An Roinn Oideachais agus Óige
Department of Education and Youth

Whole-School Curriculum Planning

Guidance for all Primary and Special Schools

2026

Developed by the Department of Education and Youth, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Oide and the National Council for Special Education

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1 Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this guidance

The purpose of this document is to provide **guidance for school leaders and teachers** regarding whole school curriculum planning to support the enactment of the redeveloped Primary School Curriculum for primary and special schools. Curriculum planning and enactment[1] is an important component of the overall School Plan. [2]

The *Primary Curriculum Framework* is the first ever curriculum framework for primary and special schools in Ireland. The *Framework* places the child at the centre of the learning process, and the curriculum specifications acknowledge the unique learning journey that each child is on.

The redeveloped curriculum provides school leaders and teachers increased scope to make 'decisions about what to teach, when to teach it, and how to sequence and pace learning' (*Primary Curriculum Framework*, p20). This capacity to make choices and decisions often referred to as 'agency'', positions school leaders and teachers as active interpreters of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* and specifications, shaping learner experiences in ways that respond to the context of the child and the learning environment.
This capacity to make choices and decisions is often referred to as 'agency'. The redeveloped primary curriculum envisages school leaders and teachers as active agents who interpret and mediate the curriculum framework and specifications into learner experiences that are responsive to the context of the child, classroom and school. It is intended that the guidance offered here will support all school leaders and teachers in curriculum enactment in a way that will lead to improved learning outcomes for all children.

The degree of agency offered to schools in the redeveloped curriculum brings opportunities, new thinking, and exciting possibilities for school communities. It also brings new approaches to planning and working with the curriculum. Through the lens of the vision and principles of the redeveloped curriculum, a whole-school curriculum plan should be **a living, evolving resource that supports and facilitates reflective practice and ongoing review**

[1] The glossary in Appendix 3 provides definitions of key terms used throughout this document to support clarity and shared understanding during the enactment of the redeveloped Primary Curriculum.

[2] Section 21 Education Act 1998 (1) A board shall, as soon as may be after its appointment, make arrangements for the preparation of a plan (in this section referred to as the "school plan") and shall ensure that the plan is regularly reviewed and updated.

and monitoring by school leaders and teachers. It should support the board of management, principal, other leaders and teachers to plan for learning, teaching and assessment for all children in the school and review the effectiveness of how this is done.

This guidance document was developed through close collaboration between the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Oide, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the Department of Education and Youth including the Inspectorate.[3] These and other groups will continue to collaborate on the provision of guidance and support for school leaders and teachers in the enactment of the redeveloped curriculum.

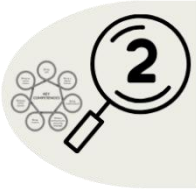
[3] This Guidance will be subject to regular review and updates.

1.2 Effective whole-school curriculum planning for the redeveloped curriculum

While the planning process and the way in which it is recorded will vary from one school to another, the following features of effective whole-school curriculum planning are relevant to all school contexts.

Identify the key contextual factors for curriculum enactment in the school

These would typically include features of the school community and the diversity of children's learning needs, as well as whole-school approaches that have been most effective in addressing these needs up to now in working towards the curriculum vision.



Support all children in developing the key competencies of the Primary Curriculum Framework

Whole-school curriculum planning can do this by fostering practice that reflects the eight overarching principles of learning, teaching and assessment and the seven key competencies.

Support the consistent and effective enactment of agreed whole-school pedagogical approaches across all curriculum areas

Whole-school curriculum planning can support an agreed approach to ensure that children experience high quality playful and engaging learning experiences.

Balance agency and accountability

Whole-school curriculum planning should promote teachers' agency in curriculum enactment, while also ensuring responsibility for breadth, balance, continuity and progression in children's learning.

Guide and inform teachers' individual preparation for learning, teaching and assessment

Whole-school curriculum planning should support teachers in using the curriculum specifications, including Learning Outcomes, pedagogical approaches, assessment guidance, and other supports, to provide suitably challenging learning experiences for all children.

Support the use of assessment

Whole-school curriculum planning should support school leaders and teachers in the use of assessment to inform learning and teaching for all children in the school and in monitoring progression.

Provide ongoing opportunities for review and improvement

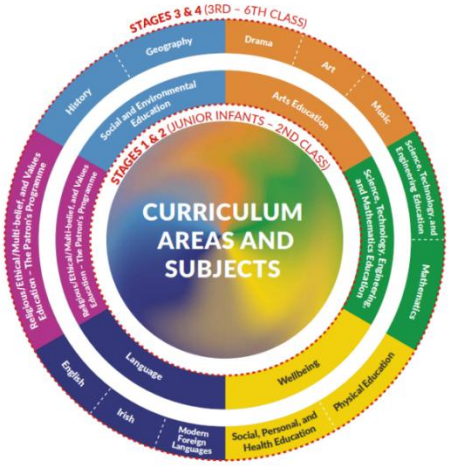
There should be regular opportunities for scheduled or unscheduled reviews of the effectiveness of whole-school planning approaches. This should be based on evidence of their impact on learning, teaching and assessment and their contribution to overall school improvement.

2 Whole-school curriculum planning in action

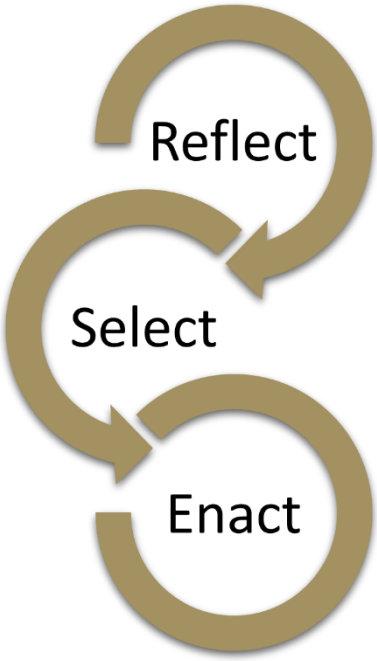
During the initial years of enactment of the redeveloped curriculum, each school has some discretion in deciding the sequence of enactment for each curriculum area. The Wellbeing specification, however, must begin within the first three years and therefore should be among the first three curriculum areas selected.

The initial step should involve the development of a strong familiarity with the specifications by school leaders and teachers to inform and support effective decision-making.

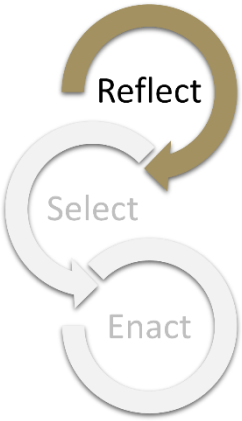
The curriculum is presented in **curriculum areas and subjects**.



Leaders, in collaboration with their school communities, should also **reflect** on current practice and, following a process of internal review and discussion, **select** a curriculum area to **enact**, with consideration given to the professional support services being provided.



2.1 Reflect



One of the essential features of effective whole-school curriculum planning involves identifying the contextual factors that shape how the curriculum is enacted in a school. These could include the strengths, needs, interests and individuality of the children, the geographical location, school culture, resources and community involvement, that influence how a school operates and delivers education. Reflection should be guided through the lens of the *Primary Curriculum Framework* with those leading the whole-school curriculum planning process supporting school communities to use it as a reference point for considering their own **school context.**

Professional Learning days led by Oide and NCSE provide school leaders and teachers with opportunities for professional conversations that help to deepen the understanding of the school's context while also focusing on the principles and key competencies.

Reflecting on the school context through the lens of the principles of learning, teaching and assessment

The eight overarching principles of learning, teaching and assessment are presented on pages 6-7 of the *Primary Curriculum Framework.* The principles provide the lens through which schools should reflect on their whole-school practice in enacting the redeveloped curriculum. The principles capture what lies at the heart of high-quality learning, teaching, and assessment in the primary curriculum. They are broad in nature, to reflect varied school contexts and children's different circumstances, experiences, and abilities.

Questions to promote reflection on the school context through the lens of the principles of learning, teaching and assessment	
	• Have we a shared understanding of what each of the principles of learning, teaching and assessment would look like if well-developed across all learning settings in our school? • Which principles are already well reflected in our whole-school practice? How do we know? What is the view of the children? Others? • To which principles do we need to give greater attention? • How might we do this?

Reflecting on our learners through the lens of the key competencies

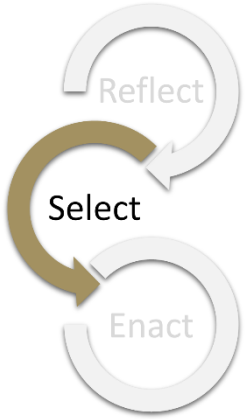
The range of key competencies comprise **the essential knowledge, skills, concepts, dispositions, attitudes, and values** that enable children to adapt to and deal with a range of situations, challenges, and contexts (*Primary Curriculum Framework,* p8-13).

The competencies play a central part in children's learning. Therefore, they require ongoing attention and are embedded across all curriculum areas through the Learning Outcomes.

Questions to promote reflection on the school context through the lens of the key competencies	
	• Have we a shared understanding of what each of the key competencies would look like if well-progressed among the children in **our school**? • What aspects of curriculum enactment are currently promoting the development of key competencies? • What aspects of curriculum enactment should be strengthened to further promote the development of key competencies?

As well as considering questions such as those above, school leaders and teachers could consider the use of audit or review tools. Links to useful resources will be available on Oide and NCSE websites (*links to be embedded) and updated on an ongoing basis.

2.2 Select



Having reflected on current practice and drawing on a deeper understanding of the principles and key competencies of the *Primary Curriculum Framework*, it is intended that the school would decide on the order of enactment across the five curriculum specifications. School leaders, in collaboration with school communities are encouraged to map their curriculum enactment journey for the redeveloped curriculum.

Professional conversations will help the school agree on and set out a clear **strategic plan**[4] to guide and support curriculum enactment. It will help the school to establish a clear pace for whole-school curriculum enactment planning and ensure a long-term approach to ongoing development. By ensuring alignment with both current needs and future goals, the plan will enable the school to manage resources, support staff development, and monitor progress over time, ensuring successful curriculum enactment.

Choices and decisions to be made by the school at this point should be informed by:

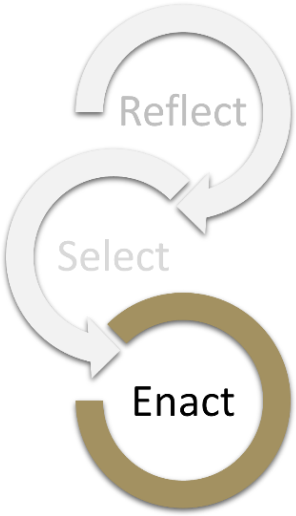
- Department of Education and Youth circulars which provide clarification regarding the parameters within which schools will be exercising their professional agency.
- Teachers' professional content knowledge of the curriculum specifications.
- Support materials available through NCCA, Oide and NCSE

In the special school context, the intended learning for children should be drawn from an age-appropriate primary or post-primary curriculum to ensure children have access to, participate in and benefit from an education that is inclusive and appropriate to their strengths, needs, interests and individuality .[5]

[4] A **strategic planning framework** for a school is a structured approach that guides the school's goals and decision-making over a set period (usually 3-5 years). It helps assess the current situation, identify areas for improvement, define priorities, and allocate resources effectively. The school self-evaluation (SSE) process is integral to this framework, ensuring that their strategic plan is evidence-based, adaptable, and continuously refined, supporting ongoing improvement. Examples of frameworks are available from Oide.

[5] Preparation for Learning, Teaching and Assessment- Guidance for all Primary and Special schools, DEY, 2026

2.3 Enact



It is essential that school leaders and teachers begin to become familiar with and gradually deepen their understanding of the structure and content of the *Primary Curriculum Framework,* curriculum specifications and the support materials in the NCCA Toolkits. They should utilise the whole-school curriculum planning process to create their whole-school curriculum plan and make decisions for their school about:

- the sequencing and pacing of children's learning from Stage 1 to Stage 4
- the pedagogical approaches and assessment approaches being utilised

These decisions should be informed and guided by the Principles in the *Primary Curriculum Framework, and* Chapters 5 and 6 in each curriculum specification. These whole-school decisions will guide **enactment** across the school and be a central part of the curriculum plan for each curriculum area. They will **guide teachers' individual preparation** at classroom level.

Where the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) cycle is well embedded, this process should contribute to sustained improvements in learning, teaching and assessment. The development and enactment of action plans can further support desired changes and improvements to practice. Records of key decisions and associated action plans, in relation to pedagogical and assessment approaches being enacted will form an important part of the school's whole-school plan for each curriculum area

Monitoring enactment is an ongoing and iterative process, and schools should review the impact of the pedagogical and assessment approaches on children's learning. Monitoring could include setting clear, timed targets and tasks in action plans, building in regular reviews, using relevant data (work samples, tests, checklists, focused discussions, surveys, etc.), gathering feedback from teachers, children and parents, and regularly reviewing progress during staff meetings. If something isn't working, adjustments should be made quickly based on evidence. Keeping everyone informed and celebrating small wins helps maintain momentum and ensures the whole school community stays engaged in the journey of enacting the redeveloped curriculum.

Questions to guide curriculum leaders in supporting and monitoring curriculum enactment	
	• How will we know if children across the school are making appropriate progression in their learning in this curriculum area? • How will we support teachers in using assessment to inform learning and teaching in this curriculum area? • Are the agreed whole-school decisions informing teachers' individual preparation and in evidence in the monthly records/cuntais mhíosúla? • What information is needed to monitor progress successfully? • How are we reviewing the impact of agreed whole-school decisions over time? • Is the plan evolving to reflect monitoring?

A range of practical resources to support whole-school collaboration and planning in the enactment of each curriculum specification will be available on curriculumonline.ie . Further supports will also be available on Oide (PCF / Leadership) and NCSE.

3 Whole School Plan – Suggested Approach

Curriculum is not a product to be delivered, it is a process; one that reflects our values, invites professional judgement and must be enacted in context.

A whole school plan is the school's own blueprint for curriculum enactment. It is an important record of the practical decisions that guide enactment in the school, choices around the sequencing of children's learning and agreed school approaches to learning, teaching and assessment reflecting the context of the school. It should evolve to reflect successes, challenges and changing contexts.

The development of a whole-school plan that is reflective of the school's unique context requires professional conversations, ongoing TPL (teacher professional learning) and collaboration. As the school uses action planning within the SSE process to enact and monitor the impact of new practices, decisions should be clearly recorded as part of the plan. See Appendix 1 for an outline of this process

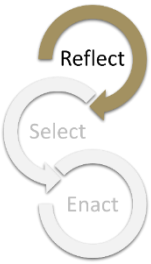
Curriculum plans should:

- be dynamic, responsive and aligned with the *Primary Curriculum Framework,* Curriculum Specifications and online NCCA Toolkit.
- capture key decisions and practices that reflect the way a particular curriculum area is enacted such as time, personnel, resources, professional learning opportunities, and ultimately support strategic capacity building.
- show evidence of school level decisions and developments, including clear indicators of progression in children's learning.
- reflect classroom practice and be responsive and adapt to changes at whole-school level.
- be grounded in School self-evaluation and improvement processes.

A suggested Whole School Plan could be divided into distinct sections.

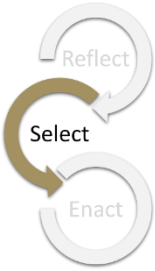
Section 1: Our school context (considerations of the unique community)
Section 2: Curriculum Enactment
Section 3: Curriculum Plans (evolving over time)
Section 4: School self-evaluation and action planning
Section 5: Appendices

Section 1: School context



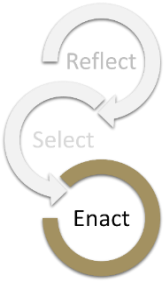
Who we are? What are our values? What is our vision for our school community? What are the strengths and challenges of our physical environment? What is our built environment? What opportunities does our locality offer? What challenges do our school community face? How does our school context — including our setting (e.g., special school, mainstream primary), profile of the children, and community needs — shape the way we design, deliver, and evaluate our whole-school curriculum enactment?

Section 2: Curriculum Enactment



A Strategic Plan [6] can lay out the sequence of enactment for the school. *What is the sequence of enactment? What do we need to consider in advance of starting to enact each specification (familiarity with the specifications-what do they say in terms of learning, teaching and assessment, teacher professional learning (TPL) needs, resourcing, current practices, availability of professional learning expertise)?*

Section 3: Curriculum Plans (evolving over time)



Recording key whole-school approaches ensures consistency across classes, protects quality practices when staff change and makes expectations around scope, sequence, pedagogy and assessment clear and shared. If it is recorded, it becomes collective, stable, and reviewable.

A curriculum plan could record:

- Scope and sequence of knowledge, skills, concepts, dispositions, attitudes and values based on Learning Outcomes– what is taught at each class level and how

[6] [6] P-I-E-W is a strategic approach to managing school improvement planning using the school self-evaluation, school Improvement and DEIS planning processes. P-I-E-W is a structured framework that facilitates collaborative discussion using the SSE process to identify the priorities that will significantly impact learning, teaching and assessment while also managing staff capacity for further change.

learning progresses (context of multi-grade classes and special schools to be considered)

- Key Pedagogical approaches (see chapter 6 of each specification)
- Integration and learning experiences – agreed approaches informed by the chapter 6 of each specification
- Assessment and progression
- Inclusion – supports for all learners and extension opportunities
- Resources – core materials and tools
- Professional learning and review – staff development needs, enactment and evaluation processes (see appendix 2 for sample review tool)

Section 4: School self-evaluation and action planning

Through school self-evaluation (SSE)[7], schools can identify strengths, areas for development and inconsistencies and gaps in what is currently taught, how it is taught, and how learning is assessed. Central to an effective SSE mindset is the sequence of identifying the specific needs within a school's own context, taking targeted action to meet those needs and establishing a structured process to monitor and review progress both during implementation and at the end of the improvement cycle. The use of the SSE process and the development, implementation and monitoring of action plans ensures that curriculum decisions remain purposeful and evidence-based and that curriculum enactment is continuously improving to meet the evolving needs of children and the school community. Monitoring action plans as part of the SSE process is important because it ensures that identified priorities are being enacted effectively, progress is tracked, and adjustments can be made to achieve continuous improvement. Support for SSE can be found on the Department of Education and Youth and Oide websites.

Section 5: Appendices

A school may wish to collate, maintain other records particular to their school context to support the enactment of the redeveloped curriculum.

[7] All schools in the DEIS programme must engage in systematic action planning for improvement. This planning process should lead to the development and implementation of a three-year improvement plan: the DEIS Action Plan for Improvement. The DEIS Action Plan for Improvement is the school improvement plan and the school community should engage self-evaluation process in devising, implementing, reviewing and updating this plan.

4 Appendices

Appendix 1

Sample guidance to support the enactment process

The identification of a curriculum area for enactment will be decided collaboratively and will involve the perspectives of different parties.
In identifying this curriculum area, schools should consider

- the impact on the pupils and the provision for equity and inclusion;
- what supports are available from NCCA, Oide or NCSE to support enactment.

A school will gather different types of information depending on its selected curriculum area. This may include qualitative information such as teachers' formative feedback on children's work, children's perspectives on their learning experiences, parents' perspectives on their children's learning, teachers' professional dialogue, or notes on observations of practice in classrooms. It may also include quantitative data such as assessment data or the results of surveys.

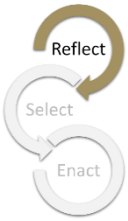
A school will then analyse and make judgements bringing together the various strands of evidence or information gathered, identification of main or messages arising from it, and reflection on those findings. It is important that analysis and reflection take place with reference to the standards or statements of effective practice set out in the quality framework, Looking at Our School. This will give the school a good idea of its strengths with regard to its selected curriculum area, aspects that may need to be developed to support enactment and the actions needed to do this.

A school may choose to share it's enactment journey with the school community to ensure support on the enactment journey.

A school should devise it's own bespoke enactment plan. The plan should include professional learning events, additional supports that will be required for successful enactment.

For successful enactment, assessing and ensuring impact, sustaining momentum for improvement, and celebrating success are essential.

Appendix 2



Review Tool

Conducting a review of a curriculum area to identify the strengths to be preserved, and the gaps that should be addressed.

In planning for each curriculum area, school leaders and teachers should consider the following.

What are our current strengths?

- Do all teachers have the necessary **necessary content knowledge of curriculum areas?**
- What current successful whole-school practices ensure continuity and progression, maintain an appropriate scope and sequence, align with the school's educational goals and are aligned with the specification?
- **Learner experience**-how are all children currently experiencing learning within this curriculum area?
- What opportunities do our **learning environments** and **community** currently provide for this curriculum area?
- How are these curriculum areas currently resourced? Which of these resources most effectively support learning and progression for all learners?
- How do we currently capture and communicate children's progression in learning in these curriculum areas?

When we look at this curriculum specification, what is the most immediate priority to support enactment?

- Do we need to prioritise **pedagogical development** to change day-to-day classroom practice?
- Are **content and curriculum alignment and progression our immediate need**, ensuring **Learning Outcomes, Focus(es) of Learning and Learning Experiences** reflect the intent of the specification?
- How do we best utilise our **environment and community** to support rich learning experiences for all learners?

- Is there agreed understanding around the **relationship between the whole-school plan and individual teachers' preparation**?

Appendix 3

Glossary of Terms

Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF): The PCF refers to the framework of the redeveloped curriculum published in March 2023. The PCF sets out the purpose, structure and content for the redeveloped curriculum in primary and special schools. It highlights what is important in primary education and why; and provides a description of what should be prioritised in children's learning. The framework underpins the individual curriculum specifications. Understanding the PCF, in the first instance, is critical before detailed exploration of the individual specifications.

Curriculum areas: The redeveloped curriculum is presented in five broad curriculum areas informed by the curriculum framework (PCF). The curriculum areas are outlined on page 14 of the PCF document and include:
1. Language 2. Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Education
3. Wellbeing 4. Arts Education 5. Social and Environmental Education

Specification: The curriculum area specification is the document which refers to the specific detail for each curriculum area of the redeveloped curriculum. The specification is distinct from the online toolkit. The specification outlines the link to the vision and principles of learning, teaching and assessment of the framework as well as the rationale, aims, strands, strand units, elements, learning outcomes, and guidance on the curriculum in practice.

Toolkit: The curriculum area toolkit is a set of supports developed and maintained by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). A toolkit is available for all five curriculum areas and will be added to by the NCCA in time. Each toolkit offers practical support for teachers in building rich learning experiences for children. The components of the toolkit are support materials, examples of children's learning and progression supports.

Vision for the Redeveloped Primary School Curriculum: The vision is a broad statement of purpose intended to inform all parts of the curriculum and ultimately the experiences of all children and teachers in primary and special schools.

Principles of Learning, Teaching and Assessment: The principles convey what is valued in primary and special education and what lies at the heart of high-quality learning, teaching, and assessment in the redeveloped primary curriculum. They are broad in nature to reflect varied school contexts and children's different circumstances, experiences, and abilities.

Key competencies: The redeveloped primary curriculum builds on and further develops children's early learning experiences in the home and preschool. It seeks to equip children with the essential knowledge, skills, concepts, dispositions, attitudes, and values which enable them to adapt to and deal with a range of situations, challenges, and contexts in support of broader Learning Outcomes. These capabilities are presented as seven inextricably linked key competencies that are relevant from stages 1 to 4.

Attributes: The attributes of the Key Competencies presented in the PCF are not intended as an exhaustive list but instead describe characteristic learning and development opportunities for children within each key competency which will be embedded through Learning Outcomes in the curriculum specifications.

Teacher Agency: Agency is the capacity to make choices and decisions about what to teach, when to teach it, and how to sequence and pace learning. This includes decisions about the specific learning experiences to be provided.

Child Agency: Children are active in their own learning and can display their agency by taking the initiative in learning situations, by observing and becoming involved in ongoing events, or by initiating conversations with others.

Enactment: Enactment refers to the process of bringing the redeveloped curriculum into practice in schools. The introduction and enactment of the primary school curriculum requires a highly dynamic set of sustained conditions. Enactment requires reflection to move forward with both clarity and purpose and places confidence in teacher's professional judgements. The enactment of the curriculum recognises that teachers are bringing the curriculum to life in their classrooms, is intended to be used flexibly and can take account of each school's unique context.

Implementation: A term commonly used in educational policy and research to describe the process of putting curriculum design into practice. In the PCF, the term enactment rather than implementation is used, reflecting the view that curriculum change involves ongoing professional judgement, contextual adaptation, and dynamic conditions within schools.

Learning Outcome: A learning outcome describes the expected learning and development for children at the end of a period of time.