

Facing the Future: Digital Learning and Wellbeing

Consultative Conference on Education 2021

Aghaidh ar an Todhchaí: An Fhoghlaim Dhigiteach agus Folláine

Comhdháil Chomhairleach ar Oideachas 2021



Clayton Hotel, Galway
12ú – 13ú Samhain 2021



Fáilte

Dear Delegate,

We are delighted to welcome you to Galway for the 2021 INTO Consultative Conference on Education. This year, the dual themes of the conference are digital learning and wellbeing as we look to the future post-pandemic. Nearly two years living with COVID-19 has placed enormous demands on schools and their communities. This year's conference offers teachers an opportunity to meet and reflect on shared experiences of remote learning, workload and the wellbeing of our teaching community.

The teaching profession has engaged in rapid and enormous change as schools grappled with the realities of teaching without access to school buildings or networks of support within their staffrooms. INTO members met the challenges of adapting to a new online environment, coupled with new ways of securing student safety, responding to the mental-health needs of pupils, acting to improve their wellbeing, adapting the curriculum and maintaining links with parents. For many members, having personal responsibilities of young children or elderly relatives to care for meant that the issue of wellbeing was brought to the forefront of conversations as never before.

The two areas to be discussed at the conference have become closely linked for educators; how to balance our physical and mental health and wellbeing needs, while building new digital skills as we continue to learn how to live with the virus. As we approach the end of 2021 we can take stock and reflect on lessons learned, challenges overcome and how to face positively into the future with the benefit of our new knowledge and skillsets.

INTO members have shown great flexibility in adapting to new methodologies, addressing the digital divide among their pupils and pivoting from supporting remote learning to in-school teaching, while keeping abreast of ever-changing restrictions. As we gather together in Galway for the INTO's first in-person conference since February 2020 we will be taking a look back over our shoulder at how much we've experienced and focusing on what we can bring with us into our future teaching careers.

Tá súil againn go mbainfidh sibh uilig taitneamh agus tairbhe as an gComhdháil.

Yours sincerely,



Joe McKeown
INTO President



John Boyle
INTO General Secretary

Clár

Friday, 12 November – Online

- 4.00 pm** **Opening of conference**
Joe McKeown, INTO President
Aidan Gaughran, Cathaoirleach
INTO Education Committee
- Presentation by Education Committee:**
Digital and Remote Learning
Dolores Killian, District 7,
INTO Education Committee
Nuala O'Donnell, Senior Official
- 4.30 pm** **Online workshops**
- 5.20 pm** **Keynote address:**
Primary Education Post-Pandemic – A
Call to Empower Teacher Agency for
Creativity and Innovation
Dr Deirdre McGillicuddy, UCD

Saturday, 13 November – Clayton Hotel

- 9.30 am** **Registration**
- 10.00 am** **Welcome address**
Joe McKeown, INTO President
Aidan Gaughran, Cathaoirleach,
INTO Education Committee
- 10.15 am** **Keynote address:**
A Vision of 'Teacher' in the Draft Primary
Curriculum Framework
Dr Patrick Sullivan, NCCA
- 10.45 am** **Presentation to INTO bursary winners**
John Boyle, INTO General Secretary
- 11.00 am** **Discussion groups**
- 11.45 am** **Tea/coffee**
- 12.05 pm** **Workshops**
- 1.05 pm** **Keynote address:**
Where is Digital Learning Going?
Ciara O'Donnell, PDST
- 1.45 pm** **Críoch**

General information

FRIDAY, 12 NOVEMBER - ONLINE

Log in to all online sessions at www.into.ie from 4 pm.

SATURDAY, 13 NOVEMBER - CLAYTON HOTEL

Registration

Registration opens at 9.30 am on Saturday, 13 November. Refreshments will also be available.

INTO communication policy

Please be advised that photography, videography and/or live streaming will be taking place at this event. These materials may be used by the INTO and included in publications, media materials, promotional materials, digital platforms and social platforms. If you do not wish the INTO to use your image, please go to the registration desk and inform staff. The INTO can then take reasonable steps to comply with your wishes.

Health and safety

In line with the current public guidelines, proof of vaccination or immunity will be required in order to attend and participate in the conference on Saturday, 13 November in the Clayton Hotel, Galway. Please remember to also bring photo ID.

Conference evaluation

Delegates will be contacted after the conference with a link to a short online questionnaire. Please check that the email address on your delegate card is currently in use and update if necessary.

Car park

There are 250 complimentary car parking spaces available on site.



Follow the conference on social media @INTOnews #EdConf21
Full coverage of the conference plenary sessions will be available on the INTO website

The Education Committee

The INTO Education Committee (EDC) was established in 1967 to advise the CEC on matters relating to education. The EDC consists of one representative from each of the 16 INTO districts, each elected for a three-year term. The committee meets five times a year. Since its establishment, the EDC has considered a wide range of matters relevant to teachers, including special education, social inclusion,

curriculum review, assessment and teacher education. The committee hosts consultative conferences on an annual basis, including discussion groups, workshops and a range of interesting keynote speakers. This is the first Education Conference to incorporate an online element. The EDC looks forward to welcoming you to the conference and hearing your views.



Deirbhile Nic Craith

The 2021 Education Conference will be Deirbhile Nic Craith's last as INTO Director of Education and Research ahead of her retirement later this year. Deirbhile has been involved with the Education Conference since the 1992 conference in Westport. Since she became secretary to the Education Committee in 1997 she has been responsible for the Education

Conference. The conference has evolved over the years and plays an important role in ensuring that the voice of teachers contributes to education policy discussions and debates. Almost 30 years since Deirbhile's first conference, we have the first virtual Education Conference complementing our face-to-face event. Go raibh míle maith agat a Dheirbhile ar son bhaill Chumann Múinteoirí Éireann.

Máirín Ní Chéileachair

Máirín Ní Chéileachair is taking up the role of Director of Education and Research. As well as serving as an INTO branch official, Máirín's previous experience encompasses a long career in teaching and almost 20 years as a primary school principal. She has also served as national co-ordinator of the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT) and as director of Dublin West Education Centre. Her areas of interest include leadership development, teacher induction, Gaelscolaíocht, Dhá-theangachas agus múineadh na Gaeilge. Máirín will be responsible for leading the development and progression of INTO policy in the areas of curriculum and assessment, teacher education, early childhood education, special education, social inclusion and Gaeilge.





Keynote speakers



Dr Deirdre
McGillicuddy

Dr Deirdre McGillicuddy is assistant professor in UCD School of Education and a primary school teacher with over 20 years' experience working across the Irish education system. Deirdre believes in the transformative power of education, not only in expanding the realms of possibility for children/young people, but also in contributing to a thriving Irish society. She is passionate about the emancipatory possibilities of education to empower those most marginalised within our society and education system. Deirdre has particular interest in children's voice(s)/rights in education stemming from her time working in a DEIS primary school and is especially interested in creative pedagogies. Core to Deirdre's work are values of collaboration, creativity, teamwork, leadership and wellbeing. She has recently been awarded a UCD Convene Innovation Fellowship to explore creativity and wellbeing in education.



Dr Patrick
Sullivan

Dr Patrick Sullivan has worked with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) since 2013. As deputy chief executive officer, he oversees developments in early childhood and primary education. Patrick began his teaching career in Callystown National School before taking a teaching principal's role in Ard Rí Community National School in 2010. He holds a first-class masters in Educational Leadership from Maynooth University and a professional doctorate from Dublin City University. Patrick has also delivered teacher training programmes in the north-east of India as a member of the charity Global Schoolroom. Of utmost importance to his work is a commitment to supporting children and teachers by ensuring an inclusive and collaborative approach to curriculum development.



Ciara
O'Donnell

Ciara O'Donnell is the national director of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), the Department of Education's largest national cross-sectoral Continuing Professional Development provider. Ciara is a primary school teacher and has worked in teacher education with the Department of Education's professional development support services since 2005 where she had held a number of curricular and policy leadership roles. On the establishment of the PDST, she held the position of deputy director for research, policy and development before being appointed national director in 2013. Ciara's research interests include teacher education, the identities of continuing teacher educators and the future of professional learning provision.

Workshop presenters



Ciara
Griffin



Jane
McGarrigle



Marion
Flanagan



Denis
Moynihan



Conor
Meyler



Máire
Nic an Rí

CIARA GRIFFIN is a second class mainstream teacher in the CBS Primary, Tralee. She completed her undergraduate degree in Mary Immaculate College where she also completed a Master of Arts in Education. Her research investigated pedagogical approaches to meaningful participation in primary physical education. She is a member of the Irish women's rugby team since 2016 and has been captain since 2018.

JANE MCGARRIGLE was educated in TU Dublin and holds a BA Hons in Photography, an Msc in Advertising and a Certificate in Cyberpsychology from IADT. Jane joined Webwise in 2015 as content development officer and has held the position of project officer for four years. Within her time as project officer, Jane has led the development and delivery of key online safety and digital literacy education programmes for primary and post-primary schools. Jane has also overseen the development of key youth training initiatives in online safety and award-winning awareness-raising campaigns tackling issues such as online grooming, coercion and harassment. Jane is a member of the National Advisory Council for Online Safety and has been an active member of Media Literacy Ireland and is also involved in a European media literacy research project.

MARION FLANAGAN is a full-time primary advisor on the PDST Health and Wellbeing team. As a primary teacher, she has taught in both mainstream and special education. She holds an MEd in Online Safety/Cyberbullying/Anti-bullying from Trinity College, Dublin. Marion has worked for many years with the INTO, initially as a staff representative tutor (District 11) and also as a course designer and facilitator of summer courses. Her work with the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT) as a mentor trainer and her work as an external supervisor and guest lecturer with many colleges of education has kept her in touch with the needs of teachers and the work in primary schools in these challenging times. She has been guest speaker at several education centre AGMs, Irish Science Teachers' Association conferences and at PDST Tánaiste and Misneach events.

DENIS MOYNIHAN is an assistant professor in Education (Digital Learning) in the School of STEM Education, Innovation and Global Studies, Institute of Education, Dublin City University (DCU). He teaches on teacher education programmes including the BEd and PMP. He has previously worked as a mainstream teacher and as an advisor with the PDST Digital Technologies team. His research interests include game-based learning, emerging technologies in education and teacher education with a focus on digital learning and digital skills. Denis is currently pursuing a Doctorate of Education at DCU.

CONOR MEYLER is a primary school teacher specialising in physical education. He graduated from St Mary's University College in 2018 then began a Master's degree in University College Dublin (UCD). In 2021 he completed a Certificate in Professional Leadership from Maynooth University and will begin a PhD in Sport, Leadership and Gender in Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) in January 2022. While teaching in primary schools he created an after-school wellbeing programme for pupils and has delivered similar workshops to both schools and underage football teams. Conor is a member of the Tyrone Senior Football team which won the All Ireland in September 2021 and is currently nominated for an All Star and Footballer of the year.

Múinteoir bun scoile is ea **MÁIRE NIC AN RÍ**. Ghnóthaigh sí céim BEd. ó Cholaiste Mhuire gan Smál. Tá céim MA sa Ghaeilge agus sa Bhéaloideas aici ó Ollscoil Maigh Nuad agus tá cáilíocht Ard Teastas Gaeilge ón Roinn Oideachais aici. Tá sí ar iasacht ó Scoil Chéile Chríost, Ráth Mór, Co Chill Dara agus ag obair mar Oifigeach Oideachais Bun scoile leis an gComhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG). D'oibrigh sí roimhe sin leis an tSeirbhís um Fhorbairt Ghairmiúil do Mhúinteoirí (PDST) mar Chomhairleoir ar dtús agus ansin mar Cheannaire Foirne na Gaeilge (Bun scoil agus Iar-bhunscoil). Scríobhann Máire alt míosúil mar gheall ar áiseanna teagaisc na Gaeilge don iris *InTouch*.



Workshops and discussion groups

DISCUSSION GROUPS: For your discussion group please attend the same room that your workshop will take place in.

FRIDAY ONLINE WORKSHOPS: Yellow and green workshops will be streamed on www.into.ie from 4.30 pm on Friday, 12 November and will also be available for viewing after the conference.

SATURDAY IN-PERSON WORKSHOPS: Delegates may choose ONE Saturday workshop by signing up at registration. Please be aware that workshops will be filled on a first come, first served basis.

BUILDING RESILIENCE – TAKING TIME TO CHECK IN ON YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

CIARA GRIFFIN

FRIDAY: ONLINE

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers had to adapt to an ever-changing learning and teaching environment. This meant taking time to learn new technologies and adapting to new teaching methods in order to ensure that pupils' education continued to be delivered to the highest possible standard. This workshop outlines the importance of taking time to check in on your own mental health and the various mechanisms you can use to achieve a better work-life balance.

AN INTRODUCTION TO GAME-BASED LEARNING (GBL) AND MINECRAFT EDUCATION EDITION FOR CROSS-CURRICULAR TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

DENIS MOYNIHAN

SATURDAY: BRIDGE ROOM

In this hands-on workshop delegates will be introduced to the principles of game-based learning (GBL). They will then enter the world of Minecraft Education Edition and participate in a cross-curricular learning activity. Following a history-focused build challenge, delegates will be provided with information on how to claim free Minecraft Education Edition licenses for their school. Where possible, delegates are requested to bring their own device, preferably with Minecraft Education Edition installed.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING WELLBEING IN PUPILS

MARION FLANAGAN

FRIDAY: ONLINE, SATURDAY: BALLYBRIT ROOM

This workshop will present an overview of the broad range of SPHE resources available to teachers and the strategies to promote physical and mental wellbeing for all pupils and especially for those who have been impacted negatively by COVID-19.

This workshop will highlight the extensive spectrum of ideas to support pupils with anxiety and to promote positive health in conjunction with the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* document.

RESEARCHMEET

AOIFE MULLEN

SATURDAY: MAIN HALL

The Researchmeet is an organised but informal meeting where participants are called on to present the findings of their own research. This year presentations will be by INTO Bursary Award winners from 2020 and 2021.

THE AUTHENTIC LEADER AND WELLBEING IN SCHOOLS

CONOR MEYLER

FRIDAY: ONLINE, SATURDAY: BISHOP ROOM

You can't truly lead others if at first you don't understand yourself. This workshop will aim to help teachers (leaders) develop an understanding of themselves as leaders and in turn understand and improve the wellbeing of those in their care.

- What do we really mean by the term wellbeing?
- How do we monitor and improve the wellbeing of our pupils both physically and mentally?

INTRODUCING ONLINE SAFETY TO YOUNG CHILDREN

JANE MCGARRIGLE

FRIDAY: ONLINE, SATURDAY: EYRE ROOM

The workshop will explore how best to introduce younger pupils to the first steps of accessing and using the internet in a safe and responsible manner. It will look at age-appropriate internet safety advice for young children including, using the internet safely, communicating online, playing and learning online, getting help and support. Teachers will be introduced to the new *HTML Heroes 1st and 2nd Class* edition as a key online safety resource to use when introducing internet safety for this age group. Teachers will also get practical advice and best practice considerations for embedding the use of digital technologies in their teaching and learning alongside an overview of key online safety resources for schools.

ACMHAINNÍ TEAGAISIC DO MHÚINEADH NA GAELIGE

MÁIRE NIC AN RÍ

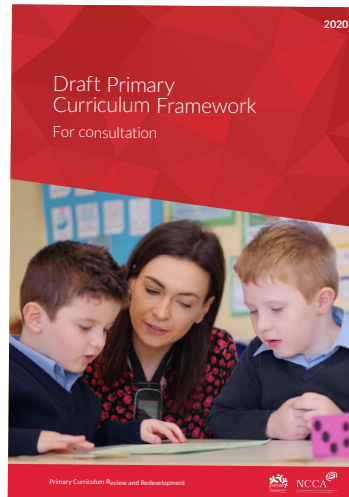
FRIDAY: ONLINE, SATURDAY: CLARIN ROOM

Tá réimse leathan áiseanna agus acmhainní úsáideacha ar líne ar fáil chun tacú le múineadh agus spreagadh na Gaeilge. Níos fearr fós, tá formhór na n-áiseanna ar fáil saor in aisce! Roinnfidh Máire eolas faoi chuid de na háiseanna sin agus conas iad a úsáid go héifeachtach sa rang.

Digital learning in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*

The use of digital technologies in schools in the past may have been viewed as something extra, an activity that learners engage in outside of their regular school activities. *The Digital Strategy 2015-2020* stressed the need to embed digital technologies within learning, teaching and assessment to prepare learners for an increasing digitised society. Effective integration of technology can be found in the Nordic countries where ICT is well grounded in educational policy documents, included in all subjects as a means of improving the teaching of that subject where appropriate, and to open up new methods of teaching. This approach to digital learning, where technology is woven into all domains of the primary curriculum, is a feature of the NCCA's *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*.

Within this framework, 'being a digital learner' is identified as one of seven key competencies, seeking to support children to become "curious, creative, confident and critical users of digital technology" (NCCA, 2020, p.8). Being a digital learner fosters children's ability to collaborate and thrive in a world increasingly immersed in technology. Where digital skills are integrated across all curricular areas, pupils will be empowered to become active digital



citizens, they will develop responsible, safe, and ethical use of technology and will be enabled to critically engage and contribute to a digitally connected world.

Digital learning can make the learners' experience more engaging, support collaborative learning, enable the co-construction of knowledge in innovative ways and has the potential to have a transformative impact for pupils with special educational needs by improving accessibility, facilitating inclusion and enabling pupils to overcome barriers to learning.

The INTO invites members to share their views on the role of digital learning in a redeveloped curriculum (as well as the other proposals within the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*) through engagement in our consultation over the coming months. Following this phase of consultation, the INTO will prepare a submission to the NCCA and our members' feedback on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* over the coming months will feed into this revised document. An array of material based on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* document including a copy of the interim submission is available on the INTO website.

NCCA guidance on preparation for teaching and learning

The role of the teacher has evolved in recent years, moving beyond classroom walls and traditional approaches to pedagogy and curriculum. Teachers are now expected to meet the social and emotional needs of an increasingly diverse learner population, implement ever-evolving pedagogical practices and participate in a wide range of initiatives in a more collaborative manner.

These increased expectations are becoming unsustainable, and one element of the role that has consistently been identified as contributing to stress and impacting wellbeing is the burden of paperwork associated with curricular planning, a learning outcomes approach and new initiatives.

To reduce the level of paperwork required of teachers new *Guidance on Preparation for Teaching and Learning* has been developed through multi-agency collaboration between the Department of Education, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and National Council for Special Education (NCSE). This document, intended to support teachers and school leaders in all school contexts, describes a renewed understanding of 'preparation for teaching and learning' which is intended to place less emphasis on written preparation and attribute greater value to the broader range of activities involved in teachers' preparation.

Teachers were encouraged to begin incorporating aspects of the guidance into their preparation for teaching and learning in the third term of the 2020/21 school year. Given that learning outcomes will be a key feature of future iterations of curriculum, this guidance will be valuable to all teachers and school leaders to ensure that planning and preparation supports the provision of appropriate learning experiences for all children

Have your say!

The issue of workload is the focus of a research project currently being conducted by the INTO and we would like to take this opportunity to encourage all members who receive our survey to engage with this important piece of research. Members' feedback will be crucial as we seek to find solutions to address the untenable workload facing our principal and teachers, thus helping their wellbeing.



Lessons learned from lockdown school closures

“It is obvious there is a role that schools play that any amount of technology cannot replace”

– *COVID-19 in Schools Report*, Maynooth University, 2020

INTRODUCTION

Schools are at the epicentre of our communities, playing a fundamental role in our broader society, in supporting children to thrive and flourish in a holistic way. A school building is the site where much learning takes place but a key element of a school’s support capacity comes through human connection. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a seismic event and we have observed how support systems and social connections that allow children to develop have been impeded. Whilst the pandemic-enforced school closures saw teachers and principals exhibit incredible energy, commitment and flexibility in continuing to provide enriching and engaging learning content, the social spaces of school are virtually impossible to replicate. Online platforms were valuable for schools in maintaining connection with pupils and their families. Healthy relationships between schools and children and their families improve pupil outcomes in ‘normal’ times, but during a time of crisis as the world grappled with COVID-19, those relationships came into sharper focus paving a path for recovery. We have witnessed commendable efforts of teachers and school leaders to manage the evolving situation, but there is a recognition that increased, sustained supports are needed as the repercussions of the pandemic are likely to be felt far into the future.

The initial physical closure of schools across the country in Spring 2020 was planned for a short duration, but the ensuing lengthy periods of remote learning provided a monumental challenge that schools and families were ill-equipped for. To ascertain schools’ experiences of adapting to remote teaching and learning, and to identify the supports that schools require, the INTO conducted research of members both North and South in 2020. Our experience as a society has planted seeds of change within the education sphere that the government departments in both jurisdictions must address with urgency.

The Department of Education’s Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020, *Enhancing Teaching, Learning and Assessment* (ROI) recognizes that digital technologies can play a central role in transforming learning, teaching and assessment practices for teachers and students in a high-quality 21st century education system, yet the recent closures illuminated the shortcomings in this strategy given that most schools do not have sufficient resources and

infrastructure to realise its aims. Just over three quarters of principals involved in the INTO’s research reported that their school had “an effective digital learning plan” in place prior to the COVID-19 school closure. In the months that followed many schools made amendments to their digital plan to respond to the changed context in which they were operating. Some strategies and methodologies would initially have been introduced as short-term measures, but schools were mindful that there was a need to review and explore digital practice on a deeper level and plan for future school closures.

Indeed, this proved to be the case following the 2020 Christmas school closure with schools forced to close their doors again as the country faced a third, devastating wave of COVID-19. This second period of remote teaching and learning evoked a range of profound emotions including tension, frustration, and fear. Anxiety was compounded by the distressing daily news reports of the surge in fatalities and hospitals’ struggles to deal with the volume of cases. In the dull, dreary days of January an overriding sense of fatigue within society was palpable. Although teachers were to a certain extent prepared for another spell of working from home based on plans that had been devised in the first term of the school year, it was evident from testimonies across media that learning from a distance was far from a smooth and seamless experience for many. This was particularly true for households where adults found themselves managing care needs of family members and work commitments, as well as situations where there was a lack of access to technology and literacy to ensure meaningful engagement. Uncertainty and disillusionment about the future was especially overwhelming for parents/guardians and teachers of children with additional needs. Children with additional needs were more acutely impacted by disruption to education and support systems and those with autism for example, for whom routine is paramount, struggled with the prevailing sense of upheaval. Teachers of children with special educational needs expressed their concern for pupils in their care as it is difficult to meet the unique needs of these in individuals in the absence of face-to-face interaction.

INTO RESEARCH ON DIGITAL LEARNING

The INTO’s consultation with members through surveys in Autumn 2020 sought to gain an insight into the reality of school life during the lockdown period, explore how teachers provided for the continuity of learning and how schools managed to return to the physical building safely after a prolonged, unprecedented absence. At the time of publication of the survey results, schools had reopened after the summer closure although society remained enveloped by a cloak of anxiety with a prevailing sense of

uncertainty about the trajectory of the virus. There was a distinct sense of relief among the vast majority of teachers who were pleased to return to their classroom setting and hoped that there would be no further disruption in the form of school closures. The safe reopening of our schools had been a priority for government with a deep understanding of its critical role in society, particularly to ensure equity of access to education for all children and young people. Ireland boasts one of the highest-ranked education systems across the OECD with an internationally-recognised high calibre of primary school teachers – this despite the gross underinvestment in primary education and the largest class sizes in Europe. COVID-19 has served to expose these weaknesses in our system and has forced us to reflect on how we invest in education to ensure our children receive the best start and our high-quality teachers can perform their roles to the highest standard in a suitably resourced and safe environment.

Respondents to the INTO survey (ROI) had a range of teaching experience from newly-qualified teachers, up to teachers/principals with 40 (or more) years of teaching experience. The size of the respondents' schools ranged from less than 50 to in excess of 500 pupils, with a broad range of responses in a variety of school settings from full stream to Gaelscoil, special schools to DEIS schools, reflecting the diversity of schools across the country. Similarly, the profile of respondents to the INTO NI research captured a range of teaching experience in both primary and post-primary settings across all key stages including the foundation stage. The research examined the challenges teachers and school leaders reported and the impact of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals' mental health and wellbeing. Findings of this consultation with members have informed the planning and preparation of this year's consultative conference on education as we seek to support our members in facing the challenge of teaching in an increasingly digitised world and emphasise the need to prioritise health and wellbeing. In guidance to schools the Department of Education promoted a mantra of "slow down to catch up" and it is evident from teachers' accounts of their pandemic experience that there is a need to adopt such an approach to avoid burnout and stress.

During the periods of school closure due to COVID-19, technology transpired to be a lifeline for school communities, with teachers, students and families relying on online methodologies to enable and sustain communication. This shift to online platforms excluded certain groups and served to emphasise the stark digital divide that exists within Irish society. However, even for individuals and families for whom availability of software and internet connection is not a constraint, lack of digital literacy (which is a prerequisite for meaningful learning) may be a barrier to engagement. There is a misconception that equality of access to internet and availability of devices will ensure effective online and remote teaching solutions (Adam, 2020). Drawing on the Knowledge Gap Theory (Tichenor et al., 1970), Rohs and Ganz (2015) explain that proficiency in digital technology and the ability to engage with resources that optimise learning is proportional to an individual's or family's socio-economic status. This not only applies to students, but teaching staff whose experience,

competence and access to resources will vary. In a study conducted by Maynooth University (2020) such concerns were reinforced with four out of 10 principals identifying a digital divide within their school, underlining the inherent social inequalities in society and the unfair playing field created.

...the survey results also show that a considerable number of schools connected with online platforms for the first time...

The INTO's research (ROI) shows that technology played a key role in the provision of learning material and school email facilities were used widely in communicating with pupils and their parents/guardians with four out of five respondents to our survey indicating that they used this method. Four out of 10 respondents to the teachers' survey noted that they used existing online educational platforms which would have been set up prior to the pandemic and the consequential school closure. However, the survey results also show that a considerable number of schools connected with online platforms for the first time. This sudden shift to supporting children's learning in an online space was a challenge for teachers, particularly those who felt that they did not have the requisite skills. Prior to the enforced school closure only one third of teachers surveyed engaged with technology on a daily basis in their classroom setting. Just under 30% of respondents described themselves as "apprehensive" or "extremely apprehensive" in using digital technology with only 9% considering themselves to be "very confident". Despite the dearth of resources and the relative inexperience of most teachers, they exhibited resourcefulness and ingenuity in their response to the crisis. Our teachers' creativity was manifest in the innovative ways through which they interacted with pupils and families. We witnessed the compassion of teachers in the many inventive projects and whole-school initiatives that were undertaken as well as online graduation ceremonies and celebratory events to mark special occasions and pupils' milestones such as transitions to post-primary school.

Teachers' lack of readiness for supporting children's learning remotely was echoed in the INTO NI research with a mere 5% of respondents describing themselves as "confident" in conducting remote learning. Over half of those surveyed (52%) emphasised the need for professional development and support in this area. Furthermore, 31% of teachers stated that they were "nervous, but willing to try". This willingness and commitment of teachers was evident in the manner in which they adapted to a new reality of working but the chasms of knowledge and expertise, and the diverse competencies of teachers led to anxiety and stress.

It is apparent from the figures obtained in the ROI survey that teacher readiness varied and in addition to their limited experience of engaging with online educational platforms over a sustained period of time, teachers' personal situations and the conditions under which they were working remotely were not uniform. On a practical level, only 10% of teachers stated that they "never" experienced interruption as a result of technical issues. Just



under 40% of participants described their broadband as “of good quality”, 36% of teachers stated that their broadband access was “adequate”, 16% stated that they had “sporadic” broadband and 8% referred to their broadband as “poor”. This finding highlights the inequities within the system and the unequal starting point for teachers which presented a challenge to schools in devising plans for the continuity of teaching and learning.

To empower teachers to embrace digital technology skills and cultivate a learning environment where children can flourish as ‘digital natives’, robust strategies must be put in place to remove inequity within our society. Adequate and reliable hardware, software, digital content, ICT infrastructure, continuous professional development, and maintenance and technical support are key factors to promote the type of digital learning that a primary curriculum seeks to provide. In the words of George Couros, “Technology will not replace great teachers, but technology in the hands of great teachers can be transformational.”

WELLBEING: BEING WELL AND STAYING WELL

Relationships and interactions lie at the core of hands-on, guided learning for pupils at primary level. The absence of group-based, active learning that is promoted in the primary curriculum impacted greatly on the development and lives of children and their families in 2020. Wellbeing dominated discourse in media circles with pupil wellbeing prioritised in guidance issued to schools from the Department of Education (ROI) which instructed teachers to focus on Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Physical Education (PE). This advice was underpinned by an approach to promoting wellbeing developed by Hobfoll et al (2007) who described five essential elements of care that promote resilience and wellbeing during and after traumatic events. Prioritising SPHE offers greater scope for teachers to deal with sensitive issues in the classroom context and allow children to express their emotions and share their thoughts in a safe environment.

For teachers too, face-to-face collaboration with colleagues is a crucial component of their work. When looking at instances of stress and burnout among school principals in Australia, Beusaert et al. (2016) found that positive relationships and social support from colleagues served as a buffer to burnout. The INTO’s (2015) study of workload, stress and resilience among teachers and principals in Ireland found that the vast majority of teachers and principals felt that more time for staff collaboration would make their role more satisfying. Collaboration between teachers in professional networks, within their schools and with teachers in the area who face similar challenges, allows them to be more effective in their learning and response. Rather than “reinventing the wheel” individually, such co-operation creates collective agency of teachers, a principle that is embedded within the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* which identifies teachers as “committed, agentic and skilled professionals”. Collaboration allows teachers to revitalise their profession in leading the development of their practice to meet the continuing challenges of the pandemic. Given the concerns over long-term learning loss and rising inequality, such professional networks become ever so important.

Feedback from members surveyed in the INTO research (both North and South) last year emphasized the negative impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of principals and teachers. Balancing the personal and professional when the home setting becomes the place of work is an immense challenge, with over three quarters of principals in the ROI survey having stated that they found themselves “working excessive hours” and it was difficult to structure their day when working remotely. Respondents to the INTO NI survey in June 2020 highlighted members’ concern regarding the lack of any respite/holiday time for teachers and school leaders over the summer period after a stressful few months with policies and plans to be updated and rewritten within a short timeframe and in the absence of appropriate guidance.

The accessibility afforded by online learning platforms served to demand more of educators’ time from negotiating how to use them, uploading learning tasks, providing feedback whilst dealing with technical issues. Meeting the expectations of parents also proved to be a difficult task fraught with a frustration and teachers’ sense that they were not doing enough. The advent of social media platforms allows individual teachers and schools to showcase their efforts publicly, and whilst this can be a valuable tool to support teachers and provide inspiration, it may also serve to exacerbate stress and heighten pressure. School settings differ greatly and therefore the way in which staff and communities adapt will vary to suit their own circumstances. At all stages, the INTO sought to offer reassurance to teachers that society was experiencing an emergency and navigating uncharted territory, therefore the focus was on maintaining connections and promoting wellbeing. Echoing the words of Baytiyeh (2007), continuity of education during a period of crisis, via whatever means possible is essential.

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On an international level, countries use different terminology to denote the educational practices employed during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., distance education, e-learning, online education, home-schooling). However, these terms do not quite capture what is taking place during the interruption of education in this context, which may be more effectively encapsulated in the phrase ‘emergency remote education’. Considering that the expressions used in different countries are derivations of the generic term ‘distance education’, the predominant difference between emergency remote education and distance education is that the latter is an option while the former is an obligation. Therein lies the contrast and an awareness of this is important as misconceptions in definitions could lead to misconceptions in practices. Distance education is an organised, scheduled activity and its implementation is anchored in theoretical and practical knowledge which is specific to the field. Conversely, emergency remote education involves spontaneous, unplanned activities and practices and is concerned with reacting and surviving in



a time of crisis using whatever resources (offline and/or online) that are available at a given time.

Almost nine out of 10 principals who responded to the INTO ROI survey stated that their workload was greater than normal, and it was striking to note that only 2% of principals regarded their level of work as “manageable”, with one response from a principal stating that the COVID-19 school closure “was the most stressful, demanding, draining period of (their) whole teaching career to date”. Among the main sources of stress and anxiety for principals was the overwhelming sense of responsibility with limited support. Some principals found it difficult to manage not only their own anxiety, but that of their staff. In their role as school leader, they felt a great deal of pressure in responding to concerns and queries of staff and members of the wider school community with one respondent to the principal’s survey commenting that it was difficult “trying to have all the answers to questions from teachers and parents when I didn’t have all the answers myself”. Some principals referred to a feeling of “isolation” and the demands of exhibiting to their colleagues a positive vibe and assured feel. One teacher remarked “it was very lonely, no-one there to listen to principals who felt that they had to always be upbeat and on top form for everyone else ... afraid to let down defenses and putting others’ wellbeing first” – a notion that will resonate with many school leaders.

For principals and teachers, bespoke supports were designed with a suite of material prepared for teachers and school leaders in the ROI by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS), and the Education Centre Network among others. The INTO recognises the need for such supports to our teachers and school leaders, acknowledging the challenging experiences of members and the long-lasting impact of the pandemic. The most important thing to remember is that first and foremost, the health and wellbeing of teachers, school leaders and the wider school community is paramount, mar a deir an seanfhocal “Is fearr an tsláinte ná an táinte”.

SUPPORTS FOR SCHOOLS

The role of schools within society extends far beyond teaching, curriculum, and assessment. Schools are vital venues for social care, providing critical supports to families and their children, particularly in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, yet they have been – and continue to be – inadequately funded and resourced to meet the needs of those most vulnerable in our communities. Schools’ experience during the pandemic raises questions in relation to other elements of the system that must be resourced to meet the needs of children with additional needs. The School Inclusion Model (SIM), which is currently being piloted in the Dublin and Wicklow areas, seeks to address the lack of integration in the Irish education system providing a research-informed package of education and health supports which aims to build schools’ capacity to include children with additional needs. There is a recognition of the need for increased expertise within schools and an integrated service model between educational and clinical professionals. Problematic outcomes of school closures coupled with the pause in therapy services have served

to reinforce the inadequacy of supports for children with additional needs. The INTO have consulted with schools involved in the SIM pilot project and will continue to liaise with the teachers and school leaders in these settings to identify the strengths and limitations of the model. The provision of appropriate supports and in-school therapies to meet the needs of pupils without placing undue pressure on teachers is a priority for the INTO.

One vital scheme that was impacted by the initial school closure was the School Meals Programme (ROI). School leaders and teachers shared their fears for children and families who would be deprived of one of the most basic needs at this challenging time. Funding for school meals is one of the targeted supports provided to DEIS schools but it is important to realise that disadvantage is not exclusively associated with poverty, nor is it always absent in middle-class surroundings. That all children have substantial nourishment to allow their development physically and cognitively is a basic need, and it was sobering to realise that but for the efforts of schools, many young people would not have had access to daily meals.

CONCLUSION

Teachers across Ireland – North and South – have demonstrated their professional agility and adaptability over the last 18 months, and this preparedness to adopt new methodologies is crucial in the coming years as ICT evolves and continues to impact on schools, teachers, and pupils. Although we cannot identify the rate of change in a world immersed in technology, a revised curriculum must recognise the importance of digital learning. The INTO surveys on teachers’ and principals’ experiences of school closures both North and South identified several foundational issues that must be in place to enable our education system to serve the digital learning needs of our pupils in a redeveloped curriculum.

Sustained investment and a commitment to a developmental approach to policy is vital to allow ambitions of integrating ICT into teaching, learning and assessment be realised. Respondents to the INTO’s survey agreed that the State should have a role in providing high-quality broadband to all schools within the country and that there must be a commitment to ensuring all teachers have access to a device for use in their teaching and to enable the continuity of education where remote working must take place. Opportunities must be afforded to all teachers to engage in professional development and upskilling in digital competence, to ensure that they are ready to adapt to embrace change and developments in technology to support children to become competent digital learners. Coupled with the practical skills and expertise to weave technology into teaching, we must prioritise the social and emotional skills of teachers to support their positive wellbeing.

Technology is just a tool. In terms of getting the kids working together and motivating them the teacher is the most important.

-Bill Gates



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