NCCA

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

Primary Curriculum Review Phase 1

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

May 2005


Colours of Things
COLOURS

Introduction

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

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) initiated a review of the Primary School Curriculum in September 2003. The review focused on teachers' and children's experiences of the English Curriculum, the Visual Arts Curriculum and the Mathematics Curriculum. Findings in this report are based on data from 719 completed teacher questionnaires and individual and focus group interviews with children, parents, teachers and principals in six schools, gathered from September 2003 to September 2004.

This booklet provides a summary of the main findings and recommendations of the review.

English Curricculum: Main Findings

- Teachers reported difficulty in understanding the English strands and using them to plan for and to teach the English Curriculum. They contrasted the difficulty with the English strands, with the ease of use of strands in visual arts and mathematics.

- Oral language was the strand unit which received the greatest level of support from teachers across all four strands, followed by reading and then writing.

- Teacher observation was reported as the most frequently-used assessment tool in the English Curriculum, followed by teacher-designed tasks and tests, and work samples, portfolios and projects. Nearly all (99.5%) teachers reported using teacher observation as an assessment tool at *least a few times a week.*

- Teachers identified three challenges for assessment in the English Curriculum namely, time, appropriateness of assessment tools, and catering for the range of children's abilities in English.

- Whole class teaching was the organisational setting which teachers most frequently reported using to support the English Curriculum, followed closely by individual work. Teachers reported limited use of group work and pair work with children in their classes.

- Three-quarters (75%) of teachers reported using ICT to support the English Curriculum. ICT use in English was generally limited to typing up or transcribing children's written work. Little use of ICT for research purposes or for creative uses was reported by teachers.

- Teachers reported developing children's literacy (reading and to a lesser extent, writing) as their greatest success with the English Curriculum, followed by increasing children's confidence in English and in encouraging oral language.

- The greatest challenge to teachers' use of the English Curriculum was reported as time, followed by curriculum organisation and developing children's oral language.

- In their ongoing implementation of the English Curriculum, teachers prioritised improving children's writing skills, followed by teaching and learning oral language, and making progress with children's reading.

English Curriculum: Main Recommendations

- The organisational framework (strands and strand units) for the English Curriculum should be revised to ensure that the English Curriculum is presented in a manner that is accessible to teachers and that enables them to plan for, and to support children's learning in the primary school.

- Further support for implementing the writing strand unit may be necessary to enable teachers to implement an effective programme on the writing process in their classrooms.

- Detailed direction and guidance should be provided for teachers concerning the teaching, learning and assessment of spelling, phonics and grammar.

Visual Arts Curriculum: Main Findings

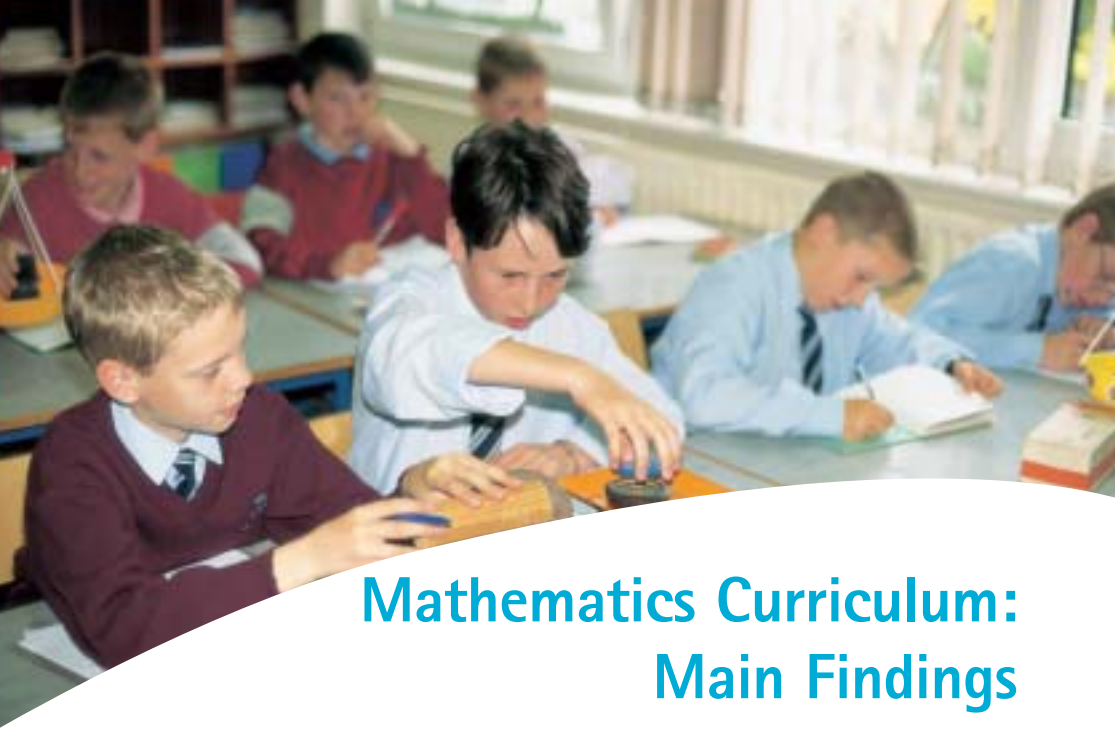
- Paint and colour was the strand which teachers identified as the most useful in the Visual Arts Curriculum, followed by drawing–another two-dimensional strand.
- Teachers reported that the structure and layout of the Visual Arts Curriculum according to the six strands and two strand units facilitated their planning and teaching in visual arts.
- Teacher observation was reported as the most frequently used assessment tool in visual arts, followed by work samples, portfolios and projects, and teacher-designed tasks and curriculum profiles. Three-quarters (76%) of teachers reported using teacher observation as an assessment tool *at least a few times a week.*
- Teachers identified three challenges for assessment in the Visual Arts Curriculum namely, time, the appropriateness of assessment in visual arts, and teachers' knowledge of visual arts assessment.
- Individual work was the organisational setting which teachers reported using most frequently in visual arts, followed closely by whole class teaching. Limited use of group work and pair work was reported by teachers.

- Just over one-third (34.4%) of teachers reported using ICT in the Visual Arts Curriculum. ICT use in visual arts focused on using the Internet to look at art and artists' work and using software to design and printing cards and to paint and colour.

- Providing a breadth of visual arts experience for children (using all six strands) was the greatest success reported by teachers, followed by children's enjoyment of visual arts and children's self-expression through visual arts.
- Class size and classroom space were reported as teachers' greatest challenges in implementing the Visual Arts Curriculum, followed by insufficient time for visual arts.
- In their ongoing implementation of the Visual Arts Curriculum, teachers prioritised the looking and responding to visual arts strand unit, followed by the fabric and fibre, and construction strands.

Visual Arts Curriculum: Main Recommendations

- Further support and ideas for using the 3-D visual arts strands (clay, construction, fabric and fibre) would support teachers in continuing to implement the full visual arts curriculum.
- There should be a renewed focus on developing the child's ability to look at and respond to art in implementing the Visual Arts Curriculum. Greater support should be provided for teachers in implementing this strand unit.



Mathematics Curriculum: Main Findings

- Number was the mathematics strand which received the greatest level of approval from teachers across all class levels, with early mathematical activities (the additional strand for junior infants) being rated very useful. Data was the strand which teachers reported as being the least useful across most class levels, with shape and space being the least useful in the case of first and second classes.

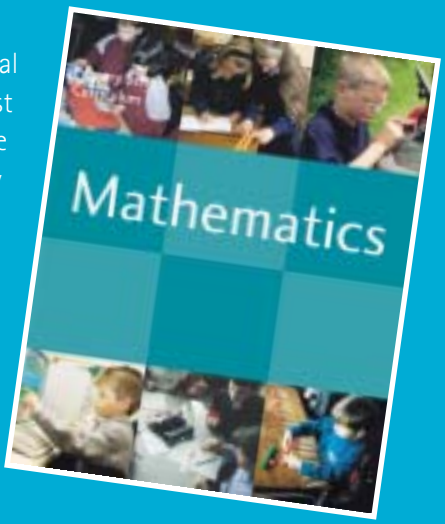
- Within the number strand, the operations and place value strand units were considered to be the most useful, with counting being the most useful strand unit in the early mathematical activities strand. In the data strand, the representing and interpreting strand unit was identified as being the least useful in the case of junior infants to second class, while chance was reported as the least useful from third to sixth classes.

- Teacher observation was reported as the most frequently-used assessment tool in the Mathematics Curriculum, followed closely by teacher-designed tasks and tests and work samples, portfolios and projects. Almost all (99.1%) of teachers reported using teacher observation as an assessment tool *at least a few times a week.*

- Teachers identified three challenges for assessment in the Mathematics Curriculum, namely, time, appropriateness of assessment tools, and catering for the range of children's ability in mathematics.

- Whole class teaching was the organisational setting which teachers reported most frequently using to support the Mathematics Curriculum, followed closely by individual work. Limited use of pair work or group work was reported by teachers.

- Some 58% of teachers reported using ICT to support the Mathematics Curriculum. ICT use in the Mathematics Curriculum was limited to using content based software programmes. There was little reported use of the Internet in maths.



- Teachers reported doing practical work (hands-on work) as their greatest success with the Mathematics Curriculum, followed by increased enjoyment of maths for children, followed by children's success in specific content areas of the curriculum. This mirrored many of the findings in relation to how and what teachers considered the impacts of the Mathematics Curriculum to be on children's learning,

- The greatest challenge to teachers' use of the Mathematics Curriculum was reported as catering for the range of children's abilities, followed by implementing specific curriculum content areas, and accessing resources. In exploring the challenge presented by the range of children's abilities in mathematics, teachers drew particular attention to time as a resource.

- In their ongoing implementation of the Mathematics Curriculum, teachers prioritised focusing more on specific curriculum content, increasing their use of practical work and giving more attention to the use of mathematical language.

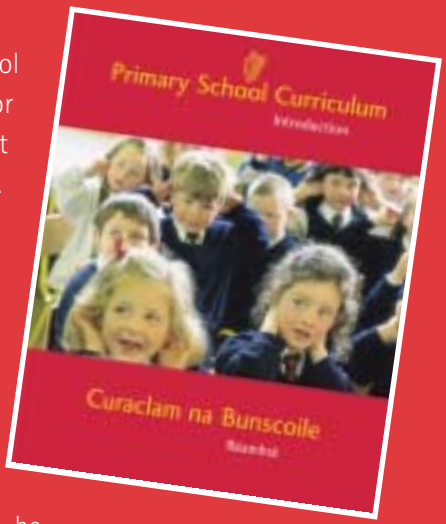
Mathematics Curriculum: Main Recommendation

- Further investigation of teachers' needs in implementing the data strand would enable the NCCA to develop guidance to support teachers in implementing this aspect of the Mathematics Curriculum.

Primary School Curriculum: General Findings

- The individual and focus group interviews carried out in the six case study schools also gathered data about more general aspects of the Primary School Curriculum. A summary of these findings is presented below.
- More detailed advice and support should be provided for teachers regarding the use of assessment to support teaching and learning. Exemplification of student work for each level of the curriculum (combination of two classes) across all subjects should be made available to support teachers' classroom assessments. Such examples of student work should also be accessible to parents.
- Parents and schools should receive greater support on how to involve parents/guardians in supporting their children's learning.
- There should be a renewed focus on developing the child's higher order thinking and problem solving skills in the Primary School Curriculum. Greater consideration should be given to the use of self-directed learning and to project work.

- The integrated nature of the Primary School Curriculum should be exemplified for teachers to a much greater extent than it currently is in the curriculum documents. This should help alleviate the time pressures experienced by teachers and should also support the development of children's English language skills throughout the day in all curriculum subjects, rather than in a discrete manner through English alone.



- Greater direction and guidance should be provided for teachers to enable them to extend their repertoire of teaching approaches and methods to include greater use of collaborative learning, including group work and pair work.

- Techniques for differentiating content and managing multi-grade classes should be provided for teachers to enable them to cater for the range of learning needs and abilities represented by individual children.

- The potential of ICT to support the aims and objectives of the Primary School Curriculum should be further exemplified for teachers, to support the development of children's concepts and skills in all subjects.

Electronic copies of this booklet and
Primary Curriculum Review Phase 1: Final Report
may be downloaded from the NCCA website, www.ncca.ie