

Submission to NCCA on the proposed review of the Primary School Curriculum

issued by Sligo School Project CLG

Board of Directors

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The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has opened a debate about a new structure for the primary school curriculum, and about a new time allocation model. The suggestions put forward by NCCA so far can be viewed at:

http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Primary-Education/Primary_Developments/Structure-and-Time-Allocation

NCCA has called for submissions on the proposals.

The Board of Directors of Sligo School Project welcomes discussion about the primary school curriculum. We have issued the following statement in response to the call for submissions by NCCA:

Curriculum is not as clear-cut a term as it may seem. In the case of the primary curriculum it is commonly identified with the written document that states the aims and objectives of the schooling of children, the content of subjects that is to be taught in primary schools in order to achieve these aims and objectives, and the principles of teaching used.

Yet, there are other ways to understand curriculum in a more encompassing manner, be it in discussions about hidden curriculum or in those about cultural curriculum. Unfortunately they do not feature in the published proposal for a reconsideration of the primary curriculum referring to structure and time. This is a self-inflicted constraint. It closes down certain avenues of thinking/talking about school practice/s that would have the potential to significantly add to the development of a more pluralist landscape of innovative and differentiated approaches within the education sector. We cannot see a reason to restrict the areas of discussion on such a narrowed view. It would be highly desirable for this self-constraint to be shaken off.

In fact, as soon as practitioners are involved in discussions about curriculum there is already an immediate tendency to widen the scope of arguments and areas considered.

In the consultative conference on the NCCA-proposal/s held in Dublin on the 28th of March 2017 there were two short periods during which participants were asked to briefly discuss the proposed stage-models of restructuring the curriculum, and the proposed revision of time allocation. The group discussions were introduced and facilitated by NCCA-members who provided a framework of questions to be considered by participants. Striking in these short exchanges was the difficulty to remain within the narrow constraints as provided by the facilitators. When discussing about curriculum teachers, principals, early childcare practitioners inevitably move away from discussing a written document (or collection of written documents). They instantly bring in the contradictions that they experience and the fields of tension within which they shape their daily practice. Issues that were mentioned in the groups included elements like power structures, teacher mentalities, parental pressure and expectations, exam orientation (standardised testing), resourcing, class-sizes, school size,

social equality, rigid school inspections (WSE). This listing is certainly not exhaustive and it can be easily expanded, taking into account e. g. elements like team pressure, pluralism of philosophical underpinnings, constructions of childhood etc.

Another observation from the same conference concerns the presentations of two primary teachers and a primary principal on their current practice in their respective classes, schools. The examples shown referred to:

- a) the revision of the delivery of mathematics (and inclusion of elements of coding) resulting in a restructured time-frame (i. e. a full day of maths/coding every two weeks) combined with a largely explorative learning culture with little interference from adult side;
- b) the integration of all subject areas in a theme based approach towards classroom planning and practice;
- c) the restructuring of classroom practice based on the implementation of a purely play based learning, with a resulting restructuring of physical space/s in classrooms (school).

Albeit that it was not explicitly mentioned by the moderator/s, these examples were presented not at random, rather they were shown as exemplary “good practice.” What was remarkable about the presentations was the context in which they were placed. Given that the conference was a consultation process as a first step into a revision, overhaul and re-structuring of the primary curriculum these examples gave an impression of the range of practice that is actually possible at present, i. e. against the background of the *current* curriculum.

This is an important observation. It confirms the relative openness of the current curriculum (here understood in the narrow sense of written document, see above) for creative local adaptation and implementation.

As all practitioners know quite well there is an immense overlap between subject areas. In fact the subject areas as distinguished (not only) in the current primary school curriculum are simply a set of theoretical concepts of interpreting worldly phenomena and processes in a compartmentalised manner. As such they have been historically established in ideological battles over influence zones in what can be claimed to be legitimate “knowledge.”

From the viewpoint of lived experience (of children and teachers in primary school) the distinctions are a superficial grid that is imposed on this experience. One example for the myriad of others that happen day-in day-out in primary schools in Ireland.

Babies and Bathwater

It started as a scientific exploration about capacities, litres, containers, bottles and their volume, but science is anything but dry matter ...



... so it developed into an array of other areas, balance, grace, height, weight ...



... until eventually the babies called for attention, which was duly granted ...





... and after having them all cleaned they were dressed and fed ...



... while the bathwater remained for more scientific exploration.



In terms of the current curriculum this activity covers as a minimum the subject areas: Mathematics, Science, History, SPHE, English, plus the core curriculum of the school. Hence for the teacher it is possible to subsume the activity in any of these subject areas in her notes (planning and/or recording). However, the mental operation that is necessary to rip the activity apart for subsuming (certain elements of) it under whatever is considered subject-

specifically correct snippets of knowledge easily becomes a hindrance in allowing the activity flow in practice. In concrete terms: If the teacher had allowed herself to be stifled by the restrictions imposed by the subject area (in this case originally “Mathematics”) she would have most likely stopped the children from pampering the babies ... and by doing so prevented the appropriation of a (learning) activity through the children, prevented thus the conversations that ensued over topics of significance for them (their siblings, their growth, their physical and social needs, wants, wishes, demands), prevented the role play in which traditional gender roles are practically challenged, and simply taken out the fun of the whole situation.

Similarly to the presentations at the consultative conference the baby/bathwater example provided here could be seen as good practice – under the conditions of the current curriculum. Yet, there is a process of bending the curriculum (i. e. the written document/s) involved in the presentation of such good practice in teacher's planning notes, reports and the underlying mental (and time) efforts. This process warrants at least two comments.

a) It gives evidence of the actual possibilities offered by the current curriculum, and the flexibility that it allows if teachers are willing to enter into (mental and practical) negotiations over a creative and locally adapted implementation. This is a positive element.

b) It gives evidence of the actual necessities imposed on teachers in (mental and practical) negotiations over a creative and locally adapted implementation of the current curriculum. The time and mental effort that is necessary to bend the written documentation to fit in with the subject driven approach appears completely inappropriate. This is a negative element.

It could be argued that the current curriculum as such does not explicitly require teachers to engage in this process of jamming activities into subject areas (i. e. it is not specifically demanded in the written document). But this is exactly the point where the first observation from the consultative conference comes into play, teachers discussing the curriculum in terms of their practice. It is a shared experience amongst practitioners that school inspectors often push for a certain interpretation of the curriculum in which subject areas are central, and also the time allocation based on these subject areas as incorporated in the current curriculum in spite of the fact that the time allocations are only a suggested framework.

Teachers who use the suggested framework “in the most flexible way” in a bid to “provide a comprehensive and coherent learning experience” for the children in their classes by “adapting the curriculum to the particular needs and circumstances” in “awareness of the distinctive character of the school” therefore easily face a battle against inappropriate attempts for standardisation that are in fact in contravention to the spirit of the current curriculum.

A discussion about a change of curriculum structure and time allocation as opened now by NCCA fails to address this conflict in a straight manner. Indeed, to a large degree the conflicts on the ground do not ensue over issues of content of curriculum as a written document, they rather ensue over issues of the use of the document, its interpretation according to different visions and within certain power structures.

In this regard the discussion of a revised curriculum structure and time allocation simply misses the point.

It is accepted that there is a chance that a revision of the structure of the curriculum (i. e. the written document) could bring about a liberation from the (mental) shackles of subjects, thus opening the avenue to a more holistic approach in teaching in primary schools. In this regard the proposal of NCCA does not reach far enough.

More important however seems a discussion about an increase in the likelihood of schools taking serious the request to adapt the curriculum to their local circumstances and withstanding the demands for standardisation that is put on them. It is here that NCCA should play an important role by making clear – in relation to the current curriculum, as much as in relation to any revised version thereof – that it is the obligation of each school and each teacher to take as their starting point for planning and implementation of their practice the *real children* in their classes and not the fictional child that is implied in a cross-sectional average standard.

for the Board of Directors of Sligo School Project CLG

Robert Hamm

Secretary