

# ***Leading Out***

Report on the  
Seminar Series



**NCCA**

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

# Report on the *Leading Out* Seminar Series

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The NCCA reached an important milestone in its Primary Developments 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 seminar Reports and the Pathways document include **Thinking Forward** spaces where the intention is to give direction for further deliberation – to explore further, check for consensus, problematise, and so on.

## **Seminar 7: 25.10.2022**

Reading material provided by the keynote speaker, Dr Janet Lord, Manchester Metropolitan University was circulated to participants in advance of the seminar. Responses to the theme of Teacher Agency and Identity included: a panel discussion and round-table discussions.

Fundamentally, discussion at the seminars has been underpinned by an understanding of the education system as an ecosystem, leading to a recognition of the interdependence of its various

parts. This recognition helped to establish two significant points of consensus, termed *principles of action* in the Pathway document. These are

**1...**[that] **systemwide change is effective only when all of the interrelated parts of the system change and adapt**. Consequently, the outputs from the seminars take the form of a set of issues and action points for all stakeholders.

**2...**[that] **the importance of sustained communication across the different areas of the system** might be thought of as the second principle agreed by participants at the Leading Out seminars.

With an eye to the next phase in the change process the Pathway document concludes with a proposal:

*With a view to progressing the issues and areas identified above, it is advisable that a high-level group be established (or agenda item inserted into an already established group/committee) with a view to building capacity in the system, making decisions, establishing sustainable communities of practice, sustaining support for schools, and to carry out cyclical, systemic review of the change process itself.*

This proposal has been followed through upon. The consultation phase for the development of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* has drawn to a close, and, most significantly for the Leading Out seminars, work in NCCA has begun on **convening development groups for five curriculum specifications** (following the work completed for Language and Mathematics). In an important sense, this is where the overarching vision and principles of the Framework will translate into sets of Strands and Learning Outcomes, where, as it were, ‘the rubber hits the road’ in the redevelopment. The seminars in this phase of Leading Out will reflect this work, and for this reason the focus of Seminar 7 returned to the question of **agency**. From the beginning of the seminar series, agency has been discussed in terms of the agency of the teacher in the classroom, the agency of the school in its unique context, and the agency of the system in support of change.

## **Keynote address and round table discussion**

The keynote address by Dr Janet Lord of Manchester Metropolitan University foregrounded the critical importance of the professional decision-making of the teacher, a professionalism which is socially constructed and enacted in context. Agency is, therefore, not just individual capacity. For that reason, the promotion of meaningful agency should be considered across all levels of an educational system.

The round table discussion looked towards building a vision for an agentic Irish teaching profession, and centred on the teacher, the school and the system. From the follow-up poster activity consensus emerged around the following points.

The **agentic teacher** is one who:

- is keenly aware of the needs of children, has knowledge of curriculum, and has the ability to reflect on his/her teaching, has the courage to explore and try new things

- has a confidence which is not misplaced, but is based in competence, pedagogical knowledge and awareness
- is professional, in effect is an expert in teaching.

The **agentic school**:

- promotes open communication, collaboration between staff, discussion and reflection
- is characterised by trust, a shared vision, an ability to think outside the box, and support for and encouragement of professional learning amongst staff
- demonstrates flexible leadership, where leaders understand curriculum, pedagogy and children's lives
- embodies affirmation of innovative and creative practice, trusting the experience and expertise of teachers; does not streamline everything to templates, but is supportive and empowering.

The **agentic system**:

- embodies distributed leadership which values the voices of all partners
- promotes professional conversations, for example, between teachers and inspectors; provides facilities and time for new teachers to access mentoring
- values clear communication about innovations coming on stream
- provides time for networking and time for reflecting, thereby acknowledging teachers as leaders
- is characterised by a level of trust that provides quality professional learning opportunities; is supportive yet challenging.

## The Panel Discussion

A panel, representative of the Schools Forum, school management, initial teacher education, and the Department of Education, responded to questions about agency, in particular teacher agency. Responses from the panel members echoed many of the points from the previous session. They stressed the importance of openness and communication at school level in pursuit of a shared vision for teaching and learning. They recognised that we are coming from a solid foundation, which inspires confidence in teachers and principals, and which allows us to look forward to professional conversations about the curriculum changes. While it is important that we learn from each other through networking and clustering of schools it is important too that we temper our expectations. Change is demanding and will take time.

This point was echoed through the observation that when the new framework emerges with broad outcomes for subject areas it will bring challenges to the 'knowledgeability' of teachers. Therefore, content knowledge will be vital. It is, after all, what gives teachers the options, what allows them to make professional choices and decisions.

## The Padlet Activity

Focusing on the enablers and prohibitors of an agentic profession the closing session used a Padlet to record digitally the views of seminar participants through a series of short statements.

Prominent among the enablers listed were:

the principal and board of management	subject knowledge and pedagogy	effective CPD and timely access to it	time, resources, supports, and buy-in	collegiality
communication with parents and wider community	quality leadership, from inspectorate and at school level	freedom to make professional choices	space to explore options and to make mistakes	building on professional knowledge and existing culture
high quality in curriculum developments	willingness to develop knowledge and skills	culture of curiosity – inquisitiveness in schools	communities of practice	re-imagining continuing professional development

The inhibitors of agency included:

lack of time for reflection	reliance on text books and pre-prepared resources	predisposition to a particular culture	non-supportive leadership in school and elsewhere	fear of failure and the external demands on the school
pressure to master everything at once	inappropriate focus on testing and results	imbalance between compliance and agency	regime of accountability	challenge of integration and lack of curriculum knowledge
conflicting conceptualisations of the curriculum	lack of cohesion in provision of resources	social media and teacher influencers	day-to-day demands of the classroom	non-supportive inspection processes

Closing remarks included affirmations of the achievements of the Leading Out seminars to date and recognition of the value of the forum to participants from across the broad spectrum of the eco-system.

## Thinking Forward

Now that the kind of inter-agency collaboration proposed in the Pathway document has been formally established it seems appropriate for the Leading Out seminar series to turn attention to questions that might arise from the next phase of work on the specifications for individual curriculum areas. While the curriculum framework rightly views teachers as committed, skilful and agentic professionals, teachers (indeed all actors within the education system) may experience feelings of de-skilling or de-professionalisation in the face of significant curriculum change. Two interrelated features of the proposed change – integration in Stages 1 and 2, and broad learning outcomes – require to be teased out in the context of agency within the system.

*The curriculum areas support **an integrated approach to teaching and learning**, with links across areas optimising curriculum integration while supporting progression in learning. (Draft Curriculum Framework, p11.)*

*The specifications will describe children's learning through **broad learning outcomes which teachers can interpret locally** and which allow for variations in children's learning needs. (Draft Curriculum Framework, p21.)*

Looking forward to the next seminars in the Leading Out series questions such as these suggest themselves:

- How best will specifications for the individual curriculum areas support teacher judgement in terms of integration and the exploration of broad learning outcomes?
- What challenges to teacher subject knowledge will emerge and how can the system best support teachers during the time of transition?
- What are the implications for transition (for children and teacher) between Stages 2 and 3 of a significantly altered curriculum structure?
- What kinds of exemplification will best support the curriculum documentation?
- What might be the role of the Schools Forum in relation to the exploration of broad outcomes and the generation of exemplification?
- What model/s of CPD will be appropriate to this level of curriculum change?
- How can we ensure effective communication with all stakeholders during the developmental work on the new curriculum specifications?
- How will the individual specifications link with the key competencies and how will the competencies be nurtured and developed in children?
- How will the specifications interface with models of teacher planning that might emerge in light of the recent advice on Preparation for Teaching and Learning?

Questions such as these and others will insist that we continue to look for synergies between Leading Out and the Schools Forum, between Leading Out and leadership within and across the system, and between Leading Out and the strengths and potential of inter-agency collaboration.

