

CIDREE Expert Meeting, Dublin, June 21st – 22nd 2018

Theme: Aims, values and vision underpinning primary curriculum

Delegates from Belgium (Flanders), Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Ireland attended an expert meeting on 21st and 22nd June 2018 in the offices of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Dublin, Ireland. Hosted by the NCCA, the thematic focus of the meeting was **curriculum change**, with an emphasis on **the aims, values and vision underpinning a primary curriculum**. The meeting was a timely one in that the NCCA is currently engaged in a redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum (for children between the ages of 4 and 12 approximately), which has been in place since 1999. Recently the curriculum body has hosted two consultation seminars for which it commissioned research papers on a range of topics including a critical reflection on the *Introduction* to the 1999 curriculum, values and vision in primary education, pedagogy, curriculum integration, knowledge, and competencies. These consultation events highlighted some issues and questions upon which the NCCA felt it would be useful to gather the perspectives of some of its European sister organisations; hence the expert meeting.

The primary curriculum in Ireland is at an early stage in the current phase of reform and the work of the NCCA is focused on the development of a draft curriculum overview, which will be the subject of public consultation in 2019. Consequently, the thematic focus for this expert meeting was on overarching aims, values and vision. The fact that the jurisdictions represented at the meeting are currently engaged in comparable developmental projects added relevance and urgency to the deliberations. Although the meeting was structured over four sessions the focus on a values-led curriculum ensured that there was a considerable degree of continuity and overlap across the discussion sessions. This report summarises the business of the meeting.

Day 1: Session 1 – Setting the context – discussion on curriculum vision – affinities and differences

The introductory presentation by Dr Jones Irwin (NCCA) set the context for the meeting by referencing societal change across Europe since the publication of the Primary School Curriculum in 1999. Given the emergence of complex, multicultural societies, curriculum developers face the challenge of finding ways of reconciling unity and diversity, being inclusive without being assimilationist, and cherishing plural cultural identities without weakening the precious identity of shared citizenship. This places questions of vision and values centre stage. Indeed, there were values that underpinned the 1999 curriculum: recognising the uniqueness of the child, preparing the child for life as a social being and as a life-long learner, for example. However worthy those aspirations, a state curriculum for 2019 and beyond will need to grapple with evermore complex and contested issues. The vision for education underpinning a new curriculum will need to be robust but agile, and will need to state its values explicitly and coherently.

The centrality of a values-led curriculum in the deliberations of the expert group was evident in the ensuing discussion where delegates stated their hopes for the outcomes of the meeting:

- a better understanding of values-led curriculum
- understanding of how to achieve a values-led curriculum ‘without attitudes’
- what are the values that should be included implicitly?
- how values can be enacted through such a curriculum
- teacher positionality and responsibility in a values-led curriculum.

Following this introduction each delegate made a short presentation focusing on the primary curriculum in their jurisdiction and covering these areas:

- the vision for education articulated in the curriculum
- the impetus for that vision, how it is formed and from where it stems
- how this appears in official curriculum policy documents
- the approach taken to developing aims and rationale, etc.
- a symbol or metaphor that reflects curriculum in the country/jurisdiction.

Access the individual country presentations [here](#).

Discussion on the presentations explored the delegates’ perceptions of affinities and key differences between jurisdictions.

Affinities	Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding new processes – to problematise notions of identity and control • Child-centred/student-centred • Conflict between Church and State and how to articulate values • Enlightenment values – perhaps questioned • Key competences v subject-oriented structure – desire to achieve a meaningful balance • Growing involvement of others in the processes – consultation • Oscillation between centralisation and decentralisation • We have to <i>discuss</i> the values...grapple with definitions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In some jurisdictions people are reluctant to open the discussion about values...public discourse can be difficult because it challenges a political orthodoxy • In some jurisdictions processes of change are teacher-led • There are variations in levels of centralisation • Some countries have a much stronger role for the state in mandating curriculum • There are differences of degree between curricula where values are explicitly stated and those where values are implicit

Day 1: Session 2 – Curriculum or Curriculum Framework – Historical context for developments in Ireland

As all the jurisdictions represented at the meeting were engaged in comparable projects of curriculum re-evaluation and design, it was agreed that it would be particularly important to consider questions of process and structure. The current phase of work in NCCA is centred on the completion of a draft overview of the redeveloped primary curriculum and the meeting next turned to matters arising from that work. The ongoing nature of consultation employed by NCCA—online consultation on priorities for primary education, consultation seminars, a Schools Forum fostering a community of practice, the representative supporting structures of the curriculum council—was seen to contrast quite sharply with other jurisdictions, which were more directly political, or those where consultation happened at a preliminary phase, or those where school autonomy was paramount and where the state intervention happened by way of assessment and evaluation. There was considerable interest in the emergence in Ireland of a debate regarding the relative merits of a broad curriculum framework and a detailed curriculum where ‘subject’ content was explicitly stated. Without aiming for agreement as to the desirability of either model, discussion yielded the following SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis of possibilities.

Curriculum Framework	
<p>S</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for transdisciplinary approach • Freedom/Autonomy for teacher • Can be made relevant to context • Easier to communicate • Amenable to local influence 	<p>O</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To be child-friendly and emergent, even child-led • Democratic • Allows for different approaches to inspection, professionalism and teacher CPD
<p>W</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insecurity about expectations for learning • Can be ‘miscommunicated’ • Lack of clarity about subject knowledge • Less easily assessable • Can lead to confusing differences between textbooks 	<p>T</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fostering competition among schools • Creates or perpetuates inequality • Uncertainty about quality and standards • Uncertainty factor...is it too big a change from the current setup?

Detailed Curriculum	
<p>S</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher security • Clarity • Commonality of experience for learners • Measurable outcomes/assessable • Publisher-friendly • Affordable CPD programme 	<p>O</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides for learner mastery (even if to a limited degree) • Output is controlled • Progression routes are clear • Coherence • Egalitarian...fairness in that sense • Facilitates quality control
<p>W</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • De-professionalises the teacher • Lessens teacher autonomy • A short-term fix – not a long-term strategy • Removed from the individual experiences of children • Not flexible • Will age or date quickly 	<p>T</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leads to overload (curriculum review merely adds content) • Atomisation of learning more likely • 'Learnification' (relentless management of content) • Leaves little room for reflection • Undermines teacher professionalism • Implies questionable aim/s

The final session on day 1 was an input from Dr Thomas Walsh, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, on his critical review of the *Introduction* to the Primary School Curriculum, 1999. Conducted for the NCCA, this review highlighted successes and shortcomings of the introductory material in support of the process of drafting a redeveloped overview document. In his presentation Dr Walsh noted among the successes of the *Introduction*:

- continuity with the previous curriculum
- a good overview of the structure of the new curriculum
- recognition of teacher professionalism
- a comprehensive range of elements.

Among its shortcomings, however, he noted:

- inclusivity over clarity
- lack of definition of the various elements and their relationship to one another
- weak articulation of the educational theories or research underpinning the curriculum
- lack of alignment with other curricula
- limited overarching pedagogical guidance
- conflation of 'system' and 'curriculum' in the vision, aims and principles.

In relation to the redevelopment work, he posited several recommendations from current research. The draft overview for consultation should include:

- a strong theoretical, conceptual and research base
- clear statements of purpose, aims, and principles
- recognition of the centrality of the teacher as curriculum developer
- clarity and consistency in terminology used.

Research also recommends the development of a curriculum framework with overarching pedagogical guidance for teachers as opposed to a curriculum containing detailed lists of specific content. In discussion, delegates were in broad agreement on the need for a state curriculum for primary education to include a vision for education that is for ‘the whole system’, one that emerges through a clearly articulated statement of values. If such a values-led vision is in place then it should inform all curricula from early childhood to the end of second-level school, thereby ensuring continuity in curriculum aspirations and aims. That said, delegates recognised this as an arena of contestation and, in that context, there was considerable interest in the consultative way in which the NCCA carried out its work with schools and teachers and, in particular, the workings of the Schools Forum as a space for innovation.

Day 2: Session 1 – Exploring ideologies of curriculum: a theoretical lens, a political lens, a values lens

The first session on day 2 considered some key questions about how philosophy and values might inform and shape a curriculum overview, which would in turn have implications for curriculum design, developmental processes, implementation, and teacher CPD. The session began with a discussion of the importance for the curriculum development process of continuing to pose overarching questions (what is education for...what is curriculum for), in effect the **theoretical lens on curriculum**. In the early stages of redevelopment of a state curriculum it is important that we do not allow current (or fashionable?) ideologies to be taken for granted as the given ground upon which the curriculum is to be constructed. Such a stance encourages a critical engagement with the assumptions underpinning both the previous curriculum and the curriculum under development. (See the PowerPoint presentations for detail [here](#).) A hot-seat exercise followed, and the following tentative perspective emerged:

- Curriculum developers are not free to develop curriculum by reference to their own value systems but are often dictated to by political decisions...they receive a remit, an enacted decree that determines the policy they must enact through the curriculum.
- In some jurisdictions discussion about the relationship between social values and curriculum is explicit; in others there is little explicit discussion but a strongly felt sense of identity underpins thinking and informs policy.
- Perennial questions appear: whose values determine curriculum...how are those values shaped and articulated...whose voices are excluded from the process and how?
- Sometimes the curriculum seems to enshrine values such as egalitarianism and inclusion, but the reality of schooling and the outcomes of assessment procedures can conflict with or even deny those values.

The next session took the form of a *walking debate* in which participants indicated in turn the extent of their alignment with two provocative statements reflecting a **political lens on curriculum** by taking up an initial position in the room and then shifting that position as they became less or more convinced by the ensuing discussion. The statements were:

Statement 1– *State curriculum should hold a firm political (ideological) stance.*

Statement 2 – *In formulating state curriculum, ALL stakeholder’s voices should be considered equally.*

Participants were largely in agreement with Statement 1, less so in relation to Statement 2. Although the first statement was initially seen as somewhat authoritarian it emerged through discussion that

just such a firm stance was needed to make clear the values that underpin the curriculum, and that this stance could include allegiance to qualities such as respect for difference, tolerance, and a commitment to social justice. While the second statement seems inclusive and welcoming of differing perspectives it quickly became clear that such a stance might render the curriculum development task virtually unworkable. Both statements served to remind delegates of the inevitable contestation that surrounds curriculum development; the next sessions showed models of innovative and inclusive practice.

Two examples of values-led curriculum in the work of NCCA were shared. The first example focused on the development of a curriculum for Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics where a network of eight schools are sharing inclusive practice. The second example showed how in State-run multi-denominational schools the design and implementation of the *Goodness Me, Goodness You!* programme means that teachers and management in those schools are explicit about their values and give careful consideration to the type of learning experiences and resources they want for children. (See the PowerPoint slides for detail [here](#).)

Day 2: Session 2 – Considerations for curriculum design – Philosophy Circle - Debrief

Following on from the presentations with a values-led lens, discussion focused on the considerations for curriculum design and implementation and, in particular, the role of the individual teacher and/or school teaching staff in curriculum development. Irish delegates made the point that the study of curriculum in the Bachelor of Education degree (the basic qualification for primary school teachers) has taken something of a back seat, overtaken by a concentration on particular disciplines or subject areas. International delegates felt that this was not unique to Ireland; this has a lot to do with time and feelings of overload; in schools the textbook producers tend to take over. This session concluded with the identification of **core issues for a state curriculum**. The meeting agreed on the importance of:

- articulating the purpose of education and curriculum (including the balance of knowledge and skills)
- making an explicit stance on the 'why'...on the philosophy underpinning the curriculum
- articulating the role (positionality) of teachers in relation to the new curriculum
- a democratic approach to curriculum development (recognising the inevitability of conflicts and being determined to resolve them)
- getting the public engaged and interested in curriculum change (dealing explicitly with questions such as 'why change?')
- mobilising and preparing the system generally for curriculum change.

The final session, the Philosophy Circle, explored and shared, in a somewhat light-hearted manner, critical lessons or key messages that participants would take from the expert meeting. Participants felt they would 'take home' that the meeting had been:

- Intriguing...I will look beyond my local context to see what happens elsewhere and what can be learned from that.
- Enlightening...values are everywhere and it important to integrate and reflect.
- A reminder of the common issues that face us...important to reflect at a meta-level, and to have confidence in moving forward.

- Good...it is important to feel free to explore curriculum development in a different way, but freedom brings responsibility.
- Engaging...each jurisdiction is looking at the same set of questions but may reflect upon them in different ways and come to differing solutions.
- Fun...I am now more interested in working with networks of schools as a creative way of developing and trialling curriculum.
- Thoughtful and positive...it is important to be consistent in our processes so that the solutions we find are grounded.

Finally, the consensus among the group was that the meeting had been a successful one. Participants noted that while education systems and structures differed across the jurisdictions represented at the meeting, they had much more in common than might have been expected. In the final analysis, engaging with CIDREE colleagues in this way serves as an important reminder of the need to promote dialogue across our countries, not least because the similarities that facilitate such dialogue are more remarkable than the differences that appear to separate us.

[Presentations/documentation from the meeting can be accessed [here](#).]