



## Early Childhood and Primary Developments

Consulting with children: Child voice in curriculum developments

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# Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is reviewing and redeveloping the primary curriculum. The voices of children have an important role in contributing to discussions on the type of curriculum needed for the next decade. This recognises children's agency and capacity to contribute as well as reflecting a growing recognition, at a policy level, of the importance of incorporating children's voices in decisions that affect them.

Like other jurisdictions that have ratified the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), Ireland acknowledged its obligations in this area through a series of policy actions across a number of years including the formation of a new government department in 2011, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, which is headed by a cabinet minister. In 2012, the Irish Constitution was amended following a referendum to strengthen, in law, the right of children to have their views considered in matters affecting them. In 2015, the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making (2015-2020)* was launched. These developments, among others, provide an important backdrop to increasing engagement with learner voice in curriculum development at national level.

The NCCA develops curriculum and assessment advice through close collaboration and in consultation with the education partners and a wide range of other stakeholders. Over the last 10-15 years, as part of this work, the Council has developed consultation tools, models and processes for working with children and young people in early childhood settings and in primary and post-primary schools. Alongside research, developmental work with settings and schools, and work with partners and stakeholders, this work with children has helped to shape the direction of curriculum reform and development. This paper provides a brief synopsis of a number of consultation processes over recent years in which the NCCA included the voices of children in respect of curriculum developments at primary level. It identifies and highlights some of the key messages to have emerged from listening to children and which inform the ongoing work in reviewing and redeveloping the primary curriculum.

The consultations are as follows:

- Consultation on the proposals for a curriculum in **Education about Religion and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics**: Final Report (NCCA, February 2017) *What the learning might look like: children's perspectives* (pp.44-46) (Hereafter referred to as ERB and Ethics)
- Primary Developments: Consultation on **Curriculum Structure and Time (CST)**– Final Report (NCCA January 2018) *Consultative Meetings with Children* (pp.35-36)

- Primary developments; **Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile (PLC/CTB)** – Report on the Consultation on the draft curriculum for Stage 3 and 4/Céim 3 agus 4. (NCCA September 2018) *Voices of Children* (pp.11; 23-28)
- Consultation Report on the **Primary Mathematics Curriculum (PMC)** for junior infants to second class (NCCA, July 2018) *Child's Voice* (pp.6; 84-90: 4 themes).

As well as contributing to consultations on curriculum developments, children's opinions were sought in the development of two videos that framed broad discussions on the future of the primary curriculum. The key messages and themes from these are also included in the report.

- [\*Children: Their lives, their learning\*](#): video produced by NCCA with Coláiste Mhuire, Marino Institute of Education for 'Children: their lives, their learning', a conference held in 2011 to check in with the primary curriculum and to begin to lay foundations for its review. (Hereafter referred to as CTL.)
- [\*Children's Voices\*](#): video produced by NCCA for the Consultative Conference: Proposals on Structure and Time in the Primary Curriculum (2017). This video was developed from the consultation with children on Curriculum Structure and Time and highlights some of the salient points. (Hereafter referred to as CVV.)

In conjunction with the child voice work that the NCCA has engaged in over a number of years, the Council also commissioned three reports based on the *Growing Up in Ireland* study, a national longitudinal study of children and young people in Ireland. The study is nationally representative with over 20,000 cohort members. Taken together, the three reports focus on issues across the age span of the primary years:

- *The Transition to Primary Education: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland study*, Emer Smyth, ESRI/NCCA, 2018
- *Learning in Focus. Wellbeing and School Experiences among 9- and 13-Year Olds: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study*. Emer Smyth, ESRI/NCCA, 2015
- *Learning in Focus. The Primary Classroom: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study*. Selina McCoy, Emer Smyth and Joanne Banks, ESRI/NCCA, 2012.

Throughout this paper relevant aspects of the GUI reports are linked to themes or messages that emerged during consultations with children. Also, factors to have emerged from the GUI study, but not in NCCA consultations, and that have implications for children's experience and learning in primary

schools are briefly highlighted. These factors specifically refer to the significance of relationships and the impact of pupil variability on experience.

## Consultation design and methodology

The specific questions, data collection sample and research method situate this work with children within the qualitative paradigm. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth investigation of the concepts and a deepening of the understanding of the complexity of the issues involved. Research has to demonstrate 'fitness for purpose' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.460), which took into account accessibility to the sample and the human resources available to the NCCA. Each consultation used slightly different approaches based on the needs and resources of the consultation and the nature of the questions being asked. However, there were a number of commonalities across all consultations, regarding listening to children's voices:

- topic of the consultation was age-appropriate
- language used was age-appropriate (e.g., language was simplified for young children)
- questions asked were broad
- approach used was age-appropriate (e.g., in some cases young children were asked to talk about pictures they drew)
- children's assent and parental consent were sought and children could stop participating at any point.

In the case of the **ERB and Ethics** consultation, the NCCA worked with seven case-study schools and gathered feedback from children in fourth, fifth and sixth classes. The schools came from a range of backgrounds: urban/rural, denominational/multi-denominational, Irish-medium/English-medium, DEIS/non-DEIS. Prior to the visit, teachers were provided with stimulus material to encourage children to engage with some of the ideas and concepts behind the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. Responses were recorded by the children themselves using a template provided, and by an NCCA observer who took field notes during the process. The approach asked the following broad questions relating to key concepts:

- What do these words that you talked about have to do with your life? Are they important to you? Why?
- How would you like to learn more about these ideas?

During the consultation on **Curriculum Structure and Time**, to support children in sharing their views, NCCA worked with four schools on an ongoing basis to develop trust and to build a rapport with the

children. The work included children in four schools across the contexts of English-/Irish-medium, DEIS/non-DEIS, urban/rural. The children came from the junior, middle and senior classes. To ensure that children were informing the process from the outset, a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) was established with a cohort of children in one school. The aim was that these children, although not part of the consultation itself, would help shape the questions and tools used during consultation. The key questions put to the children from junior infants to sixth class were:

- Why do you come to school?
- What do you like to learn?
- How do you like to learn?

For the consultation on the **Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile** (PLC/CTB), children were invited to share their thoughts on their language experiences in English and in Irish as schools tried out aspects of the draft curriculum. Reflections were invited from children from third to sixth classes in three schools which were part of the Primary Language Network, and were presented as part of the consultation. The schools involved included a rural English-medium school, a large urban English-medium school and a scoil sa Ghaeltacht. A number of prompts were provided to the children and these focused on their experiences of learning English and Irish; both positive experiences and aspects of the learning that they found most challenging. The children were asked to write a short letter to the NCCA outlining

- What aspects of the language learning process they enjoyed?
- What parts they found challenging?
- What they would like more help with?

For the Consultation Report on the **Primary Mathematics Curriculum** (PMC) for junior infants to second class, children's perspectives on their mathematical learning experiences were gathered by teachers who had put aspects of the draft specification into practice. Grounded in qualitative research, the planned activity sought to elicit the worldview of the children and create new knowledge and understandings (Rossman and Rallis, 2012), thereby endeavouring to give children a voice (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2011). The purpose of this aspect of the consultation process was to enable children in the schools to voice their experiences of learning, where the teacher had enacted an aspect of the new draft curriculum. Participating teachers had autonomy regarding how they gathered children's perspectives, and consequently the artefacts collected (mainly drawings) are not in a standardised format. The total number of artefacts included in the analysis was fifty-four. Thematic

data analysis brought to light understandings of and reflections on the mathematical learning experiences the children engaged in.

In addition to these consultations, the video *Children's Voices* (CVV) produced for the consultation on **Curriculum Structure and Time**, highlighted key aspects of the consultation with children, namely:

- Why do we come to school?
- What do you like to learn?

The second child voice video, *Children: Their Lives, their learning* was developed in 2011 at a time when NCCA was preparing to review the curriculum and consulting widely on priorities for primary education. In developing the video, NCCA worked with children from schools across the country and asked three questions:

- How do you like to learn?
- What does your classroom look like?
- What is your favourite thing at school?

The following section provides an overview of the key themes to have emerged across these consultations, and draws on relevant data from the GUI reports.

## Key themes

While the consultations had varying purposes, the consideration of what children had to say about their learning in school was a common element within them. The main themes that emerged from the data across the consultations may be summarised as follows:

- Children's understanding of the purpose of school and of learning
- What children like to learn
- How children like to learn.

## Purpose of school and of learning

The *Children's Voices* video (CVV) showed some children talking about why they came to school. Children gave three main reasons – the need to learn, the need to make friends, and the importance of education for future life.

Some of their comments included:

- *If we didn't come to school, then basically no-one will know anything*
- *Téimid ar scoil chun foghlaim agus chun cairde a dhéanamh*
- *Because then you're not lonely and you have some friends to talk to*
- *Is féidir linn post a fháil agus airgead a fháil agus teach a cheannach*
- *We need to learn stuff...If we don't know what parents know, we can go to school and the teacher will teach us.*

As might be expected, children's responses to this question varied across the class levels and the ages of the children. Younger children tended to see school as a place to learn and a place to have friends. As they became older, understandings of the purpose of school were more nuanced as their perspectives became more future-oriented. By sixth class, children were already perceiving the life-preparation function of school.

## What children like to learn

The most notable point that emerged from children's comments on what they like to learn is that their favoured subjects or favourite learning experiences invariably involved activity on their part. Unsurprisingly, visual arts, Physical Education and learning involving projects, investigations or role-play scored highly with children of all ages.

Responses included:

- *There was a café out there and a post office and you get to be the people* (CVV video)
- *I like writing on iPads* (CVV video)
- *Déanaimid cluichí mata agus cabhraíonn sé go mór linn* (CTL video)
- *Do projects on different places of worship in other religions* (ERB and Ethics).

A number of children referred positively to learning situations where they got opportunities to learn in a more interactive and collaborative manner and through non book-based activities, for example, drámaíocht in Gaeilge lessons. Other opinions included:

- *I would like to do more PE between lessons as a break from things* (CVV video)
- *It was fun to have a break from the books* (PMC)
- *We like working in groups because you get to learn more* (CTL video)
- *Is maith liom a bheith ag foghlaim nuair atá muid ag like déanamh stáisiúnaí agus rudaí so is féidir leat rudaí difriúil [a dhéanamh] ag gach stáisiún* (CVV video).

An interesting aspect of the way children talked about what they learn is that younger children showed little awareness of boundaries between areas of learning—learning was simply seen in terms of how enjoyable or interesting it was to them. At the senior end of primary school, however, the children had come to view their learning in terms of subjects and readily discriminated between them.

- *When we were making the bread, we had to stir this and add this and this, and 80 grams of this, so it incorporates English and maths and there's fun* (CTL video)
- *Drama, music or art that includes the subject* (ERB and Ethics report, p.45 – recommending ways the subject could be taught/learned).

While children predominantly spoke of 'fun' subjects as their favourite learning experiences, of note too were the largely positive views of learning in language and mathematics that emerged from the

consultation with children in those two curriculum areas. This is particularly the case where learning is through active methodologies.

- *Irish for the day was really good fun (PLC/CTB, p.24)*
- *I enjoyed writing stories – they let me express myself in different ways [referring to English] (PLC/CTB, p.27)*
- *It was kind of like a maze walking around and I liked finding the shapes as fast as I could (PMC, p.84)*

Highlighting the maturing in children's attitudes to learning as they move through the primary school, the ERB and Ethics consultation report remarked on the interest expressed by children in fourth, fifth and sixth classes in learning about other religions. The report talks of *the agency children have in developing their own ideas and beliefs*, and the fact that children *have already adopted a personalised approach to belief* before they leave primary school (ERB and Ethics p.46). Implications for the redevelopment of the primary curriculum are that its content, structure and methodologies need to take account of the cognitive development of children through the primary school phase.

While children participating in various consultations put forward their thoughts on what areas of learning or subjects they liked, findings from the *Growing Up in Ireland Report, Learning In Focus* (2012) outlined the variations that occur across school types in respect of the curriculum balance experienced by children. For example, that report highlighted that boys in single-sex schools spent more time on history, geography and PE than boys in coeducational schools; children attending Gaelscoileanna were more likely to spend more time on music, art and PE, as well as Irish; girls in single-sex schools spent more time on RE. McCoy et al. (2012) also noted a shift in curricular emphasis over time with more experienced teachers tending to devote more time to English, Irish and Mathematics. Therefore, as NCCA updates time allocations as part of a redeveloped primary curriculum it is important to bear in mind what children have told us about what they like to learn and what the ESRI reports tell us about the differences in experiences across context.

## Children's views on how they learn

The content of children's learning and the ways in which that content was taught and learned were almost inseparable in the minds of younger children. As referred to above, younger children who participated in the consultations and videos seemed unaware of subject boundaries and differences, understood their learning largely as experiences, and mainly in terms of how interesting or enjoyable these were. As they progressed through the primary classes, the children heard those experiences increasingly described in terms of subjects. By the senior classes, children were able to identify the methodologies associated with particular subjects and evaluate them not only in terms of interest or enjoyment but also in terms of perceived effectiveness for their learning.

- *We saw how they built their houses and how they cooked their food – it's better than just reading about it on a page; Yea it sticks in your brain more* (CTL video - Children referring to an educational outing to learn about the Celts.)
- *Talk about it more often in groups; Make a poster about other religions with facts; Through acting and debates* (ERB and Ethics - Children suggesting ways of learning which they think would be successful.)
- *You could be an engineer or an architect in real life and it's good to learn about how people would do things* (Girl talking of building a model theme park, senior class.)

Learning through play was referenced by many children—and not only younger children—in the responses reviewed in this paper. In many instances, the child may not even have seen the playful event as a learning experience. Younger children mentioned enjoying play and games—possibly *Aistear* activities—and station teaching. Sensory aspects of the experiences were also recalled by children. A first class child, talking of a maths lesson in the PE hall, told how she *got really fast the more the game went on*; another told that he *guessed [his] shape quickly by feeling the edges and corners* while a child in first class commented that *we made 3D shapes with playdough* (PMC). Other comments included:

- *My favourite game we played with the shapes was the one where teacher put a shape on the board over our heads. I got a green rectangle and a yellow triangle* (PMC, first class child)
- *We are doing maths time and matching game. Maths time is fun . . . We take cards from the table and match them* (PMC, senior infant child)
- *I love stacking cubes to see which tower is the tallest* (PMC, second class child).

Games were obviously enjoyed by children in third to sixth classes when they mentioned *language games* as a favourite activity in learning Gaeilge and expressed their desire to have more of them (PLC/CTB, p.24). The findings from these consultations have interesting connections with the data of the ESRI Report on Transitions (2018). The report records that play-based learning is a common feature of early years classroom although its use was found to decline as children moved into senior infant classes. Large class sizes and multi-class settings were found to have less frequent use of creative and pretend play. The report also noted that play was used as a teaching/learning methodology more frequently in urban DEIS schools. However, in Smyth's view, the introduction of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, along with the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme, had brought about *a transformation of the early years policy landscape in Ireland* (2018, p.104).

One of the features of games and other activities enjoyed by children was the co-operative and participative nature of the learning:

- *We like working in groups because you get to learn more* (CTL video)
- *Through acting and debates; Talk about it more often in groups; Maybe more projects or presentations* (ERB and Ethics - Methodologies suggested by senior class children).

Many of the more favoured ways of learning in Gaeilge involved interaction between children—drama activities such as mime and roleplay were mentioned, as well as debates, singing and language games. *Obair ghrúpa* was also listed. Interestingly, this links to findings from the *Growing Up in Ireland Report Learning In Focus* (2012). In that report, McCoy et al. noted that children who participated in groupwork appeared to be more engaged in their learning, but they cautioned that the causal link here was not quite clear.

The *Learning In Focus* report (2012) provided evidence that whole-class teaching continues to be the dominant approach used in primary classrooms, while access to more active learning methods varies by teacher characteristics and classroom setting. More recently qualified teachers were found to make greater use of active learning methodologies. Teachers of large classes used such methods less frequently than others. Boys generally, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds were the groups most likely to lose out in experience of such activity-based methods.

Finally, the use of technology as a tool for teaching and learning across the curriculum was mentioned by a number of children and consistently in positive terms. Use of technology for Irish language learning was reflected in references to iPads and the interactive whiteboard *clár bán*, where their use

was for *taighde* (research) or for language games (PLC/CTB, p.25). Other comments favouring technology included:

- *Using computers or iPads to learn more about people who have fought for justice and [to] learn about other people's cultures* (ERB and Ethics, p.45)
- *Make video clips of people talking about their religion* (ERB and Ethics, p.45)
- *I like writing with iPads as it doesn't get your fingers sore like writing in books* (first class child, CVV).

## Older children like oral language activities

Listening to the views of older children, it's noted that they frequently favoured and recommended activities that are essentially verbal. Thus, they described debates and discussion as good ways to learn. Some suggestions made by children on how they would like to learn more about religious beliefs and ethics included *Talk about it more often in groups; Through acting and debates; Group discussion* (ERB and Ethics, pp.44-45). A feature of these kinds of methodologies was the open-ended nature of them, having no right or wrong answers. This was mentioned by some children too in relation to games and creative areas such as art, drama and music.

Asked about their preferred ways to learn languages, most striking across children's responses in relation to learning Gaeilge was the children's enjoyment of oral language: *comhrá, caint, speaking Irish*. One child said, *I like talking about your life, your hobbies and other stuff about yourself*. Another said, *Thaitin an chaint liom* (all responses from the PLC/CTB).

Interestingly, when the same question was asked regarding English language learning, writing came ahead of reading as the activity they enjoyed most. Oral English was scarcely mentioned possibly because it wasn't seen as an aspect of language to be 'learned' since it was in use throughout the day.

It's worth noting that the elements of language learning that children found difficult were what may be termed the technical aspects. In Gaeilge, *gramadach, litriú* and sentence structure were frequently mentioned. In English, grammar also topped the list of challenging aspects, as well as spelling and dictionary work.

How languages were taught and learned was commented on by children, with methodologies that have elements of activity in them being most favoured. This was consistent with the views expressed by children about virtually all curriculum areas.



# Conclusion

Listening to what children have to say about their learning in school is valuable and necessary. This paper does not claim to be a widely representative sample of the views and voices of Irish primary school children. However, given that the perceptions and opinions of children here were collected from a variety of school types, from the full age range of primary school classes and were spread over a three-year period lends considerable credence and value to them. In addition, certain consistent threads run through the data presented here.

Children are the best people to ask about their personal and individual experience of learning in schools—what they enjoy or dislike about it, what they find easy or challenging, what areas of learning/subjects interest them, and importantly, what ways of learning work best for them. Hearing what they believe the purpose of school to be can be revelatory—we understand that younger children’s views may be a reflection of their parents’ views, but children are gradually forming their own opinions and evaluations of their learning as they grow through the primary years.

Some of the ways in which children’s perspectives on their learning develop through the primary school are evident in the children’s voices reported here. Some of these are not new—the cognitive growth that allows the child to progress from working with concrete materials to abstract thinking and consideration of ideas; children’s increasing capacity to interpret the nuances of complex language; the evolution of an understanding of different disciplines of thought that come to be called subjects; a social awareness that is increasingly concerned for people and matters outside of one’s self, such as in the community or the wider world.

Yet, some things children feel about their learning show little change over the eight years of primary school. Older children want to enjoy their learning just as younger children do—a junior infant and a sixth class child equally want it to involve fun, creativity, movement, interest, variety, games, playfulness. They enjoy learning with other children be it co-operative or competitive. They engage enthusiastically with technology from the earliest age.

As part of the ongoing review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum the NCCA is drawing on these consultations with children. Later in 2019, the Council will publish the draft Primary Curriculum Framework which will form the basis for an extensive consultation. This consultation will include working with children to tease out further their thoughts on what is proposed for the next iteration of a primary curriculum.

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