

Leading Out

Report on the
Seminar Series



NCCA

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

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The NCCA reached an important milestone in its Primary Developments with the completion of a *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* for consultation in 2020.

Consultation and collaboration are at the heart of the series of Leading Out seminars for key stakeholders, the first of which was held on December 1st, 2019. Although not unique to Ireland, the consultative and collaborative nature of curriculum development is a hallmark of education work here. Generally, it is characterised by the recognition of a shared journey where decisions taken in a spirit of collaboration, while not irrevocable, enjoy a high degree of stakeholder confidence. Consensus-building is not without its challenges and it benefits from occasions when time is taken to reflect upon the journey to date and to tease out the ramifications of decisions taken and changes proposed, in a forum where participants are free to share doubts and concerns without feeling the need to adopt final positions. Similarly, such a forum offers opportunities to look back upon developments, at the how-we-got-to-here story, and to speculate on how the future will look once change has been implemented, with a view to building consensus around how all stakeholders might adapt to the change – a vision for how-we-will-be-then. To that end, the NCCA is holding this series of Leading Out seminars for representatives of stakeholders engaged in and supporting the redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum. The deliberations of the seminars are recorded in two ways:

To that end, the NCCA is holding this series of Leading Out seminars for representatives of stakeholders engaged in and supporting the proposed redeveloped Primary Curriculum. The deliberations of the seminars are recorded in two ways:

- A **Report** document that provides a brief overview of the presentations and a summary record of the discussion at each seminar, including some indications of the likely shape of the agenda for the next seminar in the series
- A **Pathways for Change** document that offers an overview of the themes, issues, reflections, and action points for consideration by all stakeholders as the series develops. A particular feature of this document is its focus on linkage across the seminars – its attention to overarching questions. Consequently, the Pathways document begins after Seminar 2.

The intention of the series is that participants will determine the agenda and, through deliberation and discussion, shape an emerging document, which becomes not just a record of what has been said during the meetings but a picture of agreed pathways and action points in support of change. The Pathways Document, then, will provide a record of the main areas of thinking, signalling points of convergence and questions yet to be addressed. So, both the Report and Pathways documents will include **Thinking Forward** boxes where the intention is to give direction for

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Seminar 6: 01.03.2022

A draft of the *Pathway for Change document*, subtitled *A discussion document for decision-makers*, was circulated to participants in advance of this seminar, which, as a half-day face-to-face meeting, represented an end to the online meetings and to the first phase of the Leading Out seminar series. Consequently, Seminar 6 had something of a stock-taking character where presentations and discussions focused on the consensus achieved over seminars 1 to 5 and on responses to the Pathway document. Fundamentally, discussion at the earlier seminars was underpinned by an understanding of the education system as an ecosystem, leading to a recognition of the interdependence of its various parts. This recognition helped to establish two significant points of consensus, termed *principles of action* in the Pathway document. These are

Consensus was established in the following areas:

1...[that] systemwide change is effective only when all of the interrelated parts of the system change and adapt. Consequently, the outputs from the seminars take the form of a set of issues and action points for all stakeholders.

2...[that] the importance of sustained communication across the different areas of the system might be thought of as the second principle agreed by participants at the Leading Out seminars.

While it might be a relatively simple matter to agree on these fundamental principles, following through on their implications for all of the education partners is likely to be a deal more challenging. Therefore, the agenda for Seminar 6 moved from an initial review of the emerging consensus to a set of discussions and responses to issues raised through the Pathway document. With an eye to the next phase in the change process that document concludes with a proposal:

With a view to progressing the issues and areas identified above, it is advisable that a high-level group be established (or agenda item inserted into an already established group/committee) with a view to building capacity in the system, making decisions, establishing sustainable communities of practice, sustaining support for schools, and to carry out cyclical, systemic review of the change process itself.

A number of responses to the Pathway document followed: a panel discussion, a round-table discussion, and a response from the Department of Education.

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Response through a panel discussion

Panel members responded positively to the Pathway document. They emphasised the importance of multi-faceted communication in support of the change process as an important means of supporting the teacher as agentic professional, and as a powerful way of fostering trust and confidence in the changes that will inevitably happen in classrooms. A focus on the education system as an ecosystem with the curriculum and the child at the centre was felt to be supportive, too, of the agency of the teacher. Yet it was felt that it is important to continue to interrogate the meaning of the system, especially to look closely at how the home can be an active part of the system and how parental engagement and involvement can give leadership to learning. It was felt that the management of the change process will be vital in setting the tone to such a significant change and, in this regard, time and engagement would be crucial, especially in the matter of rebuilding relationships as schools emerge from the pandemic. Breadth (harnessing the potential of all forms of communication to reach the widest possible audience) should come before depth of engagement, it was felt. One participant felt that while it is encouraging to see the pathway being set out clearly for the leading-in part of the process, it is very important that a clear pathway continues to be in place during the enactment phase too.

Response through round table discussion

Participants in the round table discussion were asked to consider how we currently support change in our system and to identify things we do well and things we need to improve on, and to make one suggestion to improve our work.

The following featured among the contributions.

- **Things we do well**
 - Consultation – we do this better now, not focused solely on gathering perspectives but on putting these in conversation with each other
 - We have a robust approach to curriculum development and are ambitious for our learners. Also, we have a desire to work collaboratively and enjoy good relationships across stakeholders, organisations, and between home and school
 - Our resilience, agility and flexibility are exemplified in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic
 - As a caring profession we have a strong sense of social justice, especially of what children with SEN require, and while we have invested significantly there's still a road to travel
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- Na pairtnéirí á dtabhairt le chéile. Plé ar céard is brí le próiséis an athruithe. Tá glacadh leis go bhfuil gá le hathruithe.

 - **Things we could improve on**
 - Communication needs to be more multi-directional and sustained – listening to each other and checking for understanding
 - Agency is not just for the individual; it is system-wide and is realised through collaboration
 - We could improve by lessening the disconnect between the teacher in the classroom and policy: this will foster trust in the relationships we build, so that everyone feels part of the process
 - We can improve on the provision of resources to support change: financial resources, human resources, time, CPD, a comprehensive digital toolkit, and so on.

 - **Suggestions to support our work**
 - We should develop communities of practice that allow teachers and school leaders to learn from each other, but we need time and structures to support this formally. And we should build stronger connections across the education system: Early Childhood, Primary, Junior Cycle, Senior Cycle
 - It is time to rethink the expectation that the primary teacher can deliver all areas of learning; is it time to consider having specialist language teachers, for example
 - The curriculum could support child-led approaches and children's agency in their learning by, for example, including explicit references to enquiry-based methodologies, e.g., inquiry-based science education (IBSE)
 - A focus on assessment that promotes and supports feedback for learners on an ongoing basis and that gives the child the opportunity to assess his/her own learning
 - We need to think how we promote and support the home languages of all our pupils, not just Irish and English, to promote linguistic diversity and to celebrate and promote multilingualism.
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Response from the Department of Education

The response of the Department of Education was set in the current context of significant curriculum change across early childhood, primary and post-primary, focusing on how the change elements interrelate and are underpinned by a set of key principles and values which give direction and add coherence to the process. It noted the integrated and collaborative change process underway, seeing research, the Schools Forum, and the Leading Out seminars as supporting the objective of capacity-building within the system. The response stressed the importance of agency, leadership, and the alignment of policy as challenges for all of the education partners, challenges which can lead to the creation of collaborative structures and important parallel processes. The creation of a high-level group, as proposed in the Pathway for Change document, would require careful thought in terms of the nature and purpose of such a structure and what it might be expected to achieve. Finally, the response posed some questions for stakeholders:

- How do we best reflect the principles of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* in future developments?
 - How do we build on the learning from the introduction of the *Primary Language Curriculum*?
 - In what ways can we exemplify the key competencies in the development of the curriculum specifications?
 - How can we include the voices of children and parents in the process, and what are our priorities for teacher Continuous Professional Development in this context?
 - How do we reflect what we have learnt over the past two years of the pandemic in the ongoing development?
 - What synergies exist, or might emerge, that can be considered in supporting the changes?
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Thinking Forward

Now that a first iteration of the Pathway document has been completed and initial responses shared, it is timely to consider the questions and issues raised in the responses outlined above as indicative of a 'work in progress'. The achievement of the first phase of the Leading Out seminars has been the opportunity for stakeholders to articulate priorities for the change process and to achieve a significant level of consensus in that regard. An important element in that consensus is the acknowledgement that supporting change is an iterative process. So, looking forward to the next phase in *Leading Out* it is worthwhile taking a somewhat synoptic view of the seminar series in light of questions such as:

- What documentation have we generated through the series and what is its significance?
- Have key messages from the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* been refined, clarified, or better understood in light of the Leading Out series?
- Are there issues or questions that, despite our best efforts, have escaped our attention and that need now to be addressed?
- Agency, leadership, ecosystem, and collaboration are terms that have been central to our deliberations. What progress have we made in our shared understanding of their significance?

As we continue to look for synergies we ought to look to the strength of connections between *Leading Out* and the Schools Forum, between *Leading Out* and leadership within and across the system, and between *Leading Out* and the strengths and potential of inter-agency collaboration.

