



Submission on Curriculum Reform

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1. Parents

- Any exercise in reforming curriculum must give greater opportunities to hear the voice of parents both through their representative body (NPC) and as individuals. Traditionally educators have not been inclusive enough with parents. This may have arisen from previous centuries – parents nowadays are highly educated and well able to express views on the primary curriculum.

2. Curriculum Excellence

- The 'revised curriculum' (1999) built on the best of their 'new curriculum' (1971) is considered to be as good as anything available anywhere in the world. There is a strong emphasis on child centred and discovery based learning.
- However, the manner in which the revised curriculum was published and the in-service training provided to teachers was on a subject by subject basis. Subliminally the integration of subjects and how they are taught were given far less emphasis in the previous 1971 new curriculum.
- The inclusion of drama as a subject in the 1999 curriculum may not be the best of ideas. Drama in education is a most effective teaching and learning methodology – this is beyond argument. However, affording drama as a timetabled standalone subject area doesn't make sense.

3. Time Allocation

- The framework to allocate time for different subjects in the 1999 curriculum leaves 1 ½ hours of unallocated time to be used at the discretion of each school. It appears that most schools spread this time evenly across the core subjects. Some schools use it for teaching a third language or other areas of interest that a school may have development e.g. orchestra, ICT etc.
- Many schools in middle and high income areas witness their pupils engaging in multiple after school classes e.g. swimming, violin, French, computers etc. Such schools can then afford to spend more time on the core subjects. Schools in low income areas struggle to balance their time between the arts as well as the needs of basic literacy and numeracy.
- Following national consultation, every school should be operating the same time allocation framework.

4. Gaeilge

- A radical review of teaching gaeilge is required. We have decades of experience in failure to deliver even minimal standards of proficiency. As a starting point a national policy towards the Irish language is required and this must deal with the elephant in the room – the default negative attitude towards the language. Children come to school without bias and full of enthusiasm. Within a few short years, the negativity they have absorbed puts an end to their desire to learn.
- Some strategies
 - Spend less time in the formal teaching of the language
 - Teach PE exclusively through the medium of Irish – benefits to both subjects!
 - Separate Irish culture from Irish as an academic subject. Maintain Irish culture as a compulsory subject throughout the educational system. This is to include songs, stories, seanfhocail, jokes, humour, slang, etc. Emphasis entirely on oral
 - Provide Irish as an optional academic subject studying language and literature as an optional subject in secondary school

5. Social Personal & Health Education

- Currently allocated 30 minutes per week – totally inadequate time – probably the most important subject for children in today’s reality – Early sexualisation of young children, negative body self image, eating disorders, drugs, alcohol, bullying, depression, neglect, broken homes etc.
- Any parent asked the right question will acknowledge two things about SPHE – it is critically important to their children’s health and happiness – it is the area that parents find most challenging and need most help from their child’s teacher
- The Stay Safe Programme has been well funded and teachers train to deliver its content over the last 18 years. Yet the most recent survey of schools by the Child Abuse Prevention Programme shows that more than 10% of schools do not teach it! This is completely unacceptable given all we know now.
- Over the last 15 years, every teacher has been given training on the use of Circle Time, co-operative learning and a number of other proven teaching methodologies which improve children’s learning. These methodologies are not being utilised in all schools. DES circulars are used to implement many changes. Why not confirm the implementation of these teaching methodologies nationally?

6. Physical Education

- PE is allocated 1 hour per week, again not enough time and poor facilities still in most schools
- Childhood obesity and related illnesses e.g. diabetes type 2 are significantly on the rise in Ireland. There is a need for a national strategy to deal with obesity. Schools have a part to play but cannot be the full solution.
- There is a lot of evidence to suggest that girls in particular and boys to a lesser extent drop out of playing sport after leaving primary school. This issue needs to be addressed by the major sporting bodies and indeed by the physical education experts at second level

7. Religion

- It's interesting to compare the time allocated to Religion, SPHE, PE etc. Sample surveys of parents indicate that most parents have no idea how much time is allocated to teaching religion or any other subjects for that matter. However, when they are asked their opinion, they have very definite views. A key question for educators, administrators and politicians is – Are we prepared to give parents a say in this vital area?

8. Information & Communication Technology

- The over-riding legacy of the integration of ICT into Primary Education has been the creation of a huge 'digital divide'. Other than schools whose parents can afford to fund ICT and in a smaller number of cases; where Principals have secured the support of Irish-based multi-nationals, the vast majority of Primary classrooms are not benefiting from technology. A major opportunity was lost when the 1999 curriculum was introduced. At least one subject area should have been designed for ICT as the medium for teaching and learning. Successful Ministers have repeated investment announcements and established multiple committees to advise. There is an urgent need to define the hardware and support systems that are needed. Principals and teachers must be relieved from struggling with hardware and internet access. A target must be set e.g. September 2011, whereby every child in the country to be taught mathematics through ICT – start with the end in mind and plan for that success. We already are lagging so far behind our OECD counter-parts, that unless there is immediate action taken, we are on course to deliberately undermine our entire education system and the future of our national competitiveness.

9. A New Focus

- The category titles (Irish, English, Maths, History, Geography etc) through which we have organised the curriculum has not changed much since the 19th Century. Just about everything else has changed in schools, homes and the workplace; yet, this set of subject headings prevails. Curriculum integration is a familiar concept at Primary level. However, the Junior and Leaving Certificate examination system continues to exert a downwards pressure on the upper end of Primary School. The time has come to find new ways of structuring curriculum. This categorisation into traditional subject headings does little to enhance the education of the whole child. In reality of course, it is the ideal model where success against your peers is measurement of rote learning and a child's ability to reproduce information. This blunt model really suits the whole grind school industry.

10. Supporting Teachers

A curriculum that is both dynamic and broad-reaching has implications for teachers. The confidence and on-going enthusiasm required to deliver such a curriculum needs to be replenished through on-going professional development. The model of 'cuiditheor' developed by the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) is an excellent model, and should play a key part in the support of teachers in the years ahead.

11. Homework

The role of homework in our education system requires serious research and analysis. There is little evidence to suggest that homework as we currently know it has any real benefit. Some serious concerns exist amongst principals and teachers about the impact of homework:

- Homework causes a lot of stress between parents and children
- Parents frequently report being unable to help their children with homework
- It often erodes the short length 'quality-time' that parents have with their children
- Homework is often based at a challenge level suited for average to high achievers
- Inexperienced teachers frequently over prescribe the amount of homework
- The more homework a teacher gives; the more teaching time is lost 'correcting' it
- Some teachers admit that they give homework because they feel parents expect it
- Some parents admit that a teacher who gives a lot of homework is considered a good teacher
- Effective teaching in the classroom which differentiates both children's learning styles and learning abilities far outweighs any value of homework.

12. Continuity

- While acknowledging some aspects of curriculum continuity between Primary and Post- Primary schools are being addressed; the over-all the lack of continuity, not just in terms of curriculum content, but also in areas such as timetabling, pupil-teacher interaction, pastoral care and teaching methodologies indicate a serious lack of continuity between Primary and Post-Primary schools. This begs the question – is the school meant to serve the educational needs of the child or is the child meant to fit in to our various schooling systems?
- Given the broad range of pre-schools from home care, crèches, playschools and Montessori schools, it is far more difficult to address the issue of continuity at entry level to Primary education. Nobody denies the importance of early childhood education. There is a real need to address the issue of quality and provision for 3-5 year olds given how important this period in a child’s life is in determining their overall education and life chances.