

# Contemporary Perspectives on Primary Education

## A time for change?

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Education has changed dramatically because of Covid-19. We are learning to live and work with levels of precariousness that we never thought possible. How prepared are our children and our system for this fast-changing world? This overview of primary education looks at the key themes in the sector and how the landscape is set to continue changing in the coming years.

### Covid-19 impact

Education has changed dramatically because of Covid-19. We are learning to live and work with levels of precariousness that we never thought possible. Closing schools to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in March 2020 initiated a phase of change so radical and so profound that it will take time to appreciate the impact it has had on society at large and in particular on children and teachers.

While teaching and learning continued remotely throughout 2020–21, the impact of school closures on children has been significant, with research suggesting that children from areas of socio-economic disadvantage fared worst. When children could not come to school, the importance of being with peers and maintaining personal relationships with their friends and teacher came into sharp relief. Everyone realised something that teachers have always known: that relationships are at the heart of education and that learning in community, learning with and from our interactions, and engaging socially are pivotal to the educational experience.

As the prevalence of Covid-19 created an expected swell in illness and resulting staff and pupil absences in late 2021, a key priority across all sectors was to keep our schools open. An acute shortage of substitute teachers arose during the winter period and, following a request from Minister Norma Foley, all teacher education providers deferred regular teacher education programme schedules to enable years 3 and 4 student teachers on concurrent programmes and all student teachers on consecutive (PME – professional master of education) programmes to provide substitution cover for schools before and after Christmas.

### Teacher supply

In order to ensure that student teachers at primary level could continue to support schools up to the February mid-term break, a ‘framework



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for adapted school placement arrangements' was developed through collaboration among the higher education institutions, the Department of Education, and the Teaching Council. Although it was challenging for principals to navigate the reopening of schools in early January, and the absence of qualified substitutes was keenly felt, the availability of 2,000 student teachers helped ensure that schools remained open. While we recognise that employing students as substitute teachers is not desirable, in the exigencies of the time it was a welcome support to school communities who so generously accept student teachers on placement throughout the year.

One unexpected outcome of our Covid-19 experience is the acute shortage of substitute teachers. Although teacher supply has been the focus of research and planning by the Department over a number of years, the anticipated over-supply of teachers in the primary sector based on demographic trends has not materialised. Instead, the capacity to respond to unplanned teacher absences, and to ensure that all children have a qualified teacher each day, has been a concern for schools throughout 2022.

The under-supply of teachers at second level has been predicted for some time, as the number of children in this sector has grown. However, the solution to a teacher shortage is not to shorten the duration of teacher education programmes, as has been suggested by some in the media. Rather, we need to buttress the quality of our teachers, secure the time they need in teacher preparation programmes, and make teacher education financially viable for students. The costs of fees, accommodation, and deferred income, allied with the prospect of casual employment or short-term contracts when qualified, combine to reduce the attractiveness of second-level teaching.

Ireland is in an enviable position internationally, where teaching is still an attractive and respected profession and where high-achieving young people still have ambitions to become teachers. This is not the norm elsewhere. We must act now to ensure that the quality of our teachers is maintained and that teaching remains a profession of choice for our most talented and capable graduates. The quality of our education system is premised on the quality of our teachers. Lessons from other jurisdictions, where entry requirements have fallen and teacher education has been truncated or translated into in-school apprenticeships, illustrate how the culture and tradition of teaching can be diminished within one generation.

## Classroom diversity

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the ensuing war unfolding on our screens each day have accentuated the unpredictable nature of our lives. While abhorring the level of violence being meted out in Europe today, we admire the resilience of the people of Ukraine. The Irish nation has

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responded generously, and Irish schools have welcomed 12,500 children seeking refuge from the crisis into their communities.

The inclusion of these children, the complexity of their needs, and the supports they and their carers require have been embraced by schools across the State. The response of primary schools has been immediate, informed by the realisation that all children need the normal engagement and routine of schooling, being with their peers, and experiencing the joys and challenges of school life.

Relatively recently Ireland was considered to be largely a culturally homogenous society. Today, as a result of immigration, it is estimated that 10%–15% of the school-going population were born outside Ireland, and in some schools the proportion of newcomer children can reach 50%. Primary teachers have responded with agility and flexibility to the multilingual communities in their classrooms. The teaching profession itself, especially at primary level, is less culturally and ethnically diverse than in other OECD countries. Projects such as the Migrant Teacher Project at Marino Institute of Education work with teachers who have qualified outside the State, providing an induction to the Irish education system and preparing these teachers to restart their teaching careers in Ireland.

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While it is important that we focus on diversity in our classrooms and the rich linguistic heritage of our immigrant children, it is equally important that we value and promote our Irish language. On foot of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017–2022*, which articulated a need for specialised teachers to teach in Irish settings, an Irish-medium degree programme for primary-level teachers was established at Marino Institute of Education in 2019. The programme is the first of its kind since the foundation of the State, and the first cohort of students on this programme will graduate in 2023. We are confident that these graduates will make a significant contribution to the supply of high-quality teachers for Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools into the future.

## Curriculum reform

Curriculum is a valuable mirror of our society and an expression of the values and content we wish to hand on to the next generation. Since independence, the Irish primary school curriculum has changed on only three occasions. This, in and of itself, is an example of the continuity with the past that prevails in education. Our 1971 curriculum focused on the centrality of the child in all learning, and this central tenet was revisited and re-articulated in our 1999 curriculum.

The rate and pace of change have been dramatic over the last quarter century, and so we now have another exciting opportunity to engage in curriculum reform, something that does not come too often. Aware of the necessity to revisit approaches to literacy and numeracy in schools, we have seen the Primary Language Curriculum already revised over the last

five years, and the mathematics curriculum is now ready to be implemented in schools.


This piecemeal revision did not address the wider questions as to the purpose of education for our children in a modern and global environment. It is therefore timely that the structure, content, and philosophical underpinnings of our curriculum are now reviewed and revised. The proposed revised curriculum seeks to bring greater cohesion to children's learning, with an integrated approach to subjects in the junior and middle classes. It gives greater agency to the teacher in the programme, and it prioritises inquiry-based learning. It is proposed that schools will have greater discretion over the use of time and the approaches they adopt to teaching and learning.

As the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) consultation concludes, we must use our voices and engage in this process because our curricula, once established and implemented, have traditionally become long-standing features of our education landscape.

## Inclusion

Inclusion and diversity are now pivotal values in Irish education. The inclusion of children with additional needs in our local schools is a priority for all parents. The availability of special classes in schools, and the staffing and other appropriate resources to support these children and their families, continue to be a matter of grave concern. Despite the goodwill of all, there are still families and schools seeking appropriate supports for children with special educational needs. The extension of DEIS status to more schools has been very welcome during this year, recognising the value and impact of DEIS supports to make measurable improvements in children's learning and to reduce the inequalities that exist in society.

Typically, primary children love their school, their friends, and their teacher. That love for their teacher, and the level of national respect for teachers more generally, was illustrated most poignantly in the tragic death of Aisling Murphy in January 2022. People across the State stopped to mourn the loss of a wonderful, loving daughter, sister, friend, inspiring teacher, musician, and athlete – adored by her pupils, respected by her school community. Aisling's tragic death shone a light on violence against women, but also on the amazingly talented cohort of teachers in our schools, who populate our classrooms each day. The sympathies of the nation go to Aisling's family and her colleagues in Durrow National School – go raibh leaba i measc na naomh ag Aisling.

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## Concluding thoughts

In conclusion, the last year has given us much cause for reflection. Now that we are hopefully in a post-Covid-19 phase, are we returning to the pre-pandemic norms of education? What have we learned that might change our experiences? With the increased appreciation of interactions and relationships in schools, combined with the ready availability of curriculum-related material online, it is time for a good debate on the future role of teachers. How can our next generation of teachers be prepared for a society that requires resilience and strong relationships, where e-learning is a vital component of life, and where our youth must navigate the ubiquitous superficiality of social media?

It is just a decade since the duration, structure, content, and nature of initial teacher education for primary teachers was radically reformed. Initial teacher education programmes must now be research-informed, and graduates must be both research literate and research active, and prepared to address the ever-changing needs of their pupils and schools – in terms of special education, linguistic and cultural diversity, global awareness, and sustainability.

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The quality of a system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers, and if Ireland wishes to retain the high quality of education that we have built up over generations, it is essential that the recent advances in teacher education are not undermined by immediate teacher-supply concerns. It is equally important that our beginning teachers are prepared to use technology in all its guises appropriately in their teaching.

Our children too are changing – they are now less physically active than they were a decade ago, they spend more time on social media, and they are facing a world where the rate of change is accelerating and the sustainability of the planet is threatened. There are big questions to be asked about the future of education in Ireland and the way that young children and people interact with the world. While the NCCA review of the curriculum framework is a step in the right direction, it does seem timely that the government should respond to the recent call for the establishment of a Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Education.

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