



From Purpose to Practice – Primary Curriculum Developments in Ireland

Reflections from the
Advisory Panel (Primary)

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NCCA

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Foreword

The NCCA is currently conducting a large-scale, high-level review of the *Primary School Curriculum (1999)*. This work is an important opportunity to ask fundamental questions about what a curriculum should do and needs to do, first and foremost for children, teachers, school leaders, parents and society as we move further into the 21st century.

To support the process of incorporating the central ideas as presented in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2020) in the redeveloped curriculum, NCCA established the Advisory Panel (Primary) in March 2020. The panel members have been sharing their expertise in curriculum design, development, change and implementation with the Executive and with key stakeholders. *From Purpose to Practice* is a collaborative document emerging from this work and is intended to support stakeholders to engage with the ‘big ideas’ of curriculum change, and to help shape the process of curriculum redevelopment.

The panel is comprised of four members:

- Professor Louise Hayward (University of Glasgow),
- Professor James Spillane (Northwestern University, Chicago)
- Dr Thomas Walsh (Maynooth University)
- Professor Dominic Wyse (University College London).

Throughout 2020, the panellists have been reviewing the proposals within the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2020), considering their implications for children and the primary sector generally, and providing high quality documentation and presentations to support stakeholder engagement through the Board for Early Childhood and Primary.

Figure 1: The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework/Dréachtchreat Curaclaim na Bunscoile*



This document provides insights into the panellists' collective thinking on the more challenging aspects of curriculum such as pedagogy, assessment, leadership, and the vision of the agentic teacher and child. The panel's attention has also been drawn to the system conditions that support change, so the document presents a possible way forward for all actors in our education system, one that is based on the concept of everyone *learning together* as developments progress and are enacted.

We invite readers to engage in some reflective work by thinking together about issues that the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2020) raises. With this in mind, each section of the collaborative document has questions for reflection to guide your deliberations. We look forward to hearing your views on the ideas set forth in this document.

Introduction

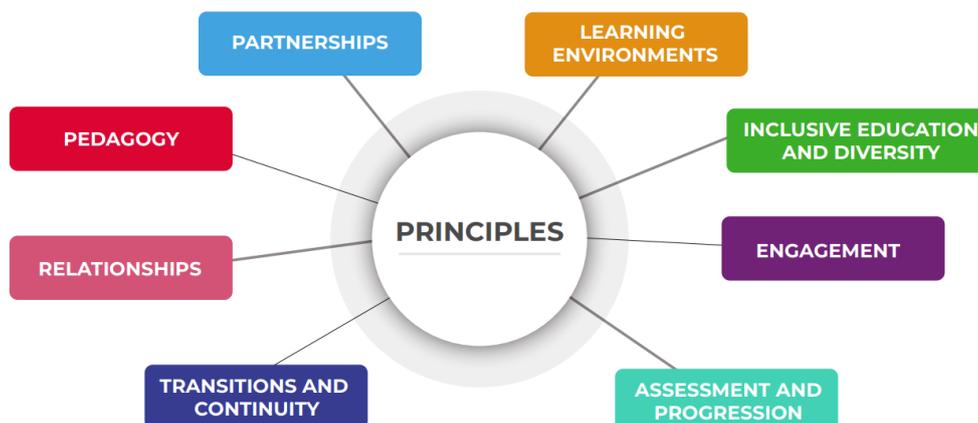
Ireland's *Primary School Curriculum*¹ introduced in 1999 is a story of more than 20 years of successful education. However, developments in education nationally and internationally have created an impetus to reimagine the future for Ireland's children and citizens. This document focuses on how practice in every school in Ireland can build from the strengths of the past and face the challenges that will lead to the realisation of a new vision for the primary curriculum as set forth by the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*.²

The first part of the document outlines the vision for the future that has been carefully crafted over several years. Here you will read about the way that new research and innovative policy and practice, bespoke to the context of Ireland, has influenced the thinking about curriculum. One of the most important messages is that curriculum, pedagogy and assessment need to be in harmony in order to create outstanding education. The impact of any curriculum is only achieved through the engagement of its learners and teachers. The agency of children and teachers is vital to the success of any new development, as the final section of part one of this document outlines.

The second part of the document maps the road and challenges ahead. While it is understood that children's learning is paramount, successful curriculum change requires *all* stakeholders to be learners. Professional self-reflection through opportunities to engage with the new ideas will be key to success. The work on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* is truly research informed, building particularly on new research since 1999. But research on its own is not enough. Research, policy and practice need to be strongly aligned for the best outcomes. And finally, children's learning, teachers' pedagogy, and local community engagement all need the skill and wisdom of leadership. This leadership is both widely distributed across the people in the system but also a main responsibility of principals, curriculum leaders, and policy makers.

The vision and principles (see Figure 2 below) of the redeveloped curriculum are clear and exciting –now is the time to put these into practice: to develop new learning for all children in Ireland, something that will also be a powerful model from which other countries may learn.

Figure 2: Principles of the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*



¹ DES, Primary School Curriculum.

² NCCA, Draft Primary Curriculum Framework. Described as 'the framework' for the rest of this document.

Part 1: Redeveloping the Primary Curriculum

Overview of Primary Curriculum Review and Redevelopment

Since the advent of Ireland's political independence 100 years ago there have been three major changes to national curricula in primary schools in Ireland, namely in 1922 (updated in 1926), in 1971 (the 'New' curriculum) and in 1999 (the 'Revised' curriculum).³ These major curriculum changes each reflected societies' views about pedagogy, children/childhood, and educational standards. The traditional approach to curriculum development during these three periods was largely the production of a centralised, detailed, prescriptive curriculum that was enacted by teachers within schools, albeit with flexibility for local adaptation.

Since the publication of the *Primary School Curriculum* in 1999 there has been significant advances in the wide range of research relevant to children's learning and development, much of which is reflected in the recently published *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile*.⁴ There have also been considerable changes in society and society's expectations of the education system in recent decades. For example, there have been calls to recognise the increasing importance of areas in the curriculum such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Physical Education (PE) by increasing their time in the curriculum. There have also been recommendations for new areas of learning such as Coding and Computational Thinking, Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, Modern Foreign Languages, as well as a greater emphasis on Wellbeing.

The process of developing the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* utilised a different approach to curriculum redevelopment efforts in previous eras, attempting to engage stakeholders from across the system in its design. Indeed moving from a prescriptive curriculum to a curriculum framework at primary level represents a significant shift in itself. The draft framework was published for consultation in February 2020 in recognition of the need to reflect on and respond to societal changes and new research. The draft framework articulates what is important in primary education and why (vision and principles), and in broad terms makes a case for what should be prioritised in children's learning.

The publication of the draft framework marked the culmination of close to a decade of work by the NCCA and its stakeholders, around three key pillars: namely research and seminars; consultation; and engagement with the Schools Forum. These are explored in turn below.

³ Walsh, *Primary Education in Ireland 1897-1990*.

⁴ DES, *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile*.

Research and NCCA Seminars

Research relating to the implementation of the *Primary School Curriculum*⁵ marked the first steps in the curriculum redevelopment process. The redevelopment work began in earnest in 2011 when the NCCA invited all those interested in primary education to indicate their priorities for primary schooling.⁶ Of the 960 respondents, the majority of whom were teachers (71%) or parents (19%), six key priorities emerged (see Figure 3 below). Among these was a focus on life skills and dispositions, and the prioritisation of children’s well-being as a starting point for learning.

Figure 3: Priorities for Primary Education – Have your say (2011)



Between 2018 and 2020, the NCCA commissioned 14 research papers⁷ from academics in Ireland and other countries to inform the redevelopment process. These papers focused on key issues such as assessment; competencies; pedagogies; integration; and transitions. The work also reviewed international policy and practice in key aspects of curriculum provision.

In addition to this research that was directly connected with the development of the draft framework, research into areas related to DES strategies or by Ministerial request was also incorporated into the wider body of research informing the published proposals.⁸ An example of this, the DES Strategy *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*,⁹ sets out a curriculum reform agenda. It requested the NCCA to begin the redevelopment of the primary curriculum in the area of Language (English and Irish)¹⁰ followed by Mathematics.¹¹ Shaped by this timeline in the strategy, this work proceeded ahead of the review of the primary curriculum as a whole and the research underpinning these curriculum subjects has informed the subsequent wider curriculum redevelopment. Care was taken to ensure that whole curriculum developments maintained their integrity at the same time as building on the work done on language and mathematics.

⁵ NCCA, Primary Curriculum Review, Phase 1. Primary Curriculum Review, Phase 2.

⁶ NCCA, Priorities in Primary Education?

⁷ See: <https://ncca.ie/en/primary/primary-developments/consultation-on-the-draft-primary-curriculum-framework/research-and-publications>.

⁸ See: <https://ncca.ie/en/primary/primary-developments>

⁹ DES, Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life.

¹⁰ NCCA, Primary Language Curriculum.

¹¹ NCCA, Draft Primary Mathematics Curriculum: Junior Infants to Second Class.

NCCA research papers,¹² developed to support stakeholder engagement in shaping the proposals of the draft framework, were presented and discussed at five curriculum seminars hosted by the NCCA between March 2018 and January 2019. These were attended by representative stakeholders from across all levels of the system with the NCCA distilling key issues from these seminars to inform the curriculum drafting process.¹³ Following preparation of the draft framework, the NCCA invited stakeholders from partnerships, agencies and organisations with a remit or interest in the primary school curriculum to attend *Leading Out* seminars (see Figure 4 below). These seminars were designed to bring stakeholders together to explore, identify and begin to work on necessary actions to support the conditions for curriculum change in primary schools. The culmination of this work will be seen in the coming years as the curriculum is developed in practice in schools.

Figure 4: Curriculum and *Leading Out* seminars



Consultations

Consultation with a wide range of partners and stakeholders through the aforementioned curriculum seminars (physical and digital) was a key feature of the redevelopment process. In 2016 a consultative document on the time allocations and structure for a redeveloped curriculum was published.¹⁴ The outcome of the initial consultation work, published in 2018,¹⁵ was the stimulus for the design of the draft framework. Redevelopment work also included consultations with parents¹⁶ and a series of consultations with children.¹⁷ There was also a range of consultations in recent years on specific aspects of the curriculum including ERB and Ethics,¹⁸ Coding,¹⁹ the *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile*,²⁰ and the draft Primary Mathematics Curriculum.²¹

¹² See: <https://ncca.ie/en/primary/primary-developments/consultation-on-the-draft-primary-curriculum-framework/research-and-publications>.

¹³ NCCA, Report of Main Findings from Parents on the Review and Redevelopment of the Primary Curriculum.

¹⁴ NCCA, Structure and Time Allocation in a Redeveloped Primary Curriculum.

¹⁵ NCCA, Consultation on Curriculum Structure and Time Final Report.

¹⁶ NCCA, Synthesis Report on Stakeholder Curriculum Seminars.

¹⁷ NCCA, Consulting with Children: Child Voice in Curriculum Developments.

¹⁸ NCCA, Proposals for a Curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics.

¹⁹ NCCA, Final Report on the Coding in Primary Schools Initiative.

²⁰ NCCA, Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile Report on the consultation on the draft curriculum for Stage 3 and 4/Céim 3 agus 4.

²¹ NCCA, Consultation Report on the Primary Mathematics Curriculum for Junior Infants to Second Class.

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the NCCA has re-considered its timelines for consultation on the draft framework, which was due to conclude in December 2020. Acknowledging the circumstances in schools, a second phase of consultation focusing on connecting with teachers, school leaders, parents and, importantly, children, commenced in Autumn/Winter 2021 and continues into 2022. It is planned to publish the finalised *Primary Curriculum Framework* in early 2023 which will be followed by specification development in the years that follow.

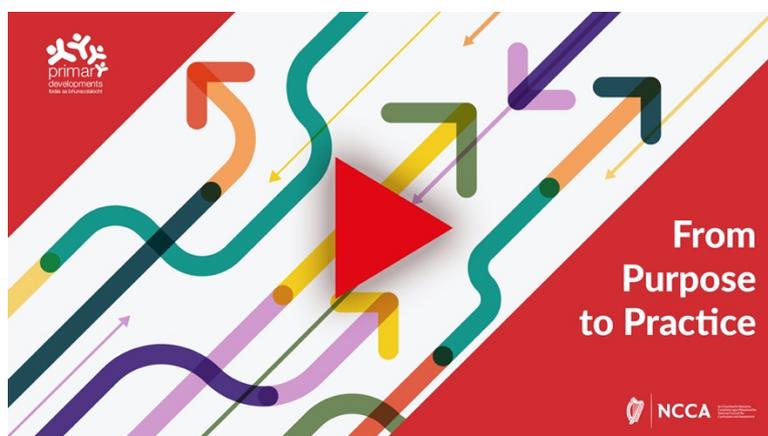
Schools Forum

Engagement with teachers and principals through the Schools Forum²² has been instrumental in the redevelopment process. The Forum comprises 60 preschool, primary and post-primary schools from across Ireland that have provided a consultative and developmental forum for the proposals set out in the draft framework. During meetings of the Forum, teachers and principals tease out ideas from research, bringing their particular school experiences to the discussions about a redeveloped primary curriculum. This approach sees teachers and schools as central to curriculum development and helps to ground the ideas for a redeveloped curriculum in the reality of primary education in Ireland, while at the same time being sufficiently aspirational. Work with the Forum will continue as the developments related to the primary curriculum progress.

Figure 5: The Schools Forum



Please click on video presentation below for a summary of key points in this section.



²² See: <https://ncca.ie/en/primary/primary-developments/consultation-on-the-draft-primary-curriculum-framework/schools-forum>.

The Links between Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment

The draft framework proposes that children in primary school should develop knowledge, concepts, skills, understanding, values, attitudes and dispositions in five areas: Language; Mathematics, Science and Technology Education; Wellbeing; Arts Education; and Social and Environmental Education. In addition to these, school patrons provide teaching related to Religious/Ethical/Multi-belief Education during the school day in accordance with the ethos of their schools. The broader competencies (see Figure 6) children should develop as they engage in these areas are represented in approaches to learning that encourage them to: be active citizens; be creative as they learn; be well and foster well-being in others; and to understand and to develop their skills in the processes of learning. In addition, it is proposed that they will be supported to understand ways in which communication, mathematical understanding and digital tools are part of all areas of the curriculum, integrating different areas of the curriculum in ways that reflect experience in the real world.

Figure 6: Key Competencies of the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*



These competencies that bind curriculum, pedagogy and assessment have particular relevance for the ways in which learning experiences are designed. For example, the pedagogy of working individually through a textbook is unlikely to create an active citizen; undue emphasis on completing worksheets is unlikely to encourage creativity; always telling children what to do next is unlikely to deepen a child's ability to reflect on their own learning. These pedagogies are not intrinsically wrong, it is just that they are unlikely to facilitate the connections between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that are built into the structure of the draft framework. Further, these activities are unlikely to support the vision of pedagogy based on high quality interactions between adult and child and among children that is posited by the draft framework.

The draft framework recognises that learning is not always linear and that young people in real life do not make progress in neat, consistent ways. Hence, the draft framework is presented in two broad learning cycles: Stages 1 and 2 (infants to second class) and Stages 3 and 4 (third to sixth class). Stages 1 and 2 build on children's learning in a range of early childhood settings supported by *Aistear – the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. In the case of these stages, the draft framework presents an integrated integrated curriculum structure that both supports

continuity in children's experiences and builds the foundational knowledge, skills and dispositions to support progression towards a subject-based curriculum in Stages 3 and 4. This offers a good balance between providing a framework for progression that includes expectations for broad stages of development whilst allowing for individual learners to make different rates of progress in different aspects of the curriculum.

The central focus of the draft framework is learning. For children to have opportunities for high quality learning, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment should be well aligned. Alignment begins from the curriculum, for it is the curriculum framework that signals what is important for children to learn. Pedagogy that is well aligned with curriculum will offer children a range of approaches to engage their learning. Assessment that is well aligned with curriculum and pedagogy will seek to discern children's progress in the curriculum and, crucially, to use that information to support children's future progression in learning. As the draft framework states:

Drawing on the key ideas within Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools (NCCA, 2007), assessment in the redeveloped curriculum supports the progression of each child towards the curriculum's vision.²³

The idea of assessment supporting the progression of each child is key to the role that assessment is intended to play in a redeveloped curriculum. Assessment is commonly used to serve a wide range of purposes, for example, to inform learning; to focus teaching; to share information with parents or future teachers; to provide information at the level of the school, or nation, about education. These different purposes are recognised in the draft framework, where assessment is identified as 'an integral part of teaching and learning' and 'provides information for various stakeholders'.²⁴ However, whilst assessment can be used to serve a wide range of purposes, essentially it serves two functions: learning or judgement.²⁵ The draft framework has learning at its heart and the development of an assessment culture that is focused clearly on learning will have a major role to play in the creation of an authentic learning culture. There is international evidence²⁶ to suggest that when attempts are made to have assessment serve both functions, it is the judgement function that dominates, often driving out the intention to have assessment evidence support learning. This is true for learners, for teachers, for schools and for education systems. In Ireland, it will be important to collect information for use at the level of the system in ways that remain consistent with the 'spirit' of the draft framework's focus on learning. This will avoid unintended washback where the focus becomes collecting evidence to inform judgements of children or schools rather than using evidence to improve the learning of an individual learner, a classroom, a school or a nation.

²³ NCCA, Draft Primary Curriculum Framework.

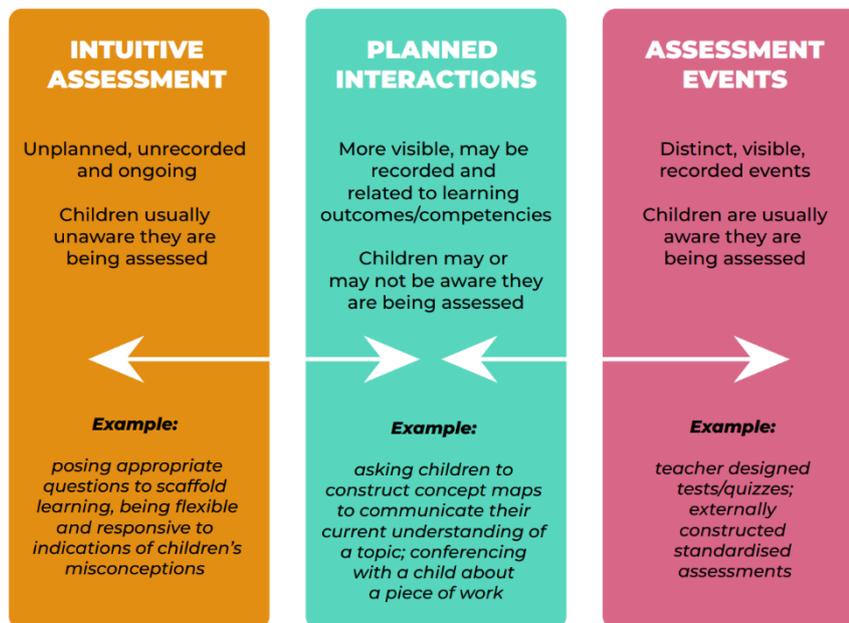
²⁴ NCCA, Draft Primary Curriculum Framework.

²⁵ Hayward, Assessment is learning: the preposition vanishes.

²⁶ Wyse, Hayward, and Pandya, SAGE Handbook of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment.

Two issues are of particular interest in the approach to assessment proposed in the draft framework. The first is the inclusion of children as the most important stakeholder group and the second is the introduction of assessment as representing a continuum of practices – from intuitive assessment, to planned interactions and assessment events (see Figure 7).²⁷ It will be important for children, teachers, principals, schools and national agencies, such as NCCA, and school inspectors, to think through what these ideas might look like in schools and classrooms if the spirit of these concepts is to be realised.

Figure 7: A continuum of assessment as presented in the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework



The following questions may help stimulate discussion in all levels of the education system:

- Can children describe the story of progression in their own learning?
- What are children learning and why does it matter?
- Can children explain what they are achieving and how they intend to make further progress?
- Can teachers describe the progression journey in learning in their classroom, and can principals describe the progression journey in learning in their schools?
- Can inspectors work with schools to gather evidence to inform future progression in a school's learning journey?
- Can NCCA and partners gather evidence to support further progression in the enactment of the redeveloped Primary School Curriculum nationally?

Time taken to think through how curriculum, pedagogy and assessment might come together to support the new vision for primary education in Ireland and how the roles of each stakeholder group might be developed to support the 'spirit' of the new vision will be time invested well.

²⁷ NCCA, Draft Primary Curriculum Framework: For Consultation.

Please click on video presentation below for a summary of key points in this section.



Questions for reflection:

1. How will we engage in the process of curriculum development in ways that reflect the principles of the draft framework, e.g., encourage creativity, active citizenship amongst teachers, children, parents?
2. What approaches to learning and teaching will we adopt to enable our children to develop the competencies in the redeveloped *Primary School Curriculum*?
3. How will we promote approaches to assessment that will support progression?

Agency

The reports from the first two *Leading Out* seminars highlighted the concepts of agency and flexibility as part of a redeveloped primary curriculum. During the seminars, a broad range of topics linked with agency were highlighted, for example, diversity; the agentic child; and the democratisation of education. It was also recognised that agency and flexibility affect the education system as a whole including teachers, children, parents, school leaders, support services and inspectors. The point about the education system as a whole is consistent with academic analysis that sees agency as intrinsically linked with structure.²⁸ The vision of the draft framework, a structural element of education, includes attention to agency:

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework views the child as a capable actor who shares power and agency with the adult. Curriculum for the agentic child is co-constructed through adult-child collaboration. Adults guide the learning process, based on their learning, life experiences and resources. Pedagogy that encapsulates observation, recording of children's language, ideas and interests, and discussion of learning with children is indicative of the child's agency.²⁹

The breadth of areas and factors identified as constituting agency points to the need for a clear definition of agency in order that attempts to operationalise it can be exemplified and reflected on. Agency can be defined as “individuals’ will and capacity to act”.³⁰ Agency and structure are distinct but interacting phenomena both of which impact on the curriculum that children experience. For example, decisions made by teachers are influenced by children’s actions, the curriculum structure, and expectations regarding professional evaluation and accountability. The sense of agency and the exercise of agency are distinct but closely related elements. The implication is that children, teachers and other actors in schools need to have a sense of agency, then they need opportunities to exercise agency (see Figure 8 below).

Figure 8: A sense of agency in teaching and learning



²⁸ Archer, Structure, Agency, and the Internal Conversation.

²⁹ NCCA, Leading Out Seminar Series: Seminar 2 (February 2020).

³⁰ Gao, Strategic Language Learning: The Roles of Agency and Context.

There is then an important role for policy makers to support agency, for example, by creating time and space for teachers to reflect and learn. The draft framework includes 'Flexible Time' which encourages schools to decide how best to allocate time to teaching, learning and assessment in flexible and creative ways. There is also the need to be mindful that external assessments have an effect on the professional decision-making of teachers and on the learning experiences of children as the Irish National Teachers' Organisation/Centre for Assessment Research, Policy in Education³¹ survey found, hence assessment is inextricably linked with the agency of children and teachers.

In addition to the flexible use of time across the curriculum, the draft framework has various elements that encourage agency: the presence of key competencies; a more integrated structure for Stages 1 and 2; and a conception of pedagogy as a responsive approach to children's learning, social, and emotional needs based on high quality interactions.

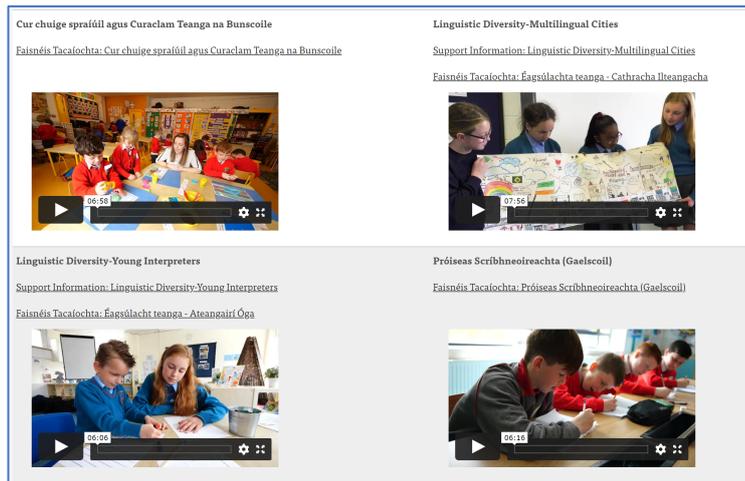
As the redevelopment of the curriculum progresses it will be important to guard against the curriculum becoming 'vague and unstructured', and to recognise that understanding agency is part of the 'journey' of curriculum professional development. These issues underline the need to develop examples of agency. These examples should not be seen as exemplars, but more as opportunities for the exercise of agency to be made explicit and hence provoke reflection by stakeholders to help them clarify what agency looks like in practice. For example, the exercise of agency enables choices to be made about teaching and learning, including engagement of learners through play. Appropriate examples would be based on "purpose and integrity" and closely aligned with the principles of the Primary Curriculum. To build engagement with stakeholders, the examples of agency could be generated by teachers in collaboration with NCCA as a result of trying new practices. Indeed some examples of agency in action already exists as part of the toolkit developed to support the *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile*³² (see Figure 9 below). This approach to the development of examples will help stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, parents and others, to own and enact the curriculum vision.

Making agency visible is an exciting prospect because it can, a) take the education system beyond the binary 'pendulum swings' of child-centred versus teacher-centred learning, and b) resist some people's tendency to ideologically equate pupil agency with a laissez faire or sloppy approach to pedagogy.

³¹ See: https://www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/carpe/carpeinto_standardised_testing_survey_web.pdf.

³² See: <https://curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum-Areas/Primary-Language/Primary-Language-Toolkit/?lang=en-ie>.

Figure 9: Examples of Children’s Learning from the Primary Language Toolkit



Please click on video presentation below for a summary of key points in this section.



Questions for reflection:

1. Why might a ‘one-size-fits-all’ process of curriculum development be inappropriate?
2. What are the similarities and differences between teacher agency and children’s agency?
3. What are the consequences for primary education if curriculum guidance becomes over-specified?

Part 2: Enabling Curriculum Enactment

So far in this document we have addressed some key ideas in relation to the vision for Ireland’s children that is represented in the curriculum developments at primary level. In Part 2 we turn to some of the realities of transforming vision into practice, through the themes of policy alignment; leadership; and learning.

Aligning Policy, Practice and Research

Concepts of alignment and coherence in terms of policy, practice and research are critical in curriculum redevelopment processes. Alignment is sometimes framed as a technical concept focusing on the ‘lining up’ of the various elements of the curriculum to provide for internal consistency as well as aligning with the broader policy landscape. This is often undertaken at the outset of a curriculum redevelopment process. The concept of policy coherence is more dynamic, interactive and subjective, relating to the interface of values and motives.³³ Consequently, achieving coherence is an ongoing process and negotiation engaged in by all actors to frame and enact a new curriculum vision. Ultimately a focus on both alignment and coherence is necessary for the realisation of a ‘competent system’,³⁴ rather than focusing exclusively on the competence of teachers.

Figure 10: Presentation from Dr Thomas Walsh during *Leading Out Seminar 3*



Curriculum as text and discourse

In terms of achieving alignment and coherence within the redeveloped curriculum, the work of the NCCA in drawing on national and international policy, practice and research to frame the curriculum vision and associated elements (for example, principles, competencies, curriculum areas) is acknowledged. However, the curriculum is a living document and social construction, so achieving alignment and coherence within the written text is never enough: policy is discourse as well as text.³⁵ Curriculum documentation can provide the artefact that stimulates professional conversations, a context for a process of changing minds and hearts. Crucially, achieving coherence will require complex sense-making,³⁶ negotiation, co-construction and participation from actors, both individually

³³ Honig and Hatch, Crafting coherence.

³⁴ Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Van Laere, and Peeters, Competence requirements in early childhood education and care.

³⁵ Ball, What is policy? Texts, trajectories and toolboxes.

³⁶ Pietarinen, Pyhalto, and Soini, Large-scale Curriculum Reform in Finland.

and collectively. Moreover, there is a need for clarity around the parameters of agency and flexibility within curriculum policy: what is and what is not negotiable?; what elements of the curriculum are a given and what can be co-constructed?. Ultimately a co-constructed curriculum is a very powerful tool for meaningful and sustainable change – and curriculum documentation will need to be updated regularly to reflect these shared understandings as part of an organic and evolutionary system of review and renewal.

Curriculum and the wider policy, practice and research landscape

The curriculum occupies a space where existing curriculum policy and discourses are part of the wider context of education and other policies. It is imperative that the redeveloped curriculum allows for continuity and smooth transitions from early childhood education and onto further post-primary educational experiences. Any developments, such as curricular development, can cause imbalance, acceptance or rejection of proposed changes. Key among the challenges will be the move from a more prescribed curriculum to a more open-ended curriculum framework, a departure from historical norms for most teachers in Ireland at primary level and for many educationalists in the wider system. In this context, people exercise their agency through professional decisions as they make sense of the curriculum changes, enacting them in a process of collective sense-making. Mapping and understanding the ‘zone of influence’ of all actors across all levels in the system is critical to the achievement of a competent system. Further work on the mapping of actors from the supranational to the micro levels, including the points of interface, interaction and interdependency between them, will be critical to ensuring all actors understand where they ‘fit’ on the landscape and the criticality of their contribution to the change process.

Curriculum coherence as a process

While policy alignment and coherence are critical within curriculum design and enactment, the perfect achievement or realisation of either is not realistic. Design is just the first phase and while this should set up the conditions for coherence it is only through negotiation, sense-making and recursive interaction that individual actors across the system will gain an ownership of the redeveloped curriculum. It is through this individual and collective sense-making process, as opposed to conceptualising the change as an event, that real and sustainable change occurs in practice. Curriculum design needs to allow space for continuous growth and adaptation, for innovation and creativity. Indeed the creativity and innovation that emerges from local contextualisation and sense-making of curricula, even where this involves dissonance, are productive and necessary. The work of the Schools Forum and the way such schools have become local ambassadors for change is a positive development, as well as a reminder of the need to maintain close engagement with all schools as the key sites of curriculum change. The more stakeholders are connected to the process and to each other, the more they will be willing to support and realise their respective roles in curriculum change. Bilateral or multilateral meetings between clusters of schools (including wider actors from different levels of the system), or documenting their curriculum development processes, are useful ways of extending and sharing this close engagement.

In summary, the three issues of clarity (in terms of language, roles and responsibilities), complexity (power dynamics, co-construction of curriculum, framing what is negotiable) and culture (beliefs and expectations, structures that supports what the curriculum is) are critical concepts for alignment and coherence. Hayward and Spencer's³⁷ *Integrity Model of Change* is a useful model to consider given its reach across all actors and levels of the education system, where sustainable change is achieved based on the combination of educational integrity, personal and professional integrity, and systemic integrity. The complexity of redeveloping the curriculum is significant given the change in vision and values, disrupting the current educational ecosystem that has been shaped within a particular context over time.

Please click on video presentation below for a summary of key points in this section.



Questions for reflection

1. What are the current strengths of the Irish educational policy landscape in terms of achieving alignment and coherence?
2. In the curriculum change management process, what expertise do you and your organisation bring to the system?
3. What activities and structures would be helpful to facilitate sense-making, negotiation and co-construction of the curriculum among stakeholders at a national and school level?

The ideas set forth in this section of the paper have been engaged with by stakeholder organisations through the Leading Out Seminar Series. You can find a supporting podcast from Dr Thomas Walsh [here](#) and a presentation from Leading Out seminar three [here](#).

³⁷ Hayward, and Spenser, The complexities of change: Formative assessment in Scotland.

Leadership

Cultivating the conditions to support curriculum development and enactment in every school in Ireland will also require attention to educational leadership. The conditions necessary to support curriculum change of the scale envisaged by the draft framework will not develop organically, at least not in most schools. Research consistently points to the importance of leadership, especially at the local level, for the successful enactment of instructional policy and curriculum.³⁸

Deliberations about educational leadership, however, tend to be person-based or place-based. Scholars write about teacher leadership, principal leadership, and so on. They talk about school leadership and increasingly system leadership. Yet, educational leadership is neither place nor person bound. Whereas what a principal does is important to educational leadership as experienced by children, parents, and school staff, it rarely matters in isolation. Instead, it interacts with other people and artifacts within and beyond the school to fundamentally shape leadership on the ground. Attention to educational leadership is important for enabling curriculum enactment and we outline a framework here for thinking about it that gets beyond place-based and person-based notions.

Figure 11: Presentation provided by Prof James Spillane at *Leading Out Seminar 4*



Specifically, we focus on the *practice of leadership*, framing it as a systemwide practice. In this view, the practice of educational leadership in schools is constituted or defined in the interactions among multiple stakeholders (principals, teachers, system leaders, inspectorate, children, parents, teachers) and artifacts (for example, curriculum, circulars, policies) that stretch from the classroom to the principal's office and beyond to the community and school system. In this framing, the work of educational leadership is spread over multiple levels of the school system and what happens at different levels interacts in ways that profoundly shape the practice of educational leadership as it is experienced by teachers, children, and school leaders. Our multilevel framing of educational leadership involves four core ideas.

³⁸ McLaughlin, The Rand change agent study revisited: Macro perspectives and micro realities. Spillane, Standards deviation: How schools misunderstand education policy.

Anchoring leadership in teaching

First, we anchor deliberations about educational leadership in teaching. Here, we distinguish teaching from learning: seeing teaching as the primary means that schools and school systems have for creating the conditions for enabling children's learning. Educational leadership enables improvement in children's learning by cultivating the conditions necessary for quality teaching. If we want to understand and develop educational leadership so that it ultimately enables the sort of children's learning envisioned in the draft framework, then we must anchor our deliberations in teaching, as that is the chief means we have for getting there.

Practice of educational leadership

Second is the actual practice of educational leadership, because that is where the rubber of educational leadership ultimately meets the road of supporting the enactment of the framework. One development in the field of educational leadership over the past few decades involved attention to the practice of leadership; that is, how the work of leadership is actually accomplished in schools. While some research on leadership practice focused on identifying the actions or behaviors of effective leaders such as principals,³⁹ other work focuses on the interactions among people, that are the essence of social influence relationships, rather than the actions of individual leaders.⁴⁰ A distributed perspective frames educational leadership practice as about the interactions among people, not just the actions of individuals. Leadership practice is about what people do together. Centering on the practice of leadership means that to understand relations between leadership and teaching we must systematically examine the interconnections between these two interdependent practices in order to cultivate the conditions essential for curriculum enactment.

A distributed perspective

Third, a distributed perspective not only foregrounds interactions but also affords aspects of the situation a prominent place in shaping leadership practice. Aspects of the situation, such as organisational routines (for example, assemblies, classroom visits) and artifacts (for example, the framework) are framed as essential constituting elements of leadership practice because they focus and frame interactions among people in particular ways – who interacts with whom, about what, and how they interact with one another. The situation fundamentally defines educational leadership practice. Developing educational leadership in order to cultivate the conditions needed for enabling the enactment of the principles and purposes in the framework, then, will require careful attention to how the situation enables and constrains interactions.

³⁹ Blase, and Blase, Principals' instructional leadership and teacher development.

⁴⁰ Spillane, Distributed leadership (Vol. 4).

Informal and formal leadership

Fourth, educational leadership in schools is an embedded practice, involving formal and informal leaders in schools but also in other organisations in the school system (for example, Department of Education, Inspectorate, Agencies including NCCA, support services, Unions, Management Bodies) which are engaged in supporting curriculum development and enactment. Research on educational leadership practice more often than not focuses only on what happens in the school building. The reality is more complicated because school leaders and teachers are embedded in relationships with people and artifacts beyond the school in the school system, which condition leadership practice as it unfolds in the school. Leadership, therefore, is distributed both horizontally within schools and vertically across the school system.

Seeing educational leadership *systemically*, as a multilevel *systemwide* phenomenon, presses us to look beyond any single source of leadership for teaching such as the school or Department of Education.⁴¹ Further, it involves more than aggregating different sources of leadership in the school system. A multilevel distributed perspective calls for a systemic examination of how different sources of leadership in the school system interact to shape, for good and bad, educational leadership practice on the ground. It is more about multiplication than addition!

Please click on video presentation below for a summary of key points in this section.



Questions for reflection

1. How, if at all, is leadership for teaching in Irish primary schools distributed among staff and stakeholders?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Irish education system in supporting a multilevel distributed perspective?
3. How might you and your organisation support a multilevel distributed way of thinking about educational leadership in Irish primary schools?

⁴¹ Spillane, Morel, and Al-Fadala, Educational Leadership: A Multilevel Distributed Perspective.

The ideas set forth in this section of the paper have been engaged with by stakeholder organisations through the Leading Out Seminar Series. You can find a supporting podcast from Prof James Spillane [here](#) and a presentation from Leading Out seminar four [here](#).

Learning - the Essence of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment

Ireland is well-positioned to embrace a new model of curriculum change considering the long-established tradition of the Department of Education and key partners working collaboratively to develop curriculum. This approach features a change process that is anchored in learning about, and learning for, curriculum change. To see the principles and purposes of Ireland's redeveloped primary curriculum come alive in classrooms will require learning from all involved about developing, enacting, and supporting curriculum change. The following list suggests the kind of thinking that is needed.

- 1. Learning by All:** The learning that we envision for realising the ambitions set forth in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* will require all stakeholders to learn, i.e. teachers, parents, children, school leaders, policy makers, inspectors, and those involved in initial teacher education. As all stakeholders are agents of curriculum change, learning by all will be essential for successful enactment as it will allow for collaboratively, a) making the curriculum relevant to local circumstances; b) identifying risks and challenges to successful enactment, and c) developing solutions to these challenges.
- 2. Learning at the Nexus of the New Curricular Vision and Current Curricular Practice:** Rather than being centred exclusively on a prescribed curriculum, learning will involve simultaneously reflecting on current practices as well as the principles and purposes embodied in the framework. The vision developed in the framework provides principles and purposes for the re-imagining of primary education, and schools' current curricular practices are key resources that they will build on and transform in order to enact the new ideas.
- 3. Learning as a Journey:** While maintaining the distinctive experience that is primary education in Ireland, we acknowledge that this experience is part of a broader learning journey, uniquely positioned between early childhood education and the junior cycle learning experiences. Recognising this positioning of primary education, we embrace a modern view of learning as part of a journey that both builds on children's experiences in the early years while anticipating their learning in junior cycle. Hence, strong professional communication between primary, early childhood and junior cycle stakeholders, so as to craft a seamless learning experience for all Irish children, is essential.
- 4. Learning Authentically:** Authentic learning is anchored in the particular opportunities and challenges for practice that different stakeholders encounter as they develop and enact the framework. Though anchored in a shared vision, challenges of practice will differ depending on stakeholders and their circumstances. What teachers grapple with as they design and enact lessons will differ from the challenges that school leaders or inspectors deal with as they work to support teachers. We must embrace these different circumstances as occasions for authentic learning.
- 5. Learning Together:** While different stakeholders will need to learn different things, it will also be important that these different stakeholders learn together in order to ensure that the education system is

consistent in its support for the development and enactment of the new primary curriculum. Learning that spans stakeholder groups will be essential for building shared understandings.

6. **Learning Progressions:** Learning progressions are the connections that children and their teachers make between daily classroom practice and children's development over time. They are informed by assessment for learning. Learning progressions also matter for the various stakeholders that are the key agents of curriculum change because they help anchor learning in both a new vision for primary education and in the challenges that stakeholders grapple with as they work to develop and enact a curriculum that reflects that vision.
7. **Learning as Storytelling:** We learn by telling and retelling stories about our experiences and storytelling has a long tradition in Ireland, and indeed across the world. Storytelling enables learning because narrating our experiences is value-laden, context sensitive, and involves explaining purposes and intentions in action.⁴² Embracing storytelling we can help stakeholders re-imagine learning for curriculum development and enactment. As stakeholders engage in developing and enacting the redeveloped curriculum's vision, storytelling provides a powerful tool for capturing current practices, efforts to enact new practices and principles, and the challenges therein. Storytelling enables learning together as it encourages a type of sharing that enables the building of common understandings rather than telling.

Figure 12: Slide from presentation from Dr Thomas Walsh during *Leading Out* Seminar 3



The NCCA and its stakeholders have already embarked on their learning journey in redeveloping the primary curriculum. Much authentic learning is taking place as stakeholders engage with the implications of this change for their roles and responsibilities in primary education. This process has been managed by learning together in the form of curriculum seminars, consultative events and *Leading Out* seminars. As the learning of the NCCA and its stakeholders advances, they will accumulate stories to tell and share with others involved with primary education as everyone learns together through collective engagement with curriculum change.

⁴² Bruner, Actual minds, possible worlds.

Please click on video presentation below for a summary of key points in this section.



Questions for reflection:

1. How do you understand the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework's* vision for primary education in Ireland?
2. What opportunities exist or could be created to support 'learning by all' and 'learning together' in order to advance the enactment of the framework?
3. How can the ideas of 'learning progressions' and 'learning as storytelling' support stakeholders in thinking about potential risks and how best to negotiate these risks?

Concluding Remarks

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* offers a unique opportunity to improve learning and teaching for the children who, as citizens, will lead Ireland's future. The draft framework was built collaboratively, and in the coming years the relevant specifications to support the framework will also need to be developed collaboratively. 'Stakeholder' is a much used word but here is an opportunity, perhaps unrivalled worldwide, for all to work together in bringing to life an exemplary vision. Although the focus of developments is curriculum, it is through pedagogy and assessment that the curriculum is enacted. We know only too well from research and from practice that enactment is the ultimate testing ground, the reality, and the day-to-day essence of primary education.

The goal of aligning policy and practice with research is a challenging and enticing one. The voices of stakeholders are already represented in the text of the draft framework, but if a curriculum text is not to be mere rhetoric then collaborative enactment is the only way forward. Teachers, children and all involved with the curriculum can use their agency to mould experiences to own and be proud of. Through the exercise of agency all those involved in the system are leaders in so many important ways. And when the different elements of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are part of a shared learning story it is children who benefit most.

We look forward to listening to your responses related to the ideas set forth in this document and to reflecting on experiences of curriculum development as the next profoundly important steps are taken.

You can access all materials related to the content of this document [here](#).

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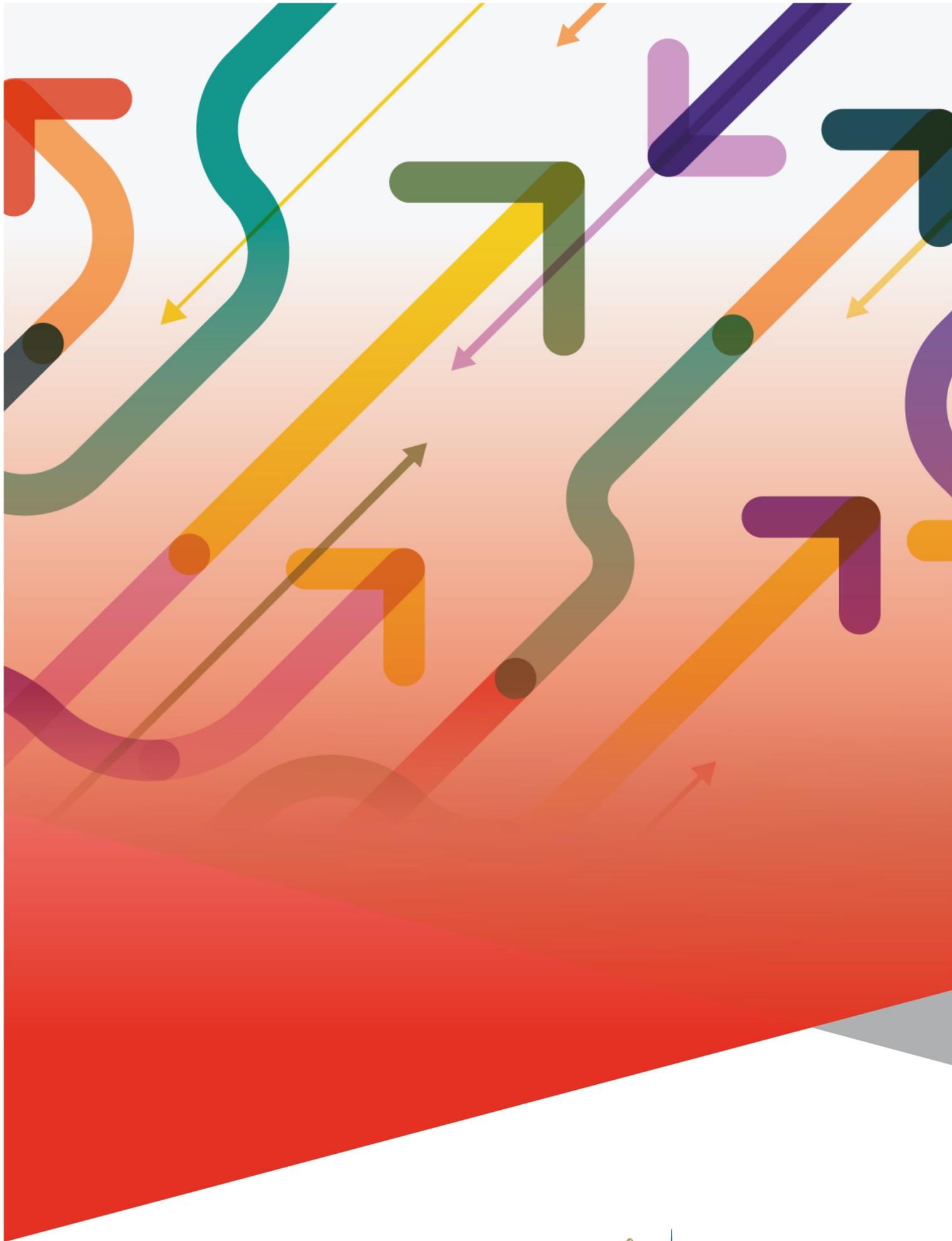
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