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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 INTRODUCTION
- 1.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS
- 1.3 AREAS FOR EXPLORATION  
AND ACTION

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has a statutory responsibility to keep under review all aspects of the curriculum for grant-aided schools and colleges of further education and to advise the Department of Education on matters concerned with the curriculum (Education (NI) Order 1998).

The revised Northern Ireland (NI) Curriculum was implemented in schools over a three-year period from 2007. Research has found that other countries, (such as Japan, Switzerland and Finland) evaluate curriculum implementation every 10 years.<sup>1</sup>

In 2018/19, CCEA therefore initiated a curriculum monitoring programme to:

- establish the current level of understanding and engagement with the statutory curriculum in the education system;
- seek views on the extent to which the curriculum has been embedded in schools;
- identify if there are any gaps between intended curriculum, implemented curriculum and achieved curriculum (UNESCO, 2017);
- establish communication and feedback mechanisms between CCEA and the school system; and
- inform next steps in curriculum and qualifications development and support.

The monitoring programme was designed to allow CCEA to hear the views of teachers and other stakeholders about the curriculum. CCEA sought views on:

- the implementation of the curriculum – the benefits and challenges;
- progression and continuity across key stage transitions;
- the effectiveness and relevance of the Cross-Curricular Skills and the Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities;
- assessing progress; and
- awareness and usefulness of CCEA curriculum support materials and areas to prioritise in the future.

This is the first phase of the monitoring programme of work and takes a holistic view of the NI Curriculum, using feedback from schools, teachers and education professionals. Future phases of research will target specific areas and will include learners, parents, further and higher education and employers.

<sup>1</sup> Sargent, C., Byrne, A., O'Donnell S. & White E.. (June 2010). Thematic Probe Curriculum review in the INCA countries. National Foundation for Educational Research NFER. [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130220111733/http://inca.org.uk/Curriculum\\_review\\_probe\\_final\\_01\\_dec\\_2010.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130220111733/http://inca.org.uk/Curriculum_review_probe_final_01_dec_2010.pdf)

## 1.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The following provides an overview of the feedback from those who participated in the curriculum monitoring exercises between December 2018 and June 2019.

It is based on the feedback and views obtained from 382 responses to the curriculum monitoring questionnaire, 82 participants in principals' focus groups, 231 semi-structured interviews conducted during school visits and around 300 participants in subject advisory group discussions. While there were only a few responses to the questionnaire from practitioners in Special Schools and Irish-Medium settings, these were supplemented with school visits.

### 1.2.1 The Implementation of the Curriculum - the Benefits and Challenges

**The central aim, objectives and ethos of the NI Curriculum are well received and schools have embedded these in pupils' learning,** particularly at primary, where thematic approaches encourage connected learning. Teachers like the flexibility to adapt the curriculum to specific contexts and needs and, on the whole, feel that there is an appropriate balance between knowledge, understanding and skills.

**However, when theory is translated into practice, there may be variation in understanding and implementation of the curriculum within schools.** While flexibility is appreciated, this puts more onus on the leadership team in schools and teachers to develop their own approaches. Pupils' experience of the curriculum may depend on levels of teacher confidence or familiarity with, for example, areas such as The World Around Us and digital skills. At post-primary, planning is often based on the content of specifications. Some teachers said they would like more guidance and support to ensure greater consistency in delivery of the curriculum, while retaining flexibility.

**We may need to do more to prepare our learners adequately for future life and work.** Fewer than half of post-primary respondents were positive about this aspect in their schools, feeling that there should be greater connectivity between the curriculum and the qualifications that young people need to enter the world of work. While Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PD&MU) is valued and embedded at primary, Learning for Life and Work (LLW) is not always valued or prioritised at post-primary.

**Curriculum provision is being impacted by external assessment.** Stakeholders reported that preparation for the non-statutory transfer tests in Year 7 and external qualifications at Key Stage 4 can narrow the range of educational experiences for pupils. For example, subjects such as languages and Physical Education (PE), careers (CEAIG) provision and enrichment activities are coming under pressure.

**All would benefit from a refocus on the curriculum, including its purpose and application.** Since the curriculum has been in place for 12 years, there is a need once again to increase awareness of the curriculum and confidence in its delivery. Both primary and post-primary respondents identified the need to promote awareness and understanding of the curriculum in their schools, including its relationship with current key developments, examples of best practice, teaching methodologies and pedagogy.

### 1.2.2 Progression and Continuity across Key Stage Transitions

**There is generally good progression across the key stages at primary,** although some reported that pupils may find it challenging to move from play-based learning at Foundation Stage to the more formal approaches used at Key Stage 1.

**There remain challenges with transition from primary to post-primary.**

Challenges include the transfer of consistent and accurate information from primary to post-primary schools, the cognisance taken by post-primary schools of pupils' previous learning, and the shift in pupil experience from thematic approaches to discrete subjects taught by different teachers.

**There is a particular disconnect from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4 in some schools,** with a shift from the skills emphasis at earlier key stages to an increased focus on content and examination preparation at Key Stage 4. Post-primary representatives were concerned about the balance of the curriculum – in particular, the balance between subject-specific knowledge, understanding and skills – and continuity between Key Stage 3, Key Stage 4 and post-16, with a lack of specified frameworks for progression in key concepts. There are concerns in some schools that content is being concentrated into Key Stage 4 and that assessment methods used may not be consistent with a skills focus.

### 1.2.3 The Effectiveness and Relevance of the Cross-Curricular Skills and the Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities

**The Cross-Curricular Skills remain relevant,** particularly Communication and Using Mathematics, and are well embedded at primary. At post-primary, teachers identified fewer opportunities to address Using Mathematics and Using ICT in some subject contexts, particularly after Key Stage 3.

**Using ICT is less embedded than the other skills.** Teachers reported that digital skills are underdeveloped at Key Stage 3 and that some of the current practice in teaching ICT is dated and narrow and does not account for the wide variety of careers that can be accessed through ICT/digital skills. Respondents welcomed the general move towards teaching coding and computational thinking and some felt that there is a case for more opportunity for the development and embedding of digital skills provision, particularly at Key Stage 3 and across the curriculum.



However, they felt that pupils still need to learn basic IT skills and the broader range of creative technologies. In some schools, pupil learning may be limited by teacher confidence and capability. Teachers reported that they needed access to professional learning opportunities in order to keep up to date with technological developments and that access to equipment and resources such as devices and reliable Wi-Fi can be inhibiting factors.

**The Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities are particularly valued and embedded.**

These are seen to be relevant and innovative, with the majority of teachers at primary and post-primary incorporating opportunities to use them into their planning and seeing the impact in pupils' development of these skills. However, approaches to teaching Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities may be more implicit than explicit, with the skills being seen as intrinsic rather than teachers employing specific strategies for their development.<sup>2</sup> Post-primary teachers are not always clear on their relationship with subject-specific skills and opportunities for skills development are not always prioritised at Key Stage 4, where in some cases there can be a focus on a narrow set of skills, such as information recall, designed to pass examinations. Some respondents also reported that these skills may be less valued as they are not assessed by stakeholders or measured in a meaningful way.

### 1.2.4 Assessing Progress

**Teachers use and value a wide range of assessment methods to support learning,** and Assessment for Learning is well embedded. **The Levels of Progression are more used and valued at primary than post-primary,** and teachers who engage fully with the statutory assessment materials recognise that they provide useful pathways through the skills.

**However, there is a general lack of familiarity with and value given to levels, assessment requirements and external processes such as moderation.** There are concerns about the accuracy and reliability of teacher assessment and the breadth of the Levels of Progression, as well as the availability of reliable and robust assessment information.

Post-primary in particular preferred summative assessment methods such as class tests and commercial assessments to quantify pupils' attainment and progress, particularly when assessment outcomes are used for accountability purposes.

**Continued industrial action has impacted on engagement with, and the implementation of, statutory assessment,** making it difficult to measure its usefulness or the success of its practice.

<sup>2</sup> This is in keeping with recent EEF findings. See <http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/tool/guidance-reports/metacognition-and-self-regulated-learning>

### 1.2.5 Awareness and Usefulness of CCEA Curriculum Support Materials and Areas to Prioritise in the Future

**There are a lot of useful resources and support available to teachers,** with teachers accessing the CCEA website and attending CCEA face-to-face events. However, some teachers felt that they do not always have time to visit the CCEA website, attend events or familiarise themselves with support materials and were not satisfied with the provision of guidance materials at Key Stage 3. Teachers may not always be aware of the range of resources and materials available and find the CCEA website hard to navigate.

**Teachers are conscious of the impact on education of the general pace of change and want to remain up to date with current thinking and pedagogy.** Teachers particularly value having time and opportunities for professional development and face-to-face engagement outside of school, but these opportunities are perceived to be limited.

### 1.2.6 Special Educational Needs

**Educators in Special Schools generally feel that the NI Curriculum is appropriate and has been embedded in pupils' learning in their schools,** providing flexibility to adapt the curriculum to pupils' specific needs. However, some respondents believe that the minimum requirements of the NI Curriculum do not always take account of learners with severe/moderate learning difficulties (SLD/MLD) and that schools can struggle with adapting curricular expectations, particularly in mainstream classrooms.

**Teachers feel it can be challenging to assess and track the progress of pupils with SEN,** even with Prerequisite Skills (Q-Skills)<sup>3</sup>, and qualifications do not always suit learners with SEN. General concerns were raised regarding funding, resources, pupil absences and class size, which are preventing teachers from fully implementing the NI Curriculum.

### 1.2.7 Irish-Medium

**Irish-Medium representatives are generally positive about the NI Curriculum.** They feel that it is structured reasonably well, providing good direction and flexibility.

**Irish-Medium practitioners are positive about existing CCEA resources but feel that there are still significant gaps** and that Irish-Medium teachers are under greater pressure to create their own resources. There is a particular demand for more literacy resources and for a greater variety of post-primary resources in terms of content and language.

<sup>3</sup> The non-statutory Q-Skills for Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT provide a broad and inclusive framework that builds towards Level 1 of the Levels of Progression.

Practitioners felt that there is also a particular need for literacy and numeracy assessments for use in Irish-Medium schools. Current externally available assessments are not felt to be appropriate, as they are targeted at English-medium or designed for the Republic of Ireland school system.

### 1.2.8 Feedback from Subject Advisory Groups

**There are opportunities for progression through all key stages;** participants felt that effective delivery of subject areas incorporates the development and progression of the Cross-Curricular Skills, the Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities and other subject-specific skills, but reported that this is not consistently evidenced in school practice or pupil experience. **There are clear progression routes to post-16 in most subject areas,** although some groups commented that there may be gaps in progression between GCSE and Level 3 qualifications. Groups discussed the importance of industry and employer engagement, alongside ongoing conversations with further and higher education institutions.

**There can be a tension between the degree of prescribed content at Key Stage 3 and in GCSE qualifications.** Some groups felt that a lack of prescribed statutory content at Key Stage 3 has led schools to offer varying subject experiences, leading to contrasting and inconsistent degrees of preparation for Key Stage 4 and GCSE qualifications, while some commented that content heavy GCSE qualifications and overloaded timetables can lead to a lack of focus on skills development once pupils reach Key Stage 4. They reported that **assessment methods are generally appropriate,** but there are some concerns about the amount of content to be covered and the logistical challenges of practical examinations.





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91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	100

## 1.3 AREAS FOR EXPLORATION AND ACTION

Feedback from the CCEA curriculum monitoring programme has identified a number of areas for exploration and action by CCEA with key stakeholders.

You said:	Areas for Exploration and Action
<p>The aim, objectives and ethos of the curriculum remain sound, and it's time to encourage schools to refocus and reflect on the curriculum.</p>	<p>CCEA intends to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>engage with schools and stakeholders to refocus on the approaches to curriculum delivery in schools, drawing on the online materials that are available via the Education Authority, CCEA, the Education and Training Inspectorate and other bodies.</li> </ul>
<p>There may be a narrowing of pupils' curriculum experience at post-primary.</p>	<p>CCEA intends to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>support schools in focusing on appropriate pedagogy and practice at post-primary by developing curriculum planning guidance and support with exemplars of practice, if appropriate or required, for Key Stage 3 to post-16.</li> </ul>
<p>We need to ensure that the curriculum is accessible for pupils with SEN and other vulnerable groups.</p>	<p>CCEA intends to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>work with partners to review and explore the curriculum support required to help teachers make learning meaningful for pupils with SEN, particularly those in mainstream education.</li> </ul>
<p>There may be a need for further curriculum guidance to ensure effective pupil progression.</p>	<p>CCEA is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>developing non-statutory guidance on curriculum progression pathways, giving an overview of subject progression in conceptual knowledge, understanding and skills within the context of the NI Curriculum and across key stages. Subject areas will include the arts, science, digital skills and modern languages.</li> </ul>

You said:	Areas for Exploration and Action
<p>Digital skills within the curriculum needs to keep pace with societal and technological change.</p>	<p>CCEA is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• further developing materials and resources to support its Digital Skills strategy<sup>4</sup>, in line with the House of Lords Report.</li> </ul> <p>CCEA intends to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work with partners to clarify the position of Using ICT and digital skills within the curriculum and explore the extent to which this can deliver appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills in a rapidly changing environment.</li> </ul>
<p>Teachers require access to professional development opportunities for digital skills.</p>	<p>CCEA intends to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• continue to work with partners with responsibility for teacher professional learning to provide and/or highlight opportunities to develop digital skills and outline the benefits to learners, both in discrete delivery and in subject contexts across the curriculum.</li> </ul>
<p>There are issues with how the curriculum can be validly and reliably assessed and measured.</p>	<p>CCEA is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• developing and piloting a range of online assessments to support learning and teaching, including for Irish-Medium.<sup>5</sup></li> </ul> <p>CCEA intends to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• continue to support teachers and school leaders to consider how assessment may best reflect and support the NI Curriculum and provide meaningful and reliable information for stakeholders.</li> </ul>

<sup>4</sup> Information on CCEA's Digital Skills provision and resources across the key stages can be found at [www.ccea.org.uk/digitalskills](http://www.ccea.org.uk/digitalskills)

<sup>5</sup> To date, 73 post-primary schools have participated in trialling literacy and numeracy assessments. Further opportunities to participate will be available from autumn 2019.

You said:	Areas for Exploration and Action
<p>Curriculum provision is being impacted by external assessment, with a focus on examination preparation at Key Stage 4 and Post-16.</p>	<p>CCEA intends to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• explore how we can support schools in offering a balanced curriculum, for example by further engagement with Subject Advisory Groups and principals to look at the range of qualifications taken and assessment approaches to support the aim and objectives of the NI Curriculum at Key Stage 4; and</li> <li>• explore the factors contributing to examination pressure, specifically the burden of assessment on pupils and schools, while ensuring assessment methods remain valid, reliable and rigorous.</li> </ul>
<p>The Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities may not be fully valued because there are not mechanisms in place for them to be assessed.</p>	<p>CCEA intends to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• in the longer term, explore and disseminate educational thinking in relation to valid assessment of Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities.</li> </ul>
<p>We need to ensure that qualifications recognise the achievement of all pupils and provide access to a range of pathways.</p>	<p>CCEA intends to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• keep its qualifications portfolio under review to ensure that they are fit for purpose to support effective progression pathways beyond Key Stage 4.</li> </ul>
<p>Transitions remain a challenge, including from primary to post-primary.</p>	<p>CCEA intends to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work with partners responsible for teacher professional development to ensure that transitions are part of sound pedagogical practice and continue to form part of the teacher professional learning programmes delivered by partner organisations.</li> </ul>
<p>There is a disconnect between pupils' experience of the curriculum up to Key Stage 3 and qualifications at Key Stage 4.</p>	<p>CCEA intends to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• continue to keep under review, and if appropriate revise, GCSE and other Level 2 qualifications to explore how stronger links may be made between the curriculum and qualifications.</li> </ul>

You said:	Areas for Exploration and Action
<p>Teachers want to remain up to date and have access to professional learning opportunities.</p>	<p>CCEA intends to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• continue to work with partners through the Learning Leaders Strategy to identify effective ways to maximise professional learning opportunities, including efficient use of School Development Days; and</li> <li>• work with partners responsible for teacher professional learning to ensure that professional development opportunities focus on appropriate pedagogy in the context of the NI Curriculum.</li> </ul>
<p>It is difficult to find resources on the CCEA website.</p>	<p>CCEA is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• redeveloping its website to make curriculum and qualifications support materials easier to access.</li> </ul>