



Supporting systemwide primary curriculum change

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Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has finalised the *Primary Curriculum Framework* providing the foundations for a redeveloped Primary School Curriculum. This work involved an extended public consultation garnering significant feedback which focused on the framework and the redeveloped curriculum. In their responses, consultation participants also drew attention to the conditions they perceived to be important in preparing for the introduction and enactment of the curriculum. In addition, building on a series of curriculum seminars in 2018 and 2019 and sustained engagement with research, NCCA has continued to collaborate and consult with schools and wider education stakeholders about how and what they, as a collective as well as individually, might do to support the conducive conditions during the introduction and enactment of the redeveloped curriculum. This document draws on [research and publications](#), [consultative curriculum seminars](#), [stakeholder consultations](#), the [Leading Out](#) seminar series, engagement with the [Schools Forum](#), [BEACONS events](#) and engagement with the [NCCA Advisory Panel \(Primary\)](#)¹ (see Figure 1), and synthesises the key considerations which have emerged.

The document is intended to support collective and collaborative decision-making and action as all stakeholders in the primary sector work together to support and guide curriculum change.

Figure 1: Development process informing the identification of conducive conditions for systemwide change



The introduction in 2019 of the *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile* (Government of Ireland) for junior infants to sixth class provides a unique opportunity to draw together what has been learned recently about curriculum change alongside learnings from the introduction of the 1999 *Primary School Curriculum* (DES). This experience can provide helpful signposts to possible future models for supporting curriculum change that can best yield positive outcomes for the whole education system.

¹ The Advisory Panel (Primary) comprises four members: Prof Louise Hayward, University of Glasgow; Prof James Spillane, Northwestern University, Chicago; Dr Thomas Walsh, Maynooth University; Prof Dominic Wyse, University College London.



Change in education is easy to propose, hard to implement, and extraordinarily difficult to sustain.

(Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 1)

The conditions to support sustainable curriculum change of the scale envisaged will not develop organically, at least not in most schools. Research consistently points to ‘familiar flaws’² during large-scale reform efforts, with many now advocating for an implementation philosophy that strives for mutual adaptation, enactment, and encouragement, with room for diversity, flexibility, and choices, thus stimulating local, context-specific ownership (Nieveen, Sluijsmans & Van den Akker, 2014). With this in mind, the document identifies what the primary system, as a collective, sees as being the most important areas for action in the period ahead. In doing this, the ideas presented are based on the concept of everyone learning and working together as curriculum development progresses and as we move into its enactment.

While not unique to Ireland, the collaborative nature of curriculum development and enactment is a hallmark of developments in education here. Close links between the Department and agencies under its auspice support such collaboration and hold great potential for alignment and partnerships, all of which become particularly important during times of systemwide change. The commentary that accompanies each condition described in this document is intended to stimulate thinking, encourage discussion, and identify pathways forward in support of cultivating the conditions that are conducive to successful curriculum enactment.

² Some of which include: symbolic implementation; weak connections between the various system levels (national, local, school and classroom); a lack of adequate professional learning/development; over-emphasis on accountability through output regulation; a lack of capacity building across stakeholders; insufficient cooperation; and poor alignment of assessment to curriculum. [composite list compiled from: Fullan, 2008, 2016; Van den Akker, 2018; Sinnema, Nieveen and Priestley, 2020]

Three overarching conditions: **(1) Shared Vision, (2) Teacher and Child Agency, and (3) Collaborative Sense-making** (see Figure 2) have emerged as critical and are used to categorise and frame the remaining discrete, yet interrelated conducive conditions to support curriculum change:

Shared Vision

- Timing and pacing
- Communications
- Securing resources
- Alignment and coherence

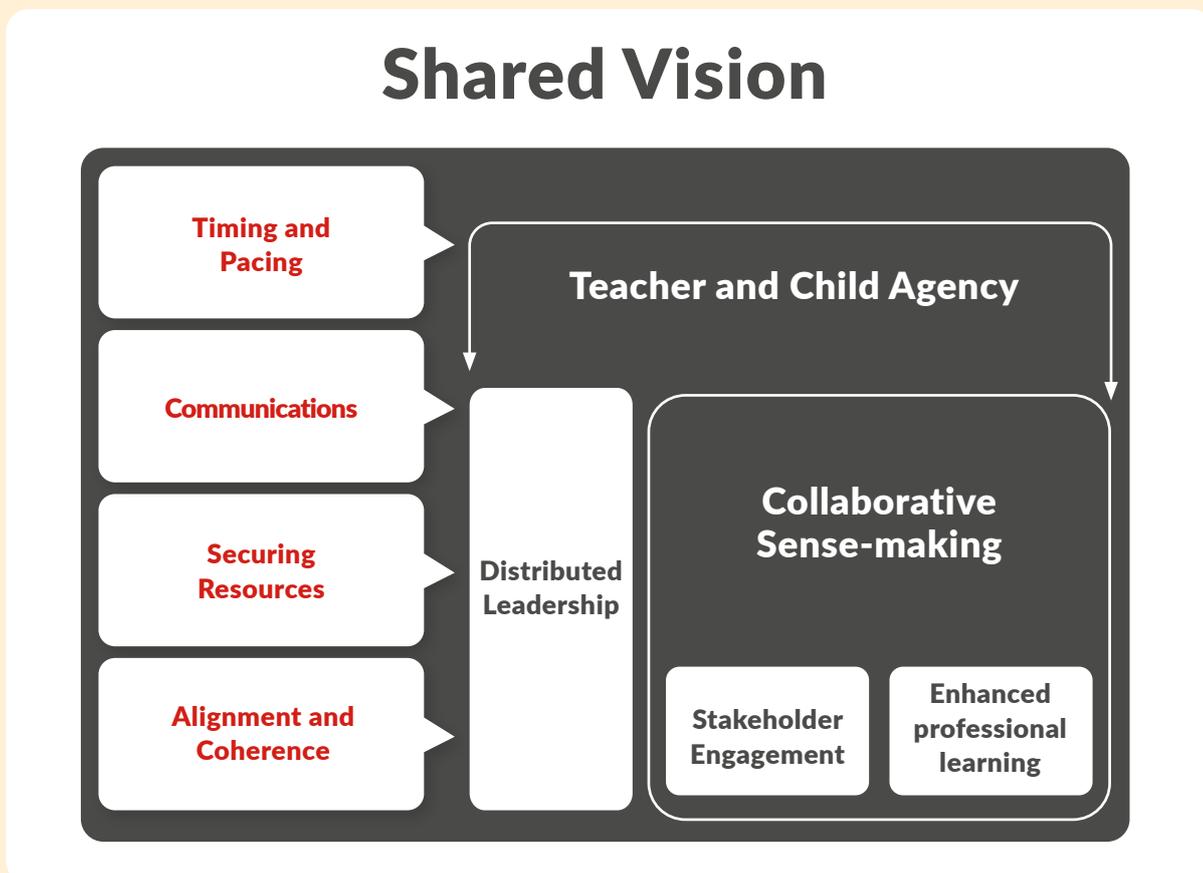
Teacher and Child Agency

- Distributed leadership

Collaborative Sense-making

- Stakeholder engagement
- Enhanced professional learning

Figure 2: Overview of conducive conditions



Conducive conditions

Shared vision

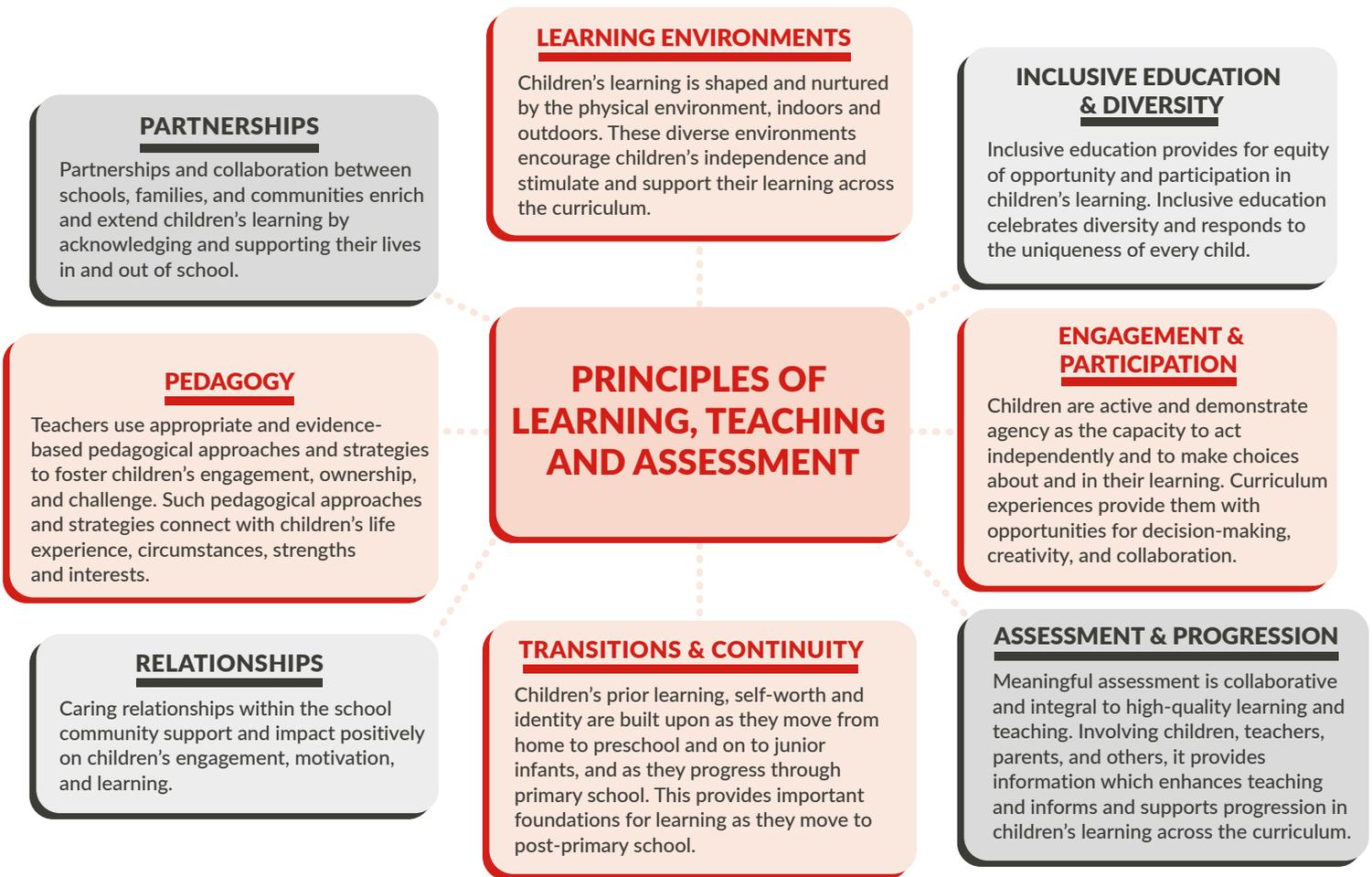
“ The curriculum aims to provide a strong foundation for every child to thrive and flourish, supporting them in realising their full potential as individuals and as members of communities and society during childhood, as they progress through primary and special education and into post-primary education. Building on their previous experiences, the curriculum views children as unique, competent and caring individuals, and teachers as committed, skilful and agentic professionals. It supports high-quality learning, teaching and assessment that is inclusive and evidence-based recognising the right of all children to make progress in all areas of their learning and development.

(Vision in the *Primary Curriculum Framework*, p. 6)

A clearly understood and shared vision for the primary curriculum is essential in guiding the curriculum change process. The development of people’s belief in the vision and principles (see Figure 3) of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* needs to be sustained throughout the redevelopment journey and during curriculum enactment. This is particularly important in the case of a curriculum framework that encourages local adaption and contextualisation.



Figure 3: The principles of learning, teaching, and assessment (Primary Curriculum Framework, p. 7)



This overarching condition of a 'Shared vision' is influenced and impacted by (1) Timing and pacing, (2) Communications, (3) Policy alignment and coherence, and (4) Securing resources.

Time taken to consider how practice across all stakeholders in education and every school can build from the strengths of the past, and face the challenges that will lead to the realisation of a new vision for the primary curriculum will be time invested well. Raising awareness of the vision and principles of the redeveloped curriculum among stakeholders can support a systemwide coherent understanding of the aspiration and underpinning philosophy of the curriculum. Cultivating a systemwide shared understanding of the vision provides the basis upon which the remaining nine conditions can be supported.

Timing and pacing

Successful curriculum enactment will require sufficient time and space for all stakeholders to plan and work together towards the vision of the curriculum through a culture of professional collaboration and a co-construction of ideas. Time is needed for national support services and agencies to work collaboratively on the implications of curriculum change and the adaptations they will need to introduce. Time is also needed for teachers and school leaders to reflect on and share their experiences and expertise so that developments can be critically engaged with, embedded in thinking, and enacted in practice.

Timing and pacing is important in the context of curriculum changes underway such as the continued embedding of the *Primary Language Curriculum / Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile* (Government of Ireland, 2019) and the introduction and early enactment of the Primary Mathematics Curriculum from 2023. Cognisant of the need for local adaptation of the curriculum across the diversity of school type and context, consideration towards the development of a coherent and realistic timeline for the pace of change will provide a strong supportive signal to the system and especially for those enacting the curriculum at local level.

Communications

Successful curriculum enactment will require that all stakeholders have the opportunity to become aware of and familiar with the *Primary Curriculum Framework*. This can begin with the framework's underpinning vision and principles. During the consultation on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2020) participants continually remarked on the successes of the communications strategy supporting the dissemination of the *Preparation for Teaching and Learning – Guidance for all Primary and Special Schools* (Government of Ireland, 2021). In particular, reference was made to the multimodal approach and the incremental mediation of the key messages from the publication of the guidance through to its use in schools and classrooms. This strategy was developed collaboratively by the Department of Education (DoE), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST).

The foundation for communications work is well underway in the form of the Department of Education Inter-Agency Communications Working Group (Primary) whose brief is to ensure consistent, timely and coordinated communications related to the curriculum are shared in a variety of formats across traditional and social media platforms.³ This group could employ a similar multimodal strategy as that used for communicating the *Preparation for Teaching and Learning – Guidance* (Government of Ireland, 2021). In considering such a strategy, the opportunity and capacity to listen and learn from schools, public dialogue and wider system experiences during curriculum engagement would continue to bring a responsiveness to the communications developed. The duration, frequency, interactivity, reciprocity and depth of communication across during the introduction and enactment of the redeveloped curriculum will also require close attention.

A launch event for the *Primary Curriculum Framework* will provide a strong signal to the system that the redevelopment of the curriculum is advancing with schools, including children, centrally involved in its development, and is wholly endorsed by the partners in education, the Department of Education, and the Minister. A launch event can also provide an opportunity to communicate the key messages of curriculum change to a national audience, especially parents, and to outline the next steps in the journey.

Policy alignment and coherence

Successful curriculum enactment is enabled through processes of policy alignment and coherence. Aligning curriculum policy with wider education policy that impacts directly on the practices of schools and indeed classrooms will be a key enabler in working towards the curriculum vision. Achieving policy coherence is a dynamic and interactive process, focusing on the interface between curriculum and wider policy. A ‘competent system’ where everyone is playing their part, working and learning together is essential. Consequently, achieving coherence is an ongoing process involving continued negotiation, and engaging all stakeholders in working towards a new curriculum vision.

The primary education sector is well equipped to support alignment and coherence between the curriculum and wider policy. Coordinating structures currently in operation such as the Department of Education’s Primary Education Forum and the Primary Curriculum Steering Committee, are examples of fora that support and enable policy alignment and coherence. Ongoing work within and across these fora may support a greater consciousness of, and openness to, situating curriculum change within wider education policy, and to making adjustments to both, so that wider policy and the curriculum achieve coherence and alignment across primary education. Curriculum redevelopment also offers important opportunities to look at alignment and coherence more broadly, including from early childhood to primary, and from primary to post-primary.

³This group is under the aegis of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit (CAP). It includes representatives from the NCSE, NCCA, PDST, the Inspectorate and the CAP Unit.

Branching out from these fora, the NCCA's *Leading Out* seminar series also holds potential to play a role in the dissemination of messages and actions to a wider stakeholder audience⁴, further supporting ongoing processes of negotiation and learning among stakeholders to foster policy and curriculum coherence.

Securing resources

Successful curriculum enactment will require investment. During the consultation on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2020), stakeholders referenced the need for resourcing in order to make the introduction and enactment of the curriculum manageable for schools. The curriculum changes coming are significant and resourcing is needed to help teachers and school leaders translate the vision of the redeveloped curriculum into a reality for children. Planned multi-annual funding of developments in junior cycle has been put in place in recent years which has enabled provision for professional learning, initial teacher education, and increased non-contact time for teachers. A similar approach at primary will be an important consideration for the change involved.

The progress on the pupil-teacher ratio, currently 24:1, in recent years is seen as significant by stakeholders in enabling child-centred learning, teaching and assessment in the *Primary Curriculum Framework*. The current average pupil-teacher ratio across the OECD is 21:1 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022). Many also pointed to the need to consider the classroom space itself, the facilities for outdoor learning, appropriate spaces for children with additional needs in our schools, and appropriate resourcing for the introduction of a Modern Foreign Language in primary schools⁵.

Teacher and child agency

Successful curriculum enactment will require people in the education system to have agency in their curriculum work. While 'agency' is a new term to some, the principles underpinning agency are central to most teachers' professional practice. Agency refers to people's capacity to make decisions and to act. This capacity to act is related to our knowledge, confidence and the room for agency afforded by the policies for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Agency is about choice and flexibility: teachers and children being able to make choices as part of their educational experience together is fundamental.

Children's lives beyond their schooling will necessitate them having a strong sense of their agency. They will face many challenges including climate change and social justice. Having a sense of agency should enable children and adults to act decisively, with due regard for the rights of other people.

⁴ A full list of organisations participating in the *Leading Out* seminar series can be found here: <https://ncca.ie/media/4834/stakeholder-engagement-leading-out-list-2020.pdf>

⁵ See Section 10 of the *Background Paper: Integrating modern foreign languages in a redeveloped primary curriculum*: [background-paper-integrating-modern-foreign-languages-in-a-redeveloped-primary-curriculum.pdf](https://ncca.ie/media/4834/background-paper-integrating-modern-foreign-languages-in-a-redeveloped-primary-curriculum.pdf) (ncca.ie)

Understanding agency is part of the 'journey' for multiple stakeholders with different perspectives involved in curriculum change. Everyone in the education system, particularly children, teachers and school leaders need to be made aware that they have agency, and feel empowered to exercise their agency. This can be supported or inhibited by the prevailing culture, norms, established practices, beliefs, relationships and interactions between people within and across a system, an organisation, a unit within an organisation, a school, a classroom, etc. Supporting a conducive environment for stakeholders to exercise agency will require reflection on current practices and adaptation from everyone across the system.

This condition speaks directly to the implementation philosophy of Nieveen, Sluijsmans & Van den Akker (2014) referenced in the opening section of this document. This approach may be supported by the development of a long-term strategic approach to planning that will balance greater flexibility for schools in working with the curriculum, whilst also ensuring effective system structures and processes are available to support enhanced local flexibility.

Distributed leadership

Successful curriculum enactment will require understanding of educational leadership as a distributed practice that is anchored in learning, teaching and assessment. While acknowledging the crucial role of senior school leaders (principals and deputy principals) and the daily challenges they face, there is a need, and an opportunity, to embrace the potential for middle leaders (assistant principals), teacher leaders, and others to be involved in the practice of leading learning, teaching and assessment. Distributed leadership has the potential to contribute to teacher and child agency.

In designing continuing professional development programmes (including Initial Teacher Education) for teachers and school leaders, it may be worth giving consideration to the inclusion of a focus on learning, teaching and assessment approaches and strategies that nurture the concepts of teacher and child agency. The learning outcomes of the programmes could include the empowerment of the teaching profession to recognise, value, and engage with multiple sources of distributed leadership so they can build collaborative environments to support the co-construction of a curriculum. Taking opportunities to build on, expand, and enhance teacher / school leader induction, mentoring, coaching, peer learning, and school clustering through *Driohead – the Integrated Professional Learning Framework* (Teaching Council, 2017), the Support Services, and the Centre for School Leadership merits consideration.



Collaborative sense-making

Successful curriculum enactment can be supported through sustained opportunities for teachers and school leaders to make sense of the curriculum changes. Collective learning experiences foster professional learning among the teaching profession, and indeed other stakeholders. Provision of individual and collective learning opportunities is about serving the needs of schools as learning communities and teachers as agentic professionals. Across all strands of the consultation on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2020), the provision of time and space for teachers and school leaders to negotiate the fit between the curriculum and their current practices was a re-occurring and strongly held view. Appropriate use of allocated time for teachers to meet with each other for professional learning and to reflect on the implications for their practice can enhance the learning that takes place during the time they spend in the classroom.

Building on the local experiences of school clusters at a local level, and the facilitation of professional learning communities, provides opportunities for schools and individuals to connect, learn from each other, and network (with external expertise from the support services) enhancing a systemwide culture of sharing and learning from practice. This overarching conducive condition also encompasses (1) Stakeholder engagement and (2) Enhanced professional learning.

Stakeholder engagement

Successful curriculum enactment will need to place stakeholder engagement at the centre. Meaningful stakeholder engagement underscores successful developments in education. Ireland has a strong track record of stakeholder engagement in education and is well positioned to embrace a coordinated effort to support large-scale curriculum change at primary level. Building on this track record, it would be beneficial to further consolidate the mutual trust that exists between stakeholders across all levels of the education system through continued open communication, dialogue and negotiated action. There are many existing systemwide stakeholder engagement efforts which can contribute, for example, the NCCA's *Leading Out* seminar series, the IPPN's project on *Sustainable Leadership*, and the Teaching Council's work with the OECD on BEACONS and citizen engagement in policy formation and enactment; as well as the upcoming Citizens' Assembly on Education. In further promoting and facilitating stakeholder engagement careful consideration should be given as to how to include under-represented and seldom heard groups from wider society.

Enhanced professional learning

Successful curriculum enactment can be supported by ongoing, flexible and sustained systemwide professional learning, including engagement with research, new practices, and importantly, understanding the concept of professionals as learners. Professional learning includes professional development but is more expansive. A progressive professional learning culture has the potential to focus both on the components of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and on teachers' and school leaders' efforts to enact the curriculum while simultaneously engaging with and building on their prior knowledge and practice. Central to this is connecting with the professional and personal aspects of learning, attending to the emotional/affective aspects of

curriculum change (e.g. fear, anxiety) and beginning from what teachers value in their practice, and building on their strengths (bottom-up approach).

The teacher education continuum has undergone considerable change over the last decade through the extension of both undergraduate and postgraduate courses, the enactment of the *Céim: standards for initial teacher education* (Teaching Council, 2020) and the publication of *Cosán: framework for teachers' learning* (Teaching Council, 2016).

Professional development support is in place to support primary and special schools with the enactment of the *Primary Language Curriculum / Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile* (Government of Ireland, 2019). This investment in professional development has enabled schools to make significant progress in enacting the PLC/CTB and begin to become familiar with using learning outcomes. The design and provision of this professional learning has been supported by the principles of the *Cosán* framework which:

- recognises teachers as autonomous and responsible learning professionals
- is flexible
- facilitates teachers in identifying and pursuing relevant learning opportunities
- recognises the importance of teachers having access to rich and varied learning opportunities
- provides a long-awaited opportunity for teachers and stakeholders to formally acknowledge and recognise teachers' learning
- facilitates teachers in valuing their learning, and in prioritising learning that benefits them and their pupils. (Teaching Council, 2016, p. 7 – 10)

The continued embedding of the *Cosán* framework in professional learning opportunities for teachers will serve the enactment of the redeveloped Primary School Curriculum well in the coming years.

A further change relates to the evolving nature of curriculum in schools and the importance of pre-/early-career teachers having confidence in working with the curriculum. This necessitates student teachers acquiring a full understanding of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and their role as curriculum makers during their course of initial teacher education (ITE). The central message of ITE being an important time in a teacher's learning journey has been shared by stakeholders across different fora, including the *Leading Out* seminars, Schools Forum and consultation on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2020). Stakeholders are of the considered opinion that ITE affords an opportunity to raise awareness and deepen understanding among student teachers about the curriculum and about teachers as agentic professionals. Teacher educators involved in ITE for primary teachers are cognisant of the curriculum changes taking place. Their awareness of the curriculum changes will ensure that student teachers are provided with opportunities to gain a thorough understanding and knowledge of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* while also empowering them for learning and teaching in their future careers.

Importantly, stakeholders are of the view that the time between the publication of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* prior to the full redeveloped curriculum being available, provides opportunity to focus on the underpinning vision and principles of the curriculum which will be integral to its successful enactment. In this context, schools may not have to wait until the entire redeveloped curriculum is available to begin enacting the vision and principles, and potentially other aspects, outlined in the framework.



Concluding remarks

The publication of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and future related specifications heralds a new era in Irish curriculum reform. The subsequent introduction and enactment of the redeveloped Primary School Curriculum will necessitate a dynamic process, involving a range of stakeholders working together across multiple levels of the education system. Each stakeholder will play a key role in making the curriculum a reality. However, to be successful in their endeavours, those leading the reform effort need a nuanced understanding of the conditions, as delineated in this document, that will be required by each constituent group (teachers, school leaders, support services, policy makers, inspectors, teacher educators and the wider education system) during this time of curriculum change.

The identified conditions set out in this document are underscored by the omnipresent aim of bringing about meaningful and sustained curriculum change that supports high quality experiences for all the education stakeholders, but in particular for children, their parents, their teachers and school leaders. It is important that this is seen as a long-term journey rather than activities at a particular point in time. It needs 'buy in' and sustained commitment from all stakeholders. Mobilising support for the changes requires strong and effective communication that highlights how change will impact all work and activities concerned with the curriculum redevelopment process. All stakeholders, and in particular parents and wider society, need to be kept engaged about changes to the curriculum. This cannot become the sole responsibility of schools.

A national and regional support infrastructure has the potential to support an effective and sustainable enactment process. Part of this infrastructure could include the Education Centre Network and the support services as they have a vital role to play in this arena through the provision of professional expertise. Teachers and school leaders, as agentic professionals, need to feel confident that the supports they receive will be responsive to their context. Potential barriers and challenges can be pre-empted by responding to the requests of teachers and school leaders that enable them to take ownership of the curriculum change in their context.

Schools are dynamic places varying in context, location, size, and structure. A one-size-fits-all approach to introducing and enacting curriculum change may not have the same impact as a more dynamic, responsive and agile model of enactment. There is need to understand the differences in school contexts and reflect this in the approach to enactment.

Contemporary advice around enactment forefronts the value of collaboration and co-construction of ideas through stakeholder participation. Bringing about change is a social practice and it is vital that everyone with a vested interest feels engaged and valued in the decision-making process. There needs to be ample opportunities with sufficient time and space to work towards the vision of the redeveloped curriculum through a culture of professional collaboration and co-construction by all the stakeholders in the system.

There are key implications for higher education institutions involved in the provision of initial teacher education. They, in particular, play a key role in preparing the next generation of teachers to work with a curriculum which will be significantly different in layout, structure and content from the 1999 curriculum. There is an opportunity to reflect on how the foundation studies, professional studies and school placement which student teachers undertake might reflect (1) a reconceptualised role for the teacher as curriculum maker, (2) the components of the *Primary Curriculum Framework*, and (3) the learning outcomes approach already used in the *Primary Language Curriculum / Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile* (Government of Ireland, 2019), and the *Primary Mathematics Curriculum*.

Overall, the conditions are intended to be sufficiently flexible, agile and adaptable so that they have relevance and can be applied to all levels of the education system – the national, regional and the local. They are intended to support complex, large-scale curriculum change. Lessons learned from the change efforts in introducing previous curricula suggest that the chances of success will be significantly enhanced if there is a shared vision, where each stakeholder clearly understands the crucial role they have to play in the process and the process is underpinned by the potential power of policy alignment and coherence. As an education system intent on introducing a redeveloped Primary School Curriculum that will yield improved outcomes for children's learning, we need to champion the overarching concept of agency which lies at the heart of the curriculum vision.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) looks forward to continuing to work with stakeholders, in a spirit of collaboration and partnership, as the next profoundly important steps are taken.



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