

This chapter explores the interface between the draft primary curriculum framework for primary schools and curricular provision for preschool education, most notably Aistear. It argues that the redeveloped curriculum provides an opportunity to forge enhanced levels of continuity and coherence in the learning experiences of young children.

Introduction

Processes of curriculum review and redevelopment are integral to education systems to ensure coherence between educational programmes in schools, evolving educational understandings, and societal values and expectations. Since the advent of political independence a hundred years ago, there have been three substantive curriculum changes in primary schools: in 1922/1926, in 1971 (the 'New' curriculum), and in 1999 (the 'Revised' curriculum). These curricula encapsulated and reflected the pedagogical understandings, concepts of children, and societal standards of their respective eras. Guidance on content and pedagogies for pupils in the infant classes (pupils aged four to seven, generally) were integral to these curricula.

Exciting work is currently under way, led by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), on redeveloping the 1999 curriculum. This has already resulted in the publication in February 2020 of a *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework for Consultation* (NCCA, 2020), and it is intended that the redeveloped curriculum will be introduced in all primary schools from the mid-2020s. The purpose of this article is to explore the interface between the draft primary curriculum framework for primary schools and curricular provision for preschool education, most notably Aistear.

Curriculum provision for young children in Ireland

Before exploring the vision, content, and pedagogies of the recently published redeveloped curriculum framework, it is important to contextualise curricular provision for preschool education in Ireland. Historically, the State has been notable by its absence in the provision of childcare or preschool education, leading to the development of provisions among private, community, and voluntary providers (Coolahan et al., 2017). The infant classes of primary schools, which have traditionally catered for children aged four and upwards, were the key State provision for young children.

The Redeveloped Primary School Curriculum

An opportunity for continuity and coherence in early childhood education



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In the past two decades, however, there have been enhanced levels of State involvement and support for the care and education of preschool children, including the universal provision of up to two years of 'free' preschool (three hours a day for thirty-eight weeks a year) under the ECCE Scheme since 2016 (Walsh, 2016). Until the publication of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) for children from birth to six years of age, there was no national guidance on curriculum for preschool children. *Aistear* and *Siolta* (the National Quality Framework) were merged in the *Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* in 2015 (NCCA, 2015). Preschool settings participating in the ECCE Scheme are obliged to adhere to the principles of *Aistear* and *Siolta* when planning their educational programmes (DCYA, 2019).

As a consequence, many pupils attending the infant classes of primary school now and in the future will have experienced up to two years of preschool education, which was not accounted for when the 1999 curriculum was being devised. In the past decade, children's educational experiences in many infant classes have been increasingly informed by *Aistear*, with a greater emphasis on play-based approaches to teaching and learning. Moreover, the recent *Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019) incorporates a strong emphasis on play and playful approaches in every outcome for the infant classes. However, there is scope to further clarify the interface between *Aistear* and the primary school curriculum and to support its implementation (French, 2013). This reality makes the decision to redevelop the primary school curriculum a welcome and timely initiative, wherein issues of alignment and coherence with provisions at preschool must be to the fore of considerations.

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The redeveloped curriculum framework

The publication of the draft primary curriculum framework in 2020 (NCCA, 2020) marks the culmination of a range of research publications, consultations with a wide variety of partners and stakeholders through curriculum seminars and online fora, and engagement with teachers and principals through the Schools' Forum¹. One of the key reports in this regard related to the structure and time allocation in a redeveloped curriculum. The consultation underpinning this report favoured a more cohesive approach between the preschool years and the infant classes to support continuity of learning for young children, as well as a more integrated or thematic approach to learning in the infant classes (NCCA, 2018a). In terms of the Schools' Forum, it is heartening that a number of preschools are participating in and contributing to this work to ensure that cognisance is taken of children's learning and development before they attend primary school.

The draft primary curriculum framework is infused with many of the principles of *Aistear*, including teacher and child agency, flexibility for local adaptation in line with school needs and contexts, and learning through play, exploration, experimentation, and inquiry. Moreover, there are strong resonances between the two documents' visions for the child as a unique, capable and caring individual. Transitions and continuity between preschool, primary, and post-primary schooling are a central principle of

the redeveloped curriculum, facilitating smooth transitions for the learning journeys of children throughout their educational experience. This aligns well with the NCCA work on preschool to primary school transitions using the *Mo Scéal* documentation as a context for communication and dialogue between professionals, families, and children (NCCA, 2018b).

Similarly to Aistear, the redeveloped primary school curriculum will focus not only on knowledge and skills but also on developing children's dispositions, values, and attitudes through seven broad-based competencies which will be embedded across the curriculum outcomes. For the first four years of primary schooling (junior infants to second class), there will be a focus on integrated and thematic learning across a range of curriculum areas, providing for a continuum of experiences from preschool to primary school, which is subsequently built on within subjects from third to sixth class.

Once the draft curriculum framework is finalised at the end of the current consultative period, this document will then be used to develop a curriculum specification for each curriculum area or subject. These specifications will be similar to the format of Aistear and the subjects for post-primary Junior Cycle, as well as the new languages and Mathematics curricula at primary level, providing the broad direction of travel but allowing freedom and flexibility to teachers to frame contextually appropriate learning content, pedagogies, and assessment practices.

Conclusion

The current redevelopment process and the initial outcomes bode well for a primary school curriculum that respects, learns from, and builds on children's successes and learning in preschool settings. Early indications are that supportive pedagogical considerations and values from Aistear are being infused upwards to the primary school, informing the pedagogical provisions and interactions in the infant classes of primary schools. The enhanced levels of synchronisation in curricula should create a context for increased dialogue and sharing among early years professionals and primary school teachers to support continuity of learning for young children. This should provide for smoother transitions for young children entering the infant classes, enabling the framing of more contextually responsive learning experiences and pedagogies.

“**Transitions and continuity between preschool, primary, and post-primary schooling are a central principle of the redeveloped curriculum.**”

Aistear was the first curriculum framework introduced in the Irish context, and the shift in culture from a prescribed curriculum to a more loosely defined curriculum framework, now also proposed for the redeveloped primary school curriculum, should not be underestimated. Frameworks require higher levels of engagement from early years professionals and teachers as 'curriculum makers' (Priestley and Philippou, 2018) at a school level rather than as 'implementers' of prescribed content. The 'framework' style has arguably proved challenging for early years professionals, infant class teachers, and indeed post-primary Junior Cycle teachers. Sustained support for 'sense-making' (Pietarinen et al., 2017) at both individual and collective level must become a feature of the enactment of the redeveloped curriculum, supporting the agency of teachers and schools to make contextually appropriate and informed content and pedagogical decisions.

On the positive side, the learning experiences for all young children will be guided by curricular frameworks (Aistear and the redeveloped primary curriculum framework), providing for more flexibility, agency, and responsive pedagogies. Perhaps this is the next step on Ireland's journey towards a composite curriculum framework to inform all aspects of learning and development, such as the Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government, 2009) for three- to eighteen-year-olds that has been developed in Scotland.

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ENDNOTES

1. The NCCA established a Schools' Forum consisting of sixty primary schools, post-primary schools, and preschools from across the country, representing the rich diversity of school contexts in Ireland. Teachers and practitioners meet every four to six weeks to guide and help shape the primary curriculum review and redevelopment. See: <https://ncca.ie/en/primary/primary-developments/consultation-on-the-draft-primary-curriculum-framework/schools-forum>.