

REPORT

LEADING OUT SEMINAR SERIES

SEMINAR 3

14TH OCTOBER 2020



NCCA

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 1st, 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 deliberations of the seminars are recorded in two ways:

- A **Report** document that provides a brief overview of the presentations and a summary record of the discussion at each seminar, including some indications of the likely shape of the agenda for the next seminar in the series
- A **Pathways for Change** document that offers an overview of the themes, issues, reflections, and action points for consideration by all stakeholders as the series develops. A particular feature of this document is its focus on linkage across the seminars – its attention to overarching questions. Consequently, the Pathways document begins after Seminar 2.

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 3: 14.10.2020

Hosted online, the seminar can be regarded as a central event in the series in that its theme addressed the main intention of the Leading Out seminars: to provide a space in which stakeholders tease out practical implications for policy alignment and action in the context of the redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum. The opening presentation from Dr Thomas Walsh (following on from a podcast which had been circulated prior to the seminar) focused on the topic of Policy Alignment and Coherence. Building on ideas from Stephen Ball, Dr Walsh set his discussion of **policy as text** and **policy as discourse** in the context of Ireland's educational landscape, a graphical representation of which supported the participants' discussions. As well as being embodied in key texts such as curriculum documentation, policies are also processes through which certain possibilities for thought are constructed. *Discourses are about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority.* (Ball, 1993)

Seminar 3 Discussion 1

The first discussion session focused on the current **strengths** of Ireland's educational policy landscape and on the **opportunities** to contribute to policy alignment identified by the participating organisations.

Strengths in Ireland's policy landscape

The **quality of the primary teaching profession** is a major strength of the Irish educational system. Teachers and school leaders are seen as agents of change through the quality of their engagement with curriculum.

The **quality of Ireland's education system**, and the level of public trust it enjoys, means that any change to the system is deemed to be high stakes. This ensures that what happens in the classroom space stays at the heart of deliberations and that schools remain central to the process.

There is **resilience in the system** and a shared perspective on issues, which means that the system responds to challenges in a collegial and collaborative way. In this context the way in which **PDST** works directly with individual schools and clusters, through its sustained-support model, allows for better dissemination of policy.

Given the significant changes in early childhood education and in post-primary junior cycle, there is an **openness to policy change** among teachers and others in the system.

A decided strength is the **consultative nature of the education system in Ireland**. All the major stakeholders enjoy a significant level of involvement in policy development.

Our education system fosters **interconnectivity**; strong links and collaborative practices already exist to further the sharing of **expertise within the system**. A strength of the policy landscape is the many partnerships that have already developed. Examples include inter-agency collaboration between NCCA, NCSE, and PDST, or clusters of small schools in relation to *Aistear*, primary maths, primary STEM. The Education Centre Network supports this work at local and national level. This enhanced connectivity ensures that **communication has evolved**, supporting consistency in key messaging across what is, after all, a small system.

Because of its small size Ireland's policy discourse happens at a **national level** with few regional variations or multiple systems. This brings clarity and consistency, but somewhat ironically allows for local decision making, especially in the area of curriculum leadership.

The practice of **School Self-Evaluation** is a strength in itself, which has also encouraged schools to collaborate to engage with changes in the policy landscape in a more collective way.

Ireland's engagement with **educational research** and its access to supra-national agencies across the EU ensures that we stay in touch with international developments as we develop solutions for curriculum challenges.

In the context of the current redevelopment of the primary curriculum, the impact of the **Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach** and the **timeline** the work is following are two important dimensions to the work, the latter especially underpinning the iterative, non-linear nature of the process.

Opportunities for organisations to contribute to the alignment of policy

While it is important to **consider the power relationships** across the landscape and how these differ, all organisations have a **responsibility to participate in the consultation** process and use their influence to encourage their membership to contribute. Organisations should not be afraid of confronting the difficult questions that inevitably emerge, in an understanding that all organisations are facing questions of a similar nature. In the context of a national partnership, stakeholder organisations have a role to play in spreading the key messages about the curriculum change, thereby ensuring that the prevalence of conflicting messages is minimised.

There is an understanding that organisations play a role in ensuring that issues which need further consideration and discussion are **brought to the fore during the consultation phase**, rather than when the curriculum is being enacted. This can be facilitated in effective ways through **interagency collaboration**, facilitating discussion and drawing on expertise through, for example:

- the work of PDST on **curriculum leadership** which is well-placed to support leadership across all aspects of school. The changed model of CPD will **support teacher engagement with the curriculum** and empower teachers to get involved in policy discourse. The support services and Teaching Council will continue to encourage such a discourse, working with schools in a co-construction of knowledge.
- the NCCA's continued engagement with school and parent organisations, and with the Schools' Forum, to foster **informed dialogue** through a variety of communication strategies
- the potential for engagement across the sectors, from early childhood to primary, to post-primary education. Perhaps a **cross-sectoral focus on pedagogy**—making sure that the classroom space is at the heart of all discussion—could be facilitated.
- the **focus on SEN and inclusion** which has been there from the beginning, evident in co-design and co-delivery of support. The National Council for Special Education will seek to continue this collaboration.
- the ITE sector which is in a good place to **contribute to the dialogue on policy** and practice, between innovation and implementation. While the conversation to support change is alive in teacher education a review of programmes may be required to ensure coherence with policy. For example, DCU and Marino have begun to hold internal sessions on the draft framework, and these will continue.
- the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT), with an involvement of 759 **newly-qualified teachers**, which is a good site for policy dissemination. It is important to harness the energy of NQTs in this regard.
- the work of the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) and the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), which provides opportunities during principal one-to-one and group mentoring to focus on teaching and learning issues and the redevelopment of the Primary Curriculum. Both espouse a model of professional learning whose ambition is to move teachers away from a dependency culture through professional learning.
- innovative action at local level, for example, the school principal/s who had previously agreed with staff to **pilot some of the proposed changes** in the framework (perhaps the proposals around time and structure and enhancing pupil voice) and while the COVID-19 crisis has intervened the challenge will be to re-motivate staff to get them back on board.
- the **facilitation of school clusters** as in the case of the Gaeltacht Policy, in conjunction with the new **Gaeltacht unit** in the DES.

Thinking forward

- How can we, as organisations, move from the point of saying ‘what should happen’ to a situation where we can outline, however tentatively, the **specific measures** we might take to ensure the change process is as coherent as can be?
- Aside from the Leading Out seminars, what particular forum or structure/s will be needed to support specific planning for change?
- What specific lessons can be learnt from recent policy developments: the launch of *Aistear*, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, The Junior Cycle Framework, The Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile, for example?

Observations on the Landscape Graphic

Participants referred to a graphic representation of Ireland’s education policy landscape during the discussion and some observations on the graphic itself are noted here.

- the complexity of the policy landscape and the interconnections across levels are increasingly non-linear and are coloured somewhat by an implicit Constitutional dimension. This means that changing Irish education policy landscape is very complex.
- while consultation, which has become normalised since the 1990s, is a strength of the system, it is also a weakness in that it can become a cacophonous space.
- the sheer number of organisations involved at macro level can seem overwhelming from some points of view but it is important that all are involved in the conversations.
- the new Gaeltacht unit in the DES is not included on the diagram and it needs to be included in future policy decisions.
- while it is recognised that some detail in the graphic was indicative, it did not explicitly mention Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) and participants felt it was important that their contribution be recognised.
- a small number of typos was noted.

Seminar 3 Discussion 2

In what ways can you use your 'zone of influence' to cultivate the conditions for the ongoing development, introduction and enactment of the redeveloped curriculum in the months and years ahead?

It is important to **build trust** across the system. Communications is important in this regard and the shared messaging as in the case of the recent Primary Language Curriculum interagency video is a great example of support clear messaging and trust building. Initial discussions must encourage people to reflect on differences in landscape (between the 1999 curriculum and now) to build an **understanding of the rationale, value and purpose** of the draft framework.

The **NCCA** can use its zone of influence to continue to collect data, connect with stakeholders, and ensure that the consultation is as inclusive as possible.

Schools and teachers are now in a challenging space with COVID-19, despite a successful re-opening. One principal noted that she will try to motivate staff to re-engage and agree to pilot aspects outlined in the framework. At local level, schools will need to create opportunities where the school community—teachers, parents, pupils, school leaders, BOM members—can learn together and be welcomed into consultative processes. This will encourage schools to 'open their doors' to a re-imagining of professional learning. Greater consultation will lead to greater ownership and make the process less 'disruptive'.

Special schools can see themselves in the curriculum for the first time and the **National Council for Special Education (NCSE)** can use their influence to ensure that they continue to bring their voices to the table in the framework discussions.

School self-evaluation plays a critical role in helping schools to identify and to put in action positive steps to support their development as a school community. The **Inspectorate** can continue to use their zone of influence to engage in issues related to curriculum and assessment at school level, through the promotion of good practice in areas such as play-based learning and ensuring that professional conversations are grounded in respect and appreciation of the agency of teachers and school leaders. There is acknowledgement that continued collaboration internally across the **Department of Education (DE)** particularly between the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP) Unit, the Teacher Education Section (TES) and the Inspectorate, as well as externally with other agencies and indeed the teaching community, is important in supporting the ecosystem into which the redeveloped Primary School Curriculum will be introduced. The **steering structure within the DE** alongside the enabling structures of the NCCA can continue to focus on the dissemination of the broader policy perspective.

The **Teaching Council** can continue to promote teacher agency, professional learning and sharing of learning through *FÉILTE* and *Cosán* with its emphasis on teachers' learning and research, the goal of which is to develop the dispositions, skills and competencies that teachers need. Possibilities for collaboration with Education Centre network exist and to ensure teachers on the ground receive a coherent message about the positive impact that teacher agency can have on teaching and learning.

Those **involved in ITE** can ensure that teacher educators engage with and have knowledge of what is happening ahead of time. ITE can continue to build dispositions within student teachers, such as agency, professional confidence and creativity, and will see this change as an opportunity to examine the programmes they offer, including how they are taught. Knowledge of what is coming can be used by Higher Education Institutes to prepare newly qualified teachers for a changing landscape through a focus on Learning Innovation, Acquiring Practice and Understanding Constraints.

The **Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)** can continue address and process the inevitable concerns related to curriculum change of its members, thereby influencing and cultivating awareness of changes to come. INTO can continue to encourage and facilitate the engagement of its membership in the consultation process.

PDST can engage with schools through a sustained support model tailored to the needs of each school. Its representatives noted the level of trust developed through engaging on the ground with teachers in schools; the relationships built over time constitute an important zone of influence and, importantly, a cultivation of trust between the national and the local levels of our system.

Additional considerations

Questions around **the resources that are needed to bring about real change** will persist and will require responses that involve multi-annual projection and planning. Diversity, emerging sphericity (degrees of influence being vertical/horizontal) and agency were cited as important in helping in the process of creation of curriculum and in getting the message of the new curriculum across to schools, teachers, leaders and parents. Perhaps a first step to achieving coherence and connectivity might be to **clarify power relations** and identify where access might be limited. From this a **systematic plan over a timescale to engage (mapping idea)** might be created.

Thinking forward

Questions emerged through discussion:

- It is important to recognise that all stakeholders/agencies have some **level of influence**, and that this influence will be stronger at the different stages of the curriculum development and enactment process. So, how do we cultivate conversations, interactions and exchanges that are multi-directional and that continue to take place over time?
- Just as the influence of stakeholder organisations fluctuates at different times of curriculum review/development/enactment, so too does the **influence of teachers and school leaders**. At what point are they empowered to 'lead out', exercising their professional agency, on these curriculum changes?
- **COVID-19** has given **strength to online platforms** as means to support and spread messages. Can we use this development to ease the pressure teachers sometimes feel when attending professional learning events/opportunities? What would this look like?

Seminar 3 Discussion 3

What activities and structures between the macro (national) and the micro (local) levels would support additional connectivity and coherence in the context of curriculum change?

The points listed below can be thought of as further examples of **Thinking Forward** by the seminar participants.

Support teacher leadership at all levels: principals, teachers in middle management or teachers leading in other capacities. It will be important to get a message of system support for all teachers acting as leaders. In the interest of coherence, we need to agree about the type of learning that leaders engage in, to have a guide for those developing professional learning.

Open up discussions about teacher wellbeing. Teachers are currently struggling to maintain a sense of wellbeing; time and space are needed to have discussions both inside and outside the school.

Communicate the rationale for change clearly and powerfully. Communication of the vision should be at a national, regional, and local level through support networks, education centres and professional learning organisations. Engage people so they feel part of the change, and especially that they understand the reason for the change and can frame the 'newness' appropriately; it can be disempowering if teachers keep hearing that things are all 'new'; we need to find the harmony with previous experience.

Enhance the potential of regional Education Centres. They already provide a really good service for teachers and they facilitate communities of practice. Greater use of the Education Centres should be made in order to support more school clustering. During the current pandemic online communities of practice for school leaders have become popular and have helped many schools. Such communities can be further cultivated and supported. There are arguments both for and against the creation of regional structures. Is there an opportunity to look at structures that are in place in other jurisdictions, not just English-speaking countries? We need to look at countries with similar demographics and preferably countries with a large number of small schools. Informal school clusters already exist, and are often supported by national agencies. Further alignment of existing structures is possible – e.g. building on the existing Teaching Council model. Don't create something new when there are systems in existence.

Continue to focus on enhanced communication and messaging. Again, the inter-agency video for the PLC/CTB was very effective and should be looked at as a model for further reform. Multiple agencies together delivering a common message made an impact on the ground.

Maintain the sustained school support model of CPD where PDST supports go into the school and remain with them on the journey.

Listen to the voices of practitioners in an authentic way. We must provide teachers with opportunities to give feedback and engage professionally with policy developments. These feedback mechanisms need to be robust, effective and frequent. In addition, the BEACON model could have an important role to play at micro level.

Have clear expectations for how those at the micro level can engage with the macro level. Agreement between levels is in some ways more important than the detail and so there needs to be frequent dialogue. Fluidity and openness to connect and collaborate between the various levels is critical.

Flatten the boundary between ITE, induction and CPD. With a new primary curriculum framework in the ether, now would be a good time to make stronger connections in this space. Stronger cohesion between these sectors would help create a shared understanding.

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