

# REPORT

LEADING OUT SEMINAR SERIES

**SEMINAR 2**

25<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2020



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

## Report on the Leading Out Seminar Series

The NCCA has reached an important milestone in its Primary Developments/Foráis sa Bhunscolaíocht with the completion of a *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* for consultation in 2020. Consultation and collaboration are at the heart of the series of Leading Out seminars for key stakeholders, the first of which was held on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019. Although not unique to Ireland, the consultative and collaborative nature of curriculum development is a hallmark of education work here. Generally, it is characterised by the recognition of a shared journey where decisions taken in a spirit of collaboration, while not irrevocable, enjoy a high degree of stakeholder confidence. Consensus-building is not without its challenges and it benefits from occasions when time is taken to reflect upon the journey to date and to tease out the ramifications of decisions taken and changes proposed, in a forum where participants are free to share doubts and concerns without feeling the need to adopt final positions. Similarly, such a forum offers opportunities to look back upon developments, at the how-we-got-to-here story, and to speculate on how the future will look once change has been implemented, with a view to building consensus around how all stakeholders might adapt to the change – a vision for how-we-will-be-then. To that end, the NCCA is holding this series of Leading Out seminars for representatives of stakeholders engaged in and supporting the proposed redeveloped Primary Curriculum.

The intention of the series is that participants will determine the agenda and, through deliberation and discussion, shape an emerging document, which becomes not just a record of what has been said during the meetings but a picture of agreed pathways and action points in support of change. The Pathways Document, then, will provide a record of the main areas of thinking, signalling points of convergence and questions yet to be addressed. So, both the Report and Pathways documents will include **Thinking Forward** boxes where the intention is to give direction for further deliberation – to explore further, check for consensus, problematise, and so on.

### Seminar 2: 25.02.2020

The report on Leading Out Seminar 1 concluded as follows: *Looking ahead to Seminar 2, the intention is that the outcomes of the discussion at each seminar will inform the agenda for subsequent ones and that this document will become a record of the discussions, highlighting areas of consensus and signalling points of debate or divergence requiring further attention.* Discussion at Seminar 1 highlighted the importance of two areas that became the basis of the main agenda items for Seminar

- Agency and Flexibility in a redeveloped primary school curriculum: the teacher as a *skilful and agentic professional and implications for leadership*
- Professional Development in a redeveloped primary school curriculum: how can stakeholders support such professional development.

Readers of this document should note that as all elements in the change process are interlinked, deliberation and discussion across the seminars will be iterative: themes will arise for repeated discussion, and this will help participants to arrive at clear points of stakeholder action and responsibility.

In addition to the overview of the NCCA's work on the redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum, Seminar 1 introduced ideas of particular relevance to the seminar series as a whole: the centrality of collaboration among education partners and wider stakeholders, the importance of close, sustained work with schools as the key sites of change, and the need to develop and nurture the conditions conducive to curriculum enactment. Fundamental to these ideas is the conviction that creating the conditions in support of change is a shared enterprise. Change cannot be *delivered into the system*; neither will change *happen* just because we want it to or because we say it should.

Seminar 2 coincided with the publication for consultation of the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (published at [www.ncca.ie/primary](http://www.ncca.ie/primary)) and the opening presentation stressed the importance of the seminar series to the consultation process. A vital step in that process is getting the initial stimulus and information out to all stakeholders, and in a manner that will ensure that they can and will engage meaningfully. As a first point of discussion, seminar participants considered how their organisations could promote engagement during the consultation. Participants felt that, to reduce perceptions of pressure for immediate change, there should be **key messages that every organisation leads with** (e.g. details of the timeframe for implementation) so that the draft framework is viewed in a positive light.

## Seminar 2 Discussion 1

### Agency and Flexibility in a Redeveloped Primary School Curriculum

Three presentations served to indicate the complex nature of agency and flexibility in a pedagogical context, not least because discussion encompasses the implications for the teacher, the school, the child, the curriculum, and for the system as a whole. Agency encompasses areas such as **teaching to diversity, the agentic child, and the democratisation of education**. Factors influencing agency include individual histories and experiences, culture, structure, environment, purposes of education and curricular goals. Essentially, teacher agency does not imply some kind of directionless free-for-all;

rather, it envisages the school and teacher enacting a curriculum which offers options and choices that allow for the achievement of specific curricular goals, meeting local needs and most importantly the needs of all children. While the 1999 curriculum did allow for some flexibility, teachers will require time for collaboration to adjust, accommodate, embed a redeveloped curriculum with considerably greater emphasis on agency and choice. Leadership, initial teacher education and continuous professional development will be vital in this new context. At school level, in particular, leadership will need to move from compliance and accountability to renewal and enactment.

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* views the child as a capable actor who shares power and agency with the adult. Curriculum for the agentic child is co-constructed through adult-child collaboration. Adults guide the learning process, based on their learning, life experiences and resources. Pedagogy that encapsulates observation, recording of children's language, ideas and interests, and discussion of learning with children is indicative of the child's agency.

### Outcomes of Discussion 1

A facilitated discussion considered the following question:

***What are our Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats in realising a vision for greater agency and flexibility in Irish primary schools?***

The significant strengths within the teaching profession and the cohesive relationships across the education system can be the basis for a collaborative approach to the implementation and management of change. Enacting a significantly changed curriculum inevitably involves all actors in risk-taking and it is vital that policy alignment provides stability for stakeholders. Schools are active sites of professional development, and confidence can be boosted in schools already engaged in developing their practice, especially where the wider system is supportive. All stakeholders will benefit from a recognition that in times of significant change the whole system is in 'learning mode', not just those charged with implementing the redeveloped curriculum in classrooms. However, policy misalignment and unrealistic expectations about the nature and extent of change could lead to inertia, a loss of positivity and a weakening of confidence in the system.

#### **Thinking Forward**

- If curriculum and practice is to change, then stakeholder organisations will also have to adapt and learn. How can stakeholders be supported on their journey of change?

- Thinking of the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework's* conception of teachers as *agentic professionals*, what precise limits of definition can/should be established regarding terms such as 'agency', and 'flexibility'?
- How can all actors in the change process foster and promote such a vision of the profession? Will new structures and processes be required to actualise this?
- Does such a conception of the teacher require reflection on how we think about leadership in the school?
- How can all stakeholders collaborate to ensure that, over a period of several years, policies are characterised by consistency and clarity?
- When it comes to the enactment of a policy initiative as significant as a redeveloped curriculum for primary schools, what supports for school leaders will be needed?

**Overarching question:**

- How do we as a group committed to supporting change collaborate to ensure that all actors in the system cultivate a 'learning system' at all levels during this period of curriculum renewal and enactment?

## Seminar 2 Discussion 2

### Professional Development in a redeveloped Primary School Curriculum

The programme of professional development associated with the implementation of the 1999 curriculum was of its time, with events for teachers in central locations. Since then, provision has developed through the cascade model to a provision that emphasises facilitated and contextualised support. The introduction of a sustained support model at school level—as in the CPD supporting the *Primary Language Curriculum*—enables teachers to access support in a developmental way. CPD during the change process must acknowledge varying levels of readiness for change and be appropriately contextualised to offer support for the needs of schools and their pupils. A range of professional learning supports will be needed to offer sustained, incremental approaches which acknowledge the central involvement of school leaders and promote professional growth through building internal capacity.

Professional learning to embed a new curriculum should be viewed in a systemic way, and support from support services will occur alongside other forms such as online learning and resources e.g. webinars and collaboration among staff across clusters of schools. In this context, Education Centres are powerful hubs of professional learning that will facilitate local capacity building and self-empowerment.

A facilitated discussion considered these two questions:

***In reference to the SWOT analysis, how could the weaknesses identified be converted into strengths? and how could the threats identified be converted into opportunities?***

#### **Actions for converting weaknesses to strengths:**

- Showcase and celebrate good practice so that schools are empowered to value what they are doing well and are encouraged and enthusiastic about continuing to take risks
- Provide exemplars of evidence-based strategies and practices
- Change perceptions of what we mean by inclusion and agency
- Initial Teacher Education support is very important in addressing teacher perceptions of the nature of curriculum
- *We need to make teachers aware that it's a journey (to 2024 and beyond) so that they have plenty of time to get to grips with everything new.*

#### **Actions for converting threats to opportunities:**

- *Grow listening cultures in schools*

- Continue to engage schools in policy development
- Enable schools to evaluate and assess their own CPD needs and be proactive in addressing them
- Ensure all stakeholders are involved and all voices are heard
- During the process of curriculum development opportunities arise to counter over-reliance on textbooks
- All stakeholders to look at the roles they play from a collaborative perspective, to see how they can best offer encouragement and support.

## Outcomes of Discussion 2

The responses of participants exhibit considerable levels of optimism once all stakeholders assume their roles and responsibilities and when the policy voice aligns well with the views and actions of leaders across the system. For that reason, it is appropriate that policy alignment and leadership are given particular prominence at the forthcoming seminars.

### The Panel Discussion

The presenters on agency and continuing professional development took part in a panel discussion, offering commentary and observations on the range of topics covered. These included:

- commentary about the consistency of perspective among the presenters
- the observation that teachers have always been agents for change
- the belief that *agency* is not a new concept, that teachers always make choices about what/how to teach
- the observation that while schools are not perfect, we should celebrate the professionalism of teachers, join the dots and give hope
- commentary on the need to be hopeful, an observation that there *is loads already happening* in schools that is compatible with the direction and thrust of the redeveloped curriculum. There is significant *curriculum-making* where teachers are not unquestioningly tied to the objectives at the class level
- regarding initial teacher education, the *Céim* idea, the teacher as researcher during school placement, is a very important aspect that will evolve to *Droichead* and *Cosán*
- *front-loading* CPD to focus on teacher agency, pedagogy, and curriculum integration in the years between publication of the Primary Curriculum Framework and the introduction of curriculum specifications will pay dividends in the long-term success of the curriculum.

### Plans for Future Engagement

In general, there is a very positive response to the Leading Out seminars and good-will for the major change process to come. Looking ahead to further seminars, participants engaged in a dotmocracy activity where they prioritised aspects for future consideration.

### Results from the dotmocracy activity

Leadership	44
Policy Alignment	32
Timing and Pacing	25
Securing Resources	20
Feasibility	4

Other issues cited were stakeholder engagement (roles and responsibilities); system infrastructures; teaching principals/multi-class; the need for the development of planning frameworks/tools and the issue of accountability.

### Thinking Forward

- How do questions of leadership apply to all stakeholders during times of significant change?
- How and where can organisations articulate their vision for leadership in this context?
- What might an absence of leadership, or a presence of ineffective leadership, look like in this context?
- What supports for leaders within our system will be needed over the period of change? How can stakeholders support each other?
- Who is more important for change to be effective at school level, the curriculum leader or the administrative leader?
- Can we cite some good examples of policy alignment in Ireland or elsewhere? What lessons can we take from these examples?
- Questions about alignment of policy and practice go to the heart of the Leading Out seminars. What points of agreement are essential to the success of the changes we are leading and supporting? How can we begin to articulate our consensus in this regard?



- When we speak of alignment, how can all stakeholders ensure that the whole system moves forward together, and that we avoid the pitfalls that arise when new demands are retrofitted to old beliefs and practices?