

Assessment in the primary school...

and classroom
approaches
for post-primary
teachers

page 10



National Council for Curriculum and Assessment | JANUARY 2008 | Issue 8



welcome...

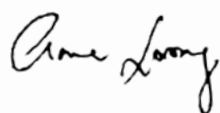
to our second decade.

December 8th 1987 was a big day! On this side of the Atlantic, the media were engrossed by the developments in the appeal of the Birmingham Six. On the other side, Reagan and Gorbachev met in the first meeting of the leaders of the USSR and USA on US soil for fifteen years. And the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment was born. We'd like to think that all three news stories turned out to be landmarks, although for different reasons!

This info@ncca is a bit of a birthday special. We can't include a free gift, but we can give you plenty of ideas to use in class, from assessment, to interculturalism, to ICT. Those of nostalgic disposition can read more about how it all began, and about the first big NCCA project, the Junior Certificate examination.

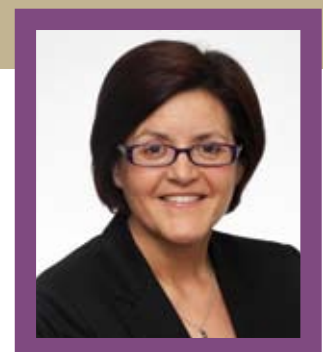
When it was announced in 1987, the media commented on the 'new freedom' teachers and schools would have to develop their own programmes under general syllabus headings, and how the new school-based assessment proposed would give students more chances to succeed. What happened to the aspirations for that new examination? Read about the research being conducted by the ESRI into the experiences of students in the three years of junior cycle to find out.

Over the course of 2008 we hope you will have a chance to share in the celebrations of our 21st year. We will be coming to an education centre near you to look at current and future development in curriculum and assessment. You will have lots of online opportunities to share your views on draft syllabuses due for issue in 2008. And we hope to host a conference on the big issues in curriculum and assessment as we look forward to the next 21 years. That conference will also offer a chance for 'virtual' participation to include as wide a debate as possible. Keep an eye on www.ncca.ie for the latest events, and for opportunities to participate in what we hope will be another landmark year.

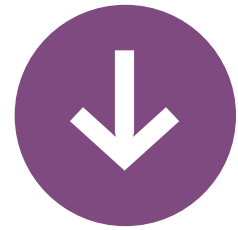


Anne Looney
Chief Executive

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment



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Supporting teaching and learning...

info@ncca is published three times over the school year, in September, January and April.

Copies are distributed to teachers in every primary and post-primary school in the country. Electronic versions of the newsletter, in both Irish and English, are available to download from our website, at www.ncca.ie. If your school requires extra copies of **info@ncca**, please send your request by email or post.

We welcome articles from teachers as well as comments and queries about content.

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EAL in ACTION

In our last update we told you a little about the multimedia resources we had gathered in schools to complement our draft guidelines for mainstream teachers on *English as an Additional Language in Irish Primary Schools*. These resources are available on our ACTION website at <http://action.ncca.ie>. Since September, we've been adding more videos and photographs as well as samples of student and teacher work. Don't forget to revisit the site to view these new materials and more!

Junior cycle factsheets

Want a student-friendly way to explain what your subject is about? The NCCA has produced a series of factsheets on the subjects in the junior cycle. Each factsheet describes what and how a student will learn in the different subjects. The factsheets also include information on learning opportunities outside of the classroom, links with the subjects in primary, and the nature of the Junior Certificate examination. Twelve factsheets are available on the NCCA website and hard copies will be distributed in early 2008.

Two research projects to note

The NCCA has commissioned two research projects at primary level during the current school year. When completed, both research reports will be posted on the NCCA website.

Research on reporting to parents in primary schools is being undertaken by a team at University College Cork, led by Prof. Kathy Hall. The purpose of the research is to find out *how schools report children's learning to parents*. It will focus on school policy and practice on reporting, including the use of report cards and meetings. The research will describe reporting across a sample of 400 schools and within a small number of case study schools. It will include the views and voices of teaching staff and principals, parents and children concerning different reporting practices and their effectiveness.

This research will be completed in early 2008 and will be critical to developing the NCCA's advice to the Minister on using Report Card Templates (RCTs) in primary schools.

Research on science in primary schools is currently underway to support Phase 2 of the Primary Curriculum Review (Gaeilge, science, SPHE). There are two phases to the research. **Phase 1** asks, *what is science like for children in primary school?* The research will focus on children's experiences of science at each of the four class levels in the primary school through questionnaires, group interviews and classroom observations. Phase 1 will be completed in May 2008. **Phase 2** asks, *how does children's learning in science at primary level impact on their learning of science in first year at post-primary?* It is scheduled for completion in September 2008. The research team at St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, is being led by Dr. Janet Varley.

What's happening at senior cycle?

If you would like to find out more about the developments underway at senior cycle, check out *Senior Cycle: Moving Forward*, which was sent out to schools last term. The bulletin gives you an overview of all the current work and alerts you to some upcoming consultations and developments in which you, or your school, might be interested in participating. Of course you can also download it from the website at www.ncce.ie/seniorcycle.

Online conversion of DVD for parents

The DVD for parents on *The What, Why and How of Children's Learning in Primary School*, was published by the NCCA in March 2006 and disseminated to all parents of primary school children via their child(ren)'s school. To increase access for teachers and parents, the NCCA has now published the contents of the DVD online, accessible from the NCCA homepage, at www.ncca.ie.

The content has been published in five languages: English, Irish, French, Lithuanian and Polish. English subtitles are provided for all language versions.

And now, we'd like to hear from you! Look out for the online feedback form for the DVD on our website in the coming weeks and share your thoughts with us. Following your feedback, we'll explore the potential of this flash video technology across other projects.

Intercultural education in the post-primary school

Have you received your copy of the guidelines?

Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School, guidelines for teachers and management in post-primary schools, has now been published. Printed copies and a CD were sent to all schools in October – including a copy for every teacher. If you haven't received your copy yet, please check it out with your principal, who can order a new copy by emailing newsletter@ncca.ie.

You will find plenty of really useful information in the guidelines – from background information on racism and interculturalism to practical suggestions for including intercultural education in your everyday classes. You will also find some help on practical areas like selecting intercultural texts, welcoming newcomer students and ideas for classroom activities.

Primary curriculum review

Analysis of data for the second phase of Primary Curriculum Review is well under way. The NCCA received a tremendous response to the *Review and Reflection Templates for Teachers*. The data set includes 1380 completed teacher templates, as well as case study interviews with principals, teachers, parents and children in 8 schools. Three subjects provide the vehicle for this review: Gaeilge, science and SPHE. The final report on this second phase of review will be completed in early 2008 and posted on the NCCA website.

NCCA: 20 years a-growing

That was the year that was

In 1987 affluent techies watched *The Untouchables* on Betamax home video systems and cared little that the market had turned to VHS format. Amstrad, BBC Master and Commodore computers continued to make their way slowly into business places and even more slowly into homes and schools. TV soaps *Dynasty* and *Dallas* dictated that power dressing and shoulder pads were high fashion for women. New Romantics, epitomised by Adam Ant, counteracted the anarchic statement that was punk. U2 released *The Joshua Tree*, the fastest selling album in UK chart history. The inaugural Rugby World Cup was hosted by New Zealand and Australia and the Irish Soccer team, under the guidance of Jack Charlton, qualified for Euro 88. Kilkenny won the All-Ireland Senior Camogie Championship and Johnny Logan became the first person to win the Eurovision Song Contest twice.

Early in 1987, the Irish electorate had returned a minority Fianna Fáil Government. Following an austere budget, the first social partnership agreement, the Programme for National Recovery, was negotiated between the government, trades unions, employers, farming organisations and industrialists. The Single European Act was endorsed by Irish voters in May. Teachers at their conferences at Easter that year discussed staffing and class size, salary especially the low level of substitute pay, job sharing, career breaks, funding for schools and the possible amalgamation of the three teacher unions.

The evolution of our language policy must be conditioned more by hard facts and reality than by emotion.

Dr. Edward Walsh, Chairperson, NCCA, December 8, 1987

Launch of the NCCA

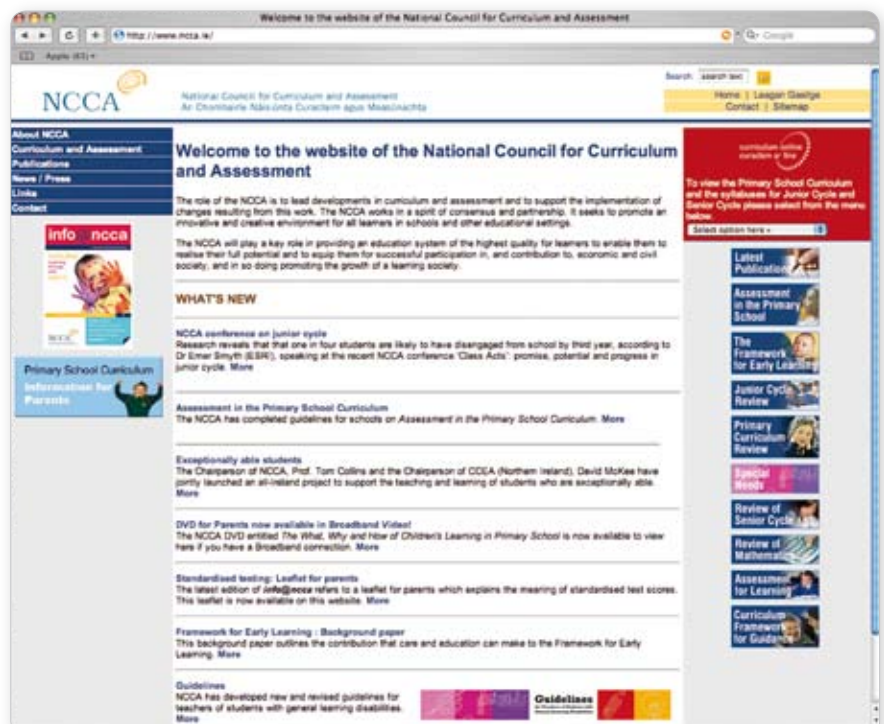
For those of us involved in education, 1987 was momentous as the year in which Mary O'Rourke, Minister for Education, launched the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to replace the interim Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB), originally set up in 1984. The Council would report directly to the Minister and advise on curriculum and assessment at first and second level. Responsibility for public examinations was, however, to remain with the Department of Education Inspectorate.

Structure

Dr. Edward Walsh, President of the National Institute for Higher Education, Limerick, had been chairperson of the CEB, Sr. Eileen Doyle its vice-chairperson and Albert Ó Ceallaigh its Chief Executive. All were to fill the same roles in the fledgling NCCA thereby ensuring continuity. The chairperson and vice-chairperson were appointed directly by the Minister for Education. There were two representatives from the Department of Education and other members were appointed by the Minister on the nomination of representative organisations including the National Parents' Council, the Irish Federation of University Teachers, the Confederation of Irish Industry and the Joint Managerial Body.

Though the proposed level of teacher representation on the Council was opposed initially by the teacher unions, ASTI, INTO and TUI, their concerns were eventually resolved and they took their seats on the NCCA, which was appointed for a three-year term of office.

The Minister for Education also laid down the composition of course committees at junior and senior cycle levels. Membership of these committees was also on a representative basis. The committees were charged with devising syllabuses, defining assessment objectives, advising on appropriate modes of assessment and reviewing standards attained in public examinations. They would be served by education officers who, it has been said, were 'almost



subversive' in their commitment to reform! These were seconded from their schools on a part-time basis.

The permanent executive consisted initially of Ó'Ceallaigh and Gary Granville, Assistant Chief Executive (now Head of Faculty of Education, National College of Art and Design) with a small administrative support team.

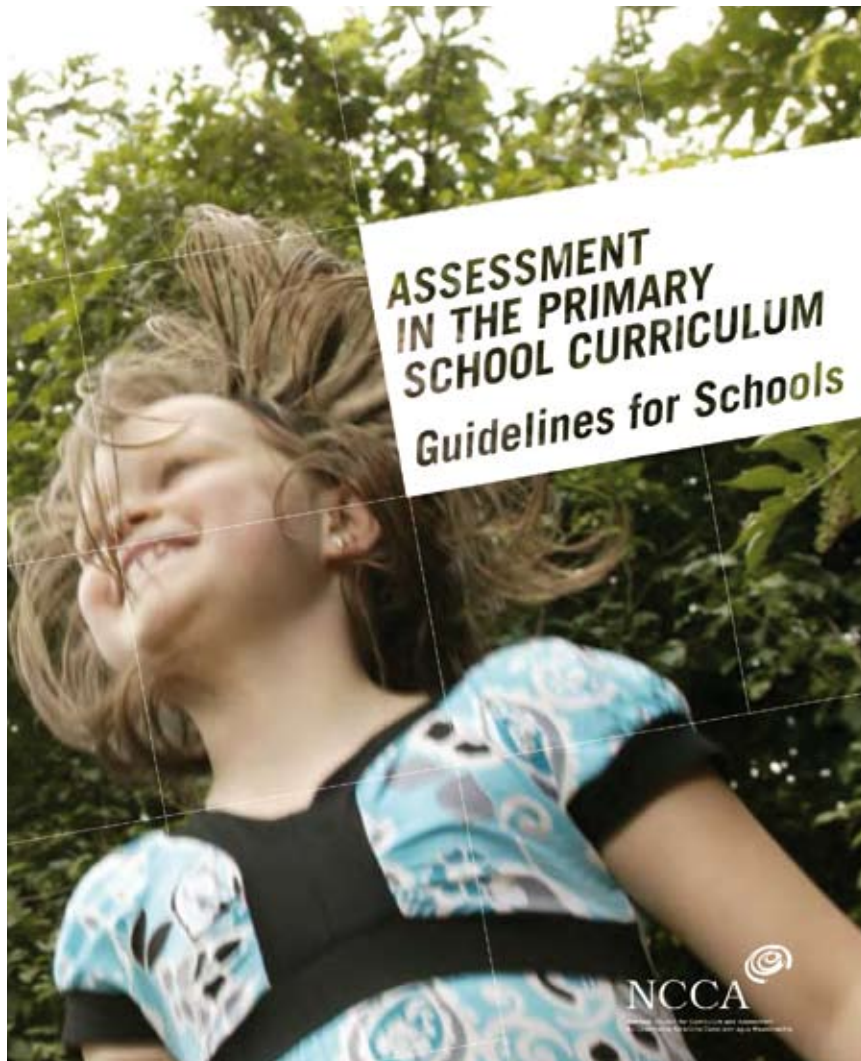
It was the Inter. Cert. before that...

In launching the NCCA, the Minister asked that it plan the introduction of the Junior Certificate - a new system of assessment and certification to replace the Day Vocational (Group) and Intermediate Certificates at the end of second-level Junior Cycle. It was envisaged that the Junior Certificate would include new and revised syllabuses of interest and relevance to students and would be offered at two levels to cater for differing ability. There would be scope too for local variation within the national syllabuses. Information sessions would be held throughout the country in the following months to allow the NCCA to brief principals, teachers and parents on the proposed changes.

The Junior Certificate was duly launched by Mary O'Rourke, Minister for Education, in 1988. From the beginning of the next academic year, all students entering post-primary schools would follow the new Junior Certificate programme. In 1992, they would, for the first time, sit the examination for the award of this new certificate.

The new certificate is a response to the changing needs of education and society. It will also put an end to unnecessary and outdated divisions in our school courses. It helps to ensure social equity, by allowing all students follow a common programme.

Mary O'Rourke, Minister for Education, speaking at the launch of the Junior Certificate, September 20, 1988.



Primary Curriculum

The Minister also charged the NCCA with overseeing the completion of the review of the primary school curriculum. The Review Body on the Primary Curriculum had commenced its work during 1987 under the chairpersonship of Moya Quinlan.

Ten years on

In *Comhairle*, the NCCA's Information Bulletin, December 1996, Albert Ó'Ceallaigh, Chief Executive, outlined his perception of the achievements of the NCCA during its first ten years. He wrote that in responding to the recommendations of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum, the NCCA had undertaken work that required specific skills and expertise, new structures and a new approach to curriculum reform. He looked forward to systematic and structured statements for each aspect of the primary school curriculum and drafts of teacher guidelines to support the further development of teacher skills in implementing the revised curriculum.

The Primary School Curriculum would be published in 1999.

Statutory Body

The NCCA became a statutory body in 2001. The Minister for Education and Science, Michael Woods, began consultation regarding the membership of the new statutory Council. Thereafter began the recruitment of staff including a new Chief Executive. Anne Looney, who had been a full-time education officer since 1997, took over from Albert Ó'Ceallaigh as Chief Executive on his retirement in September 2001.

The brief of the statutory Council as outlined in the Education Act, 1998 is to advise the Minister for Education and Science on matters relating to *the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools and the assessment procedures employed in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum.*

The twenty-five members of the statutory Council, appointed by the Minister for a three-year term,

The composition of the Council's course committees recognises the key professional role of teachers both in defining syllabuses and in implementing them in the classroom.

Mary O'Rourke, Minister for Education,
speaking at the launch of the NCCA, December 8, 1987.

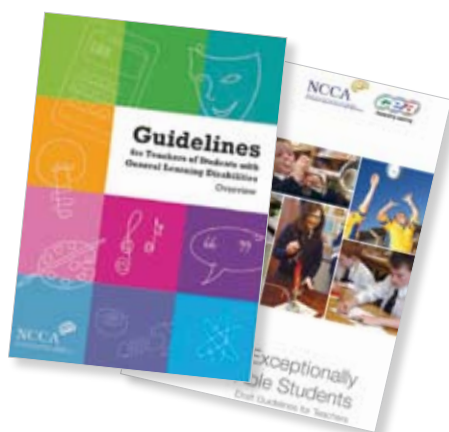
represent teachers, school managers, parents, business, trades unions and other educational interests. Other members include representatives of the Department of Education and Science, the State Examinations Commission and one nominee of the Minister. The Minister appoints the Chairperson.

In 2003 the NCCA began the Primary Curriculum Review, Phase 1. In 2004, we published *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, our first involvement with education at this level. The same year saw the launch of **info@ncca**, a newsletter for teachers, and the NCCA's new website, **www.ncca.ie**.

Since 2005 the NCCA has participated in planning and development in curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning - key areas of the senior cycle. We produced a DVD for parents, *The What, Why and How of children's learning in primary school*, in 2006 and in the same year began Primary Curriculum Review, Phase 2. We continued work on report card templates and won a Metro Éireann Media and Multicultural Award (MAMA). These awards celebrate the contributions of people who promote cross-cultural understanding in Ireland. The National Action Plan against

Racism Award was presented to the NCCA for *Intercultural Guidelines for Primary Schools*, which provides advice on creating an inclusive atmosphere in primary schools. *Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School* was published later in 2006.

2007 was also a busy year for the NCCA. We published revised *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities*, *Guidelines for Teachers of Exceptionally Able Students* and *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Teachers*.



And, somehow, we managed to find time to celebrate our 20th Anniversary!

Council Chairpersons

1987-1991

Dr. Ed Walsh,
President of NIHE, Limerick .

1991-1995

Dr. Tom Murphy (deceased),
former President, UCD, and
Chairperson of the Primary Education
Review Body

1995-2000

Dr. Caroline Hussey,
former Registrar, UCD.

2000-2006

Dr. Catherine O'Brien,
Professor of Italian, NUIG

2006 -

Dr. Tom Collins,
Professor of Education,
NUI, Maynooth

Role Call

Over the past 20 years, the NCCA full and part-time staff has included the following people, now moved on to apply their curriculum development experience in new settings.

Gary Granville

Professor of Education, NCAD

Breda Naughton

Principal Officer, Department of
Education & Science

Lucy Fallon Byrne

Director, National Centre for
Partnership & Performance

Steven McCarthy

Education Officer, City of Dublin VEC

Valerie O'Dowd

Lecturer, Marino Institute of Education

James Mulcahy

Director,
Cork Teacher Education Centre

Regina Murphy

Head of Professional Development,
St Patrick's College, Drumcondra

Helen Guinan

Principal, St. Paul's Special School,
Montenotte, Cork

John Fitzgibbon

Education Officer, Cork City VEC

Marion Palmer

Head of Learning Sciences, IADT,
Dun Laoghaire

Harold Hislop

Assistant Chief Inspector,
Department of Education &
Science.



Diversity

Issues of diversity and inclusion have featured often on the agendas of NCCA Council meetings in the last year. Whether these have been issues to do with the increasing number of international students, the inclusion of students with special educational needs, or the diverse needs of disadvantaged students, the view that has emerged is the same. The challenges involved for primary and post-primary schools in serving a diverse student population and in being truly inclusive are many and may be unprecedented. The comments and quotes around these pages are testimony to this.

But the comments also raise the question of whether the increasing diversity of the school-going population is recognised, accepted and viewed by all as a positive development in education. Perhaps the challenge of responding to diversity, whether that diversity relates to language, ability, culture or social difference and expectations, is not being equally met across our schools.

Some schools seem to be embracing diversity, others are struggling with being inclusive places. Parents and guardians availing of choice in an increasingly marketised education system may, as often as not, be choosing to avoid diversity rather than embrace it. This may be particularly true where a school's approach to handling diversity is perceived to have a negative impact on 'my' child.

But do we know enough about what is happening in schools, and what is changing in schools, in relation to this rapidly changing dimension of the educational environment? The view emerging from discussions in the NCCA is that we don't, and that a research initiative is needed in this area. The research, which will commence shortly, will aim to capture the situation of schools with a diverse student population and their experience of being inclusive. The

They're no way ambitious that way... so it's mainly foundation; foundation in Irish, English and Maths, and then pass in all the other subjects.

Case study school teachers, ESRI research, explaining how the lower stream classes are allocated levels in the Junior Certificate examinations.

research will look at the dynamics associated with policy and practice related to diversity and inclusion in the school, with how this plays out for all students, rather than particular groups or categories of students.

For the purpose of the research, an inclusive school is being defined as one that operates on the basis of policies and practices that aim to cater effectively for the full and diverse range of learning needs of its students and that supports them fully in pursuing learning to the highest standards commensurate with their ability and potential.

An inclusive school welcomes, recognises, respects and celebrates diversity. A commitment to achieve equality of access, opportunity, participation and outcome for all its students is a foundational principle of an inclusive school. From the perspective of the learner, it is a school where the learner feels comfortable engaging with all aspects of schooling; where he/she has a strong sense that the school is working for them, in their interest; where she/he feels a genuine sense of belonging and well-being.

The first part of the research will be conducted during 2008. A final report on that phase will be completed early in 2009.

*We would be seen in the town in a certain way.... you know, that the LCA wouldn't be seen as **the** Leaving Certificate.*

Case study school principal, ESRI research, explaining why they are reluctant to offer LCA.

and inclusion



The research will involve working with a group of about 15 schools (primary and post-primary) that are identified as having a diverse student population. The subject of the research is the schools themselves. It will look at how the schools organise themselves, plan for and develop policy on diversity and inclusion. It will also gather information and examples of practice in the classroom – in teaching, learning and curriculum implementation - related to addressing diversity and inclusion.

For the NCCA, the research will contribute to ongoing curriculum and assessment review, specifically review in the areas of special educational needs, the Primary School Curriculum, the Junior Certificate School Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied.

Most importantly, this research should also provide important insights, examples and experiences *from* schools for all those working *in* and *with* schools on how they can better serve a diverse student population and become more inclusive in this context.

We could design our Leaving Cert course to be better for weaker students...we discuss it every year and the school ...would have teachers...that would be totally opposed to seeing arts coming in, seeing woodwork coming in seeing.... building coming in because this is an academic school.. they feel that if we open the doors to those subjects that we will also get the kids coming in for those subjects.

Case Study School, teacher, ESRI research.

“The key to social cohesion is the use of a common language . . . resourcing English-language tuition to provide competencies in English as the common language of the State is imperative and absolutely essential,” Mr. Moriarty told the opening day of the IVEA conference in Killarney, Co Kerry.

Mr. Moriarty said achieving social cohesion was the way to avoid ethnic conflict in the future and said the winner/loser dynamic, “where one group’s gain is seen as a loss for another group”, had to be avoided.

Irish Times, September 27th 2007.

Conditions are so tight at St Mary’s National School.....that the special teacher for the non-Irish national population is now wedged into the cloakroom in a bid to find space.

The resource teacher, meanwhile, has no classroom at all and has to use the staff room while the general-purpose room, which should be used for PE and drama, is being used as a classroom to cater for increasing numbers at the school.

Almost 170 pupils attend the mixed national school which has its highest school population since it was built 50 years ago.

Irish Times, September 20th 2007.

Assessment in th

Responding to your questions

Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning... If this sounds familiar to you it's probably because it is one of the most frequently quoted lines from the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999). But like many teachers, you might be wondering, *what exactly does it mean?* If so, this might just be the article for you.....

As primary school teachers, we are constantly gathering information about how well children are doing in their learning. But as many teachers noted in Phase 1 of the NCCA's review of the Primary School Curriculum, we are often not so good at using the information we gather to benefit children's learning. Thankfully, the last ten years have seen huge developments in what is now known about **how** assessment can actually help to make learning more enjoyable, more motivating and overall a more positive experience, and that's not just for children but for teachers as well. Interested in learning how? Read on

Re-thinking assessment

If you've had an opportunity to read *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* which should have arrived in your school last term, or if you have browsed assessment articles in previous editions of *info@ncca*, you'll be familiar with two of the current buzz phrases in assessment:

- Assessment for Learning (AfL)
- Assessment of Learning (AoL).

You might indeed find yourself asking, *'what do we mean when we use these terms and what are the kinds of classroom activities covered by them?'*. Together, AfL and AoL capture the very essence of what primary school teachers do:

- AfL – teachers gather, interpret and use information—from what children say, do and make (and

don't say, do and make!)—to make learning relevant and meaningful for children.

- AoL – teachers record and report information on children's progress and achievement to the children themselves, their parents, other teachers, and other professionals. Teachers also use this information to take stock of their teaching—to consider the methodologies, the resources, the differentiation strategies and so on.

Why focus on assessment now?

As you know, the *Primary School Curriculum* provides general information on assessment. At the time the curriculum was developed it was intended that further information and advice would be provided for teachers. Then in the first phase of the review of the curriculum (NCCA, 2005), teachers throughout the country highlighted again the need for this additional support in assessment.

Not just another set of guidelines...

In a nutshell, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* answers questions teachers asked in the curriculum review. These focus on

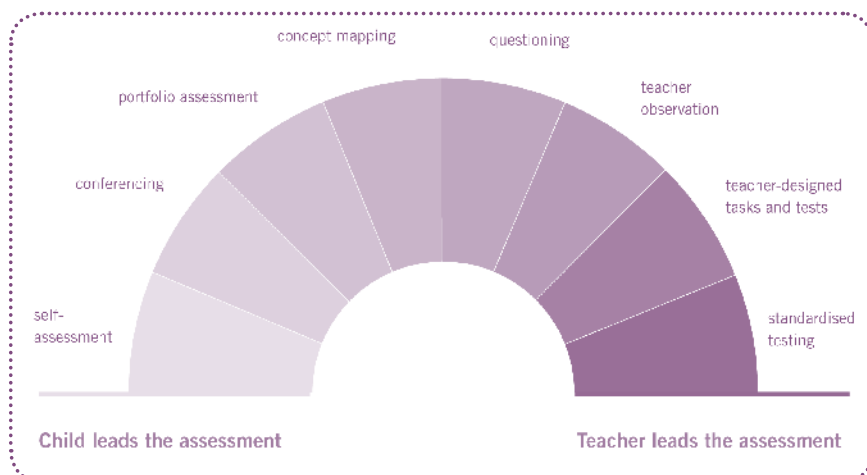
- Assessment in the classroom – *how can I as a teacher use assessment to extend and enrich children's learning?*
- Assessment at a school level – *what assessment processes and arrangements can we put in place across the school to benefit all children?*

In responding to the first question, the guidelines present a continuum of eight assessment methods which teachers can and do use, and in addition focus on the benefit of using a combination of methods when working with children.

Adopting a practical approach, the guidelines show what assessment can look like in classrooms of different sizes, different class groupings and different abilities and when focusing on different subjects. Essentially, the guidelines describe assessment 'in action' through examples from practice referred to as *sample activities*.

The guidelines also provide advice on developing an assessment policy. Legislative requirements are a key consideration here. However, this doesn't mean that you have to source, study and try to interpret the various Acts. The work is done for you, as the guidelines set out the relevant implications for recording and reporting information about children's progress and achievement.

A continuum of assessment methods



e primary school

....and classroom approaches for post-primary teachers

The second part of this article showcases some of the practical suggestions for using assessment in your classroom. You'll find these and much more in the guidelines.

Delving deeper into the guidelines ...

Assessment literature and practice highlight that children learn best when they

- know what's expected of them when they are learning
- get feedback on how well they are doing in their learning
- understand what they can improve on and how they can do this.

Good common sense really. But how can this be done? The guidelines explore self-assessment as one method teachers can use to help children learn. Yes, self-assessment, and yes, even for junior infants! Self-assessment basically involves children looking at their own work in a reflective way, identifying parts that are good and parts that perhaps are not so good and could be improved, and then deciding how they might do the work differently the next time in order to improve it. The teacher can use many different tools to help children develop self-assessment skills. One of these is rubrics.

So, what is a rubric and how does it work?

A **rubric** describes varying levels of quality in a piece of work. It has two main features:

- (1) a list of criteria, giving the important elements of the work
- (2) a set of statements which describe different levels of quality in the work.

The combination of these two elements of the rubric helps to build up a picture for the teacher and the learner of what

success will 'look like' in the activity or piece of work.

The two sample activities from *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (pp. 15 and 25) shown on the next two pages describe teachers using rubrics with two different class groupings and with two different subjects.

Rubrics can also be used with younger children. In this case, faces or other symbols might be used to show 'levels of satisfaction'. Young children can be helped to assess their own work by talking about what they have done, saying whether they are pleased with it, what they like or don't like about it, or what they would like to do better in it next time.

What types of learning suit rubrics?

Rubrics can be used to assess many kinds of learning such as a piece of art work, a science project or a project presentation to the class, a poem, a piece of drama, or a musical performance. Over time children themselves can be involved in identifying the important elements of their work, and in creating suitable rubrics in collaboration with the teacher.

What's in here for post-primary teachers?

Teachers working in one sector can be acutely aware of how little detail they actually get about what goes on in other sectors. When it comes to assessment it is too easy for the post-primary school teacher to imagine that there is no assessment happening in primary schools because there is no examination there. Equally, it can be tempting for the primary school teacher to imagine that there is no assessment happening in the post-primary school apart from the examinations. Of course we know that neither of these simplifications is

correct and a quick look through the assessment guidelines for primary schools can serve as a useful reminder that there is much in the way of shared practice across the sectors.

Once again...Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning...

Certainly, a lot of a post-primary teacher's time and energy can go into the preparation of students for examinations – for tests that will be carried out by others, in fact. But there is so much more to assessment in the post-primary school than this. And, if the levels of interest and response to articles on Assessment for Learning in recent issues of **info@ncca** are anything to go by, there is a growing interest among post-primary teachers in classroom approaches that use assessment information to support students' learning directly, to keep their learning on track. Indeed, the outcomes of the NCCA review of post-primary junior cycle are remarkably similar to those of the first phase of the primary curriculum review, in that teachers prioritised assessment as an area in which they would appreciate further support.

Assessment for learning is centrally concerned with the ways in which teachers use their judgements about the work produced by students to give feedback in support of further learning, and a very good way of doing this is by setting out clear criteria for success and sharing these with the learners. This is why, among many other useful approaches, the use of rubrics in *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* will be of interest to teachers in post-primary schools.

How do rubrics support learning?

One way of thinking of this is to consider what frequently happens

when a person is learning a new skill, like an action in tennis or swimming, or how to strike a ball effectively with a hurley, a golf club or a hockey stick. Coaches often employ a process of mental imaging to model the correct outcome for the learner, to create a clear image in the learner's mind of

what success 'looks' or 'feels' like. Looking back at either of the rubrics from *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* it is very easy to see how listing the key areas for achievement (the features) and the graded range of possible levels of achievement together build

up just such an image of success at a particular task or activity. Helping them to see clearly what success looks like is an important first step in supporting learners; it fosters feelings of capability, literally promoting a positive academic self-image!

Sample activity 2.1

Using a rubric for self-assessment

Curriculum area	Arts Education
Subject	Visual arts
Strand	Construction
Strand unit	Looking and responding
Curriculum objective	The child should be enabled to look at and talk about his/her work and the work of other children.
Class level	Third and fourth classes

The children in Mr. Byrne's third and fourth classes are given the task of building a model of a bridge. They have learned about many kinds of bridges over a few lessons. Mr. Byrne wants them to show that they understand the essential functions of a bridge, its construction, and its features. The children have to show the plan they have drawn of the bridge, and they have to tell why the bridge is built in this way. They can use any kind of suitable materials to make it. The teacher has discussed the important elements in planning and building this model with the class. The following rubric is used after the model is built.

A sample rubric

Feature	1	2	3
Plan	I made out a plan for my model with a few details.	I made out a plan of my model with quite a few details.	I made out a very detailed plan for my model.
Design	I didn't show the important features of the bridge.	I showed some of the features in my model.	I showed a lot or all of the features in my model.
Materials	The materials I used to make the bridge were not suitable.	I used some suitable materials.	All the materials I used were very suitable.
Why the bridge was built like this	I didn't explain this.	I partly explained it.	I explained it very well.
Appearance	My bridge looks OK.	My bridge looks good.	My bridge looks great.

The children complete the rubric by ticking or colouring the appropriate level of quality they judge their model to show. Differentiating according to the children's ability, Mr. Byrne helps some children use the rubric by reading the statements and talking to the children about what they think of the quality of their bridges.

Variations on this rubric include extending the range of quality to perhaps four levels. For example, for children who have more experience of using assessment rubrics this could include familiarising the children with the expected standards or levels of quality before beginning the model work, and demonstrating what such levels would look like by showing similar work done by other children.

Curriculum continuity

Students, especially in their first year in post-primary school, find a sense of continuity with their work and experience in primary school to be especially important in reinforcing positive expectations of their new school lives. This can make a lasting

impact on their engagement with their school work. The practical approaches to classroom assessment contained in *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* apply equally to the post-primary classroom and have the potential to provide that kind of continuity even where the content of subject lessons

moves on, or even where completely new subjects are encountered.

For more information, have a look at *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Teachers* on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie/publications.

Sample activity 2.6 Using an assessment rubric as part of conferencing

Curriculum area	Language
Subject	English
Strand	Competence and confidence in using language / Writing
Strand unit	Writing: developing competence, confidence and the ability to write independently Competence and confidence in using language: developing competence, confidence and the ability to write independently
Curriculum objectives	The child should be enabled to write, without redrafting, on a given or chosen topic within certain time constraints. The child should be enabled to observe the conventions of grammar, punctuation and spelling in his/her writing. The child should be enabled to help others in editing their writing.
Class level	Fifth and sixth classes
Strand	Receptiveness to language / Writing
Strand unit	Writing: creating and fostering the impulse to write Receptiveness to language: creating and fostering the impulse to write
Curriculum objective	The child should be enabled to receive and give constructive responses to writing.
Class level	Fifth and sixth classes

Sixth class children use the rubric below to assess a story they have written. The particular elements in the rubric are based on what makes a good story as discussed and agreed by the children and their teacher beforehand (the criteria for success in writing the story). Another rubric might be used in subsequent writing to assess punctuation, for example the use of quotation marks, exclamation marks, and so on.

Sample rubric

Feature	I didn't do well	I made a good effort	I made a very good effort
Structure and plot	My story doesn't have a clear beginning, middle and end.	My story has a structure and plot but some of it is not clear.	My story has a clear structure and plot.
Paragraphs	I have too many (or too few) paragraphs, or they are not beginning in suitable places.	Some paragraphs are in the right places, but some aren't.	My paragraphs begin at change points in the story and help the reader to follow the story better.
Interest	My story is not that interesting.	My story is fairly interesting.	My story is very interesting.
Characters	I have described no strong character in the story.	I have described at least one strong character in the story.	The characters in the story are described well.

Each child's reflection on his/her own piece of writing helps to develop his/her skills of metacognition (reflecting on one's own learning). A key outcome of each conference is that both the teacher and the child can understand something more about the child's learning and the next steps that need to be taken in supporting learning. In addition, the individualised nature of the conference means that the teacher can differentiate support appropriate to each child's abilities and needs.

ICT: the ‘invis

Have you ever imagined a classroom where Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is part and parcel of teaching and learning? Where students from junior infants to junior cycle have opportunities to develop ICT literacy across curriculum subjects? Where ICT is invisible—not because teachers and students don’t have access to it—but because it has become so much part of daily teaching and learning that it is transparent?

Three years ago, the NCCA began to imagine this future for all schools. With the support of ICT experts, we developed a draft *Framework for ICT in Curriculum and Assessment*. The ICT Framework was designed as a practical resource for teachers to plan teaching and learning with ICT across the curriculum, from primary school through to the completion of junior cycle.

Is ICT a curriculum area?

No. Internationally, countries now opt to embed ICT across curriculum subjects rather than establish it as a separate subject.

Is the ICT Framework a syllabus then?

No, the ICT Framework is a cross-curricular tool for planning and using ICT in curriculum and assessment.



So, what does it include?

It has four objectives. These focus on enabling students to

- create, communicate and collaborate with ICT
- develop ICT foundational knowledge, skills and concepts
- think critically and creatively with ICT
- understand the social and personal impact of ICT.

There are outcomes outlined for each of the objectives above. These outcomes are the skills, attitudes and knowledge considered important for students to develop.

Are some of the outcomes more relevant at different stages of students’ education?

All outcomes are important to students from junior infants to the completion of junior cycle. Learning, and what it might look like across the four objectives, is described for children at three levels—lower primary level, upper primary level and lower second level.

Feedback

The draft ICT Framework was completed in 2006. To test its effectiveness, teachers in twelve schools opted to use the framework and to provide feedback to the NCCA during the 2006/2007 school year. The key questions for the teachers were: *To what extent and to what effect was the ICT Framework*

1. **accessible** in terms of its language, structure and content
2. **helpful** in planning the use of ICT in curriculum and assessment
3. **feasible** to use at class and school levels?

What did we learn?

Teachers in the twelve schools in general responded positively to the ICT Framework and its potential to achieve the vision of ICT literacy for all students.

Accessibility

Teachers liked the structure and layout of the framework. Some teachers found the language accessible while others asked us to reduce the use of jargon and technical terms.



ible' plan

Have you ever imagined ICT being invisible... as a good thing?

“ The ICT Framework is a great idea. It is great having a structure and an outline of what students should be doing with ICT. It will be a great help for planning the integration of ICT across the curriculum.

I found the language very accessible, even approaching it with a slight fear of all ICT! I think all items in Level 1, which I was working from, were very clearly laid out and easy to understand and follow.

”

Usability

Teachers found the framework useful as a tool for planning ICT across curriculum subjects, including planning with other teachers at school level. They told us that its depth and breadth was appropriate for the kinds of ICT-supported activities they would like to undertake with their students. However, a number of teachers were unsure if the levels were realistic for their students or if they were pitched at too advanced a level. Other issues focused on concerns about the size of the ICT Framework, and the level of teacher competence required for effective engagement.

Feasibility

How feasible did teachers think the ICT Framework was for schools? Positive findings focused on the ICT equipment provided, opportunities for discussion and support from other teachers and NCCA staff, and resources shared (lesson planning tools, etc.). However, teachers also identified concerns.

- These referred to lack of or limited:
- access to ICT
 - quality and capacity of ICT equipment
 - technical support
 - time
 - continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers.

What do these findings mean?

The NCCA has identified four recommendations arising from this work with schools on the ICT Framework. These focus on

- developing further support materials, including planning tools, sample activities, etc.
- embedding ICT in curriculum, assessment and examinations across subjects and syllabuses
- investing in ICT infrastructure in schools
- providing continuing professional development (CPD) for primary and second level teachers for ICT in curriculum and assessment.

“ The ICT Framework has made me really think about my teaching methodologies. ICT provides great opportunities on how I present things to students. More importantly, I see great potential in providing more active experiences for my students.

It is a super framework but there's just so much in it and we already have so much to do!

”

It's clear that all of these actions are key to successfully using the ICT Framework in schools. Without these four supports, the vision of ICT literacy for all students promoted in the framework will remain aspirational.

The full report on the initiative with schools has been issued as advice for the way forward to the Minister for Education and Science and is available on the NCCA website. The revised ICT Framework has been published online too and is available at: www.ncca.ie/publications.



“ **Could we be expecting too much for this level?**

Is the [ICT Framework] directed towards teachers who are confident with what they're doing in the area of ICT already?



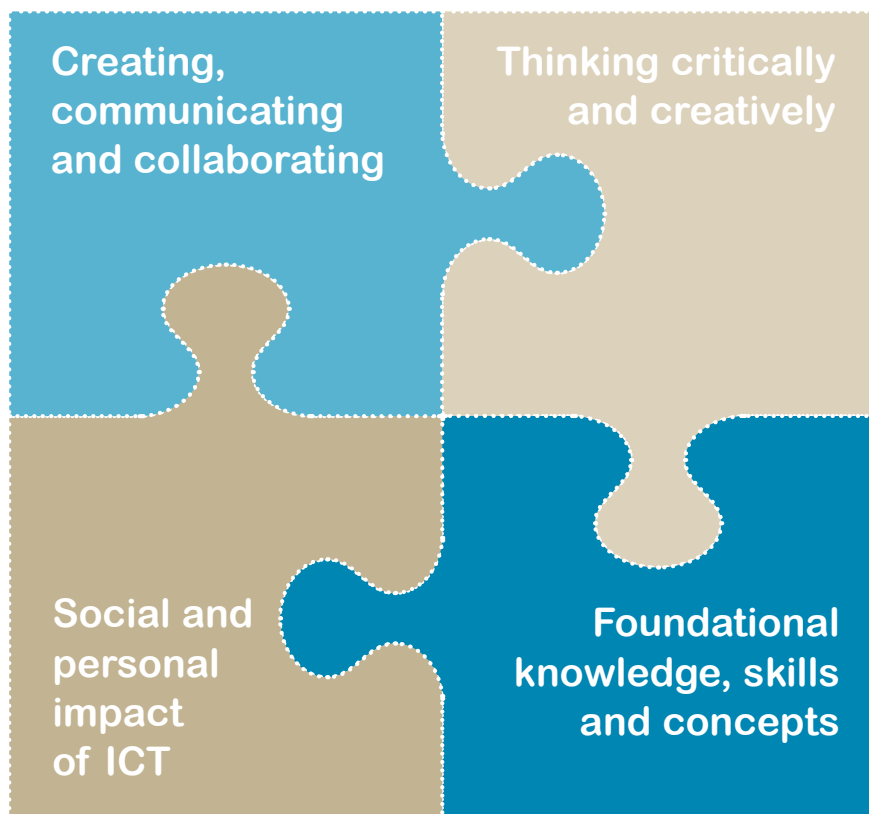
In the meantime, if you're looking for ideas to use ICT to support teaching and learning, check out the Sample Activities published on the ACTION website, at <http://action.ncca.ie>. These were developed by teachers as part of the ICT Framework online. They include lesson descriptions, photos and digital videos of classroom work and sample teacher-generated resources. If you'd like to share ICT activities you've used with us for the ICT Framework online, we'd love to hear from you! You can contact us at: newsletter@ncca.ie.



Teachers found the framework useful as a tool for planning ICT across curriculum subjects, including planning with other teachers at school level...



ICT Framework: Four objectives



Intercultural education:

every teacher has a role

Many of the more interesting intercultural moments are those that are unplanned – moments arising from incidents in the school or issues raised by children themselves.

(Teacher involved in 'Celebrating Difference: Promoting Equality' project)

Intercultural education is part of what every teacher does in schools throughout the country. It is about more than the curriculum and what we teach. Intercultural education should inform how we plan teaching and learning and how the classroom operates as a supportive learning environment.

At its core, it has two focal points:

- It is education which respects, celebrates and recognises the normality of diversity in all parts of human life.
- It is education which promotes equality and human rights, challenges unfair discrimination and promotes the values upon which equality is built.

The NCCA recently developed guidelines for schools, *Intercultural Education in the Primary School* and *Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School* to support teachers and school managers in creating intercultural schools and classrooms.

The guidelines include detailed information about intercultural education and some practical ideas about

- school planning
- classroom planning
- curriculum audits for each subject including exemplar lessons
- approaches and methodologies
- assessment and cultural diversity
- language and interculturalism.

The guidelines emphasise the importance of creating a supportive environment as the key to the successful integration of new comers to our schools.

How can I creating a supportive intercultural environment?

Intercultural education is not confined to a single curriculum area. It is embedded in the practices, 'how we do things around here', and dispositions that inform both the classroom climate and the 'hidden curriculum'. Every teacher has a part to play in creating an 'inclusive school'.

“ Because people generally find it easier to develop complex thinking in their first language, it is important that student's first language is valued and affirmed within the classroom and the wider school context. ”

In planning the physical and social environment of your classroom, you could use the **Classroom Review Checklist** on **Page 37** of the post-primary guidelines:

	YES	TO SOME EXTENT	NOT YET
Physical environment	✓	✓	✓
Do the pictures, images and displays in the classroom and school physical environment reflect in a current and accurate way the diverse cultural and ethnic groups of Ireland and of the school?			
Social environment	✓	✓	✓
Are routines in place for welcoming new students, for assisting them in becoming part of the class, for ensuring that their culture is affirmed in the environment and for ensuring that their capabilities and needs are recognised?			
Are classroom routines made explicit to all students?			
Can students and teachers pronounce each other's names properly?			
Do students engage in co-operative learning activities which enable them to recognise and benefit from each others strengths?			
Do students share responsibility for classroom organisation and for ensuring that all feel welcome and included?			
Are members of minority ethnic groups affirmed in a positive sense of their identity?			
Have strategies for dealing with discriminatory behaviour been considered and put in place?			
Has consideration been given to ensuring appropriate language and interactions between teachers and pupils?			
Is a supportive environment created for second language learners?			
Choosing resources	✓	✓	✓
Is there a method for vetting the appropriateness of images and messages contained in school texts and others resources?			

Classroom Review Checklist

Positive answers indicate a more intercultural classroom context. Negative answers identify areas which can be improved. For example, in planning a supportive physical environment, teachers might consider

- representing diversity as a normal part of Irish life and human existence.
- ensuring that representations of minority groups do not focus on 'spectacular' or 'colourful' events.
- ensuring that all students irrespective of their colour, religion, ethnic group, or ability can feel at home and represented within the classroom.

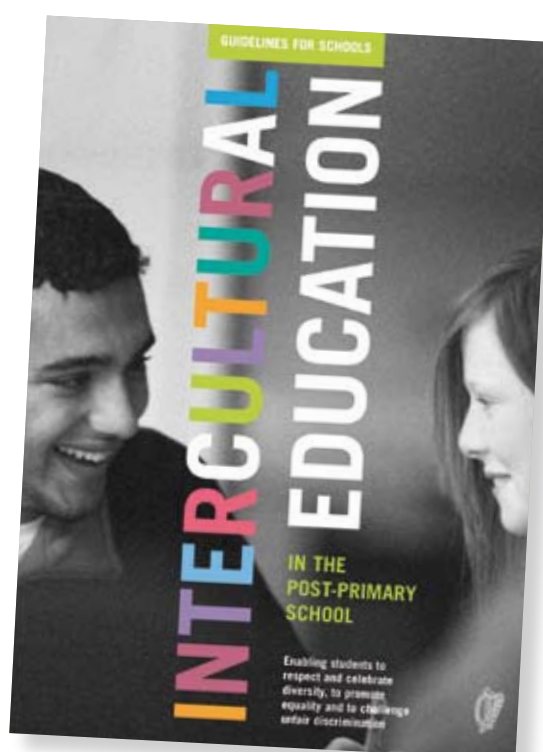
Creating a supportive social environment in the classroom

What can I do when things go wrong?

Many of the more interesting intercultural moments are those that are unplanned – moments arising from incidents in the school or issues raised by children themselves. These incidents offer a great chance for dialogue and often provide some of the best opportunities for intercultural education

(Teacher involved in 'Celebrating Difference: Promoting Equality' project)

Relationships and interactions within the classroom are framed by a set of agreed rules of classroom behaviour. While these are based on mutual respect, students sometimes respond to diversity with discomfort and may identify diversity as abnormal. Such responses might include laughing, name-calling, shunning or aggression. Such responses, while inappropriate, do offer the teacher an opportunity for engaging in intercultural education.





The guidelines suggest a number of steps that the teachers can take:

- Intervene immediately, rather than ignoring it or waiting to see if the behaviour will change on its own.
- Challenge the ideas – not the person.
- Gently make clear that certain behaviour or responses are inappropriate by making reference to agreed rules of classroom doing so in a way which does not leave the students who have engaged in discrimination likely to withdraw from conversing with the teacher.
- Support the student who was the target of discriminating behaviour.
- Enable students who engage in discriminating behaviour to relate to how they would feel if they were discriminated against in a similar way.
- Help students identify why they were uncomfortable with difference. For example, identify if there is a misconception or a prejudiced belief which underlies their actions and address these causes immediately, and if, appropriately, in ongoing work.

(Intercultural Education in Post-Primary Schools: page 41)

“**Relationships and interactions within the classroom are framed by a set of agreed rules of classroom behaviour.**”

As teachers, it is important that we continue to reflect on our own interactions with students and how we may be providing inappropriate cues. For example, can we pronounce unfamiliar names or identify appropriate language for referring to ethnic groups? By reflecting on our own use of language, we can prevent inappropriate messages being inadvertently transmitted.

How can I support students' language development?

Language is a key part of a student's identity as well as playing a central part in their learning. The right to one's own personal language is important in enabling students to develop a strong positive self-image. Because people generally find it easier to develop complex thinking in their first language, it is important that student's first language is valued and affirmed within the classroom and the wider school context. It is also important to create an environment that supports the learning of a second language. The guidelines suggest that it is important to recognise and affirm the student's first language. This can be achieved by

- the teacher and students learning key words and phrases (greetings, simple instructions, etc.) in the students' first language.
- communicating positive attitudes towards linguistic diversity and multi-lingual students' skills, recognising the capacities of second language learners rather than identifying them primarily as people with 'language needs' e.g. Maria speaks fluent Spanish and she is improving her English everyday.
- providing multilingual resources where possible.
- providing a range of cues and supports in order to enable students to understand the language that is being used – gestures, other non-verbal means of communication and pictures can be useful supports to a second language learner in understanding what is being said.
- suggesting ways in which students can help and support their classmates, such as repeating and re-phrasing statements.
- modelling and/or role-playing strategies for asking clarification and for confirming that the students understands what is being done.

The classroom community can become a resource for learners of a second language. It is, after all, important that students feel that they can speak and make mistakes without fear or ridicule.

Further information on

- whole school approach to intercultural education
- resources
- welcoming new students
- supporting second language learning
- including intercultural education in your classroom planning and teaching
- working with exemplar materials

is available in *Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School: Guidelines for schools*. A copy of the guidelines, along with the accompanying CD, has recently been delivered to every teacher in your school and is also available to download from our website, at www.ncca.ie/publications.

Junior cycle

Is it making the grade?

Readers of past issues of *info@ncca* will know that the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), on the NCCA's behalf, has been carrying out research among 900 students in 12 post-primary schools, from the time they entered first year to the end of their post-primary education.

This ambitious project, the first of its kind in Ireland, is providing us with a unique insight into how different groups of students experience school as they move through our education system.

To date, the ESRI has published two reports—*Moving Up*, a report on the first year findings and *Pathways through Junior Cycle*, a report on the second year research. You can download summaries of both of these from the NCCA website, at www.ncca.ie/publications.

With work on third year now completed, the project has reached an important milestone, giving us an opportunity to stand back and look at students' experience in junior cycle as a whole, and to consider changes that we might make to the way we 'do' school so that all of our students get the best education possible.

What is it like being in third year?

A majority of students in the case study schools reported that they enjoyed school and got on well with teachers and each other, but they were a lot less positive about school than in first and second year.

Third year students were very aware that it was an exam year and found that work got harder and their teachers put a lot more pressure on them in class. Most students got more serious about study and spent more time on their homework as a result. The researchers called these students 'the

engaged group' and it was noticeable that a majority of these were girls, from professional backgrounds and in mixed-ability or higher-stream classes.

But some groups of students actually found third year easier and reported that they were doing the same amount of, or even less, homework and study than in second year! These were more likely to be boys, from working-class backgrounds and in the lower streams of streamed schools. This group of students also tended to report higher levels of misbehaviour and being 'given out to' more by their teachers. It goes without saying that these were 'the *disengaged group*'.

What helps students learn?

Looking at each of the three years of the research there is a consistency in students' views about how they learn best. It is when teachers explain things clearly, make learning interesting and fun, and come across as having a love for their subject.

Having a positive relationship with the teacher and being encouraged to ask questions in class is also seen to be very important to students, but copying notes and listening to the teacher reading from the textbook doesn't hit the spot.

Views on junior cycle subjects

Students found subjects in which there were many practical activities like

woodwork, art and physical education most interesting, whereas maths, Irish and languages were less so. Business studies, maths, home economics and computers were seen as being very useful while Irish, history and geography were not.

Maths, without doubt, was seen as the most difficult subject and a surprising number of students were taking grinds in maths in third year. Irish got a negative response all round—being seen as the least interesting, least useful and among the most difficult subjects. When the researchers looked at the time devoted overall to each of the subjects in the curriculum, it was noticeable that the least time was given to subjects the students enjoy!

How schools group their students

The researchers found that the way in which students were grouped had a strong influence on how they experienced junior cycle. Students in the lower streams of streamed schools (and 6 of the 12 case study schools used streaming) did not have a very positive experience of junior cycle. They received very traditional forms of teaching and the pace of lessons was very slow. They were expected to take all their subjects at Foundation or Ordinary level. Students in the middle streams did a lot better in the Junior Certificate exam, even though many of these had the *same reading and writing ability* as their friends in the lower stream classes! Students in lower stream classes were more

likely to be boys from working-class backgrounds—the ‘disengaged’ group once again.

What is really interesting is that students in mixed-ability settings performed *better* than those of the same ability in the higher streams in streamed schools. They were more likely to keep up higher level maths, Irish and English in third year and, on average, did better in the Junior Cert exam!

Streaming, then, as a way of helping students of differing abilities to learn best and to succeed, was not working for the case study schools.

The Junior Cert exam

What is unique about the ESRI research is that it has enabled us to look at how the students’ starting point, i.e. their initial reading and maths ability, class background, gender, and the class grouping in which they are placed, influences their eventual performance in the Junior Cert (and beyond!).

It will not surprise you that students from middle-class backgrounds, who have more ‘learning capital’, made more progress and performed better in the Junior Cert than those of similar ability from working-class backgrounds, and that higher stream

students did better than those in the lower streams. What you may find surprising, however, is that students in mixed-ability settings outperformed their peers in the higher streams.

Girls in the case study were found to do better than boys in the Junior Cert exams. Not unexpected, you may say. After all, don’t girls study harder and aren’t they more ‘mature’ than boys at this age? However, the research found that it was only some groups of boys who underperformed—mainly working-class boys in lower streams—and remember, these boys were not expected to take any subjects at higher level. They could only reach the level of achievement that was expected of them!

Can schools make a difference?

What stands out in the research is that the reading and maths ability students *come in with* strongly influences what students *come out with* at the end of junior cycle.

This leads us to ask, *can post-primary schools make any difference?* To find out, the researchers looked behind the statistics to see if ‘all things being equal’ some schools were making more of a difference than others. The answer was YES—some schools were having a more positive effect on students’ achievement.

The characteristics of these schools may be a good pointer to how junior cycle can be made a more successful experience for students. Key factors are: promoting a supportive school climate that fosters positive relationships both inside and outside the classroom; developing teaching methods that best help students learn, giving particular attention to how teachers ‘pace’ their lessons; providing students with the opportunity to take subjects that interest them, especially activity-based subjects; expecting students to do well and removing obstacles, such as streaming, that might limit students’ opportunities to achieve.

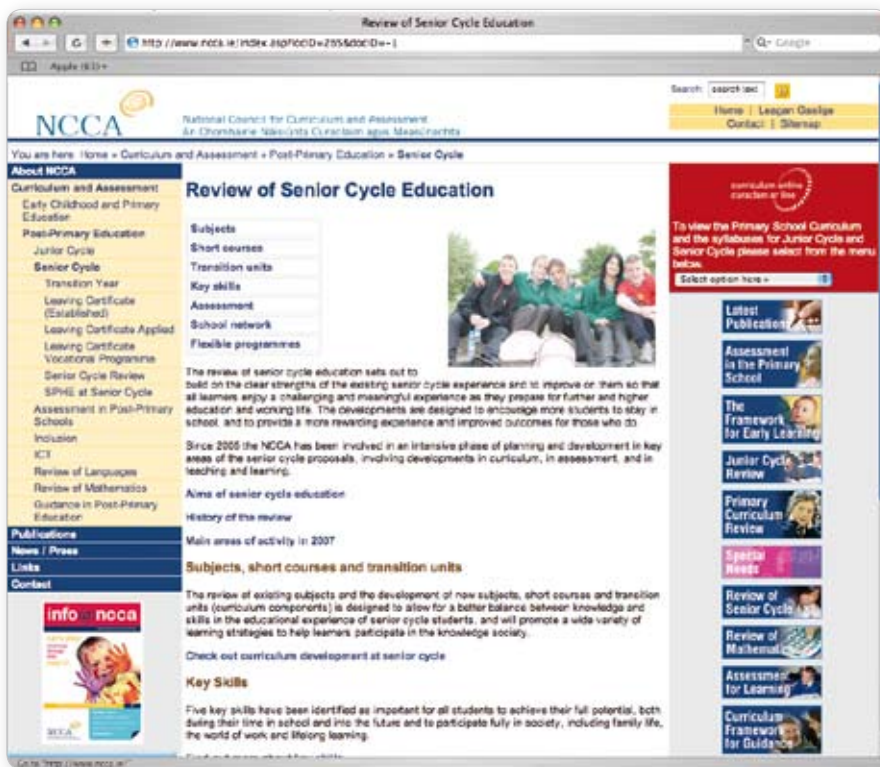
What next?

The ESRI research is ongoing and interesting data is already emerging about the different pathways the students in the case study schools have taken in senior cycle. And we will continue to update you on their progress!

In the meantime, the full ESRI report, *Gearing Up for the Exam?: The Experiences of Junior Certificate Students* is published by The Liffey Press (details from www.theliffeypress.com). A summary of the report is available at: www.ncca.ie/publications.



Senior Cycle Review on the web



“ the Senior Cycle Review ‘home’ page acts as a gateway to a collection of web pages and documents designed to keep you fully informed on all aspects of the review... ”

If you want to find out more about the review of senior cycle and keep up to date with developments as they happen, check out www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle.

As you can see from the screenshot above, the Senior Cycle Review ‘home’ page acts as a gateway to a collection of web pages and documents designed to keep you fully informed on all aspects of the review. Apart from reading about the review online, you will also be able to download all of the published documentation.

You can trace the review’s progress and read about how and why it came about. The work behind the scenes is outlined in the ‘History of the Review’ page and in the ‘Main areas of activity in 2007’ page, where you can download reports on all of the consultations that have taken place.

You can keep up to date on the developments in each of the subjects being reviewed in phase one and the new subjects and curriculum frameworks. There is also information on the embedding of key skills in the curriculum and on assessment.

“ We will be keeping the Senior Cycle Review pages up to date with the latest news, so keep on clicking! ”

In the last issue of **info@ncca** there was an article describing how the NCCA works with schools to explore and test the practical implications of change. Regular updates on this work with schools can be downloaded in the form of newsletters from the school network page.

If you want more information on the development of transition units there are PowerPoint presentations and sample transition units to download.

We will be keeping the Senior Cycle Review pages up to date with the latest news, so keep on clicking! And if you have any questions or observations to share, just click on the Contact page.