

# Teachers as curriculum developers

The Irish perspective



We've already seen from the *Project Maths* and *Transition Units* articles in this edition of *info@ncca* how teachers are becoming their own curriculum developers and how the work of the NCCA is now shared between the learning site (in schools and other settings) and the committee site (with NCCA committees and working groups). All of this focus on school-based curriculum development got us to thinking: what skills do teachers need to become curriculum developers and how can we promote and encourage the development of these skills?

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Reflecting on their findings from working with the *Primary School Network* and the *Senior Cycle School Network*, two NCCA education officers presented their thinking to the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) in Vienna last September. The Irish teachers' experiences were presented at a symposium at the conference on *Teachers' competencies for school-based curriculum development: European perspectives*.

### What curriculum decisions do you have to make?

Now you might be thinking to yourself, before we go any further with this, that some parts of our curriculum at primary and post-primary are centrally devised, so what freedom have you as a teacher to develop a curriculum that suits the students in front of you? It is interesting to note that the level of autonomy of teacher curriculum development among the countries represented at the conference varies from our specified centrally devised syllabus to greater levels of freedom, as in the Netherlands. There, Dutch teachers decide within a given context of core attainment targets on what content to teach and what methods of teaching they will use.

In those countries with centrally devised syllabuses, some have very tightly specified courses, while others just offer guidelines. In all countries, teachers have a degree of autonomy around how to teach, what supporting materials to use and the sequence of teaching different areas of the curriculum. It was also surprising how, despite the varying degrees of school autonomy around curriculum development in the different countries, the competencies identified for teacher curriculum development were very similar for all the countries.

### So what are those competencies?

So what sort of competencies do these countries think teachers need for curriculum development? There are long lists of skills that teachers use in their professional lives; however, from the Irish perspective, three competencies were identified as being central to teachers engaging in curriculum development. These are **professional knowledge**, **commitment to change** and **team work**. These are not the only competencies teachers displayed in the work with NCCA, just three of the most obvious ones! They were arrived at

following an analysis of teachers' self-recorded reflections, student reflections, classroom observation and survey results, together with field notes recorded by NCCA education officers.

Teacher **professional knowledge** involved content knowledge (what you teach), general pedagogical knowledge (how you teach) and pedagogical content knowledge (why you teach this way). Teachers' **commitment to change** was closely linked to the quality of the impact of the change on their students. Teachers also needed opportunities to work together (**team work**) to bring about change in their practice. Active learning processes such as discussion, dialogue with colleagues, opportunities to watch other teachers teach, either on video or in person, and opportunities to give and receive feedback were used to facilitate this.



### Are these competencies for me? Or just for teachers in NCCA networks?

Why don't you have a look at some of the learning activities on ACTION and try out some new idea with your class. Then reflect on how it worked and ask your students to reflect on their learning. Invite a colleague into your class to see how you teach and to have a discussion about teaching and learning. The teachers we have worked with tell us that doing this re-energised their teaching and led to improved learning in their classrooms. And that's a big part of curriculum development. Students never get to experience the NCCA curriculum. They only ever get to engage with the one designed by the teacher!