



NCCA

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

BEACONS - *From Purpose to Practice*

A consultation with school communities on the future of the Primary School Curriculum in Ireland

May 2022

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Introduction

This report records the substance of conversations at a consultation gathering on the *Primary School Curriculum* in a Dublin hotel on 3 March 2022. The event was jointly organised by colleagues from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and Teaching Council. The 'BEACONS' acronym is *Bringing Education Alive for our Communities On a National Scale*. Originating in the Teaching Council, it is an approach to consultation that sees diverse stakeholders talk with each other and listen to each other on educational issues of common interest and importance.

Today, those talking and listening were primary-school children, parents and teachers, and the conversations were of particular interest to the NCCA who are currently engaged in a review and redevelopment of the *Primary School Curriculum*, with consultations on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (DPCF) ongoing. For the Teaching Council, this was an opportunity to bring education partners together – the first in-person event since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic – to talk about teaching and learning and hear the views of the others.

Papers written by members of its Advisory Panel (Primary) for NCCA's *Leading Out* seminars prompted today's consultation event. The [*From Purpose to Practice*](#) document proposes the idea of *learning together* as a notion of how to support everyone in the curriculum change process - this event put this notion into action. Some 70 participants engaged in the day's activities. Over 40 of these were children from three Dublin primary schools, accompanied by some of their parents and teachers. Unfortunately, Covid-19 issues prevented a fourth school from attending. The report captures the views of participants at a moment in time, across three school communities.

This report follows the sequence of activities on the day as they evolved, and provides a description of the day's discussions and conversations. Suggestions, views and opinions in italics are as they were spoken or written. Given the relatively small scale of the event, the picture that emerges cannot be claimed to represent the general views of Irish primary school children, their parents, or their teachers. It simply represents the views of *these* children and adults at this point in time. The point in time matters, as schools emerge from two years of a school landscape transformed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Besides the outcomes of the day, the *process* of engagement here is also to be affirmed, as views being exchanged between children, parents and teachers is not a commonly-seen encounter.

From this point, let the children, their parents and teachers speak for themselves.

Starting the day . . .

In the introduction, participants were told 'We are going to be talking about the purposes of primary education'. They were then asked to engage in the One Word activity. Participants – children, teachers and parents – were asked to provide just one word when they think about curriculum and learning. In no particular order, these are the words offered at the tables:

Table 1: One Word Activity

improve	cooking	fun	maths	Irish	subjects
inclusivity	outdoors	play	support	flexibility	fun
exercise	forest school	sports	everyone	together	variety
voice	inspiration	fun	celebration	learners	learning
collaboration	engaging	exciting	inclusion	fun	sports
exercise	improve	empathy	tolerance	wellbeing	optimistic
time	teamwork	exercise	technology	teamwork	play
love	interest	wellbeing	joy	listening	inclusive
diversity	open-minded	thinking	engaging	child voice	listening
support	teamwork	time	practical	mental health	

The nature of the response words here was strongly positive, comprising personal qualities, characteristics of learning, and particular learning areas. The following broad groups contain the words which were offered – and are illustrated in the table above:

Personal qualities included *open-minded, flexibility, optimistic, inclusive, together, listening, tolerance, empathy, love*.

A range of **characteristics of learning** received attention, such as *collaboration, engaging, teamwork, exciting, fun, play, joy, thinking, diversity, technology, improve, practical, interest, celebration, child voice, outdoors, variety*.

A few **areas of learning** or specific subjects received mention, namely *maths, Irish, sports, technology, play, wellbeing, cooking, exercise*.

In addition, a few contributed words were not readily assigned to groups or categories: *voice, mental health, forest school, time, learners*.



A positive bias in responses in an activity such as this, at the outset of a day such as this, is not entirely surprising. However, the constructive quality of the participants' initial orientation to the day is notable. This is even more striking when one considers that the children, parents and teachers present had been through an unprecedented challenging two years of the Covid-19 pandemic and all that that meant for everyone's experiences of schools and education generally. Even the activities of this day itself were constrained by the ongoing pandemic protocols. One might expect the more personal qualities in this context to be largely positive, but that affirmative tone extends right through the ways in which learning itself is considered. There was an energy and activity in the pattern here – *engaging, fun, play, joy, outdoors, exciting, teamwork, variety*. Perhaps not unrelated to that pattern is the fact that surprisingly few curriculum subjects received mention. It could be concluded that this day was going to be more about *how* the children wanted to learn than about the details of their learning and its content.

Learning from the pandemic

Participants were next asked to think about learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Four related questions were posed for reflection and response:

Table 2: Learnings from the pandemic

During the pandemic....	
What worked well?	What didn't work so well?
What helped things work well?	What problems are now more obvious?

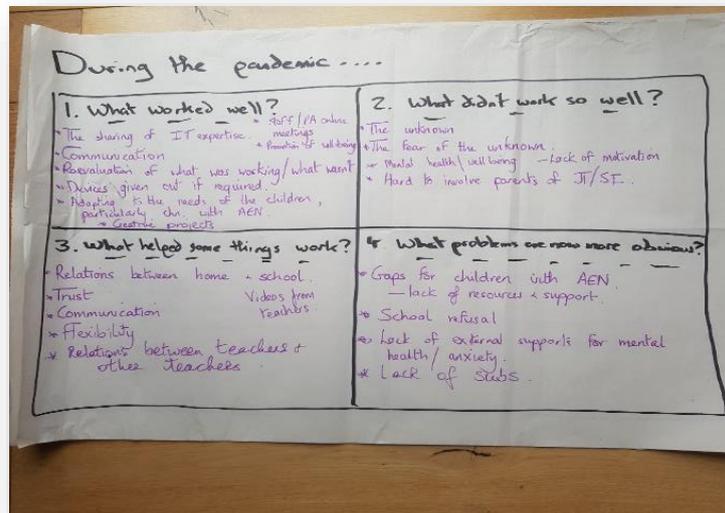


All areas of society faced unprecedented challenges during the pandemic, schools being no exception. Children, parents, teachers and school management had to adapt to major challenges over two years, especially during the closure of schools for extended periods. The views of those who attended this consultation represent a valuable insight into some of the ways in which learning communities responded to the difficulties confronting them.

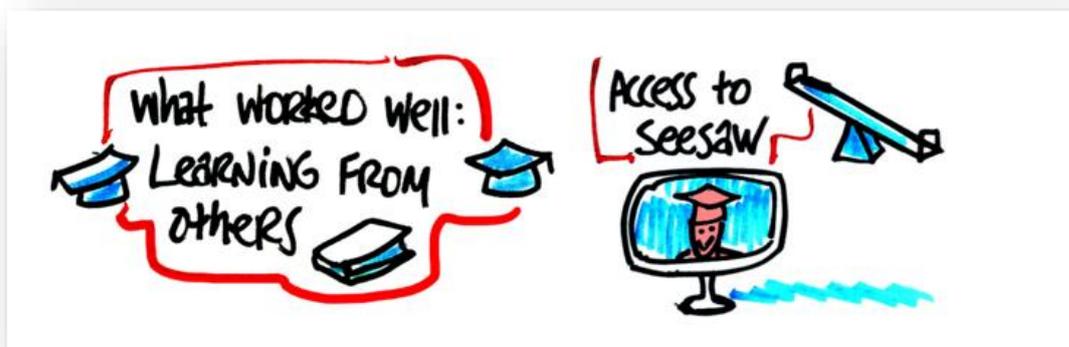


In responses to the question **What worked well?**, the pervading theme was the importance of communication and community. Responses - here largely the voices of teachers - included *collaboration between home and school; keeping in contact; people caring about each other; social responsibility; different stakeholders working together; schools as a focus for community*

Perhaps the rupture to normal daily communication in all aspects of school became the spur to creativity, as all sought to compensate for the lack of in-person lessons, meetings and contacts of many kinds.



It was remarked that *teachers and educators became incredibly creative*; that *parents became more involved in school work*, and that *schools became more flexible*. One noted *innovation and initiative*; another that there was a *solution focus to problem solving*. Teacher contributors noted *greater in-school collaboration*, and *teachers taking more leadership roles*.



The closure of schools changed the nature of learning, with technology taking centre stage as the means to ensure learning continuity. Development of necessary skills for digital learning had to be accelerated. There were positive as well as negative comments on how technology worked, these being mainly positive here under the banner of the question *What worked well?* Zoom calls were seen as a good way to keep contact with teachers. Positive mentions also emerged for *Google Classroom* and *Seesaw*.



Asked **What helped things work well?**, a number of respondents referred to the shared nature of the challenges – *the tradition of collaboration, sharing; teamwork and co-operation; common purpose; shared learning journey; the general understanding that we were all in this together.* Other helps mentioned included *routine; talking; learning from others; a positive mindset.*

There were quite a few references to people's personal qualities – *patience, tolerance, perseverance, trust, flexibility, commitment, resilience, kindness.* These qualities might be largely considered as strengths of character, called into service in a crisis, and put in the service of relationships to support learning.



Technology resources were frequently seen as helping things work well – again mentioned here were Google Classroom, Seesaw and Zoom; also, Duo Lingo and RTE's School Hub. *Fun activities* too were seen as helping learning. Resources in the form of supports, many of them interpersonal, were listed as working well. These included informal communications such as *teachers listening to feedback from parents* and *videos from teachers to explain to children what work to do and how to do it.* More formal supports included professional learning supports; parent body collaboration; and supports provided by Education Centres. The *application of lessons learned between lockdowns* was noted, an indication of how schools built up new skills as the pandemic moved through its phases.

What didn't work so well? The obstacles pandemic restrictions placed on the normal teaching and learning in schools and the consequent difficulties for everyone were stated in stark terms by participants here. A strong theme was that of disconnection and isolation, as learning at home became the option for most. Children's comments here included: *Lonely learning on your own; Hard not to be mixing in class; Keeping connected with everybody; Lost out socially; No friends, lonely, isolated.* Some referred to mental health challenges and the *impact on health and wellbeing.* Among difficulties in learning cited were *lack of motivation; managing your own time, distractions; Irish hard online; group projects online.* One child said *after online learning, I fell behind a bit – it was harder to memorise after project-based learning.* Another referred to *parents' and teachers' different*

methods of doing things. Reliance on technology raised other concerns: *uploading the work; harder to talk and share on Zoom than if in person; not everyone gets to talk on Zoom; technical difficulties meeting with friends and teachers online.*



The particular difficulties experienced by children with Special Educational Needs were raised by a number of teachers. Teachers also noted *challenges around practices and procedures* and the potential safety issues around *children's premature access to the internet*. Some teachers found it hard to involve parents of Junior and Senior Infants through technology.



Participants in this element of the consultation day were then asked to comment on **What problems are now more obvious?** It is seen that the 'problems' can be divided into two main groups: One group comprises the set of issues arising directly out of the shift from school to home learning; the second group may be considered as those issues that pre-dated the pandemic but became more apparent because of it.

Issues in the first group would include a recognition of the importance of interpersonal elements in the classroom - between children themselves and between them and their teachers. The restriction of friendships because of classroom pods and bubbles and staggering of yard breaks were instanced. A participant referred to these as *the social aspects of school*. The limitations of communication through facial expression as a result of mask-wearing were highlighted. A teacher said that *the importance of everyday rituals and routines became apparent*. The role of technology also came in for mention in this context, with a statement that *online learning has a limited impact*. Comments on this were surprisingly few here, although difficulties with technology were raised in an earlier context. The role of technology and skills development for digital learning may well have been 'fast-forwarded' by the pandemic, but a consideration of the desirable balance of face-

to-face learning and virtual encounters was beyond the scope of the consultation here. It's a consideration that needs to happen at a national level – even an international level.



The second set of issues were also brought into focus by the suspension of normal schooling. These weren't new issues or problems but now had new light and attention focused on them. The gaps between children from different social backgrounds became more apparent – one contributor called it *the social divide*. The level of home supports was thrust into consideration when schools closed. Regular learning supports were disrupted and the home was called upon to help fill the gaps in provision. Teachers referred to the lack of IT access in some homes, and the varied capacity of many parents to take on some of the teacher's roles and functions. Anecdotal evidence and the views of some teachers in this consultation suggested that educational disadvantage was exacerbated by the experiences of the pandemic. Inclusion was also seen as an issue that now required greater attention, as parents of children with special needs found it very difficult to manage without the daily supports and directions the school normally provided, the issues here also playing out on national media.

The Covid-19 pandemic confronted schools with challenges that few ever imagined. The contributions of children and teachers in this consultation provided an illustration of the remarkable ways in which all in school communities faced the challenges and provided learning in the unprecedented circumstances that evolved almost overnight. Unsurprisingly, the situation obliged many to look critically at the nature of children's learning and the role of schools, teachers, parents and of children themselves in shaping their learning world. Later elements in this day's consultation provided opportunities for that critical look. As Chris, the facilitator noted *we're talking about the pandemic, but it's about more than the pandemic*.

Purpose, and what's important?

At this point, the participants were asked to consider 'the purpose of primary education (and the things that should be most important)'. They were further asked to approach this task 'in the light of our experience over the last couple of years' (i.e., during the pandemic). The recorded responses had a number of prominent themes: communication, relationships, wellbeing, teamwork and creativity.



Some responses stressed *peer relationships, inclusion, social skills and the importance of face-to-face learning*. Others emphasised working together: *teamwork, collaboration, child and adult sharing learning, being more connected to our teachers and to each other and the nuances of being together in person*. A plea to *allow creativity* appeared among contributions, with another (likely a teacher) asking for *trust, and not to be overly prescriptive*.

Mental health, physical and mental wellbeing, life skills, empathy and compassion, developing relationships, and making friends – these were given prominence by a number of contributors. One stated *for children to feel happy and safe – so they can learn*.

Regarding children's learning, it was seen as important to *engage children in fun activities*, and that they would be *enjoying learning*. One child's comment was to *discover what you love to do and do it more with others*. Another's personal comment was *you don't want to go to school in the morning but once you're there, you enjoy it*. Yet another felt that *children's opinions should be shared during class discussion*.

While it was not possible to record the detail of the lively conversations and debates among the various groups at their tables, the themes above fairly represent the most frequent issues that arose. There's evidence here once again of the effects of pandemic experiences, with perceptions of learning strongly influenced by personal and interpersonal factors. Although a few contributions in this activity saw literacy, numeracy and 'more languages' as important, it was notable that the nature and dynamics of children's learning received much greater attention – *how* definitely trumped *what*.

How we would like learning to happen

Having given consideration to what was important to learn in their schools, the participants were next asked to think about *how we would like teaching and learning to happen*. Characteristics and qualities of that teaching and learning that emerged included variety and flexibility in the ways of learning, greater say for children in what they would learn, that adults and children would work together, and that learning should be more fun. The role of technology was highlighted as an important medium for learning.



The use of teamwork and group work as means of learning was suggested, with *specific roles for children*; groupwork for projects was favoured, and technology was seen as having a role in enabling project work too. Play as a methodology was proposed as one of the *different ways to learn one thing*. A variety of learning styles should be catered for, it was suggested. Technology such as Seesaw was considered helpful in *supporting children to learn at their own pace and level*. Not for the first time in the day, the element of fun and enjoyment in learning was mentioned a number of times, with comments such as [it's] *easier to learn when it's fun*; *supporting children's learning by incorporating fun activities*; and *joy - it should be enjoyable for adults and children*.

With children, teachers and parents talking together around the tables, it wasn't surprising that there was approval for the idea of children and adults working together on their learning. A few participants felt that children should have more say in what they learned, while one believed that *listening to children is essential*. One table interpreted the posed question a little differently and among their suggestions were *options, fairness, creativity, independence and respect for others*.

What we could do together

This session's purpose was to move the day's conversation forward from expression of wishlists, aspirations and ideals towards possible practical steps. Themes that featured in earlier exchanges were echoed here – perhaps influenced somewhat by the session's title – as suggestions foregrounded community, friendship, co-operation and supports.



Most contributions here seem to stress the need to repair and restore practices and events that had been stalled during the two Covid years. But there is also a sense of looking anew at such practices, perhaps bolstered by a renewed sense of the values inherent in them. Following a period where many struggled to learn successfully as individuals, the strongest conviction becomes evident again as the need and desire for learning to be done together. Among views expressing this were:

When we work together, we get to learn from each other

Buddy systems between classes interacting as a school community again

More group work and projects please with our own class and with other classes

And one teacher contributor who certainly wasn't favouring solo learning:

Learn together, listen together, play together, create together, talk together.

Here too, were pleas for better communication and greater attention to the voices of children

Share ideas, talk about it more – kids, parents, teachers

Involve kids more in what will happen

More open conversations with teachers and friends

Ranking purposes of primary education and what's important in school

In this part of the day, following on from the aims and purposes activity, participants were presented with statements about aims/purposes in primary education. Each group, comprised of children, teachers and parents, was given the same set of cards with possible aims and purposes to think about, and were asked to rank them in priority (the diamond ranking exercise). The groups were not given titles for the rankings (Top, Upper middle, etc.); these were subsequently applied to their broad rankings. The table below is a summary of the groups' relative rankings of the various aims and purposes.



Table 3: The Purpose of Primary Education Ranking Activity

	Top	Upper middle	Lower middle	Lower
Empowering children	xxx	xx	xx	x
Working together	x	xxxx	xxx	
Basic skills	xx	xxx	xxx	
Diversity and uniqueness	xx	xxx	xx	x
Caring	xx	x	xxxxx	
Valuing each other		xxxxx	xx	x
Realising potential	xx	xxx		xxx
Learning about the world	x	xx	xxx	x
Build on strengths and capabilities		x	xxxx	xxx
Post-primary preparation	xx			xxxxxxx

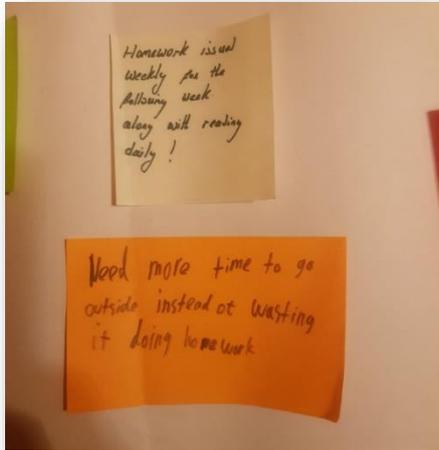
Eavesdropping on the tables' discussions told that groups felt that all the statements had merit, so that ranking them proved challenging. In addition, statements were seen to overlap, for example *realising potential* and *building on strengths and capabilities*. Nevertheless, the ensuing debate helped everyone to clarify what mattered to them.

A point made by a number of participants was that attending to certain objectives would result in the others benefiting as a result. In the words of one participant *We put caring at the top - we need more of this to enable other things to happen*. The relatively low priority accorded to preparation for post-primary was a case in point, since fulfilling many of the other aims would be effective preparation for lifelong learning, not just for post-primary. The ranking patterns here suggest that promoting and nurturing personal and interpersonal qualities were seen as priorities. This

prioritising echoes that of the preceding exercises, where relationships and values are seen to take precedence over specifying content. It further reflects a view that children and their welfare and development are central concerns of primary education *per se*, and that cannot be merely a preparatory stage for something in the future.

What more is important to say?

This discussion – the final one around tables – provided an opportunity for participants to raise issues that they felt hadn't been given attention during the day's previous conversations.



A prominent issue raised by many children was that of **homework**. The audible reaction from the attendance whenever the topic was mentioned by a child was one of humour, implying a common view that this topic wasn't to be taken too seriously. Children in this day's event frequently made the call for 'less homework' or 'no homework'. Because it wasn't a specified topic on the day's agenda, it received only passing mention in the tables' discussions. One child referred to it taking up their play time. Another said *homework should be more creative*. Another still made this constructive suggestion - *adapting homework to be more like the activities we shared from home during Covid – cook something, share with the class or upload a photo, do a*

project over the week on something you find interesting. Children also made use of the graffiti wall at the day's end to make their point about homework, pictorially and as slogans.

A widespread acceptance of the orthodoxy of homework renders it resistant to serious debate as an educational or even a child development issue. Also obscured is the potential of homework to be treated as a curriculum development issue – could it be harnessed as an aid to learning rather than being commonly seen as drudgery without obvious benefit, generating home-school links that are often more negative than positive? It remains a perennial issue and perhaps is one that truly merits community voices being heard, given that children, parents, and teachers all have a stake in any possible policy reform.

Desires for **inclusion** and respect for **diversity** were frequently expressed during the day's conversations, and those desires continued to receive expression here. Inclusion and diversity meant different things to those who responded here: *Have more including [sic] events with all students included; more clubs /activities in school that help you meet new friends; we should not be promoting stereotypes, e.g., girls wear pink, boys play sports; additional resources and funding for children with additional needs is essential; stop gender-aligning subjects in secondary school; we need to include people who are Black, LGBTQ, Asian, Hispanic, etc. in our reading and writing.*

One group here stressed the importance of **developing life skills** including *critical thinking – influencers, media, etc.; more STEM, coding – preparation for future life and jobs; money, budgeting; sewing, cooking, first aid; building resilience*. Some content that was felt should be added to the curriculum was proposed: *environmental education – more in-school action; more creative time/free writing involving the subjects we are learning; more of a place for wellbeing; learning ISL; peer tutoring / learning (older/younger) gets a bigger place*. One of the day's participating schools made a strong pitch for the inclusion of a values programme, their proposal inspired by such a programme in use in their own classrooms.

The wish to **empower and trust children more** appeared among suggestions here (though unclear whether from a child or an adult), as did *valuing the students and their opinions*. Finally, there were pleas once more for *fun at the centre of school and learning; making subjects more enjoyable, fun, e.g., Irish games and maths games*; and this (qualified) suggestion *fun and learning (not all the time)*. The links between school and community were mentioned by a number of participants, and the school itself was also seen as a community - *important to hear the voices of the whole school community, including children, parents, grandparents*. There were suggestions that the school should make more use of community resources including 'human' resources: *invite speakers in*; one speaker used the term *skills transfer - connect everyone in the community - link schools to e.g., AgeAction*.

Interestingly, some aspects of teaching and learning received little or no attention on this day's consultation. For example, we have no record of anyone mentioning assessment as an issue or a concern. Could this mean that children's experience of assessment is largely formative, with their teachers practising more intuitive and unplanned assessment events? And as mentioned previously, references to specific subjects and learning areas were few and far between, and where they occurred (e.g., art, sport, Irish, maths), it was usually in the context of pedagogies. Also of interest - particularly to those designing a curriculum framework - was that children seem to anticipate the essence of the key competencies currently proposed in the draft curriculum. While they cannot know the competencies by name, they seek more time to be creative, they are keen to be digital learners, they desire to be active citizens. And in their seeking of greater choice and autonomy in their learning, they are seeking *agency*, they are already viewing themselves as *capable actors*, and are already pursuing *learning to be a learner*.

Summary

History is replete with examples of how the 'ways of doing things' are challenged by unexpected and unplanned events. Inevitably, the Covid-19 pandemic, having forced all involved in education to re-imagine and re-create teaching and learning, was a major influence on the day's conversations here. The coincidence of the pandemic occurring when a major review of the curriculum was in progress could be viewed positively or negatively, but the nature of changes over the preceding two years obliges a radical and critical rethink about how we teach and how children learn. Many of the issues in that rethinking appear in the record of today's conversations, and serve to add new questions to an ongoing curriculum review. Questions were asked about *what* children learn or should learn. Even more were asked about *how* children learn. And children themselves were more than ready to both ask the questions and provide some of their own answers.

Children believe that learning should be interesting, engaging and fun, and that the best learning happens when done with others. In discussions on the role of technology in their learning, children were perceptive in their assessment of IT's advantages and its limitations. Foremost among the latter were the isolation and impersonal aspects throwing into sharp relief the absence of the interpersonal and the social. In the conversations on this day, the adults present, including teachers, parents and visiting guests, agreed with the children's assessments.

A strong theme across the whole day's talking was that of children having care and concern for each other, for their schools, their community and the planet. There was an obvious appetite for learning, and a desire that school life should be broader and more inclusive, through class links within the school, communications between schools, and relationships across their community. Children clearly want to feel that their voices are heard and that their opinions matter. Yet adults' experiences and life knowledge must temper and balance children's idealism. The challenge for curriculum developers – and ultimately for teachers - is to integrate children's voices into experiences that enable them to 'learn to be learners' as they move towards the wider world.

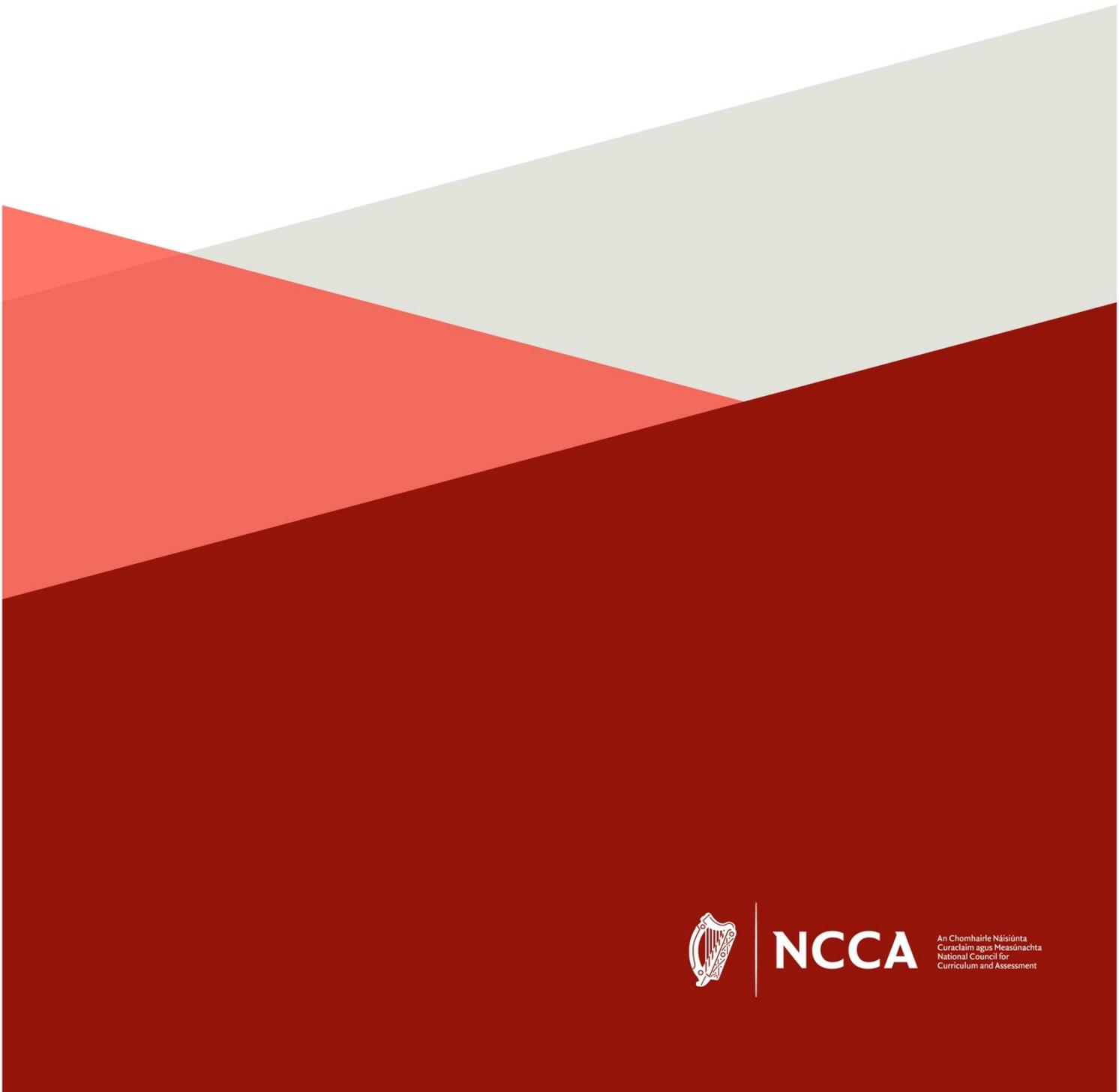
The BEACONS process – its banner proclaims - aims at *Sharing our Learning* and *Connecting our Voices*. On this day, voices were certainly connected and a great deal of learning was shared. Despite the challenges and traumas of the past two years, that connecting and sharing was evidence of a resilience and optimism that possibly surprised even those who expressed it.

Questions for reflection

1. The children have a lot to say about how teaching and learning happens. What balance of thought do we as teachers give to how we teach as against what we teach? Does the curriculum interest itself enough in teaching methodologies?
2. Children ask that there be a lot more enjoyment in their learning, not just fun, but interesting, engaged learning – ‘what you want to do more of’. Is this about content and/or methodologies?
3. Children tend to have strong feelings about fairness and justice, equality and inclusion – how can the curriculum harness and channel their commitment to these?
4. Homework gets a bad press from children – it did on this day, too. Is it time to reconceptualise homework and its potential role in children’s learning?
5. Can a curriculum leave spaces for thinking by teachers and children, or has all the thinking been done by the time the curriculum reaches the teacher’s desk or desktop?

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) would like to thank the Teaching Council for their support of this event. In particular, NCCA would like to thank the participating schools, their teachers, parents and, importantly, children:

St. Brigid’s Girls National School, Glasnevin
Ranelagh Multi-Denominational School
Whitechurch National School, Rathfarnham.



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