

# **Child's Voice: Consulting with children as part of the redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum**



**Final Report**  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

In November 2023, Marino Institute of Education successfully tendered for a research project, commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), to consult with children on their views about their experience of curriculum. This ***Consultation with children as part of the redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum***, progresses from a previous study, a consultation with children at the time of the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*, published in June 2022. Like the previous study, this project involved engaging with children around their experience of curriculum in school. Fifteen schools comprise the sample for the consultation with children around the six key messages of the redeveloped Primary curriculum. The research study was conducted in two phases. In phase one, group interviews with children were carried out by the research team, two classes in each of the fifteen schools. The second phase of the research study involved a series of seven case studies, conducted in seven schools chosen from the same original sample of fifteen schools. These were carried out to gain in-depth knowledge of children's experience of the five curriculum areas: Language, Science, Technology, and Engineering Education (STE); Wellbeing; Social and Environmental Education (SEE); and Arts Education. Two of the seven case studies focused on the views of children with additional needs and children from the Travelling Community. The context for the consultation is the development of the Draft Primary Curriculum Specifications, content for the redeveloped primary curriculum. The *Primary Curriculum Framework* was published in March 2023. The curriculum specifications for each curriculum area are currently being devised through consultation with various stakeholders. It is hoped that the findings from this research study will inform the final curriculum specifications.

As per the previous study, (Kiely et al, 2022), the six key messages underpinning the new *Primary Curriculum Framework* formed the basis for the questions put to the children. They include as follows:

1. Building on the strengths of the 1999 curriculum and responding to challenges arising from it.
2. Supporting agency and flexibility in schools
3. Building connections between pre-school, primary and post-primary schools
4. Emerging priorities for children's learning
5. Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented
6. Supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to teaching and learning

The research team collected both sets of data (phase one: Fifteen schools; phase two: seven schools) in schools. This differed from the previous consultation with children in 2022, whereby classroom teachers collected the data. Because the previous study took place as schools emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, it was decided to limit the numbers of external personnel entering schools and so teachers were upskilled to collect the data through online training workshops and support from the research team.

### Methodology

For phase one of the research project, group interviews with children were held in two classes in each of the fifteen schools. For phase two, brief group interviews with children, (hereafter referred to as phase two, task 1) based on a particular curriculum area, were held in two classes in each of seven schools. This was followed by a methodology chosen by the children, (hereafter referred to as phase two, task 2) whereby they gave additional details on a specific curriculum area. The children chose from a suite of methodologies, as follows: walk and talk tours of relevant curriculum areas of the class and school, drawings, concept/conversation maps, use of emoji stickers to indicate likes and dislikes of curriculum areas, sentence starters on a worksheet and guided drawings on an

embodied language experience. A member of the teaching staff in each of the seven schools was also interviewed, (hereafter referred to as phase 2, task 3), typically the classroom teacher but in some instances the school principal or a teacher designated by the school principal. These interviews were conducted to get a sense of the particular school context.

## Sample

The fifteen schools in the sample included urban and rural settings, DEIS and non-DEIS schools, vertical schools, English-medium, Irish-medium, a Gaeltacht school, two special schools and one mainstream school with a large population of children from the Travelling community.

## Findings

Findings from both phases of the research follow, beginning with the findings from phase one -

### **Key Message 1: Building on success of 1999 curriculum and responding to new challenges and developments.**

Children indicated strong satisfaction with and preference for PE and the Arts. They spoke about how these subjects allow for freedom, imaginative exploration, agency and spending time with friends. Children want more opportunity to move, to engage in active learning, to have opportunities for conversation and creative expression. They do not like sitting for long periods and do not like workbooks.

Children in Irish-medium schools like Irish and especially like learning Irish through other subjects, such as Drama. Children in English-medium schools find learning Irish through repetition and answering questions to be difficult, but they enjoy activities such as making pizzas through Irish or doing PE through Irish.

### **Key Message 2 – Building Agency and flexibility in schools.**

There is a need for more agency and autonomy in learning experiences for children of all ages. According to the children, the teacher, principal, the government, the president, subject experts such as archaeologists are in charge and children must do what they are instructed to do. Children's definition of choice may vary significantly from adults. If they are given a limited array of choices for a specific task, they do not see this as choice.

### **Key Message 3- Building connections between preschool primary and post-primary schools**

Children in infant classes saw connections with preschool in terms of play, friends and nice teachers. Children in senior classes look forward to some aspects of post-primary such as more freedom and new practical subjects but have fears around workload, forming friendships and difficulty of curriculum content.

### **Key message 4 – Emerging Priorities for children's learning**

Children value curriculum topics that will 'stand to them' in later life, such as Mathematics and literacy. They are quite focused on this and on the usefulness of subjects for their future careers. Children want to know more about themselves and the world they live in, other cultures and languages.

### **Key message 5 Changing how the curriculum is presented and structured**

Children like the idea of immersing themselves in depth in two subjects a day if the subjects are Art and PE. However, they report a fear of boredom and fear of missing out on other subjects if there is a deep focus on one or two subjects only.

### **Key Message 6 – Pedagogical Approaches**

In many respects, the findings from phase one of the study mirrored findings from the report on the consultation with children on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (Kiely et al, 2022). Children report they would like more active learning, technology-based and play-based learning, more opportunities to work outdoors and with a partner/peer. Children show a clear preference for playful and active learning methodologies. They appreciate playful teaching, such as games, for subjects they find difficult, particularly in senior classes. Their experiences of the curriculum are clearly influenced by the teaching methodologies used in each subject. Additionally, the specific workbooks used for curriculum areas/subjects often influence children's experiences of that curriculum area. The current data set demonstrated a strong love of reading by children. The data also revealed an awareness of assessment practices and children furnished examples of practices of self-assessment, peer-assessment and teacher-assessment. The children talked about opportunities to work alone, in pairs and in groups and debated the merits and de-merits of group work and peer assessment.

### **Findings from the second phase of the research: Case Studies on the five curriculum areas**

#### **Case Study A: Social and Environmental Education (SEE)**

Older children enjoy engaging with certain aspects of History and Geography, specifically Irish history and learning about other countries, while the younger children, especially, found learning about the environment less interesting, although they recognised its importance. Project work appears central to particularly History and Geography and is greatly enjoyed by children. Interactive, investigative and playful approaches to SEE were preferred over text-based work. Learning approaches used affected children's learning experience of the curriculum area. Children had opportunities to visit local sites, buildings, museums and libraries, which enhanced their learning experience of the subject. The children in this case study did not seem to have a metacognitive understanding of the skills of a historian or a geographer.

#### **Case Study B: Arts Education**

Arts Education was highly prized amongst children for the freedom it gives them to be creative, to try out ideas, to be agentic in their choices and to be able to chat with their peers as they work. Visual Arts was repeatedly mentioned as a favourite subject amongst children in junior and senior classes. Concerns were expressed around the time given to Arts Education. It seems to 'slip off' the timetable sometimes, while other curriculum areas are prioritised. Findings indicate that skills development in Arts education needs additional focus.

#### **Case Study C: Wellbeing**

It was striking that there is a strong emphasis on children's wellbeing across all schools, not just the school in which the Case Study was conducted. The sense of school being a safe and nurturing space for children is universally prioritised. Emotional wellbeing and regulation and the language around emotional wellbeing is a strong focus in this case-study school, as well as online/digital safety. Wellbeing has a whole-school approach and curriculum-wise, is integrated throughout subjects, rather than restricted to the teaching of SPHE and PE. Children are aware and vocal

about the subjects and activities that promote their wellbeing, mentioning P.E. and SPHE and the arts, as well as playing with their friends, using the school library, and having a say on committees such as the student council and green schools committee.

#### **Case Study D: Science, Technology and Engineering Education (STE)**

Findings from this case study demonstrated sophisticated practices in relation to the integration of technology with both Science and Engineering. Children report they use iPad's for "nearly everything", including the documentation of processes around Science experiments and engineering processes. Curriculum experiences are supported by field trips and participation in exhibitions and events such as Science Week and Science Blast. Methodologies experienced include a considerable amount of collaborative learning.

#### **Case Study E: Modern Foreign Languages (MFL)**

Findings demonstrated that children had some plurilingual awareness of language, demonstrating an ability to discuss languages and make comparisons across languages in this case-study school, which was a Gaelscoil. The children were aware of how languages can be learned through culture (e.g. song and sport) and through community use (e.g. signage in the local supermarket, announcements on public transport). In learning language, children had experience of working in pairs, of direct teaching and use of the interactive whiteboard and textbooks. The children in this school seemed to be strongly and favourably disposed towards learning additional languages and recognised the cultural benefits accruing to this activity, such as the ability to communicate with others when travelling abroad.

## INTRODUCTION

In November 2023 Marino Institute of Education successfully tendered for a research project, commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), to consult with children on their views about their experience of curriculum, as part of the redevelopment of the *Primary School Curriculum*. This ***Consultation with children as part of the redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum*** progresses from a previous study, a consultation with children at the time of the *Draft Primary Curriculum*, published in June 2022 (Kiely et al., 2022). The consultation at the time of the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* informed the *Primary Curriculum Framework* which was published in March 2023. In this present study, like the previous study, children were consulted on their current experiences of curriculum, rather than on the redeveloped curriculum, which has not yet been implemented in schools. Children's experiences of curriculum, teaching methodologies/pedagogy and school were examined to gain in-depth knowledge of what children consider important in relation to school and learning.

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* was published in March 2023 (Department of Education, 2023). The curriculum specification for Mathematics was published in September 2023 (Department of Education, 2023b). Curriculum specifications in the areas of Wellbeing, Science, Technology and Engineering Education (STE); Social and Environmental Education (SEE); Primary Language Curriculum including draft Modern Foreign Languages (MFL); and Arts Education have been circulated for consultation and will be introduced in primary and special schools in 2025. Data gathered and analysed from the current research project will feed into the finalisation of these curriculum specifications by the NCCA. It should be noted that while English, Irish and Maths were not the focus of this consultation because those curriculum specifications are already completed, these curriculum areas were reported on by the children. This is unsurprising, given the centrality of these subjects to the children's school lives. Hence there are references to these subjects in the report.

The research project was organised as follows: Initially children in fifteen schools, two classes in each school, were interviewed in their classroom groups about what they liked, disliked, and would like to change about school. They were asked questions about how subjects are taught in school and whether they enjoyed those pedagogical approaches and what changes they would make. This was phase 1 of the research study. Like the previous consultation on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*, (Kiely, Haals Brosnan, Uí Chianáin, Colum & Dunne, 2022), children were asked questions about school and curriculum based on the six key messages of the redeveloped *Primary School Curriculum*. These include -

1. Building on the successes and strengths associated with the 1999 curriculum while recognising and responding to challenges and changing needs and priorities
2. Supporting agency and flexibility in schools
3. Building Connections between pre-school, primary and post-primary schools
4. Emerging priorities for children's learning
5. Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented
6. Supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to learning and teaching

The second phase of the project involved seven case studies, conducted to gain in-depth knowledge of children's experience of the following five curriculum areas: Language (in particular, the introduction of a Modern Foreign Language); Science, Technology and Engineering Education (STE); Wellbeing; Social and Environmental Education (SEE); and Arts Education. The reason for seven case studies on five curriculum areas is that children from Special Schools and children from the Travelling community were given an additional opportunity to have their voices heard as well as their inclusion in the mainstream school context. Mathematics was excluded from the study because the

new *Primary Mathematics Curriculum* had already been published in September 2023. The new Primary Language Curriculum was published in September 2019. It did not include modern foreign languages (MFL) at that point. Thus, the Primary Language Curriculum is being updated to include information on MFL. There is no change to the primary language curriculum material for junior infants to second class. MFL is being introduced at stages 3 (third and fourth classes) and 4 (fifth and sixth classes).

The next section of this report will describe the methodological approaches designed by the research team for data collection purposes. The consultation with children for the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (Kiely et al., 2022) was conducted as the country was emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic and so, in adherence with protocols at the time, the research team did not go into schools to collect data but supported teachers, through online workshops, to collect data on their behalf. For the current study, the research team interacted directly with the children as data gatherers. Following the methodology section, the findings will be presented and discussed.

## CHAPTER 1: METHODOLOGY

### Research Paradigm

This research was in the interpretive paradigm, concerned about the individual and aims to understand their perspectives and experiences (Cohen et al., 2011). As the overarching aim of this study was to gather the views of children regarding their experiences in Irish primary and special schools, for the purpose of informing the redevelopment of the curriculum, this paradigm was deemed the most appropriate choice for this project. Additionally, the methods utilised in this study were informed by best-practices participatory research methods with children, which positions children as central actors in the research process and views them as equal participants. Furthermore, the research team acknowledges, “If children’s ‘voice’ is being sought, then children must be positioned as participating subjects, knowers and social actors, rather than objects of the researcher’s gaze” (Smith, 2011, 14). Such methods utilised include: valuing the voices, opinions and experiences of children, utilising a child-friendly research design, giving agency to children in allowing them to influence the design and data collection utilised in the study (Clark & Moss, 2011).

### Research Methodology

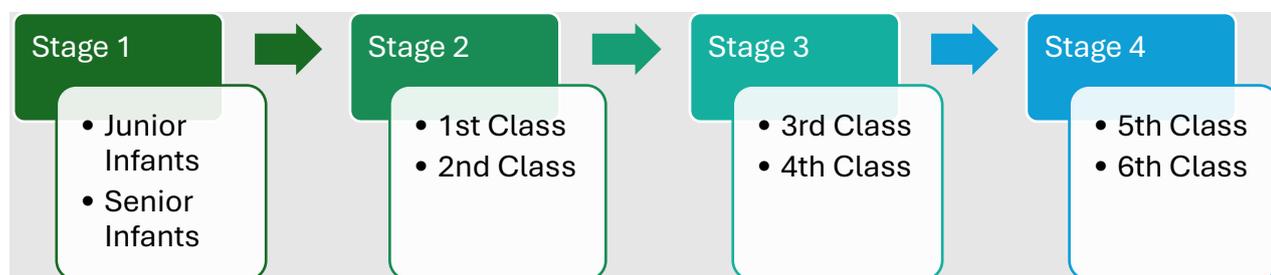
A mixed mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2011) was chosen for this project which engaged children at all levels of primary education in two core data collection phases, as summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Research Methodology**

Areas of Focus	Methodology and Stages
<b>Phase 1</b>	
All Curriculum Areas Method Chosen by Researchers	Group Interview with children (Stages 1-4: Junior Infants – Sixth Class)
<b>Phase 2 Task 1</b>	
Specific Curriculum Areas Method Chosen by Researchers	Group Interviews with 2 classes in each case study school
<b>Phase 2 Task 2</b>	
Specific Curriculum Areas Method Chosen by Children	Walk, talk and photography tours of relevant areas of the class/school Emoji stickers in classroom Drawings Concept maps Sentence starters/worksheet Embodied language experience
<b>Phase 2 Task 3</b>	
Interview with classroom teachers or principal to set context	Individual or paired online interview

In line with the redeveloped curriculum (Department of Education, 2023), children were divided and grouped into the following stages:

**Figure 1: Children grouped in Stages and classes**



### Phase 1 Data Collection Methods

Phase 1 formed the first stage of data collection in which the researchers designed and utilised group interviews which ended with a short poster exercise with all children in Stages 1-4 to obtain their experiences and opinions regarding the primary curriculum. Adler et al. (2019, 2) acknowledge the many benefits of utilising group interviews with children as young as four to five years of age, such as “creating a safe peer environment” and avoiding imbalances of power between the researcher and child participant, which can often occur during individual interview sessions.

The group interview schedule (see Appendix H) was developed following a review of the literature, which included the new *Primary Curriculum Framework* (Department of Education, 2023), the project tender and overarching aims, and previous studies and consultations with children on their school experiences (Kiely et al., 2022). Next, the research team engaged in brainstorming potential questions for each of the six key messages, and these were then reviewed to ensure clarity, non-repetition and that language and terms were clear and age appropriate to aid children’s understanding (Adler et al., 2019; Sandberg et al., 2017). The resulting group interview schedule contained a total of 50 questions:

- 27 questions were utilised with all age groups and explored topics such as: daily experiences in school, agency, flexibility and choice in learning, emerging priorities for learning, and pedagogical and assessment preferences.
- 8 questions were specifically for children in Junior Infants to 3<sup>rd</sup> class and explored connections between preschool and primary school and preferences regarding how the curriculum is structured and presented in Stages 1 & 2.
- 15 questions were specifically for children in 4<sup>th</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> class and explored connections between primary and post-primary school and preferences regarding how the curriculum is structured and presented in Stages 3 & 4.

For the last set of questions during the group interview, which explored pedagogical approaches and assessment strategies, the children were presented with large posters (see Appendix G) which contained a series of 15 images; 12 of these illustrated different ways of learning in school, (e.g. alone, in pairs and groups; outside, in the classroom and in other rooms in the school; learning through play and using technology), while the final 3 images illustrated methods of assessment (e.g. correcting your own work, having a friend correct your work, and asking the teacher for help). The remaining questions during the group interview asked children to review the images on working and assessment, and to share which methods they typically engage in during the school day (including any they do not utilise), along with their likes and dislikes. Then, children were asked to discuss the methods of assessment typically utilised and their preferences. All questions and research instruments for participating Irish-medium schools (scoileanna Gaeltachta and

scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge) were available in Irish and due cognisance was given to issues of dialect and the needs of native and new speakers in the translation process.

### Phase 2 Data Collection Methods

Phase 2 of the research project utilised a case study methodology consisting of three tasks to conduct an in-depth investigation of the following five curriculum areas:

- Social and Environmental Education (SEE)
- Arts Education
- Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) as part of the *Primary Language Curriculum*
- Wellbeing
- Science, Technology and Engineering (STE)

**Phase 2, task 1** consisted of group interviews with children in each of the participating schools. Six separate interview schedules were developed, one for each of the five curriculum areas under investigation (n=5), and one which covered all 5 curriculum areas for use in the special school and with children from the Travelling community in a seventh school. Each member of the research team assumed responsibility for developing 1-2 interview schedules in the areas most closely related to their expertise. Then, each researcher conducted a close read of their chosen area(s) in the redeveloped *Primary Curriculum Framework* (Department of Education, 2023b) and in the five draft primary curriculum specifications (Department of Education, 2024). They created a series of questions which explored the strands and elements of each curriculum area, along with the principles of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (e.g. partnerships, learning environments, inclusive education and diversity, engagement and participation, assessment and progression, transitions and continuity, relationships, and pedagogy) (Department of Education, 2023, 2-3).

**Phase 2, task 2** offered an age-appropriate suite of methodologies to each participating class, from which the children chose one method by which the assigned curriculum area would be investigated with them:

**Table 2: Methodologies offered to children to express their views**

Suites & Stages	Methodologies
<b>Suite A</b> Stage 1 (Jr & Sr Infants) Stage 2 (1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup> Classes) Special Schools	School walk, talk and photography tours of relevant areas of the class/school Emoji stickers Drawings
<b>Suite B</b> Stage 3 (3 <sup>rd</sup> & 4 <sup>th</sup> Classes) Stage 4 (5 <sup>th</sup> & 6 <sup>th</sup> Classes)	School walk, talk and photography tours of relevant areas of the class/school Drawings/poster Sentence starters/worksheet Concept maps Embodied language approach

**School walk with photography:** In small groups, children walk around the school with the researcher, taking photographs of elements related to the curriculum area under investigation.

**Drawings:** Using a variety of media (pencils, crayons, pens), children drawing their responses to a series of research questions, thus enabling children to engage in symbolic communication (Webber, 2020), while supporting their reflection, recall, and understanding (Papandreou, 2014).

**Sentence starters/worksheets:** Children complete worksheets designed by the researchers to aid their understanding, thinking and responses to a series of questions about the curriculum area under investigation.

**Embodied language approach:** Children reflect on the connection between their repertoire of languages and their location in their body (Piazolli, 2018).

**Emoji Stickers:** Children are invited to place 'emoji' stickers on concepts/ideas/materials to indicate preferences.

**Concept Maps:** In groups, children discuss a particular aspect of a curriculum areas, using sheets of paper to help them delineate, through mapping, the parameters of the conversation and to make connections across ideas. For example, a discussion on dance in the draft Arts Education Curriculum, might have the word 'dance' in the centre of a web and words connected to dance (Performance, exercise, rhythm, creativity, free movement, folk dance, responding to music, body awareness) might be drawn in lines emanating from the centre of the web outwards.

The range of methods included in this task were chosen to facilitate the inclusion and participation of all children, including those with diverse abilities and needs. For example, photography, drawings, and emoji stickers are examples of such activities and can be used with older children who may have communication difficulties or for whom English is an additional language (Clark & Moss, 2011; Nic AIndriú, 2019).

**Phase 2, task 3** of the methodology involved online semi-structured interviews with teachers in each of the participating schools. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they are commonly utilised within qualitative research and are recognised as "useful for exploring participants experiences, understandings, and opinions on a particular" (Wakelin et al., 2024). Following a review of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (Department of Education, 2023), a series of 12 questions were devised for teachers as key-informants of teaching and learning practices in their school. Topics included: the school, its context and history; core priorities in school; curriculum areas of excellence; the impact of Covid on the school; and a series of questions related to the teaching and learning of the specific curriculum area chosen.

### **Piloting**

Adopting the advice of Malmqvist et al. (2019), a pilot study was carried out with two classes (class one n=9; class two n=13) in one school. The pilot examined the research questions, approaches and methodologies employed (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). No changes were made to the research instrument after the pilot, but some observations informed the other data collection sites. See Table 3.

**Table 3: Observations from the Pilot Study**

Observations from pilot	How this informed other data collection
<p><b>The instrument</b> The instrument is good and yields good answers. The data from these two group interviews can be used in the data analysis as we won't change the questions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delete the questions relating to parents' school experiences – not relevant.</li> <li>• Modify instruments for special schools.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Time</b> Junior class: 55 minutes (including set-up time) Senior class: 82 minutes (including set-up time and break).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If conducting the process alone, allow at least 3 hours as you will need a break-in between and time to talk to the principal.</li> </ul>
<p><b>The posters for final question</b> Very useful.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hand out when the final question is asked so children do not get distracted.</li> <li>• In the younger classes, you need to go through each picture one at a time.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Seating arrangements</b> Children sat in semi-circle. They were small classes and with several children out due to the snow. The senior class had 9, the junior class had 13. The recording devices were on the floor.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We recommend having children at tables – this would bring the recording devices closer to them and it would also mean they could leave the posters on the tables rather than fiddling with them.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Teacher presence</b> Teachers were present in both classes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not all children consented to participate, we would recommend that an additional adult stay in the classroom.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Children's names</b> We used them in one class, not in the other.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't use children's names - It is easier for anonymity not to use them</li> </ul>
<p><b>Recording devices</b> We each had three recording devices with us. The children are softly spoken, so one device per table is needed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If sitting in one circle 2-3 recommended.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Field notes</b> The researchers sat for an hour afterwards noting the subtleties of each interview – this was a good process to capture the immediate response to the process.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Record field notes after interview.</li> </ul>

### Sampling & Recruitment - Phase 1 of the research study

Purposive sampling was utilised as the best means by which to obtain the voices of primary school children and teachers who could speak to the objectives of the study (Alder et al., 2019) and provide insights on their experiences and perspectives regarding the primary curriculum. A list of primary and special schools was received from the NCCA, and members of the research team also presented information about the study at an NCCA Schools Forum Meeting, some of whom contacted the Principal Investigator (PI) to express their interest. A Gaeltacht school and a Gaelscoil were recruited by the research team. Based on the contact details gathered from these sources, the PI sent each

principal an email informing them of the opportunity for two classes at their school to take part in the study, and included the following attachments:

- Information letter to schools (Appendix A).
- Parent/Guardian Information Letter and Consent Sheet (Appendix B).
- Child Information and Assent Sheet for Junior Infants through Second Class (Appendix C).
- Child Information and Assent Sheet for Third through Sixth Class children (Appendix D).

All information regarding the research study was made available bilingually and the principal could choose the most appropriate way to communicate with staff, parents/guardians and children (in Irish only or bilingually). A diverse sample of schools was desirable for this project, and as principals affirmed their school's participation in the study, each school was considered according to its demographic characteristics, and the needs of the project in terms of creating a diverse sample. The final sample for Phase 1 consisted of 15 schools located throughout Ireland as illustrated in Table 4 –

**Table 4: School Sample – characteristics**

School Characteristics	Number of Schools
Special Schools	n=2
Scoil Ián-Ghaeilge	n=1
Small Rural	n=2
Large Rural/Semi-Rural	n=2
DEIS Status	n=2
Urban Affluent	n=2
Urban Sociocultural Diversity	n=2
Mainstream school with large population of children from the Travelling community	n=1
Gaeltacht School	n=1
<b>Total Participant Schools</b>	<b>n=15</b>

30 classroom visits were conducted (n=4 in special schools; n=26 in mainstream schools). The following chart illustrates the total number of classes in each grade level that participated in Task 1:

**Table 5: Number of classes that participated in Phase 1**

Grade Levels	Number of Classes
Special School Junior Class	n=1
Special School Senior Class	n=3
Junior Infants	n=2
Senior Infants	n=3
First Class	n=3
Second Class	n=7
Third Class	n=2
Fourth Class	n=3
Fifth Class	n=3
Sixth Class	n=3
<b>Total Number of Classes</b>	<b>n=30</b>

### **Sampling & Recruitment – Phase 2 of the research study**

A total of 7 schools (Mainstream, n=5; Special Schools, n=1; school with significant numbers of children from the Travelling Community, n=1) were selected for participation, mostly from the original sample of schools engaged in Phase 1. The same classes who participated in Phase 1 were targeted for participation in Phase 2, and as such, consent and assent did not need to be sought again. In the case of the Irish-medium school, however, as the MFL curriculum pertains to key stages 3 and 4 (3<sup>rd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> classes), it was not possible to include the junior class that had taken part in Phase 1. As such two, new senior classes in the same school were recruited. Similarly, in order to ensure that all class stages were equally represented, in one of the English medium schools, the participating classes also had to change and information and consent sheets were updated and re-issued to the new classes.

A different curriculum area was assigned to each of the five mainstream schools. In choosing which curriculum area to assign to a school, a conscious decision was made not to pair schools with curriculum areas in which they seemed to excel. The team wanted to explore how curriculum areas were typically treated in schools. One school, for example, was renowned for its work on Wellbeing, but this school was not chosen to showcase its work on Wellbeing. A school was deliberately chosen for the case study on Modern Foreign Languages because it had taught a European language in the past. It would have been difficult to explore MFL in a school where there was no experience or practice of this. All five curriculum areas were explored in the special school and with the children from the Travelling community to provide a broader understanding of teaching and learning within this provision.

## **Data Collection**

### **Phase 1 of the study - Research Protocols**

Mutually agreeable dates and times for data collection were arranged with the principal of each participating school. In addition, the principals assumed responsibility for ensuring that the parental and child information and consent sheets were distributed and returned to the classes selected for participation in their school, and together with the classroom teachers, ensured that only children who assented with their parent/guardian's permission took part in the focus group activities.

All members of the research team were involved in phase 1 data collection. To ensure consistency in data collection processes, a research protocol document (Appendix E) was developed which explained what each researcher should do before, during and after the group interview. In most cases (unless the number of participating children did not warrant it), the research team went to schools in pairs, and each researcher interviewed one of the participating classes. Most interviews took place in classrooms (some interviews with smaller groups of children took place in other rooms within the school building). On average, the group interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes and length, and proceeded according to the following protocol:

- After collecting hard copies of the permission slips, the researcher introduced themselves to the children and reminded them of the group discussions' purpose and how the activity would proceed.
- Once all children were happy to continue participating, they were grouped around a set of iPads or other recording devices to record their responses for subsequent transcription.
- Throughout the interview, children were reminded that they did not have to answer questions that they did not want to answer. They were also reminded that they could simply take out a book or draw/sketch/colour if they no longer wished to take part in the interview. Some children opted for this, either for a few minutes during the interview and then resumed participation, or for the remainder of the interview.
- The researcher then asked children a series of questions related to five of the six key messages.
- When the interview reached the final set of questions on the key message of supporting a variety of pedagogical and assessment strategies, the children were presented with a large poster of related images and

given time to study the photos. Following this, children were led through the last set of questions regarding the pedagogical and assessment practices utilised in their schools, along with their own preferences.

- At the end of the interview, the children were thanked for their time and participation.

## Phase 2 of the study - Research Protocols

**Task 1:** During this segment of Task 2, researchers returned to the 7 case-study schools to conduct group interviews with the children. The protocol for this class interview was the same as for the Task 1 class interview described earlier.

**Task 2:** For this element of Task 2, the children in each school collectively choose to engage with 1 method of data collection, and the chart below illustrates the choices that were utilised in each case study school.

**Task 3:** Pairs of researchers interviewed the teachers of the two classes involved in data collection at each school. Interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams for convenience and flexibility (Wakelin et al., 2024) and lasted on average between 30-45 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded to ensure accurate transcription. At the end of each interview, the suite of methodologies utilised in Part C of Task 2 were explained to the teachers, who were then asked to survey their children about the methodology they wished to utilise during their subsequent data collection session. This choice was then emailed to the research team.

**Table 6: Data Collection Methods chosen by the Children**

Classes	Method Chosen
<b>Mainstream School A: Social &amp; Environmental Education (SEE)</b>	
Second Class	Discussion of wall displays relevant to SEE on walk tour Emoji stickers Drawings
Fifth Class	Concept maps
<b>Mainstream School B: Arts Education</b>	
Second Class	Walk and talk tour of Arts around the school Drawings
Fifth Class	Concept maps Walk and talk tour of Arts around the school
<b>Mainstream School C: Wellbeing</b>	
Third class	Wellbeing walk and talk tour
Fourth class	Wellbeing walk and talk tour
<b>Mainstream School D: Science, Technology &amp; Engineering Education</b>	
First class	STE walk and talk tour
Sixth class	STE walk and talk tour
<b>Mainstream School E (Irish-medium school): Modern Foreign Languages (MFL)</b>	
Fourth class	Embodied language experience, drawing
Fifth class	Embodied language experience, drawing
<b>Special School: All Curriculum Areas</b>	
Junior class	Walk and talk tour
Senior class	Drawings

## Ethics

Full ethical approval was granted by the *Marino Ethics in Research Committee*, prior to engaging any schools or children in this project. Given that children were involved in this research, we recognised that consideration of power relations was merited. This project recognised ‘children as social actors’ and the principle of ‘ethical symmetry’ (Christensen & Prout, 2002) formed the theoretical framework for this research. Ethical symmetry utilises the same ethical principles advocated in research with adults. However, it calls for the relationship between researchers and children to be symmetrical, particularly in relation to the power of each (Tiefenthaler et al., 2023).

This study obtained active consent from all participants, and documents such as information and consent/assent sheets, were written in plain, accessible and age-appropriate language for the reader. Issues of dialect and the needs of native and new speakers were considered in the Irish-language versions of the information sheets, research instruments and in all verbal communication. The information and consent sheets were sent via email to the principal of each school, who assumed responsibility for distributing and collecting signed hardcopies from the parents/guardians and their children. These documents continually reminded participants of the voluntary nature of their participation, as well as their right to withdraw or rejoin the study at any time. Additionally, during data collection, children’s assent was negotiated on a ‘moment-to-moment basis’ (Mukhaji & Albon, 2015), and the researchers were cognisant that children often express acceptance or withdrawal through means other than verbal, such as physically moving to leave or join a group, or by exhibiting non-verbal indicators of interest or discomfort (Kiely et al., 2019, p.38).

This study was designed to pose no risk to the participants. While tangible and direct benefits were not received for taking part in this study, this research was associated with numerous indirect and altruistic benefits such as:

- Having a “safe space” (Lohani et al., 2018) for children to voice their opinions and perspectives on issues that relate directly to their own lives (Government of Ireland, 2000)
- Exerting agency in the design of research (via choosing the second methodology utilised in Phase 2)
- Contributing to an area of investigation that is under-researched, while increasing our understanding of children’s lives and realities in school (Government of Ireland, 2000)
- Being involved in research which holds the potential to positively impact future generations of primary-school children (Castillo et al., 2012).

Confidentiality was guaranteed to all participants. Any specific identifying information that could lead the reader to infer the identity of specific participants or schools has been omitted.

## Data Retention & Storage

All data collected through the fieldwork are managed by the research team. All electronic data and files are stored in a secure Microsoft Teams cloud storage and accessed through encrypted laptops. Data collected through paper (for example, fieldnotes, consent and assent sheets) are stored securely in a locked cabinet in the single occupancy office of the PI. Data will be retained in line with the Marino Institute of Education Records Retention Schedule and as advised by the NCCA. Only the researcher team has access to the data. If necessary, the project will be supported by MIE’s Data Protection Officer where required, and this individual may also require access to the data.

## **Data analysis procedure**

To address the six key messages of the redeveloped Primary curriculum, deductive analysis, i.e. applying predetermined codes to the data (Bingham, Mitchell & Carter, 2024), was employed to map the connections in the data to the six key messages.

### **Phase 1**

The data was sent to an external colleague who transcribed it verbatim and sent it back to the PI on Microsoft word (MW) documents. Each member of the research team read and re-read transcripts and scrutinised field notes to acquaint themselves with the nuances of the children's perspectives. This immersive phase enabled each member of the research team to become familiar with their dataset thus laying the foundation for thematic emergence. The PI designed a template (see appendix F) and the team input relevant data coinciding with the key message. This allowed for an overview of initial themes to emerge. The research team identified the common and disparate answers and were able to elicit recurring themes.

### **Phase 2**

As with task one, data were sent for transcription and returned in the form of Microsoft Word (MW) documents. Children from second to sixth class in Irish-medium schools took part in Task 1 and Task 2. Their views are discussed with the rest of the views from the mainstream schools. Any distinctive comments or perspectives are highlighted in the analysis below. Data in English-medium schools was collected through the medium of English. Data in Irish-medium schools was collected through the medium of Irish.

## CHAPTER 2: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS FROM PHASE 1

### **Key Message 1: Building on successes and strengths associated with the 1999 curriculum while recognising and responding to challenges and changing needs and priorities**

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* builds on the successes and strengths associated with the 1999 curriculum while recognising and responding to challenges and changing needs and priorities. The redeveloped curriculum will address curriculum overload at primary level; take stock of strategies, initiatives and programmes and clarify priorities for children's learning; support continuity and progression in children's learning in preschool settings through *Aistear- the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and into their experiences in post-primary through the *Framework for Junior Cycle*.

Research questions related to this key message explored children's current curriculum experiences. To contextualise children's experiences, children's likes and dislikes in school were explored in some detail. Some of their views expressed are directly related to curriculum areas / subjects, while other views help us to understand how, when and why children like to learn.

#### **Key Message 1: Analysis of Junior and Senior Infant data**

When children in the infant classes were asked about what they like in school, it became clear that the contextual aspects matter a lot, speaking to the ongoing process of transition from preschool to primary school. For example, children in the infant classes spoke about liking lunch, yard time (recess) and being outdoors. While older children also enjoyed lunch and yard and mentioned these, they were much more likely to mention specific curriculum areas/subjects rather than focus as heavily on the contextual aspects. Children also greatly value play-based learning, again speaking to their experiences of preschool and enjoying the continuation of play in the primary school classroom. Specifically, when asked what they like to do in school, they mentioned their enjoyment of *Aistear*, meaning dedicated time for play based learning, playing with puppets and construction play such as Lego and doing puzzles. Children from the Travelling Community also expressed a strong preference for playtime and social interactions with friends, referring to games such as playing tag, running, yard time and the general enjoyment of play time, which emphasises the importance of unstructured play in their daily school experience. This preference for play highlights the interest that children have in engaging with each other and its importance for socialisation and physical activity in early childhood.

It also became clear that children in infant classes do not yet predominantly think about school in terms of curriculum but rather in terms of activities, such as drawing/painting for Arts, reading or learning sounds for English or playing ball for PE. Exceptions to this included Maths and Irish, which were mentioned as subjects. Children in the infant classes mentioned liking arts and crafts (responding with a mix of 'colouring', 'drawing', 'painting' and 'Arts') and PE, in particular ball play such as football and basketball, and swimming. Children also like reading, with the exception of a few children only, and learning about phonics (specifically learning new sounds) or phonemic awareness, which is directly linked to reading. Also related to reading, children in one school really enjoyed their *Reading Buddy* system where children from older classes come into the infant classes to assist children with reading. Children's reported enjoyment of reading is noteworthy when compared with previous research where they were more equivocal about reading, associating it with passive learning (Kiely et al, 2022). One thing the children did not like in relation to reading was "tricky words", similar to children's complaints about difficult vocabulary in Irish. Their dislike of tricky words, however, did not appear to impact their love of learning to read. Children had more mixed views on Maths, in line with previous research findings (Kiely et al, 2022). Many children in English-medium schools did not like Irish, either because they find it boring or difficult. Children from the Travelling Community differed in some of their views. They mentioned play, colouring and Maths as activities and subjects they like. The focus of their interest is mainly on the less structured, creative activities which suggest that these activities would enhance engagement and learning. Several children stated that "I don't like to do work" when asked what they did not like to do in school indicating a dislike of schoolwork or structured learning tasks. Others stated that they liked work but had mixed feelings about writing or

reading as part of schoolwork. This indicates the importance of teaching and learning approaches that are fun and engaging and having a balance between structured lessons and activities that feel less like work and more like play to motivate and engage children and to foster a positive attitude towards learning.

Children in infant classes had very diverse views on what is important to learn about, as opposed to what they like to learn about. Responses included Maths, reading (including phonics) and History, sports and engineering, speaking to traditional curriculum areas but also included more specific themes such as aerodynamics, having new things and ideas explained to them (with one child mentioning having recently learned what a coffin ship is) and learning about Biology, with one child stating it is important to learn “how to get your heart pumping”. Children’s reasons for finding things important are interesting to examine. For example, a few children identified sums/Maths as important because you need them in senior school. They also identified phonics as important because “there might not be pictures”, referring to the need to understand phonics to access word meanings. One child said Irish was important to learn because it was not done in playschool, and it was important to learn new stuff in big school, while another child identified drawing as important and that it was okay to make a mistake when you are colouring, suggesting that children in infant classes see school as a place to continuously engage in new learning, to learn important messages about persistence and problem solving and develop skills and knowledge needed later in life.

### **Key Message 1: Analysis of data in First and Second Class**

Unlike the infant classes, children in first and second class answered primarily in relation to specific subjects/curriculum areas when asked about their likes and dislikes, suggesting a shift in perception of school from activities to subjects. The findings are relatively consistent across the different schools with children particularly liking Maths, PE, Arts (children typically meant only visual arts when referring to ‘Arts’) and reading, as well as being outdoors and playing (similar to the infant classes) and disliking homework, Irish and English (despite liking reading). The children in the junior classes in the special schools shared many of these likes. They particularly mentioned their enjoyment of spending time outdoors, reading and writing, Maths, PE and Arts (mentioning both music and visual arts), History, Geography and Science as something they really enjoy but unlike their peers feel more positively about homework in the cases where homework is provided. Specific to the children in the special schools, they report a greater integration of technology in curriculum, due in large part to children’s greater need for technology in mediating the curriculum. Children from the Travelling Community had more mixed views on reading, with some disliking the reading groups or the comprehension tasks involved in such groups. In the case of the Irish-medium schools (Scoil Ghaeltachta and Scoil Ián-Ghaeilge), children reported a keen interest in the Arts, particularly Visual Arts and Drama. Children in one Irish-medium school reported liking cultural and physical activities such as Irish dancing, Gaelic football, and running the daily mile. It would appear from children’s responses that they see reading and dictation as a separate subject or activity to English as they seem to love and enjoy reading but not English more broadly as a subject. This is consistent with data presented later which suggests that many children find learning languages (including English) difficult and boring.

Children mentioned a wide range of sports for PE that they really enjoy, with only one small class (with four children participating in the research) mentioning not liking swimming. Noteworthy here is that children from the Travelling Community did not share such enjoyment of and enthusiasm for PE. Physical Education is an area that they seem to dislike, explaining that they do not like running with a mention of asthma as a reason for one child. There seems to be a fear of personal injury around physical education activities. For example, one boy explained that he does not like basketball because “when you are probably juggling the ball the other person comes behind you and just goes with their shoulder and you could fall” and another explains that “One time I broke my arm playing, I fell down the hill”.

More broadly, the main reason provided by children for not liking a particular subject area was boring workbooks. In reverse, children who liked particular workbooks also liked the subjects those workbooks worked towards. As an example, science was liked by some children and disliked by others, mainly due to the workbook being used. Views were more positive on these subjects in the special schools where they were taught through technology and projects

and less through workbooks. Children in the Irish-medium schools reported disliking specific elements of a particular textbook e.g. dictation or handwriting activities.

Children in second class from the Travelling Community expressed enjoyment in Maths, especially when integrated with interactive elements like iPads and games. Art, particularly drawing, is also a significant interest. There is mention of Science as an enjoyable subject and the children describe experiments such as using hot and cold water to watch skittles (sweets) melt, making things erupt with mentos sweets “like this magic thing in a bowl of water and it exploded” and placing coins in cola overnight to see what happens. One child describes the skittle experiment as follows: “Once we were after putting like hot water and cold water in skittles, the hot water is after making the skittles go rainbow, the cold water only done like two or three”. There is a clear preference for these hands-on experiments that ignite curiosity and a love for exploratory learning. The children also mention ‘Golden Time’ as a preferred activity and there is a deep appreciation for this free choice period allowing children to pursue personal interests like drawing and playing games.

When asked what children would like to change, it became clear that some boys in particular do not like school and find the school day very long. Those children generally wanted a shorter school day, while those who really enjoy school, particularly girls, would like a longer school day, a view also shared by some children in the special schools. Children also generally, expectedly, want more of the subjects they like and less of the subjects they don’t like. Children almost unanimously wanted to get rid of homework or significantly reduce or change it, also consistent with previous research in the Irish context on children’s experiences of primary school (Kiely et al, 2021). They also wanted to get rid of specific textbooks. For some children in English-medium schools who dislike Irish, they wanted to either not have to learn it, reduce the amount or change how it is taught. Children in Irish-medium schools reported a desire to use their Irish in different contexts, especially in Drama. Some children mentioned they would like more chances to play outside and be given more outdoor breaks. A small number of children would like the school day to start and finish earlier so they have more time in the afternoon to relax and play, reasons also given for wanting to get rid of homework. Children also want more opportunities to work through digital media, such as Chromebooks and generally want more choice. Children in Irish-medium schools report an interest in baking both in school and at home. One child also mentioned not liking when work is too easy, while many children mentioned not liking work that is too difficult. The fact that children neither like it too easy nor too difficult speaks to the importance of a curriculum that is flexible and agentic and thus allows teachers to sufficiently differentiate learning for children with different learning preferences, strengths and interests.

### **Key Message 1: Analysis of data in Third and Fourth Class**

Two of the five participating 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> class participant schools were very rural, small, 2-teacher schools. Interestingly, children from these two schools had a greater emphasis on play and similar contextual aspects to those presented for the infant stage, including spending time with friends, playing and being outdoors and going on school trips. Of subjects, they particularly liked Maths and PE, and felt they had too little time for PE. A dislike of Irish was expressed in these English-medium schools and the children commented they did not find Irish useful. The children here had a particular interest in practical subjects or topics, such as hair dressing, mechanics etc., and shared very entrepreneurial interests and mindsets, focusing on wanting subjects that could help them to get jobs and earn money. They did not consider Irish useful for these purposes. One class also mentioned that they did the same Irish as the children from higher class levels in their multigrade class, which they found too difficult. In particular, they noted using the same workbook as their older class peers finding this very difficult, suggesting again the role of workbooks in mediating children’s experiences of curriculum and specific subject areas, and perhaps pointing to the limitations of workbooks in differentiating learning for children.

The responses from children in the urban schools were more focused on specific curriculum areas, albeit with some comments around breaktime and opportunities to play as well. Breaktime came up mainly as children not liking yard time being too short and wanting more opportunity to play during breaks. Of subjects, albeit showing some mixed

views, children in both English-medium and Irish-medium schools were generally positive about Maths, many children across all classes in this stage liking it as a subject, as they also did in first and second class. Children particularly seem to like Maths games. Only a couple of children mentioned not liking Maths, in fourth class, because they find it difficult and complicated, in particular multiplication. However, the overall sense from 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Class is that they like Maths. Views are a little bit more mixed on subjects such as History, Geography and Science. Similar to the younger classes, children really enjoy reading time and appreciate any opportunity to be allowed to choose a book to read with activities such as DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) being particularly popular. Similar to the junior classes, children's favourite subjects, however, are consistently Arts (by which children primarily mean visual arts) and PE. One school runs a Forest School program for some of its classes and the children really enjoyed this. It is something they do for six weeks of a school year and the fourth class had recently returned from the forest school. This came through in their answers as they wanted more Forest School and wanted more outdoor learning.

The two English-medium urban schools shared the views of their rural peers regarding Irish. Again, children suggested it is because it is 'hard' learning a new language, with one child stating, *'Because most of the time you just get thrown into something and we have never heard a word before, no one knows what it is.'* When probed a little further about what they do like or would find helpful, children mentioned needing more activity-based learning and spoke of liking the games and activities they do in Irish, such as making pizza and playing Bingo through Irish. They also suggested having more English translation to help with understanding/comprehension and less focus on the workbook/copies and changing how Irish is taught to make *'more people want to hear it'*. Children generally don't like when they have to write a lot in their copy books or learn the phonics or answer difficult questions that they struggle to understand. These insights are particularly important in considering the introduction of teaching modern foreign languages.

In relation to what children in this stage wanted to change, many children generally asked for no homework or less homework. They also wanted more time for Arts Education (Visual Arts, Music and Drama were all mentioned) and PE, children reasoning that these subjects require more time to be able to do the work properly. All children in this stage wanted much more opportunity for hands-on learning, including learning outdoors, through play or doing experiments. Even for those who don't like Science, they like experiments, speaking to the need to move away from workbooks to more active learning. Some children mentioned it was difficult to sit still for long periods of time. Similar to the younger classes, children want more of the subjects they like, those liking Science, History and Geography in particular saying they want more of these. The majority of children also seem to want more time to eat their lunch and more opportunity to choose who to sit with, children themselves suggesting that they don't need allocated seats but should be able to choose themselves on a daily basis.

### **Key Message 1: Analysis of data in Fifth and Sixth Class**

It is evident in fifth and sixth class that children are developing more nuanced understandings and opinions of the different curriculum areas. Like the infant classes, being able to spend time with friends both during and in between schoolwork and activities is of huge importance to children. While play gets mentioned less as 'play', children speak at length about sports, skipping, ball play, yard games, spending time with friends and learning through games, experiments, hands-on activities and outdoors, all of which are playful in nature, reflecting children's shifting engagement with play as they get older.

Children's likes and dislikes regarding specific subject areas are fairly consistent with views expressed by children in younger classes, with some important nuances, however. Children in senior classes continue to favour PE. Children in one Irish-medium school reported a desire to spend more time playing American Football. Children generally enjoy the Arts (including Visual Arts and Drama, less so Music). In the Irish-medium school, there is a strong emphasis on Music and children enjoy bringing in various instruments to school to play. They really enjoy engaging in the Arts especially through Drama and debating. Although these views were generally shared by children in the senior classes

in the special schools, a few children mentioned not liking drama and music. PE and the Arts are particularly favoured because of the opportunities they provide for spending valuable time with friends. As one child responded, “Three main things: Chatting with friends, PE and Art”. When probed, the child elaborated “I like Art and PE because they are fun, and you can have a lot of time with your friends.” Another child concurred with this sentiment, “Art is fun, you spend time with your friends”, and comments made by other children suggest the same: “you get to sit beside your friends”, “talk to your friends in Art” and “Art because I like drawing too because it helps you calm down”. PE was valued for the opportunity to exercise and keep/get fit but also because it afforded opportunities to engage in ball-play with friends. These views are shared by children in special schools. Two children expressed how much they liked to play football with the senior classes outside in the basketball court area in the school. Engagement in these activities positively impacts the social inclusion for children in special school settings which is paramount for academic development (Colum & MacIntyre, 2019).

Children in one class mentioned their enjoyment of the *Reading Buddy* system in their school that the infant classes also liked. Interestingly, while children enjoyed reading and the *Reading Buddy* system, children were critical of the literacy component of English and expressed a dislike of this, including the workbook used for spelling in the school. In the Irish-medium schools, children reported not enjoying dictation or grammar exercises.

It is evident that children in fifth and sixth once again have mixed views on Maths, with some finding it easy and enjoyable and others finding it difficult, in particular long division. One child said he had ‘a beef with Maths’ and it was medium rare! Interestingly, however, regardless of whether they like Maths or not, they recognise its importance in life and in their futures. As one child explained,

*“I don't like Irish or Maths but I think they are important because Irish was our language and you can't really do anything without Maths, like if you are counting out change and you don't know...”*

Children also speak at length about Science, History and Geography in the senior classes, but mixed views are presented on these three subjects. Some children find them interesting because they enjoy learning about other times and places (History and Geography) and in more active ways through experiments (Science), however others find History difficult to keep track of with all the different dates and eras and some children do not like all the non-experiment aspects of Science. Children in these classes also noted their dislike of workbooks and working in copies and were noticeably clear that they prefer active and hands-on learning across all subjects. Many enjoy working on projects and with partners and doing ‘stations’ where they can move freely from one activity to another, suggesting freedom and choice. Similar to the junior classes, children in the senior classes in special schools mentioned their enjoyment of Science in particular.

Across all participating classes in fifth and sixth class in English-medium schools share the same views on learning as Irish as children in more junior classes and suggested they would like to see more games and active learning approaches in Irish.

Several children, as in junior classes, suggested they would like to see more games and active learning approaches in Irish.

Children in these classes also mentioned their dislikes of tests. Acknowledging that they see the benefit of tests (giving them a sense of how they are doing in a specific area) they would nonetheless prefer not to have them weekly, suggesting fortnightly might be sufficient.

Children also continue to express the same negative views on homework because it is only revision of what they have done in school all day and it gets in the way of afterschool activities, playing outside and spending time with friends, with comments like “You’ve already worked all day in school” being very common across classes. One child commented that homework may be more important to do in secondary school.

## Key Message 1: Summary of Findings

In exploring children's perspectives on the strengths of the 1999 curriculum, some significant considerations emerge. The data was broken down by class stages and from tracking children's perspectives by class stage it becomes significant that despite maturing social, physical and cognitive development and needs, children's understandings of, preferences in relation to and needs within school remain fairly consistent over time. Considering how much children change from the time they start school aged 4 or 5 and transition to secondary aged 12 or 13, the consistency of their expressed likes and dislikes and preferences for learning is noteworthy. Their language around such preferences changes, however the core of what children appear to need and desire in school remains constant. They want many opportunities to move and be free, to be with friends for relaxation as well as when learning and they want learning to be active, engaging and incorporate lots of opportunity for conversation and creative expression. They do not like sitting still for extended periods of time and engage in work that is repetitive and heavily workbook based. These views are also very similar to those expressed by children in special schools who enjoy many subject areas, spending time outdoors, being with friends, playing and going on school trips.

In this closing section of discussing responses to Key Message 1 key findings that emerged in the above analysis are discussed in more detail, including areas such as children's views on language learning and their preference for subjects that allow them to move and spend time with friends.

Children's views on learning English and Irish are important to consider in relation to the new MFL specification in the *Primary Language Curriculum*. Evident in children's discussions of English and Irish as subjects is that certain aspects of the process of language learning feel complicated, challenging and 'boring' or 'repetitive' for children and may influence their views overall of each specific language. Children enjoy reading when they can read something engaging and do so in a relaxed or leisurely manner; similarly, they like to engage in creative writing when they can imagine and write their own stories. In contrast, they are much less positive about learning new complex vocabulary, answering a lot of questions or having to practice handwriting. Children express fondness for doing fun activities but do not like relying heavily on workbooks or having to engage in repetitive tasks centering on vocabulary and long, difficult sentences. For children to enjoy the process of language learning, they express the need for relevant and meaningful engagement with the language where they understand the relevance of its use and they get rich opportunities to use it in practice and in concrete everyday situations.

Physical Education is a subject that is loved by children across class stages and schools. There appear to be several reasons for this. Firstly, children see its importance by suggesting they see it as important that they can move, exercise, and therefore get fit, particularly in the older classes. Children also mentioned PE as a subject where they play many games, which they like, and where they often get the opportunity to be outdoors, something most children express a great desire for. Finally, what appears to particularly inform children's preference for PE is that they have greater choice and freedom, as well as the opportunity to be with their friends and converse while engaging in PE; in other words, PE does not feel restrictive to children as they are neither required to sit still or be quiet for long periods, which other subjects or curriculum areas appear to require.

Children also express a strong preference for Visual Arts and unanimously across schools feel they should be given more time for the Arts. Children in particular express positive views on sketching, drawing, painting, and crafts but a less positive regarding colouring in, which many feel is tedious. Overall children express strong views that they want more opportunities, and significantly more time, for the Visual Arts. The other areas of the Arts education curriculum were mentioned less, although children also spoke of liking Music and Drama. What children particularly appear to enjoy in Arts is the opportunity to be creative and use their imagination, and to be able to talk to their friends while they are working on their art. In other words, children feel they can be more relaxed and social while continuing to do important and meaningful schoolwork.

Some key themes beyond specific curriculum areas also emerged from the questions relating to Key Message 1. The themes include children's views on different pedagogical approaches, such as playful learning, the use of workbooks and the social context for learning, including being able to learn together with and through conversation with friends. Children's views on their experiences of breaktime and lunch, opportunities to spend time and play with friends and being allowed sufficient time for activities they enjoy and feel require deep and prolonged immersion suggest that children feel the impact of hurried classrooms.

## **Key Message 2: Supporting Agency and Flexibility in Schools**

### **Introduction**

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* supports agency and flexibility. The framework recognises teachers' and principals' agency and professionalism to enact the curriculum in their individual school context; gives more flexibility to schools in terms of planning and timetabling to identify and respond to priorities and opportunities; connects with different school contexts in the education system; gives greater opportunities for flexibility and choice for children's learning through the use of learning outcomes in curriculum specifications.

In exploring children's views and perspectives on agency and flexibility in the curriculum, and in their wider school experiences more generally, the research questions were designed to identify children's perceptions of having choices in and influence on their learning. Agency goes beyond having choice; thus, children were also asked whether they feel they can bring their own interests and expertise to classroom-based learning experiences and opportunities, and whether they have an influence on the curriculum and their own learning.

### **Key Message 2: Analysis of Junior and Senior Infant Class data**

It is clear from children's responses that choice is not something children feel they experience in the infant classes, choice appearing confined to golden time / free play time on Fridays. All children agreed it is the teacher who decides what they do in school and what topics they learn about, with only one child suggesting the teacher decides this together with the principal and one child saying the teacher and the child themselves decide, with the teacher deciding the work and the child deciding 'fun' things. When asked if they are ever afforded opportunities to be the teacher, the majority of classes responded with a resounding no, with the exception of one class who all immediately answered with one particular child's name, suggesting this child might be given leadership roles in the class. One child said she plays the teacher sometimes but did not elaborate further. In the main, however, children do not feel they get to be the teacher and do not consider themselves to have any say in what they learn about. Some children in senior infants from the Travelling community feel they have some choice in relation to what they do while others felt their teachers decide this.

When asked what work they would choose if given a magic wand or the opportunity to decide, play and Arts, along with fantastical Harry Potteresque magic, dominated children's responses. Children want more opportunities to play and learn through play, and they want more Arts and creativity, with one child suggesting she would choose to dress up as Cinderella. Reflecting a growing body of literature that explores the interconnectedness of playful learning and children's agency (Baker et al, 2023), children in the infant class do not appear to feel agentic in their learning and express views that introducing more play in school is an opportunity for them to have choice and express agency.

## Key Message 2: Analysis of First and Second Class data

Children in first and second class were as adamant as the infant classes about having little choice or say with regard to what they learn about; that it is the teacher who chooses what they do, and sometimes the principal, other teachers, government and/or president, although a small number of children mentioned they sometimes get 'to do a vote', for example on which movie to watch. A small number of children in one Irish-medium school agree that they choose activities, e.g. class games, to do on the interactive whiteboard. Children from the Travelling community concurred with their peers in relation to the lack of decision-making power. Children from special schools also concur with this, suggesting that their teachers, SNAs or school secretary decide on their work. The mention of the secretary and the SNA is reflective of the relational context between adults and children in special schools where children do not distinguish between the roles of adults but see all individuals as educators (Colum, 2020; Zhao, Rose and Shevlin, 2022).

Unlike the infant classes, however, children in first and second class identified a small number of instances where they have some choice, including in relation to reading, writing, Arts and PE. One class gave the example of choice in PE when the teacher allows them to choose which game they want to play, while another class gave the example of having choice in relation to which picture to colour in for Arts. Some children also mentioned having the choice of which book to read or which theme to do a project on.

In most instances, with the exception of two second classes, it is also the teacher who decides what they should do when they finish a task or an activity early. In one class, the choice is generally between reading and sketching/drawing, while in the other the choice was a little more open. Children in Irish-medium schools report some opportunities for choice when they have completed an activity early e.g. engaging in *Drop Everything and Read*, engaging in jobs in the classroom or working with peers.

When asked if they get to learn about topics they are interested in, children answered no, suggesting they would never ask in the first place. In one instance where the children said they do not get any choice, their substitute teacher interjected that the class were given choice about what stories to write in creative writing, which the children concurred with. Some children in Irish-medium schools express an interest in learning about climate change and care for the environment and describe how they then learn about these topics in school. When asked if they ever get to be the teacher, similar to the infant classes, children responded that they do not really get this opportunity. With regard to the special schools, despite the perceived lack of choice, children express enthusiasm for learning about topics they enjoy, such as hibernation, animals, and Easter. This indicates a preference for thematic learning.

Similar to the infant classes, if given a magic wand, children would generally like to have more opportunities to play, both for breaktime and for learning, and would like more opportunities to work with playdough and similar hands-on learning experiences. Some children in the Irish-medium school would like to spend more time on rugby or watching movies, while children from the Travelling community would spend more time in yard, or playing, or have access to video games. Data from the special schools suggests that the children express a desire for more control over their activities, exemplified by one child's hypothetical scenario of declaring '*no work today, let's go home*' if given the opportunity to be a teacher. Responses to the 'magic wand' question reveal imaginative engagement with school activities, with desires ranging from teaching and reading to going home early or to the coffee shop for brownies. Other answers suffered the Harry Potter effect with children across different classes wanting to turn their teachers into frogs or introduce potions into classes! Methodologically, the impact of Harry Potter's popularity possibly means the magic wand question may no longer be an effective way of getting children's earnest responses.

### **Key Message 2: Analysis of Third and Fourth Class data**

In third and fourth class, children continue to identify the teacher, with some assistance from the government, president, Department of Education and the NCCA (possibly because NCCA was mentioned by the researcher in her introduction), as the person choosing what work the children have to do. One child excitedly exclaimed that “The President, Michael D. Higgins, is on a mission to ban homework!”.

Like the junior classes, children do not feel they ever get to choose what they learn about or what they do, except in some qualified cases. Of choice, children suggest they can choose between reading, sketching / drawing and free writing when they finish their work early, and they get some choices when it comes to PE and what games to play, be it in PE, Arts or other subjects such as Maths, or which games to play for learning on their Chromebooks or the whiteboard.

One class suggested that the teacher gives them a choice but then forgets about it, suggesting that they consider their ‘choices’ somewhat tokenistic and not properly respected or considered by the teacher. Indeed, the limited set of choices children feel they have may make it feel very tokenistic, and in this case when not necessarily followed through on may make children feel they have no real impact on decisions even when given a ‘choice’. When it comes to their ability to choose, many children explained in different ways that once in a while they might get a set of options to choose from but they seem to never feel that they can freely choose what they want to learn about, for example, on projects. For example, “If we are lucky, we get an option to choose... but it is very rare”.

Interestingly, in one of the participating DEIS schools, children expressed a much greater sense of agency and choice in one of the two participating classes (the fourth class) while the younger class (third) expressed having no choice or agency. The fourth class, that felt a strong sense of agency identified project work in particular as an aspect of the school day where they can really influence the learning but they offered other opportunities as well. When children were asked about choice, the children in this class agreed that if they professed a particular interest in a topic, they would be allowed to pursue that topic. They are clearly used to doing projects and they feel they have agency and choice when working on projects. When asked if they could choose what to do after completing an assigned task, some children said they would have to ask the teacher what to do, while others indicated they knew what to do and just went ahead with more work themselves, without asking teacher.

Children in third and fourth class are more specific in their responses to the magic wand question in terms of how they’d like to introduce more play and hands on or activity based learning, for example suggesting different games they like to do across subjects such as Maths, Arts and PE, and like younger children would like more of the subjects they like and feel need more time, such as PE and Arts. In third and fourth the Harry Potter effect persists and requests were also made for potions and herbology classes.

### **Key Message 2: Analysis of Fifth and Sixth Class data**

Children in fifth and sixth class shared similar views to children in younger classes regarding who decides what work they should do. Children believe it is predominantly their teachers who decide, with some assistance from the government. Interestingly, children in fifth and sixth class suggested teachers may be restrained in their professional autonomy, or at least communicate that to children. For example, one child suggested, “When we ask teacher not to give us homework, she says she doesn’t have a choice”, with other children suggesting, “It is the government because the government is the one who is telling every school to give each child homework but not on the weekends”. Other children believe decision-makers depended on the subject, for example archeologists for the subject of History, while other children believed that it is the teachers who write the workbooks. Some children’s responses to this question suggested that workbooks again appear to be central to children’s understandings, engagement with and perspectives

on specific subjects and curriculum areas, as is evident in the following quotes, “The people that write the book” and “Maybe on History an archaeologist”. In the special schools, like the junior classes, children believe teachers, family, and SNAs determine their school tasks, suggesting a continuation of perceived or real limited agency in older grades.

In most classes, children concurred with their peers in younger classes that they do not get much choice, “Sometimes when the children want to ask their teacher can we do PE first and then the teacher might say, well if you get Maths and Irish done then you can do it then”, the condition in this ‘choice’ therefore undermining, indeed counteracting, the choice. These, and other comments, suggest that children are offered narrowly defined choices that in many cases are conditional. Thus, in one class choices were given as rewards while in other classes, children can choose between a range of options what work they want to do when they’ve finished work early. However, as one child commented, they get a choice of doing more work if they finish their work early, making ‘having choice’ perhaps somewhat less appealing. Other children’s comments suggested a similar cynicism in relation to choice. For example, one child suggested they have 2% choice and the teacher has 98% choice, specifying that the 2% are made up of 1% in PE and 1% made up by having a choice of WHEN to do a test, but not whether to do it. The choice in PE, the child also justified, was perhaps not really a choice as they may be given a choice between which of 3 sports, they want to do but if they choose x, they will also have to do y, suggesting the choices are ‘bad’ when they become conditional on other additional work.

When asked if they ever get to be the teacher, such opportunities carry the same perception of condition and reward. One child mentioned passes: “I forgot, some people basically get passes where you can organise lessons with the teacher and then you can either do an art lesson or a PE lesson and whenever they come that they organise they do a PE or an art lesson with the person, the child who organises it being the teacher.”

When asked if they get to learn about topics, they are interested in, this did not appear as an option.

When asked the magic wand question, children generally wanted more opportunity to engage with subjects they liked and in playful and games-based teaching. Children in one Irish-medium school report having some opportunities to teach something to the class.

### **Key Message 2: Summary**

Children’s responses to the questions about choice and agency clearly placed decision-making power nearly exclusively with the teacher, with some assistance by the government in the form of the Department of Education, the President, the Government and the NCCA. Some children acknowledged the role also of subject area experts such as archaeologists. Children across all class stages believe that they have no, or extremely limited, say in what they do of work and learn about. They also do not believe they ever get the opportunity to learn about topics they are interested in unless the teacher has already decided to cover such topics, with the exception of one class in a disadvantaged school where children felt they had considerable influence on what they learn about because they engage in a lot of project work.

Particularly striking is that children in the junior classes, especially in infant classes, feel they have very few choices and identify playful learning as a good opportunity for such choice, of which they feel they need or want considerably more. When analysed by class stage, the data suggest that children get slightly more choice as they get into the more senior classes, or that they may be better able to identify such choices. While it may be a combination of the two, it does appear that children do not generally experience choice until senior classes, with the exception of children from the Travelling community and in special schools where agency does not appear to increase with children’s age based on the responses from children participating in this research. Where agency appears more prevalent, it still appears limited. Indeed, children’s views on choice suggest that ‘choice’ in and of itself does not lead naturally to a sense of being an agentic learner. The limited parameters of children’s choices, between a narrow range of options, appear to

feel restrictive and in some cases, 'bad'. Agentic learning rather seems to arise from opportunities to learn about their interests, where there is freedom to move and converse about the work with their friends and peers and in subject areas where children could explore learning more freely, such as some areas of Arts Education, in particular sketching, drawing and painting, and through playful learning approaches of which all children want more. Conditionally, limited choice may offer children some autonomy but serious consideration should be given to the role of such choice in facilitating agentic teaching and learning. This raises the significant question of whether conditional narrowly defined choice is choice at all and prevents such 'choice' from allowing children opportunities for agency and agentic learning.

The data suggests a desire among children for more agency and choice in their learning experiences, which could enhance motivation and engagement. This was demonstrated via the magic wand question where children imagined what they would like to do. It is clear from the data that children are interest driven and target specific topics. This is advantageous for teachers as they can support children's interests, as evidenced by their enthusiasm for specific topics, tailoring instruction and fostering deeper engagement. Understanding children's perceptions of who determines their activities can inform collaboration between teachers, parents, and key stakeholders to create a more participatory learning environment. The data underscore the importance of agency and flexibility in promoting child engagement and suggests avenues for enhancing educational experiences to better align with children's interests and preferences.

### **Key Message 3: Building Connections between pre-school, primary and post-primary schools**

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* connects what and how children learn across preschool, primary and post-primary schools. The framework provides a clear vision for children's learning across the eight years of primary school; links with learning experiences provided through the themes of the *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and connects with the subjects, key skills and statements of learning in the *Framework for Junior Cycle*; supports educational transitions by connecting with what and how children learn at home, in preschool and post-primary school.

In addressing this key message, children in junior infants to second class were asked questions relating to their preschool experiences and their perceptions of similarities and differences between preschool and primary school. Children in third to sixth class were asked questions relating to secondary school and whether they had discussions with their teachers, peers and families around this. If children in third class said they had not yet had such discussions, which the research team expected them not to have had, they were instead asked questions relating to their preschool experiences.

#### **Key Message 3: Analysis of Junior and Senior Infant data**

Children in infant classes felt that preschool and primary school feel very similar. Specifically, the children mentioned that they had really good teachers and friends in both places. Children also mentioned having a lot of opportunities for Arts and crafts, play and Aistear, circle time, as well as engaging in learning sounds, and having some opportunity for outdoor play in both settings, although circle time felt less learning focused in preschool. There were some notable differences, however. Children generally felt that they had more choice in preschool, in regard to availability of play equipment (toys), where and how to play and for how long. Thus, children in infant classes identified an important continuation of play from preschool to primary but suggested that the time spent in play and the nature of it altered slightly. When discussing primary school with their preschool teachers, the children who remembered such conversations said they expected primary school to be more difficult than preschool because the learning would be 'harder' and a small number of children were worried about homework and learning being too difficult. Other children commented that they expected school to be a place where they had to sit still and be quiet a lot more than in preschool.

The biggest difference between the two educational contexts, according to infant class children, appear to be in their experiences of having choice, in particular in relation to play.

Experiences differed somewhat for children from the Travelling community. The senior infants class felt that there was a difference between 'big school' and 'play school' with much more emphasis on "work" such as "reading" in big school. There was more playing in their play school. The children reported that things like playing in the yard were the same between the two schools. They also indicated that they had an opportunity to speak about big school when they were in play school, but the emphasis was on "being in school" and on the yard.

### **Key Message 3: Analysis of First, Second and Third Class data**

Children from first class upwards felt primary school was very different to preschool, in particular in relation to the role of play in learning. Children in first and second class feel they had a lot more time to play in preschool, including more time outside and better availability of equipment. In the case of Irish-medium schools, children feel that while they have opportunities to play in primary school, the play is more structured. They also believe they had more opportunities to listen to someone reading them a story in preschool and to take naps. In primary school children from first class onwards do not feel they play a lot for learning, that play is confined to yard time and playing specific games in some subjects whereas they feel in preschool they spent most of the day playing. Interestingly, children expressed views that they felt playing all day was much easier because they didn't have to do much learning, except for a few sounds and shapes, suggesting a certain juxtaposition between play and freedom, which they found easy, and learning, which they associate more with sitting down and being 'harder'. Children in first and second class did not always remember their conversations with preschool teachers about primary school but one boy remembered primary school being used as a threat to manage his behaviour - when he didn't do as the teachers wanted in preschool, he said they had told him he'd have to start to behave much better for big school, which had made him scared.

There was a higher incidence of children attending preschool in the Scoil Ián-Ghaeilge compared to the scoil Ghaeltachta. For the children who had attended preschool, they believed that they had opportunities to talk about the transition including the new friends they would make and the need for their increased independence like putting on their own coat when going out to the yard. In the main they reported looking forward to primary school.

Children in third class were also asked about preschool and one third class child concurred with the views of those in first and second class and elaborated with a nuanced view of the changes in perception as they progress through primary school. This child, like those in first and second class, maintained that preschool and primary are "completely different". Children in third class also stated they would like to do more painting (on canvasses) and play—which they used to do a lot of in preschool. As one explained, "You see I feel like the more you play the more you know, it is kind of the same as work except you don't actually have to be stuck with a book. I feel when you play you still get to know stuff." This child speaks to their perception of a juxtaposition between fun and play on the one hand and learning and 'being stuck' in books or at a table, on the other. Children's views suggest that playful learning is central to curriculum alignment and a sense of freedom and agency by children.

Not all children from the Travelling community had attended preschool but for those who had, their experiences were similar to their peers, namely that they felt they had played more in preschool. When asked about things they liked to do in play school that they would still like to do in primary school, the strong response was "Play with all my friends, the time I was in play school I liked playing with my friends".

The context was a little different for children in the special schools who remembered previous schools (mainstream primary schools) as opposed to previous preschool experiences. One child noted that there was a

difference in size between their previous and current school, the special school being much bigger. Another child mentioned that there was a difference in the types of work expected of them, with more emphasis on writing in the special school. When probed, the children listed a variety of activities in their previous setting comprising circle time, snack time, outdoor play, and specific academic tasks like reading. Differences in previous school experiences were more prominently noted by junior class children, suggesting that early schooling experiences may have a more significant impact on their perceptions and memories.

### **Key Message 3: Analysis of Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Class data**

The data illustrates that children in fourth class are actively thinking about post-primary school and imagining what it will be like. At this age, children primarily engage in conversations about post-primary school with their friends and classmates. Their conversations typically centre around the subjects they will take (or would like to take), how difficult the work will be, and the amount of homework they will have. Their ideas about post-primary school were typically based either on their own assumptions, or insights gained from older siblings, and in a few cases, from parents who are post-primary teachers. In addition, a few children live near a post-primary school, and thus believe they have some idea regarding what it is like.

As children age into fifth and sixth class, it is clear they become more actively engaged in conversations with teachers about their expectations regarding what the post-primary experience will be like. Many of these discussions focus on the subjects they will study, what classes will be like, how to prepare for examinations such as the Leaving Certificate, as well as the importance of earning good grades in relation to getting into college and obtaining a good job. Some children in the Irish-medium schools are excited about school trips that they will take while in post-primary school.

While some expressed excitement at the thought of taking new subjects like ‘woodwork’ (which is unavailable to them in the primary curriculum), conversations appear to centre around the more challenging nature of particular subjects, like Maths and Irish. Indeed, some children expressed concern or worry about these subjects. Some children in Irish-medium schools expressed an opinion that post-primary school would be more ‘strict’.

In addition, the increased workload featured prominently in discussions. Children believed they would have ‘tonnes of homework’ in post-primary school along with more tests, and they implicated teachers for impressing these ideas upon them. Children in one Irish-medium school expressed anxiety around homework at the weekend and the possibility of getting detention. As a result of the increased workload, many children believed that they would need to study substantially more than they currently do in primary school. The children also discussed the importance of working and studying now, while in primary school, in order to be better prepared for the transition to post-primary; a few children mentioned the usefulness of studying an additional language in primary schools as a way to further prepare for post-primary.

The children in fifth and sixth class were also focused on the more practical ways that school will differ from their primary experience, and they discussed a myriad of examples such as: the length of the school day, bells signaling transitions throughout the day, having multiple teachers, what discipline is like, and the increased amount of breaktime/free time they will receive (relative to their current experience). In addition, a number of children mentioned moving from classroom to classroom (as opposed to studying in the same classroom throughout the day as they currently do), and for some this was accompanied by a bit of worry regarding their ability to find classes and navigate a larger school building.

A minority of children in the fifth and sixth classes raised concerns regarding friendships. For example, one child expressed nervousness related to being the youngest in the school again, ‘The first day of secondary school you would probably feel so nervous because there is a lot of people that is [sic] older than you’. A number also voiced relational concerns about bullying, and with great certainty, one child declared, ‘some of the kids will get bullied’, while another

emphasized that, ‘you must be able to stand up for yourself in secondary school because there may be bullies there’. Similarly, others mentioned the danger of falling into the wrong crowd, along with concerns about not making or having friends. As one child explained, ‘I am nervous [that]...I am not going to have any friends when I go to secondary and it is going to be hard to make friends’.

When asked whether they are prepared for post-primary school, children expressed mixed views, some answering affirmatively, while others were not so sure.

Due to the age ranges in the classes in the special schools, some of the junior classes were also asked about later transitions. One child, although initially uncertain, expressed an interest in farming, specifically in farming machinery, *“a vehicle to harvest the wheat”*, and perhaps this could be an avenue that could be explored. One child expressed a clear plan, mentioning *“Go to high school. Then we go to college and then after that you will get your job”*. When probed as to what job that would be, he said: *“Maybe a Garda. I don't know yet.”* The children in the senior classes did not respond to this question. This might indicate uncertainty about the question or indeed about their own futures. It might also suggest a shift in priorities as children progress through school.

### **Key Message 3: Summary**

Children generally reported positive experiences of transitioning from preschool to primary school and feeling prepared for this transition. The role of play in learning appears the biggest perceived difference, and this role of play being associated with greater freedom and choice. Play declines in the amount of time and freedom it affords and is replaced with more structured, adult-led play.

In fourth through sixth class children can identify positive elements associated with transitioning to post-primary school which they are anticipating with excitement, such as exposure to new practical subjects. However, it is clear that children may be largely focused on the difficulties and challenges they associate with this transition, including the heightened difficulty of particular subjects, the increased workload, and navigating new friendships—and furthermore, depending on the source, combined with their lack of experience in this area, their expectations may be inaccurate.

## **Key Message 4: Emerging priorities for children’s learning**

### **Key Message 4: Analysis of data in Junior & Senior Infants**

Children in infant classes expressed very clear ideas regarding their priorities for learning, many of which were very practical in nature and often focused on the skills and abilities they are naturally learning at this stage of their education, such as learning “to sit down”.

Many of their learning priorities also focused on relationships, and in one particular school, a number of children stated that it was important to learn “how to be kind, patient and tell the truth”. Similarly, another mentioned the importance of “Fair Trade”. In many ways, these answers may also indicate their budding awareness of concepts such as fairness, justice and equality. Interestingly, within an urban setting school, children mentioned the importance of learning “to defend yourself” and “tell teacher”, which the teacher clarified was about “staying safe”. For these particular children, their responses may illustrate the centrality of teaching and learning about “staying safe”, which is an important life skill to acquire, given the urban contexts in which they are living. The children also had very clear ideas about what is not important to learn in school, such as exploring topics and issues they see on the news/on TV, such as guns and violence.

When asked about their views regarding what children in the future will need to learn, their responses often centered around the STEM subjects and included responses such as: Maths, ‘the human body’, ‘engineering’, ‘aerodynamics’, and sports. Other children discussed the importance of learning particular abilities such as their numbers, letters and reading, which they viewed as important and beneficial skills to acquire. In addition, a few children appeared to have an awareness of the importance of the past in terms of shaping future events, and therefore believed the study of History and knowing about important people from the past would be important for future generations of learners.

It is clear that even at this early age, children’s learning priorities are very much focused on obtaining the skills, aptitudes and knowledge that will be required for later success in school, as well as daily life.

#### **Key Message 4: Analysis of First and Second Classes data**

When asked regarding their learning priorities, children often mentioned the development of age-appropriate abilities such as: learning the alphabet, spelling, and reading. When it came to specific subject areas, there was a focus on the STEM related disciplines, such as coding, Science and Maths. The rationale was typically due to the utilitarian benefits that arise from these areas for daily life, success in post-primary school, or in relation to future careers they might pursue. A minority of children expressed a desire to learn more Maths overall, while others wanted to explore more advanced Maths topics than what is typically included in the curriculum at this level. A number of children also expressed a desire to learn more Science, and to conduct more experiments in class. Overall, this data highlights their keen interest in STEM related disciplines, and perhaps, their desire for more practical and active learning. However, in one class, some of the children maintained they do not learn Science or conduct experiments. As such, it may be that they do not recognise the learning they are engaging in as being related to Science and/or experiments.

The topic of languages also featured prominently among first and second class discussions. Children’s views were varied. A few children in English-medium schools noted the importance of learning Irish given its place as the first language of Ireland. One child explained, ‘we need to learn our own language’ because ‘it is the country that we live in’. However, more common was the rationale that Irish wasn’t important to learn as it isn’t spoken outside of Ireland, and they generally don’t see the usefulness of the language in daily life. Children in Irish-medium schools highlighted the importance of learning Irish and reflected on ways that they use their Irish in different areas of the curriculum. Similarly, a number of children also failed to see the importance of learning English, and this was typically linked to the fact that they can already speak and understand the language. In the case of the Gaeltacht school, children begin formally learning English in first class and they highlighted the importance of and their interest in literacy in English for the rest of their schooling. Importantly for the *Redeveloped Curriculum*, there was much greater consensus in English-medium schools on the importance of learning other foreign languages such as French, Spanish and Japanese. Their rationale was typically linked to the usefulness of being able to speak and understand languages when traveling abroad. Children in Irish-medium schools also expressed an interest in learning other modern foreign languages.

Beyond the academic disciplines, a number of children expressed the importance of learning about themselves, along with gaining relational skills and aptitudes such as learning more about each other, how to foster friendships, how to avoid ‘hurting others when you are angry’, and Wellbeing. In addition, they showed a great interest in other people, cultures, religions and countries which all featured prominently in the discussions. One child from the Travelling Community felt that “it is important to learn about all the facts you need to know when you are actually getting a job and you are out of school, and you are making your own choices”. The children know that “when you grow up you can do whatever you want to do, you can be a teacher, a scientist, a doctor, a guard” but you can get into these professions “only if you go to college”.

Children in the special schools referred to the importance of friends as a priority for learning, placing an emphasis on the social - emotional development of the child. It also indicates that the children see social interactions and relationships as integral to their learning. The topic of social inclusion for academic achievement is documented in the

literature (Colum & McIntyre, 2019) and there is recognition of social and emotional learning in addition to academic subjects.

When asked about topics that are important to learn about, which are not currently explored within the primary curriculum, children typically named areas which they are naturally interested in and enjoy, and often their suggestions also related to careers they aspire to or dream about. Examples included: ‘dogs and veterinary stuff’, learning to play the guitar, sports including basketball and football, and videogames.

In summary, it is clear that children’s interest in the STEM subjects continues to be strong at this age level, as is their desire to learn skills and knowledge that will serve them in practical and utilitarian ways in their daily lives. Additionally, it is clear that even at this young age, children are thinking about their own future careers and enjoy learning topics they believe will be useful in this regard.

#### **Key Message 4: Analysis of Third and Fourth Class data**

Similar to younger cohorts of children, third and fourth classes learning priorities centered around topics and aptitudes which they perceive as useful in their daily lives, as well as potential future careers. Maths featured prominently in the discussion, “because you have to give people the correct change” and “because you kind of need that when you are older if you want a job”, along with using money in daily exchanges, “Because money you use in your daily life to go to the shop”. History was also mentioned, because it gives you a bit of insight into places you are visiting.

Children expressed mixed views on the importance of learning languages, in particular English and Irish. Like the younger children, views were more univocal regarding the importance of learning a modern foreign language. Opinions regarding the importance of language appear primarily related to the utility of the language. One felt that since we all speak English, there’s no need to learn Irish. This ideology also extended to travelling abroad, as one child explained, “If you go over to another country, I don't know where you would go for anyone to speak Irish. They [other countries] know English, and if they don't know English, I would be shocked”. Some commented on the importance of learning to speak English fluently, and using it for reading comprehension, while others felt that learning English was unimportant because they already possess the ability to speak and understand it, “You probably don’t need English that much because we are all kind of fluent in it”. This shows that, when considering the value of languages, children make their determinations mainly based on their ability to speak and use the language in daily life. If either is lacking in their view, this may reduce the usefulness of the subject in their opinion. As such, it is important for teachers to emphasise the practical utility of languages with children, while also helping them to understand that mastering a language includes many other skills and aptitudes beyond speaking and conversing.

There was also a marked shift in the understanding of children at this age level regarding the purpose of homework. For example, in one class, many of the children thought that homework was important as it gives you a second chance to learn and practice topics explored in school. However, despite this increased understanding, this did not mean that all children embraced homework—and some made their preferences for less, or no homework, clear.

When it came to the learning needs of future children, this age group emphasised the importance of learning a variety of skills and aptitudes that are useful in daily life and everyday situations such as: mechanics, art for designing and how to build things, how to become a scientist and preserve fossils, cooking. Additionally, a number of children mentioned finance related topics such as: doing one’s taxes, how to save and invest money. A number of children also thought that future children should receive more input on careers and how to get a job and be successful. Regarding specific subject areas that will be important for future children, the children commented on foreign languages (in order to communicate with others), technology, business, Maths, engineering, and art (for designing and building things). Their answers clearly reflect a desire to learn more about the skills and subject areas that will be required in their daily lives in the future, particularly as they grow and mature into adulthood, as well as skills that could be useful for careers and making an income.

#### **Key Message 4: Analysis of Fifth and Sixth Class data**

Similar to younger cohorts of learners, those in fifth and sixth classes continued to express learning priorities that are highly practical and utilitarian in nature, as they are focused on the future and the requisite skills they will require for success in their studies, daily life and future careers. Children in Irish-medium schools expressed a desire to do more baking and home economics. Also, like younger cohorts, this age group continued to focus on the importance of Maths as it relates to their lives both now and in the future. Their more nuanced responses also called for learning more practical skills that would be useful in real life (like addition, subtraction and multiplication, particularly in relation to the use of money, calculating taxes, and taking out a mortgage), and less about shapes and geometry which are examples of mathematical concepts they do not perceive as being useful outside of the school setting.

Similar to younger children, this age group also wanted to learn more modern foreign languages as these enable you to speak to locals if you go on holiday. English was also mentioned as a learning priority, so that you can learn to speak properly and clearly, while Irish was not—with the rationale being linked to a lack of usefulness, particularly in careers, unless one were to become a teacher of Irish. Lastly, it is of note that, similar to children in third and fourth class, this age group desired more input on future careers, thus showing a strong interest and awareness of their future trajectories, and a desire to know more about the possibilities that are open to them.

Additionally, it should be noted there was an increased emphasis on topics related to Wellbeing, happiness, and managing one's emotions, along with relaxation techniques. This may be due to their increased level of maturity, as well as an increased interest in self-awareness, development, and relationships, which is typical at this age.

Views on the usefulness of History were varied among this group. Some children did not feel the subject was important as they didn't see the usefulness for future careers unless one were to become a teacher of the subject. Yet, in contrast, one particular class of children illustrated a strong understanding of the importance of History (particularly the study of wars) and of the need to learn about our past. They also thought about contemporary issues that children in the future will likely learn about, "The children of the future will be learning about Gaza and Ukraine", while another child explained, "Our History will not be their history".

When asked about their opinions and learning priorities for children in the future, one child explained that it is important for future children to get an education. Like younger cohorts of children, those in fifth and sixth classes continued to emphasise the importance of learning Modern Foreign Languages, and promoting subjects like SPHE, art and technology, which in their opinion, are not currently being covered as much as they would like within their current experience of the primary curriculum. When discussing their views on technology, children clearly showed a keen awareness of technology's future impact on ways of learning, as they maintained there will eventually be no copies in future primary schools, only the use of technology for teaching and learning. Additionally, it was suggested that future children should learn more coding, with the rationale that more jobs will be online in the future. Additionally, children noted the importance of future children learning about topics like Wellbeing, friendships, and generally being happy. One child noted the importance of these topics, especially during the post-primary school years, as they explained: "Really Wellbeing, because of your mind and when you are maybe in secondary school, and you have a test and you are so frustrated with what to do, to calm down and don't worry".

#### **Key Message 4: Summary**

In summary, the data provide interesting insights into children's priorities for learning, both now and into the future. Younger children in Infants through Second Class tend to prioritise the skills and aptitudes they are currently learning in the curriculum which lend to success in daily life and academics--this includes traditional subjects like literacy and numeracy, but also more relational abilities like listening, getting along with each other, making friends, as well as staying safe.

When judging and articulating their learning priorities, it appears their valuation of curriculum is strongly determined by how useful they perceive the subject to be in their own lives, both now and into the future. This shows they are keenly aware regarding how the aptitudes and knowledge they are learning now in primary school will ultimately connect to and support their future studies, career trajectories, and roles and responsibilities as adults. As such, if they deem a subject has little value to them, either now or in the future, they often do not seem the merit of engaging with it. This is significant, as it may signal the need for teachers to emphasise and illustrate the practical importance of subjects and concepts where children may not see the immediate usefulness (such as Irish, English and certain mathematical concepts).

All children expressed an interest and desire to learn more about things they enjoy and are interested in. These areas tend to be very practical in nature, such as sports, Arts and Music, engineering and mechanics, and technological abilities like coding and creating and playing video games. Beyond having a natural/innate interest in these areas, the children often value these areas of study because they perceive them as being useful and linked to future career possibilities. It should be noted that many of their learning priorities and interests are not directly or immediately included on the primary curriculum and may be useful for future consideration.

Starting in first class, children appear to have a keen awareness of the importance of studying maths, and in particular, a strong desire to learn practical skills that are useful to them in their daily life now, such as the exchange of money when they go to the shops, or topics that will be useful to them in the future, such as doing taxes, investing and getting a mortgage. Conversely, they would like to learn less about mathematical concepts that they feel have no practical use in the real world, such as geometry.

Additionally, it should be noted that children appear to develop a keen interest in studying and engaging with the STEM disciplines as early as first and second classes and this continues as they age throughout primary school. There is a clear appreciation among children regarding the usefulness of these subject areas to our daily lives, as well as their future careers. Children also wish to increase the amount of scientific learning they experience in the primary curriculum, particularly in relation to carrying out more experiments, and being able to learn and conduct themselves like a real scientist would.

Lastly, it is of note that starting in Infants and continuing on throughout sixth class, children showed a clear desire to learn more about themselves and others. For younger children this often took the form of learning manners and relational skills (like listening and following directions), along with exploring other countries and cultures. Foreign languages were also deemed of importance, as it would allow them to travel and directly interact with the people they encounter.

As they age into the upper levels of primary school, modern foreign languages continued to be of great importance given the usefulness in daily life, but there was also an increased emphasis on the study of personal Wellbeing, handling emotions, and relaxation, along with recognition of the importance of learning the prerequisite skills required for fostering positive relationships and friendships.

## **Key message 5: Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented**

The main question asked in relation to this key message was - "Do you like to learn about different topics at the same time or do you prefer to learn about one topic and learn about that topic in all areas/subjects (e.g. Irish, Art, History, Geography, Maths)?" The intention of the question was to explore whether children like to learn in an integrated or more fragmented manner. Research suggests that young children learn best through an integrated approach (Burke & Lehane, 2023). The children were also asked a question about how they learn. A particular question on play was

designed to ascertain if children thought it was possible to learn while playing. There was a question about homework, asking children if they thought homework is important to help you to learn.

#### **Key Message 5: Analysis of Junior Infants and Senior Infants data**

Children in the infant classes were asked “Do you like to learn many different things on the same day (e.g. Maths, Irish, English, Art) or do you prefer to just learn a few things on the same day and spend more time learning these things?” Many of the children in Junior Infants found it difficult to engage with this question as it was a little abstract, but extended explanations harvested responses.

When asked how they would like their day to be structured, there was an even split between children who wanted to visit many topics in one day and those who wanted to visit one or two topics in depth. Some children said that they would like to do different subjects on different days because it would take a long time to do everything on the one day and “you would get so tired.” The children who wanted topics done in depth wanted those topics to be Art or Sport or “just one thing and reading.” Some children said they would be fed up if they were doing the one thing all day long unless it was Arts and Crafts or playing outside. Other children said they would prefer a variety of topics in the day to avoid getting fed up with one thing. One child said they would prefer lots of subjects in one day because that would be fairer on everyone as they would all get a chance to do the subject they liked.

Children said they played in school, and they agreed that you could learn through play. One example of what they learned was – how to share, “not to leave people out.” Others said you learned about sounds, letters, building houses and learning languages through play. Children in the special schools identified writing, reading, and learning through maths activities as methods of learning. There was also an emphasis on listening as a learning method from most of the children with one child categorically stating, “*that is the most important thing in the world*”. In the special schools there was no perception of play as a learning activity and when probed, reiterated “*we just have fun playing around. Like when we are finished work.*” This indicates that children do not see a correlation between play and learning in the special school. In the special schools, there was a very positive response to learning through projects with enthusiasm for theme-based projects. Children listed themes such as books, Valentine’s Day, music, world book day, holidays, moon phases and family trees. They see projects as an opportunity for creativity and hands-on learning, which they believe helps them learn. For example, one boy likes doing projects in building because “*you could be a construction man*”. Another child described their project on the life cycle of the frog which “*begins at the frog spawn, tadpoles, then froglet and when the frog is an adult it moves to the land*”. The fact that the children could recall their project work indicates that it is a sustainable learning approach for children as they learn by doing and can recall facts once they have the work completed.

When asked about how you learn in school, children from the Travelling Community in the senior infants' class reference many methods such as group work, individual work, using laptops and “If you have a hard word you have to put up your hand to ask teacher to help you.” The children also feel that they learn when they play but do not elaborate on it with specific examples. In general, all these approaches signify that there is a variety of teaching and learning approaches which will appeal to young children, cater to different learning styles and accommodate a wide variety of needs.

Only one infant class spoke about homework. The children in this class had one piece of homework every night which was to read a book and keep their reading records. Five children said homework is important “because you can’t get a job” unless you can read. Two children said that they did not think it was important to do and other children (n=3) said that homework takes too long. There is a generally positive attitude toward homework among the children from the Travelling Community. This is somewhat in contrast to earlier comments where they stated that they did not like to do work in school. This positive attitude towards homework could stem from the structured nature and clear expectations of these tasks to be done at home. It suggests that when children understand the purpose and expectations of an activity, they may be more willing to engage with it, even if it is work-related.

In the special schools there was a mixed response to the question on homework with only one school administering homework. In this school the children explained that they liked homework, and it was a mixture of “writing and maths”, “letters” “English” “maths” again placing emphasis on the learning of literacy and numeracy. The children liked getting homework “because it is fun” indicating an interest in literacy and numeracy and perhaps how homework is presented for the children. The children who did not get homework were content with this arrangement, acknowledging that “some school has to do them, but we mostly do work at school”.

### **Key Message 5: Analysis of First and Second Class data**

When asked if they would like to learn multiple subjects every day or one or two subjects in depth, some children opted for the latter with the proviso that the latter meant prolonged study of Art. Other children preferred to learn a few things each day. One child suggested that they alternate so every other week would have a lot of work stuff and every other week would have a lot of fun stuff. Another child had the same idea but alternating every couple of days, so perhaps Mon/Tue lots of work, then a few days with lots of fun. Another child mentioned that there should be fun stuff every day in between work so it is not all just work every day and that things like PE should be part of every day. Overall, like the younger cohort of children, the children in first and second class had mixed views on learning one or two subjects in depth daily or studying multiple subjects in one day.

The children felt that playing with your friends is an effective way of learning. They mentioned that they learn playfully when they learn via games in Maths and Irish. When asked how they currently learn in school, children said that they learn by listening to the teacher. They also said that sometimes the teacher explains something first, then they might watch a video about it and then they might read about it or work on it in workbooks. One child mentioned they learn by practising something a lot. Children in the two special schools placed an emphasis on learning through literacy and numeracy. While there seems to be play in the special schools, the children place value on the recreational aspect or only see play as a recreation. This does not mean that educational games or structured play activities are not carried out to reinforce academic concepts; it simply suggests that children do not perceive play as a vehicle for learning.

Children from the Travelling Community identified a variety of ways to learn, including listening to the teacher, working on assignments, and following rules, learning through play, especially during Golden Time, and interactive methods using iPads for Maths. It seems that most of the learning occurs within the classroom, with few mentions of learning in other environments like outside or in different rooms within the school. When asked about having subjects on the same day, there is a mixed response, with some children preferring a variety of subjects each day, while others prefer to focus more on certain subjects, especially art.

In the special schools, the children were positively disposed to the administration (or lack of) of homework. They did not express a strong dislike of homework and accepted it as part of their schoolwork. Children from the Travelling Community expressed a strong dislike for homework with the explanation that “we are not allowed get homework anymore because none of us ever do it”. Children expressed a desire for clear boundaries between school and home life with the quip “if school isn't a place to sleep then home isn't a place to work”.

### **Key Message 5: Analysis of Third and Fourth Class data**

In one third class, children seem to prefer to learn about a lot of things in one day. Others, who were thinking they might prefer fewer subjects per day, qualified their statement based on the subjects and whether they like them or not: “It depends, if it is Maths, no, if it is English, no, if it is Irish, no.” Children in third class also indicated a preference for an integrated approach to learning, saying they liked to visit the same topic in History, Geography and Art. Another third class said they do not want to learn about too many things in one day as that would make it harder to learn but

they also did not want only two subjects as they would get fed up with those two subjects, having to spend a long time on them. Children suggested having about an hour for a subject before moving onto something else. This is like the way the curriculum is currently presented in schools. One child mentioned only wanting to do the subjects they like and avoid the ones they do not like. One fourth class group felt focusing on one or two subjects a day was better than having to focus on everything because “you get confused when there is too much stuff in your head.” Another fourth-class group agreed it was better to do “a lot of topics/different topics,” but another noted that “if it is too much then our brains will get fried.”

The children indicated a preference for more social learning, rather than book learning. They mentioned they learn a lot with books and workbooks. They asked for more use of quizzes and technology, saying there have enough iPads for everyone in the class but they do not use them much. They said they ask teacher for help when they are ‘stuck.’ They said they do play in the classroom (via games) and they think “it is better because you can remember” and they would like more play/games for learning. Another fourth-class group said they learned through books, painting, drawing, (sometimes) playing, projects, and guest speakers.

#### **Key Message 5: Analysis of Fifth and Sixth Class data**

When asked if they would like multiple subjects in one day or fewer subjects with a deeper focus, children said they would opt for one or two subjects all day but only if they could choose the subjects themselves. This was the same response that came from children in first, second, third and fourth classes. One child said they would choose multiple subjects per day because it would make the day go faster. A second child agreed with this, saying it would be boring to spend too long on one subject. If you disliked a particular subject, at least you could move on to something else. Another child said they would like to integrate their learning throughout several subjects and mentioned going outdoors to measure spaces for Maths.

This fifth-class group claimed not to experience play, apart from an occasional game. When asked how they would like to learn, they said they should watch more videos in class, do less writing, more talking in class (like pair work), more topics that are exciting, more projects, and more time to do their work and projects. They favour practical ways to learn and gave an example of being allowed to go to the shop to learn about money.

#### **Key Message 5: Analysis of Irish-Medium School data**

Children in the Irish-medium schools revealed mixed views as to whether they preferred to engage in individual learning activities for an extended period or whether they preferred to have a variety of activities in one day. In the main these views related to a specific curriculum area. While they would like to spend extended periods of time engaged in Visual Arts or sports activities, they are not as keen to spend a similar amount of time on handwriting or dictation.

#### **Key Message 5: Summary**

The data show that children were conflicted over the question of whether it is preferable to visit several subjects in one day or if it is better to stick with one or two subjects per day and go into them in depth. Those that chose to go into depth with one or two subjects chose that option, depending on the subjects that were to be explored. If the subjects were PE or Visual Art or working outdoors, they were happy with an in-depth exploration; otherwise, they would rather visit multiple subjects on one day because it would be less boring and because it would be fairer on children who did not like certain subjects.

Children felt it is possible to learn through play and expressed a desire for social interaction. They claimed there is a lot of book learning, and they would prefer more active approaches. This echoes findings in the report on the consultation with children on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (Kiely et al, 2022).

One thing that became clear in relation to homework is the older the child, the more critical they are of homework. Many younger children, right up to third class did not mind homework and /or saw the value of it. Older children tended to think it is not important and home should be a place of rest from schoolwork.

## **Key message 6: Supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to learning and teaching**

When addressing key message 6, *Supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to learning and teaching*, the focus was on what pedagogical and assessment approaches are favoured by children. The children were given an A3 poster, (Appendix G), one between two, to allow for discussion, with 15 pictures depicting different pedagogical approaches and strategies. The pictures were chosen based on the *Primary Curriculum Framework's* Principles of Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (Department of Education, 2023b).

The poster was the sole concrete resource used during the group interview. The rationale for introducing the poster was to support the children's thinking. The team discussed whether the poster might influence the children's responses, 'putting words in their mouths'. When piloting the use of the poster, children responded to the poster, as per the questions on the interview schedule, by identifying how they like to learn but also by saying whether they got the opportunity to practise the strategies illustrated on the poster. This was an important distinction for the purposes of analysis and indicated that children were able to distinguish between how they liked to learn and what pedagogical approaches they experienced in school. On that basis, it was decided to use the poster when exploring key message 6.

### **Key Message 6: Analysis of Junior and Senior Infants Class data**

In the infant classes, researchers encouraged children to engage with the '*How to learn*' poster by playing a game, whereby children had to identify illustrations by putting their finger on the illustration. The researcher asked, for example, 'Who can find the picture of the children working with a friend?', 'Who can find the picture of the children doing an experiment?' etc. Once it was clear that children could identify what each picture represented, they were asked to discuss with their friend how they liked to learn. This was followed up by questions about their experience of these learning strategies in school. See Appendix H: Phase 1 Interview Schedule (Children).

When presented with posters illustrating 'How I learn at school', the children recognised all the following as activities they do in school –

- Watching movies
- Working outside
- Working with iPads
- Doing experiments
- Playing/playing with materials, shapes etc.
- Teacher talking and using the interactive whiteboard.
- Reading books
- Working with friends/group
- Working in pairs

- Working on your own
- When your friends help you correct your work
- Working in another room
- Working on your own
- When you must correct your own work
- When you don't understand something and need to ask teacher for help

It emerged that children were familiar with all the pedagogical approaches and strategies listed on the poster. This indicates that a good variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies are used in the infant classes. As might be expected in infant classes, children were **least familiar** with different modes of assessment, or rather – illustrations around assessment needed to be explained most to the children and they were **most familiar** with illustrations related to play, both outdoor play (recess time) and indoor play, (meaning engagement with materials such as blocks, construction toys, dolls, toy cars, trucks, animals, 'junk' art, various writing implements such as crayons, pencils, markers and paints and pretend play using real world materials such as mobile phones, weighing scales, calculators, menus, shopping baskets etc (NCCA, 2009, pp103-106). Many children referred to indoor play as 'Aistear', meaning a dedicated classroom time-period for play that is connected in some way to learning in the curriculum but allows children freedom to explore the material in a playful way<sup>1</sup>.

When asked what they did when they played in class, some of the senior infant children pointed to the shelves in the classroom which were laden with play resources suitable for construction, small world play, Mathematical activities, and pretend play. Many children mentioned their delight in reading books. In one senior infant class, for example, reading got eighteen positive mentions from the children.

When the data on children's preferences for the various activities was collated, the most favoured activities amongst Junior and Senior Infants were working outside, working with digital technology (tablets), watching movies, doing group work, reading, doing experiments and playing. Interaction with others, both adults and peers, is important to the children. They consistently chose working with a peer or a group of peers over working alone, although some children chose working alone too. In one senior infant class, most of the children said they did not like working on their own at their desk.

As noted previously, illustrations around assessment needed to be mediated more than other illustrations but this is not surprising as arguably there is no one picture that can encapsulate the experience of assessment in the junior and senior infant classroom. Assessment could be happening when conferencing with a teacher, participating in a learning task alone or with others, using a checklist or giving feedback on work (DeLuca, Pyle, Suparna, Chalas & Danniels, 2019). When asked to choose how they would like to be assessed, most children said they liked when someone helped them to correct their work. Children also said that the teacher generally corrected their work. The children were split down the middle when it came to whether they liked asking their teacher for help with their work; about half liked asking the teacher and half did not like asking the teacher for help.

In the Senior infants' class, the children from the Travelling Community indicate that they do all the things listed on the poster. The most popular ways to learn is through iPads, play and reading. Some children like to watch movies, and other do not. Most children do not like it when their friends correct their work, and one child stated that "I don't like to put up my hand".

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<sup>1</sup> *Dedicated playful learning time in many primary schools has become known as 'Aistear time'. Aistear is the early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to 6 years in Ireland. The Aistear curriculum framework states that children learn through active learning, play and hands-on experiences and relevant and meaningful experiences (NCCA, 2009, p.7).*

### Key Message 6: Analysis of data from First and Second Class

Data collection in one of the **first classes** was interrupted when key message 5 was completed so no data was collected on key message six – on pedagogical approaches, strategies and assessment. The other first class interviewed claimed to experience all the approaches listed except for ‘working outside’ and ‘having another child or friend correct your work’. The children explained that the teacher corrects their work. One child claimed to love doing all the activities illustrated on the poster. Other children mentioned the following as activities they liked to engage in –

- Doing experiments
- Role play
- Learning through play
- Reading
- Correcting your own work
- iPads
- Planting stuff
- Working in pairs
- Working in groups

These choices indicate children like learning actively, learning using materials and learning with others.

When asked what pedagogical approaches are practised in their **second class**, children said they got opportunities to play, an activity they loved; to read, to watch movies, work in pairs (claimed by children to be a favourite activity) and in groups, work with iPads (another much loved activity), working with the teacher while she/he uses the interactive whiteboard and working alone at their desks. Children claimed they do not work in other rooms in the school, they do not do peer assessment, and they do not ask their peers for advice on how they might improve. There were a few instances when children answered both yes and no to the same question. One child said they would like if their friend corrected their work. Play and working with iPads were the most favoured activities.

Another group from second class talked about liking pair work. They did not like working alone and they thought working with another person meant you could get help, if needed. They did not like asking the teacher for help. A small number of children did not like pair work, claiming it might distract them from learning. Working in pairs therefore seems to centre around perceptions of help, whether it’s asking for it or offering it.

The third picture, group work, was not liked by most children but they agreed that this depended on who was in the group. They generally do not like group work because they find it distracting and they don’t like if group members copy their ideas or are behaving in a silly manner or are noisy. Several children mentioned that it can be very difficult to be allowed to concentrate and do the work in groups.

In the third second-class group interviewed, children seemed to like learning in other rooms over learning in the classroom. They mentioned that they might go out for a while with a support teacher, which they like, or they might get to go to a different room in a small group to try out a new book, or they may be allowed to try out different Maths concepts in the hall, all of which they like and would like to do more of. They said that they didn’t like when teacher explained things on the board, especially if it took too long. The children like to learn by reading about something except for when a book or topic is boring. They answered in the same vein for learning by watching a movie about something. They use Chromebooks in the school and really like using these. The children often correct each other’s work and like to do this, except one child who does not. They also get to correct each other’s work when they have had tests, which they also like.

The final second-class group interviewed really liked working outdoors. This is likely to be connected to the Forest School activities the school is involved with. Rooms outside the classroom they mentioned they liked learning in included the hall and the seomra spraoi (playroom). Everyone in the group mentioned they like to read to learn. The majority of children also like to watch a movie to learn about something, play and working on computers/iPads. They sometimes correct their own work, and some children like it while others don't. The same goes for peer assessment. Everyone who answered the final question said they don't ask their teacher for help but either work it out themselves or ask the person sitting next to them. A similar equivocal attitude towards asking teacher for help pertains in first and second class as per the infant classes.

The data offers insights into how pedagogical approaches and strategies, with assessment central to learning and teaching, are perceived and experienced by junior and senior classes in special school settings. The most popular responses to the question, how do you learn, were *"learning in different rooms"* and when *"the teacher talks and writes on the whiteboard"*. There were also some references to working outside and one child commented *"I play with chalk in the garden"*. The data suggests that the children experience a variety of learning environments to enhance their learning. The children in the Special School setting felt that assessment is primarily conducted by adults such as teachers or SNAs, who inform children if their work is correct or incorrect. There is minimal peer assessment with one child stating that *"Your friend doesn't correct your work, only teachers can"*. In general, there is a preference for working alone because *"you don't get distracted if somebody is asking what is it, what is it"*. Children identified various ways they learn and expressed preferences for activities such as play, working alone, working in pairs, and watching films. However, they disliked activities that required self-correction or collaboration with peers. In one school iPads are not used in junior classes because they are *"not allowed"* until the senior classes which may limit opportunities for technology-based learning experiences. In the other school the children expressed an interest in iPads. Overall, there seems to be an interest in technology, and it is being utilised in special school settings.

The children in second class from the Travelling Community explained that they do not get to do all the things on the poster. There is evidence that social learning through group activities and peer interactions is valued in some cases, though the opportunities for this are limited according to the children. However, one child explained *"I don't like working in groups, I just like working by myself because when I am trying to read something, like all the other voices gets you confused"*. The children state that they *"don't watch films about something"* or *"work alone at your desk"*. One child reported that *"We don't do experiments by our self, the teacher does it alone or we can help her do it and she picks out someone to help"*. One child said: *"I like when I do schoolwork outside and when I read about something and... when we play"*, mirroring data gathered in other school contexts. Play is a popular activity for the children interviewed in this study.

**Table 7:** How you like to learn, illustrates that children from infants to second like to learn using a diverse range of pedagogical approaches. Working with technology (iPads and Chromebooks) and reading rated highest, followed by play, watching movies and working in pairs.

**Table 7: How you like to learn. Junior infants to Second class**

How you like to learn.	Jun & Sen Infants	First class	Second class 1	Second class 2	Second class 3	Second class 4	TOTAL
Play with materials in class, Role play...	√	√	√			√	4
Work with iPads and/or Chrome books	√	√	√		√	√	5
Watch movies	√		√		√	√	4

Work alone at desk	X		√	X			1 √ 2 X
Work in pairs	√	√	√	√ and X			4 √ 1 X
Work in a group	√	√	√	X			3 √ 1 X
Experiments	√	√					2
Work outdoors	√	√				√	3
Work in the classroom							
Work in other rooms of the school			X (do not get to do this)		√	√	2√ 1X
When teacher talks & writes on interactive board			√		X		1 √ 1 X
Reading	√	√	√		√	√	5
Correct your own work		√				√ and X	2 √ 1 X
Your friend corrects your work			X (do not get to do this)		√	√ and X	2 √ 2 X
Ask peers for advice on how to improve			X (Do not get to do this)				1 X
Ask the teacher for help when you don't understand.				X		X	2 X

### Key Message 6: Analysis of data from Third and Fourth Class

One of the third and one of the fourth classes included here are part of composite classes situated in a rural context. The other third and fourth classes are from an urban context.

One third class was very clear that they would love to work with iPads/Chromebooks, but they do not get a chance to do so. The children said they rarely learn in other rooms in the school. They really like reading, play and Maths games. They are equivocal about working in groups of more than two but they like working in pairs and they like working on their own at the desk. They sometimes practise peer assessment and some self-assessment. A few children mentioned that they might ask each other for help if they don't understand something. They claim not to like working outside. This contradicts findings from other classes and other schools in relation to outdoor learning. On the day that data was collected, the weather was cold, and it was raining. This may have influenced the children's opinions. The other third class group talked about play as a valuable way to learn and wanted to experience more of it. They were familiar

with all forms of assessment and the children said it is handy to be able to correct one another's work because the teacher is busy because there are a lot of different languages spoken in the class.

On seeing the suite of pedagogical approaches and strategies, one fourth class child said, "We do everything." Another child said they would change nothing about the way they learn, which could be interpreted as an endorsement of the status quo. Like other groups, the children reported loving play (Maths games and 'Golden Time' in this instance), doing schoolwork outside, planting stuff, computers and doing experiments. They do not like working alone at their desks because "it is no craic." They do pair and group work but critiqued it, saying sometimes group work held you back and was unfair because some people work harder than others. The children claimed they used all forms of assessment, including correcting their own work, correcting one another's work and the teacher corrects the work. They also work on editing their work. Other children said they never appraise one another's work. There were reports, however, of the children helping one another out with the work. Some children said that help from another child is not always welcome. One child objected to their drawing skills being commented upon and another said "He tries to teach you but sometimes you don't want..."

The final fourth-class group said they wanted to learn more through play, they wanted to learn more outdoors, they loved project work, and they wanted to do more pair work. The children have access to forest schooling but despite this they still wanted additional time outside.

**Table 8: How you like to learn. Third and fourth classes**

How you like to learn	Third class	Third class	Fourth class	Fourth Class	Fourth Class	Comment
Play with materials in class, Role play...	2v (What we do and like to do). 1X	Would like to do more play. They do role play.	v Love play, especially Maths Games and 'Golden Time'	Do games in Maths but would like more playful learning.	Asked for more playful learning. Children do Maths games and PE games. Use games to teach Irish.	
Work with iPads and/or Chrome books	X Don't do this but would like to.	Would like but do not do.	Like it but it happens occasionally			
Watch movies	X (We don't do very often but like to do this)	Not often				
Work alone at desk	4v (What we do and like to do)		X			
Work in pairs	4v (What we do and like to do 2P).2X		Sometimes confusing for Maths		Would like more pair work	
Work in a group	X (We don't do very often and we	Not often	This class does a lot of		Would like to do more project work	

	dislike this) 2X		projects in groups.			
Experiments	√ (What we do and like to do).		√ Love this			
Work outdoors	X (We don't do very often and we don't like to do this) 4	Not often	√ Love the outdoors but don't go out very often.	Planting stuff	Has access to a forest school but still asked for more outdoor work.	
Work in the classroom	√ (What we do)					
<b>How you like to learn</b>	Third Class	Third Class	Fourth Class	Fourth Class	Fourth Class	Comment
Work in other rooms of the school	They do this sometimes. Others say they never do this. 3 say they would like to work in other rooms.		Occasional use of other rooms.	X No other rooms available to the children		
When teacher talks & writes on interactive board	√ (What we do and like). 1X					
Reading	We do reading and we like reading 5		6 children mentioned liking reading			
Correct your own work			√			
Your friend corrects your work	2√ 1X		√			
Ask peers for advice on how to improve	√		√			
Ask the teacher for help when you don't understand.			√			

## Key Message 6: Analysis of Fifth and Sixth class data

### Fifth Class

Having studied the poster on *How we like to learn*, (Appendix G), one fifth class concluded they get to do most of the activities illustrated, but not every day. Children liked the following activities best: Reading, working in pairs, iPads, working in groups., role play, playing, watching movies, and doing work outside. Most children (n=8) did not like working alone at the desk, one child saying, “because it is really silent, and you are trying to figure it out alone” and other saying that group work is more fun. Two children said they did not like when “others correct my work” with one stating “I just don't know, I have a bad feeling about it”. The other said that sometimes if someone corrects their work they could mark in wrong on purpose. When asked if they ever talk to their friends about how they might improve their work, one child said, no, “If you are repeatedly (sic) asking them then they just tell you to stop, and you can think that could ruin your friendship or something.”

A second fifth class claimed they learned all the ways that the poster illustrated except for watching films. They preferred working in pairs to larger group work because group work is “too crowded”. They do most of their work on iPads and the school is known for its emphasis on the use of technology. Children had mixed feelings about others grading their work, but they did mention they got opportunities to advise one another on how they might improve their work, using ‘Two stars and a wish,’ i.e. they say two positive things about their peer’s work and give one piece of advice on how to improve.

### Sixth Class

When asked how they typically learn in school the children mentioned learning from books and having to do an extensive list of activities that the teacher puts on the board. They complained about not being allowed to write in the Maths book and instead having to write sums into their copies. The children mentioned they regularly do projects in school, and they like them because they remember what they learned. They also like the opportunity to work in pairs, which project work allows. They love doing ‘reading buddies’ with the junior infant class, whereby they read stories to the younger children. Opportunities to be in social situations and to work together, to work with digital media and to work outdoors were most liked.

When shown a series of pictures on ‘how children learn’, children were asked to identify what pictures show what they do in school.

They identified the following –

- Working in pairs and working in groups for science experiments and project work
- Working with chrome books and iPads
- Work in their outdoor classroom, including planting. This is done occasionally.
- When teacher talks and uses the interactive whiteboard.

The children identified the following as ‘we don’t really do’, indicating these activities happen rarely, as follows –

- Watching films (“Once we watched a video on Michael Collins”)
- Going to other classrooms (they identified the P.E. Hall and the library as rooms they visit in the school)
- Learning games. “We only do PE games”.

In relation to assessment, children said sometimes they correct their own work and teacher calls out the answers, sometimes teacher collects all the copies and marks all the work herself and other times the children are told to check

their answers against answers provided in a book. When asked if children talk to one another about how to improve/correct their work, the children said they do this informally and sometimes teacher thinks they are chatting about other things, when they are discussing their work. The children professed to like working with one another and supporting one another because “your friend can explain it to you in a way that you would understand, kind of”. And “So when you pair up it is more fun”. They also said it is easier to discuss their opinions with one other rather than the whole class group. One child said that sometimes children who are finished their work walk around the class and help other children. The children also spoke about the Friday spelling tests. They saw them as a necessary evil but thought they could be held every two weeks instead of weekly – “I think that they are kind of good, you kind of have to check that everyone is not falling behind, but I don't think it is necessary to have them every week”.

The second sixth-class group said they would like more emphasis on oral rather than written work and more opportunities to learn about themselves. They claimed they did not have opportunities to play, to watch films or to work outside. They did have opportunities to work with iPads, to work in pairs and groups, to work alone and to do reading. They were familiar with all methods of assessment but expressed some trepidation about other children correcting their work – “I used to go to a different school this happened once someone swapped their books with a not very friendly kid and marked them all wrong.” They also did not like their errors being exposed to others - if someone starts correcting your work and you got something wrong and you don't really understand it [] and then everyone knows you got it wrong.”

Children in the Irish-medium schools reported experiences of individual work and working directly with the teacher. Older classes reported engaging in more group work.

There was not much data from the senior classes in the special schools on this question so only two strong themes emerged. Echoing the responses from the junior classes, the senior classes identified working in pairs, in groups, teacher led instruction and reading as preferred learning approaches. They showed less interest in activities like experiments, painting, or playing. This suggests a preference for more traditional teaching methods. The data suggests that there is flexibility in Learning and Teaching approaches to support diverse learning preferences and promote engagement in the special school settings. This includes opportunities for independent work, peer collaboration, hands-on activities, and technology integration. While some children prefer working independently, others benefit from collaborative learning experiences. Balancing these preferences can foster a supportive learning environment where children can develop both independent problem-solving skills and collaborative teamwork abilities. The children did not see the value in peer assessment and showed a preference for adult led assessment.

**Table 9: How you like to learn. Fifth and sixth classes**

How you like to learn	Fifth class	Fifth Class	Sixth Class	Sixth class	Comment
Play with materials in class, Role play...	Like Roleplay	Like Golden time	Occasionally do this. PE games playtime.	X	

Work with iPads and/or Chrome books			Love this		
Watch movies		X	Occasionally do this	X	
Work alone at desk	X Do this but not liked.				
Work in pairs			Love this		
<b>How you like to learn</b>	<b>Fifth Class</b>	<b>Fifth Class</b>	<b>Sixth Class</b>	<b>Sixth Class</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Work in a group		Divided opinions	Do a lot of project work		
Experiments					
Work outdoors	X Divided opinions This happens for PE only		Love this	X	
Work in the classroom					
Work in other rooms of the school		Use the hall a lot and library	Uses the PE hall and the library.	X There are none	
When teacher talks & writes on interactive board				Sometimes watch video clips on whiteboard	
Reading			Love doing buddy reading with the Junior Infants		
Correct your own work					

Your friend corrects your work	This happens but children are not sure if they like it.	X	Happens informally		
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### Key message 6: Summary

Children seem to be familiar with and using most of the pedagogical strategies listed on the *How you like to learn* document, (Appendix G). They like interactive work and they like playful learning and want more of it. Most of the children like learning outdoors and most of them like movies. Virtually every child interviewed likes technology and either was experiencing a lot of technology, (one school teaches almost exclusively using iPads) or was looking to use technology more in the classroom. It is noteworthy that even classes that did not report a lot of other interactive learning experiences, reported use of technology. Experience of playful learning is different in junior and senior classes. In junior classes, there seems to be a lot of engagement with materials when learning through play, whereas in the senior classes role-play is mentioned quite a bit, as well as Maths games and PE games. Younger children seem to get more opportunities to work outside. Children in the senior classes want to work outside but opportunities to do so seem to be more limited. Children enjoy working alone, pair work and larger group work, with pair work the most popular choice. Children generally liked helping their peers and receiving help from peers with learning. There were some mixed views on larger group work with children commenting that it could be distracting and noisy and noticing people who ‘coast’ in a group or are annoying and try to take over. Interestingly, children seem familiar with different forms of assessment, (self-assessment, peer assessment, teacher marking work) unlike in a previous study (Kiely, 2022) and while they enjoyed supporting one another’s learning, mentioning the ‘two stars and a wish strategy’, they were less enthusiastic about formally grading one another’s work.

## **CHAPTER 3: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS FROM THE CASE STUDIES**

### **Introduction**

Data for the case studies have been collected in six mainstream schools and one special school. One of the six mainstream schools was chosen because it has a large population of children from the Travelling Community, another school was chosen because it is a Gaelscoil. The other four schools represent urban and rural contexts, urban and rural DEIS and two schools have diverse student populations in terms of ethnicity, language and religious orientation. The areas explored in the case studies are Social and Environmental Education (SEE), Arts Education, Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), Wellbeing, and Science, Technology and Engineering (STE) Education. Each case study will include the school profile, data analysis and presentation of preliminary findings. Data comes in two forms: A short group interview and a methodology chosen by the children to look at the curriculum area in question in more detail. Choices available to the children included: Walk and talk tours of relevant areas of the class/school, use of Emoji stickers to indicate preferred activities, sentence starters on a worksheet, drawings, concept maps and an Embodied language experience exercise.

### **Case Study: Social and Environmental Education (School A)**

School A is a large, rural DEIS school located in a border county, with a socioeconomically and culturally diverse child population from countries including South America, Africa, and the Ukraine, many of whom have English as an additional language. The classes are relatively large with approximately 30+ children in each.

A second (n=30) and fifth class (n=25) participated in this case study on Social and Environmental Education (SEE). A group interview was conducted with each class. Additionally, the second class completed an emoji sticker and drawing activity, while the fifth class opted to complete conversation maps. These were the two same classes that participated in Phase 1 data collection.

During the case study, some children displayed confusion and uncertainty regarding the SEE curriculum and often struggled to recall their learning and experiences in this area. Their inability to answer some questions about SEE may simply indicate they have forgotten certain related activities and lessons, particularly those that occurred earlier in the school year. However, their struggles may also be resulting from the seamless and integrated nature of the SEE curriculum, resulting in learning that is not compartmentalised, but rather, which is understood as spanning the entire primary curriculum, and overlapping into other subject areas.

#### **Context for SEE Education in the School**

Based on an interview with the principal, the school follows the SEE curriculum very closely and brings in facilitators where possible to enhance the children's learning on related subjects. The school proactively participates in initiatives which benefits the school population and enhances their SEE learning, such as Heritage and Culture Weeks, and participation in creative clusters such as Music Generation, Blast Art, and Literacy Lift Off, amongst others. The principal also noted the importance of guest speakers and parental involvement in SEE learning and given the ethnic and multicultural diversity within the school community, parents commonly visit to share their own cultures with the children. Exploration within the school garden is also an important element of teaching and learning within the SEE curriculum, and overall, the principal believed the children's experiences of SEE learning are very positive, largely as a result of receiving weekly instruction in this curricular area.

## **Second Class Findings & Analysis**

### ***What they Learn***

When first asked about the topics they learn in SEE, one child immediately responded, 'Not much!'. However, several children quickly clarified the initial statement by explaining they only cover SEE related topics 'a few times a week', and the perceived infrequency of SEE inputs may explain children's challenge in remembering what they learn about in this curriculum area.

Initially a few children mentioned electricity, 'the island beetle' and shows they have seen in the local theatre. They also mentioned learning about 'rain and the weather' in geography, and as they were due to have a history lesson later on that day, it did not take them long to remember what they learn in history. For example, one child mentioned famous people in history, but a conversation quickly developed about Irish history and in particular the Irish Famine. 'We learned about when England attacked Ireland' and 'When the war was going on, the potatoes stopped growing so lots of people died because they didn't have anything to eat'.

The children also mentioned learning about other people's histories, cultures, languages and traditions from 'new people coming in', which may refer to the increased enrollment of children from diverse cultures and countries, and/or to the school's initiatives to engage parents and other speakers within the classroom setting.

Children also recalled learning at the local river and exploring topics like environmental care including recycling and composting, 'We learned how long it would take a banana peel to go back into the ground... that it takes five years'.

Children were probed regarding what they learn in relation to social justice, democracy, rights and related themes, however, they were not certain regarding what these concepts meant. Yet, when provided with a brief explanation, they immediately started to talk about the 'conflict corner' in their classroom, where the children could work out any interpersonal issues or conflicts experienced during the school day.

### ***Pedagogical Approaches***

When queried regarding pedagogical approaches utilised in SEE, one child explained they learn a lot from textbooks and their teacher, but surprisingly, workbooks did not come up in relation to SEE.

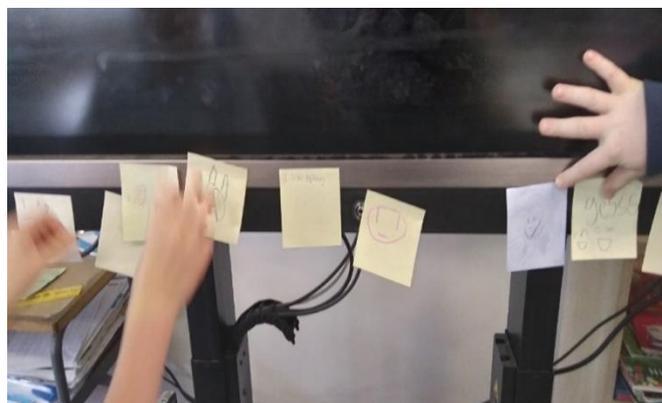
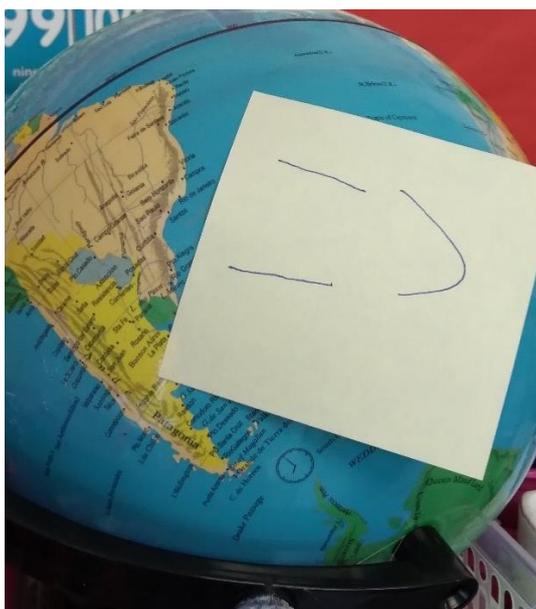
Children also mentioned learning through games, however some of their examples appeared to relate to subject areas other than SEE. They also recalled doing word searches, quizzes such as Kahoot and watching videos, which suggests a variety of teaching and learning methods are used within this curriculum. Interestingly, they identified the screen (where they watch films and use as an interactive whiteboard) as something several of them don't like, suggesting a differentiated view of the role of technology in SEE.

The children also recalled doing projects in different contexts and unanimously agreed that such work is enjoyable and engaging. They particularly enjoyed completing project work on different countries and cultures and languages—and these topics appeared to be at the forefront of their minds as they commonly linked both history and geography to such learning opportunities and moments. However, the academic study of other religions did not feature in their conversations.

They also spoke about going on tours around the area, visiting the local theatre, the old train station, the library, etc. They also spoke about nature walks and learning geography at the local river and landmarks, which they suggested they would like to do much more of. They said that they have not visited any museums or heritage sites.

Children were also asked if they ever use artefacts, such as maps or historical items, when learning about SEE, to which they responded 'No' almost unanimously. The teacher then reminded them of a recent project that included a lot of globe work, which the children then remembered with great excitement. Some children appeared to have used flat maps more concretely on holidays, rather than within the classroom.

Overall, the children appeared generally satisfied with the pedagogical approaches utilised in SEE, and they did not have recommendations for more active learning.



Example 2: Examples of the Second Class Emoji Sticker Activity

### ***Children's Preferences***

Children expressed mixed views regarding what they enjoy and prefer to learn about in SEE. Learning about history, and specifically the Anglo-Irish war, certainly featured highly for some children, as they enjoyed learning about how Ireland fought back for its land. In comparison, others preferred learning about geography, while only one child said that all areas of SEE were 'boring'.

Overall, their primary recommendation was a desire to spend more time engaging with the SEE curriculum and related topics throughout the week.

On this particular question regarding their learning preferences, it is noteworthy that the majority of children's answers did not actually relate to the SEE curriculum, but rather the conversation steered towards learning preferences in other curricular areas such as Maths, Irish and English (and here too, a number of children mentioned they did not like certain elements of these subjects). However, it seems that children's learning preferences were ultimately influenced by their own personal interests.

### ***Children's Priorities***

The children were asked regarding what is important to learn about in SEE, and they readily identified foreign languages, and different cultures and traditions as important, possibly reflecting the diverse nature of the child population in this school. Children also felt it was important to learn about geography, and in particular the environment and how to save it, as one child explained, 'because so many people litter'. The frequent association between 'littering' and 'composting' and environmental education suggests that a new curriculum could deepen and widen the scope of environmental education, and help children understand the complexity of environmental damage in a non-judgemental way.

Children were also asked whether they receive the opportunity to learn about topics they are curious about and interested in. Initially, a boy responded they had learned about the first man on the moon, but other children maintained they did not really get opportunities to learn about things they themselves identified as interesting or important.

### ***Learning to be Historians & Geographers***

Children did not appear to see themselves as historians or geographers and needed considerable prompting to remember activities or learning they had done as part of this curricular element. However, once prompted by their teacher, they spoke at length about projects where they had acted as historians, for example, by interviewing their parents or grandparents about their lives.

With regard to being story tellers, children identified a number of opportunities, such as telling their news from the weekend every Monday, and they also mentioned that new children in the class often share about their culture, religion, traditions and families.

### ***Assessment***

Children's projects and work is often displayed in the classroom and around the school corridors, however, they did not feel they received any feedback on their work. It is clear that displays of their work form a centerpiece in their classroom, and were not only beneficial but indeed necessary, in triggering their memories of the work and learning they had done in relation to SEE.

The children also recalled opportunities to share their work both in-class and with other classes in the school. It seemed they enjoyed such sharing opportunities and wanted to do more of this, and suggested they might share their creative writing outputs in the future.

## **Fifth Class Findings & Analysis**

### ***What they Learn***

Fifth class children strongly associated with the SEE curriculum with learning about historical events, geography, countries and cultures, and environmentalism.

When asked whether they learn about concepts like fairness, justice and equality, the children responded by mentioning examples from history, such as the Irish war for independence, and the Troubles. As such, it appears they more readily equate social justice themes with historical events, than with their current everyday lives.

The children strongly asserted they do not learn about 'human rights' within SEE, and there was no discussion of learning about other global themes like political contexts, global issues, different worldviews and systems, or other religions, despite these areas being an integral part of the SEE curriculum (NCCA, 2024).

### ***Pedagogical Approaches***

Within the SEE curriculum, it appears that fifth class children learn largely via individual and passive methods such as listening to and watching the teacher at the whiteboard, reading about the subject, watching videos, and completing K-W-L Charts. One child explained, 'We read about the topic first and then sometimes there is [sic] questions and we write the answers in our copies'.

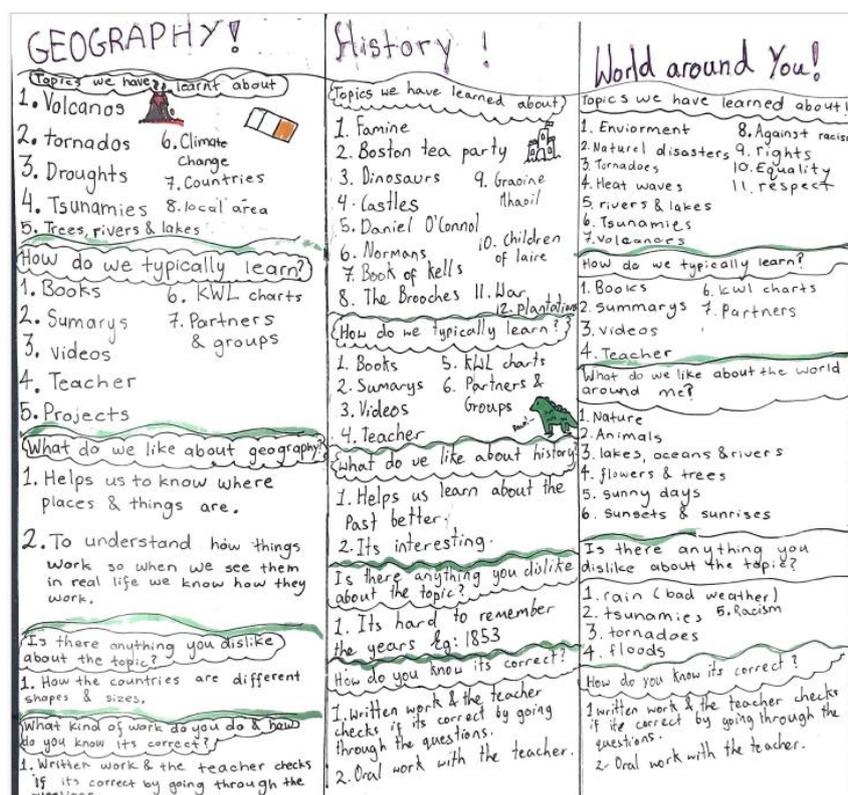
Active and interactive methods of learning were also mentioned by children, but less frequently overall, including: collaborative work in pairs and group activities, completing art projects on related topics, and acting out group plays. All of these pedagogical approaches clearly signal their heightened interest and enjoyment of interactive audio, visual, and cooperative learning methods.

Use of Chromebooks and iPads appears to be minimal within the context of SEE, and one child lamented, 'I didn't like how we never really use the Chromebook'. Similarly, the use of play and games only happens 'sometimes' in their classes, but interestingly, the examples cited related to Maths and Irish. As one group summarised it, 'We don't like not playing games and we would like to do more on the Chromebooks'.

## Children's Preferences

### Geography

Geography was generally appreciated by most children, and they expressed great interest in learning about other countries and cultures, and numerous children fondly recalled completing a project on Christmas around the world. One child from Guatemala also discussed his appreciation for studying the Mayans due to the personal connections he shares with this culture. As such, the international nature of the SEE curriculum may serve as a support for children from diverse cultural backgrounds, while simultaneously promoting the values of inclusion and respect for diversity more broadly.



Example 4: Fifth Class Conversation Map about Learning

Within the context of Geography, another child expressed enjoyment in learning 'All about the stadiums and football teams in the world', signaling heightened engagement and interest when SEE topics are linked to areas they are personally interested in, like sports.

However, the children expressed divided opinions regarding other areas of Geography, such as learning about landforms and bodies of water. While some clearly enjoyed these topics, others did not. Therefore, a reexamination of the pedagogical methods used in the instruction of these areas may be warranted to ensure that active learning is fully utilised to engage children in topics they may be less enthusiastic about.

### History & Environmentalism

Several children mentioned their interest in events and significant people within Irish and World History, and one child explained, it is 'Fun to learn about what they [historical persons] did on a daily basis', perhaps alluding to the enjoyment they receive from engaging their imaginations in learning about life in bygone times.

Children also appeared to enjoy environmental studies, as one explained, 'We like learning about the Environment, and Climate Change, and Global Warming'. Additionally, they appeared to gain satisfaction from acquiring an understanding of their local environment, while developing the practical skills required to care for it.

### Areas for Improvement

While children generally seemed to enjoy and appreciate the SEE curriculum overall, some opined that the content was 'complicated' and 'boring', and one child felt that 'some stuff is not needed'. Such comments may be due to the amount of rote content they are required to retain in SEE, as several children mentioned difficulties around memorising specific dates in history, while others felt the amount of content was too voluminous.

### **Learning Priorities**

Children largely prioritised learning in history and geography (along with environmentalism in the context of these subjects), because of their practical and real-life value, which helps them to understand and navigate the world around them. Similar utilitarian trends were identified in earlier rounds of data collection, wherein children also prioritised the learning of subjects they perceived would be useful either now, or in their future lives.



Example 5: Fifth Class Conversation Map about Learning in Geography

### **Learning to be Historians & Geographers**

The formation of partnerships with members of the local community is a key principle of teaching and learning within the SEE curriculum, which includes collaborative work with local historians and geographers (NCCA, 2024, p. 2). However, the children could not recall a time when speakers or members of the local community contributed to their SEE learning.

Similarly, the curriculum emphasises the importance of learning and working as historians and geographers (NCCA, 2024, p. 18), however, the children struggled to articulate what it means to assume these roles and appeared unable to recall times when they engaged in such activities. As such, this represents another area for improvement in their SEE learning.

When asked whether opportunities arise for them to be storytellers, one child explained they often share their weekend news on Mondays, while another recalled a new student being allowed to share her religious background and traditions with them. The data clearly indicates that children are being provided with some opportunities to share stories about themselves and their families with the larger class, however, the examples provided were limited in number and scope.

## **Assessment**

When queried regarding assessment methods in SEE, the most common responses highlighted individual methods of assessment, such as writing out answers to 'questions from the book', crafting 'HUGE' summary paragraphs to illustrate what they've learned, and answering questions orally.

Children also mentioned projects and posters which they greatly enjoyed, as they often experienced some level of agency, for example, choosing their topic of enquiry, or their mode of working (e.g. pairs or groups).

Their work is generally corrected via teacher-led methods, such as the teacher correcting their work or calling out the correct answers in class. However, some child-led methods were mentioned, such as when the students are allowed to discuss answers with their classmates, or when they search for the correct answers in textbooks or on the internet via Chromebooks. 'Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down', whereby children can quickly indicate their level of proficiency in a curriculum area by using thumb gestures, was also mentioned as being utilised for assessment.

## **Summary of Case Study on Social and Environmental Education**

It is clear that both classes enjoy numerous aspects of SEE and would like to learn about this curricular area more often during the week. Children benefit from a range of interactive and hands-on learning opportunities and experience integration of SEE in other subject areas. However, the older children feel that more interactive learning opportunities are required. Despite both classes identifying several instances of SEE learning at local sites, museums and libraries, none of them felt like they ever worked as historians or geographers, highlighting the need to support children in consciously translating actions into a state of being, or a fund of identity. Similarly, human rights, social justice and other global themes pose additional areas for further development, where teachers may need particular support implementing the new curriculum. However, the children are keen to learn about these concepts and find them important. It appears that children engage very positively in project work and learning within the local community and can easily recall work they have completed through such means better than work completed through other methods in SEE. Finally, children in both classes suggest that technology is not used readily utilised in SEE beyond watching movies or searching for information on the internet, pointing to a significant area for development in the new curriculum.

## **Case Study: Arts Education (School B)**

School B is a large semi-rural school with a socio-economically and socio-culturally diverse school. The school has DEIS status and has over 40 nationalities represented. The school has two classes at each class level, each class with approximately 25-30 children; there are 3 classes in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class respectively. The school also has two autism preschool classes and two autism primary school classes. In School B, the curriculum area of Arts Education was explored. A second and a fifth class participated from School B. These were the same two classes that participated in Phase 1 of the research study, although some children from the other second class also joined for Phase 2, resulting in a much larger sample in Phase 2 for the second class compared to Phase 1.

### **Context for Arts Education in the school**

When the participating class teachers were interviewed about the school context and the school's focus on the assigned curriculum area, Arts Education, the participating class teachers felt there was a strong dedication to Arts Education in the school, especially in relation to Visual Arts and Music. According to the teachers there is a lot of focus on Visual Arts within classrooms and Music is generally a strong focus in the school with many teachers being very talented in Music and playing different instruments. The school has a school choir, often hosts school concerts and provides piano lessons as an extra-curriculum activity after school, which many of the children attend (and mentioned in the class interview). However, the participating class teachers also identified areas that need further work.

In relation to the Visual Arts, the teachers commented that a lot is done within each of the classes and a lot gets made and displayed within each class, however there is perhaps a lack of a spiral approach to Visual Arts or a lack of overview with what is being done in each class so that others may not be aware of what is happening in other classes.

Similarly, the teacher commented that because the quality of the specific area of Arts comes down to the individual teacher's personal skills in that area, some classes may not benefit as much as others in terms of Arts Education depending on a teacher's confidence in the area. More specifically, in relation to Music, one area the teacher felt they could improve their focus on is the structure of Music. Thus, the teacher felt they are very strong in making and responding to Music but the more theoretical work in relation to Music may need further work.

In relation to Drama, the teachers felt that this was something they were very good at integrating into other subject areas but perhaps did not give as much attention to as a subject in and of itself, primarily due to time constraints. Overall, however, the teachers expressed that they feel the school generally is implementing meaningful educational experiences in the area of Arts Education.

### **Findings relating to Arts Education**

What became very clear from children's engagement with and responses to the questions was that when 'Arts' is mentioned they think primarily in terms of 'Visual Arts', especially painting, colouring, drawing. Other areas of Arts Education, such as Music, Drama and dance (part of the PE curriculum in the 1999 Curriculum), required more targeted and prompting/probing questions. When asked generally what they do in Arts Education ('Arts'), children explained that they "learn to be creative", "to express yourself" and "express your imagination". They explained that they colour and paint and do art competitions with friends. Before being asked what they like to do, children were reminded to think about all areas of Arts Education, including Music, Drama and dance. Children mentioned the following as things they like in Arts Education, each of which will be explored further under each specific curriculum area:

Children enjoy drawing, painting sketching, piano/keyboard and violin, Drama (in particular acting), singing and the opportunity to express themselves.

There were generally very few things children did not like in the Arts. In the second class, children's responses were very particular with regard to dislikes such as painting outside the lines, making mistakes when drawing or making mistakes that can't easily be corrected and when they don't themselves get to choose what to paint or draw, in other words, when they don't get choices. One child also mentioned not liking Music without words. However, very few children had anything to say about the question of dislikes in Arts Education. In the fifth class, responses were also very specific in some regards, such as not liking particular styles of music or dance but overall dislikes referred more to children's growing self-consciousness and not liking to expose themselves through singing or acting. These will be discussed under each aspect of arts education below.

## **Visual Arts**

### **Second class**

Children clearly associate Visual Arts most strongly with Arts Education, answering in relation to Visual Arts before any other aspect of Arts Education. Children particularly like drawing, sketching and painting but expressed less positive views of colouring in. While some children like it to an extent, they do not like when they have to do a lot of it or they have to colour in really complex pictures with a lot of detail so it takes a long time and feels tedious, and the possibility of colouring outside the lines, which they really don't like, increases. In Phase 1 of the study, sketching and drawing were two activities children often said they had the choice of doing if they finished another work task before their peers and it was mentioned in the second class in Phase 2 as something they really enjoy doing and would like to do more of. Children like that they usually get to choose what to draw, and certainly how to draw it, and they think drawing is something that is fun to do. Some children also felt they were very good at it and therefore enjoyed it more.

Some of the girls also mentioned they really like to have the drawing at the end of it which they then get to hang up in their own room at home or in the classroom. One child did not like drawing, arguing that he did not see the usefulness of it. This prompted a conversation about the uses of drawing and other children in the class offered several suggestions as to why drawing is useful, including if someone wants to become an artist or painter, or simply wants to learn to be creative, or to become an architect. This dislike was also depicted in several of the children's individual drawings (5 out of 25 drawings denoted this under dislikes) with another couple of drawings depicting not liking colouring more generally. In the interview, it also became clear that they don't like that they usually don't get a choice as to what to colour in or indeed that any sheets for colouring in offer very little choice.

### **Fifth class**

In their interview they spoke most extensively about drawing and the many aspects of it that they really enjoy. Freedom, control and choice were themes that continuously emerged in children's descriptions of why they like drawing. One child explained he really liked when they had made their own creatures, monsters, because he enjoyed having control over what he was making and could really imagine it because it was entirely his own. Several children, in particular boys, spoke about liking to scribble or just like a blank page to invite them to draw 'chaos' in which they could then identify objects or find a way to control the chaos. One child elaborated that he loves when chaos is happening on the page while another boy expressed, he likes to find control in the chaos. A few other children said they really enjoy drawing cartoons and making comics, while another few children mentioned animations. What they especially liked in the animations and comics is their ability to make characters come alive and really deeply imagine the different characters. One child also commented that he likes to draw with pencil so he can later colour it in, while another child mentioned he likes to read picture books because the illustrations help him imagine the stories better.

Children in 5<sup>th</sup> class created a mind map about the activities they do, what they like and dislike and where they exhibit their work in relation to visual arts. Of the activities they commonly do they included clay, construction, painting, sketching, drawing, pop art and finger puppets. Children identified doodling, finger puppets, clay, drawing, construction and painting as aspects of visual arts that they really enjoy. Other children, however, identified several of these amongst dislikes, including painting, print, pop art and finger puppets. Of more specific aspects of these, children also included in the dislike section not being able to sit with friends during arts activities and "leaving empty spaces on a blank page".

Children also spoke of crafting and enjoying making their own creations out of materials from home, such as cereal and shoe boxes and turn these into artistic projects. At the time of the interview, the class seemed to be working with construction and integrating Arts herein through constructing things through junk art, something they repeatedly came back to.

Children also spoke about art History, learning about different artists, their backgrounds, popular art works and different Arts styles. They gave the example of Andy Warhol. Children spoke of learning about different styles and sometimes not enjoying it if they don't like the particular style they are learning about, however in the main they enjoy learning about different approaches to Visual Arts. In relation to the Visual Arts, some children also spoke about their joy in writing poems and stories, in particular rhyming poems and the freedom to create new characters. One child mentioned his interest in mythology and found Visual Arts a really good means of expressing how for example Greek gods might look in modern times. What all the children unanimously agreed on was the value in having dedicated time for the Visual Arts where they "don't have to worry about anything else", mentioning that they enjoy freedom at the end of the week, the last half hour on Fridays where they always get to do free art, a space free from worry.

In terms of exhibiting their work, children included in the mind map areas inside the school such as the hallways, their classroom and the achievements board (outside their classroom). Outside the school, the group noted the local pharmacy while another child noted 'Mr. Kilbride's Mythical Creatures', the meaning of which is uncertain. Children

mentioned that they have a blank page copy book that they can use for anything creative they like and can note down ideas, try out drawings and sketches; in other words, a free space to explore the Arts, which they really appreciate. Children in 5<sup>th</sup> class thus seem to enjoy when they have freedom to explore creative processes and to let their imaginations guide such process, speaking to the importance of process art and connecting with children's literary, technological and media related interests.



## Music

### Second class

Children appear to associate Music primarily with playing different instruments and singing. Children professed a love of practicing the tin whistle with only one child saying he did not like it (because he wanted to try other instruments), which he reinforced in his individual drawing where he has depicted himself playing the tin whistle with a red x in the corner. Children would also like the opportunity to try other instruments and commented that the other second class teacher (who was in the class at the time of the interview because some of the children from her class participated in the interview) has many interesting instruments hanging on her classroom walls that they would like to try. Children appreciate the opportunity to try the piano in school and enjoy the extra-curriculum piano lessons held after school once a week. Children are more mixed in their views about singing, with about half the class enjoying it and the other half not enjoying it. They said they sing a variety of different styles, including country and pop, and that they sing both in English and in Irish. Very few of the children like the Irish songs as they find them too difficult and don't understand a lot of the words. A number of the boys mentioned that they like singing when they have the lyrics and don't enjoy singing when they don't have the lyrics.

At the time of the interview, children were preparing for their First Holy Communion and mentioned doing a lot of Communion related songs, which they enjoyed. Beyond instruments and singing, children mentioned they sometimes play different Music related games, such as song games, including 'finish the lyrics', and games such as Musical chairs and Musical statues. Children expressed mixed views on these games, generally finding 'finish the lyrics' difficult and not liking Musical statues but enjoying Musical chairs. Children said they sometimes get to perform concerts, which some enjoy and find fun and exciting, and some do not enjoy due to feeling nervous and scared of performing. Children say they sometimes get to discuss and talk about Music in class with their teacher but also commented that this does not happen frequently, which was also expressed by the participating class teachers in their interview. Music is sometimes used to help their learning in other subjects. For example, they mentioned they sometimes learn songs about and from the past and therefore have Music integrated with History, while another child mentioned their teacher sometimes find songs to help them with mathematical concepts (such as units and tens).



### Fifth class

Fifth class children were somewhat less enthused by Music education than their junior counterparts. Like the second class children, they enjoy playing the tin whistle and enjoy getting to play different songs on instruments. They also mentioned a Music book they use for Music classes and they generally seemed to like this book. Some of the children also started a conversation about the 'cup song', a popular song at the time of the interview that children play a clapping game too, clapping to the beat on a table with a cup turned upside down, involving a focus on rhythm and tempo. Children expressed not being very keen on singing, as some children don't necessarily like their own voices, although this depends on the Music genre and whether they like the song or not. Children generally appeared to prefer fast paced Music rather than traditional Irish Music which they found slower and which most children did not seem to

like. Music as a subject area was something the children had less to say about than the Visual Arts and Drama, both of which they appeared very passionate about.

The children's mind map on music includes some significant observations. Under activities, children have included roleplay, listening, tin whistle, singing, 'guess the instrument' and making dances for songs, reinforcing the link between music and dance and the close integration of these two in children's experiences of dance that they enjoy. What children have especially identified as 'likes' under music on the mind map is the fact that it takes away from 'work' such as Maths. Children also seem to like music that relates to their personal interests such as Pokémon and Star Wars (identified by the boys). Other children like particular types of music such as fast music or sad songs, with one child having noted "the griddy music", which another child has put down as a dislike. Of dislikes, children have included slow music, singing solo, role play and dancing (again reinforcing the link between dancing and music in children's views). The girl's group have also commented as a dislike "the boys cuckoo ugly weird music". While gender did not appear to impact on children's views on most things school related, gender came out relatively strongly in the area of Arts Education in terms of what boys and girls like respectively, and to a lesser extent in comments such as that about boys cuckooing. Music is something children share with each other in the classroom, in the hall (it was not clear from the mind maps how music was shared in the halls) or outside.

## Drama

### Second class

Children in second class generally appeared to like Drama as a curriculum area. Of the 26 children participating in the research, 18 agreed that they like Drama while 8 said they don't like it. Those who like it particularly like the acting aspect of Drama, specifically when they can act out stories they have read and when they get opportunities to act things out without needing words, try to act out different characters and create and experience different universes. One child said they like it because it is an opportunity to be a bit crazy. Those who do not like Drama primarily put it down to finding performing scary or it makes them nervous, or they find acting out stories complicated and difficult. Children expressed that Drama helps to teach them how to act and makes stories become more immersive and engaging, while it also generally helps them to be better at different things. One child would like to have more props available for acting. In the main, children like performing as part of Drama, in particular the girls, with a small number of boys expressing a dislike of performing. In their individual drawings, only one child depicted acting as a 'like' while four children depicted 'drama' as something they don't like.



## **Fifth class**

Children in fifth class noted very similar activities in Drama as the children in second class. One child expressed, “You really learn to express yourself”, and they talked about getting opportunities to act things out in groups, sometimes having to draw topics blind from a box and then act it in groups. Similar to second class, children really enjoy the acting aspect of Drama, however more so than second class, children in fifth really don’t like the performing aspect of Drama, especially if they have to act on stage. Nor do they like solo acting. Reflecting findings from Phase 1 of the study, children prefer to work with a friend. In relation to acting, children in fifth class felt comfortable acting in the presence of friends and therefore preferred acting in small groups where they are neither alone, nor acting / performing in front of an audience. The presence of an audience or many other people were mentioned by several children to be an uncomfortable aspect of Drama. Children enjoy acting for several reasons. Some children like acting out stories and being able to add their own ‘touch’ to those stories or adding to the stories.

Children also mentioned being able to experiment with different characters. Boys in particular mentioned enjoying the rebel characters because these allow them to act like they want as such freedom and agency fits the rebel character. Other children like acting out and experimenting with characters that are similar to themselves because this affords them opportunities to explore their own characters further and feel a little freer doing so. Some children don’t like acting out sad scenarios as they find them difficult to connect with, find them slow and find it difficult to properly embody the characters. Other children mentioned liking opportunities to explore different voices, which one child felt was ‘empowering’. Another child didn’t like solo singing because of a discomfort with his own voice, suggesting that children’s experiences of Arts Education that have a bodily performance element to them are intricately tied up with children’s growing self-awareness and consciousness of their own bodies as they enter puberty.

In their mind map on drama, children included as activities roleplay (also identified on the music mind map), acting with expression, acting out scenarios and acting in groups, all of which they also mentioned in their interview. Of likes, children included similar comments such as for music, namely, “we miss work”, i.e. when they are engaged in Arts Education they do not have to do ‘work’ as they associate more book heavy modules. They also included role plays, doing drama with friends, being particular characters, both evil and good, and generally just liking drama. The dislikes reflected fifth class children’s general fear of exposing themselves or being embarrassed, with comments such as “if you do something wrong, they might laugh at you”, and reiterating their dislike of singing solo and not being with their friends. One of the boys who particularly disliked dancing included dancing as a dislike across all mind maps. Drama is something children feel they share in the classroom, on a stage and in the school hall.

## **Dance**

### **Junior class**

Dance, currently part of the PE curriculum as children experience it but included here due to its inclusion in Arts Education in the *Redeveloped Curriculum*, is not something children experience a lot within the school context. Children commented that they have someone come into the class to teach them Irish dance for a number of weeks every year. At the time of the interview, it was obvious that this had happened much earlier in the school year as many of the children had forgotten about it. According to the children in Second Class they are only exposed to Irish dancing in school and most do not really enjoy this. Three children said they like it, 3-4 children ‘kind of like it’ and the other 17-18 children in the class do not like it. Some children mentioned that they like dance in general, in particular hip hop, but that any opportunity to try out different dance styles happens outside of school. Dance did not figure in children’s walk around the school, except in the sports hall where they come for Irish dancing; however, no further comments were made on it. Several of the children’s individual drawings, however, did denote dance. In total, of the 25 drawings made for this part of the research, two drawings denoted disliking dance, both drawn by boys, and five drawings denoting liking dance, all drawn by girls. Two of these drawings note a child dancing to music, while one girl drew a ballet dancer for what she likes and wrote “I love dancing, it’s very fun”, while on the dislike side of the page she drew

another dancing by a script stand and wrote above “I don’t like that we don’t get a choice” (in relation to dancing, it was confirmed in conversation).



### **Fifth class**

“Some people like to express themselves in dancing, they feel like they have freedom when dancing.”

The quote is from a girl in fifth class who expressed her view on dance as part of the Arts Education. However, beyond this point, similar to the junior class, children in fifth class did not have a lot to say in relation to dance as it is not something they seem to experience a lot in school. Children have Irish dancing for a set period with an external teacher every year, which the majority of children do not seem to like, in particular the boys. Only one group put down Irish dancing as something they like in the mind map. In relation to Irish dancing, they also identified in their mind maps that they also do jigs and reels. Those who dislike it could not really put words on why, however one child did mention that they don’t like the slow tapping and the repetitiveness of it, with comments in the mind map such as “dancing the same part over and over again”. The fifth class also mentioned in their interview having just started to learn hip hop dance, which they liked more than the Irish dancing. In the mind map they also identified creative dancing, which may have prompted the girl’s statement above, and which was denoted in the mind map as something they really enjoy. In the mind map is also written that they like to learn new moves and dancing to good songs, either fast songs or that allow for ‘chill dancing’, which may shed further light on why Irish dancing is not enjoyed as they also did not express a strong like of Irish music. The boys generally did not like dance at all, which particularly transpired when the boys’ groups had to do the mind map on dancing where in the ‘dislike’ section they generally put down ‘dancing’ and “everything about dancing”. In the mind map on dance, someone also wrote “when you can’t do a dance move”. Nonetheless, the boys preferred the hip hop to the Irish dancing (even if they didn’t all like hip hop) as they liked the fastmoving aspect of it and the breakdancing. Boys’ comments in relation to dance generally ran along the lines of being tiring it and “my body is not made for it” and “my body doesn’t stretch well for it”.

### **The strands of the Arts Education Curriculum**

Children were asked several questions about the different strands of the Arts Education curriculum, namely creating; performing and presenting; and responding and connecting, as well as integration with other subjects, the use of technology and assessment. Children were less expressive in relation to these questions but did offer important insights into wider engagement with Arts Education when they are not explicitly creating art. Children concurred that creative technologies are not used in Arts Education but Arts Education is used as means of learning in other subjects such as History, Maths and English. Although children during Phase 1 of the study often identified Arts as something they enjoy because they can talk to their friends while engaging in Arts work, children primarily expressed in Phase 2 (in the second class) that they don’t really get to work with peers or in groups for Arts, except for Drama where they

act out stories in small groups). In terms of assessment, children said their teacher always comments that their creations are 'nice' even if they are not, appreciating that the teacher compliments them for their efforts rather than the result.

### **Strand: Creating**

Children get to create art in diverse ways. Most opportunities to create art is in the area of Visual Arts where they often paint, draw, sketch, do crafts and colour in. They also create in Drama through acting out stories and creating new universes. Some children also mentioned that they sometimes get to create their own songs.

### **Strand: Performing and Presenting**

Children expressed several opportunities to perform or present their work. Sometimes they present their work to the class and many of their Visual Arts projects are displayed in their own classroom and around the school. The children were all very keen to go on the walk and talk tour to show their Arts projects around the school; however, it is interesting that when asked about exhibiting or presenting their work, they did not mention all the art they had hung around the school. Generally, the questions relating to exhibiting, performing or presenting yielded very few answers. Children seemed to enjoy exhibiting and presenting their work but opinions were as already discussed, more divided in relation to performing.

### **Strand: Responding and connecting**

The final strand of responding and connecting was less visible in the children's discussions of Arts Education. The children said they sometimes discuss Music and Art with their teacher but that this does not happen very often. Children primarily identified opportunities to connect with the Arts as happening in their homes or with their families when they go to Musicals, plays or other places outside of school and not as part of a school tour. Children only offered one opportunity they had had to engage with performances by other people, namely when they had gone to watch the 6<sup>th</sup> class children rehearse for their school rendition of *Oliver Twist*.

### **Summary of Case Study on Arts Education**

It is clear from this case study on Arts Education in School B that children gain deep satisfaction from the creative arts and favour any opportunity to express themselves through drawing, painting, sketching and arts forms that suit their individual personalities. Children specifically appreciate and value the opportunities for choice and free expression, as well as the social nature of much of Arts Education. It is clear from children's perspectives on all aspects of Arts Education that this is where they feel they have most agency in school, are able to engage in hands on and interactive learning with peers and friends and have physical as well as creative freedom to explore their interests and likes. The areas of Arts Education that children enjoy less reflect their views on other subject areas and pedagogical approaches; they don't like the repetitiveness of Irish dancing, the difficult vocabulary of Irish songs and the limited opportunities for exploration and creativity facilitated through the use of templates in visual arts ('colouring in') or only learning one instrument. Words that came up across all areas of Arts Education across both the junior and the senior class were expression, creativity, choice, freedom and exploration, suggesting that Arts Education is where children are most likely to identify feelings of being agentic in their learning

Arts Education appears primarily as something that happens in indoor learning environments. In terms of assessment, children voice an interest in having more critical and constructive feedback from their teacher in particular and are unsure of feedback from their peers as children identified this could quickly become embarrassing or make them feel exposed or vulnerable.

## Case Study: Wellbeing (School C)

### Context for Wellbeing in the school

There were seventeen children in third class and eighteen children in fourth class in this DEIS Band 1 school who agreed to talk about the curriculum area of wellbeing. The children were from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Teachers reported that large numbers of children for whom English is a second language, attend the school, including significant numbers from eastern Europe. Many families attending the school experience a high level of challenge and adversity in their lives, and many children experience emotional difficulties. The teachers report that the school focuses strongly on the children's emotional well-being. Significant effort is invested in supporting the children to attend school. Attendance has disimproved since the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. The teachers conveyed the sense that the school is still trying to get back on its feet after the pandemic.

There is a school council in the school and children from fourth to sixth are represented at it. There is a representative, one from each class. They also have a green schools committee, and this has representatives from each class too.

When given a choice on how they would like to represent their experience of well-being, for example through drawings, making posters or a wellbeing walk, the children in both third and fourth class chose to go on a wellbeing walk. The children's wellbeing walks will be discussed in the section after next.

### Wellbeing as part of the curriculum

The children identified wellbeing as being about mental health, physical health and the heart, or emotional health. They chose PE, Art and SPHE as areas of the curriculum that supported their wellbeing. "It {Art} is calming". In relation to PE, they spoke about opportunities to play basketball, football and to practice yoga in the hall. They professed not to be familiar with warm-ups and pulse-raising activities. The children found it difficult to respond to specific questions relating to the core curriculum, struggling to remember activities in which they engaged, unless prompted. However, young children would not be expected to have a meta-awareness of curriculum like educators would. When the classroom teacher occasionally prompted their memories, the children responded with "Oh yeah..." and proceeded to talk about the memory in question. For example, their experience of circle time, strategies around identifying adults who can support children with their mental health (Five fingers: Each finger represents an adult who could help if in trouble) in areas such as managing emotions, making good decisions, respecting feelings, and trust. The children spoke about the importance of feeling you belong, the class as a team and team building. The classroom teacher intervened occasionally when the children struggled to answer a question. In relation to SPHE, it was clear the children were used to matters such as conflict resolution, talking about bullying, being able to say NO or STOP, as appropriate, to unwelcome overtures from others. They were well versed on online safety and spoke about how to protect themselves online by not revealing personal details, not talking to strangers in chatrooms and not following uninvited links or pop-ups. It was clear that the children were familiar with vocabulary around wellbeing, including the language of emotions and ideas around respect, autonomy, and self-control. In relation to citizenship, they were very tuned in to the idea of celebrating diverse cultures and had a dedicated culture day every year until the COVID-19 pandemic changed this practice. The school corridor is festooned with flags from countries around the world, reflecting the diversity of the school population. Healthy eating was also mentioned - "I remember we saw this wheel with all the healthy food and then all the unhealthy." The children also talked about studying the human body in SPHE. They mentioned circle time as part of their experience of having discussions in SPHE. The children sang a rap which they had learned the previous year in SPHE and was related to learning in the 'Stay Safe' programme. The 'Stay Safe' programme educates children about recognising and resisting abuse/victimisation and teaches them that they should always tell (an adult that can help) about any situation which they find unsafe, upsetting, threatening, dangerous or abusive (MacIntyre & Lawlor, 1991). The children also described a visit from staff from the Barnardos organisation whereby they focused on

children's social and emotional development. It was surprising that the children did not have much to say about P.E. given that it was rated repeatedly by the third class in Phase 1 of the study as a favourite subject. A chorus of children said they loved P.E. and one child asked for "More PE, more PE, more PE and one hour more PE." Another child piped up "I would say five minutes of more PE and five minutes more of big yard and half of the day to be art time". It can be reasonably deduced that PE is favoured, along with playtime and art time because the children have more freedom to move and possibly more freedom to make their own decisions during these times.

Some of the children struggled to describe and recall their curriculum experiences of wellbeing, and the pedagogical strategies that were utilised in mediating material in relation to wellbeing. This may have been due to the numbers of children in the class who are learning English as a second or third language (Dobinson & Dockrell, 2021). However, once the children moved outdoors, they had less trouble demonstrating meaning. They came to life on the wellbeing walk, clamouring to explain matters to the researcher.

### **Wellbeing resources – the wellbeing walk.**

There is a strong emphasis on inclusivity, belonging and wellbeing in the school. This was noticeable on the 'wellbeing walk,' from observing children's artwork, and noticeboards in the indoor environment. Miniature national flags adorn the corridor ceilings, and corridor walls are covered in photographs of children and in some cases including parents. One Polish child was excited to point out a framed photograph featuring his mother and another framed photograph featuring his father.

There was a 'worry stone' mounted on one corridor wall at a height accessible to children. It had an indent of a human hand cut into it. A child could place their hand into the indent and a green light would come on at impact. This was supposed to wipe out children's worries. Several children took a turn to measure and then erase their worries. There was a sign on the wall encouraging attendance at school and there was also a display showing school rules, positively stated. The P.E hall was continuously busy with different class groups doing yoga.

The wellbeing walk outside the school revealed many spaces where children felt was good for their wellbeing. There were several wooden benches in the third/fourth class section of the yard and inquired if they supported wellbeing. Children from fourth class agreed that the benches did so, but third class said No, children were constantly pushing one another off the benches and they were no longer using them because of that.

The outdoor wellbeing walk revealed a dedicated library with a cushioned space for children who wanted to rest, a fenced-off area covered in astro-turf, which was popular with both third and fourth class. Football was played there.

The children in fourth class pointed out what they called the 'brain-calming' room. They said you could go there if you felt stressed. There was also a sensory room indoors which the children described as a peaceful space - "You can, like, relax." A discrete play area was cordoned off from the rest of the yard, including a trampoline and other play equipment. The children said they did not use this space. The class teacher clarified later that it was a dedicated play space for children with Autism.

Some of the fourth-class children pointed out their bicycles in a bicycle park as they walked past and talked about feeling well when cycling to school. As they walked around outside, a fifth or sixth class was receiving tuition from an outside body on how to cycle according to the rules of the road. There were approximately twenty children cycling around the yard-space, weaving through cones and obeying signals from coaches.

The children then visited a large pond on the school site where there were some frog spawn and lily pads. This was followed by a visit to a bug hotel and a specially planted 'forest'. Each child in fourth class had planted a tree the previous year and many were eager to share their tree with the researcher. They spent some time visiting each tree, using a plant identifier app, and confirming for one another the type of tree they had planted.

There was a henhouse with a live hen. It had been moved from the field where children played to beside the staff room because it was vulnerable to prowling foxes at night.

### **Wellbeing – summary**

Children's personal well-being is highly prioritised in this school and takes up a lot of teacher time, energy and thinking. There is a sense that the teachers are working as social workers as well as pedagogues, and some hurried conversations in corridors were witnessed where teachers exchanged information about the wellbeing of various children that day. From a curriculum perspective, the children were well versed in the vocabulary of wellbeing, particularly around the management of emotions, working on being calm in mind and body, internet safety and working together as teammates. The children indicated that the plentiful outdoor school resources might be used more often, with some children claiming they do not use these spaces. This ties in with other findings from Phase 1 of the study and in previous research (Kiely et al., 2022), where children ask for more outdoor learning experiences. Interestingly, in phase 1 of this study, some of the children from these two classes had said they did not like working outdoors, which was untypical of children's comments about outdoor learning. The children did not elaborate on their experiences of P.E. except to say that they played football, basketball, and practised yoga. In Phase 1, P.E. was cited as a favourite activity and the children expressed a desire for more PE time. One child claimed that PE was not 'a subject'. It may be the case that the children feel that you need to learn subjects such as Maths (a much-liked subject by the children in both classes) and literacy to 'get on' in life and activities such as P.E and outdoor learning would not advance one's career opportunities. In Phase 1, the children talked about the importance of learning how to spend your money wisely, to understand taxes and to learn about business. It appears that the children, though young in years at age nine and ten, have already formed views in relation to what is needed to succeed in the world.

## **Case Study: Science, Technology and Engineering Education (School D)**

### **Context**

Children from first class and sixth class were interviewed in this Community National School. The school is relatively new, at eleven years old and has a diverse population of children. The teacher who was interviewed reported that 75% of the children attending the school do not speak English as their first language. Families come from Africa, Asia, and Europe. The school does not have DEIS status, despite a high level of need amongst families attending the school. Many families are in rented accommodation, rather than Council (publicly funded) accommodation and in many cases share a house with one or two other families. The school population is quite transient, and many children attend for three or four years before moving to another part of the country or abroad. Intensive learning support is concentrated around the infant classes, mostly in the form of language support. Many children have additional learning needs and the teacher reported that 50% of the children in the school are on support plans (DES, 2017). The school has a specialised unit for children with Autism.

There is a very strong emphasis on technology in the school and every child from second class onwards has an iPad. The school's website demonstrates how iPads can be used to develop skills such as photography and editing as well as being used by children to make presentations to their peers and to access educational games and curriculum content. Parent-school relationships are strong, with parents deciding on matters such as a name change for the school and the design of school uniforms. The school has a student council, a green schools committee and it has an amber flag, an initiative run by Pieta House, which recognises the efforts of organisations to create healthy, inclusive environments that support mental health.

Children in first class and sixth class spoke of their curriculum experience of learning Science, Technology and Engineering (STE). There is a display of certificates earned for participation in Science week and Science Blast (<https://www.esbscienceblast.com/>) in the entrance hall to the school, indicating a strong interest in the area. When asked to choose their preferred method for exploring STE in more detail with the researcher, both first class and sixth class chose the STE walk around the school, indoors and outdoors.

### **Science and Engineering (Designing and Making)**

First and sixth class children gave many examples of having made and designed, explored, discussed, problem-solved, evaluated and communicated in STE as part of their schoolwork. It is clear from talking to them that they are seasoned inquirers and seasoned users of technology to facilitate their inquiries.

#### **First Class**

The children in first class designed and made volcanoes using a hollowed-out pumpkin and used slime and play doh to fashion other creations. They also mentioned making pancakes as part of their Science curriculum. They talked about projects and experiments conducted and said they did the work in the classroom and then sometimes brought their work to the school hall, where they shared their experiments with children from other classes. "We normally start them here and make them in the classroom and then when we need to bring them down for everyone to see, we bring them down." They talked about experiments conducted on the topic floating and sinking - "we got a bucket, a clear bucket, we held it up with wire and we dropped random things into it," and presenting on those topics to the rest of the school population in the school hall. This sharing of Science schoolwork in the school hall takes place during Science week. The children reported that they also display their written project work on the walls of the hall during Science week. They mentioned doing a static electricity balloon experiment and creating structures with pasta and marshmallows. They mentioned experiments with magnets and described immersing raisins in water and watching them swell up. One child said her favourite thing about Science was "creating explosions and making stuff!" The children also mentioned that they have freedom to explore with materials in Science. The child who talked about her fondness for creating explosions said she taught herself; teacher did not show her. She spoke about trying out experiments at home that she had done in school, an indication perhaps, of the level of enthusiasm for Science generated in school. The collaborative nature of the project work appeals to the children and they spoke about their enjoyment of working with their friends and helping one another out. Some liked to work with just one friend, others with multiple friends and one or two children said they liked to work alone. The children mentioned they take photographs of their work with their iPads and upload the photographs to 'Aladdin,' (an online communication system with parents) so that their families can see their work. The children described an experiment they had done with plants, depriving different plants of air, light, water and heat and giving one plant all the aforementioned, to see which plants thrive. The children in this first class have had much exposure to Science, Engineering and technology and all three subjects have been beautifully interwoven through project approaches. The children are motivated and excited to share their experiences of project work and working together. Their experiences epitomise twenty-first century learning approaches: Creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration and digital literacy (Volante, 2018).

#### **Sixth Class**

Sixth class described how they made sun dials, for example, and made Oobleck, a substance made from a mix of cornstarch and water that can mimic the qualities of a solid or a liquid, taking the shape of whatever is holding it. This sixth class attended Science Blast, a Science fair at the RDS in Ballsbridge, where they viewed Science exhibits from schools around the country and shared their work. "We went there last year and we were, like, showcasing like, science experiments and other classes were doing that too." A child described something that impressed him at Science Blast - "There was a virtual reality thing where you could go in, put the headset on and you were in, it was like a world in front of your eyes." The children also attended a Lego exhibition where engineers showed them how to make structures - "I remember in 5th class on a Friday we went over to this place and these engineers made us do stuff

like...” The children also recalled a trip they took in third class - “I think this was when I was in 3rd class my class went to this place, I can't remember where it is, and it was a bit scientific, how light works and there was screws there and you had to lie down on it and if you lie down on one it would hurt, if you lie down on a bunch it won't hurt.” Clearly there are regular opportunities for the children to take educational trips to Science and Engineering exhibitions/fairs.

In terms of how the children learn in Science and Engineering, they get opportunities to explore materials for themselves and technology plays a significant role. “Once the teacher just left us with materials and cardboard and then she told us to figure out, we had a bunch of materials and she told us to try to figure out how you could go in a straight line. She gave us a flashlight and cardboard boxes with holes in it and string and we had to figure out how do we do it in our pairs and groups.” Sometimes the teacher presents something on the interactive whiteboard, “like explaining it all and then we have time for either group or pairs to talk about it.” “Sometimes she (teacher) would play a video on the stream and then we would interact with items and figure it out.” Another example - “This is like one time, { } we got some tissue, cardboard and soft materials, placed them on the floor and dropped an egg from a certain height to see if it would break or not.” Another example of designing and making - “like I was with Jason, and we made this recycling box that could lead out to the actual big bins outside. And then we added a logo made out of wood and glass.” The children are involved on a daily basis in school recycling initiatives. They have also had input from scientists at Science Blast, in school and online about climate change and about “how the ocean is rising”. “A while ago somebody came in and they wrote a book and it was about climate change so they left the book in here and it told us about climate change in the book.”

Like the children in first class, the sixth-class children showed how their enthusiasm for inquiry spilled into the home “When I was playing with one of my toys I asked my mum, how does this thing work? She didn't know so I tried to take it apart. I asked my mum if I could take it apart and then I finally found out how it works.”

When asked how they like to work on Science and Designing and Making, it emerged that nobody liked working alone, six children liked working with one other person and nine children liked to work in groups with more than two people. Assessment in STE happens when children present to one another and to the teacher on their work. The teacher occasionally gives a worksheet to be completed at the end of an exercise.

The children reported they help one another if they are stuck and they are well used to “pairing up.” They use the traffic light system to indicate their level of understanding of a concept (Green = I understand, Yellow = I am near to understanding it but am still a little confused, Red = I do not understand.)

## **Technology**

The school describes itself as a digital school. It promotes digital technology as a means to the personalisation of learning and a form of interactive learning that is highly motivating for children. Internet safety is a major consideration, and the school uses a device management system to ensure oversight and safe use of digital technology. At the end of First Class, parents purchase an iPad for their child's learning in school and for homework. This iPad is a ‘parent-bought’ and ‘school-managed’ educational device for the duration of the child's education. The school's impressive website hosts a video which demonstrates how iPads are used in the school for Art and photography, for Maths (e.g. the teaching of fractions), History, coding, Science (e.g. making parachutes to transport marbles to the ground from a height), literacy, looking and responding in Art, comic strips trí mhean na Gaeilge, and Designing and making engineering projects. The children become skilled at using iPads and put them to amazing creative use, as well as using them for reading and accessing content.

## **First Class**

The children in first class have access to iPads. All children from second class upwards have an iPad but the children in first class also have limited access to them, using them for drawing shapes, playing games, including Maths games. One child mentioned “Hit the Button,” an interactive Maths game, describing it as “very challenging.”

## **Sixth class**

Sixth class professed to do “pretty much everything” through technology in school. They said they had completed a Maths class that morning, using iPads exclusively - “Today, in the morning, we did Maths on our iPads, which helped us to save time to write anything.” During Science class, iPads are used to take photographs and videos to document experiments. Children are encouraged to hone their photography skills, to learn how to zoom in and to edit. The class held a photography competition the previous year, which generated a lot of interest and excitement.

## **Summary on STE**

The objective of this Case Study section of the research was to look in depth at each particular curriculum area to discover how children typically experience learning in that area. The research team deliberately did not seek out schools to find examples of best practice. The point of a case study is to learn as much as possible about a particular case so that the information can be generalized to many others. This case study on STE, however, ‘landed’ in a school where part of the mission of the school is “to provide a new model of primary education that reflects Ireland in the 21st Century.” In delivering on their mission, the school has put a strong emphasis on technology as a learning tool and this has facilitated cutting edge learning experiences for the children in the area of STE. Children are given opportunities to inquire into how materials work or react to stimuli in the environment; they are experimenting with and documenting their work in a sophisticated fashion, using iPads. They demonstrate, by their modus operandi, the effectiveness of integrating Technology with STE. The children work collaboratively, playfully, scientifically, critically and they are problem-solving as they work. They have had the benefit of field trips to Science and Engineering exhibitions and have publicly displayed and presented their work. Volante (2018) states that “it is the adoption of an inquiry stance within play-based approaches – namely questioning and pondering solutions to novel problems with children – which is especially important” (p.8). The children in this case study school are engaging with their learning in STE as per the vision articulated by literature in the area.

## **Case Study on Modern Foreign Language (School E) (Irish-medium school)**

The case study on Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) took place in an urban Irish-medium school, outside of the Gaeltacht. It is a co-ed vertical school. Children in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Class from one Irish-medium school took part in Phase 2 of this study, as MFL will be introduced in senior classes only. The school is relatively new and has been operating for just over ten years and are housed in a new facilities. The student population in this Gaelscoil is somewhat socio-economically and culturally diverse, with several European nationalities represented.

### **Context for Modern Foreign Language in the school**

While the element of the Primary Language Curriculum that focuses on Modern Foreign Languages will not be fully implemented until 2025, the school in which this case study is situated, has a keen interest in promoting language learning. It is clear that the school has adopted a ‘Language-Friendly School’ disposition (Cummins, 2021) with multilingual signage in parts of the school, and opportunities for children to learn French during the school day. Supporting the acquisition and enrichment of children’s language skills, and positive attitudes towards language learning are key priorities for the school. There is a great emphasis on developing language awareness, particularly through the study of local place names, which can be built on in the studying of MFL. Children in senior classes are engaged in the learning of French once a week with external teachers during the school day, and this language learning is reinforced to an extent by the class teacher at other points during the day. There is a small number of children in the school who speak languages other than English or Irish at home, but in the main the learning of French occurs within the context of the vast majority of children also learning Irish as a second or additional language. The group interview was conducted in Irish but children’s responses are presented bilingually below.

### **Building an Awareness of Languages and Cultures**

In the current version of the *Primary Language Curriculum – including draft Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) (2024)*, Stage 3 focuses on building an awareness of languages and cultures. At Stage 4, children learn to communicate at a very basic / basic level in the L3, and there is continued focus on developing an awareness of languages and cultures. Understandably, children’s school experience to date in learning a MFL is not as vast as their exposure to other parts of the curriculum. Yet a majority indicated that they think it is important to learn another language. This is in keeping with the views expressed by other children in Irish-medium schools when discussing the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (Kiely et al., 2022).

In encouraging children to use and develop their existing knowledge and experience of languages, children were invited to draw on their own language resources and at the beginning of their French classes. They explored the French words that were already familiar to them e.g. *baguette*, *croissants*, and *cul de sac*. New vocabulary in French was introduced in a play-based way e.g. through the game *Splat!* where children had to point to images of items on the white board or point to concrete objects in the classroom. The focus on oral language initially is understandable as children acquire a basic level of competency in French. Children, too, showed an awareness that they were learning more basic vocabulary in French such as colours, and simple directions in the classroom. One child remarked “*Bhíomar ag foghlaim faoi conas a rá ár n-ainmneacha.*” (We were learning how to say our names). In one class the children engaged in the arts, especially learning songs, to support the learning of French. “*Bhíomar ag déanamh like amhrán.*” (We were doing like songs). They reported enjoying these activities. Children perceive the emphasis in MFL to be mostly in developing language but they enjoy undertaking projects on aspects of French culture e.g. sports.

### **Language Learning as an Integrated Process**

As the PLC acknowledges, language learning is an integrated process. The introduction of an MFL as part of the Primary Language Curriculum offers the chance to have a more coordinated approach to language teaching, and to utilise a plurilingual approach to language teaching. Children were first invited to reflect on the similarities and between the learning of English, Irish and MFL. Children reported a slightly different experience with each language. They don’t perceive that they engage in much paired work to give feedback on their work in French, as they do in Irish and English. Children noted the emphasis on oral language, over reading and writing in learning French, which differed to their experience of reading novels, discussing grammar or engaging in writing in English or Irish in copybooks. When describing Irish and English lessons, one child said “*Táimid ag scríobh inár gcóipleabhair.*” (We write in our copybooks). *Caithfidh abairt a scríobh faoi na focail atáimid ag foghlaim.*” (We have to write a sentence about the words we are learning). Learning French, on the other hand was not associated with textbooks and the same degree of writing, but rather with interactive materials on the white board. As one child remarked “*Bhí sé ar an scáileán.*” (It was on the screen).

### **Emerging Identities as Language Learners**

Children show an awareness that learning French is unique to the senior classes, unlike the whole-school approach to learning Irish wherein all children focus on a new phrase weekly introduced during assembly. “*Míníonn an príomhoide frása nua.*” (The principal explains a new phrase). A small number acknowledge that additional language might be hard for some children “*I gcomhair cúpla duine beidh sé deacair.*” (For some people it will be difficult). This relates to cases where children believe the other language is very distinct from English or Irish. “*Tá focail píosa difriúil*” (Words are a bit different). They reported that the main source of support was the teacher and that they didn’t have as much access to other supports such as dictionaries in the classroom. Most children, however, believe that their learning of Irish helps them in learning another language. As one child said “*Tá sé níos éasca mar tá teanga eile díreach ar eolas agat.*” (It is easier because you just know another language). Another child remarked “*Mar má tá a fhios agat dhá theanga, tá sé níos éasca chun ceann amháin eile nó níos mó a fhoghlaim.*” (Because if you know two languages it is easier to learn another one or to learn more languages). This has been noted by children in other studies of additional language learning in Irish-medium schools (Dillon, 2009; Prats Porcar, 2013).

### **Making Connections between Languages**

Children highlighted the similarity between accents in French words and síneadh fada in Irish, and the similarity of some words e.g. blue in English and bleu in French. The researchers facilitated a conversation on similarities between some words in French and English and Irish. École and school, and église and eaglais. Children showed an interest in exploring the origins of and connections between words. For children who speak a language other than Irish or English at home, they reflected on the connections between their home language and other languages. One class learned a similar song in French, Irish and English and this was a springboard for discussing the differences in saying your name in different languages “Je m’appelle X”, “X is ainm dom” and “My name is X.” Children were interested in discussing the differences in word order and could see differences between the three languages. Children observed a difference in “An áit a gcuireann tú an focal” (The place you put the word). As Nic Aindriú shows, children can have challenges with languages that are different to one another and the need support in exploring similarities and differences between languages.

The development of metalinguistic skills, or the ability to think about and discuss aspects of language, in children who attend immersion education programmes in Ireland has been linked to their increased exposure to another language (Kennedy, 2012). Teachers in Irish-medium schools who took part in the Modern Language in Primary Schools Initiative also reported that children had several advantages in learning an MFL, including children’s increased metalinguistic skills (Dillon, 2009; Harris and O’Leary, 2012). These metalinguistic skills are reinforced by explicit plurilingual pedagogies that draw children’s attention to similarities and differences between languages.

### **Authentic Use of Language**

The PLC encourage the authentic use of language and interaction with peers and adults, through the target language. While children describe opportunities to use and speak English and Irish at home, they don’t have as many opportunities to use French outside of school. They reported that they didn’t usually engage in homework in the MFL but they understood that they could use the language outside of the classroom, particularly if they travelled to a region or country where the language is spoken. They do note the advantages of having French, or another language, if they travel to a country where the target language is spoken. “Tá tú in ann caint an teanga sin.” (You can speak that language).

### **Children’s Chosen Research Method**

Children chose to engage in an embodied language drawing activity based on a research method employed by Piazzoli (2018) and is similar to the exemplar on pages 99-101 of the draft *Primary Language Curriculum – including draft Modern Foreign Languages (MFL)*. The aim of this research method is to encourage children to reflect on their repertoire of languages and the connections between them, how and when they use these languages, and where the languages reside in their body. This method highlights that language experiences are embodied and not external to us, and also that there is a continuum of language proficiency. Overall, it focuses attention on using languages creatively and joyfully in different contexts.

The main researcher (Researcher A) began by drawing an outline of a body on the whiteboard. They began talking about the languages that one of the other researchers in the room (herein referred to as Researcher B) uses and how they use them. The first example given was that Researcher B can play the fiddle and comes across some Italian words such as *Crescendo* when they are playing. Researcher A mimed the playing of the fiddle and explained that Researcher B, therefore, has some Italian in their shoulders. The word Italian was then included in the body outline on the whiteboard. The next example given was that Researcher B enjoys salsa dancing and has a few Spanish words in their hips. This dancing activity was mimed and the word Spanish was included in the body outline on the whiteboard. The discussion of other languages followed this format and the language names were included in different parts of the body outline on the whiteboard. When all the languages were included on the body outline, Researcher A recapped orally on the various different languages that Researcher B has and the creative ways in which they use them.

Each child then received crayons and a blank sheet of paper to draw a body outline. They were encouraged to include all their languages on the body outline (by writing the name of the language or including a suitable symbol). Children

could refer to the example on the whiteboard and the researchers circulated the class throughout the activity to conference with individuals. When they had finished the activity, children had time to discuss their drawing with the person beside them. The drawings were then collected by the researchers.

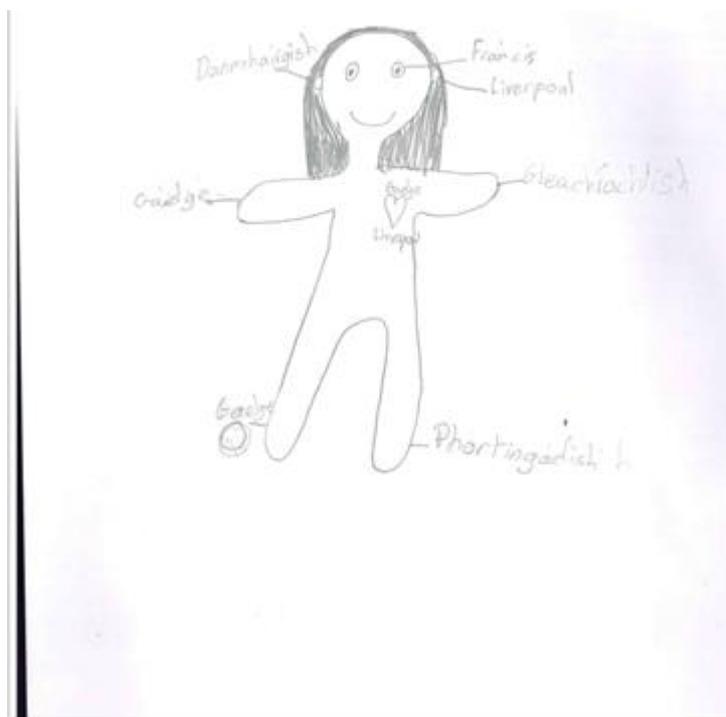
### Children's Reflections on Embodied Language Experiences

All children included English and Irish on the body outline. In the main English was associated with more cognitive work as indicated by the inclusion of English in the brain. and was associated more often with the affective domain as indicated by Irish being included in the heart. This view is linked to perspectives children revealed in the group discussion where they spoke about engaging in some cognitively challenging and stimulating tasks in English e.g. reading the class novel, whereas they spoke about positive attitudes to the Irish language and in particular using it orally. Some children in the class speak languages other than English or Irish at home and included them in the drawing e.g. Danish and Maori. It was clear that children understood that they had varying degrees of proficiency in other languages too. Having engaged in the learning of French for some weeks and listening to songs in the language children included French beside their ears or mouths. Children who played the piano included Italian in their fingertips or who enjoy reading Manga included Japanese in their minds. A number of children who play football included Portuguese in their feet as they had picked up a few words in the language from watching the sports star Ronaldo on television and draw on basic phrases and vocabulary when they are playing football. Some children included invented language such as 'gleacaíocht-ish' or 'peil-ish' to describe the specific terminology and phrases they use when engaged in these activities. A selection of pictures is included below.

Example 1 – Fourth class



### Example 2 Fourth Class



### Summary of findings relating to Modern Foreign Languages

Children generally report that they enjoy learning a MFL in school and believe that learning about other languages and cultures is important. They see the experience of learning an L3 as somewhat different to learning English and Irish, and report that there more of a focus on oral language. While children have limited exposure to MFL learning in school, they can draw on their own language resources, especially in Irish and English to support the language learning process, and their exposure to words and phrases in other languages outside of school. Children describe how learning Irish is an advantage to them in learning a MFL. Language learning is enhanced by making explicit connections between languages, supporting children to develop an identity as a language learner, and developing an awareness of their entire linguistic repertoire.

### Case Study: Exploring all curriculum areas with a Special School (School F)

#### Context of School F:

a large, co-ed rural special school in a beautiful setting in the countryside. The school provides specialist instruction for children between the ages of 4 and 18 years. Children in the school present with severe, profound, and moderate learning abilities. The educational programmes are aimed at developing communication, independence, life skills and social skills where each child is supported to achieve his or her potential. The school follows the primary school curriculum with use of the environment to support learning. This was observed during the visit where children were learning SESE through gardening. Data was collected from a junior class and a senior class in the special school. The junior class chose a walking tour of the school as their preferred method to respond to the questions. The senior class chose drawings and their preferred playful learning strategies to respond to the questions. All curriculum areas were

included in the interview schedule, but some areas were not covered on the day as some of the children did not want to cover all questions.

### **Arts Education: Junior class**

The children described various art projects that they have worked on, such as “the solar system, that is the phase of earth and moon, and I did spring and the butterflies”. There was reference to painting and making flowers that they saw outside. The project on the phases on the moon was a keen favourite among the children highlighting a specific interest in astronomy-related art. In general, the responses indicate that there is an interest in art activities and the children enjoy and learn through art. The school has a subject specific art teacher, and the children have opportunities to go to her to do art, but it depends on the class, the current class will have their turn in the next academic year.

All children express enjoyment in music activities, including singing songs like "Rocket Man" by Elton John, participating in the choir, and enjoying specific songs like the "brushing teeth song." Music seems to be a regular part of their routine, with activities scheduled every Friday at 1:40. There is a general sense of enthusiasm for music, with children engaging in singing, clapping songs, and playing music.

In terms of dance, there was mention of using lámh signing to dance and again enjoyment of it. The children chose to show the researchers their “Lámh to dance” learning by putting on songs they had learned the lámh signs for. The choice to ask children to engage in their preferred activities during the interview was made to help them feel at ease and comfortable and get deeper insight into their experiences of curriculum.

Drama is introduced as pretending to be someone else, but it seems less familiar to the children compared to other activities. There is some mention of storytelling and acting out parts during story time, suggesting a more informal approach to drama, not dissimilar to how children in mainstream schools' experience arts, however it was less prominent in children's experiences of curriculum in the special school.

### **Arts Education: Senior class**

The children show interest in various art activities like painting, cutting, sticking, and colouring. This variety caters to different interests and developmental needs, fostering both cognitive and motor skills. Children in this class in particular like to draw and spend a lot of time on their drawings, paying meticulous attention to detail and putting considerable effort into choosing specific colours. Children were happy to engage in conversations about their drawings, which will be discussed further below.

Music and dancing are subjects that the children enjoy, and they engage with musical instruments like the ukulele and drums during circle time. They also get ample opportunities to put on music on their big screen where they can choose their own songs and dance and sing along to them (not all the children in this class are verbal so engage in music in more bodily ways). As with the junior class, children were offered and accepted the chance to play their preferred music and dance along to it and visibly enjoyed this.

### **Languages: Senior class**

For communication, the children use Lámh or iPads. The use of these Augmentative and Alternative Communication systems signifies an inclusive approach to communication, ensuring that all children can participate in discussions and express themselves. This method helps create an engaging and supportive learning environment and reinforces the importance of the child's voice in their learning. It also highlights the variety of communication techniques needed for children with communication difficulties and /or other needs. The difficulty experienced by some of the children in using these devices for novel engagements such as a research interaction, however, suggests that such strategies must be properly supported and planned for to fully support children's meaningful communication abilities and inclusion.

An interesting feature in the interviews was the presence of adults who work with the children and how they repeated or rephrased the sentences for the children when the questions were asked. This approach also aids communication, ensuring comprehension and responses from the children. Adults frequently use simple language, direct prompts, and positive reinforcement to engage the children. They play a crucial role in interpreting the children's responses and encouraging them to participate. They help articulate the children's preferences and ensure that each child's voice is heard.

### **STE (Science): Junior class**

Science activities include studying the solar system, the life cycle of butterflies, and weather phenomena in the junior class with much enthusiasm expressed by the children for these topics. The children referred to science projects involving real caterpillars, drawings, and experiments. In general, the children show a strong interest in science topics, particularly in space missions (e.g., Apollo missions) and historical figures like Galileo. The children participate in hands-on experiments like sinking and floating, which they find enjoyable and educational. They also use the outdoor learning environments extensively and often participate in gardening and outdoor arts-based activities. There is an extraordinarily rich integration of topics relating to STEM. For example, the boy who has a keen Gaelic learner has also expressed a strong interest in learning about Roman numerals. He has been facilitated to learn about the history of these, learn all the Roman numerals and was given a space in the outdoor area to make a chalk display of his Roman numerals. The boy was incredibly proud to show us this artwork on the walking tour of the school. For this boy and other children in the class, the teacher uses a project-based approach to their learning, which integrates topics relating to STEM, particularly with Arts Education and other subject areas. Indeed, to support this boy's interests further, the Arts Teacher is currently working on creating a big chalk board specifically for him to develop these interests further and have his learning on display for other children.

### **STE (Science): Senior class:**

Similar activities were also done with the senior class children, but the children struggled to express their views on specific curriculum areas, and the teacher spoke to us through what the children enjoy learning about. Most recently, they learned about trains, their history, and mechanics, which the children engaged with enthusiastically, particularly a non-verbal boy. This boy struggled to communicate with us through this device and instead showed us some of the things he really enjoys. His preferred activity for learning in school is construction play through which a lot of STEM topics can be facilitated.

### **Technology: Junior class**

The children use Chromebooks and iPads in school, suggesting integration of technology in their learning. They view these devices positively. They use their interactive whiteboard extensively to engage in new topics, engage visually and aurally with music and explore new interests. Non-verbal children use iPads to communicate with their SNAs, teachers, and peers in the class. Children also sometimes receive individualised learning through their iPads, such as engaging with songs and music and short videos that can help them in certain areas of self-care, such as brushing teeth.

### **Technology: Senior class**

The main form of technology used in the senior class is iPads which are used for communication and for activities such as watching videos of current interests, such as trains, and other educational content.

Across both classes, the integration of technology, such as iPads, not only aids communication but also serves as an educational tool, making learning more interactive and accessible.

### **Wellbeing - PE: Junior class**

The children participate in a range of physical activities, including horse riding, yoga, rugby, basketball, swimming, and dancing. They enjoy these activities, particularly team games and swimming. Physical education and other physical

activities are regular and structured parts of their school routine. The children particularly enjoy being outdoors and having a large, green play area with playground equipment, which they really enjoy spending time in. They also especially enjoy PE activities where they travel by bus, such as swimming and horse riding, the bus ride being associated with fun and adventure.

### **Well-being – PE: Senior class**

Yoga, biking, and other physical activities are part of their routine, with a dedicated PE teacher, who the children enjoy spending time with. The boys in the class, who are a little older, enjoy the freedom of moving between indoor and outdoor spaces and the non-verbal boy really enjoys playing chase. One of the girls, according to her teacher does not seem to express a preference for most things, however one thing she really expressed enjoyment of was the swings in the playground attached to the class.

### **Wellbeing –SPHE: Junior class**

In the junior class, the children benefit from multiple SNAs who attend to their needs and well-being throughout the day. The children also benefit from personalised rooms that cater for their particular needs. The boy who really enjoys Gaeilge likes to use 'the purple room' immediately adjacent to the classroom. The purple room is a space for children to relax and manage emotions. It is described as a place to lie down and calm down from being sad. There are several sensory stimuli and a calm corner where he can lie on cushions and relax. The room also has equipment for movement breaks and for individualised learning opportunities. Another space, the yellow room, is associated with activities like playing with Play-Doh and reading books, with one corner dedicated to a boy who particularly enjoys these activities and goes in there to work on his letters and numbers and really enjoy this. This boy worked on writing letters in Play-Doh throughout most of the interview. The free availability and individualised nature of these rooms indicate a focus on sensory and calming activities tailored to each child's individual needs. A third boy preferred the gym as a bigger space for sensory and movement breaks. The room was locked on the day, and he was disappointed not to be able to show us. Instead, he showed us the other spaces around the school that afforded wellbeing opportunities, such as the outdoor play spaces. Due to the prominent level of physical needs in the class, there is a lot of focus on children learning to look after themselves, such as brushing their teeth, getting dressed and feeling calm and children are provided with individualised opportunities to help regulate and manage their wellbeing.



The yellow room for individualised learning.



The Purple Room for sensory input, relaxing and individualised learning opportunities.



The children really enjoy gardening and all the arts projects that are integrated with gardening/outdoor related learning.



One of the many outdoor play spaces.

**Senior class:**

The children like playing in the garden, using swings and the climbing frame. The older boys especially like to participate in these activities. The children planted flowers and expressed an interest in gardening. The children also have circle time and a structured time for discussing feelings and other topics. Mr. Squiggle is a tool used during this time to help express emotions. These activities help children understand and express their emotions, contributing to their overall well-being. In circle time, the children learn practical life skills like public transportation and road safety.



**Drawing above:** The student was invited to draw a picture of something he likes at school. When asked what he was drawing, the student replied that he was drawing a picture of Eddie. When asked what he was drawing beside Eddie, the student said that it was a cat. The student said that he was drawing Eddie's house. The student said that the house had a red roof. The student provided an oral description for what he was drawing as he drew it – the house, the window, the door, the red roof. The student who drew the picture did not provide any further information about who Eddie was. When asked if Eddie was his friend, the student did not respond. The teacher said that there was no one called Eddie in the student's class.



**Drawing above:** When originally invited to draw a picture about something she likes at school, the student said no. When crayons, markers, and paper were taken out for another student to draw with, the student then took a page and started to draw. When asked what she was drawing, she said “Kitty”. However, when asked again later, she said that the same picture was a “puppy”. When we asked if the student would be happy for us to keep the picture or if she would like to take the picture home, she said that she would like to take the picture home.

### **Conclusion: Special School Case Study**

The children in the junior class express positive feelings about their activities and school environment, enjoying various creative, educational, and physical activities. The presence of supportive adults who facilitate and encourage the children’s participation in diverse activities is evident and this reflects literature where adults, both teachers and paraprofessionals are central for inclusion (Zhao et al, 2022). In terms of the senior class, the data highlights that this special school setting prioritizes inclusive and holistic learning, and the needs of all children are met in a supportive manner with a strong emphasis on communication, varied activities, and emotional development, echoing findings in the literature (Colum, 2020; O’Reilly and Colum, 2021). The facilitators' role in supporting and engaging the children is crucial, and the use of technology further enhances the learning experience. This ensures that children with unique needs and preferences receive the support they require to develop in their educational environment and that all children.

### **Case Study: Exploring all curriculum areas with children from the Travelling Community (School G)**

School G is classified as DEIS band one and is in a Dublin suburb with a significant level of socio-economic disadvantage. Approximately 46% of the children in the school are from the Travelling community. The teachers who were interviewed stated that this was because there was a large Travelling population in the area but also grandparents and parents of the children had attended the school and there were good relationships and a level of trust between the two parties. Developing relationships and trust between settled and Travelling communities is of utmost importance for progress and development in all areas of life and in this case education (Colum & Collins, 2021). The school has over 20 teachers, eight full time class teachers and 12 support teachers and approximately 10 SNAs. The school's core priorities are literacy and Mathematics development. There is also a focus on wellbeing, supported by a nurture room, to help the children identify and manage their emotions and behaviour, indicating an understanding of the complex needs within the school. The teachers report that use of the nurture room has resulted in positive impacts on the children, many of whom come from challenging backgrounds and may experience trauma or emotional distress. When

conducting the interview, the children took us on a walking tour of the school and took pictures of various displays to show us what they are doing in school.

### **Arts Education**

There is a clear preference for art over other subject areas and the children describe projects like painting backgrounds and creating cut-out designs. There is also a link to history and one child explains “Like we learn about famous artists, famous big singers, people who invented things, people who invented the first telephone. We did that in first class I think”. The children like to make things “I like when you make the puppet, you can design them, and you can make them again”.

In terms of music one child commented “I like doing music because I have a guitar at home, and I want to learn how to play it”.

### **Wellbeing**

The understanding of wellbeing is “when you are being well to yourself and others”. Children are cognisant of the classroom rules and the importance of respect and kindness, and they point out activities like hurling and a poster with their hurling coach. There was a good sense of self-care and one boy said that “I want to learn about looking after myself. Because I could be doing things that could be hurting my life, but I don't know”.

There are mixed feelings about physical education as noted above. The children say that they like warm up games such as ‘ship, sea, shore’. They also like dodge ball.

### **STE**

As stated above the children really enjoy engaging in hands-on experiments in science. There was an interest in technology with one boy reflecting that “I think technology is going to rule the world, take over the world ... because for a very, very long time when technology was first invented everybody thought it was very good, but then it kept increasing, increasing, increasing and we have robots now”. There was an understanding that engineering was linked to building “because we build with bricks and Lego and stuff” and “You can build whatever you want, you can build towers, houses, cars, boats”.



**A poster on the science experiment on leaving coins in cola overnight**

**SEE**

The children show areas or items in the school that represent subjects across science, geography and the environment. They mention activities like learning about cherry blossom trees and local geography and “we learn about loads of countries but like, not rivers”.



**The children's work on cherry blossom trees**

## **Languages**

Learning words in Irish and CANT are part of the children's work and the children were proud to show a poster on CANT in the school. It is important that Traveller culture is represented in schools so children can see their own lives as part of their everyday education (Colum & Collins, 2021; Collins, 2022; NCCA, 2019). The children were proud to point out the poster on CANT and when questioned where he learned the language, his reply was "Well me mother taught me".



### A poster on CANT in the school

Children show enthusiasm, curiosity, and a sense of pride in their work and learning environment. They demonstrate knowledge and recall of various subjects, indicating effective learning. The focus on practical and hands-on activities, such as experiments, art projects, and outdoor observations, suggests an experiential learning approach. This approach resonates well with the children, enhancing their understanding and retention of information as they can recall and explain key concepts throughout the interviews.

The interview provides valuable insights into the children's learning experiences and the school's educational approach. The children's engagement and enthusiasm, coupled with the practical, diverse, and supportive learning environment, create a solid foundation for effective education. With its ongoing commitment to innovate and focus on student wellbeing and engagement, the school can continue to flourish and enhance its educational impact.

### Summary of findings from Case Studies

Case Studies were held in seven primary schools, six mainstream schools and one special school. In five of the seven schools, one of the following curriculum areas was investigated, - Modern Foreign languages (MFL), Science Technology and Engineering (STE), Arts Education, Wellbeing and Social and Environmental Education. In the two remaining schools, the special school and a mainstream school with a large population of children from the Travelling community, the case study focused on all five curriculum areas.

#### Summary of Findings: Social and Environmental Studies (SEE)

What emerged from this case study is that children enjoyed SEE when it was activity-based. Interactive and playful approaches to SEE were preferred over text-based work. Despite both classes being able to identify several opportunities of exploring SEE topics through visits to local sites, buildings, museums or libraries, none of the children felt like they ever got to be historians or geographers, highlighting the need to support children in consciously labelling 'fieldwork' and other investigations and inquiries as the act of being a historian or geographer. As noted elsewhere in

this report, it is difficult for children to have a metacognitive appreciation of curriculum like teachers would. Nevertheless, it is important that they are conscious of what they are doing, what skills they are employing and what the purpose of their actions are. For example, it would be important for children to know that using timelines and being aware of chronology and being able to use and examine evidence are skills of a historian that and being able to use maps, globes and other graphical skills are skills of a geographer (Government of Ireland, 1999). Children can effortlessly recall learning experiences where outdoor work or field trips were involved and were less able to describe classroom learning. This ties in with findings from the previous study on the consultation with children on *the Draft Primary Curriculum* (2022), where it is suggested, there be more educational field trips. Technology use did not feature in this case study on SEE beyond using search engines to get information. Matters of resourcing would be key to supporting the changes that the new Primary Curriculum Framework (DES, 2023) will bring. This study also found that learning about rights, diversity, social justice and related themes is another area for further development, again echoing findings from the previous study (Kiely et al., 2022).

### **Summary of Findings: Arts Education**

Children love Arts Education and spoke more about Visual Arts than Music and Drama and dance. This could be simply when they hear the word 'Art', they associate it with Visual Art. It could also be that more children love Visual Arts than Music, Drama or Dance or indeed it could be the case that Music, Drama and Dance feature less on class timetables than Visual Art and therefore children have less to say about those subjects. Findings from the report on the consultation with children on the Draft Primary Curriculum (2022) suggest that children needed more time for Arts subjects. These were the subjects that sometimes slipped off the weekly timetable because of teachers' concerns about other subject areas. Findings from this current study echo this, with Drama suffering particularly, due to time constraints. Drama, Music and Dance also seem to be vulnerable to teacher expertise. Templates were used for Visual Arts in one class, for example, while more creative approaches were used in another. Dance is almost exclusively taught by external teachers, indicating that class teachers may not feel qualified to teach dance. In the case study, it emerged that there is perhaps a lack of a spiral approach to Visual Arts. How, for example, do we measure incremental improvement in Arts practice, particularly in Visual Arts and Drama? The curriculum content is in situ, of course. Perhaps a stronger focus on skill development is merited. Visual Arts was highly prized amongst children for the freedom it gives them to be creative, to try out ideas, to be agentic in their choices and to be able to chat with their peers as they work.

### **Summary of Findings: Wellbeing**

Without exception, there is a strong emphasis on children's wellbeing across schools. Educators hold dear the sense of school being a safe and nurturing space for children. Mental wellbeing, including emotional regulation and digital safety, are preoccupations in all schools and there are also many wellbeing displays, calm corners, sensory rooms and some nurture rooms. Noticeably, many staffrooms have displays around wellness and mental health, including contact details of health organisations to support wellness of staff members. In the school where the wellbeing case study was conducted, rules of the school are displayed in the school corridor. They are wellbeing-focused, emphasising care, kindness, respect, and cooperative behaviours.

Wellbeing has a whole-school approach and curriculum-wise, is integrated throughout subjects, rather than restricted to the teaching of SPHE and P.E. Children are aware and vocal about the subjects and activities that promote their well-being, mentioning P.E. and SPHE and the arts, as well as playing with their friends, using the school library, and having a say on committees such as the student council and green schools committee. Mindfulness is practiced in the classroom. The teacher talked about how, at first there were a lot of giggles, but children really 'got into' mindfulness and it works very well now for the children. A suggestion from the children to have wellbeing homework (doing an act of kindness, for example, or exercising, meditating etc.) at least once a week, echoes findings from the consultation on the draft curriculum (Kiely et al., 2022).

From a curriculum perspective, the children recalled various activities in SPHE class based on keeping safe, identifying an adult who is trustworthy, management of emotions, friendship matters, working on being calm in mind and body, internet safety and working together as teammates. Circle time was mentioned, used for discussions during SPHE class. Classroom displays on wellbeing showcase children's project work in SPHE. Although P.E. came up consistently as one of the children's favourite activities, the children did not speak about it much, other than to mention doing yoga, playing basketball and football. The children indicated that the plentiful outdoor resources could be more fully exploited for learning purposes. There was a sense that the school is still recovering from the fall-out from the COVID-19 pandemic and considerable time is being spent on matters around families' wellbeing.

#### **Summary of Findings: Modern Foreign Languages (MFL)**

The case study on MFL was conducted in a Gaelscoil that had experience of teaching a third language, French, as part of a pilot project in a previous language initiative. Findings demonstrated that plurilingualism was in evidence in the classroom. Children were able to talk about words in different languages and how they were connected. They knew, for example, that words such as 'croissant,' 'café,' 'chic,' and 'entrepreneur' are words with French roots, used in English. They realised that knowledge of the same song in three different languages gave them an insight into sentence structure in different languages and a discussion ensued on this, developing children's metalinguistic awareness. The children could also discuss where signs and announcements in the community were displayed in different languages. They talked about signs on the road, signs and announcements on the DART and Irish language names of food products in local supermarkets. They were unaware that language learning could happen across subjects such as P.E. and Art until it was pointed out to them. In terms of teaching methods employed in the teaching of language, children said that textbooks and the interactive whiteboard were used. They said that teacher mostly assessed their work. The children had opportunities to work in pairs in order to practice language. The language embodiment exercise they chose to do succeeded in heightening their awareness of words from other languages that are used in English.

#### **Summary of Findings: Science, Technology and Engineering (STE)**

This case study highlighted the success of the integration of Science and technology. The children were adept users of digital devices and they used them to record their work by taking photographs and videos and orally recording the processes involved in their investigations. The children had highly developed technology skills and informed the researcher that they used technology for 'nearly everything.' They described group projects undertaken, the work they showcased during Science week and at the Science Blast event, amongst other events they attended. They described experiments they had conducted and what they learned. They spoke excitedly about their topics. Assessment occurred through teacher observation of their group presentations. The children had many opportunities to work individually, in pairs and in groups and showed a preference for working in groups firstly, then in pairs and lastly, individually. The teacher used video through the interactive board to teach and demonstrate, the children then got an opportunity for questions and discussions and they would then proceed to conduct their own investigations.

## **CHAPTER 4: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY**

Looking back at the report on the consultation with children on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (Kiely et al., 2022), most of the findings from that report still pertain and merit re-stating:

- More agency for children in the classroom
- Increase in the use of active learning strategies and inquiry-based approaches
- More time for Arts subjects, and P.E./sport activities.
- A focus on issues relating to diversity, other cultures, other languages, the environment and wellbeing.
- Consideration of the role of homework

- Consideration of how to use the outdoor environment more for learning and provision of outdoor play resources.
- More school field trips
- Focus on how Irish is taught in English-medium schools
- Review approaches to the teaching of handwriting.
- Greater attention to how creative technologies are used in the classroom for learning purposes
- More time for children to eat lunch and to play in school

Analysis of the current data set reinforced the findings from the research conducted in 2022 (Kiely et al.,2022), with two exceptions: There was no desire expressed to review approaches to handwriting, nor did the data reveal that there needed to be a stronger focus on wellbeing; they found rather, that schools were very committed in this respect. This may be because schools responded to the needs of families, following the COVID-19 pandemic. In relation to handwriting, the current data found that children sometimes complained of suffering from sore hands from repetitive writing tasks, such as when they were not allowed to write into workbooks but instead had to write answers in long-hand into their copies. The children did not complain about practicing the art of handwriting.

The current data set demonstrated a strong love of reading by children. This was across all class levels. Children reported enjoying learning to read, doing Storytime, DEAR time and the older children enjoyed doing Buddy Reading Time with children from the junior classes. The data also revealed that children seemed to be more aware of assessment practices and could give examples of practices of self-assessment, peer-assessment and teacher-assessment. It was clear that formative assessment practices were used by teachers because children described learning processes wherein, they checked what they were doing was correct before moving on to the next step, e.g. In Mathematics, literacy (editing), Science (designing and making) and Technology. The children talked about opportunities to work alone, in pairs and in groups and debated the merits (e.g. helping one another and learning from one another) and de-merits (e.g. too noisy and distracting, people not doing their fair share, people marking your work incorrectly, people seeing what mark you got) of group work and peer assessment.

It could be interpreted that the variety of teaching and learning methodologies to which children are exposed may have expanded slightly since 2022, with findings indicating that children experience a variety of teaching and learning methodologies in class. In any case, like the findings from the 2022 study, children report that they would like more active learning, technology-based and play-based learning, more opportunities to work outdoors and with a partner/peer. Children show a clear preference for playful and active learning methodologies; they do not like sitting down for extended periods of time. They appreciate playful teaching, such as games, for subjects they find difficult, particularly in senior classes. Their experiences of the curriculum are clearly influenced by the teaching methodologies used in each subject. Additionally, the specific workbooks used for curriculum areas/subjects often influence children's experiences of that curriculum area. The case study on STE revealed innovative practice where Science and Technology were very well integrated and technology enhanced children's ability to be inquirers, independent learners and to express their creativity through skillful technology practice. The children demonstrated they could edit, photograph, video and present most ably, using digital devices.

The case study on the Arts gave insights regarding arts practice, how teacher expertise dictated the frequency and quality of experience for the children. Of course, teacher expertise dictates quality in all areas, but in the Arts, there appears to be more of a distinction between routine/workaday and exceptional practice. Interestingly, a finding emerged about the need for a spiral approach in the Arts, with a focus on skill development.

A similar finding emerged in relation to the teaching of Irish. Children in English-medium schools reported finding Irish difficult, with some children reported learning the same thing in Irish repeatedly. There were no negative findings in relation to Irish or the teaching of Irish in Irish-medium schools. In relation to MFL, it was found that children became meta linguistically aware when they learned the same song or poem in two or more languages. They began to notice similarities and differences in language structure.

Findings in relation to children's experiences of choice suggest that children do not experience much autonomy in school. They certainly *feel* they do not have opportunities to make their own choices, calling out the teacher, the principal, the president, and the government as officers of authority. Children's definition of choice may vary significantly from adults. If they are given a limited array of choices for a specific task, they do not see this as choice. The literature suggests that as children progress through school, there should be opportunities for them to become more autonomous, more specialised and more flexible in the ways they demonstrate their competences (Volante, 2018, p.4)

Children in senior classes look forward to some aspects of post-primary school, such as more freedom and new practical subjects. They expressed fears around workload, making new friends and the difficulty of curriculum content.

In relation to children's priorities for their learning, many children value curriculum topics that will 'stand to them' in later life. They are quite focused on this, as evidenced in the case study on wellbeing. Children were able to differentiate between subjects they enjoyed and the usefulness of subjects for the future. The current data set also revealed that children want to know more about themselves and the world they live in, other cultures and languages. This was also a finding in the 2022 consultation report (Kiely et al, 2022).

In response to questions on how the curriculum is presented, children said they liked the idea of immersing themselves in depth in two subjects a day if the subjects are Art and PE. But there was fear of boredom and fear of 'missing out' on other subjects if the school day was deeply focused on one or two subjects.

Literature emphasises the importance of play-based learning, inquiry-based learning and or cooperative learning in primary classrooms (e.g. Bruner, 2006; Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Martlew, Stephen & Ellis, 2011; Mc Guinness, Sproule, Bojke, Trew & Walsh, 2014; Tolmie, Topping, Christie, Donaldson, Howe, Jessiman, Livingston & Thurston, 2010; Van Um, Verhoeff, & Peeters, 2016; Walsh, Sproule, Mc Guinness & Trew, 2011). The case studies described here evidence many of these practices. Children's voices in this study strongly support findings in the literature. Unsurprisingly, children ask for more time for subjects (Arts Education, P.E, subjects supported by field trips such as SEE and STE), where these play-based practices are most evident. It can be said, from analysis of data in this study, that there are many positive signs of evolution to twenty-first century practices in our primary schools. These include creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration and digital literacy. Rich CPD opportunities for teachers will be crucially important in ensuring the evolution continues.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A Information letter to schools



Dear principal and classroom teacher,

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this research project to elicit children's views on curriculum and school life. Your involvement will ensure that children's views are heard and included in decisions on curriculum matters nationally.

The research team are requesting that they visit your school in the month of March, the exact date to be agreed with each school, and interview two groups of children, one from junior infants to second class and one from third to sixth class. The children will be asked a series of questions based on the six key messages of the primary curriculum, as follows -

1. Supporting agency and flexibility in schools
2. Building connections between preschool, primary and post-primary schools
3. Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented \*
4. Emerging priorities for children's learning
5. Supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to teaching and learning
6. Building on the strengths of the 1999 curriculum and responding to challenges arising from it.

There are approximately 4 questions based on each key message. We envisage the group interview will take about 40-50 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded.

Parents and children will need to be approached to give their consent to participation in the project.

To that end, we ask that you might distribute the information sheets and consent forms to children and their parents and ask that the signed forms are returned by Friday, May 17<sup>th</sup>.

The research team will collect the signed consent forms from you. If there are children who have not consented to participating and/or whose parents have not given consent for them to participate, those children will remain under your care while we work with the children who have given consent.

We wish to advise that your school, your class and the children will not be identified when this research is published. All data will be anonymised.

Should you have any questions about this study or your child's participation, please contact the lead researcher:

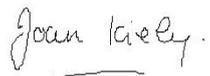
**Dr Joan Kiely,**

**Dean of Education: Curriculum and Education**

**Joan.kiely@mie.ie**

**01-853-5157**

We look forward to working with your school soon.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joan Kiely." The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a short horizontal line.

on behalf of the research Team - Dr Miriam Colum, Dr Maja Haals Brosnan, Dr Andrea Uí Chianáin and Dr Claire Marie Dunne.

## Appendix B Parent Info letter and Consent Sheet NCCA 2024

### Parent/Guardian Information Sheet

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Thank you for your interest in this project. We ask you to read through the following document which outlines the various aspects of this study that are important for you to know about.

After reading through this information sheet, if you are still happy for your child to participate, you will be asked to sign the consent form at the end of this document. We will then ask your child to sign their own version as well to affirm their assent.

If you need help with understanding this letter, please contact your child's teacher.

**Title of Project:** *Child's Voice: Consulting with children as part of the redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum.*

**The Purpose of this Research:** The purpose of this research project is to consult with children to obtain their views and opinions in relation to their experiences of curriculum in school. The consultation involves two tasks –

**1** Consulting with children (Junior Infants to Sixth Class) in fifteen schools on the key messages of the Primary Curriculum, numbered 1-6 below.

**2** Consulting with children (Junior Infants to Sixth Class) on individual curriculum areas such as Language; Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Education; Wellbeing; Arts Education and Social and Environmental Education. We will work with **5 schools** (two classes/ classrooms in each) only on this part of the project.

This research is founded on the six key messages that underpin the *Primary Curriculum Framework, published in March 2023*, namely:

1. Supporting agency and flexibility in schools;
2. Building connections between preschool, primary, and post-primary schools;
3. Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented;
4. Emerging priorities for children's learning;
5. Supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches with strategies with assessment central to teaching and learning;
6. Building on the strengths of the 1999 curriculum and responding to challenges arising from it.

### Why is this research important?

This research is being conducted because we want children to have a say in how they work in school and we feel this is important because the curriculum impacts on their lives on a daily basis. Therefore, listening to their opinions and learning about their experiences in Irish schools is an important step prior to making any changes to the curriculum and implementing it in schools. In summary, this project has the power to create positive change in Irish schools and the lives of young people, and listening to their voices is an essential part of this process.

### **What will your child be asked to do?**

Child participants will be asked to engage in two forms of data collection, wherein they will discuss their opinions and experiences of the curriculum in their schools with researchers. In the first task the children will participate in a group interview with two researchers. The interview will be audio recorded and should take about 30 minutes. If you consent to your child's participation in the interview, they can still change their mind on the day and will be given an opportunity to do so.

The second task will involve 5 schools only and will involve a close exploration of children's experiences of curriculum areas such as Language; Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Education; Wellbeing; Arts Education and Social and Environmental Education.

### **Benefits and risks of participation**

This study has been designed to pose minimal to no risks to your child. By participating in this study, your child will have the opportunity to reflect on and share their insights and experiences of the primary school curriculum, thereby having their voices listened to by interested adults. In turn, the data that we collect may be used to positively influence the curriculum and its delivery, thereby improving the experience and outcomes of future children in Irish schools.

### **Children's rights in this study**

The rights of your child include the following:

1. Freedom of participation--your child should be freely participating in this study because they want to;
2. Your child has the right to only answer those questions they feel comfortable answering;
3. Your child has the right to stop participating in this study at any time;
4. Even if they do stop participating, your child is free to re-join the project at any time.
5. If you decide not to allow your child to participate in the study but your child insists on participating on the day with her/his classmates, we will allow your child to participate in the activities but your child's work will not be forwarded to the research team as part of the data set.

### **Confidentiality**

You and your child are assured of confidentiality in this project. Any specific details collected in the data that could be potentially used to identify you, your child or family, or the teacher, the school they attend will be omitted from the final publication of this project in order to protect your privacy and that of your family. The only time that confidentiality will be breached in this project pertains to cases where the child participant discusses or discloses something that makes the researchers seriously question the safety of the child, or those around them. In this case, the school's child protection protocol will be followed.

### **Data protection**

All data and information collected from participants in this study will be kept in password protected files on the researchers' work laptops. Thirteen months after this study has been completed, all data will be destroyed.

**How results and findings will be communicated**

After data has been gathered, it will be analysed, and the researchers will look for important ideas and insights about the experience of the primary curriculum in Ireland. This information will be used to inform future classroom practice. Additionally, the findings will be published in executive documents from the NCCA, and possibly communicated in academic journals, and disseminated at national and international conferences so that educationalists can learn from it.

**If you have any questions**

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for considering your child's participation in this study.

If you need help with understanding this letter, please contact your child's teacher.

Should you have any questions about this study or your child's participation, please contact your child's teacher, or the lead researcher:

Dr Joan Kiely  
Dean of Education: Curriculum and Education  
[Joan.kiely@mie.ie](mailto:Joan.kiely@mie.ie)  
01-853-5157

**Please see consent sheet on next page**

**Consulting with children on the of the redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum.**

I \_\_\_\_\_ (parent/guardian name) agree on behalf of my child  
 \_\_\_\_\_ (child's name) that the following is true:

*Please tick as appropriate:*

- I agree that my child may participate in this study if they wish to;
- I have read through and understand the information sheet;
- I have had enough time to consider my child's participation in this study;
- I have been provided with the contact details of the lead researcher;
- I confirm that my child's participation in this study is voluntary;
- I understand that my child may stop participating in this study at any time, and if they wish, may re-join at a later date.

Name of Child (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Parent (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Parent: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

***Please return this consent sheet to your child's teacher. You may retain the information sheets for your own reference.***

## Appendix C consent child junior infant to second class



### Student Information & Assent Sheet (Junior Infants to Second Class)

Please read and talk about this with your parent/guardian at home.

We would like to find out about what school is like for you and other children in Ireland! Do you think this is something you would like to help us with?

#### What will the visitor to your school (the researcher) ask you about?

The researcher will ask you questions about what you do in school each day, what it was like learning in school, and what your favourite things in school are.

#### What will you get to do?

If you want to help the researcher and answer their questions, you will get to share your ideas on the voice recorder. You can hear your voice back on the recorder if you like and you can change your opinion and start again if you wish. You might be asked to help us again later by taking some photographs or maybe doing a worksheet or drawing.

#### What is good about helping us out?

By talking to us (the researchers), you get to share your ideas out loud. What you say could help make school better for you and other children too.

#### Will everybody know what you said?

You do not have to say your name so no one will know that this is you speaking.

#### Can you change your mind about talking to us, even if you are in the middle of talking to us?

Yes, you can decide not to talk to us at all and you can also change your mind. You might have said 'yes, I'll talk to the researcher visitors' and then on the day of our visit you might decide not to talk to us. That is OK.

#### What happens after you talk to us (the researchers)?

The researchers will listen to what you have said and think about what they mean. They will then talk to other important people, so they too can understand what school is like, and how we can make it better for children.

#### Do you have any questions?

If you have any questions, please talk to your teacher, or your parent/guardian.

***Please see next page***

**Confirmation of Understanding:****Instructions: Draw a circle around the picture that best shows how you feel:**

Would you like to take part in this project? It is OK to say no if you do not want to.



Do you understand that a researcher will have a chat with you about what school is like?



Are you happy to take part in some activities with the researcher such as taking photographs of activities you like or maybe doing a worksheet?



Are you happy that a researcher will audio record the chat with the class?

**Draw a smiley face in the space below if you are happy to help us with this project by chatting with us and answering our questions -****Informed Assent to be signed by child**

Please sign your name here: \_\_\_\_\_

**To be completed by Parent/Guardian**

Parent's name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D Child consent assent third to sixth class

### Student Information & Assent Sheet for completion of an online questionnaire (Third to sixth class)

**Title of Project:** *Child's Voice: Consulting with children as part of the redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum*

Dear Student:

Please read this with your parent /guardian at home.

You are being invited to take part in a project on the curriculum in your school. "Curriculum" means the topics you study and the activities you complete during your school day.

The reason for this project is to listen to your opinions about school and to learn about your daily experiences.

#### **If you participate in this project, what will you get to do?**

If you participate in this project, you get to share your ideas and answer a few questions using an audio recorder about things like: what you like to do in school; how you learn best; and what you do each day in school. You might also be asked to answer some questions online.

#### **What is good about helping us out?**

By helping us out, and talking about what school is like for you, you get to share your ideas with others, who want to know what you have to say. The things you say may also make school a better place for other children in the future.

#### **Will everybody know what you said?**

No, no one will know what you have said because you will not say your name on the recorder. If you do the online form as well, we will not ask for your name, so we won't know that it was you who filled it out.

#### **Can you change your mind about talking to us, even if you are in the middle of talking to us?**

Yes, you can decide not to talk to us at all and you can also change your mind. You might have said 'yes, I'll talk to the researcher visitors' and then on the day of our visit you might decide not to talk to us. That is OK.

#### **What happens at the end of the project?**

The researchers will listen to the answers on the recorder and read the answers from the online form and will look for important ideas. These will be written up in a report, so that other people can read and understand what children think about their experiences in Irish schools, and then, make improvements for the future.

#### **What to do if you have questions?**

If you would like to find out more information about this project, or if you have any questions, please talk to your teacher, or your parent/guardian. We have asked them if you would like to participate, and they said 'yes' but only if you want to. If you do not want to take part, that is perfectly fine too.



## Appendix E Research Protocol document

### NCCA Child Voice II Research Protocol

This document outlines the research protocol each researcher should take when collecting data in schools. By following this protocol, we can ensure consistency in data collection.

#### Before Heading to the School

1. Collect the voice recorders and make sure that they are fully charged
2. Collect your set of Posters
3. Print off a copy of the questions to ask the children

#### Before the Focus Group Discussion

1. When you arrive, ask to meet with the principal for a quick introduction, and then proceed with them to the classroom.
2. Ask the teacher where they will be during the focus group discussion, in case any children decide they want to leave the discussion early. The teacher is also welcome to stay in the class if all children have assented to participate.
3. Ask the teacher for the signed consent/assent, and to ensure that only the children with permission are involved in the focus group discussion. If the school needs to retain the physical copies, please ask them to email you a PDF of the consent/assessment forms.
4. Put the voice recorders on tables around the room, and have the children sit in groups in a circle formation around the recorder.
5. Before you begin, go over the assent sheet with the children to ensure they understand what they are doing, and to make sure they all still want to participate. Remind them they can leave at any time and instruct them on where to go if this happens (i.e. back to the teacher, etc.).
6. Remind the children that it is important for them to speak towards the recorder, so it picks up their voice.
7. Towards the end of the interview, place the posters on each of the tables for questions on pedagogical approaches.

#### During the Focus Group Discussion

1. Start all of the recorders
2. Try to cover each question as applicable to the age group you are interviewing. If you find that the children are getting tired or distracted you can either a) pause for a break or b) focus only on the questions indicated with a \* as these are the central questions we want asked in each section.
3. If the children repeat the same answers over and over, ask them if anyone else has a “different” answer they can think of
4. If you find the children are confused or shy, ask them to discuss the question with the person sitting next to them, and then share the answers.
5. Each focus group should last 45-60 minutes, so be mindful of the time
6. The last remaining set of questions are about the poster...refer to the poster and give them time to study the poster and consider each question.
7. Once the discussion is over, turn off all voice recorders.
8. Be sure to collect all of your posters for use at the next school you attend.

**After the Focus Group**

1. If you have any hard copy consent/assent forms, return these to Joan's office for storage
2. If you have electronic consent/assent forms, upload these to Teams, folder 03 Ethics and Research Instruments/folder "Signed Consent Forms". Once in this folder, create a subfolder with the name of the school, and upload the consent forms.
3. Upload the voice recorder files to the Teams, folder 08 Research Data. Name your file with the name of the School.
4. When you are finished collecting data, return the posters to Joan, and the voice recorders to [enter in IT or other location].

## Appendix F Template to support thematic analysis

Class level	4 <sup>th</sup> class
Context	<p>This is an urban, co-educational, DEIS band 1 school. It has a diverse school population, with a large proportion of the children coming from ethnic minority groups.</p> <p>The whole class group participated and the teacher remained in the room with the children and the researcher.</p>
<p>Summary of responses from</p> <p><b>Key message 1:</b> Building on the successes and strengths associated with the 1999 curriculum while recognising and responding to challenges and changing needs and priorities.</p>	<p>When asked what they like in school, children mentioned the following: Reading, Art, Playing outside with friends, Doing PE, Golden Time, History and going to the 3Arena, which, one child reported, they visit every month. I did not get to probe this further although I intended to. Children also like Music and relaxing. The most liked were Reading, art and playing with friends.</p> <p>When asked what they don't like, several children said homework. In fact, they enjoyed echoing one another on this response.</p> <p>The top three favourite subjects were Art (8), Science (7) and Maths (6) "cos teacher explains it really well" (Maths). Other favourites mentioned were reading (3), history (3) Music (2) and English (2).</p> <p>Subjects not liked included Geography (4), Maths (3), and History (2). One child did not like SESE. Interestingly, Maths was both much liked by some and much disliked by others.</p> <p>When asked about changing needs and priorities, it was clear that children already had ideas about the needs of the citizens of the future. They wanted to learn about business and investing money. Key message 4 elaborates on this point.</p>
<p>Summary of responses from</p> <p><b>Key message 2:</b> Agency and flexibility in schools</p>	<p>When children were asked about choice, One child mentioned they were allowed to design their own character for a story.</p> <p>Once assigned tasks are completed the children have a choice in what to do as an early finisher. They have choices such as doing Art or read something.</p> <p>The children also agreed that if they professed a particular interest in a topic, they would be allowed to pursue that topic. They are clearly used to doing projects and they feel they have agency and choice when working on projects.</p>

	<p>When asked if they could choose what to do after completing an assigned task, some children said they would have to ask the teacher what to do, while others indicated they knew what to do and just went ahead with more work themselves, without asking teacher.</p> <p>Asked if they had a magic wand, what would they choose to do the children said the following – Medical stuff, more Maths, Art and Duolingo (language learning in bite-sized lessons).</p> <p>The children spoke about playing in terms of Maths games and Golden Time on Fridays. They clarified they would continue with these activities if they had a magic wand.</p>
<p>Summary of responses from <b>Key message 3:</b> Connections between preschool, primary and post-primary schools</p>	<p>When asked if they ever thought about post-primary school, the children said yes and thought it would be harder work and the teacher had confirmed this and gave Maths as an example. The children also believed they would have ‘tonnes of homework’ and they were looking forward to having their own lockers. This came up a number of times in different interviews; a preoccupation/fascination with lockers and with changing classes every 40-50 minutes.</p> <p>The children said their teacher advised it better to learn while in primary school so that secondary school would not be too hard. Children need to know their tables so they won’t ‘be stuck’ in secondary school. The children said they chat to their friends about secondary school, mostly discussing how HARD it is going to be and how much more homework they will have.</p> <p>One child said they were worried about ‘allge...allgeb...’ and another child prompted ALGEBRA! Challenges of secondary school, according to the children, include the bigger size of secondary school, how to find your class, how to find your locker and how to make friends.</p>
<p>Summary of responses from <b>Key message 4:</b> Emerging priorities for children’s learning</p>	<p>When asked what, if anything, would they change for the future, children said they wanted to learn about business, taxes, cooking, how to save money for the future and how to invest money! They also mentioned that children should be taught not to litter and that it was important to learn about the human body and medicine.</p> <p>The children were also asked about what they thought was IMPORTANT to learn in school. They named the following: Maths, “because you have to give people the correct change”. History is important because it helps you to know a little bit about places you are visiting.</p> <p>One child said it was important to learn Irish because you could use Irish as an adult when you did not want the children to understand what you were saying!</p>

	<p>Another child said Gaeilge was important because if English didn't exist, we would all be speaking Irish. Another child said English is important; you need to speak it fluently and you need it for reading.</p> <p>In terms of priorities for the future, children felt it was important to learn how to make money, to learn how to save money instead of spending it, and to learn how to become a scientist so that we would know how to preserve fossils. One child said it was important to learn other languages so we can communicate with others.</p> <p>Many of the children in this class thought homework was important. One child said it was important because it gives you a second chance to learn something you were doing in school but "if we get all our work done in school, you shouldn't really have homework". Another child said it was good for practice at stuff. One child said you should only have homework in an area where you need additional support.</p> <p>The children were asked if they learned about climate change and one child answered, "Maybe we did but I have a terrible memory". One child then recalled "We did something about tornadoes".</p>
<p>Summary of responses from <b>Key message 5:</b> Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented</p>	<p>With regards to how children like the day structured, i.e. if they want to learn about many things on the same day or fewer and spend longer on them, children generally felt focusing on one or two subjects a day was better than having to focus on everything because "you get confused when there is too much stuff in your head".</p>
<p>Summary of responses from <b>Key message 6:</b> Supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to learning and teaching</p>	<p>The children were asked about how they typically learn. It is clear they are used to doing projects and like that they can focus on what interests them when doing projects. The children also like the breadth of what can be learned from projects – stuff about other countries, currencies, animals...</p> <p>One child said they liked projects but did not like having to present on their project to the class.</p> <p>Children professed to like learning through play, particularly through games and especially Maths games. One child mentioned liking Golden Time and liked to play because it is "entertaining but it also gives you knowledge". The children learn their tables in a playful way.</p>

When shown a poster with a variety of learning methodologies, one child said, "I think we do everything". This included indoor and outdoor learning, working with iPads, watching films, doing experiments, listening to the teaching while the teacher uses the whiteboard, working alone, working with one other and working in groups, reading independently, learning in other rooms in the school, assessing one's own work and assessing one's friend's work.

Talking about working in pairs, one child said they do not like working in pairs for Maths because it gets too confusing. Another said the class uses other rooms in the school only occasionally. The children also report that they use chrome books and iPads only occasionally and they go outside occasionally too.

They reported loving experiments, playing and doing schoolwork outside.

One child critiqued group work because you can't have your own way and you are held back by others. Or maybe you are working harder than somebody else in the group and that is not fair.

The children claimed they used all forms of assessment, including correcting their own work, correcting one another's work and the teacher correcting the work. They also work on editing their work. Other children said they never appraise one another's work. There was divided opinion on whether the children critiqued one another's work. There were reports, however, of the children helping one another out with the work. One child said that help from another child is not always welcome. "He tries to teach you but sometimes you don't want...all right...thank you".

## Appendix G: 'How you like to learn' poster

## How you like to learn



Working alone at your desk



Working in pairs



Working in groups



When you get to try out what you are learning – experiments, role play, planting etc.



When you do school work outside



When you learn in the classroom



When you learn in other rooms in the school



When the teacher talks and writes on the whiteboard



When you read about something?



When you watch films about something?



Play/Aistear



Working on iPads/computers



I can do this!

I'm getting there.

I need help!

**When you have to correct your own work?**



**When your friend has to correct your work?**



**When you don't understand something and you have to ask your teacher for help**

## Appendix H Task 1 Interview Schedule

### Appendix H Task One Interview schedule (Children)

Key message	Proposed questions	Notes/ Observations
Building on the successes and strengths associated with the 1999 curriculum while recognizing and responding to challenges and changing needs and priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>*Tell me what you like to do in school.</b></li> <li>• <b>*What don't you like to do in school?</b></li> <li>• <b>*What are your top 3 most favorite subjects in school, and why?</b></li> <li>• <b>*Are there any subjects that you don't like?</b></li> <li>• <b>*Do you think what you do in school now should change or be different?</b></li> </ul>	Question about parents/grand parents was/is to establish strength of current curriculum compared to past curricula.
Agency and flexibility in schools	<p><b>Choice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>*Who picks what work you must do in school?</b> <b>*Prompt: do you sometimes pick what work to do?</b></li> <li>• <b>Who picks what topics you learn about?</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Agentic learning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>*If you are interested in a topic, do you get to learn about it in school?</b></li> <li>• <b>*When you have finished work, do you always have to ask the teacher what to do next or can you pick yourself?</b></li> <li>• <b>Do you sometimes get to be the teacher? What happens then?</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Magic wand questions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>*If you had a magic wand, what kind of work would you choose to do in school?</b></li> <li>• <b>If you had a magic wand, what would you do when playing in the classroom (not during break time/on yard)?</b></li> </ul>	
Connections between preschool, primary and post-primary schools	<b>Connection to preschool (junior to third)</b>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>*Do you do activities or things here in (big) school that you did in play school? Are they the same or different? How?</b></li> <li>• <b>*When you were in play school did you ever talk about big school with your teacher?</b></li> <li>• Is there something you remember that you liked to do in play school that you would still like to do in primary school?</li> </ul> <p><b>Connection to post-primary/secondary (fourth to sixth)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>*Does your teacher ever talk to you about secondary school and what it might be like? What types of things have they discussed with you?</b></li> <li>• <b>*Do you talk to friends about what secondary school will be like? What do you think it will be like?</b></li> <li>• <b>*Do you feel you are well-prepared to start secondary school? Why or why not?</b></li> <li>• What are you most looking forward to about secondary school?</li> <li>• Is there anything that concerns or worries you about going to secondary school?</li> </ul>	
Emerging priorities for children's learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>*What do you think is important to learn about?</b></li> <li>• <b>*Do you learn about some things that you think are not important to learn about?</b></li> <li>• <b>*What do you think it will be important for new children in the future to learn about?</b></li> <li>• <b>*Are there topics or things you think are important to learn about that you do not learn about in school?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Prompt: Do you sometimes watch the news? Do you hear about things in the news that you think are important to learn about? Do you learn about these things at the moment?</li> <li>○ Prompt: Do you sometimes hear adults talk about things that you think are important to learn about?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented	<p><b>Junior classes: (junior-2<sup>nd</sup>)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>*How do you learn in school? What activities/work do you do?</b></li> <li>• <b>*Do you play in the classroom? Do you learn things when you are playing? Do you think it is helpful to try to learn things when you play?</b></li> <li>• Do you like to learn many different things on the same day (e.g. math, Irish, English, art) or do you prefer to just learn a few things on the same day and spend more time learning these things?</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you like to learn about different topics at the same time or do you prefer to learn about one topic and learn about that topic in all areas/subjects (Irish, art, history, geography, math)? (Skip for the infant classes)</li> <li>• <b>*What do you think about homework? Is it important to have homework to learn?</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Senior classes: (3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>*What are some of the ways that you typically learn in school now?</b></li> <li>• <b>*Is there anything you would change about the ways you learn now in school?</b></li> <li>• <b>*Is there anything you would change about the topics and subjects you study in school?</b></li> <li>• In what different ways do you do your work in school?</li> <li>• Do you do projects in school? Do you like this way of working? Is it a helpful way to learn? Why or why not?</li> <li>• Do you do any work in books? Do you find this helpful?</li> <li>• Do you like to learn many different things on the same day (e.g. maths, Irish, English, art) or do you prefer to just learn a few things on the same day and spend more time learning these things?</li> <li>• <b>*Do you think play is an important way to learn in the classroom? Do you use games to learn? Do you get to learn through play?</b></li> <li>• Do you get assigned homework to do? If so, what types of work and activities are assigned?</li> <li>• <b>*What do you think about homework? Is it important to have homework to learn? Is there anything you would change about it?</b></li> </ul>	
<p>Supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to learning and teaching</p>	<p>Using, as a prompt, a high-quality poster with images of children working in diverse ways, (as per worksheet in previous NCCA consultation with children, 2022), have a conversation with children about how they like to work, e.g. alone, with another child/children, with the teacher, through an activity, using technology, using the outdoor environment.</p> <p><b>Guiding questions for the Posters:</b></p> <p>Researcher Says: “Look at each picture, they are all different ways of learning. (Then, explain what is in each picture)”.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>*Do you get to do all these things?</b></li> <li>• <b>*Are there some of these things you don’t get to do?</b></li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pick out the ones you like.</li> <li>• <b>*Pick out the ones you don't like. Why do you/do you not like these?</b></li> </ul> <p>Researcher Says: "Look at the pictures again. The last ones show different ways of finding out whether your work is okay or correct."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>*Which of these do you do in class?</b></li> <li>• <b>*Are there any you don't do?</b></li> <li>• <b>*How do you find out if the work you do is okay/correct?</b></li> <li>• Do you ever get to talk to your friends about how to do the work better?</li> <li>• Do you like when you have to work with your friends to make your work better?</li> </ul>	
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## Appendix I: How Questions were designed for the Case Studies.

### The following three documents were used:

1. The tender document from NCCA (NCCA, Request for Tender, p. 5)

Each case-study research may include the following:

- Children’s experiences of learning
- Children’s experiences of playful and active learning
- Children’s experiences of assessment (intuitive, planned interactions and assessment events)
- Role of the teacher
- Role of the indoor and outdoor learning environments
- Role of technology.

2. The 5 curriculum specifications in The New Primary Curriculum Framework: Language, STEM, Wellbeing, Arts Education and Social and Environmental Education (SEE)

3. The Principles of Learning, Teaching & Assessment (Dept of Ed., 2023, p. 6). Questions on pedagogy including relationships/working with others, role of teacher, Funds of knowledge, Inclusion and Diversity, Assessment, Indoor and Outdoor environment

**Note 1:** Children answered questions in the Case Studies based on their current experience of curriculum, i.e. the Primary School Curriculum (1999).

**Note 2:** Designing and making (1999 Curriculum) is akin to Engineering Education (Primary Curriculum Framework, 2023). Technology is mentioned in the PSC (1999) as Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and refers mostly to the use of ICT in presenting children’s work. It was explained to children that when we talk about designing and making materials, we can also call that engineering.

### Sample Questions from the Case Study on Science, Technology and Engineering Education

1. What are some of the benefits of studying Science, Technology (ICT in PSC) and Engineering Education (designing and making in PSC)

#### Pedagogy & Learning Environments

2. What are some of the topics you’ve learned about this year in relation to STE?
3. Of Science, Technology and Designing and Making, which do you enjoy and why?
4. Of Science, Technology and Designing and Making, are there any you do not enjoy, and why?
5. How do you typically learn in Science? In Technology? In Engineering?

6. Do you ever get to engage in hands-on learning? If yes, can you give some examples?
7. Do you ever learn through “play” in STE?
8. Do you ever get to explore or investigate STE topics? Explain.
9. Have you ever made any “discoveries” in STE? Explain.
10. Do you ever get to do projects in STE? Do you ever get to present your projects?
11. Do you ever get the opportunity to investigate topics that matter/are important in your daily lives?
12. Do you ever get to use your imagination when studying STE? If yes, can you give me some examples?

#### *Inclusive Education & Diversity*

13. Do you ever get the opportunity to choose what you learn about in STE?
14. Do you ever get the opportunity to choose how you learn in STE?
15. What are your preferences for how you learn? What do you enjoy most?
16. Do you ever get to lead discussions or learning in STE classes?
17. How challenging is Science? Technology? Engineering/Designing and Making stuff?

#### *Engagement & Participation*

18. Do you ever get to work together in pairs or groups within STE?

#### *Partnerships & Relationships*

19. Do you ever have guest speakers talk to the class about STE topics? If so, can you give me a few examples, and what they spoke about?
20. Have you ever worked on a project with another school? With people working in STE?
21. Do you ever get to work or investigate STE topics with children from other classes?

*Assessment & Progression*

22. Tell me about how your teacher finds out what you know or have learned in STE?
23. Do you ever get to create portfolios, or use photography to show what you know?
24. Do you ever get to assess yourself?
25. Do you ever get to comment on your friend's work?

*Transitions & Continuity*

26. For younger children: In Aistear, "Exploring and Thinking" was an important way to learn. Now that you're in primary school, do you still learn through Exploring and Thinking? If so, can you give me some examples?
27. Do you feel you are prepared to study STE as you move into the older classes in primary school? Are there any areas in Science, Technology or Making and Designing/Engineering that you'd like to improve in?
28. For older children: Do you think that your current STE studies are going to be useful in secondary school? What are your thoughts about the following subjects that you might study in secondary school: Biology, Physics, Chemistry, Engineering, and Technology?
29. Do you feel prepared to study these subjects in secondary school? Why or why not? Are there any areas in Science, Technology or Engineering that you'd like to improve in?
30. Now that you've been studying STE, do you see yourself as a scientist, engineer, or technologist (someone who uses technology)? Why or why not?
31. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your experience of learning STE in school?