INTRODUCTION

This unit brings together aspects of the Northern Ireland (NI) education context which are most pertinent to student teachers who are learning to teach in NI. It outlines some of the major issues which make schooling in NI different from elsewhere in the UK. The unit then provides an overview of the Revised Curriculum for NI, which totally changes the face of teaching from Foundation to Key Stage 4. It explores some of the major aspects of the Revised Curriculum, such as thinking skills and personal capabilities; assessment for learning and learning intentions. Finally, the unit introduces the new teaching competence framework which articulates specific statements of competence which teachers are expected to demonstrate progressively at different stages throughout their career. Throughout the unit, there are tasks which encourage you to reflect on your progress throughout initial teacher education (ITE) and beyond. The importance of such reflection (and acting on it!) cannot be over-emphasised, as you will see from the story in the final paragraph of the unit.

OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit you should be able to:

- explain the essential issues regarding schooling in NI
- describe the key components of the Revised Curriculum for NI and consider how to integrate these into your subject teaching
- explain the competence framework for ITE in NI and reflect on your level of competence.

Check the requirements for your course to see which relate to this unit.
NORTHERN IRELAND SCHOOLS

It could be argued that most NI schools are divided by religion, academic ability and gender. The history of NI has been dominated by repeated attempts to manage the ‘troubled’ relationship between the Protestant majority and the Catholic minority (Gallagher, 2007). We are faced with a legacy which fostered the development of parallel school systems for Protestants and Catholics. However, in 1981, the first integrated school opened, largely due to the energy and commitment of parents. There are now about 60 integrated schools in NI, comprising approximately 6 per cent of the school age population. Among the rest of the schools, only a small handful has a ‘mixed’ pupil body, and for the majority of pupils, most of their time in school is spent in a context in which their peers and teachers are co-religionists (Gallagher, 2007).

NI schools are also divided by a selective system of secondary education which, until June 2008, required primary schools to prepare pupils for a selective transfer test in which only a set percentage obtained the ‘highest’ grades and gained entry to the academic grammar schools.

There are also a relatively high proportion of single-sex schools. Only a minority of schools are directly controlled by local authorities: all the Catholic schools, most of the integrated schools and all of the high status voluntary (Protestant and Catholic) grammar schools sit outside local authority control (Gallagher, 2007).

Most secondary student teachers study through one of the two universities, both of which are mixed in terms of religion and gender. However, most primary student teachers study in either Stranmillis University College (mostly Protestant) or St Mary’s University College (mostly Catholic).

Set against this background, ITE courses for all student teachers in NI provide student teachers with opportunities to consider how they, as future teachers, can best promote reconciliation and tolerance in post-conflict NI.

Task 7.6.1 CONSIDER THE IMPACT OF THE NI SCHOOL CONTEXT ON YOUR TEACHING

Select one of the key characteristics of NI schools (e.g. religion; gender; academic selection) and articulate ways you might adapt your teaching in the different school contexts.

THE (REVISED) NORTHERN IRELAND CURRICULUM

Background

The Education Reform Order (1989) introduced a ‘Common’ Curriculum for NI. A series of reviews was undertaken and changes were introduced in 1993 and 1996. after which schools were given an understanding that there would be no further changes to the statutory curriculum for the next five years, until 2001. The Curriculum Council for Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) undertook a curriculum monitoring programme in the school year 1997–1998. This programme garnered teachers’ views on the curriculum and held a series of conferences to stimulate debate about the future curriculum (Curriculum 21 Conferences Report, 1998). CCEA also commissioned a major cohort study which collected the views of almost 3,000 pupils in 51 schools (Harland et al., 2002). In summary, these studies suggested that pupils considered that the current curriculum:
lacked balance and breadth
should be more relevant and enjoyable

The studies suggested that teachers felt that there was:

- too much emphasis on content
- too little emphasis on emotional, social, cultural and moral development.

In addition to these studies, other influences included studies on thinking skills and neuroscience, information and communications technology (ICT) initiatives, European trends and advice from the business and employment sector. Taking these concerns into consideration, CCEA set about designing the revised NI Curriculum for phased implementation starting September 2007.

OVERVIEW OF THE REVISED NI CURRICULUM

The Revised NI Curriculum (CCEA, 2006) aims to empower young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives as an individual, a contributor to society and a contributor to the economy and the environment. This is to be achieved by introducing Learning for Life and Work (LLW) at the top level which at Key Stage (KS) 3 and KS4 comprises Personal Development, Home Economics, Local and Global Citizenship and Employability (see Figure 7.6.1).

![Figure 7.6.1](http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/key_stage_3/Big-Picture-KS3.pdf)

© 2007 CCEA from The Key Stage 3 Curriculum Support and Implementation Box.
Learning for Life and Work is a new learning area designed to directly address the curriculum objectives. The statements of minimum requirement for all other subjects are articulated under the curriculum objectives and make reference to the key elements which include moral character; media awareness and education for sustainable development (see Figure 7.6.1). The key elements can act as a focus for Connected Learning between areas of learning.

The Cross-Curricular Skills are communication, using mathematics and using ICT. Schools are required to assess and report annually on pupils’ progression in the cross-curricular skills. In addition, there is a strong emphasis across the curriculum on developing pupils’ Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities (TSPC) which include managing information, working with others, thinking, problem-solving and decision-making, self-management and being creative.

In the Revised NI Curriculum, traditional subjects are arranged into Areas of Learning, as shown in Table 7.6.1.

Each subject strand in the Revised Curriculum is set out in terms of how it contributes to the objectives of the Revised Curriculum. The statutory curriculum for each subject strand is set out as ‘statements of minimum requirement’ and makes reference to ‘key elements’ of the curriculum such as mutual understanding, ethical awareness and education for sustainable development. The statements of minimum requirement are the compulsory elements of the curriculum in terms of knowledge and understanding, curriculum objectives, key elements and learning outcomes which must be taught. Aside from these statements, teachers can choose the content they feel best suits their teaching context.

The Revised Curriculum promotes learning experiences which are, amongst other things, relevant and enjoyable, linked to other curriculum areas, active and hands on, enquiry based, culturally diverse and varied to suit pupils’ learning styles. Implementation of the Revised Curriculum was phased into schools over a three-year period from September 2007.

THINKING SKILLS AND PERSONAL CAPABILITIES (TSPC)

The Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities (TSPC) framework (developed by Professor Carol McGuinness from Queen’s University and Dr Lynne Bianchi from Sheffield Hallam University) integrates different types of thinking skills with personal and inter-personal skills and dispositions. The framework was largely based on findings from the Activating Children’s Thinking Skills (ACTS) programme, that the creation of a ‘disposition to be a good thinker’ can have as much influence on
the development of good thinking as the acquisition of specific skills and strategies (McGuinness, 1999: 6). The framework is summarised in Figure 7.6.2.

The TSPC framework (see Figure 7.6.2) can provide a heuristic to assist teachers in planning and in assessing pupils’ progress (Cousins, 2005). It affords a common language across the curriculum and should be delivered in and through the areas of learning.

An example of a ‘thinking skills’ activity is provided in Table 7.6.2. Now complete Task 7.6.2.
The ‘odd one out’ task (Task 7.6.2) and the debriefing questions in Table 7.6.2 show that there can be more than one credible answer and more than one way to reach an answer. They also show that it can be helpful to ‘struggle’ when thinking about a problem. Remember that in these activities, it is the dialogue which is more important than the answers. Tasks 7.6.3 and 7.6.4 ask you to plan a thinking skills activity for your subject.

**Task 7.6.2 THE ‘ODD ONE OUT’ ACTIVITY**

1. On your own, identify the similarities and differences between the well-known faces.

2. Then select the ‘odd one out’.
3. Share and explain your choice to a partner.
4. As a pair, share and explain your choice to another pair.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7.6.2 Examples of debriefing questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How did you arrange the objects?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What assumptions did you make, and why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me more about . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you mean by . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did your ideas change over time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did your group operate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you resolve disagreements?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you did it again, what would you do differently?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ‘odd one out’ task (Task 7.6.2) and the debriefing questions in Table 7.6.2 show that there can be more than one credible answer and more than one way to reach an answer. They also show that it can be helpful to ‘struggle’ when thinking about a problem. Remember that in these activities, it is the dialogue which is more important than the answers. Tasks 7.6.3 and 7.6.4 ask you to plan a thinking skills activity for your subject.

**Task 7.6.3 PLAN A THINKING SKILLS ACTIVITY**

Create an ‘odd one out’ activity for your subject.
ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING IN THE REVISED CURRICULUM

Assessment for Learning (AfL) is encouraged by the Revised Curriculum and includes building a more open relationship between learner and teacher, clear learning intentions shared with pupils, peer and self-assessment, peer and self-evaluation of learning and individual target setting. It is not, however, statutory:

While the Revised Curriculum does not require you to integrate AfL practices into your classrooms, we strongly recommend the use of AfL as best practice. The introduction and regular use of AfL in the classroom can help you to fulfil other statutory components of the Revised Curriculum (like Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities . . . In addition, AfL offers significant advantages for pupils.

(CCEA, 2007)

The Assessment Reform Group (2002) defined assessment for learning (AfL) as ‘the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go next, and how best to get them there’ (p. 1). In the Revised NI Curriculum, the components of AfL are:

- effective planning (school and classroom level)
- sharing learning intentions
- agreeing success criteria
- effective questioning
- constructive feedback
- student self-reflection including peer and self-assessment.

Effective planning includes setting learning intentions, which describe what the pupils should know, understand or be able to do by the end of the lesson (or series of lessons).

Learning intentions should be shared with the pupils and should thus be written in pupil-friendly language. It is best to start small, separating the learning intention from the activity.
instructions. You should discuss why pupils are learning what you intend to teach with them. Look for their views and try to reach a shared intention.

Another aspect of learning intentions is to include success criteria, so that pupils can be aware of how well they are doing during the lesson. The success criteria could summarise the key steps in order to fulfil the learning intention.

Providing constructive feedback is also key for AfL. Perhaps the best way to think about constructive feedback is by carrying out Task 7.6.5.

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**Task 7.6.5 ASSESSING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK**

Rate the following feedback statements as 1–10, where 1 = non-constructive and 10 = highly constructive:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback statement</th>
<th>Your rating (1-10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Tell me more. What do they look like? How do they move?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gold star</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Explain why you think this</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How do you think he felt? &lt;br&gt;• Angry that people did not trust him &lt;br&gt;• Annoyed with himself for lying in the past</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Beautiful, neat work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Well done!!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Say how you think this made him feel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Develop these ideas further</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Describe the expression on his face</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Good, but not as good as your brother’s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. How do you think Darryl felt about not being believed? &lt;br&gt;Do you think he might have regretted anything he’d done?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. You must try harder</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. First place in class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Try one of these or one of your own instead of bad: ferocious, terrifying, evil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. A lovely story</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. You’re one of the best</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. 10/10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. He showed me he was a good friend when . . . &lt;br&gt;(finish this sentence)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Very good start. Count how many times you have used the word ‘said’. What other words could you have used?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. What did you see on your boat trip? Fish, birds, people?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AfL is a key aspect of the training for teachers relating to implementation of the Revised NI Curriculum. Whilst the documentation suggests that AfL is not a statutory element, teachers and student teachers are strongly advised to use it in their teaching.

**INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

In NI, the only routes into secondary level school teaching are the traditional Bachelor of Education (BEd) and Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programmes. All full time PGCE programmes are offered only at Master’s (M) level in NI, with the consequence that all entrants must hold an Honours degree or its equivalent. PGCE pupils are examined only at M-level; the advantage of this is that they earn M-level credit which can be ‘cashed in’ for module exemption in future M-level courses.

**Professional competence**

The professional competences to be developed by teachers at all levels of their careers have recently been reviewed and published by the General Teaching Council in NI (GTCNI, 2007) in a booklet entitled *Teaching: The Reflective Profession*. In this document, the GTCNI suggests that it has ‘consistently rejected any attempt to adopt a reductionist approach to professional development’ (p. 4) and that the adoption of a competence based system allows for the conceptualisation of professional development as ‘organic, and to an extent evolutionary, reflecting a synthesis of research, experiences gained and expertise shared in communities of practice’ (p.4). To some, this may seem paradoxical, as the very fact of articulating generic competences could be considered as ‘reductionist’. The GTCNI argues that it has been ‘conscious that the teacher competences must be considered holistically and not treated as a series of discrete entities, divested of values or a sense of mission and professional identity’ (p.5). The GTCNI understanding of a teacher is as an ‘educator and moral agent’ who is:

knowledgeable, skilful, reflective . . . and concerned with the purposes and consequences of education, as well as . . . technical proficiency; be prepared to experiment with the unfamiliar and learn from their experiences; have an approach characterised by open-mindedness and wholeheartedness; be committed to professional dialogue in collaboration with colleagues, in school and beyond; have working patterns characterised by a process of action, evaluation and revision; and . . . assume, as life-long learners, responsibility for their ongoing professional development.

(GTCNI, 2007, p. 9).

**The reflective and activist practitioner**

The GTCNI concept of a reflective and activist practitioner sees the teacher as a moral agent and an informed, knowledgeable practitioner. This can be illustrated by the diagram in Figure 7.6.3.

The illustration in Figure 7.6.3 suggests that each of the four areas of values and attitudes, mission and purpose, sense of professional autonomy, and knowledge and competence contributes towards the development of the reflective and activist teacher in a dynamic interaction which serves to reproduce the reflective and activist components as each area develops.
In seeking to make more explicit the attributes, skills and knowledge that teachers as professionals should possess and exemplify, the GTCNI set out 27 new competence statements, under three broad headings. These are:

- Professional Values and Practice
- Professional Knowledge and Understanding
- Professional Skills and Application:
  - Planning and Leading
  - Teaching and Learning
  - Assessment.

Competence statements

The new competence statements are ‘predicated upon the notion that the achievement of competence is a developmental process which, of necessity, transcends early teacher education and continues throughout a teacher’s career’ (GTCNI, 2007: 11). They therefore effectively underpin all phases of early teacher education and professional development. The achievement of competence depends on:

- the nature and level of the teacher’s experience and their personal effectiveness
- the work-based context
- the roles teachers experience and the development opportunities arising from such experiences.
The full description of the 27 competence statements is articulated, with exemplars for the initial, induction, early professional development and continuing professional development (CPD) stages of a teacher’s career on pp. 16–43 of the competence booklet (GTCNI, 2007). The summary outlines of the statements are set out on pp. 13–15. Full details are available on the website (http://www.gtcni.org.uk/).

Each of the competences is articulated progressively for the different stages in a teacher’s career from ITE to continuing professional development. They progress in terms of complexity and sophistication but each assumes that teachers relate theory to practice at all career stages.

Now complete Task 7.6.6.

Task 7.6.6 **REFLECT ON YOUR CURRENT LEVEL OF COMPETENCE**

Consider the statements of competence for your course. Rank them in groups representing your self-perception of how well you demonstrate each (a) during your ITE course and (b) during your first year of teaching.

**Code of values and professional practice**

The code of values and professional practice indicated in the first competence statement is considered as ‘eloquent testimony to the profession’s commitment to excellence in and for all’ (GTCNI, 2007: 44). This code seeks to ‘set out clearly the core values underpinning professional practice; encourage attitudes and conduct commensurate with the core values of the profession; provide a framework for evaluating both policies and practice; and enhance the status of the profession in the eyes of the public’ (GTCNI, 2007: 44).

The core values of the profession are: trust, honesty, commitment, respect, fairness, equality, integrity, tolerance and service. These values are to be exemplified ‘in their work and in their relationships with others; recognising, in particular, the unique and privileged relationship that exists between teachers and their pupils’ (GTCNI, 2007: 45). Teachers will at all times be conscious of their responsibilities to others (learners, colleagues and the profession).

The competences articulate the way that it is envisioned that teachers will progress through their careers. During the PGCE course in NI, student teachers complete a ‘formative profile’ report after their first extended school placement, in which they self-assess their progress against the competences. This document is discussed with a tutor and consensus is reached in terms of strengths and targets on which student teachers will concentrate during the second extended placement. Following this, student teachers complete a ‘career entry profile’ report. This report indicates the direction for support during induction and is given to the employer responsible for mapping the course of induction and early professional development for the beginning teacher.

New teachers follow a process of induction during their first year of teaching, during which they are observed and supported in the production and implementation of a personalised action plan. There follows two further years of early professional development, in which teachers complete portfolios of whole school issues, such as discipline, pastoral care or ICT use in the school. Having completed this stage, teachers then embark on CPD in their chosen direction, be that towards school management or towards expert teacher status.
**SUMMARY AND KEY POINTS**

The intention of this unit is to raise your awareness of some of the key characteristics of NI schools and to the major developments which have occurred in relation to curriculum and assessment in schools. It also provides a discussion of professional competence, particularly in relation to student teachers, which includes consideration of the essence of becoming a reflective and activist teacher.

You are encouraged to start the process of reflection on practice at this early stage in your career and to return and repeat some of the tasks as you become more experienced. If classroom experience alone makes an individual a good teacher, then those who have taught the longest would all be the best teachers. This is not the case. Much research shows that the only way to become a better teacher is to reflect on practice, identify areas for development and address these areas. Getting feedback from your pupils is an excellent way of doing this.

I end this unit on a salutary note: a colleague had a discussion with two pupils in his class following a physics lesson which had not gone well. One of the pupils said that this teacher had outlined a problem for them to solve and had gone through some examples—fine. Then, instead of letting the pupils get on with their work in peace, the teacher walked around the classroom and distracted everybody... the pupil was so nervous of the teacher coming to stand over him, he couldn't do the work and switched off. The teacher, meanwhile, had been convinced that walking around and supporting his pupils was the best way to teach... The second pupil agreed with the first and the teacher, who had twenty years' experience in the classroom began to doubt all that he ‘thought’ was right and checked with the pupils the best way to teach them. He concluded that it is often our pupils who are in the best position to help us teach them!

Check which requirements for your course you have addressed through this unit.

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**FURTHER READING**


The GTCNI site is one with which you should become familiar as they provide considerable guidance for teachers in Northern Ireland.