

# Primary Curriculum Review and Redevelopment

## Synthesis Report on Stakeholder Curriculum Seminars

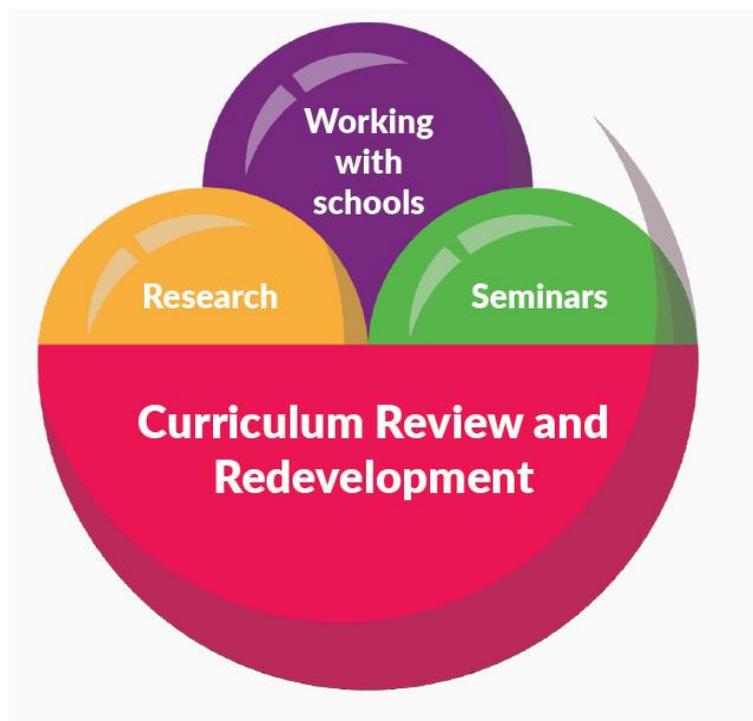
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# Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is reviewing and redeveloping the primary school curriculum. We are working with teachers and early childhood practitioners, school leaders, parents and children, management bodies, researchers, and other stakeholders to develop a high-quality curriculum for the next 10-15 years. We need to ensure that a future primary curriculum can continue to provide children with relevant and engaging experiences that contribute to their childhood and their later years as adults. Taking account of contextual considerations, the work involves a consideration of the purpose, structure and content of a redeveloped primary curriculum. There are three complementary strands to this work: 1) Working with schools, (2) Research and (3) Seminars (see Figure 1). Each strand feeds into and helps shape the others and equally, each is informed by the others.

**Figure 1: Three strands of curriculum review and redevelopment**



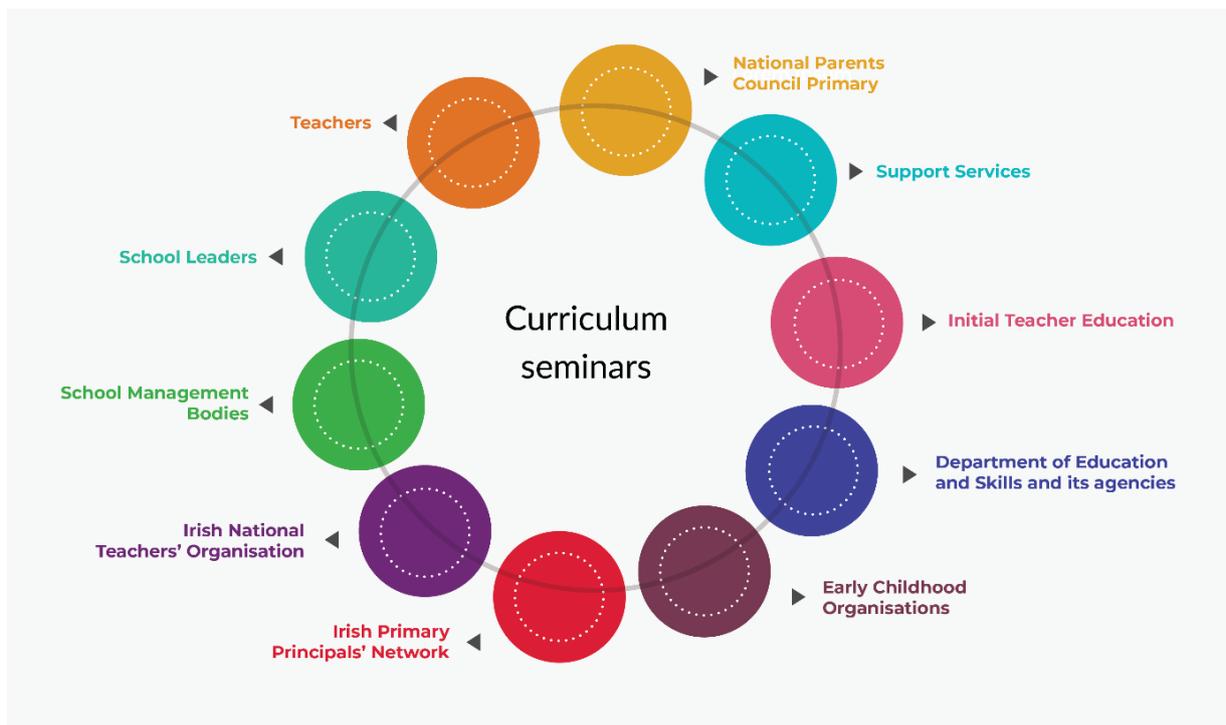
The NCCA’s work draws heavily on research, and consequently national and international researchers authored a suite of short research papers on key aspects of a redeveloped primary curriculum. The research papers support engagement in the review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum. The research papers can be found in the primary

section of the NCCA website at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie). We are also working with primary schools, post-primary schools and preschools from across the country. Together, these represent the rich diversity of school contexts and form the Schools Forum.

The NCCA held five curriculum seminars between March 2018 and January 2019. Attendance was by invitation to the education partners and wider stakeholders (see Appendix 1) while many of the attending teachers, school leaders and early years practitioners were members of the Schools Forum. The seminars gave participants opportunities to consider the key points emerging from the research papers, and to discuss and tease out these points from different perspectives (see Figure 2). Each seminar included keynote presentations (see Appendix 2) focusing on important aspects of a primary curriculum. The five seminars were as follows:

- Seminar 1: Curriculum Purpose
- Seminar 2: Powerful Synergies
- Seminar 3: New Horizons
- Seminar 4: Enhancing Learning Journeys
- Seminar 5: Charting the Journey Forward

**Figure 2: Participants in the curriculum seminars**



# Primary Curriculum Review Themes: Seminars 1 – 5

This report identifies seven themes which emerged across the five curriculum seminars. These themes raise issues of a general nature that participants felt were germane to the process and outcomes of the review and redevelopment work. They include observations about the system implications of the reform, the impact of proposed changes on the teacher and school communities, and the consequences for CPD and for initial teacher education (ITE).

Each of the themes is outlined below and as expected received varying degrees of consideration across the seminars. Some themes reoccurred more frequently, explaining why some sections below are more detailed than others.

## Theme 1: Moral purpose

The moral purpose of curriculum and the values enshrined in it was a theme that was revisited across the seminars. Largely it was felt that the social dimension of curriculum should be foregrounded and its values should be stated in clear, unambiguous language. Regarding outcomes for children, some participants identified inquiry-based learning as being important to promote the development of critical skills needed to negotiate knowledge so that children acquire knowledge and develop understanding. In addition, children's wellbeing was seen as a key dimension of the curriculum, providing children with an awareness of their social responsibility as citizens of an increasingly fragile world. These sentiments give support to the inclusion of broad learning outcomes that will help to shift the curriculum focus from content objectives and related activities and tasks more firmly in the direction of process and understanding.

## Theme 2: Teacher agency

A concern that surfaced in one way or other across all of the seminars was the somewhat perplexing question of teacher agency, especially the challenge of finding just the right degree

of agency. For example, teachers felt that changing the curriculum from detailed, prescriptive content objectives to broad learning outcomes would be attractive because of the autonomy it would offer but were wary of the added responsibility for content and pedagogy implied in such a change. The desire for recognition of the professionalism and independence of the teacher and school was frequently tempered by a concern that teachers need their choices to be supported by guidelines and exemplification. This concern has relevance for initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD) during the implementation phase.

### Theme 3: The learning context/environment

The seminars saw discussion of the context in which a redeveloped primary curriculum would be implemented. Participants argued that the physical spaces of classrooms were an expression of the values enshrined in the curriculum, for example, whether they were active spaces providing freedom for children and facilitating inquiry-based learning.

### Theme 4: Consultation during the developmental and implementation phases

Participants welcomed opportunities to learn from the perspectives offered by research and from the views of other stakeholders. They stressed the need to keep the consultation active and widespread throughout the development and implementation phases. The importance of NCCA's ongoing engagement with primary schools, post-primary schools and preschools through its established Schools Forum was recognised in this regard. Participants at Seminar 5 were much taken with the phased introduction of the new curriculum in Wales—available to schools in 2020, but without a requirement for implementation until 2022—giving schools time and space to develop their understanding of the curriculum style, content and intent.

## Theme 5: Curriculum alignment

Regarding curriculum alignment and continuity across the sectors, some participants argued that the system needed to do more to promote dialogue between the sectors, especially between early childhood settings and primary schools, and to ensure a greater alignment of qualifications and working conditions between early childhood practitioners and their counterparts in the primary school. Dialogue of this kind was seen to be especially important in the context of high-quality transitions from early childhood settings to primary school.

## Theme 6: A playful pedagogy

Across the seminars the discussion on pedagogy was of particular relevance. This centred frequently on the link between pedagogy and children's skills development, especially the development of the critical skills needed to enable children to grow up safely in an information-laden, complex environment. Many participants argued that this is best done through a playful pedagogy that fosters inquiry-based learning. Pedagogy was central to discussions about values and teacher agency in Seminar 1 while Seminar 3 raised the question of pedagogical continuity from preschool to primary and from the junior to senior classes in primary school. The call for examples of learning theory in practice in Seminar 4 underlined the need for shared understanding of pedagogy, especially of a playful pedagogy. Seminar 5, with its focus on assessment, learning and teaching, highlighted the importance of assessment as a key aspect of pedagogy, not as an afterthought or add-on. Some seminar participants felt that there is a need to combat misunderstandings about the nature and value of a play-based pedagogy, arguing that too often it is referred to in terms of unstructured play sessions, as a kind of timeout from 'real learning', and too often it is seen as something appropriate for younger children, to be left behind when the 'real learning' happens later on. The prevalence of concerns about pedagogy during these consultation seminars suggests that NCCA needs to provide significant leadership in this area, perhaps in collaboration with the providers of teacher CPD.

## Theme 7: Joined-up thinking

With particular relevance to the curriculum implementation phase, many participants stressed the importance of a system-wide response to change management. They were especially concerned with ‘readiness for implementation’ incorporating joined-up thinking in respect of

- Continuing Professional Development and Initial Teacher Education
- inspections by the Department of Education and Skills that are supportive of the redeveloped curriculum and of teachers/schools
- a clear articulation of values and outcomes
- provision of supportive and appropriate resources
- support for transitions, and for professional dialogue across the sectors
- widespread consultation and engagement with all stakeholders, including children.

## Conclusion

In overall terms, the participants welcomed the direction being set by the NCCA in producing robust academic research to support the process of developing a framework for a redeveloped primary school curriculum. They appreciated the opportunity to participate in the review and redevelopment of the curriculum.

The seminars’ keynote presentations and panel discussions can be viewed in the primary section of the NCCA website [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie). The research papers are also available online, along with further information on the process of redeveloping the curriculum.

## Appendix 1: Stakeholder Organisations

An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta

An Forás Patrúnachta

Association for Drama in Education in Ireland

Association of Childcare Professionals

Association of Teachers'/Education Centres in Ireland

Autism Ireland

Barnardos Ireland

Catholic Primary Schools Managers' Association

Centre for School Leadership

Children's Rights Alliance

Church of Ireland Board of Education

Computers in Education Society of Ireland

Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Department of Education & Skills

DES Inspectorate

DICE Project

Dublin City University

Early Childhood Ireland

Early Years Education Policy Unit

Economic and Social Research Institute

Educate Together

Education and Training Boards Ireland

Educational Company of Ireland

Educational Research Centre

Foras na Gaeilge

Hibernia College

HSE Health and Wellbeing Division

Inclusive Ireland

Irish National Teachers' Organisation

Irish Primary Physical Education Association

Irish Primary Principal Network

Education Support Centres Ireland

Lifeways Ireland Ltd

Marino Institute of Education

Mary Immaculate College

Maynooth University

Migrants Rights Council Ireland

National Childhood Network

National Council for Special Education

National Educational Psychological Service

National Induction Programme for Teachers

Ombudsman for Children

PLÉ

Professional Development Service for Teachers

Royal Society of Chemistry

Safefood

Science Foundation Ireland

SPHE Network

Teachers' Union of Ireland

Teaching Council

The Ark

The National Disability Authority

Tusla – Child and Family Agency

University College Cork

University College Dublin

## Appendix 2: Seminars and Keynote Presentations

<b>Seminars</b>	<b>Keynote Presentations</b>
Seminar 1: <b><i>Curriculum Purpose</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dr Thomas Walsh, Maynooth University - Review of the Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum (1999)</li> <li>▪ Dr Jones Irwin, Dublin City University - Priorities and values of society</li> </ul>
Seminar 2: <b><i>Powerful Synergies</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Professor Louis Volante, Brock University – Pedagogy and Meta-practices</li> <li>▪ Dr Karin Bacon, Marino Institute of Education – Curriculum Integration</li> <li>▪ Professor Emerita Carol McGuinness, Queen’s University – 21st century competencies</li> <li>▪ Professor Dominic Wyse, University College London – The role of knowledge in curricula</li> </ul>
Seminar 3: <b><i>New Horizons</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Bernie McNally, DCYA - Context and policy developments in early years provision</li> <li>▪ Dr Harold Hislop, DES - Current provision and future challenges in early years learning experiences</li> <li>▪ Prof Emer Smyth, ESRI - Transition to primary education</li> <li>▪ Dr Alejandra Cortázar, CEPI, Chile - Curriculum alignment and progression</li> </ul>
Seminar 4: <b><i>Enhancing Learning Journeys</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dr Emer Ring, Dr Lisha O’Sullivan, Marie Ryan and Patrick Burke, Mary Immaculate College – Learning theories</li> <li>▪ NCCA – Parents’ perspectives on a redeveloped primary curriculum</li> </ul>
Seminar 5: <b><i>Charting the Journey Forward</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Sharon O’Donnell – International primary curricula</li> <li>▪ Prof Michael O’Leary and Dr Zita Lysaght, Dublin City University - Aligning assessment, learning and teaching in curricular reform and implementation</li> </ul>

