

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

Special Educational Needs: Curriculum Issues Discussion Paper



December 1999

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Foreword

Under the terms of the Education Act, 1998, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment as a statutory body has the function of advising the Minister for Education and Science regarding the curriculum and syllabuses for students with a disability or other special educational needs. The NCCA is anxious to meet this challenge in consultation and co-operation with the widest possible range of interests.

The White Paper on Education, Charting our Education Future (1995), states:

All students, regardless of their personal circumstances, have a right of access to and participation in the education system, according to their potential and ability.

Like the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) Report (1993), which preceded it, the White Paper envisaged a continuum of provision for students with special educational needs that is flexible enough to cater for the diversity of those needs. What is of singular importance is that students with special educational needs should have the same opportunities and right of access to education as all other students. This right is now enshrined in the Education Act, 1998. The NCCA welcomes this priority given to special educational needs by the Minister for Education and Science and his department.

The NCCA has already begun the process of developing curriculum guidelines within a national framework to cater for students with special educational needs. The initial focus of the guidelines is on students with general learning disabilities.

This discussion paper is intended to stimulate discussion and debate that will inform the work of the NCCA and assist in the development of curriculum guidelines that will provide access to an appropriate education for all students with general learning disabilities, in whatever setting they are being educated.

I wish to record my appreciation of the work of the Chairperson, Mr. Tom Gilmore, members of the Steering Committee, the working groups that assist that committee, and the bodies and individuals who have contributed so far. I also wish to thank the executive of the NCCA for managing the work, in particular Albert Ó Ceallaigh, Chief Executive, and Lucy Fallon Byrne, Assistant Chief Executive, and also the Education Officers Valerie O'Dowd, Helen Guinan and Emer O'Connor, who have supported and guided the committee and the working groups in their task.

Views, responses and recommendations are being sought and will be most welcome. These should reach the NCCA at 24, Merrion Square, Dublin 2 (e-mail Valerie.ODowd@ncca.ie) not later than **5 May 2000**.

Dr Caroline Hussey
Chairperson

December 1999

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to describe the progress made to date by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in the development of curriculum guidelines for students with special educational needs. Although it is acknowledged that there are many different types of disability, the initial thrust of the work of the NCCA in this area will be in the development of curriculum guidelines for students who have a general learning disability.

The target audience includes all the partners in education, but it is especially aimed at primary and post-primary teachers, parents, and other professionals who work with students who have a general learning disability. An outline of the scope of present provision for these groups is provided in appendix I.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment was established by the Minister for Education in November 1987. Its function was to advise the Minister on matters related to curriculum and assessment procedures for primary and second-level education. The Education Act, 1998, established the NCCA as a statutory body and expanded its functions. Section 41, (1) of the Act states:

The object of the Council shall be to advise the Minister on matters relating to:

- (a) *the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools, and*
- (b) *the assessment procedures employed in schools and examinations on subjects that are part of the curriculum.*

The Act further states, in section 41, sub-section (2):

It shall be a function of the Council: ...

- (g) to advise the Minister on the requirements, as regards curriculum and syllabuses, of students with a disability or other special educational needs.*

The term “students with a disability or other special educational needs” encompasses a wide range of disability and educational needs. In fulfilling its functions in this area, the NCCA will concentrate initially on developing curriculum guidelines for students with mild, moderate and severe and profound general learning disability. Other areas of special educational need will be dealt with subsequently. The rationale for this and the structures that the NCCA has established will be outlined and discussed later in this document.

Structure of the document

This document aims to raise awareness of special educational needs throughout the system and to explore some of the issues involved. For those working within the special school system, much of the background material will be familiar. However, as more students with special educational needs are being integrated in mainstream education at both primary and post-primary levels, it is important that all the partners in education, and in particular teachers in mainstream schools, have an understanding of the issues involved.

- *Section 1* provides a brief historical background, looks at current provision for students with special educational needs, and discusses the significance of the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993). It also examines some recent initiatives in special education in Ireland and considers the implications of the Education Act, 1998.
- *Section 2* discusses the concept of special educational needs and the principles of education for students with special educational needs and explores issues of curriculum development in this area. It also describes the structures and strategies that the NCCA has established to initiate the development of curriculum guidelines for students with special educational needs.

- *Section 3* describes the proposed curriculum guidelines and outlines the key skills and learning areas that they will incorporate.
- *Section 4* explores current access to mainstream curricula for students with special educational needs at primary and post-primary levels.

SECTION 1

1.1 Historical background

During the first half of the twentieth century there was little or no progress in the development of educational provision for people with general learning disabilities, then called mental handicap. It was not until the mid nineteen-fifties that a number of voluntary organisations and religious orders took the initiative in establishing schools for students with such disabilities. These schools were subsequently officially recognised as special national schools by the Department of Education.

Special schools were set up in most counties during the nineteen-fifties and sixties. In some instances, where the establishment of a special school was not feasible, special classes for students with mild general learning disabilities were attached to mainstream primary schools. A small number of these classes accommodated students with moderate general learning disabilities.

The Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Mental Handicap (1965) made many recommendations that influenced the development of educational provision for students with general learning disabilities. It used the term “mental handicap”, which was divided into three categories: mild, moderate and severe mental handicap (now called mild general learning disability, moderate general learning disability, and severe and profound general learning disability, respectively). Since the commission’s report was published, separate special schools and special classes have been provided for students functioning at these three levels of intellectual ability.

After the introduction of the 1971 primary curriculum, most special schools and classes provided a modified curriculum for their students. In the nineteen-seventies the Department of Education developed Curriculum Guidelines for Schools for the Moderately Handicapped. One important principle of these guidelines was that

children have needs as children that have to be satisfied at school as well as their needs as future adults.

A short set of guidelines for post-primary schools “*designated as centres making special provision for mildly mentally handicapped pupils*” was also issued to schools in the early eighties.

Since 1986, specific educational provision has been made for students with severe and profound general learning disability. Special classes for these students have been established in schools for students with moderate general learning disabilities or through the assignment of teachers to Child Education and Development Centres (CEDs). This development has its origins in a pilot scheme launched in a limited number of schools and institutions in 1986. Since then there has been a rapid spread of special classes for students with severe and profound general learning disabilities throughout the country, and a number of special schools that accommodate such students have also been established.

1.1.1 The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC)

The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993) was of great importance in the development of special education in Ireland. The range of difficulties and disabilities it included in the term “special needs” was extremely wide. It defined students with special educational needs as including

those whose disabilities and/or circumstances prevent or hinder them from benefiting adequately from the education which is normally provided for pupils of the same age, or for whom the education which is generally provided in the ordinary classroom is not sufficiently challenging. (p. 18)

The Review Committee summed up its position regarding the integration of students with disabilities or special needs in the mainstream school system by stating that it favoured

as much integration as is appropriate and feasible with as little segregation as is necessary. (p. 22)

It recommended the establishment of a continuum of educational provision to meet a continuum of special educational needs. This provision should allow for:

- full-time placement in a mainstream class, with additional support
- part-time or full-time placement in a special class or school
- full-time placement in a residential special school
- part-time placement in a Child Education and Development Centre or special school.

The findings and recommendations of the SERC Report have had a major influence on policy development in special education. In the White Paper on Education, Charting our Education Future (1995), the Government affirmed that its objective would be

to ensure a continuum of provision for special educational needs, ranging from occasional help within the ordinary school to full-time education in a special school or unit, with students being enabled to move as necessary and practicable from one type of provision to another. Educational provision will be flexible, to allow for students with different needs, at various stages in their progress through the education system. (p. 24)

1.1.2 Recent initiatives in special education in Ireland

Current Government policy is to encourage the maximum possible level of integration of students with special educational needs in mainstream schools and to establish the necessary supports to facilitate this development.

In November 1998 the Minister for Education and Science announced a number of special initiatives in pursuit of this policy:

- a formalised system of special teaching support in the form of resource teachers was introduced for all students in mainstream primary schools who are assessed as having special educational needs. This can be on a part-time or full-time basis.
- a system for the appointment of full-time or part-time special needs assistants was introduced for students in mainstream primary settings who are assessed as needing such support.

The concept of “automatic entitlement” to resources was also stressed in the Minister’s announcement.

After a process of extensive consultation with the education partners, the Government has established the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) as an executive agency of the Department of Education and Science. The service will be developed over a five-year period and will eventually have a staff of 200 psychologists. Its objective will be to provide educational psychology services for all students in first-level and second-level schools and in other centres supported by the Department of Education and Science. In time the NEPS will become an independent statutory agency under the terms of the Education Act, 1998.

A comprehensive system will be established for identifying and assisting all students with learning difficulties. In relation to students with special needs, the principal role of the psychologist will be to consult teachers and parents, to identify the special needs of the student, and to make recommendations for appropriate provision. The NEPS will also have a role at national level in the development of policy relating to students with special needs.

These initiatives are co-ordinated in the New Deal: A Plan for Educational Opportunity, which provides for a comprehensive, needs-based system of special education provision.

The White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999) focuses mainly on children from three to six years and covers a wide range of educational needs, including special educational needs. It proposes the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA), which would ensure a high quality of provision of early special education services. The White Paper stresses the importance of early diagnosis and the identification of disability and proposes the development of a policy for early special needs education.

The White Paper on Early Childhood Education states

- that parents of all pre-school children with diagnosed disabilities will have access to an early education expert
- that there will be access to and liaison between specialist advisers
- that all teachers, including those who already work with young children with special needs, will have access to appropriate pre-service and in-service development in relation to this area.

The policy as set out in this paper is of great significance, as it addresses as a priority the needs of children with special educational needs and the educationally disadvantaged.

1.1.3 The Education Act, 1998

Another recent development in special needs education has been the enactment of the Education Act, which was signed into law on 23 December 1998. The preamble to the Act makes specific reference to provision for the education of persons with disabilities or special educational needs. A stated objective of the Act is to

give practical effect to the constitutional rights of children, including children who have a disability or other special educational needs.
(Part I, section 6 (a))

The Act states that the Minister for Education has a function in ensuring that an education appropriate to their needs will be made available to persons with disabilities or other special educational needs. It describes the type of support services that the Minister may provide for schools and students. It also outlines the roles and responsibilities of schools and boards of management in making appropriate provision for students with disabilities or special educational needs.

Part VII, section 41 (f) of the Act specifies that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) will

advise the Minister on the requirements, as regards curriculum and syllabuses, of students with a disability or other special educational needs.

1.2 Current provision

According to the SERC Report (1993), there were approximately 8,000 students with special educational needs in mainstream classes in primary schools at that time. About half of these were receiving additional support, mainly from remedial or learning support teachers. Since then there has been a very significant increase in the number of resource teachers, and at the present time there are over 200 resource teachers providing a service for students with assessed learning disabilities in over 550 mainstream primary schools.

Provision in mainstream schools

Provision for students with special educational needs in mainstream primary and post-primary schools is made through special classes and through resource teachers. Special classes generally cater for the same types and levels of disability as special schools, but there is a wider range of special classes at primary than at post-primary level. The combined enrolment of primary school special classes is also approximately 7,500. It is estimated that about 900 students with special educational needs are enrolled in special classes in mainstream post-primary schools. Special schools also provide post-primary education for their students but are designated as primary schools.

The Visiting Teacher Service supports students with visual and hearing impairment at pre-school, primary and post-primary levels. It also provides a service for some students with Down's syndrome.

Provision in special schools

Students with special educational needs are also accommodated in special schools. There is a wide range of special schools catering for various types and levels of disability, including sensory impairment and physical disability. These special schools cater for students both at primary and post-primary levels. The great majority of special schools accommodate students with a mild or moderate general learning disability, and their combined enrolment is approximately 7,500.

1.3 Structural, organisational and resource issues

There are many issues that will have an impact on the development and implementation of appropriate curricula for students with special educational needs. These are well documented in the SERC Report (1993), ESF Programme Evaluation Unit Summary Report on Training for People with Disabilities (1996), and A Strategy for Equality (1997). The following is a summary of the principal structural, organisational and resource issues.

1.3.1 The organisation of the education system

Students with special educational needs may be enrolled in mainstream first-level or second-level schools. These students are generally catered for in special classes and through the provision of resource teachers. The organisation of first-level and second-level schools differs; therefore the manner in which special

classes and the provision of resource teaching are organised is different at the two levels. This has implications for both the process of integration and access to mainstream curricula for students.

Students with special educational needs may also be enrolled in a variety of special schools. These schools are organised in a different way from mainstream schools. Almost all cater for students aged four to eighteen, and only the larger schools can organise classes according to the age of the student only. Classes in most special schools cater for a considerably wider age range than that which is found in many mainstream schools. In addition, student populations in special schools are not homogeneous, and there can be a wide spread in levels of functioning and potential, including multiple disabilities, in any given class.

At present there is little regular and sustained contact between mainstream and special schools in the sharing of resources and expertise. However, informal links have been established between some mainstream and special schools, whereby students can attend both schools on a part-time basis or where joint projects and activities are organised. There is a need to provide the structures whereby such linkages can be extended and developed within the education system.

1.3.2 Designation of special schools

Special schools are officially designated as primary schools. However, they frequently accommodate students of post-primary age and prepare them for transition to the world of work through a variety of vocational training programmes. In some instances, students participate in the national post-primary curriculum and sit for state examinations at and above Junior Certificate level.

While many special schools offer a post-primary programme, they do not have access to the same level of specialist teachers and other resources as mainstream post-primary schools.

At present, qualified post-primary teachers, including those with recognised qualifications in special education, are not eligible to teach in a full-time recognised capacity in most special schools, and primary teachers with experience of teaching students of post-primary age in special schools may not teach in mainstream post-primary schools.

1.3.3 The involvement of professionals other than teachers, and agencies other than schools, in special needs education

A range of professionals, such as psychologists, speech and language therapists, nurses, occupational therapists and physiotherapists, have an overlapping and interdependent role to play in the education and management of students with special educational needs. Students will often need support from such agencies as health boards, voluntary organisations, religious orders, and training and employment agencies.

It is essential that Government departments, statutory agencies and voluntary organisations, all of which have an important contribution to make to the education and training of students with special educational needs, should co-ordinate their efforts to support such students.

1.3.4 The availability of appropriate materials and resources

The availability of age-appropriate, Irish-context teaching resources and learning materials for use in the education of students with special educational needs has been identified as an area of concern. Some special schools have developed materials and resources themselves or have successfully adapted commercial programmes for use with their students. There is a need to develop structures whereby this expertise can be shared.

1.3.5 Pre-service and in-service education

Teachers of students with special educational needs have generally had limited pre-service professional training in catering for students with special educational needs and thereafter have only restricted access to existing in-service courses in special education. Limitations placed on the professional training of teachers of students with special educational needs may have an effect on their ability to develop and implement curricula appropriate to the needs and abilities of their students. Class and subject teachers in mainstream schools also need increased access, both at pre-service and in-service level, to professional training in the education of students with special educational needs.

1.3.6 Parental involvement

The Constitution acknowledges that the family is the primary educator of the child and that parents have a right and duty to provide for the education of their children. Children's first experiences are in the home, and they naturally begin to learn about the world through interaction with people and the objects in their environment. This process has an effect on their future learning, and they are greatly influenced by the relationships they have with the significant people in their lives.

When a child has special needs it is particularly important that there are close links between the learning environments of home and school. A collaborative approach between parents, teachers and others who are involved in the education of the child is essential. There is a need for mechanisms and structures that will improve and encourage the involvement of parents in the education of their children and to support them in their role as primary educators of their children.

SECTION 2

2.1 Principles of special education

The principles underlying education for students with special educational needs do not differ from those that are relevant to all students. The introduction to the Primary School Curriculum (1999) states that:

all children have a right of access to the highest-quality education appropriate to their needs. This includes children whose disabilities or circumstances inhibit their effective participation in the education that is normally provided for children of their age ... It is important that a range of educational provision is available that is flexible enough to cater for the special needs of individual children at the various stages of their development. (p. 29)

The White Paper on Education (1995) defines the term “curriculum” as encompassing

the content, structure and processes of teaching and learning, which the school provides in accordance with its educational objectives and values. (p. 18)

This includes the knowledge, concepts and skills that students acquire as well as the factors that inform the ethos and general environment of the school.

The broad aims of education for students with special educational needs include

- enabling the student to live a full life and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual through access to an appropriate broad and balanced curriculum

- enabling the student to function as independently as possible in society through the provision of such educational supports as are necessary to realise that potential.

The student's wider environment is, of course, a powerful factor in his or her learning. This begins in the home; and the skills and knowledge that all students bring with them to school are of vital importance to their future development. Close co-operation between home and school is essential if the student is to experience the full benefit of his or her education. Curriculum, then, encompasses the whole range of learning experiences, both within and outside of the school.

2.2 What are special educational needs?

A precise definition of special educational needs is difficult. Different sources use different descriptions and different categorisations. Some experts believe that *all* students may, at some time in their lives, have some form of special educational need. This may range from a physical disability to exceptional or gifted ability in a particular area. Such a broad definition has implications for practice and also for the essential resources required by individual students.

However, the general understanding of students who have special educational needs is that they encounter barriers to learning. Their difficulties may be specific to language or mathematics or can come from a physical impairment that affects their movement, sight, or hearing, or from a complex combination of several disabilities. Some of these may be addressed by the provision of alternative teaching methods, suitable materials, appropriately adapted equipment, or personalised tutorial support. However, this approach tends to focus on the difficulties of the student rather than on his or her individual needs. It is necessary also to look at the curricular options available to *all* students.

The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (1993) defines areas of special educational needs under four broad headings, which embrace a wide range of special educational needs and include

- general learning disabilities
- emotional and behavioural disturbance
- language and communication difficulties and disorders
- physical and sensory disabilities.

In the SERC report, special education is defined as

any educational provision which is designed to cater for pupils with special educational needs, and is additional to or different from the provision which is generally made in ordinary classes for pupils of the same age. (p.18)

In recent years attitudes to disability have changed, and the labelling of students as “handicapped” has been replaced by broader descriptions of their learning needs. All students have common needs, which include a sense of belonging, being respected as an individual, and being challenged as a learner. Some students, however, may have complex individual needs that arise from particular characteristics that are different from all others.

The SERC Report proposed a number of principles on which the future development of special needs education in Ireland should be based. These principles stated that

- students with special educational needs have a right to an appropriate education
- the needs of the individual student are paramount in decisions relating to their education
- parents should have an active role within the system
- a continuum of educational services should be provided and, where practicable, appropriate education should be provided in ordinary schools for all students with special educational needs
- only in exceptional circumstances should a student have to live away from home to avail of an appropriate education
- the state should provide adequate resources to enable students with special educational needs to avail of an appropriate education.

The NCCA acknowledges the validity and importance of the findings of the SERC Report and recognises that the whole area of special needs is both complex and wide-ranging. However, since students with general learning disabilities form by far the most numerous student cohort in special needs education, the development of curriculum guidelines for this group will be the initial concern of the NCCA.

2.2.1 Students with general learning disabilities

Students with general learning disabilities are provided for in many educational settings. They range from students who are formally undiagnosed but are identified as having a particular learning difficulty to those who are immobile, lack functional communication skills, and need specialist, multi-disciplinary interventions to realise their potential. These are the students who were previously labelled as “mentally handicapped”. However, students who have a general learning disability display a wide range of abilities, learn in different ways, and are motivated differently. Like students in any typical primary or post-primary class, their learning potential should be recognised and be developed as fully as possible.

Such students are entitled to access to a full educational experience, but the pathways they need to take and the time they need to achieve this may be different from many of their mainstream peers. However, the aim will be the same: the realisation of their full potential as unique human beings, both now and in the future.

Although some students will require detailed, individualised programmes of work, these programmes should not isolate students from the class group, from the benefits of co-operative learning, or from the educational opportunities available to their mainstream peers. They need a flexible and diverse range of provision in location, curriculum, teaching approaches, and assessment and certification options. Developing educational approaches that are appropriate for each student will require the involvement not only of teachers and other professionals but of students and their parents in the development of any adaptations, enhancements or elaborations of content and methodology that will make their educational experience relevant and meaningful.

2.3 Curriculum development for students with general learning disabilities

Teachers and other professionals involved in special education have always embraced innovation. In recent times, the changing nature of the student population and increased integration of students with special needs in mainstream education has demanded even greater flexibility and creativity from teachers. Teachers in special schools and centres have also contributed greatly to the process of curriculum development, very often with inadequate support and resources. In devising curriculum guidelines, the NCCA proposes to draw on the

wealth of experience and knowledge of teachers and other professionals in both mainstream and special settings.

The Special Education Review Committee (SERC) drew attention to gaps in curriculum development as one of the deficiencies in the system of special education in Ireland. The lack of specific curricular guidelines for students with special educational needs in post-primary schools, for students with mild general learning disabilities in special and mainstream schools and for students with severe and profound general learning disabilities was identified as a significant shortcoming by the Review Committee. The Committee stated that

curriculum development and review, for students with disabilities and special educational needs, should be the ongoing responsibility of the NCCA.

It recommended that these areas should be examined as a matter of priority. In this context and in the light of the Education Act, 1998, the NCCA has taken the first steps in the development of curriculum guidelines for students with special educational needs in Ireland.

Current research indicates that there is no simple answer to the provision of curriculum for special needs. The curriculum in Irish schools encompasses subjects and methodologies, the reasons why the subjects are taught, and the educational outcomes for the learner. It also includes the formal programme of lessons and the hidden curriculum that is inferred by the children from the general ethos of the school and its organisation. The White Paper (1995) further states that *"the way in which the curriculum is defined, planned, implemented and evaluated crucially influences the quality of education provided."* (p.19) This statement gives considerable flexibility to schools in planning their own curriculum.

At school level the responsibility centres on the development of a comprehensive school plan, and a recently published booklet by the Department of Education and Science, *Developing a School Plan*, echoes the White Paper in its definition of curriculum.

The curriculum consists of all the learning experiences designed or encouraged by the school as its programme to promote the educational aims and objectives of the school for its pupils (p. 32).

The Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum, which has recently been revised, states that

the breadth and flexibility of the curriculum, the choices it offers in the selection and sequencing of content and its focus on the developmental needs of children ensures its adaptability to the diversity of children's circumstances and experiences. (p.17)

In the conclusion it also states that *"these goals will only be achieved if the philosophy, aims and objectives of the curriculum are realised in its implementation."* (p. 75)

One of the defining features of the curriculum is the importance of planning. *"Within the framework of the curriculum schools are afforded flexibility to plan a programme that is appropriate to the individual school's circumstances and to the needs, aptitudes and interests of the children".* (p.11) It clearly states that the curriculum assumes that schools will *"adapt and interpret the curriculum where necessary to meet their own requirements."* (p.11). It sees curriculum development as a dynamic process, which is evolving rather than established.

However, these worthy aims must be translated into more specific goals and practical, manageable objectives if they are to meet the needs of individual students.

How, then, are children designated as having special educational needs any different? It is quite clear that although students will have common needs, there will be some who have complex additional needs and will therefore require additional goals. The difficulties they have are real and must be addressed. In identifying individual learning needs, therefore, we must look at what exactly those needs are.

In the past, children with special educational needs were seen as being separate from the mainstream system of education and the responsibility of specialist teachers and medical staff. In a study of provision for pupils with special educational needs by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (1998) it was indicated that adaptations have been made to legislation relating to students with a disability throughout Europe during the past decade. This study did not include Ireland but did include England and Wales. The main areas of concern that emerged were teacher training, teachers' attitudes, and the less developed nature of second-level systems in dealing with special educational needs. The role of parental choice was also seen as significant, as was the use of

individual education plans. The categorisation of special educational needs into anything up to ten different divisions, often based on IQ scores or categories of disability, has often led to more rather than less segregation.

All children have individual needs, not just those with disabilities, so there is a need for variety in both curricular content and teaching approaches, as is enunciated in the Primary School Curriculum. Realistic and flexible approaches to learning are required for *all* students, and these include activity-based learning, self-directed learning, practical hands-on approaches, thematic approaches to topics, open-ended tasks, and a greater emphasis on the development of oral language. This will entail much more than a watered-down version of mainstream curricula. The proposed guidelines will enable teachers and schools to establish significant and flexible connections between the key skills and knowledge in the curriculum guidelines and the content of mainstream curricula.

Flexibility of provision

The educational experience of students with special educational needs should reflect what is available to their non-disabled peers. In particular, co-operative and group work that encourages peer learning is very important. Students should increasingly begin to take control of, and responsibility for, their own learning. Students with special educational needs should be enabled to make choices and decisions, and this can be achieved only through an accepting environment that celebrates diversity and individuality while acknowledging the importance of peer learning and group interaction.

The curriculum the student experiences will allow for both age and stage of development. However, flexibility is required if it is to be mediated in the most effective way. This must allow for a full-time curriculum experience in mainstream education or in special education but also for a combination of part-time experience in both where this is appropriate. It must also take account of the practicalities involved in providing both group and individual experiences for students who may have multiple and complex needs.

Whole-school approaches

Instead of treating the individual student with special needs in isolation, it is necessary to plan for the class or group as a whole and to identify the learning opportunities that exist for *all* children. Whole-school approaches to planning, both in mainstream schools and in special settings, could maximise the educational opportunities available for students. These opportunities should be based on learning need, not learning difficulty, and the student should be involved in identifying those needs where appropriate.

The necessary balance between mainstream curricula, developmental curricula and additional curricular areas varies according to the strengths, needs and circumstances of the particular student. Flexible multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary approaches involving teachers, parents and other professionals must keep the student at the centre of the educational process.

Where all students are striving to realise their own potential, age-related and ability-related levels of attainment become a reality, and curriculum-based assessment becomes meaningful.

What is needed both at primary and at post-primary levels are innovative approaches to assessment. The Junior Cycle programme at post-primary level marks the end of compulsory schooling. It is based on the curricular principles of breadth and balance, relevance, quality, coherence, continuity, and progression. However, Ireland is the only developed country that uses wholly external terminal examination at this stage of schooling. Many students with special educational needs, both in special and in mainstream schools, are now seeking national certification. In a recent review of the Junior Cycle programme (1999) the inadequacy of the range of modes and techniques of assessment for Junior Certificate is highlighted. *“There is an ongoing mismatch between the aims and principles of the Junior Certificate programme and the modes and techniques currently in use for the formal assessment of that programme.”* (p. 32). So while students are engaging in a broad and balanced curriculum based on eight areas of experience they are not being assessed on some of the areas. There is an over-emphasis on the assessment of product and little assessment of the affective development of the student.

A booklet entitled *The Junior Certificate: Issues for Discussion* (1999), published by the DES, states that

when the assessment leads to certification which is school-focused and learner-centred then the participation of teachers in the assessment of their own students can only add to the validity of that assessment and support the placing of assessment as part of teaching and learning, rather than as a ritual which takes place when the teaching and learning is complete. (p. 10)

This will not happen automatically but will require whole-school policies and in-service training to develop in teachers shared understandings, shared intentions and shared interpretations of professional roles.

2.4 NCCA structures for curriculum development in special education

Initially the NCCA will focus on the development of curriculum guidelines for students with general learning disabilities at both primary and post-primary levels. Three broad groups are identified for this initial phase. These groups are the largest numerically and are catered for in the broadest range of settings.

The NCCA Special Education Steering Committee proposes to

- develop curriculum guidelines for students with mild general learning disability
- review and develop the existing provision for students with moderate general learning disability
- develop curriculum guidelines for students with severe and profound general learning disability.

The following structures have been established by the NCCA to develop curriculum guidelines for these three groups:

- a widely representative steering committee (appendix II)
- three working groups, which will identify the essential skills and processes required to provide broad curriculum opportunities and experiences for students in the three specified areas. Each working group comprises teachers, parents, and a representative from the Department of Education and Science. (appendix III). Structures have been established to ensure wide consultation with other relevant and interested parties.

An outline of present educational provision for students with general learning disabilities is provided in appendix I.

2.5 A strategy for curriculum development

The development by the NCCA of curriculum guidelines is part of a strategy in which curricula for students with special educational needs will be addressed.

This strategy will

- ***provide an overall structure for curriculum development for students with special educational needs***

Because of the diversity and complexity of needs within schools and classes, any curriculum development at national level must be in the form of *curriculum guidelines*.

- ***draw on best practice, national and international, in the development of the guidelines***

Curricula must allow for differentiation within a school or class relative to the needs, abilities and aptitudes of the students. This will necessitate whole-school planning, regular review, and the development of cross-curricular skills. If a student is operating below his or her chronological age, he or she should be taught using age-appropriate methods, approaches, and resources. Guidelines that offers broad descriptions of outcomes rather than a prescription of content is therefore likely to be appropriate. The guidelines should be flexible enough to be relevant to a wide variety of school and class types within each sector. Curriculum development should also take account of the complex learning styles of all students.

- ***facilitate linkages to mainstream curricula where appropriate***

There is a need to explore how a coherent relationship between mainstream and special curricula can be achieved and how relevant this relationship is for students at both primary and post-primary levels. The proposed curriculum guidelines will consider core competences, academic achievement, and the continuing need for an emphasis on life skills and independence training. The overall aim should be that the students acquire skills that are relevant to their lives, both as young people and as adults. The extent to which elements of mainstream curricula can contribute to this will be explored thoroughly.

- ***take account of the resource implications of any curriculum guidelines***

It will provide a context and an opportunity to address the issues of the relevant human and physical resources that will be necessary in making the strategy effective.

SECTION 3

3.1 Curriculum guidelines: outline of the framework

International experience has shown that developing curricula for students with special educational needs is particularly challenging. Curricular provision, both in content and methodologies, should minimise rather than emphasise difference while at the same time facilitating integration in mainstream education where this is appropriate.

Moreover, those involved in special education, either in mainstream or in special schools, need a common vocabulary with which to describe the educational experiences of students and to facilitate communication between parents, teachers, and other professionals.

The guidelines developed to cater for students with mild, moderate and severe and profound general learning disabilities will be flexible enough to be accessed by a broad variety of school and class types. They will allow for choice and have a practical life-skills orientation that addresses both the present and the future needs of the student. They will also address assessment issues with a view to providing an accurate record of the student's cognitive and attitudinal strengths and to identifying clearly opportunities for future learning.

The curriculum guidelines will incorporate the development of key skills within broad content areas. Cross-curricular skills will be developed within an enabling curriculum that is oriented towards life skills. There will be a continuum of curricular provision that recognises and addresses students' appropriate levels of achievement and takes due account of needs, ability and age-appropriateness. The guidelines will be adaptable for use in different circumstances and be capable of extension and refinement.

The structure will cover broad areas of content but take into account the fact that the child is an individual whose age and developmental stage must be considered. The importance of early work in language and communication, pre-academic skills, life skills and enabling skills will be emphasised. Strategies for long-term and short-term planning will be incorporated, and authentic, performance-based assessment and review will be seen as an integral part of the teaching and learning process.

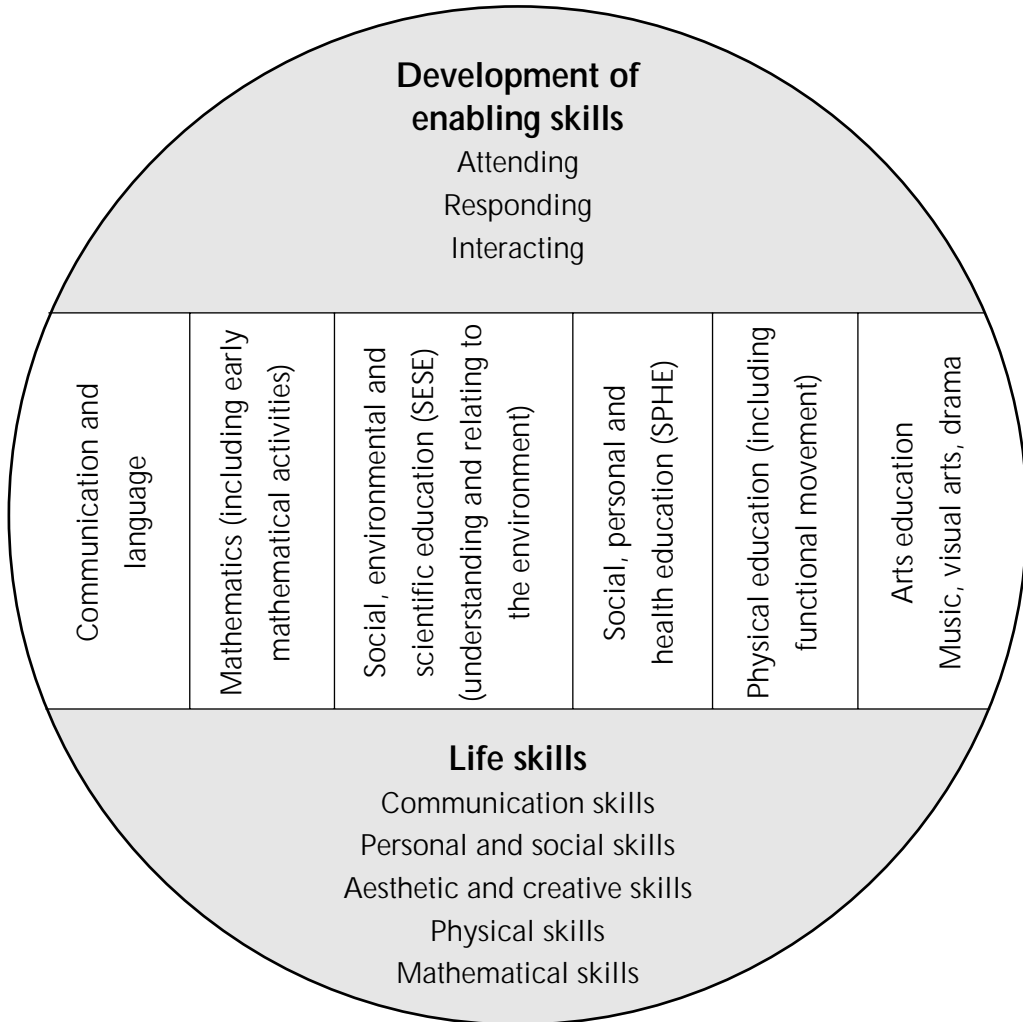
3.1.1 Structure

The structure of the curriculum guidelines will include:

- broad principles and aims of education for students with general learning disabilities
- the identification of realistic, time-referenced targets
- the use of individualised education programmes
- the use of a variety of assessment tools
- lines of development in the skills areas, with short exemplars illustrating how they can be developed
- new content and linkage points to national curricula at both primary and post-primary levels where appropriate
- whole-school and classroom planning approaches that will facilitate schools and teachers in developing and implementing an appropriate education policy for students with special educational needs
- a range of multi-disciplinary approaches in the education of students with special educational needs.

When students reach post-primary level, those capable of participating in mainstream post-primary curricula for certification can do so. For those who require more specialised provision it is suggested that appropriate use of the structure of the Junior Cycle areas of experience could provide such a framework.

The proposed curriculum guidelines for students with general learning disabilities will encompass the following:



*At primary level the development of a curriculum for religious education remains the responsibility of the various church authorities.

3.1.2 Key skills as developmental processes

There are particular skills that enhance lifelong learning. For students with general learning disabilities, these skills must be frequently reinforced. The student must be enabled to use them in many different circumstances and to see their relevance in real-life situations. Progress, however small, must always be recognised and valued. The skills will be developed through age-appropriate content, methodologies and approaches. The three curriculum guidelines will elaborate on this development, from their earliest applications to their use in education, employment, and leisure.

Each area will be developed on a continuum, but individual schools and teachers will take account of the age and ability of individual students in their own planning.

3.1.3 Enabling skills

These skills underlie all areas of a student's education. For students whose interaction with their environment is in the early stages, an appreciation of causality (cause and effect) and means-end behaviour is essential. The ability to exert control over the environment is an underlying aim of the curriculum guidelines.

Certain skills are essential to all learning: these include attending, responding, and interacting. At the earliest stages they include the ability to attend and to use the senses in order to become aware of the presence of people and objects in the immediate environment. These can be developed to encompass

- responding to and interacting with people and objects
- social interaction with others
- taking part in group activities
- focusing on tasks
- understanding, collecting and organising information.

The main purpose of developing these skills is to enable the student to become an independent learner who can use these skills in both leisure and work activities.

3.1.4 Life skills

Life skills are those that cross the boundaries of subjects and the school day. They are essential for all facets of a person's life and include the following:

Communication skills

These skills range from awareness of people and the environment, making eye contact and using gesture, signs and symbols to listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Personal and social skills

These skills range from basic personal hygiene and self-help skills, feeding and dressing, awareness of own feelings and body, and social interaction with others, both individually and collectively, to conflict resolution and understanding and dealing with moral issues.

Aesthetic and creative skills

The broadening of experience and the raising of levels of awareness to expression through the visual arts, music and drama and expressing ideas and thoughts in a creative manner are included in the development of aesthetic and creative skills.

Physical skills

These skills range from basic mobility and positioning and physical activation through an understanding of spatial awareness, and fine and gross motor skills to specific skills required for a purpose, for example writing, sports or leisure skills.

Mathematical skills

These are the skills needed to develop sensory awareness, perception of colour, pattern, shape and position, reaching out, sorting, grouping, and classifying, through to practical problem-solving involving a variety of mathematical skills and social mathematics, including time and money.

The following grid elaborates on the continuum of provision in the key learning areas of the curriculum guidelines. This is followed by a brief outline of the developmental approach that will be taken in each key learning area.

3.1.5 Key learning areas

Key learning areas within the curriculum guidelines for special educational needs	Curricular areas in primary schools	Curricular areas in post-primary schools (Junior Cycle areas of experience)*
Communication and language	Language	Language and literature
Mathematics (including early mathematical activities)	Mathematics	Mathematical studies
Social, environmental and scientific education (SESE)—history, geography, science (understanding and relating to the environment)	Social, environmental and scientific education (SESE) history, geography, science	Science and technology Social, political and environmental education
Social, personal and health education (SPHE)	Social, personal and health education (SPHE)	Guidance, counselling, pastoral care
Physical education (including functional movement)	Physical education	Physical education
Arts education (visual arts, music, drama)	Arts education (visual arts, music, drama)	Arts education
Religious and moral education	Religious and moral education	Religious and moral education
Leavers' programmes and transition to world of work or further education		

*The review of the Junior Cycle being undertaken by the NCCA suggests that language and literature may be amended to language, literature and communication and that mathematical studies be amended to mathematical studies and applications.

At primary level the development of a curriculum for religious education remains the responsibility of the various church authorities. At post-primary level church authorities offer a syllabus to schools, but from the year 2000 schools will have the option of a state syllabus for assessment in the Junior Certificate examination.

3.1.6 Elaboration of the key learning areas

The detail of the content will be developed at school level as appropriate to the particular students, but the general vocabulary used to describe the content will be common to all. This will make planning easier for schools, especially if they have students with complex and diverse disabilities.

Important issues in the development of the guidelines include:

- the provision of relevant, age-appropriate content, methodologies and approaches that address both the present and the future needs of the student
- the use of ICT as a cross-curricular tool
- the contexts in which learning takes place, both in schools and in the community
- the incorporation of appropriate, time-referenced objectives, using individualised education plans where applicable, and the development of continuous and cumulative forms of assessment and evaluation of progress that stress the unique strengths and needs of students.

Communication and language

Communication is an essential element of the education of students with general learning disabilities. Early learning in this area includes sensory, perceptual, physical, social, emotional and cognitive development directed at enabling the student to make sense of and to interact with the immediate environment. The ability to gain control over the environment opens up a world of opportunity for the student. Central to such development is an interactive approach that stimulates the desire to communicate and acknowledges that every effort to communicate is valuable.

As in mainstream curricula, the importance of oral language will be pivotal, and the language needs of children will be seen as central to the development of the oral language programme, both at school and class levels. An emphasis on the social function of language and the development of a social sight vocabulary, the ability to read for meaning and functional writing skills will be integral to most students' education.

Effective assessment of the strengths and needs of the student is an essential factor in developing a functional means of communication for individual students. The contribution of more than one discipline may be required, and parents should be involved at all stages.

The framework of the communication curriculum includes the following areas; but other areas such as developing cognitive abilities through language and emotional and imaginative development through language will also be included.

Receptiveness to communication

This will range from alerting the student to the immediate environment through stimulation of the senses, to enabling him or her to understand symbols, hand signs, oral language, and written language. Perceptual and discrimination activities will bring the students towards an understanding of symbolic representation and lead to reading both for enjoyment and for information. Oral language activity in response to listening to stories, to texts read aloud and to texts read by the student will be directed at developing first the simple comprehension skills and then some of the higher comprehension skills.

Competence and confidence in communicating

This will begin with the student's first attempts at reaching out to people and objects and will then develop towards competence in the use of verbal or non-verbal methods of expressive communication. Activities for developing understanding of concepts such as object permanence, causality, purposeful problem-solving, spatial relationships and imitation of actions and sounds will be suggested. Fine-motor activities that lead to the development of written communication will also be included.

Strategies for encouraging meaningful written work, which include the use of ICTs will also be explored. As reading and comprehension skills develop, the child will be enabled to read and write independently and to use these skills in both functional and imaginative situations.

Mathematics (including early mathematical activities)

Mathematics education provides all students with a wide range of knowledge and skills that help them to develop an understanding of the physical world and social interactions. It provides a variety of experiences and opportunities for all students to develop their sensory awareness and their ability to reach out, to explore and to solve problems and in this way to comprehend basic mathematical concepts. Exploration and development of the senses through the use of a wide range of three-dimensional materials will be an important part of this area of mathematics.

Students should have opportunities to develop the communication skills necessary for the formation of early mathematical concepts and to use mathematical language accurately.

Play is an essential part of the student's early mathematical development. He or she should be given opportunities to develop and apply their early mathematical skills and understanding in both undirected and structured play.

The social value of mathematical education is of prime importance to students with general learning disabilities; and activities that encourage the use of social mathematics in real-life situations and in solving real problems will be included. For older students, managing money, reading timetables and using functional mathematics will help their transition to the world of work and leisure.

Social, environmental and scientific education (SESE)

This key learning area deals with understanding the environment and relating to it. It encompasses the areas of history, geography, and science. From the earliest experiences in developing a sense of place and space and investigating and exploring their physical and natural surroundings, students can come to some understanding of their place in the world, both in their immediate environment and in the wider world. The level of interaction will vary with the ability of the student to understand the difficult concepts of time and of cause and effect. Through thematic approaches and sensory experiences, students can engage in the exploration of a broad range of experiences that will enrich their understanding of the world.

Social, personal and health education (SPHE)

SPHE is intrinsic to all areas of the curriculum and to every facet of the student's life. Issues cannot be explored in isolation but must be seen as part of the daily experience of the student. Students should be enabled to understand and use language appropriate to particular situations. Every opportunity should be taken to place learning in its functional context.

SPHE involves fostering personal development by helping the student to reach a greater understanding of himself or herself and of his or her relationship with family, friends, and other people in the school and the community. Students can be helped to recognise, understand and accept themselves as unique and multi-faceted individuals who feel valued and loved. Self-worth and self-confidence will be nurtured, with opportunities for choice and independence being seen as essential learning experiences. The ability to control one's environment and to be as independent as possible within it is particularly important for students with general learning disabilities.

Through SPHE, students can learn to appreciate the role of other people in their lives, to strive towards an understanding of the feelings of others, and to

treat people and their property with care and respect. This area of the curriculum will aim to develop in the student an appreciation of the importance of family, friends, school, and the community. It will also explore social communication and the responsibility that goes with being part of a group, which are of vital importance both at school and in work and leisure. Through learning about food and nutrition students can establish self-help skills such as cookery, and the ability to organise meals and to develop healthy eating habits.

Physical education (including functional movement)

Because of the varied physical needs and abilities of many students with general learning disabilities, considerable flexibility must be exercised in planning a programme that meets the needs of each particular school, class, and student. Activities suggested in this area will take into account the fact that teachers often work in collaboration with other disciplines. At the same time, it is hoped that all students will have access to the broadest possible curriculum in physical education, as in all curriculum areas. Students should, to the full extent of their capacity and with as much help as is necessary, safely experience activities and explore a wide range of stimulating equipment.

As well as developing the body's strength and physical well-being, physical activities provide opportunities through which students can improve fine and gross motor co-ordination, concentration, listening skills, self-esteem, self-confidence, and the ability to co-operate and communicate with others.

Structured play can provide opportunities for the early physical development of body awareness, spatial awareness, and safety. To enable students to become familiar with the language of specific movement skills, teachers should be consistent in the use of appropriate language for physical education. Most importantly, it must be an enjoyable and fun experience for the student and contribute to the development of leisure pursuits and participation in team sports.

Arts education

Arts education will include music, visual arts, and drama. It will aim to enable the students to increase their awareness and enjoyment of the arts and to be actively involved. In a mainstream setting, arts education provides a non-threatening collaborative experience where students can enjoy a more inclusive educational experience and interact fully with their peers. Students with general learning disabilities will be encouraged to engage in a wide range of creative experiences and activities. The cross-curricular value of arts education will be fully explored, and the sense of enjoyment and fun in the creative experience will be encouraged.

Music

Music is a highly motivating force for many students with general learning disabilities. It can help to elicit responses from students whose interest is often quite difficult to arouse and is enriching and liberating for students who find academic work difficult. The emphasis will be on the enjoyment and satisfaction of making sounds and singing songs.

Suggestions for extending basic participation in listening activities to performing and simple composing will be included. Listening and responding to a variety of music will be an important element of that participation. The use of music as a cross-curricular strategy to support learning in other areas is of particular relevance to those with general learning disabilities.

Visual arts

Visual arts education places an emphasis on the importance of making art (perceiving and exploring the visual world) and responding to art (looking at and responding to the visual world). This area affords endless opportunities for sensory and creative exploration, with a wide variety of stimulating visual and tactile materials being made available. Opportunities for developing visual awareness can be built into activities, but the emphasis on the visual elements should be informal and contextualised. While recognising the fact that some students will require a high degree of guidance by the teacher, the importance of the student's own experience and expression is central to all work.

Drama

Educational drama is a creative process that allows the student to safely test his or her hypotheses about what the world is like and how it might feel to have certain experiences. The primary task of the teacher is to facilitate and encourage the student's ability to make believe while also extending it to other areas of life and knowledge. In this area the emphasis will be placed on process rather than product. Drama may be used to highlight and explore current events that are important in the student's life, and it is envisaged that it will be incorporated in cross-curricular activities where opportunities arise. The potential of drama in areas such as SPHE is extremely important, especially in learning to deal with conflict and relationships.

SECTION 4

4.1 Accessing mainstream curricula

Recent theory and practice in special education strongly favour providing students with general learning disabilities with appropriate access to mainstream education. Experience of education in the broader setting of a mainstream class can enhance the self-perception of students, encourage others to have a higher expectation of them, and contribute to their wider social development. Traditionally, curricula for students with special educational needs tended to concentrate on a narrow range of skills; and while the development of these skills is essential, the provision of a broader range of opportunities is now recognised as a more effective model.

Both the primary school curriculum and the Junior Certificate curriculum acknowledge that students learn in different ways and at differing rates. This entails the use of a variety of teaching approaches and methodologies, differentiation in the choice and organisation of content, and the development of the student's ability to learn independently. Both curricula also stress the importance of identifying students' strengths, learning needs, rates of progress and levels of attainment in providing an effective learning experience. These characteristics of the curriculum at primary and junior cycle levels are appropriate to the learning needs of many students with general learning disabilities and, with appropriate human and physical resources, can enable a range of such students to experience a successful educational experience in mainstream settings.

4.1.1 Primary

The principles of the Primary School Curriculum (1999) celebrate the uniqueness of the child and aim to ensure the development of the child's full

potential. In the pursuit of this vision of the child, great stress is laid on one of the defining features of the curriculum:

It accords equal importance to what the child learns and to the process by which he or she learns it. One of its essential features is a recognition of the principle that there are different kinds of learning and that individual children learn in different ways. (p. 10)

The curriculum gives a detailed statement of content for each subject. It also incorporates a rich variety of approaches to teaching and learning, which cater for the differing needs of individual children. In this way it provides children with an extensive and varied learning experience.

Many students with general learning disabilities can access some elements of the primary school curriculum in the context of their own particular needs and abilities. The structure and presentation of the curriculum content facilitates the planning of access to the curriculum for students with special educational needs. This can be done most effectively through the guidelines which will identify how the wealth of material in the curriculum can be used to provide meaningful and appropriate learning experiences for these students.

At present, special schools do not have access to intervention programmes that are available to some mainstream schools. Many students with special educational needs come from disadvantaged backgrounds and, consequently, must cope with the further educational drawbacks that such an experience entails. There is a need for greater flexibility in the system so that interventions such as Early Start and Breaking the Cycle, which are particularly suited to special education settings, can be made available in a wider variety of schools.

Assessment

Assessment at primary level places great emphasis on assessment as an integral part of the teaching and learning process. A wide range of assessment tools is suggested, including

- teacher observation
- teacher-designed tasks and tests
- work samples, portfolios, and projects
- curriculum profiles or other norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests
- diagnostic tests
- standardised tests, where appropriate.

Important issues that will be addressed are the manageability of assessment and its use in informing the planning process for individuals and for groups. It is also essential that good assessment techniques include acknowledging the student's participation in activities and his or her attitude to learning and thus contribute to meaningful communication with parents and with other teachers.

4.1.2 Post-primary: junior cycle

At post-primary level, a similar flexibility in approach to teaching and learning is required to ensure that each student experiences a curriculum tailored to his or her needs and capabilities. However, this flexibility poses particular challenges in a subject-dominated system. In post-primary schools the timetable and deployment of resources are organised around subjects, assessment for certification is subject-based, and teachers tend to be subject specialists. Therefore, flexibility across all subjects is needed if students with special educational needs are to be enabled to achieve their full potential and to promote their after-school prospects and transition to adult life.

All post-primary students, including those with a general learning disability, need access to a comprehensive and age-appropriate curriculum. The recently published Junior Cycle Review Progress Report: Issues and Options for Development (1999) raises the issue of greater flexibility in curriculum provision for all students. Addressing the issue of special educational needs, it notes that

students with special needs may require flexibility in statements of educational outcomes, statements rooted in the ability, potential and rate of progression of the student but nonetheless offering a quality educational experience for each student concerned, directed towards the full range of outcomes. (p. 10)

Assessment

The report also stresses the need for greater congruence between curriculum objectives, teaching and learning methods, and the arrangements for the assessment of students' progress and achievement. The impact of the restricted range of current modes and techniques of assessment used in the Junior Certificate examination is discussed, as is the over-reliance on a terminal examination for certification.

Following the publication of the NCCA Junior Cycle Review Progress Report, the Department of Education and Science published a discussion paper on the future of the Junior Certificate examination. It proposes that in future less

emphasis be placed on terminal written examinations and greater emphasis on the assessment of students' progress through a much wider range of modes and techniques. In this model, certification would be based on students' progress over time, as well as on terminal performance. Such a development would have implications for the access to national certification of students with special educational needs who may, at present, be excluded from that certification because of the nature of the terminal written examinations. It would open other pathways and offer new possibilities for all students. Certification could extend to validated records of achievement, which would record the strengths of every student as a learner.

4.1.3 The Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP)

The JCSP is an intervention programme that offers a flexible approach to the curriculum and its assessment. It is particularly aimed at students who are at risk of leaving school early. Those following this programme take at least two subjects in the Junior Certificate examination, usually English and mathematics at foundation level, and may take other subjects as appropriate. The remainder of the curriculum focuses on key components of the curriculum in other curricular areas. A student profile is kept as a positive record of the student's achievement. On completion of the programme, students receive both state certification based on subjects taken in the Junior Certificate examination and a school-assessed student profile.

In the consultations held during the course of the Junior Cycle Review, personnel working in the support of this intervention stressed that the curriculum itself had the potential to meet the needs of all students in the target group, as outlined above. The central factors that determined the suitability of the curriculum in meeting the needs of all students were:

- the approach taken to the curriculum in schools and classrooms
- the modes and techniques used for assessment and certification.

The forthcoming review of the JCSP will include an examination and evaluation of the extent to which it has been accessed by students with special educational needs.

4.1.4 Transition year

The transition year is a one-year optional programme that can be taken after the Junior Certificate examination. It is designed at school level within a framework of national guidelines. These guidelines specify that each transition year programme should offer students a broad variety of learning experiences inside and outside the classroom. The programme should encourage activity-based, self-directed learning and provide students with an input into the assessment procedure. An element of work experience is usually included.

Given the emphasis in the transition year on a wide range of learning and on the development of personal and social skills, it has considerable potential for students with special educational needs. The NCCA is about to undertake a review of the transition year, which will take account of the experience of such students, their parents, and their teachers.

4.1.5 Developing the system

Post-primary provision can appear inflexible. The domination of subjects and the emphasis on terminal written examinations as a pathway to national certification may create an impression that if a student's learning needs do not match the school as it organises for learning, then the school can do little to support that student. However, the JCSP and the transition year show how flexibility can be built in to the system, and it is timely that both these initiatives are under review during the development of the curriculum guidelines for special needs.

The Junior Cycle Review is also timely. If the path to certification can be extended beyond terminal written examinations, those who cannot obtain access to current arrangements may find that in future there may be opportunities for rewarding, and certifying, the learning, progress and achievements of *all* students.

4.1.6 Post-primary: senior cycle

At senior cycle a range of options is also available to students. The aims and principles of senior cycle education include preparation for the requirements of further education, for adult life and for working life and the development of a capacity for independent thought.

Leaving Certificate programmes

The Leaving Certificate (established) programme on its own is often inappropriate for many students with general learning disabilities. The Leaving Certificate Applied, which uses a modular approach and short-term goal-setting, has been accessed by some students with a mild general learning disability.

However, schools must assess carefully the appropriateness of such programmes for their particular students. These senior cycle programmes are designed to meet the selection needs of further education, training, and the world of work. They pose a significant challenge for all students, and while they do offer a pathway to national certification, care is needed that too great a challenge is not placed before any student with special educational needs.

4.1.7 National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA)

The NCVA was established in 1991 to set, maintain and certify standards for vocational education and training. These courses are structured on a modular basis and are certified. They operate at four levels, from Foundation Level to NCVA Level 3. Assessment is on a portfolio basis. The awards are designed to provide access to employment and to facilitate progression to further education and training. At present some special schools access NCVA programmes.

4.1.8 Alternative programmes

Many students with special educational needs will not, however, find traditional post-primary programmes appropriate to their needs. For these students an alternative model will be included in the curriculum guidelines. This will include transitional programmes that have a strong vocational element and a special emphasis on personal development and relationships that will enable students to transfer learning and reinforce it in social settings where possible. The main emphasis will be on the use of age-appropriate and ability-appropriate materials and methodologies and on preparing the student for life beyond the classroom.

Conclusion

This document proposes the development of coherent national curriculum guidelines for students with general learning disabilities (mild, moderate, and severe and profound). These guidelines will provide for a continuum of needs and the development of a curricular response to those needs. It will enable parents, teachers and other professionals who deal with the student over his or her educational career to share a perception of the aims and purposes of the educational experience it provides and to communicate effectively.

Curriculum planning for students with special educational needs must look to the future and have clear goals in mind. All students, but particularly those with special educational needs, need access to a range of educational opportunities and genuine choice in the directions that their education may take.

The most important point is that students will experience a quality education in response to their needs.

Appendixes

Appendix I: Present educational provision for students with general learning disability

Mild general learning disability
<p>Primary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• special schools• integrated in mainstream with resource or visiting teacher support• special classes <p>Post-primary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• special schools—senior sections accessing mainstream curricula; senior sections not accessing mainstream curricula• integrated in mainstream with resource teacher support• integrated in mainstream• special classes
Moderate general learning disability
<p>Primary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• special schools• integrated in mainstream with resource or visiting teacher support• special classes <p>Post-primary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• special schools—senior sections• integrated in mainstream with support• special classes
Severe and profound general learning disability
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• special classes in special schools• special classes in mainstream schools• special classes in Child Education and Development Centres (CEDCs)• special schools

Appendix II: Membership of the Special Education Steering Committee

NOMINEE	REPRESENTATIVE BODY
Chair: Tom Gilmore	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
Tony Bates	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Deirbhile Nic Craith	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Séamus Caomhánach	Department of Education and Science
Peadar Mac Canna	Department of Education and Science
Denis McCarthy (IATSE)	Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education
Sister Eithne Woulfe	Joint Management Board (JMB)
Aidan Savage	Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
Mary Keane	Catholic Primary School Managers' Association (CPSMA)
Nuala Uí Dhúill	National Parents' Council—Primary
Margaret Horgan	National Parents' Council—Post-primary
Frances Ryan	Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA)
Ann Whelan	Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI)
Donough O'Brien	Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)
Dr Brendan J. Spelman	Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT)
Antoinette Buggle	National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE)
Paul O'Mahony	Principal, special school
Ann Jackson	Church of Ireland General Synod Board of Education
Patricia Lynch	Special Education Department, St Patrick's College of Education
Valerie O'Dowd	Education Officer, NCCA

Appendix III: Membership of the working groups

SPECIAL EDUCATION WORKING GROUP 1

Mild general learning disability

CATEGORY	NOMINEE
Chair	Tony Bates
Principal	Pat O'Keefe, St Francis Special School, Port Laoise, Co. Laois
Resource teacher post-primary	Eamonn McAuley, Jobstown Community College, Dublin 24
Special school	Mary Drislane, St Augustine's School, Carysfort Avenue, Blackrock, Co. Dublin
Special class teacher	Áine O'Neill, Ladyswell NS, Mulhuddart, Co. Dublin
Special school junior class	Anita Craig, Scoil Chiaráin, Glasnevin, Dublin 11
Special school senior class	Ita Teegan, Scoil Bernadette, Montenotte, Cork
Parent	Caroline O'Brien
Department of Education and Science	Seán Terry
Education Officer	Mary Drislane (to June 1999)

SPECIAL EDUCATION WORKING GROUP 2**Moderate general learning disability**

CATEGORY	NOMINEE
Chair	Deirbhile Nic Craith
Principal	Catherine Farrell, Holy Family School, Cootehill, Co. Cavan
Post-primary, senior class	Tom Galvin, Scoil Aonghusa, Cashel, Co. Tipperary
Resource or special class	TBA
Special school	Emer O'Connor, St John of God School, Islandbridge, Dublin 8
Special school	Mary Carrig, Stewart's Special School, Palmerstown, Dublin 20
Parent	Susan Corrigan
Department of Education and Science	Harry Cheevers
Education Officer	Emer O'Connor

SPECIAL EDUCATION WORKING GROUP 3
Severe and profound general learning disability

CATEGORY	NOMINEE
Chair	Ann Jackson
Principal	Griffith J. Griffiths, St Francis School, Beaufort, Co. Kerry
Teacher	Miriam Quinn, St Michael's House, Grosvenor Road, Dublin 6
Teacher	Helen Guinan, St Paul's, Montenotte, Cork
Teacher	Emir Duffy, St Paul's, Montenotte, Cork
Specialist	Jean Ware, Special Education Department, St Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin 9
Parent	Frieda Finlay
Department of Education and Science	Michael Connolly
Education Officer	Helen Guinan

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