

Level 1 Learning Programmes

Background Paper

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Introduction

The profile of students at post-primary level has changed significantly in recent years. Consequently, provision for students with special educational needs (SEN) has been enhanced since the introduction of the Junior Certificate in 1989. The most recent development - the introduction of Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LPs) in September 2014 as part of the new *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES 2012) means yet more students with specific SEN have access to an inclusive and appropriate curriculum. However, there is still a sizeable portion of this cohort of students with disabilities in the low moderate, severe and profound range, who are still unable to equitably access the curriculum. Though there is an established curriculum in place that offers a broad and balanced educational experience for these students, there is no accreditation. The existence of Level 1 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) means there is potential for the learning of this group of students to be assessed and accredited and thus publicly recognised.

This paper is informed by a review of international trends in curriculum provision for the target student group with SEN and by the provision for these students in Ireland currently. The paper also reflects findings from visits to a small number of special schools. The visits were for the purpose of observing classroom practice, and consulting principals, teachers, SNAs and other professionals who work in those schools (see Appendix 1). The paper also takes account of the perspectives of a small number of parents who responded to a request for their views by the National Parents' Council. The paper presents the main findings this initial work and proposes a brief for the development of a specification for Level 1 Learning Programmes (L1LPs).

Background

For the first half of the 20th century the education of people with special educational needs fell under the remit of religious orders. The government did not develop policy in this area as such and early thinking of Irish educators was that educating students with special educational needs in mainstream schools was inappropriate; their needs being considered a medical as much as an educational issue. Segregated education was the practice of the time with the first state-recognised special school opening in 1947. A dedicated state service for special education was only established in the 1960s under the Department of Health. The *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Mental Handicap* (Ireland, 1965), commissioned as a result of the 1960 White Paper *The Problem of the Mentally Handicapped*, became the foundation for special education policy in Ireland for three decades. While it did suggest the inclusion, in some cases, of special classes in mainstream school for 'slow learners' (Carey, 2005, p. 130), it was a supporting document for a parallel, special school system. It proposed an increase in places in residential special schools as well as the creation of 3000 places in day special schools and special classes in mainstream schools. Subsequent reports, *The Education of Children who are Handicapped by Impaired Hearing* (1972), *The Education of Physically Handicapped Children* (1982), and *The Education and Training of Severely and Profoundly Mentally Handicapped Children in Ireland* (1993), continued to support the establishment of special schools. However, the recognition of a difference between children considered to be 'slow learners' and children with physical and mental disabilities was emerging and a pilot scheme was set up where teachers, trained in special education, worked in residential schools. It is only in the last two decades that special schools have moved from under the remit of the Health Service Executive (HSE) to that of the Department of Education and Skills (DES).

The influence of the *Special Education Review Committee (SERC) Report* in 1993 was evident in the *White Paper on Education* which stated that *the philosophy of the education system was to promote equality of access, participation and benefit for all in accordance with their needs and abilities* (Ireland, 1995, p.8). In line with the SERC Report, it stated that the provision of education for children with disabilities would be flexible and include the option of mainstream, special school or a combination based on an assessment of the needs of the child. It identified the lack of substantive legislation for primary and secondary education in the country and set out what future legislation would focus on.

The White Paper was followed by several pieces of legislation. The Education Act 1998 provided the first legal definition of disability. Its first three objectives dealt with the constitutional rights of children, *including children who have a disability or who have other special educational needs* (Ireland,

1998, p 10) to education; the provision of resources to meet these needs; and the promotion of equality of access and participation in education. The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 provided for the right of every child to a certain minimum education. The Equal Status Act 2000 prohibits discrimination on nine grounds. This Act puts the onus on schools to put supports in place to meet the needs of the child with special needs.

The NCCA developed a *Special Educational Needs: Curriculum Issues* paper in 1999. It laid the foundations for future developments related to curriculum access for students with SEN. It is emphasised from this early stage that the principles underlying special education are the same as the principles of education for all students, a statement that is dominant in all curriculum guidelines since 1999.

The NCCA paper acknowledged that students with SEN *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* (p.18). It also emphasised the necessity to achieve a balance between the common curriculum, developmental curriculum and additional curriculum¹ to meet the needs and abilities of individual students, and that content and strategies used to achieve this *should minimise rather than emphasise difference* (p.25). It proposed key development and life skills for learning and teaching which would be linked to the common curriculum. What followed were the draft *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* (2002).

The Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 put further emphasis on the responsibility of schools to provide equal access to education for students with SEN, with particular emphasis on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to support the student to access the curriculum. It is important to note that to date not all sections of the Act have been implemented. The NCSE (www.ncse.ie/for_parents/FAQs.asp, n.d.) list the following sections as commenced:

- Section 1 Interpretation of the Act
- Section 2 The right to be educated in an inclusive environment
- Section 14 (1) (a) Duties of Schools
- Section 14 (1) (c)

¹ Common curriculum refers to the mainstream curriculum followed by schools. Developmental curriculum refers to a curriculum designed on the basis of the developmental stages of the student. Additional curriculum refers to additional/alternative programmes for students, for example in the area of social skills and independent life skills.

- Section 14 (2) to 14 (4) Duties of Schools
- Sections 19 to 37 Establishment of the NCSE
- Sections 40 to 53 Establishment of the NCSE

The revised *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* (NCCA, 2007), hereafter referred to only as The Guidelines, were developed for use in all educational settings and were to be accessible to all professionals working with students with SEN. There are guidelines for students with mild general learning disabilities, for students with moderate general learning disabilities and also for students with severe and profound general learning disabilities. For students in the low moderate and severe and profound range, these guidelines emphasise enabling, communication and life skills, using a spiral and generative approach to learning.

The consultation process for The Guidelines highlighted a gap at junior cycle for students with mild and moderate general learning disabilities. Students within this group - despite having access to extra teacher support, flexible programmes like the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), and differentiation - are accessing the curriculum at a level that does not allow them to gain nationally recognised certification. A further point, that the junior cycle mainstream curriculum, in its current form, was *not appropriate for this group of students who needed concerted support in personal, social and vocational development* (NCCA, 2009, p.6) was also made. This led to the development of the L2LPs which were introduced in September 2014 as an alternative pathway for students with low mild to high moderate general learning disabilities (GLD) within the new Junior Cycle Student Award (JCSA) and to the revised approach in developing the new junior cycle curriculum of using the principles of universal design.

The L2LPs are designed around Priority Learning Units (PLUs) in Communicating and Literacy, Numeracy, Personal Care, Preparation for Work, and Living in the Community, rather than the traditional academic subjects. These PLUs can be taught as independent curriculum areas or they can be integrated into mainstream subject teaching. Two short courses are also taught as part of the programme. The L2LPs are assessed on an ongoing basis in school and are designed in alignment with Level 2 qualifications on the National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ).

Student Target Group for L1LPs

The L2LPs are designed to meet the learning needs of those students in the low mild to high moderate range of ability. The discussion on L1LPs will focus on the needs of students in the low moderate, and severe and profound, ability range. Of course any student within this range whose needs can be met by an L2LP should follow that programme.

The most recent NCSE schools data (2013) shows that the number of students with moderate and severe and profound general learning disabilities receiving support in 2012/2013 was 2,799. This figure is broken down as follows

Setting	Students with Moderate Learning Disability	Students with Severe and Profound Learning Disability
Mainstream post-primary	209	0
Special class in mainstream post-primary	16	7
Special school	2255	312

As the statistics indicate, this cohort will be a very small group within the population of school-going students.

The complexity and multiplicity of needs, including care needs associated with this group of students must be acknowledged, particularly for those students whose learning needs are severe and profound. Both the cognitive and functioning levels of each student within this group must be considered. The Intelligence Quotients (IQs) commonly associated with these students are:

- Under 20 for students with profound general learning disabilities
- 20-35 for students with severe general learning disabilities
- The lower part of the IQ range 35-50 for those students with moderate general learning disabilities.

In addition, students taking L1LPs tend to have significant difficulties with cognition: the mental process of gaining knowledge and comprehension. These processes include thinking, knowing, remembering, judging and problem solving. These are higher-level functions of the brain involving language, imagination, perception, and planning.

While cognisant of the students' individual needs, the same kinds of expectations for learning should apply for this group of students as for their more able peers. The principles contained in *A Framework for Junior Cycle* apply to this cohort as to all students. Providing supports and challenges as appropriate forms part of the teaching and learning process involved.

The Guidelines outline the learning challenges and needs of this cohort of students. For students with moderate general learning disabilities these include:

- Limited concentration
- Passivity
- Delayed oral language development
- Difficulty in adapting to their environment
- Limited ability to generalise
- Difficulties in problem solving.

(Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General learning Disabilities: Overview, p.17)

For those students with severe and profound general learning disabilities their needs include:

- Learning targeted at a very early developmental level
- Consideration of additional motor and/or sensory difficulties
- Basic self-care needs
- Significant needs in the area of communication, with strategies for non-verbal communication being critical
- Significant emotional and/or behavioural needs that affect learning and social interaction
- Specific help in generalising concepts and skills to enable them to accommodate to a change of context.

(Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities: Overview, p.26)

International trends

England

In England it is acknowledged that the common national curriculum and assessment was not accessible by all. Performance scales (P scales) are the alternative preparatory, or foundation, level of the national curriculum (Douglas et al., 2012). The QCA (2009, 2011) describes them as tools to monitor the progress of students working below or towards Level 1 on the national curriculum and they are a statutory requirement for reporting the linear and lateral progress of these students at the end of Key Stages 1-3. P scales are designed to describe the skills, knowledge and understanding that a student with moderate, severe or profound learning difficulties might attain in subjects across the national curriculum. There is also the flexibility to move between P levels where a student is attaining at a higher level in a particular area. In terms of accreditation, the proposed L1LPs would equate to the English scales P1 to P3 which describe the earliest levels of attainment. However the L1LPs would reflect the rich and varied curriculum already established in Ireland for these students and use The Guidelines as their foundation.

ASDAN (a curriculum development and awarding organisation with charitable status) Education has developed national curriculum programmes for students working at P scales level. Called Preparatory Programmes, they *provide a real-life context to promote the development of personal, social, independent, ICT and work-related skills*" (ASDAN, What are the preparatory programmes? n.d., par.1). There are four programmes, each designed to meet different special needs and goals, and for different age groups. These programmes also offer the opportunity for the student to receive a qualification recognised within a qualification framework².

Wales

Though it has a national curriculum, it appears that the Welsh government has moved towards a more student-centred approach for students with SEN. *Routes for Learning* (2006) is the assessment tool used to monitor the progress of students with profound learning needs. Imray and Hinchcliffe (2012) describe *Routes for Learning* as a break away from the idea of progress taking place through formal

² The Personal Progress qualification will be certified until 2016 (ASDAN, Courses: Personal Progress Overview, n.d. par.3)

subjects (p.153). It focuses on the early cognitive and communication skills, and emotional wellbeing of students with profound learning needs. These are pathways common to all humans, who progress along them at different rates. *Routes for Learning* identifies the key milestones this cohort of students might pass and acknowledges that they might take various pathways to reach them. Thus it serves to *meet the very individual needs of these learners by showing a range of possible learning pathways* (Welsh Government, Routes for Learning, 2009, par.2).

Scotland

Education Scotland states *that children and young people should experience continuous progression in their learning from 3 to 18 within a single curriculum framework* (<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/thecurriculum/howisthecurriculumorganised/principles/index.asp>). Its Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) offers 5 levels of national qualifications. Scotland's National 2 and National 1 Levels (previously called Access 2 and Access 1) appear to align with Ireland's L2LPs and the proposed L1LPs.

The National 1 award recognises the especially complex and significant level of needs of the cohort of students with moderate and severe and profound learning needs. The award is for learners for whom assessment at National Level 2 would be inappropriate. It acknowledges that varying levels of support, for example direct or hand-over-hand support, are required by individuals, reflecting their learning needs. Teachers have suggested that this should be reflected within the award through different levels of achievement. This would also show the progress students make within the level. However the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is of the view that while existing tools can be used in schools to monitor these different levels of support and achievement within the programme, the National 1 Award should encompass any and all learning achieved by this cohort.

The National 1 curriculum is designed around independent units. Students require no prior knowledge or experience and the units *can be used to allow candidates to develop a broad base of independent living skills, such as recognising time and handling money, or to fill gaps in an individual's basic skills* (SQA, 2003, p.2). It is possible to pass subject units separately to gain a National Level 1. Learners working at National 1 level can progress to other National 1 units or National 2 units (SQA, 2014).

Canada

One country that appears to advocate a wholly inclusive approach is Canada. Looking particularly at Alberta, a public consultation process highlighted a number of areas for change that resulted in a curriculum *'rethink' to fit diverse learners rather than 're-tooling' simply to accommodate them, with the development of a more adaptable rather than a more accessible curriculum* (O'Mara, 2012, p.52). Alberta Education (2009) reported that Albertans had come to believe that special education had become a setting rather than a provision, resulting in the emergence of two parallel systems. There was now a need to re-connect these systems into a single holistic one for all. Its consultation process identified a need for life and social skills curricula and for curriculum flexibility for students with SEN. Alberta Education moved towards a social model of special education which is a value-based approach with equal opportunity for all students to be included in general education. This means that all stakeholders work together for the success of the students, that diversity is valued as a positive and enriching aspect of the education system, and that decisions are learner-centred.

Alberta Education recognises that its goal to *de-emphasize the difference between students and build a system based on the value of all learners in schools* (p.9) goes beyond curriculum change. It demands a cultural shift to one inclusive system with curriculum development as just one element of this change. Alberta Education offers a variety of certification options for secondary school students. For students with *significant cognitive disabilities* it offers The Certificate of School Completion. Students must meet specific criteria for this award and have participated in special education programming (Alberta Government, 2014, p.82).

Current provision for students in Ireland

In Ireland, provision for the students in this cohort is, in most cases, based on The Guidelines. Teachers report favourably on their value as a practical reference point for curriculum development. Many schools are adapting The Guidelines to develop their own programmes and aligning them with targets set out in IEPs. Some schools are adapting QQI Level 1 and Level 2 programmes on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to teach as subjects.

In the absence of a nationally developed set of precise, specific and sequential learning outcomes for students with low moderate and severe and profound general learning disabilities to guide the planning of programmes and to be used for assessment purposes, teachers are using assessment tools designed for use in the UK. Schools are using tools such as *Routes for Learning* (Welsh Government, 2006) and *Mapping and Assessing Pupil Progress (MAPP)* (The Dales School, n.d). Other options include ASDAN programmes, the *English P Scales* (QCA, 2011) and the *Scottish National Level 1* (SQA, 2003). TEACCH levels of assessment (pass, emerging, fail) are sometimes also used by schools.

A thematic approach to learning is occurring in many schools. Differentiation is clearly evident in some schools. Teachers are creating individual materials to suit the needs of each student in their class group. Examples of these resources were available to see when visiting schools.

Students are often offered a wide range of assistance/support in terms of demonstrating learning. This includes direct or hand-over-hand support, verbal prompts, visual cues, and gestures.

Though a vital element of the students' lives, care/medical needs can interrupt and reduce teaching time for schools. Good practice is seen in schools where teachers are using time for care needs as opportunities to integrate learning from IEP targets. One example of this is where schools are using extended feeding times as an opportunity to develop communication skills (requesting and responding) and personal care skills.

The integrity of the school day is important. Yes there are care needs that must be attended to but we are a school and as such our primary focus should be on education.

(Principal, special school)

The availability of technology for students in schools is also supporting teaching and learning. The use of apps, augmentative communication devices and writing devices support students' participation in the learning process.

In some schools students have access to required medical/care support from Occupational Therapists (OTs), Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) and nurses.

There is evidence of schools designing their own assessment criteria, informed by The Guidelines and IEPs. There is a sense that schools believe The Guidelines' bands of attending, responding and initiating are a good place to start assessing, though it is also important to assess maintaining and generalising skills. The assessment process needs to include appropriate forms of formal, informal and teacher-designed assessments. There should be accurate analysis and interpretation of these assessments. Recording and reporting of results are also important aspects of the assessment process.

Ongoing assessment is undertaken through discrete observation and checklists, and professional judgement is an important aspect of this assessment process.

(Class teacher, special school)

Some considerations related to current provision

There are a number of key considerations in terms of the way curriculum is currently designed and implemented.

The students concerned can be at the very early stages of their learning and development, and some are even at the pre-learning stage. Therefore there is a necessity for high interest and high frequency learning and teaching. Students must be given sufficient time at each stage of the interactive process to attend, to respond and to initiate. Repetition is essential and the pace at which learning outcomes need to be achieved in the common, subject-based curriculum does not allow for this.

Teachers are constructing curriculum focusing on core developmental and functional skills areas, such as communication, cognitive awareness, social interaction, physical skills, leisure skills, independence skills, RSE and personal development. While schools try to incorporate the common curriculum into the school day, these skill needs of students appear to restrict opportunities for this. Despite attempts in schools to provide group learning situations, the highly individualised needs of each student makes this difficult. Time to teach students individually is essential.

Quality teaching time is important. The student first learns a new skill through individual instruction - then it can be built on in the group. Time constraints mean I work individually with each student a maximum of three times a week.

(Class teacher, special school)

The time it takes for this cohort of students to learn new skills is an issue, particularly in terms of a new programme. While some students in the higher ability range of this group may complete a

programme of learning in three years, it could take other students their entire school lives to complete it. Currently there is a lack of flexibility in the system in relation to the time students have to complete a programme of learning.

There appear to be limited opportunities to recognise publicly the type of continuity and progression of learning these students achieve. It is acknowledged that students should be able to move between learning levels and programmes within the common curriculum according to their abilities. At present there is no appropriate national assessment or certification for students with low moderate, and severe and profound general learning disabilities. Thus schools are developing their own systems for monitoring and recognising progress. The concern is that basing assessment on the broad outcomes of The Guidelines and IEPs as reported earlier may result in inauthentic results being recorded. For authentic measurement of student progress the language of targets needs to be very specific and presented in a manner which allows a shared understanding among teachers and other professionals carrying out the assessments.

Every student can achieve Level 1 if the targets are specific.

(Class teacher, special school)

There is much debate about standards, authenticity and expectations when discussing assessment of this student cohort. While it is agreed that every student can achieve and progress in their learning, the argument is made that for the qualification to have meaning and value a set of criteria must be met to achieve it. There is also the importance of fairness. Griffin and Shevlin (2007) explore the issue of assessment in terms of fairness for all students. They highlight that mainstream assessment criteria are discouraging to particular students and are setting some up for failure. They question the fairness of judging the work of the student with special educational needs against the standard of the mainstream or 'normal' student. They also question the fairness of giving the student with special educational needs the same grade as the mainstream student based on their level of ability and the effort they make in class rather than the assessment criteria used to grade their mainstream peers. The same arguments apply in terms of assessing students with profound disabilities against the same standards/criteria for students with low moderate learning needs (both potentially students who might undertake L1LPs). Two consequences may come of this. Firstly the certification may lose credibility as it is perceived as being 'dumbed down' for the student with lower ability. Secondly, it may give parents false hope and expectations in terms of academic progression for their child - a serious concern of teachers. Finally, teachers do not want a token gesture to give to students and parents at the end of the school year or programme.

We need to recognise when a student achieves to the best of his/her ability and any progress made is significant. However the assessment to achieve this recognition must be genuine. There needs to be a set of criteria for teachers to follow.

(Deputy Principal, special school)

There are issues related to the use of QQI programmes at level 1 and level 2 on the NFQ as these programmes are designed for further or adult education. If a more age-appropriate programme of learning is made available to replace QQI for this cohort of students, it should be suitable for certification at Level 1 of the NFQ.

Different schools using a variety of different programmes and assessment tools can lead to inconsistencies between and within schools and can affect the transfer of information on student progress to other teachers, schools or parents. It also means there is no publically recognised Irish qualification common to all these students.

Developing a framework for L1LPs

Introduction

As students with learning disabilities in the low moderate to severe and profound range are considered to be in the very early stages of learning, any framework designed for them will have a focus on enabling skills in attending, responding, initiating, maintaining and generalising. It will also focus on closing the gap in a continuum of provision between the Primary Curriculum and L2LPs. The L1LPs should reflect the diversity of this cohort of students. The framework will be designed according to the developmental stages of learning.

The starting point for setting out the learning outcomes for L1LPs should be the *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with Moderate General Learning Disabilities* and *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with Severe and Profound General Learning Disabilities*. The L1LPs should reflect and build on the breadth of learning found in The Guidelines. They should also echo (albeit in a nuanced way where necessary) the principles, statements of learning and key skills of the *Framework for Junior Cycle*, which have been designed for all students and be consistent with the revised junior cycle subject and short course specifications. It is intended that students undertaking L1LPs should have equity of access to any and all curricular material which is appropriate to their needs and stage of learning.

The language and format of the L2LPs should be echoed in the L1LPs framework (Guidelines for teachers, PLUs, elements...).

The language of the framework should also be cognisant of the individual functioning abilities of students. For example, instead of 'the student will speak appropriately to...' the framework should say 'the student will speak/ gesticulate/ make eye movements appropriately to...'

While respecting the autonomy of individual schools, the framework might suggest a thematic approach where schools can choose elements from subjects that complement the theme and enhance learning. This reflects the idea already present in L2LPs that schools have the discretion to choose or design their own short courses. It has been suggested by some teachers familiar with *A Personal Project: Caring for Animals*, a Level 2 short course developed by the NCCA, that short courses would have a useful place and role to play in L1LPs.

Taking the concerns about assessment and certification identified earlier into account, the L1LPs framework should consider how the assessment for this programme could be based on ongoing student work, teacher observations, checklists, photos and/or videos. For particular students it will

not be necessary to demonstrate/achieve every learning outcome. This will apply particularly to students with profound and complex physical disabilities. The assessment should show progression between levels as outlined by The Guidelines. In order to allow for recognition of all and for any learning below that associated with Level 2 on the NFQ two approaches should be considered: The progression steps for the *Draft Primary Language Curriculum* milestones could be examined to see if they can be adapted and/or used to guide the development of learning outcomes for L1LPs. Additionally, the *Curriculum Access Tool* being developed by the Special Education Support Service (SESS) to assist teachers in mediating the Guidelines should be explored to see if progression levels used in it can be used for the purposes of grading in assessment.

Although the L1LPs are being developed in the context of the JCSA, their completion by students should not be time-bound and they should be capable of being facilitated in all education settings and centres. Similarly, any student whose needs are best served by undertaking elements of L2LPs along with L1LPs should be facilitated to so.

The L1LPs should consist of five Priority Learning Units and two short courses.

The proposal to develop L1LPs have been welcomed generally. Teachers are positive about the possibilities that they present, both for themselves and their students. With national guidelines for L1LPs there would be an identified set of assessment approaches and criteria for schools to follow. Guidelines for teaching and learning aimed at achieving the learning outcomes would also be available, thus providing a formalised curriculum structure for the target cohort of students.

The proposal to introduce L1LPs brings with it some concerns, for instance adding to an already heavy teacher workload. On the other hand it has been highlighted that teachers frequently find it very challenging to provide meaningful learning for their Level 1 students in the absence of a structured curriculum with specific learning outcomes. In fact it is arguable that the introduction of L1LPs should alleviate the amount of work involved. Other concerns include those related to the credibility of assessment and certification; the flexibility to meet all student needs; the challenge of and capacity for providing a meaningful programme; timetabling/structuring classes; gathering evidence and resources; the need for the professional development necessary to build capacity and expertise among teachers in assessment. There is also the need to balance recognition for achievement with supporting realistic expectations on the part of students and (particularly) parents. These concerns will require further consideration and discussion with schools, teachers and parents.

Brief for developing L1LPs

Suggested aims

The aims of the L1LPs Framework are to:

- support and build on the existing broad, balanced and relevant curriculum and learning experiences
- ensure that it is appropriately positioned in relation to A Framework for Junior Cycle
- meet the needs of a diverse range of students
- contribute effectively to a continuum that offers a means of including all students with SEN
- facilitate a targeted focus on priority learning areas for students, enabling them to learn the relevant skills to become more independent and take more control of their environment
- provide opportunities for flexibility (in content, pace, support given), continuity, and progression within and between Level 1 and Level 2 programmes
- contribute to schools' development of programmes and programme content that facilitates students' learning as described in their IEPs
- provide appropriate, differentiated assessment that leads to meaningful certification for this cohort of students

Design

The design of the framework will involve:

Developing Priority Learning Units (PLUs)

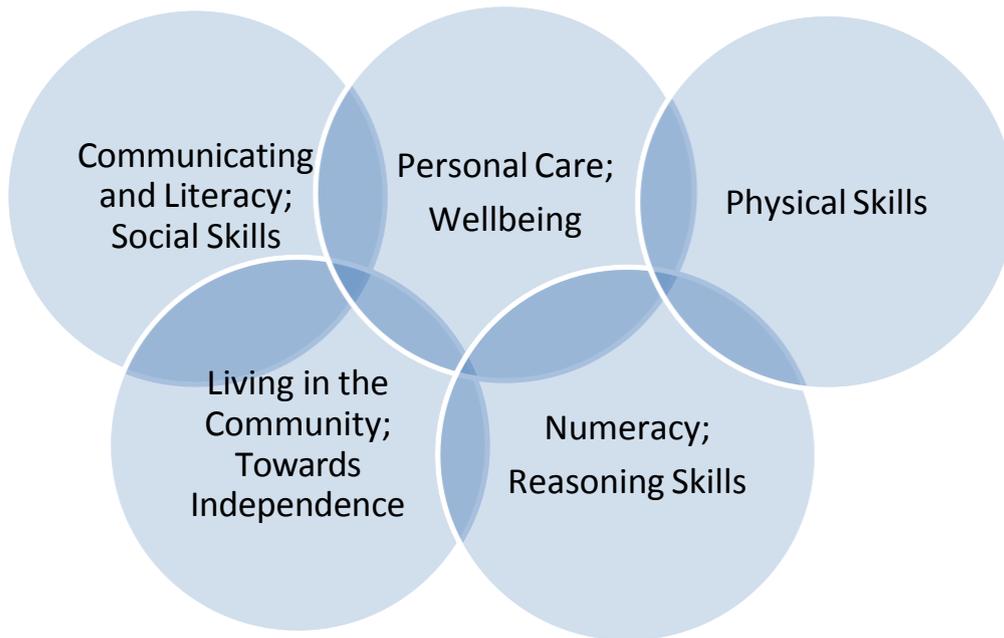
Considering the challenges and needs of this cohort of students, as well as feedback from schools, the L1LPs will be designed around core skills for learning and teaching. In discussions to date, different views have emerged as to what skills and curriculum areas the PLUs in a L1LP should address. Some are of the view that the PLUs should mirror those in the L2LPs namely: Communicating and Literacy; Numeracy; Personal Care; Living in the Community and Preparing for Work. The main problem with

this is that many see the preparation for work as one which is not directly related to and suitable for the situation, capacities and skills of the student cohort in question.

Another view is that the areas addressed by L1LP PLUs should be customised to suit the context and situation of the students in question. When this is the approach taken, a list along the following lines emerges:

- Contingency Awareness
- Cognitive Skills
- Communication
- Emotional Development
- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Social Interaction
- RSE
- Safety Awareness
- Personal Health and Personal Care
- Physical Skills (PE/OT/MOTOR)
- Independent Life Skills
- Leisure Skills
- Digital Literacy and IT skills

These can be grouped in the way illustrated below. They could be described as self-contained units but can also overlap and complement each other as part of a learning programme. Each PLU should have a general descriptor to outline the unit.



(Digital Literacy and Contingency Awareness can be transferred across all programmes)

The decision on what comprises the PLUs in L1LPs will be one of the key questions in the forthcoming consultation.

Outlining elements for each PLU

The elements break down the PLU into component parts, as in the case of L2LPs.

Identifying the learning outcomes for each element

The learning outcomes describe what students will be able to do in specific, incremental learning steps to demonstrate evidence of achievement. These outcomes will require more detail than those of the L2LPs and here the milestones' progressions steps of the Draft Primary Language Curriculum³ may be drawn upon. These specific descriptors must be accessible to all students in the cohort. Therefore the ability of students, both cognitively and physically, must be considered when developing the outcomes.

Suggesting how to include short courses and thematic approaches

Schools and teachers should have the autonomy described in A Framework for Junior Cycle to design the content of the L1LPs. Selecting their own subject areas, short courses and themes is one aspect of this autonomy. Schools may choose to design their own short courses or use NCCA short courses. The

³ See Appendix 3 for a brief description of the continua from the Draft Primary Language Curriculum.

latter may involve either differentiating existing L2LP short courses and/or developing one or two specifically aligned with the indicators for L1LPs.

Setting out procedures for assessment

The purpose of assessment and the process of generating, gathering and assessing evidence of learning will need to be outlined. The focus should be on formative assessment, though summative assessments also have a role to play.

In keeping with formative assessment, examples for gathering evidence of learning will be given. Portfolio assessment can be promoted as an effective approach in this context.

The features of quality related to assessment tasks will need to consider the levels of support required by students (direct physical support, verbal prompting, gestures) to achieve the L1LPs. The different levels of achievement and progression (experiencing, with support, independently) for students within this cohort might also need to be acknowledged.

Setting out procedures for certification

Certification is important for all students and their families. When students complete the L1LPs they should receive an award recognising their achievements which is aligned with the indicators for Level 1 of the NFQ. Despite students requiring different levels of support to achieve, the grading assigned should simply read achieved.

Providing support material

The framework will include practical examples of how to implement the L1LPs by including case studies. Examples of teaching and learning strategies as well as examples of annotated student work to guide assessment practice should be developed. Videos of classroom practice could be published online as supplementary material.

Moving forward - next steps

- The consultation process will take place between January and March 20th 2015.
- A report on the consultation process will be published on the NCCA's website.

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Appendix 1: Consultation for this paper

The voice of teachers has contributed to the development of this paper.

Parents' opinions were also sought

There was a small informal focus group meeting with teachers and principals from three special schools facilitated by NCCA in April 2013. In addition there has been focused consultation with four special schools in 2014. The latter involved semi-structured interviews with principals before observing classes and meeting other school staff. Conversations with class teachers, Special Needs Assistants, Occupational Therapists and Speech and Language Therapists also occurred and were based both on the initial interview with the principal and on observations. Samples of templates for information sharing and assessment/monitoring progress were also offered by schools. Principals were also asked to give a sample of a student profile. A focus interview was then held where a summary of our findings was given for discussion and feedback purposes.

Schools involved in consultation

School	Personnel Interviewed
Central Remedial Clinic	Principal, Class Teachers,
Stewarts Care Special School	Principal, Deputy Principal, Class Teachers, SNA
St. Michael's House, Baldoyle Special School	Principal
St. Michael's House, Grosnevor School	Principal, Teachers, Occupational Therapist (OT), Speech and Language Therapist(SLT), SNAs

Parents were surveyed through the National Parents' Council (NPC). At the time of writing only a small number of parents had responded.

Questions to guide conversations with Parents

Core Skills

What skills do you feel are most important for your child to learn in school? (Feel free to describe the things you feel are achievable for your child e.g. Awareness of their immediate environment or Communicating with others.....)

Subject areas

Would you like your child to have the opportunity to learn in subject areas in addition to the core skills?

What subject areas (if any) do you think should be offered? (e.g. Art, Music, Drama, Horticulture (science), Geography, Woodwork, Home Economics, English (this list is not exhaustive).

Learning

What helps your child learn best? (atmosphere, teaching approach, materials etc)

Certification

All qualifications in Ireland are aligned with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

How important is it to you that your child receives a qualification to recognise his/her achievements?

Very

Not really

Not at all

Would a record of achievement award be acceptable for students leaving school who have not yet completed the Level 1 programme?

Any other comments?

It is acknowledged that this is a very small sample. While it cannot be considered representative of all teachers and parents, it did give an insight into the thinking of these schools, teachers and parents that, in conjunction with the literature, helped inform the development of this paper. A more robust public consultation will take place before development of L1LPs begins.

Appendix 2: The Draft Primary Language Curriculum

The development of the new Primary Language Curriculum (2014) is relevant for students with moderate to profound learning needs and The Guidelines were considered in its design. It recognises that children come to school with different language experiences and at different development stages in their communication and language learning skills. Using progression continua (oral language, reading and writing) with progression milestones within each continuum teachers can make professional judgements on the learning stage or milestone of the individual student. It also supports the teacher to plan for the next stage in the child's language learning. The stages of the continua support children of a wide range of abilities and the initial milestones in each continuum reflect the areas of learning that the L1LPs wish to build on.

Appendix 3: Level indicators for Level 1 of the NFQ

Descriptor	
Title	Level 1 Certificate
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
NFQ Level	1
Volume	Small
Knowledge - breadth	Elementary knowledge
Knowledge - kind	Demonstrable by recognition or recall
Know-how and skill - range	Demonstrate basic practical skills, and carry out directed activity using basic tools
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Perform processes that are repetitive and predictable
Competence - context	Act in closely defined and highly structured contexts
Competence - role	Act in a limited range of roles
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to sequence learning tasks; learn to access and use a range of learning resources
Competence - insight	Begin to demonstrate awareness of independent role for self
Progression & Transfer	Progression to programme leading to a Level 2 Certificate, or at a higher level if appropriate.

