



# The Primary Curriculum in Schools

Insights from  
the Curriculum Implementation Evaluation  
and the Primary Curriculum Review

English

Visual Arts

Mathematics

## Introduction

During the 2003/2004 school year, a year of curriculum review and consolidation, two different studies gathered information about how the Primary School Curriculum (1999) was shaping the classroom experiences of teachers and children. The **National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)** undertook a review of the curriculum, while the **Department of Education and Science (DES)** initiated an evaluation of curriculum implementation. Both studies focused on the curriculum for English, visual arts and mathematics. The NCCA Primary Curriculum Review gathered information from multiple perspectives through a questionnaire of 719 teachers and a case study of six schools (involving children, teachers, parents and principals). The DES Curriculum Implementation Evaluation is based on the evaluation of teaching and learning by the Inspectorate and information gathered from

teachers and principals in 86 schools in conjunction with the annual cycle of school inspection. Findings from both studies are synthesised in this leaflet and presented under the following five headings:

- Curriculum planning
- Methods of teaching and learning
- Involvement of parents
- Literacy
- Assessment

A preview of the NCCAs next steps in responding to the findings from the Curriculum Implementation Evaluation and the Primary Curriculum Review is provided at the end of this document.

The NCCA report is available online at: [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie) and the DES report is available at: [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)

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## Curriculum Planning

The **DES study** notes that the effectiveness of whole-school plans varied across schools. Thus, almost three-quarters of schools had effective plans for the visual arts, but less than half of schools had effective plans in place for mathematics or English. Findings from the DES study show that the most effective plans result from a **collaborative and consultative planning process**, with members of the school management team sharing responsibilities for coordinating whole-school planning. These plans result in a close alignment between the approaches and content objectives outlined in the curriculum statements, whole-school plans and classroom planning. The DES study notes that some schools have devised planning documents because they are obligatory rather than in response to the need to contextualise the curriculum for the school's requirements. Such plans were reported as general in focus

and had little impact on classroom practice.

Teachers in both studies responded well to the structure of the curriculum in visual arts and mathematics. Teachers in the **NCCA review** explained, *the way it [Visual Arts Curriculum] is broken down, you know exactly where you are going; you can pick an area and go for it*. Similarly, teachers responded positively to the Mathematics Curriculum explaining, *it's well laid out ... you look at those strands and you can plan very easily throughout the year*. These findings contrast with the difficulty teachers reported using the four strands to plan for the English Curriculum. As one teacher in the NCCA study noted, *we hope we're going to be achieving the strands by doing the strand units*.

## Methods of Teaching and Learning

Findings from both studies show that to varying degrees, teachers have reported/demonstrated using the following teaching methods presented in the Primary School Curriculum.

- 1. Active learning:** The DES study notes that in two-thirds of classrooms, pupils were active learners in mathematics. In the NCCA study, practical work was identified by 58% of teachers as their greatest success with the curriculum in mathematics. One teacher in the NCCA study explained, *the greater emphasis on the use of a wide variety of concrete materials means the children have a greater understanding of maths concepts.*
- 2. Environment-based learning:** Both studies provide evidence of teachers and children using real-life (authentic) contexts for teaching and learning. Teachers in the

NCCA study reported that when they used manipulatives and everyday scenarios in mathematics, learning became more interesting and enjoyable for children. Similarly, teachers in both studies reported/demonstrated success using newspapers, magazines, and the novel to engage children in English. Teachers and children also reported successes with project-based learning across subjects. In contrast, the DES study notes that in classrooms where textbooks exerted a dominant influence on teaching and learning, teaching tended to be didactic and children were not sufficiently interested or engaged in their own learning.

- 3. Collaborative learning:** Half of the teachers in the NCCA study reported using pairwork and/or groupwork on a weekly basis. Children who were interviewed by the NCCA said groupwork was one of the things they liked most about school, *I like*

*working with other people better than working on my own because if you put two minds together you get more clever stuff.*

- 4. Differentiated learning:** Findings from the DES study show that a majority of teachers planned and provided for individual differences in pupils' ability, attainment and learning styles in English and in mathematics. In the NCCA review 48% of teachers reported that catering for children's different levels of achievement presented the greatest challenge in working with the curriculum in mathematics. To meet this challenge, teachers reported varying the structure and content of their lessons and modifying questions for individual children.
- 5. Higher-order thinking and problem-solving:** Both studies show that in general, children experienced limited opportunities in classrooms to develop their skills in

higher-order thinking and problem-solving. The DES study notes the importance of providing opportunities for children to practise the skills for examining and deconstructing problem situations.

## Literacy

The development of the child's language is a key principle of learning in the curriculum. The NCCA review shows that **oral language** was the strand unit which teachers reported finding most useful in their teaching, followed by reading, then writing. The Inspectorate evaluation notes that while a majority of teachers were successful in teaching oral language, in a significant number of classrooms the content objectives for language development were not emphasised sufficiently, and oral language was taught incidentally rather than explicitly.

Findings from the DES indicate that the teaching of **reading** was effective in three-

quarters of classrooms inspected. Positive findings from both studies include an emphasis on the emergent reader and the use of a variety of texts such as novels, fact books, newspapers, film reviews, and catalogues. Difficulties reported by the Inspectorate in some classrooms included mechanical reading of texts and lack of variety in the reading material provided to children.

The DES study notes that in many instances teachers placed insufficient emphasis on the writing process, were dependent on workbook activities, and underutilised Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the writing process. As one teacher commented in the NCCA study, *it was a challenge to accept the value of writing as the process rather than the final product.*

### **Involvement of Parents**

Findings from both studies show that the involvement of parents in their children's

learning in primary schools varied greatly. The DES study notes that in three-quarters of the classrooms inspected, parents were encouraged to support their children's learning in English (for example, in shared reading initiatives) which contrasted with occasional involvement in children's learning in mathematics and the visual arts. Both studies provide few examples of schools communicating with parents about the curriculum (for example, through information evenings). The DES study notes that strategies to involve parents in their children's learning were only occasionally included in **school planning documents** and that parental involvement in policy formulation or in contributing to and organising learning resources for the school was limited. In interviews with parents, the NCCA found that parents wanted to have much **more information about their child's curriculum**, and the methods of teaching and assessment

which teachers use and which parents themselves might use to support their child's learning. As one parent commented, *education is everything in this day and age and I know I want to help mine [my children] as much as I can. But I need to know how to do this. I need to know what the curriculum is about, the methods etc.*

## Assessment

Findings from the Inspectorate evaluation show that most schools have not yet developed **whole-school plans for assessment**. The effectiveness of available plans was reported by the Inspectorate as weak or requiring significant development. Four areas for improvement were identified:

- preparing a school assessment policy
- broadening the range of assessment methods and tools used

- developing school procedures for recording pupils' progress
- using the results of assessment to inform teaching and learning.

In the NCCA study, when teachers were asked to identify their methods of assessment, they reported using **teacher observation** most frequently, followed by teacher-designed tests and tasks, followed by work samples, portfolios and projects. Teachers reported that teacher observation was an intuitive act, but they were unsure what they were to observe, or how they were to record or report their observations. They asked for more detailed **advice and support** on how to conduct assessments including teacher observations (what information to gather, how much, for how long, and for what purpose). In the words of one teacher, *what am I assessing? ...my idea of their ability?...their end product? ...both?...how do I assess a piece of work?*

## Next Steps

In response to findings from teachers concerning the difficulty of using the strands of the **English Curriculum**, the NCCA has drafted additional support materials for teachers which use the current strand units (oral language, reading and writing) to present the English Curriculum. This support material will support teachers in planning for English using either the strands or strand units. The additional support material will be presented in a user-friendly format and sent to all teachers in the coming weeks.

To complement the booklet, *Your Child's Learning* (2001), the NCCA is developing a **DVD for all parents** of primary school children. The DVD will present different examples of how parents can support their children's learning. It will reflect the diversity of Irish life and will be translated into a number of languages.

In response to teachers' requests for **further assessment advice**, the NCCA will provide practical and helpful information for teachers

on how to gather, record, interpret, use and communicate information about children's progress with the Primary School Curriculum. As part of this work, the NCCA will examine how examples of children's work can be used to guide teachers' classroom assessments. Our website, [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie), will provide access to this additional support material. The NCCA will also develop a national report card template for primary schools, and establish pilot projects to build on and consolidate good practice in transfer from primary to post-primary school.

Finally, given the extent of the findings regarding **methods of teaching** with the Primary School Curriculum, the NCCA will work with the support services to develop targeted supports for teachers. This will include, for example, advice on differentiating learning for children with specific learning needs and planning and managing teaching and learning in multi-class settings.