



NCCA

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

Reimagining Curriculum

Report on Seminar 3

October 2023



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Introduction to the Reimagining Curriculum Seminars

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* 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.

In light of the eight overarching Principles of Learning, Teaching, and Assessment in the Primary Curriculum Framework, the focus of Seminar 3, 4th October 2023, was on Integration, Pedagogy and Assessment in a redeveloped curriculum. To support deliberation and discussion about these curriculum dimensions, presentations by the research teams (from Dublin City University and from the *Children's School Lives* national, longitudinal cohort study,

from University College Dublin) focused on important aspects of their findings. The presentations were followed by facilitated round-table discussions on these questions:

- 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 nine 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: Integration, Pedagogy, and Assessment – Key themes emerging from the discussions

Research evidence from the study on integration, pedagogy and assessment, shows that a nuanced application is required, with no one approach being privileged, thereby underscoring the agency of the teacher. Integration is viewed not as an end in itself, but as a balancing of cross-disciplinary and disciplinary learning to enable engagement and depth. Equally, as something that emerges through choice-making within a supportive context, the agency of both teacher and child is evidenced through things that they do and not something they simply have.

In discussion the scope and clarity of the presentation was warmly welcomed. It was felt that the consideration given to integration from the outset would ease fears that subject disciplines might be overshadowed or lost, or that disciplinary knowledge and/or direct teaching might be undervalued. It was felt that the system can learn much from the example set by *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, which can provide a map for the way forward in developing an integrated curriculum, especially through its focus on relationships and in how it strikes a balance between the child-led and the teacher-led dimensions of curriculum. Furthermore, it was felt that in aligning with the principles of the *Primary Curriculum Framework*, integrated learning experiences should be relevant to children's lives, promote meaningful engagement and allow for the development of skills that relate to children's lived experiences.

Given the extent of the changes envisaged for teachers and schools, provision of time and space, at both a school and support level, for discussion of concepts such as agency would be essential, so that a shared understanding of new concepts can emerge. It was suggested that exemplars, toolkits and CPD will have to align with the thinking about integration in the framework. School leadership will have an important role in moving this type of thinking forward, and empowerment of all members of the school community will be vital.

Teacher reflection was felt to be the key to preparation: '*You plan, change your plan and change your plan again – but you have to keep recording the planning. You have to record actually what you did rather than what you initially planned*'. Even if lessons or activities do not meet a teacher's initial expectations, it was noted that teachers could learn from the experience,

reflecting on their practice and using their reflections to inform future preparation and planning. Consistencies were observed between findings from this research and the *Preparation for Teaching and Learning* from the Department of Education, particularly where the focus on the lived experience in assessment mirrors the emphasis on *invisible preparation* in the guidance.

Testing is just one part of assessment, and the conversation about assessment priorities at primary level needs to continue. There was agreement that it is important that the child is able to make visible what they've learned. Participants acknowledged the impact of formative assessment in shaping teachers' plans and informing decisions about learning activities. They reiterated the importance of ensuring that children are at the centre of teachers' decisions about pedagogical and assessment approaches.

Transmitting the messages from this research at initial teacher education (ITE) was considered important, particularly to offset the impact of a culture of 'continuing what has always been done' as new teachers enter the profession.

Discussion 2: Primary Pedagogies, the perspectives of teachers and children – Key themes emerging from the discussions

The presentation of research findings from *Children's School Lives (CSL)*, the national longitudinal cohort study of primary schooling in Ireland, centred on pedagogy as perceived by teachers and children. Noting the complexity of classrooms as social spaces, the clarity of children's reflections on learning and teaching the systemic agility and responsiveness of primary education, the presentation reminded the seminar participants that teachers influence and in turn are influenced by the children they teach. It also revealed something of a mismatch in pedagogical practice between the earlier and later years of primary school.

In the discussion, there was agreement that it was lovely to have new Irish research data, underscoring the importance of the CSL study. Participants felt that, while there are things we can work on, the majority of children seem happy in school, which was affirming to see. The nurturing and resilient nature of Irish primary schools was noted; relationships in a happy classroom and the professional judgment of the teacher were cited by many as central to effective pedagogy, aligning closely, they felt, with the emphasis on wellbeing in the *Primary Curriculum Framework*. The notion of teachers working with *the head, the hand and the heart* emphasises the relational dimension of teaching and the role that teachers and school play in children's lives. Some remarked that it was regrettable that children might report that enjoyment declined as they progressed through primary school. For them, the characterisation of a primary school where children are afforded less time for play and creativity as they get older was somewhat dispiriting, and they stressed the importance of maintaining a focus on playfulness throughout the school. The extent to which the transition to post-primary makes an impact on the experience children have in senior primary was noted by some who wondered whether teachers can become too focused on preparation for secondary school rather than celebrating the stage children are at for its own sake.

Some noted that learning through play can dwindle after 1st class as school becomes more 'academic'. Their view was that, if a playful pedagogy is to continue in older classes, it needs more explicit defining. Therefore, a framework for play in senior classes would be welcome and exemplars might usefully be provided for teachers to discuss and consider. Some felt that excessive time devoted to documenting teachers' planning lessened the potential for a

responsive pedagogy and detracted from their capacity to prepare for concrete and active learning experiences. They felt that teachers should have greater agency in their planning and that in this regard the role of invisible preparation needs to be emphasised more. In this regard, some identified school culture as a crucial factor. Some felt that schools might do more to support teachers trying new approaches, and that co-planning when trialling a new methodology was a good starting point. As one participant noted: *'Although there is 'risk' involved in trying something new, the bigger risk is in not trying something new!'*

The finding relating to ability grouping was of interest. While many participants found the finding surprising, some wondered about the reasoning behind the practice, whether it was more a practical necessity than a pedagogical choice, or whether it was employed merely to ensure a mixture of abilities in each group; there was some suggestion that in the interests of clarity more research would be needed. The acknowledgement of flexibility in ability grouping in infants—that children are not fixed in groups for a long period of time, that they can move in and out of different groups—was welcomed.

Many assessment approaches referenced in the report are, it was felt, included in the current assessment guidelines for schools. Schools are not starting from scratch and yet teachers may not be aware of the variety of assessment methods they are already using. Participants were supportive of the idea that children should have choice in how they demonstrate their learning. Commenting on the finding from the CSL report that child voice tended to centre upon agreeing rules and rewards, some felt that the child's agency could be extended to decision-making about aspects of learning more broadly. That said, some participants noted that the level of confidence and experience required of the teacher to step into a facilitating role and allow children to lead should not be taken for granted.

Agency (including giving the children voice and choice in their learning) was seen as core to both presentations. The importance of time and space for exploration and engagement with new and complex ideas was stressed in the presentations and some participants felt that this raised a particular challenge for the design and delivery of CPD, expressed as: *'Reference to pedagogy in CPD is typically associated with one subject area. Teachers with a particular interest or expertise in this subject area become very engaged. However, general CPD on pedagogy, integration and assessment could be very helpful for teachers, regardless of their own knowledge of a particular subject area.'*

Conclusion – the panel discussion

The round-table deliberations were supported by a discussion with members of the Advisory Panel (Dr Thomas Walsh, Prof Louise Hayward, Prof Dominic Wyse, Prof established by NCCA to support the redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum. The panellists commented on the research presentations and on their involvement in the table discussions. The point was made that at its heart the work of redeveloping the curriculum is all about purpose and that this should remind us of the need to involve children and teachers in thinking about learning. This is especially important if we want to engage teachers in the development process; we need to reflect the ideas into teachers' practice as core to the process.

Panellists offered a number of reflections on pedagogy and agency. The Children's School Lives study asks important questions like what does it feel like to be a learner, and reminds us of the power of children's voices and, indeed, of the many positives in our education system. Thinking of

the dichotomy between the early and later stages of primary education can remind us of the impact of Aistear and of the centrality of the relationship between teacher and child. Pedagogy is foundational in that it deals centrally with dispositions for learning, children's agency, and the power dynamic of teacher and learner. It can involve us in relatively simple questions too, making us think about how teachers talk to children, how they think about children, how they quietly explore the lives children live outside of school. Teacher agency and child agency are one: agency is fundamental to effective learning and we need to see how we can help to make people part of the learning process. All system factors support or hinder agency – agency is co-produced in action.

Looking to the next steps in the redevelopment process the panel members noted that concepts such as integration and pedagogy are complex, and teachers will need time and opportunity to engage with these elements. Perhaps something of a road-map for this engagement suggests itself through examples from the real world of school life, exemplars that are accessible and not necessarily perfect, a database that would be comprehensive enough yet open-ended, showing what teachers and children do. Such a resource could help to engage all of us in this shared enterprise, in the tentative exploration of complex ideas, in the trial-and-error/trial-and-success rhythm of curriculum change. Perhaps the key take-away from this seminar is about discovering not a simple solution but a nuanced application of approaches in the areas of integration, pedagogy and assessment, an application that foregrounds the emotional labour that is central to education.

Finally...a synoptic view

As the redevelopment of the curriculum progresses the work of the development groups will be informed by the commissioned research and by the thrust of these *Reimagining* seminars: by the excitement and challenges 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 conclude, 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.

There were three seminars in the *Reimagining Curriculum* series and seminar participants and panellists raised a small number of issues for consideration during the ongoing work.

- The flexibility of broad learning outcomes will bring many exciting opportunities but also challenges for those who like detailed content objectives. The challenge will be to keep the outcomes broad and open but in ways that point to areas of appropriate content.
- A comprehensive toolkit to support teaching of learning outcomes will be a necessary along with the curriculum specification. A framework for a playful pedagogy in senior classes

could be included in the toolkit and exemplars might usefully be provided for teachers to discuss and consider.

- The exciting newness of the curriculum demands that teachers are afforded the time and space to engage in the kind of professional dialogue in collaboration with colleagues and others to support their engagement with the curriculum.
- The culture and environment of the classroom—and of the school—is of critical importance. Relationships, both formal and informal, are at the core of everything, and in this context school leadership plays a vital role in facilitating the sharing of expertise and capacity building.
- In an important sense, 'voice and choice' is an appropriate touchstone for the redeveloped curriculum, through its vision of building independent learning into collaborative projects.
- The undoubted strength of the primary system suggests that Ireland's education community is well positioned for the curriculum change. However, the scale of the change warrants a carefully designed programme of CPD to support teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and methodology.
- Children are frequently the source of exploration and learning, and it is important to trust the professional judgement of teachers in their interactions with their pupils. The curriculum documents will need a clear structure but with scope for localisation in response to school contextual differences.

The *Reimagining Curriculum* seminar series has introduced important research studies in the areas of Arts Education (Drama, Art, Music); Social and Environmental Education (History and Geography); Wellbeing (Physical Education, and Social Personal and Health Education); Integration, Pedagogy and Assessment; and Pedagogy – the perspectives of teachers and children. The discussion has been lively and fruitful. The NCCA is grateful for the enthusiastic participation of stakeholders from across the education community.

Appendix 1: Stakeholder Organisations who attended the seminar

An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta (COGG)
An Foras Pátrúnachta
Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS)
Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI)
Better Start National Early Years Quality Development
Blackrock Education Centre
Catholic Primary School Management Authority (CPSMA)
Childcare Committees Ireland
Church of Ireland Board of Education
Conradh na Gaeilge
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)
Department of Education
Department of Education Inspectorate
Drumcondra Education Centre
Dublin City University (DCU) Changemaker Schools' Network
Dublin City University Institute of Education (DCU IoE)
Educate Together
Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
Foras na Gaeilge
Froebel Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Maynooth University
Gaeloideachas
General Synod Board of Education
Hibernia College
Ibec
Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT)
Irish Congress of Trade Unions
Irish Episcopal Conference
Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)
Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN)
Irish Second-Level Students Union
Joint Managerial Board
Kildare Education Centre
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 Collaborative of Voluntary Childcare Organisations
National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
National Parents' Council (NPC)
National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)
Navan Education Support Centre
Ombudsman for Children's Office

Oide

Pedagogy Learning & Education for the Early Years

State Examinations Commission

Teaching Council

The National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT)

Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)

TUSLA Child and Family Agency

University College Dublin (UCD)

Appendix 2: Keynote Presentations and Panellists

- **IPA Research Team Keynote Presenters**

Dr Patrick Burke, Institute of Education, Dublin City University

Dr Paula Lehane, Institute of Education, Dublin City University

- **Children's School Lives (CSL) Team Keynote Presenter**

Prof Dympna Devine, School of Education, University College Dublin

Panellists

- Prof Louise Hayward, University of Glasgow
- Prof James Spillane, Northwestern University, Chicago
- Dr Thomas Walsh, Maynooth University
- Prof Dominic Wyse, University of London



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