

The Primary Curriculum Framework

Heralding a new era for primary and special school education in Ireland

This article, written by the four members of the advisory panel supporting the redevelopment of the primary school curriculum, explores the key features, concepts, and 'big ideas' in the Primary Curriculum Framework, as well as the opportunities and challenges inherent in the curriculum change process.

Introduction

In March 2023, the Department of Education published the Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools (Department of Education, 2023). This adds 2023 to the short list of seminal years since the foundation of the State in which substantive changes to the primary school curriculum in Ireland have been published, the others being 1922, 1971, and 1999.

The curriculum redevelopment has been prompted by advances in research and understanding on children's learning and development since the 1990s, and by the need to ensure the curriculum remains reflective of and responsive to local and global societal changes. The framework was prepared by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) after a long process of consultation, deliberations, and engagement with research (Grant et al., 2020).

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Key features of the Primary Curriculum Framework

The publication of the framework is noteworthy for four substantive reasons. First of all, it is the first time that a curriculum framework as opposed to a more detailed and prescriptive curriculum will inform teaching and learning in schools in Ireland (Walsh, 2016). It sets out a vision, a set of principles, and a list of key competencies that underpin and inform all elements of teaching and learning (summarised in Figure 1).

Over the next two years, this foundational framework document will be complemented by a suite of additional subject area and subject specifications which will articulate, among other things, the aims and learning outcomes for each subject. The shift to presenting learning in the primary curriculum as a set of outcomes as opposed to a set of objectives also marks a new approach and is in line with the more recent Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019) and Primary Mathematics Curriculum (NCCA, 2023). A key element of the curriculum development process is to focus on continuity and progression in children's learning by building on previous learning experiences in early childhood education (Walsh, 2020) and to prepare for future learning at Junior Cycle.

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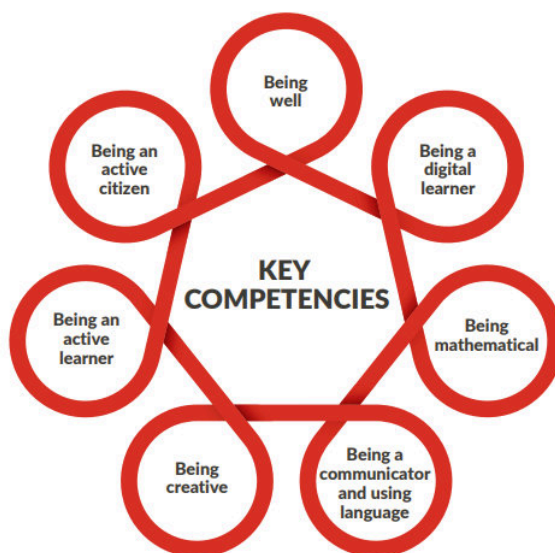


Figure 1: Key competencies in the Primary Curriculum Framework (Department of Education, 2023, p.8)

Second, and consistent with the move away from prescription, the framework articulates a new vision for the primary curriculum in Ireland, one that emphasises the individual and collective agency of teachers and children in

teaching and learning (Hayward et al., 2022). There has been much discussion of agency in the research literature and in the curriculum development. It relates to the freedom and capacity to make informed decisions and choices. The framework's focus on agency empowers school leaders, teachers, and children to make key decisions about the content and approach to education – by, for example, determining themes and topics that are contextually appropriate and enriching.

Third, the framework introduces changes to the range and grouping of primary school subjects, with new distinctions for the various classes and stages (Figure 2). Most noteworthy is the introduction of Technology and Engineering Education alongside Mathematics and Science to form a STEM curriculum area. A Well-being curriculum area has also been established, incorporating elements of Social, Personal and Health Education and Physical Education, and a modern foreign language is being introduced for all children from Third Class.

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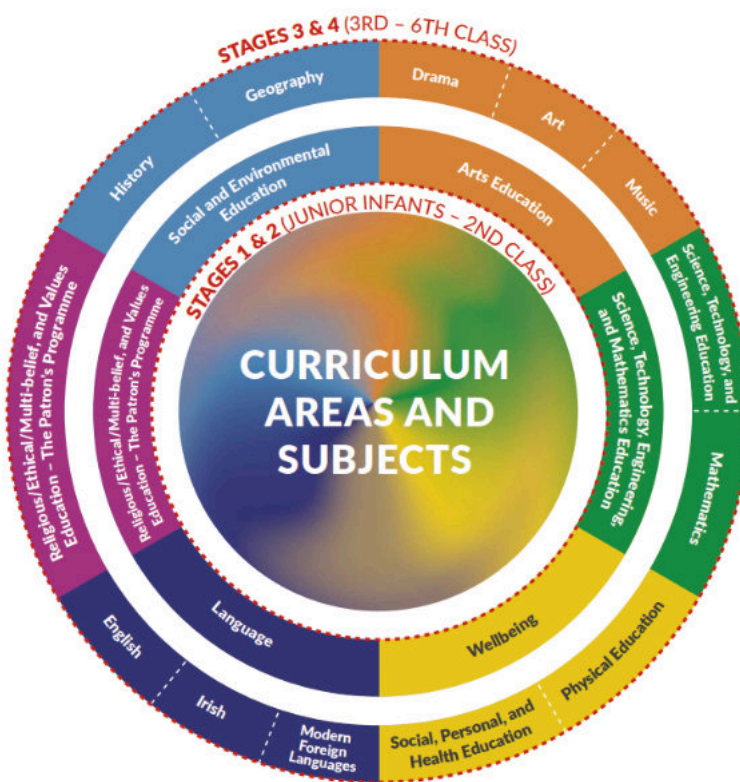


Figure 2: Curriculum areas and subjects (Department of Education, 2023, p.15)

Fourth, and in line with the increased emphasis on teacher and child agency, the framework includes revised suggested guidance on time allocations for the various curriculum areas and subjects. This guidance is provided in a new format with ‘minimum curriculum time’ and ‘flexible time’ that includes both weekly and monthly allocations for the various subjects. Overall, flexibility is encouraged in the suggested time allocations ‘in order to embrace integrative learning, avail of unexpected learning opportunities, pace learning in response to children’s needs, and support immersive and engaging learning experiences’ (Department of Education, 2023, p.38).

Supporting system-wide primary curriculum change

Curriculum change is exciting but also challenging. Indeed, its history in Ireland and internationally is replete with examples of ambitious and progressive policy provisions not becoming embedded in widespread practice in schools (Walsh, 2012; Bascia & Hargreaves, 2013). For the first time in primary school curriculum development in Ireland, the curriculum provisions have been accompanied by a published set of ‘conducive conditions’ necessary for the introduction and enactment of the curriculum: Supporting Systemwide Primary Curriculum Change (NCCA, 2022). The ‘familiar flaws’ (ibid., p.2) in redevelopment and enactment, garnered from national and international research and consultation, have been used as the basis for developing three overarching conditions to support teachers, school leaders, and the wider system (Figure 3).

While the three broad categories and their various subcategories are individually important, it is only in combination and in unison that the fertile ground can be created for introducing and enacting the ambitious curriculum plans. One key strength of this document is that it focuses on potential pathways and actions for all stakeholders across the education system, from national to school level, that will be necessary to support sustainable curriculum change. In our view, the enactment of the actions in this document is as important and necessary as the focus on enacting the framework itself.

Substantive changes to the curriculum: reducing prescription, emphasising teacher and child agency, revising the range and grouping of subjects, and encouraging flexible time allocations.

Shared Vision

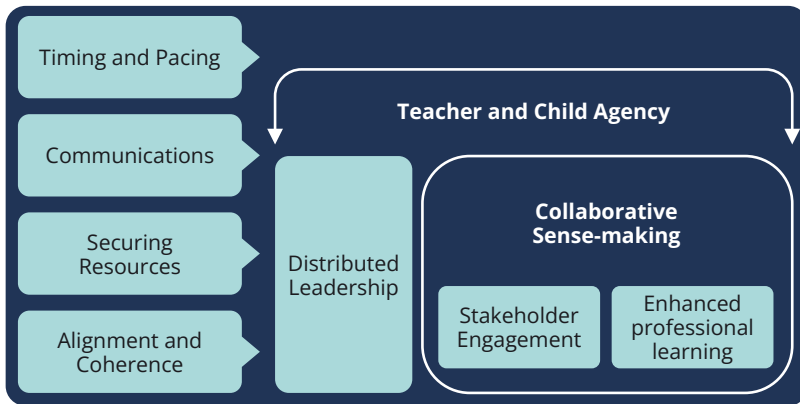


Figure 3: Overview of conducive conditions (NCCA, 2022, p.3)

Conclusion

The substantive changes to the curriculum – reducing prescription, emphasising teacher and child agency, revising the range and grouping of subjects, and encouraging flexible time allocations – provide boundless opportunities and possibilities to enhance teaching and learning experiences into the future. However, these provisions represent significant shifts in curriculum and pedagogical understandings and introduce changes for school leaders and teachers which may challenge their existing beliefs, identities, and practices.

How successful the curriculum framework becomes in informing teaching and learning in schools will depend on the cultivation of conducive conditions for its introduction and enactment. A propitious start has been made with the publication of a rigorous and informed curriculum framework and the identification of the supports necessary for its enactment. It is hoped that the necessary human, infrastructural, and financial resources will be forthcoming to make the curriculum vision a reality for the next generations of teachers and children in Ireland.

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