

# Vision into Practice: Design Principles to Support the Enactment of the Redeveloped Primary School Curriculum

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This article, written by the four members of the Primary Advisory Panel of the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment, advocates for effective enactment of Ireland's redeveloped Primary School Curriculum. It argues that traditional implementation models should give way to curriculum enactment, where teachers, children, and other stakeholders collaboratively adapt and construct the curriculum based on local contexts while maintaining fidelity to core curriculum principles.

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## Curriculum redevelopment

The primary school curriculum in Ireland is changing. In recent years, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has undertaken redevelopment work, informed by research, consultation, work with schools and settings, and deliberation with stakeholder groups. The shape and structure of the curriculum were formulated in the Primary Curriculum Framework, published by the government in March 2023. Work has continued with the development of curriculum specifications for the remaining areas, which will be introduced in the 2025/26 school year.

The Primary Curriculum Framework emphasises teacher and child agency, and in doing so challenges traditional notions of *implementation* as being mostly about faithfully putting a prescribed national curriculum into practice. Instead, curriculum *enactment* is the focus, whereby teachers, children, and stakeholders actively adapt and construct curriculum based on local contexts, priorities, and needs – and where *integrity* to the curriculum principles is the central aim. Central to curriculum enactment is the notion of sense-making, where



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educators use curriculum documents not only for guidance but also for the purposes of making and crafting curriculum locally through collaboration and learning together *by all*.

Considering this new paradigm, this article draws from evidence-informed design principles to elicit the conditions that can effectively prepare and support the enactment of the primary school curriculum. Key assumptions that underpin this approach include:

- » Curriculum enactment as learning *together by all*: Viewing curriculum enactment as a process of continuous learning for teachers and stakeholders, incorporating formal and informal learning opportunities informed by adult learning principles.
- » Engagement of prior knowledge, practices, and beliefs: Acknowledging the role of teachers' prior knowledge, beliefs, and practices in shaping curriculum enactment efforts, and leveraging constructivist approaches to facilitate learning.
- » Focus on implementation integrity: Emphasising the importance of alignment between local adaptations and the curriculum principles and guidance as outlined in the Primary Curriculum Framework and specifications.

### Evidence-based design principles for curriculum enactment

This article builds on these foundational assumptions to propose six interconnected design principles for supporting the effective enactment of the redeveloped primary school curriculum. These principles are grounded in adult learning theories and empirical research, aimed at fostering pedagogically sound environments that can nurture both individual and collective learning among educators and stakeholders (National Academies of Sciences, 2018).

#### *Building on prior knowledge, practices, and beliefs*

Recognise and actively engage teachers' knowledge, practices, and beliefs in learning from their curriculum enactment efforts. Using constructivist and socio-constructivist approaches to engage teachers' existing knowledge and beliefs in their ongoing collective sense-making about revising their instructional practices as they enact the new curriculum framework and specifications (ibid.).

#### *Addressing cognitive and affective dimensions*

Attend to teachers' emotional and motivational states alongside their cognitive development in their learning about and from enacting the new curriculum framework. Implementing supportive frameworks that attend to and alleviate

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anxiety and facilitate the adoption of new pedagogical strategies and content knowledge (ibid.).

#### *Designing educative curriculum materials*

Develop curriculum documents and other materials that educate by providing ongoing, job-embedded, discipline-specific, professional learning tools for teachers as they enact the curriculum in practice. Educative curriculum materials enhance subject-matter knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and self-efficacy among educators (Davis et al., 2017; Furman et al., 2022).

#### *Promoting collective sense-making*

Foster collaborative environments where teachers learn together and co-construct understandings of the reforms from their engagement with the curriculum materials in their efforts to enact the curriculum in practice. Studies highlight the positive impact of peer collaboration on curriculum enactment, leading to improved pedagogical practices and outcomes (Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Spillane et al., 2018).

#### *Sustaining continuous professional development*

Provide professional learning opportunities that are curriculum-content-focused, involve active learning, support collaboration, include reflection and feedback, incorporate coaching and models of effective practice, and are ongoing. Effective continuing professional development (CPD) is crucial for supporting teachers' collective sense-making and learning as they enact and adapt curriculum reforms over time (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; McLure & Aldridge, 2023).

#### *Engaging all stakeholders in sense-making*

Engage diverse stakeholders (e.g., teachers, children, parents, school leaders, special needs assistants, and support personnel) in sense-making and learning about and from curriculum enactment from inception, including opportunities to learn together that cross roles and responsibilities. Cultivate a sense of collective ownership and responsibility to foster efficacy and sustainable curriculum implementation (Gouëdard et al., 2020).

### **Redesigning school system structures**

Adopting new approaches for supporting curriculum enactment that embed the six design principles in practice involves rethinking existing structures and creating new ones that facilitate collaboration. Professional learning communities and design-based implementation research offer frameworks

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that foster collaboration among different stakeholders, allowing for joint learning and iterative improvement through curriculum enactment (Stoll et al., 2006; Penuel & Fishman, 2012).

Specifically, curriculum enactment is enabled when school systems create structures that bridge different communities of practice (inspectorate, school leaders, teachers, parents, etc.) through intentional use of boundary practices (e.g., CPD, inspections, off-site school visits), boundary objects (e.g., curriculum documents, school self-evaluation, student work), and boundary spanners (e.g., inspectorate, coaches) (Spillane et al., 2018). Such system redesign work will require audits of existing structures to assess their support of curriculum-enactment goals. Based on these audits, strategic plans can be developed to restructure norms, roles, routines, and materials, ensuring a cohesive approach to supporting effective curriculum enactment.

## Conclusion

Effective enactment of the redeveloped primary school curriculum in Ireland hinges on embracing evidence-informed design principles that promote continuous learning together among educators and stakeholders, through ongoing sense-making, collaboration, and adaptation. By adopting evidence-based approaches and negotiating the necessary structural change, educators can better navigate the complexities of curriculum enactment, ensuring that reforms are translated locally into meaningful educational experiences for all stakeholders, especially children attending primary and special schools in Ireland.

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### EXPLORERS EDUCATION PROGRAMME



**Dr Caroline Cusack and Denise O'Sullivan from the Marine Institute with Cushla Dromgool Regan, Explorers Education manager and lead author.**

The Marine Institute's Explorers Education Programme is pleased to announce the launch of its innovative 'Superhero Climate Change' educational resources. This comprehensive suite includes:

- interactive presentations,
- teacher guides,
- lesson plans,
- activities designed for thematic and cross-curricular learning in primary schools.

These resources offer a unique opportunity for teachers and pupils to engage with the complex issue of climate change in a practical and enjoyable way.

Marine Institute CEO, Dr Rick Officer, said:

"This wide range of content helps to demystify global warming and the impacts of climate change, presenting them in a way that both teachers and children can easily understand and enjoy. The learning and engagement process also inspires creative solutions to tackle this global challenge."

Restoring and protecting the Earth's land, ocean, and biodiversity, as well as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, are priorities echoed in key messages from recent UN climate summits. These summits have called for international collaboration to galvanize world climate and environmental goals.