

Reopening, Re-engaging, and Renewing

A reflection on 2021

Extended school closures, losses of learning time, and the stress experienced by children, parents, teachers, school leaders, and policymakers can leave us with a sour taste as we reflect on 2021. This article takes an optimistic view, however, pointing towards the re-emergence of education as a national priority, the agility of our system-wide response, the renewed focus on equity and inclusion, and the supreme efforts of stakeholders during this remarkable time.

Damien White, writing in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2020*, referred to the time 'Before Covid-19' as BC and looked forward to a time post-pandemic which will surely have an 'Altered Direction' or AD. While we are still quite a distance from being post-pandemic, the Altered Direction of education is coming somewhat into view, presenting opportunities and challenges for primary schools and special schools in the years ahead.

The pandemic has, among many other things, given us the opportunity to look at primary education with fresh eyes and to consider what an Altered Direction might be in the context of a redeveloped curriculum and, more precisely, the consultation on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020) published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

School closures

Paul Reid, chief executive of the Health Service Executive (HSE), in the early days of the pandemic referred to 'perfect as the enemy of good' during crisis situations. Acting out of necessity, he and his colleagues knew that the decisions being made were not going to be perfect, that there would be teething and ongoing issues in a host of areas. But these difficult decisions had to be made.

This was also true for the organisations and agencies supporting our schools. The second national closure of schools and early childhood settings in January 2021 is one such decision which, though undesirable, was certainly the right decision from a public health perspective.

By this time, teachers and school leaders had reflected on their experiences of the first prolonged school closure (from March to June 2020), put in place contingency plans for remote teaching and learning, further developed their Digital Schools Strategy, undertaken professional



Dr Patrick Sullivan
Deputy Chief Executive
Officer, National
Council for Curriculum
and Assessment

learning in digital learning platforms, and established new ‘ways of working’ and collaborating remotely.

While teachers and school leaders were better prepared for the round of closures, the expectations from parents, children, the general public, and policymakers had changed. Their expectations were informed by stories illustrating the effects of school closures on children and wellbeing, the loss of connection to peer groups, and the realities of the socio-economic and digital divide. In response, teachers and school leaders re-engaged in remote teaching and learning with a renewed sense of purpose and focus: to maintain connections with children and their families, to support those in need, and to provide quality remote learning experiences for all children.

Despite the best efforts of all involved, the challenges of remote teaching and learning re-emerged. The realities of uneven access to digital devices; varying levels of engagement in online learning; the stress and burnout experienced by teachers, school leaders, and parents; and the social isolation of children from their peer groups began to present themselves. As our collective concern deepened, it seemed everyone was calling for schools to reopen and to stay open.

“ We gained an insight into the incalculable social value of schools and education. ”

The positive reassertion of the value of schooling has been striking in public discourse since the reopening of schools in March 2021. This value is beyond economic imperatives; it understands the vital connection that schools nurture with communities and peer groups, supporting cognitive, emotional, civic, and social development and providing a place where children most in need are supported. In short, we gained an insight into the incalculable social value of schools and education.

Reopening – the system response

If the pandemic reasserted the importance of schools and the need to keep them open, it equally brought calls for agility and responsiveness from our education system. In the early days of school closures this was evident in many ways:

- the Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, declared a stalling of consultations and policy renewals from the Department of Education (DE) and its agencies in an effort to ease the burden on schools;
- the support services and Education Centre network provided an extensive catalogue of professional learning opportunities in digital technology and the effective use of pedagogy;
- the support and advisory calls provided by the Inspectorate;
- the assessment and pedagogical guidance provided by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA);
- the use of established networks such as the Irish Primary Principals’ Network (IPPN) and the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO);
- the intermediary communications supported by school management bodies;
- the coaching service to principals from the Centre for School Leadership (CSL);

- the DE and the Educational Research Centre rescheduled standardised test administration;
- the funding for personal protective equipment (PPE) and sanitisation, and the comprehensive guidance developed by the DE and its agencies.

Echoing Paul Reid's sentiment, much of this support was put in place at great speed, and while it may not always have been perfect, it certainly showed our system's willingness to respond to the needs of children, their families, and their schools.

An example of the government's commitment to keep schools safe and open was seen in the expansion of the HSE school support teams. These consisted of colleagues reassigned from across the Inspectorate, the support services, Better Start, the National Education Psychological Service (NEPS), the CSL, and the NCCA and provided invaluable support for schools managing Covid-19 cases. Working around the clock, the support teams responded as best they could to the increasing case numbers.

“ Looking ahead, we need to ask whether our system can actively reflect on what it has learned from the experience [of Covid-19].

The reopening of schools in September 2021, coinciding with the peak of the Delta variant, added to the pressure on the system, and response times to schools were impacted as a result. While the successes or failures of the system can be debated, the reassignment shows the willingness of the system and individuals to step up in an effort to give schools the best chance of remaining open during waves of the pandemic.

These efforts were also evident during the recent shortage of teachers due to rising case numbers in the community and, as a result, in our primary schools. The measures facilitated by our support services and initial teacher education institutes, and introduced by the Department of Education, enabled seconded, retired, and student teachers to 'step into the breach' and provide substitution cover to schools in need.

Looking back on the system response to the pandemic in 2021, we can assert that the system was willing to respond to the crisis in innovative ways. Looking ahead, we need to ask whether our system can actively reflect on what it has learned from the experience and how it can build constructively on this learning to support schools in their Altered Direction.

Learning – what the research tells us

An important part of this learning process is to consider what the research done during the pandemic is reflecting back to us. The sheer volume and breadth of education studies examining the ongoing experiences of the pandemic illustrate the impact it continues to have across all aspects of our education system.

This was evident when the *Irish Educational Studies* journal published a special edition (Hall et al., 2021) focused on the impact of the pandemic. It was the largest ever edition of the journal, with over 30 papers published. Its wide-ranging themes include:

- implications for diversity, inclusion, and social justice in education
- the impact on curriculum, assessment, and examinations
- system leadership, leadership, and interagency collaboration
- schooling at home, online and distance learning, and outdoor education
- mental health and well-being for learners and teachers.

One of the most in-depth pieces of research published is a national longitudinal study, Children's School Lives (www.cslstudy.ie), being undertaken by a research team in University College Dublin (UCD) and funded by the NCCA. It follows a representative sample of 4,000 children in 189 schools through their primary school years. As the first study of its kind in Ireland, it is beginning to generate rich, in-depth insights into what it is like to be a child in an Irish primary school.

The study continued during school closures and reported on the experiences of children (in third class), parents, teachers, and school leaders from March to June 2020. The report outlines the challenges and barriers experienced but also how teachers and school leaders rose to these challenges and the supreme efforts they made to support children and families during this time.

Schools continued to access support services and also reported learning from other schools during school closures. Teachers reported contacting parents frequently about remote learning, and most children were very positive about the quality of communication they received about remote learning. However, principals reported feeling overwhelmed with the advice they received from government stakeholders, and with the stress of having to carefully manage communication with the range of stakeholders in their school communities – a finding mirrored in research by Burke and Dempsey (2020) at Maynooth University. While challenges were evident, overall the picture painted is very positive, where schools actively reached out and supported their most vulnerable children and families.

The impact of remote teaching and learning undoubtedly altered the progress of children's learning during 2021. And we know that some children have been affected more than others (Symonds et al., 2020; ESRI, 2021). As studies continue to analyse the impact of the pandemic, some will turn to standardised test scores as a way to measure the gap in learning pre- and post-Covid-19. And it is likely they will document the extent of inequity within and across schools, with schools that have more children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds experiencing a greater loss in learning. The pandemic has not been a uniform experience for all, and so the impacts will be uneven.

The value of schools in this regard is outlined by Hargreaves and Shirley (2021):

When we eject young people from in-person schooling, in the overwhelming majority of cases, we remove the counterbalancing forces that schools provide for vulnerable students ... leaving them at the mercy of the unequal environment outside of their schools. (p. 38)

It can be easy to jump to ready-made solutions to address the loss in learning. Some will refer to increasing time, and focus on direct teaching, the three Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic), and the use of objective measures to assess progress. These responses have merit, but they address only a narrow set of specific areas of learning which alone will not address the inequality and loss of engagement experienced by many children.

For this reason, it is heartening to see the turn towards a focus on 'connection before content' in the discourse on losses in learning in Ireland. This was a feature of the Teaching Council's webinar series 'Learning for All' and was based on a paper by Bray et al. (2021) at Trinity College. Their findings highlight two things: firstly, that meaningful connection between teachers and children matters for engagement, particularly for children at risk of educational disadvantage. Secondly, when teachers use innovative teaching and learning methods and encourage the development of children's skills, engagement increases.

“ By reflecting on the research, we can see the precious space our schools hold in Irish society, and how we may have taken this for granted in the past.

Encouragingly, the focus on connection and engagement, and the targeted support for children most impacted by the pandemic, are seen in the Covid Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS): Guidance for Primary and Special Schools (DE, 2021). In addition to providing for additional teaching support, CLASS aims to support extracurricular activities to redress the negative impact on children's wellbeing and to promote a sense of belonging and connectedness. This is a timely and important example of marrying effective targeted support with an understanding of the broad impact of the pandemic on children's lives.

Each study undertaken during the pandemic provides an insight into our collective experiences, and as we look across this body of work, we can begin to understand the extent of its impact. By reflecting on the research, we can see the precious space our schools hold in Irish society, and how we may have taken this for granted in the past.

We now understand that we cannot do without physical schools and the sense of connection, identity, and belonging that school communities foster. They are places that can enhance and support wellbeing, human dignity, positive relationships, and engagement, along with providing equity in educational endeavours. These insights can strengthen our investment in and commitment to the educational enterprise as a whole.

Renewing – the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework

As we look ahead from 2021, cognisant of our recent experiences, we might ask what an Altered Direction will look like. In particular we might ask what we have learned about what is important for children in the 21st century and how can this be reflected in curriculum and assessment developments.

In February 2020, the NCCA published a set of proposals, for consultation, on the future direction of the primary school curriculum in the form of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework. This followed a process of engaging with and generating research, working with networks of schools and educational settings, consulting on specific curriculum areas, and

deliberating with partners in education. Fundamentally the draft framework presents an opportunity to revisit the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) as a whole and to ask:

- What is the *purpose* of a primary education for tomorrow's children?
- What *priorities, structure, and components* in a curriculum can support this?

The draft framework sets out a clear vision and a set of principles for teaching and learning. It attempts to highlight what is important in primary education and why, and it provides a description of what should be prioritised in children's learning. The proposals take account of:

- recent calls for curriculum change; for example, increasing time for existing areas such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Physical Education (PE)
- suggested new aspects of learning, such as Coding and Computational Thinking, Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, Modern Foreign Languages, and more emphasis on wellbeing
- the provision of two years of universal preschool education, and the publication of Aistear (2009) and the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)
- advances in technology and the world that children are living in, where they have ready access to information
- different experiences of family life, different cultures, different beliefs and viewpoints, and different abilities and needs.

The draft framework views children as *unique, capable, and caring* individuals, and teachers as *committed, skilful, agentic* professionals. Through this vision the draft framework's proposed aim is:

to provide a strong foundation for every child to thrive and flourish, supporting them to realise their full potential as individuals and as members of communities and society during childhood and into the future. (NCCA, 2020, p. 5)

To achieve this, the draft framework builds on the success and strengths of the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999), including enhanced enjoyment of learning for children, increased use of active methodologies for teaching and learning, and improved attainment levels in reading, mathematics, and science, as evidenced in national and international assessments. It also responds to challenges and changing needs and priorities in education by:

- addressing curriculum overload
- taking stock of strategies, initiatives, and programmes in order to clarify priorities for children's learning
- providing a link between Aistear and the Framework for Junior Cycle.

The draft framework places importance on agency and flexibility for teachers and schools, recognising the variety of school contexts and providing for environments that support the learning of every child. It aims to increase flexibility for schools in terms of planning and timetabling. For instance, it proposes up to seven hours of 'flexible time' per month. Each school would decide how best to allocate this time: a particular curriculum area one month and another area the next month, for example, or a local

project or initiative. Central to this proposal is the vision of teachers as agentic professionals who are well equipped to make professional decisions based on their expertise, their knowledge of their children and their school context, and the information they have to hand.

The draft framework supports strong connections between children's experiences in preschool and in early primary, and between later primary and early post-primary. It does this through its eight principles, the proposed key competencies that link to Aistear's four themes and the eight key skills in the Framework for Junior Cycle, and through the types of learning experiences described across the curriculum areas and subjects that would provide children with opportunities for decision-making, creativity, and collaboration. See Figure 1.



Figure 1: Key competencies in the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020)

Children born this year will begin primary school in the mid-2020s, start their working lives in the 2040s, and retire in the 2080s–2090s. Taking account of the Irish and global community, these children will be part of the proposal's identified emerging priorities, which are presented as seven key competencies for junior infants to sixth class. These are intended to equip children with essential knowledge, skills, concepts, dispositions, attitudes, and values to help them adapt to and deal with a range of situations, challenges, and contexts that life will bring.

The draft framework also proposes giving more time to wellbeing, introducing a modern foreign language, broadening arts education, and increasing the focus on technology in a redeveloped curriculum.

It proposes a broad and balanced curriculum in both purpose and content. It proposes moving from subjects in the first four years of primary school to broad curriculum areas that support an integrated approach to teaching

and learning. To achieve this, the curriculum structure is in five broad curriculum areas:

- Language
- Mathematics, Science and Technology Education
- Wellbeing
- Social and Environmental Education
- Arts Education.

These areas would become further differentiated into subjects from third class onwards to reflect children's growing awareness of subjects as a way of organising their learning.

In addition to the five areas, school patrons have a legal right to design their own programme in accordance with their school's ethos, as reflected in Figure 2.

STAGES 1 AND 2 (JUNIOR INFANTS - 2 ND CLASS)	LANGUAGE (IRISH AND ENGLISH)	MATHEMATICS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION	WELLBEING	ARTS EDUCATION*	SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION	RELIGIOUS/ ETHICAL/ MULTI-BELIEF EDUCATION - PATRON'S PROGRAMME
STAGES 3 AND 4 (3 RD - 6 TH 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, DIGITAL MEDIA)	HISTORY GEOGRAPHY	RELIGIOUS/ ETHICAL/ MULTI-BELIEF EDUCATION - PATRON'S PROGRAMME

* Broad learning outcomes in Art Education would continue to support learning in visual arts, music and drama, as well as supporting other aspects of arts education such as dance, film and digital media, and enabling schools to engage with local, national and international initiatives and opportunities. The learning outcomes would also support integrated learning experiences in stages 1-2. While disciplines within Arts Education have a common creative process and share transferable skills, each has its own knowledge, concept and skills. Subject specific learning outcomes in stages 3-4 alongside a set of broader outcomes overarching the subjects, would ensure children experience a broad and balanced Arts Education.

Figure 2: Curriculum areas and subjects in the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020, p. 11)

Finally, the draft framework promotes evidence-based pedagogical approaches and strategies, with assessment central to teaching and learning. Its focus is on fostering engagement, ownership, and challenge while connecting with children's life experiences and interests. As part of this, it emphasises the importance of curriculum integration, inclusive practice, inquiry-based learning, and playful pedagogy.

Assessment is presented as a central part of teachers' daily practice, with the information enabling them to feed back to children and to make important decisions about what to teach next, the types of activities to use, and how to modify pedagogical approaches to support further learning.

Looking ahead

Consultations on the redevelopment of the primary curriculum as a whole do not happen often, particularly following such a direction-altering crisis as the Covid-19 pandemic. It is now timely to reflect on our experiences and to consider the learnings and new understandings that we've gained during the pandemic. The research generated to date raises questions of:

- wellbeing of children, teachers, and school leaders
- equity and fairness
- our commitment to holistic and inclusive education
- the opportunities and limitations of digital technology and remote learning.

The consultation on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework remains open into early 2022 and is accessible through the NCCA website (www.ncca.ie) and social media channels. Now is the time to exercise your voice on the proposals for a redeveloped Primary School Curriculum.

REFERENCES

- Bray, A., Banks, J., Devitt, A., and Ní Chorcora, E. (2021) 'Connection before content: Using multiple perspectives to examine student engagement during Covid-19 school closures in Ireland', *Irish Educational Studies*, 40(2), 431–441.
- Burke, J. and Dempsey, M. (2020) Covid-19 Practice in Primary Schools in Ireland Report. Maynooth University. www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Covid-19%20Practice%20in%20Primary%20Schools%20Report_0.pdf.
- Department of Education (2021) Covid Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS): Guidance for Primary and Special Schools. www.gov.ie/en/publication/0b4a7-covid-19-learning-and-support-scheme-class-guidance-for-primary-and-special-schools/.
- Department of Education and Science (1999) Primary School Curriculum – Introduction. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Department of Education and Skills (2015) Framework for Junior Cycle. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) (2021) Growing Up in Ireland: Key findings from the special COVID-19 survey of Cohorts '98 and '08. www.esri.ie/publications/growing-up-in-ireland-key-findings-from-the-special-covid-19-survey-of-cohorts-98-and.
- Hall, T., Byrne, D., Bryan, A., Kitching, K., Ní Chróinín, D., O'Toole, C., and Addley, J. (2021) *Irish Educational Studies Journal*, 40(2). COVID-19 and Education: Positioning the Pandemic; Facing the Future.
- Hargreaves, A. and Shirley, D. (2021) *Five Paths of Student Engagement: Blazing the Trail to Learning and Success*. Bloomington: Solution Tree Press.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: Government Publications.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2020) *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*. <https://ncca.ie/en/resources/ncca-primary-curriculum-framework-2020pdf/>.
- Symonds, J.E., Devine, D., Sloan, S., Crean, M., Moore, B., Martinez Sainz, G., Farrell, E., Davies, A., Farrell, J., and Blue, T. (2020) *Experiences of Remote Teaching and Learning in Ireland During the Covid-19 Pandemic (March–May 2020)*. University College Dublin. Available from Children School Lives: <https://cslstudy.ie/news/>.