

CIDREE Expert Meeting Dublin, Ireland, May 11 - 12, 2017

Theme: Curriculum structure, Time allocation, and Transitions

The primary curriculum in Ireland is at an early stage in the current phase of reform. Consequently, this expert meeting was held to gather an overview of how curriculum is organized and structured in other jurisdictions, to consider the rationale for the curriculum structure, and to explore how time is allocated for individual curriculum areas. In examining the organization of primary curriculum in this way, the meeting considered the approaches adopted in jurisdictions to supporting children as they make transitions through different stages of learning e.g. from the early years to senior primary classes, as well as approaches to support transitions across settings e.g. from pre-school to primary and primary to post-primary school. Finally, the meeting asked colleagues who had recent experience of curriculum reform in their jurisdictions to share their insights into the change process and the successes and challenges encountered along the way.

The two-day meeting was hosted by Ireland's National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in Bedford Hall, Dublin Castle, on May 11 & 12, 2017. Eight delegates from Luxembourg, Netherlands, Scotland, Slovenia and Sweden, joined their colleagues from Ireland for the meeting. This report offers a brief account of the business of the meeting which was structured across 5 sessions, 2 on Day 1, and 3 on Day 2.

Day 1: Session 1 – Introductory presentations and Question/Answer session

During this session, each organisation or jurisdiction represented at the meeting gave a short presentation to the group, providing participants with an overview of curriculum structure, time allocation, and transitions in the speaker's jurisdiction. During the informal question/answer session that followed the presentations, some themes to which the participants would return over the two days emerged. These included:

- Learning goals/targets/outcomes can be set out as global statements, or in a very detailed way. Global statements can be seen by teachers as being too vague; detailed statements run the risk of being used as checklists. Highly detailed outcomes can lead to a feeling of lost freedom or autonomy for the teacher. This debate can be hard to resolve during the curriculum development phase.
- However it is structured, curriculum must strive to find an equitable balance between competences, skills and techniques, and the curriculum content through which such things are developed.
- The curriculum for early childhood should be an emergent one with a developmental and process approach, which takes into account individual traits and has the development of each child as a goal that is more important than achieving narrowly prescribed results. It is best to have an open and flexible curriculum with specified principles, outcomes and examples of activities, but one that is not structured in detail. It can be challenging to achieve this in today's world where demands for accountability and evaluation are high.

- Transitions can be challenging, not only for children but also for all stakeholders who need to collaborate in a trusting manner with each other to support the child's development and learning in a long-term perspective. This involves exchanging knowledge, experience and information to create context, continuity and progression in the children's development and learning. There must also be types of collaboration to prepare children and their parents or guardians prior to transitions.

While noting how structures for curriculum development, patterns of engagement and consultation, approaches to implementation of reform and professional development for teachers were nuanced differently across the jurisdictions, the participants readily acknowledged that they shared much common ground in terms of priorities and aspirations for children's learning and wellbeing.

Day 1: Session 2 – Experiences of Introducing Change

During this session, participants shared their experiences of introducing change to curriculum in their jurisdiction, focusing on the key determinants of the success and/or challenge of the process.

Delegates from Luxembourg noted that while in-service providers might support the implementation of reforms very effectively, change never reaches a final and simple end, and that adoption versus adaptation must be recognised as a key part of the dynamic.

In Slovenia, implementation of reform followed a top-down approach for the most part. Although effective when it came to mass implementation and a transmission-based approach, this approach was superficial and did not contribute to in-depth understanding and reasoning. In addition, the professional school staff still expected national institutions to provide more and more solutions for direct teaching practice. As a result, they tended to attribute reasons for failure to external factors.

These two perspectives on change framed much of the subsequent discussion very well, and there was considerable agreement on the following:

- It is important that school staffs are involved in the whole process and are not seen simply as receivers of the change message/s.
- Where there are too many changes, or where things change too frequently, the change process becomes very challenging. How can the teachers adapt to this frequency of change?
- Curriculum change is really about a public conversation about what we value in children's education.
- It is a slow and iterative process and we can go wrong if we assume that the launch of a new curriculum is the end; it is just the beginning. But sometimes we can underestimate the impact of opinion leaders in schools and in the teaching profession.
- When it comes to continuing professional development (CPD), teachers need to be given the tools for change, but they need to recognise that the tools are not the end. Professional practice requires teachers to take responsibility for their own development.
- Be careful about the level of change expected ...and the frequency of that change.
- The biggest question is about school culture...what is school for?
- We should not underestimate the power of effective initial teacher education as a positive influence on teacher readiness for change.

Day 2: Session 1 - Provocation Session followed by Café Style Discussions and Panel Session

In this session, participants had an opportunity for small-group discussion on the three key questions generated from the provocation session. The provocation session consisted of short presentations from three invited guests, experts with differing perspectives on children's educational transitions. Each presentation posed a single question for small-group discussions, and the session concluded with a panel discussion with the invited guests.

Focusing on the transition from preschool to primary school, the presentation by Dr Mary O'Kane (Lecturer in Early Childhood Education and Psychology) underlined the importance of a positive experience of transition as a predictor of future success in terms of social, emotional and educational outcomes. Her question was: what role does curricular alignment play in supporting children during the transition from preschool to primary school? The question prompted reflection and discussion on the following themes:

- Whether the preschool should reflect the primary school, or the other way around
- How curriculum alignment is understood
- The most important pedagogical approaches for preschool and primary school
- The issues associated with training programmes and qualifications for professionals in the early childhood education and primary education sectors.

In her presentation, Dr Maeve O'Brien (School of Human Development, Institute of Education, Dublin City University) turned to the transition from primary to post-primary school with reference to the challenges of inequality and social disadvantage. Quoting from Gorwood (1986) she reminded her listeners that the *child who has been accustomed to learning by discovery, who has been used to handling materials and working with real objects can be plunged into a verbal world where it is assumed that merely to read about something or to have explained it in the abstract is to understand*, and she posed the question: What can schools and teachers do about the issue of socio-cultural distance before the transition and what are the implications for curriculum in this regard? The ensuing discussion touched on the following:

- Teachers can take steps to become more aware of disadvantage and its impact on the lives of learners.
- It is important for schools to work in partnership with parents.
- Economic inequity can create a wide range of challenges for schools and teachers.
- Teachers can make a considerable difference to children's lives, but school cannot fix everything.

Dr Paul Downes (Institute of Education, Dublin City University) chose to focus his input on three misconceptions about transitions:

Misconception 1. Transition is a problem of the 'maladjusted' child

Misconception 2. The transition rather than the system is the problem

Misconception 3. A flat one-size fits all approach to transitions is sufficient to meet children's needs.

His question was: What are the key features of a differentiated response to transitions to promote inclusive systems? Discussion points included the following:

- There are wide systemic problems that impact on the transition for children. School mirrors what happens in society. Secondary schools can be quite selective and elitist. The mix of

children's socio-economic and cultural backgrounds is not reflected in the backgrounds of teachers.

- There is a strongly individualised approach to transitions in the Netherlands where it is up to teachers to address the general and specific needs of children. In Scotland, additional support is available for vulnerable groups, and there are extended transitions over the summer months. Yet neither jurisdiction has policy supports for children who have experienced specific trauma. Consequently, the individual needs of children are not being addressed, supported or recognised.
- Sweden has a joined-up service provision where preschools, leisure-time centres and primary schools can be jointly managed and sometimes on the same site. This situation reflects family-friendly work and education policies, and this can help with children's transitions from one setting to the next. Many delegates were interested in this leisure-time centres model, with its play-based activities and multidisciplinary teams with a transition focus.

Panel discussion

The session concluded with an open panel discussion with the invited guests, which afforded opportunities for all to share feedback and tease out ideas from the group discussions. Key points made included:

- The importance of providing support for emotional literacy for all teachers across the different sectors within the profession was stressed.
- In working with parents involved in settings, the important priority is ownership of the programme – that the parents have ownership of what happens.
- The way in which curriculum is enacted is vitally important – sometimes teachers can forget that they are teaching children!
- Teachers need to have care for themselves, and need to reflect not only on the professional demands being made upon them but upon their personal wellbeing.
- Preschool practitioners are not always respected professionally. This needs to change to pave the way for more successful transitions between settings.
- It is important to pay more careful attention to the child's/student voice in the education world.
- Scotland has built the children's voice into curriculum development...and this also is happening in Sweden where the curriculum for early years is being re-written.
- Curriculum is sometimes written for distinct stages, even though children's development is seamless. Teachers especially need to recognise this and be flexible and responsive.

Day 2: Session 2 – Plenary Session

The final session explored and shared critical lessons or key messages that participants would take from the expert meeting.

- The challenges across countries are similar and solutions too can be shared. It is important to keep up the dialogue for this reason.
- The gap between curriculum development and enactment means that we must keep communicating the messages. The whole process of curriculum development is iterative: every success is a partial one, continuity and consistency being keys to success.
- Systems thinking is a fundamental challenge for education.

- Countries are interestingly different in their processes for development but it is important not to become blinkered into thinking that we are unique!
- Continuity across education sectors is vital for the child's development.
- Given the rate at which our world is changing and the uncertainties that surround us, what will future curriculum look like?

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.