impediment to fully implementing curriculum subjects or to addressing all of

the objectives within all subjects (NCCA 2005; 2008a). Teachers also reported that they did not have enough time to meet the growing range of children's learning needs, particularly in large classes. Circular 0056/2011 which outlined initial steps in implementing the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011), including the allocation of increased time to literacy and numeracy, is likely to have further accentuated the challenge of implementing the primary curriculum in the way it was intended when developed almost 20 years ago.

The last two decades have also seen an acceleration in the volume of research on children's learning and development in their early childhood and primary school years. Much of this offers fresh insights into *how* children learn and develop during this stage of childhood. *Growing Up in Ireland*, Ireland's first longitudinal study of children (www.growingup.ie), following 18,000 children, illuminates how children are developing in their social, economic and cultural environments and how these rapidly changing environments, especially in recent years, have impacted on children's lives. Together with other research, this study enables us to see and better understand children's experiences of education in Ireland today. Across research, one constant is the centrality of the relationship between children and their teachers and the importance of 'quality' relationships for teaching and learning. These relationships are central to high-quality teaching in the primary years which, in turn, is crucial to children's success as highlighted by Bryk and Schneider (2002) and Hattie (2012).

As well as new research on teaching and learning, and new insights into children's experiences of their primary school years, NCCA has been requested to add more and new 'content' to the primary curriculum. Schools and the curriculum, together, are often viewed as a critical site for responding to national priorities or needs, and addressing societal problems. This is evident in calls for increased time to be allocated to existing curriculum areas such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Physical Education (PE), and in demands for the inclusion of new curriculum areas such as Coding, Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, Modern Languages, and Wellbeing. Oftentimes, calls for a greater focus on a particular aspect of the curriculum can result in initiatives such as health initiatives and environmental initiatives which can, in practice, become layered on top of the primary curriculum potentially adding further to an experience of curriculum overload. These different kinds of requests 'for more' highlight the competing demands on teachers and schools as they translate the written curriculum into the lived curriculum for all children. The requests also make the NCCA's work in reviewing and redeveloping the primary curriculum more complex and demanding.

The publication of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020*[1] (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2011) re-adjusted the priorities for education by providing more time for the teaching of language and mathematics. This change was made without further re-adjustment of time allocation across other curriculum areas. The NCCA is now tasked with advising on time allocation across the curriculum. On the face of it, advising on time might sound like a straightforward, technical exercise. But is it? At one level, it could involve simply reviewing current time allocations and re-adjusting them to reflect developments since 1999. However, time allocations are not neat, uncontested bundles of minutes allocated to individual curriculum areas or subjects. They represent values and priorities in primary education—what we deem important for our young citizens in the formative years of their educational experiences and what we value and prioritise for children's learning and development. These priorities, in turn, influence how a curriculum is organised, how time for teaching and learning is distributed across curriculum areas and subjects, and how that time is used.

The *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* also set out a curriculum reform agenda. This required the NCCA to begin the redevelopment of the primary curriculum in the area of language (English and Irish) followed by mathematics. Shaped by the timelines in the strategy, this work proceeded ahead of a review of the primary curriculum as a whole, and the new *Primary Language Curriculum* for junior infants to second class was published at www.curriculumonline.ie in December 2015. Recognising that schools will begin work with the new language curriculum during this school year, the NCCA now sets out proposals for the review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum as outlined in the *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*.

Changing classrooms, ever-increasing and changing demands of a primary school experience, a crowded curriculum, policy changes and new findings from research on teaching and learning create both a need and an opportunity to revisit the primary curriculum and to ask the question: *how can it be improved to support children's learning into the next decade?* The proposals in this document are intended to begin this important discussion. And their role is simply that—to begin discussions. This consultation will run until Spring of 2017 with the outcomes informing more detailed work by the NCCA in developing an overview of a redeveloped primary curriculum. This overview will be the basis for further consultation in 2018.

[1] Throughout the remainder of the document, this publication is referred to as the *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*.

Purpose of a primary curriculum

The 1999 primary curriculum reminds us that the *relationship between education and society is dynamic and interactive. Education not only reflects a society but is an influence in shaping its development* (p.x). So as we look ahead to the next decade and beyond, what is, or what should be, the purpose of primary education? In 2012, Adam Burk facilitated a rousing discussion on www.TED.com about the purpose of education. Closing the discussion and noting the diversity of opinion, he commented that this question and its answer *are the shapers of education systems and, in turn, cultures* (Burk cited in Sloan, 2012). The *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (DES, 2011) acknowledges the importance of curriculum evolving over time to reflect changing circumstances while at the same time stating that *the curriculum cannot include everything that might be desirable. We have to be realistic in the expectations that we set for students, teachers and schools. We have to acknowledge that defining the curriculum inevitably involves making choices and setting priorities* (p.44). In an article entitled, *What's the Purpose of School in the 21st Century*, Carter, CEO of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) concluded:

> *Research, policy, practice, and common sense confirm that a whole-child approach to education will develop and prepare students for the challenges and opportunities of today and tomorrow. A whole-child approach is the belief that each student in each classroom should be healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged.*

A useful understanding of curriculum might be that it is the *collection of stories which one generation chooses to tell the next about the world in which they live* (Looney, 2016). With this in mind, the NCCA worked with schools during 2010 to gather and learn from their experiences of curriculum overload. The importance of clarity in relation to the purpose of the primary curriculum was highlighted by schools during this work: *…in an increasingly layered, content-laden curriculum, key aims for children's learning and development in primary schools become lost, or at best, difficult to find* (NCCA, 2010c, p.6) and *In exploring practical measures to reduce curriculum overload in our primary schools, it would be worthwhile—and may in any case be necessary—to return to the key questions about what we want of our primary schools today, and what kind of curriculum is most likely to achieve those aims* (NCCA, 2010a, p.37).

The introduction to the primary curriculum (1999) presents three general aims of primary education:

- to enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual

- to enable the child to develop as a social being through living and cooperating with others and so contribute to the good of society
- to prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning.

While these probably remain broadly relevant and incontestable, a more focused set of aims or purposes could better support the redevelopment of the primary curriculum and ultimately, the experiences of teachers and children. Building on the work with schools in the decade following the publication of the curriculum, the NCCA issued a public invitation to 'have your say' on the priorities for a primary education in 2011/2012. A total of 960 responses were received. Analysis showed six broad priorities for children's primary education with some similarity to those expressed by Carter (see Table 2).

Table 2: Primary priorities in order of total respondents (NCCA, 2012)

Rank	Priority ***Primary education should…***	Total n=960	
1	Help children to develop **life skills through a broad curriculum.**	370	39%
2	Help children to **be good communicators.**	358	37%
3	Help children **to be well.**	347	36%
4	Help children to develop **literacy and numeracy skills.**	346	36%
5	**Motivate and engage** children.	249	26%
6	Help children to develop a sense of **identity and belonging.**	237	25%

Using these priorities as a starting point, and in the light of work done in developing an integrated language curriculum and the exploratory work on curriculum structure and time allocation, it seems opportune that we ask questions now about how the curriculum should be organised across the eight years of primary education. In doing this, this document comprises two parts. Part one presents options for rethinking the **structure** of the curriculum while part two sets out a proposal for rethinking the use of **time** across the curriculum in a different way to that currently suggested in the 1999 curriculum.

Summary

- Drawing on a range of evidence, the introduction to this consultation document provides the following rationale for revisiting the primary curriculum and asking the question: *how can it be improved to support children's learning into the next decade?*
- The *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) was informed by extensive research and deliberation. It was a curriculum of its time. However, much has changed in classrooms and in society since the curriculum was published.
- Responding to teachers' calls for more practical help in using the primary curriculum to support all children's learning, the NCCA developed guidelines and online resources. While these didn't change *what* children learn, they added to the volume of documentation which teachers use in school and classroom planning, contributing to a sense of curriculum overload.
- The publication of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and a programme of reform at junior cycle create a need for greater curriculum alignment and continuity as children move from preschool to primary school and on to post-primary school.
- There have been calls to allocate more time to existing areas in the curriculum such as SPHE. There have also been requests for new areas such as coding and ERB and Ethics. In light of teachers' experience of curriculum overload, it is important to reflect on what learning is important for children in a primary education.
- Through research on teaching and learning, and insights into children's experiences of their primary school years, we now know more about *how* children learn and develop during this period.
- *The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* required the NCCA to begin the redevelopment of the primary curriculum in the area of language followed by mathematics. It is important to now look at the primary curriculum as a whole.
- Collectively, the points above create an opportunity and a need to revisit the priorities of a primary curriculum as we look to the next decade.

Proposals for consultation

How curriculum is organised and how guidance on the use of time is expressed impact significantly on the nature of teaching and learning in classrooms. Primary education plays a uniquely important role in a child's lifelong learning and in his/her life experiences and achievements. While it is a distinct phase of education in its own right, primary education builds on and from children's home lives and their very early childhood experiences including, from September this year, up to two years of pre-school education based on *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Primary education also links to, and leads on to what will be a new and evolving junior cycle experience.

As already noted, this consultation paper presents proposals for a new curriculum structure and based on these, a proposal for how time might be re-organised across the curriculum. The proposals have been informed by recent research, in particular:

- *The Primary Classroom: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study* (McCoy, Smith and Banks, 2012)
- *Curriculum Structures and Stages in Primary Education – Audit of Policy Across Jurisdictions* (Grayson, Houghton, O'Donnell, and Sargent, 2014)
- *Stages in Educational/Cognitive Development – Current Status and Implications* (Morgan, 2014)
- *Student Learning Time – A Literature Review* [OECD Education Working Paper No.127] (Gromada and Shewbridge, 2016)
- *Transition from Preschool to Primary School* – Research Report No. 19 (O'Kane, 2016)
- *Recommended Annual Instruction Time in Full-time Compulsory Education in Europe 2015/16. Eurydice – Facts and Figures* (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2016).

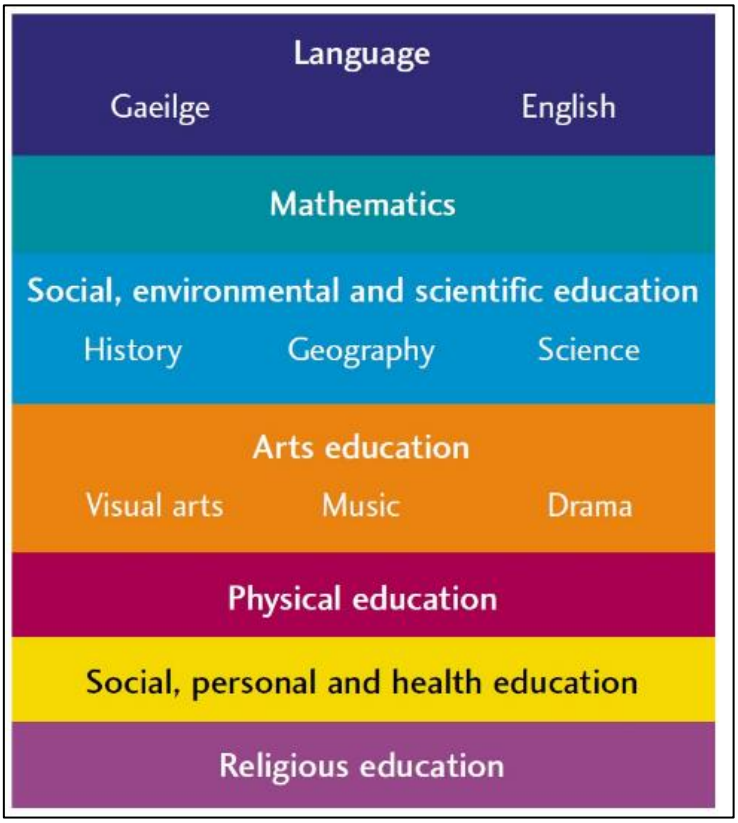
At this stage of the work, the consultation paper does not address the ***content*** of a redeveloped curriculum, focusing instead on ***organisational aspects***. In this way, it presents a broad framework within which work on the redevelopment of the primary curriculum might proceed.

Part 1: Structure of a primary curriculum

The Primary School Curriculum (1999) is presented in four bands each spanning two classes or years. Morgan (2014) argues that the main purpose of the two-year bands is that *a statement of expectations of learners and curriculum objectives are specified for children in each level. The problem is that there is no justification for the consequent stages and no statement of the distinctive features of each stage* (p.4). At the time, no clear explication of the rationale for differentiating between the four two-year bands, was set out. In the case of each band, the curriculum presents children's learning and development using the same seven curriculum areas and 11 subjects (

1) from junior infants to sixth class. Religious education, although included as a curriculum area in the graphic, is the responsibility of the patron of the school, which traditionally has been a denominational organisation in the vast majority of schools.

Figure 1: Current structure of the primary curriculum



January 2010 saw the launch of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme commonly referred to as the *Free Pre-School Year* with approximately 95% of eligible children participating in it in 2015/2016. The programme was extended on September 1st 2016 with all children being given an entitlement to state-funded early childhood care and education from their third birthday and up to

their entry to primary school, provided they are not older than five years and six months by the end of June before beginning school. This policy development has, in essence, created a further 'band' with state provision for early childhood and primary education now comprising five two-year bands. It is important to note that while state provision begins at three years, the two early childhood practice frameworks—*Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009)—support children's learning and development from birth.

Post-primary education consists of a three-year Junior Cycle followed by a two-year or three-year Senior Cycle depending on whether the optional Transition Year is taken by students. This Transition Year takes place immediately after the Junior Cycle and provides students with a broad educational experience, acting as a bridge between the Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle programmes. As a whole, state provision for education from early childhood through primary and post-primary, includes seven 'bands' as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Seven stages of state provision for early childhood, primary and post-primary education

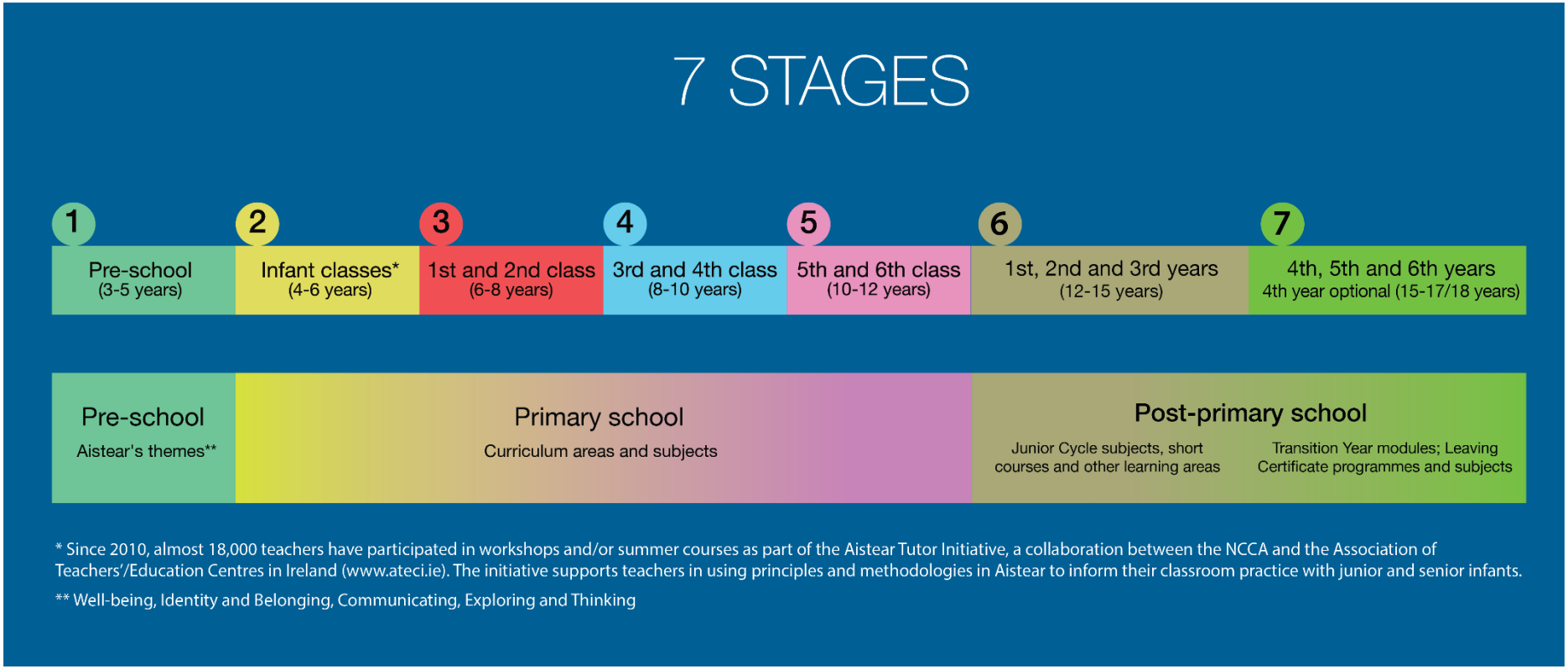
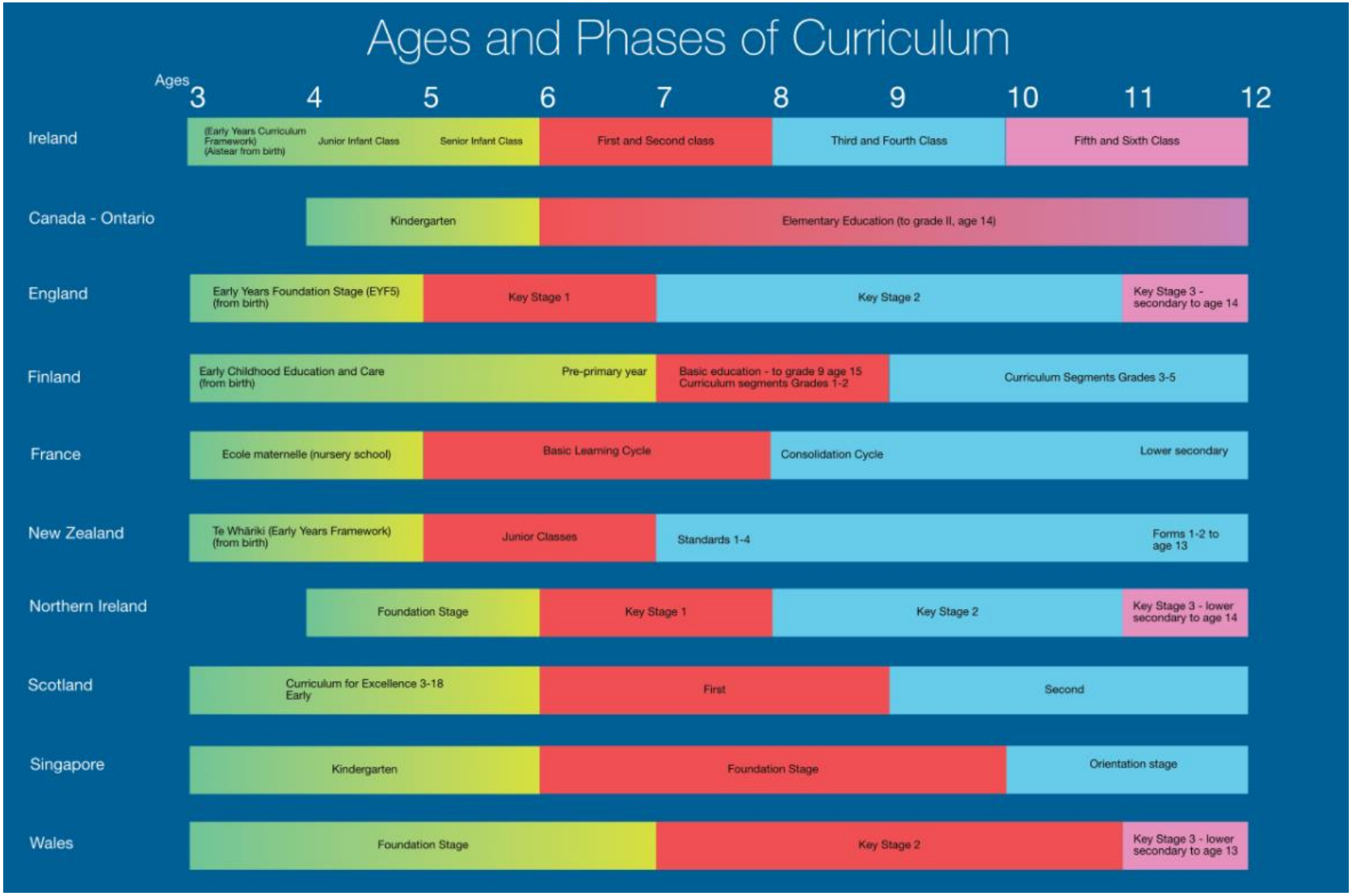


Figure 3: International comparison of ages and phases of curriculum



At this point, it might be helpful to look outside Ireland to see how the primary curriculum is structured in other jurisdictions. Figure 3 from *Structures and Transitions in Primary Education - Audit of International policy* (NFER, 2013), provides an overview of curriculum stages across ten jurisdictions. The majority of countries audited tend to use a two- or three-stage model for curriculum between the ages of three and 12 years. A point of particular interest given the recent introduction of a second year of universal pre-school education, is that age ranges and phases of the curriculum sometimes overlap a structural phase of education as happens with *Aistear* traversing pre-school education and the first two years of primary. Similarly in Wales, the Foundation Stage curriculum for children aged three to seven years covers the pre-school stage and the first two years of compulsory, primary education—one stage encompassing experiences in two different types of physical settings. Likewise in France, the final year of pre-school education (five- to six-year-olds) is covered by the first year of the first phase of the primary curriculum (the basic learning cycle), and the final year of the final phase of the primary curriculum (the consolidation cycle) is the first year of lower secondary education.

Given the addition of a further stage of education in the Irish context in which children's experiences are increasingly being shaped by *Aistear*, it is timely to ask whether the organisation of the curriculum with seven areas and 11 subjects is the best structure for children throughout their primary school experience. While children learn and develop through the same curriculum areas and subjects from junior infants to sixth class, the curriculum does acknowledge that children learn in a different way, particularly during the first two years of primary school, compared to the rest of their primary experience. In addition, and historically, even the title 'junior and senior infants' implies a different experience and one that is more akin to an early childhood experience than perhaps a formal, school experience. This is further reflected in the different suggested timetable for infant classes (DES, 1999).

In addition to the primary curriculum, many teachers working with junior and senior infant classes also use principles and methodologies from *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) to enhance their classroom practice. A study looking at *Aistear* (2009) in relation to the Primary School Curriculum (Gray and Ryan, 2016) reported concerns about teachers' ability to teach curriculum subjects through the medium of play and noted the primary curriculum as a barrier to the successful implementation of *Aistear* in infant classes. This reflects international evidence of a tension between competing demands of play-based pedagogies and curriculum. Shaeffer (2006) agrees, suggesting that children experience sharp differences in the curriculum when they begin primary school and asks the question: *To ease the transition do we formalise the informal…or de-formalise what is usually considered formal? Unfortunately, the former seems to be the trend* (p.7).

The last five to ten years have seen curriculum change at primary level in a number of jurisdictions. Key drivers for this change have included a desire to raise standards especially in children's literacy and numeracy achievement, an emphasis on supporting broader learning through the development of competences and skills that help pupils to become lifelong learners and active participants in society, and a focus on greater coherence and alignment across the different phases of education. Shaped by some of these drivers, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011) sets out the beginnings of a redevelopment of the curriculum for primary schools. While much of this focuses on a new language curriculum, the first part of which was published in December 2015, and a new mathematics curriculum, it tasks the NCCA with revising *the required learning outcomes in subjects other than English, Irish and mathematics to take account of the reduced time available for these subjects and provide guidance on the possibilities for cross-curricular teaching and learning* (p.57). In addition, the Strategy refers to the importance of revising the full curriculum for junior and senior infants to ensure:

> *consistency with the Aistear framework and to support and facilitate the integrated teaching of subjects especially the development of language across the curriculum and the integrated teaching of the areas of social, environmental and scientific education, social, personal and health education and arts education* (p.56).

What type of curriculum structure should therefore be considered in a redevelopment of the primary curriculum?

An incremental stage model

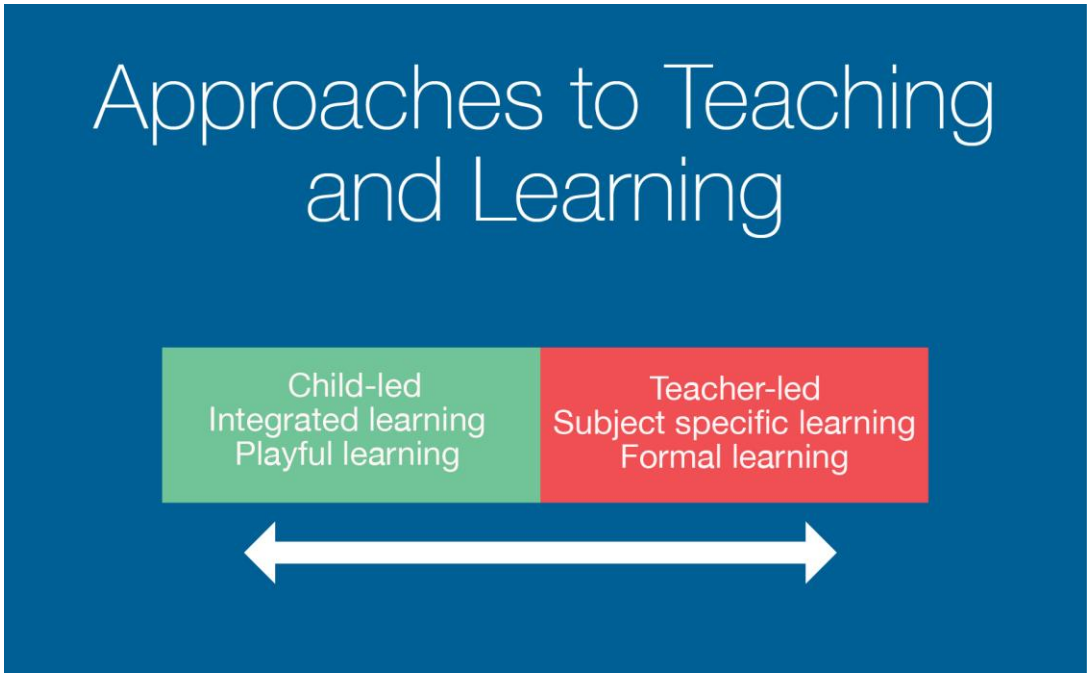
Studies of cognitive development and children's social-emotional and physical development provide a strong rationale for moving from the current model of four two-year bands to an incremental stage model to structure and organise the primary curriculum (Morgan, 2014).

> *An incremental model differentiates stages on the basis of children's capacities in cognitive and social/personal development, while recognising that some core principles of learning apply at all stages. In other words, learning experiences should match the distinctive features of children's ways of understanding and relating with the world* (Morgan, 2014, p.6).

In explicating this view of stages, Morgan (2014) emphasises the consistency that characterises the development of children at certain ages but also the commonality that exists across stages. This view would see some principles of children's learning experiences being common from junior infants to sixth class while the approach to teaching and learning most suited to an early stage or to a later stage, would be distinctive. Emphasising the incremental nature of change in children's capacity for learning

and development rather than major qualitative changes, Morgan (2014) posits that this is currently the most widely accepted view on stages within developmental psychology. This way of organising the curriculum aligns differentiated, incremental stages with the develoospmental contexts in which children learn. This differentiation reflects the view of Morgan (2014) that features of learning change across stages. Consequently, the focus for children's learning should be appropriate for each stage and characterised by different emphases. These emphases might be considered in terms of positions along the following continua.

Figure 4: Pedagogical continua



* The term 'teacher-led' is understood as the teacher making key decisions about what, in broad terms, children will learn, the sequencing and pacing of that learning. These decisions are informed by the curriculum. This role is not synonymous with a transmission model of teaching and learning.

* Playful learning has six key pillars. It involves (1) fostering warm secure relationships with children; (2) cultivating playful and engaging interactions with children; (3) creating playful opportunities in all teaching and learning experiences; (4) ensuring sensitive pacing and matching, based on knowledge of developmental pathways; (5) respecting individual differences in ability, personality, age and culture; and (6) managing progression and transitions (Walsh, 2015).

Adopting the idea of an incremental stage model, two proposals for curriculum structure are outlined below for consideration. While these differ in small and sometimes significant ways from each other, they are all underpinned by the following three assertions.

1. Curriculum **alignment and continuity** on entry to and exit from primary education is important for all children. Policy changes and curriculum developments at early childhood and junior cycle necessitate a particular focus on this in considering a new structure for the primary curriculum.
2. A **subject-based curriculum** is no longer the most appropriate curriculum structure for supporting children's learning and development in their **early years of primary school**.
3. A **subject-based curriculum** continues to be an important curriculum structure in the **senior years of primary education**.

Each of these points is explored briefly below.

Curriculum alignment and continuity

Recent and ongoing policy changes in the phases before and after primary education, make 'joining-up' the curriculum across phases an important consideration when thinking about the structure of the primary curriculum. This 'joining-up' has already been a key theme in recent curriculum developments with the principles and methodologies of *Aistear* being embedded in the new language curriculum[2] for infant classes. In the case of junior cycle, new curriculum specifications take account of children's learning in the senior years of primary. Curriculum alignment and coherence can also be seen at the level of priorities across phases, for example, how the themes of *Aistear* link closely with the eight junior cycle key skills.

Through reviews, children have highlighted the need to improve transitions at the beginning of the primary cycle, e.g., *the only thing I don't like doing is when I can't play…I miss dressing up as well* (NCCA, 2005, pp.242-243) and towards the end of primary school, e.g., *I would like if maybe for the last few months of the school year you got to try a few of the subjects that you do in secondary school so you'd know what you like and what you could do when you go and you'd have a head-start*[3]. The drive to ensure that the curriculum is 'joined-up' across the phases of education is not unique to Ireland. Curriculum reform at primary level in other jurisdictions has also had coherence as one of its drivers, e.g., in Scotland, with the development of Curriculum for Excellence offering a single curriculum continuum for those aged three to 18 years of age, and in Wales.

Changing images of children as learners together with new insights from research in the cognitive development field, pose questions about an appropriate curriculum structure and whether the current curriculum model is still relevant from junior infants to sixth class. Taken together, the themes

[2] The new Primary Language Curriculum for junior infants to second class is published at www.curriculumonline.ie.
[3] Podcast with Children (NCCA, 2011) http://vimeo.com/82283247

of *Aistear* and findings from the audit of curriculum structures across 10 jurisdictions (NFER, 2014, pp.11-16) highlight the value of differentiating the curriculum structure by stage and connecting the stages at the beginning and end of primary school with the early childhood and junior cycle stages.

Appropriateness in the early years of primary

The curriculum acknowledges that children at the infant level perceive and experience learning in an integrated way:

> *For the young child, the distinctions between subjects are not relevant. What is more important is that he or she experiences a coherent learning process…It is important, therefore, to make connections between learning in different subjects…integration gives children's learning a broader and richer perspective, emphasises the interconnectedness of knowledge and ideas and reinforces the learning process* (DES, 1999, p.16).

However, the same curriculum structure from junior infants to sixth class—seven curriculum areas and 11 subjects[4]—has the potential to unnecessarily fragment learning and development in a way that is unhelpful to young children.

Primary teachers and principals have highlighted the challenge of making curriculum integration a reality in schools and classrooms (NCCA, 2005; 2008). Reflecting on curriculum overload in particular, teachers shared the following thoughts on how the primary curriculum might be improved (NCCA, 2010b, pp.45-52): *Maybe there are just too many subjects…*(p.46); *I think there needs to be a greater focus on effective integration and the development of skills rather than developing individual subjects.* (p.51). Developing some of these ideas further, respondents to a survey on curriculum priorities suggested that curriculum areas and subjects were perhaps somewhat less important than the development of dispositions and life-skills (NCCA, 2012, p.ix). Discussing the implications of *Aistear* for the primary curriculum, a teacher responded, *huge implications…Bring it on…we need to have our infant curriculum more responsive to the needs of 4-year-old children, but it must note the realities of large class sizes in small rooms with few resources*.(2010b, 2010, p.47).

Prioritising the integrated nature of early learning and development, *Aistear* uses a different curriculum structure based on four interconnected themes—*Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating*, and *Exploring and Thinking*. The themes describe the contents of learning including positive dispositions, knowledge and understanding, skills, and attitudes and values (see Appendix 1 for an overview of *Aistear*'s four themes). Through meaningful and purposeful experiences, children

[4] While Religious Education is not the responsibility of the NCCA, it is included in the total count of curriculum areas and subjects.

make connections across their learning, explore their surroundings and make sense of the world around them. Children experience learning in a holistic way. *Aistear*'s themes offer a holistic view of children as young learners and of our societal priorities for their learning and development.

In setting out actions for the improvement of the curriculum for infant classes, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011) calls for *the integrated teaching of subjects especially the development of language across the curriculum and the integrated teaching of the areas of social, environmental and scientific education, social, personal and health education and arts education* (p.56). Since the Aistear Tutor Initiative began in March 2010, teachers who have participated in *Aistear* workshops and/or summer courses have highlighted the very real challenge in using a play pedagogy within a subject-based curriculum. As the following quotations illustrate, working with content presented within the boundaries of 11 subjects along with a feeling of content overload, appears to squeeze the time and opportunities to move from predominantly teacher-led experiences to a greater balance between teacher-led and child-led activities.

> *There is the timetabling impact also and when you add on the increased time we are supposed/obliged to give to Maths and English it becomes a bit of a squeeze to do it every single day. The children love it [child-led play], I love it but time, as always, is against us.* (NCCA, 2012, p.40)
>
> *feel the curriculum is overloaded and finding an hour [for child-led play] is difficult.* (NCCA, 2012, p.40)

Perhaps a further development of *Aistear*'s thematic curriculum structure might provide greater support to teachers working with children in the first two years of primary school.

Appropriateness in the later years of primary

As children progress through their primary school education, their capacity for more abstract thinking and learning grows (Fisher, 2011). In discussing the importance of subjects, especially for children from 11 years of age on, Kirk and Broadhead (2007) state that:

> *subjects constitute the available ways we have of exploring and interpreting the world of subjective experience, of analysing the social environment and of making sense of the natural world. It is through subject study that learners acquire historical, scientific, mathematical and other forms of understanding; and it is through subject study that learners develop the capacity to engage in the distinctive modes of investigation and analysis through which human experience is differentiated and extensions of human understanding are achieved.* (p.10)

While subjects as discrete or specialised domains of knowledge and understanding can often be associated with children's cognitive development, Kirk and Broadhead argue that subjects contribute to all aspects of children's learning and development:

> *subjects nurture the sense of achievement, the growth of self-confidence and self-esteem, enthusiasm and enjoyment, the self-understanding that comes through challenge, the capacity to engage and interact with others, and the satisfactions that derive from participation in sport, adventure, the arts and forms of service to the community. In all of these ways subjects, whether approached discretely or in integrated mode, exert a humanising, liberating and ultimately transforming impact on learners* (2007, p.10).

In his review of directions in primary curriculum development in 10 jurisdictions, Pepper (2008) observed that the *differences between 'subjects' and 'areas' are not hard and fast* (p.2). Primary curricula tend to be predominantly characterised either by subjects of which there will tend to be many or by areas of which there will tend to be fewer with some countries such as Slovenia having 15 subjects compared to Northern Ireland's six areas (Pepper, 2008; NFER, 2012). Beyond the infant years in primary school, is it then a matter of choice between curriculum areas and subjects? If subjects are the key curriculum organiser, at what point in a child's primary school experience should they appear?

Of the two approaches, the use of curriculum areas tends to be more common than the use of subjects as a curriculum organiser. Analysing curriculum documentation, the rationale presented for moving from subjects to curriculum areas often references cognitive development; transition from pre-primary modes of learning; curriculum integration to optimise learning; new importance attached to cross-curricular competences; a need to simplify the curriculum and its assessment; or, a need to make the curriculum more manageable (Pepper, 2008). Not only have recent developments seen a general move towards a more integrated curriculum structure but curriculum content itself shows a high degree of convergence (Alexander, 2009b).

Some commentators such as Young, however, contest these trends in educational policy. Young (2010) re-states that one of the purposes of education including at school level, is *to ensure that as many as possible of each cohort or age group are able to acquire the knowledge that takes them beyond their experience and which they would be unlikely to have access to at home, at work or in the community* (pp.5-6). Referring to this as 'powerful knowledge', he sees a move towards broad learning areas (curriculum areas) and away from subjects, as a threat to promoting access for all children to conceptual thinking and knowledge distinguished from the everyday knowledge that children bring to school. Arguably, subject-based learning also provides important opportunities for children to come to a deeper understanding and mastery of the skills involved in working effectively within a particular discipline, for example, working as a historian or a geographer or developing a musical composition. In a similar vein, Alexander, Rose and Whitehead (1992) argue that resistance to subjects in a curriculum *on the grounds that they are inconsistent with children's views of the world is to confine them within their existing modes of thought and deny them access to some of the most powerful tools*

for making sense of the world which human beings have ever devised (p.23). Developing this argument further, they contend that *education is an encounter between these personal understandings and the public knowledge embodied in our cultural traditions. The teacher's key responsibility is to mediate such encounters so that the child's understanding is enriched* (1992, p.23). Even in the case of the youngest children in primary school, Cullen (2003; cited in Hedges and Cullen [2005]) acknowledges the importance of weaving subject-based content into interest-based learning and knowledge construction, and that purposeful teaching and learning occurs when teachers' subject knowledge contributes to appropriate pedagogical strategies and meaningful learning experiences for children (Hedges and Cullen, 2005). In one sense therefore, curriculum areas are not incompatible with subjects in that using the former as a curriculum organiser does not necessarily deny children opportunities to experience and benefit from subjects as *communities of debate and argumentation, of exploration and criticism, of conjecture and refutation* (Kirk and Broadhead, 2007, cited in Lambert, 2010, p.211). Reflecting a similar position, Rose (2009) notes the importance of curricular content being increasingly configured as subjects to reflect and support children's progression in learning and to help ease their transition to the next stage at second level, while at the same time advocating the use of six broad areas of learning for the primary curriculum.

In his exploration of stages in children's educational development, Morgan concludes that *any curriculum (and by implication, the distinctive emphasis in the various stages of primary school) will reflect not only the needs of children but also the society and culture of the educational system* (2014, pp.8-9). Likewise, while trends and developments as outlined above show a general move away from presenting primary curricula as sets of connected subjects to using broader and more overarching areas of learning (with subjects more visible in the later stage of primary), it is important to note relevant contextual factors in the Irish system. These include

- an eight-year primary cycle preceded by up to two years of universal pre-school provision for all children
- a potential further increase in primary school starting age. Prior to the introduction of the Free Pre-school Year in January 2010, 49% of four-year-olds were enrolled in primary school. This figure fell to 38% in 2015. The extension of the Free Pre-school Programme in September this year could further impact on the age profile of junior infant classes which, in time, will see an increase in the age at which children transfer to post-primary.
- a strong tradition of subject teaching in primary and post-primary even with a primary curriculum which nests its subjects within broader curriculum areas

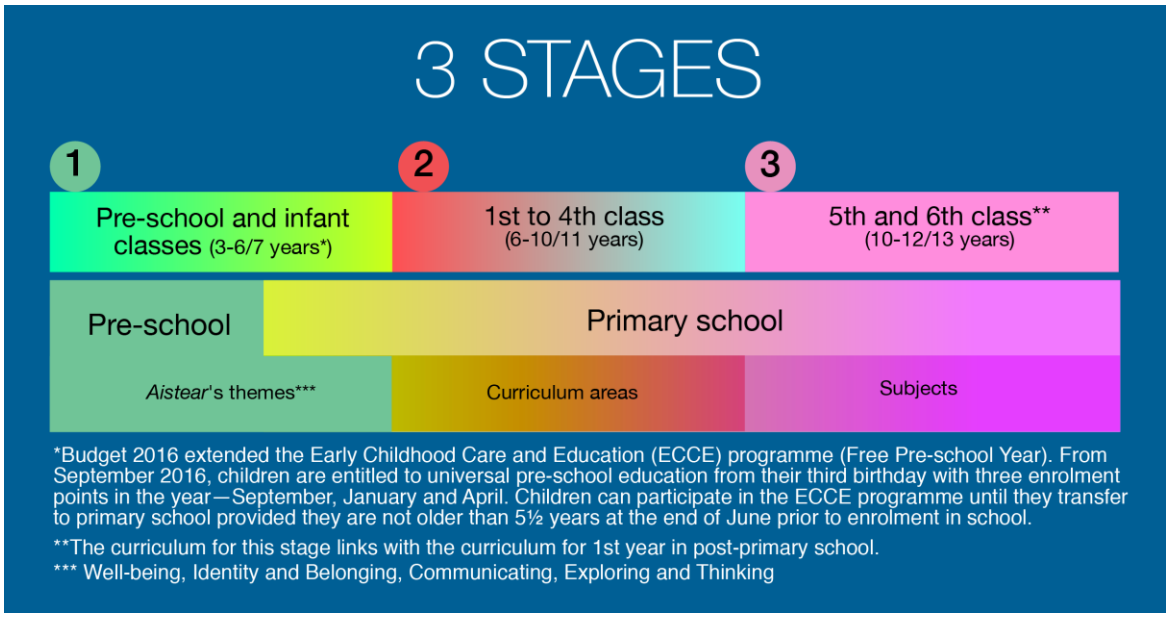
- the introduction in the current school year of the new primary language curriculum for English and Irish from junior infants to second class. Work is on-going in relation to the development of the new primary language curriculum for third to sixth class. This integrated language curriculum is currently comprised of two stages—Stage 1 (junior and senior infants) and Stage 2 (first and second classes).

These factors warrant particular attention when considering a change to how the primary curriculum is structured. The following pages set out two options, both using the concept of an incremental stage model, for how a redeveloped primary curriculum might be structured. The options indicate when the points of curriculum differentiation happen, whether it's moving from *Aistear*-like themes to broad curriculum areas or to subjects. These points mark, in very broad terms, changes in children's learning and development. The options are not exhaustive but are intended to stimulate discussion about the most appropriate structure for the primary curriculum.

Option 1: Three-stage model

Figure 5 sets out a re-conceptualisation of stages that might better reflect children's different and changing developmental stages during primary education and how these stages impact on both *how* they learn and *what* they should learn. This approach also acknowledges and builds on the *funds of knowledge* (Hedges, 2015) that children bring with them from home and pre-school into primary school.

Figure 5: A three-stage model for a new primary curriculum



Stage 1 of this model would encompass the *Free Pre-school* education provided for children from their third birthday as well as the two infant years in primary school. Based on the principles, themes and methodologies of *Aistear*, the curriculum for this stage would support continuity of experience and progression in children's learning and help them make an effective transition from pre-school into primary school. This stage would prioritise playful teaching and learning across the curriculum with child-led play being an important aspect of this.

Stage 2 would then refer to the 'middle' four years in primary school—first, second, third and fourth classes. The curriculum for this stage would bridge the thematic and highly integrated approach to curriculum in Stage 1 with a subject-based curriculum in Stage 3. This representation of curriculum would recognise the incremental development of a child's cognitive ability to distinguish and compartmentalise forms of knowledge. Using curriculum areas, the structure for Stage 2 would continue to promote connections across children's learning and development while also acknowledging their capacity for more abstract thinking and learning. Within the curriculum's broad areas, subject identities would be more visible than in the themes of Stage 1 helping to balance subject-specific knowledge with skills and dispositions. In this way, Stage 2 would provide children with opportunities to deepen the knowledge gained in Stage 1 and enable them to have greater and more frequent opportunities to apply their knowledge in particular contexts and to develop greater mastery of certain skills.

Stage 3 would use a largely subject-based curriculum structure. Building on their experiences in earlier stages, this type of curriculum would provide children with opportunities for foundational disciplinary

learning and distinctive subject-based forms of inquiry and investigation. These experiences, in turn, would enable them to develop high levels of independence and a strong sense of themselves as learners. The move to more discipline-specific learning would also support children's transition from primary school to post-primary school.

As with any model, there would be both benefits and challenges. While some of these are set out below, they are not intended to be exhaustive but rather, a support for discussions on the potential of the three-stage model as a structure for a redeveloped primary curriculum. The benefits and challenges are followed with an initial overview of features of children's learning experiences as they move through the three stages.

Benefits of the three-stage model

The benefits of presenting and organising curriculum in three stages might include the following.

- The concepts, dispositions, knowledge, skills, values and attitudes specified would reflect the priorities for children's learning according to their particular stage of development and their level of independence as learners. The use of three stages would support a greater level of differentiation in these priorities across children's primary school experience than that afforded by a two-stage model as set out in Option 2.
- Three stages would provide opportunities to prioritise and support the use of particular pedagogical practices which are highlighted in research as being particularly effective and important for children's learning, for example, the use of child-led play in the initial years of primary or the use of problem-based learning for deep exploration of concepts and the development of skills in the senior years of primary. This differentiation of pedagogical practices could extend beyond the classroom, for example, to suggestions for how parents might support their child's learning at home including through different types of homework tasks.
- The model would acknowledge that stages of learning and development are more complex, fluid and transient than a two-stage model where children might be expected to go directly from theme-based or curriculum area-based learning to subject-specific learning.
- The three-stage model could be more conducive to effective transitions between sectors with children's learning experiences in the infant classes more closely aligned with their pre-school experiences. Similarly, the model could support better continuity of experience and progression in children's learning as they move from primary to post-primary school.

Challenges of the three-stage model

The challenges of presenting and organising curriculum in three stages might include the following.

- Using *Aistear*'s themes and drawing on its principles, the model would advocate a highly integrated curriculum structure and the use of a playful pedagogy for teaching and learning in Stage 1. This would represent a significant departure from the current organisation and presentation of the curriculum (1999), and in the case of some teachers[5], would mean a change from current teaching approaches.

- The model's potential to support more differentiated approaches to teaching and learning across the three stages could, in turn, pose challenges at a systems level. For example, how could initial teacher education best support and enable an individual teacher to work across the three stages? How might continuing professional development further support teachers in building their professional expertise to work in all three stages?

- The model could pose challenges related to teacher identity, recruitment and career progression. Care would be needed to ensure that teachers weren't allocated to a specific stage of the curriculum with that stage largely defining the course of their school career. This potential risk of specialisation in one of the three stages could have implications for teachers' career paths. Could teacher recruitment, or indeed teacher promotion, become linked to a particular curriculum stage perhaps narrowing employment opportunities for some teachers?

- The three-stage model may be especially challenging for small schools with multi-grade classrooms and particularly for two-teacher and four-teacher schools where teachers would find themselves working with two different curriculum structures. Two-teacher and four-teacher schools account for almost 18% of primary schools and 4.3% of children attending primary school (DES, 2015/2016 school year).

- While the three-stage model could impact positively on children's transition from pre-school into primary school and from primary school into post-primary school, it could also generate a new transition challenge for teachers in moving between stages, for example, moving from fourth class in Stage 2 to fifth class in Stage 3, and for children going from highly-integrated theme-based learning to curriculum areas and then to subjects.

[5] Since spring 2010, almost 18,000 teachers have participated in *Aistear* workshops and/or summer courses offered by Education Centres. These continuing professional development events are designed to support teachers in using principles and methodologies in *Aistear* to inform their classroom practice with junior and senior infants.

Key emphases for children's learning

While children's learning at all stages would be underpinned by many common experiences reflecting Morgan's observations (2014), the focus for their learning and development at each stage might be distinguished in the following ways as set out in Table 3.

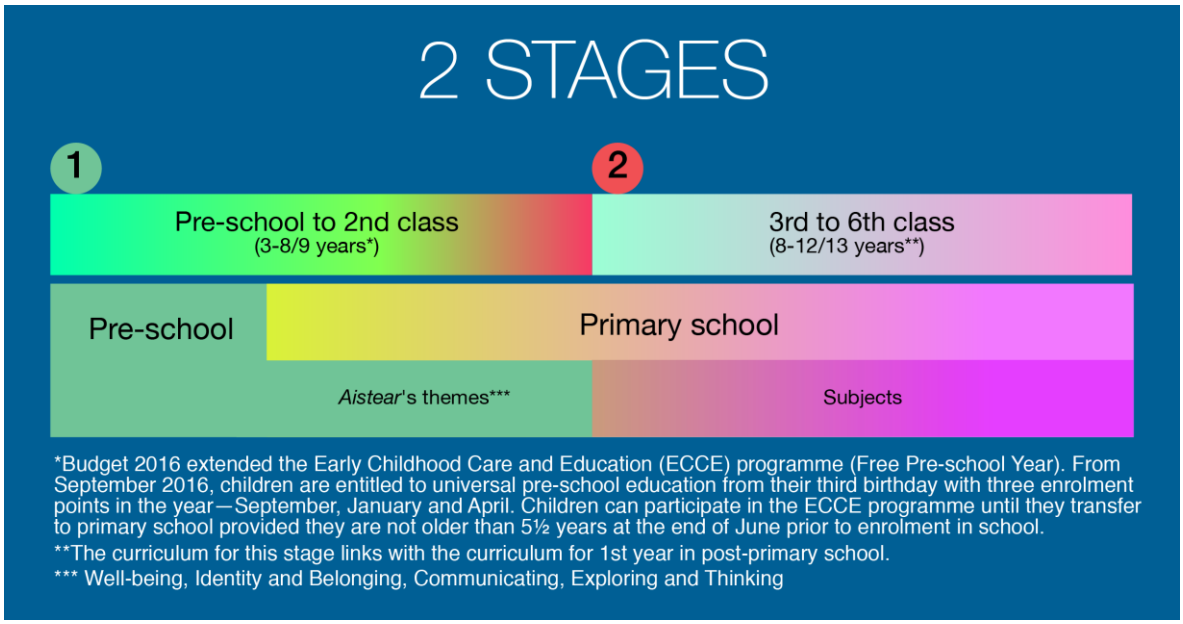
Table 3: Key emphases for children's learning across three stages

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
▪ Supporting transition and continuity from pre-school to primary ▪ Building competence and confidence in a new environment ▪ Building relationships ▪ Learning through child-led play and playful experiences ▪ Gradual introduction into more formal learning routines and structures ▪ Using the environment as the third teacher ▪ Building strong oral language foundations	▪ Interaction, collaboration, active learning ▪ Building content knowledge and conceptual development through integrated learning experiences ▪ Developing fluency in skills and application of knowledge ▪ Nurturing and extending relationships	▪ Stronger sense of self-identity, self-esteem, emotional resilience and grit ▪ Greater capacity for problem-solving and higher-order thinking ▪ Greater independence and assertiveness ▪ Laying foundations for subject-specific learning at post-primary ▪ Managing complexities in relationships

Option 2: Two-stage model

Figure 6 presents a second option for a new primary curriculum structure. Comprising only two stages, this model again recognises that children have significant educational experiences before they come to primary school and that it is important that their early school experience builds on these.

Figure 6: Two-stage model for a new primary curriculum



As in Option 1, Stage 1 would be based on the themes, principles and approaches of *Aistear* and would comprise the two *Free Pre-school* years, the two infant classes and first and second classes. The continuity of learning experience provided by a common curriculum structure in pre-school settings and early primary would support children's development and transition between the two settings. Through differentiation, teachers could ensure appropriate extension and challenge in children's learning experiences as they progressed into first and second classes in order to support their conceptual and knowledge development as well as development of skills, dispositions, attitudes and values.

Stage 2 would span third to sixth class and be based on curriculum subjects. The use of a subject-based curriculum would begin at an earlier age in this option compared to Option 1 (using three stages and focusing on subjects in fifth and sixth classes only). In Option 2, children would learn through subjects from third class and links could be made with the curriculum for Year 1 in the new Junior Cycle in post-primary.

As with the three-stage model in Option 1, there would be both benefits and challenges. Some of these are set out below as a support for discussions on the potential of the two-stage model as a structure for a redeveloped primary curriculum. The benefits and challenges are followed by an initial overview of features of children's learning experiences as they move through the two stages.

Benefits of the two-stage model

The benefits of presenting and organising the curriculum in two stages might include the following.

- As with the three-stage model, the concepts, dispositions, knowledge, skills, values and attitudes specified would reflect the priorities for children's learning according to their particular stage of development and their level of independence as learners. However, the degree of differentiation and change reflected in these priorities would be less than in the three-stage model given the smaller number of stages.
- Similar to the three-stage model, having two distinct stages would provide opportunities to prioritise and support the use of particular pedagogical practices highlighted in research as being particularly effective and important for children's learning.
- Again, like the three-stage model, the two-stage model could support better continuity of experience and progression in children's learning as they move from pre-school to primary school and from primary to post-primary school. An additional benefit of the two-stage model would be fewer transition points in terms of curriculum structure for teachers and children. With only two types of curriculum structure, teachers could find it easier to move between stages in terms of the classes they would teach.
- The two-stage model would potentially be more suitable for small schools compared to the three-stage model. As noted in the outline of challenges associated with the latter model, this sense of better fit might be especially important and relevant in the case of two-teacher and four-teacher schools. In the case of larger schools, the two-stage model could be more suited to junior and senior schools than the three-stage model where junior schools comprise junior infants to second class, and senior schools include third to sixth classes.

Challenges

The challenges of presenting and organising the curriculum in two stages might include the following.

- Like the three-stage model, the two-stage option also represents a significant departure from the current organisation and presentation of curriculum (1999), particularly the highly integrated structure and the playful pedagogy advocated for teaching and learning in Stage 1. As noted earlier, while many teachers might be familiar with this type of pedagogy, it would represent a significant change in classroom practice for many. With the inclusion of first and second class in Stage 1 in this model, teachers would be required to use significant levels of differentiation, for example, to ensure play-based learning provided sufficient degrees of challenge in order to help children make progress.

- The two stages in the model would necessitate different approaches to teaching and learning. As with the three-stage model, this could pose challenges at a system level, for example, for designing and structuring initial teacher education and for ensuring that continuing professional development would meet the needs of teachers across Stage 1 and Stage 2. However, the degree of challenge posed at a system level may be less than in the case of the three-stage model.
- Like the three-stage model, the two-stage model could also pose challenges related to teacher identity, recruitment and career progression. Compared to the three-stage model, the potential for one stage to be seen as more important than the other could arguably be less, with less potential, as a result, for the particular curriculum stage to impact significantly on a teacher's opportunities for moving between schools and applying for promotion.
- The two-stage model could pose more challenges than the three-stage model in aligning with the new Primary Language Curriculum (2015; www.curriculumonline.ie). This new language curriculum presents sets of learning outcomes for each of two stages—Stage 1 (junior and senior infants) and Stage 2 (first and second classes). Moving to a two-stage curriculum structure could require a representation of those learning outcomes at a time when schools are at an advanced stage of their work in implementing the language curriculum.

Key emphases for children's learning

While children's learning at all stages would be underpinned by many common experiences, the focus for their learning and development at each stage might be distinguished in the following ways as out in Table 4.

Table 4: Key emphases for children's learning across two stages

Stage 1	Stage 2
▪ Supporting transition and continuity from pre-school to primary ▪ Building competence and confidence in a new environment ▪ Building relationships ▪ Learning through child-led play and playful experiences ▪ Gradual introduction into more formal learning routines and structures ▪ Using the environment as the third teacher ▪ Building strong oral language foundations	▪ Stronger sense of self-identity, self-esteem, emotional resilience and grit ▪ Learning through problem-solving ▪ Fostering independence and assertiveness ▪ Deepening knowledge and understanding and acquiring mastery of skills through discipline-specific learning ▪ Managing relationships ▪ Preparing for the transition to post-primary

The options presented above set out two possibilities for a new structure for the primary curriculum. But they are just that, **two options**. In considering other options or permutations of Options 1 and 2, perhaps a key question is, *at what point in a child's primary education should subjects be introduced*? *Should a redeveloped primary curriculum use Aistear-like themes for the infant years (and the two Free Pre-school Years) and evolve to subjects from 1st class onwards? Should the Aistear-like themes be used to structure the curriculum to fourth class with subjects used only in fifth and sixth classes? Should subjects even continue to form part of the structure?*

Themes, areas and subjects

This consultation paper has presented proposals for curriculum structure underpinned by the concept of an incremental stage model. The proposals focus on the concept of moving from a model of four arbitrary stages which share the same structure, to an incremental stage model of either two or three stages which have a differentiated curriculum structure. Structure, however, is but a first layer in thinking about a curriculum and beyond this, one immediately thinks of what 'fills' that structure. Exploring the importance of school subjects, Lambert writes:

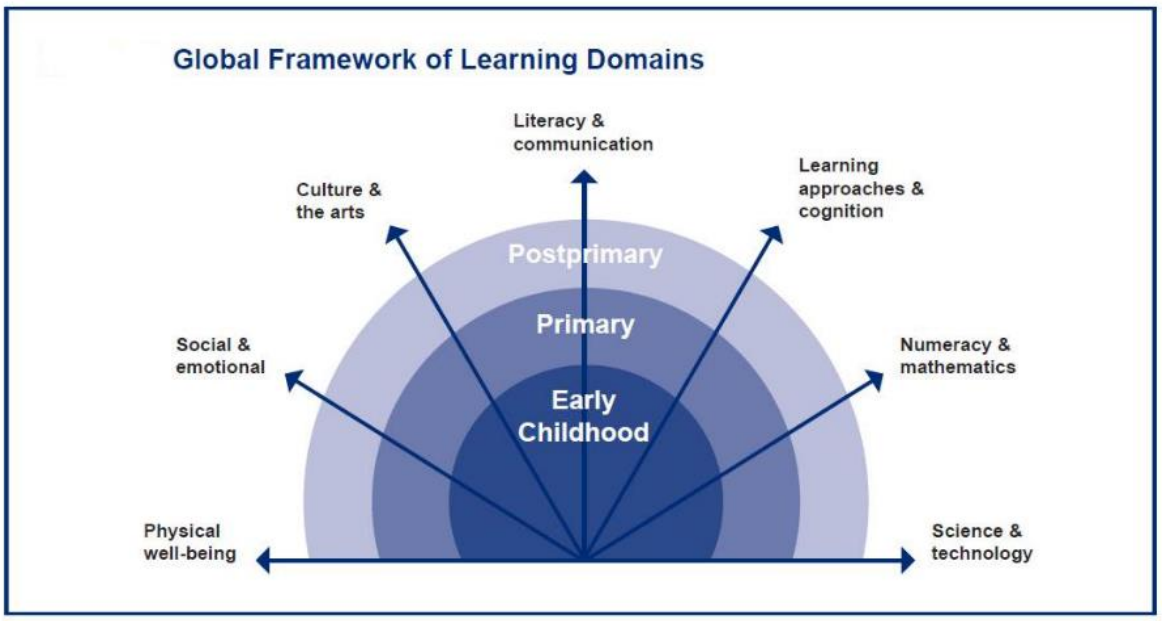
> *Whenever we ask ourselves what education (or school) is for, we inevitably get into curriculum debates about what we select, or elect, to teach young people. These are of course deeply complex matters requiring the most judicious mix of idealism (concerning what we want, in the form of our aims, values and purposes) and practicality (addressing implementation, but in so doing taking on some weighty social, economic and political issues and other significant matters such as teacher identity)* (2008, p.207).

The question of content—what themes, curriculum areas and/or subjects would constitute a redeveloped primary curriculum—is a critical decision requiring careful thought. This decision will ultimately chart learning journeys for children for at least the coming decade if not longer. The 1999 primary curriculum provides us with an important starting point: *Should the current areas and subjects remain*? *Should some be reconceptualised and reconfigured while others are superseded by new themes, areas or subjects? And if so, what should these be*?

Irrespective of what structure a curriculum uses, the UNESCO/Brooking Report (2013), *What Every Child Should Learn*, recommends that education systems should offer opportunities for *all* children to develop competencies in seven domains of learning as outlined in Figure 7. This global framework is intended to provide guidelines for curriculum design at a macro-level. It is interesting to note the extent to which the areas of the 1999 primary curriculum developed almost two decades ago reflect these seven domains. While there are of course some differences, this nonetheless reminds us that the broad parameters or dimensions of children's learning and development remain relatively

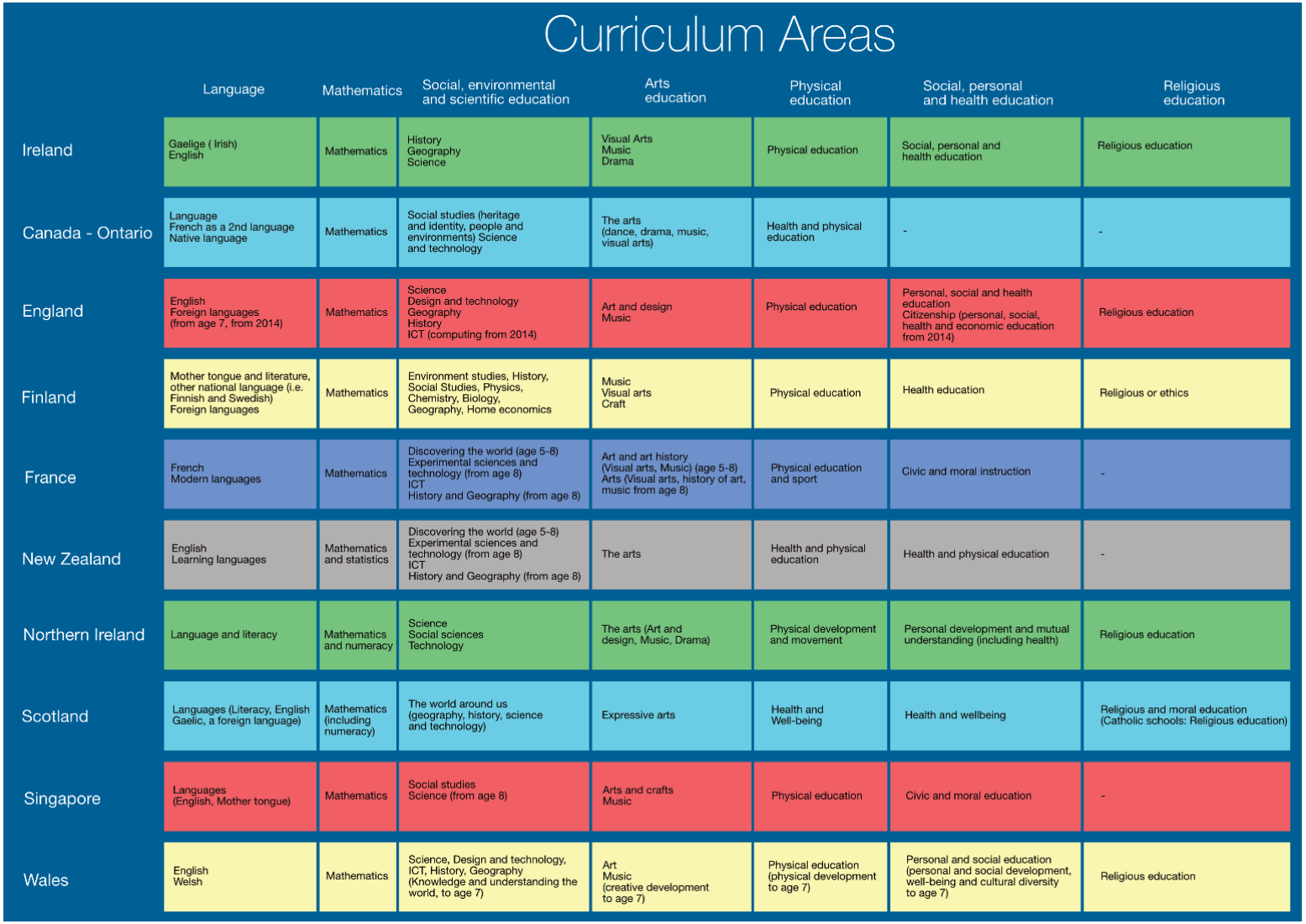
constant over time, across sectors and increasingly across jurisdictions. Within these, however, the particularities or specifics of *what* children should learn evolve and change, reflecting the 21st century in which we live.

Figure 7: Seven learning domains



The report identified these domains as being essential from early childhood to post-primary while acknowledging that some are of greater or lesser importance depending on the stage children are at. These domains resonate with the findings from the audit of curriculum structures and stages in primary education commissioned by the NCCA (NFER, 2014) as well as those from Pepper's analysis of directions in curriculum development (2008). Figure 8 shows an overview of the curriculum areas and subjects in primary education in ten jurisdictions including Ireland. Pepper (2008) and Alexander (2009b) observe a convergence of primary curriculum content across countries. Pepper (2008) comments that *the content tends to include: first language, mathematics, science, information technology, design, history, geography, PE, art, music and RE...There also tends to be content relating to PSHE, citizenship and foreign languages…in many countries one or more of these subject areas are compulsory rather than optional.*

Figure 8: Curriculum areas in other jurisdictions



Curriculum Areas

	Language	Mathematics	Social, environmental and scientific education	Arts education	Physical education	Social, personal and health education	Religious education
Ireland	Gaelige (Irish) English	Mathematics	History Geography Science	Visual Arts Music Drama	Physical education	Social, personal and health education	Religious education
Canada - Ontario	Language French as a 2nd language Native language	Mathematics	Social studies (heritage and identity, people and environments) Science and technology	The arts (dance, drama, music, visual arts)	Health and physical education	-	-
England	English Foreign languages (from age 7, from 2014)	Mathematics	Science Design and technology Geography History ICT (computing from 2014)	Art and design Music	Physical education	Personal, social and health education Citizenship (personal, social, health and economic education from 2014)	Religious education
Finland	Mother tongue and literature, other national language (i.e. Finnish and Swedish) Foreign languages	Mathematics	Environment studies, History, Social Studies, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Geography, Home economics	Music Visual arts Craft	Physical education	Health education	Religious or ethics
France	French Modern languages	Mathematics	Discovering the world (age 5-8) Experimental sciences and technology (from age 8) ICT History and Geography (from age 8)	Art and art history (Visual arts, Music) (age 5-8) Arts (Visual arts, history of art, music from age 8)	Physical education and sport	Civic and moral instruction	-
New Zealand	English Learning languages	Mathematics and statistics	Discovering the world (age 5-8) Experimental sciences and technology (from age 8) ICT History and Geography (from age 8)	The arts	Health and physical education	Health and physical education	-
Northern Ireland	Language and literacy	Mathematics and numeracy	Science Social sciences Technology	The arts (Art and design, Music, Drama)	Physical development and movement	Personal development and mutual understanding (including health)	Religious education
Scotland	Languages (Literacy, English Gaelic, a foreign language)	Mathematics (including numeracy)	The world around us (geography, history, science and technology)	Expressive arts	Health and Well-being	Health and wellbeing	Religious and moral education (Catholic schools: Religious education)
Singapore	Languages (English, Mother tongue)	Mathematics	Social studies Science (from age 8)	Arts and crafts Music	Physical education	Civic and moral education	-
Wales	English Welsh	Mathematics	Science, Design and technology, ICT, History, Geography (Knowledge and understanding the world, to age 7)	Art Music (creative development to age 7)	Physical education (physical development to age 7)	Personal and social education (personal and social development, well-being and cultural diversity to age 7)	Religious education

As noted, the question of *what* themes/curriculum areas/subjects is a critical part of the discussion about a redeveloped primary curriculum. The introduction to this document shows the volume and range of guidelines and other resources developed by the NCCA since 1999 to support teachers in unpacking and working with the primary curriculum in their classrooms. This, together with changed classrooms and new and growing demands on primary education, highlights the importance of reviewing and redeveloping the curriculum *as a whole* rather than tweaking *in places or at the edges of those places*. Other curriculum developments feed directly into this discussion about content, for example, the NCCA's current work on Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, and the Minister's recent request to consider approaches to integrating coding in the primary curriculum. The school day and school year present a finite amount of time for teaching and learning as explored in more detail in Part 2 of this document. While greater support for curriculum linkage and integration can go some way to making the curriculum more manageable, ultimately the question of *what should come out* has to be asked, debated and responded to.

In addition to discussing the proposals set out for a new curriculum structure, the consultation will provide an opportunity to begin to explore the very content of a new structure, whatever that structure may be.

Summary

- Drawing on a range of evidence, Part 1 of the document provides the following rationale for rethinking how the primary curriculum is structured.
- Current research provides a limited educational rationale for a four-stage model.
- Developmental psychology provides a strong basis for having an incremental stage model and differentiating the curriculum by stage.
- Policy developments, internationally, show a move towards fewer stages in primary curricula.
- Policy developments in Ireland, such as the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (Free Pre-School) and the publication of *Aistear*, create a need to clarify the relationship between curriculum in the pre-school years and the curriculum for the infant classes in primary school.
- Research along with curriculum trends internationally, point to a more integrated curriculum structure especially in the junior years of the primary school.

For consideration

1. The proposals recommend moving from a model comprising four two-year stages to an **incremental stage model** which uses a **differentiated curriculum structure**. To what extent do you agree/disagree with this proposed change? Give reasons for your response.
2. The two options for a new curriculum structure refer to the **two years of universal pre-school education as part of Stage 1** to help support better continuity of experience for children and progression in their learning. To what extent do you agree/disagree that the two pre-school years should be seen as part of Stage 1? Give reasons for your response.
3. **Option 1 – three-stage model**: This model would give rise to three approaches to presenting curriculum—using **themes, curriculum areas** and **subjects**. To what extent do you agree/disagree with this option as a structure for a redeveloped primary curriculum? Give reasons for your response. What might the 'content' of each of these include, for example, what themes? What areas? What subjects?
4. **Option 2 – two-stage model**: This model would give rise to two approaches to presenting curriculum—using **themes** and **subjects**. To what extent do you agree/disagree with this option as a structure for a redeveloped primary curriculum? Give reasons for your response. What might the 'content' of each of these include, for example, what themes? What subjects?
5. Options 1 and 2 both include subjects as a way of organising the curriculum in the latter years of primary school. **At what point** in primary education do you think a curriculum based on **subjects** should be introduced? Why this point?
6. What **organisational** and **resource supports** would be necessary to introduce a curriculum based on an incremental stage model?
7. What are the **implications** beyond the classroom of using an incremental stage model for structuring a primary curriculum, e.g., initial teacher education, working with parents, etc?
8. What, in your opinion, are the strengths and challenges of the **structure of the 1999 primary curriculum**?

Part 2: Time allocation

The allocation of time across the curriculum can be seen to place a value on what is important for children in the formative years of their educational experience. Indeed, it could be argued that time is *the most valuable resource in the educational process* (OECD, 2016, p.7). Thus, the guidance provided for schools in optimising the use of time across the curriculum becomes important. The Introduction to the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) currently provides a suggested minimum weekly time framework. This framework includes three key elements:

- the time allocated to religious education
- a suggested minimum time allocation for each of the other six curriculum areas, along with a period of discretionary curriculum time[6]
- the time allowed for breaks and assembly time (1999, p.67).

The suggested time framework provided by the curriculum is intended to be used *in the most flexible way* (p.68) and examples of planning in blocks of time over extended periods are presented as appropriate means through which children are provided with meaningful learning opportunities. Furthermore, the incorporation of discretionary curriculum time enables teachers to be flexible in meeting the needs of children and the differing circumstances of the school. While flexibility has been provided in the curriculum, teachers have nonetheless identified time constraints as a major challenge to curriculum implementation (NCCA, 2005, 2008). For the purposes of consultation, the proposed new model of time allocation outlined below addresses the use of time across the six curriculum areas, discretionary curriculum time, assemblies and the patron's programme. It also attempts to provide teachers and schools with greater flexibility in how they might plan to use time across the school year.

The *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) provides a weekly time framework as outlined in Table 5.

[6] Discretionary curriculum time in the 1999 curriculum is understood as:
A particularly important feature of the framework is the inclusion of a period of discretionary curriculum time. This affords the teacher and the school the flexibility to accommodate different school needs and circumstances and to provide for the differing aptitudes and abilities of the children it serves. It can be allocated, at the teacher's and at the school's discretion, to any of the six curriculum areas—language; mathematics; social, environmental and scientific education; arts education; physical education; social, personal and health education—or to any of the subjects within them. This framework also allows for the inclusion of a modern language in the curriculum where this is available.

Table 5: Weekly minimum time framework suggested in the Primary School Curriculum (1999)

Curriculum area	Weekly time allocation (full day)	Weekly time allocation (shorter day)***
Language 1 of the school	4 hours	3 hours
Language 2 of the school	3 hours 30 minutes	2 hours 30 minutes
Mathematics	3 hours	2 hours 15 minutes
Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (History, Geography and Science)	3 hours	2 hours 15 minutes
Social, Personal and Health Education	30 minutes	30 minutes
Physical Education	1 hour	1 hour
Arts Education (Visual Arts, Drama and Music)	3 hours	2 hours 30 minutes
Discretionary curriculum time	2 hours	1 hour
Religious education (typically)	2 hours 30 minutes	2 hours 30 minutes
Assembly time	1 hour 40 minutes	1 hour 40 minutes
Roll call	50 minutes	50 minutes
Breaks	50 minutes	50 minutes
Recreation (typically)	2 hours 30 minutes	2 hours 30 minutes

***The shorter day refers to junior and senior infant classes only.

In 2011 the Department of Education and Skills (DES) issued Circular 0056/2011 requesting schools to allocate increased time to literacy and numeracy. With effect from January 2012, all primary schools were required to:

- increase the time spent on literacy, particularly in the first language of the school, by one hour overall for language (Irish and English) per week (i.e. to 6.5 hours for infants with a shorter day, and to 8.5 hours per week for students with a full day).
- increase time on maths by 70 mins to 3 hours 25 mins per week for infants with a shorter day, and to 4 hours 10 mins per week for students with a full day.

Therefore, schools now spend 8 hours 30 minutes (6 hours 30 minutes in infant classes) on Irish and English roughly broken down as 5 hours (4 hours) on the school's first language and 3 hours 30 minutes (2 hours 30 minutes in infant classes) on the school's second language. The new time allocation for maths is 4 hours 10 minutes (3 hours 25 minutes in infant classes). Schools were asked to find this additional time for language and maths through a combination of approaches such as:

- integrating literacy and numeracy skills with other curriculum areas
- using some or all of discretionary curriculum time for literacy and numeracy activities
- re-allocating time spent on other subjects to literacy and numeracy
- prioritising the most valuable curriculum objectives and delaying the introduction of elements of some subjects, for example, by delaying the introduction of strands and strand units from the history and geography curriculum for the infant classes and first and second classes to later in the primary cycle.

Table 6 below outlines the time framework based on the amendments made by Circular 0056/2011. The table presents the increased time for the teaching of language and mathematics without a reduction in the time for other curriculum areas. When setting out the requirement to allocate additional time to literacy in the school's language 1 and language 2 and to mathematics, Circular 0056/2011 gave schools flexibility in deciding where and how the additional time is found from across the curriculum. Schools have used the advice from the circular and negotiated this space through integration, the use of discretionary curriculum time, prioritising some units of work above others and/or by re-allocating time spent on other subjects.

In Table 6, the time figures across the curriculum areas other than language and mathematics have been greyed-out to highlight that the additional time for language and mathematics requires deductions from these. Elements of time outside those of the curriculum areas and discretionary curriculum time, amounting to 36% of school time, **have not been affected by the changes** made by Circular 0056/2011. These include recreational time, breaks, roll call[7], assemblies, and religious education (the patron's programme)[8], and so have not been greyed-out in the table.

[7] Section 56, subsections 4, 5 and 6 in the Rules for National Schools provide for roll call and at least one half hour for recreation and at least ten minutes for breaks during the school day (1965, p.29).
[8] Section 30 2(d) of the Education Act (1998) states that the Minister: *shall ensure that the amount of instruction time to be allotted to subjects on the curriculum as determined by the Minister in each school day shall be such as to allow for such reasonable instruction time, as the board with the consent of the patron determines, for subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the school*.

Table 6: Weekly time framework based on Circular 0056/2011

Curriculum area	Weekly time allocation (full day)	Weekly time allocation (shorter day)***
Language 1 and 2 of the school (English/Irish or Gaeilge/Béarla)	8 hours 30 minutes	6 hours 30 minutes
Mathematics	4 hours 10 minutes	3 hours 35 minutes
Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (History, Geography and Science)	3 hours	2 hours 15 minutes
Social, Personal and Health Education	30 minutes	30 minutes
Physical Education	1 hour	1 hour
Arts Education (Visual Arts, Drama and Music)	3 hours	2 hours 30 minutes
Discretionary curriculum time	2 hours	1 hour
Religious education (typically)	2 hours 30 minutes	2 hours 30 minutes
Assembly time	1 hour 40 minutes	1 hour 40 minutes
Roll call	50 minutes	50 minutes
Breaks	50 minutes	50 minutes
Recreation (typically)	2 hours 30 minutes	2 hours 30 minutes

***The shorter day refers to junior and senior infant classes only.

Currently there is little data or research on how and where schools have found additional time for language and mathematics. Conceivably, much of the discretionary curriculum time provided for in the primary curriculum's suggested weekly time framework may be used to meet the additional teaching time for these two curriculum areas, thus reducing the flexibility teachers and schools previously had to negotiate time locally. It would seem likely that practice varies from school to school and so updated guidance which would take account of these new time requirements for language and mathematics, may be welcomed by schools and teachers alike.

Given that many teachers have highlighted the overcrowded nature of the curriculum (NCCA, 2005, 2008) as discussed in the introduction to this document, and given the increased pressure on time in the primary classroom (NCCA, 2010), the question arises as to how subjects 'lose out' when time is constrained. The following paragraphs map out some of the national and international research in this regard.

Findings on the use of time across the curriculum

In a recent study on the primary curriculum, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) found that teachers often trade off one subject against another in an attempt to prioritise teaching and learning in other areas:

> *One participant remarked that she 'would have dropped drama as a subject in the senior classes because I just didn't have time, especially since the Literacy and Numeracy strategy', whilst another stated that she 'wonder(s) about drama as a standalone subject, to me drama is more of a methodology'* (2015, p.20).

In the same study, a number of subjects were highlighted as not having enough time to ensure children are given adequate space for meaningful engagement with the curriculum; these subjects include Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Physical Education (PE) and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE). In fact, 72% of respondents spent more time on language and mathematics than recommended by Circular 0056/2011. There is a sense here that curriculum overload and the revised time allocations from Circular 0056/2011 are contributing to *important* subjects competing for space with one another and also competing with what some consider to be *less important* subjects. This issue also seems to be a feature of other jurisdictions, with the Cambridge Primary Review's enquiry into the use of the curriculum in England finding that as teachers endeavoured to attain high standards in *the basics* there was little time for thinking, reflecting, problem-solving or exploration, and the time for subjects such as art, music, drama, history and geography was often diminished (Alexander *et al*, 2009b, p.3).

Furthermore, an ESRI study into the experiences of children in primary school found that time spent on individual subjects varied greatly depending on the gender of the teacher, whether the school was DEIS/non-DEIS, the language medium of the school and the years of experience of the teacher (ESRI, 2012, p.30). Two variables—the school type and the teacher—impact upon the amount of time spent on teaching specific areas of the curriculum. Overall, teachers who devote more time to English tend to spend less time on other subjects, especially history, geography and science. Similarly, additional time on mathematics is traded off against these three subjects as well as religious education and drama.

Since the introduction of the primary curriculum 17 years ago, curriculum reviews, evaluations, international and national assessments, and data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* longitudinal study provide insights into how teachers and schools *actually* use time across the curriculum. Drawing from a range of sources, Table 7 sets out some of these findings.

Table 7: Findings on use of curriculum time

Experience in Ireland
▪ There is significant **variation** in the time allocated to particular **subjects/curriculum areas**. ▪ This variation is evident **across schools** and among individual teachers working in the **same school**. ▪ There are **marked differences** in how time is used between **DEIS and non-DEIS schools**, and between **single-sex and co-educational** schools. ▪ Timetabling is also found to reflect **teacher characteristics** with more experienced teachers more likely to emphasise a 'core' curriculum, spending greater amounts of time on English, Irish and mathematics. ▪ The national assessment data (2014) shows time allocated to English classes being broadly in line with Circular 0056/2011 while data on mathematics classes suggests that more time than that envisaged in the Circular, is being spent on this area. This does not take account of additional time allocated to teaching the two subjects across the curriculum.

Given developments in recent years regarding the *intended* allocation of time across the curriculum and in light of what we've learned about *actual* use of time, it seems opportune to reconsider how we conceptualise time for teaching and learning across the curriculum and how best a primary curriculum can support schools in using time to provide learning experiences that meet the needs of the children and families in the local communities. It may be useful in this context to look at some broad pointers from international practice:

- many jurisdictions **specify time allocations** for curriculum areas/subjects
- where time is specified, jurisdictions tend to focus on **annual allocations**
- time allocations are provided for **curriculum areas** rather than subjects
- more **flexibility** is allowed for allocating the **recommended minimum instruction time** than for choosing curriculum subjects
- time allocations **vary** from **area to area** within the curriculum and can vary from **year to year** reflecting prioritisation of certain areas at particular stages in a child's education
- some jurisdictions, for example, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, England and New Zealand, **do not specify time** allocations at all. Instead, schools must ensure that children experience a broad and balanced curriculum.

Looking beyond Ireland, Table 8 gives a brief overview of practice internationally in specifying the allocation of time across a primary curriculum.

Table 8: International practice

Experience internationally
▪ Internationally, many jurisdictions **specify time allocations** for curriculum areas/subjects. ▪ Where time is specified, jurisdictions tend to focus on **annual allocations**. ▪ Time allocations are provided for **curriculum areas** rather than subjects. ▪ More **flexibility** is allowed for allocating the **recommended minimum instruction time** than for choosing curriculum subjects. ▪ Time allocations **vary** from **area to area** within the curriculum and can vary from **year to year** reflecting prioritisation of certain areas at particular stages in a child's education. ▪ Some jurisdictions, for example, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, England and New Zealand, **do not specify time** allocations. Instead, schools must ensure that children experience a broad and balanced curriculum.

Length of school day and teaching time

A noteworthy point when considering time allocation is the length of time Irish children spend in primary school. In Ireland, children spend 183 days annually in school. This equates to a total of 1,073 hours in school and 915 hours of actual curriculum teaching time. The European Union average for the 22 members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is 180 days annually of primary school—a total of 1,107 hours in school, 754 hours of which is actual curriculum teaching time (OECD, 2016). While Irish children may spend less time overall in school, the amount of actual curriculum teaching time they receive is significantly higher than the European Union average for the 22 members of the OECD. This may be due to differences in the time provided in schools across the European Union for breaks and recreation during the school day.

Children's curriculum experiences

The kinds of learning experiences children have are at least as important as the amount of time the teacher spends teaching a particular subject or curriculum area. The following quotation provides a helpful reminder of the limited impact of formal time allocations on classroom practice.

> *To think about curriculum balance solely in terms of subject time allocations, however, is to neglect another and possibly more fundamental way in which the curriculum impacts upon the child. Classroom research, for example, has identified 'generic activities' (such as*

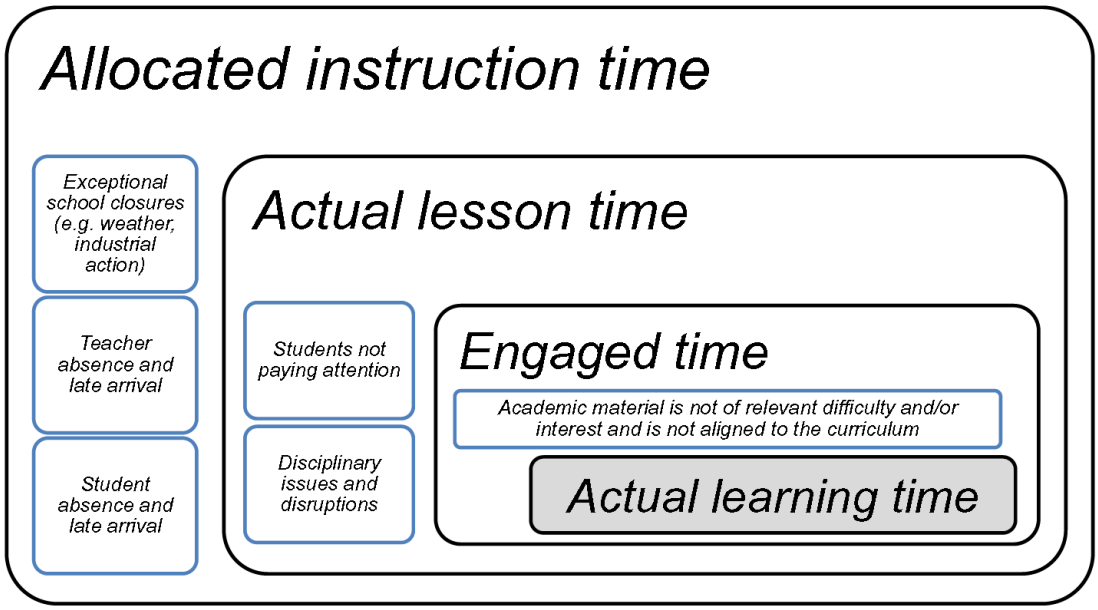
> *reading, writing, using apparatus, talking with the teacher and collaborating with other children) which pupils encounter daily regardless of subject labels. The balance which is struck amongst such activities is arguably as important as the balance which is struck amongst subjects* (Alexander, Rose and Woodhead, 1992, pp.24-25)

And so while guidance on time allocation may be significant for teachers and schools, inevitably it is the learning experiences provided for children that contribute most significantly to a child's development.

Considering the use of time in primary schools in England, the Cambridge Primary Review called for a responsive and flexible use of time across the curriculum (Alexander, 2009b). To encourage local innovation and to meet the needs of a diverse range of learners and communities, the Review recommended a national curriculum with both *national and local components, with 30 per cent of the yearly total (time) available for the local curriculum. This would give schools more flexibility, greater opportunity to tailor learning to local needs and characteristics and would encourage innovation* (2009b, p.22). This framework makes the distinction between a *nationa*l curriculum and a *community* curriculum. The national curriculum's status in this scenario is statutory taking up 70 per cent of teaching time, while the community curriculum is locally developed, non-statutory and relates to nationally agreed curriculum domains.

The OECD recognises that providing time alone may not result in better outcomes for children and highlights that teaching time will only be impactful if meaningfully translated into *engaged time* and *actual learning time* (Gromada and Shewbridge, 2016, p.38). They propose a model for understanding the effective use of allocated instruction time (Figure 9) that attempts to capture how time is used and lost during lessons. Figure 9 presents *engaged time* as a proportion of *actual instruction time* during which children are judged to be paying attention. The a*ctual learning time* is difficult to measure as this depends on the individual learning needs of the child and the quality of the teaching. Indeed, for many children *actual learning time* also depends on a host of additional factors, such as the time of the day, how hungry they are and how much sleep they had the previous night. Furthermore, it seems that children from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds, children with a migrant background and males lose greater amounts of allocated instruction time (p.51).

Figure 9: Model for understanding the effective use of allocated instruction time (Gromada and Shewbridge, 2016, p.38)



To facilitate discussion on the question of time allocation across the curriculum the next section proposes a model which takes a differentiated approach to the matter.

Proposed model of time allocation

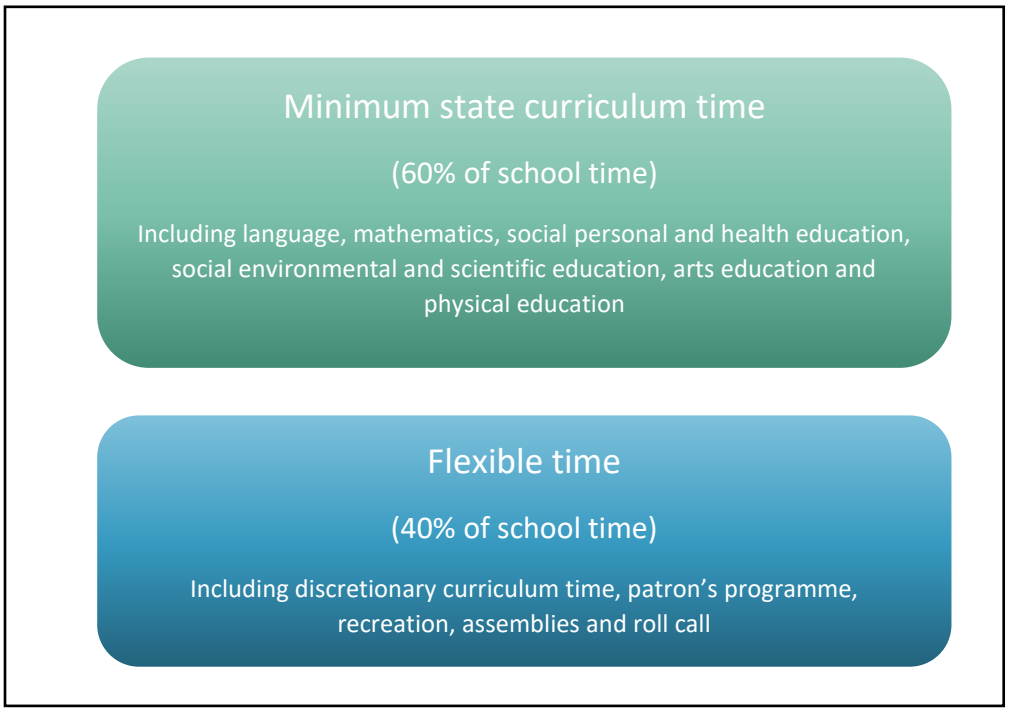
Reflecting some of the trends and developments internationally and building on what has been learnt about schools' experience with the suggested weekly time framework in the 1999 curriculum, the model below proposes a **differentiated approach** to time allocation. The model is intended to better meet children's learning needs, and the needs of teachers and schools in terms of planning, teaching and assessing. It intends to provide teachers with greater flexibility in their use of teaching time to meet the needs of children and the school community.

The model can work with either the three-stage or two-stage option for a revised structure for the primary curriculum as presented earlier in this document or indeed with the current configuration of the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999). The proposed model has two categories of time rather than the three categories presented in the Primary School Curriculum[9]. The two proposed categories

[9] The framework for time in the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) includes three key elements:
- time allocated to the teaching of the patron's programme
- a suggested minimum time allocation for each of the other six curriculum areas, along with a period of discretionary curriculum time[9]
- time allowed for breaks and assembly.

are *minimum state curriculum time* and *flexible time*. Figure 10 below presents the two categories of time in the proposed model for time allocation across the curriculum.

Figure 10: Proposed model of time allocation for primary schools



Two categories of time

Minimum state curriculum time refers to the least amount of time teachers and schools could spend teaching the state's curriculum and the themes/areas/subjects specified within it. The amount of time specified in this category reflects the breadth of the state curriculum and provides adequate time necessary to meet the learning outcomes specified.

Flexible time is a new feature proposed in this model of time allocation. It encompasses all time outside the minimum state curriculum time. This time includes what is currently referred to as discretionary curriculum time, assembly time, roll call, breaks and the patron's programme. While discretionary curriculum time in the 1999 curriculum accounts for up to 10% of the total weekly time, flexible time would require a greater proportion of time due to the incorporation of additional elements as outlined above. Each of these elements currently has its own weekly time allocation in the 1999 curriculum, as detailed in table 9 below.

Table 9: Time allocation across discretionary curriculum time, the patron's programme, assembly time, roll call, breaks and recreation

Element of time	Weekly time allocation (full day)	Weekly time allocation (shorter day)***
Discretionary curriculum time	2 hours	1 hour
Patron's programme	2 hours 30 minutes	2 hours 30 minutes
Assembly time	1 hour 40 minutes	1 hour 40 minutes
Roll call	50 minutes	50 minutes
Breaks	50 minutes	50 minutes
Recreation	2 hours 30 minutes	2 hours 30 minutes

***The shorter day refers to junior and senior infant classes only.

Taken together, these elements amount to 10 hours 20 minutes or 36% of the full school week. Combining these previously distinct elements of time with a greater degree of flexibility for schools in their work across the state curriculum into a newly conceived single block of time would represent a significant change in overall time allocation. In light of this, it is proposed that up to 40% of time would be presented as flexible time.

While the proposed portion may seem like a modest increase from the 36% in the 1999 curriculum, by not delineating the specific hours and minutes to be spent on each element within flexible time, schools and teachers would have greater latitude to decide how best to use this time to meet the needs of the school. In doing this, schools might work with their stakeholders to establish how much flexible time should be used for additional teaching and learning, for cross-curriculum community initiatives, for whole school events/celebrations and for other educational activities. Indeed, given the value associated with the amount of time a school gives to particular types of educational experiences, these decisions would reflect what the school community sees as important for their children.

Additional features of the time allocation model are detailed below. Again these features would work with either a three-stage or two-stage curriculum structure as presented earlier in this document.

Table 10: Additional features of time allocation model

Within minimum state curriculum time (60% of school time):
▪ **Minimum** time allocations would be specified for **English, Irish** and **mathematics** on a **weekly basis.**
▪ **Minimum** time allocations for **other themes/curriculum areas/subjects** would be specified on a **monthly basis.**
Within flexible time (40% of school time):
▪ Schools would have the **remainder of time** in the school day as **flexible time**.

Minimum allocations for curriculum areas

The allocation of minimum weekly teaching time for English, Irish and mathematics would reflect the foundational nature of these skills as outlined in the *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* and as reported by participants in the NCCA's consultation on curriculum priorities (2012):

> *Developing good literacy and numeracy skills among all young people is fundamental to the life chances of each individual and essential to the quality and equity of Irish society* (DES, 2011, p.9)

The proposed new model for time allocation would ensure frequent teaching of these subjects to help develop important foundational skills which children use in accessing the rest of the curriculum.

The allocation of minimum monthly teaching time for the remaining themes/curriculum areas/subjects would provide teachers and schools with the flexibility to use more substantial blocks of time in their curriculum planning. While the 1999 curriculum encourages the use of 'block planning', it is arguable that by delineating time in a weekly fashion this has hindered the use of such strategies especially since teachers have referred to time constraints as a major barrier to curriculum implementation (NCCA 2005, 2008). Monthly allocations of time would present the opportunity to use extended periods of time for working on particular learning outcomes in the curriculum enabling teachers and children *to delve deeper and linger longer with their subjects* (Lambert, 2008, p.212). The use of monthly allocations would also help to ensure that all themes/curriculum areas/subjects were taught regularly during a term and school year. The use of block planning could also encourage thematic work supporting greater integration and coherence across the curriculum. In addition,

incorporating flexible time into the curriculum would go some way to responding to the call to support teacher professional judgement and provide flexibility for schools in how they negotiate the curriculum at local level.

Based on the model above and the two proposed options for curriculum structure, a number of other considerations arise which warrant consideration when thinking about time for teaching and for learning. For instance, the European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice Report (2016) highlights that in many jurisdictions the amount of time spent teaching the first language of the school reduces as children progress through primary education[10], while time for mathematics also varies across jurisdictions according to the stage of primary education[11]. The question then of whether minimum weekly time allocations should be differentiated across stages and whether larger/smaller proportions of time are needed for language and mathematics becomes pertinent. Furthermore, should the monthly time allocations for other curriculum areas also be differentiated in a similar manner? Should time allocations for curriculum areas/subjects of the curriculum ultimately differ across different stages of the primary curriculum, decisions and proposals in relation to this level of detail can be made at a later stage when specific time allocations to curriculum themes, areas and subjects are considered. For this phase of consultation, **the focus is on overall time allocation**.

The delineation of time within and across the curriculum presents clear messages about the types of learning experiences that are supported in primary schools. The proposals above attempt to ensure that schools and teachers have the necessary framework and flexibility to provide children with a rich, broad and balanced primary school experience that supports them to make appropriate progress in their learning. The proposals aim to give greater flexibility to schools in deciding on how, when and where time is spent across the curriculum. This would enable schools to tailor the curriculum more effectively to reflect the values of the school community and to be responsive to the needs of the children.

[10] These jurisdictions include:Cyprus, Denmark, France, Greece, Portugal and Spain.
[11] In Cyprus, Greece, Luxembourg and Portugal, time for teaching mathematics decreases as children progress through primary. In the case of Estonia, Finland and Latvia time spent teaching mathematics increases.

Summary

Drawing on a range of evidence, Part 2 of the document provides the following rationale for rethinking how time is allocated across the primary curriculum.

- Circular 0056/2011 required schools to give increased time to language and mathematics with flexibility in deciding how best to find this time from other curriculum areas. In some cases, this has resulted in teachers having to prioritise some subjects over others.
- Research findings highlight significant variation across schools and from classroom to classroom in how time is used across the curriculum.
- Schools' experience suggests that a sense of curriculum overload results in subjects being traded off against each other.
- Schools identify the current suggested weekly time framework as a barrier to pedagogical approaches such as child-led play, and for planning extended blocks of time for deeper learning in subjects such as history.

For consideration

1. To what extent do you agree/disagree with the proposals on **minimum state curriculum time**? Give reasons for your response.
2. To what extent do you agree/disagree with the proposals on **flexible time**? Give reasons for your response.
3. What are your views on the overall division of time into **minimum state curriculum time (60%) and flexible time (40%)**? What are your views on the percentage time allocations proposed for each?
4. Are you in favour of specifying **time allocations** for themes/curriculum areas/subjects? Should all have time allocations or should some be prioritised over others?
5. Where time is allocated, what are your views on whether it should be on a **weekly, monthly, termly, annual basis**? Please provide further comment as appropriate.
6. Should the proportion of time allocated differ depending on the **curriculum stage** involved? In what way should the time allocation change?
7. Do you agree that **Language and Mathematics** should be provided with more tightly specified time allocations than other themes/curriculum areas/subjects? What should the weekly minimum allocations be?
8. What **opportunities/challenges** do you foresee for schools in using flexible time? Is **guidance** or support needed on this? If so, what should that guidance focus on?

In conclusion

Ireland, like the rest of the world, is changing. Children's appetite and thirst for knowing, understanding and doing in their early childhood and primary school years is unrivalled. These years are important in their own right as a time for experiencing and enjoying, as well as laying important foundations for what follows. Put more eloquently by Dewey (1897), *Education is not a preparation for life. Education is life itself*. If the primary curriculum is to continue to help fulfil this purpose of education, then the curriculum itself must be updated too. The proposals for a new curriculum structure and a new way of conceptualising and using time across the curriculum set out in this document, offer **starting points** from which to consider the shape of a redeveloped primary curriculum and how it might be used in schools.

Decisions on these structural matters will provide a basis for reconsidering curriculum content—the themes, curriculum areas and subjects and the particular concepts, dispositions and skills—that are important in primary school education. Throughout reviews and evaluations, teachers have called for a reduction in curriculum content, and greater clarity on curriculum aims and outcomes. These messages signal the importance of a redeveloped primary curriculum that is leaner, more relevant and more helpful for teachers and children.

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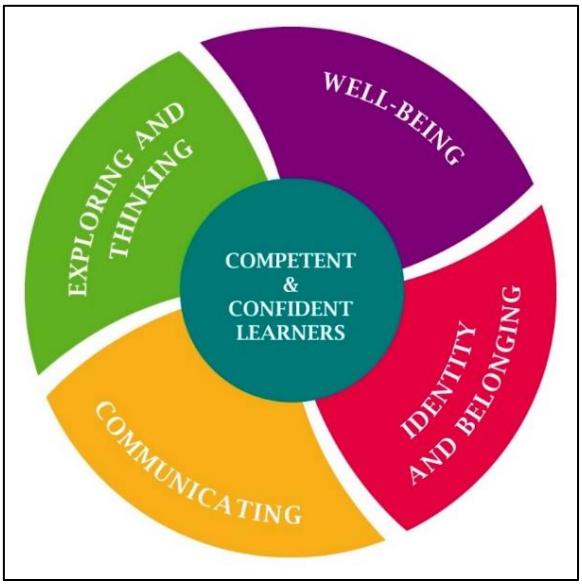
Appendix 1: *Aistear*'s themes

Figure: *Aistear*'s curriculum structure – four themes



The table below provides a brief description of each of the four themes and how it contributes to children's learning and development in their early childhood years.

Table: Overview of themes

Overview of themes
Well-being is about children being confident, happy and healthy. It focuses on developing as a person. Well-being has two main elements: psychological well-being (including feeling and thinking) and physical well-being. (p.16)
Identity and Belonging is about children developing a positive sense of who they are, and feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and community. (p.25)
Communicating is about children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings with others with growing confidence and competence in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. Their language includes words, phrases and sentences, art, Braille, dance, drama, music, poetry, pictures, sculpture, signing, and stories. (p.34)
Exploring and Thinking is about children making sense of the things, places and people in their world by interacting with others, playing, investigating, questioning, and forming, testing and refining ideas. They form ideas and theories and test these out. (p.43)

Aistear's themes could offer a curriculum structure to better reflect how children aged four to seven years learn. This structural change could support pedagogical changes such as a greater use of child-led play and playful learning experiences across the curriculum in early primary.