Maynooth University
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Pupil Choice in the Flexible and Differentiated Curriculum: The Irish Experience

May 25th

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Majella Dempsey – Ireland

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- STEM Education
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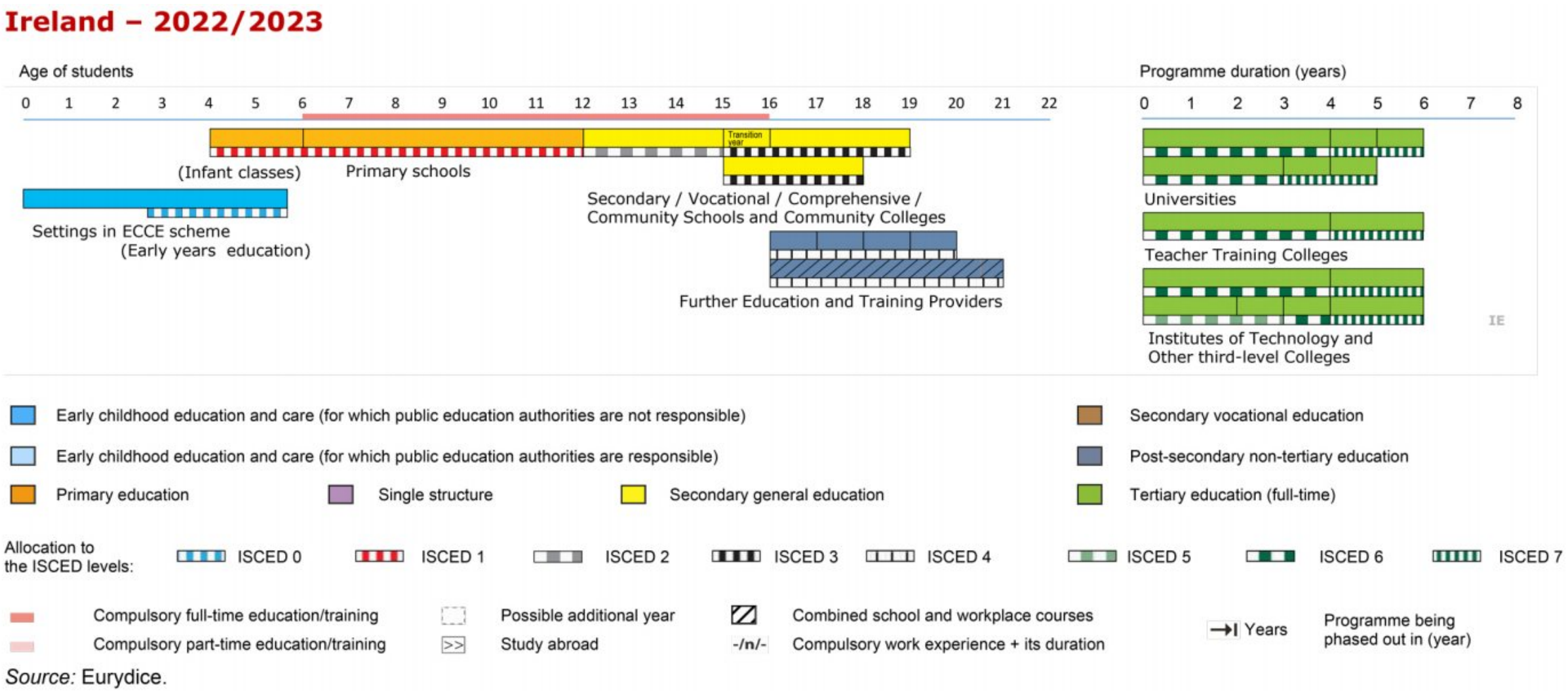
Curriculum Studies
ESAI SIG

Overview of the presentation

- Structure of Irish Education
- Curriculum development in Ireland
- Flexibility and choice
- Inclusion
- Lower secondary education reform
- Early evaluation of reform
- Upper secondary developments
- Challenges

Structure of Irish Education



Source: Eurydice.

Key features of Irish Education

- Rapid growth in enrolment (recent growth of students from Ukraine (approx. 7k students, 5,043 at primary level and 2,238 at secondary level)
- Need for more pluralist school system to reflect diversity (particularly religious)
- Participation of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)
  - 1.9 M (20% of total Ed. Budget) in 2020
  - 17,000 Special Needs Assistants
  - 1,618 Special classes
  - 13,620 Special Education Teacher posts
- Teaching of foreign languages
- STEM education
- Technology
- Early Childhood – lot of progress here since 2010

NCCA Curriculum development in Ireland

- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)
- NCCA was established in 1987 is a statutory body advising the Minister for Education on curriculum and assessment for:
  - early childhood education (0-6)
  - primary schools (6-12)
  - post-primary schools (12-18).
- Also advise the Minister on assessment procedures used in schools and examinations as part of the curriculum.
- Vision is to lead and sustain developments in curriculum and assessment that are sufficiently far-reaching so that all children and students can experience and benefit from enjoyable, engaging, relevant and appropriately challenging experiences to support learning, living in, contributing to, caring for, and working in a changing world.
- https://ncca.ie/en/

Four pillars to inform curriculum development

Critically review and debate cutting-edge **research** from across the globe and commission new research where this is needed.

Feedback from **networks.** Work with children, students, practitioners, teachers, parents and school leaders as key ideas about learning, teaching and assessment are developed, tried out, discussed and evaluated.

Hold public **consultations** so people can engage with the key ideas about curriculum and assessment change. Use a range of consultation methods to gather feedback on these ideas, hearing directly from children and students is central to all consultations.

Drawing on research, work with schools and settings, and consultation findings, work closely with the members of **Council, Boards and Development Groups** to generate and agree advice for the Minister.

What are the challenges and opportunities you see with using these four pillars to develop curriculum?

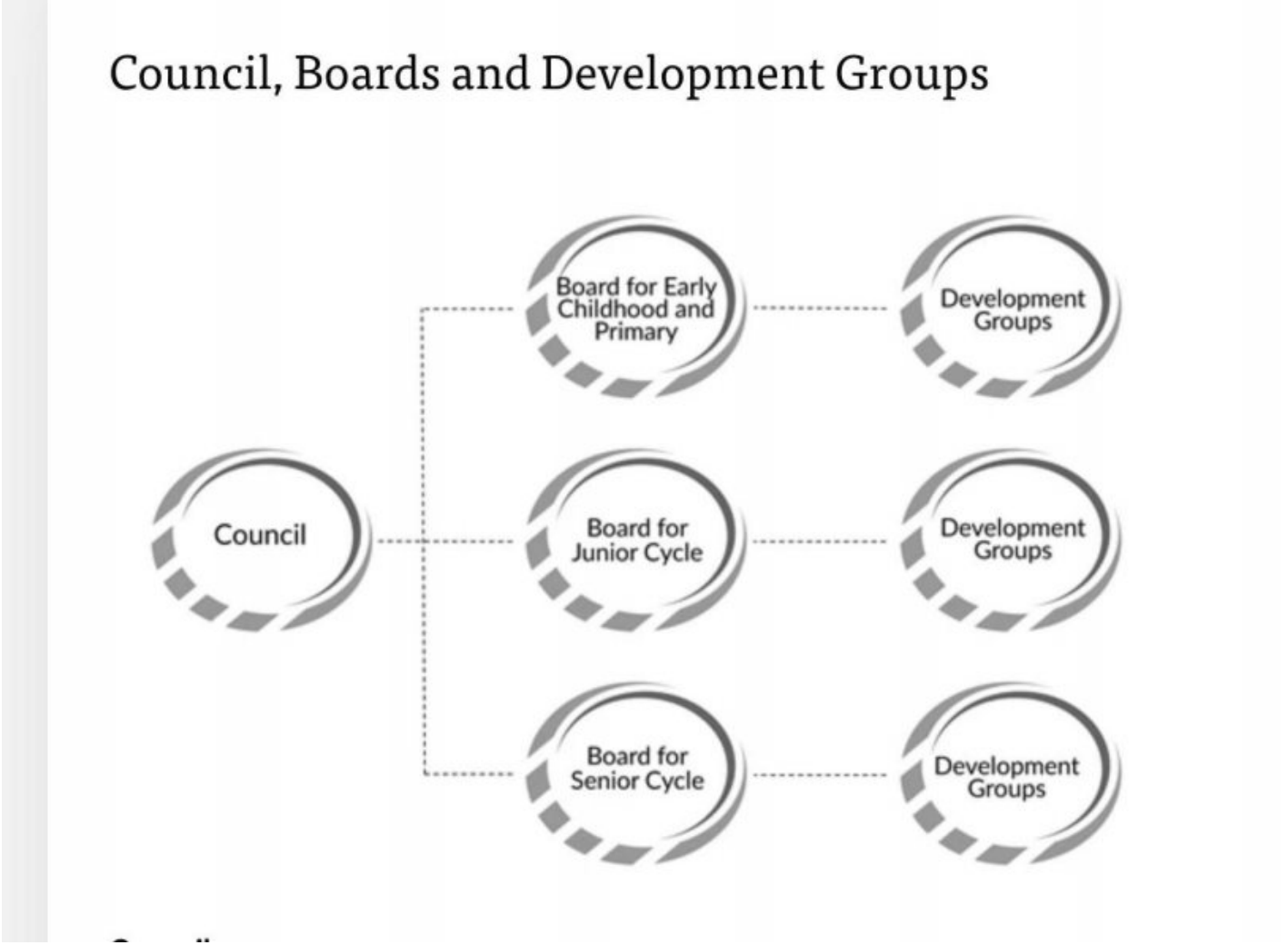
Think about this question for a minute

NCCA Research reports coming soon

As an example of how research feeds in to curriculum development in Ireland

- New *Framework for Key Competencies at Senior Cycle*
- Literature review on *The technical form of curriculum specifications for subjects and modules in a redeveloped Senior Cycle*
- Research into *Additional Assessment Components in International Jurisdictions*

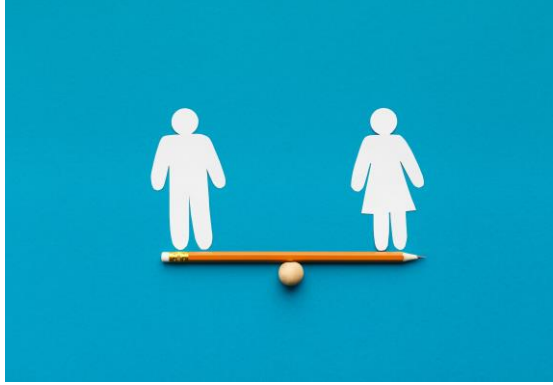
Many stakeholders involved – multiple voices



Board for Senior Cycle (21 people, many voices)

- Chair – Independent
- Department of Education – Inspectorate (2)
- Association for Community and Comprehensive Schools
- Joint Managerial Body (2)
- Education Training Boards Ireland
- Foras na Gaeilge
- Institute of Guidance Councillors
- State Examinations Commission (2)
- Irish Universities Association
- Technological Higher Education Association
- National Parents Council –PP
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland
- Irish Business and Employers Federation
- SOLAS
- Teacher unions
  - 2 ASTI
  - 2 TUI

Changing curriculum is a slow process



Strengths

- Buy-in from stakeholders
- Representative nature - voices from across the education system are heard
- Path to introduction of change can be smoother and more easily negotiated

Challenges

- Too much compromise on key principles – what emerges is a pale imitation from what was envisaged or what was possible
- Takes too long? Not enough time?
- Power dynamics within boards and groups – the voices most heard

Policy

- Educators make choices in how they interpret, mediate, and sometimes ignore policy (Ball et al., 2012, p. 3).

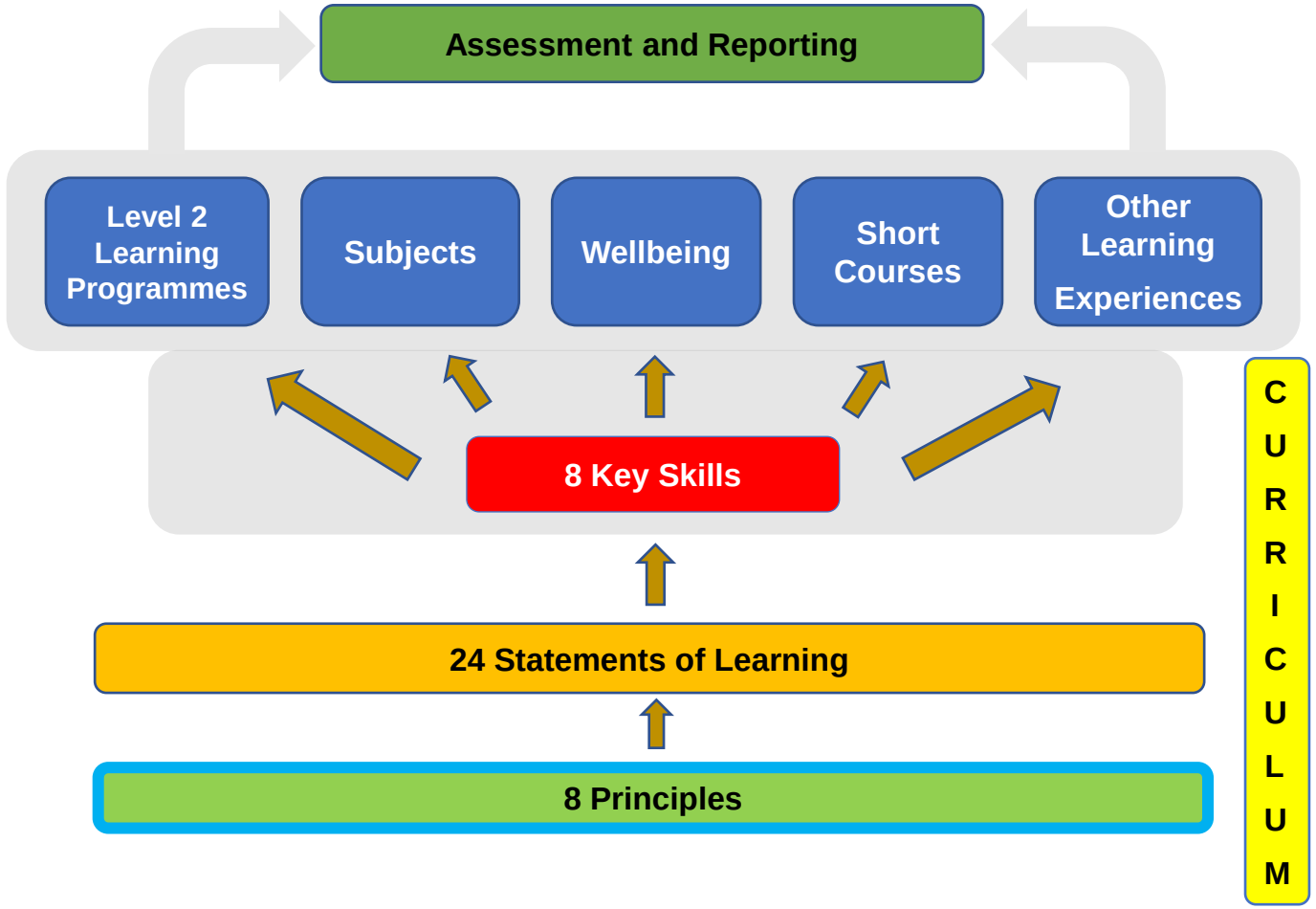
Flexibility, choice and differentiation

- At programme level
- At written curriculum level
- At sites of enactment
- At point of assessment

Second level education

- Junior Cycle three years (12-15)
  - Underwent large scale changes in 2015
  - Subjects and short courses https://curriculumonline.ie/Junior-cycle/
  - Irish, English and Mathematics taken at Higher and Ordinary level
  - L1 and L2 learning programmes
- Senior cycle two or three years (15-18)
- Undergoing an extensive review at present https://ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/senior-cycle-review/
  - Optional Transition Year (78%)
  - Leaving Certificate Established (71%)
  - Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCE plus vocational modules) (23%)
  - Leaving Certificate Applied (Address early school leaving and inclusion) (5.8%)

Structure of Junior Cycle



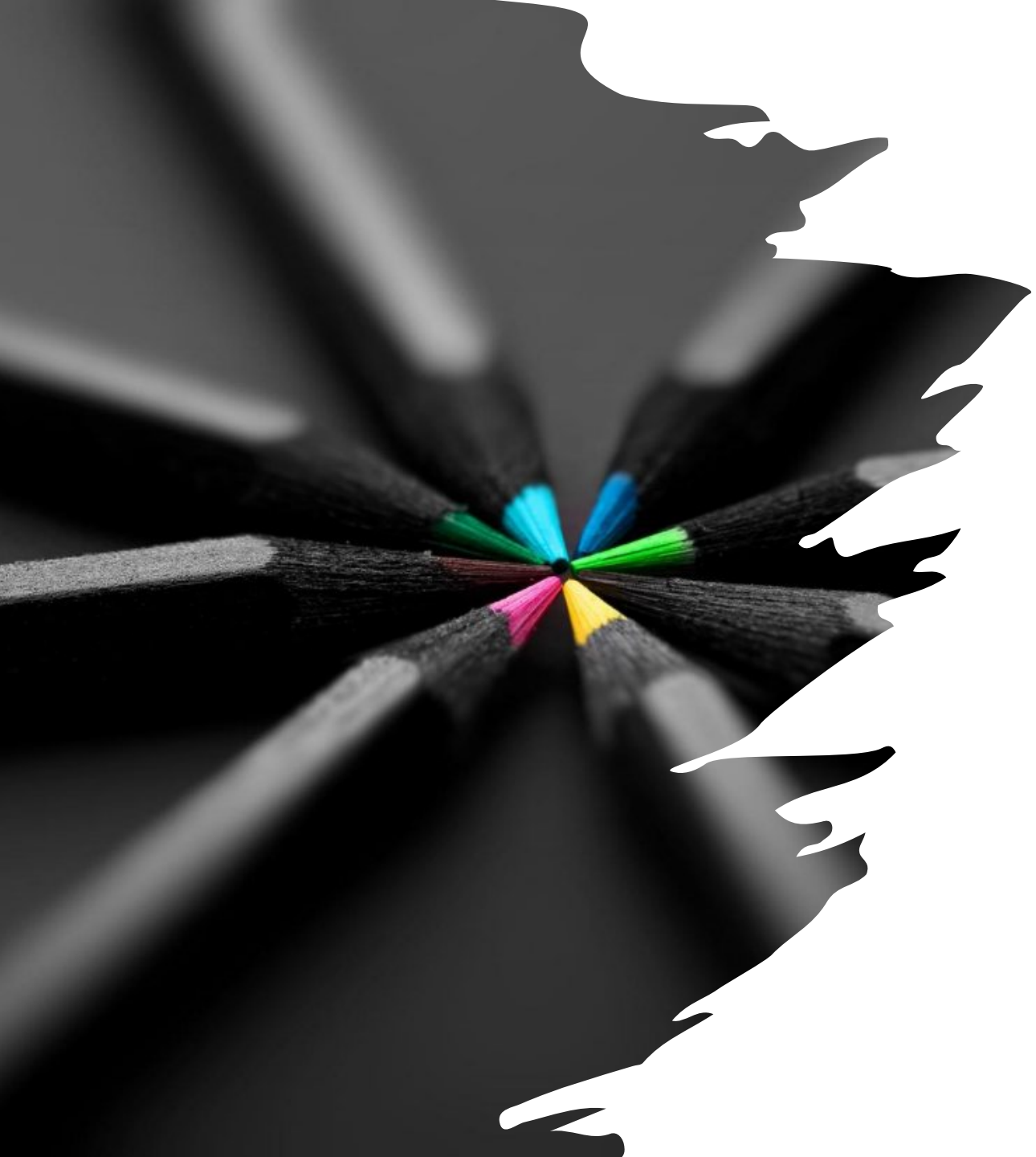
NCCA

The Rationale for Junior Cycle Review

- To place the **student at the centre** of the educational experience.
- To enhance, **make equitable and enjoyable**, the educational experience of all students in the first three years of post-primary school.
- To help students negotiate **the transition** from primary to post-primary school.
- To offer schools, teachers’, students’ and parents' **agency and autonomy in curriculum development.**
- To help students build confidence and ability to critically reason, problem solve and develop transferable skills so that they can take their place in the world of the 21st century.
- To change our approach to assessment so that it focuses on improving learning.

(see Dempsey et al, 2021)

Learning to Learn
Choice and Flexibility
Quality
Creativity and Innovation
Engagement and Participation
Continuity and Developme nt
Inclusive Education
Wellbeing
The Principles of Junior Cycle Education



L1 (low to moderate) and L2 (profound) Learning Programmes

- Communicating, language and Literacy.
- Numeracy.
- Personal Care.
- Living in a Community.
- Preparing for work.
- The Arts.
- Physical Education.

(See https://ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/level-one-and-level-two-programmes/).

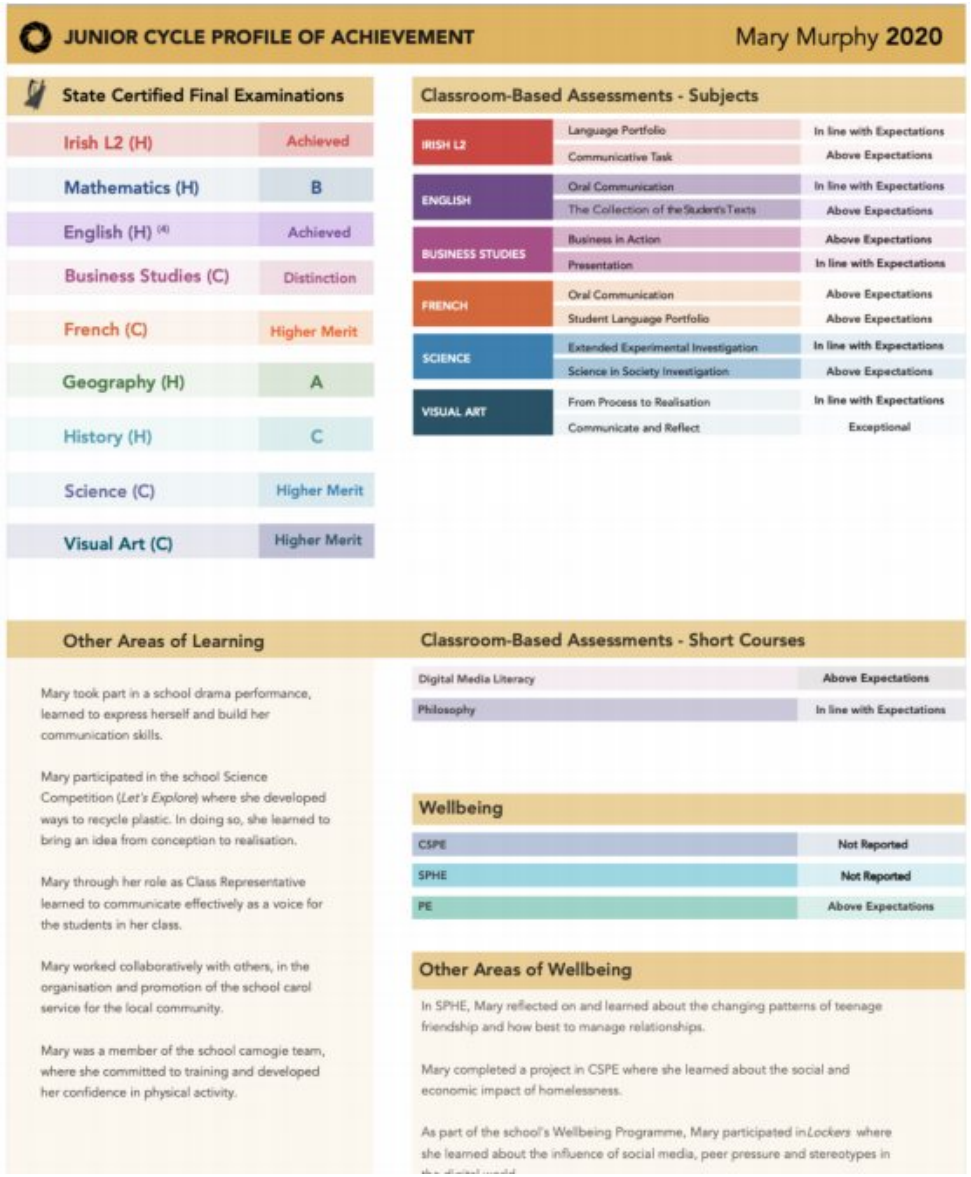
ASSESSMENT Junior Cycle

2 Classroom Based Assessments (CBA's) - one in Year 2 and one in Year 3.

Assessment Task (10%) marked by State Examinations Commission (SEC)

Final Exam in June of 3rd Year marked by State Examinations Commission (90%).

Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement – issued in November.



JUNIOR CYCLE PROFILE OF ACHIEVEMENT — Mary Murphy **2020**

State Certified Final Examinations

Irish L2 (H)	Achieved
Mathematics (H)	B
English (H) [4]	Achieved
Business Studies (C)	Distinction
French (C)	Higher Merit
Geography (H)	A
History (H)	C
Science (C)	Higher Merit
Visual Art (C)	Higher Merit

Classroom-Based Assessments - Subjects

IRISH L2	Language Portfolio	In line with Expectations
	Communicative Task	Above Expectations
ENGLISH	Oral Communication	In line with Expectations
	The Collection of the Student's Texts	Above Expectations
BUSINESS STUDIES	Business in Action	Above Expectations
	Presentation	In line with Expectations
FRENCH	Oral Communication	Above Expectations
	Student Language Portfolio	Above Expectations
SCIENCE	Extended Experimental Investigation	In line with Expectations
	Science in Society Investigation	Above Expectations
VISUAL ART	From Process to Realisation	In line with Expectations
	Communicate and Reflect	Exceptional

Other Areas of Learning

Mary took part in a school drama performance, learned to express herself and build her communication skills.

Mary participated in the school Science Competition (*Let's Explore*) where she developed ways to recycle plastic. In doing so, she learned to bring an idea from conception to realisation.

Mary through her role as Class Representative learned to communicate effectively as a voice for the students in her class.

Mary worked collaboratively with others, in the organisation and promotion of the school carol service for the local community.

Mary was a member of the school camogie team, where she committed to training and developed her confidence in physical activity.

Classroom-Based Assessments - Short Courses

Digital Media Literacy	Above Expectations
Philosophy	In line with Expectations

Wellbeing

CSPE	Not Reported
SPHE	Not Reported
PE	Above Expectations

Other Areas of Wellbeing

In SPHE, Mary reflected on and learned about the changing patterns of teenage friendship and how best to manage relationships.

Mary completed a project in CSPE where she learned about the social and economic impact of homelessness.

As part of the school's Wellbeing Programme, Mary participated in *Lockers* where she learned about the influence of social media, peer pressure and stereotypes in

Assessment - Features of quality

Exceptional

Above expectations

In line with expectations

Yet to meet expectations

Features of Quality for The Science in Society Investigation	
Exceptional	
Investigating	▪ Chooses an interesting or novel topic and research question ▪ Finds information about the topic from a large number of varied and balanced sources, and gives a complete reference list ▪ Evaluates the reliability (relevance, accuracy and bias) of the sources
Communicating	▪ Clearly positions the topic as science in society; explains the relevant science and the impact of the topic on society and/or the environment ▪ Presents the investigation in a very well-structured way (that is clear and easy to read) using relevant scientific terminology and informative representations; uses an innovative approach that truly enhances the work ▪ Explains different sides of the argument in detail
Knowledge and understanding	▪ Views on the chosen topic are considered and discussed in depth ▪ Gives a justified personal opinion informed by research, linking the information to the argument and using science explanations
Above expectations	
	▪ Chooses an interesting or novel topic and research question ▪ Finds information about the topic from a number of balanced sources, and gives a complete reference list ▪ Considers the reliability and quality (relevance, accuracy and bias) of the sources
	▪ Positions the topic as science in society; explains the relevant science and the impact of the topic on society and/or the environment

Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) Meetings

About developing a shared understanding of standards within junior cycle

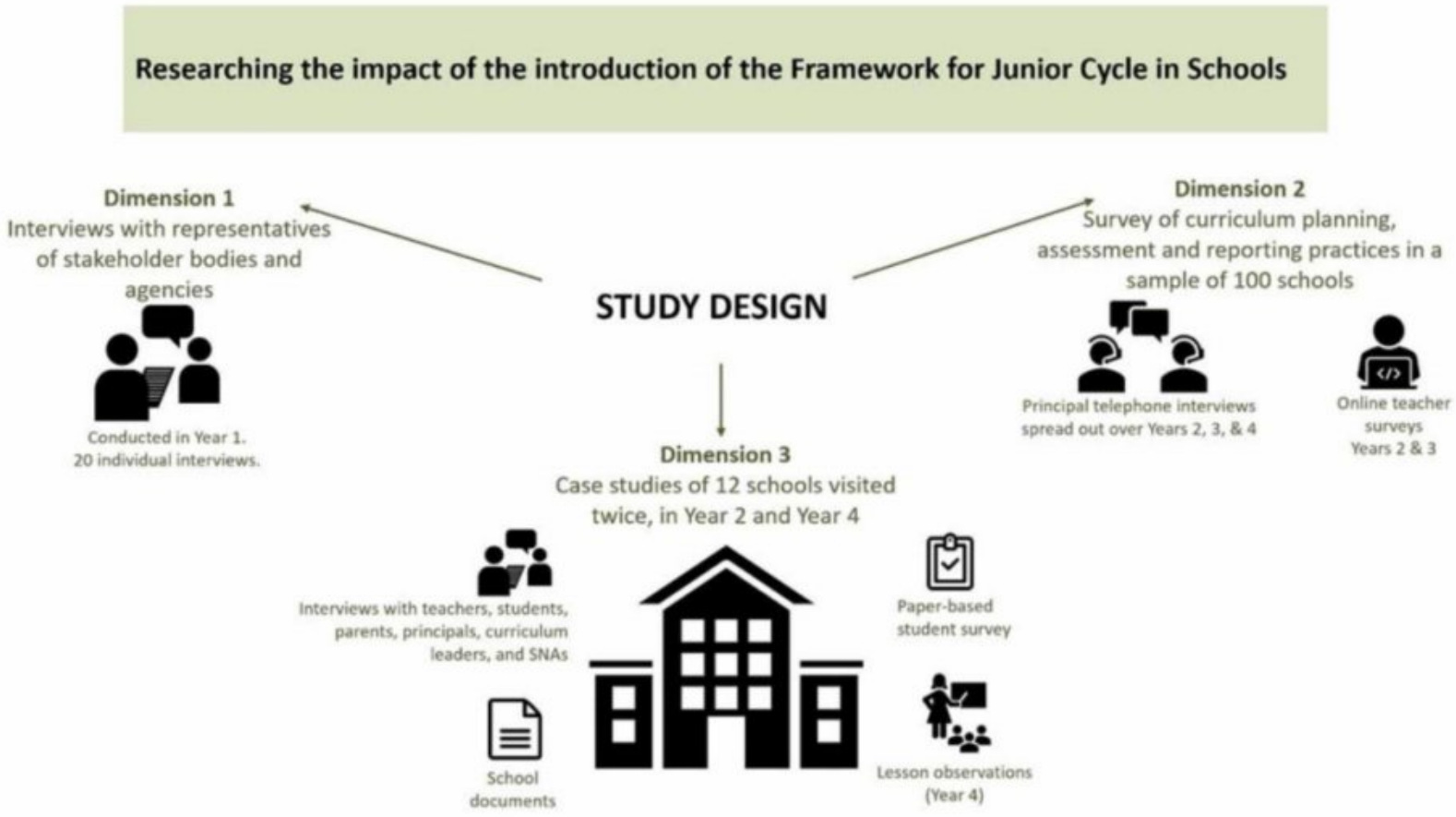
Through professional discussions

Where teachers bring their own examples of student work and compare their judgements with other colleagues

Using annotated examples of student work and with specifications provided by the NCCA.

Early evaluation

https://www.ul.ie/ehs/junior-cycle-national-project



Key findings (1)

- The need for change was supported by the actors at different levels
- Change to student-centred pedagogy including
  - Key skills / competencies
  - Inclusion
- Professional development a key enabler – Junior Cycle for Teachers Professional Support
- Teacher collaboration, professional conversations and language of pedagogy
- Students have a greater voice in, and greater awareness of, their own learning
- Student- teacher relationships have improved (McGarr et al, 2022)

Key findings (2)

- More formative assessment happening, student centred pedagogies
- Students also favoured student-centred learning experiences such as groupwork, active learning and inquiry-based ‘real-life’ learning

- *Teachers’ and students’ experiences of the curriculum would indicate that there is a level of incoherence in its actualisation, and this was most acutely felt in relation to assessment practices. This curricular misalignment appears to be a result of the use of summative external assessment to assess subject specifications that employ learning outcomes that provide scope for teachers’ interpretation and enactment*. (McGarr et al 2023, p.17)

Senior cycle curriculum reform

A work in progress

https://ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/senior-cycle-redevelopment/

Leaving Certificate – High stakes examination

- Students usually take 7 subjects plus Physical Education and Religious Education
  - Can take extra privately – such as Applied Maths, Music
- Subject options – taken at Higher Level and Ordinary Level
- Count six subjects for University Entry
  - Mathematics – bonus points 25
  - Irish [exemptions]
  - English
  - European Language [exemptions]

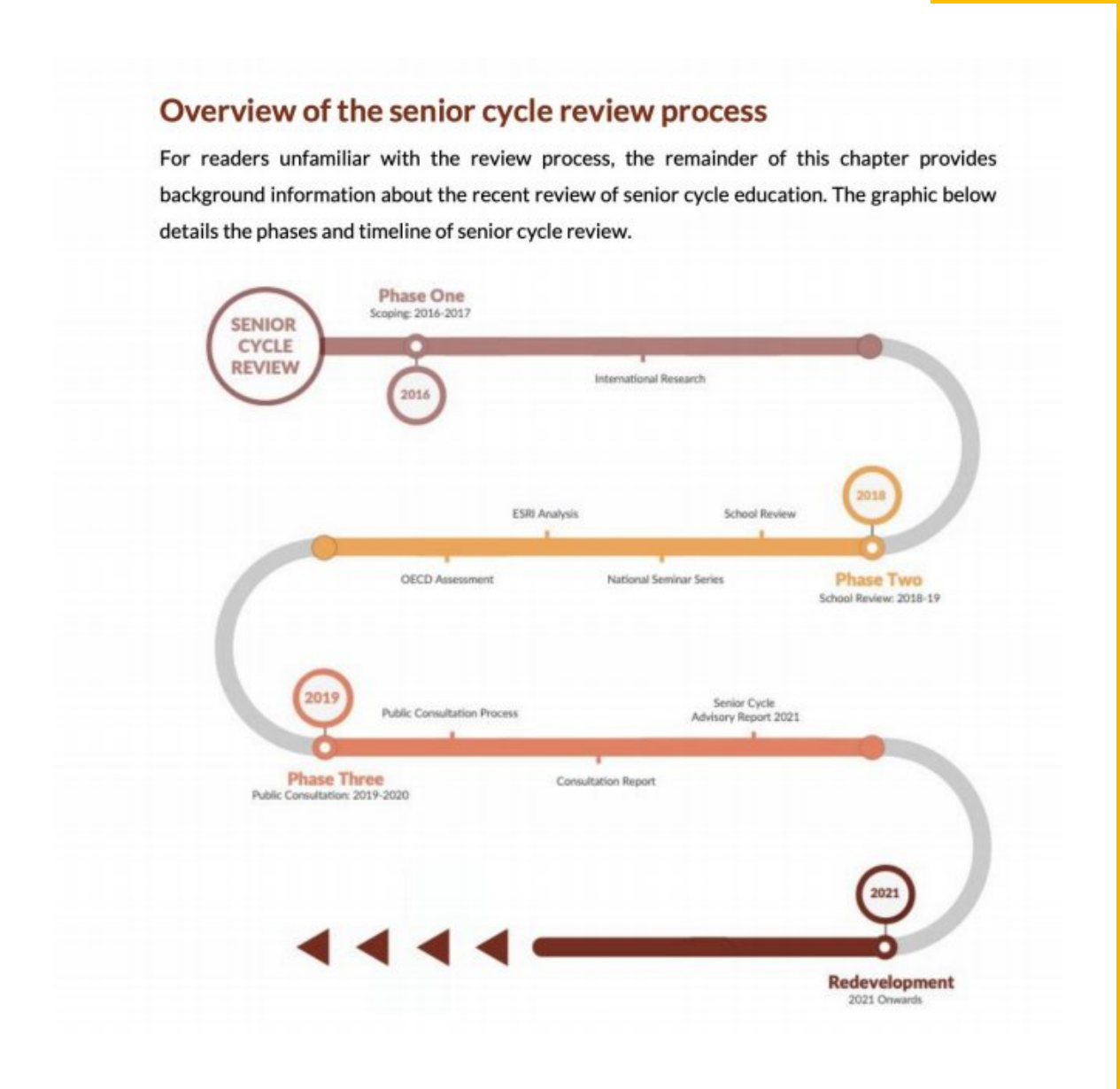
  - See www.sec.ie

Change is slow …

- Started in 2016
- For details see

https://ncca.ie/media/5399/scr-advisory-report_en.pdf

- NCCA (2022) Advisory Report



The three tenets of Senior Cycle reform are to:

- Empower students to meet the challenges of the 21st century
- Enrich the student experience and build on what is strong in our current system
- Embed wellbeing and reduce student stress levels

Senior cycle reform – Minister of Ed Response

- New curricula for subjects across Senior Cycle, updating subject content
- Two new subjects – Drama, Film and Theatre Studies; and Climate Action and Sustainable Development
- Changing the final assessment procedure to significantly reduce reliance on final examinations and introduce teacher-based assessment components. (40% SBA and 60% SEC)
- Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students will have improved access to Mathematics and Modern Foreign Languages
- A new qualification will be introduced at L1 and 2 on the National Qualification framework to provide an appropriate level of assessment to some students with special educational needs, building on the equivalent programme at Junior Cycle level.
- A revised Transition Year programme

Figure 2 Overview of Key Competencies in Senior Cycle

Key competencies in senior cycle

Communication about change is important

- There needs to be a conscious focus on shared sense making as a form of mediating and refracting curriculum reform (Priestley et al., 2012) – *resisting change is part of this process*
- People tend to encode new ideas by casting them in their existing practice (Spillane et al., 2002)- *we are already doing this!*
- People are biased toward interpretations consistent with their prior beliefs and values - *we don't need this change*.

What do we need to protect

- Curriculum space – as opposed to curriculum narrowing – *the classroom is too uncertain a place for recipes*
- Agency – professional expertise at risk if we see teachers a deliverers of the curriculum, professional confidence
- Knowledge – skills, attitudes and values can only be developed in the context of knowledge
- Change needs careful cultivation, support and nurture
- Resist cultural homogenisation (Gough, 2014) and “learnification” (only concerned with what can be measured, Biesta, 2022)
- Push back from seeing students as consumers – they do not know what is best for them

In conclusion

Teacher agency critically shapes how we respond to complex situations, it is temporal and depends on our past experiences, our personal and professional values coupled with our aspirations for the future. In this vision of the classroom curriculum space, the power and influence are coming from within the school, within the curriculum encounters, within individuals and collectives, and it has potential to change the world through powerful interconnections and ethical actions (Dempsey, 2023).

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