

The Review of the Primary Curriculum

Discussion Document and
Proceedings of the Consultative
Conference on Education 2019

into 
Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

into

The Review of the Primary Curriculum

Discussion Document and Proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education 2019

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A nation's greatness depends upon the education of its people



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Foreword

Twenty years ago, our current primary school curriculum was welcomed as child-centred and innovative. Nevertheless, a curriculum must meet the challenges that societal changes bring. Irish society has seen unprecedented change since the 1999 curriculum was published. Many of the students going through schools now never lived in a world without smart phones, drones, tablets apps, and 3D television. This unprecedented access to technology means our students have more information available to them than we could have dreamed of, even a couple of decades ago. They can teach themselves almost anything they want to know using the resources available to them.

As educators, we are tasked with helping these capable, intelligent children prepare for challenges we can't fully foresee. That requires a curriculum that is different than any we have seen before, but not entirely different as much of our current curriculum still serves our pupils very well.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has begun the process of reviewing the curriculum. However, any new curriculum must harness the strengths of the 1999 curriculum, while using the opportunity of a revision to address the current challenges, particularly the issue of curriculum overload and paperwork for teachers.

The INTO has always led teacher involvement in curriculum change and curriculum development, and the current review will be no different.

It is vital that the teacher's voice be heard at all stages of curriculum development and review as we continue to be key decision-makers regarding the type of primary curriculum that is experienced by children now and in the years ahead.

I would like to record the organisation's appreciation of all contributors to our conference, our guest presenters Arlene Forster, Thomas Walsh and Emer Ring, and of course the pupils of St John of God's National School and De la Salle National School, the INTO Education Committee, and the Education and Publications teams in INTO Head Office that prepared these proceedings.

John Boyle



General Secretary
INTO

December 2021



Part One:

Reviewing Curriculum – Having Your Say

A Discussion Paper

Introduction

A curriculum process is cyclical. To be relevant it must be created, taught, reviewed, and adjusted. In our rapidly changing environment, it is important to review curriculum and make necessary adjustments in a targeted way. In an Irish context, curriculum has undergone significant change with the development of a framework for early years (*Aistear*), the junior cycle and the commencement of a review of senior cycle education.¹ The primary curriculum is the next key piece of the jigsaw that we must consider, ensuring that it ‘fits into’ the overall education structure, serving all pupils, including children with special education needs. *Aistear*, which was introduced a decade ago in 2009, is the curriculum framework for all children in Ireland from birth to six years, describing the types of learning that are important for children at this stage in their lives. Whilst it was never formally introduced or properly resourced, *Aistear* was embraced and complimented by many teachers. The new junior cycle introduced (on a phased basis) in 2014, features revised subjects and short courses, a focus on key skills, and new approaches to assessment and reporting. The revised framework allows schools more freedom to design junior cycle programmes that meet the learning needs of all students.²

The aim of curriculum review and redevelopment is to enhance student learning, engagement, experience and outcomes, therefore, as we mark 20 years since the launch of the ‘new’ (1999) primary curriculum, it is timely that the Department of Education seeks to review the curriculum to ensure that it reflects the reality of the society in which we live. In Northern Ireland, a similar review took place in 2007 seeking “to retain the best of current practice while seeking to give greater emphasis to important elements, such as children’s personal development and mutual understanding and the explicit development of thinking skills and personal capabilities” (CCEA, 2007, p. 2).

The centrality of the teacher

Without doubt, the most important person in the curriculum implementation process is the teacher. With their knowledge, experiences and competencies, teachers are central to any curriculum development effort

Merfat Ayesh Alsubaie, 2016, p. 106.³

¹ NCCA. (2009). *Aistear: The Early Years Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: NCCA.

² Department of Education and Skills. (2015). *Framework for Junior Cycle*. Dublin: DES.

³ Alsubaie, Merfat Ayesh. (2016). Curriculum Development: Teacher Involvement in Curriculum Development. *Journal of Education and Practice* Vol. 7, No. 9, (2016) p.106.



Irish teachers have a unique role in curriculum design. The 1999 curriculum was a combined effort, developed through a partnership process involving teachers, parents, school management and the Department of Education. Primary teachers and the INTO were active participants in preparing the revised curriculum of 1999 through their participation on committees designing and preparing curriculum content. The input of teachers cannot be underestimated as their contributions are based on real-life situations and lived experiences in a school context and we must ensure that the voice of the teacher continues to resonate in any updated curriculum. In Ireland, we are renowned for the high calibre of our primary school teachers. Sugrue (2004) commented that the INTO's involvement with the NCCA in the process of developing the 1999 curriculum, afforded teachers a level of ownership resulting in professional buy-in.⁴

In general, while the *Primary School Curriculum 1999* was well-received by teachers, it emerged over the years that certain aspects posed challenges, including a strong sense of curriculum overload and increasing pressure to participate in a plethora of initiatives and programmes that were introduced to support the curriculum.

A vision for primary education

The overall vision of the 1999 primary curriculum "is to enable children to meet, with self-confidence and assurance, the demands of life, both now and in the future", (*Primary School Curriculum: Introduction*, 1999, p. 6).⁵

This statement effectively encapsulates the aim of the *Primary School Curriculum* which celebrates the uniqueness of the child, as it is expressed in each child's personality, intelligence and potential for development and strives to lay solid foundations for the child in all dimensions of his or her life—spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical. Within the 'vision' of the 1999 curriculum was an acknowledgement that children are woven into the fabric of society and thus their personal growth and development is deeply influenced by their dynamic relationships with others at home and in the wider community. In our rapidly changing society, there is a clear need to reflect on the curriculum and its effectiveness to serve the needs of our children, yet the key element at the core of the vision outlined in 1999 still prevails to cultivate the assurance and confidence in our pupils which will prepare them for life not just in the immediate future but as they grow into adulthood.

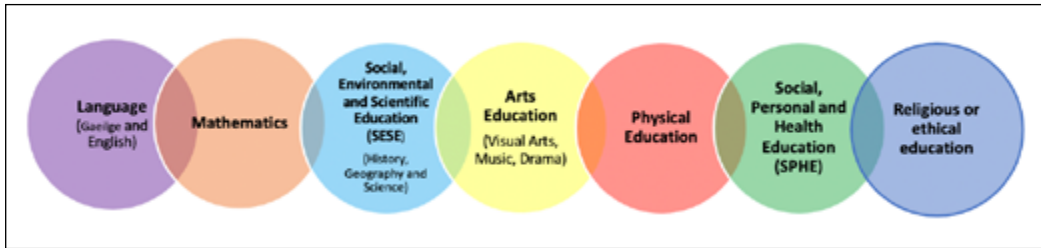
The curriculum is characterised by its breadth and balance within a clear and structured national framework, replicating a broader global context. Looking at our curriculum composition through a global lens we strive to meet sustainable development goals through policies of inclusion and diversity. In our modern-day, changed society, acknowledging the diversity within classrooms, we must consider how we can retain the breath and balance within our primary curriculum while promoting wellbeing of the pupils we teach.

⁴ Sugrue, C. (2004). *Curriculum and Ideology: Irish Experiences, International Perspectives*. Dublin: Liffey Press.

⁵ Government of Ireland. (1999). *The Primary School Curriculum*. Dublin: Government Publications.

Subjects

Reflecting its vision to ensure a well-rounded, holistic education, the 1999 curriculum encompasses seven curricular areas, some of which are further subdivided into individual subjects, namely:



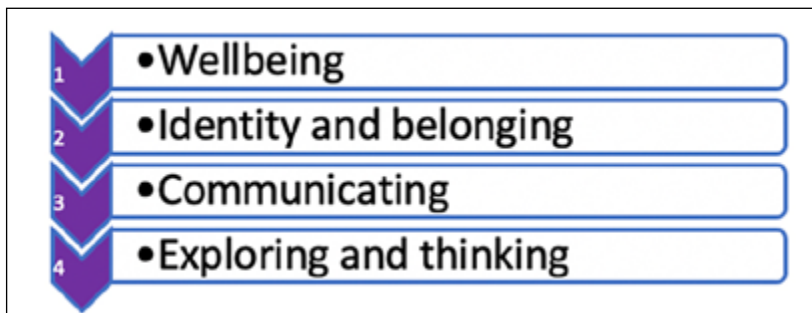
The above areas seek to provide a “broad and balanced” learning experience for all primary school pupils, and whilst the range of content within these areas fulfils the ambition of offering a “broad” curriculum, striking the “balance” can often pose a challenge for teachers. The allocation of time is weighted in favour of literacy and numeracy and the sheer volume of other subjects to be taught can result in pressure within a teaching context.

The Primary Language Curriculum (2019) acknowledges the evolving language-learning journeys that all children are on, in both English and Irish, whilst also recognising and harnessing the diversity of languages spoken in Irish primary schools.⁶

Supporting the introduction of modern foreign languages may be considered as building incrementally on children’s existing knowledge and awareness of language, with a pilot scheme (1998-2012) broadly welcomed by teachers. The technological and digital-oriented society we live in also gives rise to the need to promote digital literacy in our curriculum with many schools already engaging in coding and computational thinking. Such changes to content and pedagogy along with further developments in relation to Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and demands for ethics education, place even more work on teachers which we must ensure does not exacerbate the pressure felt in relation to workload and time.

Integration

The merits of integration have long been highlighted, with the value of an integrated approach endorsed in the 1971 curriculum. Integration is a key method for teachers to ensure that they are enabling children to access a variety of subjects and approaches within a common theme – an approach which is the premise of *Aistear* at infant level. *Aistear* describes children’s learning and development using the four themes of:



⁶ NCCA. (2019). *Primary Language Curriculum*. Dublin: NCCA.



In reviewing the curriculum, we must consider the way in which subjects are presented and grouped. We seek to support younger children's learning and development in stages by building on and extending their earlier learning experiences in preschool through *Aistear*. The areas are designed to support an interdisciplinary approach, optimising curriculum integration and flexibility while supporting progression in learning. Pedagogies in *Aistear* should underpin curriculum for infant classes. For the young child, the distinctions between subjects are not relevant: what is more important is that he or she experiences a coherent learning process that accommodates a variety of elements.

Subjects should be considered in an integrated, organic way which will allow for thematic approaches to learning, combining subjects where appropriate, similar to the Northern Ireland curriculum which states that "although the (six) areas of learning are set out separately teachers should, where appropriate, integrate learning across the six areas to make relevant connections for children" (CCEA, 2007, p. 10). The curriculum recognises the need for "considerable flexibility" for teachers "to select from within the learning areas those aspects they consider appropriate to the ability and interests of their pupils", (CCEA, 2007, p. 2).⁷

The challenge for us as we devise a new curriculum is how can we develop the pedagogies which prove successful in *Aistear*, through the various stages of the primary curriculum.

Time is of the essence

One of the challenges faced by teachers, and a factor that features in all INTO research and consultation with members, is time management. Time is a precious resource, but the range and depth of the subjects which must be taught within the curriculum, coupled with other additional initiatives, makes it difficult to address all aspects to the extent that the curriculum merits. Teachers do like guidance (for example current weekly guidelines) in relation to how they should allocate their time, although it is also clear that the use of discretionary time is extremely important.

With the advent of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, the Department of Education issued guidelines for teachers (*Circular 0056/2011*) marking the beginning of a major national effort to improve literacy and numeracy standards among children and young people.⁸ Ideally, a review of the whole curriculum would be a logical first step, but the Minister for Education identified literacy and numeracy as "among the most important skills taught in our schools ... fundamental to a person's ability to succeed in education, to gain fulfilling employment and to lead a satisfying and rewarding life" (DES, 2011, p. 5) and initiated a review of these two areas.⁹ The five key elements that the minister sought to address were:



⁷ CCEA. (2007). *The Northern Ireland Curriculum Primary*.

<https://ccea.org.uk/learning-resources/northern-ireland-curriculum-primary>.

⁸ Department of Education and Skills. (2011). *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Among Children and Young People 2011-2020*. Dublin: DES.

⁹ Department of Education and Skills. (2011). *Circular 0056/2011*. Dublin: DES.

The increased time available for the teaching of literacy and numeracy came from what would previously have been part of a teacher's discretionary time as well as teaching literacy and numeracy across the entire curriculum. This greater amount of time allocated to literacy and numeracy may have had implications for other aspects of the curriculum. The value of flexible time for the teacher is immense, and in keeping with the overall aims and holistic vision of the curriculum, exploration of creative aspects of the curriculum is hugely important. INTO consultations with members on time reveal that teachers, in general, are supportive of weekly guidelines in language and mathematics and favour monthly guidelines in other curriculum areas (as this allows for block teaching in certain curricular areas). Whilst a broad framework is needed, the desire for flexibility is strong and autonomy for schools on how time is used must be considered central.

Key competencies

On analysing and reviewing curricula in an international context, the focus appears to be on competency development to ensure a well-rounded, holistic education. In her research-informed analysis of *21st Century Competencies in a Redeveloped Primary Curriculum*, Carol McGuinness spoke of learning as much more than "to be remembered material".¹⁰ She argued that development of curricula seeks to ensure that children develop thinking plans and strategies rather than routine learning, affording children a deeper understanding – an idea that has been strongly rooted in our 1999 curriculum, with the pupil seen to be an active learner and the benefit of exploratory work emphasised. McGuinness considered the modern competency-based curriculum in six different states, namely her native Northern Ireland, New Zealand, Singapore, Victoria (Australia), British Columbia (Canada) and Finland in addition to the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme (PYP). Learning how to learn, and developing thinking plans and strategies, are critical for children to build foundations for later life.

As we review the curriculum, we consider the competencies that we would like to see included in a primary curriculum framework. The aim is to enable and foster effective and deep learning while also contributing to the holistic development of the child. Children's progress towards potential key competencies will be influenced by their varying circumstances, experiences and abilities in the same way as progress towards learning outcomes. It would be envisaged that competencies will link closely to *Aistear's* four themes and the six key skills in the framework for junior cycle in order to make connections with children's prior learning in preschool and future learning in post-primary school.

Transitions

The current redevelopment of the primary school curriculum could be used as an opportunity to ensure better alignment in the curriculum across pre-school, primary and post-primary education. Teachers are supportive of a continuum of learning and of more linkage between pre-schools and primary schools to ensure continuity of learning and experience into early years of primary education. It is evident from previous INTO consultations with members that teachers would welcome more opportunities to share information with the pre-school sector in relation to transitions although they cautioned that it must not put an unreasonable administrative or time burden on teachers and schools who are already overwhelmed by paperwork and initiatives.

¹⁰ McGuinness, C. (2018). *Analysis of 21st Century Competencies in a Redeveloped Primary Curriculum*. Dublin: NCCA.



Teachers acknowledge that children experience a discontinuity in structures and environments as they transition from pre-school to the early years of primary school, in terms of the physical environment, the complexity of the school setting, the level of individual attention children receive and a different approach to learning. In light of the extension of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme there is a need to address the issue of consistency and continuity. The INTO previously proposed that consideration should be given to the provision of the second year of the pre-school scheme in the primary school with fully qualified teachers to ensure that continuity be better facilitated.

Concluding comment

There is much discussion about a 'knowledge-based' versus 'skills-based' curriculum - both are intertwined. Fundamentally the challenge for a revised curriculum is how to achieve the right relationship between a knowledge-based and a skills-based approach. Knowledge remains important, because you cannot develop other attributes in a vacuum - you can only do so through an interaction with information and knowledge – therefore, you cannot have a 'skills based' approach without developing knowledge.

Many aspects of the 1999 curriculum are deeply valued including the holistic and child-centred approach; the emphasis on collaboration and active learning; the clarity of strands, strand units and objectives for each class level; and the support and guidance for planning. The INTO is of the view that any new curriculum should harness the strength of the 1999 curriculum while using the opportunity of a revision to address the current challenges, such as the issue of curriculum overload and paperwork for teachers. The INTO supports a play-based, thematic and integrative approach to teaching and learning, however, there are a number of pre-requisites that underpin the successful implementation of such an approach. A substantial reduction in class size, which was one of our key Budget priorities in recent years, is essential to ensure the effective implementation of either of these proposed models. A comprehensive programme of professional development must accompany all curriculum change, through pre-service, in-service and follow up support to facilitate changes to the current curriculum. Consideration must also be given to the fact that infrastructure and physical resources in many primary schools do not currently support a play-based, active approach to teaching and learning. The INTO recommends that the curriculum in the infant classes should be adjusted to reflect the thinking, philosophy and approaches in *Aistear*, removing the structure of 12 individual subjects, but not losing the richness of the current curriculum or the strong focus on early literacy and mathematics. The move towards discrete subjects should occur incrementally and gradually from first or second class, with clear guidelines for schools around flexibility to address the needs of multi-grade classes. While teachers would welcome flexible time and monthly and weekly guidelines for time allocation, the INTO reiterates that any accompanying guidance should reflect teacher autonomy, trust and professional judgement.

In conclusion, Irish society has seen unprecedented change since the 1999 curriculum was published. The education system and children themselves are also shaped by different experiences of family life, different cultures, different beliefs and viewpoints, different abilities and needs. Consequently, schools and teachers face a growing challenge to recognise and respond to this diversity in a way that enables all children to learn and make progress. These changes raise an all-important question about the type of primary curriculum we choose to develop for children now and for the years ahead.

Mar a deir an seanrá, "is de réir a chéile a thógtar na caisleáin".

Part Two:

Proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education 15 and 16 November 2019, Kilkenny

Presentations and Opening Speeches

Introduction

Feargal Brougham, INTO President

Welcome delegates, I would like to extend a warm welcome to you all. It's a great pleasure to be here in Kilkenny for our annual Consultative Conference on Education. Tá fáilte mór romhaibh go léir.

Today, in addition to you our delegates, we also have with us representatives from ASTI, Church of Ireland Board of Education, CPSMA, COGG, DCU, DES Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit, DES Inspectorate, Early Childhood Ireland, Education Centre Network Ireland, Froebel Department Maynooth University, National Induction Programme for Teachers, Teaching Council and TUI. I also welcome our guest speakers who will be introduced to you later. This year we have almost 400 delegates from branches all over the country, in addition to our invited guests and national committee members.

The theme of this year's conference is Curriculum Review. We are focusing, in particular, on the review of the primary curriculum. The aim of curriculum review and redevelopment is to enhance student learning, engagement, experience and outcomes, therefore, as we mark 20 years since the launch of the 'new' *Primary School Curriculum (1999)*, it is timely that the Department of Education and Skills (DES) seeks to review the curriculum to ensure that it reflects the reality of the society in which we live.

The input of teachers to curriculum design and review cannot be underestimated as their contributions are based on real-life situations and lived experiences in a school context and we must ensure that the voice of the teacher continues to resonate in any updated curriculum.

While we can't keep adding to the curriculum, we must reassess our priorities. Young people around the world have begun demonstrating their awareness of issues around climate change and sustainability. As teachers should we be educating our pupils on these topics? Do we have a responsibility to educate 21st century children about local and global inequalities and the changing world around them?

An important part of being a professional is being given the opportunity to meet with others for dialogue and discussion. Today, all delegates will get the opportunity to attend a discussion group, in addition to two workshops tomorrow. You will have signed up for these at registration, so please make a note of which workshop you will attend.

I hope this conference will be a thought-provoking and enjoyable experience for you all.



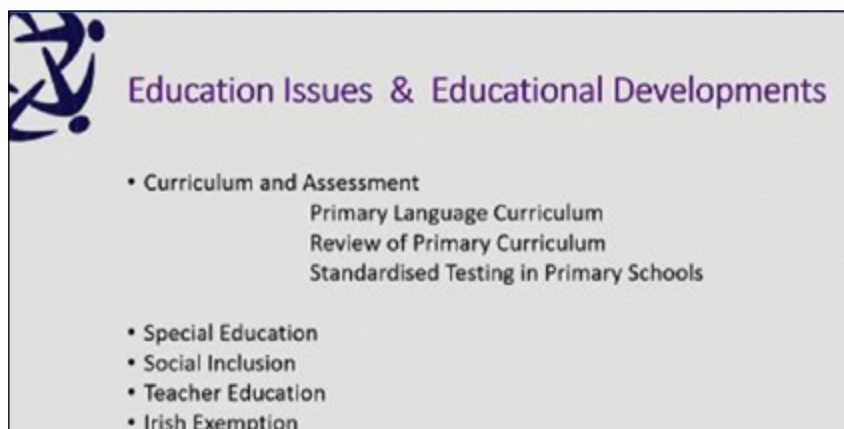
Siobhán Lyskey, Cathaoirleach, Education Committee, INTO

On behalf of my colleagues on the Education Committee, I would like to welcome you all to Kilkenny. As our president has said, it is remarkable the amount of people who have given up their Friday, given up their time, given up their Saturday, and travelled long distances to be here. It shows the importance we place on curriculum and curriculum reform.

For those of you who might be attending your first conference I would like to tell you very briefly about the Education Committee. We have elected representatives from each of the 16 districts and the president, vice president and general secretary who work under the guidance of the Director of Education and Research, Dr Deirbhile Nic Craith. The work of the committee is also supported by a senior official from Northern Ireland. We aim to be the leading voice in education policy development as policy shapes all that we do. We anticipate and try to prepare for trends and issues that might be emerging.

The Education Committee meets several times a year and our role is to advise the CEC on education related matters. We organise this conference that you are going to enjoy today, and I hope you do enjoy it.

On the slide below, you will see some of the areas that we have looked at, I won't read them out for you. We try to monitor developments in curriculum and assessment. Some of us sit on the development groups of the NCCA, the primary language development group, or the mathematics group and we contribute to policy and curriculum development work. We draft documents to be considered by the CEC. We try to look at all aspects of education.



The process to review the whole primary curriculum is under way and this conference is your opportunity to engage deeply with this process. But there are also other issues - you will see several issues troubling us at the moment, like standardised testing, the upgrade from the Drumcondra tests last year and how schools grappled with that. Speaking as a principal the workload with the new model for Irish exemptions is certainly something that we have to consider very deeply.

As we start to engage with these issues it is very easy to get dragged into the problems. But we have looked at the curriculum before. We looked at the primary curriculum in a survey in 2005 and again we had a conference on curriculum in 2015. We have to remind ourselves, and it is very important to remind ourselves, that generally the 1999 curriculum was well-received, and it was because it was holistic and child-centred, and there was an emphasis on collaborative learning and active learning. But there are challenges and one of the biggest challenges that we face is the challenge of workload. And that is also being addressed by the INTO because there is a Workload Steering Group working on this at the moment. We have consultations ongoing regarding workload and there will be more towards the spring. But it is a deep issue for us and something that we certainly can't shirk.

Speaking about standardised testing, the INTO was involved in a joint research project with DCU, with the CARPE institute, about standardised testing. I would like to draw your attention to the report *Standardised Testing in Irish Primary Schools*¹¹ that is available on the INTO website and it is well worth a look.

What I would like to leave you with is a quote from the 1999 curriculum that caught my eye.

... the uniqueness of the child is perhaps most apparent in the innate creativity of each individual ...

Primary School Curriculum, Introduction, 1999, p. 15.

We certainly feel that many years of grappling with literacy and numeracy, and STENS and scores and percentages, maybe it is time for looking at the creativity that we can bring into the curriculum and explore imagination and critical thinking. So, when you are reviewing the curriculum today remember creativity is very important as well.

¹¹ O'Leary, M., Lysaght, Z., Nic Craith, D., and Scully, D. (2019). *Standardised Testing in English Reading and Mathematics in the Irish Primary School: A Survey of Irish Primary Teachers*. Dublin: Dublin City University, Centre for Assessment Research Policy and Practice in Education and Irish National Teachers' Organisation.



John Boyle, General Secretary, INTO

A Chairde, how often have you heard the phrase ‘that’s something that should be taught in schools’? It’s a testament to the great work that you do on a daily basis that you are seen as the solution to all of society’s problems – childhood obesity, climate action, over-exposure to technology or inappropriate media, the list goes on. But there are a limited number of hours in the day. If, every time a new concern caught the public’s interest, we tacked a little bit extra on to the current curriculum, we might as well rebuild teacher residences next to our schools since there would be no chance of anyone getting home in the evening.

Yet, there’s no doubt that the world has changed dramatically and at a rapid pace in the last 20 years. When the 1999 curriculum was launched, there was no *WhatsApp*, no *Instagram*, no *Snapchat*. Phones were just for phone calls and tablets were something that you took if you had a headache. We know that our pupils live in a very different world than children 20 years ago did. We know better than anyone, because we know our own pupils. We meet them at the school gate or the classroom door every day and they tell us about the games that they play, the friends that they pal about with or the pals they have all over the world, the things that they worry about and the things that make them tick. We know better than anyone the world that they are living in and the guidance they need to navigate it. And we know that any curriculum for their learning should be carefully planned out and considered, not a knee-jerk reaction to a dramatic newspaper headline.

We saw that knee-jerk in action with the literacy and numeracy strategy – A half-baked ministerial decree coming hot on the heels of PISA results and some newspaper reports. And of course, like any rush job, it was destined to fail. A curriculum cannot be written on a whim and proper training cannot be passed on from person to person like a game of Chinese whispers.

You told us that you weren’t happy with the way that the language curriculum was rolled out, with good reason. It wasn’t acceptable to drip feed bits of a curriculum and expect principals and teachers to deliver in-service training themselves. We made sure that the Department heard that as is evident from the recent revisions to that curriculum and from the suite of supports that have now been provided for its roll out. We insisted that they slow things down with the maths curriculum and learn from their mistakes. As a result, they have pushed the implementation of the maths curriculum out a few more years, until the language curriculum is embedded and the maths curriculum is ready, fully ready, to go. The Department are consulting on the full maths curriculum and listening to the people that know best – the teachers that will implement it. They will soon begin consultations on the whole curriculum. Please make sure that every teacher you know engages with that consultation process directly with the NCCA and through the INTO.

I want to thank you for your feedback. We rely on you to share your opinions with us so that we can represent your views as loudly and as clearly as we possibly can. I hope that, over the course of this conference, and after it, you will continue to steer us so that we, as a union, can be certain that we are representing the views and interests of our members. You work at the coal face; you teach the curriculum every day. That feedback is crucial.

One thing is certain, we will insist that any new curriculum coming down the tracks must be properly resourced and come with proper training for each and every teacher.

Society puts its hopes and ambitions on the shoulders of teachers because it knows the critical and fundamental role that teachers play. It is important that we remember that. The quality of teaching in Ireland is consistently one of the highest in the world. We should and do trust our teachers. We allow, and must preserve, space for the creativity and personal teaching style of the individual, a stark contrast to some other countries where teaching materials come with a rigid script that anyone who can read could deliver. We as teachers should, and do, have professional confidence around the work we do, and trust in ourselves.

There will always be new trends, new fashionable ideas and bandwagons that somebody thinks we should jump on, and while we, as educators are used to adapting to meet new challenges, change must be managed. The INTO will be to the forefront in managing that change through our work at the primary education forum. We must take care not to be overly swayed by external forces, whether those forces come in the form of the Inspectorate or our view of what the school down the road is doing.

We know what a successful day in our classroom looks like. It might be the excitement in a child's face when they get that 'Aha' moment with something they previously struggled with. It might be kindness that your pupils show to a new child in the class, because they know, from your example, that 'that's how we treat people in our class'. For some, the very fact that a certain child is at school on a particular day, might make that day a success.

You know your own yardstick. While you might choose to take on things that are right for your school or your class, the value of the work you do isn't measured in awards, WSE reports or flags.

I know that above everything else Irish teachers genuinely care about the wellbeing of their pupils. When it comes to understanding the pupils in your care, you know best, and we must continue to have confidence in that. I hope that, over the course of the next day, you will share that professional insight with your colleagues and with us to make the 2019 education conference another great success.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.



Curriculum Review

Deirbhile Nic Craith, Director of Education and Research, INTO

Good afternoon delegates.

Is deas a bheith ar ais i gCill Chainnigh don Chomhdháil Oideachais. Ceist chonspóideach í athbhreithniú curaclaim. Cloistear go minic go bhfuil dóthain le déanamh againn. Agus nach bhfuil an curaclam atá againn go breá! Tá curaclam nua ó thuaidh le deich mbliana anuas, tá curaclam nua don tsraith shóisearach faoi lán tseoil, tá athbhreithniú tosaithe ar an Ardteist agus tá *Aistear* againn do na luathbhlianta. Tá sé in am mar sin féachaint arís ar an gcuraclam bunscoile. Fiche bliain d’aois atá curaclam na bunscoile anois. Fiche bliain ag fás – agus is cinnte gur ag fás a bhí an curaclam le fiche bliain anuas! B’fhéidir go bhfuil sé faoi bhláth? Ach ná fanaimis go dtí go mbíonn sé ag meath. Tá sé tráthúil súil siar a chaitheamh ar a bhfuil ar siúl againn.

As we embark on a review of the primary curriculum, we have an opportunity to reflect on what’s important today in education. What are the educational experiences we wish for our children? What stories does this generation want to tell the next? How do we balance the passing on of our heritage and culture with ensuring children are ready for the challenges of today’s and tomorrow’s world? It’s about change and stability.

There have been battles over the years about what education is for. The traditionalists, influenced by Plato, focus on knowledge; progressivists, influenced by Rousseau, focus on child development. Imaginative education is about tuning in to pupils’ emotions and interests. There are many schools of thought, some more influential than others at different times in our history. Emer Ring will talk to us tomorrow by reminding us of what influences our curriculum and our approaches to pedagogy in the classroom.

Teachers play a central role in curriculum design, development and implementation. It’s not about curriculum delivery. Teachers’ role is far more complex. Curriculum is a social construct – it’s more than what’s in the curriculum books. It takes time to agree what should be in the national curriculum. Teachers make their own of it as they teach, interpret and mediate it to reflect the needs of their own pupils. Children will also experience the curriculum according to their readiness to engage and their interests – and not always according to plan. The new primary language curriculum is a national curriculum, but it will be experienced differently by pupils in Scoil Phádraig, Kilkenny, Scoil Phádraig sa Ghaeltacht or in Scoil Phádraig Special School.

Society has obviously decided that children should come to school. It is good for society to have an educated population. Curriculum reflects our values as a society. On its own curriculum is not enough. It is the teacher who makes the greatest difference, in how we mediate the curriculum, and the pedagogies we use, to reflect the contexts in which we teach.

That is why the INTO argues for the voice of the teacher to be heard in curriculum development and design. Teachers’ experience of working with various curricula must inform new developments. The outcomes we want for our children must be more than aspirations. A good curriculum in the hands of a good teacher, appropriately supported and resourced, is what we need for our pupils to reach their potential, to develop their talents and to understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

There are three points I’m suggesting we focus on when reviewing our current primary curriculum:

Infant classes

First, our infant classes: Since 2010 the government has provided for free universal pre-school. Now that all children are entitled to two years in pre-school, children will be starting school with a very different experience than heretofore, creating new challenges for teachers. Children will have four years of early years' education – two years in pre-school followed by two years in infant classrooms. Many teachers have embraced *Aistear – the Early Years Framework* since 2009, even though it was never formally introduced. *Aistear* also underpins practice in the pre-school sector. So, in reviewing our primary curriculum, we must take into account that children now spend up to 10 years in early years and primary education.

Inclusion

The second issue we need to consider is inclusion. Ireland's increasingly diverse population is reflected in our schools – children with special educational needs, children with English as an additional language, children of diverse faiths and none, Travellers, Roma, migrants and refugees. How does our curriculum respond to this diversity?

The new *Primary Language Curriculum* is designed as a curriculum for all teachers in all contexts. Teachers take responsibility for deciding how to differentiate the curriculum to meet the needs of the pupils in their own context. In order to ensure all children experience a broad and balanced curriculum, as desired, differentiation rather than exempting pupils from aspects of the curriculum may be the way forward.

Learning outcomes

The third issue is learning outcomes. The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011)* recommended a review of the language and maths curriculum to be presented in the form of learning outcomes. Our first experience of learning outcomes has been the *Primary Language Curriculum*. The revised maths curriculum – deferred until 2022 – will also be presented in this form. A learning outcomes approach is about focusing on what we want children to learn.

Those of you who were at the education conference last year heard Professor Andy Hargreaves say that he worked with a number of different countries where a learning outcomes approach had been introduced and had failed. Learning outcomes can be problematic. If they are too vague, teachers don't like them because they don't give enough guidance. If they are too precise, teachers don't like them because they are too precise. Professor Hargreaves went on to say that a learning outcomes approach works well when communities of teachers know what they're about, know their pupils, can identify what their priorities are and work together in pursuit of those priorities. They figure out what the outcomes mean for them in their own schools. The message here is that education systems, at policy level, must invest in professional time to allow for teacher collaboration, so that school communities can fulfil learning outcomes in a way that make sense to them. According to Hargreaves the alternative was worse – standards, testing and top-down control – an alternative we certainly do not want in Ireland.

It is too soon to comment on how a learning outcomes approach is working for us here. It was certainly a struggle to start with. But we can be proud of our teaching profession in Ireland, which attracts high calibre individuals to become teachers and where the profession is trusted and well-regarded in comparison to other countries. What we make of our curriculum, to meet the needs within our own schools, is what will determine our ongoing professionalism. We must resist the pressures of curriculum overload. It's not about 'covering' the curriculum – but more about what we want children to learn and experience in school.



Today is the beginning of the INTO's consultation on proposals for a review of the primary curriculum. We will continue with our consultation in the spring. We invited the NCCA to provide an overview of the issues being considered in the review – something for you to reflect on in your discussion groups this afternoon. Later on, Tom Walsh will leave us with some challenging ideas to think about regarding curriculum development and review – the past, the present and the possibilities.

Finally, as we argue for teacher involvement in curriculum design and development, we must remind ourselves that we are not the only voice in the process. Parents, of course, have views, but so do children. How many times do we run with a lesson that is going extremely well, where children are fully engaged and enthused, while at other times we may cut short a lesson that's not going so well? Even the inspectors are exploring student voice as part of their evaluations. Pupils have strong agency. They can choose to engage and learn, or they can resist. They experience school and curriculum in their own way. We will hear more about pupils' voices later.

Tá súil agam go mbainfidh sibh taitneamh agus tairbhe as an gComhdháil.

The Review of the Primary Curriculum

Arlene Forster, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Dia dhaoibh go léir. Ar son na Comhairle Náisiúnta Curaclam agus Measúnachta, ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an INTO as ucht cuireadh a thabhairt dom teacht go Cill Chainnigh chun a bheith páirteach libh ag bhur gComhdháil Chomhairleach.


Reeling in the years

Less than two weeks into this school year, we saw the 20th anniversary of the *Primary School Curriculum*.¹² Below you'll see a tweet from Dr Regina Murphy in DCU marking that milestone. I was teaching fifth class in Kill-O-The Grange primary school in Dublin the day the white delivery van pulled up outside my school window and the driver started lifting out multiple cardboard boxes containing the 'new' curriculum.




Using a show of hands, how many others are from the same vintage as myself having worked with the '71 curriculum and then the '99 curriculum?

And just to jog your memory further, that was the year when posters of the Backstreet Boys adorned walls up and down the country and when the Euro was used for the very first time in 11 countries. *Friends* was one of the most popular television series and we all thought our electronic devices would self-combust on the stroke of midnight on 31 December with Y2K!




Two decades later

- 1999 curriculum is 'of its time'
- Curriculum reviews and evaluations
- Work with schools
- Research
- Changing expectations
- Developments in the EC and JC sectors
- *Primary Language Curriculum / Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile (2019)*



A FRAMEWORK FOR JUNIOR CYCLE

Inspiration & Identity



¹² Government of Ireland. (1999). *The Primary School Curriculum*. Dublin: Government Publications.



Two decades later

The primary curriculum was cutting-edge, a curriculum of its time. But as we now know, the 1990s when the curriculum was developed were different times. A lot has happened since then which impacts directly on children and teachers. Through research, curriculum reviews and evaluations, and work with schools the last 20 years have spotlighted the many strengths and successes with the curriculum alongside particular challenges. In addition, society has changing expectations of a primary curriculum with many calls to add more to it and very few, if any, calls to remove anything! These calls reflect changes in societal values, globalisation, technological advancements, and growing concern for sustainability, social cohesion and so on.

We've also had policy developments. In the case of early childhood, most children now attend at least one year of preschool and many attend two before coming to primary. We also have a changing junior cycle experience. As we think about redeveloping the primary curriculum, an important consideration is the journey through these sectors that a child will take, and the contribution that primary education needs to make to this journey.

Four days after the curriculum's 20th anniversary, the NCCA sent out the tweet on the bottom right (of slide on previous page) marking the publication of the new primary language curriculum/curaclam teanga na bunscoile, the first part of the curriculum to be fully redeveloped.¹³ I think there was something quite fitting about it being launched during the week of the 20th anniversary. As you know, the new primary language curriculum/curaclam teanga na bunscoile reflects more contemporary thinking and research on curriculum development and involves teachers working with it in a different way compared to the 1999 curriculum.

Tomorrow's children

All of this contributes to a need and an opportunity to look at the curriculum as a whole and to ask some BIG questions about it.

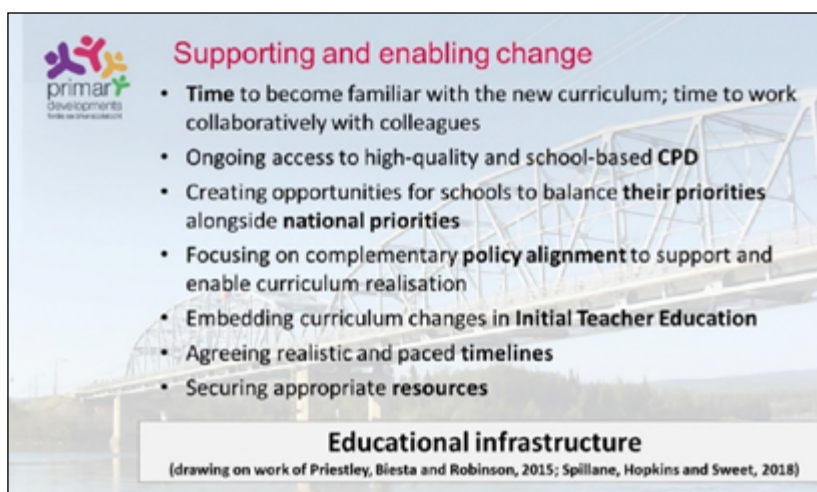
It might be helpful to put matters in more concrete terms as follows. Children born this year will begin primary school in September 2023/24. They'll likely begin their working lives in the 2040s and probably retire in the late 2080s/early 2090s.

Thinking about these children and the fact that the world they live and work in is likely to be quite different to today's, what then is the purpose of a primary education? And how should the curriculum be structured and what components should it include to reflect that purpose? What should it say about teaching and learning when we think of the next 10/15 years? These are some of the questions shaping our review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum.

Directions in curriculum development

The last 20 years have brought new thinking about the purpose of a national curriculum, and in turn, its components. Reflecting this, we see a move internationally from detailed curricula such as the '99 curriculum to broader and more open curriculum frameworks. These frameworks set out a clear vision for education that is shared and supported by all stakeholders – a vision about what's important in primary education and why. In this way, a curriculum framework together with specifications such as the new *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile*, provide a shared sense of direction while giving flexibility and choice to schools.

¹³ NCCA. (2019). *Primary Language Curriculum*. Dublin: NCCA.



This approach to curriculum development at national level is underpinned by the concept of teachers and school leaders as curriculum makers to use Priestley *et al's* phrase¹⁴. This role of building a curriculum guided by the national framework requires particular conditions to be in place such as time and space for teachers to meet and work together as they tease out questions about the curriculum in their school context and make shared decisions about that curriculum and the types of experiences that they need to provide for the children in their school community.

Drawing on this new thinking which is reflected in *Aistear* and in the *Framework for Junior Cycle*, the NCCA is currently developing the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*.^{15 16 17}

Review process

I want to take a minute to map out for you how we've been developing this draft framework.

There are three strands to the work:

- ✎ We're drawing on an extensive body of literature much of which is captured in a series of research papers published on our website. The two keynote speakers at your conference – Dr Tom Walsh and Dr Emer Ring – are amongst the authors of those papers.
- ✎ The papers have been the focus of curriculum seminars with education partners and wider stakeholders. Short reports on these seminars are currently being translated and will be published on our website.
- ✎ And we're also working very closely with schools which I'll come back to.

Throughout all of this, we're drawing on the successes and strengths of the curriculum while responding to the key challenges and taking account of changing circumstances and changing priorities for children's learning and development.

Schools' Forum

I want to come back to the schools with which we work. The Schools' Forum held its first meeting in May 2018 and includes 44 schools – three of which are preschools and three are post-primary. The 38 primary schools represent the range of school contexts in Ireland. Meeting every four to six weeks, the teachers and principals bring their school experiences to the discussions when teasing out ideas from research about a redeveloped primary curriculum. This approach is premised on the understanding of teachers and schools as being central to curriculum development, a concept captured in the work of Hargreaves and Fullan.¹⁸

¹⁴ Priestly, M., Biesta, G. and Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher Agency: An Ecological Approach*. UK: Bloomsbury.

¹⁵ NCCA. (2009). *Aistear: The Early Years Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: NCCA.

¹⁶ Department of Education and Skills. (2015). *Framework for Junior Cycle*. Dublin: DES.

¹⁷ NCCA. (2020). *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: NCCA.

¹⁸ Hargreaves, A. and Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in every School*. New York: Teachers' College Press.



The approach also means that the ideas in the draft framework are grounded in the reality of primary education in Ireland while at the same time being sufficiently aspirational.

Draft Primary Curriculum Framework

Building on the strengths of the 1971 and the 1999 curricula, the vision for the redeveloped curriculum is that it will provide a foundation for every child to thrive and to flourish, supporting them to realise their full potential as individuals and members of communities and society in childhood and in the future. Within this, it recognises each child's uniqueness. Something that has come up strongly in our work with schools is the need to foreground the role of teachers more clearly. Therefore, the image of the teacher captured within the vision is that of a committed, skilful, and agentic professional. Out of this vision then flows a set of principles to guide and inform schools' work across the curriculum.

Priorities and structure

Reflecting the earlier point about curriculum developments in early childhood and junior cycle, transitions has been a key priority in work on the draft framework – transition from preschool into junior infants and from sixth class to post-primary and thinking about how the structure of a redeveloped curriculum and the learning it sets out for children could link more effectively and directly with these two sectors.

A key theme in discussions with the Schools' Forum has centred on the opportunity the redevelopment of the curriculum now provides to take stock of initiatives, programmes and strategies and clarify what's important in primary education. Because we can't do it all!

Some of you may have been involved in the NCCA's 2017 consultation on 'time and structure'. During that consultation there was strong agreement to move away from subjects to broader curriculum areas in the early years of primary and to retain subjects in the later years. Using this feedback, the draft framework sets out proposals for what those areas might be ensuring that they provide strong foundations for the subjects that might emerge and flow from them. As we've noted already, recent years have brought calls for adding new areas of learning to the curriculum including key competencies, education about religions, beliefs and ethics, and modern foreign languages. The draft framework sets out proposals for what these new areas might be, their purpose, where they might fit within the curriculum, and their relationship with other areas and subjects.

Time allocations, teaching and learning

Work on the draft framework has also included revisiting the *Suggested Minimum Weekly Time Framework*. If any of you were involved in the NCCA's recent consultation on the *Draft Report of the Review of RSE* at primary and post-primary, you'll know that there are calls in that review for more time to be given to SPHE. The 2017 consultation on time and structure saw a similar call for PE. Other findings that year included:

- ⌘ Support for holding weekly allocations for maths and language and for consideration to be given to doing likewise for the whole area of wellbeing.
- ⌘ Support for exploring moving to time allocations across longer periods such as months or terms for the rest of the curriculum.
- ⌘ Support for reinstating a block of time which schools could use as they wished across the curriculum.

The school day is a particular length as is the school week and year. Put all of these demands alongside calls for more to be added to the curriculum, and you find yourself in a very challenging and complex space. Through our work with the Schools' Forum, education partners and wider stakeholders, we've arrived at a set of proposals for time which speak to these many demands and expectations.

Moving more to what teaching and learning looks like and the important teacher-child relationships which lie at the very heart of practice, the draft framework promotes more play-based and inquiry-based learning with a focus on the outdoor environment.

Finally, it spotlights assessment and in particular highlights this as a core part of what teachers do every day. Reflecting assessment changes in junior cycle and assessment in *Aistear*, the draft framework positions teachers as skilled professionals making informed decisions and judgements about teaching and learning based on the evidence they gather from children's work, conversations, tasks and so on. In this way, it sees teachers' assessments as being as important, if not more important, than summative or external assessments.

Enabling and supporting change

Many researchers such as Priestley, Biesta and Robinson writing about curriculum renewal and implementation refer to factors that are conducive to curriculum change. Spillane *et al* refer to these as being part of the educational infrastructure.¹⁹ This infrastructure has been another recurring theme in the work of the Schools' Forum. You can see some of the most prominent factors that have emerged as part of this:

- ⌘ Time to build familiarity with a redeveloped curriculum and time for teachers to work together.
- ⌘ The professional development continuum – changes embedded in ITE and access to high-quality, school-based CPD.
- ⌘ Policy alignment across primary education so that the redeveloped curriculum is supported by wider policies; and
- ⌘ Setting realistic time lines for implementation and securing the appropriate resources to make the curriculum a reality in all schools.

The NCCA is acutely aware of the importance of this educational infrastructure and will continue to work with stakeholders in the coming months and beyond to tease out what is needed and what's possible, what actions can be taken and by whom in order to plan for and build capacity-build readiness for the enactment of the redeveloped primary curriculum in the coming years. do and why we do it and consider how we might further improve it. In Ireland, that opportunity only comes every now and again

Recapping big ideas

As I've outlined, the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* is grounded in a set of key ideas which are summarised on screen. With Council's approval, we plan to publish the draft in January for consultation.



Priorities and structure

- Supporting educational **transitions**
- **Consolidating** initiatives, programmes and strategies – clarifying **what's important** for primary education
- Moving from subjects to a more **integrated curriculum** structure for early primary
- **Retaining subjects** to structure the curriculum for the later years in primary
- Exploring the integration of **new areas of learning** in the curriculum, e.g., key competencies, ERB and Ethics, modern foreign languages

¹⁹ Spillane, Hopkins and Sweet. (2018). School District Educational Infrastructure and Change at Scale: Teacher Peer Interactions and Their Beliefs About Mathematics Instruction. *American Educational Research Journal*. 55(3):000283121774392.



Consultation

The consultation will run to June next year and involves many different formats which you can see on the following slide. Thinking about our curriculum changing can be unsettling; it can trigger a desire to hold on to what we know, to keep the familiar. It's also an opportunity to revisit what we do and why we do it and consider how we might further improve it. In Ireland, that opportunity only comes every now and again.

Please join the conversation during the consultation. This consultation will play a key role in determining the purpose, structure and content of the next primary curriculum.



Link and contact form

Our hope then is to have the framework finalised and published by the end of 2020. It then informs our work in developing curriculum specifications for each area/subject as we've done for language and are doing for maths. So, we're still some way off in terms of having the fully redeveloped curriculum in our hands.

I want to finish using the words of Alsubaie from Western Michigan University who reminds us that:

... no curriculum will be perfect, a finished product cast in stone, or free from criticism, ... teachers are central to any curriculum development effort.¹

I look forward to hearing from you, and perhaps meeting you during the consultation.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

¹ Alsubaie, Merfat Ayesha. (2016). Curriculum Development: Teacher Involvement in Curriculum Development. *Journal of Education and Practice* Vol. 7, No. 9, (2016) p.106.



Feargal Brougham, INTO President

We are at an exciting part of the day; we are going to hear the pupils' voice. So, for the next session we welcome four children from local schools to give us their view of the curriculum. Their schools have conducted a survey on curriculum and they will be presenting their findings.

Their names and schools are Isaac Okorafor and John Barton from St Patrick's De La Salle BNS, Kilkenny and Katie O'Keefe and Siobhán Murphy, St John of God GNS, Kilkenny. I'm really looking forward to hearing their presentation.

Children's voice

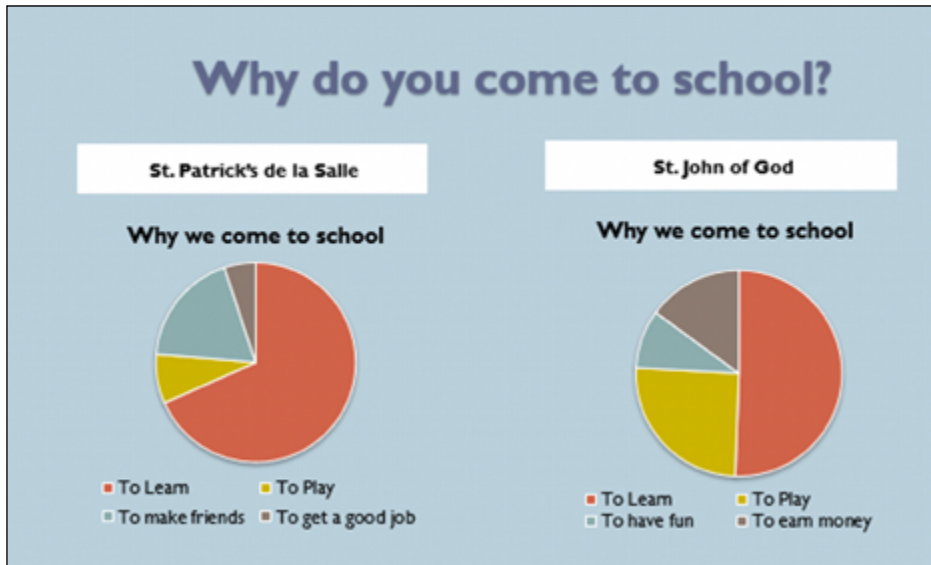
Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. My name is Isaac and this is John and we are 5th class students in St Patrick's De la Salle, Kilkenny.

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. I am Katie and this is Siobhan and we are 5th class students in St John of God, Kilkenny.

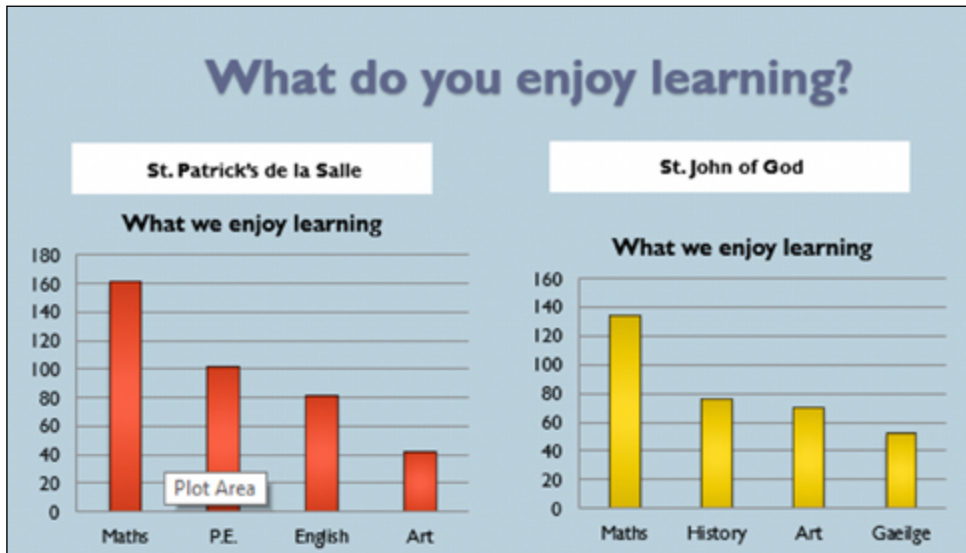
We were asked to conduct a survey called the children's voice. We conducted the survey by deciding on five questions. Then we went around to the classes and explained about the survey. We gave people time to think and then we went to the classes and gave them the survey. We helped younger students to write what they wanted. We let younger pupils draw what they wanted.

We asked De la Salle boys' school and John of God girls' school questions that would allow them to answer in their own words. The five questions were:

- ⌘ Why do you come to school?
- ⌘ What do you enjoy learning?
- ⌘ How do you enjoy learning?
- ⌘ What would you like to learn more of?
- ⌘ What would make you happier in school?

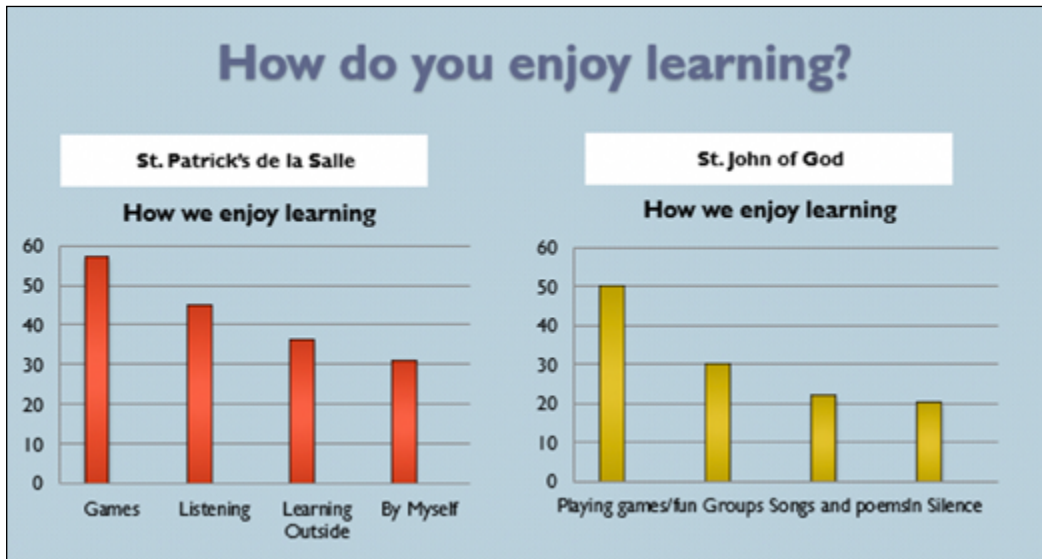


Why do you come to school? In St Patrick's De la Salle you will be glad to know that the majority of pupils say they come to school to learn. The next most popular answer was to make friends, followed by to play then to get a good job. In St John of God's half of the pupils said that they come to school to learn, about a quarter said they come to school to play, followed by to earn money and have fun.



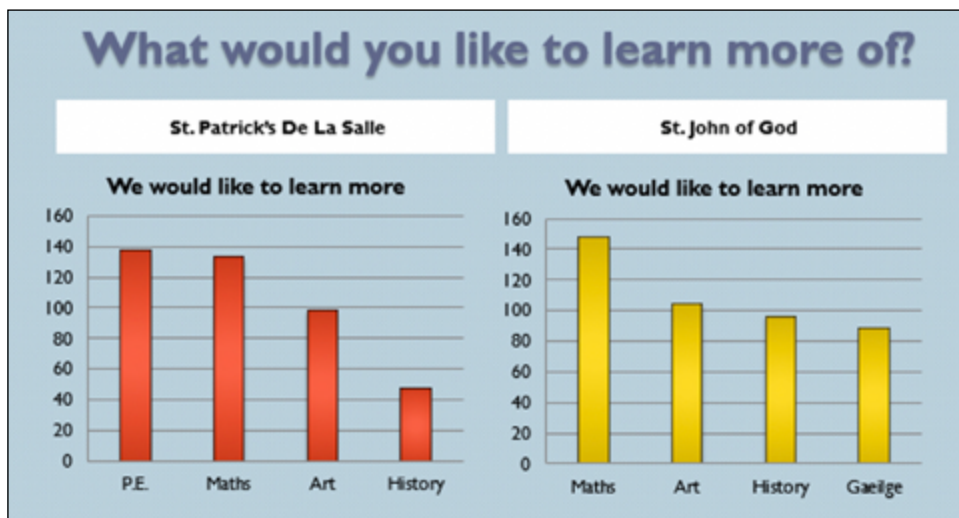
The second question was what do you enjoy learning? The most common answers in St Patrick's De la Salle were maths, PE, English and Irish.

The most common answers in St John of God were maths, history, art and Gaeilge. Interestingly, maths was the most popular in both schools with Irish also featuring in both. There were also numerous other answers that did not make the list such as English and science.

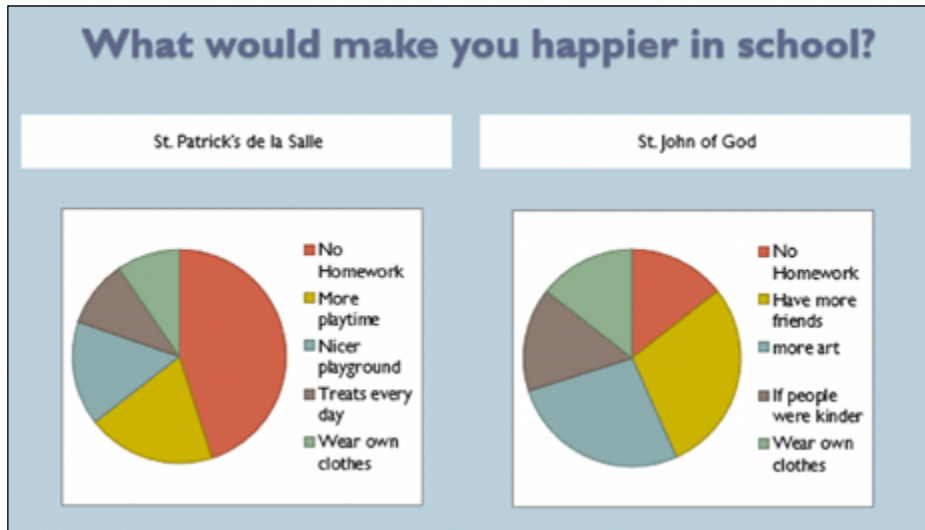


How do you enjoy learning? In St Patrick's De la Salle most students said they enjoyed learning through games, this was followed closely by listening. Learning outside was very popular with the boys. Interestingly a lot of pupils said that they like learning on their own.

In St John of God most students enjoy learning through playing games and having fun. A lot of girls enjoyed learning through group work. The girls also like learning through song and poetry. Many girls said they like learning in silence.



The fourth question was, what would you like to learn more of? There were lots of different answers to this question. The most popular for De la Salle boys was PE followed closely by maths, art and history. In comparison the most popular answer from the girls in St John of God was maths then art, history and Gaeilge. Children in both schools would like to learn more maths and art. Other answers which did not make the list include coding and more time to read.



What would make you happier in school? In St Patrick’s De la Salle most students decided that no homework would make them happy in school. They also said they would like more play time. There is no surprise there! The playground is important to the boys and a nicer playground would make us happier. To make things even better we would like treats every day and we want to wear our own clothes.

In St John of God the girls also want to get rid of homework but not as much as the boys. The girls felt that having more friends would be a good thing. They would like if they could do more art. The girls also wanted people to be more kinder. Many girls said that they want to wear their own clothes.



In our final slide we used a word cloud to show you what our perfect school would look like. As you can see, we would love a school that would allow us to wear our own clothes, to learn in a fun way, to work in groups and individually, to have more play time, more friends, to learn outside, and learn in a kind happy environment.

As Greta Thunberg said, “the eyes of all future generations are upon you” and we can’t wait to see you create our perfect school in years to come, no pressure there!

President – closing remarks

Isaac, John, Katie and Siobhán, you are a credit to yourselves, your school, to your parents. That was just wonderful and make sure you work on that non-uniform wish; you have the power to do it. Look at Greta Thunberg - she has managed! We are listening more and more as we have failed generations on the climate. We are more and more listening to young people so make sure your voice is heard. Make sure your voice is heard.

Primary Curriculum in Ireland: The Past, The Present, The Possibilities

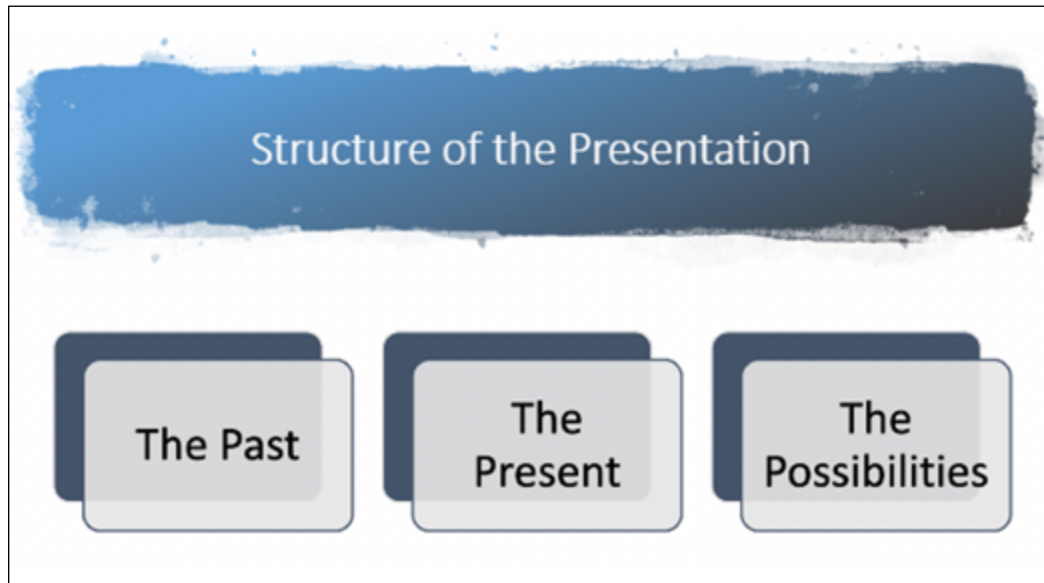
Dr Thomas Walsh, Maynooth University

A Uachtaráin, a chathaoirleach, baill den choiste oideachais, rannpháirtithe, daoine ar líne, a chairde, Dia dhaoibh go léir and míle buíochas as ucht an chuiridh seo chuig bhur gcomhdháil i mbliana. Is mór an onóir dom a bheith in bhur measc inniu chun labhairt libh maidir le cúrsaí curaclaim – ábhar ina bhfuil suim an-mhór agam. I would particularly like to thank Dr Deirbhile Nic Craith for the invite to be here today.

I am very aware that I am in a room full of educationalists and curriculum specialists and the key message I will be delivering today relates to your critical role as teachers in curriculum development.

I will draw today on my research relating to the curriculum in Ireland but also from my years as a teacher and as an inspector with the DES – But please don't hold that against me! Indeed, it was observing and discussing curriculum with teachers that I have learned the most about curriculum and its enactment.

I am also aware that I am standing between you and a drinks reception so I will do my best to stick to time!



As the title of my input implies, I would like to do three things over the next 30 minutes relating to the primary curriculum in Ireland. After setting the scene by exploring what a curriculum is and focusing in particular on the role of the teacher in the development of the curriculum, I will then concentrate on the past and examine the reasons why curricula must evolve and change.

The focus of the present will be to critique current curricular provisions in Ireland, examining the 1999 curriculum – its successes and shortcomings.

I really believe that we have so much to learn from, and be proud of, in terms of the past and the present to look forward with confidence to future possibilities – A time when I hope that teachers will become more firmly embedded and recognised as the key curriculum developers in Ireland. To this end, I will talk a little about Hargreaves and Fullan's concept of professional capital as well as the concept of teacher agency ... and explore ways in which this capital can be unleashed and nurtured further in the Irish education system.²⁰

²⁰ Hargreaves, A. and Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*. New York: Teachers' College Press.



What is a Curriculum?

- The term 'curriculum' encompasses the **content, structure and processes** of teaching and learning, which the school provides in accordance with its educational objectives and values. It includes specific and implicit elements. The specific elements are those **concepts, skills, areas of knowledge and attitudes** which children learn at school as part of their personal and social development. The implicit elements are those factors that make up the **ethos and general environment** of the school. The curriculum in schools is concerned, not only with the subjects taught, but also with how and why they are taught and with the outcomes of this activity for the learner.

Department of Education (1995:18)

So, let's get going. I think a good place to start is by asking what exactly a curriculum is? There are multiple definitions in the literature but one which always appeals to me is that provided in the white paper on education from 1995 reproduced on the slide above.²¹

I will let you read it yourself, but I would like to emphasise a few points. This definition provides a broad and expansive view of curriculum as not just relating to content, but also encompassing the processes, values and attitudes – focusing on the bigger educational questions of the 'why' and the 'how'.

It is easy sometimes to focus on the curriculum sometimes as just the 'what' or the content of education, but it is crucial to keep these bigger purpose and pedagogical questions central when considering the curriculum.

Another definition that always resonates with me is one I have heard Dr Anne Looney of DCU use – that of curriculum as the story one generation tells to the next.

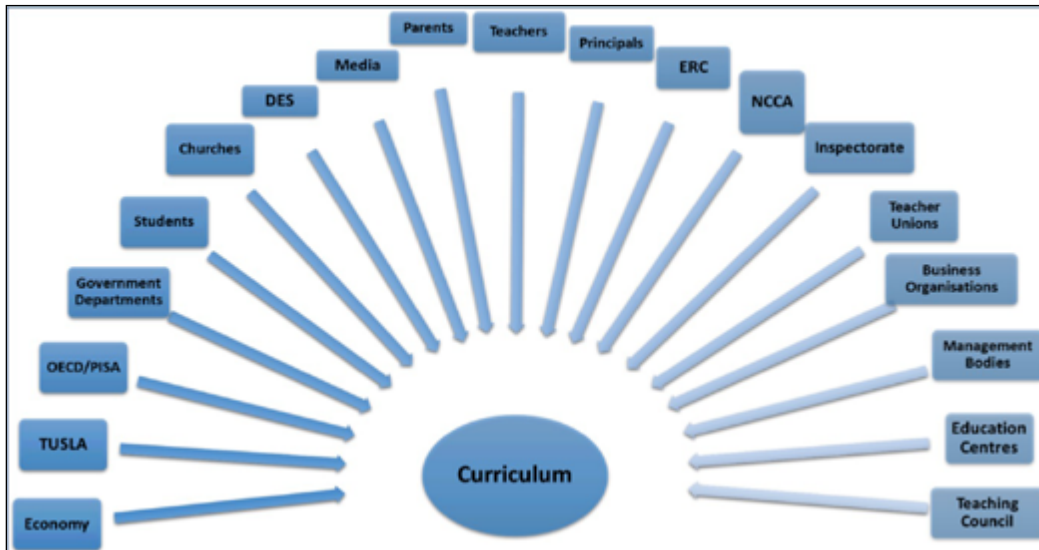
Curriculum as story evokes for me the image of the teacher as storyteller. And we all know the importance of the person telling the story as much as the written text. It is the storyteller who chooses the best story for the audience, who picks the plots and characters to be developed, who brings the story to life, who knows how to read and respond to the audience and who knows when enough is enough.

It is similar in terms of curriculum – the written text is but one part of that story and it is in the hands and through the skill of the teacher that the curriculum becomes a lived experience and embodied reality for pupils.

But there are so many stories to tell. National curriculum development is becoming ever complex at both a national and school level considering the multiplicity of competing demands on the education system.

As Larry Cuban says, "If society gets an itch, schools get a scratch." And it feels like society has never been itchier!

²² Department of Education (1995). *Charting our Education Future – White Paper on Education*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.



The fan on the slide above shows a range of international and national stakeholders that articulate varying viewpoints about the purposes of education and of the direction of curricula, many of whom come from varying historical, ideological, cultural, political, economic, theoretical and practical traditions. Curriculum development must face these contradictions and tensions.

So, as Lawton (1989) states, curriculum development at both a national level and at a school level requires difficult decisions – decisions on the inclusion or exclusion of content, on values, on vision and much more.²² In the partnership and consultative model that is operated in Ireland, this is a particular challenge.

All of this is happening in an ever-changing world, with the challenges of increased globalisation, the focus on economic imperatives and ensuring environmental sustainability.

What we often experience in curriculum development, both in Ireland and elsewhere, is a game of tag between policy and practice. Practice overtakes national policy, optimistic and futuristic curricula are developed that are often ahead of contemporary practice until once again this practice supersedes the policy, which becomes dated and in need of reform.

That is because the curriculum, as advocated by Goodson (1998)²³ and Elliott (1998)²⁴ is a living entity and social construction that is constantly re-negotiated, redeveloped and adapted. The other warning to issue is that the written policy is just a statement of intent – it cannot guarantee that it will be experienced by pupils or enacted by teachers.

But for the moment, let's take a look backwards.

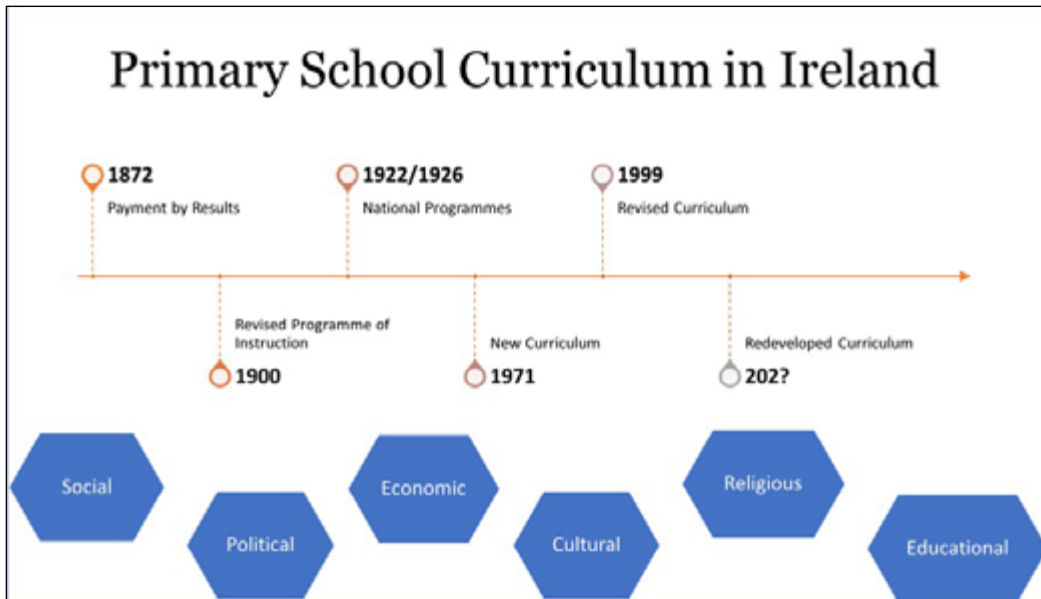
²² Lawton, D. (1989). *Education, Culture and the National Curriculum*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

²³ Goodson, I. (1998). *The Making of Curriculum: Collected Essays*. London: The Falmer Press.

²⁴ Elliott, J. (1998). *The Curriculum Experiment: Meeting the Challenge of Social Change*. Birmingham: Open University Press.



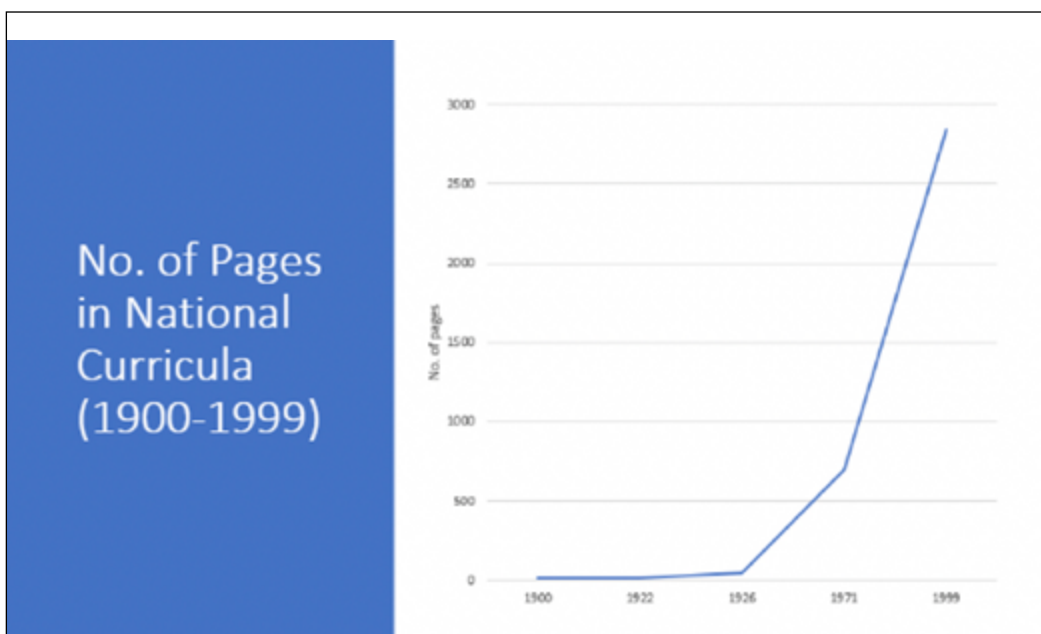
Curriculum: The past



I thought this slide might provide a useful graphic on the evolution of various curriculum policy documents in the past in Ireland. In effect, to date, there have been five major curricular revisions since the establishment of the national system of education in 1831.

These have varied in broad terms between being child-centred in nature to being more instrumentalist in approach. Generally, the motivation and impetus for reform have come from external forces listed at the bottom of the slide (particularly political and economic reasons) as much as pedagogical considerations.

For example, curriculum changes in the 1920s were necessitated by the changing political situation and the need to involve schools in the building of national identity and nationhood. Going back further, Payment by Results was introduced in 1872 as a response to concerns around accountability for educational expenditures. Plus ca change!!



It is also interesting to look at the 'physical face' of these curricula, a term coined by Alexander and Flutter (1999),²⁵ and the graph does this by charting the number of pages in the national curriculum guidance.

I am sure you must be jealous when you hear that the 1900 curriculum was 14 pages long ... rising to 15 pages in 1922. And this was pretty much it in terms of guidance with few accompanying initiatives or strategies!

By 1971 it had tipped 700 pages and the 1999 curriculum reached close to 3,000 pages. Hopefully we have reached the peak pages and the peak of specification ... and I think Arlene has hinted that this is the direction of travel for the NCCA.

We often wonder why there must be a change in the curriculum as change challenges us all. Indeed, there have been so many changes over the years that we are running out of words to term the revisions with – we have moved from revised to new to revised and now to redeveloped.

But curricula do need to change if policy and practice are to evolve in line with societal and educational changes. Indeed, I would argue that more frequent rather than less frequent changes are needed to avoid these periodic seismic revisions that are challenging for all.

But let's take two examples of curricular provisions from the past that may no longer be desirable in our contemporary education system. I have mentioned that payment by results was introduced to Ireland in 1872 as recommended by the Powis Commission. It stated:

That to secure a better return for the outlay and labour of the National system, each Teacher, besides a fixed class-salary, should receive an addition according to the number of children whom the Inspector, after individual examination, can pass as having made satisfactory progress during that year.²⁶

I cannot see too many arguing for the return of such a curriculum provision!

Another provision that came to mind was the very gendered nature of many of the subjects in the curriculum up to the 1970s, when a number of subjects were designated for study by either boys or girls only.

For example, the following quote was included under the subject Domestic Economy for Girls in the 1900 curriculum:

... they do not wish to train cooks or laundresses, but to impart such information about these domestic sciences as shall enable the average primary school girl, when she assumes the position of housewife, to perform the ordinary culinary and washing operations that may appertain to her position, or efficiently to superintend these operations when performed by others.

I feel it safer to make no further comment!

²⁵ Alexander, R. and Flutter, J. (2009). *Towards a New Primary Curriculum: A Report from the Cambridge Primary Review. Part 1: Past and Present*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. Available at: <http://cprtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Curriculum-report-1.pdf>.

²⁶ Royal Commission of Inquiry into Primary Education (Ireland) (1870). *Conclusions and Recommendations Contained in the General Report*, Vol. 1, Part X, Recommendation No. 2, p. 522.



The Programme as specified for each subject is not obligatory but is merely an indication of the aims and desires of the Commissioners. The Commissioners will consider other Programmes which Managers may bring under their notice. But such Programmes must be arranged in the first instance in conference with the Inspectors of the district." (CNEI, 1901:29)

"Teachers are at liberty to draw up and submit for the approval of the Education Authority special programmes to suit the circumstances of their individual schools taking into account the number and attainments of the staff, the local needs, etc., but all such programmes must be framed along the lines of the National Programme." National Programme Conference (1922:4-5)

Freedom for teachers within curricula

One defining feature of curricula in Ireland for more than the last century that I would like to draw attention to is that each have included considerable freedom in terms of their interpretation and enactment, in policy terms at least.

As you can read on the slide, provision was made in the 1900 and 1922 curricula for schools and teachers to develop alternative programmes of work based on the national guidance to suit the needs of their school contexts.²⁷

However, this was an agency that was rarely encouraged by inspectors at a national level, and it is only in recent decades that an emphasis has been placed on whole-school curriculum planning and teachers as curriculum developers.

I would argue that overall, we have a strong tradition and culture in Ireland of following nationally prescribed curricula and there has been an apprehension to deviate from national guidance. I don't think it would be an overstatement to say that historically teachers have been understood as 'implementers' of centrally-designed curricula.

This, I would argue, has led to a lack of ownership over the curriculum and a reduced sense of professional identity for teachers. There is still a freedom in terms of using the national curriculum in Ireland and I believe this is a key opportunity for accentuating teacher professionalism into the future.

Curriculum: The present

And so, to move to the contemporary context.

1999 Curriculum: Successes

- Continuity
- Partnership and consultation
- Broad and holistic
- Child-centred
- Phased implementation
- Centrality of teachers

²⁷ Commissioners of National Education [CNEI] (1901). *68th Report of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland for 1901*. Dublin: Alexander Thom and Co, p. 27.

No doubt all of you are intimately familiar with the current primary school curriculum – the heavy box of books that arrived in 1999 and the various online iterations, additions and versions that have ensued since. In my estimation, that curriculum has many strengths.

It provided for continuity by building on the positive aspects of the 1971 curriculum. It was developed using a partnership-based approach over a protracted period of time. This consultative approach, now enshrined in the Education Act, ensured teachers were central in the development and drafting of the national curriculum under the auspices of the NCCA.

The published curriculum was broad-based and holistic in nature, underpinned by a child-centred philosophy. Its roll out was phased in nature over a number of years and structures were created to support schools and teachers in enacting the curriculum in practice.

Indeed, teacher professionalism and the critical role of the teacher in making curriculum decisions was foregrounded strongly within the curriculum, lauding teacher professional judgement and decision-making in the curricular process.

But we have learned a lot in the last 20 years from the experience of using the curriculum. As teachers, you have grappled with the demands of a crowded curriculum.

Since 1999, curriculum documentation has been accompanied by numerous action plans, guidelines, initiatives, resource packs, strategies and curricular revisions (such as RSE and ethics education, coding, digital literacy, computational thinking, modern foreign languages, revisions to the language curriculum).

Indeed, it is questionable if the myriad of additional demands on schools have largely displaced the 1999 curriculum guidance as the entity informing teacher planning and practice.

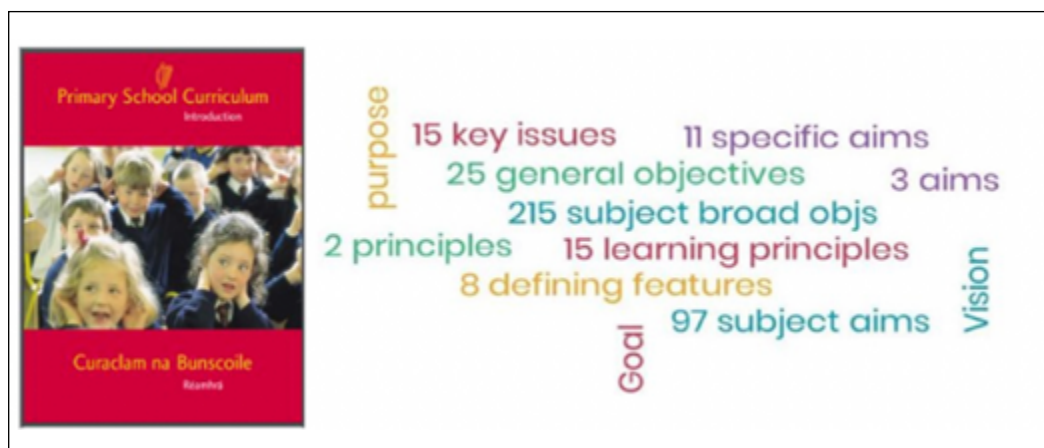
The sheer extent of national guidance challenges the underpinning philosophy of the curriculum being child-centred (responding to children’s needs) or indeed the avowed professional autonomy being afforded to teachers to make curriculum decisions at a school level.

I think one of the key shortcomings for the 1999 curriculum is that it did not communicate sufficiently its flexibility, the freedom it afforded to schools and to teachers to make choices and to use the national curriculum to frame their own programmes of work at a school level.

The introduction handbook to the curriculum included a very extensive range of elements (such as vision, goals, aims, principles, objectives), but in this mix it is difficult to deduce the core vision or purposes of the curriculum or the interface between these various elements.

Indeed, many of the key messages became diluted, obscured or lost in lists of elements, leading to a lack of clarity.

There too was a lack of clear articulation of the ideology, theories or research underpinning the curriculum.





When I enumerated the totality of aspects in the introduction handbook (the red book), the picture in the slide above emerged. As you can see, this resulted in:

- ⌘ 1 goal
- ⌘ 1 vision
- ⌘ 1 purpose
- ⌘ 2 principles
- ⌘ 3 aims
- ⌘ 8 defining features
- ⌘ 11 specific aims
- ⌘ 15 learning principles
- ⌘ 15 key issues
- ⌘ 25 general objectives

I feel like bursting into song ... “And a partridge in a pear tree” ... as we approach the festive season but believe me it is best for all I don’t sing!

And this is before going to the remainder of the curriculum where we find an additional 97 subject aims, 215 broad subject objectives and literally hundreds of strand unit content objectives!

So, I can understand the sense of being overwhelmed by curriculum overload and ongoing initiatives when the extent of the ‘physical face’ of the curriculum is explored.

I am also reminded of David Tuohy, who asserts that more and more, teachers are being required to evolve and extend their practices to respond to new priorities but with little guidance on what is to be left out.²⁸ As he states:

In the change process in education, schools have tried to mix the roles of settlers and nomads. They have kept all the possessions of the past and also tried to head out for new pastures. The lack of prioritization has meant that teachers have taken on more and more roles and burdens, and shed none of the older ones.

But the task of identifying what might be removed or reduced in priority is much less easy. There is little in the 1999 curriculum that anyone, even in 2019, could argue against.

And indeed, there is so much more we might be tempted to add given the advances in educational research, and new societal and educational priorities.

Curriculum: The possibilities

And so, to the possibilities. I don’t know if it something that you find reassuring or daunting but, in my estimation, you as teachers are front and centre to the possibilities for the future of curriculum in Ireland.

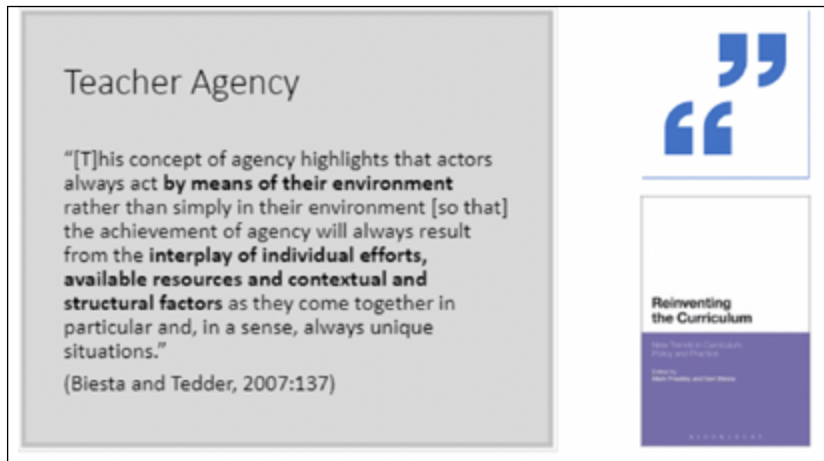
In a recent study, Mark Priestley and Gert Biesta identified three trends in curriculum development internationally, including a focus on teachers as curriculum developers rather than the preparation of prescribed curricula.²⁹ Central to this focus is the concept of teacher agency, that is, teachers’ capacity to act.

While there has been much debate about teacher agency and its conceptualisation and theorisation, I find the ecological approach advocated by Priestley, Biesta and Robinson as useful in understanding the concept. This approach advances that agency is not something that teachers automatically have but is something that can be achieved through the interplay of individual capacities (their professional capital) and the social or material conditions in which they work.

²⁸ Tuohy, D. (1999). *The Inner World of Teaching: Exploring Assumptions*. UK: Falmer Press, p. 121.

²⁹ Priestley, M. and Biesta, G. (Eds.) (2013). *Reinventing the Curriculum: New Trends in Curriculum Policy and Practice*. London: Bloomsbury.

Agency has both temporal and relational dimensions. Understood this way, teacher agency is not about teachers implementing the policies or agendas of others but more the capacity to direct actions and to articulate alternative judgements. It also involves reshaping, resisting and tempering curriculum policy, maintaining a “critical and appreciative edge” as termed by Hargreaves and Fullan.



As you see on the slide, Biesta and Tedder³⁰ articulate that agency is exercised (or not) depending on the interface between the individual, the environment and wider structural factors.

But often times teacher agency is reduced by system and school structures and cultures which disempower teachers from exercising their agency, such as drives for accountability and performativity.

This focus on the environment in which teachers work is crucial as placing all of the responsibility on teachers alone could risk setting them up for failure.

While teachers are central, this story is also about other players and factors. There is an entire infrastructure and ecosystem around you that either enable your professionalism to flourish or flounder.

The interaction and interface between the individual and the system is crucial. As Priestley et al. (2015) assert, there is a need to focus on "... the interplay of what teachers 'bring' to the situation and what the situation 'brings' to the teacher."³¹



³⁰ Biesta, G. and Tedder, M. (2007). Agency and Learning in the Lifecourse: Towards an Ecological Perspective. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 39, pp. 132-149, p. 137.

³¹ Priestley, M., Biesta, G., Philippou, S. and Robinson, S. (2015). The Teacher and the Curriculum: Exploring Teacher Agency (in) D. Wyse, L. Hayward & J. Pandya (Eds.). *The SAGE Handbook of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment*. London: SAGE. Available at: <https://bit.ly/30C93AI>.



They go on to say that there is a need “to attend more explicitly to the cultural and structural domains which frame teachers’ work.”

Reconceptualising the role of a national curriculum to be a framework guidance rather than being a detailed prescription requires a paradigm shift across a range of agencies and organisations that are part of the educational ecosystem.

Our solar system only works when there is synergy and harmony in the movement of its various constituents. The gardener alone cannot ensure the growth and flourishing of plants without the support of the soil, the sun, the air, the rain, a range of tools and even sometimes a greenhouse.

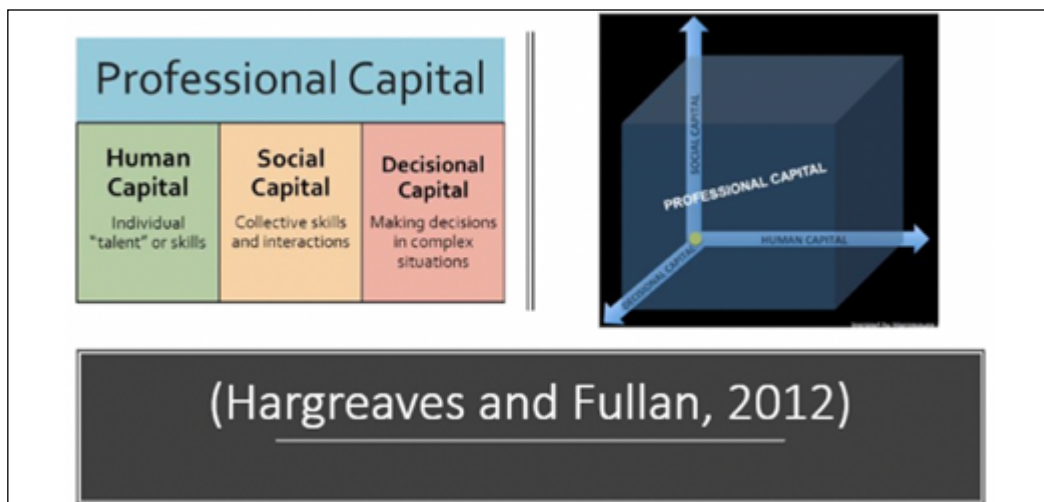
This reconfiguration relates to multiple aspects, including the way in which the curriculum is presented and mediated, the inspection system, the provision for teacher ITE and teachers’ professional learning and the way in which textbooks are produced and used. I am heartened by the direction of some policy initiatives such as *Cosán*, the PDST model of ‘sustained support’ for school leaders and teachers and more advisory visits by the Inspectorate.

But to consider these possibilities and to make these decisions locally requires time and space, and these are resources that we greatly lack in the very pressurised school days which are spent almost exclusively teaching.

Being able to make sense of a curriculum framework, of the high-level purposes of education, of learning outcomes, to debate and discuss how these might be used in a given context, to make decisions around content and pedagogy, requires supported and sustained engagement and exploration.

But it is only through this sustained engagement that a deep, ‘second order engagement’ with the curriculum or sense-making’ will be achieved. This space and time must be provided if we are serious about exercising teacher agency further in curriculum development.

Given all that the research says about curriculum development and teacher agency, I was prompted to revisit a concept developed by Hargreaves and Fullan in 2012 called Professional Capital.



I think this concept has great promise to unleash some of the untapped potential within the teaching profession relating to the curriculum, at an individual and collective level.

While the term ‘capital’ may sound somewhat business-like and economic in focus, Hargreaves and Fullan employ it in the broadest terms to explore the value of investing in the teacher and in teachers collectively.

Looking at the three dimensions individually for a start, we are fortunate in Ireland to have the brightest and the best entering the teaching profession – high calibre students, driven by a moral purpose to make a difference in children’s lives, low attrition rates, high levels of self-efficacy and good pedagogical content knowledge.

So, we have a very strong pool of human capital in the profession – as evidenced by each and every one of you here on a Friday evening in November!

Social capital looks at the collaborative power of the group, the quality of interactions and relationships, the sense of trust within the profession and collaborative cultures within schools.

I would argue that this too is becoming stronger in schools with the advent of SSE, Droichead and other initiatives that fosters such collaborative relationships. And as in many aspects of life, we are stronger as part of a team and when we work collaboratively.

The last dimension is Decisional Capital, the capacity to use teacher expertise to make sound professional judgements based on years of experience. This is the hallmark of the professional - the capacity to respond to complex situations and make judgements where there are no clear-cut answers available. It is this autonomy and capacity that separates the professional from the technician or the 'implementer'.

Malcolm Gladwell surmises that 10,000 hours of professional experience, approximately 8-10 years of teaching, is the term needed to achieve this decision-making capacity. There is both an individual dimension and a group dimension to decisional capital.

While I believe that decisional capital is something that each and every teacher uses every hour of every day within classrooms, I think there is scope to extend the collective decisional capital of the profession, for example in matters relating to the curriculum.

Because it is in the realm of the collective that our capacity to make informed and professional decisions is accelerated. So, it is in this collective that I see most potential, harnessing individual teacher expertise through local school-based communities of practice to accentuate collective decisional capital.

Despite curriculum policy that has allowed some measure of school and teacher agency, we have a general tradition and culture of following national guidance with less focus on local and teacher flexibility and agency.

Yes, this freedom was used in terms of the resources used, methodologies and the sequencing of content, and perhaps more recently around *Aistear* and the language curriculum, but my view is that the flexibility within the curricula in Ireland in terms of school-based development has not been fully exploited to date.

Changing to more locally-based curriculum development will be a challenge for everyone. We all react to change differently. As Michael Young asserts, change impacts on our personal identity, on our beliefs, our values, our attitudes, our motivations, our philosophy and our practices. In the past, detailed and highly-specified curricula perhaps provided some certainty. Perhaps too much certainty.

But in the past when efforts have been made to reduce the level of specification and detail, there have been calls for greater clarity in terms of expectations for teachers. There is a delicate balancing act to be struck in the redeveloped curriculum between providing sufficient detail and clarity around expectations but not engaging with a 'spiral of specification' (a term coined by Wolf, 1995) that has beset many curricula internationally, and arguably our 1999 curriculum.

And this may require us all to live with a little professional uncertainty and to work out the best pathways forwards.

Aistear, published in 2009, offered a curriculum framework (with broad aims and goals) rather than a prescribed curriculum. A learning outcomes approach, as embedded now in Junior Cycle specifications and in the recent language curriculum, suggests a pathway to providing national guidance without engaging in a detailed spiral of specification. These can bring together subjects in integrated, thematic ways and offer flexibility to teachers at a school level.

While I know schools have found using *Aistear* challenging and the move to the learning outcomes model of the language curriculum since 2015 has brought its difficulties, it is beginning to result in schools engaging in school-based planning, coming together to explore the broad learning outcomes and to put 'meat on the bones' that are contextualised and personalised to the school's needs.



A lot has been learned from this process that will hopefully feed into the roll out of the mathematics curriculum and wider primary curriculum redevelopment.



As advocated by Alexander and Flutter³² (2009), national guidance should provide a repertoire rather than a recipe, with each school and teacher framing the right mix for their contexts.

And it is from the discussions, the discourses, the disagreements and the frustrations that the learning emerges – that collective social and decisional capital is further augmented in schools.

I conceptualise the national curriculum of the future as providing a range of ingredients that will be chosen from at an individual school level so that across the country, teaching and learning will be contextualised, personalised and appropriate. In this image, the teacher is the master baker.

Locally-based curriculum planning allows you to choose the ingredients for the cakes you want to make, to tell the story you want to tell, and to leave aside some of the possibilities you could have included - and to confidently articulate these decisions to fellow professionals and parents.

I think teachers need to trust further in their professional capacity and indeed to be trusted further in their professional roles.

My call to action would be to recognise and harness the professional capital in yourself, in your school and in the wider profession and to exploit the freedom within the national curriculum to make those professional decisions not only within your classrooms, but to do so regularly at a whole-school level.

Because the reality is, the curriculum and educational experience of each and every child is the one that you, as teachers, develop and enact. You embody the curriculum in your classrooms every day, even though pupils are blissfully unaware of the complexities that lie behind the experience you offer.



³² Alexander, R. and Flutter, J. (2009). Towards a New Primary Curriculum: A Report from the *Cambridge Primary Review*. Part 1: Past and Present. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. Available at: <http://cprtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Curriculum-report-1.pdf>.

So, to conclude, I would like to bring together some of my earlier thoughts and leave you with some of my hopes for the future of the primary curriculum in Ireland:

- ⌘ I would like to see an aligned and coherent curriculum, both internally and with other sectors. Less should be more and the physical face of the national curriculum should be much reduced. The national guidance should outline the broad direction of travel, supported by broad learning outcomes in subject specifications, for schools and teachers, but leave much freedom and autonomy to frame the curriculum, or the story, at a local school and classroom level. This is a new approach rather than grafting new practices and content onto old structures.
- ⌘ While the national guidance should be succinct, it needs to be robust. The national curriculum should be underpinned by a well-articulated theoretical, conceptual and research base to provide transparency and legitimacy to the decisions informing the national guidance.
- ⌘ Teacher agency is the key ingredient for the future of curriculum development. It is stemming from the individual and collective professional capital of teachers that each pupil can experience a personalised and contextualised learning experience.
- ⌘ The curriculum should be rich in pedagogical guidance to support teachers to translate the national guidance into a coherent and workable programme of work at a school and classroom level.
- ⌘ While teachers are and should be central to curriculum development, reconceptualising what a national curriculum is will also require a reframing of the role and functions of wider agencies and actors in the education ecosystem. So, curriculum redevelopment must be accompanied by a re-imagining of elements of how the inspection system operates, as well as the system of professional learning for teachers.
- ⌘ In order to change the culture of curriculum policy development at school level, sustained and systematic supports are required, including most importantly time and space for sense-making. Without supports, the curriculum will remain an aspiration, an intention. It is only when teachers are empowered to engage with its provisions that it will begin to impact on practice and experience.
- ⌘ I would hope that the curriculum will be seen as an organic, dynamic, developing entity that will be subject to systematic cyclical and iterative review and evolution, informed by experience and research, rather than periodic seismic shifts in structure and content. Gradual, evolutionary changes in education have been proven to be more steadfast in education.

Mar fhocal scoir, I would like to leave you with one last thought from Gert Biesta's book on *The Beautiful Risk of Education*,³³ where he lauds the centrality and authority of teachers in education, asserting that "...teaching is not a matter of following recipes but ultimately requires teachers who are able to make wise situated judgements about what is educationally desirable".

I have great confidence that the redeveloped curriculum will be in safe hands given the professional capital of the teaching profession in Ireland.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

³³ Biesta, G. (2013). *The Beautiful Risk of Education*. London: Taylor and Francis, p. 140.



Leaving the Harbour for the Sea in Search of the Pedagogical 'Holy Grail': Why as Teachers We Alone Can Steer the Ship

Professor Emer Ring, Mary Immaculate College

Introduction

I would like to thank all of you for the invitation to be here with you this morning and I promise that I won't come between you and your lunch. Being from Kerry, I speak as fast as we play football or used to play football. Be forewarned however, I still speak fast!

My presentation *Leaving the Harbour for the Sea in Search of the Pedagogical 'Holy Grail': Why as Teachers We Alone Can Steer the Ship* has quite a long title, which will hopefully become clearer as we go through the presentation.

First, a little bit about my own background. I was teaching almost 20 years before joining the Inspectorate and then joined Mary Immaculate College 10 years ago as head of department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies. Looking at my whole experience of being a teacher in the classroom, I believe that pedagogy is central to what we do. From speaking with so many of you over the past two days, the search for the perfect pedagogy that enables each and every child to achieve their potential is something that consistently exercises all of us as teachers. During the presentation, I will also discuss a paper commissioned by the NCCA and co-edited by my colleagues at Mary Immaculate College, Dr Lisha O'Sullivan, Marie Ryan and Patrick Burke: *A Melange or a Mosaic of Theories? How Theoretical Perspectives on Children's Learning and Development can Inform a Responsive Pedagogy in a Redeveloped Primary School Curriculum*.³⁴ I am delighted that one of the co-authors, Patrick Burke, is here with us this morning. So Patrick, feel free to chip in if you want to correct me on anything!

So why did I choose this title for the presentation? As I was preparing for today, I came across some wonderful images of our coast and how as a nation the place where land meets the sea is deeply embedded in our psyche. It reminded me of the importance of place, our own rich culture and the unique education system that we have built over many years since the foundation of the State.

I don't think we shout loud enough about the great education system that we have. The reason we have such a great education system is because of you here in the room this morning. I have had the privilege to travel and look at very many education systems, the most recent, two months ago in Uganda where I delivered the keynote to 4,000 primary teachers at their annual conference and in Slovenia, where I am just back from yesterday. I am repeatedly reminded, as I have the privilege to engage with education systems internationally, of the exceptionally high-quality education system we have here in Ireland. During this presentation, we will explore many of the factors that contribute to this, remembering always that at the heart of this high-quality education system are teachers.

As we listen to the words of David Gray's *Gathering Dust*:

I got no reason, but that I must, maybe I feel like I've been gatherin' dust, I must
leave this harbour for the sea

I am reminded of the painting *Gathering Dust* by Fergus Finlay's wife Frieda.

³⁴ Ring, E., O'Sullivan, L., Ryan, M. and Burke, P. (2018). *A melange or a mosaic of theories? How theoretical perspectives on children's learning and development can inform a responsive pedagogy in a redeveloped primary school curriculum*, Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), available: www.ncca.ie/media/3863/seminar_four_er_los_mr_pb_paper.pdf.



Source: <https://bit.ly/3q2AQ7m>

The painting hangs in the foyer of Inclusion Ireland and reminds us of the danger of all of the policy documents that we have remaining on the shelves, and in effect 'gathering dust'. It also reminds me of my time as a teacher. When I started teaching, I was so fortunate, looking back, to have worked with a wonderful principal, Mary Murphy. I started my teaching career as an infant teacher and Mary would always send over all relevant circulars and reports to my room. To this day, I have to admit that I had so little time in those days to read these circulars and reports because as an infant teacher, there were in my world at the time more important things to do. Cleaning up the mess around the sand corner, making sure everything was tidy in the dressing up corner, ensuring all jigsaws were intact and all the things that we do as teachers every day to plan and prepare for children's learning experiences were my focus at that time.

I can empathise a hundred percent with teachers when they say that there is so little time to engage with policy on a daily basis. However, in preparing children for the 21st century in the context of a redeveloped curriculum, we need to reflect on the influence of policy on our practice in the classroom and remember that as Thomas Walsh pointed out yesterday, we are no longer operationalising policy but rather developing it.

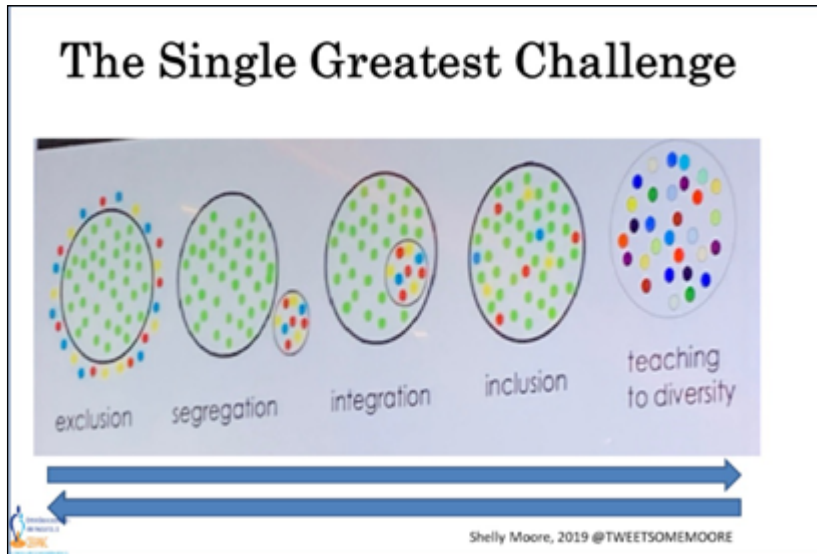


Source: www.lonelyplanet.com/ireland/activities/valentia-harbour-sea-safari-beginish-island-2-hrs/a/pa-act/v-118899P1/359581

I come from Caherciveen in South Kerry and this is a photograph (above) of Valentia Harbour. The photograph captures the concept of leaving the harbour for the sea, while it is a very exciting prospect, there are also challenges and issues that we really have to think about. This I believe is the place we are at in education currently, we are in effect, leaving the harbour for the sea.



The single greatest challenge



More recently I find myself using this slide quite often in my presentations because I believe it captures what is the single greatest challenge in our schools and classrooms today. This challenge stems from where we are on the journey towards creating more inclusive education systems and ensuring that we are prepared and supported for teaching to diversity, so that each and every child in our classroom flourishes and achieves their potential.

We are all familiar in this room with the journey from exclusion, which actually in the scheme of things was not that long ago, where children for different reasons were excluded from school. When I'm speaking about exclusion, I am not talking exclusively about children with additional needs but all children. We moved then to a segregated education system and onto an integrated system, where children were expected to adapt to the school's existing culture and from there, we moved to building inclusive schools, which were expected to adapt in order to meet the needs of all children. However, as we all well know from our experiences of inclusion, many of the findings of the research around inclusion suggest that there are still many challenges and barriers to inclusion. What we know now is that we need to be moving to creating school and classroom spaces where diversity is the norm and differences are accommodated and celebrated.

Those two arrows at the bottom of the slide are very deliberate because while it looks like we are going forward, we also have to be careful that we are not going backwards. You have all seen the newspapers' reports about the five-year old on a reduced-hours timetable and we know in this room why this happens, and we will explore this further this morning³⁵. In September, there were reports of hundreds of children with autism not having appropriate school places³⁶. So we must continue to reflect and continue to be careful about where we are going and be sure that we are not going backwards.

³⁵ Mooney, B. (2019). Is it lawful to put my five-year-old on a reduced-hours timetable, *The Irish Times*, 9 April 2019, available at: www.irishtimes.com/news/education/it-it-lawful-to-put-my-five-year-old-on-a-reduced-hours-timetable-1.3835220.

³⁶ O'Brien, C. (2019). Hundreds of children with autism special needs without appropriate school places, *The Irish Times*, 24 August 2019, available: www.irishtimes.com/news/education/hundreds-of-children-with-autism-special-needs-without-appropriate-school-places-1.3995648.



Source: <http://muslimgirl.com/46703/heres-care-equity-equality/>

We also need to be clear about what inclusion means and what treating each child equally means. Your general secretary spoke earlier about the inequalities that continue to exist in our education system. Treating every child equally is not about giving all the children the same but rather it is about ensuring that each child has the same opportunities to flourish. Focusing on the third image on the slide, treating each child equally is based on the principles of universal design for learning and removing barriers for all in creating this new space where diversity becomes the norm.



Looking at this photograph here on the slide of the *Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC)*,³⁷ underlines the importance of history in understanding our journey in education. This was 1993, and we all know that the SERC report was a pioneering report in terms of its commitment to the integration of children with special educational needs in our education system.

³⁷ Ireland (1993). *Report of the special education review committee*, Dublin: Government Publications' Office.



However, what the SERC report advised at that time was that there would not be integration, which was the word that was being used at that time, in all schools but that there would be hubs regionally to accommodate children with special educational needs. This concept was rejected by parents' groups in particular and the recommendations of the SERC report evolved into the right to inclusion in the subsequent raft of education legislation that followed.

Then in 1994, we had the *Salamanca Statement* and I have been reflecting on this. I was teaching at that time, and I certainly had no knowledge of the SERC report and the *Salamanca Statement*, they were something that were very much removed from my practice in the classroom. Recently in Colombia, there was a conference to mark the 25th anniversary of the *Salamanca Statement*.³⁸ The conference highlighted that worryingly 750 million adults around the world cannot read or write and 262 million children and youth are out of school worldwide. It is important to be mindful that our education system here in Ireland is included in these statistics also.

These statistics remind us that as an education system, we need to continue to keep those two arrows that I referred to previously in mind, the possibilities of going forward are endless as are the omnipresent danger of going backwards.

What we know

So, what do we know? Well, Pasi Sahlberg was referred to yesterday and in his book, *Finnish Lessons, 2.0*³⁹ he observes that:

... as the level of teacher professionalism gradually increased in Finnish schools during the 1990s, the prevalence of powerful teaching methods and pedagogical classroom and school designs increased.

Sahlberg 2015, p. 49

It is useful for us to consider that word 'professionalism', which I have emphasised deliberately in the above quotation. This word has come up a lot in the workshops I have attended at this conference and was referred to by Thomas Walsh yesterday also. This concept of 'professionalism' and what it actually means for us as teachers merits thinking about and it is reassuring that this word is entering our teacher lexicon, as it further emphasises and places a value of what we do every day in our classrooms as teachers.

What we do know is that teachers matter. This photograph (*photograph does not feature in this publication) is my favourite photograph. This is the school that I taught in for many years. I am very proud to say that I taught the teacher in the photograph, who is now the principal of the school, in junior infants. When she was in junior infants, she always wanted to be a teacher and she is a wonderful inspirational teacher and principal today. A picture truly speaks a thousand words. In this classroom, there is a child with autism, a child with physical disability and there are children with many different learning needs. So, teachers and the pedagogy we commit to remain central to how successful we are in meeting the diversity in our classrooms in the context of this redeveloped primary curriculum.

This photograph is from 1927. Your general secretary mentioned Vere Foster, and reflecting on history again, we are truly standing on the shoulders of giants. All the boys here in this photograph are from Two Mile National School in Killarney in 1927 and this school now is one of the new community national schools. So, 1927. We could stay all day looking at this photograph as it tells us so much, but actually in 1926 the *Compulsory School Attendance Act* had just commenced. So immediately after the foundation of the State, as a society I think we can be very proud that those who came before us, were so focussed on education and on the transformative power of education to change lives, to change society and to enable all of us to flourish.

³⁸ unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000370910.

³⁹ Sahlberg, P. (2015). *Finnish lessons*, 2nd ed., Columbia University, New York: Teachers College Press.

Times they are a changin'



Source: www.pinterest.ie/pin/744712488356722531/

I experienced classrooms very like the one in the photograph above as I am sure many of you in the room here this morning did also. However, it is time to take another look at what classrooms we need in the 21st century, because as Bob Dylan reminds us, *the times they are a changin'*.



Source: content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20061218,00.html

An article written by Claudia Wallis and Sonja Steptoe, 'How to Build a Student for the 21st Century' appeared in *Time* magazine on 18 December 2006.⁴⁰ The article considered the importance of education systems reflecting the future children are now being prepared for and noted that 'This is a story about whether an entire generation of kids will fail to make the grade in the global economy because they can't think their way through abstract problems, work in teams, distinguish good information from bad, or speak in a language other than (their own).' I will leave you with that thought for the moment.

⁴⁰ Wallis, C. and Steptoe, S. (2006). 'How to bring our schools out of the 20th century', *TIME*, December 2006.



Education today is much more about **ways of thinking** which involve **creative and critical approaches to problem-solving and decision-making**. It is also about ways of working, **including communication and collaboration**, as well as the tools they require, such as **the capacity to recognise and exploit the potential of new technologies, or indeed, to avert their risks**. And last but not least, education is about **the capacity to live in a multi-faceted world as an active and engaged citizen**. These citizens **influence what they want to learn and how they want to learn it**, and it is this that shapes the role of educators.

(Schleicher 2019)

In 2019, Andreas Schleicher, Director for the Directorate of Education and Skills at the OECD, suggested that education today is concerned with 'ways of thinking, creative and critical approaches to problem-solving and decision-making including communication and collaboration ... the capacity to recognise and exploit the potential of new technologies, or indeed to avert their risks. The capacity to live in a multi-faceted world as an active and engaged citizen, influence what they want to learn and how they want to learn it'.⁴¹

We had a discussion yesterday during the discussion group about the purpose of education and one of your members really struck a chord with me when she said, 'you know this is all fine but how do we do this, we have all of these skills for the 21st century but can someone tell us how we can teach these skills, how can we enable children to achieve these skills through the curriculum'.

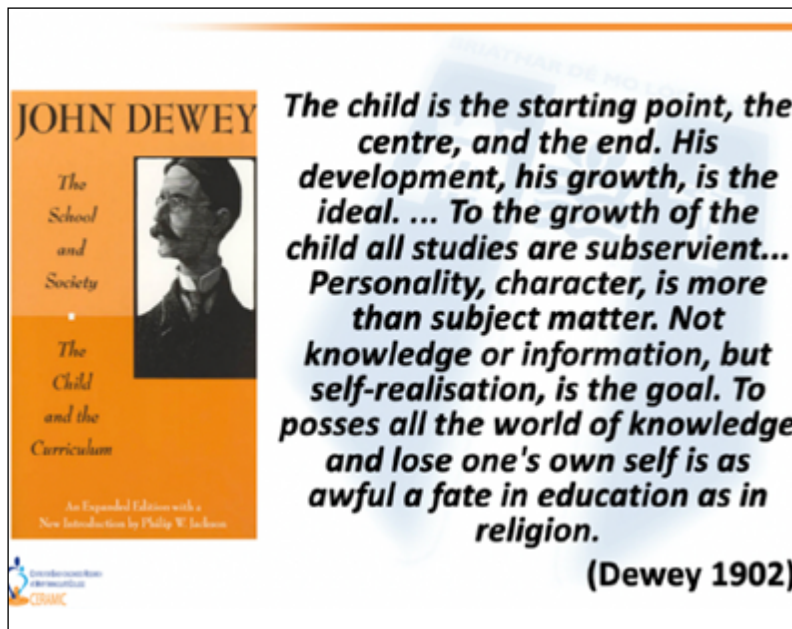
As I mentioned previously, I was in Slovenia for the last four days. In Slovenia, children start school at six years, these children (in the photograph – not shown) are four and half/five and half years of age. First of all, the photograph confirms the universal appeal of the cardboard box for all children. However, let's think about the skills that the children are developing in a playful context as they manipulate the cardboard box. Surely those skills described by Andreas Schleicher are clearly discernible when we observe the children play with the cardboard box in the photograph. There is evidence of creative and critical approaches, including communication and collaboration, problem-solving and decision-making, children clearly influence what they want to learn and how they want to learn it.

I think it is clear that in our classrooms we are already focused on cultivating those 21st century skills. I think the danger of curriculum redevelopment is that we believe it is something completely new and that we have to leave everything behind but actually, I think we really have to reflect on how much of this we are doing already. Somebody mentioned also during the workshops, the 1999 curriculum and how powerful that curriculum was and still is. It struck me that maybe because of all the initiatives that are up on that shelf gathering dust, we may not have fully engaged with many of the principles in the 1999 curriculum, which we now have the opportunity to build on in a redeveloped curriculum.



⁴¹ Schleicher, A. (2019). *The case for 21st century learning*, available: www.oecd.org/general/thecase7for21st-centurylearning.htm.

Our determination in Ireland to maintain a focus on the holistic development of the child is the envy of so many education systems globally. Wherever I go, I use this slide, the principles are from the 1999 Curriculum, and it describes the elements of the holistic development of the child. And what does this mean? It means that as teachers we are charged with the spiritual, (spiritual as opposed to religious), moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical development of the child. So unlike in other jurisdictions where there is a focus particularly on cognitive development, we are in Ireland charged with the child's 'holistic development' and this is something that we have held onto from the 1971 to the 1999 curriculum.



We are reminded of the words of my superhero, John Dewey, when he reminds us of the child being the starting point, the centre, and the end.⁴² John Dewey had a powerful influence on our 1971 curriculum and I would argue our 1999 curriculum. Again, you know this, to the growth of the child all studies are subservient ... Personality, character, is more than subject matter. Not knowledge or information, but self-realisation, is the goal.

While it is important that our classrooms reflect the times that are changing, we must also remember and continue to build on the excellence that is already central to our existing practice.

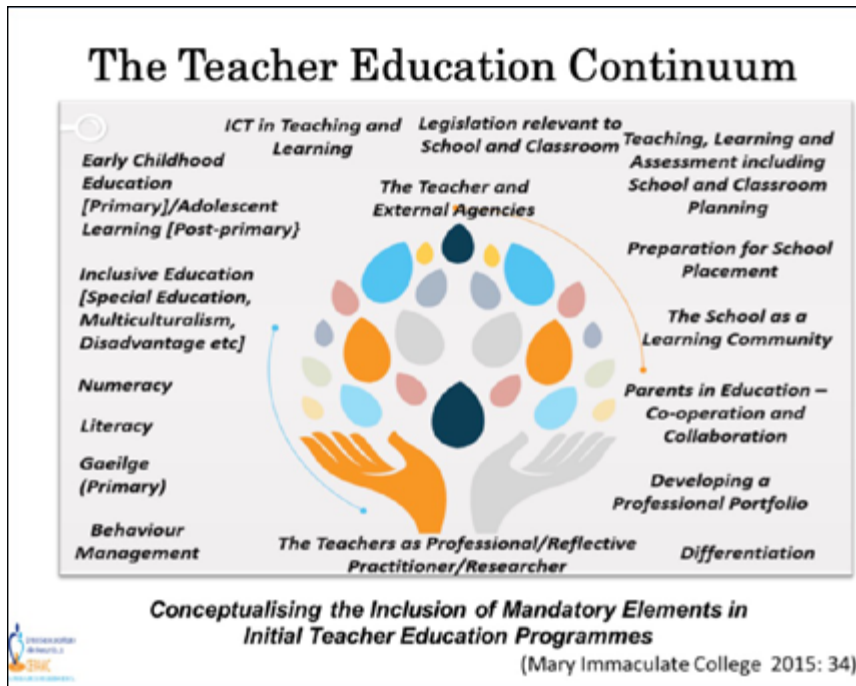
The Teacher Education Continuum

There have been many references at sessions both yesterday and this morning to the Teacher Education Continuum. At the moment you may or may not be aware that the Department of Education and Skills is developing a policy on initial teacher education (ITE). At Mary Immaculate College we have just prepared a submission and submitted a response to the Department of Education and Skills.

⁴² Dewey, J. (1990). *The school and society. The child and the curriculum*, Chicago: Centennial Publications of the University of Chicago Press.



Here I would like to share a summary slide of the submission with you.⁴³



Building on the exceptional work that the Teaching Council has done in terms of streamlining what our teachers need for the schools of today, we know that what teachers need to teach to the diversity in our classrooms is very different to what was needed in the past. Glancing at the slide summarising the key mandatory components of ITE programmes provides an indication of the complexity of ITE programmes. Additionally, the slide reminds us of the responsibility that initial teacher educators have in supporting students to develop competence across all of these areas as a first step in becoming a teacher.

As we prepared our submission on ITE for the Department of Education and Skills, we carefully considered the principles that we believe should underpin an ITE Policy Statement. We identified these principles as Adequate Resourcing: Teacher Roles in the 21st Century; Inter-connectivity of the Teacher Education Ecosystem: The Teacher Educator Profession; a Shifting Educational Landscape: Commitment to High Quality: Contribution of all Stakeholders and Teacher Education as a Continuum. We could spend the day here talking about all of these, but I am going to focus on one for now, teacher roles in the 21st century.

We can describe the role of the teacher as four-fold: teacher-as-researcher; teacher-as-collaborator; teacher-as-pedagogical leader; and teacher-as-lifelong learner. For today, I am going to focus on the role of teacher-as-pedagogical leader and look closely at pedagogy. Pedagogy is at the heart of the teacher's role and has always been at the heart of our role in the past, present and future. It is useful therefore to ask ourselves, 'what is pedagogy?'

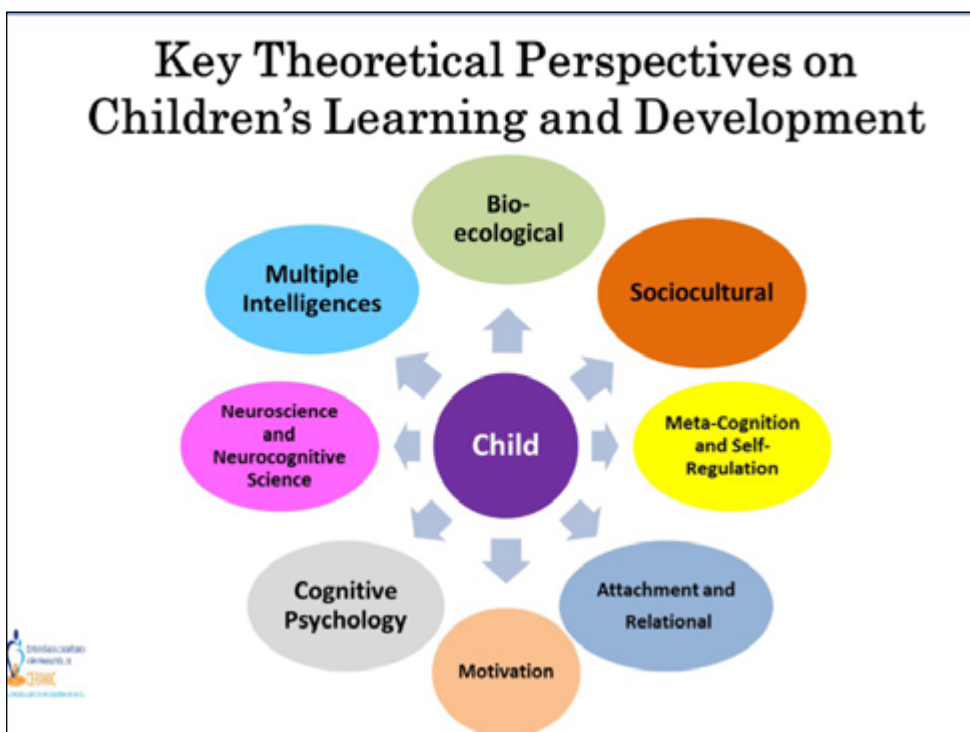
Dr Liz Dunphy spoke very eloquently this morning in relation to the central role of pedagogy in early childhood education. What is clear is that our pedagogy is underpinned by our philosophy and our beliefs about education and also by theories about how children learn and develop.

⁴³ Mary Immaculate College (2019). Submission to the invitation received from the department of education and skills on 15 August 2019 to contribute to the proposed policy statement on initial teacher education, 7 October 2019, Limerick: Mary Immaculate College.

Pedagogy remains at the heart of the teacher's role

In examining the role of pedagogy in a redeveloped primary curriculum, I am going to explore briefly the paper we developed for the NCCA that I referred to previously: *A Melange or a Mosaic of Theories? How Theoretical Perspectives on Children's Learning and Development can Inform a Responsive Pedagogy in a Redeveloped Primary School Curriculum*.⁴⁴ The paper is available on the NCCA website. My colleagues Dr Lisha O'Sullivan, Marie Ryan, Patrick Burke and I were delighted to accept an invitation to work on this paper.

We began by examining the key theoretical perspectives on how children learn and develop. Our initial response was there were so many theories that we wondered how they might fit together in a redeveloped curriculum. We questioned whether in fact these diverse theoretical perspectives actually fit together or were simply a melange of theories with little inter-connectivity for operationalising in the classroom. We spent the long hot summer of 2018 interrogating these diverse theoretical perspectives, until we concluded that in fact, what was emerging was a mosaic rather than a melange of theories.



The theoretical perspectives we examined are included in the below slide. I am now going to briefly explore some of these perspectives and consider what they might look like in the classroom. You will all have heard of these theories and theorists at some point and will recognise them on the slides. As we journey through the slides, it is useful to reflect on these theories that have influenced our practice in classrooms and continue to influence our practice today.

Bio-ecological

The founding theorist of the Bio-ecological approach was Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005). This theory places the child firmly at the centre of their ecosystem. Key principles of this theory suggest that the child is influenced by their environment, each child has a unique ecosystem and that relationships are critical.

⁴⁴ Ring, E., O'Sullivan, L., Ryan, M. and Burke, P. (2018). *A melange or a mosaic of theories? How theoretical perspectives on children's learning and development can inform a responsive pedagogy in a redeveloped primary school curriculum*, Dublin: NCCA, available: <https://bit.ly/32165q0>.



Sociocultural

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) is accredited with being the architect of the Sociocultural Theory, which suggests that learning occurs in social contexts. According to Sociocultural Theory: learning and development happens through social interaction; cultural tools are internalised; the zone of proximal development is critical for children's learning and teaching; the role of the adult is pivotal; playful approaches are effective, and language and dialogue are central.

Meta-cognition and self-regulation

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) and John Flavell (1928-) introduced us to the theories of meta-cognition and self-regulation. These theoretical perspectives stress the importance of thinking about our own thinking and developing self-regulation. Critically they point to the need to plan, monitor and evaluate learning.

Attachment and relational theory

John Bowlby (1907-1990) reminds us that positive relationships promote emotional security and reminds us of the importance of cultivating positive teacher-child relationships, creating safe and secure classroom environments and consistently focusing on relatedness.

Motivation

Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) developed motivation theory. Motivation has been described as the mental state that arouses, directs and maintains behaviour. Motivation theory suggests that cultivating children's autonomy, providing choice and challenging goals impact positively on motivation.

Cognitive psychology

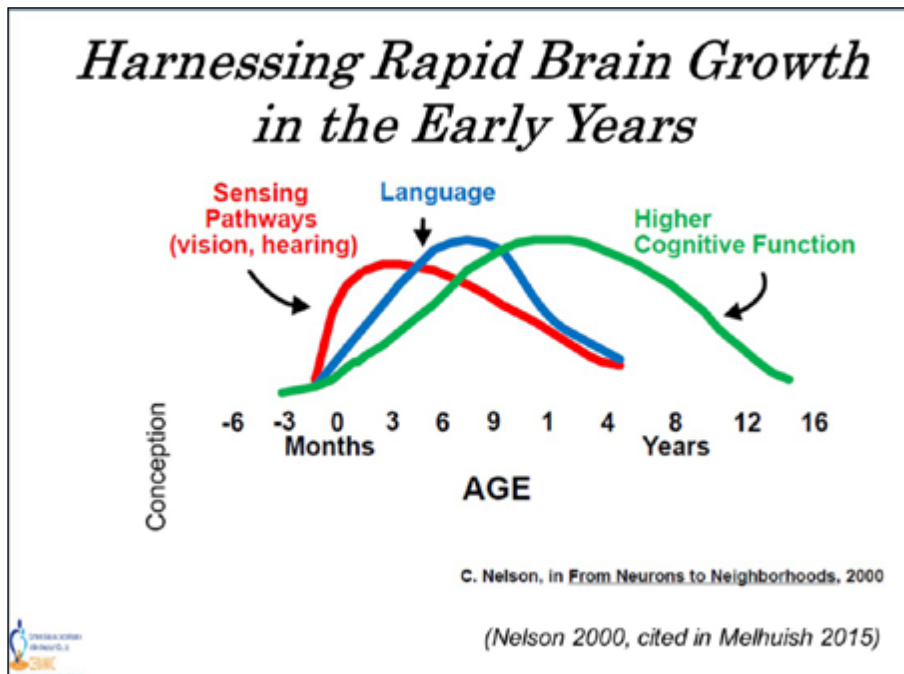
Cognitive psychology's founding theorist was Ulric Neisser (1928-2012) who engaged in the systematic study of mental processes. For us as teachers, cognitive psychology suggests that learning requires effort, background knowledge is important, and learning needs to be planned and sequenced.

Neuroscience and neurocognitive science

Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1852-1934) identified the potential in understanding how the brain and the nervous system impact on what we do and created a series of wonderful drawings exploring the structure of the brain. We know now that neuroscience and neurocognitive science offer immense possibilities for pedagogy through its focus on brain development; the role of prior learning; multi-modal representation; instruction and exploration and how children respond to feedback on their learning.

When we look at the graph tracking language development, we can see the central importance of language for children's learning and development and the dangers of 'schoolification' of children's early learning experiences in terms of a transmissive model of learning that expects children to know letter names, numbers and sounds prior to commencing school.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Melhuish, E. (2015). 'What Matters in the quality of ECCE? Answer: interactions drive development', Organisation for Economic Development and Co-Operation Meeting (OECD), Early Childhood Education and Care International Policy Event, 28 October 2015, Chartered Accountants House, Pearse Street, Dublin 2: Pobal, available: www.youtube.com/watch?v=2U1zoC6EUbw.



Multiple intelligences

Finally, Howard Gardner's (1943-) theory of multiple intelligences suggested that intelligence is comprised of distinct modalities. This is related to learning style theory also. As theories, multiple intelligences and learning styles have a particular appeal for teachers, well at least they certainly had for me. I hadn't heard about Howard Gardner during my ITE and when I read his book, I was so excited about it. I felt it spoke to me about the children I was teaching. Children who were so good at football and yet were experiencing difficulties in terms of communication for example. I was delighted to be given the opportunity to explore the empirical basis for multiple intelligences when we were working on this paper but unfortunately while both multiple intelligences and learning styles are feel-good theories, they lack empirical evidence. I am hoping however that I will be still alive when we find the empirical evidence for multiple intelligences and indeed learning theories!

On a serious note, multiple intelligences and learning style theory provides us with a good example of the difference between an empirical theory of learning and development and what in essence are philosophical theories. As teachers, we can embrace both perspectives, while discerning between the basis for both.

A melange or a mosaic of theories: key messages for the classroom

It is timely at this point to ask ourselves, 'what are the key messages as we leave the harbour?'. In the final analysis, as noted previously, all theories can be viewed as a mosaic that can support us in our work in classrooms. Key messages across a range of perspectives suggest that relationships in the classroom matter; interactions drive learning and development; each child is different; planning for children's learning is crucial; language-rich environments are critical; providing active learning opportunities and supporting children's thinking enables all children to flourish; listening and including children's voices promotes participation and engagement and the role of the teacher is pivotal.



A Responsive Pedagogy

Table 1. Deconstructing the Mosaic of Theories for Application in the Classroom

Bioecological	Sociocultural	Meta-Cognition and Self-Regulation	Attachment	Motivation	Cognitive Psychology	Neuroscience	Multiple Intelligences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Attention needs to be directed to individual child characteristics; family and community contexts. ○ Quality of the physical, pedagogical and interactional classroom environment matters. ○ Children's relationships with others are critical. ○ Relationships and shared understandings between key people in a child's life are important. ○ A curriculum responsive to each child's context is necessary. ○ Responsive policy development ultimately impacts on a child's learning and development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Providing enriched opportunities for children to learn with others. ○ Exploring the potential of play-based learning. ○ Considering the potential of the emergent curriculum and children's interests. ○ Reflecting on the central role of the adult in guiding the child's learning and development. ○ Providing the child with access to developmentally appropriate curricula. ○ Creating a non-stressed context that takes cognisance of children's well-being and belonging. ○ Considering the ZPD – socio dramatic play as a ZPD for self-regulation skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Providing activities which promote a child's autonomy and creating autonomy supporting classrooms where children are given opportunities to make choices; control challenge and self-evaluate learning. ○ Ensuring curricular experiences are meaningful for the child, for example play is a meaningful activity for children. ○ Including collaborative activities. ○ Considering the role of mixed-ability groups in encouraging other- and co-regulation. ○ Providing activities which allow children to articulate their learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Creating classroom and school environments that provide emotional warmth and security. ○ Engaging in ongoing reflection on how as teachers we interact with children and remembering that 'interactions drive development' ○ Developing meaningful partnerships with parents. ○ Ensuring a consistent approach across teachers and across the school. ○ Providing consistent boundaries sensitive to the child's individual needs. ○ Understanding the implications of providing a secure base for children's learning and development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Creating classroom environments where children are given opportunities to experience being competent; having choice, autonomy and relatedness leading to intrinsic engagement. ○ Remembering that some learning tasks may not be intrinsically motivating – using external rewards with caution and always explaining the value the task and fading rewards. ○ Offer learners challenging learning opportunities. ○ Avoid activities likely to lead to repeated failure for some children e.g., spelling tests. ○ Praise the effort not learner trait. ○ Promote mastery rather than completion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Learning is effortful and curriculum activities should be cognisant of the limits of memory. ○ The cognitive load in learning can be reduced by careful sequencing of activities. ○ Supporting children's learning through providing multi-modal representations can increase the child's capacity to process new information e.g. providing both auditory and visual explanations. ○ Provide appropriate knowledge about a topic prior to asking a child to solve problems. ○ Distribution of learning through interleaving; providing retrieval practice and allowing the child to articulate learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Effective pedagogy should elicit previous learning. ○ Facts should not be presented in isolation but as broader concepts in a structured, meaningful way. ○ Multi-modal teaching enhances memory. ○ Direct instruction can be efficient for some types of learning ○ Playful adult interactions guide learning and support exploration ○ Children will learn best in encouraging, risk-free environments. ○ Timely, corrective feedback is important. ○ Individual differences can be met by alternative teaching approaches. ○ Fixed intelligence is not supported. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ While multiple intelligences and learning style theories continue to be popular in education, the lack of validation of these theoretical perspectives suggests that caution is required when interpreting what these perspectives tell us about children's learning and development. ○ Harness the research related to multi-modal representations and motivation theory, suggesting that children's engagement increases through recognising the role of both cognitive and affective processes in learning. ○ MI and learning style theories remind us of the need for an individual focus.

Through this mosaic of theories, we can as teachers develop a responsive pedagogy.

We devised the table on this slide to support teachers in beginning to translate the range of theoretical perspectives into practice in the classroom. The greatest compliment we got when we presented this at the NCCA seminar was from a principal who came up specifically to the podium to tell us, "I'm taking this paper back to my staff". I will leave this table with you to read in your own time.

Conclusion

As we leave the harbour for the sea in this time of exciting curriculum change, we can take the 'professionalisation' of the role of the teacher with us as we discover a responsive pedagogy for a redeveloped primary curriculum. It is also important for us to remember that we have been translating many of these theories into practice in our classrooms for many years and that we can now continue to build on our extensive knowledge and experience in this regard.

What I am suggesting therefore is that the teacher needs to be placed at the centre, teacher voice needs to be listened to, and teaching as a profession taken seriously. What does teaching as a profession mean? It means a lot of things, but it means that our views are respected and that we have autonomy and agency. As teachers, we should be saying 'I am doing this because' rather than 'I am doing this because someone else told me'. Thus, our practice is transformed, and we become professionals as we take ownership of this redeveloped curriculum.

We are all committed to creating classrooms where diversity is the norm and where all children can flourish and achieve their potential. We will need support to do this, and it is important therefore that continuing professional development is available to support us on our way. For example, *Aistear* has been mentioned frequently at this conference and its principles continue to be very relevant for a redeveloped primary curriculum.⁴⁶ Continuing professional development is needed to support teachers in translating the principles of *Aistear* into practice in the classroom. We have economists like James Heckman⁴⁷ telling us that high-quality early childhood experiences

⁴⁶ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009). *Aistear: The early childhood curriculum framework*, Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

⁴⁷ Heckman, J. (2013, September 14). 'Lifelines for poor children. The great divide', *The New York Times*, accessed: opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/14/lifelines-for-poor-children/.

are critical for children's learning and development and yet there have been very limited continuing professional development opportunities available in relation to *Aistear*.

Let's be clear – diversity needs to be supported. Currently, I am involved in the evaluation of the therapy demonstration project with my colleagues Dr Lisha O'Sullivan and Dr Therese Brophy at Mary Immaculate College and colleagues at University College Cork.⁴⁸ The emerging findings suggest that the occupational therapy and speech and language therapy provided in the 150 sites, 75 of which are early childhood and care centres, contribute significantly to teachers' capacity to meet the needs of all children.

I always remember a teacher who participated in the Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autism⁴⁹ that I was involved in with colleagues at Mary Immaculate College, saying 'Emer, I am not a speech and language therapist'. As teachers, we want to solve everything, we want to try to be all things to all children and we simply can't do this.

Yes, we are up for creating an education system where all children are included but this needs investment, investment in continuing professional development and the support of other professionals, in addition to investment in the continuum of teacher education. Teacher education matters, investment in teacher education is what will enable our children to flourish. I understand that resources are limited, of course we know this, but we need to be aware of what we need in the context of going forward. A teacher mentioned yesterday, a young teacher, that she was spending her money buying sensory toys for children. This can't go on. We need to resource our schools adequately.

I think we need to celebrate our success because as an education system I believe that we have had phenomenal success. I believe that we have that because we have this belief in social justice, belief in ensuring that all children should benefit from education, and belief in ourselves as professionals. I think we have to continue to hold onto that belief. I would like to finish with a little clip for you of Katelynn Ferris and her experience of having autism in the school system:

Some people with autism can't speak and I want to say these words for them. I love having autism and I want people to learn about it.

My name is Katelynn and I have autism. To me autism means that you can find things harder than other people and sometimes you can be better at some things than other people. So, in other words, I think differently. My mum found out I had autism when I was nearly two years old.

In first years of pre-school, it was a preschool where autistic children go to. In preschool it was a little bit noisy and I found things hard to learn. Because I was so scared, I stopped talking for three years. I started speaking again in senior infants and it made me more comfortable.

Some people ask me why I shake my hands or jump up and down. That's called 'stimming'. 'Stimming' makes me feel better. Now I am in second class, and I find things a little bit easier. Some things are a little bit hard, but I know I can ask for help. I want people to understand that I am a little bit different and that's a good thing. If we were all the same, the world would be so boring. Some people with autism can't speak and I want to say these words for them. I love having autism and I want people to learn about it.

⁴⁸ Lynch, H., Ring, E., Boyle, B., Moore, A., O'Toole, C., O'Sullivan, L., Laoide-Kemp, S., Frizelle, P., Horgan, D. and O'Sullivan, D. (2020). Evaluation of early learning and care and in-school therapy support demonstration project, Trim: National Council for Special Education [In preparation].

⁴⁹ Daly, P., Ring, E., Egan, M., Fitzgerald, J., Griffin, C., Long, S., McCarthy, E., Moloney, M., O'Brien, T., O'Byrne, A., O'Sullivan, S., Ryan, M., Wall, E., Madden, R. & Gibbons, S. (2016). An evaluation of education provision for students with autism spectrum disorder in Ireland, Trim: National Council for Special Education.



I think truly that the success of our education system is because of you here today, those who have gone before us, and those who can't be with us today, in terms of that commitment to education and that commitment to enabling all children to flourish.

Finally, I would like to finish with one of my favourite quotes from Neil Postman (1982, page 8) 'that children are the living messages that we send to a time we will not see.'⁵⁰ I was reminded of this sentiment during the week at Mary Immaculate College, as we celebrated a project we were involved in with St Canice's Special School in Limerick. Where one child created a 'keyboard warrior' and eloquently explained that his creation was designed to capture the role of technology in our lives and yet the importance of arts education.

This is the work that you all do in schools every day, and will continue to do, as we leave the harbour for the sea in search of the pedagogical holy grail.

Thank you – Mile buíochas

⁵⁰ Postman, N. (1982). *The disappearance of childhood*, New York: Vintage Books, available: <https://interesifiles.wordpress.com/2017/10/disappearance.pdf>.

Report from Discussion Groups

Introduction

At the 2019 Education Conference delegates were assigned to discussion groups on the Friday afternoon, each of which was facilitated by a member of the Education Committee. Groups met to consider a number of questions based around the overall conference theme *Review of the Primary Curriculum*.

Curriculum review

Delegates were asked to discuss what they valued most about *The Primary Curriculum 1999* and to list priorities that should be addressed as part of the curriculum review. It was generally felt that the 1999 curriculum successfully emphasised the importance of a child-centred, holistic approach to teaching and learning and that it highlighted the importance of the role of the teacher. Groups appreciated the focus on arts and clear learning objectives.

Delegates welcomed the balance of structure and flexibility which allowed teachers to use their professional autonomy and judgement. It was also noted that consultation with teachers had resulted in improvements over time.

There was a general view across the groups that workload issues were causing significant challenges with curriculum implementation. Delegates discussed their concerns around the potential for teacher burnout and overload, and there was a view that the amount of paperwork required had increased which took away from teaching time. Delegates highlighted as problematic the increased range of initiatives being introduced, in tandem with the pressure of excessive administration and large class sizes, which resulted in difficulties maintaining a child-centred approach.

Teachers repeatedly cited their concerns in relation to keeping up with paperwork in the time available and a lack of guidance around planning, resulting in an excess of time being spent on planning instead of teaching. Delegates looked for further guidance on weekly and monthly planning to balance the various strands of the curriculum. Templates for making the transition from pre-school into primary were suggested.

Proposals were made by delegates for face-to-face CPD where possible over online webinars, looking for the provision of high-quality professional development and a whole-school approach to curriculum implementation. One group suggested the development of a central database of planning resources for teachers to access online.

Delegates expressed a view that a continued focus on the importance of the teacher's role was needed and that the input of class teachers should continue to be valued.

Child-centred curriculum

In discussions on the child-centred curriculum, delegates commented that reduced class size was viewed as an essential ingredient for successful implementation. Active learning and discovery-based learning were raised as important objectives in responding to children's unique needs.



Pedagogies

Teachers were asked to consider how to ensure that up-to-date pedagogical approaches are a reality in schools. Discussions found a consensus on the increased need for ICT and digital learning while expressing concern that the focus on technology was balanced out with other methodologies. A thematic approach to some subjects was seen as positive by one group, particularly for children moving into primary school from pre-school because the *Aistear* framework which underpins pre-school education is theme-based. A lack of consistency in pre-school programmes was seen as causing difficulties when introducing the primary curriculum.

The importance of assessment was acknowledged by delegates, however one group felt that too much emphasis was put on standardised testing and that assessment scores should not be a criterion for resource allocation. Delegates highlighted that assessment in larger classes could be problematic and recommended greater supports for families in interpreting results.

Societal change

Delegates acknowledged the extent to which Irish society had changed since 1999 and the difficulty of keeping the curriculum up to date. The groups debated how the revised curriculum could respond to topical issues such as climate change or obesity. An increase in activities such as PE or yoga along with the benefits of mindfulness were suggested by delegates as one way to address anxiety and promote well-being in children. One group felt that adding extra subjects would be the wrong approach, integration of new areas into existing material was seen as preferable.

Delegates felt that schools needed more support in dealing with issues such as homelessness as the impact on schools and the teacher's role could be significant. It was also suggested that a balance was needed between introducing new initiatives and bedding in existing actions.

The incorporation of religious education and ethics into the curriculum was discussed, with the suggestion being made that multiple religions should be taught ahead of sacramental preparation.

Conclusion

The Primary Curriculum 1999 emphasised a holistic, child centred and play-based approach. In discussing curriculum review, delegates demonstrated a consensus that successful implementation of an updated framework would require an examination of workload. Discussion groups raised a perceived lack of resourcing and the need for improved professional development opportunities for teachers. Delegates highlighted the importance of smaller class sizes with increased supports and stated that schools were critical to ensure the success of curriculum review. Delegates welcomed past consultation on the curriculum and looked forward to the expertise of the teaching profession being utilised into the future.

Appendix I – Workshops

As part of the Education Conference programme, delegates were invited to sign up to and participate in two separate workshops..

1. Early childhood pedagogy in primary schools in the context of curriculum renewal (mathematics)

Liz Dunphy

In the course of this workshop participants revisited some of the principles underpinning good practice in early childhood classrooms. They considered some of the features of good pedagogy in early childhood mathematics, and discussed a range of strategies that could be effective in supporting children’s mathematical learning in infant classes in the context of the redeveloped curriculum.

2. Literacy in a broad and balanced curriculum: how can research inform practice?

Patrick Burke

This session outlined key ideas from the research on how language and literacy could be developed throughout the curriculum. It focussed on the implications of the Primary Language Curriculum for integrating with other subjects in the senior classes. Practical strategies and children’s book recommendations were explored. The session also looked towards the upcoming review of the Primary Language Curriculum and the role that literacy might play therein.

3. Child-directed differentiation

Michael and Denis Daly

Child-directed differentiation is a pedagogical approach that is based around the teacher identifying and removing barriers to learning for pupils using Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The pupils themselves are directly involved through their awareness of Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences or alternatively learning styles. The children direct their learning of the topic using these multiple intelligences/learning styles in a UDL environment which the teacher creates.



4. Visual arts and the arts: analysing arts, integrated arts and arts integration

Dr Michael Flannery

This presentation/workshop reminded participants of the essentiality of visual arts in the curriculum. It unpacked the key characteristics of quality arts practice. Through discussion and arts-based methods, it explored the potential pearls and perils of arts integration. It aimed to rejuvenate classroom practice.

5. Integrating curriculum through inquiry-based learning

Mairéad Nally

This workshop introduced inquiry-based learning and explored how this approach to teaching and learning could facilitate curriculum integration. Participants looked at some aspects of planning for learning across disciplines through an inquiry stance.

6. One school 50 languages: why good EAL teaching is good teaching for everyone

Dr Déirdre Kirwan

This presentation provided insights into how an integrated approach to language learning, in a school where 80% of pupils came from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, resulted in unexpected educational benefits for all learners. The voices of teachers, pupils, and parents described their response to this integrated approach where the use and status of Gaeilge increased and pupils developed autonomous learning skills



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