



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Interim submission to NCCA on Draft Primary
Curriculum Framework

Submission on behalf of the INTO

26 February 2021

Introduction

The INTO welcomes the opportunity to engage with the NCCA consultation on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (published in February 2020) as part of a partnership approach to curriculum review involving the education partners.

In anticipation of a series of nationwide consultations with members, the 2019 Annual Consultative Conference on Education (which was held in Kilkenny) centred on the theme of Curriculum. Twenty years after the introduction of the 1999 curriculum, this event served as a timely conversation on the vision and expectations of Irish primary school teachers on how a redeveloped curriculum might look, and the strengths of its predecessor that should be harnessed and woven into the next version. Given the changed and rapidly evolving society we are living in, the need for curriculum change is ever more apparent as we seek to offer a holistic education for pupils that will foster skills, attitudes, and values to equip them for adulthood. At this Conference in November 2019, 400 INTO delegates engaged in discussion on the future of the primary school curriculum, having listened to an insightful address from Arlene Forster of NCCA as well as keynote presentations from Professor Emer Ring (Mary Immaculate College, Limerick) and Dr. Thomas Walsh (Maynooth University).

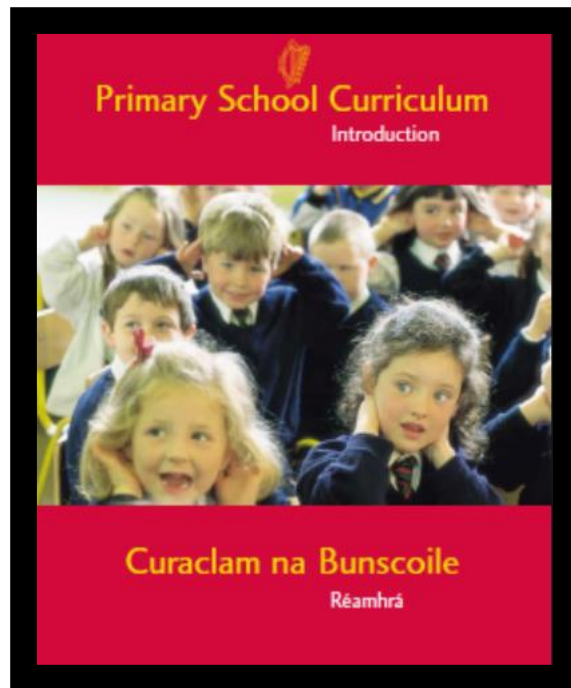
The INTO has prepared an array of material for members based on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework document. A short explanatory video and PowerPoint presentation have been prepared to support members in completing an online questionnaire. These materials are available on a dedicated page on the INTO website which also encourages members to contribute to this important consultation with their own written feedback. Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, face-to-face consultation with members has not been possible to date, although an online focus group was facilitated in November 2020 and proposals within the framework have also been considered and discussed by the INTO Education Committee. Further focus groups will be organised over the current school year.

Informed by our discussions to date (albeit limited due to the pandemic-enforced restrictions), the INTO takes this opportunity to submit an interim response to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. The centrality of the teacher voice in the redeveloped curriculum cannot be underestimated as their contributions are grounded in real-life situations and lived experience in the school context. Merfat Ayesh Alsubaie (2016) acknowledged the role of the teacher stating that theirs is “*without a doubt, the most important (role) in the curriculum implementation process.... with their knowledge,*

experiences and competencies, teachers are central to any curriculum development effort”
(2016, p.106)

In previous consultations regarding curriculum restructuring and revision of time allocations (2017), INTO members expressed some criticism at the sequencing of the developments given that the primary language curriculum had already been introduced. There was a view that proposals around restructuring the curriculum should have preceded the development of the revised language and mathematics curricula. Teachers’ responses to the proposals contained within the Draft Primary Framework have been broadly positive, although there remains an element of concern in particular in relation to time and overload which must be addressed.

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 welcome the balance of structure and flexibility to allow teachers to use their professional autonomy and judgement and this is further underlined in the Draft Framework. The emphasis on the Arts in the current curriculum was celebrated and the proposal to devote more time to this curricular area is greeted with positivity, although the time available is acknowledged as a challenge.

Practices of integration, thematic and play-based teaching advocated within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework are already happening within the current boundaries, however the lack of investment in primary education hampers its effective implementation. The theme-based approach which complements the curriculum vision of a ‘broad and holistic curriculum’ is reinforced in the proposed framework and while the merits are recognised, the requirement for increased funding and resourcing is highlighted by primary school teachers and the practicalities of achieving effective integration. Professional development opportunities in this area would greatly enhance teachers’ competence and confidence.

Aistear



Although the ‘Aistear’ was published in 2009, there was never any formal introduction of Aistear in Irish primary schools. Many teachers at infant level embrace the premise of play-based learning within their teaching, the absence of professional development has led to inconsistencies in approaches. Those who are familiar with the framework engaged in professional development at their own expense and in their own time. This voluntary approach is not sustainable and 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.

Key competencies

Broadly speaking, teachers welcome the seven key competencies planned to be embedded across all curriculum areas in this redeveloped curriculum. On analysing and reviewing curricula in an international context, the focus appears to be on competency development to ensure a well-rounded, holistic education. In her Research-Informed Analysis of 21st Century Competencies in a Redeveloped Primary Curriculum, Carol McGuinness spoke of learning as much more than “to be remembered material” and thus the development of curricula seeks to ensure that children develop thinking plans and strategies rather than routine learning.

According to INTO members to date, being an active citizen, a digital learner, creative, mathematical, using and communicating language, fostering well-being, and learning to be a learner will extend pupils’ skills and knowledge enabling deep and meaningful learning. Fostering well-being will be of importance in our current climate as it will support the children’s social, emotional, and physical development. Building and developing well-being will enable pupils to grow in confidence and help with performance in other curricular areas. embedded in the framework which are important emerging priorities for children’s learning.

“Being a learner” is seen as a crucial key competency and the attitudes and values of respecting difference, learning about others, and showing empathy are critical aspects to promote inclusion (particularly of children with additional needs).

Being ‘creative’ is acknowledged as a positive element that compliments the emphasis on Arts education within the primary school curriculum. Encouraging creativity help children to successfully navigate and contribute positively to the world around them.



Subject structure

There was general agreement that the incremental model, using a differentiated curriculum structure, could 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 and particularly appropriate for two-teacher schools and junior / senior schools.

The grouping of subjects for junior classes seeks to extend their earlier learning experiences in preschool through Aistear. The areas support an interdisciplinary, thematic approach and teachers agree that this offers scope for curriculum integration, flexibility and making connections, as promoted in the Northern Ireland Curriculum which states that “although the (six) areas of learning are set out separately teachers should, where appropriate, integrate learning across the six areas to make relevant connections for children” (2007, p.2).

Pedagogies in Aistear should underpin curriculum for infant classes. At this stage, the distinctions between subjects are less relevant than the experience of a coherent learning process accommodating a variety of elements. Developing pedagogies which prove successful in Aistear through the various stages of the primary curriculum is identified as an important step of a revised curriculum, however, as noted earlier professional development for teachers is imperative.

Teachers also noted that as pupils move from the broader curricular areas in junior classes to more distinct subjects in senior classes, this process should be facilitated in an organic, time-appropriate manner. The influence of textbooks at this stage was highlighted by some teachers who feel that there should be greater emphasis on project work rather than the pressure of completing workbooks which can sometimes dictate the pace of teaching and learning and in the context of the proposed redeveloped curriculum, this may accelerate the move from broad subject areas to more distinct subjects.

Teachers noted the similarities and connection between the structure and the language used in this proposed framework and the new Junior Cycle (for example key skills, competencies and learning outcomes). It is hoped that this will make planning easier for teachers in special school settings who may find themselves drawing on both Primary and Secondary curricula in their day-to-day planning.

Wellbeing

Teachers are pleased with an increased emphasis on Wellbeing, which was previously identified by INTO as an area to be targeted in curriculum review. Addressing children's mental-health needs is crucial if they are to fulfil their potential socially, emotionally, and academically. Pupil wellbeing underpins all aspects of school life. The ethos of a school is often founded on a vision of wellbeing with supports for students and staff. The SPHE curriculum is sometimes referred to as the 'hidden curriculum' as many aspects of the subject are addressed indirectly through the ethos of the school and through the day-to-day interactions between pupils and teachers.

There are currently a large range of programmes available that assist in the promotion and enhancement of pupil wellbeing in the classroom. The culture and atmosphere of the classroom and the school and how well SPHE is integrated across the curriculum will enhance the impact of any programme used. Many schools now use wellbeing programmes such as Incredible Years, Friends for Life, Circle Time, Restorative School, S.A.L.T and the Roots of Empathy. However, while teachers acknowledge the value of these programmes, they present significant cost and time barriers that make their implementation prohibitive in some schools. The implementation of a well-resourced, indigenous SPHE programme as part of the overall subject area of Wellbeing will allow for consistency across schools. The INTO welcome the review of RSE / SPHE and call for thorough professional development for teachers in implementing the revised curriculum.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated stress and anxiety among young children and during periods of school closure some pupils regressed not only in their learning on an academic level, but also on a social and emotional development. Upon the reopening of schools in September 2020, the Department of Education instructed schools to prioritise wellbeing and schools were encouraged to "Slow down to catch up". This was welcomed by school communities in the short-term, as the current provision for SPHE (30 minutes per week) is often highlighted as inadequate.

Given the prevalence of mental health issues among young people and the increase of incidences of challenging behaviour in schools, the INTO welcomes the forthcoming publication of guidelines for teachers. The need for a multi-disciplinary and inter-agency approach to supporting pupils who present with difficulties, for example, social or emotional difficulties should also be highlighted in the context of curriculum redevelopment. Research

indicates that the key challenges to addressing mental-health needs include the shortage of mental-health professionals and the stigma associated with mental disorder (Patel, Vikram, et al., 2007). INTO proposes that consideration be given to the provision of an in-school model of mental health support service. In-school support services have many benefits including an increase in attendance, a decrease in stigmatisation and improved cross-agency collaboration between teachers and other professionals. The INTO welcomes the Therapy in Schools Demonstration pilot project and recommends that other therapies (in addition to speech and language and occupational therapy) should be available onsite at school also as is the case in most other European countries.



Physical Education

Research conducted by Dublin City University (published in January 2020) involving over two thousand primary school pupils on the island of Ireland, found that skills development of children with regards to running, jumping, catching, and kicking (movements that are categorised as fundamental movement skills (FMS)), plateau and stop progressing at the age of ten. Results also show that one in four children cannot run properly; one in two pupils cannot kick a ball properly; and less than one child in every five can throw a ball.

Both gross motor skills and fine motor skills should be honed through physical activity and development. Their absence may lead to significant problems in later life. Exercise and activity are the keys to solving these issues, as well as providing a range of other physical and mental health benefits. The current time allocation for physical education at primary level is one hour per week. In reality, the lack of adequate and appropriate resources, the pressures of

curriculum overload for individual teachers or, in some cases, a lack of interest, result in pupils experiencing less than the recommended 60 minutes of physical education per week. A UCD study (2010) noted that the actual average weekly time spent on primary PE was just 46 minutes.

PE in school is the foundation of physical activity for hundreds of thousands of children in Ireland, many of whom are not involved in sport or other organised physical activities outside of school. The increase in time allocated to Wellbeing is welcomed by teachers and this may allow the problem of insufficient time allotted to physical education be addressed. However, for teachers to buy in to this development, resourcing is crucial. Many schools struggle with PE hall availability and rely on outdoor options which are determined by weather conditions. Better infrastructure in schools and in communities and professional development for teachers to provide what might in time become an expanded PE curriculum with higher goals will be required.



Digital technology

The INTO welcomes the approach to embedding digital technology across all curricular areas. This approach is considered the method that best serves the digital learning needs of pupils, rather than a specific standalone subject such as coding. It is widely accepted that technology is a major part of children's lives today and it is our responsibility to ensure that they are equipped with this skill which will be essential in their future. The positive impact of technology within the classroom to enhance teaching and learning and capture pupils' attention was noted by many teachers. However, teachers have concerns about the availability of resources in schools, their level of skill and competence and an over-reliance on technology. The recent school closure has highlighted the “digital divide” within our society, exacerbating the inequality that exists with students already suffering educational disadvantage further at a loss due to lack of devices and access to technology.

At school level, there is inconsistency in resourcing and equipment available to teachers and students. Quality of broadband in various areas also dictates the level of engagement with digital technology. Respondents to the INTO Survey on Remote Learning (2020) called for increased investment in digital technology and in continuous professional development for teachers.

The primary objective of Ireland's ‘Digital Strategy for Schools’ (2015) was to “ensure that ICT is embedded in the planning, design and delivery of all teacher education courses”. Egan et al. (2012) note that a lack of ability to integrate technology effectively in the classroom persists despite many newly qualified teachers being members of the “net generation”. Teacher education programmes must, therefore, ensure that technology and digital literacy is integrated in a way that is not superficial, permeating teacher education at all levels.



Modern Foreign Languages

The possibility of including modern foreign languages in the primary school curriculum from third class onwards draws mixed responses from primary school teachers. In some cases, teachers feel that the introduction of another language would be beneficial in promoting linguistic skills that are common in all language learning. Many schools that participated in the pilot project on modern languages in the primary school indicate that it was a positive experience.

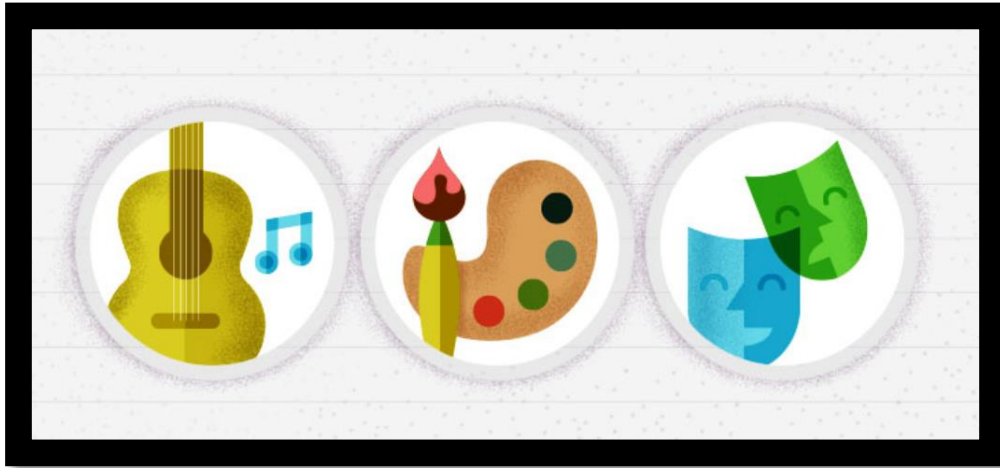
In our modern society with more people travelling than ever before and large multi-national companies based in Ireland, language acquisition is a key skill and therefore exposing children to a widely used language will benefit them in later life. The fundamental skill of communicating and using language is recognised within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework and teachers at primary level believe that the emphasis should be on oral language skills and conversational language rather than grammar and written exercises.

The learning of another language develops children's receptive skills and enhances the pupil's ability to communicate. Children are encouraged to distinguish different sounds, rhythms, cadences, and ways of conveying meaning. When the learning experience is an enjoyable and active one, children's attitude towards the language is a positive one.

The introduction of an additional language also has the potential to enhance children's understanding and appreciation of different cultures and therefore promote inclusion, one of the core issues referenced in the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework. Learning a language is seen as one of the most effective ways of understanding a culture. It is important that schools embrace the diversity within their setting and pupils for whom English or Irish is not their first language hear others using their own mother tongue. Therefore, should modern foreign languages become a feature of a revised curriculum, the choice of language must be carefully considered and reflect the needs of the school population.

Some challenges identified in the introduction of modern foreign languages include the difficult issue of time allocation. Teachers also expressed concern that the teaching of Gaeilge could be negatively impacted if another language were introduced in the primary school curriculum. The INTO recommends that a thorough exploration of other regions where the introduction of modern foreign language in primary school has been successful, particularly where two languages are currently taught, is important and its effective

Teachers, in general, also highlight the importance of drama as a standalone subject in Arts Education. Whilst various subjects such as English, Gaeilge and History lend themselves to effective integration of the discipline of drama, teachers advocate for the retention of drama as a distinct subject, recognising its unique skills and intrinsic value.



Agency

The proposal within the Draft Primary Framework regarding increased agency and flexibility in schools is a welcome development. INTO members emphasise that nobody understands the children in a class setting and their individual and collective needs better than the class teacher, and they are best placed to make decisions relating to teaching and learning approaches that will suit their own school and classroom content. In viewing teachers as ‘agentic professionals’, the Draft Framework empowers them to make these decisions and promotes confidence.

Teachers are very much in favour of ‘flexible time’ which affords opportunities to invest more substantial blocks of time responding to the interests of pupils as well as openings to engage with community arts and cultural organisations or participate in collaborative project work in the locality. This ‘partnership’ element is one of the principles within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework.

Time

There is 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. The improvements in literacy and numeracy that have been achieved considering the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011 reflect the increase in time allocated to these subjects, but teachers fear that a reduction to these areas would negate the progress made in the last decade. Teachers support the increase in allocation to the area of Wellbeing (encompassing SPHE and Physical Education). The ringfencing of the Arts subjects and the expansion of this subject area (with the addition of dance, film, and digital media) is also welcomed.

The allocation of flexible time is greeted positively, and it is anticipated that this would allow more autonomy for the teacher and it would alleviate the pressure of being bound by weekly timetables. Flexible time also has the potential to facilitate engagement with extra-curricular activities and project work in the senior classes. 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. It is important that any flexible time should not be accompanied with a requirement to document, further increasing the burden of paperwork.

Regarding the need for guidance on the use of flexible time, teachers have differing views. Some teachers are concerned that guidance could erode autonomy and discretion while others acknowledge the need for non-prescriptive guidelines to support the use of flexible time. In the absence of recommended guidelines, there was a concern that some subjects would miss out. Teachers have also acknowledged that the term 'flexible time' does not accurately capture the reality of time available to teachers, 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.



Transitions

The INTO welcomes the emphasis on transitions within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework to ensure better alignment in the curriculum across pre-school, primary and post-primary education. Effective communication and transparency during the transitional phase from early years setting / pre-school to primary school is important. The sharing of information between pre-schools and primary schools (such as the *Mo Scéal* document) can ultimately enhance the experience for children, parents, and educators (NCCA, 2016). The co-dependent relationship that exists between early education and care and primary schools should be nurtured and respected (Hayes, 2007). Teachers acknowledge a discontinuity in structures and experiences for children in terms of the physical environment, the complexity of the school setting, the level of individual attention they receive and a different approach to learning. Any expectation for schools and/or teachers to engage with transitional arrangements must be accompanied with the provision of appropriate resourcing, space, and time.

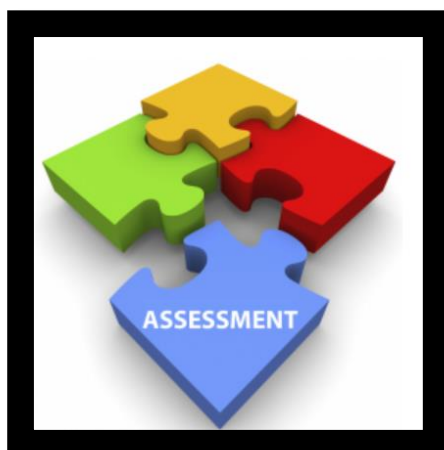
The same holds for the transition from primary school to post-primary school. The NCCA report cards provide sixth class teachers with an opportunity to share information in writing about children's progress and achievement in learning. They are a key part of the communication between school and home and the end-of-year 6th class Education Passport also provides post-primary schools with a summary of children's learning progress and achievement. The merits of sharing such important information with post-primary schools to facilitate a smooth transition for sixth-class pupils are acknowledged, but it is important that teachers are not overburdened with paperwork.

As well as transitions from one school setting to another, pupils should be supported with progression internally, within the primary school. Teachers acknowledge the significant changes within the curriculum from one class grouping to the next. As mentioned previously, the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that subjects become more differentiated in the senior classes of primary school. INTO members are of the view that such a progression takes place at a gradual rate over the course of the third-class year (this is particularly relevant in schools where a considerable amount of the second-class academic year is devoted to preparation of sacraments).

Pupils with Special Educational Needs

Particular attention must be given to the transitional process for children with special educational needs (SEN) to ensure a smooth transition. Every effort should be made to ensure early detection and intervention for children with SEN. Crucial time is lost if intervention is left until the beginning of junior infants. For all stages of transition for children with special education needs, protocols should be agreed around the transfer of information and the continuity of support and resources to ensure successful transitions. Collaborative multidisciplinary assessment should be readily available in a pre-school setting to increase early intervention. It is regrettable that the increase in the number of special classes at primary level is not matched by a corresponding increase in special class provision at second level. This lack of provision creates significant difficulties for pupils transferring from primary to post-primary, particularly for those pupils who require a continuity of experience and support. Some pupils who manage at primary level may experience considerable difficulty at post-primary level and may need access to more support, or special class at that point.

Assessment



The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework seeks to “conceptualise assessment as an essential and critical part of teaching and learning.” Drawing on the key ideas within Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools (NCCA, 2007), assessment in the redeveloped curriculum supports the progression of each child towards the curriculum’s vision. It is a collaborative process involving children and teachers and, at times, parents, and other stakeholders, as they gather, record, interpret, use, and report information about a child’s progress and achievement in developing knowledge, concepts, competencies, skills, and dispositions. The INTO welcomes the continuum of assessment presented within the framework including informal, planned interactions and more formal assessment events which recognises that assessment is integral to high-quality teaching and learning across all curriculum areas and subjects. The three interrelated types of assessment are complementary, and necessary to gain a comprehensive picture of a child’s progress and achievement.

Teachers are pleased that the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework reinforces the concept that assessment goes far beyond activities that contribute to external accountability and national monitoring. Teachers acknowledge the very important role assessment has in their work and their requirement as professionals to reflect critically on their teaching and the learning in their classrooms to enable them to make informed decisions about how pupils are progressing. The inclusion of ‘intuitive assessment’ is welcome as this reinforces the concept that assessment is happening on an ongoing basis, informed by teachers’ professional judgement. Whilst the word ‘intuitive’ reflects the spontaneous nature of such assessment, teachers emphasise the importance of ensuring that the term used captures the professional observations that prompt the informal assessment. In relation to more formal assessment, in

particular standardised testing, teachers would welcome professional development and guidance on communicating results to parents / guardians.

Conclusion

Teachers believe that many aspects of the 1999 curriculum are deeply valued, including the holistic and child-centred approach; the emphasis on collaboration and active learning; the clarity of strands, strand units and objectives for each class level and the support and guidance for planning. The overall view is that any new curriculum should retain the strengths of the 1999 curriculum while using the opportunity of a revision to address the current challenges, particularly in relation to curriculum overload. Teachers welcome a thematic and integrative approach to teaching and learning; however, they identify several pre-requisites that underpin the successful implementation of such an approach including:

- a reduction in class size
- increased funding for schools (improved infrastructure)
- comprehensive programme of professional development
- a curriculum for infant classes that reflects the philosophy and approaches in Aistear,
- clear guidelines for schools around flexibility to address the needs of multi-grade classes,
- flexibility regarding time (any monthly and weekly guidelines for time allocation element should be accompanied by guidance reflecting teacher autonomy and professional judgement).



In summary, the INTO acknowledges the need to review the Primary School Curriculum to ensure it meets the needs of children today. Reviewing the curriculum is also an opportunity to address curriculum overload, an issue of concern to teachers for last 20 years. The INTO welcomes the overall philosophy and structure of the draft Primary Curriculum Framework. The principles and competencies have been well-received by teachers to date. However, the draft Framework was published before the pandemic and before remote learning became the norm for a period of time. Perhaps, a revised Primary Curriculum Framework should include a reference to remote learning and what its place might be into the future.

Teachers have indicated support for the proposals regarding pedagogy, integration, inclusive education, diversity, and assessment. There is also support for the restructuring of the curriculum as outlined. The INTO notes a desire among teachers to include opportunities for pupils to learn modern languages, however, there will be practical challenges to be addressed, which will warrant further consultation and discussion.

The INTO notes that the NCCA will commence phase two of its consultation in the Autumn, involving work with schools and focus groups with teachers. From an INTO perspective, this phase of consultation is crucial to the process as the voice of teachers and their experiences in schools will inform the future development of the Primary School Curriculum. The INTO will continue its consultation with members throughout 2021 and will make a further submission in due course.

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