

Reviewing and Redeveloping the Primary Curriculum

Curriculum Seminar 3: New Horizons

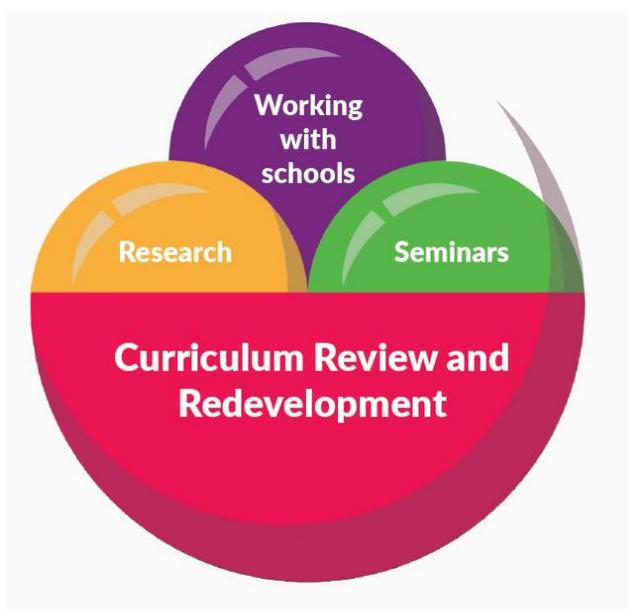
Contents

Introduction	3
Discussion 1	6
Alignment between <i>Aistear</i> and a redeveloped curriculum	6
Defining features of a redeveloped curriculum for the early years	8
Moving from an integrated curriculum to subjects	9
Discussion 2	10
Bringing about greater alignment in seven jurisdictions	11
Alignment in the Irish context	12
Integrated curriculum structure to support greater alignment	13
Conclusion	14

Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is reviewing and redeveloping the primary school curriculum. We are working with teachers and early childhood practitioners, school leaders, parents and children, management bodies, researchers, and other stakeholders to develop a high-quality curriculum for the next 10-15 years. We need to ensure that a future primary curriculum can continue to provide children with relevant and engaging experiences that contribute to their childhood and their later years as adults. Taking account of contextual factors, the work involves a consideration of the purpose, structure and content of a redeveloped primary curriculum. There are three complementary strands to this work: 1) Working with schools, (2) Research and (3) Seminars (see Figure 1). Each strand feeds into and helps shape the others and equally, each is informed by the others.

Figure 1: Three strands of curriculum review and redevelopment



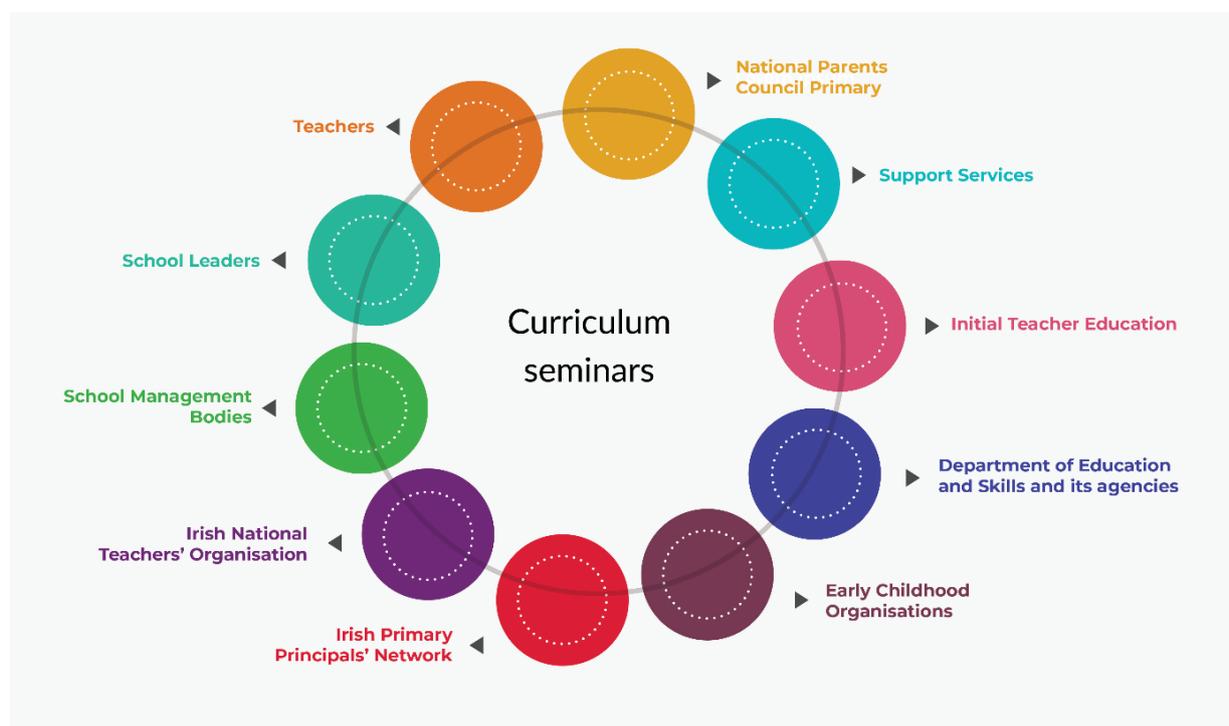
The NCCA's work draws heavily on research, and consequently national and international researchers authored a suite of short research papers on key aspects of a redeveloped primary curriculum. The research papers support engagement in the review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum. The research papers can be found in the primary section of the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie. We are also working with primary schools, post-

primary schools and preschools from across the country. Together, these represent the rich diversity of school contexts and form the Schools Forum.

The NCCA held five curriculum seminars between March 2018 and January 2019. Attendance was by invitation to the education partners and wider stakeholders (see Appendix 1) while many of the attending teachers, school leaders and early years practitioners were members of the Schools Forum (see Figure 2). The seminars gave participants opportunities to consider the key points emerging from the research papers, and to discuss and tease out these points from different perspectives. Each seminar included keynote presentations (see Appendix 2) focusing on important aspects of a primary curriculum. The five seminars were as follows:

- Seminar 1: Curriculum Purpose
- Seminar 2: Powerful Synergies
- Seminar 3: New Horizons
- Seminar 4: Enhancing Learning Journeys
- Seminar 5: Charting the Journey Forward.

Figure 2: Stakeholders who participated in the curriculum seminars



Primary Curriculum Seminar 3

The third seminar entitled 'New Horizons', took place on October 3rd, 2018.

The seminar included four keynote presentations as follows:

- Bernie McNally presented on early years provision: context and policy development
- Dr Harold Hislop presented on early years learning experiences: current provision and future challenges
- Professor Emer Smith presented on the transition to primary school
- Dr Alejandra Cortázar presented on curriculum alignment and progression between early childhood education and care, and primary school.

The seminar discussions were an opportunity for participants to respond to and discuss the ideas in the presentations. They were framed around a set of questions (see Appendix 2) with participants sitting at round tables to facilitate discussion and debate. Although there were points on which participants agreed, there was also some disagreement. The aim of the discussion was not to reach a consensus, but instead allow everybody to contribute and consider the views of other stakeholder participants.

What follows is a snapshot of the main themes which emerged during discussions with direct quotes from participants presented in italics.

Discussion 1

The first discussion focused on curriculum alignment in the early years of primary. Participants responded to the following questions.

1. There have been many changes since the Primary School Curriculum was published in 1999. Reflecting on the opening presentations, what would support greater alignment between *Aistear* and a redeveloped curriculum for the early years of primary school?
2. What are the challenges in achieving greater alignment between *Aistear* and a redeveloped curriculum for the early years of primary school?
3. a) What do you see as being essential defining features of a redeveloped curriculum for the early years of primary?
b) How many years should this part of the curriculum include – two infant classes? Infants, 1st and 2nd classes? Other?

Three themes emerged from these discussions:

- Alignment between *Aistear* and a redeveloped curriculum
- Defining features of a redeveloped curriculum for the early years
- Moving from an integrated curriculum to subjects.

Alignment between *Aistear* and a redeveloped curriculum

Although the questions invited separate treatment of the supports and challenges, discussion focused in large measure on the removal of barriers to alignment between the preschool and primary sectors. In fact, participants made little distinction between the alignment of

curriculum and pedagogy and alignment in a structural or system sense. While they agreed that alignment in curriculum and pedagogy was desirable, their focus was squarely on the need for a cohesive plan to address structural and cultural issues, and professional issues relating to persons working in the early years space. Significantly, many of the desired supports related to the need to improve the context for learning, including children's learning environment across the sectors, preservice education, and CPD opportunities for practitioners and teachers.

Implementing a redeveloped infant curriculum that reflects the conceptual elements of *Aistear* will be challenging, given that different understandings of *Aistear* persist in and between schools and preschools, such as, *Aistear is an hour in the primary school day, or a teacher must teach all the infant subjects and then 'do Aistear'*. Cross-sectoral, targeted CPD for primary teachers and preschool practitioners together is needed for greater cohesion and collaboration.

Currently, *Aistear* was felt to compete with the demands of the primary curriculum and *teachers are obliged to present planning in terms of the curriculum subjects*. And while the new language curriculum marks an opportunity to show how the principles of *Aistear* could be reflected through the school, there is some doubt as to whether this can happen.

The physical environment of the typical primary school is not conducive to *Aistear's* methodology, and resorting to the creation of an *Aistear Room* misses the point. There is a need for more indoor and outdoor space; otherwise, children are contained for too long indoors. Flexible timetabling is important for play and integrated learning. Inspectors, too, have a role to play in recognising the importance of teacher autonomy in this regard.

The primary school starting age should line up with the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme, so that the youngest child entering junior infants would be 4 years and 8 months. Child/teacher ratios should be reduced, to help teachers implement a play-based curriculum. Support for children with additional needs by means of a general allocation agreed across all sectors (without the need for reports/diagnosis) would frontload infant classrooms with extra staffing and provide continuity of care for these children at a critical time in their development.

A parental awareness campaign is needed to create a space for discussion that includes preschool practitioners, teachers and parents. *Parents don't value informal play-based practice in school; now that children are in primary school, time for play is over!* Transitions are crucial, yet few opportunities exist for preschool practitioners and primary teachers to talk.

Equity issues need to be addressed, especially for adults working in the different sectors. Even though some of the same demands are made on early years staff as primary school staff, they have very different terms and conditions, and early childhood education is sometimes undervalued, both in early years settings and in schools. It would be helpful if teachers and practitioners could experience each other's settings so that early years settings and primary schools could develop a shared language and learn from each other.

The need for a review of professional qualifications, occupational demand, and remuneration was noted, including the gap between the minimum qualification levels of preschool practitioners and primary teachers. Also, within the early years sector there are differing levels of qualifications (NQI levels 5-9) and an alignment of training is needed.

Defining features of a redeveloped curriculum for the early years

Two conceptions of 'framework' were reflected in the discussion. The need for an overarching framework was used to refer to an educational framework from early childhood to the end of post-primary education *that shows what we are about in Ireland*. To some extent this framework was seen to have a curriculum dimension: *Wellbeing, playfulness, communication, exploring and thinking, identity and belonging – these could provide a shared centre to organise curriculum from EC to post-primary*. Such a framework, promoting high quality integrated and playful learning, would contribute to meaningful transitions. Secondly, a curriculum framework (which would be *a broad framework that is not prescriptive and that focuses on the child's interests and on the local environment*) was viewed by some participants as a desirable replacement for the 1999 primary curriculum. Such a framework, akin to *Aistear*, would contain *learning outcomes in a thematic framework that is child-appropriate rather than teacher-led*. And yet, some felt that not everything can be so broad: key

foundational skills in literacy and numeracy need to be clearly delineated. There are also curriculum subjects that need specification and a broad curriculum framework would be an inadequate agent for this purpose. For example, *some curriculum subjects such as mathematics require specification.*

The redeveloped curriculum would need to be very clear about assessment to ensure that it supports appropriate practice. *The primary curriculum diluted teacher observation as an assessment model.* Assessment should involve *the identification of planned learning outcomes and any other learning that arises through the course of an activity.*

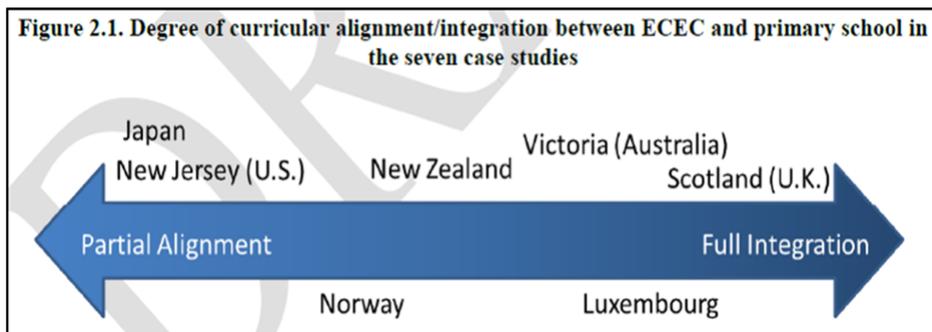
Moving from an integrated curriculum to subjects

There was little agreement on this question and there was little or no elaboration of the suggestions made. Some participants felt that this part of the curriculum should encompass the classes up to and including 2nd class. Currently *Aistear* applies to junior and senior infants only. It could be extended to 2nd class to bring about effective pedagogical change. Content could become gradually more formalised as a child moves through to 2nd/3rd class. Learning outcomes could become more subject-focused later, being more concept-based in the early primary years. Instead of 'joining' *Aistear* to the primary curriculum, a few participants wanted more of a continuum from early years to primary up to age 12. Play should not just be dropped at the end of stage one; there should be an openness to accommodate this and other learning disciplines aiming to develop creative and strong thinkers in upper primary school.

Discussion 2

The second discussion focused on curriculum alignment nationally and internationally. Participants responded to the following questions.

1. The draft OECD paper describes the approaches taken by seven jurisdictions to help bring about greater alignment between the early years and primary school. These different approaches to curriculum alignment are presented on a continuum in Figure 2.1 (page 16).
 - a) Where do you think Ireland currently sits on the continuum?
 - b) Through the redevelopment of the primary curriculum, where should we aim to position Ireland on the continuum? Why?



2. The consultation on curriculum structure and time (NCCA, 2018) indicated broad support for moving from a subject-based curriculum to a more integrated curriculum for the early years of primary. What do you see as a possibility for a more integrated structure that would support greater alignment with *Aistear*?
3. What other key points from the OECD paper do you see as being important for the NCCA's work in redeveloping the curriculum for the early years of primary?

Three themes emerged from these discussions:

- Bringing about greater alignment in seven jurisdictions
- Alignment in the Irish context
- Integrated curriculum structure to support greater alignment.

It should be noted that some participants found it worrying that the OECD reports a lack of evidence to prove that alignment is an unqualified good. Some urged caution regarding the lens through which the OECD views data on policy, transitions, alignment or 'preparing children for school.' The OECD agenda may reflect a greater emphasis on attainment (as in standardised testing) than that espoused in Ireland's curriculum policy.

Bringing about greater alignment in seven jurisdictions

There was no firm consensus regarding where Ireland sits though there was some agreement that we were somewhere in the middle. Ireland's policy aspiration is moving towards alignment, but the practice is not following quickly, and there is no structural or governance alignment. There needs to be engagement across sectors, sharing of experiences, sharing of information about children, and alignment of pedagogy.

Understanding of *Aistear* is not always evident in infant classrooms where, for example, formal reading is introduced in junior infants. Consequently, a note of caution was expressed that merely 'tinkering' with current practice might mitigate against a full expression of *Aistear's* vision – it would be retro-fitting.

Participants saw some comparisons between Ireland and New Zealand with its early learning curriculum aligned to the school curriculum. Ireland may well resemble Norway and Japan, but we lack the simple governance structure of Norway and the supports for transition in Japan. Some felt that in Scotland where a fully integrated curriculum has been introduced, *schools are struggling with that change. Handing back autonomy to teachers presents a challenge and we need to keep that in mind.*

Others felt that Ireland resembled Victoria (Australia) on the continuum because we have two curriculums that overlap. We have a framework from 0 to 6 years and then a curriculum from 4 to 12 years, so it could be argued that we have overlap structurally, but the conceptual space is not shared.

Alignment in the Irish context

While some participants expressed a desire for complete integration, others felt this would be too much of a leap. Recognising the slow pace of change (e.g. switching to play-based learning), some argued for a fully inclusive approach to alignment, to include all children from birth to 18 years.

Participants saw alignment involving a shared language between the early years and infant classes across a spectrum that includes alignment of quality, governance, policy and professional esteem. However, there was further reiteration that each sector must be acknowledged as distinct and valuable. Victoria as a good model to explore, has found ways to align them and to ensure that *the two sectors have a space to meet*.

In considering where to place Ireland in the future on the continuum there was some apprehension about a move to full integration, which might look positive in a policy instrument but might fail to see that the reality for preschools and primary schools can be quite different. In Ireland there is little formal communication between early years settings and primary schools, and working on this first is necessary, CPD being hugely important.

The need to acknowledge the enormity of what alignment would involve for practitioners was discussed. System readiness was identified as essential, and while we need to learn from the international experience, we must find a solution for our own context.

Integrated curriculum structure to support greater alignment

As a precursor to discussion of an integrated structure there were calls for articulation of the overarching goals for children's education from early childhood to senior cycle, and, if necessary, a clear articulation of the differences at each transition point.

Explication and exemplification of effective integration would be helpful; a teacher toolkit would allow sharing of good practice. Pedagogical continuity needs to be fostered, showing clear lines of progression *e.g. sand play in preschool leads to what in third class?* The successful NCCA Transition Initiative was cited as an effective model of primary teachers and preschool practitioners working collaboratively and recognising points of connection.

Let's not formalise early experiences up to age 5; we need to protect play as the key way to learn indoors and outdoors. A subject-based curriculum constrains the pedagogy of play or play-based learning. Participants noted, however, that subjects are part of cultural inheritance also and have an inherent value later.

An integrated curriculum structure must be reflected in a total plan for implementation, including the all-important CPD. There are key elements to the process: professionalisation of the early years sector, greater levels of trust in teachers, allowing time for thematic learning, the inclusion of all stakeholders (teachers, parents, and children) in the decision-making process. Yet, a curriculum can only do so much. Aligning assessment and inspection with the expectations of the curriculum would clearly help. Inspection needs to change in line with curriculum change; it can't be five years ahead.

Change in how curriculum is conceived and enacted up to 3rd class would allow a more integrated approach, and perhaps we should *ditch subjects up to the end of 2nd class*. Subjects could still be detailed but could be happening in a more organic way. More discretionary time could ensure we don't lose the subjects but package them differently. The favoured approach was an integrated curriculum structure up to the end of 2nd class.

Conclusion

The NCCA needs to promote discussion at system level around preparing teachers and other stakeholders (inspectorate, initial teacher educators, parents) for change. Clearly, CPD associated with this change is critical, involving a targeted programme for early childhood and primary school sectors.

A well-meaning, open and flexible curriculum framework, which offers freedom and autonomy, may come into conflict with other educational policies if there is a lack of joined-up thinking across the system. For example, if circulars are issued which advance a particular agenda, (standardised testing, or literacy and numeracy) then *we must question how open or flexible the curriculum framework actually is. Alongside an open framework you need open education policies, and open evaluations and inspections of schools; otherwise the framework will be shaped by other agendas.*

Appendix 1: Stakeholder Organisations invited to the Seminar

An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta

An Forás Patrúnachta

Association for Drama in Education in Ireland

Association of Childcare Professionals

Association of Teachers'/Education Centres in Ireland

Autism Ireland

Barnardos Ireland

Catholic Primary Schools Managers' Association

Centre for School Leadership

Children's Rights Alliance

Church of Ireland Board of Education

Computers in Education Society of Ireland

Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Department of Education & Skills

DES Inspectorate

DICE Project

Dublin City University

Early Childhood Ireland

Early Years Education Policy Unit

Economic and Social Research Institute

Educate Together

Education and Training Boards Ireland

Educational Company of Ireland

Educational Research Centre

Foras na Gaeilge

Hibernia College

HSE Health and Wellbeing Division

Inclusive Ireland

Irish National Teachers' Organisation

Irish Primary Physical Education Association

Irish Primary Principal Network

Education Support Centres Ireland

Lifeways Ireland Ltd

Marino Institute of Education

Mary Immaculate College

Maynooth University

Migrants Rights Council Ireland

National Childhood Network

National Council for Special Education

National Educational Psychological Service

National Induction Programme for Teachers

Ombudsman for Children

PLÉ

Professional Development Service for Teachers

Royal Society of Chemistry

Safefood

Science Foundation Ireland

SPHE Network

Teachers' Union of Ireland

Teaching Council

The Ark

The National Disability Authority

Tusla – Child and Family Agency

University College Cork

University College Dublin

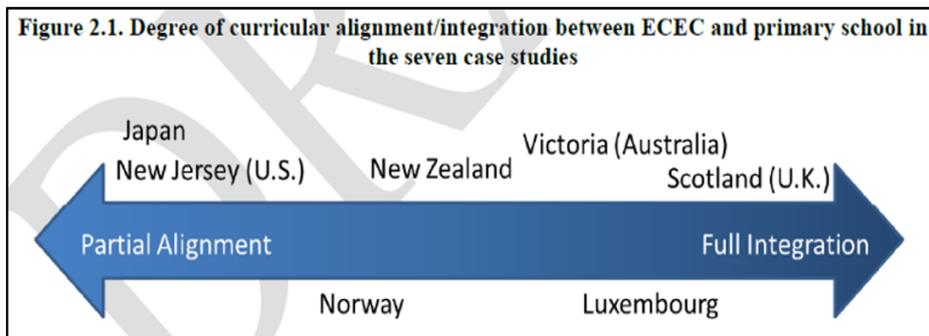
Appendix 2: Discussion Questions

Discussion One

1. There have been many changes since the Primary School Curriculum was published in 1999. Reflecting on the opening presentations, what would support greater alignment between *Aistear* and a redeveloped curriculum for the early years of primary school?
2. What are the challenges in achieving greater alignment between *Aistear* and a redeveloped curriculum for the early years of primary school?
3. a) What do you see as being essential defining features of a redeveloped curriculum for the early years of primary?
b) How many years should this part of the curriculum include – two infant classes? Infants, 1st and 2nd classes? Other?

Discussion Two

1. The draft OECD paper describes the approaches taken by seven jurisdictions to help bring about greater alignment between the early years and primary school. These different approaches to curriculum alignment are presented on a continuum in Figure 2.1 (page 16).



Appendix 3: Seminars and Keynote Presentations

Seminars	Keynote Presentations
Seminar 1: <i>Curriculum Purpose</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dr Thomas Walsh, Maynooth University - Review of the Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum (1999) ▪ Dr Jones Irwin, Dublin City University - Priorities and values of society
Seminar 2: <i>Powerful Synergies</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Professor Louis Volante, Brock University – Pedagogy and Meta-practices ▪ Dr Karin Bacon, Marino Institute of Education – Curriculum Integration ▪ Professor Emerita Carol McGuinness, Queen’s University – 21st century competencies ▪ Professor Dominic Wyse, University College London– The role of knowledge in curricula
Seminar 3: <i>New Horizons</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bernie McNally, DCYA - Context and policy developments in early years provision ▪ Dr Harold Hislop, DES - Current provision and future challenges in early years learning experiences ▪ Prof Emer Smyth, ESRI - Transition to primary education ▪ Dr Alejandra Cortázar, CEPI, Chile - Curriculum alignment and progression
Seminar 4 <i>Enhancing Learning Journeys</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dr Emer Ring, Dr Lisha O’Sullivan, Marie Ryan and Patrick Burke, Mary Immaculate College – Learning theories ▪ NCCA – Parents’ perspectives
Seminar 5: <i>Charting the Journey Forward</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sharon O’Donnell – International primary curricula ▪ Prof Michael O’Leary and Dr Zita Lysaght, Dublin City University - Aligning assessment, learning and teaching in curricular reform and implementation

