

# REPORT

LEADING OUT SEMINAR SERIES

**SEMINAR 1**

4<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER 2019



## Report on the Leading Out Seminar Series

### Seminar 1: 04.12.2019

#### Primary Curriculum Review and Redevelopment

The NCCA has reached an important milestone in its Primary Developments/Foráis sa Bhunscolaíocht with the completion of a *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* for consultation in 2020. Consultation and collaboration are at the heart of the series of *Leading Out* seminars for key stakeholders, the first of which was held on December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Although not unique to Ireland, the consultative and collaborative nature of curriculum development is a hallmark of education work here. Generally, it is characterised by the recognition of a shared journey where decisions taken in a spirit of collaboration, while not irrevocable, enjoy a high degree of stakeholder confidence. Consensus-building is not without its challenges and it benefits from occasions when time is taken to reflect upon the journey to date and to tease out the ramifications of decisions taken and changes proposed, in a forum where participants are free to share doubts and concerns without feeling the need to adopt final positions. Similarly, such a forum offers opportunities to look back upon developments, at the how-we-got-to-here story, and to speculate on how the future will look once change has been implemented, with a view to building consensus around how all stakeholders might adapt to the change – a vision for how-we-will-be-then and how-we-will-get-there.

To that end, the NCCA is holding this series of seminars for representatives from stakeholders engaged in and supporting the proposed redeveloped primary curriculum. The intention of the series is that participants will determine the agenda and, through deliberation and discussion, shape an emerging document, which becomes not just a record of what has been said during the meetings but a picture of agreed pathways and action points in support of change. This document, then, will provide a record of the main areas of thinking, signalling points of convergence and questions yet to be addressed. So, it will include what might be termed **Thinking Forward** boxes where the intention is to give direction for further deliberation – to explore further, check for consensus, problematise, and so on.

#### Seminar 1 Discussion 1

The opening presentation looked at the **Primary Curriculum Review and Redevelopment** (PCRR) to date, focusing initially on changes in society, in educational policy and in educational research since the introduction of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum. The presentation highlighted successes and challenges since the launch of the 1999 curriculum. Successes include children’s enjoyment of their learning (as documented in the Growing Up in Ireland study), the emphasis on active learning, and the evidence of increased attainments in literacy, numeracy and science. Challenges include teachers’

observations about curriculum overload and copious paperwork, and, taking account of our rapidly changing society, the challenge of supporting every child to progress and to achieve their potential.

Consultation is a significant feature of the review process, which draws on extensive research, collaborates with education partners and stakeholders, and works closely with schools and preschools through the Schools Forum. Essentially, its work to date has been guided by two questions:

- What is the purpose of primary education for tomorrow’s children?
- What structure and components within a curriculum can support this?

The **Draft Primary Curriculum Framework** which is due to be published in early 2020 sets out the proposed purpose, structure and content of the curriculum to be developed over the coming years. The flexibility to be responsive to the needs of children and school context is a key theme of the framework, acknowledging the diversity of school type and the fact that school ethos influences how curriculum is enacted. The redeveloped curriculum will provide a foundation for high-quality teaching and learning that is inclusive and evidence-based. Teachers are seen as committed, skilful and agentic professionals; children are viewed as unique, capable and caring individuals.

A move from subjects to an integrated curriculum structure for early primary while retaining subjects for the later years is proposed. The integration of new areas of learning in the curriculum will be explored, e.g., key competencies, ERB and Ethics, modern foreign languages. At the level of the school, the Draft Framework proposes greater flexibility and agency around the use of time; it supports high-quality evidence based pedagogical approaches and learning experiences for children, with a broad understanding of assessment as a central element of these.

In summary, the key messages from the draft Primary Curriculum Framework are:

- Building on the successes and strengths of the 1999 curriculum
- Increasing agency and flexibility for schools
- Strengthening connections across the education sectors
- Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented
- Clarifying priorities for children’s learning
- Supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to teaching and learning.

The consultation on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework—February to October 2020—provides a significant opportunity to begin building system capacity and to develop a readiness to enact a new curriculum.

**Participants discussed two questions:**

- **From what you've listened to, what for you and your organisation is the most significant key message and why?**
- **What opportunities do you foresee in supporting this key message to become a reality?**

### Outcomes of Discussion 1

The key message that resonated most with participants was the **increased agency for teachers and schools** that the redeveloped curriculum envisages. The move from detailed content objectives to broad learning outcomes was exciting for teacher agency and a recognition of their professionalism. If implemented meaningfully, it would allow schools to provide curriculum experiences that are responsive to their particular contexts.

However, there are challenges to its successful implementation:

- the question of balance between curriculum specification and 'carte blanche' implementation for teachers/schools
- the danger that affording greater agency and flexible may be interpreted as an extra burden that will increase workload significantly for school leaders and teachers
- how to ensure that all stakeholders align policies and practices so that schools and teachers are supported meaningfully in this regard.

Other considerations identified by participants included:

- Ongoing effective CPD at a local level in schools and classrooms will be vital
- The role of initial teacher education that imparts the new knowledge while respecting the experience of long-serving teachers is an important aspect
- The work of the Schools Forum may be particularly useful in outlining pathways of exploration and exemplification of changes proposed in the draft Framework.

It was felt that the teachers' union, professional organisations, parents' organisations, patron bodies and the Teaching Council should play an important role in disseminating the key messages and in shaping the timing and pacing of change and reform.

#### **Thinking Forward**

- What aspects or features of the proposed curriculum changes are most at risk of being misunderstood or misrepresented?
- How could stakeholders work together to combat and correct misunderstanding?

- What communication strategies support change most effectively?
- What is our collective understanding of agency for the teacher, the school leader and children in our schools?
- How do we see the draft framework's vision of the teacher as a ***skilful and agentic professional*** being realised over the coming years? How can teachers be best equipped and supported in this regard?
- Are there aspects of current education practice and policy that work against that vision of the teacher and, if so, what might we seek to change?

## Seminar 1 Discussion 2

The second presentation focused on **System Conditions and Enablers** in times of significant change.

*Schools change reforms as much as reforms change schools* (Cuban, 1998). In this conception, the curriculum is viewed as a resource and a basis for building understanding of the change involved. The teacher and the school are key agents and stakeholders in mediating and enacting the resource. The teacher is viewed as the key change agent and curriculum developer.

While being mindful of the gap between theory and practice, between curriculum specification and implementation, **nine conditions conducive to curriculum development** were presented:

- shared vision and purpose
- research, data and information
- stakeholder engagement and communication
- timing and pacing
- securing resources
- feasibility and capacity-building
- recognising teacher and school agency
- an effective model of continuous professional development (CPD)
- cyclical, systemic review.

Stakeholder engagement is more than involvement; it involves mutual trust, clear and frequent communication along with public dialogue. While securing resources is crucial, the importance of timing and pacing and complementary policy alignment between all the agencies involved is necessary. Capacity-building must take place at multiple levels of the system from initial teacher education to the development of classroom resources. The model of CPD is continual, well-resourced,

school and network-based, capacity-building, and aligned with local enactment. Teacher and school agency entail real devolution, requiring endorsement and support.

**Participants discussed two questions:**

- **From your perspective what three conditions are significant at system level?**
- **Thinking about the short term (next 1-2 years) what are the most immediate conditions that are critical to support curriculum change?**

#### Outcomes of Discussion 2

Of the conditions outlined that are conducive to curriculum development, **Continuous Professional Development (CPD)** was seen to be the most fundamental requirement. Teachers and schools must be offered sustained support if they are to become meaningful and authentic implementers of a ‘provisional and developing’ curriculum. There must be a shared vision among all stakeholders and this clear vision and consistent messaging must be communicated at CPD events. Time for school based CPD and subsequent planning time arising from CPD will be crucial.

The development of resources and exemplification will support the CPD endeavour to assure teachers that the resources are available to them. In this context, the role of publishers in the implementation and lead out will need to be interrogated. There is a real danger that textbooks purporting to be ‘curriculum-aligned’ could fill a perceived vacuum and replace teacher reflection and decision-making.

Building capacity of the leaders in schools, both the principals and the instructional leaders, will be an important foundation stone. In this regard, the pacing of the reforms to ensure realistic timeframes and outcomes will be vital. Multi-annual funding should be guaranteed from the outset.

#### **Thinking Forward**

- Given the particular demands of the redeveloped curriculum, what might the model of effective CPD look like for teachers and school leaders?
- What do we see as the role of the continuum of teacher professional development in relation to the changes proposed for the primary curriculum?
- Thinking back to CPD programmes in the past, what aspects of the programmes supported change most effectively?
- How can **all stakeholders** ensure that teacher CPD is supported appropriately?
- What incentives and structures are currently in place to encourage teachers/school leaders to manage their own CPD?



Looking ahead to Seminar 2, the intention is that the outcomes of the discussion at each seminar will inform the agenda for subsequent ones and that this document will become a record of the discussions, highlighting areas of consensus and signalling points of debate or divergence requiring further attention.