



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Submission to
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Submission on Curriculum Structure and
Time Allocation

On behalf of the INTO

May 2017

Introduction

The INTO welcomes the opportunity to engage with the NCCA consultation on Curriculum Structure and Time Allocation. To inform its position the INTO organised consultation sessions with teachers. Meetings were held in 13 INTO Districts between March and April 2017, facilitated by teachers and members of the INTO Education Committee. The INTO also held a Saturday seminar in Galway. In total, approximately 400 teachers attended the various consultations. In addition, five written submissions were received from individual teachers. The proposals were also discussed by the INTO Education Committee and the Executive Committee.

In light of the significance of the teacher's voice in policy, the INTO supports the partnership approach to curriculum involving the education partners. Teachers also welcomed the consultation process and the opportunity to share their views and concerns regarding the proposals.

The rationale for changing the curriculum structure and for re-organising time is not clear to teachers. These developments, therefore, are perceived as unnecessary change. Teachers were critical of the sequence of recent curriculum developments. There was a strong view that proposals around restructuring the curriculum and revising time allocations should have preceded the development of the revised language and mathematics curricula.

Teachers' responses to further proposals concerning curriculum must be seen in the light of the plethora of developments and initiatives that have been introduced to schools over the last number of years. Teachers will need to be convinced that there are benefits associated with change before they are willing to embrace new developments.

The proposed models for curriculum structure

There was a view that by presenting two options for curriculum restructuring the exploration of alternatives was restricted. Teachers also found it challenging to be definitive in the absence of proposed content such as themes, curricular areas and subjects.

While there was some debate as to whether a two- or three-stage model would best suit the Irish context, there was general agreement that an incremental model, using a differentiated curriculum structure, could potentially provide more flexibility at the junior end of the school and in moving from the junior classes to the senior classes. It was acknowledged that the differentiated approach is particularly suitable for multi-grade classrooms. An incremental model could also promote more inclusion for children with SEN and EAL.

The suitability of the proposed models depends on the context of the school. The two-stage model is deemed particularly appropriate for two-teacher schools and junior/senior schools.

However, there is concern that the two-staged model is too broad with insufficient structure that could result in dilution of the current curriculum in the junior classes. Teachers acknowledge that the three-stage model would allow for natural and incremental progression of learning across the stages.

There is also support for the current four-band model, with some adjustments to the content and structure of the curriculum in the infant classes.

The 1999 curriculum

In general, teachers hold positive views in relation to the 1999 Primary School Curriculum although curriculum overload and increased paperwork are cited as the key barrier to effective implementation. Teachers are of the view that the current curriculum has the right balance of structure and flexibility to allow teachers to use their professional autonomy and judgement. The 1999 curriculum is also celebrated for the attention it devotes to the Arts. The INTO recommends that any restructuring should not compromise the broad and holistic nature of the current curriculum.

Practices of integration, thematic and play-based teaching are already happening within the parameters of the current curriculum and teachers are not convinced that there is a need to restructure the entire curriculum. The primary school curriculum has never been fully resourced to allow for its full and effective implementation. Consideration could be given to the retention of the current four-band model with emphasis on a thematic approach in infants progressing to a subject-based approach. Professional development opportunities in integrative, play-based and thematic teaching would greatly enhance the 1999 curriculum and minimize the challenges of curriculum overload that currently exist.

Early Childhood

Teachers were generally supportive of the need for more linkage between pre-schools and primary schools to ensure continuity of learning and experience. Teachers would welcome more opportunities to share information with the pre-school sector in relation to transitions although they cautioned that it must not put an unreasonable administrative or time burden on teachers and schools. In general, teachers welcomed the idea of the pre-school stage being included as part of stage 1. However, teachers commented on the lack of consistency across pre-schools and the variations in quality and qualifications. In order to maximise the continuity of learning the pupil teacher ratio in infant classes must be significantly reduced.

There is also a concern about the potential impact of the extension of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme on the primary school. In light of the voluntary nature of the ECCE scheme, there will be variations in the ages and experiences of children entering school. The INTO proposes that consideration should be given to the provision of the second year of the ECCE scheme in the primary school with fully qualified teachers to ensure that continuity be better facilitated. A three-year infant cycle would support children in terms of

their social, self-regulatory and motor skill development, particularly for those children who opt for one year of free preschool.

Aistear

The majority of teachers are not familiar with Aistear, as it was never formally introduced to primary schools. Although many teachers already employ a play-based, thematic and integrative approach to learning in the early years, there has been no comprehensive professional development programme to support teachers in using Aistear and those who are familiar with the framework engaged in professional development at their own expense and in their own time. The INTO is strongly of the view that any proposal for a curriculum structure that is underpinned by Aistear can only be considered when accompanied with a comprehensive professional development programme for teachers and resourcing of materials. Teachers are currently attending professional development in Aistear on a voluntary basis and such an approach cannot be sustained. Those teachers using Aistear within the current curriculum structure face many challenges with time management and content overload.

Curricular areas

Not all teachers are familiar with the concept of curricular areas. They do not think of the current curriculum as structured around curricular areas. Nevertheless, some teachers identify with the current content areas, such as Arts and SESE, and agree that the areas are suitably broad to enable teachers to exercise professional judgement and autonomy. However, there is concern that the more 'marginalized' subjects will be diluted or displaced through a curricular area approach. Teachers outlined that inconsistencies might emerge as schools chose to focus varying degrees of emphasis on different subjects and/or curricular areas.

Subjects

There was strong agreement that subjects have legitimacy in the senior classes as children develop a clearer sense of the integrity of separate subjects and they facilitate a smooth transition to post-primary school. However, there was general consensus that language and mathematics should be core aspects of the curriculum from junior infants onwards.

There was no one definitive view on the best time to introduce a subject-structure. There is some support for continuing a play-based approach in first class with the gradual introduction of subjects between second and fourth class. The stage at which subjects are introduced would depend on the content of any future curriculum. The introduction of subjects could remain flexible based on the school context and may vary depending on the subject. For example, if a school is a senior school, perhaps, the introduction of subjects

would coincide with the first year in the senior school. The topic of subject specialisms in the senior classes arose in the consultations.

Organisational and resource supports

Large classes are a key barrier to successful implementation of any curriculum structure. A reduced pupil teacher ratio is a pre-requisite to any play-based, thematic approach to curriculum. The INTO has had a longstanding campaign for smaller class sizes¹. Consideration should also be given to the provision of classroom assistants in infant classes to facilitate a more active and play-based approach to teaching and learning. In addition, the inclusion of more support teachers would facilitate collaborative teaching and active learning opportunities. At present the learning support/resource teacher occasionally supports the infant teacher in terms of team teaching, station teaching and the implementation of Aistear.

Teachers acknowledge that the CPD provision for the 1999 curriculum was comprehensive. The provision of a comprehensive professional development programme must be a fundamental aspect of any restructuring of the curriculum. Pre-service, in-service and follow up support must accompany any restructuring of the curriculum if it is to be effective. Time for planning and guidelines around a play-based pedagogy and thematic approaches to teaching are essential if any revisions to curriculum are to make a difference in classrooms.

The Department of Education and Skills must provide the appropriate school facilities, including teaching materials and physical space allowing for both indoor and outdoor play. Many Irish classrooms were not originally designed to accommodate a thematic, play-based approach to teaching and many schools would struggle to facilitate such an approach. Many classrooms are over-crowded and are not conducive to play stations as recommended in Aistear. In addition, many classrooms require sufficient storage for resources in the interest of health and safety. Adjusting the curriculum is pointless unless there is a corresponding investment in teachers, school buildings and teaching materials.

Current DES policy on standardised testing in primary schools should be revised in the context of curriculum developments. A thematic, play based approach does not lend itself to the current practice of standardised testing, particularly in second class.

Parents of children in primary schools need to be reassured about what a play-based pedagogy means in primary classrooms. Many parents associate play-based approaches with pre- schools only. Addressing parental expectations will require improved communication and increased information to ensure their co-operation with this approach. In addition, a restructured model will require information to be communicated to pupils already in the system and familiar with the current structure.

¹ INTO (2014) *Room To Bloom*
INTO (2015) *Stand Up For Primary*

New learning

It was acknowledged that the current curriculum does not reflect the needs of the 21st century, such as, mental health and digital literacy skills. There are mixed views among teachers around the promotion of technology as overuse in very young children is impacting on children's communication skills. The INTO proposes that the curriculum should consider the inclusion of wellbeing. There is support among teachers for broader access to programmes, such as Friends for Life, Incredible Years and PAX. However, it is regrettable that substitute cover is not available at present to enable teachers to engage in professional development opportunities for these supports.

In order to create space in the curriculum, it was suggested at several consultations that aquatics should be removed from the PE curriculum considering few schools have access to facilities nearby, thus, imposing a significant time pressure on class timetables. The inclusion of aquatics not only poses a timing issue but also a financial imposition. It was suggested that SESE should be moved to the senior classes and a more thematic approach should be employed in the junior classes. A view emerging from several consultations was that the Arts subjects must be safeguarded in any restructuring to a more thematic basis. There is also support among teachers for retaining the patron's programme in schools.

Flexible Time

In general, teachers were satisfied with the proposed allocation of a minimum of 60% of time for the State curriculum. The allocation of flexible time was widely welcomed. However, the term 'flexible time' doesn't accurately reflect the use of the time, for example, recreation and patron's programme are fixed periods of time with specific time allocations in many schools. Furthermore, assembly time is at the discretion of the principal teacher at local level.

It is anticipated that flexible time would allow more autonomy for the teacher and it would alleviate the pressure of being bound and restricted by weekly timetables. A specific allocation of flexible time would also facilitate engagement with extra-curricular activities and project work in the senior classes. In addition, the flexibility would allow the teacher to encourage agency and child-led learning.

Teachers require flexibility, discretion and autonomy at local level, such as, in the event of a class requiring an intensive period of literacy and numeracy teaching. Teachers felt strongly that they, as professionals, are best placed to determine the time allocation based on their individual class needs and school structure. Any reconsideration of time allocation should

take account of time for teacher planning in light of increasing demands for paperwork. Moreover, any flexible time should not be accompanied with a requirement to document, further increasing the burden of paperwork.

Time allocation

There was support among teachers that mathematics and language should retain the dedicated weekly time allocation and that this time should not be compromised as literacy and numeracy skills underpin all other aspects of the curriculum. Teachers supported the idea that all other subjects should have a monthly allocation of time. Such an allocation was considered most ideal as a shorter period may be too prescriptive while a longer period may be ineffective. However, it was also proposed that the Arts subjects need to be ring fenced as there is concern that they would be the most likely casualty in any review of time allocation. Moreover, teachers resent unilateral decisions to change time allocations without consultation and without a broader consideration of the holistic nature of the primary school curriculum

Consideration could be given to general time allocations banded in areas similar to SESE allowing for more specific time allocations as children progress through the school. The teacher should have discretion to determine the exact time allocation based on local needs and considerations. There was support for more time in mathematics, particularly in the senior classes. It was also suggested that the junior classes require more language and mathematics time and perhaps less SESE time.

Guidance

Teachers' views differed in relation to the need for guidance on the use of flexible time. Some teachers were concerned that guidance could erode autonomy and discretion while others acknowledged the need for non-prescriptive guidelines to support the use of flexible time. Without recommended guidelines, there was a concern that some subjects would miss out. Suggestions for guidelines included examples of time allocations for a month for each class level and planning time at a whole school level. In addition, teachers would require clarification in conveying the use of time in timetables and planning notes.

Conclusion

The INTO favourably considers proposals that seek to address the issue of curriculum overload and paperwork for teachers. The INTO will not support any curriculum changes that result in increased paperwork and planning. The objective must be to reduce the current demands for paperwork and to address current curriculum overload.

The INTO supports a play-based, thematic and integrative approach to teaching and learning, however, there are a number of pre-requisites that underpin the successful

implementation of such an approach. A substantial reduction in class sizes is essential to ensure the effective implementation of either of these proposed models.

The INTO insists that a comprehensive programme of professional development be available through pre-service, in-service and follow up support to facilitate any changes to the current curriculum.

Consideration must also be given to the fact that infrastructure and physical resources in many primary school does not currently support a play-based, active approach to teaching and learning.

The INTO recommends that the curriculum in the infant classes should be adjusted to reflect the thinking and philosophy and approaches in Aistear, removing the structure of 12 individual subjects, but not losing the richness of the current curriculum or strong focus on early literacy and mathematics. The move towards discrete subjects should occur incrementally and gradually from first or second class, with clear guidelines for schools around flexibility to address the needs of multi-grade classes.

While teachers welcome the flexible and monthly element within the proposals for time allocation, the INTO reiterates that any accompanying guidance should reflect teacher autonomy, trust and professional judgement.

The INTO welcomes the opportunity to engage in further consultation, particularly in relation to curriculum content.