



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Primary School Curriculum: Have your say Discussion Document and Proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education 2015

A nation's greatness depends upon the education of its people

Primary School Curriculum: Have your say

Discussion Document and
Proceedings of the Consultative
Conference on Education, 2015

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Foreword

The *Primary School Curriculum* was published in 1999. Teachers also began their journey of curriculum implementation in 1999. While generally appreciative of the 1999 curriculum, a key message that teachers have arising from their experience of working with the curriculum is that there is too much in it. The challenge of curriculum overload is still with us, and has been identified as an issue to be addressed in the next iteration of curriculum development. Curriculum is evolving all the time as the needs of teachers and pupils and demands of the system change over time. The challenge is to maintain the right equilibrium between ensuring the curriculum remains relevant and retaining stability. A constantly changing curriculum does not allow developments to be embedded and creates overload as teachers grapple with new demands. However, as needs change, or as gaps are identified, the system has to be in a position to respond.

A nation's curriculum for schools reflects its values and priorities. Developing curriculum gives rise to many debates and contestation about what is desirable and what is possible. The curriculum is what informs the process of teaching and learning in schools. As we move further into the 21st century, the relevance of our curriculum emerges as a topic for discussion, with suggestions for new areas to be included, such as coding or education about religious beliefs and ethics. The publication of *Aistear*, the Early Years Curriculum Framework, in 2009, has implications for the curriculum in the infant classes, which also needs to be reflected in future curriculum developments. Challenges remain for teachers around integration across the primary school curriculum, assessment, ICT and continuing professional development.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has begun the process of updating the 1999 curriculum, beginning with a revision of the language and mathematics curriculum, as demanded in *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: the National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (DES, 2011). We are very grateful to our guest speakers from the NCCA, its Chief Executive Anne Looney, its former Deputy Chief Executive, Sarah Fitzpatrick, and Patrick Sullivan, Director of Curriculum and Assessment, who are always willing to engage with teachers around curriculum issues. I would also like to thank Robbie O'Leary, principal of Sacred Heart SNS, Tallaght, for his relevant and down-to-earth presentation on the use of ICT in primary classrooms. The INTO appreciates the contributions of our workshop presenters who explored aspects of the curriculum in a variety of workshops focused on teachers' interests and needs. Finally, I would like the members of the Education Committee who prepared the background paper and facilitated the discussion groups and the Education team in Head Office, whose support ensures the success of the annual consultative conference on education.

Involving teachers at all stages of curriculum development and implementation is a key to successful curriculum experiences for pupils. This publication contributes towards bringing the voice of teachers to the curriculum development process.



Sheila Nunan
General Secretary
August 2017

Part 1

Curriculum

A Discussion Paper

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I

An Overview of Primary Curriculum Developments

The Primary School Curriculum was published in 1999. Arising from the Quinlan Report, which was a review of the Primary School Curriculum published in 1990, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) was tasked with revising the 1971 Primary Curriculum. Irish teachers have a unique role in curriculum design. The 1999 curriculum was 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 involvement on committees that designed and prepared curriculum content. According to Sugrue (2004), the INTO's involvement with the NCCA in the process and structure of the 1999 curriculum allowed for strong teacher ownership with resulting strong professional buy-in. In general, the Primary School Curriculum 1999 was very well received by teachers.

The introduction of the curriculum was followed by a comprehensive programme of professional development support. Even though the curriculum was well-received, it emerged over the years that aspects of the curriculum created challenges for teachers. Curriculum overload was identified as a major challenge. Irish society had also changed significantly since the curriculum was developed. Primary schools are now more diverse, for example, 11% of pupils in Irish primary schools were not born in Ireland (Source DES). The policy focus on inclusion has resulted in greater numbers of pupils with special educational needs attending mainstream primary schools, resulting in changed profiles of pupils in both mainstream and special schools.

A curriculum reflects a nation's values and priorities. Curriculum informs the process of teaching and learning in schools. Curriculum underpins the educational experience of pupils in schools. Developing a curriculum is not a simple process, because what is important to include in curriculum is often contested with different issues attracting attention at different times. The following quotation illustrates this complexity:

The school curriculum expresses a nation's aspirations for its next generations. The curriculum must strike a balance between developing young people's understanding of their national history and culture and preparing them for a future that is increasingly global and largely unpredictable. What constitutes essential school learning will always be contested because behind it is a debate about what knowledge is of most worth. Curriculum stirs the passion- and that is a good thing. Curriculum is never completed. It is never perfect and should always be a work in progress. As responsible citizens, we are obliged to provide our future generations with the best possible opportunities and outcomes.

(McGaw 2014 cited in Looney, 2014 p.10)

The Primary School Curriculum is now sixteen years old. It is time to reflect on its suitability in a changing educational context.

Curriculum Reviews

The NCCA gathered data in 2003/04 for the first phase of a curriculum review in English, visual arts and mathematics (NCCA, 2005). The review focused on both teachers' and children's experiences of the curriculum. Teachers reported difficulties in understanding the strands in English and in using them for planning. Teachers also identified challenges in assessing English, namely time, the appropriateness of the assessment tools, and catering for the range of children's abilities. Teachers were satisfied with the visual arts' curriculum in terms of structure and breadth although challenges were identified in assessing the visual arts. They also found that class size and classroom space created challenges in implementing a visual arts curriculum. In mathematics, the number strand received most approval from teachers, in addition to early mathematical activities for the infant classes. Teachers found specific content areas and accessing resources challenging. Time, the appropriateness of assessment tools, and catering for a range of abilities were the challenges experienced regarding assessment in mathematics.

The second phase of curriculum review spanned the years 2006/07 and was designed to examine teachers' experiences with Irish (Gaeilge), science and social, personal and health education (SPHE) (NCCA, 2008). Both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered through interviews, questionnaires and a variety of reports including Whole School Evaluations (WSE). Across the three subjects, teachers reported that the curriculum had a positive impact on children's learning. Teachers reported an increase in the children's use of oral Irish and their enjoyment of lessons, especially in the infant classes, children's positive engagement with science and an increased awareness and understanding of the world around them. Regarding SPHE, teachers reported children's increased awareness of others and growth in their personal development. Time was identified as the greatest challenge to curriculum implementation. The two dimensions of time to which teachers referred were: insufficient time to implement fully all subjects, and insufficient time to meet the needs of all learners. The lack of resources was also identified as an issue. Other challenges identified were the negative attitudes in society to the Irish language, the lack of opportunity to undertake hands-on activities in science and the sensitive nature of relationships and sexuality education (RSE).

The Department of Education also reviewed the implementation of the curriculum in English, visual arts and mathematics, publishing its report in 2005. The Department found that there were challenges with planning for English, with individual planning not always linked to school plans. While overall, the Department considered the teaching of English to be effective in most classrooms, challenges were identified in some classrooms regarding the development of oral language, the teaching of writing, emotional and imaginative development through language, and the involvement of parents. There was also scope for development in assessment. In mathematics, there were challenges associated with methodologies, problem-solving, and differentiation and there was also scope for development in assessment. In the visual arts, the implementation of the curriculum was generally successful but assessment needed further development. Overall, the Department found that there was a need to promote higher-order thinking, to nurture children's creativity, and to enable children to respond both emotionally and imaginatively. There was also room to improve the use of assessment data to inform teaching and learning and to enhance the use of information and communication technology (ICT).

In 2004-2005, the Inspectorate conducted an evaluation on the teaching and learning of Irish in schools where the first language was English (T2) schools. The research objectives focused on providing a multifaceted-report on Irish that included information on the quality of teaching and learning in Irish. During the course of the evaluation, the inspectors examined the context in which Irish was taught and the factors influencing the work in schools. The aspects examined included the attitude of parents and of the community to Irish, the number of pupils whose parents requested that they be exempted from learning Irish, teachers' qualifications and their language ability, and the time spent teaching Irish. The teaching of Irish in primary schools is a complex matter. According to Harris (2007), 'Irish depends on the attitudes, efforts and commitment of individual schools and teachers in a way that other subjects do not' (Harris, 2007, pp.37-38). Commenting on the centrality of the teacher in teaching Irish, Harris expressed the view that, 'the use of Irish does not easily extend beyond the Irish slot without the special effort of the teacher' (Harris, 2008, p.63). Ring-fencing Irish within the confines of the Irish class, and sticking rigidly to a time allocation has been identified as a weakness by Ó Duibhir (Irish Times, 2014), who commented that, 'part of the issue is the system of 30 or 40 minutes a day for Irish in primary school. That drip, drip approach has not been successful for Welsh in Wales or French in Canada. Schools achieving good results here have children using Irish outside the Irish class'. The teacher, and the competence and interest of the teacher, are central to the success of Irish language learning. The teaching of Irish is a challenge for many teachers.

Following in the tradition of carrying out research on curriculum every ten years since 1975, the INTO also carried out research in 2005 and held a consultative conference on the curriculum in 2006. Teachers had a lot of praise for the primary school curriculum, but acknowledged challenges regarding resources, class size, time, planning, funding and curriculum overload. Particular challenges were identified by teachers of infants, particularly in relation to the use of play, parental expectations, class size, classroom support, and integration of the curriculum, usually addressed through thematic teaching. Recommendations focussed on reducing the pupil-teacher ratio, funding, facilities and resources, professional development, Gaeilge, teaching methodologies in mathematics, and the use of ICT. The INTO also recommended that curriculum review should occur on a regular and ongoing basis (INTO, 2008). The findings of the most recent curriculum survey, carried out in 2015, are outlined later in this report.

Support Materials

Arising from the various curriculum reviews, the NCCA responded by working with teachers, pupils and parents to develop further resources. Additional support material was prepared for the teaching of English. A DVD was produced for parents with information on the curriculum (*The What, Why and How of children's learning in primary school*), which is now available online in five languages, English, Gaeilge, French, Lithuanian and Polish. The DVD was distributed to all primary schools in April 2005. Web support was developed for teachers with exemplification of methods of teaching and learning (www.action.ncca.ie). Guidelines were also prepared on assessment, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (2007). However, additional materials continued to be prepared by the Department of Education and by the NCCA to support schools to meet their changing needs, and while useful, contributed to a sense of overload among teachers. Some of these additional materials include *Learning Support Guidelines* (2000), *Guidelines for students with General Learning Disabilities* (2002), *Guidelines on Traveller Education in Primary Schools* (2002), *ICT in the Primary School Curriculum* (2004), *Intercultural Education, Guidelines for Schools* (2006), *EAL in Irish Primary Schools: Guidelines for Teachers* (2006), *A Continuum of Support (NEPS)* 2010. See Appendix One for more details.

Aistear

In 2009, the NCCA published *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in partnership with the early childhood sector. Teachers, practitioners, children, parents, lecturers in education and training, researchers, and policy makers worked together to develop a curriculum framework for children from birth to six years. The aim was to provide information for parents and educationalists on 'challenging and enjoyable learning experiences that can enable all children to grow and develop as competent and confident learners in the context of loving relationships with others. *Aistear* describes **types of learning and development** that are important for children in their early years, and offers **ideas and suggestions** on how these might be nurtured' (Aistear, 2009, p. 5). *Aistear* was designed for use in a myriad of settings - homes, childminding settings, crèches, playgroups, pre-schools, naíonraí (Irish-setting pre-schools) and infant classes in primary schools. In the absence of any national support programme to bring *Aistear* to primary schools, the NCCA, in collaboration with the Association of Teacher and Education Centres, organised the Aistear Tutor Initiative, providing both summer courses and evening courses for teachers who wished to use *Aistear* in their classrooms. The development of *Aistear* raised challenges in relation to curriculum developments for the infant classes, as it was based on the most up to date research on how young children develop and learn.

Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

Another far-reaching innovation following the initial reviews of the curriculum was the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. In November 2010, the Department of Education and Skills published a draft national plan for improving literacy and numeracy, inviting comments from teachers, education stakeholders and the public. It sparked intense debate about school standards among individuals, parents, students, teachers, staff groups in schools, lecturers and researchers in colleges and other third-level institutions, representatives of community organisations and public bodies, as well as parents' associations, trade unions, employers' associations and school management bodies. Following the poor performance of Irish students in PISA¹ 2009, it was widely acknowledged that there was a need to improve standards in literacy and numeracy. However, the interpretations around Ireland's performance in PISA 2009 were strongly contested. Ireland's performance in later international assessments such as PIRLS² and TIMSS³ in 2011, and PISA 2012, showed that there had been no decline standards in literacy and numeracy, raising questions in educational circles as to the importance and even the legitimacy of using test results as a yardstick of improvement or excellence. Based on feedback, the draft strategy was amended and published in 2011 (DES, 2011). It is currently being reviewed.

The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* contained a number of recommendations in relation to curriculum. In the first instance, the strategy recommended that primary teachers increase the amount of time spent on literacy and numeracy, by using their discretionary time and by integrating literacy and numeracy across the curriculum (Circular 56/2011). The strategy also recommended that the primary curriculum for language (English and Irish) and mathematics be reviewed and complemented by the provision of examples of children's work and learning that illustrated what learning outcomes mean in practice. It was acknowledged in the strategy that approaches to literacy and numeracy in the infant classes needed to be revised to bring them in line with the teaching and learning approaches advocated in *Aistear*. The strategy also

¹ Programme for International Student Assessment

² Progress in International Reading Literacy Study

³ Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

recommended that the pupil-teacher ratio in infant classes be lowered. The learning outcomes that pupils were expected to achieve in the *Primary School Curriculum* 1999 were somewhat 'obscured' according to the strategy, therefore, it was recommended that the revised curriculum should be based on a "learning outcomes" design, with learning outcomes incorporated into all curriculum statements. Many of the recommendations in the strategy have yet to be implemented. A comprehensive professional development support for teachers has yet to be made available. Current professional development support has focused on developing capacities to engage in school self-evaluation, a process where schools carry out internal reviews of their teaching of literacy and numeracy. The recommendations of the literacy and numeracy strategy will inform curriculum review and development.

Language Curriculum

In light of the curriculum review reports (NCCA, 2005; 2009; DES, 2005) and the recommendations in the literacy and numeracy strategy, the NCCA set about revising the language curriculum. In keeping with NCCA view of a 'developing curriculum' and their responsibility under the Education Act (1998) for curriculum review, a draft of the *Revised Language Curriculum* for primary schools was made available for public consultation in April 2014. NCCA's approach to consultation through the use of Twitter, email and surveys has been inclusive, enabling a wide audience to participate and offer views on curriculum development. This is an acknowledgement of the need to respond to 'new research and development in children's language learning, reflect on a range of developments and current perspectives ... respond to the feedback of teachers and others on ways to improve the 1999 curriculum ... it coincides with a heightened emphasis on literacy in our schools at national level' (English, 2014, p.79) as well as an awareness of the considerable change in the profile of the primary school child. In the revised language curriculum, junior and senior infants are collectively referred to as Stage 1; First and Second classes are Stage 2. Learning outcomes for each stage are presented as Progression Continua, which indicate key milestones on the learning path through each of the strands. The online presentation of the curriculum allows teacher access to a wide range of resources – podcasts, video links, sharing of lesson plans, and tip sheets, as well as giving users a navigable and accessible resource to allow them 'to plot their own route as their needs determine' (English, 2014, p.79).

The Primary Language Curriculum is composed of a first and second language curriculum (L1 and L2). The L1, either Irish or English, is determined by the language teaching and learning context of the school. The L1 outcomes are similar in both English and Irish. The L2—Irish or English—follows the same continuum of learning as the L1 but the level at which curriculum outcomes are attained is complex and varies in accordance with experience of and exposure to the language. In this language curriculum for Stages 1 and 2 (junior infants to second class), the common curriculum specification for L1 and L2 means that integration within a specific language, between languages and across the curriculum, is identified explicitly and that language learning is not compartmentalised. The curriculum outlines the rationale and aims of the curriculum and describes the learning outcomes, supported by progression continua. The curriculum will be accompanied by examples of children's work and support materials. The revised language curriculum seeks to reduce the overload associated with the 1999 curriculum, by including fewer learning outcomes. A learning outcomes approach to curriculum is a new departure for primary schools in Ireland. Therefore, how a learning outcomes approach works in primary schools will need to be monitored and evaluated as part of the implementation process of the revised language curriculum.

Education about Religious Beliefs and Ethics

The report of the Forum on Pluralism and Patronage recommended that the NCCA be given the task of developing a curriculum for primary schools on education about religious beliefs and ethics. At present, a faith-based religious programme is provided in denominational schools, an ethical education programme is provided in Educate Together schools and the community national schools are developing a multi-belief education programme. These programmes are designed by the patrons of the schools and not by the state. Parents may request that their children opt out of religious programmes. To some extent ethics and education about religious beliefs are included in the current patrons' programmes, while education about religions and ethical issues also arise in other curriculum areas. The NCCA is preparing a consultation on curriculum for education about religious beliefs and ethics, but no decisions have yet been made about the introduction of such a curriculum, what it would include or when it would be taught. These, and other issues, will emerge during the consultation process.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education

ICT and digital technologies are valuable teaching and learning tools and resources that offer significant opportunities to enhance, enrich and extend educational experiences in primary schools. ICT has the potential to enhance teaching and learning when deployed and utilised in a pedagogically-appropriate way. The use of ICT can support the transformation of the traditional classroom where the teacher in general is 'the sage on the stage' imparting knowledge, to a 21st century concept of a teacher as 'the guide on the side' facilitating pupils in co-constructing, applying and creating knowledge for themselves, both individually and collaboratively. This type of teaching and learning is facilitated by ICT in ways that have not been completely possible in the past. New technologies can be used along with modern teaching pedagogies and developments in learning theory to better support pupils' lifelong learning.

In October 2015, the Minister for Education and Skills launched a *Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020: Enhancing Teaching, Learning & Assessment*. This strategy provides a rationale and Government action plan for integrating ICT into teaching, learning and assessment practices in schools over the next five years (*Digital Strategy, 2015*). The vision of Department of Education & Skills in relation to ICT integration in Irish schools is outlined as being to 'realise the potential of digital technologies to enhance teaching, learning and assessment so that Ireland's young people become engaged thinkers, active learners, knowledge constructors and global citizens to participate fully in society and the economy'. (*Digital Strategy, 2015, p.5*). The Strategy was developed following a comprehensive consultation process that involved an ICT census in schools; the publication of a background paper *Building Towards a Learning Society: A National Digital Strategy for Schools* (Butler et al., 2013), invitation for submissions, focus groups, consultations with key stakeholders and the establishment of an ICT Steering Group. The Strategy focuses on four key themes:

- Teaching, Learning and Assessment Using ICT
- Teacher Professional Learning
- Leadership, Research and Policy
- ICT Infrastructure

In all, thirty-six objectives are outlined to progress ICT integration. It is emphasised that multiple stakeholders, including the Department, school authorities and school leaders, will have to adopt leadership roles in attaining these objectives. The strategy will adapt UNESCO's ICT competency framework for teachers to the Irish context to ensure that appropriate supports and materials are provided to teachers. A constructivist, pedagogical orientation will embed the use of ICT in schools. The intention is that ICT will be embedded in curriculum, teacher education and Department policies with a view

to enhancing learning experiences for all pupils. The Department has indicated its commitment to supporting the implementation of the strategy.

Concluding Comment

The *Primary School Curriculum* of 1999 reflected the educational thinking and educational values of its time. Both Irish society and educational thinking have changed since the 1990s, therefore, it is timely to reconsider our curriculum to ensure it represents our current context and values. The curriculum was well received in 1999, but there has been increasing pressure on schools to participate in numerous initiatives and programmes that support the curriculum. While many of the initiatives are worthwhile in themselves, encouraging creativity, developing the arts, protecting the environment, supporting well-being and so on, there is no doubt that they can contribute to a sense of overload in schools, where teachers are of the view that they are expected to solve all the problems of society through introducing additional programmes and initiatives. Although schools are not obliged to participate in additional programmes or initiatives, they often feel under pressure to do so. The role and responsibilities of teachers today differ significantly from those who graduated as teachers with a two-year National Teacher Diploma 40 years ago. This stark contrast is outlined in Appendix Two, which lists some of the additional programmes and initiatives in schools today.

In considering future curriculum developments, it is worthwhile to revisit the opening quote by McGraw to Pádraig Pearse's comment on education in 1914⁴:

Of Freedom in Education

I have claimed elsewhere that the native Irish education system possessed pre-eminently two characteristics: first, freedom for the individual, and, secondly, an adequate inspiration. Without these two things you cannot have education, no matter how you may elaborate educational machinery, no matter how you may multiply educational programmes.

As we embark on further curriculum review, there is much to think about.

⁴ See full text in Appendix Three.

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Curriculum Developments in Northern Ireland

In 1987, plans were announced for a statutory curriculum for England and Wales and the Minister for Education in Northern Ireland, Brian Mawhinney, announced that similar legislation would be introduced in Northern Ireland. The Department of Education (DE) for Northern Ireland issued a consultation document setting out the rationale for a statutory National Curriculum and a 'common' curriculum for Northern Ireland was decreed under the Education Reform Order of 1989.

The DE consultation document established the *National Curriculum* as an entitlement for all pupils irrespective of social background, culture, race, gender, difference in abilities and disabilities. It was also to:

- Establish standards by making expectations for learning and attainment explicit to pupils, parents, teachers, governors, employers and the public
- Promote public understanding and confidence in the work of schools and in the learning and achievements resulting from compulsory education
- Prepare pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life.

The first NI Curriculum was introduced in 1991/92 with eight core subjects comprising English, maths, science and technology, history, geography, art and design, music and physical Education (P.E.) (and religious education, R.E.). Four cross-curricular themes were introduced which were to run across the curriculum: Education for mutual understanding (EMU), health education, cultural heritage and information technology.

After its introduction, the *National Curriculum* was the subject of a number of reviews which tended to come about as a reaction to pressure from schools and 'others' who genuinely believed that the curriculum was far too prescriptive and over-demanding in its content, planning and preparation.

In 1993, Lord Dearing was asked by the government to review the curriculum and its assessment arrangements. His report highlighted serious issues with the first *National Curriculum*. He found that in the early stages of implementation it was clear that 'many' schools had difficulty delivering the *National Curriculum* effectively. Teachers found it too prescriptive and overloaded and argued that it stifled their ability to teach creatively and 'give sufficient attention to some children's learning difficulties'.

Assessment arrangements were considered 'problematic' with the ten-level scale and the statements of attainment for teacher assessment were deemed cumbersome. Many teachers objected to the *National Curriculum* tests and in some cases the tests were boycotted. Dearing's report advocated a stronger focus on Literacy and Numeracy and recommended that each subject should be reduced to a 'core', plus options which would

in theory, free up approximately 20% of curriculum time. He also argued for a reduction in the attainment targets and statements of attainment and that teachers should be free to record teacher assessment in ways they found appropriate.

As a result of Lord Dearing's report and findings, a revised version of the curriculum was produced in 1995/96 and the key changes in 1995 were as follows:

- Content was reduced and more flexibility introduced
- Tests in core subjects remained the only statutory tests
- Information Technology (IT) became a subject to be taught on its own as well as through other subjects
- There were no overt statements of attainment - each subject would now have programmes of study at each Key Stage plus level descriptors for each of the eight levels (with end of Key Stage statements for art, music and PE)

The 1995/96 changes removed some content but the structure basically remained unchanged. In 1999, the Education Minister gave permission for the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to undertake a fundamental review of the statutory requirements of the curriculum.

CCEA undertook a curriculum monitoring programme for the year 1997/98 to ascertain teachers' views on the curriculum and held a series of conferences to stimulate debate about the future curriculum. They also collected the views of around 3,000 pupils in 51 schools which gleaned the pupils' view that the curriculum as it stood lacked 'balance and breadth and should be more relevant and enjoyable'. The studies also suggested that teachers felt that there was still too much emphasis on content and too little emphasis on emotional, social, cultural and moral development.

CCEA also looked at other influences, including studies on Thinking Skills and Neuro-Science, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) initiatives, European trends and advice from the business and employment sector.

Based on their research, CCEA set about designing the enriched/revised curriculum for Northern Ireland. Legislation was passed for a phased introduction of the curriculum beginning September 2007 over a 3-year period, designed to be 'more flexible, cross-curricular and relevant to the world'. It was also suggested that teachers would be given more authority and flexibility to teach content that they deemed suitable. The aims of the Revised Curriculum as laid out by CCEA in 2006/07 were to:

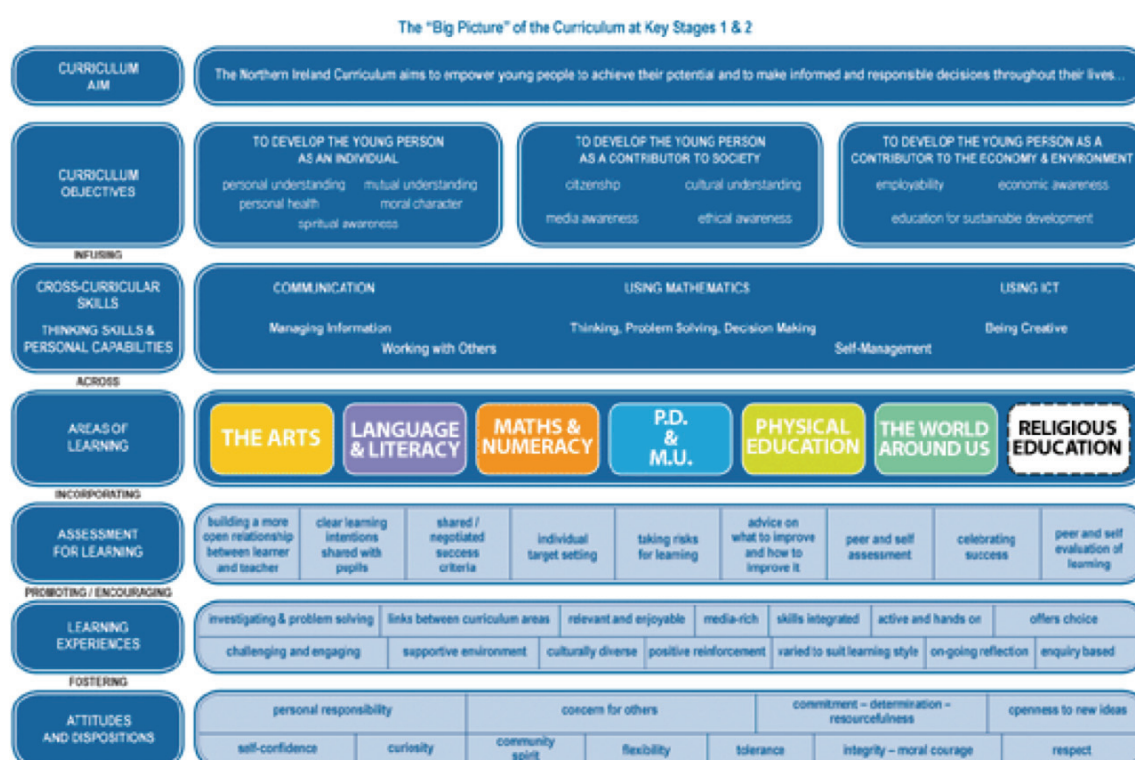
- Empower young people to achieve their potential
- Promote learning experiences which were relevant and enjoyable, linked to other curricular areas, active and hands on, enquiry based, culturally diverse and varied to suit pupils' learning styles.

Significantly, Assessment for Learning (AfL) was deemed by CCEA to be 'strongly advised, recommended and encouraged' under the new curriculum but was not made statutory. Assessment would now be carried out by the class teacher at the end of Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, with assessment materials provided by CCEA in the form of Assessment Units (AUs) as a system of moderation to ensure consistency. It sought to 'incorporate' AfL, for example, individual target-setting and shared learning intentions to 'promote' learning experiences, for example, investigating and problem-solving, active and hands on, fostering attitudes and dispositions of self-confidence and community spirit.

Under the proposals, the curriculum was no longer structured in individual subjects but organised into Areas of Learning which included, in effect, all the previous subjects. However, statutory requirements now concerned the skills and competences that children were expected to develop rather than the content they must learn.

Emphasis was placed on information management skills, thinking skills and personal capabilities, problem-solving and creativity, with a core element on learning for life and work including citizenship, employability and personal development, with subject requirements now related to these.

Details were issued by CCEA in the form of a pictorial diagram outlining the changes, called "The Big Picture":



The objectives of the Revised Curriculum were to develop the young person as an individual, to develop the young person as a contributor to society and to develop the young person as a contributor to the economy and environment. One of the significant changes in the revision, which underwent further review during the first year of the new millennium, was the creation of a new Foundation Stage for Years 1 and 2, which CCEA suggested was designed to 'promote open-ended, interactive and practical learning experiences'. The purpose was to concentrate on developing a child's disposition and readiness to learn, rather than to force the pace with children who may not be sufficiently prepared for formal learning.

The enriched/revised curriculum was devised jointly by CCEA and the Belfast Education and Library Board to address perceived problems in the formal traditional curriculum, particularly in disadvantaged areas. It was characterised as a developmentally-appropriate curriculum and was more play-based and activity led than the pre-existing

curriculum. Significantly, in Years 1 and 2 it involved postponing the introduction of formal reading schemes in order to 'concentrate on oral language and emergent literacy activities. It also postponed formal recorded arithmetic in favour of activities that laid the foundations for understanding basic mathematical concepts'. A primary focus was to remove the 'early experience of learning failure', although 'Baseline Assessments' were introduced, to be collected by the teacher at the beginning of Year 1 and 'outcome measures' collected at the end of each school year for 4 years.

The Early Years Enriched Curriculum was evaluated in an executive summary in 2005, based on the pilot scheme before the curriculum became statutory in 2007 and the relatively small number of 59 teachers who were interviewed each year over a 5-year period and surveyed by questionnaire about their experiences of teaching the curriculum and their perceptions of children's progress. They were also asked about issues relating to training and resources. Many of the 59 teachers perceived themselves as being still 'too formal' for the new curriculum and although some recognised its value, felt that lack of training and resources were affecting implementation and enthusiasm especially at the upper end of Key Stage 1 and also in Key Stage 2. According to more recent focus groups this remains the situation to the present day.

In addition, parents' views were elicited each year to find out their impressions of the new curriculum and how it affected their child's educational programme. Although the response rate from parents was very low, positive comments observed at the end of Years 1 and 2 tended to be replaced by more considered responses for Years 3 and 4. The result of the changes, which went ahead after the pilot scheme, meant that there was now much greater divergence between the statutory curriculum in NI and that in England.

By the summer of 2008, the INTO was already responding to teachers' and principals' concerns about 'serious shortcomings of the new arrangements'. Among their concerns were a lack of resources and logistical problems, the quality of training provided, and the workload involved. This prompted the Northern Secretary of the INTO to issue a bulletin in September 2008 as part of the 'Enough is Enough' campaign, instructing members to boycott the new arrangements until more guidance and time was given to implement the Revised Curriculum.

In April 2009, a policy for school improvement was published by the Department of Education for NI (DENI) called 'Every School a Good School'. Schools had reported the previous year that 'each support agency appeared to operate autonomously with no real integration of purpose'. DENI was of the view that this publication 'was a significant step which clarified both direction and purpose in education policy' and that this would improve the 'communication strategy to give a more consistent and clearer message to schools'. The implication thereby being, that the communication from associated bodies had hitherto been ineffectual.

In April 2010, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued a follow-up evaluation of the implementation of the Revised Curriculum for the year 2009, as by then the changes had been introduced to every year group from Year 1 to Year 12. The views of class teachers were not included directly as part of the evidence base, although some of the other bodies, whose views were sought, may have included the views of class teachers. An online survey of boards of governors had a response rate of 22%. Concerns, similar to those that arose in previous research, were expressed, for example, lack of adequate training, lack of guidance and support, delays in announcements of decisions and 'lack of support structure within which all policy components of the curriculum,

teaching and assessment, are considered in terms of their inter-relationship and their inter-dependency' (ETI, 2010, p.).

The Revised Curriculum was also criticised by other educationalists. RL McCartney QC (UK Chairman of the National Grammar Schools Association) openly criticised what he referred to as the fatal flaws of the Revised Curriculum exposed by Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) data. In a letter to the Belfast Newsletter in January 2013, he attempted to reconcile a previous report from the schools' inspectorate, which in his view was 'an indictment of failing primary schools', and TIMSS declaration that NI primary school education was 'a world beater in Numeracy and Literacy'. According to Mr McCartney, reconciling the conflicting conclusions was 'an impossible task', as, in his opinion, 'the inspectorate and TIMSS were assessing two very different things'. In his opinion, inspectors were examining 'the results of a "Nutty Professor" scheme, in which teachers were directed not to teach, but to facilitate children in, for example, exercises such as "thinking about thinking" and "learning how to learn"'. He felt that 'almost certainly what TIMSS was assessing was the result of teachers ignoring the Minister's scheme and doing what good teachers have traditionally done, that is, offering instruction, aiding comprehension and imparting knowledge'.

INTO has consistently sought teachers' views on developments in curriculum and assessment through a variety of means, including surveys. One such survey was *The Workload Survey*, published in *Printout*, the INTO's magazine in Northern Ireland, in June 2011. The findings confirmed that there had been an intolerable increase in bureaucracy and workload, which had a huge impact on the quality of life for teachers and principals. According to the INTO, the situation had reached crisis point. A Workload Agreement (TNC 2011/8) was agreed and ratified as a result. The INTO continues its campaign against the unreasonable demands being made on teachers regarding the revised assessment arrangements, and insists that the curriculum, now in place, must be properly resourced.

3

Findings from the INTO Research Project on Curriculum, 2015

Introduction

In preparation for the Education Conference, members of the INTO Education Committee undertook research on the *Primary School Curriculum* (PSC), with a view to ensuring that teachers' views and opinions contribute to the forthcoming review of the primary school curriculum. As part of this research, the INTO conducted a survey, both hard-copy and on-line. In order to achieve this, 500 surveys were posted to members randomly selected from the INTO membership database, and 500 additional members were also randomly selected to receive an email with a link to the same survey in an online format. Follow-up reminder letters and emails were sent out, and a link to the survey was also put on the INTO website. In total, 663 questionnaires were returned and compiled for analysis. As part of the survey, there was a facility to append comments.

The survey was followed by three focus groups held in Donegal, Cavan and Galway. The focus groups provided an opportunity to explore in more depth, some of the issues that were of concern to members in relation to the curriculum. A copy of the questions that were put to participants is included in Appendix 4.

A summary of the main findings that emerged from both the surveys and focus groups are presented thematically below.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Curriculum

According to the survey, 84% of teachers agreed that the curriculum is flexible and they can therefore bring their own strengths to the classroom. It was agreed by 91% of respondents that the curriculum provides pupils with an opportunity to study a varied range of subjects. However, it was also noted by 71% of teachers that there is too much content contained within the curriculum, while 61% agreed with the statement that 'the curriculum is idealistic and creates an unrealistic expectation'. In total, 74% of respondents agreed that the curriculum objectives gave them the scope to be professional and the autonomy to adapt the objectives to their own class needs. It was noted by 85% of teachers that the current curriculum strongly encourages cross-curricular integration.

Table 1: Strengths of the 1999 Curriculum

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	Agree	Disagree
The 1999 curriculum is flexible and I can bring my own strengths to the classroom	84%	12%
The curriculum provides pupils with an opportunity to study a varied range of subjects	91%	5%
There is too much content contained within the curriculum	71%	24%
The curriculum is idealistic and creates an unrealistic expectation	61%	18%
Curriculum objectives give me the scope to be the professional and the autonomy to adapt them to my own class needs	74%	8%
The curriculum strongly encourages cross-curricular integration	85%	16%
It is good practice to rotate class allocation regularly	76%	12%

Commentary

Both the commentary from the survey and feedback from the focus groups provided more qualitative insights into teachers' views of the strengths and weaknesses of the 1999 Curriculum. Most of the participants commented favourably on the curriculum, with participants citing child-centeredness, practicality and varied methodologies among its strengths. It was commented in the survey that there is *'lots of material to choose from'* and that *'it has some great ideas and is clearly written in an easy enough to read manner. There is scope for using the prior knowledge of the pupils'*. It was also observed in the survey commentary that the curriculum *'has the right idea behind [it] with discovery learning, etc.'* and that *'There is scope for cross curricular integration'*. It was noted by one focus group participant that the curriculum *'is flexible to teachers' own strengths; you can bring your own interests into the classroom and fit them into the curriculum'*. Another group commented that *'the curriculum was very well laid out and that it is very easy to find objectives. This assists teachers greatly in planning'*. Interestingly, one focus group reported that the curriculum gives students an opportunity to study a varied and wide range of subjects and activities that tap into each child's strengths and weaknesses.

However, participants of both the survey and the focus groups commented on the limitations of the 1999 Curriculum. One focus group highlighted the fact that the curriculum is idealistic as teachers are expected to cover every aspect of every subject for every student. There is an unrealistic expectation that teachers should teach each subject to a very high level, which is difficult, given the number of subjects presented in the 1999 curriculum. Whilst integration was encouraged, it wasn't made explicit.

Similar shortcomings were noted in the survey commentary, particularly in relation to curriculum overload and demands for paperwork. It was noted by one teacher that *'there is too much to be covered over all the subjects, putting teachers under pressure'*. Another teacher observed that it *'demands tedious paperwork. Difficult to put the good practice you do, down on paper using correct language. Too much in the curriculum'*. In this vein, the comment was made that the Curriculum has *'too many aims and objectives ...'* and, that there is *'too much emphasis on aims and objectives and not enough on methodologies and actual teaching'*. Again, it was commented on that *'there is far too much paperwork involved. Surely a better system could be put in place to cut the hours wasted on paperwork and give teachers a chance to focus on their students and making lessons exciting'*. Another teacher referred to a narrow curriculum as there is *'too much focus on Literacy and Numeracy, not enough focus on arts'*.

It was noted that the Curriculum ‘is inclusive but no guidelines are given for multi-class and SEN adaptations’ and another teacher opined that ‘as long as workbooks dominate teaching in Ireland linkage and integration is theoretical’. One teacher commented that ‘any time there is an issue, e.g. child obesity, another course of programme is added to the workload and it is for the teachers to ‘fix it’. While RE is not an official part of the curriculum, I believe that religion should be taken out of the school setting, freeing up time for other activities.’

In summary, teachers welcomed the broad, holistic and child-centred nature of the 1999 curriculum, however, they are of the view that there is too much content in the curriculum, that the required documentation is excessive and that schools are being asked to do too much.

Curriculum Overload

Curriculum overload emerged from the surveys and focus groups as one of the most significant challenges facing teachers in terms of effective curriculum implementation. Teachers were asked their opinion regarding what had the greatest impact on curriculum overload, and asked to rank their answers. Class size was the clear number one factor that teachers felt contributed to curriculum overload. This was followed by planning and paperwork in general, number of subjects, curriculum content and differentiation of pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Table 3: Curriculum Overload I

What has the greatest impact on curriculum overload?	%
Class size	42%
Planning and paperwork in general	26%
Amount of subjects	18%
Curriculum content	15%
Differentiation of pupils with SEN	10%

Related to curriculum overload, 72% of teachers agreed that schools have a role in solving the problems of society. However, 76% of teachers felt under pressure to participate in initiatives which are promoted by external agencies (e.g. recycling, road safety, healthy eating). While teachers feel under pressure to participate, there was also agreement (74%) that participation in whole-school initiatives are invaluable for the experience of the child (e.g. Read-a-thon, Green School, Yellow Flag).

Table 4: Curriculum Overload II

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	Agree	Disagree
Schools have a role in solving the problems of society	72%	20%
I feel under pressure to participate in initiatives promoted by external agencies	76%	20%
Participations in whole-school initiatives are invaluable for the experience of the child	74%	13%
In order to cope with curriculum overload I rigidly follow my plans	32%	58%
I need to be afforded more flexibility and autonomy with regard to time allocation across the curriculum	91%	4%

In general, in order to cope with curriculum overload, 58% of teachers do not rigidly follow their plans and the vast majority (91%) stated that they needed to be afforded more flexibility and autonomy with regard to time allocation across the curriculum.

Commentary

Many comments from the surveys and focus groups reflected the consensus on what has the greatest impact, particularly in relation to class size, curriculum content and differentiation. One survey respondent commented that *'class size prevents much of the hands-on experiences anyway'*. Another teacher recorded that *'multiple class teaching'* is a factor. One focus group participant echoed the sentiment by commenting that two teacher schools need a different system to larger schools. The demands for planning compounded the issue of curriculum overload and this situation was exacerbated by *'not being able to use Croke Park hours for the completion of [...] paperwork'*.

Survey comments were recorded in relation to the pressure to engage in whole-school and external initiatives. One survey respondent commented that *'the number of subjects is high but manageable, I feel, however, the push toward planning and more standardised testing makes it harder to have the events schools have always had.'* Another teacher observed in the survey commentary that *'participation in some whole-school initiatives can be beneficial but schools need to become more 'choosy' about what they take part in. It's not our job to tick the boxes for other external agencies or do their donkey work for them. We need to ask why we are taking on a programme. Does it fit in with the needs of the children or parents or the school'*. The challenge of meeting the demands to engage in external initiatives was also raised in the focus groups. There is increasing pressure being put on teachers to *'solve'* the problems of society, particularly in the curricular area of SPHE in recent years. One focus group participant commented that teachers could have their yearly schemes done but then a project comes in and it's difficult to find time to cover everything. Upon further discussion, the group agreed that parents put pressure on teachers to participate in such initiatives.

It also emerged from the focus groups that class size, Special Educational Needs in the classroom, lack of SNAs and classroom assistants, and pupil teacher ratios are factors contributing towards curriculum overload. The content of the curriculum was also mentioned as a barrier as one participant explained that *'it is a bit idealistic. It wants to fit every aspect of every subject for every student and that's just not possible'*. The issue of planning and paperwork was also borne out in the focus groups as an additional factor contributing to curriculum overload. One participant commented that *'you're going to have to trust teachers that they are covering the curriculum but don't be looking for reams of paper'*. Furthermore, another participant remarked that maintaining pupil profiles is *'messy and random and pointless'* and questioned who they are really for. Additional causes of curriculum overload cited by participants included; meetings with parents, extra-curricular activities, sacramental preparation, testing, documenting incidents and teaching in multi-grade classes.

Focus group and survey participants commented on ways of mediating curriculum overload. One survey respondent commented that they were *'not sure if there is a curriculum overload - that's the nature of the job'*. Another teacher made a similar recommendation in a survey that *'integration/linkage helps me beat overload, eg science and English, drama and Gaelge'*, while another observed that *'for me, a little initiative around integration goes a long way towards dealing with curriculum overload'*. Another survey respondent employed professional judgement and autonomy to mediate the demands of the Curriculum: *'a class teacher knows their pupils, their ability, their work rate, and their interests; flexibility for the benefit and advancement of the pupils is vital'*.

Interestingly, some of the focus group participants agreed that teachers need to stick to their plans in order to counteract curriculum overload. One group noted that the presentation of a shortened, more focused curriculum document would assist teachers. Furthermore, one participant remarked that stripping the curriculum back to the 3 Rs adding on nature, history, geography and the arts, would be of benefit. Increased integration would also help teachers to address the curricular objectives within the limited time available, as one participant stated that *'they (the DES) need to review every area of the curriculum to see where we can integrate more, make it more topic based...everything seems quite segregated, even though we are supposed to use a thematic approach'*. However, one participant cautioned that *'you need to know the curriculum very well to be able to integrate successfully'* and regular class reallocation can be a barrier to this.

In summary, teachers suggest that curriculum overload can be addressed through the employment of professional autonomy and integration, but identify class size, documentation and the need for differentiation as significant contributors to curriculum overload.

Time Allocation

Survey respondents were asked to react to several statements in relation to time allocation and curriculum. While only 29% of teachers rigidly followed the time allocation guidelines of the 1999 curriculum, 58% of teachers, however, stated that they rigidly followed the revised time allocation guidelines with regard to Literacy and Numeracy as advised by Circular 56/2011. In fact, 72% of respondents spend more time on Literacy and Numeracy than recommended by Circular 56/2011. In total, over 96% of teachers stated that they use their own professional judgement to manage time constraints, while 98% of teachers believe there needs to be room for spontaneity in teaching.

In relation to integration, 83% of teachers use integration across the curriculum to ensure they cover all curricular objectives, with, for example, 71% of teachers using drama as a methodology rather than explicitly teaching drama. A total of 86% of teachers revisit and re-teach certain topics throughout the year. Teachers were asked specifically about the SESE curriculum, and while 36% noted that they did not think the SESE curriculum was challenging enough for junior classes, 38% said they didn't know and 25% disagreed. Teachers were asked if the SESE curriculum for senior classes was too broad, and 46% agreed, with 29% disagreeing and 25% registering a 'don't know'. Not surprisingly, in relation to time allocation, 86% of teachers stated they allocated blocks of time to certain subjects depending on the time of the year (Christmas concert, Science Week, Confirmation etc).

Table 2: Time Allocation

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
I rigidly follow the time allocations guidelines of the 1999 Curriculum	29%	64%	7%
I rigidly follow the revised time allocation guidelines with regard to Literacy and Numeracy as advised by Circular 56/2011	58%	31%	11%
I spend more time on Literacy and Numeracy than recommended by Circular 56/2011	72%	16%	11%
I use my own professional judgement to manage time constraints	96%	3%	1%
I believe there needs to be room for spontaneity in teaching	98%	1%	1%
I use integration across the curriculum to ensure I cover all curricular objectives	83%	10%	7%
I do not explicitly teach drama, I use it as a methodology	71%	22%	7%
I revisit and reteach certain topics throughout the year	86%	12%	1%
The SESE curriculum is not challenging enough for junior classes	36%	25%	38%
The SESE curriculum is too broad for senior classes	46%	28%	25%
I allocate blocks of time to certain subjects depending on the time of year	86%	5%	6%

Commentary

The topic of time allocation arose in both the survey commentary and the focus groups. A significant number of those comments centred on integration as a method of handling time constraints. One survey respondent commented that *'integration can accommodate time-frames in a flexible fashion'*, while another noted that *'integration may ensure sufficient focus on literacy and numeracy'*. Another teacher recorded that the *'teacher must be flexible with regards to curricular areas and accept that all subjects can be covered through integration with core subjects'*. However, it was highlighted that some subjects lend themselves more easily to integration: *'English is integrated into all topic areas already through all strands'*. One focus group participant concurred and stated that *'integration is the key'*. It was agreed in one group that it is essential that teachers have a competent working knowledge of the curriculum to integrate across the curriculum successfully.

A further comment stated that the *'time allocations are very good. All subjects are important so [they] need current allocation'*. One teacher raised a point in relation to the phrasing of the questions asked in the survey and commented that they *'felt slightly uncomfortable with these questions as they suggest that an inter-disciplinary approach is not possible. Instead, I'd like to see themes in a few key areas rather than rigid subject divisions and an awareness that these are artificial lines that need to be actively blurred.'* Integration was further recommended from a multi-class perspective as one teacher observed that *'with multiclass I operate a 4-year program in history and geography and science with lots of integration and blocks of time in art'*.

The findings demonstrated that teachers use professional judgement and integration to cope with time constraints. As one teacher put it, *'I do my own time allocation as most teachers do. It's seasonal and according to needs at the time'*. In a corresponding comment, another survey respondent noted that *'They [time allocations] should be a guideline and not set in stone; teachers should adapt according to needs of the class'*. A focus group colleague supported this assertion stating that *'teachers have the autonomy to integrate'*. It was agreed in another focus group that children need additional time on certain areas and teachers need use their judgement to dedicate this time when difficulties arise as, *'children are not machines'*. One group also agreed that, quite often, in the reality of the classroom, topics need to be revisited, even retaught.

Some respondents were critical of the existing time allocation for subjects. In particular, many focus group participants agreed that it is very difficult to stick to time allocation especially in the infant classroom as one participant remarked that *'if you get 3 good lessons done in infants that's good'*. In addition, the emphasis on Literacy and Numeracy has *'just placed extra stress on teachers to abide by the timetable resulting in other subjects suffering such as the arts. It does not encourage multiple intelligences'*. It emerged from the focus groups that drama is generally being used as a methodology rather than a stand-alone subject. One participant remarked that she *'would have dropped drama as a subject in the senior classes because I just didn't have time, especially since the Literacy and Numeracy strategy'*, whilst another stated that she *'wonder(s) about drama as a stand-alone subject, to me drama is more of a methodology'*.

There were diverging views in relation to the time currently allocated to PE. One survey respondent commented that *'PE time is too short. It would be good if it was 20 minutes per day minimum'*. Another participant, in a focus group, stated that the 2 ½ hour provision for religion should be swapped with the 1 hour provision for PE as there needs to be a lot more time for PE and SPHE on the timetable. It also transpired from one particular focus group that some teachers feel that SESE, quite often, does not get the time it needs. One participant asserted that *'the area of SESE is particularly overloaded, especially in the senior classes. It is far too broad. The time isn't there to allow the children to develop their skills as there is too much content'*. Whilst, inversely, another participant commented that *'they (the children) could be challenged a bit more in the SESE subjects in the junior classes'*.

Teachers gave consideration to the inclusion of additional curricular areas and subjects within the Curriculum. Other respondent proposed that *'foreign languages should be considered'* and another who recorded that *'intercultural education needs to be included with curriculum'*.

In summary, teachers view the suggested time allocations as a guideline and use their own professional judgement and discretion to ensure they offer a broad and balanced curriculum. There is overwhelming support for retaining spontaneity in teaching.

Priorities for future revision of the Primary School Curriculum

In total, 71% of teachers agreed that the 1999 Curriculum caters for the needs of the 'average' child. In relation to future revision of the curriculum, 67% of teachers agreed there should be an increased emphasis on the transition of pupils from preschool to primary school. In addition, a small majority (56%) felt that a 3-year infant programme would be extremely beneficial. In relation to the introduction of an online curriculum, 64% of teachers would welcome this.

Table 5: Future Priorities

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	Agree	Disagree
The 1999 Curriculum caters for the needs of the 'average' child	71%	17%
There should be an increased emphasis on the transition of pupils from preschool to primary school	67%	12%
I think that a 3 year infant programme would be extremely beneficial	56%	17%
I welcome the introduction of an online curriculum	64%	15%

Commentary

Teachers shared their views on future priorities for any revision of the Primary School Curriculum. One survey respondent observed that, *'the needs of the more able are largely neglected in reality'*. In relation to the infant years, another teacher commented that *'I believe a three-year infant programme would be very good [with] greater parental involvement [and] more support for schools [e.g.] resources'*. A proposal for a 3-year infant programme has been put to INTO over 20 years ago and one focus group participant questioned if there were any developments to be made in this area. Another teacher, commenting in the survey, remarked that a revision should endorse *'the importance of play!'* in the infant years. In relation to transitions from pre-school to primary school, one teacher noted that *'I think the quality of pre-school provision needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. I would be happy to be part of a focus group on this topic. We had an experience with a commercial company operating from our premises which was not a positive experience'*. The need to foster stronger links between preschools and primary schools also arose in the focus groups. One focus group participant remarked that she *'finds it strange that meetings aren't held with Junior infant teachers and the pre-school, so that everyone is aware what each one is doing...'*

Some teachers commenting on future priorities in the survey highlighted a need for professional support. As one teacher observed, *'teachers must receive in-service on a regular basis. At the very least, on one subject per term. This should be continued then on a cyclical basis'*. The professional development that accompanied the 1999 Curriculum was highly commended. One survey respondent commented that *'teachers received excellent training'*. However, another teacher suggested that *'the stand & deliver approach roll out of 1999 Curriculum should be avoided. Use enthusiastic, experienced facilitators fresh from the classrooms to deliver CPD!'* Another teacher recorded that, *'CPD should include Webinars etc making full use of modern technologies. The training should not be confined to the traditional methods. Support groups may assist broader uptake & up skilling'*. Another commentator maintained that *'education is a journey not a race'* and one respondent noted that *'if we are expected to use a learning outcomes approach that's what the curriculum should have'*.

A general priority for future revision as discussed by the focus groups would be to review every area and present the curriculum with a topic based approach as *'everything is quite segregated and books are very much separate'*. Participants, in general, felt that the objectives need to be represented as clear cut and realistic and should not be catering for the needs of one cohort of pupils. Any curricular change should be well thought out and needs to consider the needs of the whole school. There was a consensus across the focus groups of the need to reduce curricular content. The reduction of class size was also mentioned as a priority.

Another participant commented that SPHE *'badly needs a review'* as there is not enough time for the subject. Life has changed so much since 1999, teachers are now responsible for teaching children about cyber-bullying, healthy eating, safety and having to deal with immediate issues as they arise:

There isn't enough time in the curriculum for SPHE. In the society that we live in, there is such an emphasis on SPHE and all aspects of it and there are a lot of agencies outside of school who are imposing their own elements of SPHE onto the classroom teacher. They are making us responsible for everything.

Upon analysis of the transcripts, it was noted that there was a recommendation that assessment needs to change as standardised testing needs to reflect what teachers are teaching. Teachers promote that it is *'ok to be wrong'* but this is not reflected in testing.

Parents also want to see their child get a high number in the standardised tests and they are not comfortable with their child sitting a test that they haven't prepared for. Also, neither group work nor pair work is reflected in testing with one teacher stating that the *'test destroys the pupils'*. It was also noted that English as an Additional Language (EAL) pupils struggle with the language of standardised tests. One participant asserted that *'the curriculum does not address the needs of children with EAL'*. Also as discussions unfolded, it transpired that schools engage in different practices regarding the testing. One positive associated with standardised testing was the assertion that standardised tests show where intervention is needed at the beginning of the next school year.

Science was also noted as an area this requires attention. Lack of resources, space, time constraints and lack of teacher knowledge can result in science lessons being taught as a text book subject. This can have a negative effect on pupils as it presents science as a boring subject. A designated science room in primary schools where various equipment is available and where experiments can be set up and left set up would be of great value. Oral Language in Gaeilge also needs to be revised, given the varying canúintí throughout the country and the strong emphasis on it in second level examinations.

The area of AISTEAR also needs to be addressed, with one participant referring to it as a *'grey area'*. It was noted by one participant that whilst AISTEAR is not *'exactly part of the curriculum'* *'inspectors seem to want to see it ... it is still being expected'*. Furthermore, the provision of more structured guidelines for the integration and timetabling of AISTEAR was discussed. There needs to be more time given to teachers who teach the same class level to get together to discuss resources.

The role of the inspectorate was discussed by one focus group at length. One participant stated that there *'was no need for incidental visits'*. There was a call for a 24-hour notice period to be introduced, with one participant remarking *'bring them in and let the see you teach and let you know what you can change'*. Furthermore, the group discussed how the inspectorate needs to move towards developing their role as tutors and advisors. Also, the manner in which the inspectorate writes up reports needs to be revised, especially when considering smaller schools, as references to teachers are easily identifiable.

In summary, there is an acknowledgement that the curriculum needs to change and evolve over time. However, there is a need for continuing professional development to be an integral part of support for teachers regarding curriculum.

ICT

In the first instance, 85% of respondents noted that in relation to ICT, schools are not adequately resourced. In addition, teachers perceived their own levels of ICT skills to be under pressure, with 85% of teachers noting they must constantly upskill to keep up to date with developments in ICT. A large minority (40%) of respondents agreed that the children have a greater knowledge of ICT than the teacher. In general, it was argued that far more support of ICT was needed, with 76% of respondents stating that the DES is not supportive of schools regarding the development of ICT in the classroom. Almost all teachers (98%) agree that all schools need technical support for ICT and, 99% agreed that all schools should have an annual budget to support ICT in schools.

Table 6: ICT

ICT in the classroom	Agree	Disagree
With regard to ICT, schools are not adequately resourced	85%	11%
I must keep constantly up to date with developments in ICT	85%	10%
The children have a greater knowledge of ICT than I do	40%	46%
The DES are not supportive of schools regarding the development of ICT in the classroom	76%	7%
All schools need technical support for ICT	98%	1%
All schools should have an annual budget to support ICT in schools	99%	1%

Commentary

Teachers surveyed had particular comments to make in relation to the ICT in the classroom. One teacher noted, in relation to resourcing, that *'There should be an annual budget for [ICT] maintenance'*. Regarding technical support, one teacher remarked that *'it should [not] be the role of a class teacher to look after the ICT in a school-they have their own class to teach. There should be a paid role allocated to the ICT needs of a school or several schools'*. Another respondent commented that *'all schools should have access to the services of an expert in I.C.T. Whether this is achieved through a clustering arrangement or by another means, it is imperative that somebody who is an expert in this area is available to come into schools on a regular basis and as a familiar person to this school, can be contacted for support or advice'*.

In relation to the funding of such supports, one teacher made the comment *'more investment - less lip service'*, while another stated that *'the general expectation of ICT in lots of schools is very high with very little to back it up from the DES'*. One respondent called for the restoration of the *'ICT post-holder and provide professional (external) tech support'*.

Several teachers made comments regarding the use of ICT in classrooms. One teacher noted that *'when it all freezes we go back to chalk and talk. Children need periods of quiet reflection and discussion. Head time. Too much technology at home and school'*. Another teacher commented that the *'use of ICT has a place in the curriculum but should not dominate practice; balanced approach'*, while yet another remarked *'I strongly disagree with recent comments made that every child should have an iPad. Plenty of information and studies provide evidence that this is not the best way to teach. I feel ICT is a tool to be used in conjunction with other methods'*. Mirroring these comments, one teacher warned *'Don't over emphasise the use of ICT in schools! Excellent teaching and excellent teachers may not always be using it. Of course, it can be of huge benefit but it will never replace excellent teaching'*.

A further comment suggested *'Let's not get carried away on ICT. Children learn best away from machines. More hands on, and through the arts, through reading and making and doing'*. However, one teacher observed, *'I value the use of ICT in the classroom'* but again, echoed the warning that *'It is also important that children are not on iPads etc for the majority of the day. A lot of children when they leave school spend their evening on ICT and although it is a valuable resource it should not take over traditional methods but enhance them'*.

Issues related to IT also emerged in the focus group discussions. Teachers need to upskill continually to keep up to date with developments in IT and schools need to be adequately resourced. One participant noted that schools have come a long way as the majority now have interactive white boards, however, one computer per classroom is not enough. The varying quality of broadband is also an issue. One focus group commented

that the DES has been unsupportive in the area of IT; *‘teacher training in IT has been ignored, neglected...we need to catch up with the children’*. There was a call to provide supports for teachers and principals with regard to developing IT within schools and for PDST to acknowledge the realities of IT in the majority of Irish primary schools and become more practical and proactive in assisting schools. Additionally, one group commented that the NCCA is quite good for responding to teachers’ comments and feedback about curricular developments.

In summary, teachers see benefits in using ICT as a pedagogical tool, but feel ICT shouldn’t dominate practice. Teachers reiterate the need for ongoing investment in ICT infrastructure and technical support.

Assessment

In relation to standardised testing, 82% of teachers agreed that standardised tests are beneficial as they highlight areas that require intervention. In addition, 91% of teachers are of the opinion that standardised tests need to reflect the curriculum. Regarding the administration of standardised tests, 92% of teachers state that they read the standardised test manual thoroughly to ensure that the administration and marking of tests is completed correctly. In total, 72% of teachers agree that assessment should include pair work and group work. Maintaining pupil assessment profiles (e.g. portfolio, records of children’s work) is worthwhile according to 85% of teachers and 93% of teachers base their reporting to parents on a range of assessment outcomes.

Table 7: Assessment

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	Agree	Disagree
Assessment should include pair work and group work	72%	13%
I read the standardised test thoroughly to ensure that the administration and marking of tests is completed correctly	92%	7%
Standardised tests are beneficial as they highlight areas that require intervention	82%	11%
The maintenance of pupil assessment profiles (eg portfolio, records of children work etc) is worthwhile	85%	14%
Standardised tests need to reflect the curriculum	91%	4%
I base my reporting to parents on a range of assessment outcomes	93%	4%

Commentary

Respondents’ comments expanded variously on statements within the survey. One teacher noted in relation to assessment that a *‘variety of assessment is more beneficial’*. Another teacher commented that *‘pair and group work when possible’* was relevant to assessment. Assessment profiles were commented on by one teacher who remarked that *‘back in the day, a range of well-kept copy books owned by each child charted their progress and told the story of their time spent in school far more effectively and efficiently than samples of work, assessments and portfolios’*. Another respondent observed that *‘teacher observation [is] most important’* in terms of assessment. Regarding standardised testing, one practitioner noted that *‘over-reliance on standardised test results should be avoided. They are a snapshot only, an indication of something. There should also be other evidence gathered as in work samples, teacher tests, self-assessment etc’*.

In relation to self-assessment, a teacher observed *‘I think the concept of self-assessment by children is a particularly useful and powerful one. Schools need to be very creative to do this well, particularly in relation to oral language and at the infant level’*. This comment was mirrored by another respondent who recorded that *‘students should continue to be encouraged to become pro-active in their own learning/assessment.’*

Assessment should be constructive and not completed as a means to tick some box that externals require us to do. We need to stop following England's strategies from the past and develop our own systems etc in terms of paperwork requirements'. On a similar note, one teacher commented that 'the emotional response of the pupils is very important for learning'.

Professional autonomy and judgement was again touched on in relation to assessment. One commentator noted that *'personal observation records all year give best overall picture of assessment'*. Another teacher recorded that *'we should respect the wisdom and experience of the teacher to observe and note as valid assessment. Teaching should take more of our time rather than testing, which is one snapshot of one aspect of the child on one day. The child is more than that - much more - and a test does not tell the full story, nor does it give all the answers'*.

In summary, teachers demonstrate a good understanding of the purpose of assessment, but caution against an over-reliance on standardised tests.

Professional Development: The Revised Language Curriculum

Firstly, the in-school planning days for the 1999 curriculum were seen as a success by 53% of respondents. Almost a third (32%) were unsure and 15% disagreed. In relation to CPD for the Revised Language Curriculum, 100% of respondents agreed that the relevant CPD should be provided at no cost to the teacher. It was agreed by 96% of teacher respondents that time spent on that CPD should count towards Croke Park hours. In addition, it was noted and agreed that the CPD should take place prior to the introduction of the language curriculum (96%), should be whole-school focused (95%) and should concentrate on the practical implementation of the curriculum, with advice on useful resources (98%). The 'link teacher model' was rejected by 53% of teachers who responded; that is, where a teacher engages in CPD and reports back to colleagues, and was seen as an appropriate form of CPD by only 28% of respondents. Clustering schools from similar contexts for CPD was seen as a good idea by 77% of teachers surveyed.

Table 8 CPD – Revised Language Curriculum

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
The in-school planning days for the 1999 Curriculum were a success	53%	15%	32%
Schools from similar contexts should cluster together for CPD for the Revised Language Curriculum	76%	10%	14%
CPD for the Revised Language Curriculum should be of no cost to the teacher	100%	0%	0%
Time spent on CPD for the Revised Language Curriculum outside of school hours should be counted towards Croke Park Hours	96%	2%	2%
CPD for the Revised Language Curriculum should take place prior to the introduction of the Language Curriculum	96%	0%	4%
CPD for the Revised Language Curriculum should spend less time explaining the origin of a curriculum and more time on the practical implementation of the curriculum and advice on useful resources	98%	1%	1%
CPD for the Revised Language Curriculum should be whole-school focused	95%	1%	4%
The link teacher model, where a teacher engages in CPD and reports back to colleagues, is an appropriate form of CPD for the Revised Language Curriculum	28%	53%	15%

Commentary

Respondents were asked to comment further in relation to their views on the Revised Language Curriculum and related CPD. One teacher commented that *'all teachers need to receive CPD on the new language curriculum'*. Many teachers surveyed noted a need for CPD on the Revised Language Curriculum with one teacher remarking that *'anything other than whole school training is a waste of time'*. One respondent stated a view that *'every teacher expected to teach the Revised Language Curriculum should receive training re same'*. Another observed in relation to the potential options for CPD that *'practical implementation and advice on resources most important of [options] for time-pressed teachers'*.

The link teacher model drew several comments, with one respondent noting that the *'link teacher [model] cannot be used for Language Curriculum; this is a whole new approach'*. Another practitioner commented that *'every teacher must hear this first hand to take it on board otherwise it depends on the quality of the link teacher and their interpretation of the message'*. In the same vein, one teacher remarked *'I think whole school in-service days are needed for the implementation of any revised curriculum. The link teacher method does not allow for accurate dissemination of information'*. Another teacher observed that *'it is vital that any in-service on the curriculum is offered to all teachers; I strongly disagree with the use of the link teacher model'*. Similar views relating to the link teacher were borne out in the various focus groups. It was recorded in one particular group that the link teachers model is not viewed as effective as it results in an increased workload for the link teacher and the intended message of the CPD may not be fully portrayed to staffs due to time constraint and *'subconscious filtering'*.

The focus groups also agreed that professional development to support the National Curriculum should take place within school time. The in-school planning days of the 1999 curriculum was cited as a factor contributing to the curriculum's success in primary schools. However, it was also noted that a review at the end of the roll-out of the curriculum would have been beneficial as it would have provided staffs with the opportunity to discuss difficulties that they may be having and would have pulled everything together. The notion of clustering schools for CPD was also discussed. It was agreed amongst one focus group that it would not be suitable to use Croke Park hours for the purposes of this CPD, Croke Park hours *'are not enough ... teachers are tired after teaching all day and you don't get much done'*. Schools with similar contexts are best placed to cluster together.

All three focus groups agreed that the PDST provides worthwhile CPD. Teachers attending the focus groups expressed a desire for professional development to be provided in a whole-staff, in-school setting as *'you might be in 6th class this year but you could be in Infants next year. Also, even if you're not moving you need to understand what the children have been learning before they get to your class'*. Furthermore, members of one group agreed that CPD courses should spend less time explaining the origins and structure of the curriculum and more time on its practical implementation and useful, worthwhile resources, whilst remaining realistic and *'has to address issues such as EAL children in the classroom'*. Also, one participant remarked that CPD should take place prior to the introduction of an initiative. It was agreed that CPD should be of no cost to the teacher.

Finally, the various focus groups explored the move towards learning outcomes in the Revised Curriculum. It was noted by one focus group that similar language is used in Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Learning outcomes can guide teachers on aspects of the curriculum on which they need to focus depending on their students. Some

outcomes were viewed to be *'waffley'* and it was suggested that outcomes could be split into shorter, more concise outcomes. Also, one participant commented that the outcomes encompass what *'teachers are doing already'*. It was also noted by one group that, from a planning point of view, the outcomes are quite broad. Participants were not, in general, adverse to the idea of learning outcomes instead of learning objectives, but it was noted that objectives give the teacher the scope to be professional and adapt them to our own classes; *'I'd rather a more open approach as it gives you more scope as a teacher, you can use your professionalism as a teacher to decide how to implement it'*. The notion of an online curriculum including hyperlinks was welcomed. Similarities were drawn between the continuum and map of development in the *First Steps* programme and the milestones and the indicators of the Drumcondra profiles.

In summary, the clear message from teachers is that professional development should accompany the introduction of the revised language curriculum, which should be whole-school focussed and practical.

Aistear

There was an equal divide between those teachers who had engaged with *Aistear*, the Early Years' Curriculum Framework, to date and those who hadn't, with 43% saying they had engaged and 57% saying they hadn't.

In total, 71% of teachers felt that *Aistear* is of great benefit to the infant classroom. The statement that AISTEAR is not beneficial to children in senior infants was disagreed with by 57% of respondents. It was generally agreed (83%) that there needs to more than one adult in the classroom while *Aistear* is being used, and it was also noted by 54% of teachers that inspectors expect to see *Aistear* being used in the infant classes. Only 25% of teachers disagreed with the statement that it is unrealistic to include one hour of *Aistear* per day in the classroom, while a significant number of teachers (77%) agreed that the primary school curriculum for infant classes should be revised to incorporate *Aistear*.

Table 9: *Aistear* II

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
AISTEAR is of great benefit to the infant classroom	71%	6%	23%
In general, AISTEAR is not beneficial to children in senior infants	11%	57%	32%
It is unrealistic to include 1 hour of AISTEAR per day in the infant classroom	55%	25%	20%
There needs to be more than one adult in the classroom while AISTEAR is being used	83%	7%	10%
Inspectors expect to see AISTEAR being used in the infant classroom	54%	7%	39%
I find it difficult to plan for AISTEAR because the children lead it	42%	24%	34%
The primary school curriculum for infant classes should be revised to incorporate AISTEAR	77%	6%	17%

The impact of *Aistear* on the infant classes was explored further in the focus groups. The participants highlighted improvements in oral language as a particular benefit of implementing *Aistear*. The four main issues associated with *Aistear* across the groups included lack of training, resources, money and time. A vast amount of resources are required, and teachers often find themselves obliged to purchase resources due to lack of school funding. Resources also take quite some time to prepare and additionally, can raise issues of sufficient storage. Furthermore, some participants commented that they find it difficult to dedicate one hour per day to *Aistear* whilst also covering all other

curricular areas. As previously stated, participants felt that the area of *Aistear* is not clearly defined as it is not officially part of the curriculum, yet it is expected by the Inspectorate. One group remarked that an extra teacher is needed to ensure that *Aistear* is being rolled out as intended, that it is not possible for one teacher to explore it in its entirety on his/her own with a class. One participant questioned the relevance of *Aistear* to the senior infant class, as the pupils are too advanced for some of it. Similarities were drawn between *Aistear* and station teaching and it was suggested that teachers are doing elements of *Aistear* in the classroom, but are not doing the follow-up discussion, as recommended. The volume of paperwork involved is unrealistic, given that teachers must maintain relevant paperwork for other curricular areas. One participant stated that *'you can't plan for it because the children lead it'*.

In summary, the incorporation of *Aistear* into a revised curriculum for the infant classes would be supported by teachers.

Croke Park Hours and the Curriculum

There were mixed views regarding Croke Park hours. In total, 46% of respondents did not feel that Croke Park hours are productive. It was also noted by 89% of teachers that the implementation of Croke Park hours varies from school to school. Only 12% of teachers agreed that INTO learning resources for Croke Park hours are useful, and 57% of teachers agreed that the majority of Croke Park hours are mere 'ticking-box' exercises. It is also interesting to note that 70% of teachers noted that Croke Park hours have had a negative impact on staff morale.

Table 10: Croke Park hours

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
I think that Croke Park hours are, in general, productive	44%	46%	10%
Teaching and learning are prominent factors of Croke Park hours in my school	54%	38%	8%
The implementation of Croke Park hours varies from school to school	89%	1%	10%
In my school, we always confine our Croke Park hour to 1 hour only	17%	79%	4%
The INTO learning resources for Croke Park hours are very useful	12%	16%	72%
I think that the majority of Croke Park hours are a mere 'ticking-box' exercise	57%	33%	10%
Croke Park hours have had a negative impact on staff morale	70%	18%	12%

Commentary

Survey comments relating to Croke Park hours were varied, with teachers offering both positive and negative views. One teacher commented that *'Croke Park hours are very helpful for whole school planning. I think they are now less questioned and are embedded as part of the job ... with the odd conscientious and vocal objector'*. Another teacher made the point that *'Croke Park hours are as useful to the school as the principal and school staff make them'*. Not all comments were as extreme as one respondent who recorded that *'Croke Park hours completely erode staff goodwill. They are fully unproductive and meaningless; an absolute drain each week after a hard day's work'*. It was observed by another teacher that *'Croke Park hours affect voluntary work in schools'*.

It was proposed by a respondent that *'Croke Park hours should include specific teacher planning time as well as time for getting classrooms ready (posters, displays, visual aids)'*. Another comment mirrored this view stating *'Croke Park hours should be used for classroom planning and organisation also'*. One teacher suggested that *'there needs to be a consensus across schools as to how Croke Park hours are used. In its present*

form, it has destroyed some of the goodwill that exists in schools'. This opinion was continued in another comment asserting that 'Croke Park hours need structure clarified and should be more about CPD'.

Croke Park hours were largely commented on favourably in the focus groups. Most participants agreed that, when used constructively, Croke Park hours can be used for group planning and staff planning and can be productive. One participant stated that *'in schools where there are large staffs, Croke Park hours are a great opportunity for staff to come together'*. Additionally, Croke Park hours put curriculum *'back on the agenda'* as traditionally, yard supervision, school tours etc. were discussed at staff meetings. Now, staffs have the opportunity to discuss policies, SSE, literacy and the curricular areas. Teaching and learning are prominent elements of Croke Park discussions and have proved to be helpful in planning. Also, it *'allows us to get speakers in to the whole staff'*. One group noted that it would be incredibly beneficial if schools could group Croke Park hours together in order to have a 5-6 hour block. However, management cannot expect teachers to stay beyond an hour or two. Furthermore, it was also noted that implementation of Croke Park hours varies from school to school. The inconsistency of the use of the hours across the system can cause difficulties amongst staffs. One participant called for some hours to be dedicated towards making classroom resources and remarked that there needs to be more *'flexibility'* regarding their use. One participant stated that there is a need to *'...convince principals and management that Croke Park hours should be for the development the staff'* and that we need to rename the hours as calling them Croke Park hours *'is wrong'*.

However, a few reservations about Croke Park Hours emerged from the focus groups. Negative commentary associated with the Croke Park hour included the assertion that the Croke Park hour rarely, if ever, is one hour. Another participant did not like the idea that INTO has bought into the idea of Croke Park hours by making INTO learning resources available. It was also noted that Croke Park hours can sometime be a *'ticking box exercise'*. In general, more flexibility around the use of Croke Park hours would be welcome.

In summary, the purposes for which Croke Park hours can be used, and their role and function in the system, need further discussion at policy level.

Conclusion

The research undertaken by the INTO Education Committee has yielded rich data and opinion for consideration. The varied responses from both the survey and focus groups reflects the concerns of teachers as practitioners in the current environment. Some themes were recurring and centred on:

- A professional awareness of the differing needs and responses of individual pupils;
- A perceived loss of emphasis on the value of the arts in education;
- A sustained objection to the effects of perceived excessive paperwork;
- An ongoing challenge of curriculum overload;
- The need to resource and support Aistear;
- The need to support integration across the curriculum;
- A call for greater trust in the judgement of teachers as professional practitioners;
- A wariness towards an over-reliance on ICT in teaching while acknowledging that it requires sustained and effective resourcing; and,
- The need for appropriate, supported and targeted CPD.

4

Conclusion and Recommendations

A nation's curriculum reflects the values of the state and of society. A curriculum should continuously evolve to reflect changing needs within society. Nevertheless, it is important to obtain a balance between change and stability. Constant change without a clear purpose can lead to uncertainty. Change needs time to be established. The *Primary School Curriculum* is now sixteen years old, and teachers have ideas and opinions regarding its further development. According to teachers, the *Primary School Curriculum* has many strengths. It is a child-centred curriculum that provides flexibility to teachers enabling them to bring their own strengths and talents to their teaching. Nevertheless, there are some areas where teachers would like to see some change.

Integration

Teachers are of the view that it is not possible to teach all subjects to a very high level. Teachers take an integrated approach to their teaching in order to ensure that all content objectives in the curriculum are addressed. However, for integration to be successful teachers need a very good knowledge of curriculum content. Therefore, allocating teachers the same class level for a period of time can facilitate a deeper knowledge of curriculum content, though this needs to be balanced with the need to enable teachers to gain experience across the range of class levels and teaching positions, an opportunity that teachers also welcome. Re-presenting the curriculum may also assist integration as the current presentation of the curriculum in separate books doesn't lend itself easily to integration. Teachers would also welcome more guidance around integration.

Content

Teachers are of the view that there is too much content in the curriculum, that the required paperwork is excessive and that schools are being asked to do too much. Regarding specific curricular areas, the area of SPHE was particularly singled out as a curriculum area with too much content, given the suggested time allocation of a half hour per week. SPHE is also the curriculum area where many outside agencies prepare content and programmes for use in schools as part of SPHE. SESE in the senior classes also had too much content according to teachers.

Drama was one area of curriculum where teachers had varying views, with some of the opinion that drama was more appropriate as a methodology, and others expressing a lack of time to engage with drama as a subject. Some teachers expressed a desire to spend more time on PE. Teachers would welcome more support in teaching oral Irish. There was a concern among some teachers that the teaching of science was being compromised by the lack of resources, space and time and that there was a risk that science could be taught as a text book subject rather than through experiential learning. Teachers are also concerned that the current curriculum may not meet the needs of pupils for whom English is an additional language.

In order to maintain a broad and balanced curriculum experience for pupils, content in all curriculum areas should be reduced.

Time allocations

Teachers regarded the recommended time guidelines as suggestions and considered it more important to address curriculum objectives as opposed to adhering rigidly to time allocations. Teachers use their own professional judgement and discretion to ensure they offer a broad and balanced curriculum. There is overwhelming support for retaining spontaneity in teaching.

Curriculum Overload

There is no doubt that teachers experience curriculum overload. This view was clearly expressed in the focus groups, in the curriculum survey and is also supported in the INTO survey on teacher overload and stress (forthcoming). The sense of overload arises from too much content in the curriculum, but also from issues such as large class sizes and the inclusion of children with special educational needs. Large class sizes make it more difficult for teachers to spend time with individual pupils to support their learning. The inclusion of children with special educational needs also places more demands on teachers' time, particularly as class sizes remain large. A third reason for teachers' sense of overload is the constant pressure they feel to participate in a plethora of programmes and initiatives, which they may find worthwhile, but time-consuming. Other reasons for overload include sacramental preparation, meetings with parents, extra-curricular activities, testing, and documenting incidents.

Teachers acknowledge that planning can assist in addressing overload, but time is required for planning, collaborative planning in particular. Teachers are also frustrated with the amount of paperwork expected of them in the name of accountability. They are of the view that time spent on paperwork takes time and energy away from teaching.

Teachers suggest that curriculum overload can be addressed through professional autonomy and integration, but identify class size, documentation and the need for differentiation as significant contributors to curriculum overload.

Teaching in the Early Years

Many teachers are aware of *Aistear*, but are unclear about its place in infant classes. *Aistear* was introduced in 2009 but in the absence of a national implementation plan, it has been left to individual schools and teachers to decide whether or not to use *Aistear*. Professional development for teachers wishing to use *Aistear* was provided through the Education Centre network, but was voluntary. The incorporation of *Aistear* into a revised curriculum for the infant classes would be supported by teachers.

Teachers would welcome more communication between pre-schools and primary schools so that each are aware of what the other is doing, particularly given that the use of *Aistear* is widespread in the pre-school sector. Children should experience a continuity of curriculum experience in transitioning from pre-school to primary school. Protocols around transition need to be developed to enable the sharing of information.

Assessment

Teachers demonstrate a good understanding of the purpose of assessment, but caution against an over-reliance on standardised tests. Teachers acknowledge the usefulness of standardised testing, particularly in identifying where intervention is needed. However, teachers have reservations about an over-emphasis on standardised testing, which

represent a narrow view of learning. The purposes and limitations of standardised tests are not well understood by parents and the media.

ICT

The lack of ICT resources in classrooms is an issue for teachers, as is the lack of professional development for teachers in using ICT, and the lack of technical support. Teachers also commented on the lack of broadband or poor broadband connectivity. Teachers see benefits in using ICT as a pedagogical tool, but feel ICT shouldn't dominate practice. Teachers reiterate the need for ongoing investment in ICT infrastructure and technical support.

Professional Development

There is an acknowledgement among teachers that the curriculum needs to change and evolve over time. However, there is a need for continuing professional development to be an integral part of support for teachers regarding curriculum. The introduction of a revised curriculum needs to be supported by professional development. Teachers who had experienced the curriculum support programme following the introduction of the 1999 curriculum, in general, thought highly of it. The clear message from teachers is that professional development should accompany the introduction of the revised language curriculum, which should be whole-school focussed and practical.

Professional development to support curricular change should be during school time, on a whole school basis, with trained facilitators. Teachers are open to the idea of a curriculum presented in the form of learning outcomes, though they would not like to lose the flexibility of content objectives that could be adapted to meet the needs of diverse learners. Teachers also expressed an openness to an online presentation of curriculum.

In summary, the INTO recommends:

- In order to maintain a broad and balance curriculum experience for pupils, content in all curriculum areas should be reduced.
- The purposes for which Croke Park hours may be used, and their role and function in the system, need further discussion at policy level.
- Suggested time allocations in curriculum should be guidelines, enabling teacher professional judgement and discretion to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of their pupils.
- Additional support should be provided to teachers to support integration across the curriculum.
- Class sizes should be reduced to enable teachers to implement a modern curriculum and meet the needs of all pupils.
- The amount of documentation required from teachers should be reduced.
- Aistear should be incorporated in to the revised curriculum for the infant classes.
- Resources should be provided to schools to support the use of Aistear in infant classrooms.
- Resources should be provided to schools to support the implementation of all curriculum areas in all classrooms
- Professional development should be an ongoing feature of curriculum support and development.

- A comprehensive professional development programme, should accompany the introduction of the revised language curriculum.
- A comprehensive programme should be designed to support the teaching of Irish in English-medium schools to assist teachers in implementing the revised language curriculum.
- Protocols should be developed to support the transition of children from pre-school to primary school.
- Teachers should be supported in developing their knowledge and skills in assessment.
- There should be less emphasis on standardised testing.
- There is a need for more support for pupils with special educational needs.

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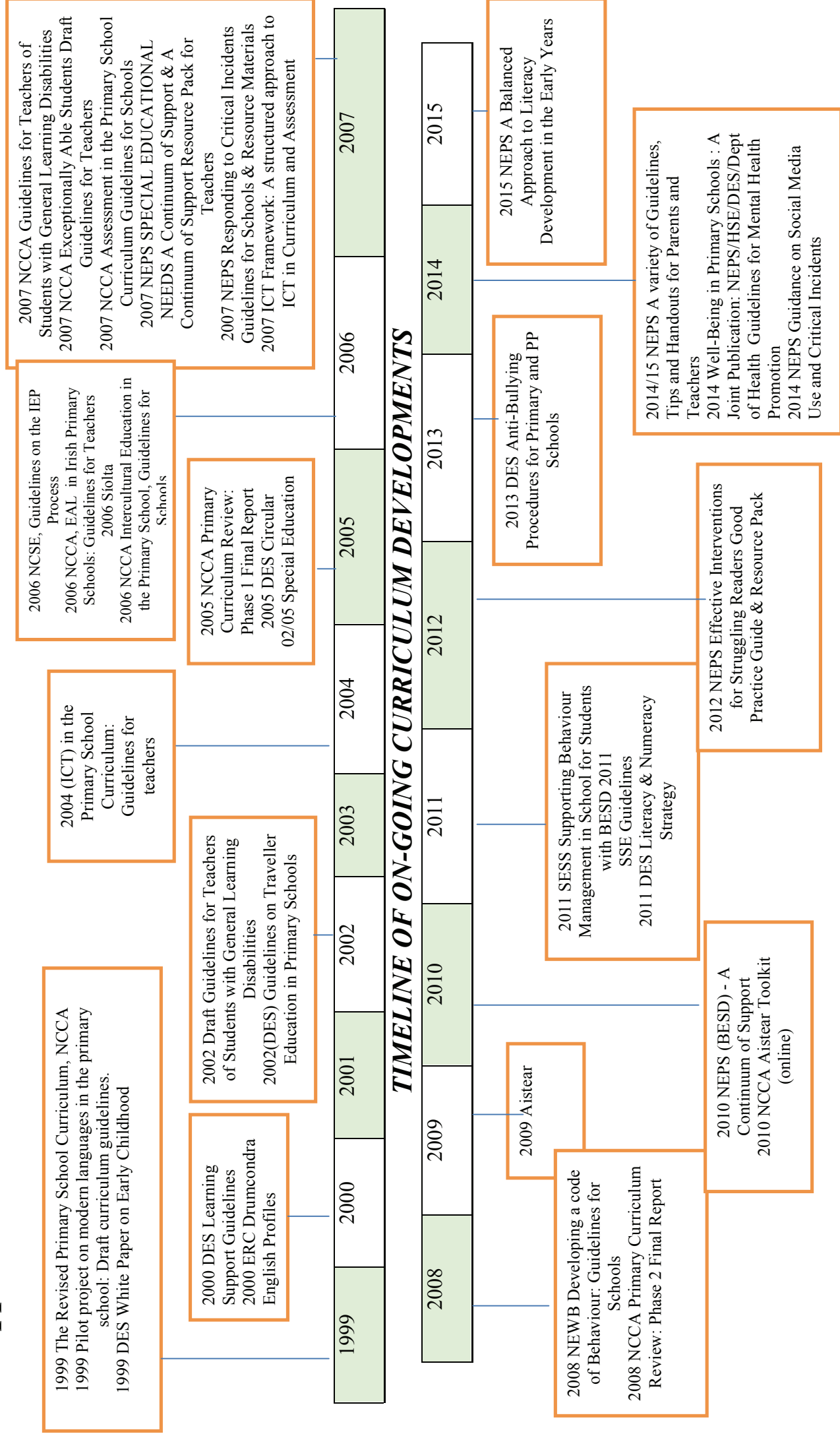
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Appendices

Appendix 1 - TIMELINE OF ON-GOING CURRICULUM AND POLICY DEVELOPMENTS



Timeline of Publications relevant to Primary Education prior to 1999

- 1965 Rules for National Schools.
- 1971 Curriculum (2 Books!)
- 1990 Report of the Primary Curriculum Review (Quinlan Report).
- 1997 Relationships and Sexuality Education: Going Forward Together.

Timeline of Publications relevant to Primary Education since 1999

- 1999 11 Curriculum Books and 11 Curriculum Guidelines + Introduction to the PSC
- 1999 [Pilot project on modern languages in the primary school: Draft curriculum guidelines.](#)
- 1999 DES White Paper on Early Childhood Education, Ready to Learn
- 2000 DES Learning Support Guidelines
- 2000 Education Research Centre Drumcondra English Profiles (Reprinted 2008)
- 2001 [Modern languages in primary schools: Teacher guidelines.](#)
- 2002 Draft Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities
- 2002 Department of Education and Science (DES Guidelines on Traveller Education in Primary Schools
- 2004 Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Teachers
- 2005 NCCA Primary Curriculum Review: Phase 1 Final Report
- 2005 DES Circular 02/05 Special Education
- 2006 NCSE Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process
- 2006 NCCA English as an Additional Language in Irish Primary Schools: Guidelines for Teachers
- 2006 Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education on behalf of the [Department of Education and Skills.](#)
- 2006 NCCA Intercultural Education in the Primary School, Guidelines for Schools
- 2007 NCCA Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities
- 2007 NCCA Exceptionally Able Students Draft Guidelines for Teachers
- 2007 NCCA Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum Guidelines for Schools
- 2007 NEPS SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS A Continuum of Support & A Continuum of Support Resource Pack for Teachers
- 2007 NEPS Responding to Critical Incidents Guidelines for Schools & Resource Materials
- 2007 ICT Framework: A structured approach to ICT in Curriculum and Assessment
- 2008 NEWB Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools
- 2008 NCCA Primary Curriculum Review: Phase 2 Final Report. Dublin: NCCA.
- 2009 Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) developed Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in partnership with the early childhood sector. Practitioners, children, parents, people in education and training,

researchers, and policy makers worked together to ensure that Aistear builds on practice in early childhood settings and is informed by research.)

- 2010 NEPS Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD) - A Continuum of Support
- 2010 NCCA Aistear Toolkit (online)
- 2010 Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, (OMYCA) Pre-school Year in Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme
- 2011 DES Literacy & Numeracy Strategy
- 2011 SSE Guidelines
- 2011 SESS Supporting Behaviour Management in School for Students with Behavioural, Emotional and/or Social Difficulties (BESD)
- 2012 NEPS [Effective Interventions for Struggling Readers Good Practice Guide & Resource Pack](#)
- 2013 DES Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools
- 2014/15 NEPS A variety of Guidelines, Tips and Handouts for Parents and Teachers
- 2014 Well-Being in Primary Schools: A Joint Publication: NEPS/HSE/DES/Dept of Health Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion
- 2014 NEPS Guidance on Social Media Use and Critical Incidents (for use with Responding to Critical Incidents Resource Materials for Schools (2007))
- 2015 NEPS A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years

Research Reports

- 2014 [Mathematics in Early Childhood and Primary Education \(3-8 years\): Definitions, Theories, Development and Progression. NCCA Research Report No. 17 Pdf](#)
- 2014 [Mathematics in Early Childhood and Primary Education \(3-8 years\): Teaching and Learning. NCCA Research Report No. 18 Pdf](#)
- 2014 [Mathematics in Early Childhood and Primary Education \(3-8 years\): Executive Summaries Pdf](#)
- 2014 [Audit of Mathematics Curriculum Policy across 12 Jurisdictions: Commissioned Report Pdf -](#)
- February 2015 Completion of revisions to the new Primary Language Curriculum for Junior Infants to Second Class.
- October 2015 Consultation and engagement on Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics proposals.

- 2005 [Report on the feasibility of modern languages in the primary school curriculum.](#)
- 2006 [Language and literacy in Irish-medium primary schools: Descriptions of practice.](#)
- 2006 [Language and literacy in Irish-medium primary schools: Review of literature.](#)
- 2007 [Language and literacy in Irish-medium primary schools: Report on the consultation and seminar.](#)
- 2007 [Language and literacy in Irish-medium primary schools: Supporting school policy and practice.](#)
- 2008 [Modern languages in the primary school curriculum: Feasibility and futures.](#)
- 2011 [Effective language teaching: A synthesis of research](#)²

- [2012Literacy in early childhood and primary education \(3-8 years\). Research Report No. 15.](#)
- [2012Oral language in early childhood and primary education \(3-8 years\).](#)
- [2013Towards a new language curriculum for primary schools: Audit of language objectives in the Primary School Curriculum \(1999\) and language goals in Aistear \(2009\).](#)
- [2014Consultation on the Draft Primary Language Curriculum: Junior Infants to Second Class. Interim report.](#)
- [2014Draft primary language curriculum: English-medium schools. English language 1 and Gaeilge Teanga 2. Stage 1: Junior and senior Infants. Stage 2: First and second class. For consultation, April 9th to July 11th.](#)
- [2014Language continuum. Writing: progression continuum.](#)
- [2014Primary Language Curriculum: English and Gaeilge Junior Infants to Second Class. Report on Consultation and Engagement](#)

Appendix 2

Programmes for Primary Schools

The vast majority of the last cohort of teachers who qualified in 1975 with a two-year diploma from the Training Colleges - as they were then called-, have completed their 40 years of service this year 2015 and have now retired. A small but significant number of these teachers were appointed as principals of small 2 & 3 teacher schools on graduation, some at the age of 19 or 20 years of age. The idea that someone so young might assume the role of principal at such a tender age seems incredible if not bizarre nowadays. Yet at the time, few of them would have been daunted by the task that lay ahead. As this group of teachers reach retirement age it is worth reviewing what exactly their role was then and how it has changed during their career span. A number of such teachers were invited to give their views on how teaching changed for them throughout their careers. A common set of themes emerged.

Back in 1975, the role of school principal involved a limited number of tasks such as filling the monthly returns, keeping the various registers/roll books up to date, deciding when the school would remain open or would close, completing occasional forms from the Department and attending reasonably infrequent Board of Management meetings. From time to time an inspector might drop by, once the trainee teacher had completed the two diplomas, but this was an infrequent occurrence unless some issue arose with the building. However, in the last twenty years or so this scenario has changed utterly. The major changes mentioned by this group in their working conditions include:

- The advent of the concept of School Planning for which training became available in the late 1980s initially given by the Inspectorate and later by the INTO and with the School Development Planning Service.
- The revision of the Primary Curriculum which began in 1999 with the increased emphasis on whole school and individual teacher planning.
- The increase in the number of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools and the consequential increase in paperwork required for the provision of supports and resources.
- The advent of the WSE and the requirement for more and more policies.
- The continual and increasing pressure from various agencies for the allocation of teaching time in primary schools for programmes related to the environment (Green Flag), fitness (Active Flag), entrepreneurship (Junior Entrepreneur Programme Flag), road safety, (www.safetoschool.ie), European Awareness (European Blue Flag) etc.
- The pressure from parents and community organizations to assist in fundraising activities for community and national organisations such as the MS Readathon, GOAL Jersey Day, and Cheerios Breakfast Morning. See below for a more extensive list of these activities.
- The arrival of technology into schools and the dearth of ongoing training and support for maintaining IT equipment following the initial enthusiasm for its introduction.

Some Programmes that schools are asked to participate in:

National Tree Week	County promotions
Junior Entrepreneur Project	Local FAI promotions
Safe Internet Day	Credit Union Quiz
Seachtain na Gaeilge	National Grandparents Day
Trocaire	One World
Bóthar	County Board Jersey Day
Irish Guide Dogs	No Uniform Day
Local GAA club	MS Readathon
Cheerios Breakfast Morning	Global Action Plan (GAP) Ireland
National Tree Week	Doodle for Google
Sight Savers Junior Entrepreneur	Library arts competition
World Book Day	Active Flag
Swimming gala	Green Flag
World Book Day	FIS -Film in School
European Blue Flag	Barnardo's Toddle Walk
Yellow Flag – Diversity	Down Syndrome ice-cream day
Texaco Children's Art	Spar Primary Schools 5 a-side
Orange Day	Tech Week (Irish computer society)
Young Entrepreneur	

Appendix 3

The article entitled 'THE MURDER MACHINE' embodies an article which appeared in the Irish Review for February 1913. The article called 'AN IDEAL IN EDUCATION' was printed in the Irish Review, June 1914.

An Ideal in Education – P. H. Pearse

The words and phrases of a language are always to some extent revelations of the mind of the race that has moulded the language. How often does an Irish vocable light up as with a lantern some immemorial Irish attitude, some whole phase of Irish thought. Thus, the words which the old Irish employed when they spoke of Education show that they had gripped the very heart of that problem. To the old Irish the teacher was 'aite', fosterer; the pupil, was 'dalta', foster-child; the system was 'aiteachas', fosterage; words which we still retain as oide, dalta, oideachas.

And is not the precise aim of education to 'foster?' Not to inform, to indoctrinate, to conduct through a course of studies [though these be the dictionary meanings of the word], but, first and last, to 'foster' the elements of character native to a soul, to help to bring these to their full perfection rather than to implant exotic excellences.

Fosterage implies a foster-father or foster-mother, a person as its centre and inspiration rather than a code of rules. Modern education systems are elaborate pieces of machinery devised by highly-salaried officials for the purpose of turning out citizens according to certain approved patterns. The modern school is a State controlled institution designed to produce workers for the State, and is in the same category which a dockyard, or any other State-controlled institution which produces articles necessary to the progress, well-being, and defence of the State. We speak of the 'efficiency', the 'cheapness' and the 'up-to-dateness' of an education system just as we speak of the 'efficiency', the 'cheapness' and the 'up-to-dateness' of a system of manufacturing coal-gas. We shall soon reach a stage when we speak of the 'efficiency', the 'cheapness' and the 'up-to-dateness' of our systems of soul saving.

What the teacher should bring to his pupil is not a set of ready-made opinions or a stock of cut-and-dried information, but an inspiration and an example; and his main qualification should be, not such an overmastering will as shall impose itself at all hazards upon all weaker wills that come under its influence, but rather so infectious an enthusiasm as shall kindle new enthusiasm.

But the teacher must be there always to inspire, to foster.

In particular, I would urge that the Irish school system of the future should give freedom - freedom to the individual school, freedom to the individual teacher, freedom as far as may be to the individual pupil. Without freedom, there can be no right growth, and education is properly the fostering of the right growth of a personality.

There are no ideas there, no love of beauty, no love of books, no love of knowledge, no heroic inspiration. And there is no room for such things either on the earth or in the heavens, for the earth is cumbered and the heavens are darkened by the monstrous bulk of the programme.

Most of the educators detest the programme. They are like the adherents of a dead creed who continue to mumble formulas and to make obeisance before an idol which they have found out to be a spurious divinity.

Appendix 4

Curriculum Focus Group Questions May 2015

- What are the strengths of the *Primary School Curriculum 1999*?
- To what extent do you comply with the guidelines on time allocations?
- What is creating curriculum overload for teachers? What is the best way to address curriculum overload?
- What are the priorities for future revision of the primary school curriculum? (What curriculum areas, subjects, or aspects of subjects would you add or omit or allocate less or more time in any revised curriculum?)
- The revised language curriculum (English and Irish) will be in the form of Learning Outcomes. How might learning outcomes better support teachers' planning and teaching?
- What form of professional development would best support teachers in engaging with the revised Language curriculum for junior infants to second class?
- How has the use of AISTEAR – the early years' curriculum framework – impacted on the infant classes in your school?
- To what extent do you engage in project work and in what areas of the curriculum?
- In your experience, what impact have Croke Park hours had on the curriculum?

Part 2

Proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education

**13 & 14 November 2015
Athlone**

1

Presentations

Ger Stack, Cathaoirleach, Education Committee

A Chairde agus a Chomhghúinteoirí,

I would like to welcome our guests and delegates here today. The INTO Education Committee was set up to advise the CEC on educational matters. Its members are the President, Vice President and one representative elected by the members of each of the 16 districts. The general aims of the Education Committee include:

- To be the leading voice in education policy development
- To be to the fore in progressing education issues
- To be aware of broader developments in Education

In addition, the Education Committee prepare research for presentation at the annual Consultative Conference on Education.

Over the last number of years, topics that have been considered by the Education Committee have included: Quality in Education, Literacy; Numeracy, Wellbeing and Learning Communities. Next year, it is hoped to build on the work that has been done over the past number of years and use the historic year 2016, as an opportunity to look at Teaching in the 21st Century.

This year we are considering the topic of ‘The Primary School Curriculum – Have your say’. The Primary School Curriculum in its current format dates from 1999, and while many of us remember its introduction, we also must be mindful that it is not a ‘revised’ curriculum for nearly 50% of our members! It is now 16 years on from its introduction and it is timely to look critically at the curriculum and consult with our members on what the challenges are for teachers.

To prepare for this conference, as the President mentioned, members of the Education Committee hosted a number of focus groups and also drew up a questionnaire on this topic that was circulated both by hard copy and electronically to a random selection of INTO members. The survey was also put on the INTO website. Over 650 members completed the survey. Tina McLaughlin of the Education Committee will outline some of the main findings of both the survey and focus groups shortly, however I would just like to highlight two areas of interest that emerged. Firstly, you will see from the background document the number of curriculum developments, strategies and programmes that have been introduced, in addition to the Curriculum, since 1999, which has contributed to the feeling of overload experienced by many teachers. In addition, it was noted by many teachers that the number of initiatives that schools are invited to take part in, although all are worthy in their own right, is overwhelming.

Our thanks are due to all those teachers who took the time to complete the questionnaire either in hard copy or on-line. There were over 11 pages of comments, per question,

submitted – in addition to the tick box questions answered. All these comments were read and the emerging points were collated and included in the document prepared for this conference. As the President said, we need the voice of the teacher to shape debate and policy.

I hope you enjoy the conference and hope that the discussion groups and workshops give you a good opportunity for professional learning and debate.

Deirbhile Nic Craith, Director of Education and Research.

Táimid anseo inniu daichead bliain tar éis dúinn an chéad suirbhé mór a dhéanamh i measc múinteoirí ar churaclam na bunscoile. The 1971 curriculum was fairly new at the time. There is probably nobody in the hall here today who completed our questionnaire on curriculum in the mid-seventies. Ach táim cinnte gur chomhlánaigh cuid agaibhse ceistneoir na bliana seo. Beidh léargas á thabhairt ag Tina níos déanaí ar chuid de na tuairimí a nochtadh sa suirbhé seo. Leanfaidh an INTO ar aghaidh ag bailiú tuairimí múinteoirí ar chúrsaí curaclaim – mar a rinneamar gach deich mbliana ó 1975 ar aghaidh. The INTO's research of teachers' experience of curriculum, provides valuable feedback about what's going well for teachers and what needs further change and development.

In my brief introduction to our conference theme this year, there are three issues I would like to address briefly. Firstly, I'll refer to teachers' role in curriculum development. Secondly, I want to make a reference to the infant classes and thirdly I'll say a few words about the increasing diversity in our primary schools.

Teachers' Involvement in Curriculum

We are privileged in Ireland to have an opportunity to influence our curriculum developments. Early in the 20th century, the INTO was instrumental in convening the first National Programme Conference in 1921 which led to changes in curriculum in 1922 and again in 1926. The INTO also had the foresight to prepare a *Plan for Education* in 1947 outlining the areas of education policy requiring development and action. The INTO played a key role in developing the *Revised Programme for Infants* in 1948.

It is very important to INTO members to be involved in education policy. We have a long history of engaging in educational debate, bringing the voice and experience of practising teachers to bear on the policy context. The INTO's voice is influential and is listened to.

Our current curriculum, published in 1999, was the culmination of almost ten years of development with practising teachers at the heart of it. The curriculum reflected the educational thinking of the day and was well-received by teachers. This process of curriculum development is highly unusual. In many other countries, teachers are presented with a curriculum to teach, having had no input into its development. Through representation on committees and through the NCCA's primary school network, teachers in Ireland continue to influence curriculum developments. Sarah will tell us about the revised language curriculum which has been developed by building on the feedback from teachers on their experience of the 1999 curriculum. It also reflects more up-to-date knowledge about literacy and language learning and responds to the demands of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

The 1999 curriculum is by no means perfect. In fact, there is a lot of it – 22 books. Compare this to the 1971 curriculum, two books, or the 33 pages of the *Programme of*

Primary Instruction in 1922!. But it reflected its time – the education values and curriculum priorities of Ireland in the 1990s.

But it wasn't enough! Over the years the curriculum was supplemented with guidelines. For example, we had the *Learning Support Guidelines* (2000); *Guidelines for Students with General Learning Disabilities* (2007); *ICT in the Primary School: Guidelines* (2004); *EAL in the Primary School: Guidelines* (2006); *Intercultural Guidelines for Schools* (2006); *Guidelines on Assessment* (2007), the NEPS guidance on *Continuum of Support* (2010), the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011) and *Well-being in Primary Schools* (2014). But additional material for teachers has not been confined to guidelines. There are all the programmes and initiatives that Ger has mentioned.

Challenges and shortcomings of the 1999 curriculum began to emerge as teachers experienced its implementation. Planning, assessment and ICT were such challenges as were class sizes, a lack of resources and the increasing need for differentiation. We have mentioned others in the background document.

Infant Education

I want to make a particular reference to infant education. We are unusual in Ireland in including a significant portion of early childhood education in our primary schools. In many other European countries children start primary school between ages five and seven, though usually attend state provided or state funded pre-school or kindergarten prior to starting primary school.

In Ireland, though school is not compulsory until age six, we have a long tradition of early years' education in our primary schools for children between four and six. Indeed, for many years children of two and three were in our infant classes.

Kindergarten was introduced to primary schools in the *Revised Programme* of 1900, reflecting best international practice at the time, and bringing with it a wide and varied curriculum, the use of the environment of the child to stimulate learning and heuristic and discovery-like methods. After the foundation of the State, the curriculum was pruned to allow more time for Irish language, history and culture, with Irish becoming the medium of instruction in the infant classes – not without controversy - given the importance of the younger years in language learning. Though there were some changes in the intervening years, such as the *Revised Programme for Infant Classes* in 1948, the next major curriculum change did not occur until the 1960s culminating in the child-centred 1971 curriculum.

The infant school has been a strong feature of the primary school. We have our junior and senior infant classes before the children enter first class, traditionally at age six.

Our infant classes are an integral part of the primary school, but also very much part of early childhood education, internationally often referred to as birth to six or in some cases birth to eight. The infant classes have the benefit of being part of the primary school, with a national curriculum, highly qualified teachers, quality assurance and school evaluation processes. However, they also have the disadvantage of being part of the primary school sector, which means large class sizes and lack of space for learning through play, both indoors and outdoors.

The pre-school sector in Ireland is changing. It's growing, additional funding is being made available, the DES inspectors are beginning their evaluations of the free-pre-school year and Aistear, the NCCA's early years' curriculum framework informs children's development and learning. To qualify for the state grant for the free pre-school year – soon to be extended – pre-schools must use the national frameworks Aistear (which many of you have heard about) and Síolta (which I'm sure very few of you

have heard about, though there is a version for primary schools). Over 95% of children now attend pre-school, before they start in Junior Infants. This has implications for our infant classes in terms of curriculum continuity and transitions in particular. Many teachers in infant classes have availed of professional development in Aistear and use it in their classrooms. However, there is, at times, a tension between using Aistear and implementing the curriculum. The thinking and approaches of Aistear will have to underpin the revision of the infant curriculum so that teachers will no longer need Aistear in one hand and the Primary School Curriculum in the other. Perhaps we should also reconsider what we call the 'infant classes'. Are children who start school really 'infants'!

Diversity

Ireland has also become more diverse since the 1990s – not that it was ever entirely homogenous. Primary classrooms in Ireland today are very different to what they were when I started teaching. Today's primary classrooms are inclusive of all pupils – children with special educational needs, children for whom English is an additional language, children of migrants, children of different faiths and none. This diversity creates additional challenges for teachers. A very recent development is the launch of a consultation on proposals for a curriculum in Education About Religious Beliefs and Ethics - ERB and Ethics.

The INTO has previously called for the development of a national curriculum in religious education at our Education conference in 1991 in Kilkenny and again in 2002 in Mullingar. The current proposals regarding a curriculum in ERB and ethics, which Patrick will outline to you this afternoon, are proposals. If, following the consultation it is considered desirable to include education about religious beliefs and ethics in the primary curriculum for all children, a discussion will have to take place about the what, the how and the when. One thing is certain, there is no room in our curriculum for more. The consideration of new areas of curriculum can only occur in the context of an overall review of our current curriculum. It means deciding what's important to us as Irish society, what our values are, and what we want the next generation to learn in schools.

But we must remember that curriculum will always reflect the political, social, economic, philosophical and perhaps religious contexts in which it is developed. The Irish school system has struggled with the idea of a child-centred curriculum since the 19th century when efforts to reflect the thinking of Froebel, Pestalozzi and Rousseau, were met with a lack of resources, and different priorities, such as the creation of the nation state. More recently, as a result of poor performance in international assessments in 2009, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy sought to prioritise literacy and numeracy by re-prioritising spending away from desirable but ultimately less important activities (p. 15). Even this week, an All Star inter-county hurler called for nutrition to be made a compulsory subject in schools!

Perhaps it's not surprising therefore that society looks to schools to address issues of importance – such as healthy lifestyles, road safety, sustainability, and so on. The care and welfare of children have become much more central to teacher's work. Schools are about more than curriculum. Educating the next generation is about the holistic development of the child. Learning outcomes are important, but we should never lose sight of the overarching aims of primary education.

- to enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual
- to enable the child to develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others and so contribute to the good of society

- to prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning

Curriculum should always be under review. Curriculum change should always be supported with comprehensive professional development. This conference provides an ideal opportunity to contribute to the debate on curriculum questions.

Is deis í an Chomhdháil seo cur leis an bplé agus leis an díospóireacht ar ár gcuraclam bunscoile. Ní mór dúinn a chinntiú go mbíonn múinteoirí lárnach i gcónaí i bhforbairtí curaclaim. Ach tá tábhacht freisin le tuairimí na ndaltaí. So, when you're passing through the corridors later have a look at what some of local primary school children think about their favourite subjects of our curriculum.

Bainigí sult agus tairbhe as an gComhdháil.

Findings of INTO Education Committee Research

Tina McLaughlin, Education Committee

Background

In preparation for this Education Conference, members of the Education Committee formulated a series of key questions for focus group discussions on the theme of the curriculum. Focus groups were held in Donegal, Cavan and Galway in May 2015. Administrative principals, teaching principals, teachers in urban and rural settings, those with many years of experience and relatively new teachers, mainstream teachers and special needs teachers were involved in the research. With the permission of the participants the focus group discussions were recorded. Transcripts of the interviews were produced and analysed.

The INTO also conducted a survey to obtain the views and opinions of primary teachers. 500 surveys were posted to members randomly selected from the INTO membership database with an additional 500 online surveys emailed to randomly selected members. The findings of the focus groups and surveys are presented here.

Strengths of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum

In general, participants of the focus group commented favourably on the 1999 curriculum, and according to the survey, flexibility and variety within the 1999 curriculum were specifically welcomed by the majority of participants.

Practicality, child-centeredness and variation were outlined as the curriculum's strengths. However, there is a very strong view that the curriculum places unrealistic expectations on teachers – due, namely, to content overload, excessive paperwork and an expectation to fix the needs of society.

Guidelines on time allocations

Based on the survey, less than a third of teachers rigidly follow the time allocations of the 1999 curriculum. However, more than half rigidly follow the revised time allocation guidelines with regard to the revised Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. Interestingly, 72% of respondents spend more time on Literacy and Numeracy than is recommended by Circular 56/2011.

To cope with time constraints, an analysis of the transcripts found that teachers use professional judgement and integration to cover curriculum content. We are all working incredibly hard to ensure curriculum objectives are covered. It is clear from the transcripts that integration of the curricular areas is favoured by many teachers. It is important to focus on ensuring the entire curriculum is taught over the course of the year than juggling weekly time allocations.

There is also overwhelming support for retaining spontaneity in teaching. One respondent noted that time allocations should 'be a guideline and not set in stone; teachers should adapt according to needs of the class'. Teachers must be enabled to use their professional judgement and discretion to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of their own pupils. Additional support should be provided to teachers to support integration.

Curriculum Overload

Following research carried out in 2005, at our 2006 Education Conference, class size and curriculum content were identified as key challenges for teachers. Not much has changed in a decade with class size the number one factor contributing to curriculum

overload, followed by paperwork, curriculum content and differentiation of pupils with Special Educational Needs.

Initiative over-load is a common complaint in the staff room. Appendix 2 of the discussion paper contains a sample of the programmes one of our committee member's school was asked to participate in last year. Whilst whole-school initiatives such as Green Flag are largely welcomed by the majority of respondents (due to their positive effect on the child), 76% of teachers feel under pressure to participate in initiatives promoted by external agencies.

One survey respondent rejected the practice of 'pumping' children with initiatives and new ideas, suggesting that 'stressed teachers do not lead to healthy outcomes'.

Within the focus groups, participants agreed that parental pressure to participate in such initiatives is causing problems in the classroom. To achieve more in the classroom, our teachers need less – a reduction in curriculum content, a reduction in class size and a reduction in the required documentation. But we'll take more resources, as we all know balance is key.

Priorities for future revision of the primary school curriculum

I stole a quote from the first page of the discussion paper. But I'm an honest thief. According to McGaw (2014) 'Curriculum is never completed. It is never perfect and should always be a work in progress'. There is an acknowledgement by the survey respondents that curriculum needs to change and evolve over time. However, change can only be implemented effectively when teachers are provided with professional support in the form of adequate resources and quality in-service. This supports needs to be available to all teachers on a regular, whole-school basis, not through a 'link teacher' as a 'one-off'.

The transition of pupils from pre-school to primary also needs more attention and clearer protocols, as noted by over two thirds of the survey respondents. One of the focus groups had an infant theme. One participant remarked that she 'finds it strange that meetings aren't held with Junior Infant teachers and the pre-school' as this would contribute towards a smoother transition for the child. This practice seems to work well at the other end of the primary school and therefore needs more attention.

Professional Development - The revised curriculum

It was agreed by 100% of the respondents that CPD for the Revised Language Curriculum should be provided at no cost to the teacher, with most agreeing that CPD should occur prior to its introduction, should be whole school focused and should concentrate on the practical implementation of the curriculum. These views were echoed by the focus groups, particularly a whole school approach, as one participant suggested that 'you might be in 6th class this year but could be in infants next year', whilst another noted the importance of understanding what the children have been learning before the get to your class.

AISTEAR

The benefits of Aistear for the infant classes were unanimously agreed upon by all focus groups, specifically the improvements in the development of oral language. The main issues cited were a lack of training, resources, money and time.

At the minute, it appears to be a 'grey area' as it is not officially part of the curriculum yet it is expected by the inspectorate. Overall, the incorporation of AISTEAR into a revised curriculum for the infant classes would be supported by teachers. But again, resources and quality training must accompany its implementation.

Croke Park

My mammy always tells me to save the best to last.

There were mixed views regarding Croke Park hours. Within the focus groups, Croke Park hours were discussed rather favourably. The recipe for success was very clear – when used constructively, the hour can be very productive.

The Croke Park hour is seen as an 'opportunity for staff to come together,' and it puts curriculum issues 'back on the agenda' as traditionally, it was felt that staff meetings were used to discuss yard supervision and school tours. Almost half of the survey respondents did not feel they were productive, with most respondents agreeing the implementation of the Croke Park hour varies from school to school. Interestingly, over two thirds of teachers agreed that Croke Park hours have had a negative impact on staff morale and can be seen as a 'ticking box exercise'.

It is worth noting the range views offered by survey respondents.

Croke Park hours are very helpful for whole school planning.

Croke Park hours are as useful to the school as the principal and school staff make them.

Croke Park hours completely erode staff goodwill.

It is clear from these findings, the purpose for which Croke Park hours can be used, along with their role and function in the system, need further discussion at policy level.

Conclusion

It's nice to know that the rantings and yarns of a handful of weary teachers over a cup of luke-warm coffee on a dreary Tuesday evening has made it into the hands of everyone here present. That, for us mere mortal teachers - our views can be heard, with an opportunity for some small changes. At the very least, it's nice to know you're not alone in your views. One of the strengths of the INTO is that we may not have it altogether, but together we have it all.

I'll finish with a quote from one of our survey respondents.

If I were to teach all day every day I could not teach all that is expected in the Primary Curriculum... Save us from too much paperwork and box-ticking. Let teachers 'breathe'.

Please remember to keep breathing.

The New Primary Language Curriculum: What's in it for Teachers?

Sarah FitzPatrick (NCCA, Naas Community National School)

Dia daoibh um thráthnóna, a chairde agus a chomhghleacaithe. It's a great privilege to be here with you this evening. I'd like to thank the INTO very sincerely for the invitation to be with you at this year's conference. Special thanks are due to Deirbhile Nic Craith and Ann McConnell for their great help in preparing for this session. I'm wearing two hats for this presentation—an *NCCA hat* and a *teacher hat*. As Emma mentioned, I finished work with the NCCA last month, when we had just signed-off on new Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile. I've since returned to my first love—teaching and learning. For the last month, my feet have been firmly on the ground in the shoes of a mainstream class teacher. I'm delighted to share with you some reflections on the new Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile this evening... wearing both hats!

Seo mar atá mar chláir oibre againn um thráthnóna – firstly a brief introduction to the Primary Developments – looking at the curriculum areas being developed and the priorities (FitzPatrick et al, 2014), and key messages shaping developments. Secondly, we'll take a sneak peek at the new Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile. Finally, I'll hand over to my former NCCA colleague, Patrick Sullivan for an update on the development of Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics in the Primary Curriculum.

The Primary Developments

To get started, let's take a look at what's happening with the Primary Curriculum. This brief video⁵ highlights three curriculum areas for development. For each area being developed, two phases of work are outlined—one focusing on the junior primary classes, and a second focused on the senior primary classes.

The new Primary Language Curriculum

Deich mbliana ag fás

Where has the new Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile come from? Deirbhile referred earlier to some milestones in the development of the new Primary Language Curriculum. Féachaimis anois ar aistear forbartha an churaclaim sa Ghaeilge agus sa Bhéarla sa CNCM le deich mbliana anuas. Táimid 'deich mbliana ag fás':

- Council's curriculum reviews (NCCA 2005; NCCA 2008) highlighted teachers' many successes with the curriculum as well as challenges such as a lack of time and difficulty differentiating teaching to meet the needs of all children. The structure of the English Curriculum and the balance of meaning and form in Gaeilge, were reported as particular issues.
- In response to the review findings, the NCCA established Networks with schools to support initiatives on Assessment and Language and to explore the issue of Curriculum overload. This collaboration with schools informed the development of the Guidelines on Assessment (NCCA, 2007).

⁵ Primary Education is Changing (Video). Available at: www.ncca.ie/primarydevelopments.

- In *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009), Communicating is one of four themes. The focus is on non-verbal communication and on language use in the early years, with opportunities for children to lead learning.
- Key targets for the NCCA in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011) focused on the development of a new curriculum for English and Gaeilge with a focus on Learning Outcomes and Examples of children’s learning.
- Commissioned research to inform the new curriculum was published in three reports which focused on oral language (Shiel et al, 2012), literacy (Kennedy et al, 2012) and the idea of an integrated language curriculum (Ó Duibhir and Cummins, 2012).
- The *Draft Primary Language Curriculum* was published for consultation in April last year and teachers have been instrumental in shaping and contributing to the curriculum both through the consultation and also the Language Network across three sites—Cork, Dublin and Galway.

Two versions of the curriculum

Let’s take a look now at the new curriculum. Seo daoibh *Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile* agus an *Primary Language Curriculum*. As you see, there are two versions of the curriculum: one with English as the first language (L1) which is focused specifically on English medium schools and another one with Irish as teanga a haon (T1) which is focused specifically on Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools. The contents of the two versions are the same with three exceptions:

- i. the curriculum L1 and L2 reflect the school’s language context
- ii. the Expectations for Learners at the end of each stage (i.e., Learning Outcomes and Progression Milestones) reflect the school’s language context, and
- iii. in the version for Irish-medium schools the Progression Continua include additional features for Irish for each of the three strands.

Comparison with the 1999 Curriculum

Before delving into the curriculum, let’s take a look at the main differences between this new *Primary Language Curriculum* (DES, 2016) and the 1999 curriculum for English and for Gaeilge (Figure 1):

How is this ‘new’ curriculum different?	
1999	2015
Strand Unit	Element
Different structure	Same structure
Content Objectives	Learning Outcomes
-	Progression Continua
Assessment guidelines	Examples of children’s learning/development
Guidelines	Support Material

Primary Language Curriculum (p.8) / Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile (1ch.8)



ncca.ie/primary  NCCA  Na Cearta Párlaiminte, Cearta na Gaeilge agus Cearta na n-Éireann

Figure 1

- The term Strand Unit has changed to Element; there are just three Elements in the new Primary Language Curriculum:
 - Developing communicative relationships through language (Communicating)
 - Understanding the content and structure of language (Understanding)
 - Exploring and using language (Exploring).
 These Elements (which are much clearer than the Strand Units in the '99 English Curriculum) are consistent with the Elements in the new English Curriculum for Junior Cycle.
- This Primary Language Curriculum is an integrated curriculum; it has the same curriculum structure and the same Strands and Elements for English and Irish to support children's learning across the two languages. The Strands are:
 - Oral language
 - Reading
 - Writing
 Added to the three Elements above, you can see a more streamlined, simpler structure for English and Irish.
- The number of Learning Outcomes included in this integrated curriculum is far fewer than the number of Content Objectives in the 1999 curriculum (94 and 269, respectively for English L1 and 96 and 351 for Gaeilge T1).
- This curriculum includes Progression Continua—road maps for teachers to plan and teach language. For each strand—oral language, reading and writing—it includes a continuum (map) of significant Progression Milestones and detailed Progression Steps involved in children's language learning and development.
- The Examples of Children's Language Learning and development are really at the heart of this curriculum because they show what learning looks and sounds like. They help teachers to make professional judgements about, and support children's progression across both languages. The Examples play as short videos.
- Finally, the Support Material for Teachers replaces the Teacher Guidelines in the 1999 Curriculum, and uses video to show rather than tell what language teaching and learning looks and sounds like.

Four connected parts of the curriculum

The curriculum is laid out in several sections (Rationale, Aims, Strands and Elements, etc.). The first five sections are relevant for all eight primary years. Section 6 is just for junior primary classes—junior infants to second primary class, and this section is organised in four connected parts (Figure 2).

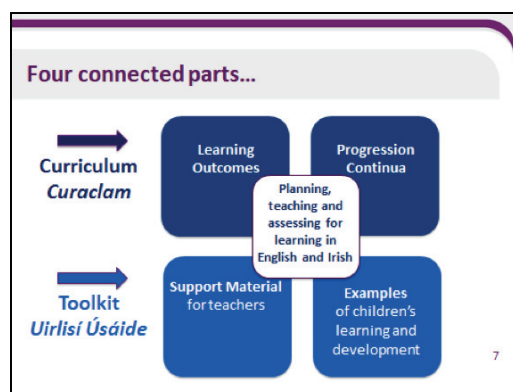


Figure 2

The Learning Outcomes and Progression Continua are included in the statutory, hard-copy curriculum while the Support Material and Examples are included in an online *Toolkit*.

What's in it for teachers?

While I was preparing the slides for this session, I was also working on a fortnightly plan for my own class. As I waded through the selection of textbooks and resources in the school for English and Irish, I began to think about how teacher planning might be different with the new *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile*. I think the key change is in giving teachers a coherent framework – a *clear structure* to inform language planning, teaching and assessment.

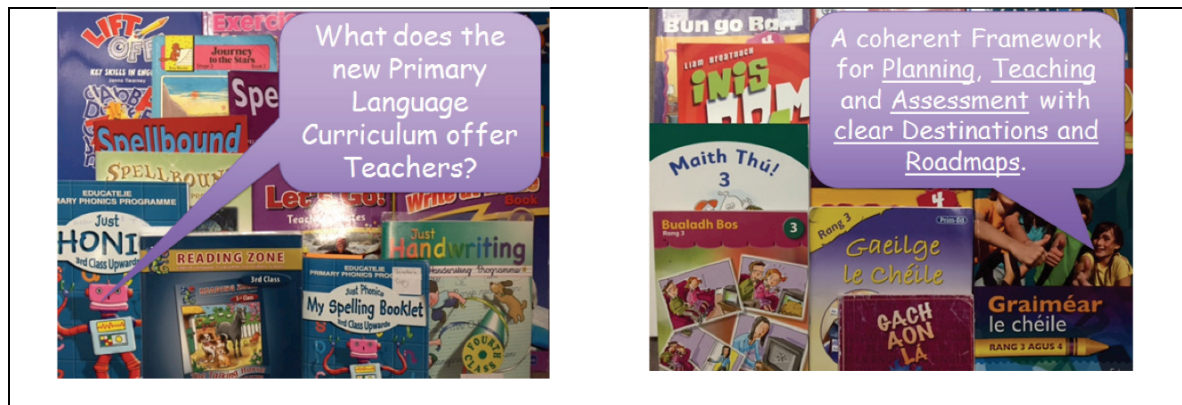


Figure 3

A Curriculum for Planning, Teaching and Assessing

Let's take a look now at what the four interconnected parts of the curriculum offer teachers (Figure 4).

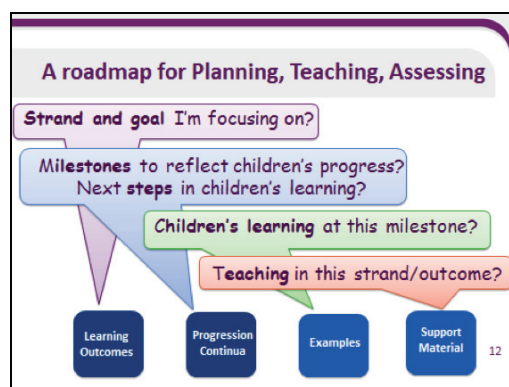


Figure 4

Beginning with Learning Outcomes, the teacher identifies the Strand and Element he/she is working on. The Learning Outcomes describe the expected language learning and development for children at the end of a two-year period. The good news is that there are just 10-15 Outcomes for each strand. Many of these Learning Outcomes are similar from one strand (level) to the next. In fact, for the 14 Outcomes provided for oral language, 13 of these are the same for Stage 1 and Stage 2, i.e., the first four primary school years (Junior Infants to Second Class).

The Progression Continua describe, in broad terms, the major milestones or signposts and the small steps children will progress through on their language learning journey. The small steps help to focus attention on children’s progress at a point in time and also to show the direction and focus of their next learning.

The Examples show what children’s learning looks and sounds like in a strand, at a particular milestone.

The Support Material shows what teaching in one strand and across strands looks and sounds like.

Learning Outcomes

The Outcomes are presented for each of the three strands, using a simple structure (Figure 5).

Clear expectations Progression Continua

STRAND			
Elements	Outcome # and label	Outcomes	
		Stage 1	Stage 2
Communicating
Understanding
Exploring & Using

- Just 10-15 Learning Outcomes for each strand.
- Same Outcomes across stages (13/14 outcomes in OL).
- Acknowledgment of the challenges ... ‘When due account is taken of individual abilities and varying circumstances’.

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Figure 5

The three new Elements (Communicating, Understanding, Exploring and Using Language) are the organisers for presenting the Outcomes. As we noted earlier, there are 10-15 Learning Outcomes per strand and many outcomes are the same for children from Junior Infants to Second Class. There’s an important acknowledgement in the new curriculum of the challenges that teachers face. Looking back, we fought long and hard at Board and Council meetings to ensure that this statement would precede all learning outcomes: **‘When due account is taken of individual abilities and varying circumstances, children should be able to...’**

Progression Continua (Contanam dul chun cinn)

Like the Outcomes, there’s one Progression Continuum for each strand—Oral, Reading and Writing (Figure 6).

Milestones and Steps Progression Continua

STRAND									
Progression Milestones									
• ...									
• ...									
• ...									
Progression Steps									
Elements	Outcomes	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h
Communicating									
Understanding									
Exploring & Using									

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Figure 6

Each Continuum has two main sections. The Milestones section is a short paragraph describing what children’s learning the strand looks and sounds like at each of the eight milestones. The Progression Steps are presented below the Milestones. The Progression Steps are small steps written in teacher-friendly language which point the way to what the child is likely to do, say, or make next in his/her language learning. Teachers told us the Progression Steps were similar to the First Steps approach.

Examples of Children’s Language Learning

The Examples of Children’s Language Learning are presented as videos.⁶ The videos show the Outcomes that were the focus of the child’s work and the Milestone that best reflects the child’s work. Together, the collection of Examples is like a Portfolio that teachers can use as a window into what learning looks and/or sounds like for an Outcome, at a particular Milestone. Let’s look at one Example for the Oral Language Strand⁷. The Introduction to the Example gives us three pieces of information:

1. The relevant Learning Outcomes for this Example are provided upfront. There are three Outcomes which focus on:
 - Engagement, listening and attention
 - Requests and questions
 - Information giving, explanation and justification.
2. Next we see the relevant Milestone from the Progression Continuum. In this Example, its Milestone F on the Oral Language Progression Continuum, because the child is describing news and also because the child is adding detail and using gestures and expression.
3. Thirdly, we see evidence of the child’s learning at other milestones (before or after ‘f’), such as understanding the listener speaker relationship, giving factual accounts and engaging in pair work.

Support Material

Let’s look now at one piece of Support Material for the Primary Language Curriculum (Figure 7).

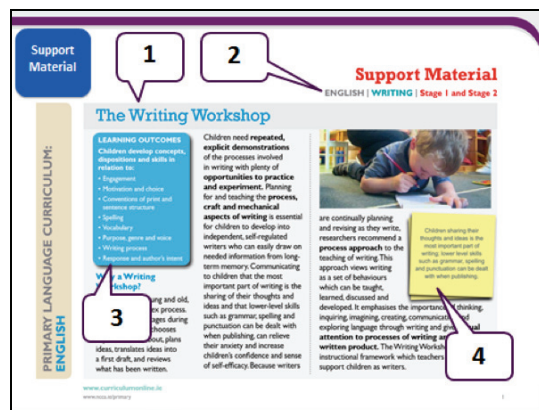


Figure 7

⁶ Examples of Children’s Language Learning and Development (Videos). Available at: <http://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum-Areas/Language/Examples-of-Children-s-Learning-and-Development>

⁷ Milestone F, Example 2 (Video). Available from: <http://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum-Areas/Language/Examples-of-Children-s-Learning-and-Development>. Direct link: <https://player.vimeo.com/video/133340357>

This piece of Support Material on the Writing Workshop was developed in collaboration with the Write to Read initiative⁸, led by Dr Eithne Kennedy (a keynote speaker at this conference in 2011). The callout boxes show us the structure for the Support Material which is repeated across all items. In this piece, the four callout boxes refer to:

1. the title of the Support Material
2. the strands
3. the relevant Learning Outcomes and
4. key messages highlighted.

The introduction to this piece of Support Material tells us that writing is complex and that writing is a set of behaviours that can be taught, learned, discussed, and developed. The Writing Workshop is introduced as an instructional framework for teaching writing. The focus is on teaching children to be *real* writers. Conditions for the Writing Workshop to flourish are outlined. Shared writing where the teacher acts as scribe and Interactive writing where teachers and children share the pen are outlined as part of the preparation for implementing the Writing Workshop. The three parts of the Writing Workshop are introduced:

1. the mini-lesson
2. independent writing and conferencing, and finally
3. the share session.

This piece of Support Material goes on to provide information on different types of mini-lessons, focused on management and organisation, the writing process, conventions and craft aspects of writing (Figure 8).

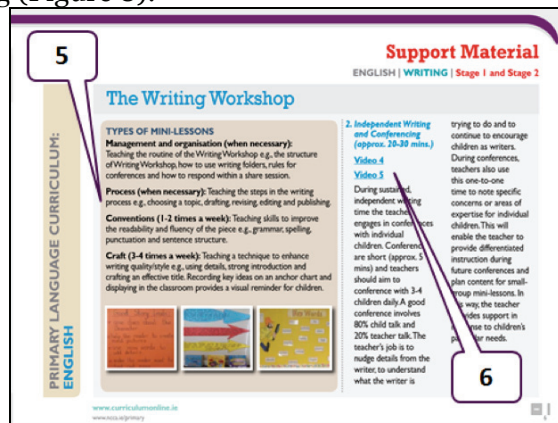


Figure 8

At the end of each piece of Support Material, you'll find links to any videos included in the Support Material and a list of references for information/further study. There are over 30 pieces of Support Material for the new Primary Language Curriculum. Each piece of Support Material focuses on a specific aspect of language teaching and learning, e.g., planning, story, poetry, fónaic na Gaeilge, léitheoireacht faoi threoir/guided reading, running records/ taifead reatha, reading for comprehension, strategies for engagement, the writing workshop/an cheardlann scríbhneoireachta, story sacks, and play as a context for language learning, to mention just a few.

The Primary Language Curriculum will be published in hard-copy and on USB and online. Each teacher is to receive a hard-copy of the curriculum. The toolkit material—Examples and Support Material is published on the Curriculum Online website⁹. There are plans to also publish the toolkit material on a USB key for off-line use in schools. I

⁸ Write to Read: <http://www.writetoread.ie/>

⁹ Curriculum Online: <http://www.curriculumonline.ie/>

hope this brief, sneak-preview has given you a sense of what's in the curriculum for *you* and what you can expect to find inside, when the curriculum finds its way into your hands.

This development of this new Primary Language Curriculum marks a major milestone in the next phase of curriculum development at primary. I'd like to very sincerely acknowledge the tremendous input of the INTO in developing this curriculum. Members of the Education Committee have provided robust and very valuable feedback on the draft curriculum at regular intervals during the development process. Thanks are due in particular to INTO members of NCCA committees, in particular, Karen Devine, Siobhán Lynsky, Dympna Mulkerrins, Áine Dillon, Mary Magner, and also to Emma Dineen who has recently taken-up a position on the Council of the NCCA. Special thanks are due to Declan Kelleher for his role in progressing this work as the Chairperson of the Board for Early Childhood and Primary, and Deputy-Chairperson of the NCCA. Finally, Deirbhile Nic Craith has been a member of the NCCA for longer than I've worked there. Her tremendous contribution to curriculum development cannot be quantified. Go raibh míle maith agat, a chara. Mar focal scoir, míle buíochas arís do lucht an INTO as ucht cuireadh a thabhairt dom chun léargas ginearálta a thabhairt ar foráis sa bhunscoilaíocht agus ar Churaclam nua Teanga na Bunscoile (CTB) um thráthnóna.

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Education about religions and beliefs and ethics in the primary curriculum

Patrick Sullivan, NCCA

So, I am here today to talk about a very significant development in Irish education; namely the development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics for ALL primary school children. I hope to talk about what the curriculum is all about, why this is being developed, what the challenges are for this curriculum and the benefits for children.

So, what is Education about Religions and Beliefs; and what is Ethics?

The definitions we are using in our proposals are as follows:

Education about Religions and Beliefs helps children to understand the cultural heritage of some of the major forms of religion, belief traditions and worldviews which have been embraced by people across the world; while ethics includes the formation in and promotion of a commitment to the personal integrity of all human beings.

Now that's what the definition says but what does this actually mean?

Well, it is proposed in the curriculum that children will be encouraged to share their ideas about the world, their beliefs about human experience; and to listen to and respect the beliefs of other children in their class and school community. Now this process enables the child to come to a deeper understanding of who they are, what they believe about the world and how they can contribute positively to it.

It is a significant area of learning; and one that is worthwhile in and of itself; while **also benefiting communities and wider society**.

Why is this curriculum being developed?

Let me begin by stating the obvious, currently no child attending primary school has ever received a formal State education in religions, beliefs and ethics. This is the first time that the State is considering these areas of education. This is quite remarkable when you think that we say we provide for the holistic development of the child and yet there is a void in our State provision relating to a child's understanding of religion, beliefs or ethical views.

Now Ireland is quite unique in this regard. Most developed countries provide some sort of State education in religion, beliefs and ethics. In fact of the 14 jurisdictions we researched, only Massachusetts in the U.S. did not have any curriculum in ERB or Ethics.

Now this void was recognised in the Forum of Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector and, parents especially thought this was an area to be addressed, so it was recommended that the NCCA develop a curriculum to support teaching and learning in these areas.

But that's not the only reason why we are developing this curriculum?

It is generally accepted that learning about religions and beliefs and ethics are good things! Most people agree that an important aspect of a child's education involves learning about and understanding the lives and traditions of their friends, classmates and members of the wider community. And that children experience religions, beliefs and ethics in their daily lives and that their experience of these have a strong impact on their lives.

We also know that classrooms have changed greatly in recent years. Schools are welcoming much more diverse populations than ever. In the 2011 *National Census* over 28 belief systems (both secular and religious) were represented in Ireland. Classrooms all over Ireland have had to cater for children from across the globe. The curriculum will enable teachers to support children in our schools to live in and contribute positively to this diverse world; to forge positive relationships with children of different backgrounds, to know and understand something that is important to these children and to recognise and respect a diverse range of beliefs and religions.

Irish schools have taken great strides in recent years around multi-cultural education and inclusion to address the areas of religions, beliefs and ethics. However, our primary school curriculum does not reflect this and so now there is a need to support these important practices that happen in our schools; in our primary school curriculum.

That's what this curriculum is all about; it will support the great work of schools in this area and ensure structured, coherent and age appropriate learning for all children.

Now we recognise that this is a new venture in Irish education and that's why we have decided to consult early in the curriculum development process and to consult as widely as possible to ensure whatever is developed is suitable for Irish schools.

Well as I said, this is a new development in Irish education, and so there was little or no research in this area, so we began by developing three research papers. And all of these are found on our consultation pages online.

The first paper focused on the Irish context, and looked at what provision there is in patrons' programmes for this learning. So we worked with the patrons to look at their programmes and what their programmes provide. So the six patrons' programmes were examined in this way.

The second paper looked internationally and examined provision across 14 jurisdictions in religions, beliefs and ethics. Now what became clear is that whatever is developed for Ireland, needs to be totally Irish and not just something that worked in another country.

The final paper, is perhaps the most important paper, it relates to how we view the child in this curriculum and the research proposes that children are viewed as active participants in their education, actively contributing to and shaping their experience.

Following on from these papers we developed our proposals for the curriculum. We are currently consulting on these. And I encourage everyone here to engage with the materials and have your say!

What are we consulting on?

In our consultation materials we present the rationale, vision and aims of the curriculum. I suppose I've already given you some insight into the rationale and vision for the curriculum.

In relation to the aims we are proposing 5 key aims: To enable a child to-

- develop self-awareness, confidence, personal beliefs and positive social identities
- have knowledge and understanding of how religious and non-religious worldviews have contributed to the culture in which we live,
- express comfort, empathy and joy with human diversity, and form deep, caring human connections

- recognise unfairness, injustice and inequality and understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities
- appreciate the impact of prejudice and discriminatory actions on others.

The consultation paper then presents five features of curriculum: That ERB and Ethics;

- are complementary yet distinct areas of education
- are pluralist in nature
- will value the child as a curious, capable, confident and caring individual
- will recognise the critical role of teachers as nurturing children's dispositions
- embody a child-centred pedagogy.

And of course towards the end of the document we raise the very important issue of 'where does this all fit in?' and 'where will the time come from?' And 'what will this curriculum look like?'

Let's look at these significant questions.

Perhaps the most obvious challenge in the Irish context is finding the time to teach it. Teachers have told us, and I know as a teacher myself, that the curriculum is 'overloaded' and that there may be 'just too many objectives' to cover in the school day. So, what is being done to help this situation?

Well as Sarah outlined earlier, the developments of new curriculum at primary are resulting in many less outcomes and a more flexible curriculum for teachers to use. This will be true of Maths and ERB and Ethics in the coming years. So, this is one way we are reducing overload.

The issue of time allocation has a real impact on the teaching and learning of the curriculum. Teachers feel constrained by the current weekly guidelines for time allocation. Looking at other jurisdictions, many focus on longer periods of time such as monthly, termly or even annual allocations of time for curriculum areas. This provides much greater flexibility to teachers and schools in how they negotiate the curriculum at local level. This model of time allocation may be worth considering for Irish primary schools.

We are due to advise the Minister on time allocation across the curriculum in 2016 and this will provide an opportunity to consider time allocation in ERB and Ethics. Although as it currently stands it may be difficult to see where time can come from for this teaching; if we consider a more flexible provision of time this may well free schools and teachers up.

Another question raised relates to where will this curriculum fit in the current curriculum structure? This is one of the most important questions we are asking teachers in this consultation. And we are very open at this point in saying that we do not know what exactly what this 'curriculum' will look like. That's why we are consulting.

And we have asked the questions of whether will ERB and Ethics will be a subject, or indeed two subjects? Or will it be a curriculum area with subjects within it? Or a framework with broad outcomes to be reached throughout teaching and learning-like Aistear? Or will it be just guidelines for schools in this area?

These are really key questions and ones that we need to be informed by your experience as teachers.

The implications for each approach are outlined in the consultation materials and so I encourage you to have a read and contribute to the discussions.

Finally, I wish to talk to you about a child's experience through a curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

Through a child's engagement with the curriculum they will foster a sense of identity and belonging by developing their self-awareness, self-confidence, self-esteem and, ultimately, their happiness. Children will share ideas about the world, promoting relationships and friendships with those of different belief backgrounds. As children reflect on their own beliefs and values, and on those of others, they will grow in respect for themselves and others.

Children's active engagement in ethics will contribute to their awareness of the complexities of human behaviour and promote the development of skills and dispositions required to live and contribute in a positive way to a diverse society. Children will develop an acceptance of the right to hold a particular belief or attitude; they will be sensitive to the diversity of religions and beliefs and the contribution this diversity makes to the richness of society. Children will engage in and promote communication and dialogue between people of different cultural, religious and non-religious backgrounds; they will learn how to contest prejudice and the worst effects of stereotyping.

I remember listening to Sir John Jones at the IPPN conference a few years ago, some of you may have been at it. He spoke about an old phrase we have used in teacher education that: 'Children don't remember what you teach them, they only remember how you make them feel.'

We are lucky in our education system that we continue to attract the highest calibre of people to train as teachers. Our schools implement a myriad of wonderful initiatives in the areas of inclusion and multi-cultural education. However, the State curriculum as it currently stands, does not provide time and space for teachers to support all children in a really important aspects of their learning - namely religions, beliefs and ethics.

Now we are at the early stages of thinking about these concepts, and what they mean for the Irish context, and so I encourage everyone to contribute to our consultation; read our proposals, fill out an online questionnaire or attend one of events around the country; and have your say on what will become an important feature of the primary school curriculum.

ICT across the Curriculum

Robbie O'Leary

Thank you very much for coming and it is my privilege to be asked to speak here today and I hope that what I have to say will be of interest to everybody here.

Let me set out my stall from the beginning. Technology in the curriculum is the theme. In my opinion technology isn't a curriculum subject nor should it be. It is a cross curricular resource. Secondly, I spent at this stage one third of my career as a principal, before that I was a class teacher and a learning support teacher. One thing that I really believe is that everything in the classrooms starts with engagement. If the children are engaged, learning is possible and the reverse is also the case. I spent most of last night and most of this afternoon tossing and turning wondering where to start and I decided to start with things I know about and things that are going on in my own school. I don't have too long and I have more questions for you than answers because I am not going to pretend that I have all the answers because I don't. I have some opinions, some suggestions, and some interesting quotations.

I am going to start by introducing you to a little dog called FIDI. FIDI cost €10 for the Irish Guide Dogs website and he got his name from a *Cornenius* project we were involved in, Finland, Ireland, Denmark and Italy. FIDI was the mascot and the idea was that FIDI would go home with children in each country, they would take some photographs, they would write about where they went and that all of this would be published for all of the children in all of the countries to read about. It had limited success but in my school, this took off like a rocket. I am not going to spend too long talking about FIDI. There was hint of romance at one point, he did go to Finland and interestingly there the children were using workbooks. One particular day we nearly lost FIDI - one of the huskies nearly took the head off him and we just managed to rescue him. The reports that were generated, were typed up with the photographs and put on display in the school and I really didn't know if this was going to take off. The first pupil who asked to take FIDI home was a lad in 6th class and he was going boxing. He wanted to bring FIDI with him take some photographs and write about it. I wondered would he be the subject of some ridicule, would other kids say anything to him about having a furry dog under his arm? And I asked him was he sure and he said I'm sure. I asked him was he worried that people might say something to you and he said, no I'm not. So I checked with him on Monday and nobody said anything. Don't forget he was a boxer. This is the type of report that was generated and what began to happen. My school is a senior school, 3rd to 6th class, children of all ages and all abilities were queueing up outside my door to bring FIDI somewhere. Now no creature should have to go to a One Direction concert but poor FIDI did. He went to Florida and Torremolinos and he really had a wonderful time. He has retired now sitting in my office and once or twice he even left the M50 and headed west. I was really quite surprised one day when our school football team who are quite an intimidating looking bunch, insisted on having FIDI in the team photograph.

So, individual children brought FIDI home and also any time a class went somewhere on a trip again there was a queue outside my office of people asking could they be in charge of FIDI. We bought a little camera for a €100. I mentioned FIDI for two reasons, first of all to make this point, you do not need the most expensive, shiniest top of the range equipment in your school to do interesting, engaging activities with pupils. There are lots of things that you can do with that computer you got 10 years ago. For this project,

you need a computer with a word processor, a colour printer and a digital camera that's all. The second point I would make about the FIDI project is this, I think while it is a really good method of engaging the children, the FIDI project begins with curricular objectives - it starts with curriculum. It is writing and reading. The function of technology is to enhance that. The third point I would make about it is that all pupils no matter what age or ability level, I've lots of kids with special needs in my school, the work that was produced on the corridor, the work they brought home was all of an equally high standard. So that is why I wanted to show you FIDI, just to make those points.

Now I am going to go back to my main presentation which is here. Having set the scene and I have four questions for you, this is the first one – what's your school like? Second point I want to make is, I copied and pasted the aims, principles and features of the primary school curriculum and almost without exception technology can enhance the attainment of every single point. You could make a case for them all actually:

Generation after generation, parents raised their children to use the tools with which they were familiar. Later on, some of the more ingenious children tweaked their ancestors' tools and invented new ones. But never before the advent of electronic computers and, more recently, of Internet-based services, did such a large fraction of humanity change their everyday habits and tools in such a short time. Within a couple of decades, the tools used in most trades and for such basic acts as communicating, gathering information, keeping records of the past or drawing plans about the future were replaced by digital ones. For the first time, today's parents and teachers have little, if any, experience with the tools that children are going to use every day in their adult lives.

OECD, September 2015, Students, Computers and Learning: making the connection

Recently you probably read in the paper, that the OECD said that there was no evidence that technology improves attainment, and I will return to that in a few moments. But I thought this was a particularly good point, 'for the first time, today's parents and teachers have little, if any, experience with the tools that children are going to use every day in their lives'. This is the first time in history that that has been the case. Which presents an enormous challenge to teachers and to schools because we are preparing children for a future that we cannot describe because the present is changing so quickly:

Giving our students the opportunity to develop 21st century skills is a priority. Technology is embedded in all aspects of our lives, and is bringing our society new advantages and solutions every day. I want to encourage all teachers to use technology in the classroom to bring learning to life for students; to give learners the tools to collaborate and to examine engaging problems; to research and analyse information; and to use digital resources to communicate their ideas and to share what they create with others beyond the walls of their classroom or school.

Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan, October 2015

Our Minister recently said this at the publication of the ICT Strategy five-year policy and she talks about developing 21st century skills. The month before that our Chief Inspector Mr Hislop said pretty much the same thing:

We have committed ourselves to embedding 21st century skills strongly in the teaching and learning of subjects. We want to provide and reward learning experiences that promote not only critical thinking, but also collaboration, creativity, innovation and inventiveness –attributes that will be absolutely necessary if we are to equip young people to tackle the challenges of changing economies and the moral, societal and environmental challenges that arise in a globalised world.

Dr Harold Hislop, Chief Inspector, September 2015

What are they? Many of the writers mention collaboration, creativity, innovation, inventiveness and problem solving and the question is are we developing these skills in our pupils? Here is another quote:

The need to integrate technology into teaching and learning right across the curriculum is a major national challenge that must be met in the interests of Ireland's future economic wellbeing.

Schools IT 2000 strategy document, 1997

Can anybody guess who said that? It was in the Schools IT 2000 strategy document from 1997, 18 years ago. So, in other words the politicians are saying the same thing over and over again and to be honest they are doing very little, over and over again. The strategy document is to be welcomed as it acknowledges the fact that technology is a very important part of our lives and we need to embed the use of technology in schools and it says there is money coming but it doesn't say how much or when. It says they are going to improve the broadband. The day before yesterday, and I'm the principal of Ireland's first digital school, I couldn't use the internet. I had to stop because my broadband capacity was down to a trickle, it was raining! It's funny but it is sad. When I was in Finland with FIDI, it wasn't Helsinki but a much smaller city than that. I was in a school that had exactly the same number of pupils as mine, 287 at the time. My broadband connection at that time was 3MB in that school in Finland it was 100MB. Now Finland are ahead of us on the PISA tables.

Another point that was made in the OECD and I couldn't agree with this more 'technology can amplify great teaching, but great technology cannot replace poor teaching'¹⁰. If you think of the FIDI project again it starts with a teacher focussing on curricular objectives and asking the question how technology can achieve those objectives.

Here is the second question for you, in our schools and classes today, what are we doing? Are we doing what was done to us or not? Are we teaching our children what to think or how to think? The second one is much more difficult but it is a question that should be asked. And I think that this is another question that should be asked but this is rough and generalised. If you think about what is happening in classrooms at any one particular time, you could have a teacher at the top of the class teaching or instructing or talking. You could have children working on their own individually or you could have children working in groups, what percentage is devoted to each of those in your classroom or in your school and is it correct? Should it be changed? I can't answer that for you but I can answer that for my own school and in my own schools some years back I concluded that there was far too much talking going on by one person in every class. Far too much teacher talk. And

¹⁰ Unesco's ICT Competency Framework for Teachers / Andreas Schleicher, OECD Director for Education and Skills [ROL slide 14]

around the same time, we decided we were going to buy some iPads and I bought 12. Even if I had the money for 24 my pupil teacher ratio is 24 to 1, I bought 12 deliberately. When your money comes, however much it will be, I think the main question you should ask yourself is what will the children be doing with this device? Will they be doing it individually or in collaboration with others? I think it is a really important question.

Over the last 20 years these are some of the questions that I have been asked on so many occasions. The very first one 20 years ago was which platform is the best, it is Apple or Acorn but we have moved a bit on from then. Ten years ago it was what interactive whiteboard should I buy, now it is what tablet should I buy. People want to be told what to do. Should we have a computer room, that was another one. What I am suggesting here today is that these are the wrong questions to ask. If you start with those questions you will more than likely end up in the wrong place and I have seen this too many times. Really if we are thinking of putting more technology into our schools we start with the curriculum and we end with the technology and the first question that we need to ask is what are the needs of the pupils? What areas are we working on? We are all doing our self-evaluations at the moment so those answers shouldn't be too difficult to find. Is it problem-solving, is it collaboration, spelling, writing, Gaelge, what is it? The next question then is, can technology help us as a school to enhance the attainment of those objectives? And again that central question, what do we want the children to be doing with the technology? We must ask that question before we decide what technology to buy not after! There is so many stories going around of schools that have gone out and bought 24 iPads or whatever it is and they brought them into the school and they are lovely, and then what will we do now? Unfortunately, that is the reality. So I'm suggesting that those people started in the wrong place, start with the needs of the pupils and the school and work from there. If you go through that process you will arrive at the correct answer in terms of what hardware we need.

Obstacles

At the moment these are the issues, roadblocks or obstacles. The first one 'absence of a clearly articulated vision' I think has been approached somewhat in the last document in that the Government has made clear what they feel technology is for, there is a vision there. But the next one 'lack of funding/investment' when is the money coming and how much are we getting? Not knowing that makes it impossible to plan. In the document, it emphasises the importance of planning and when the Cigire calls to your school they will be asking you what planning is happening in your school. It is impossible to plan in a vacuum. The broadband we have already mentioned, is a joke. Support is also an issue and what is happening on the ground is that many parents are doing it. This is a major problem the Department and Minister are aware of it but there is no movement. There must be somebody in the school other than the principal prepared to drive the technology agenda forward and to share some of the donkey work. While there are no or very few ICT co-ordinators in schools we are going to go nowhere fast.

Optimum Conditions

Going back to FIDI, the OECD report mentions that technology has fantastic potential but it hasn't been realised and I know from my own research and my own Masters and from all the experience over the years that there are actually six elements that need to be in place for this potential to be realised.

1. The first one is that there actually has to be technology in schools for it to be used and the more of it there are the more likely it will be used.
2. Secondly, the higher the specification the more that can be done with it and that included connectively i.e. broadband.
3. Thirdly, this is not such an issue anymore so much as it used to be, the availability of high quality applications or software appropriate to the needs and abilities of the learners. Most spaces are covered by now and a lot of it is free or inexpensive.
4. The role of the teacher is crucial in terms of the orchestration of the environment with regards to grouping and opportunities for interaction. How many people are working together, what are they doing and which kids are working together.
5. This one is really important too, how clear the teacher is in terms of what the technology is for. If there is confusion over that the learning will be confused if it happens at all.
6. Finally, exemplary teaching with computers is more like to occur when there is a full-time ICT co-ordinator employed in the school, when training and development opportunities are plentiful and ongoing and when a principle-led climate for productive technology use is present.

When those six elements are in place things will begin to happen. I think it is interesting that those six elements, four of them are outside the control of the school and the teacher. In other words, government policy. It is disingenuous for the government to emphasise continually the important of developing 21st century skills in schools when they won't give the teachers the resources to do it.

I just want to go back to FIDI, I started with FIDI and will finish with FIDI. I think this is very appropriate in terms of where we started. Producing sophisticated learning is a function of the sophistication of the conversation that surrounds the use of technology, in other words, all the most important things in education happen when there are people interacting with other people. The technology is not the most important thing at all, it is the catalyst, it is what draws the children in, it is what engages them and when you are thinking like that, wonderful things are possible.

Stanley Pogrow (quoted in Healy, *Failure to Connect*, 1999)

Producing sophisticated learning is a function of the sophistication of the conversation that surrounds the use of the technology – not the sophistication of the technology. (p.131)

My final point is this, when I was appointed principal 12 years ago there were no interactive whiteboards in classrooms, we used telephones to make phone calls, nobody had heard of YouTube or Facebook, there were no tablets there were laptops and desktops, nobody knew what cloud computing was. Now pupils in my school are using applications in school that they can continue working on at home 24 / 7 and many of them do. If you wanted to do a course 12 years ago you had to leave your house. Look at the changes that have taken place in that short period of time. What more changes are

going to happen? We can't even imagine what they are and yet we are trying to prepare children for this future which is changing unbelievably quickly. How do we do that?

The four questions I asked you were:

1. What is your school like?
2. Are we teaching our children what to think or how to think?
3. I asked you to think about the profile of time spent on different types of activity in the school.
4. I asked you are we preparing our pupils as effectively as we can for this future that we cannot describe.

These are separate questions but really it is one question, it is the same question.

Thank you very much.

Keynote Address

Anne Looney, NCCA

(Pause for reflection after attacks in Paris)

It may seem very odd after two days of curriculum talk that you are coming in to listen to me talking about what the curriculum is and where it might be found. That may seem slightly strange. However, I think that our NCCA survey, your discussion document and all your deliberations over the last couple of days point to the fact that curriculum has multiple representations. That doesn't mean that it is in a book or that it is online but I think it is found in different places and that it is encountered differently in different ways. What I hope to say to you today is about that complexity particularly as we move on from our 16 year old primary school curriculum. It struck me when I was reading your discussion document that the curriculum is as old as my nephew. Now he has just started shaving and also we had the experience in the family where he wouldn't sit beside his mother at the county final recently because he was going with his girlfriend. His world has completely changed and his priorities have completely changed. He is a young adult even though as his mother would like to say that sometimes she wishes he wasn't.

Sixteen years is a long time, we have quite possibly one of the oldest primary curricula in Europe and we still talk about it as if it was new. We do certainly in NCCA. I know when we bring the new language curriculum out and begin to talk about ERB and Ethics in the curriculum, people talk about the curriculum is changing again when we have only just got our heads around the other one. When we celebrated the 10th anniversary of the primary school curriculum six years ago and began looking how Ireland was changing, we looked back to 1999 and to the kind of country that Ireland was when that curriculum was launched and it was indeed a different place. For children, schools, for teachers, it was a very different world.

How schools cope with the different world varies. Many of you will have heard before that one of my favourite quotations in education comes from an American historian of education called Larry Cuban and Larry says 'if society has an itch, schools get scratched' I know in the course of your deliberations and in your discussion paper you talk about that pressure on schools to respond to everything because it is the place where children are gathered and where you have the captive audience. Teachers are the people who work with them so you can feel that you are the bottom of a funnel where all of those things get poured in. The teacher is at the bottom of the funnel with the large class outside and is the person expected to 'deliver' it all. We all know that feeling. But there are other ways to think about curriculum. I think of the work of that great Irish researcher, Jim Spillane working in the States, a global superstar in the world of educational research, a St Pat's graduate and primary teacher from here now working at Northwestern University in the States. He did a great piece of work where they tracked teachers going through a process of curriculum change in mathematics and researchers sat in on the CPD sessions so heard what the teachers heard about the new curriculum. Then they followed the teachers back into their staffrooms and back into their schools and interviewed them over a period of time about the changes in the curriculum. You won't be surprised to know that by the time they had got back to school every teacher had heard something different about what the new curriculum was going to be. They had all heard different messages about what was prioritised in the change, what was important in the teaching and learning because you approach the new curriculum from the perspective of the curriculum you know and from your own passions in education!

It is extremely difficult to isolate **the curriculum** from the **curriculum as constructed by the teachers** and that is what I am going to talk about a bit today.

You know that I spent the last year in Australia. My NCCA colleagues have already started telling me that I can stop talking about it now, with my tales of endless sunshine and blue seas. I have parked my surf board outside! But I am going to refer a little bit to the experience in Australia as it is very relevant and very different but it shows how we do curriculum here is quite unique and I am also going to draw a bit on the paper that I wrote in *The Irish Teachers' Journal*, an exciting new development from the INTO. I want to begin with the quote I used at the start of the article, which was a quote from a journalist writing about Michael Gove. He was the former Education Secretary in England and he had a very particular view of the school curriculum. He also ensured that his view was the one that was written in to the school curriculum, but in response, Simon Jenkins, a journalist in the Guardian wrote these fantastic couple of lines:

Nothing appeals to a politician as much as the chance to rewrite a curriculum. He would not dare operate on a brain tumour, or land a jumbo jet or design the Forth Bridge. But let him near a classroom, and the Jupiter complex takes over. He goes berserk. Any fool can teach. And the existing fools are no good at it. Napoleon might lose the battle of Waterloo, but he reformed the French curriculum.

Simon Jenkins

And Michael Gove did the same. He also reformed teacher education and he also changed the way children are assessed in schools all on a single chain of command. He had a direct line into the school curriculum. He could say I would like the curriculum to be changed in this way and that simply happened. He wiped out all the intervening agencies, there were lots of contesting voices but they had no place in it. And I thought that was at best an unconventional way of doing curriculum ... and then I went to Australia. The Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority, ACARA, had just finished its work on a new curriculum for Australia - in fact some of the way it does things, in particular using examples of student work, and using those for grounding in the curriculum, had influenced the NCCA's way of doing things. I arrived to find that they were in the middle of a curriculum review already. They hadn't actually introduced the new one, but post-election, the new government had decided that it would review the curriculum. And how it would do it was remarkable. It appointed these two men, Kevin Donnelly and Ken Wilshire, to do the job. I spent all week trying to find an Irish equivalent and I ended up with David Quinn and Ed Walsh. Both of whom I have great respect for but somewhat less for the sets of views that they represent! It would be as if the Minister announced that I have asked David Quinn and Ed Walsh to review the curriculum and to advise it and then we will tell the NCCA how to do it.

I thought it was an unusual way of doing business but it also bothered me that it was not seriously challenged. People spoke about waiting for the review report but there was no sense in which people felt that a two-man job wasn't the way to do curriculum. I was puzzled as I tried to learn the dynamics of another system. Then in February of this year in a discussion about initial teacher education, one of the newspapers published an opinion piece about the qualifications that you needed to become a teacher. There was a concern being expressed that they needed to make the bar higher so they would get and I quote 'smarter teachers'. The article filled a whole page and I took a photograph of the picture that travelled with the article and I said. when I come back to Ireland I am going to show this to everyone, and the first group I am going to show this to is the INTO. This is the picture and it took up half a page in *The Australian*.



And then I understood why you could appoint two individuals to reform the curriculum and people would not be up in arms. I used this picture in a seminar in Australia for teachers for the 21st century and as I was presenting it I said that when I saw this picture I thought to myself, well that is going to cause uproar! Surely by noon there will be mayhem. *The Australian* will be forced to withdraw this picture, teachers' spokespersons will be out to say that if you represent teachers in this way you will never get people to become teachers, if you represent teachers in this way you are doing untold damage to the status of the teaching profession and ultimately you are biting the hand that feeds you. But there wasn't a word, beyond one letter the following day in the newspaper. And at the seminar I made this point about how surprised I was. In the discussion that followed quite a number of people said they did see the picture but didn't notice that there was anything wrong with it, and these were people who were working in teacher education and as teachers. Then I realised what the issue was in terms of the curriculum. The way you see curriculum is completely bound up with the way you see teachers and the way you value their work. If you see the teaching profession as not to be trusted if you see them as in this way (picture) then how you define curriculum and the curriculum that you give them to work with is going to be very different than in an Irish context where we view teachers completely differently.

When I saw this picture, I could hear Sheila Nunan on *Morning Ireland*, I thought that the INTO would be on like a shot challenging this. There would be uproar about this. In fact, it just wouldn't happen in an Irish context. I hope it never does, we will be watching out! Twenty years ago, when the NCCA was established, it was one of many organisations across the world where teachers were actively included in the business of curriculum and assessment development. Since then a lot has changed and when we started out there was a Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in England, Learning Teaching Scotland very like the NCCA, there was ACCAC which was a Welsh acronym which I won't even try but it was the Wales equivalent of the NCCA. All are now gone and curriculum is determined centrally in those three countries. In Scotland, Education Scotland includes some teacher representation and you may be following debates in Scotland where there is a controversy over the Curriculum for Excellence being introduced in schools and being undermined by a programme of national testing also being introduced by a government under pressure from poor literacy test scores.

In Northern Ireland, they have a curriculum council but teachers are not represented there by right as they are in the NCCA. There are only two of us left in Europe - the Netherlands and the Republic of Ireland. All of the others have been subsumed directly under ministerial control.

In NCCA we value the fact, and continue to value the fact, that we have a 25-person board nominated by the education partners, that teachers have a direct line into curriculum development and we also reflect that in how we do our work and continue to do our work. Certainly, in Australia when I represent this way of working and this engagement with teachers to them it was something that they hadn't experienced in many years.

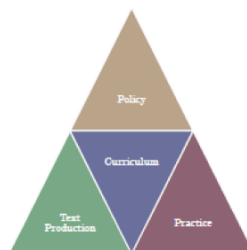
'A sometimes mysterious process'



Gary Granville, formally of the NCCA, said the way curriculum was developed before the NCCA was a mysterious process. Nobody ever knew how it was done. Now we are quite up front about the four phases of our work and you will have heard some of this yesterday. You participated in one of those phases yesterday and again in consultation and this morning. We conduct research, we find out what is going on in the field, we look at what is happening in other countries. I want to say that I am not a fan of policy borrowing; I think what works in other places you need to learn from it but you can never transport it directly in, just like you can never transport what we do directly out. You can learn, but I think everything has to be constructed in its own country.

So, we conduct research, we carry out consultations, we have deliberations in development groups and boards on which teachers are represented and we also use school networks. In the last decade, we worked with teachers in classrooms so the examples of students' work and the videos that you saw around the language curriculum are made by real teachers in real classrooms and when you see the videos that accompany the language curriculum bear in mind that if it is a bit blurry it was because there was a teacher holding an iPad up in a classroom. There wasn't a camera person in there filming that they were real teachers in real classrooms. We continue to foreground that engagement in our work, it doesn't happen in sequence, we don't get to do research first and then consultation, and then deliberation and then networks, sometimes it happens all at once. Sometimes what happens with what we learn in networks may challenge the research and teacher may say that is what the research says but in our classrooms, it seems to work differently. And we value all four parts of the process.

One view of curriculum....



Another view of curriculum that I have come across and worked with myself as a researcher was the work of Stephen Ball who is a policy theorist, in fact I think he gave the Vere Foster lecture a couple of years ago. His view of the curriculum is that there are three *locations* involved. There is the place where you devise the curriculum policy, then you write the curriculum text down the bottom of the triangle and then you put it into practice. He said there were three contexts; context of policy production, context of the text and the context of practice. I used this in my own doctoral research because I wanted to find out where teachers positioned themselves in this process. Not surprisingly most teachers position themselves in practice. But unexpectedly when I interviewed teachers I found a very significant difference between primary and post-primary teachers.

Both primary and post-primary teachers positioned themselves in the bottom triangle (practice). Primary teachers also presented themselves as having a whole other triangle so they saw themselves as being involved locally as devising a school policy as preparing the schools version of the curriculum and then putting it into practice.

Post-primary teachers had an entirely different perspective. While primary teachers saw themselves as curriculum and policy *makers*, post-primary teachers saw themselves as curriculum and policy *implementers*. Primary teachers wanted time to plan and discuss, post-primary teachers wanted clarity and instructions; primary teachers wanted local flexibility but post-primary teachers wanted to know what was in the exam.

What was clear was that one of the differences between the primary and post-primary system was actually how teachers relate to the curriculum and how they engage with curriculum. It may be the examination, it may be the subject focus, it may be a whole different set of issues but I think it is worth noting that the tradition in Irish primary education is not just of participating in the development of the national curriculum it is at local level, it is using the curriculum as one of the tools to design learning. Now it is clear that in Australia and in England that sort of behaviour is not encouraged as what the minister says goes. If teachers are presented as rather 'stupid' then we will design curriculum that will overcome any choice or flexibility that they have.

In Irish context we need to design a curriculum for a teaching force that sees itself as curriculum makers and we have to build a curriculum that can do that. When Sarah was presenting the language curriculum yesterday and focussing on children's learning, what we are trying to do in representing the curriculum in that way is trying to avoid the list of content that you must deliver in classrooms and to try instead build on the traditions of primary teachers as curriculum makers. So, when you head out to your CPD sessions and you find yourselves involved in planning and groups and devising try and remember that! What we are trying to do is to build on that tradition.

But there are things that work against this tradition and some of them have really come home to roost recently. I suppose it is about where is the curriculum is - it the books or the website, is it in teachers and schools? Colleagues in NCCA have recently begun the preparatory work on mathematics, and as the first piece of engagement we organised some of the focus groups meetings that have been going on around in education centres. This was a very simple activity where we asked education centre directors to gather a few teachers with interest in mathematics and we will just talk to them. What is maths like? What are the issues in schools? Despite these simple questions, incredibly impressive discussions have taken place about the mathematics curriculum in the context of those. It is clear when listening to the teachers and looking at what they said that have the language of the mathematics curriculum; they live and breathe the strand and strand units. They spoke the maths curriculum. And they spoke about how much they liked the maths curriculum and how much they found the mathematics curriculum was enjoyed by the children, something we picked up very early on after the 1999 curriculum in our review of mathematics. We were one of the few countries that recorded that they actually enjoyed maths, the working with concrete materials, manipulables, they really enjoyed it. All of that was picked up in the focus group discussions. But something else was picked up too, another curriculum maths language. So, we are now creating a bilingual mathematics classroom but not in the way that you might think. The first was the language of the curriculum; the second language was the language of school policies. Teachers spoke about how the language of mathematics curriculum in the school policy for maths. They often felt constrained because the policy said in 'third class we will have done x, so if I didn't do x I felt I was in trouble. Parents expected x to happen in third class. Or if x was happening in third class in a school down the road word would get out

that x wasn't happening in our school till 4th class and are we just a little bit behind'. So teachers saw that the public representation of the local curriculum plan was actually something that was impacting on their engagement with the maths curriculum.

Can you guess what was next in the challenges identified for the mathematics curriculum? Standardised tests were impacting on children on teachers' articulation of the mathematics curriculum down to the point where one teacher said 'I have to tell you that I look at the tests and if I look at the way that they are asking kids to do fractions is not the way that I am teaching fractions, I am changing the way that I am teaching fractions'. These focus groups are anonymised and we are not going to find these people and hunt them down and they are a focus group so we don't know if that is reflective of the general population but in taking these soundings, and that is what we are calling them, we found that a very interesting piece. The focus groups also found that teachers reported that because mathematics was one of the subjects in which there are standardised tests they felt a pressure in mathematics that they did not feel in other areas, and that was affecting how they were interpreting the mathematics curriculum. And equally because they had to report to parents on the STEN score on the standardised mathematics test, they felt they had to change the language that they were talking about maths in to parents. So they found increasingly parents saw mathematics as the test score and not the mathematics curriculum. And the third challenge?, text books. Two interesting observations about textbooks. A thing I didn't know about Australia until I went there and visited a primary school to meet some teachers and I asked them about text books and they said no, this is a primary school. And I said yes, and they said we don't have text books in primary schools - which they don't. I said we do in Ireland and they said why? There's a good question as to how we have evolved such a huge text book industry. And as for our maths text books and the quality of our maths text books – well ... There has been some research and evaluation done and our books are very focused on routine drill and practice. They are some way from providing support to higher order thinking that teachers are trying to do, but in our focus groups the teachers said they feel under pressure to use the text books because there is an expectation from parents that they will 'finish the book' There is an expectation from colleagues and there is a public expectation also. I suspect going forward and as we begin to work on the language curriculum as we begin to talk about ERB and as we move into mathematics I'm predicting that one of the big debates about the 2016 primary curriculum will be about text books and their role in Irish education and their place in our classrooms. Because if we have a teaching force that defines itself by curriculum planning, that values its local flexibility, that wants to create a curriculum for its own students and own school, then there are questions about the place of text books in those classrooms. There may be a big public message that we need to get out about what text books can and cannot do and some of it is about engaging with parents on these issues.

I think the final point I want to make is about that teacher piece. How we think about curriculum is bound up by or views of children, absolutely. You would have heard that in the discussion on ERB and you will hear it in the language curriculum. But I strongly believe it is also bound up with how we view teachers. It is the lesson I am bringing back from Australia. I think it is how we talk about the school curriculum and how we understand curriculum is bound up with how we view the teaching profession. If we see teachers as professionals, as knowledgeable, as confident, as knowing their stuff, if we believe that classrooms are places where technically complicated work happens then ministers are not likely to try and reinvent the school. Teachers suffer chronically because it is such a public profession because your job is to make it look simple and because everybody has been taught and therefore everybody knows how to do it.

I have a colleague who went back to school after an extended period of time with the NCCA. When I met her and she staggered in after dealing with her 2nd class students, I said to her what is the one thing the one big difference that she noticed. And she said 'well it is remarkable in the time that I have been away from the classroom, the number of parents who appear to have had an opportunity to have taken a PhD in education'. She was being facetious but she spoke about parents' genuine concern and interest resulting in their appearing at her classroom every morning with an article that they had read on the internet or some really useful thing about teaching or reading and it was a good dialogue, but she said it was unexpected. How to engage in that dialogue with parents and how to encourage parents to be interested but to recognise teacher expertise, makes for a good dialogue, but one that needs a careful balance.

So, I think we need to represent curriculum as complex work. I think when the curriculum is issued we need to be quite clear that it is something that we expect teachers to use to design the curriculum in their own classrooms. And my final point is that curriculum reflects a vision of the child but how curriculum is viewed reflects a vision of the teacher.

My final point relates to the issue of time. Next year the NCCA has the unenviable job of advising government on time allocation in primary school. That there isn't enough of it to do what you want to do is a given. That we are not going to get any more of it, is also a given, we won't be getting any more time. So, it is about how we organise time. There is limited time. There is something about daily guidelines that doesn't sit well with the idea that teachers can have some choices or that schools can have some flexibilities and there are other ways of specifying and organising that time. But watch that debate, because the time that children spend in primary school and the time that they spend engaged with different aspects of the curriculum reflects what we value about children and how we view teachers. Everything is going to converge in that debate. So we will have lots of debates that begin by saying the arts are really important for children but... we will have lots of debates that say I am all for flexibility but... I think teachers should have a choice about how they organise their school say but... you could go on. I think we will have very interesting debates and they will converge not around the aims of the primary curriculum or the rationale for the primary curriculum or what the purpose of primary curriculum is they will converge about the time issue. I really am up for it. I think it will be a very interesting debate, I think when we advise government it will be interesting to see how that advice is taken. It is good that they have asked us to advise knowing how we engage. We have begun to look at what happens in other countries - you can already see that on our website - but I look forward to engaging with you in the months ahead.

Thank you very much.

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Reports from Discussion Groups

Introduction

Delegates attending the conference were divided into groups which were facilitated by members of the Education Committee, to explore the themes addressed in the discussion document and by the various presenters. Members of the Education Committee also acted as rapporteurs. Reports from the different groups have been collated and are presented below under a number of thematic headings.

The Primary School Curriculum

There was a general consensus that effective in-service was provided for teachers during the implementation of the curriculum. The curriculum was commended for being child-centred and active. There was a general view that the curriculum was varied and comprehensive. There was praise for the integrative and thematic approach to teaching advocated in the current curriculum. More collaborative learning and group work has emerged from the curriculum. However, the delegates expressed the view that it wasn't designed for inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN). Teachers found it challenging to accommodate children with SEN within the current provisions set out in the curriculum. Particular concern was expressed regarding the Irish language curriculum. The issues included vagueness of grammar and too much emphasis on oral language. The issue was raised as to whether children with EAL should be obliged to learn Irish. There were proposals for increased mental health awareness content within the curriculum and calls were made for a framework to be developed in SPHE. The discussions highlighted the issue of curriculum overload. Teachers are experiencing increasing pressure to fulfil the obligations set out in the curriculum. Assessment, recording and planning notes for inspectors create the greatest curriculum overload. Demands were made for more flexibility and the possibility of standardised planning was proposed. The delegates commented that the previous curriculum provided more flexibility for the teacher with the same emphasis on the child's needs. It was the view that teachers in the multi-grade setting are particularly challenged in terms of planning. It was proposed that more of a connection should exist between the primary and post-primary curriculum to ensure continuity.

Environment-based learning

There was general agreement that the environment can provide practical applications for classroom learning. It was suggested that environment-based learning allowed children to 'learn through osmosis' in a natural, organic and indirect way in a new setting. Environment-based learning allows for integration and more meaningful

learning experiences. Exploring local history and maths trails were identified as examples of environment-based learning. It was agreed that environmental learning fosters a strong 'sense of place' and cultivates an appreciation for the local area. The delegates highlighted the diverse range of learning opportunities which arise from the school garden including bug hunts, identifying fruit and vegetables, composting, making food/salads to name but a few. Reference was also made to the use of the classroom environment as a stimulus for learning by incorporating a print-rich environment and interactive displays. Exploring the local environment presented varying challenges for rural and urban schools. There was widespread agreement that when planning for environment-based learning consideration must be given to the challenges faced by teachers including issues with classroom size, resources, funding, supervision, insurance, time and preparation. Infant teachers agreed that environment-based learning is an integral part of the Aistear programme and can be incorporated by using outdoor classrooms, school gardens and playground markings.

Time

Delegates expressed many views regarding proportions of time in the revised curriculum. There was a general view that timetables should be flexible to allow teachers to use their professional judgement and prioritize where deemed necessary. If the suggested time framework is too prescriptive and rigid, it only serves the purpose of meeting inspectoral commitments. There was a consensus that the curriculum is overloaded and time management is an ongoing challenge. The time pressure teachers are experiencing is compounded by the expectation to engage with additional external initiatives. Delegates outlined that integration and thematic teaching are often used as effective time-saving measures but they are not always feasible. There was a view that more time should be allocated to maths and particularly to problem-solving. Other subject time allocations are compromised to meet the demands of the core subjects of English, Irish and mathematics. One teacher suggested that the re-allocation of additional time to the core subjects was a reaction to the PISA report and the pressure for accountability. One teacher also called for a reduction in the time allocated to the Irish language. Proposals were made for INTO to include a resource section on the website with schemes and planning materials to support teachers and facilitate better time management.

Textbooks

There were conflicting views on the role of the textbook in the classroom. Delegates considered textbooks to be a creative tool when used carefully and used in conjunction with other resources. The development of the interactive element of textbooks was welcomed by teachers. A number of delegates felt that textbooks should only be used as a guidance tool rather than dictating the teaching and learning in the classroom. Several teachers were of the opinion that the use of textbooks needed to be balanced with other resources as a teaching aid. Textbooks were commended for providing a home-school link and for providing an anchor but it was reiterated that they should not define teaching content. The teachers praised the book rental scheme but outlined the need for agreement on schemes at school level to ensure coherence and continuity within the school. Teachers felt that the content is not always aligned to the curriculum and textbooks should be reviewed critically. Delegates agreed that textbooks do not address the need for differentiation. Textbooks were also criticised for limiting creative learning, active learning and critical thinking. Fewer textbooks allow for more teacher autonomy and allow for more diverse teaching and learning. Teachers feel pressure to complete the textbooks in order to satisfy the expectations of the parents.

Inclusion

There was general agreement that pupils with special educational needs be included and accommodated in the mainstream setting. Early intervention was identified as the pre-requisite to effective inclusion. Teachers provide for children with SEN by differentiating lessons, adapting the physical environment, arranging in-class support and adjusting teaching methodologies. Teachers argued that the content of the curriculum does not accommodate the needs of the child with SEN. It was acknowledged that while the class teacher has overall responsibility for pupils, teachers felt they were ill-equipped and insufficiently prepared to meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs. Effective inclusion needs to be supported with more SNAs. Teachers also made a request for more support from external agencies specializing in the field of special needs. Delegates in the discussion suggested that the needs of children with SEN would be better met by widening the remit of SNAs allowing them to engage in limited teaching duties when the curriculum is adapted significantly to accommodate the child's needs. It was recommended that a post of responsibility be allocated in each school to support inclusion.

Primary Language Curriculum

Delegates highlighted the need for fewer objectives and additional differentiation guidelines to be included as a priority in the new language curriculum. All agreed that whole-school CPD was essential for the effective implementation of the new Primary Language Curriculum. Teachers expressed concern about the competence and confidence of the link teacher in delivering the content of the new programme to their colleagues. It was suggested that the proposed attendance at in-service for two half-days be incorporated into one full day to accommodate better substitute arrangements. It was agreed that the new programme recognises and accommodates the needs of EAL pupils. Most delegates were of the opinion that the Irish language is being taught well in school in an informal, incidental and cross-curricular way. There was some debate as to whether modern languages should be included in the curriculum. Some teachers felt that there is little room for additional languages in primary schools due to time constraints. This view was challenged by another teacher who felt Irish children were at a disadvantage compared to their European peers.

Assessment

The delegates reported that the most frequently used methods of assessment were teacher observations, peer assessments and portfolios. In most of the schools represented in the discussion groups, children were involved in the process of self-assessment. Pupils used tools such as traffic lights and emoticon faces to illustrate their self-assessment. In order to better inform teaching and learning, teachers require methods of assessment that are more informative than summative. The view of several teachers was that teaching a lesson was more about the process and that outcomes should not be over-emphasised. The teachers shared their diverse views on standardised testing. Most of the teachers in the groups felt that Maths tests, in particular, should be more level appropriate. They felt it was "very stressful" for a child with low ability to be given the same test as a child with stronger ability. There was concern in the group that some teachers taught "towards the test" rather than focusing on the learning, as they considered the results to be a personal reflection of teaching competence and a form of accountability to parents. Teachers felt that standardised tests were not always reflective of curriculum content, particularly in mathematics.

Diverse Classrooms

The feedback at the discussion groups highlighted the various ways socially-inclusive culture is promoted in schools. They include the provision of a diverse range of books in school libraries and hosting Cultural Fair Days. While the current SESE program provides for multi-cultural learning, teachers agree that future curricular provisions could be made to enhance further the intercultural experience of all pupils. There was general agreement that one of the main challenges faced by teachers in the culturally diverse classroom were the communication and cultural barriers with non-Irish parents. Adequate resources were identified as the primary means to overcome the challenges presented. A number of teachers in the discussion groups thought that the curriculum could better suit the needs of children from ethnic minorities. Some of the teachers felt that "a middle class culture" was presented in some books.

Many of the teachers present felt that genuine efforts were being made in their schools to accommodate the growing religious diversity present in Irish classrooms. However, teachers demanded more structured support to accommodate children who do not attend religious instruction. One teacher quoted The Admission to School Bill passed by Education Minister Jan O'Sullivan in 2015, whereby "provisions have to be made for people of different faiths". Teachers relayed their concerns about the proposed ERB and Ethics programme pressurising an over-crowded curriculum. There was agreement that part of the current religious instruction time should be assigned to the new programme.