info@ncca

Let's play!

Learning through play

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and much more...

NCCA

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

welcome...

....to the 2007/2008 school year, and the seventh issue of info@ ncca. For most people who work in education, September is our 'new year' and we cling to the memories of the summer holidays to get us through the darkening evenings.

Flicking through this issue might give the impression that the editorial team is clinging on to those memories just a little too tightly. Play? Mobile phones? Neither of these can have a place in real classrooms, right? Well, read our article and see what you think. The role of play in early childhood education is widely accepted, but does moving from an early childhood setting to an infant classroom mean that play is relegated to the school yard, or to life outside school? As a child moves through the education system, and they learn more, is there an assumption that they need to play less....?

If your school currently has a stockpile of confiscated mobile phones, then the piece about the work by the NCCA and NCTE on using mobile phones to support teaching and learning in Irish is a must read. The project is based on a simple premise – connect the technology for which the students have the greatest enthusiasm, and the subject for which they have considerably less enthusiasm and see what happens. The phones were deployed first in second year Irish classes in Ratoath College in Co. Meath. Read about what happened when students were actively encouraged to use phones in class!
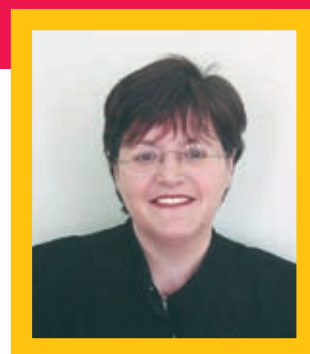
For teachers coming back to work in primary schools, especially with second and fifth classes, this school year poses a new challenge – standardised testing. The NCCA primary team has put together a simple introduction, for those who are not ready just yet to get to grips with the more extensive Guidelines!

We will be interested to get your feedback on the piece on science, which provides an overview of the science curriculum and student learning in science from primary into post-primary school. Feedback on earlier issues of info@ncca showed that primary teachers were interested in finding out about post-primary curriculum, but post-primary teachers were less keen to read what happened in primary school. Focusing on one subject, and on how best to support student progress in science should attract attention from both sides of the primary/post-primary divide! We await your comments....

Anne Looney
Chief Executive
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

what's in this issue

Supporting teaching and learning...

supporting **teaching** and **learning**

updates

Let us know!

In this edition of info@ncca we point you in the direction of some of the online resources that are available to you on our websites.

www.ncca.ie
provides information on our ongoing work.

www.curriculumonline.ie
is where you will find all the syllabus and curriculum documents to help you in planning your work for the year.

We would love to hear from you about features of the sites that you may have found helpful and we especially welcome any suggestions for improvement. All comments to: **newsletter@ncca.ie**

Subject factsheets

In a bid to smooth the passage between primary and post-primary school, the NCCA is compiling a series of factsheets about all the subjects in junior cycle for 6th class students and their parents/guardians. The factsheets aim to provide clear, relevant and 'student friendly' information on the different subjects in junior cycle. The information will refer not only to what the subject is about but will also give some detail on the kinds of learning that take place and the different learning activities that might be included. We hope that these factsheets will help students feel more confident in making the move from primary to post-primary school. They should also support students and their parents/guardians in making choices about the subjects they wish to study in junior cycle. Look out for the factsheets in the new year, when they will be delivered to schools.

Framework for early learning

The *Framework for Early Learning* is nearing completion. It will be available on the NCCA website later this autumn and primary schools and early childhood settings will receive their copy in 2008.

If you are interested in reading about some of the research which has informed the Framework, you can check out the website for two of the background papers:

→ Children's early learning and development
→ Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood.

Two more papers will be uploaded shortly. These explore the use of play and assessment in supporting children's learning and development.

ACTION website

In our last issue of **info@ncca**, you heard about our new website – **ACTION**. **ACTION** stands for *Assessment, Curriculum and Teaching Innovation on the Net*. If you log on to **http://action. ncca.ie** you can browse through some samples of student and teacher work. You will also find examples of good practice in the classroom in video, images and various multimedia. To start with, we have included materials from three NCCA projects:

→ English as an Additional Language (EAL),
→ Assessment for learning (AFL)
→ ICT Framework.

We'll be adding more to the site over time. Log on to watch, read and listen to what's available!

English as an additional language

You may remember us pointing you to the draft guidelines for *English as an Additional Language in Irish Primary Schools* (EAL) on the NCCA website?

Now photo and video footage as well as samples of student and teacher work which we gathered in schools, are available on our ACTION website (see above). The materials gathered complement the *teaching methods* section of the EAL guidelines, so you can *see* rather than just *read* the contents. Go on, get clicking!

What's happening at senior cycle?

A question we are often asked by teachers and others when we mention the NCCA!

Well now you have the answers at your fingertips on the new website area especially created for Senior Cycle at **www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle**. Log on for up-to-date information on all aspects of the senior cycle developments - it's quick and easy to find your way around. Find out more about plans for your subject, key skills, the school network, transition units, short courses and lots more.

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

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Beep…

message received!
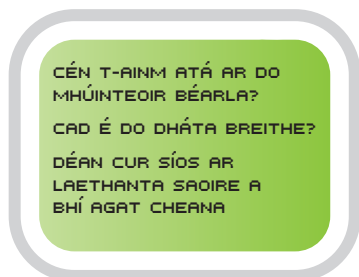
Mobile phones in the classroom

Did you ever think you would see the day when we would be welcoming mobile phones into our classrooms? Well, a pilot project trialling the use of mobile phones and text-based web chat may have changed our perspectives on their use as learning tools…

The NCCA, along with the NCTE (National Centre for Technology in Education), has been running a pilot project with three Irish teachers and their second year students at Ratoath College in Co. Meath, which examined the use of mobile phones and text-based web chat for teaching and learning Irish.

How were the mobile phones used?

Each student was supplied with a mobile phone which they used to

→ dial an Irish question prompt system
→ receive Irish vocabulary text messages each day.

> CÉN T-AINM ATÁ AR DO MHÚINTEOIR BÉARLA?
>
> CAD É DO DHÁTA BREITHE?
>
> DÉAN CUR SÍOS AR LAETHANTA SAOIRE A BHÍ AGAT CHEANA

Here's how it worked. Students were given the number for the Irish question prompt system and when they dialled it and logged in using a student number and PIN, they were presented with a random set of ten questions from a pool of twenty questions. These questions were developed by the Irish teachers taking part in the pilot project. Students also received a vocabulary word per day, randomly chosen from a pool of words and phrases determined by their teachers.

> 1 MESSAGE RECEIVED
>
> FOIREANN = A) TEAM,
>   B) PLAYER,
>   C) RESULT

How did the teachers work with the technology?

Teachers logged on to a web-based interface to

→ listen to their students' responses
→ provide feedback
→ send vocabulary text messages.

All responses and feedback were saved, so the teacher could record and print a feedback sheet for students on their responses. Alternatively, students could download a podcast of their responses with their teacher's feedback included.

Text-based web chat

The second type of technology being investigated was text-based web chat. This wasn't like your usual open internet chat room, it was a space students logged into during fixed periods when they were monitored by their teachers.
The focus of each chat session was provided by the teacher –

→ a movie or song to discuss
→ a theme for a story to be written between chat partners
→ conversation between a shopkeeper and an irate customer
→ how to use your text message vocabulary as often as possible in a meaningful way.

As students chatted, each sentence was monitored by their teacher. All chat conversations were saved, so that the teacher could go back and provide feedback for each student on their input. A similar feedback sheet to that provided on students' responses on the mobile phone was also provided for chat conversations.

The mobile phones and text-based web chat proved popular with teachers and students alike. Teachers found that the technology allowed them to hear responses from every student, even those who are usually quieter in class. They also found the web-based interface more interactive than using a red pen for providing feedback. Students said they 'weren't as nervous' providing responses to questions on the phone as they would be in front of their teacher and class.

Keep your eye on **info@ncca** for future updates and if you hear a text message being received in your school…it may just be today's vocabulary arriving!

Key skills

How was it for the students?

In the last issue of **info@ncca** (April 2007) we shared the feedback from a group of teachers from the school network who have been working on embedding key skills in their teaching of Leaving Certificate subjects. Thus far, it has been a productive exercise for all concerned and the consensus is that it can provide benefits for both teachers and students. But do the students agree? Time now to hear how they have been reacting to the changes in practice.

In an effort to get students to think critically and creatively (one of the key skills), teachers moved from handing out notes, using the overhead and 'chalk and talk' to asking them to source information themselves and to write their own notes. Initially they wrote far too much and it became evident that they did not possess the basic skill of note taking. Practice was needed.

'In the past I was taking down too much information and not just the necessary. With the help of my teacher I now know the right amount of information to write down.'

They also needed practice in looking up information from newspapers, magazines and the internet and even in using a dictionary. However, after a relatively short time they became adept at both note taking and sourcing information to the extent that they preferred their own notes and reported that 'teacher's notes can just pile up and get confusing'.

Typically students worked on their own, making sense of the information and recording the key points. Then, in pairs or groups, they explained their thinking and listened to the points that other people made. In this way they were getting three opportunities to interact with the information. This method is an excellent way to differentiate learning, with the more able students being able to extend themselves and the less able having the key points reinforced for them in a number of ways. Interestingly, students liked working in groups and honing their work into key points. One student commented that 'you understand and it is not just notes in a hardback'. On further analysis it was apparent that it was the time to process the information and to engage with the information that motivated them.

'I liked working in a group because you can help each other when you get stuck. You can also get many different ideas.'

It was clear that the students were motivated to do well in 'the leaving' and felt that taking more responsibility for their learning gave them a better understanding of the content. A French student commented,

'I like being able to research my topic and present it in a way I liked most. I found when I researched a topic myself, I learned it better. The research clarified many questions I had.'

Another student explained that, 'by making my own notes I feel I could do it better and know what information in the chapters would be the best to remember'

Students used different methods of note taking and quite a few used mind mapping. Both teachers and students agree that 'being given' a mind map does not work. What does work is when the student sources the information and develops an understanding of it before then creating his/her own mind map. One teacher commented:

'Mind maps and diagrams are helpful for the weaker pupils as it gives them a defined structure to hang the learning on. However, working on their own is important as pace cannot be determined by anyone but themselves.'

Some students found drawing diagrams a help:

'I received information from books, school, internet, charts, etc. We collected our information, broke it down....in a way it would stay in our heads, for example diagrams (labelled), bullet points of important information.'

Giving students responsibility for their own learning has proved to be a positive experience for those involved in this school network exercise. With teachers reporting that classes became more enjoyable and students that learning became more interesting, we will leave the last word to a teacher who sums up the experience thus:

'Students seemed to appreciate the different ways I tried to present information to them, e.g. using PowerPoint/newspaper articles, and they also had to do an activity where they decoded DNA into a protein. It definitely makes me want to move away from the traditional 'notes' based method of teaching because I was getting positive feedback and, although it meant the class were talking more, it was mostly about the topic being taught.'

For further information on developments at senior cycle: **www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle**.

Concept Maps

A concept map is a useful tool to help students come up with new ideas or make sense of complex topics. It helps students to think critically and creatively.

Why use concept maps?

→ To generate ideas (brainstorming)
→ To communicate complex ideas
→ As a way to organise notes
→ To aid learning by integrating new and old knowledge
→ To assess understanding or diagnose misunderstanding
→ As a study or revision aid.

Stages in the construction of a concept map

→ Brainstorming with a class or in small groups to list the important words/ symbols/ pictures.
→ Organise the words and symbols into groups.
→ Decide how to lay out the map.
→ Link the concepts with words or phrases.
→ Go back and rearrange after discussion so that it all makes sense.
→ Each individual draws up their version of the map.

Planning a class using mapping

→ Teacher needs to model the process.
→ All students must understand the information.
→ Begin with a simple topic and build up to more complex topics.
→ No single correct answer, every student's map is 'good' for them. It is a personal learning document.

Advantages of mapping for students

→ Clearly defines the central idea
→ Indicates the relative importance of each idea
→ Links ideas especially in essay writing
→ All information for topic on one page
→ Recall and review more efficient
→ Can add new information later
→ See complex relationships among ideas
→ See contradictions, paradoxes and gaps in the material
→ Can be used as a discussion tool and to share learning with others.

For more information and links to free software see:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concept_map

Differentia

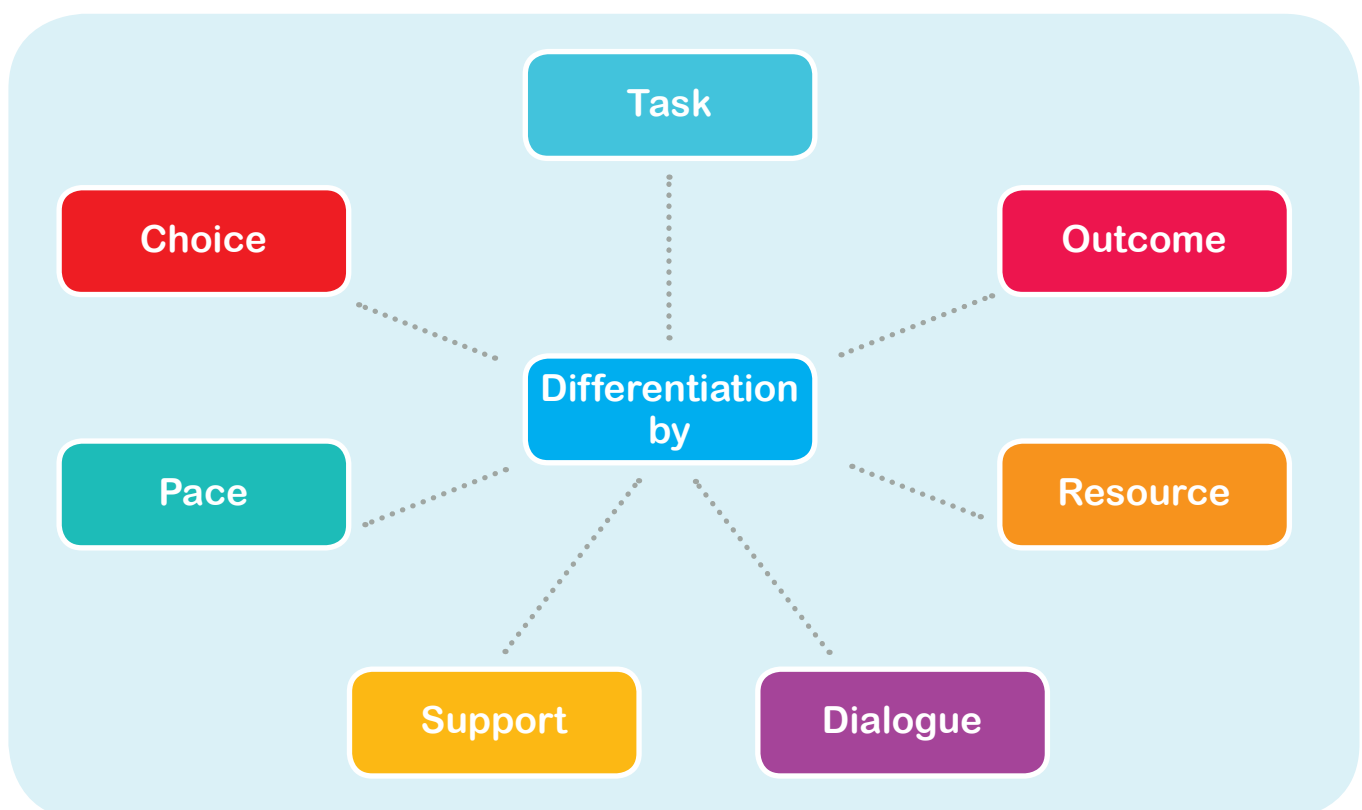> " **Exceptionally able students will always do well whatever the circumstances!** "

> " **Exceptionally able students are so clever they do well with or without special education provision!** "

The typical picture of the exceptionally able student, as evidenced above, is often one of a hard-worker who diligently completes work and is perhaps known as the class 'brain box'. This model defines the student as self-reliant and not in need of any special attention. However, in reality the picture is much more complex than that.

Exceptionally able students are not a homogeneous group and even identifying them can be a problem. Once a teacher has recognised that she has an exceptionally able student in her class, the response is often to presume that he/she will always excel, without any special provision. But, far from leaving them to get on with their own work, students who are classified in this way belong on a continuum of students with special educational needs. However, in most cases their needs are best met as part of the normal differentiated classroom provision.

If 'differentiation' is to teach to the differing needs of individual students, in the case of exceptionally able students it should allow for advanced learning opportunities both within and beyond the curriculum. Differentiated teaching may seem a daunting task but it can be planned for and organised in the classroom in many ways. Below, we introduce you to some of the ways in which you can help to structure learning for exceptionally students by addressing their particular needs.

```
                    Task


  Choice                          Outcome


           Differentiation
                 by

  Pace                            Resource


        Support       Dialogue
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tion

By task

A variety of tasks are set which relate to the same activity. Exceptionally able students can begin at a higher level, miss the first activities or move through the work at an increased rate. This may also mean missing out some of the work.

Benefits

Exceptionally able students can make rapid progress and work can be better matched to their abilities while less able students can also make appropriate progress. The tasks can be phased so those exceptionally able students move on to increasingly more difficult work.

By outcome

The same content, material, stimulus or task is used for all the students in the class. This works at its best when the outcome of the work is not prescribed or when the task is open-ended.

Benefits

Different outcomes can be sought so that exceptionally able students can extend their thinking. The class can work as individuals or in groups.

By resource

Different types of materials are provided to different members of the class. All the class might be answering the same questions or researching the same information but the resources used will be matched to ability. Less demanding work may have less dense text with more illustrations. More demanding resources may have more dense text and a richer, more complex structure. Exceptionally able students can use more demanding word banks, data files or image banks.

Benefits

Exceptionally able students can research the ideas in greater depth

and their thinking skills will be extended. Less able students will be able to achieve at a similar level as they have less complex resources.

By dialogue

The most regularly used form of differentiation is by dialogue. Exceptionally able students often only need to have a basic outline of the work explained to them. This can be a quite sophisticated explanation which sets high expectations and assumes high levels of understanding. Less able students will need a full explanation, with more detailed examples and perhaps even further illustration of the ideas and expectations. The use of targeted questioning to elicit a range of different responses, including high-level responses from exceptionally able students and small group discussions, can also raise the challenge.

Benefits

Exceptionally able students can make more progress by being encouraged to develop a higher level of understanding and moving on to more demanding tasks as soon as they are ready. Differentiated language is used by the teacher to challenge the thinking of the exceptionally able and to increase the level of thinking and discussion.

By support

All students need an equal amount of support from the teacher. For exceptionally able students it is the nature of the support that should be varied. The support time available to exceptionally able students may well be used to question the student, to encourage them to explore ideas more deeply, to introduce alternative ways of approaching the work or exploring extension into ICT systems.

Benefits

The work of teachers is better targeted to individual needs and will increase the level of interaction.

By pace

Some exceptionally able students thrive when asked to work at a fast pace, as they do not need all the small steps to be explained. They can deduce for themselves the next step in a process. They are often able to master complex tasks quickly and like to move rapidly through the early stages. In contrast, there are occasions when exceptionally able students actually work more slowly and painstakingly produce work of greater length, detail or complexity. This is often the case in creative or imaginative work.

Benefits

When asked to work at pace, some exceptionally able students move onto high-level work quickly and therefore stretch their abilities. By contrast, when they are allowed more time to complete tasks they can achieve increased levels of attainment and more highly 'finished' or inventive outcomes.

By choice

Given the opportunity to select work for themselves students can choose activities that they find more interesting and matched to their abilities. Students can be given an opportunity to select from a range of starting points, materials, subjects or processes. They may also choose to extend or adapt the set work themselves.

Benefits

Exceptionally able students can make choices and work with ideas that are well matched to their interests, enthusiasms and abilities.

In this short article we have been able to offer you just a brief glimpse into the ways in which differentiated teaching can help exceptionally able students. By now your school will have received a copy of the *Guidelines for teachers of exceptionally able students,* from which this advice has been taken. You can also download the guidelines from the NCCA website, at **www.ncca.ie/publications**.

Standardised

With the new school year started, you may already be thinking about using standardised tests with your second or fifth class. With that comes the thought of marking and scoring the tests... and the task of interpreting what the scores are actually telling you.... then there's the job of sharing the information with parents..... welcome back to reality! Never fear, however, help is at hand as we guide you through the process. And the good news is that we won't be asking questions at the end.

What exactly is a standardised test?

In many ways it is what it says on the box. A standardised test is a test that is administered, scored and interpreted in the same way no matter when or where it is given. Its purpose is to find out in a formal way how each child is progressing compared to his/her classmates or age group. Once tests are administered under these conditions (which are set out in the test manuals) standards of performance called *norms* allow us to make comparisons between the children.

What makes standardised testing topical is, of course, the fact that schools now have to administer them in reading and mathematics to children either at the end of first class or at the beginning of second and again at the end of fourth class or at the beginning of fifth class.

Things to remember about standardised test scores

Having tested the children in your class, you have a set of reading and/or mathematics results before you. What do you do with these? Well, before doing anything with them, there are a few points to be borne in mind:

→ First, all assessment by the teacher should ultimately benefit the child.
→ Second, the standardised test result is just one piece of assessment information you have about the child's learning.
→ Third, at present we have standardised tests only in literacy and numeracy. However, the fact that the child's literacy skills enable him/her to access the full curriculum has significant implications for the child's learning in school.

When you first review the test outcomes, you will usually look at the

spread (or distribution) of scores and you hope to see a spread of scores across the class. In fact, if you have taught the class during the year, you will often be able to predict the children whose scores will appear at the upper and lower ends of the list as well as towards the middle.

It can be dispiriting to see a majority of children with low average scores after you have worked hard with the class all year. Yet it is important to look at patterns in the test results, not only in the performances of individual children, but also of the class and of the school overall. While you can analyse the results in order to identify any within-class trends, the whole staff will also find it worthwhile to look at patterns that may be evident across the school.

Reporting test results to parents

As you know, one of the challenges in sharing standardised test scores with parents is to do this in a way which helps them to understand fully what the score actually means in the context of the child's day-to-day progress in the classroom. But, once again, help is at hand. The NCCA has developed a leaflet for parents which explains the meaning of standardised test scores and which can be downloaded from our

RAW SCORE ↓	This is a simple count of the number of items for which the child has supplied correct answers. It is of little use in reporting on a child's performance.
STANDARDISED SCORE ↓	Standard scores are transformations of raw scores, and usually range between 55 and 145, with an average of 100
PERCENTILE RANK ↓	The percentile rank indicates the percentage of the relevant class or age group which has scored equal to or lower than this child's score. It does not mean the percentage of test items the child answered correctly.
STEN SCORE	STEN scores are a ten-point scale with 1 representing the lowest category and 10 the highest. These are derived from Standard Scores.

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testing

Its place in teaching and learning

website, at **www.ncca.ie**. You may find this a useful aid when discussing the scores with parents.

The test scores themselves can be expressed in a number of ways, but the most accessible way (as the NCCA advises in the *Assessment Guidelines* currently issuing to schools) may be the reporting of Sten scores. These can be equated with levels of achievement, as shown in the table below:

The use of the descriptors here, along with the Sten score, will make the task of explaining the child's result to parents significantly easier, as in the examples on page 12, which show how different ranges of results may be communicated. The first describes the reporting of a 'high average' Sten score in mathematics at the end of fourth class and the second, a 'low average' in English reading at the end of first class.

The teacher will have a record of the child's scores, including raw score, standardised score and percentile rank, but the results will be most effectively communicated to parents by reporting the Sten score and its relevant descriptor.

Sten scores and descriptors

Standard Score Range	Sten Score Range	Descriptor	Coverage
115 and above	8-10	Well above average	Top one-sixth of pupils
108-114	7	High average	One-sixth of pupils
93-107	5-6	Average	Middle one-third of pupils
85-92	4	Low average	One-sixth of pupils
84 and below	1-3	Well below average	Bottom one-sixth of pupils

Example 1
Niall completed a standardised test in Mathematics in June at the end of fourth class. His scores were as follows:

Raw score	Standardised score	Percentile rank	Sten score
55	113	81	7

At the parent/teacher meeting, Niall's teacher Eamonn explained the test results to Niall's mother. He told her that Niall had done very well on the test. A Sten score of 7 was a 'high average' result, he said, and was consistent with the results of standardised tests over the previous few years as well as Niall's performance on classroom tests set by the teacher.

Eamonn was able to identify problem solving as an area that required some attention for Niall. The evidence for this was in a number of incorrect test items as well as in Eamonn's notes of regular classroom observations. Eamonn explained to Niall's mother that she could provide help to Niall at home. He explained a few problem-solving strategies that Niall used in class and could be encouraged to use in his homework. He added that he would forward his advice on this, as well as the test results, to Niall's teacher in fifth class.

Example 2
Ciara completed a standardised test in English Reading at the end of first class. Her scores were as follows:

Reading Vocabulary	Reading Comprehension	Total Reading
RS SS Sten PR	RS SS Sten PR	RS SS Sten PR
15 88 4 21	14 87 4 19	29 88 4 21

RS = Raw Score   SS = Standard Score   PR = Percentile Ranking

When the teacher met Ciara's father, she explained the test results. She told him that Ciara's result indicated that she may have need for supplementary teaching in English, particularly in reading vocabulary, as her Sten score here would be classified as low average. Her score on comprehension was similar and would also be low average. The teacher said that she would recommend that Ciara meet with the Learning Support teacher after the summer for a diagnostic test, which would give a clearer picture of her learning needs in this area.

We promised not to ask any questions at the end of this article, but you might have some for us.
Send them to **newsletter@ncca.ie**.

> **When the teacher met Ciara's father, she explained the test results. She told him that Ciara's result indicated that she may have need for supplementary teaching in English, particularly in reading vocabulary...**

Let's play Learning through play

A new school year, and a sea of new faces in front of you as junior infants set out on their big adventure. New places bring exciting experiences for these small school-goers. Sometimes these experiences are strange and daunting but they don't need to be. As infant teachers, one thing we know about 4, 5 and 6 year olds is that they love to play. And what better way to support their learning than through play?

> **As a teacher you have a very important role to play in supporting and extending children's learning through play…**

What? Play with 30 infants in my classroom? How will I organise it so that total chaos won't reign? What will their parents think? Or maybe you are worried that if they play all day instead of working they won't be learning? In many respects play *is* a child's work, and if you take it seriously, then children and their parents will also value it.

As teachers we don't need convincing of the value of play in early childhood education. Play is the cornerstone of early learning and is a child's right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992). The *Primary School Curriculum* and the *Framework for Early Learning* (soon to be completed) both highlight play as a natural way for children to learn. In addition to this, as part of the *Framework for Early Learning*, the NCCA commissioned a background paper on *Play as a context for early learning and development.* This paper, which is available to download from **www.ncca.ie/publications**, highlights the critical importance of play, both indoors and outdoors, for children's holistic development. The paper also cites children's views on the subject. When asked about play, children talk about the importance of having fun, being with friends, freely choosing activities, playing with open-ended materials and being outdoors.

As a teacher you have a very important role to play in supporting and extending children's learning through play. Remember:

→ Play and first-hand experiences are important for children's well-being.

→ Play helps children to make connections and to make sense of their experiences and their world.
→ Through play, children build on and extend at school what they have learned at home, at their childminder's and/or early years setting.
→ Relationships and language are key components of play.
→ What children learn is connected to where, how and with whom they learn. Play in classrooms varies depending on the environment, the children, their families, their social and cultural background and on you – their teacher. Your attitudes, beliefs and teaching styles influence children and their play.

→ Children need to experience a variety of different types of play in order to develop to their full potential. We provide some ideas on the different types of play later in the article.
→ Having a mix of adult-initiated and child-initiated play activities is important; being able to choose and initiate activities through free play is important.
→ Children need to play as individuals, in pairs, in small groups and occasionally in a large group.

This article provides suggestions for organising your classroom and for shaping learning activities and experiences so that you can capitalise on children's love of and need for play.

Making play part of your daily routines and activities

Play, especially with larger groups of children or in a multi-class situation, requires careful organisation. Below are some practical ideas which might help.

→ If space is tight, divide the children into small groups. Have only one group painting or playing with the sand/water at a time. Rotate activities on a daily/weekly/fortnightly basis.

→ Make the most of all the pairs of hands that are available to you – parents, people on work experience, transition year students. Extra help really extends play opportunities.

→ Divide your room into interest areas or corners for example messy/art/junk area, pretend area, quiet/library area, music and movement area, construction area. Boundaries can be set by using low shelves or dividers. Label areas with photos and, if possible, written signs in the languages of all the children in the class.

→ Add new and interesting equipment/materials regularly. This doesn't have to be costly. Rolls of wall paper are great for painting! Recycle household items for the pretend area – a broken hairdryer with the lead cut off, a real measuring tape, an old tea or coffee pot. Buy some baby clothes from the charity shop. Think safety! Check for rough or pointed edges and loose parts or buttons.

→ Children need to play indoors and outdoors. Why not move some activities outside? What about painting outdoors or creating an outdoor café for role-play? Most of the things you do inside can also be done outside (even in cold weather) - P.E., group art projects, playing with the sand, developing an infants' garden, searching for mini beasts. More space means more fun.

→ Make tidying-up after play easier for everyone by always storing things in the same place, in areas that are accessible to the children. Use storage boxes and baskets, and clearly label with pictures and words (again in the languages of all the children). Make tidying-up part of the learning experience by singing a tidy-up song or by counting the boxes that are being filled.

The tables on the right outline some of the types of play children enjoy, along with ideas for organising activities.

Types of play	Links to the Primary School Curriculum	What equipment/ resources do I need to provide for the different types of play?	What do I need to do to promote the different types of play?	How can I involve parents?	Sample activities/experiences
Pretend/imaginary/ role/fantasy/small world play	Language Mathematics SPHE SESE Arts education	Props from home (real kitchen equipment, a mirror), restaurant, flower shop, office (old mobile phones), post office, travel agents, hospital equipment Dress up clothes Dolls, puppets, soft toys Small world materials – people, cars, animals, train sets. Culturally diverse materials–cooking utensils, food packages, clothes.	Observe and take part when invited or when you can make a positive contribution. Build on, don't direct. Extend and change around the props so that different scenarios can happen. Make sure all children feel included and see their family/ community experiences reflected.	Ask them for props. Tell them what is going on and what children are learning. Take photos and write stories about the play that children can take home. Invite parents in to talk about their jobs – farmer, fire-fighter, nurse, lollipop person, chip-shop owner.	Set up a shoe shop with different shoes, money, a cardboard measure. Children can measure feet, count money, try on different shoes. Create a doctor's surgery/hospital. Children can take on roles such as doctor, nurse, patient, ambulance driver, pharmacist and learn about people in the community who help us. Introduce different food packets and cooking utensils into the home area and invite children to set up a restaurant. They can take orders, set the table, cook and serve the food, collect the money or be server, diner or cook. Help children to make a space ship with a big box and lots of junk materials. Children can then use it to pretend they are in space, introducing them to the solar system, different galaxies and stars and so on.

Type of play	Curriculum	Materials			
Play with natural materials	Language Mathematics SPHE SESE Arts Education	Sand, water, stones, leaves, twigs, lentils, cornflower, pasta, flowers, grass, feathers, clay, dough, wood Equipment to pour, measure, cut, manipulate, scoop, fill, pretend with, build with, make shapes with. Containers of same and different sizes/shapes. Things to smell, taste, touch and listen to.	Know the natural resources/amenities that are available locally. Take photos of them and talk to the children about them. Go on local trips. Ensure that children have the chance to play with sand and water regularly (at least once a week). Model using materials and describe the colours and textures in both English and Irish. Try to find out the words in the home languages of all the children in the class.	*Tell them about the importance of experiencing nature and natural materials.* *Ask them to extend what you are doing in school by going on a nature walk, bringing things in from their own garden.* *Invite parents to come in to talk about bee-keeping, fishing, gardening, farming.*	Ask the children to bring in lots of natural materials – moss, stones, twigs – and empty tomato boxes. In small groups ask the children to work together to make a miniature garden. Provide lots of pasta shapes and paint, glitter, glue and so on. The children can make jewellery or small models from the pasta shapes after they have painted them. The shells can also be used as counters or as pretend money.
Physical/Gross and fine motor skills Manipulative/ Constructive play	Language Mathematics SPHE PE	Hoops, ropes, bean bags, balls, balancing beams, blocks, boxes, threading beads, jig-saws, large and small construction materials, zips, buttons, table top activities, matching games, games with rules, bingo/lotto games, sorting sets, interlocking bricks, pegboards, magnets, dominoes, giant snakes and ladders/hop scotch to play outdoor. (These could even be painted on the school playground).	Play with children actively inside and outside. Let them see you moving – stretching, marching, running. Grade activities so that all children experience success. Use games to reinforce new language and new concepts as well as physical skills.	*Have a sports day every term and invite parents to help out.* *Provide handouts of exercises/ activities that can be done at home – activities that involve gross motor skills like dancing, running or fine motor skills like balancing, cutting, threading.*	Set up an obstacle course where children have to do a series of activities – running, crawling through boxes, catching small bean bags, jumping over small hurdles. Play different types of music and ask child to move to the beat or play musical statutes/musical chairs. Ask children to sort blocks into sets of two or three or to thread pasta onto a piece of string.
Creative play	Language SPHE SESE Arts Education	Variety of paints, brushes, sponges Musical instruments, items that make noise (babies' rattles, wind chimes, bells), Materials to make own musical instruments (plastic bottles, pebbles, biscuit tins) crayons, pencils, junk materials, stories, books, cardboard, props for drama/role play, clay, dough, empty boxes, finger paints, variety of paper of different colours, sizes and textures, scissors (left and right handed), computers, digital cameras.	Let children be messy and noisy. Encourage them to try new things – mixing paint, moving to music, miming, painting, dancing outdoors. Think of new ways to help children be creative – making a model of the[z] local community, playing word games, extending a story that you begin.	*Ask parents to come in to read a story, to help at painting/ messy play time, to play an instrument.* *Display work where parents can see it. Write children's explanations of pictures underneath.*	Get some rolls of wall paper and provide lots of paint, feathers, art/junk material and ask children to make a group picture Do finger or foot painting Encourage children to mix paints to see what happens

Online resources

How can we help at this busy

By sharing our resources, that's how. You can access a range of resources on our websites, from reports, consultative documents, draft syllabuses and guidelines (**www.ncca.ie**) to the entire range of syllabus and curriculum documents (**www.curriculumonline.ie**). Here we give you just a few examples of the resources available to help you in planning for the new school year. To find out what else is available, just go to the addresses above and....explore.

> " **You can read all about our DVD for parents when you visit the NCCA website.** "

Tipsheets for parents provide parents with information on how to help their child with early learning at home. The first one is about reading and writing in the infant classes and explains how to help children develop their skills. Additional tipsheets will be developed during the school year and will be made available to download from the NCCA website.

To download the first tipsheet (*Infant classes: Helping your young child to get ready to read and write*), go to: **www.ncca.ie/primary/parents**.

Do you need information for parents on how they can support their child's learning?

You can read all about our DVD for parents when you visit the NCCA website. The DVD is produced in 5 languages: English, Irish, French, Lithuanian and Polish and shows how parents can support their child's learning at home: before going to school, during primary school, and ingetting ready for post-primary school. The DVD is available in all primary schools and you can find further information about it at: **www.ncca.ie/primary/parents**.

Reporting to primary school parents?

As the year progresses you will be arranging to meet with parents to talk to them about how their children are doing in primary school. To help you to report on your pupils' progress, the NCCA has developed draft Report Card Templates, which have been piloted in schools this year. If you have been using them, we would love to hear how helpful you found them. If you haven't tried them yet, they are still available to download from the website, at: **www.ncca.ie/primary/assessment**.

info@ncca

for teachers

time of the year?

Planning in primary schools?

Go to: **www.curriculumonline.ie.** Here you can access the Primary School Curriculum. Whether you are planning yearly, monthly or fortnightly schemes you can use the drop-down menu to access the curriculum for your class level in each of the curricular areas. Just choose your subject from the drop-down menu on the home page, then follow the links on the side menu to get to the planning page for your chosen subject.

ICT in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Teachers offers teachers ideas and sample lessons and projects on how to include ICT across the curriculum.It also provides advice on planning curriculum approaches and methodologies and on the use of software and the Internet in a curriculum context. The ICT Guidelines can be accessed at: **www.ncca.ie/primary/ICT**.

Planning in post-primary schools?

Go to: **www.curriculumonline.ie**. Here you can access syllabus documents and teacher guidelines. The drop down menu can be used to access the Junior Cycle Curriculum

and the Senior Cycle Curriculum, which includes Transition Year, Leaving Certificate (Established), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Leaving Certificate Applied.

Teaching in sixth class or junior cycle?

Moving Up is an information booklet for schools, teachers and parents on how best to support students making the transition from primary to post-primary schools. The booklet summarises the main findings of research conducted by the ESRI (Economic Social and Research Institute) as the first part of a study of over 900 students in their first three years of post-primary school. You can download *Moving Up* from **www.ncca.ie/publications**.

Interested in different ways of assessing student work?

Click on the *Assessment for Learning* link on the NCCA home page for useful information and examples of how classroom-based assessment can support and improve students' learning. You can also download a leaflet here explaining what AfL is all about.

Special educational needs

The *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* have recently been revised. Revisions were informed by the feedback you provided as you used the earlier draft guidelines, which were designed to provide ways in which teachers can enable students with general learning disabilities to access the curriculum for primary and post-primary education. The NCCA has developed a digipack of all the guidelines, which can be downloaded or accessed online. For further information on this material, go to **www.ncca.ie/primary/inclusion** and follow the link to special educational needs.

Are there children in your primary school class for whom English is an additional language?

The guidelines, *English as an additional language in Primary schools,* provide information on how to help the child whose home language is neither English nor Irish when she/he first arrives in school. The guidelines also provide suggestions for involving parents and other members of the child's community in the school. Included are exemplars to assist teachers as they help children access all areas of the Primary School Curriculum.

To download the guidelines, follow the 'English as an additional language' link on the inclusion page of the website: **www.ncca.ie/primary/inclusion**.

Watch out also for **ACTION**, a new NCCA website that will soon be going live and will feature examples of good practice for teachers using these guidelines. For an exclusive preview, log on to: **http://action.ncca.ie**.

We did tha

Calling all science teachers. The 1999 primary curriculum included science as one of three subjects in the area of Social Environmental and Scientific Education. This means that by the time students enter first year in post-primary school they have already studied human biology, plant and animal biology, light, sound, heat, magnetism, electricity, forces, properties and characteristics of materials and environmental studies. And, as the content at primary level is similar to much of the content at Junior Certificate level, so the way in which the science that children learn at different stages in their schooling links together is very important to the overall development of their understanding. An awareness of what pupils have done before, and what students should be prepared for in the future, helps to develop a better sense of the continuous nature of learning in science, or in any subject or curriculum area for that matter.

Now, here's the science. Look at the diagram on page 19 to see how you can follow the topic of magnetism from primary school right up to the end of junior cycle in post-primary.

Notice how the primary curriculum takes a spiral approach; the knowledge, understanding and process skills of science are developed and extended as the child progresses through from infants to sixth class. The revised junior science syllabus introduced in 2003 continues this skills development.

Continuing with magnetism as the example you notice the following kind of progression. In the infant classes children **play** with magnets. They **discover that magnets cause some things to move even before you touch them**. Then, when slightly older, they **design and make** a simple magnet fishing game, they **find out** that not all materials are attracted to magnets, they can use their fishing rods to **sort materials into magnetic objects and non-magnetic objects**.

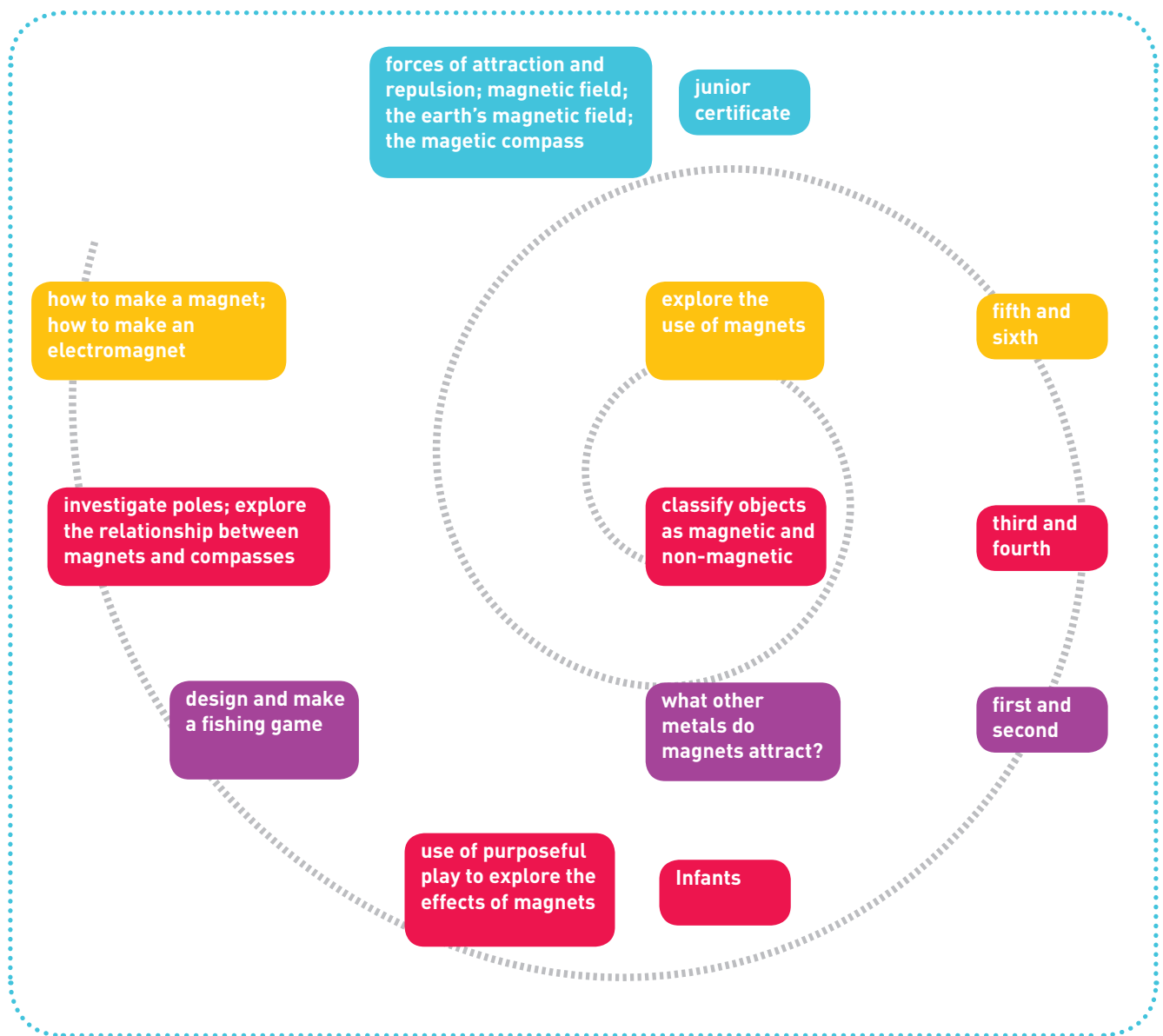This is an early introduction to 'sorting' or classification.

As their investigations into magnets continue, children discover that each end of the magnet behaves differently, and that the magnets can act as compasses. Using the relationship between magnets and compasses they discover that the earth acts like a giant magnet. This concept is developed in Junior Certificate science when students use a compass to plot the magnetic field of a bar magnet and learn about the earth's magnetic field. Addressing the concept of magnetic fields in such an advanced way might not be appropriate for primary school children, but they are building up a familiarity with and understanding of the way magnets behave. By the time they progress to post-primary school they are ready to use this prior knowledge and to build on it. The investigations that children do in infant and junior classes are appropriate to their stage of development; they think about how to solve problems such as the sorting of magnetic and non magnetic material. In the middle and senior classes, investigating and experimenting extends to planning and conducting

fair tests. This approach is central to the scientific process and children will learn to apply these skills to more complex concepts as they move through primary into post-primary school and beyond.

In fifth and sixth class children design and make an electromagnet which, although it links electricity and magnetism, does so at a macroscopic level. It is not until post-primary junior cycle that they learn about the nature of electricity and about what is happening at an atomic level inside the current carrying wire of the electromagnet. In primary school they discover that coiling a current carrying wire around an iron nail turns the nail into a magnet and in post-primary school they start to learn why.

Fifth and sixth class children carry out investigations such as 'what affects the strength of the electromagnet?'. They may predict that it is the length/ thickness of the nail, the number of coils of the wire, the type of wire, etc. The emphasis here is on **enjoying the process of science**, and the design of a fair test. When they are older and doing a similar investigation they can build on their knowledge of the effects

t last year!

forces of attraction and repulsion; magnetic field; the earth's magnetic field; the magetic compass

junior certificate

how to make a magnet; how to make an electromagnet

explore the use of magnets

fifth and sixth

investigate poles; explore the relationship between magnets and compasses

classify objects as magnetic and non-magnetic

third and fourth

design and make a fishing game

what other metals do magnets attract?

first and second

use of purposeful play to explore the effects of magnets

Infants

of an electric current to reason that increasing the current in the wire around the electromagnet increases its strength. Now, they are able to perform a more sophisticated analysis and evaluation of their data and make the investigation quantitative rather than qualitative.

During the early years of science education the emphasis is on doing, looking and discussing. There is a gradual move to predicting, hypothesizing, investigating, experimenting, interpreting, recording

and communicating results as children tackle more open-ended problem solving tasks appropriate to their age and cognitive ability. These skills are further developed as students move into the more structured curriculum of Junior Certificate where data manipulation and analysis are also included, in line with their mathematical skills development.

The introduction of science in the primary curriculum and the revision of Junior Certificate science have created a continuum of learning that

did not exist previously. Children transfer their knowledge and skills as they make the transition into post-primary school laboratories. Being seasoned investigators by the time they reach first year should make the transition to Junior Certificate science less daunting than previously, when many students were put off science within the first term because it was too new and seemed over-theoretical to them, adding to the popular myth that science was a 'hard' subject.

Concerning guidance

Thoughts on the idea of a curriculum for guidance

As regular readers will know, we welcome contributions from schools and teachers on issues relating to the work of the NCCA. We received the contribution below from Evelyn McLoughlin, a guidance counsellor in a busy Dublin school. Having recently developed a draft curriculum framework for guidance in post-primary education, we are currently exploring ways in which the framework can provide support for schools in planning and implementing their guidance programmes. Evelyn's reflections on the idea of a curriculum for guidance and the kind of impact it might have on the work of the guidance counsellor are both welcome and timely.

"Besides the obvious tasks attributed to them, guidance counsellors play a unique role in the school community insofar as their contribution crosses all activities that occur within the school. That said, they are considered neither management nor teaching staff, even though their duties permeate both areas. They have a specific knowledge base and are competent in a range of skills deemed relevant to the position but at times their remit can seem ill defined, unprescriptive and therefore unclear by nature.

Whilst this *carte blanche* can afford guidance counsellors freedom, opportunity and autonomy in terms of deciding what should be covered in the guidance programme in the school, it also poses some problems. A lack of structure can present the inevitable difficulties of a self-directed workspace. Time management, for example, can be a concern and there is the obvious challenge of taking on too much or not enough and achieving a workable balance in this regard.

The personality of the guidance counsellor, and their individual preferences around what they do, can lead to some inconsistency with regard to guidance provision from school to school. For example, if a counsellor's preference is for personal counselling, then he/she may focus the service predominantly towards that particular need. On the other hand, those guidance counsellors who feel less comfortable with personal counselling may concentrate their service in the area of vocational guidance and avoid personal counselling almost entirely. Thus, there is opportunity for discrepancies to exist from school to school with regard to the nature, appropriateness and even the quality of the service provided and this too can leave us open to question and scrutiny.

The absence of a definite programme for guidance in the school, and the absence of discussion about and planning for guidance among the whole staff can lead to a perception that the guidance service is a kind of random thing and a 'cushy number' for practitioners. This perception emerges from a lack of knowledge about the role of the guidance counsellor and is a perception for which we as practitioners must take some responsibility. Perhaps we have not been adept at promoting our role within the school in order to demystify what we actually do all day and show how we earn our wage packets!

The lack of any concrete measuring stick with which guidance counsellors can assess their performance is another real difficulty. Unlike the subject teacher, guidance counsellors have no solid evidence with which to assess or gauge progress made. Indeed, it could be argued that the success of a guidance intervention is immeasurable by its very nature. In the school environment where most teachers are driven by obvious targets and deadlines and are motivated by tangible evidence and feedback, the guidance counsellor can be at a loss to know what impact his/her service is having, if any. Working in this type of vacuum has the potential to be somewhat soul destroying in the long term.

The guidance counsellor has a pivotal position in the school community. The role is a multi-faceted one and in addition to their finely honed counselling skills, developed and nurtured in the training of guidance counsellors and integral to their work, it is fair to say that guidance practitioners perform a multiplicity of tasks on a day-to-day basis in the fulfilment of their duties.

There are many arguments that support the need for some structure in guidance provision in tandem with guidance planning at local level. The issues mentioned above might be effectively addressed with the introduction of a curriculum framework that offers us some points of reference upon which to build our programme. It will surely add consistency, transparency and clarity in terms of what is taught as well as a little 'guidance' all round."

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