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TransformED

Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028

An entitlement to excellence and equity

The capabilities

Contents

1 The aim and objectives of the Northern Ireland curriculum

The aim of the new Northern Ireland curriculum is *to support young people to develop their capabilities by equipping them with the knowledge, skills and experiences that enable them to have genuine choices and empower them to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives*.

The objectives of the new Northern Ireland curriculum are to be as follows.

To support each young person to develop as:

- an individual

- a member of society

- a contributor to the economy

- a steward of the environment

- a lifelong learner

within a system that expects excellence and places no limit on what young people can achieve.

The aim describes in broad terms what the curriculum should achieve. The objectives unpack that aim into specific dimensions of personhood. They capture what each young person should become, each in their own way, in order for the broad aim to be realised.

The objectives also broadly encapsulate the views on curriculum purpose expressed by a wide range of Northern Ireland stakeholders and align with those views most often identified globally as the main purpose of schooling.

2 Why capabilities?

To move straight from the aim and objectives to the detail of curriculum content would fail to articulate adequately the relationship between that content and its ultimate educational goods. It would leave important fruits of the curriculum unarticulated. It would risk leaving the overall aim and its objectives as worthy goals but disconnected from the daily realities of the classroom and the ambitions of teachers for their pupils.

Some education systems attempt to overcome this problem by identifying 'transferable skills' or 'competences' which support their overall aims. Such systems often require teachers to treat these as curriculum content, embedding and evidencing them across subjects, even shaping content around them, rather than viewing them as the results of a pupil's journey through a rigorous, well-sequenced curriculum.

This often leads to confusion as to how such things should be incorporated, a bureaucratic workload of incessant auditing and a tokenism which rests on auditing the mere incidence of the 'skill' rather than systematic attention over time. It distorts assessment and takes time and attention from the substance and rigour of subjects.

It also ignores the fundamental role that knowledge plays in underpinning all skills. It makes knowledge appear as a mere setting in which to practise skills. In fact, the rich textures of coherent connected knowledge provide a cumulatively powerful frame of reference that undergirds the practice of skills. That knowledge transforms the brain's capacity to recognise pattern and vocabulary without using up working memory.

Many 'transferable skills' are not, in fact, generic; they are specific to a domain of knowledge, and best gained with the rigour, depth, insight and command of that domain behind them. For example, the ability to think critically does not emerge context-free, but grows from rich connected knowledge, as well as practice in distinctive disciplinary processes and disciplined ways of thinking and arguing. The ability to question a scientific claim requires different standards of evidence, conventions of language and forms of reasoning from the ability to think critically about a historical issue.

In a high-quality, subject-based, knowledge-rich curriculum, the addition of such 'transferable skills' as curriculum content is therefore redundant. Each school subject is derived from a tradition of enquiry and debate, creativity, collaboration, problem solving and argument. Thorough and systematic teaching of the subjects therefore naturally yields the desired curriculum goods in question. These are best thought of not as 'transferable skills' to be added in, but as 'capabilities' that emerge.

3 What are capabilities?

To connect the curriculum content with its overall aim and objectives, the Northern Ireland curriculum identifies a set of 'capabilities' and, in describing them, demonstrates how such capabilities arise naturally from effective teaching of the new, knowledge-rich, Northern Ireland curriculum. This provides the bridge between the curriculum content and curriculum aim and objectives.

Capabilities are not unitary or generic skills. They are not directly teachable. They are the emergent qualities and attributes that pupils develop as a result of a well-constructed and well-taught knowledge-rich curriculum. Equipped with these capabilities, young people gain the agency and opportunity to choose who they want to be and what they want to do, within a proper understanding of moral and civic responsibility in a rapidly changing world.[1] In other words, the capabilities set and the associated descriptions explain how the curriculum achieves its objectives for pupils to become members of society, contributors to the economy and stewards of the environment, and to develop as unique individuals and lifelong learners.

A central concern of the capabilities approach is agency strengthened through knowledge. This is the principle that children and young people are encouraged to engage actively and purposefully with ideas, information, stories, activities, images, data, theories, argumentation, problem solving, decision making, song and art – all of which are at the heart of a knowledge-rich curriculum.

Engagement with this secure, wide-ranging and profoundly connected knowledge is not only worthwhile and enjoyable, but empowering. It gives young people power to describe the world, explain the world, interpret the world and ultimately to change the world. It is this that enables the curriculum to fulfil its aim.

Real choices in life derive only partly from the outcomes described by test scores and examination grades. True freedom and agency are achieved when students develop physical, intellectual and emotional capabilities which derive from the empowering frameworks, mental models and experience of engagement that a knowledge-rich curriculum supplies. This is the foundation for responsible and effective democratic participation and aspirational future achievement. Thus a knowledge-rich curriculum gives young people power to join in with the debates and pursuits – whether personal, social, professional or political – of their choosing.

1 The capabilities approach has its origins in welfare economics, where it was developed as a framework by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. It argues that a just society is one that expands people's substantive opportunities to live lives they have reason to value.

The capabilities approach gives schools a shared language for talking about what education is for, beyond grades and attainment data; capabilities do not lend themselves to valid and reliable direct assessment and should therefore not be assessed. It protects teacher professionalism by valuing teachers' possession of rich, enabling, subject knowledge. It trusts the efficacy of the curriculum and strong subject teaching to fulfil the curriculum's overall aim and objectives.

4 The capabilities set

The Northern Ireland curriculum explicitly names and describes the capabilities that arise through the different subjects taught. This reminds teachers of the broader purpose and value of what they teach, beyond induction into a single discipline. This connects daily classroom work to the aim of the curriculum in a way that content specifications can achieve only indirectly.

Because capabilities emerge from subjects taught well[2], there is no need for separate assessment, tracking and evidencing. Schools should therefore not try to audit the capabilities, nor attempt to teach any of them directly. The work of showing the relationship between subject curriculum content and each capability has been done centrally and is summarised in the capabilities descriptions (next section).

Each capability arises from the study of more than one subject. Together they describe the intended result of the teaching of the curriculum in its entirety. The combined contents of the subject frameworks have been reviewed to ensure that these capabilities are likely to result from their effective implementation[3].

The capabilities set comprises capabilities for:

- creativity and imagination
- emotional understanding and empathy
- environmental and ecological responsibility
- language and communication
- mathematical and computational proficiency
- physical health and wellbeing
- reasoning and problem solving
- self-regulated learning and perseverance
- social and civic participation

2 The principles underpinning the required pedagogy to bring such capabilities about are set out in the Pedagogical Principles document.

3 This effective implementation will include teaching the content of the frameworks in a way that is underpinned by evidence-informed pedagogy, as set out in the Pedagogical Principles.

5 Capabilities descriptions

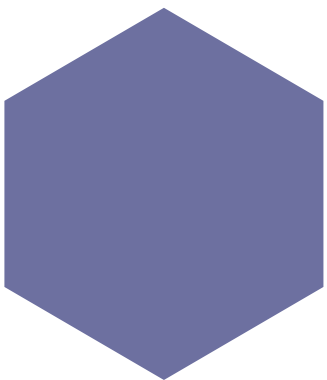
Capabilities for creativity and imagination

Pupils' capabilities for creativity and imagination arise from engagement with many forms of disciplinary knowledge and practice, right across the curriculum. Through the conventions, methods and purposes of each subject, pupils learn how ideas are generated, represented, tested and refined. Regular engagement with established traditions and bodies of knowledge enables them to understand how ideas have developed over time and how creative work responds to what has come before. Moreover, in many contexts, they actively participate in the development of ideas in response to questions, contexts and constraints.

Through wide reading of literature, together with literary non-fiction in the humanities, pupils encounter ways in which language can be used to shape meaning, make sense of experience and imagine alternative possibilities. Immersion in novels, poetry and plays, together with plentiful opportunity to discuss them, transforms their aesthetic sensibilities and allows them to join the author and wider readership or audience in engaging with humanity's ongoing efforts to explore the human condition through art. In the subjects of music and art and design, pupils learn the creative processes of the respective disciplines. Inspired by creative expression from across humanity's long traditions of artistic creation, they learn to generate and realise their own ideas through form, technique and medium. The breadth of their artistic engagement and encounter in school opens possibilities for lifelong passions in music, art or design which they might otherwise not have had.

Across all subjects, young people interpret and make meaning through form, style and structure, broadening their reference points and vocabulary for the exercise of imagination and insight. In modern languages, history and geography, they are challenged to discern unfamiliar perspectives in cultural contexts that vary across time and space. In science, mathematics and digital technology, they learn how scientists, mathematicians and designers have modelled, represented and tested possibilities. In design and technology, they apply knowledge to create and refine solutions within real-world constraints, applying design criteria through practice in systematic approaches to reasoning and evaluation. By gaining proficiency in these fields themselves, they gain the skill and confidence to recognise pattern, ask questions about possibilities and explore alternative explanations and solutions.

Through practice, reflection and revision, young people learn that creativity depends on knowledge and that knowledge and its vocabulary and tools make it possible to make new connections, build fresh syntheses, adapt conventions and so generate ideas. Together, growing command of different disciplines and experience of applying and connecting knowledge in varied ways, pupils gain the wide linguistic, disciplinary and artistic reference points to advance fresh solutions, to think the unthought and to say the unsaid.



Capabilities for emotional understanding and empathy

Capabilities for emotional understanding and empathy arise from pupils' growing knowledge of human thought, feeling, behaviour and experience. Many aspects of the curriculum support the development of these capabilities, both directly and indirectly. In Personal, Social, Civic and Careers (PSCC) they learn about the psychology underpinning the relationship between thoughts, emotions and behaviour, as it applies to themselves and to others. Their knowledge of a range of human emotion and its expression also broadens and deepens from cumulative subject learning and its interaction across the whole curriculum.

For example, in English, literature gives space for beliefs, emotions and relationships to be examined with care. Stories create a basic architecture for understanding emotion and its relationship with thoughts and behaviour. Reading fiction, in particular, supports the development of empathy through compelling and richly painted accounts of people facing dilemmas and challenges. In English and modern languages, pupils encounter and practise a wide palette of linguistic expression, both in style and in structure. This allows them to examine and express their own emotions and gives them a vocabulary for processing emotions that they encounter in others. In history, through imagining diverse past people, settings and stories, pupils extend their human sensibilities. Gaining insight into the complexity of human experience, they come to see themselves and others anew.

In PSCC pupils reflect explicitly on the interactions between thoughts and emotions. They learn to consider their own responses, to make informed choices, to notice and question unhelpful thoughts and to consider others' perspectives. In PE, pupils learn strategies such as maintaining focus under pressure and responding constructively to setbacks, thus managing their emotions during performance.

Together, this knowledge and experience across subjects gives pupils the conceptual, linguistic and practical resources to recognise, regulate and express emotions, understand the perspectives of others, and respond with empathy and good judgement in a wide range of personal and social situations.

Capabilities for environmental and ecological responsibility

Capabilities for environmental and ecological responsibility arise from pupils' growing understanding of the interdependent relationships through which human activity and ecological, social and economic systems shape long-term sustainability. Through the study of environmental systems, pupils are equipped to make informed judgements about personal and societal futures in the context of contemporary environmental possibilities and constraints. This includes global climate change, its uneven impacts, and human responses to it in the form of mitigation and adaptation.

Pupils develop these capabilities through a strong base of secure and wide-ranging scientific, technological, geographical and historical knowledge which gives them the vocabulary, reference points and concepts for engaging with the idea of sustainability in informed ways. The study of sustainability allows pupils to examine the interactions of ecological, social and political factors. Outdoor learning further deepens pupils' appreciation of the living world and how human life is ultimately an integral part of nature.

For example, in science, pupils are taught about the physics and chemistry of the Earth and atmosphere, the interconnected biological systems supporting life and the complex ecological interactions upon which all life depends. In geography, pupils are encouraged to think about the Earth as the home of humankind, using a range of concepts and perspectives to understand the dynamic nature of human–environment interconnections in specific place contexts and across a range of temporal and spatial scales. In home economics, they learn the origins of their food and the environmental implications of its journey from farm to fork. In history, studying features of ancient and medieval worlds, pupils learn how climate and the environment affected the emergence of the first farmers and how different civilisations managed natural resources such as the renewal of wood and woodlands. In history and PSCC, they come to understand how environmental issues are often interconnected across personal, community, national and global contexts.

Together, this knowledge, skill and experience acquired across the curriculum enable young people to make informed judgements about environmental challenges, and to take environmental and ecological responsibility. Young people leaving school will be equipped to draw on different types of disciplinary insight, analysis and vocabulary with which to interpret information about their world and to understand and join debates about how best to steward the environment.

Capabilities for language and communication

By mastering each subject's distinctive forms of knowledge and vocabulary, young people learn to use language as a tool for thinking, and for communicating complex ideas with clarity and precision. Across the curriculum, pupils learn to listen, read, speak and write in different forms, enabling them to interpret, construct and critique arguments. These capabilities are strengthened through sustained encounters with varied uses of language, including deep reading across literary, historical, scientific and other traditions. In English, pupils engage with language as meaning-making, from multiple angles – through narrative, argument, metaphor, grammar and context. Across all subjects, teachers attend to features of language and communication when teaching pupils to construct clear arguments according to the conventions of each discipline, and to understand and join specialised debates. In many subjects, pupils need to engage in dialogue with peers as a method of working through shared problems or where an activity is intrinsically team-based such as musical ensembles, practical work in science or games and sports in PE. In PSCC, pupils are taught how to manage disagreements arising from teamwork or dialogue.

Extending their capacity to represent and convey meaning beyond speech and text, pupils become practised in digital, musical, spatial and visual modes of communication. Understanding and communicating in multiple modes, prepares them to engage with media and ever-changing forms of public discourse. Learning more than one language, building broad language awareness and recognising both bilingualism and additional languages as intellectual and cultural resources, further expands young people's capacity to think, communicate and engage with different perspectives. In some subjects beyond English and modern languages, both language and communication are not merely a means but a direct object of study: for example, in history, the analysis of sources – whether written, visual or material – for meaning, intent and contemporary impact; in technology and design, learning about the aesthetic power of form and structure to inspire, attract and provoke.

Fluency in speaking and writing, based on a secure command of language, strengthens thinking and enables meaningful participation in social, cultural and economic life. Together with other means and modes of communication, whether visual, musical or material, these varied forms of knowledge and fields of practice develop capabilities for confident, expressive and effective language and communication.

Capabilities for mathematical and computational proficiency

Through the study of mathematics and digital technology and their applications within other subjects, young people develop the capability to use formal, abstract and symbolic systems to represent and solve problems. In mathematics, pupils combine conceptual understanding and procedural fluency to support mathematical reasoning, enabling them to model relationships, generalise patterns and justify solutions. In digital technology, they develop computational thinking through decomposition, abstraction, and algorithm construction, allowing them to design and implement solutions that can be executed by computational systems.

This mathematical and computational knowledge is further developed through practical application across the curriculum, preparing pupils for its ubiquitous use in wider life. For example, in science, mathematical reasoning functions as a language for describing, modelling and explaining the natural world with precision. Supported by the study of personal finance in PSCC, mathematics also underpins financial capability, enabling young people to interpret financial information, make informed decisions, and manage their resources effectively in everyday contexts. Similarly, secure knowledge and skill gained in digital technology underpins the wider curriculum, just as it will serve almost every aspect of life in modern society. For example, pupils use digital information in Geographical Information Systems, and in technology and design, they learn about its role in rendering industrial processes efficient. Studying digital technology supports pupils to understand how information is created, processed and shared, ultimately enabling their participation in the use and development of systems and solutions that operate at scale across all areas of life and work.

Together, such knowledge, skills and experiences from across the curriculum develop young people's capabilities for mathematical and computational proficiency.

Capabilities for physical health and wellbeing

Through the study of science, home economics, PSCC and PE, alongside the wider school curriculum, young people develop confidence, competence and enjoyment in movement and healthy behaviours, building a lasting disposition toward active and healthy living.

For instance, through science, pupils learn how the body functions and how to take care of it, while in home economics they learn about the components of healthy eating and how to manage household resources in order to prepare home-cooked meals. Across PSCC and PE, they come to understand how physical activity, rest, nutrition, hydration and everyday choices and habits (such as walking or cycling to school) benefit physical and mental health, both on a day-to-day basis and in the long term, and have opportunities to reflect on the influences of alcohol and drug use on health and wellbeing.

Through PE and wider school life, pupils engage in sports and games through which they develop an understanding of movement, performance and training, alongside knowledge connecting them to local and global cultural traditions of sport, exercise and dance. They learn how the body responds to exercise, and the importance of recovery and rest. Art and music also contribute to pupils developing a deep connection between mind and body; for example, through the awareness of posture and breath while singing, and by using their hands while working with different materials.

Through these experiences across the curriculum, young people develop the knowledge, motivation, confidence and physical competence to value and participate in physical activity throughout life. Alongside knowledge underpinning other healthy behaviours, and rich experiences of the connection between mind and body, this supports the development of capabilities for lifelong physical health and wellbeing.

Capabilities for reasoning and problem solving

Through systematic teaching of how reasoning works in each subject, pupils engage with evidence and examine ideas from different disciplinary angles. They learn to recognise and shape rigorous argument resulting in well-founded judgement. As they progress through the curriculum for each subject, pupils come to understand each discipline as a distinctive quest for truth. They learn the standards of evidence required in that disciplinary tradition and the conditions under which valid claims can be made. They gain the habits of evaluating arguments, identifying assumptions, weighing evidence and recognising flawed or misleading claims. As teachers model their own intellectual respect for truth, pupils come to see that rigorous enquiry and justification for claims are a shared ethical responsibility. They also learn how the powers of different disciplines can be brought to bear on solving intellectual, practical and ethical problems in real-life situations, and build the habits of mind necessary for navigating a complex, information-rich world with integrity and purpose.

Each area of the curriculum makes a distinctive contribution to this capability. In mathematics and digital technology, pupils develop the foundations of logical reasoning, learning to apply precision of thought and to work from defined premises to necessary conclusions. In science, they learn to design investigations, interpret data, and understand how evidence is used to develop and test scientific explanations. In history and geography, they develop the substantive knowledge and disciplinary discernment to distinguish plausible from implausible claims and the intellectual honesty to revise views in light of new information, especially when engaging with contested matters or controversial questions. Through study of the arts, literature, PSCC and religious education, they encounter diverse forms and frameworks for examining values and ethical commitments and can draw on such resources to build practical wisdom in their personal lives and communities. This knowledge and skill gained from the full range of subjects, steadily cultivate the reasoning, judgement, values and maturity that allow young people to understand the world and to engage with its challenges thoughtfully, ethically, and with purpose. These qualities form the basis of capabilities for reasoning and problem solving.

Capabilities for self-regulated learning and perseverance

The capabilities for self-regulated learning and perseverance are important products of teaching the full curriculum. Each subject framework is structured as a journey towards confident, independent performance, powered by secure knowledge and fluency in skills. Mediated by an evidence-informed pedagogy, the steady mastery of curriculum content develops these capabilities both through the explicit teaching and modelling of learning strategies and through pupils' experience of seeing success result from effort.

Teachers foster self-regulated learning whenever they make explicit the cognitive and metacognitive strategies that help pupils learn new material. They model effective approaches to tasks, thinking aloud to demonstrate problem solving, reflection and resilience in action. Pupils learn strategies such as self-assessment, retrieval and elaboration, and, in PSCC, the psychology that underpins learning. Over time, pupils draw on this knowledge to plan, monitor, evaluate and adapt their own learning, setting goals and responding productively to feedback and progress.

By breaking complex tasks into manageable steps and ensuring pupils are secure with prior knowledge, teachers support all pupils towards success, boosting motivation and self-efficacy. These manageable steps are particularly important for novices, whose learning depends on content being carefully shaped, practised and secured before it becomes a reliable reference point in long-term memory. In reading, for example, pupils learn phonics systematically, rehearsing, receiving feedback and gradually extending their repertoire of sounds and words. Such steps not only lay foundations for future learning but also build resilience by showing pupils the rewards of sustained effort and improvement. Early success reinforces the expectation that effort will lead to progress.

These principles continue throughout schooling. Pupils taking up a new modern language, home economics or sport in Key Stage 3, learning new musical repertoire or applying a geographical skill, experience the benefits of perseverance as they achieve early success through disciplined cycles of trial, feedback and improvement. In this way they come to value subject content both cognitively and emotionally, while the tangible results of systematic, responsive teaching cultivate a disposition to persevere.

Pupils also learn that challenge and uncertainty are normal and necessary parts of mastering new knowledge rather than signs of inability. This is reinforced across subjects. In history, for example, a familiar concept may feel unfamiliar in a new context, requiring further reflection, questioning and evidence before it can be understood fully. A coherent, structured and knowledge-rich curriculum therefore shows pupils that effort, uncertainty and persistence are normal features of solving meaningful problems.

These dispositions to reflect and sustain effort, together with the knowledge and language to choose the best approaches to learning, are integral to the development of capabilities for self-regulated learning and perseverance, equipping pupils for lifelong learning.

Capabilities for social and civic participation

Through sustained engagement across the curriculum, young people develop the capabilities to participate constructively in shared social and civic life at local and global levels. Through studying history, they encounter perspectives shaped by different cultural and political contexts, developing the habit of asking why people held the views they did. They learn about the origins and evolution of the ideas and institutions which have brought us democracy and the rule of law. Through literature and languages, they build empathy by imagining and entering others' worlds. In religious education and PSCC, pupils explore ethical frameworks and questions that have shaped communities across centuries. By engaging with debates across disciplines, they learn that disagreement is not always a threat to relationships, but rather, when well-managed and engaged with constructively, contributes to shared understanding.

Engagement with diverse languages, culture, art and music, and with the geography of human settlement and movement, encourages respect for those from different backgrounds and provides the knowledge that gives this respect depth and meaning. Through the study of Ulster-Scots, Irish and British literature, and Northern Ireland's complex past, young people develop a grounded sense of identity and cultural understanding, enabling them to engage with difference openly. Together, this knowledge equips them to recognise racism and other forms of discrimination, exclusion and prejudice not as abstract concepts, but as patterns that can be understood in historical and structural terms, and to respond to them with clarity, confidence and moral conviction.

Through PSCC, geography and history, pupils come to see themselves as members of overlapping communities, including the family, school, neighbourhood, society and the world, each carrying responsibilities and opportunities for participation. They learn that rights and responsibilities are interconnected, that civic institutions depend on the active and responsible contribution of those they serve, and that collective problems require collective responses. Across disciplines, pupils develop the habits of civic participation, including listening across disagreement, working with others towards shared goals, taking responsibility for outcomes, acting with integrity and an ethic of service before self. In this way, young people develop the capabilities for social and civic participation.

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