



NCCA

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

Reimagining Curriculum

Report on Seminar 1

March 2023

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Introduction to the Reimagining Curriculum Seminars

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* for Primary and Special Schools was launched by the Minister for Education on 9th March, 2023. Building on the strengths of previous curricula, the framework envisions the redevelopment 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 1, 22nd March 2023, was on the curriculum areas of: Social and Environmental Education (History and Geography) and Arts Education (Drama, Art, Music);. To support deliberation and discussion about these curriculum areas and subjects, keynote 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 through the reflections of members of a Panel Discussion.

Discussion 1: Social and Environmental Education – Key themes emerging from the discussions

Some concern was expressed at the manner in which the curriculum areas were presented in distinct disciplines, rather than through an integrated approach to Social and Environmental Education (SEE) as outlined in the *Primary Curriculum Framework*.

The emphasis on inquiry-based learning and the use of the locality as a learning environment in which children can engage in exploration and discovery was welcomed. It was felt that the redeveloped curriculum will allow for project-based learning not restricted by subjects, and that while there are discrete areas in the curriculum, they will likely connect with one another within the broader curriculum. This integrated approach was seen as a more natural approach to learning, particularly for younger children.

A caveat was entered regarding textbook-dominant school cultures, which could make integrated approaches to learning even more challenging and lead to a pedagogy at variance with the style of learning advocated in the presentation, especially the importance of learning being local. A good starting point for children's learning across all of SEE is for the child to focus on themselves and their own lives, e.g., my history (my family), my local area, my beliefs, my family's beliefs, and so on.

It was noted that teachers must have subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and confidence to effectively enact a redeveloped, integrated SEE curriculum. Given that Irish primary school teachers are generalists, it was felt that teachers' interest and confidence in certain subjects might well vary, and that this would have an impact on the way in which they teach a particular area. In the context of a redeveloped curriculum, content knowledge—and integrated content knowledge—will be most important, so that subjects do not continue to be approached separately.

It was felt that a comprehensive toolkit to support teaching of learning outcomes will be a necessary part of, or adjunct to, the curriculum specification. Some suggestions for inclusion as part of this toolkit include:

- enquiry-based learning exemplars
- opportunities for teaching numeracy and literacy through SEE

- videos to exemplify practice in diverse settings
- ideas, prompts and questions for teachers when teaching content
- information, supports and messaging for parents to carry the rationale for change.

Participants commented positively on the notion of the Primary Curriculum Framework being an extension of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. It was felt that the themes of Aistear could be seen in the curriculum area of SEE, Identity and Belonging being one example. In addition, a play-based pedagogy was highlighted as important for children's learning experiences.

Regarding the learning outcomes in the specification for SEE, it was felt that the verbs chosen and the language used would be fundamental in enabling teachers to activate their pedagogical approaches in the classroom. The flexibility of broad learning outcomes was welcomed but it was felt that this will bring challenges for some teachers who like detailed content objectives. The challenge will be to keep the outcomes broad and open but in a way that points teachers to areas of appropriate content. Yet, the importance of including, for example, the voices of the 'silenced, hidden and marginalised' in the curriculum specification for SEE (as referenced in the research presentation) points to something of a dichotomy between the need for the curriculum to be specific and explicit on the one hand, and to allow for the agency of the teacher, on the other.

Discussion 2: Arts Education – Key themes emerging from the discussions

The thrust of the research presentation on process and product was welcomed by the participants and the opportunity to develop an Arts Education specification which places a value on process and encourages children to think creatively was highlighted. In this context, it was felt that the centrality of the child's voice within the Primary Curriculum Framework should be manifested in Arts education through dialogue and conversation between teachers and children. Nevertheless, the point was made that both 'product' and 'process' are important in Arts, and a balance between them was desirable.

The centrality of process was a recurring theme and was again evident in discussion around assessment practices in Arts education. It was felt that assessment of process and product would be of benefit to learning and teaching. This was linked to an understanding of the Framework as offering more agency to children, thereby supporting their holistic development as 'unique and competent' individuals.

It was felt that there is a need to avoid a watered-down approach to the Arts and some concern was expressed about a reduced time for the Arts as referenced in the presentation. Time allocations will support teachers in blocking periods of time but there was concern that this blocking of time might be spent on producing a product (a show, a choir) rather than emphasising the process.

The broad nature of the Learning Outcomes creates greater flexibility and agency for the teacher but there is a need to support teachers in working with such Learning Outcomes, as they will provide both opportunities and challenges for teachers.

A considerable amount of discussion focused on practice within the school context and highlighted the agency of the school (and teacher/s), as promised in the Primary Curriculum Framework. Teachers' perceived reluctance to embrace a process-oriented approach rather than concentrating on the final, polished product was linked to teacher confidence and competence in the area, but also school culture and the influence of school leadership. Discussion was linked to the challenges of a broad and integrated Arts Education for the generalist teacher whose expertise might not be commensurate across the three Arts disciplines mentioned. It was suggested that the research presentation, and indeed the position of Arts Education in the new curriculum framework puts an added emphasis on areas of learning that, whilst being very important, can sometimes feel 'optional' for teachers. The point was made that there needs to be a clear rationale for integrating the arts in the curriculum, and that a conceptual model for integration would be required for teachers. Quality CPD for teachers on integration (and in-depth individual subject knowledge) was suggested as one way to enact the Arts curriculum with each subject having co-equal status. Teachers, it was felt, would need to see high quality exemplars of arts education in practice, along with strategies on how to implement what they see in these exemplars.

While Arts Education offers a natural vehicle for integration, there was some concern that Arts subjects might too often become subservient to other subject areas in the service of integration. This was evident through two points of concern:

- it was acknowledged that while Visual Art, Drama, and Music share a common creative process and transferable skills, each has its own knowledge, concepts, skills, and intrinsic value, and that the specification would need to strike a balance to maintain the integrity of individual Arts disciplines while allowing freedom for integration
- while participants agreed that drawing on more than one subject allowed learning in other art forms to be enhanced and developed through integration, caution was advised so as to prevent an unintended hierarchy of Arts subjects taking hold.

Some participants looked forward to a new specification with potential to forge partnerships and build relationships with members of the wider school community. Tapping into the interests and expertise of all school staff, the parent body, and other members of the community would, it was felt, afford children opportunities to engage in broad learning experiences. It was suggested, for example, that children can engage in broad-ranging arts learning with experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Partnerships and collaboration between classroom teachers and artists were described as offering much potential for schools. However, the need for such partnerships to be reciprocal and enriching for all involved was alluded to, and practical concerns were noted in terms of equity and agency.

Conclusion – the panel discussion

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 noted the similarity between inquiry-based learning in SEE and the creative process which is central to Arts Education, viewing this similarity as an important key to integration. One panellist argued that the concept of teacher agency, named as a value in the Framework, needs to be developed and that the pitfalls around it need to be examined. Teacher agency needs a structure in which to develop if it is not to become 'sporadic, at best'. This structure might be provided by the refinement of a set of concept-based questions as a basis for inquiry. Another panellist felt that the exciting newness of the curriculum would demand that teachers are afforded the time and space to be 'risk-taking teachers' and to engage in the kind of professional dialogue in collaboration with colleagues and others to support their engagement with the curriculum. This observation resonated with an overarching concern of participants recorded in the discussion notes: the need for appropriate time for teachers to engage with the Primary Curriculum Framework and for appropriate supports to promote certain pedagogies (including the trialling of new approaches).

Responding to a question on how the curriculum can enable better learning experiences for children the panel agreed that 'voice and choice' was an appropriate touchstone for the curriculum, as a way of building independent learning into collaborative projects. The ideal of collaborative learning would not happen, though, without appropriate CPD for teachers as individuals and as members of a school team. Again, the necessity of a clear framework or organiser for integration (possibly around a number of broad themes) was stressed.

The impact of the seminar for panellists came from the excitement of inquiry-based learning emerging from the child's personal experience; from a curriculum that will be challenging but future-focused with the potential to activate the imagination; from the possibility that into the future children will experience 'the best possible education'!

Finally...

The task of the development groups for SEE and for Arts Education 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.

Appendix 1: Stakeholder Organisations who attended the seminar

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)
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)
Dublin City University (DCU)
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 (INTOO)
Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN)
Irish Second-Level Students Union
Kildare Place School
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
Navan Education Support Centre
Rathfarnham Parish NS
School of Arts Education, (DCU)
St. Vincent's Special School
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

- **Social and Environmental Education Keynote Presenters**

Dr Susan Pike, Trinity College Dublin

Mr Peter Whelan, Institute of Education, Dublin City University

Dr Niamh McGuirk, Institute of Education, Dublin City University

- **Arts Education Keynote Presenters**

Prof Carmel O'Sullivan, Trinity College Dublin

Dr Elaine Clotworthy, Marino Institute of Education, Dublin

Dr Edmund Gubbins, Marino Institute of Education, Dublin

Dr Máire Nuinseann, Marino Institute of Education, Dublin

- **Panellists**

Ms Aisling O'Gorman (Creative Arts Manager, The Ark Arts and Cultural Centre, Temple Bar, Dublin)

Mr Ian Packham (Principal, Kildare Place School, Rathmines, Dublin)

Ms Ann Hickey (Retired teacher and International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme manager)

Mr Matthew Lester (Assistant Keeper Archaeology, Education & Outreach Department, National Museum of Ireland, Dublin)



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