



# Key Skills Initiative

## Report on phase two

September 2009



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# 1. Introduction

This report follows on from the Interim Report on Key Skills at senior cycle (NCCA, May 2008) which covered the work from September 2006 to December 2007, the first phase of the key skills initiative. The background, aims and the methodology used in the initiative are documented in the interim report. The Key Skills Framework was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), having taken into account developments in this area across other jurisdictions and having engaged experts to inform the work. The framework identifies five key skills: these are *information processing, being personally effective, communicating, critical and creative thinking and working with others*.

The key skills initiative involves working with teachers using this framework as a planning tool to embed key skills in teaching and learning. By embedding key skills in the curriculum, learners can access a range of learning experiences and outcomes that improve their present and future learning, their social interaction, their information and communication abilities and their ability to work collaboratively.

This initiative began with an invitation to each teacher involved to find their own way of using the key skills in their classrooms. Teachers were given the freedom to decide what skills (if any) were relevant to their particular subject area, class group or context. The initiative sought to provide a climate of opportunity for reflection, critique and reframing of practice in key skills teaching and learning. The intention was to build a relationship of trust so that teachers would feel supported in reflecting critically on their practice and developing new insights as to how to teach in a way that would support the embedding of the five key skills. The NCCA, in partnership with the teachers, supported this inquiry into practice by facilitating group seminars.

The initiative also enabled students to have a 'voice' in curriculum development through their reflection on learning in the different subject areas. At the outset of the initiative there was not a clear set of indicators as to what embedded key skills would 'look like' in practice. In their reflections, teachers arrived at what they believed worked based on improved student attention to, attainment in and enjoyment of their subjects. Teachers' own knowledge of their students and of their subject and practitioner

knowledge contributed to the overall picture of 'what works'. Students' reflections on their learning informed teachers' judgement and provided another perspective on the learning experience. There was video evidence for some classes which added to the overall picture of 'what worked' for teachers in classes.

Teachers quickly came to recognise that introducing key skills is intrinsically linked to methodology and to effectively develop the key skills requires less whole class teaching and more active learning methodologies. They reported that when key skills were the focus of planning for teaching that the class was more learner-centred and less content-centred. Key skills were key to unlocking new ways of thinking and new ways of doing. Teachers reported that they began to use more group work, pair-work, class discussion, peer-teaching and peer-assessment. The students had to take more responsibility for their learning. As teachers developed their own skills of working with their colleagues and reflecting on their practice and of using a variety of sources of information to plan for teaching, they observed that the embedding of the key skills in their teaching became more habitual and less of an effort. Teachers reported that the learning in the key skills classroom was greatly improved and that students had a deeper understanding of material after teaching. The main findings as detailed in the Interim Report on Key Skills can be summarised as follows:

- the five key skills are relevant to all subjects
- when key skills are the focus in planning for teaching, then teaching becomes more learner-centred
- teachers' success in embedding the key skills relates to their own understanding and practice of the key skills
- the successful embedding of key skills requires curriculum and assessment change
- according to teachers and students, key skills contribute to effective learning.

The second phase of work built on these findings and focused on four strands:

- developing learning activities
- introducing key skills across the whole school
- informing the review and development of senior cycle subjects
- sharing the learning.

The classroom dimension was still central to the work, where teachers continued to explore the embedding of key skills in teaching and learning and developing learning activities that could be shared on the ACTION <sup>1</sup>website. A toolkit was developed to support schools and teachers outside the network in the embedding of key skills. Work commenced on the rolling out of the initiative across the curriculum in the whole school within three schools. In tandem with this, the work was informing and impacting on curriculum and assessment change in the subjects being developed and reviewed in the review of senior cycle.

Throughout the initiative, teachers have built on their existing skills and developed new skills around curriculum development. They have shared their ideas and experiences with schools within the school network and their colleagues in other subject areas. This sharing of knowledge has been an integral part of the initiative and has taken many forms. Teachers have delivered professional development events to their staff, to subject departments, to national and international audiences. Their keen insights into key skills teaching and learning have informed the work of the NCCA course committees and education officers and work on junior cycle. Working with teachers, NCCA has developed a key skills toolkit for schools to use to embed key skills in teaching and learning. Schools can now access learning activities developed by teachers, presentations on key skills and videos of students and teachers talking about their experiences on [www.action.ncca.ie](http://www.action.ncca.ie). This is an on-going aspect of the initiative and will continue to be added to over the next year.

Section 2 of this report outlines the four strands of work in this phase of the initiative. Section 3 explores some of the learnings from the work on how change happens in the classroom. The final section maps out the next steps for the initiative. The Interim Report on Key Skills and the learning activities on ACTION also illustrate the work on key skills to date.

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<sup>1</sup>ACTION stands for **A**ssessment, **C**urriculum and **T**eaching **I**nnovation on the **N**et. This site is developed to support teachers in the ‘how to’ of teaching and learning through the use of multimedia.





## 2. Phase two of the key skills initiative

There were four strands to the work in this phase of the initiative; developing learning activities, introducing key skills across the whole school, informing the review and development of senior cycle subjects and sharing the learning. They emerged organically from the work with schools. They are not stand alone strands; they interlink and were worked on simultaneously. For clarity each is described separately below.

### 2.1 Developing learning activities

As stated earlier the Key Skills Framework was developed having taken into account the developments in this area across other jurisdictions and following engagement with experts in the area to inform the work. Teachers had confidence in the relevance of the five key skills to present and future learning. However, while there was clarity on the framework NCCA did not go to schools with clarity around the outcome of how these key skills would be embedded in senior cycle subjects. Rather, NCCA went to schools with a question on how to embed these skills in teaching and learning. Teachers were not given a recipe to try out in their class, they had to come up with the recipe, try it out, see if it worked and then report on what worked.

Twenty eight teachers worked on developing learning activities for sharing with other teachers through the ACTION website. Teachers began by sharing their learning with colleagues in their schools at staff meetings. This initially took the form of information giving sessions where the teachers presented to the staff on what the work entailed. Then teachers showed samples of their students' work and videos from the classroom to colleagues. This led to discussion at a seminar with teachers around how best to share the learning emerging from the work on key skills. Using a template developed for ACTION, the teachers set about developing learning activities to exemplify the work on key skills. Teachers worked individually and in teams on developing these activities. They trialled them with their students and gathered examples of student reflections and student work. Sample activities are available on [www.action.ncca.ie](http://www.action.ncca.ie).

Teachers needed to take an element of a key skill, read the learning outcomes associated with the element, plan how they would teach the class to achieve this

learning and then reflect after the class to see if students were able to do what the learning outcomes had set out. Teachers reported that they needed to drill down to the learning outcomes in the framework in order to get clarity around what developing the elements of the different skills meant in teaching and learning. The learning outcomes provided clarity for the teacher on what the student should be able to do while at the same time allowing for a variety of interpretations. For example, the learning outcome, *students should be able to check the reliability and credibility of sources, and critically analyse arguments and claims* associated with the element analysing and interpreting texts and other forms of communication, could find teachers in biology class doing a mini research project while a teacher in an English class could be having an academic controversy debate.

From teacher feedback, it is evident that the teachers in question did not reach an end point where they said 'I have done key skills now I am a key skills teacher', rather they saw key skills as building on their pedagogical knowledge and practice and enhancing and developing it.

*So it was very much a case of getting them (her colleagues) to see that the NCCA was not promoting that we revolutionise the way we teach, but instead, that each teacher absorb the skills at their own pace and in their own way. In fact, change is something that can't and shouldn't be instantaneous (teacher leader after a professional development event)*

Teachers involved in the initiative used video to triangulate what was happening in their classes alongside their reflections and their students' reflections. They spoke of the need to see exactly what was happening in the class, *I didn't realise how much I talked in class until I watched the video, I thought I had improved my questioning but after looking at the video I could see I still needed to work on giving wait time* (teacher comment at group seminar). They showed their videos to teachers at group seminars to stimulate discussion around the different teaching methodologies used. The value of the video evidence was clear to all involved in the initiative. Teachers spoke of the value of getting to see other teachers teach in situations they were familiar with *it was great to get a glimpse into a colleague's classroom and to see how the students were responding to the teaching* (comment from an evaluation sheet after a school professional development event). While the teacher-generated video material was sufficient for school and seminar use, a higher quality was needed for the web and

professional videos were developed for some activities. These are available to view on [www.action.ncca.ie](http://www.action.ncca.ie)

In response to the interest from schools and from other agencies in these learning activities and videos it was decided to produce a tool kit for implementing key skills that would be available for schools and professional development providers. Slide presentations and supporting materials were developed and are available on [www.action.ncca.ie](http://www.action.ncca.ie). It is envisaged that these will be added to over the next year with examples from all schools who have engaged with the material. The tool kit is not viewed as representing the only way to embed key skills. It is a showcase of possible learning activities which teachers should take and change and adapt to suit their circumstances. There is no one way to embed key skills; it involves a complex mix of different methodologies such as chalk and talk, questioning, cooperative learning, mind mapping, concept maps, assessment for learning and a whole lot more.

## 2.2 Introducing key skills across the whole school

Three schools have been involved in introducing key skills across the whole school to date. This strand of the initiative came about at the request of teachers and schools. Some teachers felt that it would be better to start embedding key skills in junior cycle, because when students came into senior cycle they had developed habits of learning that were difficult to change. Teachers felt that junior cycle students would be more open to this kind of learning. Other teachers in the schools, who were not involved in the initiative, were asking about key skills and the students began to ask their teachers about key skills.

*When a student asks her Geography teacher whether key skills would work in Geography because it is working in English...there is something significant happening. Students are talking about their learning in one subject and relating it to another and in doing so, seeking and implementing change in our school. Is this not personal effectiveness at its very best? (English teacher).*

In cooperation with NCCA the schools organised whole staff professional development events. Teachers involved in the initiative led these events with their colleagues, sharing their experience of embedding key skills. Typically, they had met and planned the session prior to the day and developed their presentations as a team. They each took a key skill and gave an overview of methodologies they had tried with their

classes, using student reflections to add richness to the presentations. Some of the topics covered were;

- cooperative learning, including peer teaching and learning
- changing the way we assess
- questioning
- using different learning approaches to develop key skills including graphic organisers
- involving students in reflecting on learning.

Each of the teachers then facilitated a session with their colleagues in broad subject groupings, expanded on the ideas presented in the session and worked on developing concrete examples that each teacher could try in their classes. This was typical feedback from the sessions

*It is great to hear that all the teachers involved genuinely feel that they have improved the 'learning capacity' of their students via key skills. The fact that the input was from our teachers was great, it was absolutely excellent to hear new and invigorating approaches to teaching and learning and to get practical examples from the classrooms of our colleagues.*

Teachers committed on the day to meet with a colleague periodically to discuss how their embedding of the key skills was progressing. These meetings happened in the teachers' own time and varied from once a week to once a month. In two of the schools the larger subject groups formed on the first day of professional development were allocated time by management to meet and discuss key skills teaching and learning for one class, five times over the year. There was good engagement at these 'buddy meetings' where teachers shared ideas, shared what they had tried out and what had worked, and discussed what needed more work. Teachers brought along their reflections and their students' reflections on learning. They discussed challenges they faced in embedding key skills and shared the successes they had experienced. Teachers began to see the relevance of Assessment for Learning (AfL), cooperative learning, use of graphic organisers and so on, and it led to the school seeking training in these areas or revisiting work they had already done. In some cases, the expertise needed was already in the group. For example, in one of the schools a group of teachers had attended training on cooperative learning and worked with their

colleagues on using this methodology to embed key skills. In other cases, NCCA provided the support needed.

As Elmore advises us *improvement seldom, if ever, occurs on a straight trajectory; it typically involves bumps and slides, as well as gratifying leaps* (Elmore, 2000, 13). A strength of the key skills initiative was its agility. The framework provided a lens that teachers could use in planning for their teaching. Through professional development workshops, teachers were given a range of pedagogical ideas and methodologies which they could adapt and use to suit their own subject and students. The value of using the framework as a way to mediate the curriculum became evident at a whole school level when teachers of materials technology wood could use the framework and discuss it with the language teacher.

### 2.3 Informing the review and development of senior cycle subjects

This initiative set out to explore how key skills can be embedded within the curriculum, both in the written curriculum and the curriculum experienced by the students in the classroom. The focus was to explore what needs to happen to the curriculum and in the classroom to ensure that students encounter the key skills in a meaningful way.

A significant element of the review and development of syllabuses at senior cycle is the embedding of key skills in the learning outcomes. It is envisaged that the key skills should be clearly integrated in the curriculum and that they will be visible in the syllabus through a statement of key skills and in the learning outcomes. They should also be visible in assessment, both in the assessment for learning that takes place throughout the course and in the summative assessment components used in examinations. The draft syllabus for Politics and Society (available at [www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle](http://www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle)) is a good example of how key skills are written into new and revised syllabuses.

NCCA education officers supporting committees working on the review and development of syllabuses carried out key skills audits of the syllabuses. For example, in the science subjects this audit resulted in the observation that while the learning outcomes had information processing very well represented, the other four skills were less well represented. In consultation with the Biology teachers involved in the initiative,

it came to light that they used poster presentations as a way to embed key skills in teaching and learning. The draft syllabuses for Biology, Chemistry and Physics now have poster presentations written into their learning outcomes. Students will undertake two poster presentations over two years, present their findings and defend them. In this way the evaluation and synthesis of ideas is promoted in the teaching and learning. In addition, the learning outcomes were redrafted to support the embedding of key skills in a variety of ways.

Before the syllabuses will be available for consultation, a further key skills audit will be carried out. In addition, as part of the consultation on the syllabuses, learning activities are being developed to show how the content can be taught so as to support the engagement with the methodologies suggested to embed the key skills in a meaningful way in teaching and learning. For examples of learning activities developed in Politics and Society, go to [www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle](http://www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle) .

Through the vehicle of learning outcomes, the work taking place in schools on key skills has directly informed, as in the case of science, the work taking place through NCCA committees on syllabus development and review.

## 2.4 Sharing the learning

Sharing the learning was very evident in all strands of the work. Teachers developed learning activities and shared their ideas with their colleagues, with other schools, and with the wider public on ACTION. In addition, students, teachers and management took the time to reflect on their learning, to talk on video about their learning, to put on paper and film what they thought good learning looked like and allow this to be shared. There is little doubt that this degree of openness to sharing is a good indication of the level of ownership the students, teachers and management experienced in the key skills work. It showed a confidence in their work, a confidence that this work could impact on the wider system.

In addition, teachers spoke about key skills at international and national conferences. This interest in the initiative was very motivating for the group of teachers involved. This, coupled with the work with education officers working on the syllabuses, helped

them to realise that the key skills initiative was not 'just another initiative' and that they had the potential to have an impact on developments in a very real way.

Interest from the wider education system was evident in the number of requests for key skills workshops at conferences. Department of Education and Science inspectors, Association of Community and Comprehensive School Principals, Second Level Support Service personnel, the Irish Vocational Education Association and third level initial teacher education providers are just some of the groups and organisations who have participated in key skills workshops. This aspect of the work is important as all these bodies have a key role to play in the scaling up of the initiative.

In recent times, the key skills work in Ireland has attracted European attention and it is being considered as a case study in reporting on the response of school systems to the Lisbon agenda.

## 3. The process of change

The learnings from the key skills initiative on how change happens in the classroom are outlined in this section. Student, teacher and management reflections are used to illustrate the findings. These reflections come from reflection sheets, workshops and conversations with key participants (see appendix 1 for reflection sheets used by teachers and students). The principles outlined in the discussion document *Leading and Supporting Change in Schools* (NCCA, 2009) resonate strongly with the reflections in this section.

### 3.1 The need for time to achieve change

The appreciation that change is already happening in schools and that any initiative in schools needs to be fluid and take cognisance of this was central to the planning for this initiative. Some of these schools had been involved in various initiatives over the years, including TL21, Assessment for Learning, and cooperative learning training. Some were involved in the work with the NCCA on developing Transition Units and on Flexible Learning Profiles. In some cases, teachers were implementing changes to their syllabuses: the science teachers were working with the revised Junior Science syllabus and a Biology syllabus that was revised in 2001. Yet despite the rhetoric of 'an era of unprecedented change' in curriculum, all reported that they were pretty much teaching as they had always taught, albeit they reported they were working harder than ever. Some teachers argued that there has been a lot of change but with little improvement in student learning. *Students still want to be spoon fed the information* (biology teacher).

Why all the extra work when little else had changed? They put this down to the change in the expectations of the students and the demand for more and more notes. They talked about working on auto pilot with little time to reflect on their practice, and about the need to challenge the mindset of students around change. Teachers reported that the students wanted them to do all the critical and creative thinking for them

*As a teacher of English, I found they (the students) struggled at the creative aspect of the subject. Not only did they not want the hassle of having to think, but even when they tried to think they didn't have the perseverance to stick at it: I just can't do it miss – and so I responded by giving them notes, but they*



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*became a kind of security or quick fix for both of us (English teacher speaking at a conference).*

The same teacher went on to describe herself as the model student!

*I sourced the information, I decided what was relevant, I presented it, and so the only person skilled in my class was me, well not quite...because when it came to the working with others skill, the words compromise, negotiation and team approach were absent, I was not working 'with' my students I was working 'for' my students. No wonder they were lethargic... (teacher presentation to staff).*

Teachers also reported the lack of time given to some changes, where they felt they were trying things out and not getting time to reflect on whether they worked before a new 'change initiative' was coming down the line at them. All reported that they needed time to have many cycles of action and reflection before the change became embedded in their practice. This was a strength of this initiative where teachers got to work together and with the research team over three years. The embedding of key skills into teaching and learning requires change at many different levels; the teacher's planning, the teacher's mediation of the curriculum, the student engagement with the curriculum, the teacher's relationship with his/her colleagues, the nature of leadership to name just a few.

In the schools where teachers were supported to meet and discuss teaching and learning with their colleagues, the engagement with the initiative was greater. Teacher leaders reported that their colleagues were more inclined to give up personal time to visit a colleague's class if they knew they would get time allocated periodically to meet with the larger group. In two of the three schools working on the introduction of key skills across the whole school, time was allocated for 'buddy meetings' and it proved to be very successful. In one school, no time was allocated and the school leaders reported that the initiative lost momentum.

### 3.2 Leadership and support

Distributed leadership, where the leadership in a given aspect of change comes from multiple sources and where change comes about through the relational activity that follows, has particular potential for schools (NCCA, 2009). There are many definitions

of distributed leadership and the concept has a variety of meanings<sup>2</sup>. Spillane describes distributed leadership as a system of practice that takes place in the interactions of leaders, followers and their situation is most apt when discussing the key skills initiative. Aspects of the situation can either enable or constrain practice, while practice can transform the situation. He goes on to say that

*Leadership involves mortals as well as heroes. It involves the many not just the few. It is about leadership practice, not simple roles and positions. And leadership practice is about interactions, not just the actions of heroes (Spillane, 2006, p4).*

In this initiative management, teachers, students and NCCA all took on various leadership roles. The followers were other teachers, other students, other schools, NCCA education officers and international interests to name a few. The situation was different schools, different classrooms, different subject areas and different students. The interaction between the three was crucial to the success or failure of the initiative in schools. Students showed their ability to lead and to effect change by influencing other teachers to try out new things.

Teachers became leaders in their schools; they developed and led professional development seminars in three of the schools. This had a big impact in the schools as for some it was the first time they had heard their colleagues talk about teaching. The teachers showed videos of their classroom where other teachers could see key skills in action. The message was coming from people they trusted within their context, not from outside or from the top down. This also had the effect of increasing teacher confidence in what they were doing: while to some they seemed like heroes for their openness, the teachers saw themselves as mere mortals, they were just telling it as it was. *It was the emphasis on very small, subtle changes that gave my colleagues the confidence to dabble (teacher leader).*

Some teachers' comments serve to illustrate the power of colleagues sharing practice.

*I found today's seminar really useful and enlightening, finding out what really worked for colleagues, found the video really interesting for student perspective*

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<sup>2</sup> For a review of literature in distributed leadership, see the NCSL report on Distributed Leadership, 2003 available to download from <http://forms.ncsl.org.uk/mediastore/image2/bennett-distributed-leadership-full.pdf>

*also<sup>3</sup>. I liked how today the emphasis was on learning not teaching, today gave a more authentic and legitimate approach to teaching and learning in our school. Today provoked reflection. Many points raised were resonant of one's own experience. Hearing colleagues made it real. Would like to put some into practice and then reflect with a colleague. Found today practical and stimulating. Excited by input. (evaluation sheets after a professional development event).*

The 'buddy meetings' certainly helped maintain the momentum of the work and were an essential ingredient in the success of a whole school approach. Teachers were paired up with colleagues and encouraged to meet and discuss their ideas around embedding the key skills. In some cases, the buddy meetings led to teachers visiting each others' classes.

### 3.3 Investing in and incentivising change

Investment in change in this initiative was in three areas - financial support, curriculum support and teacher support in the development of pedagogical skills. The schools involved in this initiative received a grant of €2,500 from NCCA. This money was to be used to support teachers in their work on key skills. Incentivisation alone will not ensure teachers engage in the change process. However, it is a tangible way to demonstrate to teachers that their work is valued. Schools were given the control over how the money was spent, therefore in many cases the teachers could get resources they needed in their classrooms when they needed them. For example, one teacher used peer teaching and games for learning in her class; her immediate need was for flip charts, and because the school had the money from NCCA, she could get these.

Some schools used the money to provide working lunches for teachers when they met to discuss teaching and learning, some used it to purchase learning materials such as flip charts, data projectors, laptops for subject departments, software programmes, additional training for teachers and so on. Some teachers got a small gratuity at the end of the year in the form of a gift token for their involvement in the initiative. In all schools, the money was used to support teaching and learning, but the approach to how it was used differed from school to school.

*We are supposed to be instructional leaders, yet, we are not given any budget to work with to promote teaching and learning in the school. It is all about being able to siphon off money for this and that; we should be trusted to use money to promote learning. It was great to get the money from NCCA and to be trusted to*

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<sup>3</sup> An English teacher showed two un-edited clips from her classroom on information processing

*spend it on teaching and learning but even more is needed if we are serious about teachers working together and reflecting on their teaching. Time is a scarce commodity in schools (school Principal).*

This quote suggests the need to acknowledge the school as the site of change and the need to give more autonomy to schools to manage change at the local level.

However, investment in the initiative should not be seen only in terms of incentivisation, much more powerful in this initiative was the investment of time, given by both NCCA and the teachers involved, teachers gave of their time to fill in reflection sheets, to meet with colleagues, to mentor new teachers and so on. NCCA provided curriculum support material. See [www.action.ncca.ie](http://www.action.ncca.ie) for examples of some of these materials. In addition, NCCA provided a forum<sup>4</sup> for teachers to meet and discuss teaching and learning. At these seminars, teachers had inputs on teaching methodologies, current research and got an opportunity to get feedback from the group on their work.

### 3.4 Motivation to change

Teachers reported that they looked at things differently; they got a new energy into their work. *It re-energised my teaching and my classroom. Students are more interested and taking more responsibility (English teacher).*

It is difficult to conclude if it is external incentives, rewards or pressure that motivates teachers to try something out or if it is something personal that motivates them. It is likely that it is a mix of both. In some cases the teachers in the whole school work went along with the process because it was part of the staff development and would be discussed at planning meetings, they did not buy into the vision of the initiative, in other cases teachers wanted to get involved as they wanted to improve the learning in their subject. For some the motivation was a chance to work with the NCCA and what this would do for them professionally in addition to the potential to raise the profile of the school. For some it was a very personal journey, *you can teach an old dog new tricks (Irish teacher).* Some teachers took the opportunity to look at their subject and their teaching in a new light, and to open up their practice for the first time to scrutiny from the outside.

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<sup>4</sup> NCCA provided substitution and travel and subsistence to facilitate teachers attendance at seminars

Schools volunteered to undertake a whole school approach to key skills. However, not all teachers were equally enthusiastic about key skills, so there was a good mix of dispositions from the outset – from the sceptics, the totally disinterested to the enthusiastic ones open to try something new. Genuine change and discussions around change needs disparate points of view: it is good to have some teachers question the practice and ask *does this really work? Is it worth all the time it takes for planning? How will I know my students have all the key points if I don't give notes?*

However, sustaining yourself in an initiative of this kind that required a lot of extra work on the part of the teacher, needed more than this. When asked most teachers said they kept with the initiative because it was working, they were enjoying their teaching more, the students were more engaged and the learning was better. *They (key skills) might be more work initially but students do get more involved and learn more* (art teacher). *Students are much more involved and enjoy the process more* (science teacher). *No disadvantages worth talking about (using key skills) bit of extra work but worth it, far better way to teach* (engineering teacher). Teachers reported that the learning in the key skills classroom was greatly improved and that students had a deeper understanding of material after teaching. *I found that learning is definitely more effective if you implement these skills and testing students has verified this. New methodologies are leading to better learning* (maths teacher).

Teachers were surprised by how articulate their students were in class, how they could express their opinions.

*I used to put the points for an essay on the board first, and then I'd take a few more from the class - the usual people contributed and the rest sat back. Two years ago, an essay appeared on the LC English paper 'The modern shopping centre'. I gave it to leaving certs recently and used a pair brainstorming technique. It emerged that their ideas of a modern shopping centre are far different and more up-to-date than mine. This is very useful as the exam paper centres on the student's personal engagement with life. There is no point in me standing at the top of the classroom telling them what their personal experiences are! In their reflections they are all saying they enjoy English more and love being able to give their opinion* (English teacher talking to her colleagues at a staff seminar).

Teachers were getting affirmation from their students in their reflections, students were enjoying learning, and students were letting them know that it was working. *But the*

*best part is that teachers are being affirmed in a way that they have never been. If you think about it, when was the last time you were told that you're doing a great job, that your way of teaching the play/ teaching algebra is so good that other teachers want to attempt to do it your way, that you're a model of good practice (teacher leader).*

The pursuit of quality is a key motivational force for the professional teacher – often quality is viewed narrowly in the context of preparation of students for successful examination. In the case of the key skills initiative, it extended to the quality of teaching and learning and learning progress. Teachers are uneasy with themselves when they think what they're doing lacks quality or could be done better. As teachers developed their own skills of working with their colleagues and reflecting on their practice and of using a variety of sources of information to plan for teaching, they observed that the embedding of the key skills in their teaching became more habitual and less of an effort. In fact one teacher described it as a moral duty. *I can't go back to handing out notes; morally I feel I am not doing them (students) justice. This key skills way of thinking has become second nature to me (biology teacher).* When teachers did try something different in the interest of improving quality it was recognised by the students to the extent that they suggested the same is done in other classes and other subjects. This all served to affirm the teachers and to motivate them to continue implementing change in their classrooms.

### 3.5 Teachers as key agents of change

*On that day, we achieved what the NCCA couldn't, no matter how much they wanted to: we convinced them (our colleagues). We were their teachers from their school with just our stories. Students they could put a face to and so our success stories meant all the more. The NCCA can talk about increased student engagement, but until it relates to 'quiet Mary' from 5C who's now beginning to find her voice in English class, it means nothing. Our students weren't even in the room that day, yet they were convincing our teachers that this was something worthy of further investigation (teacher leader).*

Realising deep educational change can only happen through teachers and school management and their interactions and relationships with the learner. Throughout the initiative it was the teachers who were the key agents of change and the key leaders for change in their schools. Teachers in this initiative were treated as curriculum developers and as professionals. As stated earlier, they were not given a product to try out; rather they used the key skills framework to mediate the curriculum. Teachers

came to accept that experimentation and occasional failure are expected and acceptable in the process of embedding the key skills. This was difficult for teachers to accept at first, especially as they were working with senior cycle students with a high-stakes examination in the offing. Teachers transformed their individual experiences into more generalisable conceptions via individual and collective reflection. They then developed learning activities to share with colleagues and the wider educational community via the ACTION website.

Teachers presented with different levels of expertise and skills. Some had very good classroom management skills around getting students actively involved in their learning; others needed tips on how to do this. Some teachers had parents calling the school asking what was going on in the class and whether the course was being covered. The importance of clear communication around change is crucial, communication between all parties involved. This was evident in the teachers who said they were under pressure to produce the best set of notes for the students, under pressure to say they had covered the course and under pressure to conform to the 'expected' norms of what is perceived to be good teaching.

Teachers demonstrated different levels of knowledge around active learning and how to manage it. Some had the misconception that key skills was all about active learning as illustrated by the teacher who said she taught using key skills for two classes in the week and then taught the 'normal' way for the other three. When probed on this the teacher expressed a commitment to key skills and to changing her practice. However, she had a misconception as to what the key skills meant, assuming it was only about active learning and group work. As the year progressed, her understanding deepened and the embedding of key skills permeated all classes and areas of the curriculum.

Teachers identify three aspects to change, the personal, the interpersonal and the organisational. The implications of this are that any change at school level needs to involve the professional development of the individual and the creation of spaces for teachers to meet and discuss teaching. But it must also involve looking at the culture and organisation of schools. It was evident that schools were successful to varying degrees at creating their own cultures for learning. Management in the schools spoke of the need for professional development not to be seen as something teachers go out

to do; rather that it be an integral part of the day-to-day practice. To this end, professional development needs to be part of a process rather than a once-off event. Again, this is closely linked to what the school values as good teaching. The noisy classroom might be where the best learning is taking place.

### 3.6 Implications for professional development

*To start small, maybe a little pair work. Plan carefully—particularly for group work. They might be surprised where it takes them. Definitely give it a go. Makes teaching more fun and students enjoy learning. Get stuck in* (comments from evaluation sheets when asked what advice teachers would give a colleague starting out using key skills).

There is a considerable amount of literature on professional development, teacher learning and teacher change.<sup>5</sup> A point that emerges from the literature is that changing practice is a very complex process. As is evident from this initiative there are no context-free generalisations that can or should be made about the embedding of key skills. What this report, the interim report that preceded it, and the tool kit of learning activities show is what is possible in teaching and learning when the key skills framework is used as a planning tool in certain contexts and following certain procedures.

This initiative brought teachers from different disciplines together and was focused on how to relate skills through interesting and effective teaching and learning to the content of their subjects. The group workshops afforded teachers an opportunity to make sense of the changes needed, to develop their skills around pedagogy and encouraged cross-fertilisation of ideas across different disciplines. Teachers responded positively to this new configuration of professional development: *I now see how I've developed patterns and habits of teaching over the years. We all do that and we assume they work! It's great to get a chance to share new ideas and learn from other teachers from other subject areas* (workshop reflection).

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<sup>5</sup> See Villegas-Reimers, E. (2003) *Teacher professional development: an international review of literature*. UNESCO. Available at :

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001330/133010e.pdf> [Accessed July 2009]

See also DiCerbo, K. Duran, T. (2006) *How can professional development impact teacher practice and student achievement? : A literature review*. Cisco Learning Institute. Available at : [http://www.ciscolearning.org/files/evaluation\\_resources/PD\\_litreview.pdf](http://www.ciscolearning.org/files/evaluation_resources/PD_litreview.pdf) [Accessed July 2009]



Teachers need to be given opportunities to make sense of the change involved. This entails allowing the time for teachers to have a number of opportunities to interact with the new ideas through active learning processes such as discussion, dialogue with colleagues, opportunities to watch other teachers teach either on video or in person, opportunities to give and receive feedback and so on. All this is time consuming and requires commitment to a long process. Typically teachers at the group seminars with NCCA had ample opportunities to share practice, to dialogue and discuss things they tried, to make sense of the change required. In addition teachers needed to be given time to actively engage with the ideas when they went back to their schools and to engage with the new knowledge. To facilitate this, tasks were assigned at the end of each session. The development of learning activities for ACTION also afforded the teachers an opportunity to demonstrate their deepened understanding of what was needed for the embedding of key skills.

For teachers to embed key skills in their teaching and learning they need opportunities to develop their own skills in these areas. Teachers reported that they had little time in their day-to-day practice for reading research, meeting with colleagues or to critically engage with new thinking around teaching and learning. The group seminars afforded the teachers an opportunity to develop their skills around pedagogy as they were not subject based and encouraged cross fertilisation of ideas from different disciplines.

Teachers need to be able to see each other teach, they need the support of learning materials, the support of colleagues who are willing to share the good with the bad and to be constructively critical. There needs to be a balance between outside support and support from inside the school. While working with colleagues is important it is equally important that teachers get to meet up with other teachers from other schools and have an opportunity to discuss teaching and learning. This outside support can include reminders and feedback, emails, text messages, just enough that they promote action, a cue to work. When asked at the end of the year about what supports teachers would like to encourage the use of key skills the answers varied from, *reminding* (art teacher), *constant reminders of the skills methods are essential* (home economics teacher), *meetings every few weeks to discuss approaches used with my colleagues* (religion teacher), *more time for planning and preparing resources* (maths teacher).

The key skills tool kit is available for schools to use as a support to run their own professional development events with their staff. Alternatively a teacher interested in looking at their practice may decide to use the reflection sheets available on ACTION and try out some of the ideas in the learning activities. It remains to be seen how successful this is without the support of outside personnel going into the schools. It will require schools investing in leaders from among their staff to lead and manage the process.

## 4. Next steps

The emphasis of the work for the coming year is on the development of additional resources for the tool kit on ACTION. This will involve working with teachers on the development of learning activities in additional subject areas. It is also planned to gather further video evidence from classrooms. In addition, there will be four schools implementing key skills across the curriculum. These schools will be using the tool kit and evaluating its effectiveness. The tool kit will be added to and developed in light of this experience.

In an interesting development, one school has moved key skills to junior cycle and has decided to work in particular with its first year students. Each class will be assigned a tutor who also teaches the class a subject. Each tutor will be a 'buddy' to all the teachers working with that class, they will provide information on their students with the help of the year head, all information will be learning focused, teachers will be able to come to the leader to bounce ideas, share reflections and so on. The focus will be on the student and how they learn; each student will have a learning journal where they can build up examples of their learning in the five key skills.

The focus of the initiative discussed in this report was to explore what needs to happen to curriculum in the classroom in order to ensure that students encounter key skills in a meaningful way. The initiative has promoted and encouraged active sharing of ideas for teaching and learning among teachers. It has stimulated innovative approaches by teachers in their teaching and as a consequence, it has promoted more engaged forms of learning among students. It has facilitated students in becoming more effective, reflective and autonomous in their learning. It has affirmed the value of a key skills approach to teaching and identified practical ideas and methodologies that enable the key skills to be embedded within the curriculum. These learning activities are available to all teachers as examples of key skills translated into everyday practice by teachers in a context that they can identify with. This will provide support for schools wanting to implement change in classroom practice using key skills as a lens for planning for change. Key skills as a lever for change in practice have been evidenced throughout the reflections of teachers and students.

At a national level, findings from the initiative have informed syllabus review and development in senior cycle. While the focus of the initiative has been on the embedding of the key skills in the curriculum as experienced in the classroom, it is also acknowledged that the reflective practice approach used and the professional development provided were factors in the benefits derived from the work. This will form an important part of the learning from the initiative and will inform advice on continuing professional development for teachers and on design and structure of national curricula.

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## Appendix 1

### Teacher and student reflection sheets

#### Teacher Reflection sheet

Class:

Topic:

Date:

Teaching approach tried:

1. Give a brief description of the task you set for the students
2. What was the impact on the students? How did they respond?
3. What key skills were evident?
4. How might you improve this approach or do it differently again?

## Student reflection sheet

Class:

Topic:

Date:

Give a brief description of how you participated in class today

The main thing I learned is...

I liked/didn't like this way of learning because.....