

examining assessment

Assessment is more than
just exams...

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welcome...

...to the first edition of info@ncca, a new bulletin for teachers. Info@ncca focuses on the relationship between the work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the work going on in classrooms and schools. The bulletin will showcase some of the projects where teachers and students are trying out new and innovative approaches to assessment and learning. It will also provide updates on the review work currently underway, and encourage you to participate in consultations on different aspects of curriculum and assessment.

When it comes to promoting learning, to developing good practice in assessment and to planning curriculum, the traditional primary/post-primary demarcation lines no longer apply. In the era of lifelong learning, the learner is the main focus, the setting or institution takes second place. In info@ncca material associated with primary settings is placed alongside what might traditionally be seen as 'post-primary business'. It's a new approach and the editorial team at the NCCA will be interested in hearing what you think.

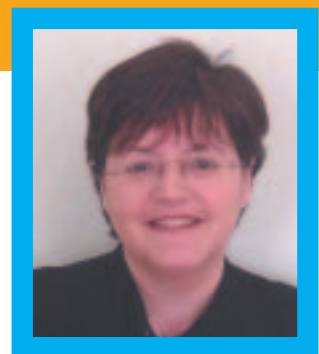
The bulletin is one way of engaging with teachers and schools; the website www.ncca.ie is the other. The new revamped website went live over the summer. It has been designed with the teacher and teaching in mind. It is hoped that, over time, it will become the first port of call in planning, in searching for resources and ideas, and in organising assessment.

info@ncca.ie is free of charge and extra copies are available from...where else but www.ncca.ie.

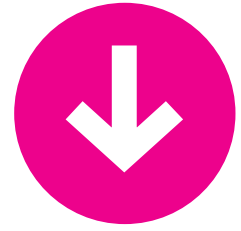
Anne Looney

CEO

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment



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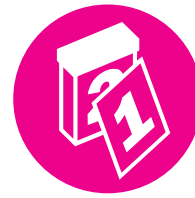
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Progress reports
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Towards a Framework for Early Learning

In the coming year, the NCCA will develop portraits of Early Learning settings as part of the development of a Framework for Early Learning to support the learning of all children from birth to six years, including children in infant classes.

These portraits will enable us to examine the relevance of elements of the Framework to young children, and to explore how children can best be supported within the Framework.

The consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, which was published in 2004, presented key ideas central to the development of the Framework, and provided the basis for an initial consultation with the Early Childhood sector.

ICT Framework

We are currently working with teachers to develop curriculum planning materials, sample lessons and assessment tools using the ICT Framework, which presents the kinds of learning experiences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) all students should be enabled to achieve by the end of compulsory education.

This cross-curricular framework is being developed to support teachers in achieving a vision of children as capable, independent learners with ICT. The NCCA described this vision of ICT literacy for all students in the discussion paper, *Curriculum, assessment and ICT in the Irish context (2004)*.

Primary review

Four priority areas of work have been identified from the findings of the first phase of review of the Primary School Curriculum:

- Assessment in primary schools
- English Curriculum
- Involvement of parents in their children's learning
- Methods of teaching and learning.

The review gathered information from children, parents, principals and teachers about their experiences with the curriculum and was published in May 2005.

A summary of its key findings will arrive in all schools during September, along with the DES Curriculum Implementation Evaluation. Each teacher will also receive additional support material for the English Curriculum in late September.

Information for parents

The NCCA is currently developing a DVD on *The What, Why and How of Children's Learning in Primary Schools*, to support parents (including guardians and carers) in engaging with their children's learning throughout their primary years.

We are consulting with parents of different backgrounds and experiences, both prior to and during the development of the DVD, to ensure that the information contained within speaks to the needs of all. Production work will commence shortly.

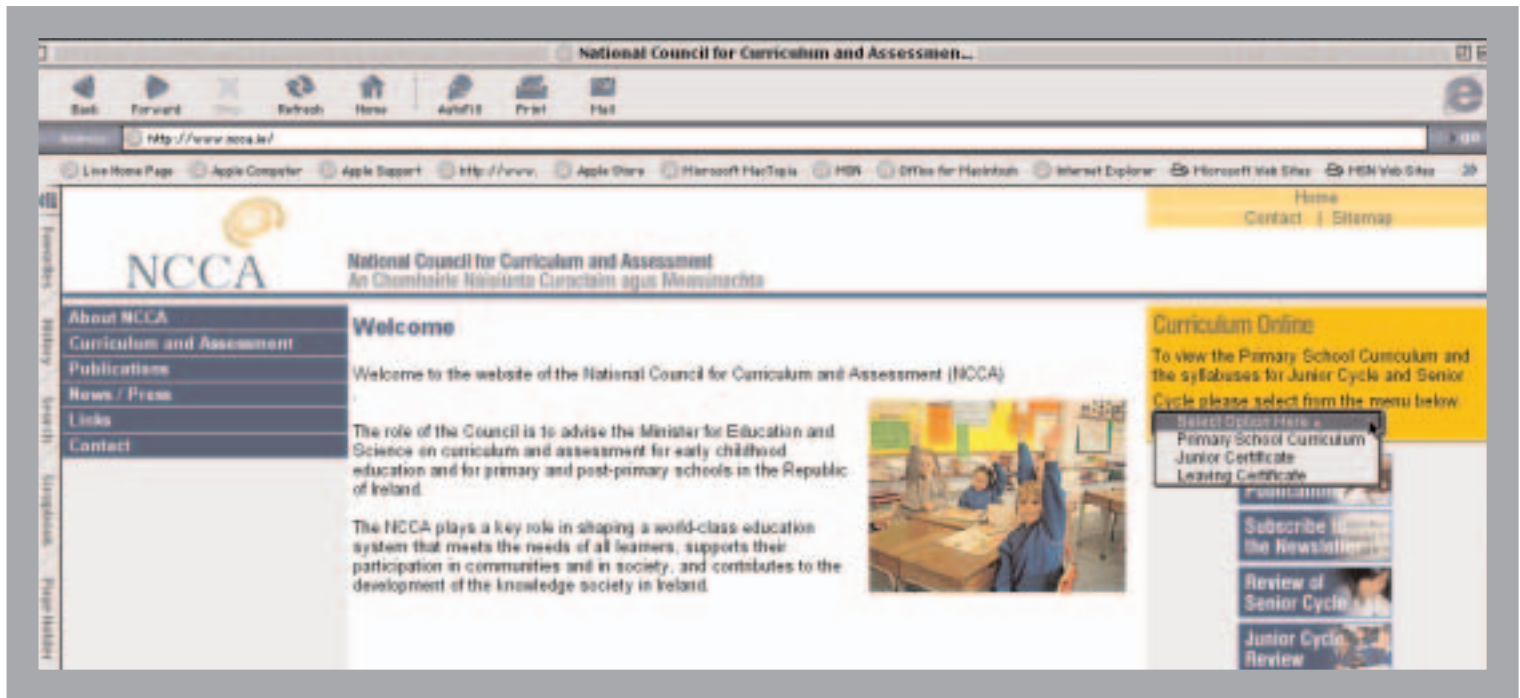
Meanwhile, if you would like some more information on this project you can access the project proposal on the NCCA website.

For further information on any of the projects mentioned on this page, please visit our website at www.ncca.ie.

To comment on info@ncca or suggest topics for inclusion, email: newsletter@ncca.ie

www.ncca.ie

A new look, for a new year



It's been a long, fraught summer for the members of the web development team here at the NCCA but at least we have something exciting to show for it in our all-new website, at www.ncca.ie. We like to think that the needs of teachers are well catered for through this site and its satellite offspring, Curriculum Online, but we would be delighted to hear your comments and suggestions. Just click on 'Contact' and our contact details will be revealed.

www.ncca.ie is designed to improve access to information about the function and processes of the NCCA. Its satellite site, which can be accessed from any page on www.ncca.ie, provides direct access to the Primary School Curriculum and the syllabuses for junior and senior cycles. Curriculum Online will expand over the coming months and its full possibilities will be revealed in the next issue of info@ncca, in December.

At www.ncca.ie all of the NCCA's publications are available to download by just clicking on the 'Publications' item in the

menu. Select from a list of reports, consultative documents, draft syllabuses and guidelines. Just choose the one you want, click and print or read online.

Choosing to take the 'Curriculum and Assessment' route on the home page menu will lead in to in-depth descriptions of projects undertaken by the NCCA in the areas of Early Childhood and Primary Education and Post-Primary Education, all of which are of relevance to teachers. Just choose your area of interest and you will be presented with a further, more detailed, menu of choices including ICT and Inclusion.

One of the highlights of www.ncca.ie, as far as the team working on this particular publication are concerned, is the opportunity to subscribe to, or just download, print and read, the electronic version of info@ncca. Just click on 'News/Press', then 'Newsletter', and follow the instructions in order to receive, by email, each new issue as it is published.

If you really want to get active and involved, the 'Newsletter' page provides the perfect opportunity. Users are invited to contribute articles, suggest topics for discussion in future editions or write to the letters page via newsletter@ncca.ie.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Intercultural education in the primary school

'The opportunities for an intercultural perspective are always in our lessons but can easily be missed if we don't look for them.' (Primary school teacher)



What is intercultural education?

At its core, intercultural education has two focal points:

- It is education which respects, celebrates and recognises the normality of diversity in all areas of human life. It sensitises the learner to the idea that humans have naturally developed a range of different ways of life, customs and worldviews, and that this breadth of human life enriches all of us.
- It is education which promotes equality and human rights, challenges unfair discrimination, and promotes the values upon which equality is built.

There can be no doubt that great changes have taken place in classrooms over the last decade and the most noticeable change for some is the increase in the number of children coming from different cultures. As teachers we have all engaged with intercultural education at some level, whether it was in simple ways like encouraging children to consider the needs of others or to treat others fairly. Some teachers will have gone further and developed lessons, resources, activities and classroom displays that help children to respond to our multicultural world in a positive way.

The NCCA recently developed guidelines for schools, *Intercultural Education in the Primary School*, to support teachers and school managers in creating intercultural schools and classrooms.

We all have a culture and ethnicity. Intercultural education helps children to value their own culture and ethnicity and this in turn helps to develop their self-esteem. It also gives them a strong sense of their own identity and this is a good starting point for valuing the cultures and ethnicities of others. By integrating intercultural education into our schools and classrooms we help all children, regardless of

their ethnicity, to learn to

- respect and celebrate diversity
- promote equality and
- challenge unfair discrimination.

How can I make my classroom intercultural?

There are many simple ways that teachers can make their classrooms intercultural places, starting with simple changes to the physical environment. Here are some suggestions:

- Include images on the walls that represent people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Try also to make sure that the images are balanced in terms of different age, gender, social class and ability groups. Remember to include some images of Irish Travellers
- Choose images that reflect people's current daily lives in Ireland, for example going shopping, at sports events, in school, at work, at the beach
- Avoid too many images of feasts or festivals from other countries or those showing people in national dress. These can reinforce stereotypes
- Include images of positive role models from the different ethnic and cultural groups that make up Ireland, for example sports stars, pop stars and people who work in the community
- Include artwork and cultural displays from the children's own work that shows influences from a range of cultural traditions, for example celtic patterns, asian art or aboriginal art.

- Write signs and labels in the range of languages that are represented in the classroom. For example, if there are Polish, Nigerian and Traveller children in the classroom signs might be in Polish, Yoruba, and Cant as well as English and Irish. The children themselves or their parents can help with this.
- Include toys and other play materials that represent diversity. For example, include white, black and Asian dolls, toy trailers and halting sites as well as toy houses and different personal objects such as hair combs and headscarves from Africa. Again the children or their parents may help with this.

Using stories to explore intercultural skills and attitudes

As the *Intercultural Education in the Primary School* guidelines demonstrate, there are many interesting stories that children are already familiar with that can be used to encourage them to explore their attitudes to bias, stereotypes, fair play and discrimination. Fairytales like *The Three Little Pigs*, *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Three Billy*

Goats Gruff all present very interesting alternatives if the story is told from the perspective of the wolf or the troll.

Another example is the story of the historical figure Pocahontas, which has been told in many different ways. Most children are familiar with the Disney version of Pocahontas and both the movie and the song *Colours of the Wind* provide opportunities for exploring stereotyping and bias. But there are many versions of the same story told in different ways that can present a very interesting class exercise in how an author can create a perspective based on his/her own bias.

These are just some of the many ideas contained in *Intercultural Education in the Primary School-Guidelines for Schools*, copies of which have been sent to all primary schools (one copy for each teacher). The guidelines also include some useful ideas on a whole school approach to interculturalism and are available to download from our website, at www.ncca.ie/publications. Guidelines are currently being prepared for post-primary schools.



Profile: Margaret Maxwell, Education Officer.

Margaret Maxwell brought a breath of fresh Kilkenny air, as well as a keen intellect and a friendly disposition to the NCCA when she joined us

in February of this year. Margaret was born and bred in County Limerick but currently resides in Kilkenny and taught at St Michael's National School in Galmoy, from where she is seconded to the NCCA.

Even though her mother and her sister are both teachers the young Margaret had no intention of following in their footsteps. It was after studying French and Irish at Trinity College Dublin that she discovered her 'calling'. 'I went to Spain to teach English as a foreign language and the interest developed from there. I taught a variety of age-groups, including young children'.

Thus it was that she came to take the Post Graduate Diploma in Primary Education at St Patrick's. Her first job was in St Laurence O'Toole's Infant Girls School in Seville Place, Dublin where, she says, she had a wonderful initiation into teaching life, supported by a 'dynamic' principal, staff and school community. Margaret completed the M.Ed during this period, and first came in contact with

the NCCA while researching her thesis on the subject of intercultural education in the primary school.

Margaret was 'hugely surprised' at the level of activity within the organisation. The degree of consultation and the representative nature of the NCCA was also a revelation. The fact that all Education Officers are teachers and that teachers are represented on the Council and the steering committees ensures that every stage of every project is viewed from the perspective of the teacher in the classroom among other perspectives, a fact that Margaret finds very reassuring.

Margaret's own responsibilities within the organisation are numerous: 'I have a number of areas of work, which makes for great variety and challenge. There's the Parents project, which involves the production of a DVD, *The What, Why and How of Children's Learning in Primary Schools: Information for Parents*', and the development of additional support materials for English, which are on their way to teachers as we speak.

Another area I'm involved in is the development of a curriculum framework across early childhood years from 0-6. I am really excited about the next step, which will involve developing portraits of Early Childhood settings. We are seeking to capture the child's voice and experience, and represent it within the framework which will indeed be a challenge, considering the age range! Sitting on the editorial board of this magazine is another task to which I have been assigned, and I am also on the design team for PCSP Drama - it's nice to have that connection with teacher professional development.'

Assessment for learning

Assessment is more than just exams...

Assessment is so much a part of teaching that we sometimes don't even recognise it as such and tend to think of it only in terms of formal examinations and tests. The fact is that we spend much of our time on the kind of assessment that helps our students to understand things more clearly, be more purposeful and organised in their work, and become more effective learners.

These activities are all important components of *Assessment for Learning* (AfL). An NCCA initiative in AfL, which has involved teachers in Cork and Sligo over the past two years, offers practical advice and support in this important part of their teaching.

Why is assessment for learning important?

Assessment is about measuring what someone has achieved and it usually involves giving feedback of some kind to the person whose work is being assessed. In examination terms that feedback is normally given in the shape of a mark or a grade. But what does the person being assessed learn from that?

Imagine you are taking a driving lesson (or getting advice on solving SU DOKU puzzles) and your instructor can give you advice only in the form of grades and marks. At the end of the first session you get the feedback - Starting and stopping 46%, Signalling 28%, Awareness of other road users 17%, Use of the handbrake 83%, and so on. What might you learn about your driving from this kind of feedback? 'Apart from the handbrake, it seems I wasn't very good. What was so wrong about my awareness of other road users? Maybe I should just stick with the public transport, or even stay at home and get to work on those SU DOKU puzzles.'

In any learning situation, the learner needs clear direction about a number of things:

- What I am learning, or trying to learn? (**Learning Intention**)
- How I will know when I have succeeded? (**Criteria for Success**)
- How I can judge the extent of the progress I have made and make further progress towards the learning goal? (**Feedback linked to the Learning Intention and the Criteria for Success**)

Assessment for learning is important because it uses these elements to support learning. It is, therefore, at the heart of the teaching and learning cycle.



Try out AfL

The initial phase in the implementation of AfL approaches involves teachers in making small but significant changes in their everyday teaching. The most important of these changes are the ones signalled above, and which you can try with any class group in any subject area.

Simply follow this step-by-step guide:

1. Choose any topic or section of the course you are teaching, or just today's lesson.
2. Decide on the key idea/s for that topic or lesson...the most important thing/s you want the students to learn. This will be your **Learning Intention**. (Keep it pretty simple for starters.)
3. At the start of the lesson tell the students what the learning intention is. Try to make it clear to them in language they can understand. You can do this in any number of ways - directly 'today's learning intention is...' or indirectly 'what we are going to learn today is...'.
 4. Give your students a quick opportunity to **re-state the learning intention in their own words**. This can take the form of getting them to discuss it or write it down very briefly. Don't spend too long on this.
 5. Now move on to **sharing the criteria for success**. This might sound a bit remote at first but it is, in fact, something every teacher does by showing students what good work 'looks like', or what to aim for when they are working alone, say on a homework assignment. Again, there are numerous ways of doing this but what is important here is actually the **sharing** of the criteria so that when you move on to the **feedback** stage the students know what they had been aiming for. A simple illustration:
 - **Learning Intention** - how to draw a good labelled diagram
 - **Criteria for success** - the different elements appear in the right order, the labels are clear, the technical terms are correct
 6. Having set up those first two steps, work through the rest of the lesson and when the students are doing an in-class or homework assignment and you want to give them feedback on their work (either individually or as a group, either oral or written feedback) make sure to re-visit briefly the criteria for success and most importantly **give your feedback by reference to those shared criteria**. It is important not to deviate from the shared criteria.
 7. When you are giving further feedback, especially written feedback, follow this pattern. Point out:
 - what the student got right
 - where the student went wrong
 - what the student needs to do to improve, in other words to get closer to the learning intention.
 8. This kind of feedback is genuinely supportive of learning and is far more valuable than giving marks or grades for work done.

What are the benefits?

The most obvious benefit for the students is the additional clarity that this approach brings to teaching and learning. Students receive feedback on their work which makes more sense to them because they understand the criteria against which their teacher was judging the work.

In recent research carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute for the NCCA students were strongly of the opinion that the best teachers were the ones who 'explained things clearly.' AfL in the classroom really makes teaching and learning clearer, and when students have this clear sense of where they are going their motivation increases.

All the teachers involved in the NCCA initiative to date agree that AfL improves the student-teacher relationship and that it enhances learner motivation. Findings in international studies go further and quantify the benefit to learners as a 12% improvement in examination grades, especially for those students who might have been labelled as 'reluctant learners.'

Is that all there is?

No. Sharing the learning intention and the criteria for success, and giving feedback related to those criteria are the lynchpins of AfL but they are not the only recommended approaches associated with it. Many other approaches have been tried out by teachers involved in the initiative, including:

- comment-only marking
- teachers thinking about their (and their students') use of questions
- student self-assessment
- peer assessment for students
- using learning logs and other ways of having students monitor and review their own learning.
- drawing on AfL when reporting to parents
- using exemplars of standard to inform student learning.

How can I find out more?

→ Log on to the NCCA website, at www.ncca.ie, where you will find a link to the Assessment for Learning pages.

→ Contact a member of the AfL Team

Hal O'Neill hal.oneill@ncca.ie

Peter Johnson peter.johnson@ncca.ie

John Halbert john.halbert@ncca.ie



Profile: Marion Lyon, NCCA Council member.

Home

We have been living in the parish of Virginia, Co Cavan, since 1981 (we live in the house my father was born in).

Family

I met my American husband while living in Spain and moved to America in 1975 after we were married. Our first child Shannon was born in North Carolina and we later lived in the Mojave Desert on the doorsteps of Joshua Tree National Park in California. Our youngest children Karen and Craig were born in Cavan and while it took me some time to adjust to living in rural Ireland after previously living in Dublin and America I have no intention of living anywhere else.

Motivation

I have always believed that parents have a duty to be as actively engaged with their child's education as they can. I have been fortunate that with the support of my husband I have been able to work for a greater participation of the voice of parents in the Irish educational system.

History

NPC-PP is an umbrella body for four constituent parent organisations at post-primary level. I was a member of PAVE (Parents Association for Vocational Education) from 1995 to 2004. I was appointed to the Board of Directors of NPC-PP in 2002 by PAVE. In 2004, when my time as a director ceased I was appointed NCCA Curriculum Officer by NPC-PP.

NCCA

I was nominated to represent the parents of post-primary students as a member of the Council in 2003. I had gained experience of the development of curriculum and assessment as a PE & SPHE curriculum committee member for primary education in the early '90's and currently represent post-primary parents on a number of committees, including: Senior Cycle, Junior Cycle, Guidance and Intercultural Education.

Council

As a member of Council, my function is to be satisfied that the recommendations the NCCA send to the Minister for Education and Science have been developed to adequately meet the needs of all our learners at early, primary and post-primary level. I have a responsibility to make sure the voice of post-primary parents is heard and that the NCCA works towards providing parents with more information on all aspects of their children's schooling.

Big issues

The biggest issue facing post-primary education is one of inclusion; our system of post-primary education is not meeting the needs two fifths of our learners. We must work sooner rather than later to develop programmes of education that adequately engage all our learners.

Hope for the future

That the advice sent to the Minister for Education and Science for the Development of Senior Cycle Education is implemented as a whole and is not cherry picked for the cheapest and easiest pieces to introduce. We need a quality educational system with quality participation for all our learners.

Post-primary teachers: all you ever wanted to know about the Primary School Curriculum



A common refrain in post-primary staffrooms during the month of September and beyond is "What do those children learn in primary school anyway?" Well, now you can find out by doing a quick internet search. Just go to www.ncca.ie where you will find a link to our Curriculum Online site. Choose Primary School Curriculum from the drop-down menu. The documents you will find include:

- An introduction to the Primary School Curriculum outlining the principles and aims of the Primary School Curriculum and providing an overview of the curriculum areas and subjects studied
- Curriculum documents for each subject of the Primary School Curriculum will enable a more in-depth examination of each subject. Each curriculum document provides a detailed outline of curriculum content at all four levels of primary school
- Teacher guidelines for each subject will give you information on the approaches and methodologies used, exemplars of sample lessons within the subject at the various class levels and information on how the subject is assessed.

What do children want from primary school?



As part of the NCCA's Primary Curriculum Review, we asked groups of children in six case study schools what they liked most and least about school. We also asked them if they could change anything about school, what they would change.

The responses of children from senior infants to sixth class suggested that they wanted more

- collaborative learning
- active learning
- autonomous learning
- authentic learning.

In this article, we unpack children's richly detailed descriptions of their school life and summarise what they told us they liked most about learning in primary school.

Collaborative learning

Children told us their experiences with group work ranged from using groups to organise desks and seating patterns, to using groups to learn collaboratively, which they enjoyed most of all.

Fourth class children explained that their teacher used group work to conserve resources in visual arts: 'When she puts us into groups in art, she doesn't want [us] to use all the paint.' Second class children told us that groups are used to organise different activity centres in one classroom: 'Sometimes we do sums and other people do weighing and then we swap around.'

Children told us that group work was also used for peer teaching: 'If you get stuck on something you just ask the teacher in the blue group.' They explained that their teachers also used groups for collaboration on a project: 'In

our group...one of us would be looking for information on the Internet and the other one would be looking for a picture...'

Children told us they liked having opportunities to learn with and from one another because, 'when you help someone...they will help you back.' A fourth class child emphasised this benefit of working together: 'I like working with other people better than working on my own because if you put two minds together you get more clever stuff and things like that.'

Only two children expressed some unhappiness with group work. One child explained that it wasn't always easy to share ideas, while another explained that collaboration was difficult when it lacked individual accountability: 'There was two people working really, really well and they didn't get to bring it [the project] home. The person who did barely anything on it got to bring it home.'

Active learning

Children told us they liked three different types of active learning: hands-on activities, physical activity, and play and games.

Children were enthusiastic about their use of concrete materials in maths. (In the NCCA's Primary Curriculum Review, 'practical work' was identified by 58% of teachers as their greatest success with the Mathematics Curriculum.) When asked what they might change, if anything, about school they explained they would like more hands-on learning: 'For science we had to bring in flies and we looked at them under the microscope. We'd definitely add that...to our new school.'

If they were designing a new school, children in fifth class said they would include more physical activity: 'not just games, but more working out, fitness and health.' A child in another school added: '[I'd like] more swimming because we only get to do it four times [a year].'



Children told us they really liked learning through play. Children in senior infants described how much they missed play in their new class: 'The only thing I don't like doing is when I can't play with the toys.' Children in fourth and fifth classes also talked enthusiastically about wanting more 'board games, table games and computer games' for learning in school.

While findings that tell us children want more play in their learning might not surprise us, their descriptions of *good* or *worthwhile* play might. According to children, learning through play provides opportunities to

- experience
- model
- simulate
- test
- hypothesize
- imagine
- succeed.

And that's probably very close to what we hope our children are doing in school!

Autonomous learning

Children in all six schools reported that they liked having control over their own learning by making choices about the content of their learning and the tools or activities they used in learning.

Children explained that being able to choose your own media and materials was very important in visual arts. They told us they also liked projects because they provided opportunities to choose topics: 'Projects are good because you have a choice and we like to pick our own things.' When given the choice, children in fourth class reported selecting very different project topics: 'We did a project on different types of people, some people did singers, artists, vets...'

Children reported that lack of choice diminished their enjoyment of learning. Their perception of the amount of control over learning afforded to them in certain subjects was often a barometer for how much they claimed to like those subjects. For example, children who expressed little enthusiasm for Irish focused on the monotony of doing so much prescribed written work every day.

Although children spoke positively about the amount of choice and control over their own learning which ICT afforded them they reported little use of ICT, which provides them with opportunities to choose the content, pace and methods of learning.

Authentic learning

Children told us they would like a greater focus on the real world in their learning in order to prepare them for the world outside the school.

In English, children reported that they liked using everyday learning materials including newspapers, magazines, posters and the novel. Similarly, they said they liked using maths resources and real-world contexts for learning in mathematics. They told us that they enjoyed 'the interesting problems, not like the ones where he goes off to the shop and you have to read it out of the book and do it by yourself.'



Interviewer:

Did you do any problems that were really interesting, where you had to figure out what was going on?

Child 1:

One day our teacher brought over this game and you had to go see how many times you'd roll the dice and how many times the number shows up again. We were going to look at the number six to see how many times it would roll again.

Child 2:

But we kept getting number 5! It's all about chance to see if you have 1 out of six chances, how many times would it happen. It was prob, probably...

Child 1:

Prob-a-bil-it-y! Like the probability you'd win the lotto!

Child 2:

As if! We couldn't even get a 6, and we had six numbers and loadsa chances...



Children's enthusiasm for learning which mirrors the real world, contrasted with their lack of enthusiasm in general for learning from class textbooks. They explained that textbooks aren't always relevant to the world outside the classroom. One fifth class child explained: 'I'd like more asking questions about what's going on in the world... there wasn't a lot of work in them [textbooks].' As a replacement for textbooks, they suggested that project work provided enjoyable opportunities for 'learning about real people and animals and things.'

As we interviewed children, listening to their experiences of school, we became more and more convinced of the value of talking with them as part of the review process and the NCCA intends to build this approach into future work.

Find out more about the Primary Curriculum Review and keep up with future developments by visiting our website.

Children work together for a common purpose

Children are actively involved in the learning process

Children have some control over their own learning

Children experience learning which is relevant to the real world



Making the 'Leaving' a better experience

Proposals for the future development of senior cycle education

The NCCA has been reviewing senior cycle education over the last two years and we have spent much of that time gathering the views of all those who have an interest in education - students, parents, teachers, principals, educational organisations, colleges of education and others.

How different might a new senior cycle be?

Following the consultation, the NCCA prepared a set of *Proposals for the Future of Senior Cycle Education in Ireland*, and these were presented to the Minister for Education and Science in April 2005. Due to the high public regard that exists for many aspects of the Leaving Certificate, we were careful in preparing these proposals to keep what is good about senior cycle, for example a broad range of subjects, the best of the transition year experience and the LCVF link modules. Rather than discarding what is there and starting from a clean slate the changes will involve building on the best of what we already have to improve the senior cycle experience of all of our students.

We recognise that while the Leaving Certificate suits some students quite well, it can be improved so that it meets the different needs of the many different types of students in our schools today. At the moment 20% of

students leave school before the end of senior cycle and a further 20% perform poorly in exams. The student population continues to become broader and more diverse and includes those experiencing educational disadvantage and students with special educational needs. Therefore the proposals for the future development of senior cycle education are designed to encourage more students to stay in school for longer and to make school at senior cycle a more interesting and rewarding experience for all students.

In her response, the Minister supported the *Proposals* as a foundation for moving forward with the reform of a senior cycle that would prioritise greater inclusion and equity and that would build on the strengths of the existing senior cycle. The NCCA is now preparing a plan of work for the further development of the various components of the advice, beginning with the review of subjects and their assessment, the key skills, and the development of transition units and short courses.

What would be new about this senior cycle?

Subjects

It is proposed that students would still select a broad range of subjects similar to what they have at the moment. However, the breadth of content would be reduced in all subjects to allow more time for students to develop a deeper understanding of the concepts and topics and to develop skills. Subjects would have two assessment events, for example this might involve a

written examination and a project or practical examination or it could involve two different types of examinations.

Short courses

Students would be able to select some short courses in areas such as Enterprise Education, Media Technology or Science and Society. Work has already begun on developing Enterprise Education as a first short course. A short course would be half the length of a subject in terms of class time. A short course would have one assessment event, for example a written examination or online assessment.

Transition units

It is proposed that transition units would be 45-hour units based on successful transition year modules already developed by many schools offering the Transition Year programme.

Key skills

Six key skills have been identified as being important for senior cycle students to develop. These would be developed through each subject, short course and transition unit. The six key skills are:

- learning to learn
- information processing
- personal effectiveness
- communication
- critical thinking
- working with others.

6

Learning management

Students would develop the skills required to manage their own learning through the greater emphasis on skills in subjects and short courses, through methodologies used in the classroom and through a greater variety of assessment methods. This would also be supported through a greater emphasis on learning guidance.

Assessment

The *Proposals* suggest that assessment methods for subjects be reviewed to ensure that they are more

relevant to the aims and objectives of the syllabuses. There would be a greater variety of assessment methods used across the range of subjects and short courses. These might include written examinations, orals, aurals, projects, portfolios and coursework. The use of digital portfolios and online assessment are also being considered. It is likely that all subjects will have two assessment events, one at the end of the programme of study and one earlier.

A new certificate

The new certificate of senior cycle education would provide an account of the student's achievements in subjects and short courses as well as recording his/her completion of transition units. The certificate would be available to all students, outlining their achievements to date, whenever they depart from senior cycle. This means a student who has only completed year 1 will get a certificate showing the transition units he/she has completed and any results he/she has achieved in one or more short courses.

Implementation

As the *Proposals* outlined here are being developed schools and teachers will be informed of the developments and an implementation strategy will be prepared to address issues such as professional development, resources and information for teachers, parents and students.



More information

The advice sent to the Minister for Education and Science in April, *Proposals for the Future Development of Senior Cycle Education in Ireland*, is available from www.ncca.ie/publications.

go to page 5 to read about our new website



Profile: John Halbert, Education Officer.



John Halbert is a member of the Cork contingent of Education Officers, and is a generous contributor to the healthy flow of banter that punctuates a typical working day at the NCCA.

His working week is split between Cork, where he is based for 3 days of each week, and Dublin where his southern wit is much appreciated.

Born and bred in the Glenville area of Cork, John went to school at Coláiste an Chroí Naofa and continued his education at the National College of Physical Education graduating in 1979. He spent two years working in an outdoor education centre in Connemara before moving on to teach at Coláiste Chríost Rí, in Cork. He became a part-time Education Officer with the NCCA in 1993 and was seconded from school in 1998 to direct a joint NCCA/DES project which, in turn, led to a full-time position with the NCCA.

As Education Officer for Physical Education, Post-primary, John helped to design the revised syllabus for junior cycle that is entering its third year of introduction to schools. He is also involved in the junior cycle review syllabus rebalancing project, assessment for learning and the senior cycle review.

John isn't phased by the variety of projects on which he is kept busy. 'I had been involved so long with the NCCA on a part-time basis that I knew what the job involved. Variety in work means you are kept invigorated all the time. There isn't the factor of sameness. Because of the size of the organisation - it is not a huge bureaucracy - there is the opportunity to get involved in all kinds of activities beyond subject, or even sectoral interests. It is really interesting as a job.'

Part of the job satisfaction comes from the possibility of effecting positive change. 'At one level - take review of senior cycle - I do feel involved in something that will genuinely change the face of education. We are responding to a need expressed by others but the process is tempered by the knowledge that the system is slow to change - and so it should be. Stability is important.'

While John's sense of humour has had an uplifting effect on his colleagues, he has also learned much from them, he says. 'One valuable experience is the habit of working in teams and groups - I find it really empowering and a very valuable learning experience. It's about collegiality and sharing, and it does work.'

info@ncca

Accessing the curriculum

Online and CD-ROM versions make planning easy

It's now almost six years since that big box of Primary Curriculum documents landed on teachers' desks and no doubt they are well thumbed and becoming increasingly battered with use and age. Or dare we say it, perhaps a few of them have disappeared altogether from the box, borrowed by overzealous colleagues or mislaid on the way from home to school to in-career development.

All is not lost, however. Did you know that it is possible to access and download all twenty-three curriculum documents at www.ncca.ie? Here on the NCCA's home page you will find a link to our Curriculum Online site at the right hand corner of the screen. When you follow the link, choose the Primary School Curriculum from a drop-down menu.

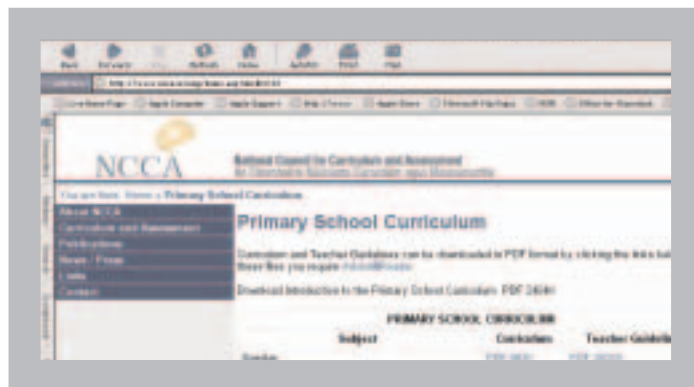
Planning with the curriculum online

Downloading the files also means that they can be copied and pasted from the curriculum document into planning documents. Teachers engaging in whole school curriculum planning and in classroom planning will find the copy and paste function invaluable in cutting down the time devoted to writing up plans.

Topic searching will also be a possibility as the site develops.

Where else can I find the Primary Curriculum documents?

The NCCA has also recently developed an interactive CD-ROM containing the Primary School Curriculum and Teacher Guidelines in Irish and English. The Department of Education and Science will be distributing copies to all primary schools so keep an eye out for it. Reprinting of the Primary School Curriculum in hard copy is also underway so, if an additional copy is needed in your school, it can be ordered from the Government publications office in Molesworth Street, Dublin.



Language and literacy in Irish-medium schools

A small number of Irish-medium schools will play a large part in helping the NCCA to develop guidelines to support the teaching and learning of language and literacy in English and Irish in Irish-medium schools (scoileanna Gaeltachta and scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge).

These schools are enabling us to develop portraits or profiles of practice in the teaching of language and literacy over the coming year.

The portraits of practice will be presented in a discussion paper, which will form the basis for consultation on key issues regarding the teaching and learning of language and literacy in Irish-medium schools towards the end of the school year 2005/6.

The guidelines will be finalised and made available to schools following this consultation. Meanwhile, you can chart the progress of this project on our website. Further updates will also appear in future issues of this newsletter.

Speaking of languages

- What exactly is Ireland's policy on languages in education?
- Do we assess the outcomes of language teaching and learning in the right ways?
- What would happen if language teaching was more integrated, if all languages were taught in relation to each other?
- What can we learn about language teaching and learning in other countries?

These, and other questions, are at the heart of the review of languages in post-primary education currently being undertaken by the NCCA.

Elements of the Review

So far, a discussion document, *Languages in the Post-Primary Curriculum*, has been circulated to all schools and is available to download from the NCCA website, at www.ncca.ie; a consultative survey (postal and online) has been carried out, and invitational seminars were held to give representatives of a wide range of language interests the opportunity to raise and debate key issues in the area.

What are the emerging issues?

The many issues that have arisen include:

- The discussion document sees the absence of what it calls a dedicated 'curriculum space' for languages as a big weakness in our teaching of languages. We should, the discussion document argues, be looking at language teaching in a more integrated way so that what our students learn in one language area is explicitly related to what they learn in their other language classes. This is especially relevant for Ireland where most of our students grow up through their primary schooling with two languages (Irish and English) and who take on a

third language (and sometimes a fourth) when they enter post-primary school.

- Interesting issues have come up in relation to the place of Irish in our schools. Why are the syllabus and examination the same for students for whom Irish is a first language (their L1) and for students for whom Irish is a second language (their L2)? Some people argue that this is unfair to both groups and that we should be looking to the possibility of having a separate L1 syllabus for Irish.
- In relation to modern languages, much of the focus of discussion so far has centred on the way we assess the outcomes through our examinations. Are we testing the right things in the right ways? Of particular interest are the tools developed by the Council of Europe and by the European Commission to support teaching, learning and assessment in languages: the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF), the European Language Portfolio (ELP) and Europass. You can find out more about these instruments from the Council of Europe website at www.coe.int.

Next Steps

Among the next steps under consideration at the moment are:

- a school-based project to examine the possibilities for greater integration in language teaching. This is to involve Irish, English, and other languages
- further research into the feasibility of developing an L1 syllabus for Irish
- a review of the assessment arrangements for modern languages with a view to achieving a greater match between the arrangements and the aims and objectives of the syllabus.

Want to know more?

Visit our website www.ncca.ie, where the Review of Languages can be found in the 'Post-Primary Education' section of the Curriculum and Assessment menu option. Regular updates will ensure that visitors to the site are kept fully informed of developments.

Assessment

The Minister for Education and Science recently welcomed the NCCA's proposals to develop a national report card template to provide information on children's progress, and to establish pilot projects with schools to examine best-practice in the transfer of assessment information from primary to post-primary schools.

In her response to the NCCA document, *Assessment in Primary Schools*, the Minister asked the NCCA to continue to develop practical guidelines for teachers on developing assessment to support teaching and learning in primary classrooms, including samples of students' work and

summaries of what children should be enabled to achieve at each level in the curriculum.

The Minister also welcomed our advice on standardised testing in compulsory schooling, including the recommendation that all children should take standardised tests in literacy and numeracy at the end of first or beginning of second class and the end of fourth or beginning of fifth class. She noted that important ground work was necessary before specifying when this requirement would be introduced.

You can follow the progress of these projects and access *Assessment in Primary Schools* on our website, where regular updates will be posted.

A 'big picture' approach to maths education

Addressing important issues in a comprehensive way

Do you teach mathematics, or a subject in which mathematics plays a part? Have you ever wondered how students connect the maths that they learn in primary school with what they meet at second level? Or, indeed, how they connect different mathematics topics across various subjects, or how they cope with different teaching and learning approaches to the same topic? If so, the review of mathematics education that the NCCA is conducting will be of interest.

What is the review?

This is a review of post-primary mathematics education. We are not talking here of syllabus revision, but rather taking an in-depth look at the kind of mathematics education that students experience at second level—a 'big picture' approach. Doing this will allow us to address important issues in a comprehensive way. Therefore, if or when syllabus revision is required, we will have a clear understanding of the reasons for such change and the direction that it should take.

Why is a review being conducted?

The philosophy and methodology now being adopted in mathematics at primary school is different from what has traditionally been the approach at second level. Perhaps as a result, mathematics is one of the subjects that students entering the junior cycle are finding difficult as evidenced by research commissioned by the NCCA and conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI).

While teachers of Junior Certificate mathematics have received support in changing the emphasis in mathematics classes to one of understanding the concepts and procedures involved, such change does not of itself entail any significant departure in the kind of mathematics that is taught and learned at second level. Nor does it address the attitudes that persist in relation to mathematics among students, teachers, parents and society at large (where, for example, it seems to be quite acceptable to say that 'I can't do mathematics', yet this would not be the case in most

other subjects). There is a need to tackle more fundamental questions about mathematics education at second level, and its appropriateness in terms of the knowledge and skills required by students in the twenty-first century. The review gives us an opportunity to do just that.

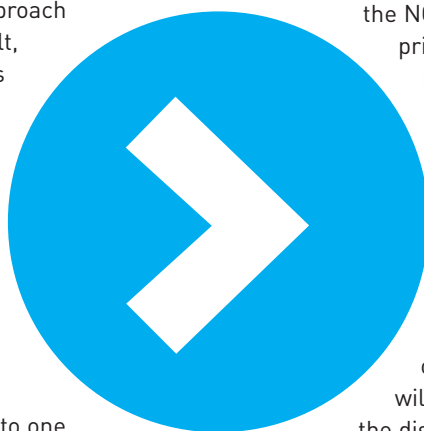
There is an annual public outcry over exam results and the numbers of students who 'fail' mathematics, especially in the Leaving Certificate. Even where students who are successful go on to third level courses involving mathematics, some are finding the going difficult.

Recent international assessments, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have shown that Irish students are not very familiar with a problem-based approach to mathematics, nor with its application in real-life contexts. This is particularly the case for the more able students. We need to be able to challenge them, while also meeting the needs of those for whom mathematics is already a challenging subject.

The NCCA discussion paper

To facilitate consideration of the broader issues involved, the NCCA has prepared a discussion paper on post-primary mathematics education. A companion paper that looks at international trends and practice in mathematics education will also be published (both discussion papers can be downloaded from our website).

Consultations on the issues raised in the discussion paper will be held with various groups and organisations over the coming months, but we also welcome individual observations and comments. The NCCA website will provide a regular update on the outcomes of the discussions and consultations. A report will be published on the consultative phase of the review, with recommendations for future action. You will have an opportunity to make a response when the consultation paper is published.

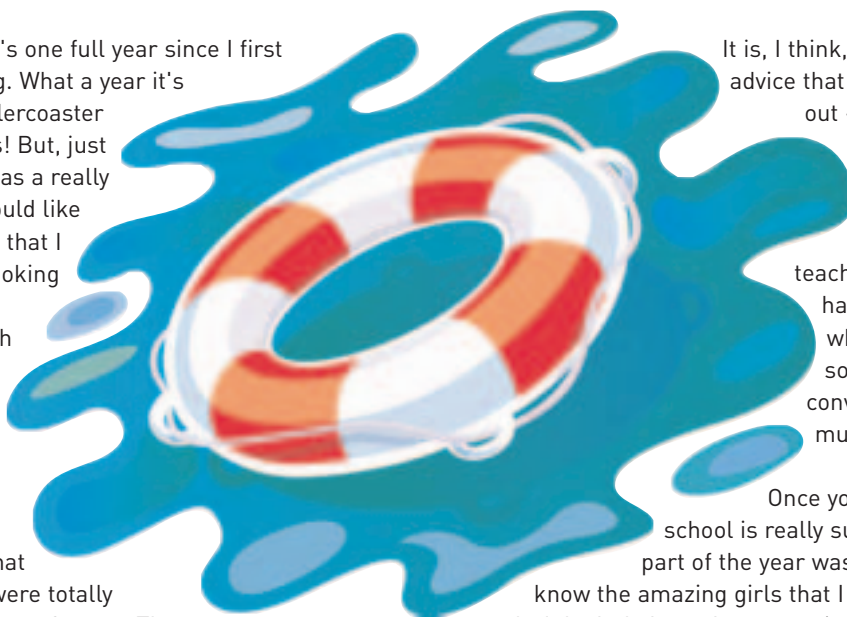


Not waving, but drowning: confessions of a rookie teacher

I can't believe it's one full year since I first started teaching. What a year it's been too - a rollercoaster of many colours! But, just before I say it was a really tough year, I would like to make it clear that I am genuinely looking forward to my second year with confidence, energy and enthusiasm.

This time last year, however, I have to admit that these feelings were totally displaced by bouts of terror. The as-yet unknown syllabus, classes, programmes and students all conspired to turn me into a nervous wreck. I felt less than fully prepared, even after a year tangling with the HDip (or should I say especially following a year tangling with the HDip!?) This feeling of being thrown in at the deep end, coupled with misgivings about my capabilities in the classroom, rose to form a tidal wave of doubt. I foolishly rode that wave for some time without letting anyone see how close I was to drowning. I attempted to find my way unaided because I thought that was what you were supposed to do and I didn't want anyone to think I don't know it all, now did I? And so it was a revelation when I finally started asking questions.

My colleagues, particularly the older and wiser ones, were unflinching in their helpfulness and encouragement. At times I felt like I was asking them really basic, banal questions but they always treated each request for advice as if it were about to reveal an amazing insight. And with their help, I gradually managed to get to grips with the curriculum and find my way around both syllabuses and students without too many mishaps.



It is, I think, the most important piece of advice that I'd give to a teacher starting out - do not be afraid to ask for help. My only regret is that I didn't realise this from the beginning. The most confident, able and gifted teachers assured me that they had felt exactly the same when they first started, and some even managed to convince me that they had felt much worse!

Once you have the asking knack, school is really such good craic. The best part of the year was the students and getting to know the amazing girls that I have the pleasure to teach. As I don't do 'scary' very convincingly I ignored the advice 'don't smile 'til Christmas' and trusted in the good nature of the girls by being myself. This really paid off and I'd advise any other teacher starting out to leave off the mask. Just be yourself.

I derived great enjoyment from witnessing the students developing and blossoming, in terms of both confidence and talent. If at any stage I could feel somewhat responsible, the pleasure swelled tenfold. Spending time with them on school tours and outside the classroom was especially rewarding and fun and I was amazed at how protective and proud of them I felt.

Finally, am I glad I became a teacher? A resounding YES to that one! I'd say a job in which you can laugh every day is a job to return to and cherish.

Aoife McArdle teaches English and Italian at Coláiste Bríde, Clondalkin, Dublin 22.



Share your views...

We have reserved space in our next issue to accommodate letters, suggestions, contributions, questions and queries that we are hoping to receive from teachers about future editions of info@ncca.

This could be seen as an opportunity to:

- tell us what topics you would like to see featured in our next issue
- wax lyrical about our website, or tell us if it's driving you crazy trying to find what you want.

Whatever way you look at it, it's an opportunity.

All contributions will be gratefully received, either by email: newsletter@ncca.ie, by fax: **01 6617180**, or through the postal service to :
Editor, info@ncca, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 24 Merrion Square, Dublin 2.