

# INTO Submission to NCCA

## Draft Primary Curriculum Framework

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Curriculum-making happens at different levels in the education system (Priestley and Philippou, 2018). The processes through which teachers interpret curriculum content and translate it into meaningful and engaging learning experiences for children is multi-faceted. As part of this consultation on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020), the INTO engaged with members through online focus groups, written questionnaires, and face-to-face meetings. Our discussions with teachers and school leaders have yielded important learning about the factors that contribute to successful curriculum implementation. This learning, together with data gathered during previous consultation with members, underpins this submission which captures key themes emerging in teachers' responses to the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework as well as priority areas for a redeveloped curriculum that will meet the needs of primary school pupils in our diverse Irish society.

INTO, as the largest teacher union in Ireland, welcomes the opportunity to prepare this submission as part of the NCCA consultation on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework. The extension to the original timeframe afforded schools a further opportunity to explore and reflect upon the content of the framework, however, it is important to note that despite a more positive landscape in Spring 2022, schools are still navigating a period of great uncertainty, and this may have impacted their engagement in consultation over recent months.

## Introduction

A curriculum process is cyclical. To be relevant it must be created, taught, reviewed, and adjusted. In our rapidly changing environment, it is important to review curriculum and make necessary adjustments in a targeted way. In an Irish context, curriculum has undergone significant change with the development of a framework for Early Years (Aistear), a new Junior Cycle framework and the commencement of a review of Senior Cycle education. The Primary Curriculum is the next key piece of the jigsaw that we must consider, ensuring that it "fits into" the overall education structure, serving all pupils, including children with special education needs.

Irish teachers have a unique role in curriculum design. The 1999 curriculum was a combined effort, developed through a partnership process involving teachers, parents, school management and the Department of Education. Primary teachers and the INTO were active participants in preparing the revised curriculum of 1999 through their participation on committees designing and preparing curriculum content. The input of teachers cannot be underestimated as their contributions are based on real-life situations and lived experiences in a school context and we must ensure that the voice of the teacher continues to resonate in any updated curriculum. In Ireland, we are renowned for the high calibre of our primary school teachers and, as noted by Sugrue (2004) when considering the INTO's



involvement with the NCCA in the process and structure of the 1999 curriculum, “*the level of ownership afforded to our teachers resulted in professional buy-in.*”

Irish society has seen unprecedented change since the 1999 curriculum was published. The education system and children themselves are also shaped by different experiences of family life, different cultures, different beliefs and viewpoints, different abilities and needs, and more recently their lived experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, schools and teachers face a growing challenge to recognise and respond to this diversity in a way that enables all children to learn and make progress. This raises an all-important question about the type of primary curriculum we choose to develop for children now and for the years ahead. This submission seeks to capture the key issues raised by INTO members in their discussions about a revised primary curriculum and their engagement with the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework.

### **Learning outcomes**

Learning outcomes differ from school to school, class to class, and teachers are best placed to use their professional judgement in making decisions about teaching and learning. The INTO notes the move to a learning outcome approach in the Primary Language Curriculum (and Draft Primary Mathematics curriculum) whereby the expected learning and development for children at the end of each stage is described, while due account is taken of children’s abilities and varying circumstances.

Learning outcomes are often presented as instruments to solve problems of transparency, quality, accountability, and efficiency – as they provide precision and avoid overlaps/repetition in learning (Souto-Otero, M., 2012). They also aid equality as they replace the traditional emphasis on equality of access with equality of outcomes, bring about learner-centred education and help teachers to better organise curriculum content. Some literature has reinforced these views by underlining the relationship between desired learning outcomes, assessment, learning approaches and learning strategies. However, the approach also attracts criticism and prompts debate among educators with some literature arguing that learning outcomes can hinder useful learning processes, inhibit explorative and unintended learning, create a target-lead culture. Learning Outcomes are technically difficult to introduce.

Any curriculum process model which relies on teacher judgement is far more demanding on teachers and thus far more challenging to implement in practice (Stenhouse, 1975). A learning outcomes approach creates a significant shift in curriculum culture which requires investment and support for teachers to enable them to develop a curriculum that meets the needs of their individual contexts. Although learning outcomes are a feature of the Primary Language Curriculum, some teachers continue to have reservations about this approach, and due to Covid-19 restrictions, planned in-



school support for schools was postponed. The INTO welcomes the resumption of sustained support for the Primary Language Curriculum and reiterates the importance of ensuring that the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) continues to be resourced appropriately to enable the three-year implementation programme of support be completed, thereby affording teachers more time and support to engage with the new approach to curriculum. The INTO highlights the value of face-to-face engagement between schools and the PDST team. Acknowledging the successful rollout of online support, the INTO states that professional development and learning must return to in-person support as the norm, to be complemented by online provision when appropriate.

It is intended that statements of learning in a revised curriculum will be intentionally broad and less prescriptive than before in terms of content. The INTO acknowledges that this is with a view to allowing teachers to employ their professional judgement based on their individual contexts. However, this must be balanced with the need for some degree of clarity and definition of context. Teachers in Ireland are often working in demanding and complex environments with an over-loaded curriculum, the largest classes in Europe, an inclusive education model, and multi-grade settings.

### **Time for implementation**

Time for teachers to engage with a new curriculum is identified as a key priority. Reflecting on schools' experience in enacting the Primary Language Curriculum, teachers at INTO consultations highlighted the importance of an appropriate implementation phase to allow schools sufficient time to become familiar with new content, objectives and pedagogies and ensure that these approaches can be embedded across all curricular areas. There is an agreement among INTO members that comprehensive in-service is required to enable teachers develop their confidence and become fully au fait with the new curriculum structure. Members who experienced the transition to the 1999 curriculum cite the extensive in-service that was rolled as part of its introduction, and this was contrasted with a more "rushed" manner of implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum. Teachers call for an appropriate adaptation period for schools to explore and trial new methods of planning and preparation for effective teaching and learning in their own individual context.

Teachers express confusion at the timing of the rollout of the revised curriculum and continue to reiterate what they perceive to be an ad-hoc approach to curriculum change. Notwithstanding policy emerging from The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011), the INTO reiterates that developing curricula in specific subject areas in advance of addressing the philosophy underpinning the primary curriculum and its overall structure is causing unnecessary flux and uncertainty for teachers. A coherent and linear approach to curriculum development must be adopted. Curriculum must be clearly communicated to teachers to ensure a consistent and holistic approach.



There is a view that it would have been more appropriate to publish *Guidance on Preparation for Teaching and Learning* as a starting point. This document provides a foundation and paves the way for teachers and school leaders understanding how to approach the proposed redeveloped curriculum. At the time of writing, there is a consensus that this guidance document – which was introduced in April 2021 – is not receiving the due time and emphasis that it requires. Members feel that this guidance should be prioritised in the coming months/the next school year to allow teachers engage meaningfully with the new approach to planning for teaching and learning at an individual and whole-school level.

### **Teachers as agentic professionals**

Fundamental to the new curriculum is the image of teachers as “*agentic professionals*” and this is a concept that is relatively new to some teachers. It is crucial that the very important conversation around agency takes place to prepare teachers for the implementation of a new primary school curriculum which relies on them being agentic.

The INTO acknowledge the concept of ‘*Teacher Agency*’ which is reinforced within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework, empowering teachers to make decisions about teaching and learning.

### **Assessment**

The continuum of assessment presented in this document is welcomed by members and teachers are pleased with the explicit reference to assessment going far beyond activities that contribute to external accountability and national monitoring.

As mentioned in INTO’s previous submission to the NCCA, the inclusion of ‘intuitive assessment’ is a positive development as it validates the view that assessment is an ongoing process which happens constantly within a classroom environment, informed by teachers’ professional judgement. Whilst the word ‘intuitive’ captures the spontaneous nature of such assessment, teachers emphasise the importance of ensuring that the term fully reflects 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. Such support would further enhance teachers’ agency by increasing their confidence in articulating important messages about a child’s learning and progression.



## Planning

Embracing the concept of teachers as agentic professionals, an approach to planning that empowers teachers to make decisions informed by their professional judgment and the various methods of assessment outlined above must be presented parallel to a redeveloped curriculum. The recently published *Guidance on Preparation for Teaching and Learning* is considered an extremely important resource which aligns with the principles and vision of the teacher within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework. The essence of this guidance is that all preparation undertaken by a teacher in providing meaningful, engaging, and effective learning environments is equally valued. Teachers' invisible, visible, and recorded preparation culminate to create positive teaching and learning experiences that are tailored to meet the needs of pupils in a particular setting. Members voice concern at the expectations of the Inspectorate and school management. They fear that the positive picture of planning presented in this guidance would not be deemed sufficient by Inspectors. This apprehension echoes feedback from respondents to a recent INTO survey on teacher and principal workload, which suggested a lack of awareness and engagement with the guidance. Targeted messaging and communication with teachers on the recent guidance would be hugely beneficial and would help to foster a positive attitude where teachers feel that they are trusted and their professional expertise and knowledge of curriculum, pedagogy and, crucially, the school community are valued. Adopting such a flexible approach to preparation for learning and imparting greater autonomy and decision-making on teachers would consolidate the concept of teacher agency within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework and would serve to empower teachers to take ownership of their planning. The proliferation of paperwork and the unsustainable level of planning associated with teaching and learning has long been an issue that teachers highlight during INTO consultations, therefore whilst the new approach within the most recent guidance is viewed as an important step forward, teachers emphasise that this will involve a considerable change of mindset and culture. Support and advice for teachers in navigating this change is crucial and sample templates and guidance developed centrally through collaboration with the Inspectorate would be welcomed by teachers in helping to scaffold them as the move towards a new model of preparation and planning. Some members also highlight the need for more resources and support material as Gaeilge.

Aithníonn Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann go bhfuil dul chun cinn déanta ag an Roinn maidir le ciorcaláin srl a chur ar fáil trí mheán na Gaeilge. Uaireanta, áfach, bíonn moill ann agus foilseacháin ag dul amach go scoileanna. Caithfear séirbhís iomlán a chur ar fáil trí mheán na Gaeilge i gach ghné de saol na scoile. Caithfear tacaíocht chuí a thabhairt do scoileanna agus iad ag iarraidh spriocanna atá leagtha amach do Ghaeilge sna scoileanna a bhaint amach. Caithfear aitheantas a thabhairt don obair atá déanta ag COGG cur leis an soláthar acmhainní don teagasc sa Ghaeltacht. Is obair leanúnach é an soláthar acmhainní teagasc agus mar sin is gá a chinntiú go leantar le maoiniú COGG chun go líonfar





na bearnaí atá fós ann. Bíonn gá i gcónaí le hábhar éisteachta agus le hábhar léitheoireachta grádaithe sna canúintí éagsúla, le téacleabhair i dteanga oiriúnach do pháistí agus acmhainní ar líne.

## Managing expectations

As mentioned in the previous section, teachers regularly refer to the burdensome paperwork associated with their role and express their dissatisfaction at the diminution of creativity owing to the large amount of time devoted to (in some cases unnecessary) preparation of lengthy documents. Some teachers who have experience working in other jurisdictions compare their current planning requirements to those in other countries and highlight a significant amount of repetition and ‘copying and pasting’ of material to fulfil planning duties. Many members feel that this time could be used more effectively, efficiently, and creatively in other ways to benefit the holistic wellbeing of pupils. Excessive amounts of time spent on written planning and recording could instead be used to create more stimulating resources that are suited to classroom context and/or organise activities within the local environment. Such collaboration with community projects or local arts and cultural organisations reflects the ‘partnership’ principle of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework and helps to develop pupils’ competency of ‘being an active citizen’.

Teachers, in general, welcome the more integrated approach to teaching and learning and the approach to planning within the afore-mentioned guidance in ensuring more realistic planning. However, teachers express concern at the expectations of the Inspectorate and school management with regard to documentation and planning. There is a worry that Inspectors may not be satisfied with reduced, individualised planning which points to a lack of awareness among teachers of the Department of Education’s involvement in the preparation and publication of this guidance. During the challenging Covid-19 period, Inspectors adopted an ‘advisory role’ and teachers welcome the professional dialogue that ensues when the Inspection approach is more supportive rather than an evaluative. Members also call for greater consistency among Inspectors, and at this juncture as the primary school curriculum is being redeveloped, it may be timely to review inspection practices to align with *Guidance on Preparation for Teaching and Learning*.

Teachers also highlight the demands that they face in engaging with initiatives and extra-curricular projects. Schools are sometimes viewed as the ideal venue to address many societal issues with many lobby groups and state organisations providing schemes and initiatives which schools are expected to implement. This is evident in the various programmes for which schools are awarded a flag, for example ‘Green Schools’ and ‘Active School Flag’. The attainment of ‘the flag’ can be an important stimulus and status symbol that motivates schools to adopt and maintain a collective approach and engage in sustained collaboration to reach a specific target. School leaders in a recent INTO survey



identified participation and engagement in whole-school initiatives as a contributing factor to increased workload and paperwork. Teachers also highlight the time and effort that engagement with these programmes demands but point to pressure from parents/guardians and the wider public to respond to societal trends and current issues. There is a concern among teachers that schools are suffering from what Michael Fullan calls “initiativitis” – doing too many things but sometimes not doing things to the standard they would expect. Addressing this dilemma is difficult as teachers and principals recognise the value of many of these programmes, but the reality is that in an already overloaded curriculum, too much is expected of schools. It is hoped that the integrated approach to teaching and learning at the core of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework could help to alleviate the burden associated with the ever-increasing demands of school-based initiatives. Affording schools the flexibility to allocate time to relevant project-based work and to engage in local partnerships may prove useful in avoiding fragmentation which many teachers currently report in setting goals that although may be suited to their pupils may not be experienced as connected ideas by the learners.

## 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 to allow teachers prepare the learning environment to meet the needs of children.

The INTO acknowledges the premise of the ‘*Mo Scéal*’ document in helping early years settings to share relevant information with primary schools thereby enhancing the experience for children, parents, and educators (NCCA, 2016). There is a recognition that the relationship between early education and care and primary schools should be nurtured and respected to best meet the needs of pupils and teachers but the INTO demands that junior infant teachers and other relevant staff members be afforded the necessary time and resources to engage with any transitional arrangements. Discussions on transitions from early years settings to primary school also shine a light on the dearth of resources available to many schools to provide adequate, appropriate support to children in their care who present with additional and/or special educational needs.

This is also true 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. 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 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).

### **Sacramental preparation**

It follows that any review of the primary curriculum prompts a discussion on the inclusion of a religious education programme. Members express mixed views about the role of religious education and a patron's programme in their schools.

Whilst some teachers support the separation of sacramental preparation from the primary school setting others believe that schools should continue to play a key role. Although teachers' opinions on this issue vary, all attendees at INTO focus groups agreed that too much time within the school day is spent preparing for sacraments in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> classes.

Teachers express concern that the proposal within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework to reduce the time allocation for schools' patron's programmes as they feel that this could develop into a large-scale political issue. Members seek clarity around the progress of reconfiguration of primary schools, given that the Programme for Government commits to achieving a target of at least 400 multi-denominational primary schools by 2030 to improve parental choice. Drawing a parallel between the vision of this Schools Reconfiguration for Diversity process and the existing model in some Scandinavian countries where pupils attend their nearest schoolteachers did acknowledge that parental choice was not always seen as a priority in other jurisdictions. Other teachers expressed frustration at the slow pace of transfer of schools to multi-denominational/non-denominational schools across the country.

Questions relating to religious diversity arise organically in all schools (both denominational and multid denominational). Sacramental preparation is one instance when conversations about different practices and belief traditions are initiated. This provides an opportunity for teachers to facilitate classroom discussions and these conversations are important to ensure that all children feel a sense of belonging and inclusion within the school community.

Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics is closely aligned to SPHE which is an important



curriculum area that supports pupils' social and emotional development. In teaching ERB and Ethics - which are bound up with people's values and practices that contribute greatly to their shared sense of identity and belonging – specific skills are required on the part of the teacher. The time allocated to SPHE in a redeveloped curriculum must be increased to reflect the broad range of topics and issues to be explored in this area. Within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework, the inclusion of SPHE within the broad curricular area of wellbeing may allow for additional time to concentrate on this complex topic and related themes. The sensitive nature of the subject matter may be challenging for teachers to facilitate successfully in a safe environment therefore sustained professional development will be necessary to implement an ERB and ethics curriculum effectively and confidently.

## Aistear

*Aistear: the early childhood curriculum framework* was published in October 2009. Although many teachers in infant classes of Irish primary schools embrace the principles of playful learning underpinning this framework, the INTO continues to highlight the absence of formal introduction and accompanying training. Those teachers who engage with this framework have undertaken courses and relevant professional development at their own expense and in their own time, and in some cases such training was confined to summer courses. This volunteerism demonstrates the commitment of members to continuous professional development and upskilling to meet the needs of pupils in their care, but such an approach has led to inconsistencies in how *Aistear* is enacted within our primary school settings. The INTO reiterates previous calls for more supports for teachers in the implementation of this framework for early years education and asserts 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. In addition, funding for schools must be increased to ensure that classrooms are equipped with appropriate resources to facilitate the play-based pedagogy *Aistear* espouses. In consultation with members, some schools describe fundraising initiatives that were held to provide resources for *Aistear*, with parents in some cases donating toys and play equipment for infant classrooms. It is unacceptable that schools are not allocated sufficient funds to purchase suitable, good quality equipment. This must be addressed on the introduction of a redeveloped curriculum to ensure that the learning environment is stimulating, safe and conducive to effective teaching and learning.

INTO also calls for the physical learning environment in schools to be considered on the introduction of a new framework underpinned by playful pedagogy. The provision of more flexible and creative spaces in new school buildings is essential. Older school buildings must be reconfigured to facilitate the provision of learning spaces compatible with playful learning approaches at all levels of the primary school.



It is also important to acknowledge at this juncture the changes that have occurred in the early childhood context since the initial publication of Aistear in 2009. The introduction of the two years of universal preschool provision (Early Childhood Care and Education [ECCE] programme), an increasingly qualified workforce, the introduction of early years education inspections by DE inspectors, the establishment of Better Start National Early Years Quality Development Service and the availability of supports for young children with special educational needs to access the ECCE programme through the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), must all be considered in the development of any new curriculum framework

## Digital learning

As we look forward to the future of our society and the increasing influence of technology in our everyday lives, digital learning will be a vital element in a redeveloped primary curriculum. Our recent experience of remote teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic has served to underline the role of digital technology in our daily lives. However, there are several foundational elements which must be in place to enable our education system to serve the digital learning needs of our pupils. Within the Digital Strategy for Schools (DES, 2015) was a recognition of the essential skills with which teachers must be equipped, based on consultation with Irish primary school teachers. Subsequent action plans for education (DES 2016, 2017) state the requirement for technological pedagogies to enable teachers incorporate digital skills effectively in their classroom.

The overall aim of digital technology in education should be to ensure that ICT becomes an integral part of the teaching, learning and assessment process in every classroom of every school, embedded across every area of the curriculum. To this end, teachers broadly welcome the inclusion of ‘being a digital learner’ as one of the seven key competencies within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework, aligned with the approach adopted in numerous other European countries [as outlined in Education International’s report entitled ‘*A Review of Technology in Teaching and Learning*’ (2020)].

To realise the key aim of enabling technology to be considered “*integral to the process of teaching and learning*” (Egan, 2020, p.15), all schools must have the capacity to provide such learning opportunities with well-equipped, fully resourced learning environments with digitally competent and confident teachers. In the absence of these solid, foundational blocks, the building of digital knowledge and skills cannot be achieved.

The INTO highlights the need for increased investment in ICT at primary school level to ensure all schools are equipped with the necessary infrastructure to allow pupils access to all required devices including:



- the provision of high-speed broadband to all primary schools, with a reliable network that extends to all areas of the school;
- the development of digital content both in English and as Gaeilge by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to support the redeveloped primary curriculum and meet the diverse needs of pupils in Irish primary schools;
- the adequate resourcing of the Professional Development Support Service for Teachers (PDST) to provide a range of upskilling opportunities for teachers in ICT including sustained support, enabling them to engage with digital technology and to provide digital learning opportunities for their pupils;
- the establishment of centralised IT support for all schools (rather than a reliance on local independent providers);
- and the provision of assistive technologies and ICT resources (with the relevant continuous professional development) by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to facilitate the inclusion of children with special educational needs.

### Children with Special Education Needs

The INTO supports inclusion and strives to ensure that all children – regardless of their needs – are included in our education system. Primary schools have routinely (almost always in the absence of adequate resources and sufficient access to services), provided an inclusive education for thousands of pupils with special needs. It is the view of the INTO that a continuum of provision to include special schools, special classes, and mainstream schools, to meet a continuum of need, is in line with providing an inclusive education system, as outlined in Section 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD).

Expertise in Inclusive Education must be built upon throughout a teacher's career. All teachers should be given the opportunity to engage in ongoing professional development and learning in relation to inclusion and special educational needs. The national framework for teacher professional development, Cosán, should include special education, and ensure access to CPD in special and inclusive education, including ASD, for all teachers.

Access to continuous professional development must be sustained and ongoing to ensure teachers are supported throughout their careers in updating their knowledge and skills in the practice of special needs and inclusive education. Adequate resources, including substitute cover, must be in place to allow teachers to engage with professional development prior to the establishment of special classes. In particular, teachers would value more opportunities for professional development to ensure that



they are prepared in advance of their allocation to a special class or special education role. Furthermore, teachers should also have the opportunity to visit other special classes and special schools to see, at first hand, how these settings operate.

## **Broad subject areas**

It is envisaged that presenting the primary curriculum in broad subject areas as proposed within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework will help facilitate integration. The way in which subjects are grouped in the junior classes seeks to extend children's earlier learning experiences in preschool through Aistear with a gradual move to more distinct, differentiated subjects in Stages 3 and 4 aims to reflect children's growing awareness of the world. Teachers, in general, agree with this approach of grouping subjects, and acknowledge that in stages one and two (junior infants to second class) distinctions between subjects are less relevant than the experience of a coherent learning process accommodating a variety of elements. The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that pedagogies in Aistear should underpin curriculum for infant classes, and teachers concur that playful, inquiry-based strategies are conducive to effective teaching and learning. Many teachers express a view that pedagogies which prove successful in Aistear should not be limited to younger classes but should be promoted at all stages of the primary curriculum. The value of play for children across all ages at primary level is acknowledged by teachers. As noted earlier, given the inconsistent approach to training for teachers in Aistear, comprehensive professional development for all teachers is imperative to cultivate a positive approach to playful learning in the context of a revised primary curriculum.

### *(i) Mathematics*

There is support among teachers that mathematics and language should retain a 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 following 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. In discussions relating to the grouping of Mathematics with Science, Technology and Engineering, teachers emphasise the importance of ensuring that sufficient, or distinct, time is allocated to Mathematics due to the crucial importance of the development of foundational numeracy and maths skills in the early years of primary school.

Teachers also note the importance of making connections between mathematical concepts and skills with children's lived environment. The provision of support materials and resources aimed at parents/guardians should be an important aspect of a revised curriculum, to ensure that children are supported to apply mathematical skills in their daily lives (through baking, shopping, or telling time etc.) to consolidate learning.



(ii) *Arts Education*

Teachers feel that creativity is a fundamental element of a primary school curriculum that seeks to support the holistic development of the child. There was a broad welcome for the ringfencing of the Arts subjects. The expansion of this area with the addition of dance, film, and digital media was considered to be a positive development. Most teachers are eager to emphasise the need to ensure that Arts education is not neglected in a redeveloped curriculum.

Although Dance is currently featured as a strand of the Physical Education curriculum, teacher confidence and competence in this area may be improved through appropriate professional development opportunities and a sharing of expertise among staff. Similarly, the use of digital media and filmmaking is also used by schools and has become more prevalent following recent experiences of remote teaching and learning, however, given the nature of this area regular upskilling and support for teachers is imperative. The proposals within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework seek to prepare children to be ‘digital natives’ and in a rapidly evolving digital landscape, teachers must have access to appropriate support to ensure that they are confident in using technology.

(iii) *Wellbeing*

The central place of Wellbeing in the curriculum has been reinforced in recent years with its inclusion as one of four key themes in Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009) as well as in the new Framework for Junior Cycle. At primary level, teachers implement a variety of age-appropriate programmes and initiatives (such as Friends for Life, Incredible Years, Roots of Empathy) and employ a wide range of strategies (such as circle time and role play) to build and support pupils’ wellbeing and resilience. Whilst teachers acknowledge the merit of this emphasis on pupil wellbeing, the need for professional development for teachers in this area is highlighted.

The proposed increased emphasis on Wellbeing attracts differing opinions. Teachers have reported a growing need for support for pupils in the area of positive mental health and wellbeing but caution against a potential tokenistic approach to dealing with this critical area. Within the context of the current review of the primary curriculum, it is proposed that wellbeing be introduced as a distinct subject area incorporating SPHE/RSE and Physical Education. When an evaluation of the implementation of RSE was conducted in 2007 it stated that the low status of SPHE emerged as a significant negative influence on schools (Maynock et al.). The suggestion that the time allocation for wellbeing would be increased in a reviewed curriculum has been widely welcomed by INTO. There is concern that the approach to presenting wellbeing as a stand-alone competency could result in it being siloed into commercial “programmes” that teachers cover for certain amount of allotted time in the month to fulfil suggested requirements in a reviewed curriculum. Some teachers feel that rather than being identified as a detached competency, wellbeing should be conceptualised as an overarching



principle encompassing all competencies. The culture in the school should be one where pupils and members of the school community feel welcomed, valued, and supported. A whole-school approach to fostering and nurturing these attitudes is essential. At system-level, the importance of ensuring that wellbeing is interwoven across all aspects of school life must be considered when designing a reviewed primary curriculum. INTO members discussed some strategies employed in their individual school contexts, with a particular focus on wellbeing since the reopening of schools following prolonged pandemic-enforced closures. Teachers' experiences of new approaches adopted to planning more integrated learning and utilising flexible time for wellbeing promotion underscore the need to sustain these positive changes as a long-term objective. There was a suggestion that consideration should be given to extending break times and lunchtimes, in line with an increased focus on wellbeing. For example, on a practical level, where schools enforce a 'no eating on yard' policy, pupils' time for eating lunch can be minimal. This contradicts lessons about mindful eating and healthy mealtimes. When we consider that Ireland's contact teaching time is 17% above the OECD average (Education at a Glance report), there is time available within the school day to facilitate flexibility. The optimum use of such time may be to provide more opportunities for interaction with peers and engaging in play or physical activity. The flexible time contained within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework may be helpful in this regard.

Teachers welcome the review of SPHE/RSE which has been conducted by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and complimented resources/teaching materials which have been made available on an online toolkit. In keeping with the focus on digital learning, teachers highlighted that safe internet usage and the issue of cyber-bullying should be a critical component in a redeveloped SPHE curriculum to reflect the increased influence of technology and the digital world on the lives of young people,

It is imperative that a revised curriculum is accompanied by comprehensive guidance and professional development for teachers to deal with issues that arise in our modern society including bullying and the impact of negative experiences on pupils' mental wellbeing.

(iv) *Modern Foreign Languages*

The proposal to introduce modern foreign language in the primary school curriculum from Stage Three (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 for teachers, pupils, and parents/guardians.

As noted earlier in this submission, Ireland's modern society is more diverse than ever before, and





language acquisition is identified as a key skill that will be of benefit to children 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. When the learning experience is an enjoyable and active one, children develop a positive attitude towards the language.

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. Pupils for whom English or Irish is not their first language should be given the opportunity to 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 that teachers identify in the introduction of modern foreign languages include the difficult issue of time allocation. Teachers also express concern that the teaching of Gaeilge could be negatively impacted if another language were introduced in the primary school curriculum. The INTO recommends a thorough examination of research in other regions where the introduction of modern foreign language in primary school has been successful, particularly in jurisdictions where two languages are currently taught. This research must inform any decision to introduce a modern foreign language within a review primary curriculum.

(v) *Social and Environmental Education*

INTO – through Global Citizenship Schools - has been to the fore in promoting Global Citizenship Education in the Primary School Curriculum and in supporting teachers and schools to take a rights-based approach to education in primary schools, including local, national, and global justice, equality, and sustainability issues. The vision of Global Citizenship School is that all Irish primary school teachers and children will learn about global citizenship and that schools will take regular and consistent action appropriate for primary schools to help make the world a better place for all. INTO Global Citizenship Schools strives to have Global Citizenship embedded in Irish primary schools to support Education for Sustainable Development in the curriculum.

Acknowledging the importance of fostering knowledge and understanding of sustainability at an early age, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in its Draft Primary Curriculum Framework states that “*Challenges such as climate change, sustainability, human migration, and geopolitical*



*shifts illustrates the importance of dispositions and skills such as resilience, creativity, innovation and critical thinking in the young and future generations” (NCCA, 2020, p.3).*

Within a redeveloped curriculum, opportunities can be found for an increased emphasis and inclusion of Education for Sustainable Development/Global Citizenship Education in primary schools. It is firmly rooted in the geography and science/SESE curriculum under the ‘environmental awareness and care’ strand. Education for sustainable development permeates other areas often involving value judgements, interpretation of evidence and higher-order questioning. Thus, sustainable development teaching will be richest when pupils experience the core elements – concepts, evidence, and values – in a non-fragmented way, reflecting the integrated approach promoted within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework.

## **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. As stated earlier in this submission, more



flexible spaces in new school buildings, the reconfiguration of internal spaces in older buildings and further investment in outdoor learning environments are solutions which should be actively explored and promoted in the facilitation of physical education and activity in schools.

## Time allocation

The allocation of flexible time is greeted positively, although teachers highlight that in the current context the term 'flexible time' does not accurately capture the reality of time available to teachers. Time for recreation and the 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 as proposed within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework would allow more autonomy for the teacher, and it would alleviate the pressure of being bound by weekly timetables for all subjects. Whilst many teachers feel that they would like weekly allocations for literacy and numeracy to be maintained, monthly allocations for other subject areas would be useful to facilitate engagement with extra-curricular activities and project work, particularly in the senior classes.

Teachers feel 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 and record, further increasing the burden of paperwork. In this context, the advice contained within the *Guidance on Preparation for Teaching and Learning* was welcomed.

However, some members who participated in our consultation requested non-prescriptive guidelines for teachers to support the use of flexible time. This approach is at odds with the vision of the teacher as an autonomous, agentic professional that the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework seeks to create, further highlighting the necessity for comprehensive professional development for teachers to accompany *Guidance for Preparation for Teaching and Learning*. Teachers make decisions about their teaching and pupils' learning on multiple occasions throughout the course of the school day. They adapt their planned lessons/activities in response to pupils' progress and experiences based on knowledge of the children, the curriculum and pedagogy. However, it is evident that some teachers harbour apprehension and hesitancy at the prospect of articulating their professional decisions and judgements without the level of paperwork and written records to which they are currently accustomed.

Teachers also note 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. In the context of the proposed redeveloped curriculum, this may accelerate the move from broad subject areas to more distinct subjects.

## Resources

Teachers are unequivocal in their demands regarding funding and resources to support the implementation of the redeveloped primary curriculum. In particular, large class sizes lead to difficulties in embracing the vision and principles of any new curriculum particularly when the focus is on a play-based approach incorporating active methodologies and differentiated learning. It is acknowledged that the staffing schedule for primary schools was reduced by one pupil per mainstream teacher last September (2021) and that a further similar reduction is budgeted for September 2022. The fact remains that the staffing schedule will operate on the basis of a general average of one classroom teacher for every 24 pupils from September 2022. We must note that Ireland's primary school classes will remain the largest in the EU at four pupils per class above the EU average.

To pave the way for the successful implementation of a revised, child-centred, and skills-based primary curriculum, the INTO submits that as a minimum, the primary school staffing schedule must be reduced by one pupil per mainstream teacher each September up to and including September 2026. These annual reductions must be applied in all primary schools including DEIS schools.

Smaller numbers of pupils would help to facilitate a more active and, in junior classes, a more play-based approach to teaching and learning which enhance the pupils' development.

The Department of Education must provide the appropriate school facilities including teaching materials and physical space to allow pupils engage in effective, active learning. Many classrooms at present are not conducive to hands-on activity-based approaches. Some classrooms are overcrowded and ill-equipped to allow the use of practical resources. Investment in support materials for teachers and adequate resources for schools is imperative to ensure that teachers can meet curriculum objectives and effectively teach education for sustainable development.

Resources used in primary schools must also reflect the diversity within our classrooms. Mirroring society, primary school classrooms are dynamic and busy places in which teachers support and respond to a greater diversity of learners with a rich variety of competencies, cultures, ethnicities, family structures and backgrounds, home languages, religions, sexual identities, and worldviews than



ever before. Enabling children to feel respected, valued and engaged in learning through appropriately tailored experiences and through positive interactions within the school community is important in the development of a more inclusive society in Ireland empowering primary school pupils to take positive actions to live justly, sustainably and with regard for the rights of others.

## **Pupil Voice**

It is an underlying principle of the curriculum that the child should be an active agent in his or her own learning. The structure and content of the curriculum are designed to provide opportunities for active engagement in a wide range of learning experiences and to encourage children to respond in a variety of ways. The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (2020) seeks to strengthen pupils' agency in terms of voice, participation, and decision-making.

At the INTO Consultative Conference on Education in November 2019 based on the theme of Curriculum Review, children from local primary schools presented findings of a survey that they had conducted with classmates based on their vision for a reviewed curriculum. The potential changes identified by young people and the maturity with which they articulated their key findings challenged us as teachers to consider how prominently the pupil voice features in planning and preparation for teaching and learning.

INTO has supported the BEACONS initiative which endeavours to engage educational stakeholders at local and community level, ensuring all voices, including pupil voice is heard and valued.

The Children's School Lives longitudinal study involving 4,000 children as they progress from preschool through primary (and on to post-primary school) will inform the redevelopment of the primary curriculum, ensuring pupil voice will be an important dimension of curricular review. Teachers acknowledge the important of incorporating pupils' interest and prior knowledge into teaching approaches and learning activities and recognise the value of self-assessment for children.



## 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 sustained and significant reduction in class size
- increased funding for schools
- comprehensive CPD for teachers (including training in play-based pedagogy for all teachers)
- adequate time for reflection on and implementation of a new curriculum
- a programme of sustained professional development, including in-school support
- clear guidelines for schools around flexibility to address the needs of multi-grade classes
- flexibility regarding time

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.



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