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Time and Structure of a Redeveloped Primary School Curriculum

Introduction

Drawing upon its particular expertise in the field of early childhood education and care, PLÉ is primarily focussed upon structure, and early childhood in terms of responding to the NCCA (2016) consultation on the proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum. Consequently, PLÉ supports the broad thrust of the NCCA proposal to move from ‘a model of four arbitrary stages which share the same structure, to an incremental stage model...with a differentiated curriculum structure’ (NCCA, 2016, p. 29) which emphasises the continuity of children’s learning experiences. In this respect, the proposed changes to the structure of a redeveloped primary school curriculum recognise the funds of knowledge (Hedges, 2015) that children bring to primary school, and in turn, acknowledge the contribution of, and the connectedness of pre-school education and primary school. We are heartened by Morgan’s (2014) assertion that the use of stages in a redeveloped curriculum represents a shift away from the Piagetian concept that there are qualitative differences in learning capacity at different stages, and that different forms of learning are required at each stage. The proposed emphasis upon the incremental nature of change in children’s capacity rather than major qualitative changes, is therefore, a welcome development. As Morgan (2014, p.6) rightly states ‘learning experiences should match the distinctive features of children’s ways of understanding and relating with the world’. In this context, it may be useful to consider the use of ‘*phases*’ rather than stages, to further consolidate this perspective.

It is also encouraging to note that the proposals are:

- a) Directed towards addressing curriculum overload which is a particular challenge of the present primary school curriculum (NCCA, 2012; McCoy, Smith and Banks, 2012)

- b) Focussed upon ensuring that children’s experiences are relevant and meaningful across the education continuum from early childhood through to entry to post-primary education.

The latter is particularly important in terms of children’s learning dispositions in early childhood, for as noted by Da Ros-Voseles and Fowler-Haughey (2007), when programmes “focus primarily on knowledge and skills acquisition, important dispositions are often ignored” (p.3). Therefore, drawing upon Bruce’s (2011) stance that areas of learning involving the humanities, arts and sciences cannot be separated; young children learn in an integrated way and not in neat tidy compartments, PLÉ endorses the importance of a thematic approach to learning in the early years as being effective. Accordingly, the intention to embed a thematic approach based upon Aistear (NCCA, 2009), and to focus upon integrated learning in a redeveloped primary school curriculum, is, in our view particularly timely, and appropriate for the early years of primary education.

The resulting curriculum alignment between education at pre-primary and primary school, would be a very beneficial development for the young child, specifically in relation to the transition from one educational environment to another. In fact, O’Kane and Murphy (2016) consider that a positive experience during this transition is a predictor of children’s future success in terms of social, emotional and educational outcomes.

Reconceptualising State Provision

Morgan (2014) suggests that ‘a strong case can be made for conceptualising the... [ECCE scheme] and the initial years in primary school as one continuous phase/stage....’ (p. 4). As part of the rationale for ‘reconceptualising education’ in this way, the NCCA (2016) refer to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE scheme) (DCYA, 2016) as being part of ‘State Provision’. In our view however, the ECCE scheme cannot be classified as ‘State Provision’ for a number of reasons:

- a) It provides a ‘State Subsidy’ to ECEC providers (the majority of whom are within the private sector),
- b) Early Years Educators are not employed by the State. Rather, individual settings are contracted by the State to provide the ECCE scheme
- c) Children’s attendance is not mandatory

A further anomaly relates to the exclusion of children aged birth to three years from the current proposals. Internationally, the period of early childhood education is normally defined as birth to eight years (Morgan, 2014). In the Irish context, it is important to note that while state provision begins at three years (i.e., the ECCE scheme), the two early childhood practice frameworks—*Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009)—support children’s learning and development from birth. Moreover, it could be argued that ‘state provision’ as defined by the NCCA, equally applies to children from birth, given the various funding schemes available within the ECEC sector including, CCS, CCS-P, CETS, CE Childcare, and the forthcoming Single Affordable Childcare scheme. Ultimately, the Affordable Childcare Scheme which will replace all existing funding schemes, will provide subsidies for children from six months old, while also providing a strong basis for supporting the following higher level objectives:

- Promoting positive child outcomes
- Narrowing the gap in attainment between more and less advantaged children by
- enabling all children to access high quality, affordable childcare
- Driving quality across the sector in Ireland (DCYA, 2016).

With this in mind, ‘State Provision’ i.e., the Affordable Childcare Scheme will afford an even greater continuity of experience for children, and an acknowledgment of the significant learning that takes place from birth.

Care-Education Divide

It is concerning to note under the NCCA proposals, that children under three years of age are not considered part of the education system. This is a worrying development, and indicative of a deeply entrenched ‘care - education’ divide (Moloney, 2015b). A staggering amount of development occurs between birth and three years, all of which is influenced by a child’s relationships, experiences and environment. During this period, relationships with adults and other children promotes healthy brain development, builds social and emotional skills, and supports emerging language, literacy and numeracy (www.zerotothree.org); all characteristic of lifelong learning. However, the current proposals risk denigrating work in this area of early childhood to that of care provision only.

Ultimately, those working with children aged from three to eight years will be aligned with the formal education sector, and enjoy an elevated status within the education system, and

within society generally. Meanwhile, younger children (birth to three years) will continue to be disadvantaged in terms of investment, qualified staff, and a holistic approach to their early care and education (Moloney, 2015b). In turn, early childhood educators working with these younger children, irrespective of qualification levels, and experience, will be associated solely with care, for which there appears to be little regard within the education system.

Summary

PLÉ welcomes the broad thrust of the proposal to move towards an incremental stage model, and favours the three staged model as set out within the consultative documentation. In our view, the proposals overall, recognise the many benefits that may result from such a model including the following:

- Emphasis upon the incremental nature of change in children's capacity rather than major qualitative changes
- Recognition of the funds of learning that children bring to primary school
- Acknowledgement of the contribution of, and the connectedness of pre-school education and primary school
- Potential to redress curriculum overload in junior and senior infant classes, focussing instead upon aligning the redeveloped primary school curriculum with the principles and methodologies of Aistear
- Awareness of the benefits of play-based, and integrated learning
- Focus on benefits/outcomes of child-led, emergent curriculum (curiosity, exploration) at 'Phase 1'.
- Possibility for 'Phase 1' to support metacognition and social interactions
- Potential to standardise the implementation of Aistear within pre-school and primary school
- Potential to create curriculum alignment between pre-primary and primary school, helping to create a seamless transition between education settings, as well as a reduction in the number of abrupt transitions associated with arbitrary stages and subject based curriculum. This is a particular strength of the three stage model which is premised upon bridging the thematic and integrated approach in Phase 1 with curriculum areas in Phase 2 and a subject-based curriculum in Phase 3, thus representing smoother transitions between phases

- Possibility for complementary collaboration between early childhood educators and primary school teachers

Consequences for Educators and Teachers

There is no doubt that the proposed alignment of a curricular approach across the pre-primary and primary sectors represents major reform of the education system in Ireland. While welcome, such reform may result in considerable challenge at multiple levels. Although the proposals explicitly state that Phase 1 of the two models being proposed, encompass the two years of the ECCE scheme (NCCA, 2016), the consultative document, does not give any consideration to how this may impact upon the early years sector. Rather, the challenges discussed within the consultative document are focussed solely upon how the proposed reforms may impact upon primary school teachers in terms of the following:

- a) Impact of the move to an integrated curriculum structure and use of a playful pedagogy in Phase 1 upon teachers
- b) How initial teacher preparation could best support and enable teachers to work across the phases of a redeveloped curriculum
- c) How continuing professional development could further support teachers in building their professional expertise to work across phases
- d) Challenges to teacher identity, recruitment and career progression (NCCA, 2016, p. 24).

While PLÉ acknowledges the inherent challenges for teachers as outlined, we are troubled by the absence of any discussion relating to the challenges and risks for those working with children aged 3 to 5 years as part of the ECCE scheme which, it is proposed will be part of Phase 1. This is disquieting on a number of levels, not least of which is associated with the ideological stance espoused by the NCCA (2016) that...

the continuity of learning experience provided by a common curriculum structure in pre-school settings and early primary would support children's development and transition between the two settings(p. 26)

In the absence of joint/shared training for both early childhood educators and primary school teachers, this particular objective cannot be realised, and may result in the antithesis of an incremental staged model. While the implementation of teaching approaches such as 'playful structure' (Walsh, 2011) may benefit children at primary level, cognisance must be taken of

Fallon's (2015) research about play and the role of the teacher in primary school. Fallon concludes that because play renders teaching invisible, and is inconsistent with the systems of accountability inherent in primary schools, that teachers perceive it as a risk to their professional reputations. Likewise, teachers who have participated in Aistear workshops and summer courses as part of the Aistear Tutor Initiative (2010) (www.ateci.ie), have also highlighted challenges in using a play-based pedagogy within the current subject-based curriculum (NCCA, 2016). The NCCA (2012) notes that Aistear is primarily implemented through the 'Aistear hour' which falls short of what is envisaged in Aistear which is premised upon a thematic and integrated approach to learning. With this in mind, PLÉ is fearful that such practices will continue, leading to the possible formalisation of academic learning for children in pre-primary settings (Ring, Mhic Mhathúna, Moloney, Hayes et al., 2015; Katz, 2015; PACEY, 2013). PLÉ strongly resists the "schoolification" of early childhood education and feel that children must not be identified as 'underperforming' or stigmatised re: 'school' readiness. PLÉ calls instead for a 'playification' of schooling, with careful consideration being given to differentiation across Phase 1.

Additionally, while some 18,000 teachers have participated in Aistear workshops as outlined above through the Aistear Tutor Initiative, there has not been a national, coordinated Continual Professional Development programme to support early childhood educators in using Aistear. The exception here is the 'Aistear in Action Initiative (ECI/NCCA, 2013) which involved seven pre-school settings. It is imperative that consideration is given to joint initial teacher preparation and continual professional development for all teachers involved in 'Phase 1'. This is the only acceptable mechanism to:

- Establish and maintain a continuum of learning experiences for young children
- Develop a collaborative approach to children's education
- Create a community of learners across Phase 1 involving early childhood educators and infant teachers, as well as parents, school principals and early years managers

Concerns relating to a diminution of teacher professional identity is well documented within the consultative document. These concerns speak volumes about the current value of play and early childhood education in Ireland. It is evident, that much work is required to elevate the status of, and recognition for both play and early childhood education within Irish society, and within the educational system. Equally there needs to be a strong emphasis in education

programmes for early childhood educators and primary school teachers on how play supports learning.

Professional Standing of Educators and Teachers

The status of early childhood educators has been the subject of much debate and concern in Ireland (e.g., Madden, 2012; Moloney and Pope, 2013; Moloney, 2015a, 2015b). The relatively low status of early years educators is strongly associated with women's work, misunderstanding of what is involved in the care and education of young children, and the diverse qualification profile within early childhood (Moloney, 2015a; 2015b). Analysis of the most recent DCYA Early Years Recognised Qualifications (2017) indicates that in excess of 500 qualifications are acceptable ranging from QQI Level 5 and 6, to QQI Level 7 and 8 across multiple disciplines including BSc, B.Ed., B.A Early Years Care and Education, B.A Social Care Practice, MA in Therapeutic Childcare and so on. Regardless of qualification levels, there is currently no correlation between educational attainment, professional status, and compensation. Unsurprisingly many educators feel undervalued and underappreciated, with increasing numbers leaving in search of better paid work elsewhere, including primary school teaching (Moloney and Pope, 2013; Moloney, 2015b).

The proposals relating to the structure of a redeveloped primary school curriculum present a meaningful opportunity to advance the professional standing of all teachers/educators working in Phase 1 in a systematic and comprehensive manner. Here we wish to reiterate the need to extend stage 1 to encompass children from birth to three years. While we acknowledge that this may not be the case in other jurisdictions (NCCA, 2016), we urge the NCCA to be brave; to grasp the opportunity presented, and to lead the way in this regard, thus becoming the first country to embrace the notion of education from birth.

In order to progress teacher professional identity, PLÉ suggests that teacher mobility must become a core aspect of Phase 1 under the proposed reforms. This would mean that ECEC and B.Ed. graduates would be eligible for teaching posts across the entire gamut of Phase 1, i.e., children aged birth to six years. To a certain extent, such mobility already exists with regards to the ECCE scheme, as evidenced through the DCYA Early Years Recognised Qualifications (2017) where primary school teachers are permitted to work in pre-school

settings. Regrettably, ECEC graduates who hold a Level 8 honours degree do not have the same mobility in terms of teaching in primary school infant classrooms.

Professional development pathways, must also be considered for those currently working in early years settings, and trained to Level 5 and 6. It is crucial that these staff are afforded the opportunity to upskill to Level 7 and 8, and that their experience of working within the sector is valued.

Furthermore pay parity for pre-school and primary school teachers where qualification equivalency is evident must be to the forefront of any reform of the education system as outlined by the NCCA (2016). Failure to establish pay parity across Phase 1 will result in considerable industrial unrest. The challenge is; that educators implementing Aistear with children aged birth to five years, or three to five years (depending on the inclusion of the former in Phase 1) will earn considerably less than their primary school counterparts who will also be tasked with implementing Aistear with children in the five to six year cohort. This situation will be both unacceptable and untenable.

The matter of inspection also warrants attention, and it is noteworthy that in 1999, the DES called for a single unitary inspection system. In keeping with the thrust of our response thus far, and building on our previous work (Moloney, 2015c), PLÉ would like to see a continuum of quality assurance from birth right through Phase 1. The precedent for such quality assurance has already been established through the recently introduced early years education focussed inspections (DES, 2015). A key benefit of this approach would be a standardised approach to inspection, continuity of experience for children across Phase 1, greater clarification in terms of the respective roles of early childhood educators and primary school teachers, and a less traumatic transition to primary school.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Although there are inevitable challenges associated with the proposed structure of a redeveloped curriculum, particularly with regards to the value of play, and early childhood education, teacher professional identify, training and continual professional development, and pay equity, PLÉ believes that these can be reduced, and/or eliminated through the following measures:

- **Extend Phase 1 to encompass children from birth to three years.** As stated we urge the NCCA to grasp this recommendation, and in so doing, that Ireland becomes the first country to embrace the concept of education from birth
- **Address the issue of teacher professional identity** throughout Phase 1, rather than focussing solely upon teachers working with children outside of the ECCE scheme
- **Develop a system of teacher mobility as a core aspect of Stage 1** under the proposed reforms, in order to enable ECEC and B.Ed. graduates to teach across the entire gamut of Stage 1, i.e., children aged 3 to 6 years
- **Establish professional development pathways** for educators currently working in the early years sector, who are trained to Level 5 and 6, so that they upskill to Level 7 and 8 if desired
- **Reform initial teacher training to encompass joint/shared training of early childhood educators and primary school teachers** as a means of establishing and maintaining a continuum of learning experiences for young children; developing a collaborative approach to children’s education, and creating a community of learners across phase 1 involving early childhood educators and infant teachers, as well as parents, school principals and early years managers
- **Develop and implement a funded national, coordinated Continual Professional Development programme for early childhood educators and primary school teachers** in how to use Aistear in the two years of the ECCE scheme, and with children aged five to six in primary school. The purpose here is to ensure that the formalisation of academic learning in pre-school is avoided, that children are not identified as ‘underperforming’ or stigmatised re: ‘school’ readiness. Rather the playification of school must be emphasised
- **Introduce pay parity for early childhood educators** and primary school teachers where qualification equivalency is evident
- **Extend the DES Early Years Education Focussed Inspections** to the early years of primary school in Phase 1. This would result in a standardised approach to inspection, continuity of experience for children across Phase 1, greater clarification in terms of the respective roles of early childhood educators and primary school teachers, and a less traumatic transition to primary school.

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