



**NCCA** An Chomhairle Náisiúnta  
Curacláim agus Measúnachta  
National Council for  
Curriculum and Assessment

# Reimagining Curriculum

## Report on Seminar 2

May 2023



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## Introduction to the Reimagining Curriculum Seminars

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The *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* was launched by the Minister for Education on 9th of March, 2023. Building on the strengths of previous curricula, the framework envisions the development of a primary curriculum that provides agency and flexibility for schools, responds to emerging priorities for children's learning, changes how the curriculum is structured and presented, and supports a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to learning and teaching. These parameters, especially those relating to curriculum structure and presentation, will have a significant bearing on the development of the specifications for curriculum areas and subjects, work upon which has already commenced through the establishment of curriculum development groups. To support the development of the new curriculum specifications, NCCA has commissioned a number of research studies, the fruits of which will form the basis of the series of Reimagining Curriculum seminars. These seminars afford stakeholders opportunities to consider the key points emerging from the research, and to discuss and tease out these points from different perspectives.

The Primary Curriculum Framework embeds seven key competencies across children's learning outcomes from junior infants to sixth class, which focus on developing children's skills, knowledge and dispositions, values and attitudes. In addition, it changes how the curriculum is structured and presented. The framework is structured in five broad curriculum areas:

- Language
- Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Education
- Wellbeing
- Arts Education
- Social and Environmental Education (SEE).

Perhaps most significantly for the Reimagining seminars, the framework provides for an integrated learning experience, with curriculum areas in stages 1 and 2 (Junior infants – Second Class). These areas recognise younger children's ages and stage of development, and give the teacher greater choice in preparing for and facilitating rich learning experiences through playful and engaging approaches. The curriculum supports older children's learning and development in stages 3 and 4 (Third to Sixth Class) by building on the curriculum areas of stages 1 and 2 and becoming more differentiated into subjects to reflect children's growing awareness of subjects as a way of organising the world.

The focus of Seminar 2, 17th May 2023, was on the curriculum areas of: Wellbeing (Physical Education; Social, Personal and Health Education); and STEM Education (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics). To support deliberation and discussion about these curriculum areas and subjects, presentations by members of the research teams focused on important aspects of their findings. The presentations were followed by facilitated round-table discussions on these themes:

- What messages stand out as important or relevant?
- What are the main considerations in developing the curriculum?
- What are the potential opportunities and changes for children's learning?
- What are the implications for teachers enacting this curriculum area?

This report offers a synthesis of the notes recorded from the 10 round-table discussions and some general observations that might require further consideration as the development of the curriculum specifications progresses. Those general observations are presented largely through the reflections of members of a Panel Discussion.

## Discussion 1: Wellbeing – Key themes emerging from the discussions

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In their presentation the research team noted that Wellbeing is an intersecting theme across the curriculum areas and the seven key competencies in the Primary Curriculum Framework. As a curriculum area in its own right, encompassing the subjects of Physical Education (PE) and Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Wellbeing is resistant to simple definition, which will prove challenging for the development of an integrated curriculum specification.

In discussion it was noted that integration in the area of Wellbeing would pose challenges and that it would be important to teach discrete areas in PE and SPHE so that the individual subject areas are not diminished – to preserve a core to this curriculum area, so it is not dragged in many directions. It was felt that conversations and discussion about wellbeing were timely. This area needed to be interrogated, including the popular perception that wellbeing is 'all about me'. It was felt that a key message from the research presentation was that wellbeing is about relationships and school climate and culture, and this orientation was welcomed. Overall, retaining an emphasis on PE and SPHE as discrete subjects was thought to be very important.

The culture and environment of the classroom—and of the school—was referenced as being arguably of greater importance than subjects or curriculum documents. Relationships, both formal and informal, it was felt, are at the core of everything, and in this context school leadership would play a critical role in sustaining a sense of community within the school and in promoting collective, not just individual, wellbeing. Children should have opportunities to learn about Wellbeing and through wellbeing. The critical importance of pedagogy was noted. It was felt that teachers need to see role models demonstrating wellbeing in everyday interactions and through relationship-building with children. This would be an important dimension of teacher CPD. It was felt that Wellbeing as a curriculum area would require much more than a curriculum document, and that CPD and exemplification would be crucial to the success of this curriculum area.

Schools differ from each other, and the individual school will need to look at its own context and needs in this area, it was felt. Consequently, Wellbeing may 'look quite different' from school to school. Some participants noted that it would be important that schools would not pathologize

wellbeing. Consequently, a focus on 'wellbeing' as opposed to 'illbeing' was noted as being important when sharing key messages in relation to this curriculum area.

Regarding Physical Education, the point was made that if it is to be authentic it must involve learning of specific skills and concepts. Some participants noted that in PE, the exploration of skills is more appropriate than the mastery of skills, so that children develop a technique that leads to efficiency instead of 'mastery'. Participants commented that there can be confusion about the distinction between physical activity and physical education and that at times PE has struggled to decouple itself from school sport. It was felt that the curriculum revision presents an opportunity to enhance children's experience of PE in a more inclusive and accessible way.

Teacher competence and confidence in the teaching of PE/SPHE is essential, it was felt. It was felt that at times elements of PE/SPHE are outsourced to third-party providers and this might adversely affect the relational nature of Wellbeing. However, some participants argued for a more open-ended discussion of current practice in 'outsourcing' PE, or at least for the issue of teacher specialisation to be explored in conjunction with the development of the new specification.

There was positive affirmation for the content of the 1999 SPHE curriculum – it was felt that it contained a lot of valuable content much of which might be retained and that perhaps some 'evolving' or 'in the moment' ideas might not warrant inclusion in a revised specification.

It was noted that the SPHE 1999 curriculum left parents out and that a new specification might provide an opportunity to reconsider their role in Wellbeing – to develop working partnerships with parents and to involve parents more fully in their child's learning.

Regarding SPHE, it was suggested that the issue of potential overload be considered in terms of curriculum content. Many societal issues impinge on the life of the school, and it would be important that these would not become the curriculum as such. It was argued that while schools have an important role to play, they cannot 'be the only ones to respond to societal challenges.' Some concern was expressed regarding teachers being 'fearful' of Wellbeing, of their not feeling confident in their ability to deal with social and emotional problems. In this regard a note of caution regarding a 'care fatigue' culture was struck. Teachers need to know both their 'limits and limitations', it was felt.

## **Discussion 2: STEM Education – Key themes emerging from the discussions**

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The research presentation was felt to have been exciting, with the hands-on, problem-solving approaches providing scope for limitless possibilities. Participants welcomed the emphasis on making connections to children's lived experience when planning for learning and teaching in STEM Education, noting that when activities are relevant to pupils' experiences and interests learning is more meaningful. However, some apprehension was expressed regarding the extent of the change implied and there was widespread agreement that a carefully designed programme of CPD would be needed to support teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and methodology.

There was a broad acknowledgement that the area of STEM Education lends itself to integration with a variety of subjects, however, as teachers begin to work with the Primary Curriculum Framework and the integrated approach which it promotes, there will be a need for support and guidance on how effective integration can be achieved. It was noted that integration is important, but to do it well is challenging. Consequently, it was argued that teachers must be afforded time to engage with new approaches and to network with other professionals, and find opportunities to upskill in the area of STEM Education.

Participants saw considerable opportunity in this area for child agency and stressed the importance of ensuring that children are provided with opportunities to engage with technology and engineering throughout the school year rather than as a once-off activity. Establishing links with organisations within their community (and with other schools and education centres) was considered an effective way of affording opportunities to develop long-term partnerships rather than one-off trips/events.

Once again, the uniqueness of the school context was highlighted in discussion. Regarding planning for learning and teaching, the specification should encourage teachers to feel empowered to embrace change and engage with STEM Education in a way that captures the imagination and interest of children in the context of the wider school community. The Guidance on Preparation for Teaching and Learning was considered important in the promotion of teacher agency, underscoring the importance of teachers' unrecorded planning and preparation as they make professional decisions about children's learning. School leadership was felt to be vitally important in facilitating the sharing of expertise and capacity building in this regard.

Some questions were raised about the need for balance of the time allocations between mathematics and the other STEM elements, and about the importance of foundational skills and knowledge required within each discipline. While open-ended, child-centred approaches were considered essential, there would be a need to balance disciplinary knowledge with integration. In addition, it was felt that children have to be taught how to do open enquiry through which children learn that it is ok to make mistakes, to learn from what they tried and how this enables them to go back and try again.

While some participants felt that the 1999 Science curriculum had quality content with very good exemplars, and that the 'design and make' content and the scientific skills are still relevant, the view was expressed that the specification would need to strike the clear note that engineering and technology permeate our world. This would be key to getting teachers and school leaders on board with this curriculum area. A related view was that children's proficiency in Maths is not yet where it should be and that this would need to be considered in the redevelopment of this curriculum area. It would be important to ensure that mathematics learning doesn't become entrenched 'in the maths book' with science, technology and engineering seen to be covering the 'inquiry-based learning'.

## Conclusion – the panel discussion

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The round-table discussions were supported by a panel discussion, the members of which commented on the research presentations and on their involvement in the table discussions. Panellists reiterated the challenge of defining Wellbeing as a curriculum subject and area. They drew attention to the importance of schools as diverse, inclusive places, and to the need for transformative professional learning in school communities in a time of major curriculum change such as this.

They spoke of the school as a place which nurtures the resilience of the child through the whole curriculum, and of the importance of maintaining focus on discrete learning domains, such as PE and SPHE. They drew attention to the central importance of 'playful' learning (not 'edutainment'!) right to the end of primary school, and, regarding STEM, they noted the danger of a disproportionate emphasis on Maths to the detriment of the other areas.

They noted that children, themselves, are frequently the source of exploration and learning, and stressed the importance of trusting the professional judgement of teachers. In this regard, they felt, the curriculum documents will need a clear structure but with scope for localisation in response to school contextual differences. Multiple externally generated initiatives can come at schools and teachers, which can have a negative impact on teacher agency. Because of this, leadership, especially curriculum leadership, is vital in promoting the Framework's vision of the agentic teacher. They expressed the hope that ultimately children would see themselves as agentic learners and that, on leaving primary school, they would be in possession of both the skills and the desire to continue learning.

Finally...

The task of the development groups for Wellbeing and STEM will be informed by the commissioned research and by the thrust of this seminar: by the excitement and challenge of integration; by the need to design a specification that is in harmony with the Primary Curriculum Framework; and by the imperative that children as active, engaged learners are central to the work. As the Reimagining Curriculum seminars progress, discussions underscore a number of areas that will need to be revisited from time to time during the finalisation of the curriculum specifications and beyond. These include questions relating to integration, to pedagogical content knowledge, to transformative professional learning and the design and implementation of programmes of CPD, to the ways in which pedagogical approaches are exemplified for the benefit of teachers and learners, and to the best ways in which the whole education community can sustain the current impetus for change to the benefit of children.

## Appendix 1: Stakeholder Organisations who attended the seminar

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An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)  
An Foras Pátrúnachta  
Better Start National Early Years Quality Development  
Conradh na Gaeilge  
Catholic Primary School Management Authority (CPSMA)  
Catholic Education Partnership  
Centre for School Leadership (CSL)  
Church of Ireland  
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)  
Dublin City University (DCU)  
Dublin City University Institute of Education (DCU IoE)  
Department of Education  
Department of Education Inspectorate  
Drumcondra Education Centre  
Dublin West Education Centre  
Educate Together  
Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)  
Froebel Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Maynooth University  
Hibernia College  
International Baccalaureate Organization  
Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)  
Irish Primary PE Association  
Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN)  
Irish Second-Level Students Union  
Irish Science Teachers' Association  
Kildare Place School  
Kinia, education focused non-profit, charity and social enterprise  
Marino Institute of Education (MIE)  
Mary Immaculate College (MIC)  
Maynooth University  
Muslim Primary Education  
National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE)  
National Council for Special Education (NCSE)  
National Museum of Ireland  
National Parents' Council (NPC)  
Navan Education Support Centre  
Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)  
Rathfarnham Parish NS  
School of Arts Education, (DCU)  
Science Foundation Ireland (SFI)  
St. Vincent's Special School  
The Quay NS, Ballina

Trinity College Dublin  
Teaching Council  
The Ark Arts and Cultural Centre  
The National Induction Programme for Teachers  
Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)  
TUSLA Child and Family Agency  
University of Galway

## Appendix 2: Keynote Presentations and Panellists

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- **Wellbeing Keynote Presenters**

Dr Margaret Nohilly (Mary Immaculate College (MIC))

Dr Fionnuala Tynan (Mary Immaculate College (MIC))

- **STEM Education Keynote Presenters**

Prof Hamsa Venkat (Dublin City University (DCU))

Dr Cliona Murphy (Dublin City University (DCU))

### **Panellists**

Dr Barry Morrissey (Principal, Limerick Project School & Chair of SPHE network)

Dr Suzy Macken (Marino Institute of Education)

Prof Colette Murphy (Trinity College Dublin)

Mr Seán Gallagher (Principal, St. Oliver Plunkett NS)



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