Primary Curriculum Review and Redevelopment

Written submission template for organisations, groups and individuals responding to the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*

This template is intended to support you (and your colleagues/organisation) in developing a written submission in response to the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*. Please e-mail your completed submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

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Submission on 'Draft Primary Curriculum Framework' (NCCA, 2020)

Characterising the key competency of 'learning to be a learner'

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This submission will critique the manner in which the key competency of 'learning to be a learner' is characterised within the 'Draft Primary Curriculum Framework' (NCCA, 2020). Within the document, the key competency is broadly conceptualised as developing oneself as a learner, both individually and interpersonally. First, considering the individual characteristics of this key competency, the Framework aspires that learners gain an ability to reflect upon their learning, engage in problem solving, as well as fully realise and explore their "innate curiosities" (p. 9). Second, in relation to "learning with and about others" (p. 9), the key competency of 'learning to be a learner' encompasses various aspects of development: communication and interaction, a sense of belonging and connection, awareness of and respect for individual differences and uniqueness, an ability to empathise with and care for others, dealing with conflict, and the fostering and maintenance of relationships. More broadly, this multifarious key competency is described to underpin the setting of personal and collaborative learning goals, the discernment of people, things and places, and "the development of knowledge, skills, concepts, attitudes, values, and dispositions for being an active, agentic learner as well as learning with others" (p. 9). It is the opinion of this author that 'learning to be a learner,' as characterised within this key competency, is wide ranging, intangible, and perceptually elusive. As such, the forthcoming discussion will critique this characterisation in relation to the literature base, both

theoretical and policy-based, in order to delineate the most effective realisation of 'learning to be a learner' in Irish primary schools.

First, however, it is necessary to disentangle the relationship between 'learning to be a learner' and its interdependent, yet not analogous, constructs of 'learner identity' and 'learning to learn,' henceforth referred to as L2L. Learner identity is a fundamental potentiating force for lifelong learning. It recognises as *sine qua non* an individual's awareness of oneself as an autonomous, dynamic, and reflective actor, continuously engaging in the "emotional and cognitive process of becoming and being a learner" (Coll & Falsafi, 2010, p. 219). By acknowledging the unique story, voice, and capabilities of each learner, the meaningful realisation of learner identity enables individuals to "see themselves as learners," compelling them to "seek and engage life experiences with a learning attitude and [to] believe in their ability to learn," both independently and collaboratively (Kolb & Kolb, 2009, p. 5). As such, therefore, the key competency of 'learning to be a learner' within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework ought to underpin the cultivation and development of a distinct sense of learner identity within each primary school student. Indeed, in light of this, the title 'learning to be a learner' for this key competency is fitting as it reflects the process of becoming and being a learner. Further, constituent to such an objective is the more discrete and tangible, yet nonetheless complex, construct of L2L, as will now be explicated.

Radovan (2019) explains that the origins of L2L can be traced to the 1980s when the processes through which individuals "control, direct, and manage" their learning became of interest to researchers, reflecting a contemporaneous shift from a teacher-oriented

behavioural conception of learning to an increasingly cognitive approach which centred on "how information is processed and stored in memory" (p. 31). Over time, such an emphasis, complemented by advances in the field of metacognition, encompassing the planning, monitoring, and regulation of one's thinking, led to a characterisation of L2L as "'classroom practices' … aimed at promoting 'learner autonomy' and enabling learners to create new 'learning tools'" (Pirrie & Thoutenhoofd, 2013, p. 610). This characterisation is evident in the identification of L2L as one of eight 'Key Competences for Lifelong Learning' by the European Commission (2019). The Commission describes L2L in largely cognitive and metacognitive terms surrounding the processing, assimilation, and application of knowledge and skills, as well as the organisation and management of information and time. This definition also somewhat acknowledges the affective and social dimensions of L2L, highlighting the role of motivation, confidence, and persistence in overcoming obstacles, either individually or collaboratively.

In addition, a predominantly cognitive and metacognitive conceptualisation of L2L is similarly reflected across varying international jurisdictions: L2L is acknowledged in the 'Personal Development and Mutual Understanding' strand of Northern Ireland's primary curriculum (Council for Curriculum, Examinations, and Assessment, 2007); L2L is described to involve reflection on learning processes as one of eight key principles of the New Zealand curriculum for years one to thirteen (Ministry of Education, 2007); and its definition as "the ability and willingness to adapt to novel tasks" has been extrapolated from the Finnish Learning to Learn Framework (Hautamäki & Kupiainen, 2014, p. 181). While contemporary authors regularly argue the need to wrest the epistemological basis of L2L from such "a narrow identification with self-regulated learning and meta-cognition" (Pirrie &

Thoutenhoofd, 2013, p. 610), as will later be explored, it is nonetheless worthy to first examine this more narrow constituent component.

A narrow vision of L2L

As such, Radovan (2019) emphasises the inextricable link between L2L and "the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of learning" (p. 30). Further, Lee (2014) definitively identifies L2L as a crucial "21st-century cognitive competence" (p. 466). Cognitive learning strategies are defined as intentional mental processes implemented by an individual in pursuit of a specific learning goal involving self-regulation and control (Radovan, 2019). Radovan (2019) outlines that they can be categorised across three different levels of cognitive engagement. First, rehearsal strategies, such as repetition and mnemonics, are useful for the simple retrieval of information but not for deeper understandings. Second, elaboration strategies, including paraphrasing and forming analogies, require the minor transformation of content by summarising and making connections. Third, organisational strategies, like making notes and mind maps, are based on the deeper processing of information related to the ways in which learners structure their knowledge. Metacognitive strategies, by contrast, involve guiding or managing the learning process (Radovan, 2019). Again, Radovan (2019) classifies these across three sequentially organised groups. First, planning strategies, including setting goals and selecting resources, take place before the learning process in preparation for the task at hand. Second, managing strategies, like maintaining attention and continuous self-testing, relate to solving problems and guiding learning during an activity. Third, monitoring strategies take place subsequent to the learning process, comprising the evaluation of performance and identification of problems.

Radovan (2019) emphasises that evidence of a positive correlation between the use of such cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies and academic achievement consistently emerges in empirical research. Furthermore, Radovan (2019) explains that the development of such strategies in learners is not passive, but rather is contingent upon their intentional instruction through either direct or indirect means. Direct instruction, also termed the "isolated" implementation of L2L by Waeytens, Lens, and Vandenberghe (2002, p. 307), is characterised by discrete courses or lessons focussing on a particular skill, thus limiting opportunities for transferability. Conversely, indirect instruction, or the "embedded" implementation of L2L (Waeytens et al., 2002, p. 307), transpires contemporaneous to the teaching of regular content, making it the preference of the "educational community" as it "guarantees to some extent the occurrence of transfer" (Waeytens et al., 2002, p. 307). Notwithstanding such a preference, however, Waeytens and colleagues (2002) assert that the implementation of this approach in exclusivity restricts L2L "to some general advice and vague learning tips" (p. 309). Therefore, it remains necessary to broaden the vision of L2L beyond the narrow remit of the cognitive and metacognitive domains.

A broad vision of L2L

In this vein, Pirrie and Thoutenhoofd (2013) definitively expound that "the embodied, situated, affective and creative dimensions of L2L have previously been subordinated to the cognitive dimension, and have thus received insufficient attention" (p. 610). Thoutenhoofd and Pirrie (2015) postulate that such subordination can be attributed to the

territorialisation and institutionalisation of educational disciplines such as psychology and sociology. It is argued that the contemporary pre-eminence of psychology in learning theory has engendered the dominant cognitive and behavioural perspective of L2L, as described above. The authors call for a more nuanced interdisciplinary approach, embracing the social sciences and the humanities, while also acknowledging "the inner world of the human imagination" (p. 82), in order to broaden L2L as a construct to encompass the aforementioned dimensions which are presently subordinated. Such a shift is necessary to transcend the current individualistic and task-oriented approach to L2L which sets arbitrary horizons to a learner's efforts through its predetermined educational ends (Pirrie & Thoutenhoofd, 2013). Indeed, Pirrie and Thoutenhoofd (2013) emphasise that this predetermination stifles creativity in the learning process through a reliance on predictable and reified practices.

By contrast, the broader vision of L2L intentionally evades such reification. For instance, aspirations to develop a "fluid sociality" (Thoutenhoofd & Pirrie, 2015, p. 83) based upon a "reflexive social epistemology of learning to learn" (p. 73) certainly appear intangible and elusive at first. Nevertheless, Pirrie and Thoutenhoofd (2013) suggest to begin by considering learning as a fundamentally social process "that takes place in a school *qua* household" (p. 622), wherein L2L embodies an end in and of itself rather than a mere means to a performative end. Waeytens and colleagues (2002) elaborate that such a perception of L2L enables individuals to recognise learning as a goal for its own sake, cultivating a desire to become lifelong learners through a set of attitudes and dispositions redolent of learner identity. Thoutenhoofd and Pirrie (2015) further strive to explicate the construct by outlining the integration of cognition and metacognition with affective factors, including

motivation, emotions, and self-regulation, in a socialised and collaborative learning context. As such, communities of learners inculcated with a broad vision of L2L come to practice citizenship, develop reflexivity, and engage in questioning through dialogical, inquiry-based, and experiential tasks (Pirrie & Thoutenhoofd, 2013), wherein they "continuously interrogate their experiences of and orientation towards learning" (Thoutenhoofd & Pirrie, 2015, p. 75).

While such multidimensionality may, indeed, seem challenging to envisage in the practical classroom context, it merely ensures that L2L appropriately reflects the complexity and variability of the human condition itself. By recognising the myriad and, oftentimes, nebulous factors which impinge upon an individual's learning engagements, this conception of L2L acknowledges and embraces the 'who' of the learner. As such, while it is evidently necessary to consider the cognitive and metacognitive 'how' of learning, its relevance is contingent upon the concurrent recognition of the unique person brought to the learning process, as well as the context in which it transpires. In this sense, L2L is not limited to the development of a toolkit of skills and strategies in pursuit of effectiveness and efficiency in learning. Rather, it must concurrently cultivate learning dispositions and attitudes, account for prior experiences and the sociocultural context, and recognise the collaborative, dialogical, and experiential nature of learning.

Recommendations

If operationalised through such a lens, L2L has the potential to underpin the realisation of the aforementioned 'learning to be a learner' key competency within the Draft

Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020). As such, it is necessary that the definition of this key competency within the document, which is presently lacking in clarity and coherence, be revised in order to reflect both the broad and narrow conceptualisations of L2L. Such a definition ought to begin by asserting that the overarching aim of the 'learning to be a learner' key competency is the cultivation of lifelong learners through nurturing a positive sense of learner identity. One facet of this aspiration is the development of specific skills and strategies to enhance effectiveness and efficiency in traditional learning engagements, namely a narrow vision of L2L. It is important that the Framework makes explicit reference to the rehearsal, elaboration, and organisational cognitive strategies, as well as the planning, managing, and monitoring metacognitive strategies, while also emphasising a preference for their instruction through an embedded approach. Beyond this, however, a revised definition should transcend the narrow 'how' of learning, to concurrently embrace the 'who' of the learner. Within this broader sense of L2L, the individual continuously engaged in the process of becoming and being a learner through interrogating their experiences of and orientation towards learning is recognised and embraced. This dynamic component of a revised definition ought to reflect various multifaceted and multidisciplinary notions including motivation, affect, self-regulation, reflectiveness, creativity, sociocultural experiences, the community of learners, and the learning context itself. Ultimately, it must be emphasised that learning embodies an end in and of itself, not a means to predetermined and performative ends as in the traditional sense. It is only through this all-encompassing and dynamic conceptualisation of L2L that a positive and meaningful sense of learner identity can be nurtured, potentiating a reflective, democratic, and creative citizenry of lifelong learners.

As an additional point, Walsh (2016) cautions that, despite the radical nature of historical curricular reform in Ireland "from a colonial, to a nationalist, to a child-centred perspective" (p. 3), it has been accompanied by a trend of insufficient focus on implementation. It is emphasised that curricular aspirations have traditionally not been accompanied by the necessary roadmap to ensure their practical realisation. In fact, the current Irish Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) identifies "learning how to learn" as an overarching aim of primary education (p. 7). Moreover, the 1999 Curriculum conceptualises the construct in the broader sense through reference to developing "an appreciation of the value and practice of lifelong learning" (p. 7). Yet, it is justifiable to argue that this aim has failed to influence Irish classroom practice to any great extent in the intervening two decades. As such, Walsh (2016) highlights that a sense of teacher ownership is integral to ensuring that policy reform is realised in practice. In light of this, Waeytens and colleagues (2002) advocate the need to broaden the vision of L2L held by teachers, the majority of whom presently have a narrow sense of the construct centred on achievement-based remediation and support. By contrast, those who conceptualise L2L in a broader developmental sense "endeavour to develop attitudes and skills which are important outside the school and classroom context" (p. 316), perceiving it as a vital life skill which warrants extensive emphasis in their classroom practice. Furthermore, in their research, Waeytens and colleagues (2002) found that such teachers desire to empower their students through L2L, while recognising the personal and idiosyncratic nature of its realisation. Ultimately, therefore, in order to wholly achieve the key competency of 'learning to be a learner,' in the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020), it is necessary that a sense of ownership is bestowed upon teachers by cultivating in them a broad vision of L2L. Without

the realisation of such clarity, L2L is likely to remain wielding "a minimal impact on … teaching behavior" (Waeytens et al., 2002, p. 319).

Conclusion

In sum, the ongoing reform of the Irish Primary School Curriculum represents a significant opportunity to definitively steer the direction of Irish educational policy towards the needs and priorities of the twenty-first century learner for decades to come. A core facet of such an aspiration is an emphasis on 'learning to be a learner,' as reflected in the publication of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020). This key competency, which underpins a sense of learner identity, thus potentiating lifelong learning, is practically manifested in the construct of L2L. The traditional conceptualisation of L2L narrowly considers the development of cognitive and metacognitive skills and strategies which enhance effectiveness and efficiency in individualised learning. While unquestionably important and valuable, contemporary authors argue the need to broaden the accepted characterisation of L2L to recognise and embrace the 'who' of the learner. This, it is suggested, requires a multidisciplinary approach which incorporates the affective, social, and sociocultural dimensions of learning, as well as the idiosyncratic characteristics and experiences of each learner. It is important that such a conceptualisation of L2L more coherently informs the definition of learning to be a learner within the aforementioned Draft Primary Curriculum Framework as discussed above. In addition, in order to ensure its practical realisation, it is necessary to engender a sense of teacher ownership by fostering in them a broad vision of L2L. If successful, innumerable opportunities abound for forthcoming generations of lifelong learners into the twenty-first century and beyond.

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See presentation given on the characterisation of the 'learning to be a learner' key competency within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework at the 2020 Annual Conference of the Psychological Society of Ireland here:

https://vimeo.com/478848718