

Leading Out

Report on the
Seminar Series



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Leading Out - Report on the seminar series

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 1st, 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.

To that end, the NCCA is holding this series of Leading Out seminars for representatives of stakeholders engaged in and supporting the proposed redeveloped Primary Curriculum. The deliberations of the seminars are recorded in two ways:

- A **Report** document that provides a brief overview of the presentations and a summary record of the discussion at each seminar, including some indications of the likely shape of the agenda for the next seminar in the series
- A **Pathways for Change** document that offers an overview of the themes, issues, reflections, and action points for consideration by all stakeholders as the series develops. A particular feature of this document is its focus on linkage across the seminars – its attention to overarching questions. Consequently, the Pathways document begins after Seminar 2.

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. The Pathways Document, then, will provide a record of the main areas of thinking, signalling points of convergence and questions yet to be addressed. So, both the Report and Pathways documents will include **Thinking Forward** boxes where the intention is to give direction for further deliberation – to explore further, check for consensus, problematise, and so on.

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Seminar 5: 16.11.2021

As with its predecessor, Seminar 5 was hosted online due to the ongoing pandemic and this had an impact on the discussion. The focus of the Seminar was system-wide learning and, in advance of the meeting, a number of organisations had shared **examples of system-wide learning** in which they had been involved. In addition, an extract from a collaborative document *From Purpose to Practice* was circulated to participants prior to the seminar, focusing on the topic of *Learning - the Essence of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment*.

Due to the pandemic, there had been a considerable time lapse between this seminar and Seminar 4, held in December 2020. Consequently, Seminar 5 was something of a recap and review occasion. A small group of the seminar's participants presented briefly on their examples as a stimulus for discussion, the focus of which was to identify the key features of a shared learning enterprise and the value of this understanding in support of the change process. The discussion was reflective of the methodology of the leading out seminars, in which participants move from reflection on practice to identification of key principles.

Consensus was established in the following areas:

Diversity

In planning for and supporting change it is important to recognise the full range of school types and contexts in which the curriculum framework will be implemented. This is particularly important because agency, flexibility and responding to local context are central to the philosophy underpinning the framework. Its vision of the teacher as agentic professional will be reflected in the broad learning outcomes in the specifications for curriculum areas and subjects, and in the framework's focus on integration and key competencies.

Collaboration

The importance of collaboration, cross-sectoral and inter-agency, has long been recognised as a hallmark of the process of curriculum development in Ireland, and the partnership approach has supported an understanding of the education system as an ecosystem with its interrelated parts. Consequently, participants in the seminar agree that collaboration is crucial for success, with no organisation having ownership of the process.

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Communication

Clear and consistent communication is felt to be essential throughout the change process. Messaging needs to be consistent and unambiguous, but this is not to be confused with clear communication from the centre out. Communication needs to be in the service of relationship building during the journey, and it needs to be two-way or multi-directional, allowing all parts of the system to feel that they are capable of valuable input to a 'conversation about the change.'

Leadership

The discussion links leadership, agency and empowerment. Leadership is required from 'someone or some agency' to take things forward, build momentum, coordinate the change activities within the system. Yet, there is considerable value in recognising the leadership potential in all teachers and not just those in management positions. Teachers need to feel empowered to be truly agentic in their work, and the empowerment is not a factor of the individual but of the system as a whole.

Showing and telling

Change journeys are not linear and a responsive system will find ways to promote reflection and establish a context for learning. When everyone adopts the stance of learner, the process is improved by listening to other people's stories, people from similar but also different contexts, sectors, education levels. Sharing knowledge, skills and expertise through practical examples is a powerful way of promoting reflection, engagement and collaboration. An emphasis on this kind of showing will be important in elucidating the curriculum messages and supporting teacher CPD.

Thinking Forward

The Leading Out seminar series has reached a point where a sufficient level of consensus exists to complete a draft of the Pathway for Change document. This document will form the basis for discussion at the next seminar, Leading Out 6. In advance of that, some questions might provide a useful lens for consideration of the Pathway document:

- Recognising, as the draft curriculum framework does, that school and settings differ in their particular contexts, what is the best way to develop a flexible toolkit of resources to provide 'tools rather than training'?
 - What is the role of the Schools Forum in relation to
 - promotion of engagement with the draft curriculum
 - modelling forward planning for the changes, at school and teacher level
 - generating examples of agentic engagement with learning outcomes
 - involving children in the preparation phase?
 - How can leadership of the process be centralised to a small oversight group while preserving engagement with practitioners at macro, meso, and micro levels?
 - What exactly do we mean when we say that it is our ambition to 'keep the child at the centre of learning' in relation to
 - pedagogy
 - assessment
 - integration
 - transition?
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