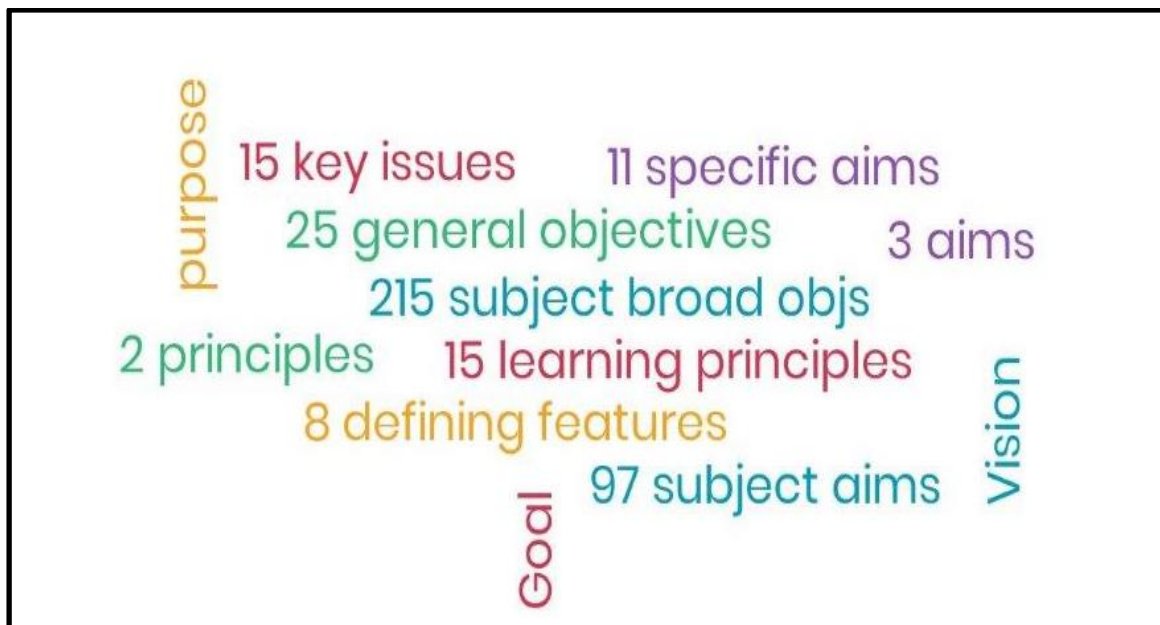# Towards an overview of a Redeveloped Primary School Curriculum: Learning from the past, learning from others

Dr. Thomas Walsh, National University of Ireland, Maynooth

NCCA
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

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1. Introduction

The intricacy of developing national curricula is growing exponentially in an ever globalised, complex and uncertain world. Curriculum decisions are influenced by a multiplicity of factors, including historical, ideological, cultural, political, economic, theoretical and practical considerations (Livingston, Hayward, Higgins and Wyse, 2015). Curriculum development essentially involves making decisions around what are considered to be the most important values and purposes for inclusion from the culture of a society (Lawton, 1989) and then creating an alignment between the aims, content, pedagogy and assessment. The identification of these priorities and values is more challenging and contentious in a diverse and globalised world, where there are many competing voices articulating a view on the purposes of education. The curriculum is a fundamentally important document (or series of documents) as it is a tool to bring about change and innovation in schools by offering new directions in terms of purpose, content, pedagogy and assessment. The quality and clarity of the written documentation is of paramount importance as it is the key artefact that communicates the curriculum to teachers, most of whom do not have a direct involvement in its development (Castro Superfine, Marshall and Kelso, 2015).

The purpose of this paper is to analyse critically the Introduction to the 1999 *Primary School Curriculum* (hereafter referred to as the Introduction) (Government of Ireland, 1999a). It serves to examine the extent to which the Introduction succeeded in presenting the key elements[1] of the curriculum. It is timely in light of the work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in redeveloping the primary curriculum and responds, in part at least, to the request in the recent consultation on time and structure in schools to signposting "…a clear articulation of the aims, principles and key theories of learning underpinning a redeveloped curriculum" (NCCA, 2018:10). Specifically this paper will focus on examining the following key questions:

- Does the Introduction provide a concise set of clearly articulated and understandable curriculum aims, objectives and principles?
- Are there notable aspects, positive or negative, in the design of the Introduction?
- Are there elements that are missing from the Introduction? Are there aspects included that are not necessary or would best be located elsewhere?

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[1] Elements is used in this paper as a collective term to denote the key aspects of the curriculum such as the purpose, philosophy, principles and aims. Please see Appendix 4 for an overview of a range of terminology collectively referred to here as 'elements'.

- How successfully does the Introduction delineate the central purpose and structure of the curriculum?
- Does the Introduction provide a practical foundation for teaching and learning in primary schools?
- How might a redeveloped Introduction be more teacher friendly, practical and ultimately more effective in helping teachers to work with the curriculum? Are there international examples that might guide our thinking?

In light of the answers to these questions, this paper further endeavours to provide guidance on the following two questions:

- What are the key elements that should be included in the revised Overview of the redeveloped primary school curriculum (subsequently referred to as the Overview)?
- How should these elements be presented to ensure that they are informative, accessible and user-friendly?

The main focus of this paper is the 89-page Introduction to the 1999 curriculum which served to underpin the wider suite of curriculum documents. This paper also draws on national and international research to inform its arguments. It is hoped that the paper, and the discussion it generates, will support the development of a revised Overview to the redeveloped primary school curriculum. The remainder of this paper is presented in the following format:

- **Section 2**: An analysis of the content and structure of the Introduction to the 1999 curriculum
- **Section 3**: An examination of recent international trends in terms of curriculum development
- **Section 4**: Learning from international examples of curriculum development
- **Section 5**: Implications for the design and development of a revised Overview for the redeveloped primary school curriculum.

2. Content and Structure of the Introduction to the 1999 Curriculum
2.1 Introduction and Context
The publication of the revised *Primary School Curriculum* 1999 marked the culmination of a decade of curriculum development by a broad range of stakeholders, co-ordinated by the NCCA. It built on

the principles and philosophy of the preceding curriculum (Department of Education, 1971) and on the deliberations of the *Review Body on the Primary Curriculum* (RBPC) (RBPC, 1990). The RBPC endorsed the underlying philosophy and principles of the 1971 curriculum but asserted it required "…revision and re-formulation in its aims, scope and content…." (RBPC, 1990:97). A number of commentators (Coolahan, 1981; Mulcahy, 1981; Sugrue, 2004; Gleeson, 2010; Walsh, 2012) have noted the historical absence of a theoretical underpinning or explicit aims regarding the purpose of education within primary and post-primary curricula. The RBPC provided a list of specific aims and general objectives for the curriculum and advocated the development of specific objectives for the curriculum. The NCCA began the process of reviewing the curriculum in November 1991. Specialist subject committees for each of the six areas of the curriculum were formed as well as a number of thematic committees that looked at aspects such as assessment, co-ordination and implementation. Interestingly, two separate committees were established for each curriculum area: one that developed the curriculum for junior infants to second class and one that developed the curriculum from third to sixth class.

The resulting curriculum was published in 1999 in an attractive format of 23 full-colour handbooks. This comprises two booklets for each of the 11 subjects (one documenting the curriculum content and the other providing teacher guidelines) and the Introduction. Collectively, the 23 handbooks comprise 2,842 pages of documentation (available at: http://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary). This represents an extensive 'physical face' to the curriculum for teachers (as termed by the Cambridge Primary Review) (Alexander and Flutter, 2009:6). Meanwhile, this initial suite of curriculum documents has been joined by a myriad of policy documents, curricular initiatives, national strategies, resource packs, guidelines and other supports for teachers (see NCCA, 2018:10). The roll out and mediation of the curriculum was supported by the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) and the School Development Planning Support service (SDPS) over an extended timeframe, mirroring the phased introduction of the various curriculum subjects.

2.2 Overview of the Primary School Curriculum Introduction

The Introduction comprises 89 pages and is set out over six chapters. This section delineates the key elements included in the chapters[2] and these are summarised in Figure 1.

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[2] Please note the 97 subject aims and 215 subject broad objectives are delineated in the individual subject handbooks.
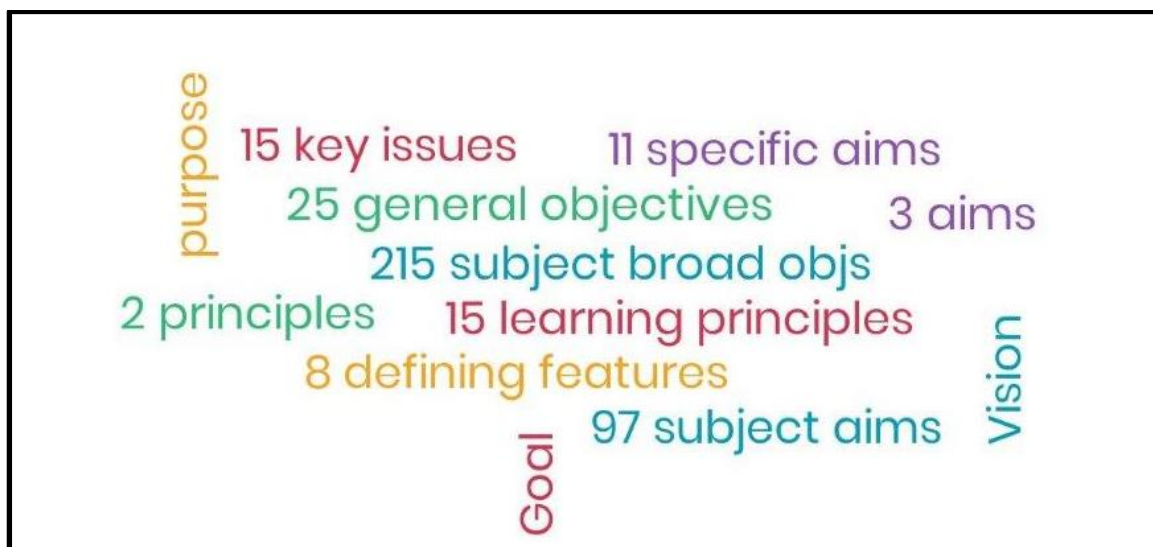
Figure 1: Elements of the Introduction and Subject Handbooks (Government of Ireland, 1999b)

Chapter 1 begins by documenting the aims, principles and features of the curriculum. However, while not mentioned in the chapter heading, the first subheading introduces a **vision** for primary education comprised of three elements.[3] The chapter then moves on to document the three **general aims** of education and the principles of the curriculum. These general aims and principles are largely a reframing of those in the 1971 curriculum. For example, three of the pedagogical principles from the 1971 curriculum are re-categorised and explicated as 15 **learning principles.** While not mentioned in the chapter title, 14 **key issues** in Irish education that were the subject of policy debate in the 1990s are introduced. Chapter 1 concludes with eight **defining features** of the curriculum which serve to underpin the aims and principles of each individual curriculum area as expressed in the subject handbooks.

Each of the 15 learning principles is further detailed in Chapter 2, with an extended focus on the final learning principle, *assessment*. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to delineating the role of the school, principal, teachers, parents, management and the local community in supporting the child's learning. Chapter 3, '*Key issues in primary education*' provides further explication on the 14 key issues introduced in Chapter 1, while an additional issue, Science Education, is added. Chapter 4 proceeds to list and explicate a set of 11 **specific aims** and a more detailed set of 25 **general**

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[3] Further detail on each of the bolded elements is documented in Appendix 1.

objectives for the curriculum. Chapter 5, '*Curriculum areas*', provides an informative guide to the structure of the curriculum, including the curriculum areas and subjects.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to '*Curriculum implementation in the school*' and discusses the processes and pacing of change. The chapter concludes with an overview of time allocation and a table charting the suggested minimum weekly time framework. Surprisingly, it is in the Conclusion that the overall purpose of the curriculum is articulated:

> The overall purpose of the Primary School Curriculum is to enhance the quality of children's learning and to provide them with a developmental experience that is relevant to their present and future needs. These goals will only be achieved if the philosophy, aims and objectives of the curriculum are realised in its implementation (Government of Ireland, 1999a:75).

Moreover, the 'goals' or 'philosophy' mentioned above are not clearly articulated as one of the key elements in the Introduction.

2.3 Individual Handbooks of the Curriculum

In addition to the overall aims and objectives set out for the curriculum in the Introduction, each of the 11 subject areas also has an introduction (providing a philosophical and educational rationale for the subject), a set of aims and a list of broad objectives. Moreover, aims and objectives are also included for the overarching curriculum areas in addition to the individual subjects. Appendix 2 charts the scope and extent of these aims and objectives. Collectively, the six curricular areas and 11 subjects are underpinned by 97 aims and 215 broad objectives.

2.4 Successes and Shortcomings of the Introduction
Noteworthy features

There is much to praise in the presentation and content of the Introduction. It brings together a range of elements for teachers in order to provide a framework and overview of the subject-based curriculum in a complex educational landscape. This was a challenging endeavour considering the scope and breadth of the curriculum and the manner in which it was devised by various committees. It built on the preceding curriculum to ensure continuity and it comprehensively delineated a wide range of elements that articulate the vision, aims, principles and features of the curriculum. Teacher

professionalism is lauded in the Introduction and multiple references are made to the critical role of the teacher in making professional judgements regarding curriculum content, the sequencing of learning, methodologies and assessment processes. It also clearly outlined the structure of the curriculum for teachers and the elements included in each of the subject handbooks.

Inclusivity over clarity

However, it is its very inclusive and comprehensive nature that also represents one of its key shortcomings. One is reminded of the image David Tuohy shares in his book on school culture about teachers juggling the role of being settlers (and holding on to the elements of the past) and nomads (incorporating new elements as priorities and professional practice change and develop). As he concludes:

> In the change process in education, schools have tried to mix the roles of settlers and nomads. They have kept all the possessions of the past and also tried to head out for new pastures. The lack of prioritization has meant that teachers have taken on more and more roles and burdens, and shed none of the older ones (Tuohy, 1999:121).

By including so many elements in the curriculum (see Figure 1 and Appendix 1) and often repeating the detail of these elements with different emphases throughout the six chapters, the core messages in terms of the purpose and aims of the curriculum become obscured and diluted for teachers in the Introduction. It is difficult to be clear on the central purpose or aims of a curriculum in the midst of such an array of elements, not to mention the additional aims and objectives listed in each of the subject handbooks (see Appendix 2). In the attempt to be inclusive and to incorporate the views of all explicitly, there is a temptation to create definitive and exhaustive lists, forcing teachers to juggle the role of settlers and nomads. Moreover, the alignment and relationship between these various elements is difficult to determine from the Introduction. In addition to the elements bolded above, various other terms are introduced throughout the Introduction such as 'purpose', 'philosophy' and 'goal'. Indeed, the myriad of elements included can cause tensions as they interact with one another. For example, the many competing demands of the aims and objectives challenge the espoused child-centred nature of the curriculum as children are charted through the various curriculum objectives and experiences that appear to be determined outside their locus of control. Another tension rests in the asserted autonomy afforded to teachers in the Introduction followed by a curriculum content that is documented in significant detail.

While implicit, the actual philosophy of the curriculum is not explicitly articulated in the Introduction. It is weak also on articulating the ideological position, educational theory (or the theoretical frame) and research that underpins the curriculum decisions evident (Irwin, 2018). Indeed, there is no list of references or a bibliography in the Introduction to reflect the theoretical or research base. This is in spite of the fact that many consultations with teachers using the curriculum have reported that it presents to them as a theoretical rather than a practical framework (NCCA, 2008). Moreover, there is no glossary of terms to define or clarify the meaning of the terminology, much of it new to teachers, that is used in introducing the curriculum. Indeed, the term 'curriculum' is not defined in the Introduction. As Sugrue (2004:196) concludes, "…the multiplicity of terms – vision, aims, principles (pedagogical, curricular and learning), features, issues, general aims, specific aims, general objectives, all of which are used without the benefit of a glossary or definition – tend to confuse rather than to clarify." Further evidence of this lack of clarity is apparent in the PCSP presentation of the aforementioned 15 key issues which were characterised as 'what we value' in the education system (http://ppds.pdst.ie/pcsparchive/intro.php).

Curriculum alignment and implementation

While reference is made to transitions and to early childhood education (there was no curriculum framework for early childhood education in 1999) within the Key Issues, there is little explicit effort to ensure alignment of the aims and purpose of education with the post-primary level. Moreover, there is no clear explication of the context and rationale for curriculum change in the Introduction or of the process by which it was developed.

There is scope to develop and extend pedagogical guidance to teachers on how to use the curriculum to support teaching and learning in their classrooms in the chapter on curriculum implementation. As Sugrue (2004) states, despite the fact the curriculum was largely developed by teachers, teaching and professional practice were largely invisible and silent discourses within the documentation. While pedagogical guidance is provided for each individual subject around content selection, methods, integration, assessment and differentiation within the Teacher Guidelines, there is no big picture overview or explicit pedagogical guidance in the Introduction that relay what to teach, why or how. Moreover, its segmentation for each subject results in much repetition and increases the 'physical; face' of the curriculum. Teachers also note the lack of pedagogical guidance in curriculum reviews (NCCA, 2005; 2008) as well as in the most recent consultation on curriculum

structure and time (NCCA, 2018). The absence of a thorough explication of models of integration and how they might be planned for and enacted in the Introduction reduced the potential for meaningful integration.

Curriculum or system aims?

It is also important to distinguish in the Introduction between the aims of the curriculum (a concept that should be clearly defined) and the aims of the education system. Is the 'curriculum' and 'primary education' the same thing? The vision, general aims and key issues in the Introduction explicitly relate to primary education as opposed to the primary curriculum. However, the specific aims and general objectives relate directly to the curriculum. Should there be a distinction between the aims of primary education and the aims of the curriculum? Are there other documents that express aims for the wider education system (e.g., *Action Plan for Education* [DES, 2016])?

It is questionable if a chapter entitled 'Key issues in primary education' should be included in a printed Introduction to the curriculum. These issues change on an ongoing basis and result in the curriculum documentation not being current. Moreover, such issues are often addressed in guidelines and strategies that are produced on an ongoing basis by the Department of Education and Skills (DES), NCCA and other educational agencies.

Considerations for the development of a revised Overview to the redeveloped curriculum are outlined in Section 5.1.

3. International Trends in Curriculum Development

3.1 Trends in Curriculum Development

Priestley and Biesta (2013) note three trends in modern day curriculum development: a return to constructivist and child-centred approaches, an emphasis on the teacher as a central agent in curriculum development, and the formulation of curricula in terms of competences and capacities. There is often a tension in terms of the recent trends around curriculum development between the autonomy proffered to teachers as curriculum developers and the control and accountability mechanisms of the wider system (Biesta and Priestley, 2013; Conway and Murphy, 2013). It is also

evident that the increasingly economic focus of many curricula has led to a narrowing of curriculum aims and purpose.

There is now a greater acceptance of curriculum as a social construction that is continuously negotiated and re-negotiated at a policy and practice level by a range of partners (Elliott 1998; Goodson 1998). This change in emphasis in the Irish context, looking at the curriculum as something that is constantly evolving, adapting and developing, requires something new and different from teachers who have historically been conceptualised as 'implementers' of curriculum policy (Walsh, 2016; Lynch, McCormack and Hennessy, 2017).

Increasingly there is a trend to frame curriculum content in terms of competencies, a development promoted by supranational and transnational organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union. Moreover, the trend of policy sharing and borrowing has led to a level of uniformity and standardisation between curricula across the world (Sahlberg, 2011), where international ideas are adopted as national goals. Biesta and Priestley (2013:36) argue:

> …that to think of the purposes of education in terms of capacities, competencies or capabilities is part of a wider trend in curriculum policy and practice where the purposes of education are no longer articulated in terms of what students should *learn* but in terms of what they should *become*.

3.2 Purpose and Aims in Curricula

Research indicates that there is widespread support in the literature for the inclusion of key elements such as purpose, aims and principles in national curricula. Tyler (2013), Reiss and White (2014) and Wyse, Hayward, Livingston and Higgins (2014) argue that curricula should begin with aims rather than subjects and that these should be used to generate the structure, content and pedagogy of the curriculum. Kelly (2004) advocates that the curriculum developers should place their energies on articulating the ideological position and broad principles rather than defining specific content. The interpretation of these principles, and how they apply to particular schools and students, is then left to the professional discretion of teachers. This allows a shift in thinking about the 'curriculum as content' and 'education as transmission' to the 'curriculum as process' and 'education as development'. All other aspects of the curriculum, including the content, are seen as subservient to these aims and purpose. As Kelly (2004:25) states:

> If we accept that curriculum planning must begin with statements about the purposes we hope to attain or the principles upon which our practice is to be based, all the decisions about the content of our curriculum must be subsidiary to those prior choices.

This view was also expressed in the NCCA consultation process on curriculum time and structure (NCCA, 2018:60) when it was stated by one contributor that "…the structure should follow a deep interrogation of vision, purpose, values and philosophy, not determine them."

The UNESCO International Bureau of Education (2013:2) summarises the purpose of the curriculum to embody "…a society's educational aims and purposes. It encapsulates what learners should learn, why, when and how." Ornsteuin and Hunkins (2018) assert that curriculum designers must make explicit their philosophical, social and political views of society as to neglect these bigger questions results in curricula with limited or confused rationales. They argue that the aims of a curriculum provide direction and reflect the value judgements of a society. Having explicit aims and purpose in the curriculum provides a rationale for the inclusion or exclusion of particular elements in a transparent manner (Biesta and Priestley, 2013).

Reid (2005) proposes a number of criteria for a national curriculum in the Australian context, including the need for a clearly articulated rationale, purpose and philosophical reference points; a theorised and articulated view of curriculum; a strong research and conceptual base and a process that engages the professional community in the conceptual phases. Brennan (2011), writing also in the Australian context, criticises the National Curriculum for resembling the characteristics of a syllabus rather than those of a curriculum. She asserts the need for "…clear and articulate principles as the basis for proposals and justification…" rather than just the specification of content and its sequence from year to year (Brennan, 2011:266). This articulation of purpose and aims would support teachers to make decisions around knowledge selection, assessment modes and appropriate pedagogies. Kelly (2004) also asserts the distinction between a syllabus and a curriculum: while the syllabus will list the content and knowledge, a curriculum must be framed within an overall rationale and purpose of education. As he states:

> Any definition of curriculum, if it is to be practically effective and productive, must offer much more than a statement about the knowledge-content or merely the subjects which schooling is to 'teach' or transmit or 'deliver'. It must go far beyond this to an explanation, and indeed a justification, of the purposes of such transmission and an exploration of the

effects that exposure to such knowledge and such subjects is likely to have, or is intended to have, on its recipients… (Kelly, 2004:4)

In a cross-national study of nine jurisdictions, Creese, Gonzalez and Isaacs (2016) report that countries considered to have high performing education systems had clear and well thought through aims, principles and goals of education. This allowed standards to be maintained while still allowing for local interpretation. As they stated:

> …the goals of the education system varied in detail but were all clear and explicitly stated, which may support the idea that the more explicit a system is about its underlying principles and objectives, the more coherent a curriculum that reflects those aims can be (Creese et al., 2016:8).

Bergqvist and Bergqvist (2017) assert the importance of clarity in the written curriculum in conveying reforms or shifts in emphases to teachers. They cite numerous examples of changes not being understood or accommodated by teachers when there was an absence of clarity. They propose that curriculum documents should be accompanied by definitions, explanations, descriptions and examples to ensure clarity of communication. Priestley and Sinnema (2014), undertaking an analysis of the positioning of knowledge in the Scottish and New Zealand curricula, reported inconsistencies in the language and terminology used within each curriculum (e.g., knowledge, skills, understanding, competencies, capabilities). They argue that these mixed messages and "…inconsistencies create a subtle, but pervasive sense of confusion about the purpose of curriculum…" for teachers (Priestley and Sinnema, 2014:66).

4. International Examples of Curriculum Development and Presentation

As part of the review of international trends in curriculum development, the curricula in four jurisdictions were reviewed to elicit learning for the Irish context: Scotland (Scottish Government, 2009); New Zealand (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007); Republic of Maldives (National Institute of Education, 2014) and Finland (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). These countries were chosen as they had undertaken curriculum redevelopment in the last decade, curriculum materials were available in English and they represented a broad geographical spread.

The main focus was on their approach to articulating the aims and purposes of the curriculum and on how the curriculum as an artefact is presented and shared with teachers. This section distils key learning for the Irish context in terms of curriculum development and presentation. Schematic overviews of the curricula are included in Appendix 3 for Scotland, New Zealand and the Republic of Maldives. No schematic overview is available for Finland.

4.1 Key Characteristics of International Practice: Learning for the Redeveloped Curriculum in Ireland

- A strong focus was placed on the context and rationale for curriculum change and how this related to the wider educational and legislative context.

- There was evidence in all countries of strong consultation with education stakeholders in the development of curricula.

- The countries prepared curriculum frameworks rather than prescribed curricula, allowing flexibility in interpretation and enactment at a school level. Furthermore, these curricula related to the entire age range of compulsory education rather than being segmented for the various sectors.

- Though the language varied across countries, curricula were underpinned by an articulation of their purposes, values, aims and principles.[4] Curricula placed importance on alignment between the various elements included.

- A strong research and theoretical base to underpin curriculum decisions was evident. In New Zealand, for example, 'packages' of documents and materials are available which provide a rationale, theoretical underpinning and research basis for the various elements included in the curriculum (see http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Principles). This facilitated clarity in the presentation of the key elements while also ensuring access to further supporting materials if required.

- The way in which and the degree of clarity achieved in introducing and defining the elements of curricula varied:
  - The Scottish curriculum introduces a range of elements but these were not always included or referred to consistently within the narrative or schematic overview. Moreover, their relationship or alignment to one another is unclear.

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[4] See Appendix 3 for an overview of terminology used in Scotland, New Zealand and the Maldives. For a more general list of the terminology used regarding the purpose of the curriculum in both national and international curricula, see Appendix 4.

- The New Zealand curriculum offers clear definitions of the various elements of the curriculum and the distinction between them.
- The curriculum for the Maldives includes a glossary of terms for many of the elements used.

- Developing pupils' competences, competencies or capacities were integral elements of the curricula in all four countries reviewed (see Appendix 3 for further detail).

- There was a strong emphasis on providing guidance and support for teachers in relation to effective pedagogies for delivering the curriculum and to promote student learning.

- Schematic overviews were provided in three of the curricula reviewed and these provided a useful visual overview of the elements of the curriculum and their relationship to one another.

- Some countries have revisited curriculum elements to ensure they are current and to respond to challenges regarding clarity and use (e.g., Education Scotland, 2016).

- Work is currently underway on developing an eCurriculum to enhance the functionality of the Finnish curriculum as a digital tool (Kauooinen, 2016).

The implications of this international learning for the design and development of a revised Overview for the redeveloped primary school curriculum are explored in Section 5.

5. Conclusion: Implication for the Design and Development of a Revised Overview for the Redeveloped Primary Curriculum

This section brings together the key issues and insights emerging from the national and international review in this paper for the framing of a revised Overview for the redeveloped primary school curriculum. We are fortunate to have a strong basis from which to begin this work having learned much from the successes and shortcomings of the 1999 curriculum. The extensive partnership and consultative structures within the education system will be instrumental in harnessing the views and expertise of key stakeholders. As Vitikka, Krokfors and Hurmerinta (2012:8) assert:

> A national curriculum in its essence is a means of social and cultural reproduction (Lundgren, 2006) and as such cannot be taken out of the national context it is applied to. Each country has its own cultural identity, value system and educational content that are deemed valuable, even irreplaceable. This cultural content is transferred to the next generation as a

self-evident part of education. National curricula both pass on this cultural knowledge and reinvent it (Vitikka et al., 2012:8).

The report on the consultative process around curriculum structure and time in schools (NCCA, 2018) articulates the demand and necessity for clarity around the purpose, aims, values and principles of education. It asserts the view that the overarching priorities provide an opportunity to identify what it is the curriculum as a whole aims to do for children, advocating an emphasis on developing pupils' skills, competencies, dispositions, knowledge, values and attitudes.

Less is more

The time has come to develop a new and contemporary Overview that underpins and informs the entire primary school curriculum. It should be clear, succinct and accessible, articulating the key elements of the curriculum and providing pedagogical guidance to teachers. Consideration should be given as to its presentation to ensure it is easily read and easily updated. As stated by Priestley and Sinnema (2014:56) in the New Zealand context, there should be an emphasis on reducing, refining and clarifying the curriculum. The temptation to keep adding without removing must be avoided. Sometimes less is more and the synthesising and streamlining of lengthy lists into a smaller number of elements could produce a more succinct and sharper underpinning to the curriculum without losing much of the current essence.

Clarity of purpose, aims and principles

Central to the revised Overview must be an articulation of the purpose, aims and principles[5] of the curriculum in Ireland. The inclusion of these elements will distinguish the curriculum from a syllabus, where the primary focus is on subject content. Being clear about this central purpose is imperative to ensure that all other elements of the curriculum, including the content, become subservient to this fundamental driver. Much work has been undertaken by the NCCA to date on reframing primary curriculum aims and principles in its consultative process on *Priorities for Primary Education* (NCCA, 2012). From the 980 responses received, six priorities with some key ideas under each were identified for primary education (see Table 1). Responses focused on life skills and dispositions more than content and called for greater clarity in terms of aims and outcomes. Indeed, the way in which children's learning and development is understood has evolved significantly since 1999, such as a

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[5] These three terms are drawn from a range of possible elements that could be used to frame the underpinning of the curriculum. See Appendix 4 for a broader range of possible terms.

greater focus on cross disciplinary competences, skills, dispositions, attitudes and values. These are much more evident in the elements of the *Aistear* curriculum framework for early childhood education (NCCA, 2009b) and in the more recent Framework for Junior Cycle (DES, 2015).

Primary priorities	Early childhood themes	Junior cycle key skills	Senior cycle key skills
Develop thinking, learning and life skills	Exploring and thinking	Managing information and thinking	Critical and creative thinking
		Being creative	Information processing
Communicate well	Communicating	Communicating	Communicating
Be well	Well-being	Staying well	Being personally effective
Engage in learning	Identity and belonging	Managing myself	
Have a strong sense of identity and belonging		Working with others	Working with others

Table 1: Primary Priorities, Early Childhood Themes, Junior Cycle Key Skills and Senior Cycle Key Skills (NCCA, 2012:46)

A further rationale for being clear about the purposes and aims of the curriculum is that if teachers are expected to use national guidance to frame their own content, there is a need for clarity about the overall purposes and aims so that there is curriculum alignment. In the absence of clarity, there could be variability in the learning outcomes and experiences of students that do not align with the overall aims of the curriculum and which could lead to inequity or issues with standards, breadth, balance and depth in the curriculum. As Brennan (2011:270) states:

> Without a robust conceptual base, teachers will not be able to make proposals that are coherent and that allow a rich curriculum across subjects to be enacted with and for each student.

This clarity in the curriculum is particularly important in the Irish context where there are few regional structures or mediators between national structures and individual schools and teachers.

Curriculum development and alignment

To determine and establish ownership of the key elements of the curriculum and to ensure they are aligned to the culture and context of Ireland, a further consultative process should be undertaken to

build on the work to date and to ensure that the resultant purpose, aims and principles articulate this shared understanding. Engaging the professional community, particularly teachers, in the conceptual design of the curriculum will enhance ownership of decisions and rightly engage teachers as curriculum designers rather than curriculum implementers. Consultation has its part to play but as Brennan (2011) warns, design by committee can also run the risk of watering down the key messages and the conceptual basis for these. Ultimately the NCCA must lead this process to ensure the result is not an unwieldy list of elements that say everything but ultimately say nothing. We must not be afraid to prioritise for inclusion the key issues for Ireland and not feel compelled to follow international standardised trends. Once formulated, these must become the kernel of the curriculum and inform all other aspects to ensure curriculum coherence and to justify at a national and school level the decisions taken around aspects included or excluded from the curriculum.

Theoretical underpinning

The purpose and aims of the curriculum must be underpinned by a strong theoretical, conceptual and research basis. However, the detail of this theoretical, conceptual and research basis does not need to be included in the Overview. It could be housed in background research papers (underpinning research papers as used in the development of *Aistear* [NCCA, 2009a]) that are referenced and that teachers can consult if they wish to understand further the rationale for inclusion of certain elements in the curriculum. In essence, the Overview needs to represent the tip of the iceberg, the visible aspects that can be plumbed to further depths if necessary.

Teacher professionalism

Ireland is fortunate in international terms to have high calibre entrants to initial teacher education (ITE) (DES, 2012) and to have comprehensive and lengthy ITE programmes. Significant progress has also been achieved in developing the continuum of teacher education at induction (Droichead) and continuing professional development (CPD) (Cosán) levels. Collectively, these place a strong emphasis on teacher reflection and teacher as researcher. It is ironic that as teachers become more educated and professional, the level of prescription and detail in terms of the work that they do is increasing rather than decreasing. Cognisance must be taken that not every aspect needs to be spelled out in detail in the Overview and that linked materials and guidance within individual curriculum areas/subjects can be used for further explication. There are certain elements that can be taken as understood and need little explication or unpacking. The challenge will be to strike an

appropriate balance between providing enough detail to be meaningful but not so detailed as to obscure the bigger picture. Links to further material, resources and pedagogical advice should be embedded within the overview so that it can be accessed as needs arise by individual teachers. As advocated by the Cambridge Primary Review, this should be a "…pedagogy of repertoire rather than recipe…" (Alexander and Flutter, 2009:8). Moreover, teachers are busy professionals and often focus on the content of curricula as opposed to other underpinning aspects. The elements in the Overview must be emphasised in any CPD activities with teachers and its messages mediated through other social and digital media.

Curriculum, syllabus or framework?

Another serious consideration for the NCCA is clarity around the nature of the redeveloped curriculum: Is it a curriculum or a curriculum framework? Is it articulating the purpose, aims and principles of the wider education system or for the primary school curriculum? While there has always been flexibility in the curricula developed in Ireland, this has not always been well articulated within these documents and has not been supported in terms of enabling teachers to use the freedom provided (Walsh, 2012). The Overview must be clear on the nature of the curriculum (is it a prescribed curriculum or is it a framework that can be modified at a school or individual teacher level?) and provide guidance on how the curriculum can be used at a school and classroom level. Alignment with curricula at early childhood education and Junior Cycle is a prerequisite. Or has the time come for a curriculum that spans all aspects of compulsory education?

5.1 Considerations for Introducing the Redeveloped Curriculum
The following considerations are proffered for the development of the Overview to the Redeveloped Curriculum:

- The context and rationale for a redeveloped primary school curriculum should be clearly delineated.
- The articulation of the overall purpose, aims and principles of the curriculum should be the starting point of redeveloping the primary curriculum. Consultation with the education stakeholders should be fundamental to determining these central elements. These should be used as a spine for the curriculum and as the anchor to inform all other curriculum decisions (including content, pedagogy, assessment and the aims of each subject). The terminology to be used for these elements (see Appendix 4 for a range of examples) and the

aspects included under each should be determined through consultation and a review of the research literature. The interface between the various elements and the precise meaning of the terms used should be clarified (e.g., glossary). Alignment between all elements of the curriculum is essential and there should be a proofing process to ensure all aspects of curriculum - structure, content and pedagogy - are congruent with the purpose, aims and principles as they are developed. There should be clarity from the outset if the purpose, aims and principles relate to the wider education system, or to the curriculum.

- The theoretical, conceptual and research base of the curriculum should be clearly articulated in the Overview or supporting linked documentation to provide a rationale for curriculum decisions. There should be clarity around the concept of the teacher and the concept of the pupil.

- Pedagogical guidance that supports giving life to the curriculum should be included in the Overview and this should be further supplemented within the themes/ curriculum areas/ subjects of the curriculum to support teachers to use the curriculum to promote teaching and learning at a classroom level. This should exemplify most recent thinking and research on teaching and learning. The shift in emphasis from teachers as 'curriculum implementers' to 'curriculum developers and co-constructors' will need to be accompanied by support and guidance in how to use the redeveloped curriculum for this purpose.

- An alignment exercise should also be undertaken to ensure congruence between the elements of the primary school curriculum and those at early childhood education and Junior Cycle levels. Furthermore, alignment with the wider policy context in terms of accountability and other issues is recommended.

- The Overview should include a schematic overview or visual delineating the various elements and their interface with one another. A second schematic diagram linking the curriculum to the wider education system would also be useful to ensure alignment in terms of accountability and other issues.

- A move towards eCurriculum documentation would make the updating of these issues, and indeed all aspects of the curriculum, easier to undertake as curriculum and educational developments warrant it.

- A particular focus should be placed on sharing key messages from the Overview through CPD and other media before focusing on individual themes/ curriculum areas/ subjects.

Discussion points to support this journey of redevelopment are included in Appendix 5.

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Appendix 1: Elements included in the Introduction

	No. included	Wording of the elements included
Vision	3	1. the uniqueness of the child 2. the child and society 3. education and society
General aims	3	1. to enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual 2. to enable the child to develop as a social being through living and cooperating with others and so contribute to the good of society 3. to prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning
Principles	2	1. celebrating the uniqueness of the child 2. ensuring the development of the child's full potential
Learning principles	15	1. the child's sense of wonder and natural curiosity is a primary motivating factor in learning 2. the child is an active agent in his or her learning 3. learning is developmental in nature 4. the child's existing knowledge and experience form the base for learning 5. the child's immediate environment provides the context for learning 6. learning should involve guided activity and discovery methods 7. language is central in the learning process 8. the child should perceive the aesthetic dimension in learning 9. social and emotional dimensions are important factors in learning 10. learning is most effective when it is integrated 11. skills that facilitate the transfer of learning should be fostered 12. higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills should be developed 13. collaborative learning should feature in the learning process 14. the range of individual difference should be taken into account in the learning process 15. assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning
Key issues	15	1. quality in education 2. literacy and numeracy 3. developing a sense of Irish identity 4. the place of the Irish language in primary education

		5. the spiritual dimension in life
		6. the European and global dimensions of modern living
		7. pluralism, a respect for diversity and the importance of tolerance
		8. the function of the curriculum in contributing to equality and fairness of access in education
		9. partnership in education
		10. the role of information and communication technologies in enhancing learning
		11. catering for children with special needs
		12. the crucial role of early childhood education
		13. facilitating the transition from primary to post-primary education
		14. the role of the curriculum in establishing patterns of lifelong learning.
		15. science education (*included in chapter 4 but not in earlier list of issues in chapter 1*)
Defining features	8	1. a focus on learning
		2. a relevant curriculum
		3. a broad and balanced curriculum
		4. a developmental approach to learning
		5. a detailed statement of content
		6. a balance of knowledge, concepts and skills
		7. assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning
		8. the importance of planning
Specific aims	11	1. to enable children to come to an understanding of the world through the acquisition of knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes and the ability to think critically
		2. to enable children to apply what they learn to new contexts in order to respond creatively to the variety of challenges they encounter in life
		3. to enable children to become lifelong learners through developing positive attitudes to learning and the ability to learn independently
		4. to enable children to develop spiritual, moral and religious values
		5. to enable children to develop literacy skills, comprehension skills and expressive skills in language and to appreciate the power and beauty of language
		6. to enable children to develop numeracy and problem-solving skills and an understanding of mathematical concepts
		7. to enable children to develop a respect for cultural difference, an appreciation of civic responsibility, and an understanding of the social dimension of life, past and present

		8. to enable children to develop skills and understanding in order to study their world and its inhabitants and appreciate the interrelationships between them
		9. to enable children to develop their creative and imaginative capacities through artistic expression and response
		10. to enable children to develop and express themselves physically through the acquisition of a range of movement skills and to appreciate the potential and importance of health and well-being
		11. to enable children to develop personally and socially and to relate to others with understanding and respect
General objectives	25	1. communicate clearly and confidently using a range of linguistic, symbolic, representational and physical expression
		2. explore and develop ideas through language
		3. develop an appropriate range of comprehension strategies and problem-solving skills
		4. understand and apply the vocabulary and phraseology particular to the different subjects in the curriculum
		5. locate, extract, record and interpret information from various sources
		6. use information and communication technologies to enhance learning
		7. listen attentively and with understanding
		8. read fluently and with understanding
		9. develop a love of and an interest in reading
		10. write fluently and legibly and acquire an appropriate standard of spelling, grammar, syntax, and punctuation
		11. develop a competence in a second, and perhaps a third, language at a level appropriate to his or her ability and cultural and linguistic background
		12. understand computational skills and apply them with accuracy and speed
		13. understand and apply mathematical concepts
		14. extend his or her knowledge and understanding of, and develop a range of skills and interest in, the cultural, historical, geographical and scientific dimensions of the world
		15. develop and apply basic scientific and technological skills and knowledge
		16. extend his or her knowledge and understanding of, and develop curiosity about, the characteristics of living and non-living things, objects, processes, and events
		17. develop an appreciation and enjoyment of aesthetic activities, including music, visual arts, dance, drama and language

		18. develop the skills and knowledge necessary to express himself or herself through various aesthetic activities, including music, visual arts, dance, drama and language
		19. acquire a knowledge and understanding of the body and movement, and develop agility and physical co-ordination
		20. develop a positive awareness of self, a sensitivity towards other people, and a respect for the rights, views and feelings of others
		21. develop a foundation for healthy living and a sense of responsibility for his or her own health
		22. develop self-discipline, a sense of personal and social responsibility, and an awareness of socially and morally acceptable behaviour
		23. acquire sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of life
		24. develop the capacity to make ethical judgements informed by the tradition and ethos of the school
		25. develop a knowledge and understanding of his or her own religious traditions and beliefs, with respect for the religious traditions and beliefs of others

Source: Government of Ireland (1999a)

Appendix 2: Aims and Objectives in the Individual Curriculum and Subject Areas

Curriculum Area	Subject	No. of aims	No. of broad objectives
	Gaeilge	9	19
	English	7	28
	Mathematics	5	37 (split across skills and the 5 strands)
Social, Environmental and Scientific Education		6	-
	History	11	13
	Geography	7	15
	Science	8	12
Arts Education		8	-
	Visual Arts	8	14
	Music	7	14
	Drama	9	16
	Physical Education	6	32
	SPHE	6	15
Total		**97**	**215**

Source: Curriculum Handbooks available at: http://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary.

Appendix 3: Schematic Overviews of the Curriculum in Scotland, New Zealand and the Republic of Maldives

A curriculum framework to meet the needs of all learners 3 – 18
A schematic guide for curriculum planners

Values
Wisdom, justice, compassion, integrity

The curriculum must be inclusive, be a stimulus for personal achievement and, through the broadening of experience of the world, be an encouragement towards informed and responsible citizenship.

The curriculum: 'the totality of all that is planned for children and young people throughout their education'

- Ethos and life of the school as a community
- Curriculum areas and subjects
- Interdisciplinary learning
- Opportunities for personal achievement

Learning and teaching

- Engaging and active
- Setting challenging goals
- Shared expectations and standards
- Timely, accurate feedback
- Learning intentions, success criteria, personal learning planning
- Collaborative
- Reflecting the ways different learners progress

Experiences and outcomes set out expectations for learning and development in:

- Expressive arts
- Languages and literacy
- Health and wellbeing
- Mathematics and numeracy
- Religious and moral education
- Sciences
- Social studies
- Technologies

Curriculum levels describe progression and development.

literacy · numeracy · health & wellbeing · skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work · effective contributor · confident individuals · responsible citizens · successful learners · outcomes · experiences · **Learner**

All children and young people are entitled to experience

- a coherent curriculum from 3 to 18
- a broad general education, including well planned experiences and outcomes across all the curriculum areas. This should include understanding of the world and Scotland's place in it and understanding of the environment
- a senior phase which provides opportunities for study for qualifications and other planned opportunities for developing the four capacities
- opportunities for developing skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work
- opportunities to achieve to the highest levels they can through appropriate personal support and challenge
- Opportunities to move into positive and sustained destinations beyond school

Personal Support

- review of learning and planning of next steps
- gaining access to learning activities which will meet their needs
- planning for opportunities for personal achievement
- preparing for changes and choices and support through changes and choices
- pre-school centres and schools working with partners

Principles for curriculum design:

- Challenge and enjoyment
- Breadth
- Progression
- Depth
- Personalisation and choice
- Coherence
- Relevance

Arrangements for

- Assessment
- Qualifications
- Self-evaluation and accountability
- Professional development

to support the purposes of learning

A Schematic Guide for Curriculum Planners (Scottish Government, 2008:13)

A Schematic Overview of the New Zealand Curriculum (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007:7)

A Schematic Overview of the Republic of Maldives Curriculum (National Institute of Education, 2014:5)

Appendix 4: Terminology for the Elements within Curricula

Aims	Aims (specific)	Aims (general)
Attitudes	Attributes	Beliefs
Capabilities	Capacities	Competences
Competencies	Concepts of learning	Concepts of teaching
Curriculum areas	Dispositions	Entitlements
Experiences	Features	Goals
Intentions	Issues	Knowledge(s)
Mission	Objectives	Objectives (specific)
Objectives (general)	Pedagogy	Philosophy
Principles	Priorities	Purpose
Rationale	Scope	Skills
Standards	Understanding	Values
Vision		

Appendix 5: Potential Discussion Points

1. What are the purposes of a national curriculum? How can it best support the education of children in primary schools?

2. Various language is used nationally and internationally to represent the key elements underpinning the 'purpose' of education. These terms differ in meaning and emphasis. Which of the terms below should be central to the Overview of the redeveloped primary school curriculum? What elements would be better placed within individual themes/ curriculum areas/ subjects?

Aims	Aims (specific)	Aims (general)
Attitudes	Attributes	Beliefs
Capabilities	Capacities	Competences
Competencies	Concepts of learning	Concepts of teaching
Curriculum areas	Dispositions	Entitlements
Experiences	Features	Goals
Intentions	Issues	Knowledge(s)
Mission	Objectives	Objectives (specific)
Objectives (general)	Pedagogy	Philosophy
Principles	Priorities	Purpose
Rationale	Scope	Skills
Standards	Understanding	Values
Vision		

3. The table below delineates the priorities for primary education based on a consultation in 2012 (NCCA, 2012). What is your view on these? Are they comprehensive? Anything you would add, amend or remove?

Primary priorities	Early childhood themes	Junior cycle key skills	Senior cycle key skills
Develop thinking, learning and life skills	Exploring and thinking	Managing information and thinking	Critical and creative thinking
		Being creative	Information processing
Communicate well	Communicating	Communicating	Communicating
Be well	Well-being	Staying well	Being personally effective
Engage in learning	Identity and belonging	Managing myself	
Have a strong sense of identity and belonging		Working with others	Working with others

4. Should the redeveloped curriculum set out the central purpose, aims and principles of the education system or focus only on the primary curriculum?

5. Is a curriculum or a curriculum framework most appropriate for the Irish context? How might teachers be best supported to use whatever flexibility is available within the redeveloped curriculum to allow for local adaptation to needs and contexts?

6. What are the key aspects of pedagogical support that should be included in the curriculum and how are these best presented?

7. What structures and processes can be established to ensure that there is curriculum alignment, both within the redeveloped primary curriculum and also with the preceding early childhood education curricula, and the subsequent Junior Cycle curriculum? What should be done to ensure alignment also with the wider system (e.g., in terms of inspection, initiatives)?

8. What other system developments may be required to facilitate and support the local development and adaptation of the curriculum (e.g., CPD, SSE, external inspection)?