Chapter 6

THE 1999 PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM AND YOUR CHILD AS A LEARNER

Paul Conway

INTRODUCTION

“What did you do in school today?”
“How did you do in school today?”
“How is my child doing compared to the rest of the class?”

When a child starts school in junior infants it is as much a landmark event for the parents as it is for the child. From the very start of a child’s school life, parents, more often than not, ask questions to find out about what school means to them. The three questions above capture some key aspects of curriculum: What did you do today?” asks about content and various activities of the school day. “How did you do in school today?” asks about how a child is doing; that is, how well their son or daughter is learning — an assessment question. Parents bring these questions to parent-teacher meetings, often adding a third question at that point: “How is my child doing compared to the rest of the class?” All three questions are about curriculum.

Your child’s grandparents or maybe you yourself went to school when “reading, ‘riting and ‘rithmetic” — the 3Rs — was the curriculum. Nowadays, the curriculum is broader and more likely
to be about the 3Ls — “living, loving and learning”. The idea that a broad, balanced and holistic curriculum is important for a child’s personal and social development has been a strong and valuable feature of Irish primary education for at least the last 30 years.

This chapter provides an overview for parents of the *Primary School Curriculum* (PSC), which was launched by the then Minister for Education and Science, Micheál Martin, TD, in September 1999. The launch followed a major review of the curriculum for primary schools by various partners in education building on the issues raised by the Primary Curriculum Review Body (1990), the National Education Convention (1994), the *White Paper on Education: Charting our Education Future* (1995) and the Education Act (1998). The 1999 revised *Primary School Curriculum* builds on the 1971 *Curraclam na Bunscoile* (Primary School Curriculum). The Primary School Curriculum reflects the educational aims and values of Irish society for primary school students, and assists educational partners in planning educational experiences for students by identifying learning guidelines and objectives, as well as suggesting preferred teaching methods. The 1999 *Primary School Curriculum* recognises very clearly the crucial role parents have in both supporting their children as learners (in and out of school) and in helping in the implementation of the curriculum itself in schools.

The 1999 *Primary School Curriculum* is available in a number of formats: in hardcopy as 21 books from public libraries and the Government Publications Office; and as downloadable files from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment website (www.ncca.ie). The Introduction to the *Primary School Curriculum* provides a very good overview of how your child’s learning is related to the curriculum and is well worth reading for parents who want to understand what the PSC is trying to achieve. Chapter 5 of the Introduction gives a general idea of what is involved in each subject area in the curriculum. A 44-page guidelines booklet, entitled *Your Child’s Learning: Guidelines for Parents*, prepared jointly by the Department of Education and Science (DES) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is available from the Government Publications Office. It outlines the seven curricu-
lum areas, encompassing 12 subjects areas, in the Primary School Curriculum (see Box 1 below), as well as providing suggestions for parents as to how they might help their child learn in school.

**Box 1: The 1999 Primary School Curriculum**

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**Mathematics**

**Social, Environmental and Scientific Education**

- History
- Geography
- Science

**Arts Education**

- Visual Arts
- Music
- Drama

**Physical Education**

**Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)**

**Religious Education**

(As noted in *Your Child’s Learning: Guidelines for Parents*, the development of the curriculum for religious education remains the responsibility of different religious bodies)

Compared to the 1971 Primary Curriculum, the 1999 Primary School Curriculum foresees a greater role for parents in contributing to their children’s learning both at home and in school. In addition, the PSC encourages parents and the school to work collaboratively in supporting children’s learning.

The 1999 Primary School Curriculum is both an extension of but also different from the 1971 Curriculum in important ways. It is extends in the 1971 curriculum in that it emphasises the importance of the individual child, and also puts a lot of emphasis on the child’s immediate environment as source of learning. It is different from the 1971 curriculum in that some subjects are given a new or more prominent status. Science, for example, as well as Social, Personal and Health Education, are both more central to the 1999 curriculum. In the 1971 curriculum, some of what is now identi-
fied as science would have been included in what was then called Social and Environmental Studies. And some of what is included in SPHE could have been undertaken as part of health education in Physical Education. The greater emphasis on both of these areas reflects changing awareness about what is important for children to learn as Irish society changes. For example, the development of the science curriculum at primary level is seen as providing a ready supply of students who will enter post-primary schools ready to study science and ultimately enter science-related professions, and support the development of a more research- and knowledge-driven Irish economy. To take another example, as society changes at an ever-increasing pace, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) has become more important in schools as society increasingly recognises that schools have an important role to play in supporting children’s personal development, and that children need to learn new ways of relating to each other and of looking after their health.

This chapter is organised into three main sections as follows:

- What is curriculum and what is its role in a changing society?
- How can you support your child as a learner?
- Supporting your child as a learner in each subject area.

The next section starts with a story that helps highlight some important aspects of curriculum in a changing world.

**WHAT IS CURRICULUM AND WHAT IS ITS ROLE IN A CHANGING SOCIETY?**

Long, long ago, in a time before the Ice Age, there lived a teacher named New Fist, who taught activities such as “scaring a sabre-toothed tiger with fire”, “horse-clubbing” and “fish-grabbing” as practical and relevant knowledge appropriate for getting ahead in those times. Elders and parents were happy with this curriculum for generations. However, years passed, the Ice Age came, and these skills no longer had direct relevance for the well-being of the tribe,
which began to suffer. Radical thinkers, in the spirit of New Fist, proposed new subjects, such as “hunting big animals with spears”. Many of the elders and parents did not agree, saying that the “old curriculum”, that is, “tiger-scaring”, “fish-grabbing” and “horse-clubbing” were taught for the general qualities of courage that they instilled in students. Indeed, they argued that these qualities of courage are relevant for all generations, despite changing conditions. Furthermore, some made the case that the best way to teach “animal-spearing” was to ask elders to tell stories about successful hunting while others argued that students needed practical experience spearing animals. Others made a strong case that society needed to know how successful students were in learning to spear big animals.

This story has some important insights in understanding the introduction of a new curriculum. First, curriculum reflects people’s shared sense of the challenges they meet as a community at a particular time (e.g. fish-grabbing, living and working with computer technologies, how to understand the conflict and peace process in Northern Ireland). Second, the content of the curriculum is often seen as important for the society’s very survival. In the above story, the coming of the Ice Age presented new environmental challenges for parents and children alike. Third, while people might agree that the curriculum is important for survival (to catch fish or to compete and contribute in a globalising world), they may disagree, especially as times change, about what skills to delete from the curriculum (e.g. fish-grabbing) and what new skills ought to be included (e.g. chasing animals with spears; learning to use computer technologies). Fourth, parents have both a point of view and an important stake in the curriculum. Parents have ideas about what ought to be taught, how it might be taught and the outcomes. Finally, the elders/parents had to talk to each other about what and how the curriculum ought to be taught, as well as how it might be assessed.

In Ireland, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is the statutory body whose job it is to advise the Minister for Education and Science about developments in cur-
riculum and assessment. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment was established in November 1987 as a successor to the Curriculum and Examinations Board and was reconstituted as a statutory body in July 2001. The brief of the statutory Council, as outlined in the Education Act (1998), is to advise the Minister for Education and Science on matters relating to “... the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools and the assessment procedures employed in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum” (Section 41.1 a, b). The NCCA uses a broad definition of curriculum, which includes both specific content, outlined in the Primary School Curriculum, as well as other aspects of curriculum such as a school’s ethos and cultural environment, which also teach important lessons to students. The NCCA states that “curriculum in schools is concerned, not only with the subjects taught, but also with how and why they are taught and with the outcomes of this activity for the learner”. In relation to primary education, the Primary School Curriculum sets out specific concepts, skills, areas of knowledge and attitudes which children are expected to learn at school as part of their personal and social development. This chapter will outline these aspects of curriculum: what is taught and why, as well as the outcomes for the learner — a particular concern for parents among others.

While the Minister for Education formulates the curriculum, on the advice of the NCCA, others have important roles in curriculum at national and local levels. For example, at a national level, the Department of Education and Science (DES) Inspectorate oversees the implementation of curriculum. The DES Inspectors undertake whole school evaluations (WSEs) to learn about how schools are implementing the curriculum and provide suggestions as to how the individual schools might improve its work (see also Chapter 1). The focus of these WSEs is on the school rather than the work of individual teachers. At the local level, each school is required to develop and continuously update a school development plan. Section 21 of the Education Act 1998 requires each school to outline how it will address the needs of students with learning difficulties.
The 1999 PSC places a heavy emphasis on understanding your children as learners. The next section discusses some key ideas about learning and how you might support your child as a learner.

**How Can You Support Your Child as a Learner?**

Children learn both in and out of school. Learning in school presents different challenges for children than learning out of school. Out-of-school learning tends to be more active and practical; occur through social activities; use tools; and include social support often involving play. On the other hand, learning in school tends to focus on individual learning; involve mental work (often memorisation) with abstract symbols such as letters and numbers; and do so in situations where learners may often not have much support. For parents who want to support their children as learners, it is important to recognise that school presents real challenges for your child. All children will at some point find learning in school a somewhat different experience than the type of learning they might be familiar with at home or in the community. For example, a child being taught to fish at a local river or cook at home by another family member or friend will spend more time engaged in the actual activities of fishing and cooking than on reading books about each. In school, it is likely that learning about fishing and cooking will involve more individual and abstract work for learners. Some children will arrive at school more prepared than others for the different type of learning that occurs in school. Parents may have to adopt somewhat different strategies in supporting their child’s learning both in and out of school.

One of the potential challenges of the current emphasis in society on performance and achievement, in which academic success in school can be crucial, is how to strike a healthy balance between ensuring that children experience childhood as a time of play as well as one focused on school work. Many child psychologists, for instance, argue that play, even if it appears informal and undirected (e.g. children’s street games, language games, pretend play, formal games, etc.), has a crucial role in helping children prepare for adult roles and responsibilities, fostering children’s
social development, as well as supporting the development of thinking and problem solving. Thus, as parents endeavour to provide a good preparation for their child both before the child starts school, as well as during the school years, it is vital that time for play is valued and protected.

In seeking to promote a child-centred approach to teaching at primary level, the 1971 *Curraclam na Bunscoile* adopted five principles:

- The full and harmonious development of the child
- The importance of making due allowance for individual difference
- The importance of activity and discovery methods
- The integrated sense of the curriculum
- The importance of environment-based learning.

Similarly, building on the insights of the 1971 curriculum, the 1999 Primary School Curriculum focuses in considerable detail on learning, emphasising the child as a learner. Promoting a love of learning among children as preparation for life-long learning is a centrepiece of the curriculum (see Box 2).

**Box 2: Children learn best when . . .**

The PSC notes that children learn best when:

- they are actively involved in learning, that is taking part in interesting and stimulating activities;
- active learning gives them a deeper understanding of what is learned and helps them to remember it;
- learning arouses curiosity and harnesses their sense of wonder;
- they experience success in learning and gain a feeling of achievement, which raises their confidence and self-esteem and fosters in them an enthusiasm for further learning.
There have been many important developments in the learning sciences since the 1971 curriculum such as a greater recognition of the importance of active learning, more emphasis on learners assessing their own learning, development of learning to learn strategies, emphasis on assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning, and a greater emphasis on language as a tool for thinking. These and other insights on learning are included in the 1999 PSC. The PSC identifies guiding principles about learning underpinning all subject areas. That children have opportunities at school for active learning is the most important idea about learning in the 1999 Primary School Curriculum. Opportunities for active learning are meant to encourage children so that learning is enjoyable and engaging. So, for example, across subject areas the PSC talks about how teachers will provide opportunities for children to think and work like scientists, historians, geographers, and writers in order to develop “habits of mind” that will be useful both in school and beyond. The PSC emphasises a number of important ideas in promoting active learning, which are outlined below.

The Individual Child
Noting that no two children are alike, the curriculum encourages the individuality of each child, including children with special needs. Although not noted in the curriculum, the research over the last 20 years on multiple intelligences reminds us that people have more than linguistic and mathematical intelligence, the two types of intelligences traditionally emphasised in schools. From the point of view of multiple intelligences, children have six other intelligences: musical, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, spatial and naturalist.

Skills
The curriculum identifies different skills that are developed in every subject. It also notes that other key skills such as observing, communicating, asking questions and exploring are taught across subjects. Thus, in helping your children to develop these skills,
teachers will be encouraging them to be good observers, to ask questions, to make good guesses, to investigate, to gather evidence and to make an argument. All of these processes are meant to develop “habits of mind” in children that will support them as learners in post-primary education and beyond in a changing world.

**Developing Concepts**

Concepts are big ideas or notions that help us understand the world. For example, in Maths children might learn that multiplication is a form of repeated addition (e.g. $3 \times 5$ is the same as $5+5+5$). Or in Science, children might learn that the rotation and tilting of the earth on its axis, rather than the distance the earth is from the sun, explains why we have seasons.

**Different Ways of Learning**

The PSC recognises that children learn in different ways. Children learn from interacting with others in pairs and small groups, being taught in whole-class format by the teacher, and taking on different roles as a learner.

**Working Together to Learn**

One of the biggest insights from learning sciences over the last 30 years has been the role of “others” in supporting children’s learning. Others here include the child’s peers, parents, teachers and other people with whom they interact to learn knowledge, skills and concepts.

**The Importance of Language**

The PSC recognises that children learn languages such as English, Irish or other languages which they may have learned at home, but also that children learn *through* language. The curriculum notes that language plays a key role in the development of concepts. So, for example, in learning about the meaning of “mother” a child may learn that “ma ma” is his or her mother. Later, the child will learn that some, but not all, other women are also moth-
ers. With more time and numerous opportunities to hear and talk about concepts and examples, the child may learn about the meaning of “motherhood”, “motherland”, “mother nature” . . . etc. The key point here is that language and concept development go hand in hand.

**Literacy and Numeracy**

Reading, writing and arithmetic — the 3Rs — was the way people talked about the central role literacy and numeracy play in school and society. Nowadays, literacy and numeracy are seen as more than basic skills but complex and high level skills themselves. The PSC emphasises both their importance and how language plays a crucial role in the development of both literacy and numeracy.

**The Environment**

Like the 1971 curriculum, the PSC notes that a child’s immediate world of home, family, locality and community will have an important influence on how the child understands him/herself and the wider world. So, for example, children living near a canal may have particular set of experiences visiting, observing and being curious about canals. Teachers will try and build on these out-of-school experiences to support your child’s learning of key curriculum concepts.

**Hands-on Experience**

Children’s opportunities to learn are enhanced when they have a chance to handle, play with and try out ideas on objects and materials. So, in school, teachers will, throughout the primary years, provide materials with which children can explore and develop knowledge and skills.

**An Integrated Curriculum**

As adults, we are familiar with the idea of knowledge packaged into different subject areas. As adults we often learn and understand more clearly when we can connect ideas in one area with
another. Likewise, children will benefit from being able to make connections between subject areas.

Assessment

The PSC emphasises the importance of giving parents a clear indication of their child’s progress in relation to the curriculum. The PSC also emphasises the role of assessment in teaching and learning. Providing feedback on progress children have made as learners is now more clearly recognised. Thus, as children learn to write they may be asked to redraft or rewrite some piece of work based on feedback from the teacher. This in-class feedback is likely to help your child develop an understanding of the standard of work expected as well as help them set goals as a learner.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

The PSC notes the crucial role which ICTs play in today’s world and the role they can play in supporting your child’s learning. Over the last decade, efforts to integrate new ICTs into classroom teaching have been a common feature of education systems all around the world. Ireland has been no different. ICTs can provide opportunities for children to access information, communicate with other children and adults, visualise difficult concepts and express themselves more easily in words and images. ICTs are seen as important in preparing students both to learn in new ways and in order that they might fully participate as workers and citizens in a world increasingly shaped by new and more powerful digital technologies. For example, I recently heard a school principal talk about how a new computer-based “draw and paint” programme was transforming the way he was teaching art (fewer water jars and less paint spillage!) but also changing what he was able to teach about colour, shape, line, pattern, space — all elements of the visual arts curriculum. The National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) (www.ncte.ie) provides guidance and support for schools in the use of ICTs.
SHARING REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING

An important goal of the PSC is the promotion of a love of learning in children. As a parent, you can model for your child what it means to both think about and love learning. More so possibly than in the past, people of all ages have to learn about new things in their daily lives: ways to live with new technologies; new ways to relate to people who are different from us, including immigrants; and ways to re-train as jobs and working tools change beyond recognition. In addition, adults will have many memories of learning — both positive and negative ones. Share some of these with your child — both memories of your learning as a child and also your thoughts on you as an adult who continues to learn. You may be surprised how useful it is for both you and your child simply to talk about how you approach a new task (e.g. hobbies, work projects, learning to use a new tool or piece of computer software), how you organise yourself, how you seek help from others, how you check on your work/hobby to see if it is what you want it to be, how you perhaps struggled initially with a task but stuck at it and now feel more competent, and how you think about new things you will have to learn in the future. The point of these reflections and conversations is to help your child become more aware of how they engage with learning, as well as to help them see how they might learn ways to learn from others in their environment at home and school.

A further benefit of sharing reflections about learning arises when you have the opportunity to share your expertise as a learner in a particular area. For example, you may like to read a lot or make a particular recipe. By expressing your thinking aloud for your child, you are engaging them in an apprenticeship in thinking; that is, helping them to think like an expert reader, writer, cook, gardener . . . etc. So, for example, good readers often re-read a difficult paragraph, guess what might come next, or try to figure out the meaning of something they are not sure of in the text. Children can benefit enormously from adults regularly taking the time to share such “expertise” as the child and adult engage in
shared reading at home. For younger children, in the case of reading it may be as simple as pointing to, and thinking aloud, how you might learn about a book’s contents — i.e. looking at a table of contents, chapter titles, reading back flap. These are simple but crucial “ways of thinking”, often a mystery to children who are new or even not so new to books.

Supporting your child as a learner in each subject area

Supporting your child as a learner in and out of school is a very important part of your role as a parent in implementing the curriculum. An important issue for many parents, since they see school textbooks every day, is how to understand and use textbooks to support their child’s learning.

The Role of Textbooks

Books are a central part of any child’s experience in school. Indeed, the heavy weight of schoolbooks is a daily reminder of this fact! Despite the easy availability of resources through computers, it is unlikely that the book will be replaced by the computer. Rather, books and computers can be used to complement each other. The internet can provide more up-to-date information than that published in books in many instances.

In general, across all subject areas modern schoolbooks are more colourful, include more pictures, diagrams and graphs than older textbooks. These changes in textbook presentation can play an important role in helping children understand important curriculum topics. As parents see how textbooks are used in the Primary School Curriculum, they may notice a new relationship between textbooks and learning (see Your Child’s Learning, p. 42). The content of textbooks and how they are used has changed and will undoubtedly continue to do so. Teachers will use textbooks as resources and often use more than one textbook in a given subject. In the past, teachers and classes may have used one textbook only, for example, in history or geography. You can help your
children get the most from textbooks by talking to them about their books. For example, talking to your child about the pictures and diagrams in the book and how they help in understanding the written text can be of benefit to children of any age.

Over the eight years that your child will spend in primary school there will undoubtedly be times when learning particular topics proves challenging. For example, some parents may notice that on entering first, third and fifth class, their child is talking about some concepts that appear new. This may occur since the primary curriculum is organised into two-year blocks, so that a given set of issues are addressed in the four two-year blocks: junior and senior infants; first and second class; third and fourth class; and fifth and sixth class. It is also important to note that each two-year block builds on knowledge, skills and concepts addressed in the previous two-year block. As such, parents should not feel unduly worried if their child does not master new material as quickly as parents might expect, as children will have many opportunities to broaden and deepen their knowledge of key aspects of the curriculum over the course of a number of years.

Keeping in mind general ideas on learning outlined above, this section outlines the seven curriculum areas (12 subject areas), and identifies what parents can do to support their child as learner in each area and each subject.

**Language: Irish/Gaeilge and English**

The PSC recognises that language is the primary means through which people communicate. Language is especially important in school and life: language is essential to learn in itself as a way of communicating but also it is through language that students learn other subject areas. For parents, then, the way in which they use language at home, talk about Irish, French and other languages, can influence how their child’s learning develops. The 1971 curriculum placed a strong emphasis on language and its role in children’s education. Going further, the 1999 curriculum identifies language as a tool for thinking, a powerful mode for expression and as a way of making life more human.
Irish

Parents reading this chapter will be thinking of one of three different settings in which their child is learning English and Irish/Gaeilge: schools in which English is the mother-tongue of their child and the principal language of teaching in the school; schools where Irish is the language of the home and the school (Gaeltacht schools); and scoileanna lánGhaeilge, where Irish is the language of teaching/instruction but may or may not be the language of the home (see Chapter 5). Depending on the type of school that your child is attending, the Irish/Gaeilge curriculum will be different. In both scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge and Gaeltacht schools the curriculum provides a setting in which Irish is the primary language of the school experience and children are expected to reach a high level of competence in Irish. In schools where English is the main language of instruction/teaching, students are expected to learn Irish to a level that will support its development at post-primary level.

There are four parts to the Irish/Gaeilge curriculum: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Consistent with principles of language teaching, the PSC approach to teaching Irish adopts the communicative approach. In contrast to focusing on grammar and translation, the communicative approach emphasises students’ contact time with the language and using it for “real-world” purposes. So, the curriculum puts a lot of emphasis on various tasks and life-like settings in learning language. Children are likely to be involved in games, conversations, role-playing, sketches and drama as well as teachers focusing on how language can be used informally in the classroom.

As a parent, you can support your child learning Irish/Gaeilge at different stages. Before your child comes to school there is much you can do as a parent to support what will happen when your child starts to learn Irish in school, including:

- Using Irish words or phrases in everyday activities with your child.
- Using Irish — even if you only know some words and phrases — for communication with other adults and older children.
• Pointing to and noting when you see Irish words written or spoken on shopping items, on television (on the Irish language station TG4 or Irish language programmes on other stations), on the radio, on the internet.

When your child is in school, you can support their learning of Irish in a number of ways including:

• Talking about what your child is learning in Irish.
• Using some words and phrases being learned at school in the home.
• Asking your child to tell you words and phrases they are learning in school and using these at home.
• Using various word games, flashcards, and dictionaries available in Irish.

English

Many parents may think of reading and writing as the focus of English as a subject area. However, oral language — that is, speaking and listening — are important aspects of the 1999 curriculum. The ways in which speaking, listening, reading and writing are connected and can support each other is an important idea in the 1999 PSC. For example, as children learn to listen to rhymes, they develop skills in breaking down words into their various sounds. As children learn to write they learn how authors organise stories. As children learn to read they learn how they might organise an essay themselves.

As a parent you have a crucial role in fostering your child’s language and literacy development from the first year of life. Before and after your child starts school you can:

• Pay attention to your child’s efforts to communicate through words and gestures from their first efforts;
• Encourage your child to use a wide variety of words to talk about what is happening in their life at home, in their community and in their school. Talking about everyday experi-
ences is important not only for language development but also for a child’s personal and social development (see SPHE).

• Talk with your child both during and after television programmes; television provides many opportunities for language and literacy development.

• Read and tell stories to your child; pay attention to the stories your child likes and talk to them about why they like these stories.

When your child goes to school, formal teaching of literacy (both reading and writing) will begin gradually. Over the last number of years, the teaching of early literacy has focused on what is called “emergent literacy”. Emergent literacy recognises the way literacy develops gradually through opportunities to see literacy being used at home, the community and in school. Before children come to school, most will have become aware that the “strange squiggles” in books allow people to tell stories and pass on information. Some will be aware that books are read from left to right, that a book has a name, that some books have pictures, and that adults might tell a story while pointing their finger at the “strange squiggles” on the page. As a parent, you can support the development of reading in many ways:

• Read to your child; children of all ages like to be read a story from before they go to school to beyond the primary years.

• Show an interest in stories your child likes to hear and later likes to read.

• Read the newspaper yourself and encourage your child to read and talk about what is in the newspaper (e.g. you can start with the pictures/photos, and the TV page may also incite interest!).

• Encourage your child to join the local library.

• With increasing use of ICTs, books are now increasingly available online. If you have a computer, your child may be able to read some of the many suitable child-friendly online sites; su-
pervision is of course essential. In Ireland, the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) has been appointed as the Internet Safety Awareness Node for a European-wide Safer Internet Initiative. The centre will focus on raising awareness of internet safety issues among primary and post-primary students, their parents and teachers (www.ncte.ie).

- Depending on your child’s interests and hobbies, provide books and/or magazines that will support both the development of the hobby/interest and reading.

As a parent you can encourage your child as a writer by:

- Writing notes to your child.
- Showing your child how you use writing in everyday activities e.g. shopping, writing down phone numbers, typing e-mail, reading letters from friends, reading bills!
- Encourage your child to develop an identity as a reader and writer by supporting them in writing to pen pals, writing text messages (they may need little support here!), and keeping a diary.

The importance of language does not end with English and Irish. Maths, for example, provides many opportunities to use language in relation to number, size, space, distance and other mathematical ideas that support the development of numeracy.

**Mathematics**

Recently in Ireland there have been concerns about high numbers of students who find Maths difficult at post-primary level. Maths is one of those subjects many people see as something they either have or do not have — “you are either good or not good at maths”. It is important to emphasise that all children are aware of number, space, size, distance and other aspects of Maths in their daily lives before they come to school. Parents can do a lot in supporting their child’s natural curiosity about each of these areas as they talk with
them from before they start school. For example, every day there are opportunities to talk about size, distance, weight, space and number in the home, while shopping, while engaged in sports and while travelling. As a parent there are many ways you can support your child’s development of numeracy:

- From the time your child is a toddler pay attention to and talk about number, distance, time, space, and shape. You can support your child’s development of emergent numeracy by talking about and buying toys that will help your child to use language to describe shapes, distances and numbers, etc.

- Be patient with your child, as mathematical concepts can take children a number of years to grasp. For example, children may be able to count before they come to school but they more than likely will not understand number concepts until somewhat later.

- Use games as a way to introduce core mathematical ideas such as number, counting, sequence, etc.

- Teach your child songs, rhymes, stories and riddles as many include mathematical ideas and language e.g. “One two buckle my shoe, three four knock at the door”; the “Three Little Pigs” story can help children develop number concepts where there are repeated opportunities to think about and consider the number three.

- Use television programmes such as Sesame Street to teach both letters and numbers. Such programmes often provide numerous examples of how to introduce difficult concepts to young children.

**Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE)**

Social, Environmental and Scientific is made up of three subjects: History, Geography and Science. History and Geography were prominent in the 1971 curriculum. Science is now given more emphasis in the curriculum. In addition, all three subjects begin in
infant classes. History and Geography did not feature in the 1971 curriculum until around midway through the primary years. In all three subjects there is strong emphasis on the use of practical or hands-on activities in teaching. For example, the Science curriculum encourages practical investigation of everyday experiences children have with forms of energy, such as light and heat, living things, and the characteristics of different materials. There are a number of ways you can help your child in SESE:

- An important goal of the primary school years is that children gain a sense of place in the world. As a parent, you can support this goal by talking to your child about where he/she comes from, visiting places, and talking about what it means to live in a city/town, in Ireland (Geography and History), and in the wider world — Europe, the world (Science, Geography and History) and the universe (Science).

- Talking with your child about questions they ask that are of historical, geographic or scientific interest e.g. “How many years ago since the famine in Ireland?” (History); “Why are the streets so narrow in this part of the city” (Geography); “How come we see the lightning before we hear the thunder?” (Science).

- Be prepared to answer “I do not know” to some of the curious questions you may hear your child ask, but let them know there are different ways to find out e.g. look it up in a book or on the Internet; ask someone who might know; or go to the library and search in that section of the library.

- Encourage your child to engage with ideas related to history, geography and science through books, computer games, toys and television; and for older children, newspapers and magazines may also be useful.

- Pay attention to and talk about the rhythms of nature such as the seasons in terms of animal and plant life.

- Cultivate an interest in human endeavours that bring together science, geography and/or history. When I was a primary
teacher, my class followed the journey undertaken by Dawson Stelfox and his team up Mount Everest in Spring 1993. Following that expedition with daily reports and a classroom wall chart provided many opportunities to talk about geography (Nepal’s location; tallest mountains in Ireland, Europe, etc.; how mountains are formed) and science (human body’s need for heat and oxygen).

- Care for the environment: get involved in, and involve your children in recycling and talk to them about how looking after our environment is important for all of us.

Arts Education

Arts education includes three subject areas: Visual Arts, Music and Drama.

Visual Arts

The aims of the visual arts curriculum are to develop children’s observation (what they see, hear and feel) and critical (what they think/feel about art) skills, as well as their capacity to create or recreate what they see in their environment, mind or imagination. Visual art consists of six topics: drawing; paint and colour; print; clay; construction; and fabric and fibre. Consistent themes through all of children’s exposure to visual arts in the primary years involve a focus on line, shape, form, colour and tone, space, rhythm and pattern. Children will be encouraged to talk about their own creations and you as a parent have an important role to play here. Asking children about what they have created, holding back from being judgemental but rather encouraging them to talk about why they created what they did are essential in fostering a language about the visual arts. There are number of ways parents can support their children in the visual arts:

- Think about and talk to your child about how the home, local area, shops, etc. are constructed by a combination of line, shape, colour and pattern. In other words, all the elements of the visual arts curriculum can be integrated casually into con-
conversation with your child. This could also involve talking about clothes, beautiful sunsets, the moon, the shape and colour of birds or butterflies’ wings, etc.

- Build up a collection of old magazines which your child can use to create collages.

- Many computers contain draw and paint programs, which can make an ideal tool for learning about shape and colour, as well as improving hand-eye coordination.

- Provide your child with materials, time and place to create and recreate art.

**Music**

Hardly an hour goes by in our daily lives when we are not exposed to music in some form or other, whether it is the jingles of a radio or TV advert, the latest pop chart hit, or the faint whisper of music from someone else’s headphones on the bus or train. I once watched a totally engrossed three- or four-year-old child move in perfect rhythm to the songs of Andean street musicians, much to the amusement of the watching crowd. Children, typically, enjoy music in all its forms and make the link to movement very easily. Music in the primary curriculum is meant to develop the musical skills and appreciation of all students, and not just those who seem to have natural inclination towards the subject. The music curriculum consists of three areas: listening and responding; performing; and composing. In a similar fashion to the visual arts, music across the primary years will address certain basic elements: pulse, style, structure (same/different), pitch (high/low), and tempo (fast/slow). There are many activities a parent can undertake at home to support the music curriculum:

- Play music for your children on tapes or CDs, or play an instrument if you can.

- Sing and encourage your child to sing.

- Bring your child to musical events.
• Listen to your child and pick up on the music they seem to like and talk to them about this music. Ask them to tell you why they like it. You may need to help them with the language they use to describe their favourite music.

• Encourage your child to join a local music group or learn an instrument.

Drama

Drama is an important subject in that it supports the development of insight in different subject areas, and has a major role to play in supporting the development of the imagination. Children, like the little boy who danced naturally to Andean street musicians, are often naturally inclined to engage in make-believe play before they come to school at all. The best school can do is build on and extend, in important ways, children’s natural capacity to engage in make-believe play. Parents can support children’s “dramatics” by providing clothes and props to allow them to play out their various improvised scenarios.

Physical Education

The main aim of the PE curriculum is that children will learn to lead full, active and healthy lives. PE encourages children to have positive attitudes to sport and physical education. The curriculum recognises that each school will have to tailor its PE curriculum to its existing facilities whether they are modern or not so modern! In addition to focusing on the six areas of activity — that is, athletics, dance and gymnastics, outdoor and adventure activities, games, and aquatics — the PE curriculum also expects schools to develop children’s understanding and appreciation of these six areas. PE, like the other subjects has knowledge and attitudes as well as skills as part of its focus. A key idea underpinning the PE curriculum is the promotion of sport for all children in the primary school, not just sport for the talented few. As a parent, you can support PE in the curriculum in a number of ways:
• Be a role model in terms of leading a full, active and healthy life.

• In an era where childhood obesity is a concern, encourage your child to take regular exercise. For adults and children alike, the same motto applies — “a little a lot is better than a lot a little”.

• Encourage your child to participate in PE and other sporting activities.

• Acknowledge your child’s achievements and progress in the area of PE, however small or large these may be. As the experience and recognition of competence is important to overall self-esteem, parents have an important role to play here. From a psychological perspective, children and particularly adolescents’ self-esteem about their physique is a very important part of how they evaluate themselves as a person. In this case, then, it is especially important that you play an active role as a parent in supporting your child’s physical self-esteem.

• Help out in various school sports and PE activities where such opportunities arise.

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)

SPHE is one of the most important areas of the curriculum as it is concerned with the personal development of the child. SPHE is “caught” from the culture of the school as much as it is “taught” from the formal timetabling of an SPHE class. As such, the quality of the “school as a community” will influence what your child learns about SPHE. SPHE aims to teach children how to care for themselves and others. The links between home and school are especially important in SPHE for the teacher, the student, the parents and the school. SPHE consists of three themes: Myself, Myself and Others, and Myself and the Wider World. Consistent with the rest of the curriculum, teachers use active learning methods in SPHE. What kinds of activities might your child be involved in during SPHE? Discussion (especially), role-play, artistic activity,
writing and use of multimedia to stimulate children’s interest and engagement in the subject area are all important aspects of SPHE.

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is a central part of the SPHE curriculum. A report undertaken for the Department of Education and Science in the mid-1990s showed that there was a very high degree of consensus or agreement among parents that RSE should be taught in primary schools. As part of SPHE, schools can include the Stay Safe or Walk Tall programmes as part of their curriculum. The relationship between parents and the school is important in working out the approach to teaching RSE within the context of the school’s ethos.

Parents have a number of important roles in supporting SPHE (including RSE) including:

- Keeping themselves informed about both the content and approaches to SPHE in their child’s school.
- Recognising both your child’s efforts and achievements and providing support for both effort and achievement.
- In a similar manner to the PE curriculum, emphasising the importance of a full, active and healthy life-style and the importance of misusing neither drugs nor alcohol.
- Communicating to children the importance of their family and the wider community and that children have a contribution to make in both family and community.
- Helping children to understand the changes that are happening in their body, in particular as they reach puberty and young adolescence.
- Encouraging and providing example of how children can develop good hygiene and good, balanced and healthy eating habits.

**Religious Education**

As discussed elsewhere, the Education Act 1998 provides a legislative framework for school patrons to define a unique ethos, pro-
mote such an ethos through appropriate policies and practices, and select key staff consistent with that ethos. As noted in Your Child’s Learning: Guidelines for Parents, the development of the curriculum for religious education (RE) remains the responsibility of different religious bodies. It is up to you as a parent to decide the extent to which you want your child involved in RE. Any questions, concerns and suggestions in relation to RE should be addressed to the school.

A brief note on the history of how moral, literary and religious curricula have been understood in terms of curriculum is important in understanding current practices in primary schools. The existence of denomination-specific religious education curricula, directed toward the promotion of particular faith traditions in all but a few primary schools reflects the existence of a denominational structure in the management of Irish primary schools since the mid-nineteenth century. When Lord Stanley’s letter established the national school system in 1831, the system was intended to foster good relations between children and families of different faith traditions (i.e. at that time between children from Catholic and Protestant families). Central to implementing this goal was the concept of providing combined moral and literary but separate religious instruction. By the mid-nineteenth century, within a few decades of Lord Stanley’s letter, denominational groups had negotiated control of the national school system along denominational lines. As such, the denominational structure of Irish primary education has its roots in the mid-nineteenth century and these roots were recognised and strengthened in 1998 when the Education Act provided a legislative framework within which school patrons can foster a chosen ethos. Thus, in the Irish primary school context, the combined effects of historical arrangements and recent legislation have facilitated the maintenance and/or establishment of state-funded Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, inter-denominational and multi-denominational primary schools. Schools managed by the Roman Catholic Church make up over 90 per cent of all primary schools in the Republic of Ireland, with the remainder of primary schools under Church of Ireland (mainly), Muslim (two schools),
Jewish (one school), inter-denominational (Foras Pátrúnachta), or multi-denominational (Educate Together) management.

In considering the teaching of religion in schools, it is important to distinguish between two different approaches: (a) the teaching of religion as part of preparation to become a member of a faith community; (b) teaching about religion(s) as a subject like any other subject (e.g. at post-primary level, religion can be studied as an examinable subject at Junior Cycle). In the first situation, where education for membership of a particular religious community is the focus, schools often draw attention to how religion permeates the wider curriculum. With the general decrease in religious observance across most, if not all, religious groups, schools are seen by many religious leaders and parents as important in fostering the unique tradition of a given religious faith.

**Roman Catholic Religious Education**

Primary schools under the management of the Roman Catholic Church use the *Alive-O* series of books. Like the curriculum for other subjects, the *Alive-O* series puts a strong emphasis on active learning. Children are often asked to reflect on their daily lives (e.g. talk about how important ideas are related to their own lives in school, home and community), create pictures/drawings or compose text that reflects insights gained from these reflections, or engage in role-play. The *Alive-O* series is designed to support integration with Social, Personal and Health Education and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) curricula. The *Alive-O* series recognises that, for children, the most important signs of God are faith, prayer and the lives of Christian adults they live with and admire at home, school and in the wider community. The RE curriculum also seeks to foster faith by introducing children to simple Old and New testament biblical texts, liturgical feasts, the sacraments, and doctrine in the form of hymns, prayers, verses and simple statements.
Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist Religious Education

Schools under the patronage of the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist Churches use the *Follow Me* series. The *Follow Me* series draws on the *Alive-O* series and has been adapted appropriately for different emphases in the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist traditions. Like the curriculum for other subjects, the *Follow Me* series puts a strong emphasis on active learning. Children are often asked to reflect on their daily lives (e.g. talk about how important ideas are related to their own lives in school, home and community), create pictures/drawings or compose text that reflects insights gained from these reflections, or engage in role-play. The RE syllabus aims to enable children to develop a knowledge and understanding of beliefs, worship and witness of the Christian faith, and in particular of the Church of Ireland and other principal reformed traditions; to explore the biblical witness to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; to develop their own religious beliefs, values and practices through a process of personal search and discovery; and to develop an awareness of and a sensitivity towards those of other faiths and none. The *Follow Me* series is designed to support integration with Social, Personal and Health Education and Relationships (SPHE) and Sexuality Education (RSE) curricula. The *Follow Me* series includes much biblical material from the Old and New Testaments as well as songs, prayers and activities.

Muslim Religious Education

As of February 2005, there were two Muslim national schools in the Republic of Ireland, both of which are in Dublin. The first was opened in 1989 and the second opened in 2002. A religious education curriculum is taught in conjunction with the Arabic language and the study of the Koran. Students in senior classes participate in daily Duhr prayer, as well as observing Holy Day prayers each Friday.
Jewish Religious Education

There is currently one Jewish national school in the Republic of Ireland. The Zion National School opened in 1934 on South Circular Road, moved to Stratford College in 1980 and was renamed Stratford National School (Scoil Náisiúnta Stratford). A religious education curriculum is taught in conjunction with prayer, Hebrew, the Torah (five books of Moses) and general knowledge. The curriculum was developed by a Jewish religious education consultant involved in such work in England. The goals of the programme are as follows: to cultivate a love for Jewish learning, which leads to the development of virtues; to attain a proficiency in Jewish learning and practice; to nurture a pride in being part of the Jewish nation and appreciation of what this responsibility entails; and to provide rich and varied opportunities for pleasurable Jewish experiences, e.g. Shabbat celebrations on Friday morning.

Ethical Education Curriculum in Educate Together Schools

Learn Together, the ethical core curriculum for Educate Together schools, was launched in autumn 2004. The curriculum is divided into four strands: moral and spiritual development; equality and justice; belief systems and ethics; and the environment. Like the curriculum for other subjects, the Learn Together curriculum puts a strong emphasis on active learning. Children are often asked to reflect on their daily lives (e.g. talk about how important ideas are related to their own lives in school, home and community), create pictures/drawings or compose text that reflects insights gained from these reflections, or engage in role-play. The Learn Together series is designed to support integration with Social, Personal and Health Education and Relationships (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) curricula.

What about Homework?

In light of the emphasis in the PSC on parents’ role in implementing the curriculum, it is important to address homework in this chapter, as the daily challenge of helping children with homework
is often parents’ biggest connection with the school curriculum and their child’s learning. Homework can provide many benefits for children, parents and teachers. Children can develop a better understanding of material and become more independent as learners. Teachers can learn about how children and parents engage with the curriculum, and how well children have understood or learned the assigned material. Parents can learn about the curriculum, learn about how their child is getting on, and also see their child grow as a learner over the years. On a day-to-day basis, however, helping with homework can be demanding, as it competes with time for relaxation, play, or time with family members and friends — not to mention the television, mobile phone or computer! Many parents ask, “How can I help my child with homework?” There are a number of important points here:

- **Monitoring time.** Homework will typically involve practice or development of work undertaken that day in school. So, it should not take a huge amount of time. Children in infants and lower classes may get 10–20 minutes homework. As children progress through the primary school, they may get up to an hour by the time they reach sixth class. Of course, there may be times when older children spend a lot longer if they are engrossed in a project. As a teacher, I remember a parent coming in to tell me that her daughter and her friends had willingly spent two to three hours each evening during the week working on a group project on animals, even though it had not been assigned as homework. The children themselves told me that they weren’t working for the full two to three hours but spent a lot of it talking to each other! Projects like that, however, are the exception rather than the rule in terms of time. Paying attention to what really interests your child is important in fostering their growth as learners.

- **Being aware of the work.** The nature of homework will differ considerably across the primary school years. Children in infants may be asked to finish a drawing, talk to one or both parents, or bring some object to school (e.g. photograph).
Children in upper primary years may have a variety of different homework assignments including writing, reading, a conversation with a parent or other family member, and some memorisation. Your child’s teacher may talk about how you can help your child with homework.

- **Having patience.** It is important at this stage that homework be seen as an enjoyable and meaningful activity. So while taking it seriously, it is not meant to be a time when the child feels under pressure to perform. Learning can be rather up and down, and parents should not be unduly concerned if their child appears to have forgotten one week what they learned the previous week.

- **Keeping track.** As homework becomes more important over the course of primary school, most teachers ask students to record homework in a journal. Many also ask that this be signed each night by the parent after they have ensured that homework has been completed. As a parent, you have an important role to play here in providing a daily reminder to the child about homework.

- **Making connections.** As a parent you can play an important role in helping children see how homework can be meaningful. You may see connections between your child’s homework and some family event or trip, or with your own work or hobbies. As the meaningfulness of curriculum is very important to foster, you can do this by helping your child make connections between homework and other everyday life as well as other school subjects.

- **Creating the right environment.** There are a number of practical arrangements you can make in creating a physical environment in which children learn from homework, including: providing a comfortable place to do homework (e.g. a place with little noise, sufficient heat, light and space all help); ensure that your child has sufficient rest; and check that the chair and table your child is using provide proper support and are not too
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cluttered. In addition, it is important to provide a space where your child can leave his or her bag and other school materials each day. There is little to be gained from a daily hunt for the missing schoolbag, homework or homework journal!

- **Avoiding conflict.** In addition to the physical environment, the social atmosphere is important. Homework should not be a daily battle of wills as to when and where it is completed.

- **Creating a routine.** Children will get the most out of homework if it is a regular part of the evening at home. Starting homework at the same time each day can be very valuable in teaching children the importance of routines and habits of work. Encouragement and praise are important in supporting your child’s homework.

- **Keeping interested.** Show an interest in your child’s homework and help your child see how it is valuable. Children may have to struggle a little as learners. It is important here to be attentive but not to get in the way of children’s learning. Sometimes children can benefit a lot from working something out themselves with only some minor help from parents.

**THE LEGAL BACKGROUND**

The authority of the state to prescribe the curriculum in recognised schools is found in Article 42 of the Constitution. Section 3.2 of Article 42 follows a provision that the state is forbidden to force parents to send their children to any particular type of school, and then states:

“The state shall, however, as guardian of the common good, require in view of . . . actual conditions that the children receive a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual and social.”

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1 This section was written by Oliver Mahon.
The 1998 Act addresses the curriculum in section 30, which provides that the Minister may “prescribe the curriculum for recognised schools” following a consultation process with school patrons, national parents’ associations, school management organisations and bodies representing teachers. Sections 39 to 41 of the 1998 Education Act establish the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on a statutory basis, indicate its composition and appointments, and delineate its responsibilities. As noted earlier in the chapter, the NCCA advises the Minister in relation to curriculum and assessment issues. The Minister is specifically empowered, in section 30, to prescribe not only the subjects taught, but the syllabus in each subject and the amount of instruction time to be spent on it, as well as matters related to guidance and counselling that schools are to offer. A school is not, however, limited to this curriculum. The section goes on to provide that, so long as the prescribed curriculum is delivered, the board of management has the power to “provide courses of instruction in such other subjects as the board considers appropriate”. Furthermore, Section 30 obliges the Minister to consider the characteristic spirit of the school and not to crowd out of the school day subjects that are related to that characteristic spirit by filling up all the available instruction time with such prescribed material.

Nevertheless, it is clear from various provisions of the 1998 Act that the delivery of the curriculum prescribed by the Minister, on the advice of the NCCA, is absolutely central to the functioning of a recognised school. One of the grounds on which the Minister may withdraw recognition (see Chapter 1) is the non-performance of the functions of the school, one of which is the delivery of the prescribed curriculum. A less drastic step available to the Minister in the same circumstances is to require the patron — and the patron must comply with such a requirement — to dissolve the board of management, having first given the board notice of her intention to do this and having then considered any representations made by the board as a result.

Clearly, the Minister is not short of muscle when it comes to having the curriculum implemented in recognised schools. This
does not mean, however, that parents are merely silent and helpless onlookers in this process. The same section of the 1998 Act gives a parent a legal right of withdrawal of a student from “any subject which is contrary to the conscience of the parent”. (This follows from a provision of the European Convention on Human Rights which states that the state must “respect the right of parents to ensure [that any education prescribed by the state shall be] in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions”. ) This is of course in addition to their constitutional right, referred to elsewhere, not to have a child attend religious instruction. However, they do not have a right to have any subjects inserted into the curriculum.

We can sum up the legal position therefore as follows: the Minister, on the advice of the NCCA, may prescribe matters relating to the content of the curriculum and its delivery, and compel boards of management to ensure that these prescriptions are followed. The board has a limited power to insert certain subjects provided that the prescribed curriculum is delivered first. Parents have rights of withdrawal in certain circumstances.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided an overview of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum and how you as a parent can support your child as a learner. The child as a learner is a key idea in the 1999 curriculum compared to the 1971 curriculum. As Irish society continues to change, curriculum will develop beyond what is outlined in the 1999 PSC. For example, given the fast pace of information and communication technology (ICT) change, the NCCA published ICT guidelines for teachers in 2003. These elaborate on how schools might integrate ICTs across the PSC. As a parent, you have a crucial role to play in supporting your child as a learner. First, each day you can provide support for your child as he or she learns about the world in and out of school. In paying attention to what rouses your child’s curiosity, what they find difficult, and when they make mistakes, you can promote a love of learning
in your child that will support them in the school context. Second, you can play a role in local, regional or national parent councils/meetings as well as provide input and feedback to schools in relation to curriculum planning in the context of School Development Planning (see Chapter 9). It is important to remember that the PSC outlines the official curriculum, and that each school and teacher will put the curriculum into practice in slightly different ways. As noted at the outset of this chapter, the 1999 PSC puts a strong emphasis on the role of parents in supporting their child as a learner and in implementing the curriculum. Both roles can be exciting and rewarding as both you and your child learn.

Resources

- DES/NCCA (1999), *Your Child’s Learning: Guidelines for Parents*, prepared jointly by the Department of Education and Science (DES) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), and available from the Government Publications Office (01-6476834) or on the website of the NCCA: www.ncca.ie

- www.educationireland.ie/htm/education/main.htm — Provides an up-to-date overview of the Irish education system including primary education. This site was developed by the International Education Board Ireland (IEBI), established by the Irish government in 1993, whose remit is to facilitate and support the development of Ireland as an international education centre.

- www.scoilnet.ie — Network of Irish schools.

- www.into.ie — Irish National Teachers Organisation.

- www.edunet.ie — Provides links to education sites in Ireland.

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