

THEMATIC PROBE. Primary Education: an International Perspective

Country Description: Ireland

This country description was compiled from the *INCA* Archive (www.inca.org.uk).

1. Organisation of school phases=

<i>How are the early years and primary phases organised? (3-5yrs? 5-11yrs?)</i>
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Education in Ireland is compulsory from the age of six to the age of 15 years. Compulsory primary education caters for six- to 12-year-olds.

However, although children in Ireland are not obliged to attend school until the age of six, well over half of all four-year-olds and almost all five-year-olds are enrolled in early childhood education in infant classes provided by state-funded primary schools. (Children can be enrolled on their fourth birthday.)

The first two classes in primary school are usually designated ‘junior infants’ (for children aged four to five years) and ‘senior infants’ (for five- to six-year-olds). (In smaller schools it is often necessary to combine different class levels with one teacher. In such cases junior infants and senior infants will usually be taught in one class.)

The typical primary school divides students by age into eight year groups, classes or ‘Standards’ ranging from junior and senior infants to Standard VI:

- Junior infants, aged four to five years.
- Senior infants, aged five to six.
- First class/Standard I, ages six to seven.
- Second class/Standard II, seven- to eight-year-olds.
- Third class/Standard III, ages eight to nine.
- Fourth class/Standard IV, nine- to 10-year-olds.
- Fifth class/Standard V, ages 10-11.
- Sixth class/Standard VI, ages 11-12 years.

Where, due to the small size of the primary school, classes have to contain children from more than one year group schools try, where possible, to ensure that classes consist of consecutive year groups (for example Standard I and Standard II/first class and second class together).

<i>What are the points of transfer between phases?</i>

Infant classes in primary schools	Primary (known as ‘first-level’)	Lower secondary (known as ‘second-level’)
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4- to 6-year-olds	Aged 6-12 years	Aged 12-15 years
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2. Locus of control

What degree of control over curriculum content and other aspects of primary schools exists at the national, regional, local and/or school levels?

The education and training system is highly centralised. The roles of different organisations in the Irish education system have been clarified recently in the Education Act 1998 which provides, for the first time, a clear statutory framework within which the rights and roles of the Department of Education and Science (DES) (the Ministry), the schools Inspectorate, school principals, teachers, parents and other interested parties are clearly defined.

Department of Education and Science, DES

The Department of Education and Science (DES) is responsible for the administration of publicly-funded primary, post-primary and special education. It formulates and reviews policy; allocates resources and monitors expenditure; is responsible for quality assurance (through the Inspectorate division, see below); and provides advice and support to educational management and staff.

Inspectorate

Inspectors are the main link between schools and the DES. Their duties include the inspection and evaluation of teachers, advice on the planning of curricula, and the administration of tests and examinations. The Inspectorate also reviews the quality of implementation of new and revised educational programmes and subjects in schools.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) was established in November 1987 and became a statutory body in 2001. Its brief is to advise the Minister for Education and Science on matters related to curriculum and assessment for early childhood, primary and post-primary education.

Boards of management

In 1975, a system of *boards of management* of schools was established for the primary sector. Following the enactment of the Education Act 1998, these boards, which were originally established by school patrons (as owners of schools) in a spirit of partnership, were given a legal framework. This lays down the rules and regulations *boards of management* are to run by, including their composition, appointment procedures, duties and responsibilities.

Boards of management have a duty to manage the school to the benefit of the students and their parents, and are expected to provide an appropriate education for every student at the school, in accordance with any policies determined by the Minister for Education and Science. They usually include teacher and parent representatives.

Funding

In publicly-funded education in Ireland, the current and capital costs of primary schools, including the full costs of teachers' salaries, are predominantly funded by the State and supplemented by local contributions. The majority of primary schools in Ireland have some involvement in fund-raising to supplement state grants.

Curriculum

There are different levels of responsibility for the development and implementation of the curriculum. At national level, the curriculum is formulated by the Minister for Education and Science, on the advice of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The Department of Education and Science (DES) then oversees the implementation of the curriculum through its Inspectorate.

The current primary level curriculum - the *Primary School Curriculum 1999*, was formulated principally by the NCCA, assisted by committees representing all the principals partners and interests in primary education (including, for example, the Irish National Teachers Organisation and the National Parents' Council). The development and implementation of the curriculum for religious education in primary schools is the responsibility of the relevant church authorities.

Within this centrally-provided curricular framework, schools have the flexibility to plan a programme that is appropriate to the individual school's circumstances and to the needs, aptitudes and interests of the children involved. At school level therefore, the particular character of an individual school makes a vital contribution to the nature of the curriculum offered. Adaptation of the curriculum to suit the individual school is achieved through the preparation and continuous updating of a *plean scoile* (school plan).

There is no provision for the DES to monitor the curriculum offered in private schools.

Are there any shifts in the distribution of control between these different levels? (Is it possible to assign percentages to each level, to reflect circumstances in each country?)

In addition to providing a legal framework for the *boards of management* established in primary education since 1975, the 1998 Education Act also provided for the introduction of *boards of management* in post-primary schools.

At what intervals is the curriculum reviewed? (eg are there established review cycles?)

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is attempting to establish the principle of aspects of the curriculum coming under review over time, with curriculum review in general being viewed as a cycle, rather than an event.

A revised Primary School Curriculum (*Curaclam na Bunscoile*) was introduced in Ireland in September 1999 and is being implemented in phases (over a four- to five-

year period). Prior to this, the last major revision of the curriculum for primary schools took place in 1971.

The process of revising the Primary School Curriculum began with the work of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum which published an annual report in 1990. This report comprised a detailed appraisal of the 1971 curriculum and provided the basis for the redesign and restructuring presented in the final 1999 version.

3. Curriculum content

What does the statutory curriculum consist of?

The *Primary School Curriculum 1999* is presented in seven curriculum areas, some of which are further sub-divided into subjects. The seven curriculum areas are:

- language: sub-divided into *Gaeilge* (Irish) and English *;
- mathematics;
- social, environmental and scientific education (SESE): sub-divided into history, geography, and science;
- arts education: sub-divided into visual arts, music, and drama;
- physical education (PE);
- social, personal and health education (SPHE) (a new curriculum area in 1999); and
- religious education.

* The majority of schools conduct lessons through the medium of English as this is the mother tongue of the majority of the population. However, in those areas of the country where *Gaeilge* is the mother-tongue, the teaching medium is usually *Gaeilge*. There are also some schools where teaching takes place through the medium of *Gaeilge* but where *Gaeilge* is not normally the mother-tongue of the children, nor is the school in a *Gaeltacht* (*Gaeilge*-speaking) area.

At their parents' request, children may opt not to study religious education.

What other aspects of the curriculum/teaching in schools are statutory? Are time allocations for subjects statutory?

Discretionary curriculum time

The inclusion of a period of discretionary curriculum time in the time framework for primary level education is intended to afford the teacher and the school the flexibility to accommodate different school needs and circumstances, and to provide for the differing aptitudes and abilities of the children it serves. It can be allocated, at the teacher's and at the school's discretion, to any of the six curriculum areas (excluding religious education) or to any of the subjects within them. This framework also allows for the inclusion of a modern language in the curriculum where this is available.

The element of discretionary time can be used for different purposes and in different ways. It could, for example, be used to provide extra time for the completion of an aspect of learning in one subject, to respond to children's needs in particular areas of learning, or to afford flexibility when dealing with a specific project or theme.

Principal skills for development

Within the curriculum framework established (see above), principal skills for development are identified for each subject at each class level. These skills vary between subjects and class levels. For mathematics, for example, for all primary school children aged four to 12, they comprise:

- applying and problem-solving;
- communicating and expressing;
- integrating and connecting;
- reasoning;
- implementing; and
- understanding and recalling.

In science (part of social, environmental and scientific education SESE), children in the third to the sixth classes (aged eight to 12 years) are expected to develop the skills of:

- questioning;
- observing;
- predicting;
- investigating and experimenting;
- estimating and measuring;
- analysing (includes sorting and classifying; recognising patterns; interpreting); and
- recording and communicating.

Key issues

In addition, the national framework provided by the *Primary School Curriculum 1999* includes certain key issues for primary education. The curriculum offered in primary schools is expected to take account of these key issues, which are:

- literacy and numeracy;
- a sense of Irish identity;
- *Gaeilge* (Irish language);
- the spiritual dimension;
- the European and global dimensions;
- pluralism;
- science (and technology) education; and
- information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Time allocation

To assist teachers and schools in planning the implementation of the *Primary School Curriculum 1999*, a time framework is suggested in the curriculum documents. This

allocates a minimum time to each of the seven curriculum areas, and includes three elements:

- the time allocated to religious education;
- a suggested minimum time allocation for each of the other six curriculum areas, along with a period of discretionary curriculum time; and
- the time allowed for breaks and school assembly.

The suggested time framework is based on a statutory minimum of four hours of secular instruction each day (over a five-day school week) in primary level education. This may be modified for children in junior infants and senior infants classes (aged four to five and five to six years respectively) who generally have a shorter length school day (see below).

The table shows the recommended minimum weekly time framework.

	Full day (children aged six to 12 years)	Short day (infant classes, ages four to six years)
Curriculum areas	One week	One week
Secular instruction		
Language	4 hours	3 hours
Language 1	3 hours 30 minutes	2 hours 30 minutes
Language 2		
Mathematics	3 hours	2 hours 15 minutes
Social, environmental and scientific education, SESE	3 hours	2 hours 15 minutes
Social, personal and health education, SPHE	30 minutes	30 minutes
Physical education, PE	1 hour	1 hour
Arts education	3 hours	2 hours 30 minutes
Discretionary curriculum time	2 hours	1 hour
Total secular instruction	20 hours	15 hours
Religious education (typically)	2 hours 30 minutes	2 hours 30 minutes
Assembly time	1 hour 40 minutes	1 hour 40 minutes
Roll call	50 minutes	50 minutes
Breaks	50 minutes	50 minutes
Recreation (typically)	2 hours 30 minutes	2 hours 30 minutes
Total	28 hours 20 minutes	23 hours 20 minutes

Are there statutory timings for the length of the school day/week?

The school year comprises 183 days (September to the end of June) for primary children. Schools open on five days each week (Monday to Friday). The minimum annual lesson time at primary level is 915 hours. There is no fixed number of lessons which must be taught. Lessons generally last 30 minutes and schools follow general

guidelines in regard to the amount of time each week allocated to each aspect of the curriculum (see above).

Primary schools usually open between the hours of 9 am and 3 pm. Children in junior infants and senior infants classes in primary school (aged four to six years) normally have a shorter school day, ending between 1.30 and 2.30 pm.

What changes have there been to the statutory/non-statutory elements of the curriculum?

Social, personal and health education, SPHE

Social, personal and health education (SPHE) was first introduced to the primary level curriculum with the introduction of the revised primary curriculum in 1999.

Modern languages

A pilot project for the introduction of modern languages is currently underway in primary schools.

Since September 1998, around 280 primary schools (approximately 10 per cent of primary schools in Ireland) have been involved in a pilot project on the teaching of modern languages in the primary school. This project was initially introduced for a two-year period, but is continuing. The languages targeted in the pilot are French, German, Italian and Spanish, and these are taught to children in fifth and sixth classes (ages 10-12), the final two years of primary school, for one-and-a-half hours per class, per week. Teaching is through the medium of the target language. The language is taught either by the class teacher, another teacher from within the school where an exchange agreement has been made, or a visiting teacher who is a secondary teacher, a native speaker or a language assistant. There are just over 140 schools teaching French, just over 70 teaching German, 44 schools teaching Spanish and 16 teaching Italian. The evaluation process has been in place since the beginning of the project and a report will be published following its conclusion. Draft curriculum guidelines for the teaching of modern languages in the primary school have also been developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). These have been issued to all the schools involved in the project for teacher comment. Teacher guidelines (including sections on school planning, classroom planning, and teaching approaches and methodologies) have also been produced to accompany the draft curriculum guidelines.

The evaluation of this pilot project is being undertaken by the *Institiuid Teangeolaiochta Eireann* (the Language Institute of Ireland). Once the evaluation report is complete, the NCCA will assess the feasibility of introducing modern languages at primary level.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs)

Although ICTs is not a curriculum subject in its own right within the Primary School Curriculum, teacher guidelines produced for each curriculum area incorporate suggestions on using ICTs, one of the key issues of the primary curriculum (see above), for teaching and learning. A specific booklet of guidelines for ICTs for

teaching and learning also accompanies the curriculum, and provides guidance for teachers, with extensive exemplars/suggestions on how ICTs can be used to enhance teaching and learning.

What government/other initiatives have been introduced? What has been their impact?

Measures to tackle literacy problems

In 2001, the Minister for Education announced a package of measures to address literacy problems from birth to secondary education. As a result, babies born from 2001 onwards, have each received five books, with the aim of raising awareness of the importance of reading from an early age. The books also provide parents and carers with tips on how best to share them with young children. In addition, teachers have been provided with new training programmes to reinforce guidance on supporting children experiencing difficulties with literacy.

Schools IT 2000 and the Blueprint for the Future of ICT in Irish Education 2001-2003

Schools IT 2000 - which ran until the end of 2001 - was a government programme with a core objective of putting in place a permanent infrastructure to ensure that:

- students in every school have the opportunity to achieve computer literacy and to equip themselves for participation in the information society; and
- support is given to teachers to develop and renew professional skills, to enable them to utilise information and communications technologies (ICTs) as part of the learning environment of the school.

Schools IT 2000 targeted action on:

- classroom resources and infrastructure;
- teacher skills development and support; and
- policy and research,

and aimed to ensure that, by the end of 2001, every Irish school had a multimedia computer and an Internet connection.

A National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) was established to implement the various elements of *Schools IT 2000*. In addition, there is an Internet network for Irish schools. Managed centrally by the NCTE, *ScoilNet*, as it is known, aims to provide information, advice and support to schools, teachers, students and parents on *Schools IT 2000* and ICT issues generally. It is available at <http://www.ScoilNet.ie/>.

As *Schools IT 2000* finished, the Government launched a further programme to develop the use of ICTs in schools. The *Blueprint for the Future of ICT in Irish Education 2001-2003* includes the payment of grants to primary and secondary level schools to be used for ICT. The plan aims to ensure that all teachers and students are equipped with the necessary skills for participation in the information society.

What other trends are emerging in curriculum development? (eg new subjects/areas of learning being introduced)

See above.

What other levers may be having an impact on curriculum content? (eg international studies: PIRLS, IEA, PISA, TIMSS)

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

4. Organisation of the curriculum

What are the common features of curriculum organisation in the primary phase? (single subjects? planning subjects as 'topics'?)

The curriculum at primary level is usually delivered in an integrated manner.

How are subjects labelled?

The *Primary School Curriculum 1999* is presented in seven 'curriculum areas', some of which are further sub-divided into 'subjects'.

The curriculum articulates not only the content to be learned, via a detailed statement of content for each curriculum area or subject, and the outcomes to be achieved, but a wide range of approaches to learning.

What examples are there of 'areas' rather than subjects?

What examples are there of clusters of subjects (eg Humanities, made up of geography and history) being brought together?

The *Primary School Curriculum 1999* is presented in seven curriculum areas, some of which are further sub-divided into subjects. The language curriculum area, for example, is sub-divided into *Gaeilge* (Irish) and English; social, environmental and scientific education (SESE) is sub-divided into history, geography and science; and arts education is divided into visual arts, music and drama.

What are the common features of timetabling? (eg weekly lessons in each subject, English and mathematics taught daily)

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

5. Assessment

What is the purpose, nature and scale of assessment? (eg end of phase assessment, statutory, published test results, optional, national, local, timed tests, teacher-assessment)

There is no formal examination at the end of primary education.

Primary school teachers carry out their own assessment of children's performance. This is seen as a continuous, dynamic, formal and informal process, for formative, summative and diagnostic purposes.

Formative assessment is used to inform decisions on teaching and learning. Such assessment, which may be formal or informal, also provides valuable information to the child on his/her own progress and learning, as well as to the teacher and parents.

Summative assessment usually takes place at the end of a course or a unit of work and provides information on what the child has learned and the effectiveness of the course or unit of work.

Diagnostic assessment - which is closely linked to formative assessment - is used to identify learning difficulties, whether associated with specific learning disabilities or a particular range of skills or understanding. Assessment for formative or summative purposes may have diagnostic outcomes - problems may be evident through teacher observation or through a series of poor test scores.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has identified six key principles that should underpin assessment of children in primary level education:

- The system of assessment should be related to and reflect the content and objectives of the curriculum.
- Assessment should provide information on how children are performing and their potential ability in relation to aims and objectives of the curriculum.
- The results of the assessment should provide a basis for decisions about children's further learning needs.
- There should be continuity between classes and schools (primary and post-primary) in relation to such procedures.
- Assessment procedures should be comprehensive enough to allow for the full range of abilities across all the subjects of the curriculum.
- The procedures should allow for effective communication of relevant information to parents, teachers, the Department of Education and Science (DES), and other agencies.

In NCCA's view, assessment of students can contribute to the overall improvement of student achievement by providing information:

- on individual and group progress;
- upon which teaching and learning programmes can be planned;
- for effective school planning;
- for parent(s)/guardian(s) and other interested parties; and
- to facilitate national policy formulation.

A significant feature of the *Primary School Curriculum 1999* is the central position given to assessment in the teaching and learning process. Assessment strategies are directed towards the identification of children's needs with the aim of improving the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. Each subject in the curriculum therefore contains a statement on appropriate assessment procedures and their use.

The assessment strategies recommended in the *Primary School Curriculum 1999* include such methods as:

- teacher observation;
- teacher-designed tests and tasks;
- work samples, portfolios and projects;
- curriculum profiles; and
- (teacher-marked) standardised (commercially obtained) tests.

Formal standardised tests (which are commercially obtained, and given and marked by the class teacher) are generally taken at the end of each year of primary education. Progression is automatic and only in exceptional cases do children repeat a year. In 1996, for example, just over 10,000 children repeated classes in primary schools. The largest numbers who repeated a class were either in Standard VI (the final year, aged 11-12) or in infants classes (aged four to six years). The majority of those who repeat do so because of learning difficulties of one form or another. Progression to compulsory secondary education is usually automatic.

How far is the curriculum driven by assessments? (eg evidence of teacher preparation for testing, 'booster' or 'catch-up' classes in schools)

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

6. Teaching profession/training

What changes can be identified in initial teacher training programmes?

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

What kinds of continuing professional development/on-going training are provided?

One of the responsibilities of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is to review the in-service training needs of teachers, with particular regard to curriculum change.

When new government initiatives are introduced, some form of training programme for teachers is usually provided in addition (see above).

To what degree are teachers'/schools' planning subject to scrutiny?

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

To what degree are teachers using electronic formats to plan?

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

7. Pedagogy

Which teaching approaches are dominant or developing a higher profile, and which are receding? (eg collaborative work, whole-class instruction)

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

What is the impact of ICT in teaching practice? (eg use of electronic whiteboards, intranets, managed learning environments/local grids)

The *Primary School Curriculum 1999* includes a curriculum statement booklet for each subject. In addition, there is a set of teacher guidelines for each of the six primary curriculum subject areas (excluding religious education). These guidelines include extensive exemplar material and incorporate suggestions on using information and communications technologies (ICTs) for teaching and learning. Although ICTs do not constitute a curriculum area in their own right, a specific booklet of guidelines for ICTs for teaching and learning has also been developed to accompany the curriculum. This provides teachers with extensive exemplars/suggestions on how ICTs can be used to enhance teaching and learning.

To what degree are teaching approaches focusing on developing thinking skills, creativity and building on children's learning styles?

The *Primary School Curriculum 1999* is based on a philosophy of teaching and learning that accords equal importance to what the child learns and to the process by which he or she learns it. One of its essential features is a recognition of the principle that there are different kinds of learning and that individual children learn in different ways. The curriculum therefore articulates not only the content to be learned, via a detailed statement of content for each subject area, and the outcomes to be achieved, but a wide range of approaches to learning.

The curriculum at this level also envisages a particular relationship between the acquisition of knowledge and the development of concepts, skills and attitudes. Concepts and skills are outlined at each class level and their development is approached through the exploration of the content of the curriculum. Strong emphasis is placed on the ability to question, to analyse, to investigate, to think critically, to solve problems and to interact effectively with others.

8. Resourcing

How far are resources to support teaching made available via government/central/local agencies?

Textbooks are produced by publishing companies on a commercial basis independent of the Department of Education and Science (DES) or the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Occasionally, resource materials/guidelines may be produced by the Department of Education and Science (DES) (or agencies contracted to the DES) and these are made available to schools on a non-commercial basis.

In general parents buy textbooks. Grant aid is available, under certain criteria, to assist with the purchase of textbooks. Some schools' parents' associations organise sales of second-hand books. Other schools rent books to children for the year. Schools operating such rental schemes can also avail of state grants to establish the scheme. There is no overall state policy.

There is an Internet network for Irish schools. Managed centrally by the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE), *ScoilNet*, as it is known, aims to provide information, advice and support to schools, teachers, students and parents on ICT issues generally. It is available at <http://www.ScoilNet.ie/>.

In March 2002, a new statutory body was established to promote Irish-medium education and the teaching and learning of the Irish language in general. The Council for *Gaeltacht* and *Gaelscoil* Education will have an advisory and supporting role in Irish language education; in the planning and coordination of textbooks and learning aids; and in the development of policies to facilitate education through Irish in primary and secondary schools.

How far, and in which subjects, are resources statutory/ recommended/ subsidised? (eg textbooks, courses, lesson plans for teachers, web-based materials)

Textbooks are not approved by the Department of Education and Science (DES). Although the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) produces guidelines for publishers with every new or revised syllabus, these are not binding.