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Reading in the Years (1922-2026): Tracing Changes in the National Primary Curriculum for Literacy in Ireland

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Abstract

How reading is positioned and conceptualised in the national curriculum gives insights into the relative priority given to literacy at a given moment in time. This article provides a close analysis of how English reading has evolved during four major curricular epochs in Irish primary schools. Though the focus is the past six decades, the curriculum still in place in the late 1960s dictates that the analysis begins with the National Programme of Primary Instruction instigated by the new Free State Government in 1922. We examine the later versions of this National Programme before turning to the 'new' Primary School Curriculum (1971), the 'revised' Primary School Curriculum (1999), and the Primary Language Curriculum (2015, 2019, 2025). The analysis provides the first account of how key aspects of reading – including word recognition and comprehension – have matured in their presentation over the course of the last 100 years of Irish curriculum. It also details the societal influences that have (and have not) influenced the recommendations for how reading might be taught in schools. The paper concludes with a discussion of how research, politics, and views of teacher professionalism have been presented in this time.

Keywords: curriculum, reading, literacy education, policy, standards

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Internationally, few areas of the curriculum are as prone to pendulum swings in philosophy and focus as that of literacy. Historical accounts show that these swings are explained, at least partially, by the different ways of *researching* literacy. Throughout the 20th century a variety of psychological, sociological, anthropological, philosophical, and pedagogical angles have been adopted to explore what literacy *is, how* it develops and, accordingly, how it should be *taught* (Kennedy et al., 2012; Pearson & Cervetti, 2015; Tierney & Pearson, 2021). When these research perspectives interact with the politics of policy development, legislation, and national curriculum formation, further layers of complexity are introduced. In a major contribution to the field on early reading, Chall (1967) noted that much of the 20th-century debate involved "intense heat and considerable rancor" (p. 1). Literacy education is always complex and often controversial.

For centuries, one of the main purposes of formal schooling has been to equip the population with basic reading, writing, and numeracy skills. Though national curricula in 2025 extend well beyond the '3Rs' of reading, writing, and 'rithmetic, literacy remains a core objective of formal education in Ireland and further afield (Burke, 2024; Kennedy et al., 2023). Our understanding of current practice and priorities is deepened when we consider their historical antecedents. Perhaps most importantly, taking this historical perspective helps to chart potential possibilities and pitfalls in curriculum and policy that are yet to come. The current article adopts such a perspective to examine how literacy, and more specifically, *reading,* has been presented in the national curriculum from 1966 to 2026. To do so, it returns to the curricular documentation that underpinned practice during this period. From 1966 to 1971, the National Programme of Primary Instruction, which had remained largely unchanged since 1922, remained in effect. This was replaced by the progressive, child-centred 'new' curriculum in 1971, which remained in place until the 'revised' curriculum was published in 1999. Since 2015, three iterations of the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) have been enacted. Each curriculum document provides a picture of how reading was conceptualised, prioritised, and practised in a given time period. We examine each in turn, before highlighting overall conclusions and their implications for the teaching and learning of reading in Irish primary schools.

For the purpose of clarity, the term *reading* in this article is employed to denote the manner in which curriculum in Ireland has conceptualised teaching for the development of cognitive and interpretive processes involved in decoding written language and constructing meaning from text. In contrast, we posit *literacy* as a broader sociocultural construct encompassing not only reading and writing but also the situated practices, critical competencies, and communicative repertoires through which individuals engage with texts in diverse contexts.

1922-1971: Reading in the National Programme of Primary Instruction

Context

For almost half a century of a newly independent Ireland, reading in primary classrooms was directed by the same national curriculum (National Programme Conference, 1922). This 1922 Programme was decidedly "Irish in outlook" (Secretary to the Provisional Government, 1922, as cited in Hyland & Milne, 1992, p. 92) and produced a radical change in focus to the programme which preceded it (Dunne, 2020). Through the curriculum, the Free State Government's vision for the country would spread to every schoolhouse and classroom. In short, this meant that the Irish language was prioritised above all other curricular considerations. To achieve this linguistic goal, the more child-centred, broad programme in place from 1900 was considerably narrowed (T. Walsh, 2016). Most notably, the 1922 Programme directed that infant classes were to be taught entirely through Irish. Though there were some relatively minor alterations to the Programme from 1922 to 1971 (see Table 1), the focus and tenor of the National Programme of Primary Instruction remained largely consistent (Hyland & Milne, 1992; T. Walsh, 2016).

TABLE 1

Curriculum Documents Informing Reading, 1922-1971

Year	Curriculum Document	Summary
1922	National Programme of Primary Instruction	Programme outlined by the First National Programme Conference; only Irish could be used in infant classes; English introduced thereafter.
1926	Programme of Instruction for National Schools	Second National Programme Conference produces minor updates to the first programme, including a higher and lower course in English and in Irish; English could be taught in infant classes before 10:30am.
1933	Notes for Teachers – English Nótaí d'Oidí – Irish	Teaching guidance produced by Department Inspectors to provide greater illustration of how/ what to teach in both languages (produced alongside 'Notes' for other subjects).
1934	Revised Programme of Primary Instruction	A further narrowed programme issued by the Minister of Education, based on the 1922/6 version; higher course in Irish was to be adopted by all schools; English was not to be taught in infant classes and was optional in First Class.
1948	Revised Programme for Infants	A more child-centred programme for infant classes replaced the content of the 1934 programme; English could be taught for half an hour a day in infant classes; the remainder of the programme remained in place.
1951	The Infant School – Notes for Teachers	Teaching guidance produced to further illustrate how to put the child-centred approaches of 1948 into practice.

The following sections focus on the iterations of the Programme still in operation in the latter part of this period, i.e. the 1933 Notes for Teachers (Department of Education, 1933a, 1933b), the 1934 Revised Programme (Department of Education, 1934), and the mid-century modifications to the Programme for Infants (Department of Education, 1951). It is important to note that the Primary Certificate Examination, first introduced in 1929 and made mandatory in 1943, operated throughout much of this time period (Hyland & Milne, 1992). The associated terminal written examinations in Irish, English, and arithmetic had the effect of narrowing what was an already narrow curriculum during this period (Madaus & Greaney, 1985; T. Walsh, 2012).

Structure and Organisation

The 1934 Programme ran for no fewer than 11 pages, in which the learning focus for Irish, English, and Mathematics at all standards (classes) were detailed. In making way for a further focus on Irish, Rural Science and Nature Study were made optional,

the content in Mathematics was reduced, and the content for English had a "less ambitious scope" (Department of Education, 1934, p. 1). The content of the remaining compulsory subjects (History, Geography, Needlework [for girls], and Music) remained the same, directed by the 1926 Programme (National Programme Conference, 1926). In keeping with the immersion approach originally set out in 1922, no content was specified for English in junior classes. Accordingly, very limited guidance was provided for the teaching of English, with both the Notes for teaching English (Department of Education, 1933a) and the later Infant Notes (Department of Education, 1951) directing teachers back to the corresponding Notes for Irish (Department of Education, 1933b). This was evidenced by the fact that the Notes for Irish ran for 55 pages, while the corresponding figure for English was just 16 pages.

From Standard II (roughly equivalent to Second Class) and up, the Programme adopted a minimalist structure to describe expected learning in English, detailing the focus of learning across just two pages. Content was outlined under two headings at each standard: (i) Oral English and (ii) Written English. The focus of the Oral English was, in actuality, *reading material* and the *conversations* which it inspired, as Figure 1 demonstrates. The figure also demonstrates that a mixture of formations was used for the content; some aspects of learning were loosely framed as objectives (e.g., "to memorise sixty lines of poetry", Department of Education, 1934, p. 11), while others were not so (e.g., "spelling"; "dictation", Department of Education, 1934, p. 11).

Teachers were directed to draw on texts from the List of Approved Books published by the Department of Education to determine the substance of their reading lessons. The content of these books conveyed a nationalistic angle on Irish history, morals, and culture (Frehan, 2012).

FIGURE 1

Excerpt from the Revised Programme of Primary Instruction Illustrating that Oral English was Based on Conversations Inspired by Reading Material

STANDARD VI.

ORAL ENGLISH.

(*a*) To read with intelligence a suitable Reader or Storybook. Conversation as in Standard V. Explanation. Spelling.

(*b*) To memorise sixty lines of poetry.

(*c*) Such elementary portions of grammar as are necessary for the correction of errors made by the pupils in speaking and writing. Easy exercises in analysis.

WRITTEN ENGLISH.

(*a*) Dictation—special attention to be devoted to legibility in handwriting.

(*b*) Narrative. Simple description of familiar scenes and incidents. Letter-writing.

Note. Reprinted from *Curriculum for English in the Revised Programme of Primary Instruction*, by Department of Education, 1934.

Key Emphases

Close examination of the learning content and the associated Notes provides insights into how reading was prioritised and conceptualised throughout this period. Although the Notes for Teachers underlined the importance of comprehension and developing a 'taste' for reading, the goal of promoting the Irish language remained constant: "we read for the language as well as for the content" (Department of Education, 1933a, p. 43).

Prioritising Irish: Teaching Directly, Speaking Correctly

Both the 1934 Revised Programme and the 1948/51 Infant Programme placed a particular emphasis on language development, as it was conceptualised at the time. In keeping with the overall aspiration to produce an Irish-speaking nation, competence in the Irish language was prioritised. The importance of language as a foundation for reading was highlighted in the Notes for Irish:

> It may now be assumed as an educational axiom that before attempting to read even in the vernacular pupils should gave [*sic*] a fairly wide vocabulary, that only words well-known conversationally should be presented to them, that the early lessons should be given them from the blackboard, that reading by phrase rather than by word should be practised from the beginning. (Department of Education, 1933b, p. 43)

However, the extent to which this axiom was actually realised could be questioned, given the considerable concerns that were expressed about immersion approaches at the time (T. Walsh, 2012). The Notes for Irish gave priority to the *direct method* of teaching to achieve linguistic competence in Irish. The Notes also made reference to the *phrase method*, the *series method*, and *dramatisation*.[1] The 1933 Notes for English gave comparatively limited guidance on language development in English in either junior or senior classes.

High priority was given to correct pronunciation. The Notes for Irish emphasised Irish phonetics, drawing particular attention to the importance of avoiding English phonemes in the Irish speech. Errors such as this gave rise to "such monstrosities as gurra morra guth" (Department of Education, 1933a, p. 13). The document highlighted the importance of correct teacher articulation and drills to ensure good pronunciation, noting that "the production of a proper 'blas'[2] is a very special duty of the junior class teacher" (Department of Education, 1933a, p. 14). In 1933, the *only* guidance for language development in English focused on *speech-training*, which concerned itself with "correct pronunciation, clear articulation and right tone" (Department of Education,

1 The *phrase method* refers to the teaching of whole phrases (e.g., an bhfuil cead agam ____?); the *series method* refers to the teaching of multiple connected sentences using actions/pictures as a support for meaning (e.g., dhúisigh mé go moch ar maidin; d'ith mé mo bhricféasta; shiúil mé ar scoil).

2 The word 'blas' refers to one's accent or pronunciation.

1933b, p. 3). Through this teaching, the Notes advised that "mispronunciations such as 'mishtake' (mistake) or 'dis' (this) could be avoided" (Department of Education, 1933b, p. 4).

Reflecting a more child-centred philosophy, the 1951 Infant Notes expanded the approaches to language teaching to include reference to incidental teaching, in which Irish was layered into children's activities during the day in a more naturalistic manner. Broader approaches to developing language in English were also presented in the 1951 Infant Notes, though they were extremely brief. Over the course of just one page, the Notes explained the potential for speech-training, stories, informal conversation, rhymes, poems, verse-speaking, and drama to support language development. The various iterations of the Programme can be commended for acknowledging the importance of language development for reading development, albeit in a somewhat limited way. However, the realities of large class sizes, poor teacher education, and the prevailing challenges of a poorly supported immersion programme undermined this aspiration.

Learning to Read: Guidance for Irish is Guidance for English

Throughout the period 1922 to 1971, the curriculum envisaged that children would be introduced to reading through Irish. However, extremely limited advice was available to teachers on how this might be achieved. The Notes for Irish (Department of Education, 1933b) provided scant guidance on how reading might be introduced in what was a second language for the majority of children. The Notes captured the limited attention afforded to word recognition at the time of their publication. While some reference is made to "phonetic drill on the sounds likely to cause trouble" (Department of Education, 1933a, p. 43), this was made in reference to correct pronunciation rather than the teaching of letter-sound correspondences.

The Infant Notes for Teachers (Department of Education, 1951) provided a clearer picture of what early reading might look like in practice, indicating advances in understanding in the intervening period. Again, the guidance for English was brief, noting that "the beginnings of reading should be dealt with on the same lines as those suggested for Irish reading" (Department of Education, 1951, p. 59). The Irish Notes presented an interesting mix of whole-word approaches and the *phonic method*. Whole-word activities were demonstrated in some depth, with accompanying illustrations, as the reading jigsaw in Figure 2 demonstrates. The Notes then advised that *after* some whole-word instruction, phonics may be used to help "children associate the written symbol with the sound it makes when spoken" (Department of Education, 1951, p. 52). The instructions align broadly with what would be classified as an analytic approach to phonics today:

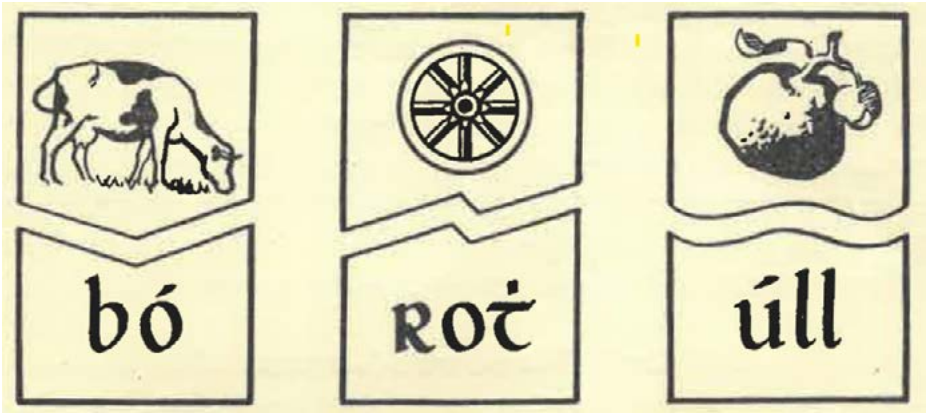
> Phonetically simple words such as "bó" should be selected for a beginning. Lists of familiar words all beginning with the same sound will be found

> helpful (e.g. cat, cáca, cóta, císte, cathaoir etc.) and a series of charts to which the pupils contribute the words can be gradually built up. (Department of Education, 1951, p. 53)

Early reading in Irish would be developed through whole-class activities, but also through reading of books in groups of about six that were "graded according to reading ability" (Department of Education, 1951, p. 53). The Notes also called out how a "skilful teacher" (Department of Education, 1951, p. 53) would provide for different learning paces in reading. The need to support independent reading for pleasure was underscored; teachers were encouraged to use classroom libraries and "suitable little reading books" (Department of Education, 1951, p. 54) created by sewing pieces of coloured paper together.

FIGURE 2

Reading Jigsaws Demonstrating a Whole-Word Approach Focused on Recognition of the Entire Word as a Visual Unit



Note. Reprinted from *The Infant School – Notes for Teachers* (p. 51), by Department of Education, 1951.

On the whole, the curriculum documentation for this period demonstrates a level of maturation from the 1930s through to the 1950s. The documentation from 1933/34 left the mechanics of early reading entirely to chance or a teacher's own invention. This had advanced by 1951, but likely still posed enormous challenges in the context of the classroom conditions at the time.

Reading for Comprehension: Attempts to Shift Practice

An implicit theme throughout the Notes for English (Department of Education, 1933a) was that contemporary reading lessons relied excessively on listening to children read texts aloud in turn (what would be referred to today as Round Robin Reading). The 1933 Notes discouraged lessons "which consisted in setting child after child, often in a large class, to read aloud in turn a few lines without previous preparation,

while the rest of the class were required to follow him word by word" (Department of Education, 1933a, p. 9). Instead, the section on *treatment of the text*, emphasised the importance of activating background knowledge ("the teacher strives to bring vividly before the consciousness of the children dormant notions which they already possess on the subject matter", Department of Education, 1933a, p. 9) and generating interest. This would be followed by silent reading of the text, after which the teacher should check student understanding. It then recommended progressing to oral reading (aloud) of the text, emphasising what we now call reading fluency ("such oral reading should be fluent, well articulated and phrased, and expressive since the matter is no longer unknown", Department of Education, 1933a, p. 9) and vocabulary development ("explanation of words and phrases through the context", Department of Education, 1933a, p. 9). The reading could be followed by discussion in order to check understanding. The guidance reminded teachers that children need support to read unfamiliar text ("essays … should not be… be thrown at the children without direction, stimulus or help", Department of Education, 1933a, p. 9). The Notes drove home the importance of reading comprehension:

> It is painful to find senior pupils about to engage in the struggle for a livelihood, their "education" completed, who yet are unable to give an intelligent account of what they have read". (Department of Education, 1933a, p. 11)

Despite these aspirations, Inspector reports from the time suggested that poor reading instruction and poor reading comprehension remained common (T. Walsh, 2012).

Coming towards the end of the lifetime of the 1922 Programme, the curriculum was ripe for change. The Government vision of reviving the Irish language through the curriculum was forced to meet reality. By the early 1960s, Department of Education Circulars 16/59 and 11/60 had permitted the teaching of Irish as a subject rather than solely as a means of instruction (Hyland & Milne, 1992). By 1967, the removal of Primary Certificate strait-jacket would provide scope for a more child-centred approach. The stage was set for a new vision for reading in the curriculum.

1971-1999: Curaclam na Bunscoile – Reading in the 'New' Curriculum

Context

Curaclam na Bunscoile, the Primary School Curriculum (Department of Education, 1971), was drafted by a group of Department Inspectors at a time of more progressive thinking in Ireland (T. Walsh, 2016). The publication of the Investment in Education report in 1965 provided an impetus for reform and recognition of the potential economic benefits of a more educated society (Hyland, 2014; J. Walsh et al., 2014). In

this context, the introduction of free secondary education in 1967 meant that primary school would no longer be the end of formal schooling for a significant proportion of the population. The country saw significant cultural, social, and economic change during the period of the curriculum's enactment. Shortly after the publication of the curriculum, Ireland joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973. By the time the curriculum would be replaced almost 30 years later, Ireland would be an increasingly diverse country on the cusp of implementing a common European currency.

This period also saw major swings in reading/literacy research internationally (Pearson & Cervetti, 2015, 2017). The late 1960s saw shifts away from the prevailing behaviourist approaches and the rise of psycholinguistic perspectives on reading skills. Cognitive perspectives came to the fore in the 1980s, while the 1990s saw growing attention to sociocultural perspectives.

Structure and Organisation

This period of curriculum is somewhat unique in the current review in that the content or structure of the 1971 Curriculum was not altered or expanded during its period of enactment. Language (consisting of English and Irish) was one of seven subjects in the curriculum, alongside Religion, Mathematics, Social and Environmental Studies, Art and Craft Activities, Music, and Physical Education. Content and guidance for teachers was presented across two hardback volumes running to just over 700 pages. While the curriculum placed English and Irish' in the same language category, they were treated distinctly, meaning that teachers were no longer reliant on guidance from Irish to inform the teaching of English. It emphasised the importance of flexibility and local interpretation to support learning in individual classroom and school contexts. The curriculum delineated specific sections for teaching language *in the Galltacht*[3] and *in the Gaeltacht*. The guidance for English in the Galltacht was relatively brief, and referred regularly back to the guidance for English in the Gaeltacht.

Structurally, the presentation of English followed that of other subjects in presenting a short, one-page syllabus for lower primary (Infants to Class II, p. 82) and upper primary (Classes III – VI, p. 101), followed by multiple pages of suggestions for practice. The one-page syllabus was further divided into class level bands (e.g., infants; first and second class; third and fourth class) and sections on oral language, reading, and writing. The syllabus tended to describe a mixture of conditions and teaching approaches, with some limited reference to actual learning objectives/outcomes. For example, the content on Reading in Infants was presented as follows, without immediate elaboration or explanation:

> Cultivation of reading readiness. Pre-reading activities: the building up of a

3 In this context, the *Galltacht* refers to English-speaking areas *outside* the Gaeltacht.

> basic sight vocabulary - use of name-tags, classroom labels, flash-cards, wall stories, the Book Corner, etc. Exercises and reading games involving picture-making and the matching and writing of words. News sheet. Weather chart. Use of suitable graded reading schemes. Reading for pleasure. (Department of Education, 1971, p. 82)

This syllabus content gave a much more vivid, child-centred picture of the envisaged learning activities and environment than that of the preceding Programme, but it could not be claimed that the expected learning at any stage was altogether more detailed or clearer.

Key Emphases

Holistic, Child-Centred and Integrated Vision of Language Learning

The 1971 Curriculum saw a significant and formal move away from viewing language and reading as a vehicle for language shift in the population. It signalled the crucial role of oral language, indicating a shift away from the "mere mechanics of reading and writing" (Department of Education, 1971, p. 83). Within the focus on language, the suggestions for practice highlighted the potential of poetry, story, and dramatic activity, alongside listening activities and speech training. The more child-centred approach to language development, first touted for infants in 1951, was now present throughout the entire curriculum. Framing language teaching as an enabler for broader learning, rather than solely as a means of increasing the use of Irish, meant that a far more nuanced and holistic view of language prevailed.

The 1971 Curriculum was viewed as an integrated one, but for practical purposes, new learning was outlined subject by subject. This integration was also seen within the syllabus for English, which stated that the "basic teaching programme should be a fully integrated one consisting of oral work cum reading cum writing" (Department of Education, 1971, p. 81). It further noted that "every lesson is a language lesson and language should be taught in and through all aspects of the work" (Department of Education, 1971, p. 81). The curriculum repeatedly highlighted the importance of reading for success in the broader curriculum, stating that "the fast, capable reader is well equipped to learn by himself and for himself, using the printed word as a means to expand his knowledge and extend his experience" (Department of Education, 1971, p. 106).

Setting the Stage: Conceptions of Early Reading Development

Review of the 1971 Curriculum for English demonstrates a clear stage model of learning to read, which contrasts with the emergent conceptualisations of reading that were coming to the fore internationally at the time (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Notwithstanding

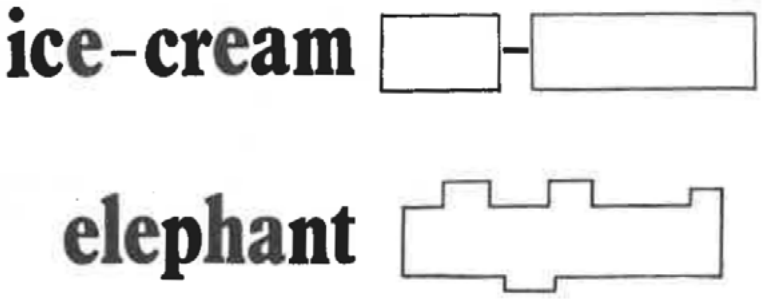
the fact that it was somewhat out of step with developing international insights, the curriculum signalled a more nuanced understanding, indicating that learning to read is a "very complex activity" (Department of Education, 1971, p. 89). The stage model manifested in several ways. Firstly, the curriculum signalled the importance of *learning to read* (concerned with "the drills and mechanics of the various skills involved and with the development of skill in comprehending what is read", Department of Education, 1971, p. 89) as distinct from *reading to learn*. Secondly, it made direct reference to pre-reading as a distinct stage that precedes "early reading *per se*" (Department of Education, 1971, p. 89). Once children had "reached reading-readiness", they would progress to individual oral reading, through which they would develop and demonstrate their facility with "mechanical reading ability" (Department of Education, 1971, p. 89).

The 1971 Curriculum dedicated roughly one page of guidance to teachers in Junior Infants to Second Class on how to teach word recognition, though it cautioned "while word-recognition ability is essential, its development can be tiresome and uninteresting for the pupil" (Department of Education, 1971, p. 93). It outlined a number of potential approaches that, in modern day conceptualisations, might be considered somewhat conflicting: (i) Look-Say, Whole Word; (ii) Phonic Analysis and Synthesis; (iii) Structural Analysis and Synthesis; (iv) Alphabetic Technique. Tensions here lie in whether reading should start with recognition of whole words (Look-Say) or systematic decoding (Phonics/Alphabetic), and how much emphasis to place on larger units of words such as prefixes/suffixes (Structural Analysis) versus basic sound-letter correspondences.

Comparing the guidance on look-say versus phonics methods, the curriculum appeared to privilege the former. Indeed, it explicitly stated that look-say, whole-word approaches are "best suited to young children in that they deal with 'wholes' (whole words, phrases or sentences), and nearly always, therefore, with meaningful interest-bearing content" (Department of Education, 1971, p. 92). It afforded two pages of guidance to using look-say approaches to building early sight vocabulary during pre-reading activities, drawing on words relevant to the child's environment and early reading material (see examples in Figure 3 and Figure 4).

FIGURE 3

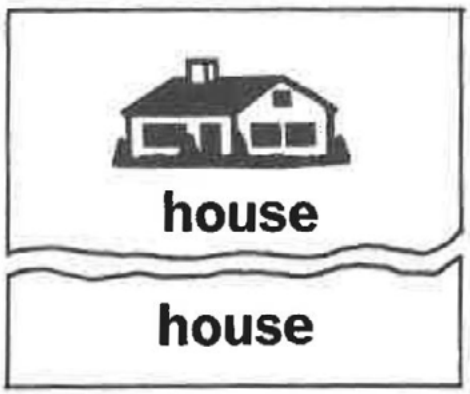
Example of Whole-Word Teaching Based on "Configurative Qualities" in the 1971 Curriculum



Note. Reprinted from *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (p. 90), by Department of Education, 1971.

FIGURE 4

Example of Whole-Word Teaching of Sight Vocabulary in the 1971 Curriculum



Note. Reprinted from *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (p. 90), by Department of Education, 1971.

The stark underrepresentation of phonics is evident in the comparatively brief and inaccurate statement that "phonic techniques require the teaching of the *sound* equivalent of the 26 letters – there are about 60 sounds in all – and of their use in certain key combinations" (Department of Education, 1971, p. 93). It went on to say that as these methods are "slow and often uninteresting", they may be "discouraging and tiresome if introduced too soon" (Department of Education, 1971, p. 93). The important role of phonics had been well signalled in international literature at that time (Chall, 1967; Flesch, 1955) but did not lead to corresponding importance in Ireland's national curriculum. A nod to the auditory antecedents of phonics was made in drawing attention to the need to "*hear* differences between widely contrasting words, to recognise words beginning with the same *sound*, to pick out rhyming words, etc." (Department of Education, 1971, p. 93). It should be noted that the

term *phonological* or *phonemic awareness*, and the associated growth in associated research and practice, did not become more widespread until the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Liberman et al., 1974). However, the fact that the curriculum was not updated in the intervening period meant that official guidance did not build on more up-to-date research insights. In sum, the 1971 Curriculum presented eclectic pedagogical options on how word recognition should be developed, but prioritised whole-word approaches in the early years.

Reading with Meaning: Prioritisation of Recreational Reading and Real Books

While the curriculum gave particular attention to the use of "reading schemes" (Department of Education, 1971, p. 92), which it defined as series of graded texts produced to support the teaching of reading, it placed a high premium on child-led, recreational reading using school/classroom libraries. Some of the boldest statements in the section of the curriculum focused on English come from the sections describing the power and potential of recreational reading. This focus aligned with the child-centred perspective that pervaded the whole of the 1971 Curriculum: "if the child is to be the principal agent in his own education, private reading from a wide variety of sources, but particularly from library books, will form an ever-increasing part of his work" (Department of Education, 1971, p. 95). The curriculum provided particular guidance on promoting positive attitudes from the outset of school through book handling activities ("looking at them, handling them, becoming familiar with… their size, weight, shape, colour, feel and appearance", p. 95). It emphasised the importance of having books in a wide variety of formats, both fiction and non-fiction, for recreational reading and also for use in learning throughout the curriculum. Guidance for teachers suggested that they should provide opportunities "for free-choice reading, without requiring written or verbal accounts from the pupils for every period so spent" (Department of Education, 1971, p. 108) and it underlined the need for teachers to have "good knowledge" of the library books (Department of Education, 1971, p. 109).

Taking the focus and approach to reading as a whole, it can be concluded that the 1971 Curriculum emphasised approaches that privileged children's engagement and natural language use. This manifested in the use of the majority language for instruction, the focus on child-centred pedagogies and the promotion of real and authentic reading materials. The curriculum *did* emphasise skill development (e.g., in word recognition), but this was in the context of a broader, meaning-focused approach that deliberately backgrounded phonics.

1999-2015: Reading in the Revised Primary School Curriculum

Context

Much had changed in the Irish educational landscape in the 28 years since the introduction of the 1971 Curriculum. A key development was the establishment of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in November 1987, succeeding the Curriculum and Examinations Board. The NCCA was later reconstituted as a statutory body under the Education Act 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998) and formally enacted in July 2001 (NCCA, 2024). This represented a significant structural shift in curriculum development, moving away from a model dominated by a small group of inspectors in 1971 towards a more inclusive and collaborative approach (Sugrue, 2004). The Education Act 1998 enshrined partnership as official policy in curriculum development and the 1999 Curriculum was the product of a decade-long development process involving a wide range of stakeholders, coordinated by the NCCA (T. Walsh, 2016).

The launch of the 1999 Curriculum marked what the Department of Education and Science (DES) described as a "significant landmark in the history of primary education in Ireland" (DES, 1999c, p. vi). The publication of 23 full-colour handbooks and an additional introductory volume was in stark contrast to the two handbooks that accompanied the 1971 Curriculum. Notwithstanding the new presentation of the curriculum, a 2005 review of the 1999 English documentation (DES, 1999a, 1999b) revealed widespread teacher dissatisfaction with the structure and layout (NCCA, 2005). In response, the NCCA published a set of additional support materials: a booklet in which the strands and strand units were reorganised in an effort to reduce confusion and improve usability (DES, 2005). Table 2 illustrates the changes that were made to the English curriculum during this time.

TABLE 2

Curriculum Documents Informing Reading, 1999-2015

Year	Curriculum Document	Summary
1999	Revised Primary School English Curriculum + Teacher Guidelines	This was the original Curriculum document that contained vision, aims, broad objectives, and class-level objectives. The associated Teacher Guidelines outlined suggested teaching approaches to support the enactment of the curriculum.
2005	English Curriculum: Additional Support Material	Following confusion among teachers identified during a review of the early implementation of the revised English curriculum, the document was reorganised and republished in 2005. While the content remained unchanged, the structure was modified: what were previously strands became strand units, and the former strand units – Oral Language, Reading, and Writing – were elevated to strands.

On the international stage, this period saw a number of important developments relating to literacy education. Interestingly, the timing of the 1999 Curriculum meant that extremely influential research reports on the teaching of reading emanating from the United States, such as *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow et al., 1998) and the report of the *National Reading Panel* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) left no readily discernible trace on the content objectives for reading. In the United States, the dominance of whole-language approaches throughout the 1980s and early 1990s began to give way to balanced literacy approaches that paid attention to the explicit teaching of skills (e.g., phonics) and meaning (e.g., reading real books) (Pressley, 1998). As the subsequent sections reveal, the trend towards including more discrete and explicit teaching of early literacy skills was not as apparent in Ireland's new curriculum.

Structure and Organisation

The overarching emphasis of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum was on breadth and balance across subjects. English was one of 12 subjects, alongside Irish, Mathematics, History, Geography, Science, Music, Drama, Visual Arts, Physical Education (PE), Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), and Religious Education. As with the other subjects, English was presented in two volumes: one detailing the curriculum content, and the other providing supplementary guidelines for teachers.

Following the publication of *English: Additional Support Material* in 2005 (DES, 2005), the English Curriculum was structured around three strands: Oral Language, Reading, and Writing. Each strand was further divided into strand units, which reflected key dimensions of language development:

- Receptiveness to language
- Competence and confidence in using language
- Developing cognitive abilities through language
- Emotional and imaginative development through language

In its introduction, the curriculum outlined 28 broad objectives for English, nine of which explicitly related to reading. Furthermore, five of the seven general aims of the English curriculum referred specifically to reading, underscoring its centrality within the subject. Within the *Reading* strand, the curriculum articulated a substantial number of specific content objectives across class levels:

- Infant classes: 29 objectives
- First and Second Class: 35 objectives
- Third and Fourth Class: 31 objectives
- Fifth and Sixth Class: 32 objectives

This structured and layered approach reflected the curriculum's intention to support a comprehensive and developmental model of literacy, integrating cognitive, emotional, and imaginative dimensions of reading across the primary years.

Key Emphases

Persisting Paradigms: The Influence of 'Whole Language'

While it is difficult to categorise the curriculum in any pure form, the 1999 Primary School Curriculum appeared to embody the whole language philosophy dominant in the preceding decades internationally (Hempenstall, 1997), combining a literature-rich, integrated model of reading with a strong commitment to the multi-cueing approach[4] and inconsistent attention to phonics. Reading was represented as an integrated process in which oral language, reading, and writing "are intimately related

4 Multi-cueing approaches to word recognition are often traced to the work of Goodman (1967), Smith (1971), and Clay (1991), amongst others. Multi-cueing involves readers using multiple sources of information simultaneously to identify and make sense of words while reading: meaning (semantic), sentence structure (syntactic), and visual/letter-sound (graphophonic) cues.

and each interacts with the others in a myriad of ways" (DES, 1999a, p. 2). It defined reading as not only the mechanical recognition of words but also the "acquisition of an appreciation of the conventions of text" and "the ability to use a range of reading and comprehension skills" (DES, 1999a, p. 4). The vision stressed that these skills must be acquired systematically and that children with particular needs should be "identified at an early stage and provided with adequate remedial support" (DES, 1999a, p. 2). The Teacher Guidelines framed this within an apparently whole-language approach, in which "the reading experience should be as rich and varied as possible", supported by "well-stocked school and class libraries" (DES, 1999b, p. 3) alongside graded reading schemes and alternative materials.

The curriculum also promoted a literature-rich environment, urging "consistent engagement with a rich selection of the best literature" (DES, 1999a, p. 8) and "regular access to a wide range of stories, poems, myths, legends, novels and non-fiction" (DES, 1999a, p. 51). Libraries were cast as "essential" resources (DES, 1999a, p. 17), and teachers were encouraged to organise book fairs, author visits, and poetry events to nurture a culture of reading for pleasure.

Cueing Over Orthographic Decoding

A central and distinctive feature of the 1999 Curriculum was its strong endorsement of multi-cueing systems (Goodman, 1967) for word recognition. Children were expected to draw simultaneously on "knowledge of letter-sound relationships (grapho/phonic cues)", "experiences and understanding of the world (meaning or semantic cues)", "knowledge of the forms of language (syntactic cues)", as well as "print conventions and punctuation awareness" (DES, 1999b, p. 57). These cues were to be used to "predict, identify, confirm/self-correct" when reading independently (DES, 1999b, p. 57). This approach was embedded throughout the class-level objectives, from the infants' use of "word order, illustration, context and initial letters to identify unknown words" (DES, 1999a, p. 18) to the senior classes' refinement of "grapho/phonic, syntactic, and contextual" strategies (DES, 1999a, p. 48). In contemporary debates, such reliance on cueing systems has been heavily critiqued for encouraging guessing strategies and underplaying systematic, phonics-based decoding (Castles et al., 2018; Seidenberg, 2017). However, it is important to note that significant critiques of the three-cueing model were around *before* the publication of the 1999 Curriculum (Adams, 1998; Pressley, 1998).

While the curriculum named "the central role of phonological and phonemic awareness" in word recognition (DES, 1999a, p. 14), the objectives focused largely on phonological skills such as isolating "the beginning and final sounds in written words" (DES, 1999a, p. 18) and recognising "rhyming parts of syllables" (DES, 1999a, p. 25). Reference to explicit, systematic phonemic awareness instruction was absent. Phonics appeared in the infant stage ("recognise and name the letters of the alphabet" and

"develop an awareness of some letter–sound relationships" (DES, 1999a, p. 16) but did not continue as a discrete or sequential set of objectives in the later years.

Beyond the Basics: Vocabulary and Comprehension

While vocabulary was referenced from the infant classes onwards, its treatment became more systematic and explicit between Third and Sixth Class. At this stage, objectives such as "identify unfamiliar words by reference to word parts, prefixes and suffixes" and "use simple dictionaries effectively" (DES, 1999a, p. 36) signalled a deliberate emphasis on morphological analysis and independent word-learning strategies. This progression reflected a shift from incidental vocabulary exposure in the early years towards a more structured approach that equips pupils with tools for decoding meaning, expanding lexical knowledge, and fostering autonomy as readers.

Comprehension was given significant emphasis, progressing from early strategies like re-reading, re-telling, and predicting in the infant classes to more advanced skills in the senior years, including "analysis, synthesis, inference, deduction, summarisation, evaluation and correlation" (DES, 1999a, p. 61). The Teacher Guidelines dedicated significant attention to comprehension. Here, a repertoire of strategies and skills such as scanning, skimming, search-reading, and reflective reading were recommended. Instructional emphasis was articulated through the suggestion that comprehension is to be supported by modelling and discussion to foster deeper engagement with text. Children were encouraged to take a critical stance in the older classes as they "distinguish between fact and opinion, and bias and objectivity" (DES, 1999a, p. 54). On the whole, the curriculum appeared to prioritise the teaching of *skills* and *strategies* as the bedrock of comprehension instruction.

This emphasis on vocabulary and comprehension was closely interwoven with the curriculum's commitment to fostering reading enjoyment, offering a wide variety of texts, and promoting personal choice. Together, these elements reflected an approach that sought not only to develop linguistic competence but also to cultivate positive reading dispositions and lifelong engagement with texts. While echoes of such priorities resonate in the subsequent curriculum, the central positioning of reading for pleasure is notably less prominent in the most recent developments.

2015-2026: Reading in the Period of the Primary Language Curriculum

Context

In the years following the publication of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999c), Ireland's literacy landscape underwent significant transformation. Between

2005 and 2012, a range of literacy initiatives gained momentum across the country. Programmes such as Jolly Phonics (Lloyd & Wernham, 1992), First Steps Reading (Department of Education Western Australia, 2013), Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993), and Building Bridges of Understanding (Courtney & Gleeson, 2010) were introduced – some through targeted interventions like Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), others perhaps adopted by schools seeking to strengthen literacy practices in response to a curriculum structure perceived as "obscure and impractical and difficult" (NCCA, 2005). Each initiative shaped pedagogical approaches to reading in distinct ways. It was into this complex and somewhat fragmented post-curricular landscape that the PLC was conceived and introduced.

The development of the PLC can be traced, at least in part, to political and policy imperatives. Ireland's disappointing performance in the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Perkins et al., 2010), combined with the fiscal retrenchment following the economic crash of 2008 (Gleeson et al., 2017) acted as a catalyst for reform. This culminated in the publication of the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011–2020 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). The Strategy was critiqued for being reactive, short-sighted and a "significant threat to the holistic nature of the Primary Curriculum" (Ó Breacháin & O' Toole, 2013). Nonetheless, it introduced a suite of measures, including increased instructional time for literacy, mandatory professional development for teachers (notably, through *literacy link days*; Department of Education and Skills, 2012), and a directive to design a new language curriculum structured around clear learning outcomes and supported by annotated examples of children's work. By this time, it was acknowledged that core components of evidence based on literacy instruction were poorly represented in the 1999 Curriculum (Kennedy, 2013).

The first iteration of the PLC appeared in 2015 (Department of Education and Skills, 2015), covering Stages 1 and 2 (Junior Infants to Second Class) and accompanied by off-site professional development for teachers. Implementation challenges (NCCA, 2018), however, prompted not just an expanded but a *revised* version in 2019, which extended the curriculum to all four stages of primary education (Junior Infants to Sixth Class). Key refinements included relocating the Progression Continua[5] to support materials and introducing a new "Curriculum in Practice" chapter (Department of Education and Skills, 2019).

In 2025, the curriculum was republished yet again to incorporate Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) at Stages 3 and 4 (Third to Sixth Class). While the original learning outcomes, introduction, rationale, and aims remained largely unchanged, two new sets

5 The 2015 version of the PLC included Progression Continua within the curriculum for the first time. These continua outlined suggested milestones and progression steps to describe learning pathways in reading, writing, and oral language, in both English and Irish. The 2018 consultation (NCCA, 2018) on the curriculum for Third to Sixth Class indicated a level of confusion and dissatisfaction in how they might be interpreted and used. This led to their removal from the 'statutory' curriculum in the 2019 iteration of the specification.

of learning outcomes for MFL were added. A fourth element (building an awareness of languages and cultures) was introduced specifically for MFL, integrated within the existing curriculum structure in an effort to preserve its holistic and interconnected design (NCCA, 2025). The three original strands and their associated elements for English and Irish remained intact. Two distinct versions of the curriculum are currently available: the version for English-medium schools presents English as L1, Irish as L2, and MFL as L3, while a corresponding version for Irish-medium schools presents Irish as L1, English as L2, and MFL as L3.

Although Table 3 demonstrates multiple changes to the curriculum for reading in the past decade, these changes have not been in response to the debates that have roiled literacy research, policy, and practice internationally in this period. In other English-speaking countries (e.g., United States, Australia, Canada), consideration of early literacy has been driven by discourse on the *science of reading*, amidst claims that out-dated and poorly evidenced practices have remained dominant under some conceptualisations of prevailing balanced literacy approaches (Hanford, 2019; Shanahan, 2020; The Reading League, 2022). Although this debate has gained a certain level of attention in Ireland (Buckingham, 2024; Burke, 2024; Horgan, 2022), it has not led to any direct policy or curriculum change to date. Rather, the most recent curriculum changes for literacy have responded to the PISA shock (seen in the 2011 Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, which instigated the 2015 PLC) and alignment with policies focused on language education (e.g., the move to integrate MFL was signalled in the 2017 Languages Connect policy; Department of Education and Skills, 2017).

TABLE 3

Curriculum Documents Informing Reading, 2015-2025

Year	Curriculum Document	Summary
2015	Primary Language Curriculum (Stages 1 and 2)	First iteration of the Primary Language Curriculum aimed at infant classes to Second Class. This contained Progression Continua for Reading, Writing, and Oral Language.
2019	Primary Language Curriculum (Stages 1 to 4)	Republished Primary Language Curriculum that extended curriculum guidance from infant classes to Sixth Class. The Progression Continua were now moved to the online toolkit and a new *curriculum in practice* section was added that outlined certain pedagogical emphases pertinent to the teaching of reading that were not present in the previous version of the curriculum. These included Digital Literacy, Disciplinary Literacy, and Critical Literacy.
2025	Language Specification for Primary and Special Schools	Much of the 2019 Curriculum remains unchanged in this iteration. However, a discrete set of outcomes for the teaching of Modern Foreign Languages was introduced, and a new element (building awareness of language and cultures) was integrated into the existing framework of elements from the original document.

Structure and Organisation

The curricula for English, Irish, and MFL are now presented within a single integrated document. The structures for English and Irish are virtually identical, as are their learning outcomes. In contrast, the outcomes for MFL are conceptually and structurally distinct. The *Reading* strand, like other strands, is broadly conceptualised in terms of aims, elements, and learning outcomes. While aims related to reading are not articulated separately, they are embedded within the broader aims of language learning. Reading, along with the other strands, was originally organised around *three* interdependent elements, but was extended to include a fourth element in the 2025 revision:

- Developing communicative relationships through language
- Understanding the content and structure of language
- Exploring and using language
- Building an awareness of language and cultures (from 2025)

These elements "describe essential language learning" (Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p. 14). Each element is associated with a set of learning outcomes that "describe important language learning in terms of concepts, dispositions and skills"

(Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p. 14). There are 40 learning outcomes for reading (L1 English), each broadly framed and typically spanning two to four years of children's learning. The set of learning outcomes for reading is supported by a Progression Continuum, which "describes aspects of the learning outcomes in more detail" (Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p. 52).

Key Emphases

From Literacy to Language: A Shift in Curriculum Vision

The 2019 PLC marks a decisive shift in the framing of reading within Irish primary education, moving away from the literature-rich whole-language inclination of the 1999 Curriculum towards a developmental, plurilingual conception of language learning. Reading is one of three strands, alongside oral language and writing, but it no longer has its own definition and rationale. Instead, it is embedded within an overarching vision of language as an integrated communicative process. The curriculum's vision statement asserts that "every lesson is a language lesson" (Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p. 7), while its aims focus on encouraging children "to engage personally with and think critically about a broad range of spoken, gesticulated, written and multimodal texts" and supporting them "to develop their literacy skills and enable them to progress at their own learning pace in oral language, reading and writing" (p. 13). These statements place literacy within a wider linguistic and pedagogical frame.

Notably, the curriculum provides no formal definition of reading, reflecting a conceptual move away from specifying reading as a set of discrete skills or behaviours. Instead, language learning is presented as "a developmental process" (Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p. 7), and reading is treated as one strand within this broader progression. Motivation and disposition are explicitly acknowledged. A "positive disposition towards reading (i.e. the 'will to read') is included in Learning Outcomes along with the concepts and skills involved in learning to read" (p. 16). However, reading itself receives relatively little direct attention in the vision and aims, indicating a deliberate shift in emphasis from the literacy-focused framing of 1999 to a language-centred orientation.

Integration and Plurilingualism: Positioning Reading within a Broader Language Framework

The curriculum adopts a strongly integrated model of language, positioning oral language as the foundation for literacy development. The curriculum states "the oral language strand requires specific attention in the early years of primary school as it is fundamental to the development of reading, writing and learning across the curriculum" (Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p. 14). Reading is framed as emerging from children's "oral and social construction of meaning" (p. 17), and language use across all

subjects is viewed as reinforcing linguistic development. This integration is extended across languages as well as subjects. The PLC "makes connections across and within languages and seeks to support the transfer of skills between languages" (p. 4).

Cross-linguistic transfer (Cummins, 1981; Ó Duibhir & Cummins, 2012) is a defining feature of the PLC. It recognises that "skills associated with word recognition, conventions of print and engagement in the writing process can transfer from one language to the other and thereby help the child learn the second language" (Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p. 7), and that "similarities in the alphabet and letter sounds can transfer from one language to the other" (p. 43). This is operationalised through explicit linking of learning outcomes across English, Irish, and other languages. Such emphasis reflects a plurilingual orientation aligned with contemporary sociolinguistic realities, positioning literacy learning within a dynamic linguistic repertoire rather than within discrete language compartments.

Discrete Literacy Skills in a Language-Focused Curriculum: Underlined or Overshadowed?

One of the main critiques of the 1999 Curriculum was that fundamental literacy skills were not clearly outlined in a developmental and explicit way. In some ways, the 2019 PLC has addressed this failing, while in others, it has not.

Turning to word recognition, the multi-cueing model that was so prevalent in 1999 is largely absent. In the learning outcomes there is no reference to using semantic, syntactic, and graphophonic cues simultaneously as word identification strategies. Instead, the curriculum delineates phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics as key components of early reading. Phonological and phonemic awareness appear consistently from infant classes to Sixth Class, beginning with the ability to "play with, recognise and manipulate sounds such as syllables, rhyme, onset–rime and phonemes in spoken words" (Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p. 26) and progressing to "compare sounds and patterns in words found in texts in various genres across the curriculum" (Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p. 26) and across languages and dialects in the senior classes.

Similarly, phonics is framed as one of the "constrained skills" that are "essential because they are fundamental to children's subsequent learning and development" and "can be achieved over a particular period of time" (Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p. 18). In infant classes, children are expected to "recognise, name and sound all lower- and upper-case letters and common letter patterns" (Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p. 26) progressing to using "phonic knowledge and a range of word identification strategies with flexibility and confidence" (Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p. 26) through the primary years. This explicit treatment of foundational skills represents a notable departure from the 1999 Curriculum, which treated phonics briefly and inconsistently and subordinated it to cueing systems.

Yet, the conceptual positioning of literacy within the curriculum remains somewhat ambiguous. On one hand, the curriculum provides clear and sequenced learning outcomes for phonological awareness and phonics, largely aligning with contemporary evidence on early reading development and signalling a move towards more structured foundational skills teaching. On the other hand, these literacy skills are situated within a broader discourse of language integration, developmental progression, and cross-linguistic transfer, and they are not foregrounded in the curriculum's vision or aims. Literacy is at once explicit (in the learning outcomes) and somewhat obfuscated (in the curriculum's overarching narrative). Though the curriculum documentation itself does not adopt the term *balanced literacy*, the underpinning research reports published by the NCCA recommend a "research-based balanced literacy framework" (Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 32). Other research reports published at the same time endorsed an emergentist view to support oral language acquisition (Shiel et al., 2012) and reliance on the interdependence hypothesis and common underlying proficiency to extend this learning across languages (Ó Duibhir & Cummins, 2012), adding further distinct foundational components to the PLC. Consequently, the PLC is informed by a unique constellation of conceptual and instructional frameworks.

This multifaceted positioning arguably generates some tension. The curriculum simultaneously highlights structured discrete skill development while embracing a more organic, sociolinguistic, developmental, and integrated model of language learning. Its relative silence on reading as a discrete construct within the vision, aims, and rationale could be interpreted as a deliberate refusal to prioritise technical skills over communicative competence. Additionally, a closer examination of the Progression Continua and some of the broader documentation relating to the curriculum reveals occasional references to the cueing systems that characterised the 1999 Curriculum and which are the source of significant critique and debate. Though perhaps an unintended artifact of earlier thinking, their inclusion compounds the ambiguity and, taken together, may signal a lack of conceptual clarity regarding how reading instruction is situated within an integrated language framework.

Discussion

The Politics of Reading Curriculum: Independence and Dependencies

Taking a century-long perspective provides unique insights on how political influence has (and has not) shaped how reading is presented in the curriculum. The first curriculum for reading (1922) was directly influenced by the nationalist outlook of the early Free State Government working towards independence. The second curriculum (1971) appears to have been influenced by philosophy more so than politics. The move towards consultative, partnership models brought about by the formation of

NCCA led to a period of largely depoliticised third curriculum from 1999. However, this was arguably upended by the political will for change that accompanied the 2011 Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and led to the publication of the fourth curriculum in 2015. That this version of the curriculum had to be revised and extended in 2019, before being reintroduced as part of the broader Primary Curriculum Framework in 2025, highlights that the 2011 political intervention likely contributed to the lack of clarity with the PLC documented elsewhere (Mac Domhnaill & Nic an Bhaird, 2022; NCCA, 2018).

While political influence is readily discernible in the *content* of the first Free State Programme of Instruction, the development of content in the latter part of our current review has been largely devolved to development groups falling under the aegis of the NCCA. This contrasts with the level of direct political involvement in reading curricula internationally. For example, recent developments in the United States have seen mandated approaches to the teaching of reading enshrined in state-level legislation (Schwartz, 2022). Ireland has not seen similar moves. While reviews of international research are now a common feature of reading curriculum reform (Kennedy et al., 2012, 2023; Shanahan, 2019; Shiel et al., 2012), they are only one of multiple influences on curriculum reform adopted by the NCCA. The large swings in approach seen elsewhere (e.g., whole language to phonics; balanced literacy to structured literacy) have largely bypassed the national curriculum. While the typically slow and consultative approach to curriculum reform has been cited as one of the reasons for Ireland's success in international assessments of reading (Buckingham, 2024; Kennedy, 2013), it is difficult to prove this assertion empirically.

Continuity and Change: The Enduring Elements and Evolving Conceptions of Reading in Irish Curricula

Our historical analysis suggests that successive reading curricula in Ireland share more continuities than differences. Since 1971, curriculum developers have consistently valued literature-rich environments. Class and school libraries have been celebrated as central features of provision, and rich talk and discussion around texts have featured prominently. Similarly, since 1971, unconstrained skills such as comprehension and vocabulary have been prioritised.

Interestingly, certain features presented as novel in recent developments – such as an emphasis on transferring skills across languages – were evident as far back as 1922. While this focus waned in subsequent decades, it has re-emerged in the PLC (2015/2019/2025). Word recognition, by contrast, has evolved more slowly. In 1951, whole-word approaches and phonics were advocated, yet the curricula of 1971 and 1999 offered little advancement in this area. The more recent specification, however, has placed renewed emphasis on this crucial facet of literacy acquisition in the specific

and consistent delineation of phonics/phonological awareness from infant classes to Sixth Class.

Two observations about change are particularly noteworthy. First, much of the evolution of recent reading curricula in Ireland has occurred at the level of terminology and layout. Since 1971, it could be argued that successive curriculum iterations have focused more on re-organising and very gradual expansion of the components of reading than on radical renewal. Second, and relatedly, a century-long review of reading reveals a slow but discernible deepening of conceptualisation. There has been a progressive "filling out of the picture" to more faithfully reflect the complexity of learning to read. This includes a growing recognition of reading as a multifaceted process and greater delineation of the diverse skills required for proficient reading.

Teacher Professionalism in Irish Reading Curricula

The early post-independence curriculum of 1922 contained clear stipulations regarding prescribed texts. Since then, this prescriptive approach has largely disappeared. While recent curriculum developments have heralded teacher agency and localised decision-making as central to curriculum design (Department of Education, 2023), a historical perspective reveals that the conception of teachers as professionals has been an enduring feature of reading curricula since as far back as 1971. Flexibility in curricular provision – enabling adaptation to local needs and using the curriculum as a scaffold rather than a constraint on professional judgement – has remained a consistent principle throughout this period.

What has changed, arguably, are the structural and material conditions within which teachers operate. On one hand, increased demands for planning and paperwork, a more diverse student population, and an accelerated pace of change in schools have made professional decision-making around reading instruction more complex. On the other hand, teachers now have access to a wider repository of rich children's literature and a wealth of online texts and resources, arguably placing them in a stronger position to exercise the autonomy that has long been embedded in Irish curriculum design. This interplay of enduring trust and evolving constraints underscores a central paradox. While teacher professionalism remains a cornerstone of reading curriculum policy, its enactment is increasingly contingent on systemic pressures of accountability, the allocation of instructional time, and the material resources available to schools.

Conclusion

Our retrospective analysis of the evolution of the reading curriculum in Ireland reveals that, while not inured from ideological, political, and economic forces, Ireland has for the most part avoided the more turbulent swings characteristic of other jurisdictions. Though it has occasionally been buffeted by political headwinds, and though there

has been a growing appreciation in successive iterations of curricula of the complex nature of learning to read, curriculum in Ireland has remained relatively stable. Yet, this stability is not without a cost. The Irish reading curriculum at times has appeared slow to respond to international trends and advances in reading research. The resistance to change can be seen as a strength. It avoids the curriculum volatility that can undermine coherence elsewhere. However, it also risks reducing alignment with the evolving evidence base, meaning teachers are reliant on other sources and guides to provide up-to-date information for their literacy practice. Furthermore, it would be incorrect to conceive that this relative stability means that Irish literacy curriculum development always follows a smooth path from conceptualisation to enactment. The 1999 Curriculum had to be re-presented six years later. In the space of 10 years, three different versions of the PLC were presented.

Equipping young people with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to be a successful reader is a fundamental goal of primary education. This was true in 1922, in 1971, in 1999, and is no less true today. What *has* changed is the vision and context in which this reading takes place. The picture of reading presented in today's curriculum – one that involves multiple languages, supported by many interacting higher- and lower-order skills, taking place in meaningful and diverse contexts – is a positive and powerful one.

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