# REDEVELOPING THE PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM IN IRELAND

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## | Executive summary

This case study focuses on the journey and progress to date within the Irish education system to redevelop the national primary school curriculum.[1] While the redevelopment process focuses on all aspects of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, a particular focus is placed on elements relating to whole-child development. Central to this is an exploration of provisions for enhanced child and teacher agency regarding curriculum and pedagogy in classrooms and schools. The key tensions in the shift from a detailed and prescriptive curriculum to a curriculum framework—and the interface with policy and discourses prioritizing literacy and numeracy while maintaining an emphasis on whole child development—are explored.

Three key themes have emerged from the case study analysis. First, system-wide involvement by stakeholders has underpinned, informed, and enriched the redevelopment process from the outset. Second, the redevelopment process has positioned the entire education system as a "learning system," conceptualizing all stakeholders as both contributors and learners in the reform journey. Third, a shift in understanding what a curriculum is and what it "does" has been prompted by the move away from a traditional detailed objective-based format to a learning outcomes-based curriculum framework. Collectively, the redevelopment process proposes the decentralization of many elements of curriculum-making and enactment, highlighting the paramountcy of teacher and child agency.

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1   This case study is a companion to "Transforming education for holistic student development: Learning from education system (re) building around the world" (Datnow et al., 2022), a summary report that explores the work of building and rebuilding education systems to support holistic student development in six education systems in Singapore, Ireland, Chile, Canada, India, and the United States and in one cross-national system (the International Baccalaureate). While different in many ways, the seven systems bear remarkable similarities in their efforts to (re)build education systems—each is working in policy contexts pressing for academic quality and equity, while also facing additional incentives to support holistic student development.

The summary report "Transforming education for holistic student development: Learning from education system re(building) around the world" lays out 10 key lessons for transforming education systems, which are all exemplified in this case study. In particular, this case study highlights the need to:

1. Develop and distribute leadership for instruction by, among other things, cultivating educator and student agency.

2. Engage and coordinate among diverse stakeholders and leverage partnerships.

3. Balance common systemwide conventions with the need for local discretion to promote and encourage reform.

# Background and context

The education system in Ireland[2] bears the stamp of its colonial history and its 19th century educational origins, resulting in both high levels of centralization alongside school autonomy prompted by the denominational ownership and management of most primary schools.[3] The Department of Education has ultimate policy responsibility for the education system and in recent decades has devolved a range of responsibilities to bespoke agencies under its auspices. Public policy in Ireland is developed in a spirit of social partnership (Coolahan, 2017:109), and there are legislative provisions that the education partners be consulted in the development of education policy (Government of Ireland, 1998:Section 7.4.b). Overall, this has led to system-wide engagement and ownership of significant policy reforms at a national

**Agency:** Agency is the individual's will and capacity to act (Gao, 2010).

**Center-periphery model:** The center-periphery model of curriculum development provides for the development of the curriculum by central authorities for implementation at school level.

**Curriculum framework:** A curriculum framework "sets out a clear vision and principles for children's learning, as well as a broad description of what should be prioritized in terms of learning outcomes and experiences" (NCCA, 2020:4).

**Curriculum maker:** "This role sees teachers and school leaders using broad learning outcomes in the various curriculum areas and subjects alongside the curriculum vision and principles to devise a curriculum that is tailored to, and appropriate for the children in their school community" (NCCA, 2020:4).

**Curriculum sense-making:** Curriculum sense-making refers to a dynamic and interactive process through which both individuals and groups of people construct meaning from the relationships between themselves and the environment in which they operate. It is an active cognitive and emotional process that consists of a person attempting to fit the new information into existing knowledge and beliefs (Pietarinen et al., 2017:26).

level, positioning the education system as a "learning system" and its stakeholders as change agents. While many jurisdictions worldwide attempt to "re-assemble previously more disparate subnational systems into new national policy assemblages" (Savage and O'Connor 2019:820), Ireland is currently focusing on

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2    The island of Ireland is comprised of the Republic of Ireland (26 counties) and Northern Ireland (6 counties), following its partition in the 1920s. The focus of this case study is the Republic of Ireland, which will be referred to as "Ireland" throughout.

3    Of the 3,107 schools in Ireland in 2020, 92.5 percent had a denominational ethos (Department of Education, 2021:3).

attempts to decentralize many aspects of education policy, including curriculum policy, by emphasizing school and teacher autonomy. Figure 1 provides a broad overview of the key stakeholders in the complex and diffuse policy development landscape in Ireland, which is loosely coupled, as defined by Looney (2011).

The role of one departmental agency, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), is central to this case study on primary curriculum redevelopment. The NCCA is a statutory agency tasked with advising 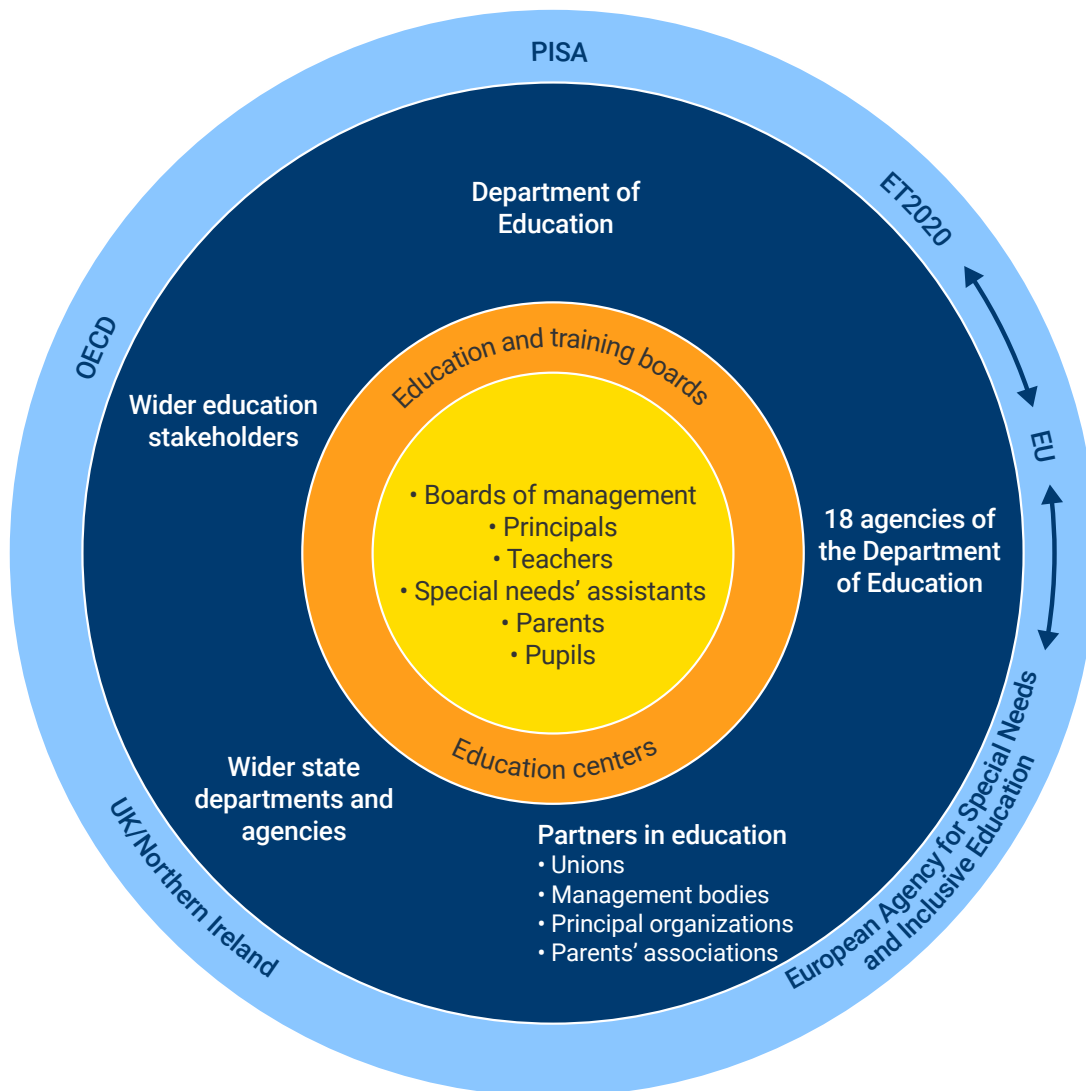the minister on all aspects relating to curriculum and assessment policy. It is noteworthy that other agencies beyond the NCCA have responsibility for providing system-wide support for curriculum enactment. NCCA governance structures are directly and explicitly representational of the educational stakeholders and social partners (Granville, 2004).

In historical terms, there have only been three significant reviews of the primary school curriculum since the advent of political independence in the 1920s, with the current redevelopment process that forms the basis of this case study representing the fourth. Ireland's

FIGURE 1

**Broad overview of the layers of the education system in Ireland, international to micro levels**



PISA

ET2020

OECD

Department of Education

Education and training boards

Wider education stakeholders

• Boards of management
• Principals
• Teachers
• Special needs' assistants
• Parents
• Pupils

18 agencies of the Department of Education

EU

Education centers

Wider state departments and agencies

Partners in education
• Unions
• Management bodies
• Principal organizations
• Parents' associations

UK/Northern Ireland

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
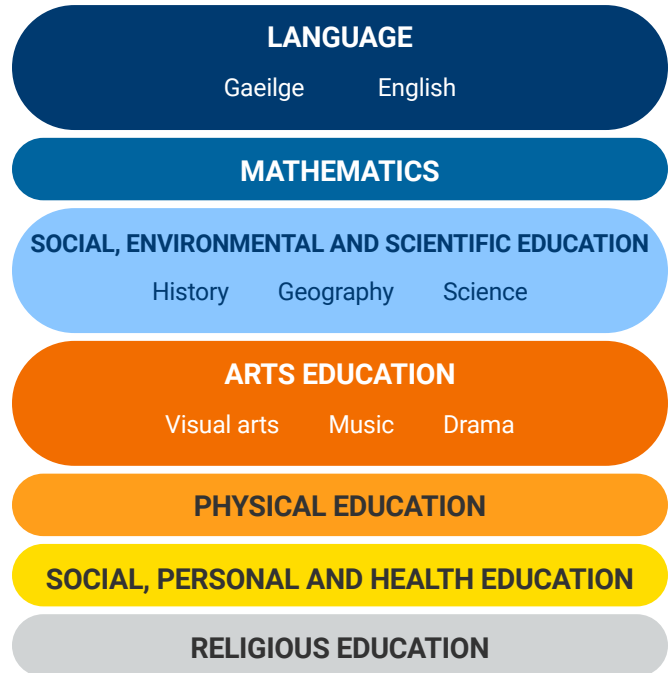
**Source:** Walsh, forthcoming.

predominant model of curriculum development has been a "center-periphery" model (Kelly, 2009), involving the publication of a centralized, detailed and prescriptive curriculum document for enactment in all state-recognized schools, albeit with some provisions for local flexibility and adaptation. Since 1971, whole-child development has been deeply engrained within the fabric of the primary school curriculum, which explicitly mentions a range of developmental domains (physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual) and focuses on both the needs of the child in the present and in the future (Department of Education, 1971:13). The current primary school curriculum was published in 1999 and further builds upon this child-centred and holistic focus in its underpinning principles and subjects (see Figure 2) (Department of Education and Science [DES][4] , 1999).

# Origins of the reform journey

A number of international and national factors coalesced in the early 2010s to catalyze and inform a review of the existing primary school curriculum. Internationally, Ireland's membership of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU) increased education policy borrowing and brokering in Ireland (Grek, 2009; O'Doherty, 2014; Klatt and Milana, 2020). Nationally, there was a recognition that the research and thinking that underpinned the 1999 curriculum needed review. The intervening period had witnessed significant developments in research and understandings regarding child development and learning, as well as increased expectations of the role of schools and education systems to respond to national priorities and societal challenges. An enhanced focus on including children's voices in research had also informed thinking on what is a child-centred and holistic education from the perspective of children (see for example the longitudinal Growing Up in Ireland project and the Children's School Lives study). The changing profile and increased diversity of Irish society also prompted questions about the positioning

FIGURE 2

## Subjects for all classes in the 1999 curriculum



**LANGUAGE**
Gaeilge    English

**MATHEMATICS**

**SOCIAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND SCIENTIFIC EDUCATION**
History    Geography    Science

**ARTS EDUCATION**
Visual arts    Music    Drama

**PHYSICAL EDUCATION**

**SOCIAL, PERSONAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION**

**RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

**Source:** DES, 1999.

of religious, spiritual, and ethical education within the curriculum given Ireland's largely denominational primary education system.

One critical development was the trend to move away from detailed and prescriptive curricula toward more flexible curriculum frameworks, as well as the framing of content as learning outcomes. The 1999 curriculum has an extensive "physical face" (Alexander and Flutter, 2009:6), extending to 2,842 pages of direct curriculum material and guidelines, which has been further extended through subsequent action plans, strategies, toolkits, and guidelines for teachers (Walsh, 2018). Curriculum provisions at both early childhood education (NCCA, 2009) and at lower-secondary education (DES, 2015) moved to more succinct curriculum framework models using learning outcomes, prompting a focus on primary curriculum provisions. Moreover, reviews of curriculum enactment highlighted a disparity between curriculum policy

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4    The Department of Education and Science was renamed as the Department of Education and Skills in 2011. It was further changed to the Department of Education in 2020. The appropriate name relevant to the year is used throughout this case study.

and practice (NCCA, 2005; 2008). Overall, there was a sense that the curriculum had become overloaded with ongoing demands for additional elements to the curriculum, and that priorities for children's education needed to be re-established.

The catalyst for the primary school curriculum redevelopment process can be traced to the provisions of the national Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011). This wide-ranging strategy was prompted by Ireland's relative drop in performance in the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) measures. The strategy placed "improving the curriculum and learning experience" as one of the key pillars of reform, and further prioritized literacy and numeracy within the curriculum in terms of focus and time. This accentuated tensions and underscored discourses within the system in terms of the curriculum emphasizing the holistic development of the child and focusing on the "core" elements of literacy and numeracy (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013). The strategy tasked the NCCA with leading the review of the languages (English and Irish languages) and mathematics elements of the primary school curriculum. This resulted in a revised learning outcomes-based primary language curriculum being introduced for the first four years of schooling in 2016, which was revised and extended to all classes in 2019 (NCCA, 2019). The mathematics curriculum was also redeveloped for the first four years of primary schooling (NCCA, 2018a), but the enactment of this curriculum was paused to allow the development of a curriculum specification for the entire span of primary schooling.

# Process of curriculum redevelopment

Parallel to the review and redevelopment of the languages and mathematics curriculum, the NCCA led a large-scale, high-level wider review of the totality of the primary school curriculum "to ask fundamental questions about what a curriculum should do and needs to do, first and foremost for children, teachers, school leaders, parents and society as we move further into the 21st century" (Hayward et al., 2022:5). The starting point was a system-wide consultation on "Priorities in Primary Education?" (NCCA, 2012). The responses (see Figure 3 below) captured wider system

FIGURE 3

## Priorities for primary education



HELP CHILDREN TO DEVELOP LIFE SKILLS THROUGH A BROAD CURRICULUM

HELP CHILDREN TO BE GOOD COMMUNICATORS

HELP CHILDREN TO BE WELL

HELP CHILDREN TO DEVELOP LITERACY AND NUMERACY SKILLS

MOTIVATE AND ENGAGE CHILDREN

HELP CHILDREN TO DEVELOP A SENSE OF IDENTITY AND BELONGING

**Source:** NCCA, 2012:7.

tensions between efforts to focus narrowly on literacy and numeracy as articulated in the aforementioned strategy, and the desire among many educationalists and stakeholders to maintain a broad-based and holistic curriculum.

The curriculum redevelopment process over the past decade has been underpinned by system-wide partner engagement from the outset, conceptualizing all stakeholders as both contributors and learners in the reform journey. It has involved four overlapping strands:

- **Research development:** This strand comprised the production and commissioning of research by the NCCA, as well as systematic reviews of wider published research. Between 2018 and 2020, the NCCA commissioned 14 national and international research papers on key issues such as assessment, learning competencies, pedagogies, integration, and transitions to inform the redevelopment process. These research papers were presented, and their implications for policy and practice critiqued, by stakeholders at five national curriculum seminars in 2018 and 2019. This was followed by a series of Leading Out seminars, which were designed to identify, explore, and begin to work on the conditions for successful curriculum change in primary schools.

- **Consultations:** A series of consultations with pupils, teachers, parents, and wider stakeholders were initiated by the NCCA since 2011 on both general curriculum principles and specific aspects of curriculum provision. One seminal consultation focused on time allocations and structure for a redeveloped curriculum (NCCA, 2018b). A further consultation, led by Marino Institute of Education, has engaged with young children using participatory methods (Kiely et al., 2022). Such consultations have continued to gather feedback on and responses to the draft primary curriculum framework, which sets forward proposals for a redeveloped primary curriculum (NCCA, 2020).

- **Schools' Forum:** The NCCA established a Schools' Forum of 60 early childhood settings, primary, and post-primary schools to support its curriculum redevelopment work. The forum meets face-to-face and/or online every four to six weeks during the school year to explore the big ideas in the curriculum development proposals and to reflect on the opportunities and challenges for practice in their respective contexts.

- **Deliberations:** Bilateral and multilateral dialogues involving key stakeholders across the education system have been central to redevelopment design to ensure a clarity and coherence of messaging. The representative structures of the NCCA provide a further context for sustained wider deliberations with education partners through its development groups, boards, and council. Ultimately, the NCCA Council is the decisionmaking body on curriculum advice developed by the NCCA.

In addition to the structures above, the NCCA established an advisory panel[5] with national and international expertise in curriculum design, development, change, and implementation to support system-wide learning and stakeholder engagement.

The redevelopment process sets an expectation of engagement and learning from all stakeholders. The varied forums, both online and face-to-face, have provided contexts and opportunities for stakeholders from across all layers of the education system to come together, to agree and disagree respectfully, to have challenging conversations, and to reach levels of consensus through multilateral dialogue. At such events, groups were comprised of stakeholders from a range of professional contexts, creating opportunities for dialogue and shared understandings between stakeholders in the system that may traditionally have limited opportunities for interaction or sharing perspectives. The process also recognizes that curriculum is discourse as well as text (Ball, 1993), and that opportunities for professional dialogue are central

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5    The panel is comprised of four members, including the current author:
      • Professor Louise Hayward (University of Glasgow)
      • Professor Jim Spillane (Northwestern University, Chicago)
      • Dr. Thomas Walsh (Maynooth University)
      • Professor Dominic Wyse (Institute of Education, University College London)

to individual and collective meaning-making and sense-making (Pietarinen et al., 2017).

Overall, the development process has drawn on iterative learnings from the strands of (national and international) research, consultations, seminars, networks, and deliberations involving children, parents, teachers, allied education professionals, support services, and interested parties. Engaging the professional community, particularly teachers, in the conceptual design of the curriculum has enhanced ownership of decisions and rightly engages teachers as curriculum designers or makers rather than curriculum implementers. Involving such a wide range of stakeholders, datasets, and processes from the supranational to the micro levels provides a rigour to the emerging curriculum proposals, facilitating a 360° review of opportunities and challenges related to curriculum design and enactment.

# Redeveloped curriculum proposals

A key turning point in the curriculum redevelopment process was the publication in February 2020, just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, of a "Draft Primary Curriculum Framework for Consultation" (NCCA, 2020). The draft framework articulates a rationale for moving from a defined and detailed curriculum to a curriculum framework format—one of the key shifts heralded by the redevelopment process. It goes on to frame what is important in primary education in Ireland, and why, through a series of statements on vision and principles, as well as proposals for key competencies and curriculum areas/subjects. Central to the vision of the "Draft Primary Curriculum Framework for Consultation" is a commitment to holistic outcomes for pupils:

> *The curriculum aims to provide a strong foundation for every child to thrive and flourish, supporting them in realising their full potential as individuals and as members of communities and society during childhood and into the future. Building on their previous experiences, the curriculum views children as unique, capable and caring*

*individuals, and teachers as committed, skilful and agentic professionals. It supports high-quality teaching, learning and assessment that is inclusive and evidence-based supporting each child to make progress in all areas of their learning and development* (NCCA, 2020:5).

There are eight overarching principles (see Figure 4 below) within the redeveloped curriculum, which "convey what is valued in primary education and what lies at the heart of high-quality teaching and learning in the primary curriculum" (NCCA, 2020:6). Many of these principles directly relate to and impact on the holistic learner's experience of education on a daily basis in classrooms and schools. While a number of these were implicit within the 1999 curriculum, naming pedagogy, engagement and relationships as principles places an enhanced emphasis on the quality of the learning/learner experience.

The seven key competencies (see Figure 5 below) are interlinked and are comprised of the essential knowledge, skills, concepts, dispositions, attitudes, and values that support the holistic development of the child, as well as supporting their wider membership of and participation in communities and society. Competencies—and their associated attributes (NCCA, 2020:10)—will be embedded within the learning outcomes of curriculum area and subject specifications, providing for progression as they are revisited and developed throughout primary schooling.

The focus on holistic outcomes is not just evident in the principles, competencies, and subject areas but also in key statements around inclusive education and diversity, pedagogy, and integration. This encourages a focus on "variability, competency and opportunity" as opposed to disability, underpinned by a Universal Design for Learning framework to curriculum specification development (NCCA, 2020:20). A focus on responsive pedagogies and positive relationships/interactions in terms of nurturing pupils' development and learning is foregrounded within the curriculum.

The timeline for refining this draft framework has been delayed by COVID-19 and a finalized curriculum framework is now expected in early 2023, which will incorporate the findings from system-wide feedback on
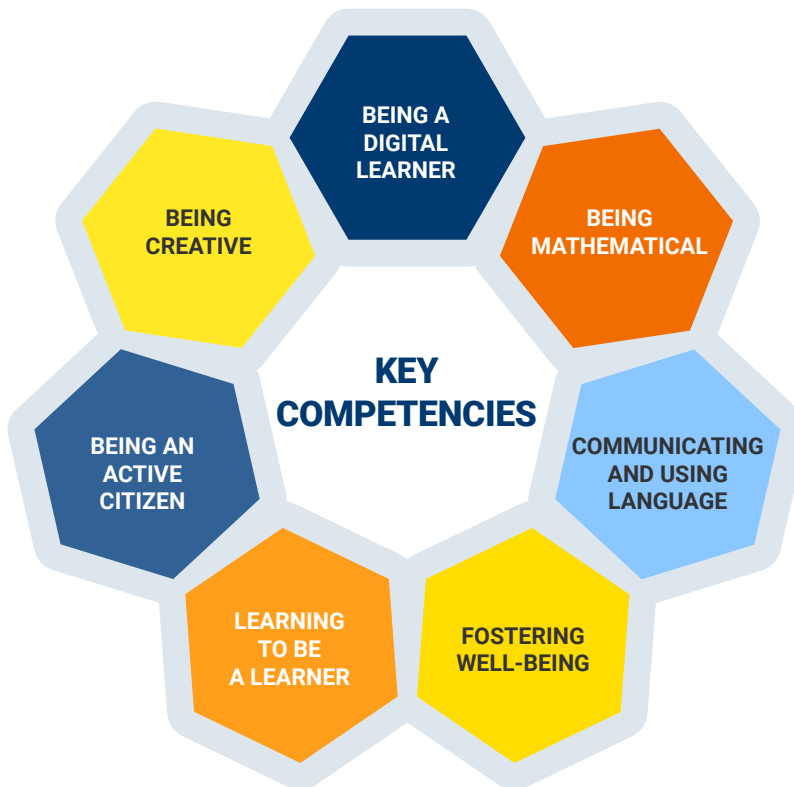
FIGURE 4

## Principles of the draft primary curriculum framework
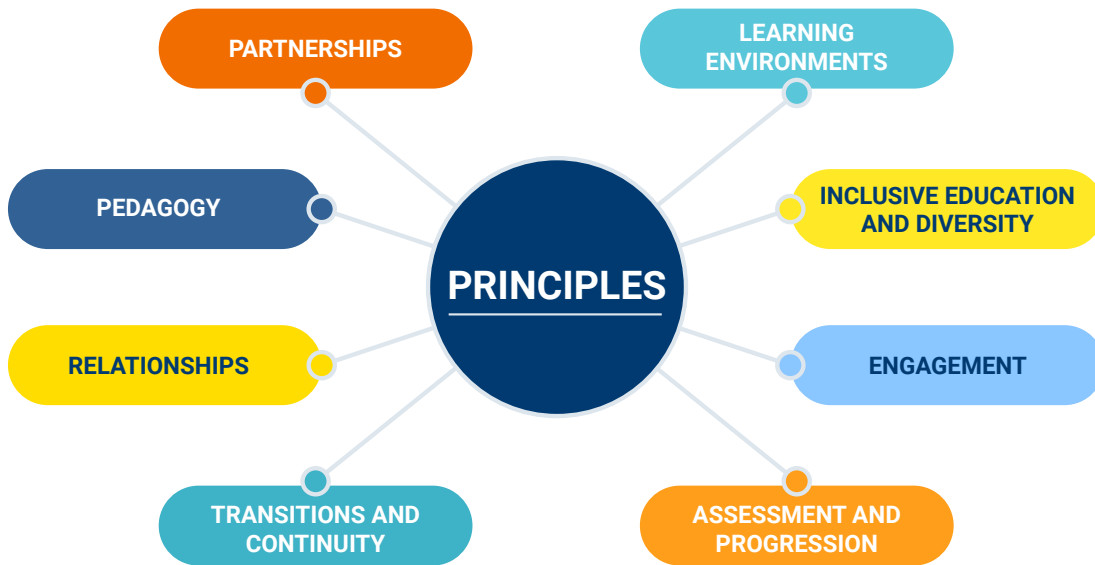


**Source:** NCCA, 2020:6.

FIGURE 5

## Key competencies of the draft primary curriculum framework



Source: NCCA, 2020:7.

the proposals gathered through further use of the four developmental strands listed above. The NCCA focus will then shift to the development of specifications for each curriculum area/subject, and the plan is to have these published by 2025, with a view to enacting the redevelopment curriculum for the school year 2025-26. Each specification will have the following components:

- Introduction
- Rationale
- Aims
- Strands and elements
- Learning outcomes
- Toolkit (NCCA, 2020:12).

The proposed toolkit within each subject (area) specification will support teacher and pupil agency by providing rich, creative, and contextually appropriate pedagogies to support progress toward learning outcomes.

# Impact on daily life in schools

Ultimately, this reform is an attempt to move away from a nationally defined and prescribed curriculum to a more personalized and contextualized approach where content and pedagogies are determined at school and classroom levels. Traditionally, there has been a lack of opportunity for teachers to collaborate to any significant degree with one another due to the intense nature of the school day and teachers' contractual arrangements, which are based almost exclusively on contact teaching time (DES, 2018:16).

## CURRICULUM DESIGN AND CONTENT

At a school level, curriculum design provides much more freedom and agency to teachers, individually and collaboratively, to choose the content and approaches that best suit their context toward achieving the curriculum learning outcomes. This reframes the teacher as a curriculum maker (Priestley, Biesta and

Robinson, 2015), moving away from the traditional role of "curriculum implementation.". It prompts a shift from the individual culture predominant in many schools to a more collaborative culture, requiring teachers and school leaders to come together to use their collective professional capital and agency to make sense of, negotiate, and make decisions on how the curriculum framework will be enacted within their school or classroom. It encourages further engagement from parents, boards of management, and local community stakeholders who are partners in supporting curriculum decisionmaking and enactment locally. It also reframes relationships between schools and agencies such as the Inspectorate, building on recent initiatives to balance the Inspectorate's supportive and evaluative roles.

At the classroom level, the "agentic" child is thought as having a much greater voice and role in curriculum decisionmaking. Pupils' choices will inform the learning journeys traveled in classrooms, thus providing children with opportunities for decisionmaking, leadership, and creativity. In terms of structure, the redeveloped curriculum envisages a reframing of curriculum content of primary schooling into broad, integrated curriculum areas in the early stages followed by more discrete subjects in the latter stages (see Figure 6 below). This reframing also introduces a number of new or more explicit elements to the curriculum such as modern foreign languages, well-being, science and technology education, and additional elements within the arts.
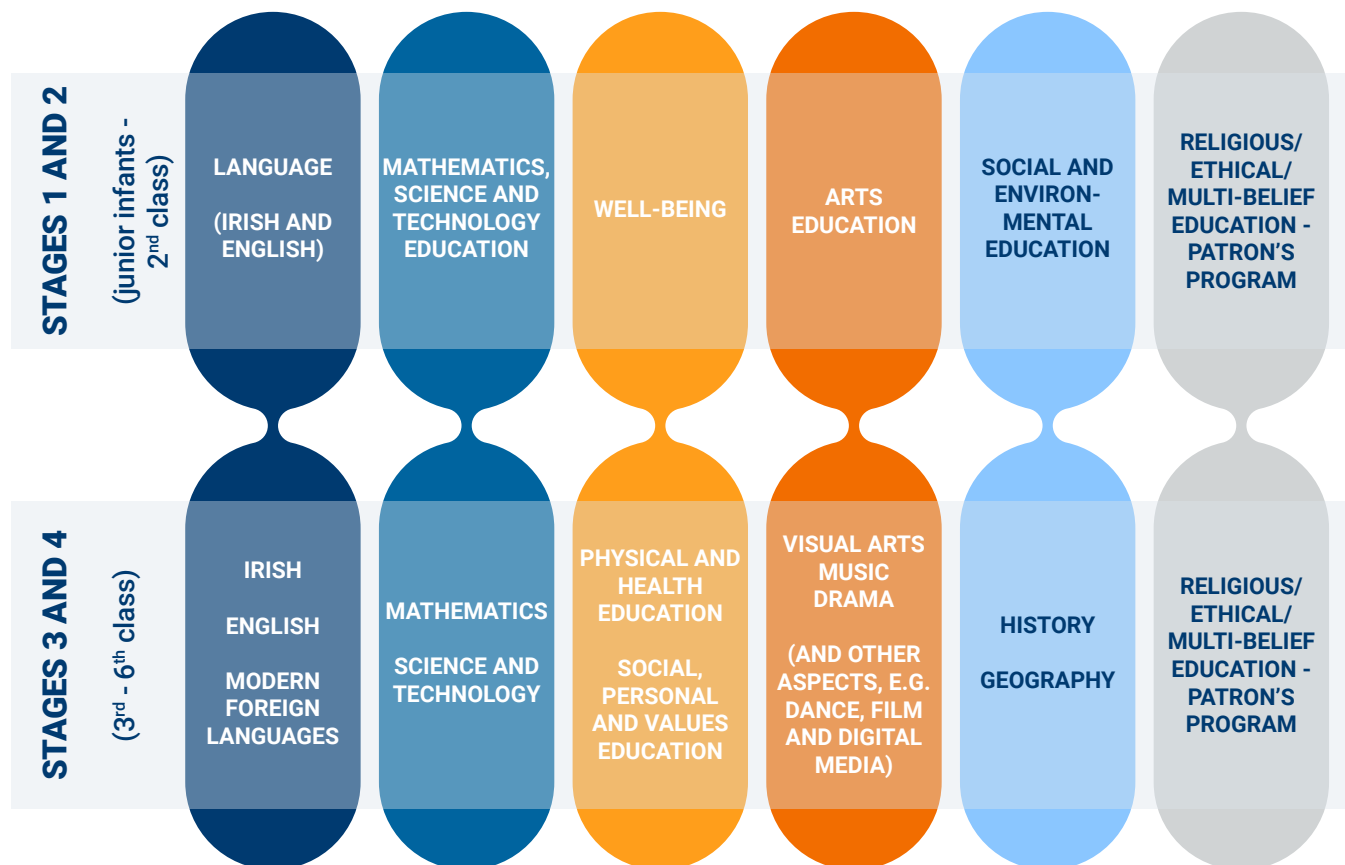
Time allocations for the redeveloped curriculum areas and subjects, as well as "flexible time," receive significant attention within the draft framework, perhaps indicating the contested nature of these issues. Overall, proposals provide for further flexibility than is currently available to schools and teachers in framing their pedagogical priorities and approaches based on their professional judgement—and in response to pupils' choices and learning needs.

## ASSESSMENT

Any change to curriculum necessitates a review of assessment practices. In the draft framework (NCCA, 2020), assessment is integral to the curriculum documentation and focuses primarily on supporting pupils' learning. Figure 7 captures the continuum

FIGURE 6

## Curriculum areas and subjects in the redeveloped curriculum



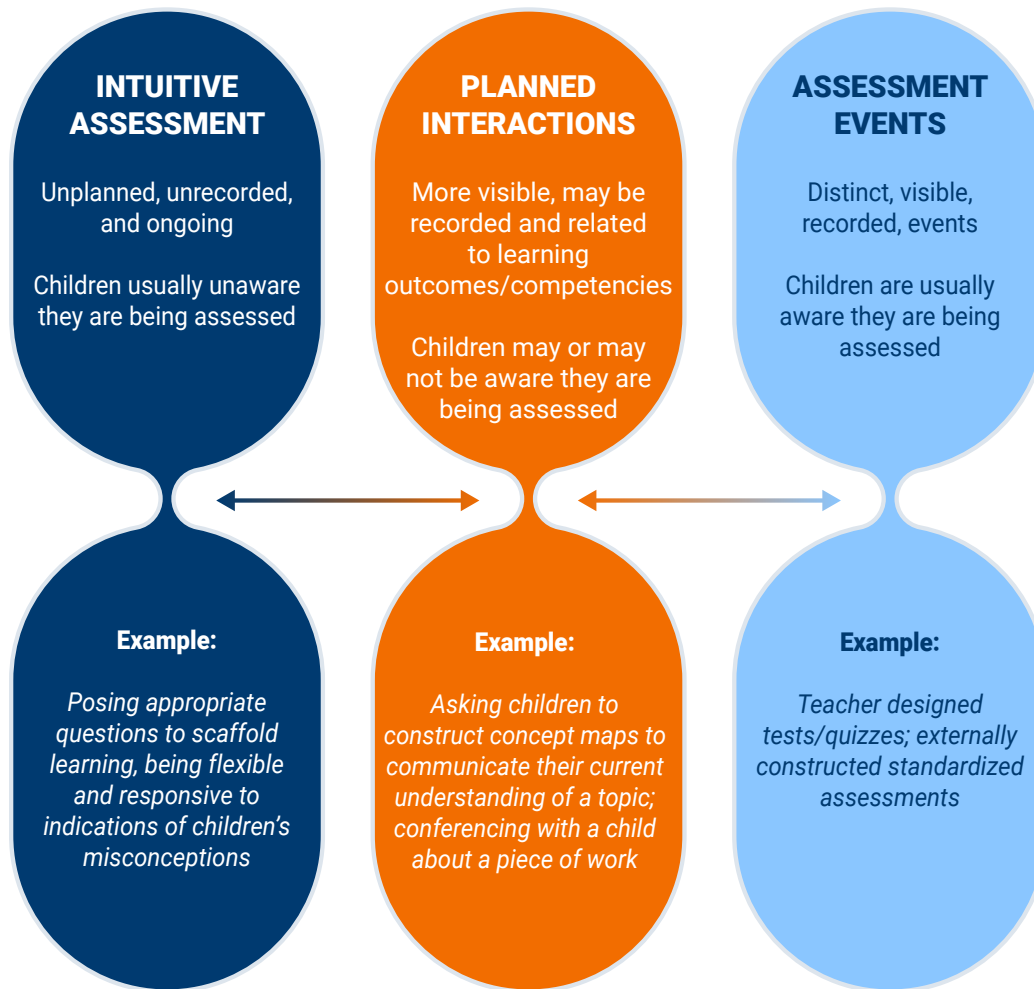| | LANGUAGE (IRISH AND ENGLISH) | MATHEMATICS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION | WELL-BEING | ARTS EDUCATION | SOCIAL AND ENVIRON-MENTAL EDUCATION | RELIGIOUS/ ETHICAL/ MULTI-BELIEF EDUCATION - PATRON'S PROGRAM |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **STAGES 1 AND 2** (junior infants - 2nd class) | | | | | | |
| **STAGES 3 AND 4** (3rd - 6th class) | IRISH ENGLISH MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES | MATHEMATICS SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY | PHYSICAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION SOCIAL, PERSONAL AND VALUES EDUCATION | VISUAL ARTS MUSIC DRAMA (AND OTHER ASPECTS, E.G. DANCE, FILM AND DIGITAL MEDIA) | HISTORY GEOGRAPHY | RELIGIOUS/ ETHICAL/ MULTI-BELIEF EDUCATION - PATRON'S PROGRAM |

**Source:** NCCA, 2020:11.

of assessment in the curriculum, which is framed around the child's awareness of assessment practices and ranges from intuitive assessment to distinct assessment events.

Acknowledging the complementary elements of the continuum —and the criticality of intuitive assessment that is rooted in teacher professionalism and judgement —is very important for understanding holistic student outcomes and for shifting assessment discourses within the system. The draft curriculum framework also acknowledges the potential insights that assessment events such as standardized testing provides for teachers and pupils and encourages a balanced and flexible assessment culture in schools. Ireland places considerable significance on both national and international measures of pupils' performance (undertaken largely in the areas of

literacy, numeracy, and science), and a shift in focus is needed to understand what such measurements tell (and indeed do not tell) about pupils' holistic learning experiences and outcomes. In a context where what is easily measured becomes valued (Biesta, 2020), a shift in focus to measuring what we truly value in education is required. In the absence of nationally defined curriculum objectives for each subject and class level and with an increased emphasis on whole child development, evaluation and assessment approaches will need to be more responsive, agile, and contextualized. They will need to focus on and capture the impact of experiences as well as outcomes and enhance focus on learning competencies.

FIGURE 7

## Continuum of assessment



**INTUITIVE ASSESSMENT**

Unplanned, unrecorded, and ongoing

Children usually unaware they are being assessed

**Example:**

*Posing appropriate questions to scaffold learning, being flexible and responsive to indications of children's misconceptions*

**PLANNED INTERACTIONS**

More visible, may be recorded and related to learning outcomes/competencies

Children may or may not be aware they are being assessed

**Example:**

*Asking children to construct concept maps to communicate their current understanding of a topic; conferencing with a child about a piece of work*

**ASSESSMENT EVENTS**

Distinct, visible, recorded, events

Children are usually aware they are being assessed

**Example:**

*Teacher designed tests/quizzes; externally constructed standardized assessments*

**Source:** NCCA, 2020:23.

# Capacity building and infrastructure for change

The complexity of redeveloping the national curriculum is significant given the proposed shifts in vision, content, and presentation, disrupting the current educational ecosystem that has been shaped within a particular context over time (Hatch, 2002; Van den Akker, 2018). From the outset, system-wide engagement of all stakeholders in the redevelopment process has been central to capacity building at all levels. One of the commendable aspects of activity to date has been the foregrounding of this capacity building to support change through seminars, events, and the work of the advisory panel as an integral element of the curriculum development process. For example, the focus of Leading Out seminar 3 was on alignment and coherence within the system with a view to identifying the "'zone of influence' of all actors across all levels in the system, including the points of interface, interaction and interdependency between them, (which) will be critical to ensuring all actors understand where they 'fit' on the landscape and the criticality of their contribution to the change process" (Hayward et al., 2022: 26).

The final section of the "Draft Primary Curriculum Framework for Consultation" (NCCA, 2020:26) identifies a range of necessary supports for successful curriculum enactment, including time to become familiar with the curriculum, opportunities for rich and meaningful professional learning for teachers and educationalists, and curriculum changes across the continuum of teacher education. Advice for the minister on creating conducive conditions for curriculum enactment will also accompany the finalized curriculum framework in early 2023.

As is evident in Figure 1 earlier, there is a centrally diffused approach to curriculum development in Ireland, with the "busyness" of the national landscape not balanced by regional or school-based infrastructures to effectively mediate or interpret national policymaking. Enhanced contexts, forums, and structures for the education system to work and learn together are key to successful curriculum development and enactment. One initiative at the national level in this regard is the establishment of the Primary Education Forum in 2018 to facilitate exchange between various departments, agencies, teachers, school leaders, and managers in an effort to bring greater alignment and coherence to policy development for primary schools (White, 2020). However, as curriculum enactment depends on touching the hearts and minds of all teachers and school leaders, more will be needed to continue the conversation into regional and local contexts, as well as to ensure local communication and messaging reaches the national context to inform iterative planning and thinking.

It is at the school level where the most significant challenges will present. In the reconceptualized role of the teacher as curriculum maker, the expertise and judgements at the local level must be further acknowledged, supported, and celebrated by wider stakeholders. As teachers and school leaders engage in individual and collaborative curriculum sense-making, negotiation, and co-construction, it will require time, space, and professional acumen to undertake the complex role of contextually and developmentally appropriate curriculum making. More broadly, the focus on pupil agency—involving child and parent voice in ongoing curriculum development processes—will result in a further dimension of professional

responsibility for many teachers and schools. The Bringing Education Alive for Communities on a National Scale (BEACONS) model—which has brought together a range of stakeholders including children, parents, teachers, school leaders, and national bodies to share their perspectives, views, and ideas on the future of a primary school curriculum in Ireland—provides a possible structure for adaptation and replication. Further embedding of school self-evaluation practices at a school level will also provide a school-based structure to support curriculum change.

# Lessons for policy

The redevelopment of the primary school curriculum in Ireland is in progress, with a final primary curriculum framework due to be published in early 2023 followed by subject (area) specifications in 2025. Even at this early stage of development, a number of key themes for charting out on a reform journey oriented around the whole child are emerging.

## SYSTEM-WIDE INVOLVEMENT

Curriculum reform is contextual, complex, and non-linear, introducing new ideas into existing practices that require complex processes of sense-making to integrate the reform into sustainable beliefs and practices. The process for redeveloping the primary school curriculum, led by the NCCA, has engaged with stakeholders from all layers of the education system and wider interested parties from the outset, drawing on research, deliberations, consultations, and networking. This attends to all the interrelated components of a "competent system," as characterized by Urban et al. (2011). The iterative nature of the process has also facilitated familiarity with the evolving proposals and a growing sense of ownership and identification with the emerging framework. This approach conceptualizes curriculum redevelopment as a multifaceted "ecology of reform," as termed by Savage and O'Connor (2019:821), where curriculum change impacts on all aspects of education policy and practice.

The threat exists, however, that curriculum messaging across departments, agencies, and organizations can become complex, refracted, unclear, and indeed

contradictory. In the context of a global pandemic and the curtailment of the normal networking opportunities, achieving system-wide shared understandings and coherence becomes a more substantial challenge. A key necessity is to foster a sense of ownership of the redeveloped curriculum across the wider membership of the teaching profession. As the literature clearly communicates (Fullan, 2018; Shirley, 2016), it is ultimately at the level of the individual teacher that the curriculum is co-constructed and mediated and where meaningful, symbolic, or superficial responses to change are formulated. In reality, the partnership structures have operated well among the national agencies at the macro level of the Irish education system, but there has been less success in terms of connectivity and transfer from the macro to the micro level of schools. Time and space are key requirements for teachers—individually and collectively—to engage cognitively and emotionally with the proposed curriculum ideas and to explore the interface between their own professional identities and the reform proposals.

## A LEARNING SYSTEM

Related to system-wide involvement, the process of curriculum redevelopment has positioned the education system as a whole as a "learning system" and all education stakeholders as agents of curriculum change. In essence, it sets an expectation that all stakeholders are simultaneously both contributors and learners. In the traditional "center-periphery" model (Kelly, 2009), there was a sense that those at the center were the experts who developed curriculum policy for teachers and school leaders to enact. Conceptualizing the process as "everyone learning together" (Hayward et al., 2022:6) has spread the focus across the entire system rather than on the actions of teachers and school leaders alone. Establishing the redevelopment process as a shared responsibility and endeavor, where each and every stakeholder brings their insights, experience, expertise, and learning needs to the table, has attempted to flatten such traditional power hierarchies. Space and contexts have been created to engage with the "messier" and affective aspects of curriculum redevelopment to support sustainable and meaningful changes in beliefs, attitudes, and practices.

It is through ongoing and mutually respectful interactions within the spirit of a learning system that a vision and its enactment can be conceptualized and developed in a sustainable way. This responds to the call of Pietarinen et al. (2017:25) for a top-down-bottom-up approach to curriculum reform, where the cross-fertilization of ideas across all levels of the system extends the "zone of proximal development" of all stakeholders. Such a system is characterized by a process of gradual progression where the specifics of the curriculum—its nuts and bolts—are continuously co-constructed by a community of partners. It also provides for a symbiotic sharing of knowledge and expertise across all levels of the system, creating social alignment as well as a sense of shared understanding and ownership of policy. Furthermore, there is a distinct acknowledgement of curriculum development being an ongoing system-wide change management process that will extend long beyond the publication of the framework or specifications, involving ongoing individual and collective negotiation, sense-making, growth, and adaptation. It has highlighted the need for further opportunities, particularly at the regional/local level, to support multi-directional communication and to mediate successful curriculum enactment.

## RECONCEPTUALIZING THE 'CURRICULUM'

One of the key conceptual changes introduced by this reform is a repositioning of what "the curriculum" is, how it looks, and how it is used. The shift from a very detailed and prescriptive curriculum underpinned by learning objectives to a curriculum framework with learning outcome-based specifications has been a source of discussion and some disquiet in the redevelopment process. This change in emphasis in the Irish context, looking at the curriculum as something that is constantly evolving, adapting, and developing, shaped by teacher professional judgement and pupil choices, requires something new and different from teachers who have historically been conceptualized as "implementers" of centralized curriculum policy. While cumbersome for many to navigate, a detailed curriculum provided certainty in terms of professional expectations for teachers and clarity as to what external inspections may focus upon. A delicate balance is required in terms of moving away from the current "spiral of specification" toward specifications

that provide a balance of clarity and flexibility. This conceptual change and emphasis on teacher and pupil agency will require ongoing discussion and scaffolding for all stakeholders across the system as the process of curriculum redevelopment moves towards a process of curriculum enactment.

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# Appendix A: Methods

The case report was compiled based on document analysis of both national and international policy and theoretical literature. The case report author has academic expertise in the historical development and contemporary landscape of primary curriculum policy in Ireland. The author has been invited to contribute research papers and make seminar presentations as part of the redevelopment process since 2018. His membership on the advisory panel, which has supported the NCCA in the redevelopment of the primary school curriculum since 2020, provided further insights in terms of the review process. An earlier draft was reviewed by a senior official within the NCCA and very useful insights have been incorporated within the case study.

# Appendix B: Artifacts that may be useful to understand the system

A broad overview of the Irish education system is available on the European Commission's Eurydice website.

The NCCA website provides a wide range of information and support in a range of media in relation to the primary school curriculum. It dedicates an entire section to the process for redeveloping the primary curriculum. This is comprised of the following sub-sections, all of which provide further insights on the system and the redevelopment process:

- **Draft Primary Curriculum Framework | NCCA:** This section contains the text of the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework for Consultation* (NCCA, 2020), as well as explanatory videos and ancillary materials

- **Curriculum Review | NCCA:** This section provides an overview of the various research reports, seminars, and consultations, which are informing the redevelopment process.

- **Schools Forum | NCCA:** This section profiles the role and working of the Schools' Forum in support of the redevelopment process.

- **Research and Publications | NCCA:** This section contains the myriad research papers and wider documentation that has informed and emerged from the redevelopment of the primary school curriculum.

- **Supporting Change | NCCA:** This section shares the structures and processes used to support curriculum change are detailed in this section.

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