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Junior Cycle
Thinking about change Page 21

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NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

welcome...

to the first info@ncca of the second decade of the 21st century!

Where did the last ten years go? If you are a primary teacher, the chances are that they went in a haze of strands and strand units, curriculum plans, and school planning days. If you work in a post-primary school, the last decade saw a new senior cycle, the key skills, the new technology subjects, the new course in history and geography, new syllabuses in religious education, an SPHE course in junior cycle...and that's just a flavour of what occupied our last ten years!

And the next ten? Well, this issue of 'info' gives a few clues to what might lie ahead, whether you work in post-primary, primary or early childhood education. Short courses in enterprise and psychology. Phones in classrooms. A new junior cycle. A journey just beginning for early childhood education. And teachers doing it for themselves. It's exhausting just reading about it all!! This issue certainly challenges the idea that

'things are slowing down'. In education, nothing ever stands still.

That principle also applies to **info@ncca**. We said goodbye to our print edition a year ago. Some tears were shed at its demise, but the e-version was embraced in the spirit of the green, and the accessible – at least online every teacher who wanted to could get their own copy, thus ending the unseemly staff room scrambles for possession of one the few copies when the new edition arrived in schools. But technology and the NCCA website have all moved on. On some days, 20,000 people visit the website. Getting '**info**' to them speedily, and updating it more regularly have become a real challenge. We already have to issue additional mini bulletins for teachers working in the 24 schools leading *Project Maths*, because the information they need can't wait for the next scheduled issue of **info@ncca**.

Of course the other factor is cost. 2010 sees us with fewer staff and less money. We have to think carefully how to make best use of both! So we are doing some thinking about **info@ncca**. Your ideas and suggestions are welcome, to **newsletter@ncca.ie**, but I think we can say for certain that, like the many projects reported in this issue, change is expected!

Anne Looney
Chief Executive
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

what's in this issue

Supporting teaching and learning...

supporting **teaching** and **learning**

updates

Maths tips for parents

As you know, homework activities help parents to get to know what their child is learning at school. However, it can be a stressful time too.

Take parents of second class children, for example. If they help their child to subtract using the 'borrow and pay back' method that they learned themselves, the child may be confused. The child is learning to subtract using 'renaming' in school. Help parents with the 'maths homework' by giving them the new subtraction tip sheet for parents at ✎ **www.ncca.ie/parents**.

Strategic plan

We recently published our ✎ **Strategic Plan 2009-2011**. It's worth a look...because it is a strategic plan but not in the usual sense. Instead of a document, we made a 35 minute presentation about our work. For the document junkies, clicking on the little paper clip in the corner will give you transcripts and background papers. But for those who just want to know what we are doing now and what we hope to do next year, you can navigate your way to each 'site' and see what's planned.

We chose this approach for three reasons. First, when we started the job of preparing the plan, it became clear that planning in uncertain times was a real challenge. We needed to build in as much flexibility as possible. Second, we realised that while our previous plans had taken huge amounts of time and energy to get them right, they had not featured on the best-seller list, which seemed to be somewhat wasteful given the money spent on them. So the third reason for the new approach was to save money. And we did! What you see cost less than half of our usual spend on plans and annual reports. Take a look for yourself!

Calling all primary teachers!

We know from the review of the *Primary School Curriculum* that primary teachers find it challenging to teach it all. Help is now at hand! Work has started on re-presenting the curriculum in a more user friendly way as a first step to responding to the challenge.

The latest drafts of the English, Maths, Gaeilge and Science materials are now available. In order to develop these materials even further, we welcome your feedback. Please visit ✎ **www.ncca.ie/curriculumoverload** to see the draft materials and give your feedback. You can also email us at ✎ **curriculumoverload@ncca.ie**.

Aistear toolkit

Want to find out more about *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* but short of time at present? Check out the 8-minute presentation with audio, *An Introduction to Aistear* at ✎ **www.ncca.ie/earlylearning**. This presentation is part of an *Aistear* Toolkit that we are developing to help practitioners such as infant teachers to become familiar with and begin to use the framework in their classrooms.

Are you wondering what the main similarities and differences are between *Aistear* and the infant curriculum? If so, read the audit of the two, which is also part of the toolkit.

Assessment

Thanks to the review of the *Primary School Curriculum*, we now have a better understanding about some of the challenges that primary teachers face in the area of assessment. We are currently working with twenty nine teachers as part of the Primary School Network, in devising practical responses to these challenges. Samples of children's work and materials devised by the teachers will be among some of the things to watch out for over the coming months on ✎ **ACTION**.

CIDREE project

As a member of the Consortium of Institutions for Development and Research in Education in Europe (CIDREE) the NCCA, along with our Swiss and Dutch colleagues, have completed a project outlining examples of good practice in differentiating the curriculum for exceptionally able students. A range of case studies capture in rich detail the different practices across these countries. For more details visit the ✎ **Special Educational Needs** section of our website.

If it's pink, it's a link

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Senior cycle short courses

Let's hear your views on Psychology and Enterprise

What's a short course?

Short courses are being developed as new 90-hour optional courses for senior cycle. They will help to increase the number of subject areas available to learners and will therefore help to introduce more flexibility and choice into senior cycle. Learners might study a short course over one year and be assessed on completion of the course at the end of that year. It is intended that they will be examined by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and that they would carry the same status as subjects for progression to further and higher education. They would carry half the 'points' of a full subject.

Two sample short courses for you to check out

In the future we would like to see a range of short courses from which learners can select. In the meantime, the first two sample short courses are now on the ✍ **consultation** section of our website for you to check out and let us know what you think. These are Psychology, and Enterprise. Both of these courses would be available for learners to choose at either Ordinary or Higher level.

Psychology

Psychology introduces learners to the scientific study of behaviour and helps them to understand themselves and the world around them. They will learn about many of the applications of psychology in the real world such as sports, media, school, technology and the workplace. In addition, they will learn how to plan, carry out and communicate the findings of their own small-scale research studies in topics that interest them. There are four units of study in the short course: psychology and research, psychology and the body, psychology and you, and psychology and society.

Enterprise

The ability to be enterprising has never been more important to learners completing second level education. Being innovative, creatively generating and building ideas and turning these ideas into practical and targeted actions will benefit learners in their personal lives, in social, cultural and public life and in business and the world of work. The short course in Enterprise will help learners to focus on

what enterprise is, what it means to be enterprising and will show how they can be enterprising through four units of study: exploring enterprise, business enterprise, community enterprise and the entrepreneur in me.

So what do you think?

The two sample short courses are now available on the senior cycle consultation section of our website, at ✍ **www.ncca.ie/ seniorcycle** (follow the link to the consultation). There is also a slideshow to guide you through the courses and give you some ideas about how they might look in the classroom. Why don't you check them out, maybe discuss them with some of your senior cycle students and respond through the feedback form? We would love to hear what you think. We would also be interested in hearing your views on whether one or both might work on a distance or e-learning basis? Could a school which might not have real access to a teacher for the Psychology course for example, be given 'virtual' access to a teacher in another school who might support the course in a range of locations? One to think about...

Consultation

The senior cycle consultation is continuing on ✍ **www. ncca.ie/seniorcycle**. Consultation on Politics and Society has now concluded but we would like to hear your views on the short courses, on *Towards Learning: an overview of senior cycle education* and on the document *Leading and Supporting Change in Schools*.

Inside *Aistear*

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Attention all infant teachers! Have you had a chance to look inside *Aistear* yet? It's worth taking the time to explore it at ✎ **www.ncca.ie/earlylearning. The new early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years is full of ideas, suggestions and examples that you might find useful in your work with junior and senior infants.**

Learning experiences

A defining feature of *Aistear* is its **learning experiences**. These describe what children say, do and make as they learn through particular activities and experiences. They also show the very important role that you, the teacher, plays in supporting and extending children's learning and development. Aistear has 21 learning experiences based in infant classrooms.

Below are two examples to whet your appetite. Learning experience 48 comes from *Aistear's* guidelines on **play** while learning experience 71 comes from the guidelines on **assessment**.

Learning experience 48b: The farmer's market

Theme: *Identity and Belonging*, Aim 4 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school in the Gaeltacht)

During drama a group of children in junior and senior infants and their teacher, Múinteoir Síle, set up a market stall in the pretend play area. Many of the children visit the local farmer's market on Saturday mornings with their parents and mention it during news-time. Múinteoir Síle sets about getting play props, including writing materials and money, empty food containers, and jars. She clears the display table and uses this as a counter. The children take on different roles and ask Múinteoir Síle to be a customer. Over the next few days they bring 1, 2, 5 and 10 cent coins to school for buying the produce. The play develops during the week as groups of children set up more specialised stalls. Space in the classroom for stalls begins to pose a problem. Múinteoir Síle suggests that they could rearrange the tables and chairs to make room. Excitedly, the children help her do this. Planning permission to extend the market is now in place! More and more stalls begin to appear as children make produce from play-dough and bring empty food cartons from home. They set up a stall selling their own paintings and the flowers they are growing. They bring old toys and books from home and sell them to each other. They take turns playing customers and stall owners. Múinteoir Síle helps them to make signs for the different stalls. Some children make signs which show the price of their merchandise.

Múinteoir Síle sends a note home telling parents what the children are doing and invites them to visit the children's market when they drop off or collect the children. Múinteoir Síle videos some of the play episodes. On another day, she uses the market to pose a problem for the children; she wonders aloud how she can use the coins she has to pay for a 5c plant (junior infants) or a 10c plant (senior infants). With each child handling, observing and exploring real coins (1c, 2c, 5c and 10c), she encourages the children to explore the combinations they could use to pay for the plants.

Reflection: How can I use pretend play to a greater extent to develop children's literacy and numeracy skills?

Learning experience 71b: Emergent writing

Theme: *Communicating*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 4

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (Gaelscoil)

Iníon Uí Mhurchú is a senior infant teacher in a Gaelscoil. This week she and her class have been reading and discussing the story, *Goldilocks agus na trí bhéar*. Part of this has involved the children speculating about what the three bears might do if they knew where Goldilocks lived. They predict many actions for her some of which involve a messy ending for her house. Iníon Uí Mhurchú sets the children a task that involves them in writing stories about *Goldilocks agus na trí bhéar*. She differentiates the task for the class. Some children are given six pictures to sequence the story and to write the relevant word for each from a list. Another group of children write the story in their own words in their books, shaped like a cottage. A third group of children write the story in their own words, including how they imagine the story might end with the bears visiting Goldilocks' house. The teacher provides key words and phrases based on the class discussions.

Iníon Uí Mhurchú moves from group to group as the young writers work on their stories. She encourages them to try spellings when their words are not on the whiteboard. She sometimes thinks aloud with them to help them plan their story ending: *Goldilocks rings her mammy when she sees all the fuss*! Each day at story time she invites six children to read their stories, showing their books or sequenced pictures. Each afternoon when the children have gone home she adds a comment on the writing of the six children to the information she has already recorded about their writing skills. She also adds a copy of the children's work to their learning portfolios.

Example of Iníon Uí Mhurchú's notes on Meadbh's story recorded in her practitioner's file:
10th March 2009: Retained original characters; introduced new one (Goldilocks' mammy) in logical way. Used her own spellings showing good phonological awareness. Added four sentences for new story ending. Great progress.

Reflection: How can I make better use of assessment information to differentiate for children's learning and development?

Check out more learning experiences at ✍ www.ncca.ie/earlylearning. Aistear is also available on CD and you can pick up a copy for your school when you next visit your local education centre.

Project Maths goes nationwide

Coming soon, to a workshop in your (post-primary) school!

Exciting times lie ahead in the world of second level mathematics. *Project Maths* is coming to all teachers in all schools. For the past year, only 24 schools have been engaged with the first phase of the project, now everyone is getting a taste of what is to come.

Maths teachers all over the country have engaged with *Project Maths* in the first of a set of ten workshops. With any new developments in curriculum there can be a certain amount of trepidation and apprehension for teachers. However, once the first workshop was finished, that apprehension soon disappeared. Teachers are enthused by the changes that *Project Maths* is bringing to classroom practice and they expressed this enthusiasm at the workshops.

> " **I was a little apprehensive coming in today, but now I am looking forward to getting started.** "
>
> **Teacher, workshop 1**

Workshop schedule

A team of regional development officers (RDOs) delivered a workshop on strand 1 (statistics and probability) between October and January 2010. This month (February), the RDOs have a role at school level, visiting teachers in their own working environment and helping to address issues at a local level. Workshop 2 will take place after Easter and that will focus on strand 2 (geometry and trigonometry). All teachers will begin to implement *Project Maths* in their own schools from September 2010, when they will begin teaching strand 1 and strand 2 to both first year and fifth year students. The ten workshops will be spread out over four years in order to continue support beyond the implementation period.

> " **New methodologies will make teaching maths more interesting.**
>
> **I am concerned that using new methodologies will take more preparation time.** "
>
> **Teachers, workshop 1**

What's next for the 24 project schools?

The teachers in these schools are introducing strand 3 (number) and strand 4 (algebra) to the current first and fifth years. These are new strands, though most of the content will be familiar to teachers and learners. The teaching approaches will be new and the schools will continue to work with the same support team as last year. The new strands will focus on the links between the areas of arithmetic and algebra and this will be further linked in the future with the development of strand 5 (functions). There will be a review of strand 3 and strand 4 at the end of this school year based on feedback from the project schools to the syllabus committees. This is a continuation of the process from last year and it ensures that the schools are at the centre of curriculum development.

How did the trial Leaving Certificate examination go?

There was a trial examination conducted with the project schools in October 2009. This was at Leaving Certificate level only and this is the first group facing examination in June 2010. Trial papers at Foundation level, Ordinary level and Higher level were provided. The papers were well received by the 24 schools who were glad to see the methodologies that they engaged with in the classroom were tested in the trial examination. These papers formed the basis for the development of the sample papers which the SEC issued to all schools recently.
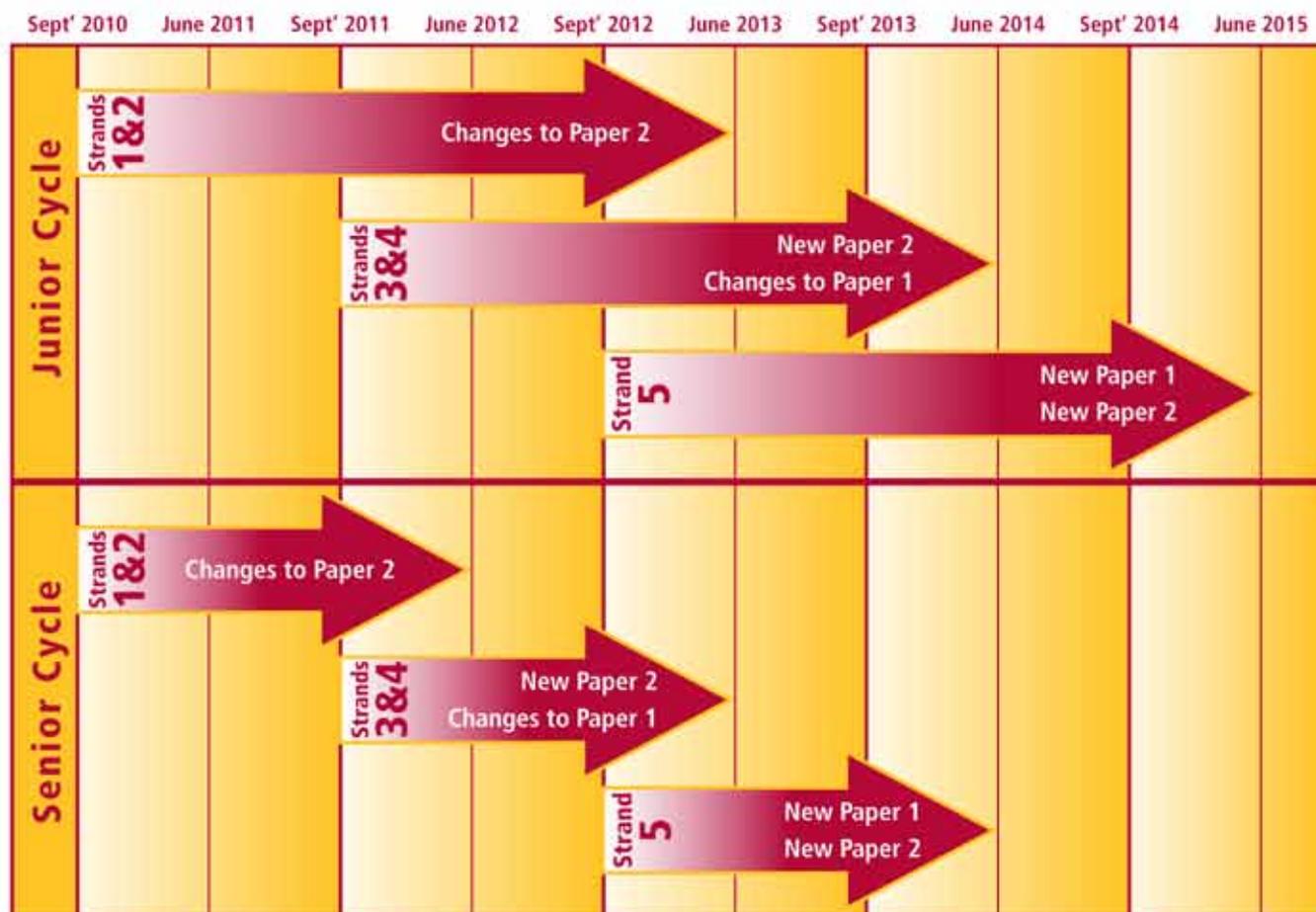
What about the Junior Certificate?

The syllabus committees are busy developing assessment arrangements for the Junior Certificate examination for 2011. This examination will be the first time that *Project Maths* will be tested at junior cycle. It will contain material from the existing course as well as material from strand 1 and strand 2. Strand 5 (functions) will be developed this year and this will compete the first draft of the full syllabus. It will give an overview of the entire syllabus for the first time. That's been one of the features of *Project Maths*. The syllabus has been developed WITH schools rather than FOR them. And it has been a challenge, for schools and for the NCCA!

Where can I find *Project Maths'* materials?

The strand documents that contain the learning outcomes for strand 1 and strand 2 are available on the NCCA website at ✎ **www.ncca.ie/projectmaths**. There are student resources developed by NCCA available for download on the same website; these are available for both junior cycle and senior cycle. The *Project Maths* development team have developed a comprehensive set of resources that are available on ✎ **www.projectmaths.ie**. These include a large number of teaching and learning plans for teachers, as well as other activities for teachers and students alike.

Project Maths
Tionscadal Mata
Development Team

Project Maths: Timeline

Roots, shoots and wellington boots

A story from Ballyraine N.S., Letterkenny

'Roots, shoots...' is one of the many school stories that we gathered to mark the 10th anniversary of the launch of the Primary School Curriculum. Read more inspiring stories by clicking on
☞ **www.ncca.ie/learningandgrowing**.

Ballyraine N.S. is a co-educational twelve teacher school situated on the outskirts of Letterkenny. This story shares some of our creative outdoor learning experiences used to bring the Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) area of the curriculum to life for our children.

Painting the canvas

In 2000, we set about reviewing the potential offered by our school grounds in the development of 'an outdoor classroom' to promote learning in SESE. The team work inherent in the outdoor classroom provided lots of opportunity to practice skills, develop deeper understanding of concepts and strengthen attitudes already being fostered in the classroom. We recognised that one of the greatest challenges facing teachers in today's technological age is to help children to awaken their senses and to appreciate the beauty and the excitement of discovering the world around them.

So where would we begin? Although located on a busy road, the school was encircled by native trees, hedgerows and large tracts of vegetation and grass. An environmental audit revealed the untapped potential offered by our school grounds. Realising the richness of the canvas available to us was a first step.

The Green School's Programme also acted as a catalyst for further work. It's amazing how gradually the canvas was taking shape and a whole new learning landscape had begun to emerge. Let's have a closer look at some outdoor projects we have undertaken to create this new landscape.

Pure magic!

The butterfly patch

Last year, children from the junior classes took the butterfly patch a step further. They collected some caterpillars and carefully placed them in their own 'butterfly cage' made from a large glass container. Over time the children had the chance to marvel at the sight of the caterpillars constructing a cocoon. In spring, four cabbage white butterflies emerged. Having carefully removed the cover from the cage, the children then watched the butterflies make their bid for freedom and fly towards the light and heat. A textbook approach to the life cycle of the butterfly could never come close to this learning experience. For the teacher, it was pure magic to witness the wide eyed look on the children's faces.

The school pond

In a similar fashion the school pond also provided the children with an opportunity to observe and record the progress of frog spawn as it developed into frogs. In the lead up to the summer holidays the pond became a home to hoverflies, whirlygig beetles and dragonflies. These projects provided the stimulus for a great variety of classroom-based learning, both oral and written.

Bird feeding stations

Bird-feeding stations are located around the school grounds. This year 5th class children created a bird observation or 'look out' post in their classroom. A section of the classroom window was 'blacked out' and the children used binoculars to observe and record feathered visitors during the winter months. Graphing in mathematics, painting in visual arts and listening and responding in music were never as captivating.

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Involving children

The creation and maintenance of habitats involves children from all classes at different times during the year. They are given ownership of the habitat and, with the support of the teacher, are encouraged to make decisions about caring for it and developing it further. Recording the story of the development of each new habitat as it unfolds in word, picture, text and photo is actively encouraged.

Hatching a good idea

The incubation project is one of the most exciting pieces of work we have undertaken. Watching and waiting, full of hopeful expectation...the children are eventually rewarded with the welcome chirping and cheeping sounds as the bundles of yellow fluff become accustomed to their school corridor home...albeit in a glass incubation box.

This incubation project was to help 'hatch' our school farm idea. The inspiration for our school farm arose from a study trip made by the principal to Stavanger in Norway in 1995 which was to later inspire the creation of our school farm in 2008. The principles of the curriculum, with the children at the centre of learning, combined with an enterprising and enthusiastic 5th class teacher provided us with the motivation to set about our school farm enterprise.

With the assistance of 6th class, together with parental support, our 'state of the art' hen-house took shape. Four farm managers were selected from the different classes and, in September 2008, our new hens moved in. Our farm was a 'mini' business enterprise with the farm managers taking responsibility for feeding the hens, purchasing the food and marketing and selling the eggs. The cleaning out of the hen house was the least exciting of the jobs undertaken but team work and a little encouragement did the trick. The children prepared regular reports on the farm work for the different classes. The responsibility and success of the farm clearly increased the confidence and self-esteem of the children. By the end of the year 2008-09 a profit of €220 was made in the sale of the eggs, and 'Woodland Way' hens have been the focus of local and national press.

Trade secrets

Key actions we take in making the outdoor classroom into a reality include:

🌐 Providing regular time as a whole school staff to become more aware of the curriculum and explore how best it can help us serve the learning needs of the children.

🌐 Planning and communication are important if everyone is to get on board. The whole school plan for SESE ensures continuity and progression of content and skills. This plan is habitat and themes based rather than textbook led.

🌐 Starting small by identifying and developing the learning potential of one habitat at a time.

🌐 Providing regular opportunities during the year for teachers to review the unfolding progress and challenges.

🌐 Thinking 'outside the box' when devising a learning experience as this will inspire the most reluctant child.

🌐 Establishing a green team made up of teachers and children as part of the Green Flag Programme as this provides an excellent focus for the projects.

🌐 Encouraging the children to record the progress of their work in a variety of stimulating ways.

🌐 Giving children ownership of the projects by encouraging them to make decisions about the jobs to be done and agreeing rotas to do them.

🌐 Calling in the experts from time to time. These are especially useful when starting off with a new project. Enfo, Crann, INTO Heritage in Schools Scheme and An Taisce have proven a wonderful support for us. A parent with an interest or expertise is always a great support.

🌐 And ... accepting that the children will get their hands dirty!

But remember…

Sometimes it's just as important to 'smell the roses' before starting out on another piece of work. Let the children enjoy and, with teacher guidance, exploit the full learning potential of the outdoor classroom already created. Then, at a later stage, the next creative project in support of SESE can begin.

A special thanks to David Oliver, the principal of Ballyraine N.S., Letterkenny and all of the teachers for sharing their story with us. Visit ✏ www.ballyrainens.ie.

Transition Units

A breath of fresh air for Transition Year?

Transition units (TUs) are one of the new curriculum components under development at senior cycle. The idea is that, in the future, schools will include a variety of TUs as part of their transition year programme. Indeed some schools are already using them.

For some schools, the transition year programme is now well established and running very successfully. Others are still new to it all. Whichever is the case, we all appreciate new ideas and find it helpful to share good practice. This is one of the main benefits of transition units.

Athlone Community College is one school that has incorporated a number of transition units into their TY programme. Principal, Val O' Connor told us, *'TUs have provided a breath of fresh air. They have completely re-invigorated our transition year programme'.* He went on to explain, *'they got teachers working together and talking about what they were doing. It has been very worthwhile and created new enthusiasm and motivation for TY amongst both teachers and students'.*

Key features of transition units

- They are designed as 45-hour courses (although not all of this time needs to be class-based learning).
- They are developed by schools or agencies working with schools.
- Assessment is built into the teaching and learning.
- They can be shared and adapted for use in different schools/contexts.

What do teachers see as the benefits?

Teachers who have written up their own transition units have seen many benefits to their involvement in the process. Here are some of their comments:

'It introduced me to the aims and objectives again and got me thinking about revamping what we are doing in TY.'

'The process is excellent because it helps you focus and be clear about your aims and it helps you reduce content and realise that you may be doing too much.'

'It clarified the order in which I will do this unit in the future and enabled me to think of improvements I can make to the unit.'

'It increased my confidence and motivation. I believe I will be more confident in teaching this unit next time round.'

'Getting the students' feedback and learning from it was, for me, one of the most useful aspects of it all.'

So how can you begin using transition units?

A range of sample transition units has already been developed by teachers and agencies. They are ready to be used or adapted to suit your needs and you can access them from our ✍ **sample transition unit** web page. Keep in mind that we are adding to this list all the time so you may wish to bookmark the page for regular reference. In the meantime, just click on the links below to go straight to the TU of your choice.

✍ **Artykats**

✍ **Creative writing**

✍ **Debating Development**

✍ **Design and Discovery**

✍ **Discovering Irish Art**

✍ **Environmental Studies**

✍ **Food Matters**

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Why not have a go at developing your own transition unit

An Artycat

Why not have a go at developing your own transition unit?

If you are interested in developing a transition unit, the first step is to identify a topic or subject that you feel could benefit from being written up in this way. You may decide to develop a TU based on work you have already done in TY or you may decide to adapt a TU that has already been developed by another school or organisation. If you're feeling really creative you may devise a TU from scratch!

We have developed a ✍ **template** to help teachers write up their units and a ✍ **handbook** to guide them through the process of writing up their TU.

Getting started

If you would like to have a go at writing up a transition unit these are the steps:

- Download the template and handbook for schools from our website.
- Have a look at some of the sample transition units written by other teachers to get an idea of what's involved.
- Have a go at writing up your own transition unit using the template. Better still, work with a colleague as two heads are often better than one!
- Submit your draft TU to the NCCA for feedback from ✍ **www.ncca.ie/transitionunits.**

Who knows, your TU might soon be on the web and available to other schools and teachers!

If it's pink, it's a link ✍

supporting **teaching** and **learning**

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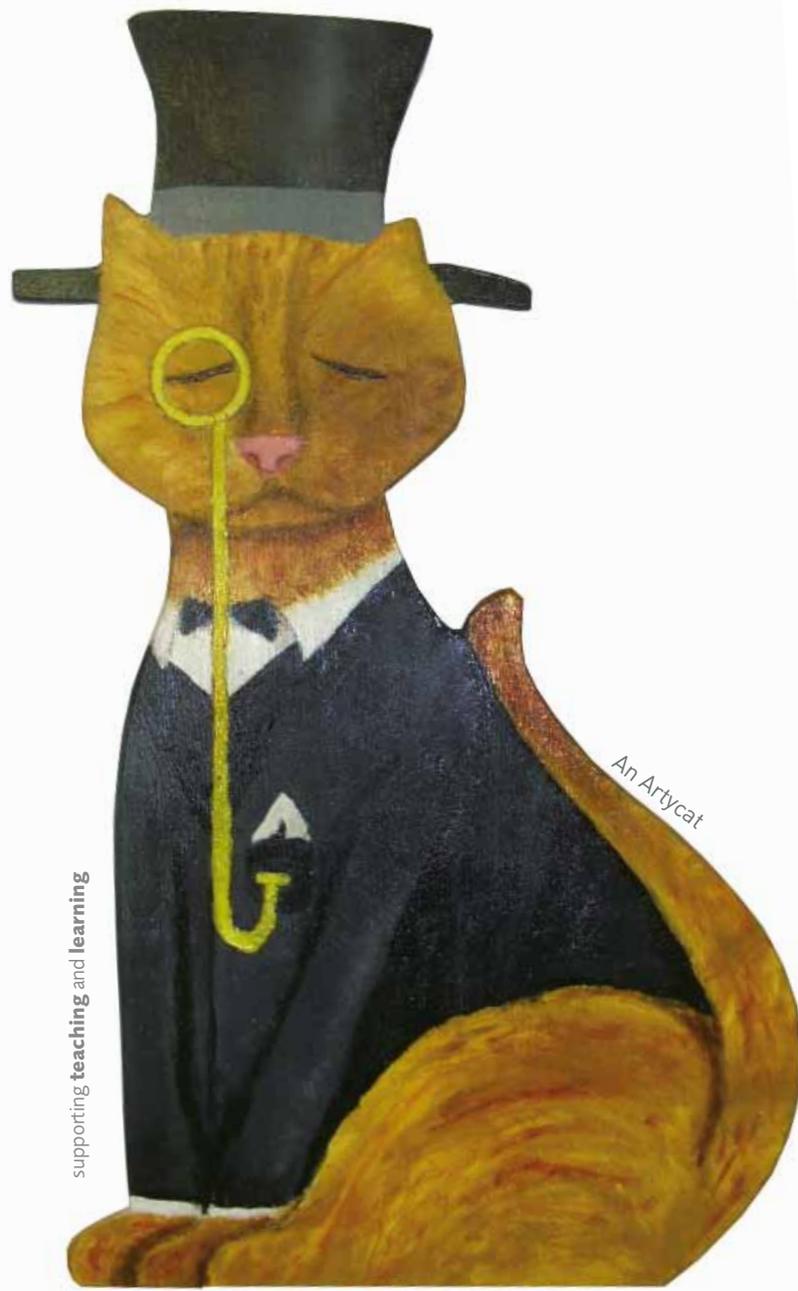
Calling all language teachers

Taking the communicative approach

What does it mean?

Have you ever wondered what the communicative approach to language teaching is all about? How would you know if your lessons are really communicative?

We recently talked to Dr. Kènia Puig i Planella, an expert in language teaching, and asked her these and other related questions. You can listen to a podcast of the conversation on ✎ **www.action.ncca.ie/en/podcasts**. In the meantime, you can read here about the key features of this approach, and find some helpful tips for using it in your classes.

Did you know?

The following curricula and syllabuses are all based on the communicative approach:
- **Primary school:**
  ✎ **Curaclam na Gaeilge** and ✎ **Draft Curriculum Guidelines for Modern Languages**
- **Post-primary school:**
  Junior Certificate syllabuses for ✎ **Irish** and for ✎ **modern languages**
  Leaving Certificate syllabuses for ✎ **Irish** and for ✎ **modern languages**

Communication is the key

The key to this approach is its focus on **fulfilling communicative needs** such as giving and asking for information, expressing an opinion or describing something. However, it would be very difficult to teach these kinds of structures, or **functions** as they are called, in isolation. Learners need something to communicate about, which is why we use **topics** or **themes**. So in a communicative lesson the teacher needs to consider both the topic and the functions that the students will be learning and then using in a task.

The **learner** is always the starting point. The teacher should choose functions that express things the learner wants to say, or to hear, read or write about. For example, for the topic of food, infants learning Irish in a primary school might want to say '*Is maith liom…*' or '*Ní maith liom…*' about the foods in their lunchbox. Sixth class children, however, might be interested in finding out about foods from other countries. Fourth year students learning a modern language in a post-primary school might want to understand the lyrics of a song they downloaded from the internet.

Working towards objectives

In communicative lessons learners are working towards a **specific language objective**, for example:
- to express likes and dislikes
- to understand and give information

This is rewarding and motivating for students, as they see that they have achieved something tangible, and realise they can use the language they have learned in an active way.

Integration of skills

Another feature is that the **skills** of **listening, speaking, reading** and **writing** are taught in an integrated way.

> It's also important to remember that real life situations include the four skills. So if you are going to a restaurant and you

> want to order a meal, you are going to have to read the menu before you can speak and say what you want, and listen to the waiter. So in real life the skills all come integrated and we should try to duplicate this in our classes. "
>
> **Dr. Kènia Puig i Planella,**
> **NCCA language podcast**

Communicative lessons

In general, communicative language lessons can be divided into three parts or phases:

- a pre-communicative phase involving language input,
- a communicative phase where the learners use what they have learned in a task,
- a post-communicative phase where there is an opportunity to reflect, address errors, and re-use language to promote transfer of skills.

It is very important not to neglect any of these parts of the lesson.

Pre-communicative phase

Set the scene: motivate learners and introduce the topic.
Language input: teach or revise the vocabulary and structures needed for the task and practice in a structured way.
Examples of activities: structured games, songs, flash cards, drills, stories, audio material and brainstorming.

Communicative phase

Task: learners use the language in a task that involves communication.
Integration: all of the skills can be integrated and used communicatively.
Examples of activities: pair-work, group-work, individual work, solving problems, asking questions, creating and telling or writing stories, emailing, blogging, listening or reading for information, role play, exchanging information, listening and responding, following instructions and social interaction.

Post-communicative phase

Reflect on and analyse the task, to promote language awareness and language learning strategies.
Address difficulties and errors: identify the need for further input.
Re-use the language in another context to promote the transfer of skills.
Examples of activities: discussion, language detective activities, grammar activities, songs, stories and poems.

Tips

Tips to remember

- Plan carefully: make sure the learners will have enough time to complete the task.
- Think ahead: what language will the students need to use during the task?
- You are a facilitator during the communicative phase of the lesson. Observe, help out and note progress and areas of difficulty.
- Grammar is taught in context. Errors are addressed in the post-communicative phase of the lesson.
- Assessment is a fundamental part of teaching and learning languages. It's important to assess learners' communicative ability in each of the four skills on an ongoing basis using a range of assessment methods.
- Differentiate for ability and learning style. Don't expect every student to complete the same task.

A range of methodologies

> " Communicative language teaching is not a method as such, but it is an approach to teaching that focuses on communication of meaning and messages and getting your point across. Because learners learn in a variety of ways many methods, strategies and activities for teaching and learning will be used in a communicative language lesson. "
>
> **Dr. Kènia Puig i Planella,**
> **NCCA language podcast**

Cur chuige na cumarsáide agus an Ghaeilge

Feidhm teanga: an úsáid a bhaintear as struchtúr, mar shampla, ceist a chur nó a fhreagairt.
Scileanna ginchumais: labhairt agus scríbhneoireacht.
Scileanna gabhchumais: éisteacht agus léitheoireacht.

Modheolaíocht: bíonn réimse modhanna múinte in úsáid sa chur chuige cumarsáideach.
Feasacht teanga: an tuiscint atá ag an dalta ar an nGaeilge, ar phatrúin, fhuaimeanna, agus chosúlachtaí agus éagsúlachtaí le teangacha eile.

Forbairt na cumarsáide

| Réamhchumarsáid	Cumarsáid	Iarchumarsáid
Gníomhaíochtaí • Foghlaim foclóra • Cleachtadh comhréire • Gníomhaíochtaí faoi threoir • Cluichí gramadaí	**Gníomhaíochtaí** • Tascanna le déanamh • Cluichí cumarsáide • Rólanna i suímh éagsúla • Idirghníomhú sóisialta • Drámaí • Sceitsí • Seiftiú • Plé • Díospóireachtaí	**Gníomhaíochtaí** • Cleachtadh gramadaí • Anailís na teanga • Cluichí breise • Tasc nua

Curaclam na Gaeilge, Treoirlínte do Mhúinteoiri, lch. 15

Want to hear more? You can listen to a podcast of the complete conversation with Kènia on www.action.ncca.ie/en/podcasts. There are also podcasts about Gaeilge neamhfhoirmiúil and about language acquisition.

info@ncca

Teachers as curriculum developers

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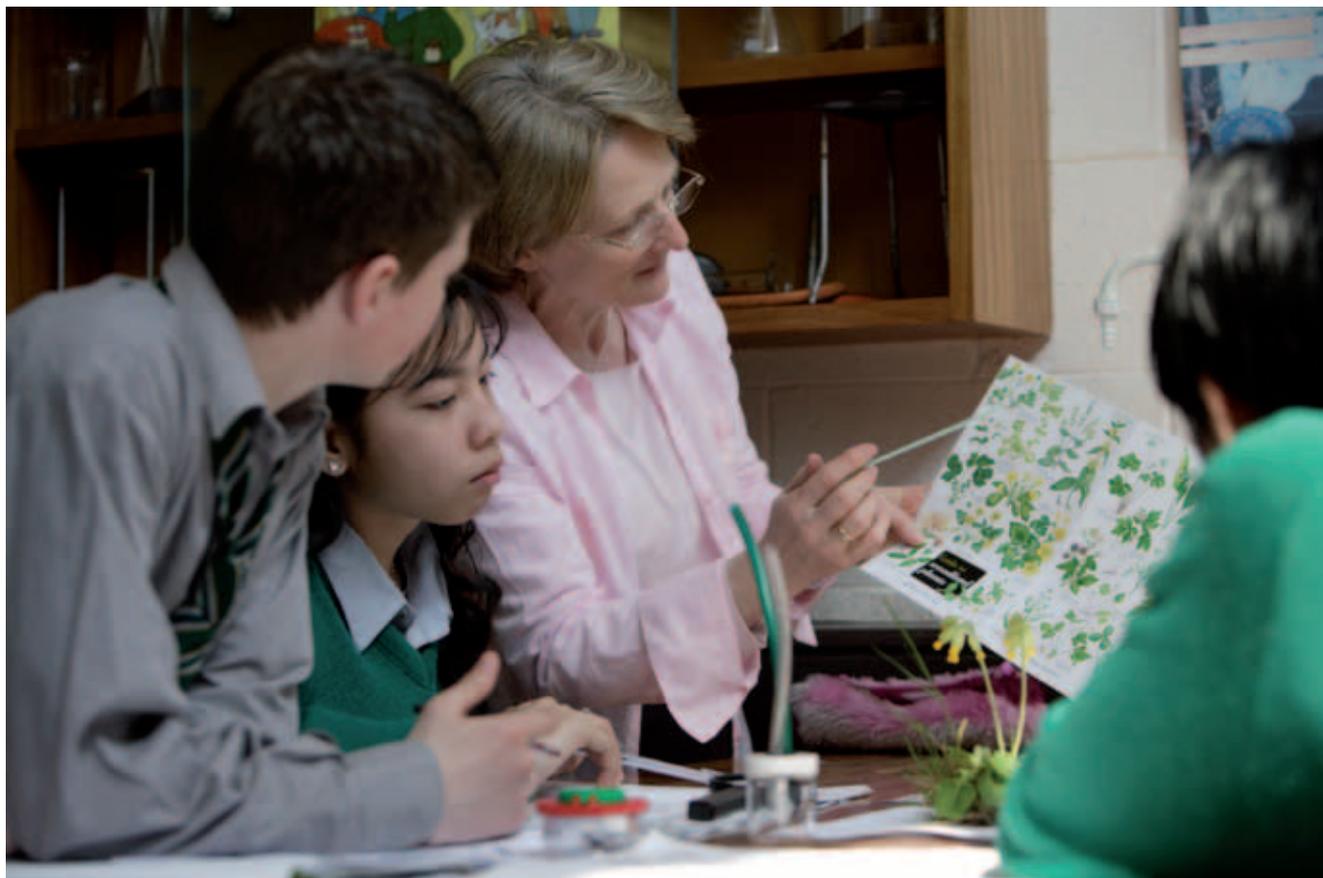
We've already seen from the *Project Maths* and *Transition Units* articles in this edition of **info@ncca** how teachers are becoming their own curriculum developers and how the work of the NCCA is now shared between the learning site (in schools and other settings) and the committee site (with NCCA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

What skills do teachers need to become curriculum developers and how can we promote and encourage the development of these skills ?

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

What curriculum decisions do you have to make?

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

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

So what are those competencies?

So what sort of competencies do these countries think teachers need for curriculum development? There are long lists of skills that teachers use in their professional lives; however, from the Irish perspective, three competencies were identified as being central to teachers engaging in curriculum development. These are **professional knowledge, commitment to change** and **team work**. These are not the only competencies teachers displayed in the work with NCCA, just three of the most obvious ones! They were arrived at
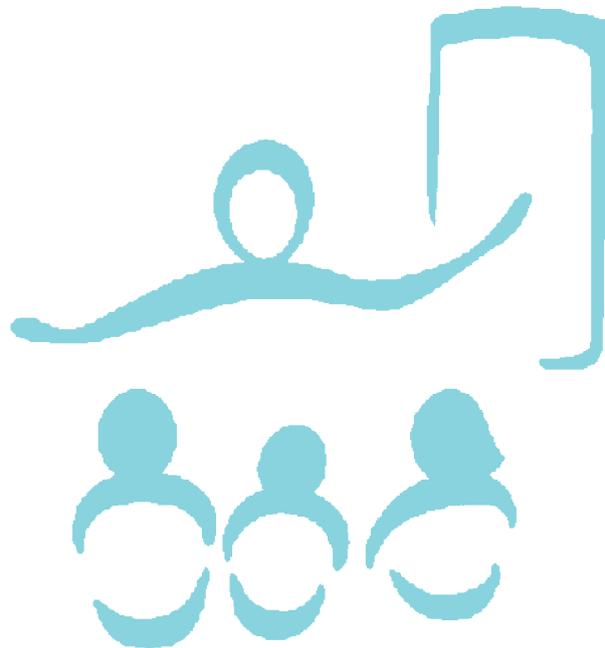
following an analysis of teachers' self-recorded reflections, student reflections, classroom observation and survey results, together with field notes recorded by NCCA education officers.

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

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

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

FÓN Project

An award-winning success

Can mobile phones help in the teaching, learning and assessment of Irish? 'Yes they can!' according to the experiences of teachers and students.

What is FÓN?

FÓN stands for Foghlaim Ón Nuatheicneolaíocht or *learning through new technology*. You might remember reading about the FÓN project in our April 2009 edition of **info@ncca.** We outlined how we used mobile phones in six post-primary schools with 16 teachers and 368 students. The phones were used in three different ways:

1. to schedule vocabulary SMS delivery to students,
2. to facilitate student-to-student chat, which is recorded for the teacher to listen back,
3. to record student responses to (a) a set of teacher's questions or (b) practice sessions, both of which the teacher can access later.

Now we're back to let you know what happened and to share what the teachers and students reported about using mobile phones.

So what did we find out?

Some FÓN facts!

- **A total of 15,374 calls were made to the system.**
- **Students listened to and spoke Irish for a phenomenal 882 hours during 22 weeks.**
- **On average, each student made 42 calls on their project mobile phones during their active 11 week project time...clocking up about 2.5 hours of Irish talk time. Imagine students speaking Irish for 2.5 hours in an 11-week period!**
- **The highest user of the system made 272 calls on his project mobile phone, totalling 4 calls per day (that included weekends!).**
- **The 6th highest user used her own mobile phone, at her own cost, after her active term on the project came to an end. She clocked up 22 calls on her own mobile phone after the project.**
- **Students made calls to the FÓN system as late as 11pm (and 1am) and as early as 6am.**

What the teachers said

"
We're the talk of the school. Everyone's talking about 10J and their phones. (There was) some very positive feedback from parents today. Everyone (was) on last night at 7.00pm and I had them 1st period today and they were still hyper. Great to see the enthusiasm. "
Project teacher

Competence

The teachers reported that the use of mobile phones had helped to improve student competence. This improvement wasn't confined to speaking and listening, it included increased vocabulary, greater student ability to construct their own sentences and greater use of tenses in Irish. Teachers also found that their students learned different topics faster when using their mobile phones for Irish, as the students had increased opportunities to practise outside of school.

Motivation

Importantly, the attitiude of students to speaking and practising their Irish improved. Teachers mentioned

- increased student motivation for learning and speaking Irish.
- the fact that students were having fun.
- that students were fully engaged during class, often speaking Irish for the entire 40 minute session.
- that students were able to take charge of their own learning.
- how their confidence improved.

From the teachers' perspectives, the opportunity to listen back to student recordings

- gave them a greater sense of student progress in Irish.
- helped them to note and address any recurring mistakes that students were making.
- gave them the opportunity to hear every student in their class, especially the quieter ones.

Listening back to students did take some extra teacher time, but they all felt it was worth it.

A living language

Using mobile phones helped to raise the profile of Irish in most schools and helped to bring it out of the classroom and into the community. Students could now speak Irish any time they wished, even if they didn't benefit from having an Irish speaker at home or in the community. Speaking to other project students on their mobile phones moved Irish beyond a school subject and made it a living language – one which was used for meaningful communication between students.

But what did the students think?

" **I think using mobile phones to teach teenagers Irish is a good idea because most teenagers are always stuck to their phone and they couldn't live without it...** "
Project student

Confidence

Students reported similar benefits to the teachers. They felt that their competence and confidence in Irish had improved. One student said, "... *before the mobile phone project I wasn't good at pronouncing words or speaking and this made me better*." They also reported enjoying using mobile phones for learning and practising Irish; they used words like 'fun', 'interesting', 'new' and 'different' when referring to the experience. The enjoyment factor also contributed to student motivation for learning and practising Irish, which in itself showed a marked improvement.

Autonomous learners

Students also indicated that they were becoming more autonomous learners, taking greater charge of their learning. They could speak Irish at any time, and anywhere. They felt it was easier to learn Irish via their mobile phones, and that it was a more enjoyable way to learn than other methods used in the classroom or more traditional homework.

Students felt they had spoken more Irish as a result of the mobile phones being integrated as a learning tool. They also indicated an enhanced ability to self-assess their level of Irish through the FÓN system – they could re-record any of their answers before submitting the answer they were satisfied with and they could gauge their level of Irish against other students they chatted with.

Similar to the teachers, one of the greatest benefits students reported was that Irish was available and facilitated beyond the school gates - *"the good thing is you can practise your Irish in your own time in your own house"*.

FÓN project awarded

While teachers and students reported the benefits of the FÓN system, the project was also recognised with a European Award for Languages – the Language Label. The award is presented in acknowledgment of a project's ability to engage language learners in a manner that is both meaningful and productive, while at the same time promoting a positive attitude towards both the learning and use of the target language.

So, where to next?

We might not make it to the White House, but check in with the FÓN blog to keep up to date with where we might be going to next with mobile phones - **http://foghlaim.edublogs.org.**

A new junior cycle?

Ideas for how it might change

In case you have not had a chance to read *'Innovation and Identity—Ideas on a new junior cycle'*, here's a summary to get you thinking.

The ideas are presented under four broad headings: the *why, how* and *what* of the changes, and a section on ideas from practice both in Irish schools and internationally. It is important to remember as you read down through this article (and the paper of course) that it describes *ideas* for how the junior cycle might change. Proposals will follow, but for now we want to give time to the ideas.

Why?

On the surface, the junior cycle looks as if it is 'working'. Most students are happy in school, most have good relationships with their teachers and these are features of the Irish system of which we can be proud. We are strong on the relationships, but we seem less strong on the learning.

We have research carried out by the ESRI on the experiences of students in junior cycle over a number of years. The insights provided by the research raise points of concern and include
- the dominating effect of the Junior Certificate exam on teaching and learning practice.
- a perception of an inflexible, overcrowded curriculum.
- the disengagement of many students at an early stage in the cycle.
- inadequate time for engagement with deeper learning.
- the narrow range of assessment activity.
- limited access to a single qualification.

In addition to this research, the **Minister addressed our Council** in June last year and asked us to look at the entire junior cycle experience and to review the innovations happening in other places at this stage of education.

So *what* could change?

The principal ideas in the paper are presented as a series of pathways leading to a new junior cycle. A new junior cycle might see

1. schools having greater freedom to be different and design their own junior cycle programme to suit their students' needs.

2. a movement away from the Junior Certificate being the sole method of awarding a junior cycle qualification and new junior cycle qualification/s introduced that would relate to multiple forms of evidence of learning.

3. a change in the structure of the junior cycle from being a three-year programme to perhaps having more flexible boundaries with 6th class and senior cycle.

4. learners having a greater role in their learning—perhaps a greater emphasis on student reflection, co-operative learning and self-directed learning.

5. schools having greater choice as to how they can generate and use evidence of their students' learning.

All of this means that schools have an increased role as curriculum developers—designing their own junior cycle programme to meet the needs of *their* learners. In undertaking this new curriculum design activity, schools will have the support of a clear and comprehensive Framework for Junior Cycle.

How would these changes happen?

Discussion on how we go about changing the junior cycle is also really important. The approach in the paper sees this *how* question as having four interrelated stages:

1. 'Big' ideas about change in junior cycle (set out in the paper) have already been issued to the Minister.

2. These big ideas are being shared and discussed with the wider education community (keep an eye on the junior cycle section of the website to find out more details).

3. A number of schools will be involved in developing models for junior cycle, describing the kind of educational programme and experience students in that school will follow. The models will be developed using a Draft Framework for Junior Cycle

4. The Framework and the models (from the initial project schools) will be introduced in all schools.

This article just gave you a very brief summary of what the paper contains. If you wish to read more about the big ideas in the paper—download a full copy: *'Innovation and Identity—Ideas on a new junior cycle'*. And don't forget to contribute to the debate. We want to hear from primary teachers too…what would happen, for example, if sixth class was considered as the first year of junior cycle rather than as the end of primary school? Food for thought.