

Proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum: For consultation

Executive summary

Contents

Introduction	3
Proposals for consultation	4
Part 1: Structure of a primary curriculum	4
Option 1: Three-stage model	5
Option 2: Two-stage model	7
Themes, areas and subjects	8
Part 2: Time allocation	10
Proposed model of time allocation	12
In conclusion	15
References	16

Introduction

Last September marked the 17th birthday of the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999). The curriculum, informed by research of its time, has provided a strong foundation for teaching and learning in primary schools. Curriculum reviews, evaluations and research since 1999 have highlighted many strengths of the curriculum as well as spotlighting challenges with it.

Teachers identified curriculum overload as a significant impediment to fully implementing curriculum subjects (NCCA, 2005; 2008). Teachers also highlighted the need for further practical support in using different organisational settings, strategies for differentiation, and ways to promote higher-order thinking skills (NCCA, 2008). While the subsequent development of supports, by the NCCA, provided practical resources for teachers and schools to unpack and implement the curriculum, the number and span of guidelines and online toolkits for schools have increased the overall volume of curriculum documentation with which teachers work, raising concerns about the feasibility of ‘managing it all’.

The last two decades have also seen an acceleration in the volume of research on children’s learning and development in their early childhood and primary school years. Much of this offers deeper insights into *how* children learn and develop during this stage of their childhoods. Furthermore, recent years have brought demands for ‘more’ in the primary curriculum—for example, more time to focus on children’s wellbeing, and new areas of learning such as Education about Religions, Beliefs and Ethics, and coding. The *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (DES, 2011) led to increased time being given to language and mathematics in the primary curriculum further reducing time for other subjects. These changes, together with changing classrooms, create both a need and an opportunity to revisit the primary curriculum and to ask the question: *how can it be improved to support children’s learning into the next decade?*

The proposals, outlined in this executive summary and presented in detail in the consultation document, *Proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum: For consultation*, are intended to begin this important discussion. The consultation on the proposals will run through spring 2017 with the findings then informing more detailed work by the NCCA in developing an overview of a redeveloped primary curriculum. This overview will be the basis for further consultation in late 2017 and into 2018.

Proposals for consultation

How a curriculum is organised and how guidance on the use of time within it is expressed, impact significantly on teaching and learning in classrooms. This short document presents a summary of the proposals for a new curriculum structure and, based on these, a proposal for how time might be re-organised across the curriculum. The paper does not suggest or make recommendations for what the content of a redeveloped curriculum might be but instead focuses on *organisational aspects*. In this way, the paper presents a broad framework within which work on the redevelopment of the primary curriculum might proceed.

The document, *Proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum: For consultation* at www.ncca.ie/timeandstructure provides further details on the proposals, and on the research and evidence from practice which have shaped them. Throughout this summary, references are made to specific pages in the main consultation document.

Part 1: Structure of a primary curriculum

See pages 9-33 in the consultation document.

Rethinking the structure of the primary curriculum is timely in view of the publication of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009), the introduction of two years of universal pre-school education, the changes taking place at junior cycle in post-primary schools, and increasing demands being placed on schools. The proposals set out two options for a restructured primary curriculum. Both options involve moving from the existing model of four two-year stages (**infants**: junior and senior; **junior**: 1st and 2nd classes; **middle**: 3rd and 4th classes and **senior**: 5th and 6th classes) to an incremental model with fewer stages. Studies of cognitive development and children's social-emotional and physical development provide a strong rationale for this (Morgan, 2014). Research along with curriculum trends internationally, point to a more integrated curriculum structure especially in the junior years of the primary school. The first option presented for consultation would mean a move to a new three-stage model while the second option outlined would use a two-stage model.

The need for rethinking the structure of the primary curriculum is timely in view of the publication of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009), the introduction of two years of universal

pre-school education, the changes taking place at junior cycle in post-primary schools, and the increasing demands being placed on schools and on the curriculum.

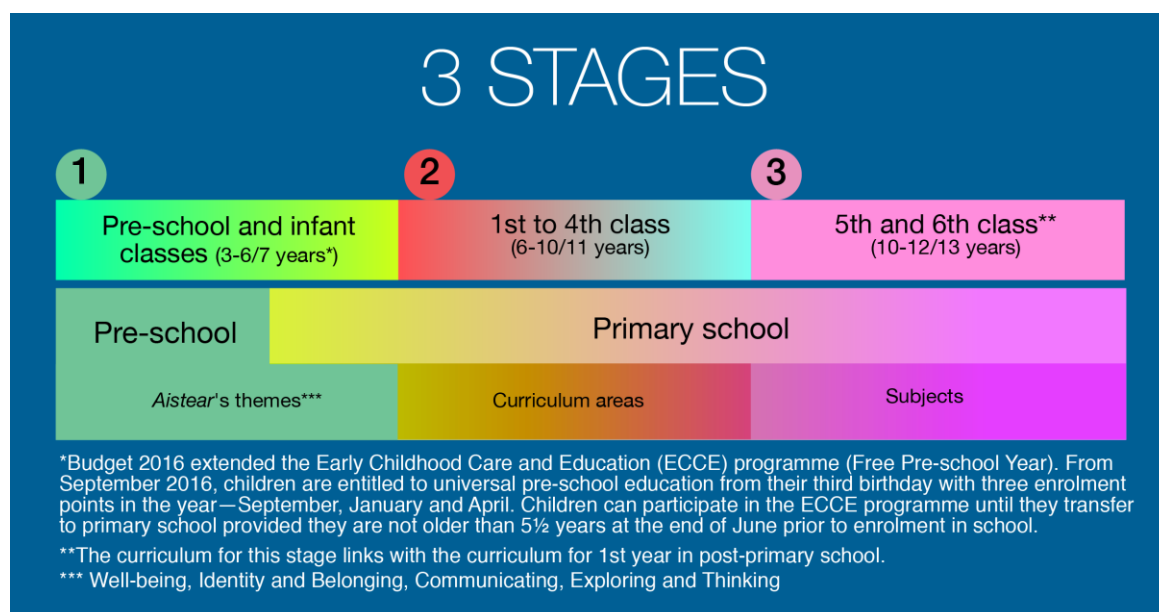
Both options are underpinned by the following three points:

- Joining-up the curriculum across phases of education is important for all children as they move from pre-school into primary school and then on to post-primary school. Policy changes and curriculum developments at early childhood such as *Aistear*, and ongoing junior cycle reform, necessitate a particular focus on this in considering a new structure for the primary curriculum.
- Research highlights that a subject-based curriculum is no longer the most appropriate curriculum structure for supporting children's learning and development in their early years of primary school.
- Opportunities to develop a deep understanding and mastery of skills involved in working in a particular discipline, for example, working as a scientist or as an artist, are important for children in their later years of primary school. A subject-based curriculum can provide a curriculum structure for this.

Option 1: Three-stage model

Figure 1 presents a three-stage model as a possible new structure for the primary curriculum. This might better reflect children's different and changing developmental stages during primary education and how these stages impact on both *how* they learn and *what* they should learn.

Figure 1: Three-stage model for a new primary curriculum



In this model, stage 1 (pre-school years, and junior and senior infants):

- is based on the principles, themes and methodologies of *Aistear*, to support continuity of experience and progression in children's learning, as they move from pre-school to primary school.
- prioritises playful teaching and learning across the curriculum with child-led play being an important aspect of this.

Stage 2 (1st class to 4th class):

- bridges the thematic and highly integrated curriculum structure in Stage 1 with a subject-based curriculum in Stage 3.
- continues to promote connections across children's learning and development while also supporting their increasing capacity for abstract thinking.
- provides opportunities for children to deepen the knowledge gained, and dispositions and skills developed in Stage 1 by using their knowledge in particular contexts and developing greater mastery of skills.

Stage 3 (5th and 6th classes):

- uses a largely subject-based curriculum structure.

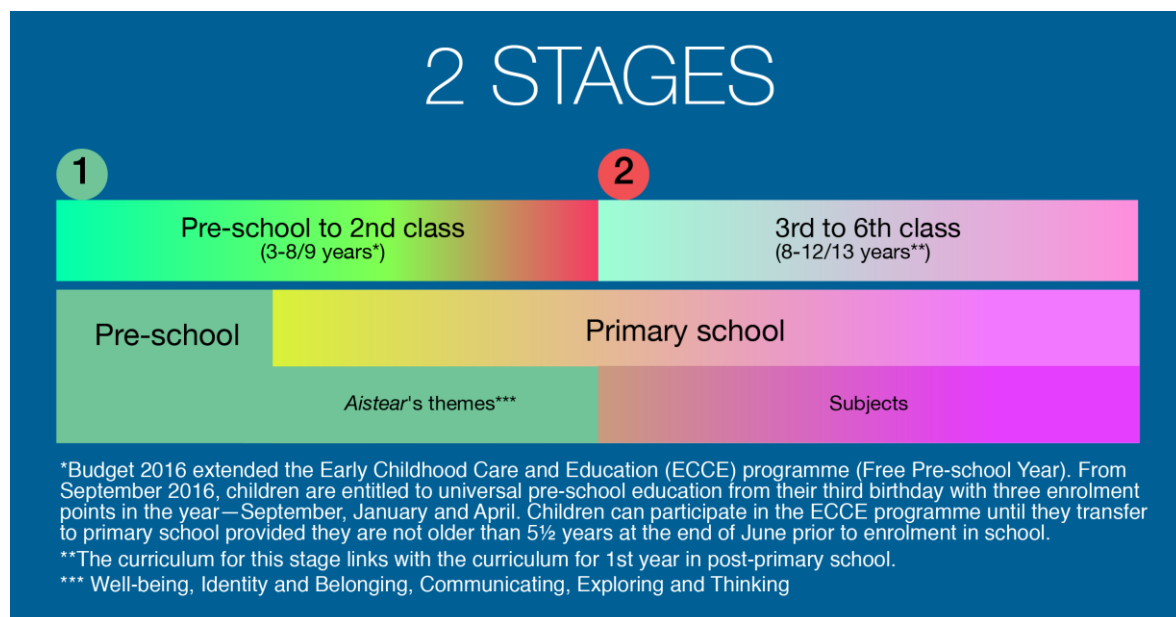
- builds on children’s learning experiences in earlier stages and provides extended opportunities for problem-solving and higher-order thinking.
- supports children’s transition from primary school to post-primary school through subject specific-learning.

The key emphases for children’s learning across the three-stages can be found in the consultation document on page 25.

Option 2: Two-stage model

Figure 2 presents a second possible option for a new structure for the primary curriculum. Comprising only two stages, this model again recognises that children have significant educational experiences before they come to primary school and that it is important that their early school experience builds on these.

Figure 2: Two-stage model for a new primary curriculum



In this model, stage 1 (pre-school years to 2nd class):

- is based on the themes, principles and approaches of *Aistear* and comprises the two pre-school years, the two infant classes and first and second classes.

- supports continuity of learning experience provided by a common curriculum structure through these six years in children’s education.

Stage 2 (3rd to 6th class):

- is based on curriculum subjects.
- encourages children’s learning through subjects in the latter four years of primary school, linking with the subject-based learning as they move to post-primary school.

The key emphases for children’s learning across the two-stages can be found in the consultation document on pages 28-29.

Both options for a new curriculum structure have benefits and challenges. These benefits and challenges are commented on in greater detail on pages 24-34 in the main consultation document. In this initial stage of consultation, it is important to note that the two options put forward for consideration are not exhaustive. They are intended to **stimulate discussion about the most appropriate structure** for the primary curriculum.

Themes, areas and subjects

The proposals focus on the concept of moving from a model of four two-year stages, which share the same structure, to an incremental model of either two or three stages which have a differentiated curriculum structure. Structure, however, is but a first layer in thinking about a curriculum and beyond this, one immediately thinks of what ‘fills’ that structure. The question of content—what – what themes, curriculum areas and/or subjects would or should constitute a redeveloped primary curriculum—is – is a critical decision and one requiring considered and careful thought. At this stage of the work, the consultation document doesn’t suggest or make recommendations for what the content of a redeveloped curriculum might be.

For consideration

1. The proposals recommend moving from a model comprising four two-year stages to an **incremental stage model** which uses a **differentiated curriculum structure**. To what extent do you agree/disagree with this proposed change? Give reasons for your response.
2. The two options for a new curriculum structure refer to the **two years of universal pre-school education as part of Stage 1** to help support better continuity of experience for children and progression in their learning. To what extent do you agree/disagree that the two pre-school years should be seen as part of Stage 1? Give reasons for your response.
3. **Option 1 – three-stage model**: This model would give rise to three approaches to presenting curriculum—using **themes, curriculum areas** and **subjects**. To what extent do you agree/disagree with this option as a structure for a redeveloped primary curriculum? Give reasons for your response. What might the ‘content’ of each of these include, for example, what themes? What areas? What subjects?
4. **Option 2 – two-stage model**: This model would give rise to two approaches to presenting curriculum—using **themes** and **subjects**. To what extent do you agree/disagree with this option as a structure for a redeveloped primary curriculum? Give reasons for your response. What might the ‘content’ of each of these include, for example, what themes? What subjects?
5. Options 1 and 2 both include subjects as a way of organising the curriculum in the latter years of primary school. **At what point** in primary education do you think a curriculum based on **subjects** should be introduced? Why this point?
6. What **organisational** and **resource supports** would be necessary to introduce a curriculum based on an incremental stage model?
7. What are the **implications** beyond the classroom of using an incremental stage model for structuring a primary curriculum, e.g., initial teacher education, working with parents, etc?
8. What, in your opinion, are the strengths and challenges of the **structure of the 1999 primary curriculum**?

Part 2: Time allocation

The allocation of time across the curriculum reflects values—what is important for children as they progress through their primary education. The guidance provided for schools in using time across the curriculum is important. The introduction to the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) currently provides a suggested minimum weekly time framework. This framework includes three key elements:

- the time allocated to religious education
- a suggested minimum time allocation for each of the other six curriculum areas, along with a period of discretionary curriculum time¹
- the time allowed for breaks and assembly time (1999, p.67).

¹ Discretionary curriculum time in the 1999 curriculum is understood as:

A particularly important feature of the framework is the inclusion of a period of discretionary curriculum time. This affords the teacher and the school the flexibility to accommodate different school needs and circumstances and to provide for the differing aptitudes and abilities of the children it serves. It can be allocated, at the teacher's and at the school's discretion, to any of the six curriculum areas—language; mathematics; social, environmental and scientific education; arts education; physical education; social, personal and health education—or to any of the subjects within them. This framework also allows for the inclusion of a modern language in the curriculum where this is available.

Table 1: Weekly minimum time framework suggested in the Primary School Curriculum (1999)

Curriculum area	Weekly time allocation (full day)	Weekly time allocation (shorter day)***
Language 1 of the school	4 hours	3 hours
Language 2 of the school	3 hours 30 minutes	2 hours 30 minutes
Mathematics	3 hours	2 hours 15 minutes
Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (History, Geography and Science)	3 hours	2 hours 15 minutes
Social, Personal and Health Education	30 minutes	30 minutes
Physical Education	1 hour	1 hour
Arts Education (Visual Arts, Drama and Music)	3 hours	2 hours 30 minutes
Discretionary curriculum time	2 hours	1 hour
Religious education (typically)	2 hours 30 minutes	2 hours 30 minutes
Assembly time	1 hour 40 minutes	1 hour 40 minutes
Roll call	50 minutes	50 minutes
Breaks	50 minutes	50 minutes
Recreation (typically)	2 hours 30 minutes	2 hours 30 minutes

***The shorter day refers to junior and senior infant classes only.

In 2011 the Department of Education and Skills (DES) issued Circular 0056/2011 requesting schools to allocate increased time to literacy and numeracy. With effect from January 2012, all primary schools were required to:

- increase the time spent on literacy, particularly in the first language of the school, by one hour overall for language (Irish and English) per week (i.e. to 6.5 hours for infants with a shorter day, and to 8.5 hours per week for students with a full day).
- increase time on maths by 70 mins to 3 hours 25 mins per week for infants with a shorter day, and to 4 hours 10 mins per week for students with a full day.

Currently there is little data or research on how and where schools have found additional time for language and mathematics. Conceivably, much of the discretionary curriculum time provided for in the primary curriculum's suggested weekly time framework may be used to meet the additional teaching time for these two curriculum areas, thus reducing the flexibility teachers and schools previously had to negotiate time locally. In a recent study on the primary curriculum, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) found that teachers often trade off one subject against

another in an attempt to prioritise teaching and learning in other areas. In the same study, a number of subjects were highlighted as not having enough time to ensure children are given adequate space for meaningful engagement with the curriculum; these subjects include Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Physical Education (PE) and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE). It would seem likely that practice varies from school to school and so updated guidance which would take account of these new time requirements for language and mathematics, may be welcomed by schools and teachers alike.

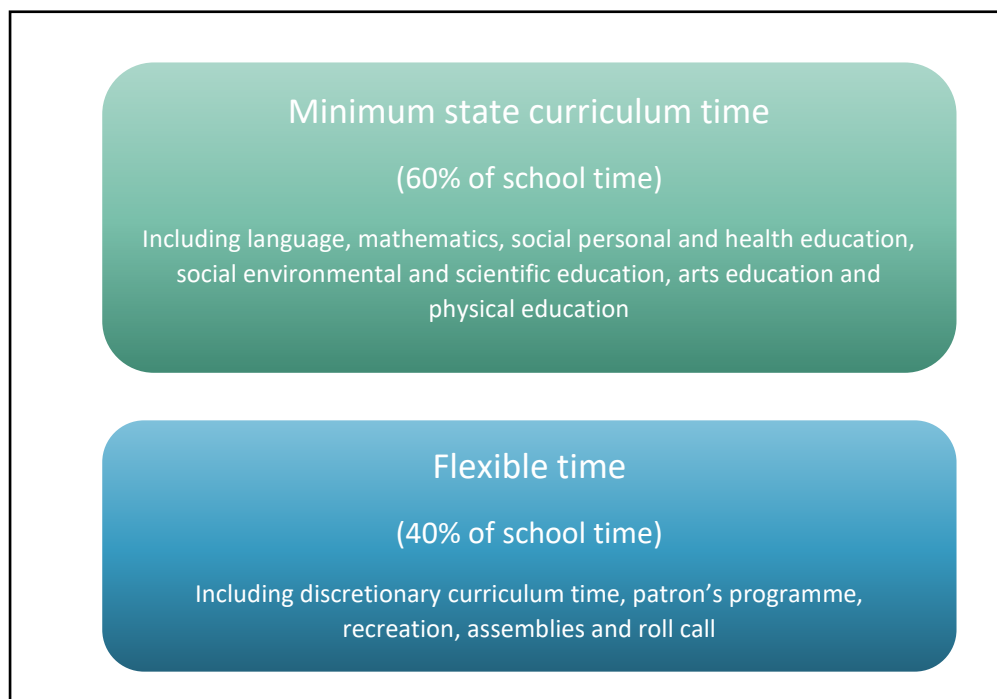
Proposed model of time allocation

Building on what we've learned about schools' experience with the suggested weekly time framework in the primary curriculum, the model below proposes a differentiated, more flexible approach to time allocation. The model is intended to better meet the needs of children in terms of their learning, and the needs of teachers and schools in terms of their planning, teaching and assessing. It is also intended to provide schools and teachers with greater flexibility in how they use their teaching time.

The model can work with either the three-stage or two-stage option for a revised structure for the primary curriculum as presented earlier or indeed with the current structure of the primary curriculum. It is proposed that a new model for time-tabling in the primary school could have two categories of time:

- Minimum state curriculum time
- Flexible time.

Figure 3: Proposed model of time allocation for primary schools



Minimum state curriculum time could refer to the least amount of time schools could spend teaching the state's curriculum and the themes/areas/subjects specified within it.

Mathematics and language (English and Irish) could have a specified **weekly** teaching time reflecting the importance of these areas of learning for children. This would ensure the frequent teaching of these subjects.

- The allocation of a minimum **monthly** teaching time for the remaining themes/curriculum areas/subjects could provide flexibility in using more substantial blocks of time when planning for more extended and deeper learning experiences for children.

Flexible time could be a new feature of time-tabling.

- It could include all time outside the minimum state curriculum time to include discretionary curriculum time, assembly time, roll call, breaks² and religious education (the patron's programme)³.
- While discretionary curriculum time in the 1999 curriculum accounts for up to 10% of the weekly time, flexible time would require a greater proportion of time due to the incorporation of additional elements as outlined above.

² Section 55, subsection 4 of The Rules for National Schools (1965, p.28) state that a minimum period of ten minutes shall be set down in the time-table for roll-call. Section 56, subsections 5 and 6 of the Rules for National Schools (1965, p.29) state that in a school in which there is only one meeting daily an interval for recreation of one half-hour should be allowed, and in all schools a five minutes' break should be allowed at an intermediate time in the forenoon and again in the afternoon.

³ Section 30 2(d) of the Education Act (1998) states that the Minister: *shall ensure that the amount of instruction time to be allotted to subjects on the curriculum as determined by the Minister in each school day shall be such as to allow for such reasonable instruction time, as the board with the consent of the patron determines, for subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the school.*

For consideration

1. To what extent do you agree/disagree with the proposals on **minimum state curriculum time**? Give reasons for your response.
2. To what extent do you agree/disagree with the proposals on **flexible time**? Give reasons for your response.
3. What are your views on the overall division of time into **minimum state curriculum time (60%) and flexible time (40%)**? What are your views on the percentage time allocations proposed for each?
4. Are you in favour of specifying **time allocations** for themes/curriculum areas/subjects? Should all have time allocations or should some be prioritised over others?
5. Where time is allocated, what are your views on whether it should be on a **weekly, monthly, termly, annual basis**? Please provide further comment as appropriate.
6. Should the proportion of time allocated differ depending on the **curriculum stage** involved? In what way should the time allocation change?
7. Do you agree that **Language and Mathematics** should be provided with more tightly specified time allocations than other themes/curriculum areas/subjects? What should the weekly minimum allocations be?
8. What **opportunities/challenges** do you foresee for schools in using flexible time? Is **guidance** or support needed on this? If so, what should that guidance focus on?

In conclusion

Ireland, like the rest of the world, is changing. Children’s appetite and thirst for knowing, understanding and doing in their early childhood and primary school years is unrivalled. The proposals for a new curriculum structure and a new way of thinking about, and using time across the curriculum as put forward in the consultation proposals, offer starting points from which to consider the shape of a redeveloped primary curriculum and how it might be used in schools. Decisions on these structural matters can then provide the basis for reconsidering curriculum content—the themes, curriculum areas and subjects and the particular concepts, dispositions and skills—that are important in primary school education as we look to the next decade.

We invite you to join this discussion about the primary school curriculum by visiting www.ncca.ie/timeandstructure.

References

Department of Education (DES) (1965). *Rules for National Schools*. Dublin: Government Publications. Retrieved from

https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Rules-and-Programmes-for-Schools/rules_for_national_schools_7_13.pdf

Department of Education and Science (DES) (1999). *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction*. Dublin: Government Publications. Retrieved from

http://www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/Curriculum/Intro_Eng.pdf

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2011). *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*. Retrieved from:

http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/lit_num_strategy_full.pdf

Irish National Teachers' Organisation (2015). *Curriculum – a Discussion Paper*. Education Conference, Athlone 2015.

Morgan, M. (2014). *Stages in Educational/Cognitive Development – Current Status and Implications*. Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. NCCA: Dublin.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2005). *Primary Curriculum Review, Phase 1 Final Report*. NCCA: Dublin.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2008). *Primary Curriculum Review, Phase 2 Final Report*. NCCA: Dublin.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2010). *Curriculum overload in primary schools: Reflections and experiences from the learning site*. NCCA: Dublin.