

DVD for parents

The What, Why and How of Children's Learning in Primary School

page 8



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this issue / School Reports /
Curriculum Online / Developing
Learning / Linking with Schools /
Assessment for Learning / Education
in the USA **and much more...**

NCCA 

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

welcome...

...to the third issue of info@ncca, the final one of the school year. While we have had feedback and comments on many of the articles and updates in previous issues, the piece about the NCCA's work on guidelines for those working with exceptionally able students generated more responses than anything else so far. It's clear that this is a hot topic for teachers and principals in primary and post-primary schools. You can follow the work on www.ncca.ie and your ongoing feedback and suggestions will be most welcome.

The work on developing a national report card template is part of the bigger project of supporting schools in reporting to parents. The feature on parent-teacher meetings was requested by a number of principals, parents and teachers who were interested in hearing about schools that have moved to teacher-student-parent meetings, and how this new format has worked for them.

Those working in Irish-medium primary schools will be interested in the update on the work on language and literacy. Along with the international review of research into good practice, we have also been developing descriptions of practice in a number of Irish-medium primary schools, including Gaeltacht schools. The different approaches are outlined in the article; don't miss your chance to have your say in the development of guidelines on language and literacy in Irish-medium settings. Details of how to participate in the consultation are included.

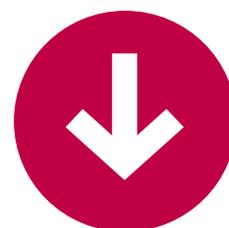
As examination time approaches, we thought it would be timely to remind those working in post-primary schools (and the many teachers who share examination anxieties as parents!) about the senior cycle reforms and the continuing work on transition units, short courses, and revised subjects. The senior cycle team have put together a summary of the main strands of work. If you want more details on a particular subject, or want to take a look at some of the emerging transition units – the website has a dedicated senior cycle space with all the latest developments.

Whether you are heading for the big finish at the end of May or the end of June, may I wish you a restful, enjoyable and well-earned summer break.

Anne Looney
CEO
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment



what's in this issue



| | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| Linking with schools | 4 |
| Curriculum Online | 7 |
| Finding common ground | 8 |
| → Profile: Anne Moloney | 10 |
| Early childhood education | 10 |
| Language and literacy | 11 |
| DVD for parents | 12 |
| Caught in the middle | 14 |
| School reports | 16 |
| Developing learning | 18 |
| Primary Curriculum review | 20 |
| → Profile: Sheila Nunan | 20 |
| Qualifications framework | 21 |
| Education in the USA | 22 |
| Finding Form | 24 |

Supporting teaching and learning...

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

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

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

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Linking with schools

From the 'big picture' to the 'real picture'



When developing advice on curriculum and assessment, the NCCA works as closely as possible with early childhood settings, school communities, teachers and practitioners. This happens in a variety of ways at different stages of each project.

Working with schools and school communities, including teachers, management, parents and students, is very important to us because it helps to ground our projects in real classroom situations and contexts. It helps us to get a real sense of what schools need in the area of curriculum and assessment – what works and what doesn't. It also keeps us in touch with the 'real world' where curriculum is being implemented – lets us know what is happening on the ground, as it were. In doing so, we try to ensure that we work with a wide variety of school types and sizes, as well as early childhood settings.

This work greatly influences the development of our advice to the Minister for Education and Science. For example, when we carried out our review of Senior Cycle Education in 2004 we included 'live' consultations with eight schools where we had extensive discussions with teachers, management, parents and students around the proposals that were being developed. These discussions influenced the advice that we forwarded to the Minister in April 2005.

The list of 2006 projects shown on these pages provides some idea of the range of ways in which our links with

schools and teachers happen and the areas of work that are involved. Detailed descriptions of three initiatives, the early childhood portraiture study, using ICT with CSPE and the senior cycle school network project, further illustrate the productive nature of this type of work.

School work 2006

Early Childhood and Primary education

NCCA work: The production of a DVD for parents

School work:

Teachers, parents, principals and children all contributed to this project. Discussion groups of parents advised on what they needed to know and how best to present it. The filming was done in schools with real characters – not an actor in sight! For further information, see article on page 12.

NCCA work: Developing guidelines on language and literacy in Irish-medium schools

School work:

Interviews with children, parents, teachers and school management gave us great insight into how schools currently plan their approaches in the infant classes in particular and we are using these descriptions of practice in a wider consultation. Read the article on page 11 for more details of this initiative.

Early childhood portraiture study

The NCCA is working with a number of early childhood settings including infant classes to gather information for the *Framework for Early Learning*. This work is taking place in the form of a portraiture study, which involves recording and interpreting the perspectives and experiences of participants in particular settings.

The purpose of this portraiture study is to:

- represent the voices and experiences of children from 0-6 years
- develop exemplars of good practice across the early childhood sector which will be included in the framework.

Through observing and listening to children, talking with them and sharing in their activities and experiences in different settings, the NCCA is gaining a greater understanding of what life is like for them in a range of settings for early learning.

The children's parents and practitioners also have much information to contribute to the portraits, and their perspectives are being documented in interviews. All of this information will help us to ensure that the framework is meaningful and relevant to children and adults in early childhood settings including infant classes.

The completed portraits, along with an outline of the portraiture study and its key messages for the *Framework for Early Learning*, will be available to download from the NCCA website in the autumn.

NCCA work: Piloting with modern languages in primary schools

School work:

A number of primary schools are piloting the use of content language integrated learning (CLIL) in the primary school curriculum. This means that they teach other subjects wholly, or partly through the target language (music through Italian for example). Others are focused on language awareness. These schools will help us in developing advice on the future role of modern languages in primary schools.

NCCA work: Developing report card templates

Schools work:

Schools and teachers are working with the NCCA advising on the most user-friendly approaches to reporting, and trying out the prototypes in development before they are circulated more widely. This school work will be vital in ensuring that we capture the good practice that schools have already developed. For further information on this project, turn to page 16.

NCCA work: Developing an ICT framework for schools

School work:

As with the report card templates, schools are also road testing the ICT framework to ensure that it translates well from the paper or the screen to the classroom. Teachers using the framework are also providing exemplars from their own classrooms so that other teachers can see the framework in action.

Post Primary education

NCCA work: Assessment for Learning

School work:

Groups of teachers from networks of schools who have been using *Assessment for Learning* approaches in their classrooms have gathered examples of student work across eight subject areas at junior cycle. These examples, which can be found at www.ncca.ie, are being used to support teacher assessment and reporting in junior cycle.

In doing so, we try to ensure that we work with a wide variety of school types and sizes, as well as early childhood settings.



Moving from RAP to eRAP

The Civic Social and Personal Education (CSPE) Action Project provides students with an opportunity to identify an issue of interest or concern to them and to engage in meaningful action on that issue. Students then report on the learning and skills gained through this process and in the majority of cases write up their reports using the *Report on the Action Project* booklet (RAP).

This year a number of teachers have agreed to explore how ICT can help their students, both in doing their Action Projects and in reporting on them. We hope that ICT will offer opportunities to capture more of the 'action', and will also interest and encourage students who would

appreciate an alternative to 'pen and paper'. In each participating school the CSPE students are using digital video cameras to record all the activities in their Action Projects and this footage will be used to produce audio-visual Action Project reports.

So far, the response from students has been very positive, with wide agreement that it is 'more fun', 'more interesting' and 'more motivating' than writing up reports

The outcome of this project will inform future developments in the assessment of CSPE and will be of relevance to other subjects that have a similar second assessment component.

NCCA work: Assessment in physical education

School work:

PE teachers are using *Assessment for Learning* (AfL) approaches in their teaching and seeing how they can support the development of the PE portfolio. Students are also participating in this project offering their views on the process.

This work greatly influences the development of our advice to the Minister for Education and Science.

Senior cycle school network

As part of the review of senior cycle education, 20 schools have formed a school network to develop some of the key areas of work. These schools are working with the NCCA to investigate the practical implications of the developments as they move forward, such as the implications for curriculum planning, teacher development, resources and timetabling. Through their involvement in the network, teachers are writing a series of Transition Units developed to a common template.

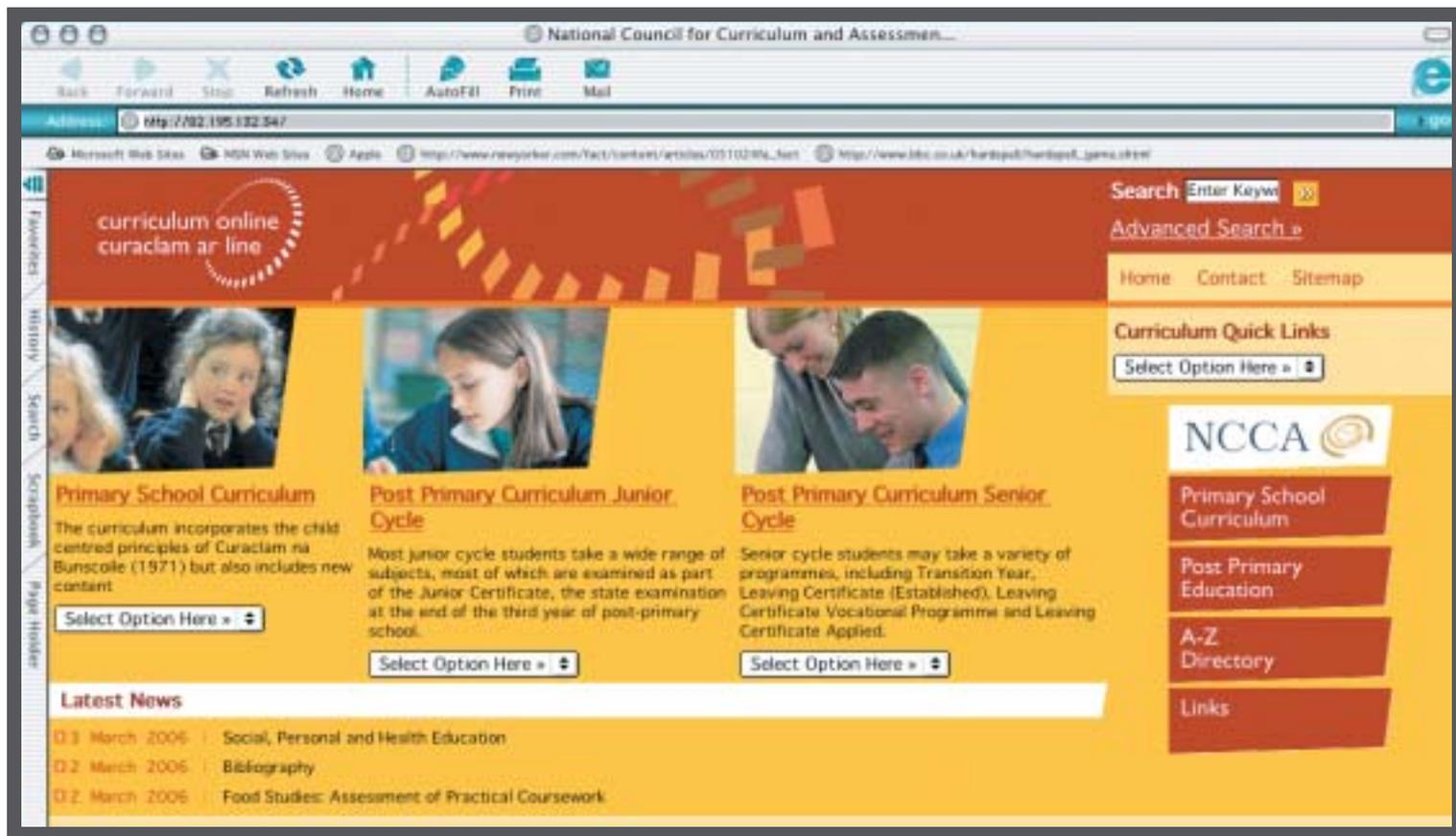
Some of the network schools are investigating how more flexible programmes of study might be developed for some senior cycle students and how they might work. Others are involved in developing learning management materials or looking at how a key skills approach to teaching and learning could be used within specific subject areas.

Schools that are interested in getting involved in future consultations or development initiatives should contact us at: newsletter@ncca.ie.

We owe a considerable debt of gratitude to the many school principals, teachers, practitioners, parents, children and young people, who give so generously of their time and expertise in support of the work of curriculum development in NCCA. If you would like further information on any of the initiatives mentioned, please contact us at: newsletter@ncca.ie.



Curriculum Online



At last! A dedicated curriculum website that houses all primary and post-primary curriculum and syllabus documents at the one, user-friendly, address: www.curriculumonline.ie. While the NCCA corporate website has been acting as a temporary home to curriculum documents and guidelines and a gateway to syllabus documents (housed on the DES site), the web team has been busy constructing a new home to accommodate all.

The 'home' page of Curriculum Online invites the user to choose access to either primary, junior cycle or senior cycle sections. The primary option brings you to the Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum, curriculum documents for each subject and teacher guidelines for each subject. The junior and senior cycle options bring you to syllabuses and guidelines for each subject.

Curriculum Online has been designed with teachers in mind, but should prove useful to students, parents and anyone interested in the Irish education system. For primary school teachers the planning of an integrated

programme of work across different curriculum subjects is facilitated by the search options. The development of themes and topics of work, thus, will be both easier and less time-consuming.

Post primary teachers will also enjoy searching topics across subjects and, even, between primary, junior cycle and senior cycle. The mathematics teacher of first years, for example, is only a click away from knowing what his or her students were taught in 6th class and therefore well positioned to address their learning needs.

As the Curriculum Online site develops we will continue to improve the search facility in line with the requirements of teachers. So, we would appreciate your input. Feel free to use the feedback form (just click the 'contact' button) to provide suggestions for improvement or to communicate your experiences with the site.

And we're not finished yet! The Irish version of the corporate NCCA website is now online and a Curriculum in Action website is currently in the planning stages. **Info@ncca** will keep you posted about developments as they occur.



Finding common ground

The parent / teacher / student meeting

When, as part of the second phase of the NCCA initiative in Assessment for Learning (AfL), we asked teachers to tell us what was the most important consideration in reporting to students and parents they prioritised the following:

- Setting clear targets and showing progress
- Looking for the positive
- Reporting more fully and more frequently.

Not surprisingly, teachers agreed that parent/teacher meetings are more effective than term reports because the face-to-face contact allows them to convey messages that are not easily captured in written reports – such as ‘how the student participates in class’, and to offer ‘the kinds of comments that will help students to improve their work’. Some teachers commented on the potential contribution of parent-teacher meetings to a sense of shared endeavour between teacher and parent.

PTS meetings in practice

In the course of putting the feedback from teachers together we discovered that two of the AfL schools, Jesus and Mary Secondary School in Enniscrone, Co Sligo and Glanmire Community College in Cork, use parent/teacher/student meetings instead of the more conventional parent/teacher meetings. Naturally, we were keen to find out more.

Here’s what Sr Mary Kelly, Principal of Jesus and Mary Secondary School in Enniscrone, had to say: ‘We have had parent/teacher/student (PTS) meetings since January 2002. The impetus for the change came from staff discussions during our school development planning sessions. We had been keen to see how we could involve parents more fully in the school community and in supporting their children’s learning and we were anxious to make parent/teacher meetings more effective.’

How frequently do they happen?

The Enniscrone school runs PTS meetings once a year for each year group, except for students in Leaving Certificate who have two meetings during this, their final year in school. In Glanmire Community College, which opened in 1997, they have always had PTS meetings for all students. Like Enniscrone, they have two meetings per year for

Leaving Certificate students and also for students in their Junior Certificate year. Importantly, both schools still offer parents the opportunity to have a one-to-one meeting with a teacher if and when the need arises.

Benefits for all

The benefits of the PTS system for teachers are many. Reporting on achievement is clearer, fuller, and more immediate.

“Yes, having the student present ensures that he or she is more accountable for their progress (or lack of it) but that’s not the main thing. More importantly, the teacher gets an opportunity to praise the student, to highlight the progress he or she has made, and in front of the parent, so there’s a positive reinforcement all round. There aren’t second-hand messages being relayed. It’s all in the open, there’s greater clarity all round.”

(Teacher, Glanmire.)

Teachers also say that the PTS meeting makes a positive impact on the in-class behaviour of students and on their attitude to work, their engagement and commitment. Sometimes a remark a teacher might make during the meeting will lead to a change in the learning behaviour of a student, for example, the student showing a greater willingness to ask or answer questions in class. *‘This gives you a better relationship with the students; they feel more secure in the class because the meeting leaves no grey areas. Everyone is straight up about what is happening!’* **(Teacher, Glanmire.)**

In the important matter of supporting their children’s learning, there are benefits for **parents**, too. Having the student present during the meeting ensures that both the parent and child see more clearly what the teaching and learning issues are. *‘If, as a parent, you learn from the meeting that there are issues like homework or behaviour then you can address those and not be distracted by other things that might not be so important. You can be sure about the things you need to address, where you need to give more support and so on.’* **(Parent, Glanmire.)** This feeling of being more sure about the key issues is of real value to the parents.



In the important matter of supporting their children's learning, there are benefits for **parents**, too.

Something that might not occur to us immediately, but is a big plus for parents, is the fact that the PTS meeting lessens the anonymity of meeting teachers. *'You don't find yourself in a big hall or on a corridor wondering which teacher is which. Your child is with you and you feel somehow more at home or at ease in the school because of that.'*

(Parent, Glanmire.)

The experience has been similarly positive for parents of the students in Enniscrone; in fact, there has been a 25% increase in participation by parents since the school changed to this system.

Equally, there is considerable value for **students**. The meetings afford them the opportunity to check on their progress in subjects in a one-to-one setting. As one of the students in Glanmire puts it: *'Sometimes in class the teacher gives general guidelines about what is important but in the meeting she is able to focus on your own strengths and on where you need to concentrate so as to improve. Just for yourself.'* This experience of personal attention and work review is valued highly by the students who feel that it provides them with a good opportunity to ask the right questions. Being present at the PTS meeting means that they get 'the full message' there and then, without its having to be relayed by their parents. They feel that this makes discussions about schoolwork at home much more meaningful. The students are also aware of getting more out of the meetings as they get older and more confident, more aware of their progress and of their needs.

Reviewing progress

As mentioned earlier, both the Enniscrone and Glanmire schools have two meetings per year for students in their Leaving Certificate year. The focus of the first meeting is to set out targets for the coming year and the second meeting reviews the student's progress in the light of those targets. This is especially important if issues like study habits, organisation of work, what level an exam might be taken at, and so on, are raised in the first meeting.

Parents agree that the only disadvantage of this system is that a student who is not working to his or her potential is more likely to be confronted by the fact and yet, as one parent from Glanmire put it, 'that is not a disadvantage, really, because the discussion is more likely to bring about change and it should ensure that it is not happening on a continuous basis.'

Assessment for learning

From an assessment for learning point of view the system has obvious benefits.

- The focus of the meeting is on the student's progress in learning, not on generalised comments about ability or behaviour.
- It gives the teacher an opportunity to set, share, and review goals and targets for each student.
- It gives the student the opportunity to look for specific, focused feedback and direction from the teacher
- It means that the parents hear key messages about their son or daughter's progress (including those all-important words of praise and encouragement) without having to relay the messages later.

As a parent from Glanmire Community College says: 'It's easier to find the common ground if all parties are present together.'

We would like to thank Sr Mary Kelly, Principal of Jesus and Mary Secondary School, Enniscrone, Co Sligo, Mr John Fitzgibbons, Principal of Glanmire Community College, Riverstown, Co Cork, and the teachers, parents and students from Glanmire for sharing their experiences and insights with us.

If your school has PTS meetings we would be delighted to hear what your experience has been, or if you would like to comment on this article, please feel free to contact us at:

newsletter@ncca.ie



Early childhood education

2006 is another busy year for the NCCA Early Childhood Team. We have three tasks in the year ahead, based on the many suggestions and comments made by the early childhood sector, including infant teachers, during the consultation on the development of a *Framework for Early Learning* in 2004. These tasks are:

- developing the content of the *Framework for Early Learning*
- completing a portraiture study in settings including infant classes
- writing background papers.

A key part of the team's work at the moment involves presenting children's early learning and development through the Framework's themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, exploring and thinking) using aims, goals and learning experiences. Our portraiture work with children, teachers and parents in infant classes will help us to include lots of practical examples of how the aims and goals can be used by practitioners and teachers to support young children's learning and development.

The *Framework for Early Learning* will be completed by spring/summer 2007 after which it will be published and disseminated to early childhood settings, including infant classes.

More information on the *Framework for Early Learning* is available on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie. 



Profile: Anne Moloney
Education Officer,
ICT Primary

Learning has always been a large part of Anne Moloney's life. From her early years in Co. Clare through to her current position as education officer with

the NCCA, she has shown a deep interest in both the academic and the practical aspects of teaching and learning.

The craft of teaching was studied at Limerick's Mary Immaculate College, followed by a move to Dublin and 2 years at an inner city school followed by a 15 year stint at St Philip's primary school in Clonsilla. During this period she managed to fit in a Diploma in Educational Administration and an M.Ed from UCD, and a graduate Diploma in Business Studies and Information Technology from Dublin Business School.

An active interest in change and the curriculum prompted a move to join the PCSP following the launch of the new curriculum in 1999. After a hectic but 'very interesting' year Anne decided it was time to dip a toe into the commercial world and by doing so utilise all three strands of her working life to date. So it was that teaching, learning and ICT were brought together in the post of Instructional Designer with elearning company,

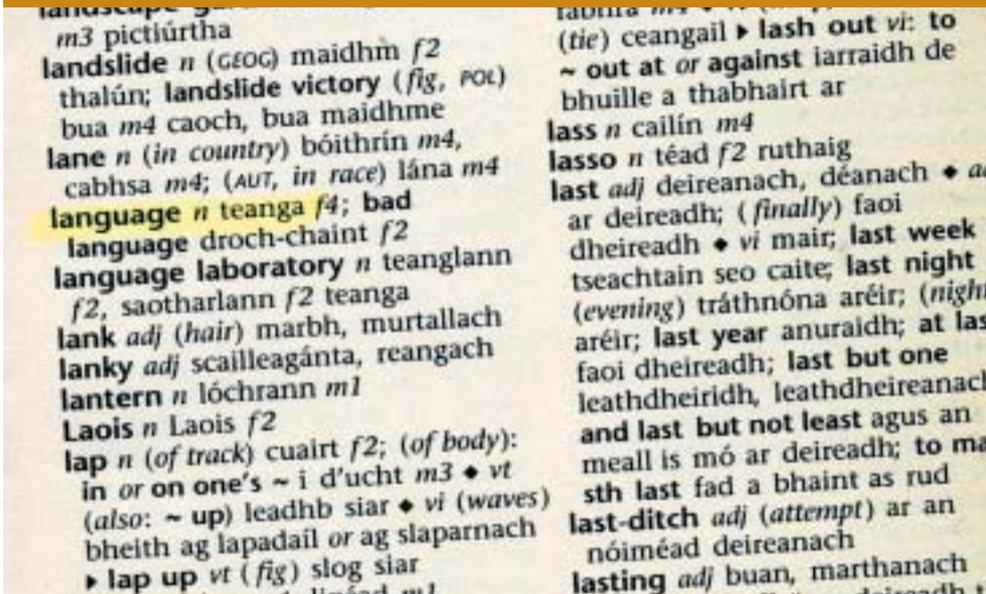
Smartforce. The experience gained working in a business environment was an interesting change: 'I found there was a big difference. As teachers we are each accountable for our own work – we make decisions and do things in our own way. In business, you are part of a process.'

Anne joined the NCCA in 2003 to work on ICT in the primary curriculum and she was plunged 'straight in at the deep end', working on the ICT guidelines which came out in March 2004. As can be expected from one so committed, she has strong views on the place of ICT in children's lives. 'ICT is a normal part of life now for children, even before they start school, and is becoming an increasingly useful tool for teachers. Teachers have a valuable role in helping children in school to use ICT productively, creatively, confidently and safely in their learning. A big challenge for ICT in schools is using the Internet productively. We need to educate children about the ethics and societal implications of Internet use and how to use it and mobile technologies, for example, in terms of rights and responsibilities. That kind of knowledge is far more important than the 'how to's'.

There is always a danger with ICT that the technology becomes more important and more intimidating than its potential uses or, even, misuses. With people such as Anne Moloney involved in working on the ICT framework for schools we can all be confident that an informed and grounded perspective prevails.

Language and literacy

What's happening in Irish-medium schools?



culture. The review explores a number of questions in the areas of

- curriculum planning,
- various types of immersion (the types of settings in which learners receive their education through the medium of a second language),
- language maintenance (how endangered languages are kept alive a language is maintained as a living language of the community),
- parental involvement
- assessment and achievement
- professional development.

Do you introduce formal reading 'as Gaelige' or in English? Does your school have a policy for introducing language and literacy? These are questions that we are asking teachers as part of a consultation on language and literacy in Irish-medium schools. And they are questions worth answering as they provide an opportunity to help inform the development of guidelines on policy and practice in an area that is characterised by a wide range of approaches.

The groundwork for this consultation has already been completed, as can be seen from the consultative document available on our website which draws on two major pieces of work: descriptions of practice in schools and a review of research literature.

Descriptions of practice

In developing descriptions of practice, NCCA staff visited 6 Irish-medium schools (3 Gaelscoileanna and 3 in Gaeltacht areas) around the country to gather information on practice in each school and to examine the rationale behind the various practices portrayed. We conducted semi-structured and focus group interviews in each school and documented the opinions and experiences of children, teachers, parents and school management. Practice in each school, we found, varies in relation to

- whether formal reading is introduced first in Irish or in English
- the extent and nature of the teaching of English in infant classes
- the approaches used.

Review of literature

The consultative document also draws on a review of national and international literature on approaches to language and literacy in various types of settings in which two or more languages are embedded in the

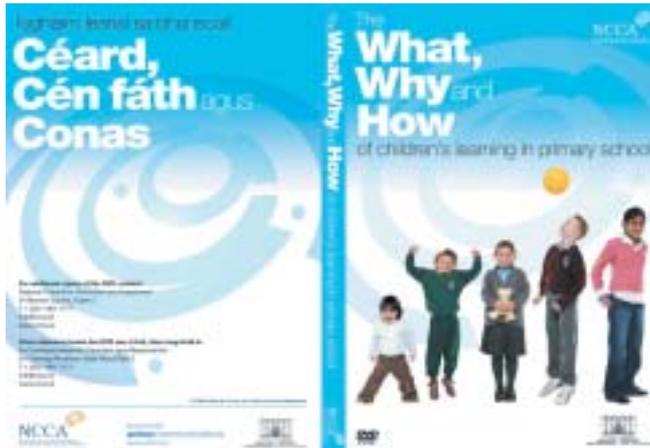
The next step in the process of consultation requires the participation of teachers in Irish-medium schools. We are asking you to study the consultative document on our website (www.ncca.ie) and contribute your views and ideas either through our online survey or by submitting a written response.

Once you've had your say, the findings from this consultation will inform our advice to the Minister for Education and Science on this issue and, as already stated, will also inform the development of guidelines on language and literacy in Irish-medium primary schools. Whether you are interested in becoming part of this process or just interested in the process itself, visit our website at www.ncca.ie for full details. 

Contribute your views and ideas either through our online survey or by submitting a written response.

DVD for parents

The What, Why and How of Children's Learning in Primary School



The What, Why and How of Children's Learning in Primary School is a DVD for parents about the Primary School Curriculum. It was launched recently and all parents of primary school children throughout the country have been receiving their free copies. Copies for teachers have been included in each school pack, because we know that you will find this resource useful in communicating with parents of children in your classroom.

Nobody knows a child like its parent and if we want the children in our school to do well we need the support of their parents to achieve that.

Mary: School Principal

What is this DVD about?

The *What, Why and How of Children's Learning in Primary School* provides information for parents about what children learn in school, why they learn with the curriculum and how they learn through different teaching methodologies. The introduction to the DVD highlights the important role of the parent in supporting the child's learning. It provides an overview of the Primary School Curriculum (content and methodologies) as well as information on assessment and homework.

By presenting the learning stories of five children at school and at home, the DVD provides parents with insights into

children's experiences with the Primary School Curriculum. Lucy's is the first story to be introduced. She is two years old and her story focuses on early learning in the home. Colm is 5 and his story focuses on learning in junior and senior infants. Courtney (age 7) shares her experience of learning in first and second class, Seán (age 9) presents learning in third and fourth class and Abeeha who is 11 introduces learning in fifth and sixth class. Through the stories of these five children, the DVD shows how parents can support their child's learning in preparation for primary school, during primary school, and in preparation for post-primary school.

I love doing Irish, I do!
Second class child

How will the DVD help the parents of children in my class?

The NCCA's *Primary Curriculum Review, Phase 1* (2005) and subsequent consultation with parents highlighted a critical issue with regard to children's learning. In order to effectively prepare children for primary school and to support their learning in school, parents told us they needed much more detailed advice and direction. The DVD responds to this need by giving parents a 'fly on the wall' view of learning in real homes and real classrooms, thereby demystifying their child's school experience. In an entertaining and engaging way, it offers advice to parents on how they can support their child's learning in practical ways at home. It provides answers to many of the questions parents have about their child's learning with the curriculum. Most importantly, it emphasises the importance of the parent's role in helping children to succeed in learning.

Why a DVD?

Using DVD as the medium for our message has enabled us to reach a more diverse parent audience in 2006 than the NCCA booklet for parents, *'Your child's learning'* did in 2000. With a menu choice of five languages (English, Gaeilge, French, Lithuanian, Polish) parents of many cultural backgrounds are catered for and there is also an option to view subtitles in English while watching the different language versions. Furthermore, the menu options allow parents to choose to watch the whole DVD at once, or to watch it over time in sections.

I find the best way that I can learn is working in groups and discussing stuff
Fifth class child

When you sit with your kids... and give them an hour or even a half-hour and the things that you can get them to do and the way they learn from it... They think it's great!

Helen: Parent

While the DVD was designed for parents, it is also a valuable resource for teachers in sharing information about how the curriculum is organised in your classroom and school. Because it is interactive, you can use the child's story for your class level to provide information to parents and to prompt discussion about how parents can support the learning in your class. Similarly, you might wish to use the introduction, which provides an overview of the Primary School Curriculum, to stimulate discussion with parents about different issues related to learning with the curriculum. It's up to you how you choose to use the DVD and we look forward to hearing about your experiences with it.

More to come....

To support schools in using the DVD with parents, the NCCA has prepared templates for primary schools that provide information about learning with the curriculum at each of the four class levels. The templates will be presented in a booklet for schools, and published on the NCCA website: www.ncca.ie. Schools can download and customise this booklet by adding relevant school details, e.g., by inserting the school name, crest or logo on the cover page. We hope these templates are a useful resource

When the parent is interested the child is going to be interested.

Maeve: Teacher

How will the DVD help me in my work as a teacher?

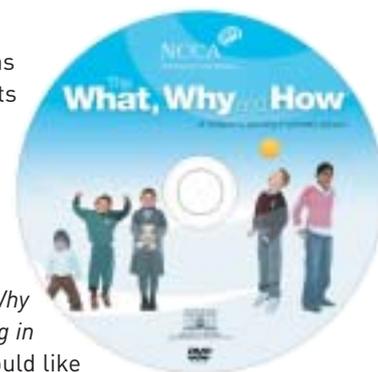
While the DVD was designed for parents, it is also a valuable resource for teachers in

for you and your colleagues as you communicate with parents during the school year.

Mile Buíochas

Many people contributed to the production of *The What, Why and How of Children's Learning in Primary School*. The NCCA would like to take this opportunity to especially thank the principals, teachers, parents and children who made this DVD possible. They opened their schools and homes to us and allowed us to capture engaging glimpses of how children are supported in their learning, by teachers and parents. We hope you enjoy the DVD and we look forward to hearing your views.

If you would like to share your experiences in using the DVD, please email us at: newsletter@ncca.ie



I feel proud of her and not just proud. I feel happy as well that she's going on the right track for the future and for the best

Tariq: parent



Caught in the middle



The experiences of second year students

Ask teachers which year group in junior cycle is the most difficult and challenging to teach and most will answer, second years! With the innocence of first year behind them, second years begin to challenge the system. We blame it on adolescence or on the lack of an exam focus, or on one of a number of other reasons. But we seldom find out what it's like to be a second year. Well, that's what ESRI researchers did recently when, as one part of a major study commissioned by the NCCA, they asked over 900 students in 12 Irish schools to tell them just that – what school life looks like through the eyes of second year students.

The findings of this part of the study give us a unique insight into what second years think about school, about the subjects they like and dislike, what helps them to learn, how they get on with and relate to their teachers, and how they feel about themselves. We don't look to this part of the research study for definitive answers, but what it does do is raise some very interesting and quite thorny issues! So read on – and find out what some of our students think...

...about school

First, the good news! The majority of second years say they like school, get on well with teachers, work hard, and participate fully in school life. Girls, especially those from professional backgrounds and those with higher academic ability, are in the majority here. But there is a minority who

The majority of second years say they like school, get on well with teachers, work hard, and participate fully in school life.

tell a different story. They don't get on so well with their teachers; they misbehave and 'get given out to' more often; they see themselves as drifting and even as beginning the process of disengaging from school life altogether. Too often these 'drifters' are boys, and those with lower academic ability levels. In fact, these two groupings, with their different experiences and expectations of school, appear again and again in the findings of the ESRI study. Not so surprising, you might think...but what about this one? Students generally become less positive about school as time progresses - in fact, the proportion of students who find schoolwork interesting falls from 50% at the start of first year to a low of 20% by the end of second year.

...about the subjects they take

Students report that they like subjects where the learning is organised in an active, project-like way, subjects like art, the technology subjects, home economics, PE, music. They are less keen on Irish, French, German, mathematics, business studies, history and geography. The 'active' subjects are even more important to that second, disengaged, grouping. So why is it, as the study shows, that students in this group have less access to subjects with a practical focus than their more academically able peers? The study also found that students who had restricted subject choice and who regretted taking some subjects had significantly more negative feelings about school and their teachers than other groups of students.

...about teaching

So, what makes a good teacher? Few surprises here really. According to our second years the good teacher is someone who:

- explains things well
- enjoys teaching
- students can talk to
- has a good sense of humour.

Other qualities the students value are 'encourages questions', 'gives praise', 'doesn't give out all the time' 'keeps order', and 'relates the subject to life'.

...about learning

Students were asked about the kinds of lessons in which they learn most. They said it was in classes where the teacher explains things very well, where they (the students) like the subject, and are good at it. Practical activities like discussions, working in a group, or where the teacher makes the subject more interesting by using different teaching styles rather than just working through the textbook, were all seen as helping them to learn. Here's what one student had to say on the matter: *'And you'd learn a lot as well...we did a whole activity on, like, learning these French verbs or something and everyone knows them now...everyone learnt them and we didn't even try to, it was just a game really.'*

...about streaming

Although the research findings about the subject of streaming are in general pretty negative, they raise one of

Students report that they like subjects where the learning is organised in an active, project-like way.

those particularly thorny questions: what does streaming actually do for the students who end up in the lower streams? The immediate answer is: *it keeps them there*. The experience for students who are placed in lower streams as early as first year in post-primary school is that they remain in lower streams through junior cycle and that they take their examination subjects at ordinary or foundation levels. This, of course, is highly predictive of the levels at which they will take their subjects for Leaving Certificate, assuming they stay on that long in school. But the most negative aspect of this is that the students themselves are keenly aware of this pattern. And this extends to their attitudes to homework and study. Students who rate themselves 'above average' spend most time on homework per night (95 minutes), while students who rate themselves 'below average' spend least (60 minutes). In streamed schools, which do the 'rating' for the students, many students in the bottom streams reported that they got no homework as they would not do it anyway!

...about study and exams

The attitudes of second year students to study and tests can appear almost contradictory at times, and peer pressure seems to exert a strong influence on those attitudes. While they generally think it is a good idea to study, most students say they do not study, and pretend they haven't studied even though they have. This seems to be because they are afraid they will be teased for studying and don't want others to know in case they do badly. It seems all right to appear 'naturally clever', but it's not cool to study!

How to get the best out of second years

The study shows that the type of interaction students have with teachers and the school is one of the strongest influences on how they get on in second year. Students who have experienced positive interaction with teachers have a more positive self-image, both academic and social. The opposite is the case for students who have experienced negative interaction with their teachers. They are also more likely to become disengaged from learning and from school life. They have lower academic aspirations, miss more school and are more likely to leave school before or after the Junior Certificate.

However, where the climate of the school and the atmosphere of the classroom is positive, students are more likely to enjoy school and to like teachers. They are likely to be more engaged in their study, have higher academic aspirations and are less likely to misbehave. What more could we ask for!

This article is based on *Pathways through Junior Cycle: the experiences of second year students*, by Emer Smyth, Allison Dunne, Selina McCoy and Merike Darmody, ESRI. A summary of the findings is available free of charge from www.ncca.ie.



School Reports

How do primary schools in other countries report progress?

Very shortly, that time of year will come around when you start preparing your end-of-year reports. The exercise may promote reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of the particular format used in your school. In which case, it may be a comfort to know that the NCCA has also been giving the issue of helping primary school teachers report children's progress to parents some thought, and has begun to develop Report Card Templates, which schools can modify for their own use.

As a first step in this work, we have been investigating how schools in other countries report children's progress to parents by asking:

- What information is included in reports?
- How is children's progress described in reports?
- How often do parents receive reports?
- How are parents and children involved?

We asked these questions of 11 countries, including Australia (Queensland), Canada (British Columbia), Finland, Germany, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern



“His grades are falling. Must be hanging out with the wrong crowd.”

Ireland, Scotland, Spain and Sweden. We found that the content of reports is similar across countries, but the way children's progress is presented varies considerably. Reports are typically issued in conjunction with parent/teacher meetings and in some countries children themselves are included in the reporting process. The number of reports issued by schools each year also varies.

What information is included in reports?

In most countries, the report gives two types of information - information on the child's progress in curriculum subjects or areas of learning, and information on the child's learning strengths and weaknesses. Some reports also comment on the child's learning dispositions e.g. motivation, thinking skills, work habits and on the child's personal and social development e.g. play, behaviour, personal care. Education authorities in some countries specify what a report must contain. For example, British Columbia requires statements about what a child is able to do, about areas of learning that require further attention or development, and about ways the teacher and parents can support the child's learning needs. In other countries, the school must include minimum information. For example, in England and Wales the report must provide information on

- achievements in all subjects
- general progress
- attendance
- results of National Curriculum tests.

The school can decide what additional information is to be included on the report card. Schools decide the format and layout of their own report cards in most of the countries surveyed.

How is children's progress described in reports?

Most countries use *outcomes* rather than *norms* to report on the child's learning. In other words, teachers compare a child's progress with expected standards, rather than with progress made by other children. Teachers use *levels* (e.g. Northern Ireland, England and Wales) to show the progress the child has made. In Northern Ireland, levels of 1 to 5 are reported for the child's progress in literacy, numeracy and ICT. In Year 4, a child's work in mathematics is considered *competent* at Level 2; in Year 6, work at Level 4 would be considered competent. A child's progress towards these

REPORT CARD

Schools decide the format and layout of their own report cards in most of the countries surveyed.

levels is cumulative and is achieved over the seven years of primary school.

In some countries (e.g. Sweden, New Zealand and Finland) teachers use comments to report on young children's learning. Grades are added to these comments from around middle primary onwards. Reports in many countries also include the results of standardised tests, usually in literacy and numeracy.

How often do parents receive reports?

In most of the countries surveyed, schools provide parents with two or three reports during each school year. British Columbia is the exception with five reports in one school year! Countries that issue two reports (such as Scotland) provide an interim report with a *formative* emphasis (i.e. aiming to help the child's learning in the remainder of the year) and an end-of-year *summative* report (i.e. telling how the child has achieved across the term or year). Reports can be oral or written. Teachers usually meet parents to discuss the report's contents. This meeting also gives teachers and parents a chance to share other information about the child's learning.

How are parents and children involved?

In most of the countries surveyed, reports provide advice for parents on how to support their child's learning. In some countries (e.g. Australia, New Zealand and Scotland) additional support for parents is provided through websites published by the education ministry or department. Samples of children's work are published on the websites to show parents what children do in school.

Children are involved in developing reports in some countries (e.g. Northern Ireland and Scotland). Here, children are invited to contribute information to the report before it issues to their parents. Their input (in writing or drawing) focuses on how they see themselves as learners. The decision on whether or not to involve children in parent-teacher meetings is made by the individual school in most countries surveyed.

How is the NCCA using this information?

This information on how schools in other countries report children's learning is a useful starting point for the NCCA in developing Report Card Templates which schools can modify for their own use. The Primary Assessment Team is also tapping into the success of the *Assessment for Learning (AfL)* initiative in post-primary schools (see issue one of **info@ncca**) in working with schools to develop the templates.

The Report Card Templates can only come to life in the hands of principals and teachers and in the context of very real classrooms, with children and parents. The assessment team will begin working with schools during the 2006-07 school year to ensure that the Report Card Templates are as practical and useful as possible for teachers and for parents. If you are interested in participating in this work, or if you would like further information, please contact us at: **newsletter@ncca.ie**

Further information on the NCCA's assessment work is available on our website, at **www.ncca.ie**.



Developing learning

Improving what and how students learn at senior cycle

Are students learning what they need to learn to prepare them for life after school? More importantly, does the way that they learn provide them with the skills and tools they need for their future as learners?

Students, teachers and parents had much to say about what and how students learn during the review of senior cycle. Many commented on the influence of the Leaving Certificate Examination on what happens in senior cycle classrooms. The general thrust of the comments can be captured through a few quotations from the online survey (NCCA, 2004):

“ ...The senior cycle must move away from a system where recall is dominant and must adapt to a system where critical thinking and understanding holds more precedence. **(Teacher)**

...students need to learn for understanding and not just for exams. I feel this is at the heart of the unsuccessfulness of the current system, and affects not only what and how pupils learn but also what and how teachers teach. **(Student)**

Students are too young to specialise, life intervenes and students should learn that they can change direction at any time in their lives. An attitude of lifelong learning should be instilled... **(Parent)**

”

What teachers, parents and students have been saying is that senior cycle students need to develop their learning in a number of ways. They need to develop:

- cognitive learning in terms of higher order thinking
- skills that will be useful to them in their ability to access and manage learning in the future
- motivation and personal values about learning
- the ability to learn independently and the capacity to work with others.

These views are also supported by debates in other countries. A recent OECD report argued that

...coping with today's challenges calls for better development of individuals' abilities to tackle complex mental tasks, going well beyond the basic reproduction of accumulated knowledge.

[The DeSeCo Project, Executive Summary, 30 June, 2005] www.oecd.org/edu/statistics/deseco

Approaches to improving learning at senior cycle

Much of the emphasis in the current developments at senior cycle is on improving how students learn. This will happen in a number of ways.

- Key skills, which emphasise the skills and attitudes that students and teachers are looking for, will be developed through all the subjects, short courses and transition units.
- Teaching and learning methodologies will support students in becoming more responsible for their own learning.
- There will be a greater variety of assessment methods that will encourage the development of a greater variety of skills.

In this issue we focus on work in progress on key skills and how it is proposed they will be developed in the first phase of subject review, short courses and transition units. Watch out for further updates in forthcoming issues.

Key skills - work in progress

We are currently working on five key skills and each one will contribute to a new culture of learning through all the subjects, short courses and transition units. As existing subjects are being reviewed and new subjects, short courses and transition units are developed, elements of the key skills will be built into the learning outcomes for each.

Information-processing – will help students become more effective learners in an information-intensive environment and will include the skills of accessing, selecting, evaluating and recording information.

Critical and creative thinking – will help students be more aware of different forms and patterns of thinking so that they can become more skilled in higher order reasoning and problem solving.

Communicating – will help students become better communicators, using a variety of media, and to recognise how communication methods influence their own understanding and knowledge. Specific skills include reading, expressing opinions, writing, making oral presentations, analysing visual forms and so on.



Working with others – will highlight the role that working with others has for learning and for achieving both collective and personal goals. Students will gain some appreciation of the dynamics of groups and the social skills needed to engage in collaborative work.

Being personally effective – will help students develop as persons, become more self-aware, and to use that knowledge to develop personal goals and action plans.

How the skills contribute to the development of a successful learner

As students become skilful in the five key skills as well as through their learning in subjects and short courses they will develop a growing knowledge about learning in general and their own learning in particular. Students will develop beliefs



about learning, learning strategies, the capacity to be reflective, to make connections across learning, and a willingness to engage in new learning situations.

Phase one begins

Work is now underway on the Phase One developments. The subjects listed will be reviewed over the next year to eighteen months. New subjects will be developed over the same time period, as will short courses. The first transition units will be ready by the end of 2006. This work will include the embedding of the key skills, reduction of content where necessary, development of learning outcomes, advice on assessment components and teaching and learning methodologies.

Updates will be available on the Senior Cycle Review section of the NCCA website, at www.ncca.ie.



Phase one curriculum components

| Subjects to be reviewed | New subjects | Short courses | Transition Units (some examples) | Other developments |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| Mathematics Applied Mathematics Irish English Modern languages Biology Chemistry Physics | Social and Political Education Physical Education | Enterprise Media and Communication Technology Mathematical applications Course/courses in the Arts/Humanities area | Genetics and Biotechnology Classical Studies Performance Arts Sociology of Reality TV Meteorology Sports Science Legal Science Craft Design and Technology Irish Cultural Studies | Social, Personal and Health Education Physical Education Framework |

Primary Curriculum review

If you were following the NCCA's Primary Curriculum Review over the last year or two, you'd be forgiven for thinking we had already finished the entire review! Not so, but thanks to the collaboration of teachers and principals, children and parents, we made a great start.

The first phase gathered information about your experiences with three curriculum subjects: English, visual arts and mathematics during the 2003/2004 school year. Our findings were published in a report on the NCCA website in May 2005, and in a summary booklet which included information from the Inspectorate's evaluation of the same three subjects, in October 2005.

Since the completion of phase one, we've been busy responding to the four issues identified in the review:

- developing Additional Support Material for the **English Curriculum** on the structure of the English Curriculum (disseminated to teachers in Winter 2005)

- developing a **DVD for parents** on *The What, Why and How of Children's Learning in the Primary School* (recently disseminated to parents and schools)
- continuing our work in developing advice for teachers on **assessment** in primary schools
- developing the NCCA website to include advice on **teaching methodologies** (e.g., including teaching multi-class settings, differentiation, etc.).

We're now preparing for the second phase of the review. This involves gathering information from teachers and others on the Gaelge Curriculum, Science Curriculum and the Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Curriculum during the 2006/2007 school year. As before, we're developing *Review and reflection templates for teachers* to prompt your thinking about your successes, challenges and priorities in teaching these three subjects. These review templates will be available on our website in September. In the meantime, if you would like to share your experiences with the curriculum for Gaelge, Science or for SPHE with the NCCA team, we very much welcome your views. You can email us at: newsletter@ncca.ie



Profile: Sheila Nunan
Member of National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and Chairperson of Primary Languages Committee.

Education

A native of Newbridge, Co. Kildare, my primary and post-primary education took place in my home town. Having studied for a B. Social Science degree in UCD, I later completed a postgraduate Diploma in Special Education Needs in St. Patrick's College in Drumcondra.

Work

My first job as a visiting teacher for young travellers was innovative at the time and I was able to define and develop the role for myself. The experience led me to understand the challenges for children and parents of a different cultural background becoming integrated into mainstream education. The experience of schools in facilitating this integration was also informative.

My current position as President of the INTO involves an interesting and varied brief. I chair the many committees of the INTO and I also represent members in the DES and other bodies. In December 2005, I was elected General Treasurer/Deputy General Secretary of the INTO and I look forward to taking up this position in May of this year.

NCCA Role

In 1995, I joined the NCCA primary co-ordinating committee who were undertaking the review of the primary curriculum. From 2003, I represented the INTO on the NCCA Council. The primary work of Council is to approve the different documents produced by the NCCA. In my opinion, Council also acts as a valuable sounding board for the discussion of these documents at their draft stages. It is a fantastic opportunity to be part of the lively debates that happen in relation to the different curricular initiatives from early childhood education to the completion of senior cycle. It leads, I believe, to more joined-up thinking about primary and post-primary education

Looking forward

I think it is important that we continue to be vigilant about the impact of developments in curriculum and assessment on the reality of teaching and learning in the classroom. Teachers are coping with many demands including an increasingly multicultural classroom and the inclusion of children with special education needs. It is important that support for teachers continues to enable them to cover all aspects of the curriculum.

Qualifications framework

Recognising learning achievements

Since 2003 the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), who have responsibility for development and implementation, have led the process of placing Irish awards on the Qualifications Framework.

The National Framework of Qualifications has been in place since October 2003. Its purpose is to offer a framework through which all learning achievements can be easily compared and valued. The framework now includes the vast majority of education and training qualifications or awards in Ireland. It includes awards currently gained in schools, the workplace, the community, in training centres and in colleges and universities. It also includes those from the past that are no longer available. It is likely that all future awards will be developed with the idea of inclusion on the framework in mind.

What is the framework?

It has 10 levels. Level 1 relates to a basic level of learning. It includes the ability to learn under supervision, to take in information and use basic repetitive skills. It also includes skills in basic literacy and numeracy. Compare this with Level 10 where learners are expected to be able

to discover and develop new knowledge and skills and where the skills required are highly specialised and can be transferred from one task to another very different one. From these descriptions you can see that each level is described in terms of

- the knowledge learners need to have
- the know-how and skill they need to be able to demonstrate
- the competence they need to absorb and apply to all their learning.

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

Since 2003 the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), who have responsibility for development and implementation, have led the process of placing Irish awards on the framework. The school awards were placed between levels 3 and 5. The Junior

Certificate was placed at Level 3, while the Leaving Certificate, including the LCVP and Leaving Certificate Applied, was placed at Levels 4 and 5.

The placing of the Leaving Certificate across two levels

reflected the wide range of learning outcomes included in the various senior cycle programmes. At this time, there are no formal awards associated with primary education.

Legacy awards

In 2004 attention turned to older *legacy* school awards and where they would be placed on the framework. These are the awards gained through schools in the past but which have been discontinued. The old Primary Certificate was placed at Level 2 of the framework. The Group Certificate and the Intermediate Certificate, which were combined in the late 1980's to become the Junior Certificate, were placed, like the Junior Certificate, at Level 3. The fact that these awards are now included on the framework means that the learning achievements of those who gained these qualifications in the past are fully recognised. Their achievement can also be easily compared with existing school awards.

Focus on the future

Review and development of the framework will continue in the following contexts:

- The position of existing awards will be kept under review e.g. whether achievement at different levels or grades in Leaving Certificate subjects should be reflected by differing placement on the framework.
- Agreement will have to be arrived at about where any new school qualifications or awards (say, arising from changes to the Leaving Certificate in the future) are to be placed.

The NCCA is developing proposals on a new curriculum framework for students with general learning disabilities (aged 12-16). This framework will derive from the Junior Certificate and will include a broad, balanced set of learning experiences as well as opportunities to develop personal, independent and living skills during the final years of compulsory education. Over the past year, this work has involved the NCCA participating in a FETAC Working Group investigating the nature of awards to be developed at Levels 1 and 2 of the framework.



Education in the USA



The American way

Una Maher describes the 'wonderful experience' of teaching in Oregon



I got married in 1999 and shortly afterwards my husband's company relocated us to Oregon, USA. Oregon is located on the Northwestern coast and is a lovely place to live, with storybook seasons (hot summers

and snow in the winter.) We live in Hillsboro, which is approximately 70 miles from the beach and 70 miles from Mt. Hood, a wonderful ski resort. It's a long way, in many ways, from St Brigid's National School in Tallaght, where I gained my first five years teaching experience alongside a very energetic and dedicated staff and where I learned a great deal.

I teach at St. Clare Catholic School in Portland. I taught second grade for three years and currently teach kindergarten, which is the first year of formal education in the US. One noticeable difference between here and Ireland is that a teacher becomes a particular 'grade teacher' here and rarely will change during their career. My colleagues found it strange that we would change grade level yearly within the same school. I believe, however, that this movement through the grades keeps a teacher fresh and is a good practice in Ireland.

St. Clare School (like most Catholic schools) is a private, fee-paying school. We have kindergarten to eighth grade with one class per grade level. We have a learning specialist primarily for testing and diagnosing learning difficulties and then creating ILPs (individual learning plans) for students. President Bush's *No Child Left Behind* policy puts emphasis on holding schools accountable for their teaching and students' learning. The Learning

Specialist was hired as a direct result of this policy. Third through eighth grades undergo standardised testing annually; students are graded against their peers while the school is 'graded' based on performance. These tests cover language, arts and maths.

St. Clare School is a fully accredited school. The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) is the body responsible for accreditation; it has a dual purpose of ensuring that schools provide high quality learning opportunities while also requiring the schools to demonstrate continual self-improvement. Upon completion a school is graded and assigned a return date for the process to be repeated. St. Clare achieved the maximum score for 6 years.

My day begins at 7:30am with children arriving at 8:05am. I teach a morning and an afternoon class, each 3 hours long. Similar to many schools in Oregon we are changing and will offer a full day kindergarten program beginning September 2006. Our school also has gym, art and music specialists. Having these teachers gives the classroom teacher additional time to prepare, a luxury most teachers in Ireland don't have. Our maximum class size is 28, resulting in 14 per group for kindergarten. It is a luxury working with such a small number of students and allows for much one-to-one teaching.

The kindergarten curriculum takes a child-centered approach. There are many student directed activities and play is valued as an essential medium for learning and discovering. Although we have some workbooks, most teaching in kindergarten takes an integrated approach, with a strong emphasis on language arts and mathematics. The children dismiss at 3:05pm and I finish at 3:35pm. The end of my day is usually spent dismissing students, meeting with parents, preparing for the next day and finally updating our school website; each grade is responsible for their own page.

It is a wonderful experience to be able to teach in a different country. Although the children have similar needs they come from very different cultural and familial backgrounds. Parental support is very strong in this fee-paying school; it is a valuable asset.

English is the official language of instruction, although over six million of the approximately 45 million school-aged children do not speak English at home.

The System

Facts and figures from INCA

National level

The responsibility for education in the United States of America is devolved to state/district level. At national level however, the United States Congress enacts legislation which impacts on states, communities and schools. In addition, there are national education reform strategies which are signed into law. These include President George W Bush's 2002 *No Child Left Behind Act*. The bill includes provision for:

- increased statutory testing
- improvements for failing schools, e.g. extra funding, summer schools
- teacher training to provide 'highly qualified teachers'
- increased spending on literacy programmes.

The 12 year goal is to improve the academic proficiency of students who are poor, who speak limited English or who have various disabilities.

State and local level

Each of the 50 states is responsible for education within their individual state. States formulate policies on the allocation of funds, the certification of teachers, textbooks and library services, and the provision of records and statistics; some states also specify curricula. The operation of public schools is managed by some 16,000 local districts. District school boards collect taxes, construct buildings and have, traditionally purchased equipment, determined instruction policy and employed teachers and other staff.

English is the official language of instruction although over six million of the approximately 45 million school-aged children do not speak English at home.

Educational phases

The three principle phases in the education structure in the United States are as follows:

- pre-compulsory: pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, age 3-5/6.
- compulsory: elementary and high school, Grades 1 – 8/9, age 5/6 – 16/18.
- post compulsory: high school, Grades 9 – 12, age 16 -18.

Certification

Compulsory schooling ends by law at ages 16, 17 or 18, depending on the particular state's education legislation. Students who leave school when they have completed their compulsory education are not considered to have completed school and do not receive a certificate. The final years of education necessary for graduation are provided in high school, Grades 9 – 12. When students complete their education (Grade 12), they receive a High School Diploma which shows that they have successfully

graduated from secondary school. The senior high school completion rate is 92.6 per cent of those who enrol at secondary level.

Special needs education

The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA), requires that, wherever possible, students with special educational needs are catered for in mainstream publicly-funded education in their local school district, in educational settings with their peers. Students with more severe needs may be catered for in self-contained classrooms or special programmes within a mainstream school or they may be placed in special schools. State-funded education is provided for all students with special needs until they reach age 21.

School year

Every state has a minimum school year requirement, a common standard for which is 180 days. Each local district board decides their own schools' schedules. Schools open for a five day week with a school day of five to seven hours.

Curriculum and assessment

Most states have common guidelines for a core curriculum which generally includes the following subjects: language arts (English/literacy), mathematics, social studies (which can include history, geography, literature, multiculturalism, ethics and values, religion, contemporary issues), science, health, music, art and physical education (PE).

In the early and middle stages of compulsory education, many states operate state assessment programmes specifically designed for diagnostic purposes. Schools also participate in periodic large scale national testing, ie., the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP) in reading, writing, science and mathematics. Since the start of 2002-2003, schools are expected to test children in reading and mathematics in three Grade spans – Grades 3-5, Grades 6-9 and Grades 10-12. *No Child Left Behind* requires the introduction of statutory annual testing for all students in Grades 3-8 (ages 8-14) in english reading and mathematics. It is expected that science will be added to this compulsory list for annual testing in 2007 -08

In senior high school, students can volunteer to participate in national tests which are designed to assess students' suitability for entry into third level education. These tests include Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs), American College Testing (ACT) and Advanced Placement (AP) examinations.

For further information about the American education system: www.inca.org.uk



Finding Form

Confessions of a rookie teacher

As we approach the final furlong of this school year, I reflect on the highs and the lows of my experiences as a second season novice teacher. Among the highs was Friday 13th (who said it was unlucky?) January, during the first week back after Christmas when the body clocks were desperately struggling to readjust to the early mornings again. The thing that I had literally prayed for when I was at school myself happened. The ESB had to close down our school to mend a cable fault and sent us all home. Oh, the cheers! The elation! (And the students were quite pleased too.)

At this stage, with four exam classes, I'm even *dreaming* of the Leaving Cert. I've actually become obsessed. Everything seems to be metaphor for the Leaving. Take the racing pages... 'Sustaining a lean spell, of the sort that strikes every stable from time to time, struggling to find their best form'. That's my class! And I'm the trainer who has to 'rouse their phlegmatic souls to success'. While I do have a few students who 'have ground to make up at this stage', I also have a few students who 'have catapulted themselves back to the fore after an inept beginning' and one '20 box stable full of such quality that even Vincent O'Brien might envy' with quite a few 'likely favourites'.

They have to have been talking about the mocks when they said, 'any serious overview of the contest is shaped by the recognition that it provides a natural springboard to the June showpiece'. As for me, I'm taking the advice that 'the timing of preparation is absolutely crucial' and it's now my 'absolute priority to coax them all to the peak of form by the beginning of June'. I feel such an enormous responsibility, even having heard phrases like 'teaching to the exam' said with utter disdain throughout the HDip. At the end of the day, many



students' hopes and dreams for their futures depend to a large extent on teachers like me teaching to the exam as best we can.

It's been an exciting year for us so far in Coláiste Bríde. We are in the enviable position of having recently moved into our beautiful new school. Nobody who isn't a teacher could possibly understand the absolute joy with which I say the following. I have my own classroom. Yes, all mine, full of my posters, charts, and my students work. And that's not all. The piece de resistance is ... a cupboard. Yes, full of my books, dictionaries, folders, materials etc. Gone are the days of carting 20 LCA folders, with posters, a

box of art materials, roll book, chalk and all my other bits and pieces outside to a prefab... invariably in the rain! It's glorious.

When I look back on this school year however, what stands out most of all is nothing to do with exams, syllabuses or our new school, but a terrible tragedy that brought us all to a standstill. One of our lovely 5th year students was knocked down in a hit and run accident and, though she battled bravely, Marsia lost her fight for life on the 22nd October. Dealing with the response to this tragedy really brought home to me that what we do is so much more than teaching. Teaching is the easy part. I think the caring and pastoral side of our job (and being a class tutor) is the most challenging, and the least acknowledged. And so, as I hang up my rookie shoes, I salute you for it and wish you all a fun and fruitful final term! Hi ho Silver!

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Share your views...

Mindful that this is the last issue of **info@ncca** before the end of this school year, we would like to thank all of the teachers who have taken time out of their busy schedules to contribute to our newsletter. Your contributions have taken many forms, from suggestions for content through sharing your own experiences in the classroom to taking part in audience research. We hope you will continue to help in building **info@ncca** into an essential resource for teachers, supporting both teaching and learning, as we plan for the September issue.

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