



Flexible Learning Profiles

Case studies from six schools

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Introduction

As part of the review of senior cycle NCCA began working with eight schools, on developing flexible learning profiles (FLPs) for senior cycle students, in May 2006. This school-based curriculum development initiative arose out of the response of the Minister for Education and Science to *Proposals for the Future Development of Senior Cycle Education in Ireland*, (NCCA, 2005) where she asked NCCA to particularly consider the needs of learners who don't benefit greatly from the current senior cycle experience. The NCCA consultation on senior cycle had already found strong support for building on the strengths of the current system while affirming the need to focus on the learning and the learner as well as on 'getting the Leaving'. As a result, when the initiative commenced it was targeted at potential early school leavers but, as work with the schools progressed, the view emerged that all senior cycle students would benefit from the kind of thinking and planning associated with flexible learning profiles. These schools have been exploring how they can improve choices for students across programmes and subjects that would ensure a rewarding learning experience and improved outcomes at senior cycle for all. Schools have told us that this work is not about developing 'another programme' for senior cycle; rather it is about exploring ways of introducing genuine flexibility and choice into senior cycle.

To date, the FLP initiative has involved two phases summarised below.

Phase one (2006-2009) of the project involved schools undertaking an analysis of current senior cycle provision in their schools and assessing its strengths and limitations. To inform this analysis, the schools consulted with their students about their experience of senior cycle, asking what are the biggest challenges, what would make school more enjoyable and what would help them learn better. This phase of the work also involved each school developing a prototype FLP Statement setting out their mission, guiding principles, defining features, aims, etc. This led to further consultation with students and staff within each school. The focus of the second consultation with students (conducted using one-to-one interviews) was to build up a profile of each student as a person and as a learner and to explore what kind of flexibility and choices would meet their needs and

interests. From this consultation, schools developed a number of student profiles and sample FLP timetables for individual students. (NCCA, 2009)

In **phase two** (2009-present) schools began to move towards implementing different elements of their FLP vision. They understood that the scale of the change involved in delivering this vision could not be achieved with a 'big bang' and that change is more likely to succeed if it is incremental and in tune with a school's capacity to deal with change. Therefore six schools involved in this phase of the work agreed to identify some key elements of more personalised and flexible learning profiles and work to implement those elements. Not surprisingly, there was some overlap between schools and the areas they chose to work on. For example, most of the schools decided that developing a programme of mentoring which would support students in their learning was an important area to explore. This was based on a recognition that providing greater flexibility and choice of curriculum in itself is not going to improve student's experience of learning or their possibility of success. Students would first need to learn how to learn and be helped to take responsibility for their learning. Most important of all, they need positive relationships at school in order to be happy and motivated as learners. A lot of schools decided that they wanted to *push out the boundaries* to see what degree of flexibility and curriculum choice could actually be accommodated within senior cycle. The case studies illustrate how this was achieved, through a variety of time-tabling innovations and more flexible approaches to teaching and learning.

In all the work on implementing different aspects of FLPs within these schools, what emerges is a rich tapestry of innovation. We see all six schools open to change, implementing change and reflecting on that change. And the message coming from all schools is the same—change is possible.

Case study 1

Nagle Community College, Cork

This school is an urban school with 160 boys and 8 girls. The school offers Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate School Programme, Transition Year and Leaving Certificate. FETAC awards are also provided for adult learners.

1.1 Flexible Learning Profile

Mission

This school's Flexible Learning Profiles will provide students with a holistic education through a collaborative learning process that fosters care, respect, equality, fairness and accountability.

Aims of FLP

- to provide meaningful, satisfying and appropriately challenging learning experiences for all the students involved
- to increase the retention in education of 'at risk' and significantly under achieving students
- to provide students with the skills and qualifications to enable them to access further education, training or employment in a way that they be able to continue learning throughout their lives. Students will become aware that learning is not just what is done in school but rather that learning is ongoing and it impacts all areas of their lives.

1.2 Elements of work developed in 2009-2010

Since the beginning of this project the school team was very committed to promoting student-centred learning which could respond to the needs of students with a range of abilities, experiences and needs. They concluded that the key skills framework (www.ncca.ie – key skills) could provide an overarching approach which would support more personalised and student centred teaching and learning. They also saw the benefits of making time to listen to their students' voices and had discovered that they had very valuable insights to offer in relation to what and how they learn. This, combined

with a belief that positive relationships are a key motivator for learning, led the team towards developing a programme of Mentoring for Learning with their students.

In this context the school concentrated on three areas of work:

1. **Embedding key skills** across all teaching and learning as the scaffold which could support more personalised teaching and learning.
2. **Promoting students' awareness of and responsibility for learning** through the introduction of a Mentoring for Learning programme, beginning with Transition Year (TY) students and through the piloting of two new transition units *It's your Future* (developed by the HEA) and *Learn Smart* developed by the school.
3. **Expanding the curriculum** through the introduction of Computing and Information Technology (FETAC level 4) for all TY and fifth year students.

Through a series of three half-day workshops (September, November and April) all the teachers were presented with ideas and resources to support them in developing a key skills approach to teaching and learning (NCCA, September 2010). An understanding of how key skills can be developed within the classroom was seen by the school planning team as a vital tool as it provided teachers with ideas for creating a more student centred classroom as well as tools for reflecting on what they were doing. *The key skills work has been hugely important because it got teachers thinking about what they are doing. It shook us all up as professionals.* It was seen as valuable in the context of promoting personalised learning. The Deputy Principal reinforced this by commenting that *using the key skills as a supporting scaffold gave the FLP project a very practical and robust supportive structure and it puts the learner at the centre of education not the subject.*

Each Transition Year student was assigned a teacher mentor who met with them for half an hour each month. The aim of these meetings was to establish a relationship of openness and trust that would allow a conversation about learning to take place. Some of the questions students explored were; What's going well? And not so well? How do you feel about this? Are you noticing any patterns in your learning? Have you noticed what helps your learning and what blocks it? What will your next steps be? Resources and worksheets provided by the NCCA were also used. (All resources will be available on www.action.ncca.ie)

The mentoring programme has been very successful for both students and teachers. Teachers have noticed *a significant qualitative change in relationships as a result of it*. They believe that it has fostered better relationships between the students themselves and between students and teachers. *Relationships are more relaxed and friendly*. The one-to-one mentoring meetings provided teachers with very valuable insights into students' experience of learning. One mentor *commented, it has been really illuminating for me and has corrected certain misconceptions I had about the students. It has improved the way I teach as well as helping the students*. Another mentor said that it *highlighted the importance of the emotional dimensions of learning*. Teachers all agreed that the students really appreciated having someone listen to them. They believe that *this has improved their motivation for learning*.

The mentoring programme was offered to all TY students and it was supported by two timetabled transition units (TUs), which were taught by the Guidance Counsellor. Both these TUs aimed to help students reflect on themselves as learners and set goals for the future. Students responded well to these TUs and liked the varied activities used in class as well as the opportunities for reflection. The teacher feels *the TUs were very valuable in giving students the language and concepts to discuss their learning*. In addition she said *they are now better able to critically reflect on themselves as learners and there is more evidence of self-directed learning*

During the year all TY and fifth year students completed the Computing and Information Technology (FETAC level 4) award. Feedback from students on taking the course was very positive. They commented that they felt it was more like adult learning. The teacher felt that the particular award was appropriate to a wide range of abilities. It promoted the development of key skills such as working with others and information processing.

1.3 The impact of the work

The teachers concluded that *mentoring individual students has had the greatest impact*. The Deputy Principal reported that *everyone agreed that it had a profound effect on our understanding of students as individual learners and indeed as individual people. This is*

the most important outcome of the whole project. The staff is now committed to extending this programme to reach as many students as possible.

The embedding of key skills across the curriculum has energised teachers to explore more diverse teaching methodologies to meet the needs of a diverse group of students. *It has helped to rebalance learning putting the individual at the centre. It has made us much more creative as teachers.*

The school is now looking at ways of expanding curriculum choice within current constraints and resources. As a result of successfully introducing a FETAC award within Transition Year the FLP planning team has made plans to introduce other FETAC awards to fifth year and second year students.

The Transition Year students were surveyed about the impact of these changes and their feedback suggests a range of benefits. Some students commented on improved learning:

The biggest difference for me is that I study more now.

Mentoring has been good for me because I found a way around the things that stop me from learning.

Mentoring taught me how to learn best and how I can prepare for the Leaving Cert. It also helped me to be more confident and speak up to people.

Others commented on how mentoring had helped foster better teacher-student relationships, *it gave me a chance to speak to the teacher face to face and I felt I was listened to. Mentoring has helped me see that the teachers are here to help me.*

Perhaps the most important impact of all this work has been the fostering of a disposition to change and a belief that change is possible which now exists within the staff of this school. This is how the Deputy Principal describes the journey in developing FLPs within his school:

It took a long time to unpack our resistance and beliefs that things couldn't change, teachers wouldn't support it and students would not like a new approach. The opposite is the case. The team and wider staff have now fully accepted the core concepts of a more flexible and personalised approach to

teaching and learning. Taking on a project like this challenges teachers' assumptions about teaching and learning, develops them professionally and upskills them. It has been a demanding but worthwhile (in terms of positive outcomes for the students) project. There are now changes embedded in the school that are too valuable to let slip.

1.4 Plans for the future

- Teachers will continue to support students' learning through one-to-one mentoring of Transition Year and fifth year students. In addition, the school is planning to build a sustainable structural support for this programme by timetabling supervised homework/mentoring for all classes. From September, 2010, first year students have been timetabled for three such classes and second years for one class per week for mentoring and supervised homework. In tandem with this, the team plans to develop additional support for learning resources (a learning journal, worksheets, graphic organisers, etc) for use during this class.
- The teachers are also keen to continue to develop their understanding of and confidence in embedding key skills within all teaching and learning. They hope to continue working with the NCCA in maintaining a key skills approach across the curriculum and they are planning a staff development workshop in 2011 to consider the embedding of key skills in the context of the junior cycle developments.
- The *Learn Smart* and *It's your Future* TUs have been incorporated into the TY programme and will be reviewed and updated as needed. The Higher Education Authority transition unit, *It's Your Future* is now published on the NCCA website. *Learn Smart* will be reviewed by NCCA and published on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie/transitionunits.
- Computing and Information Technology (FETAC level 4) will continue to be offered for Transition Year students and fifth and sixth year students will be given the opportunity to complete another Information Technology Skills (FETAC level 4). This will mean that students will have two level 4 FETAC awards in the ICT area completed when they leave school. In addition, it is proposed that second year students will be offered Computing (FETAC level 3).

Case study 2

Deerpark CBS, Cork

This school is an urban boys' school with 280 students. The school offers Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), Transition Year, Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Leaving Certificate Applied. FETAC awards are also provided to adult learners.

2.1 Flexible Learning Profile

Mission

The school believes that education can be provided in a holistic way, which will enable students to grow academically, spiritually, psychologically and socially. FLPs will provide a flexible and personalised approach to learning in support of students developing this potential. We will endeavour to develop this learning space in support of raising standards by focusing teaching and learning on student interests and abilities. We will endeavour to work as partners to develop connections between the in-school provision of education, the local Institute of Technology, the wider community and the daily reality of our students' lives.

Aims of FLP

- to provide a positive and relevant learning environment in which students have the opportunity to experience success
- to encourage the development of independent learning skills in support of promoting awareness of lifelong learning
- to encourage the formation and development of personal and social skills, as well as academic skills which will reflect the different needs, interests and aptitudes of all students
- to motivate and challenge students to achieve their potential in a student-centred environment
- to foster partnerships between the students, the school, parents and the wider community in support of educational development.

2.2 Elements of work developed 2009-2010

There was a change of liaison person in this school in Summer 2009 following the promotion of the former liaison person to Principal. One of the team members, the Transition Year coordinator, took over the role of liaison person. The team is made up of the liaison person and ICT coordinator as a core team with the Principal playing a key role and the group of seven mentors¹ also inputting into the work.

The school set out to investigate how ICT could be used to support the embedding of key skills in teaching and learning and how ICT could support learning through the development of e-learning portfolios. ICT provision in the school is limited but of a high standard. There is a computer room with 21 computers and most classrooms have PCs, albeit older versions. There is big demand for the computer room with all 45 periods in the week timetabled for various classes. It was decided to commence this work with Transition Year. The TY group had three classes timetabled for the computer room on Monday afternoon.

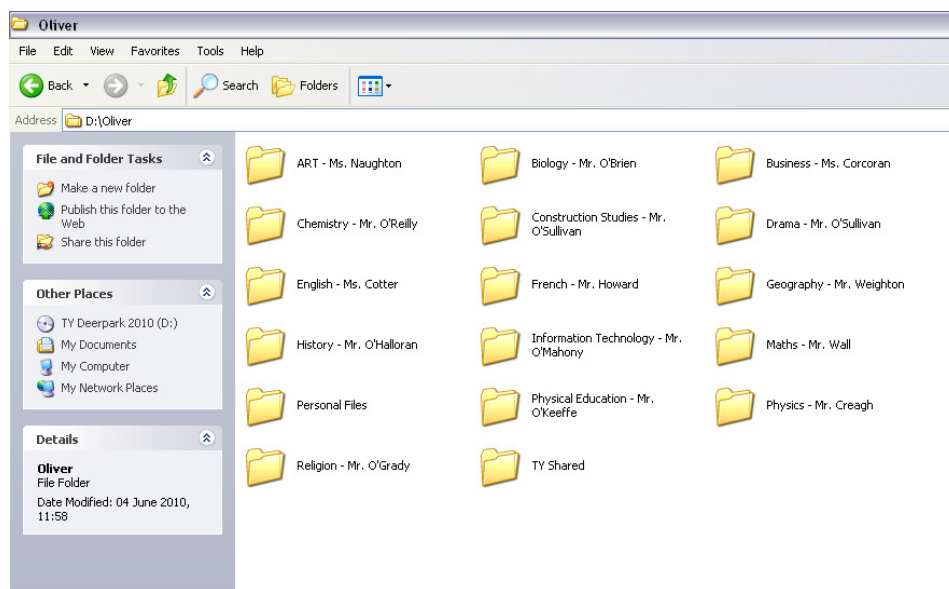
In May 2009 the school planned for three areas of work for the next school year:

- to use ICT to support the embedding of key skills within teaching and learning
- to use ICT to support learning through the development of e-learning portfolios for the students
- develop links with Cork Institute of Technology around designing and developing an eportfolio for the school.

In October 2009, Transition Year teachers had a short workshop facilitated by NCCA on the embedding of key skills in teaching and learning during Transition Year. The role ICT could play in this process was explored and teachers were introduced to the concept of eportfolio. The ICT coordinator built a portal for the students on the school server. Students log in with a password to their folder which has folders for each of their

¹ Each student was assigned a mentor in term 2. This process is discussed further in the report.

subjects or areas of learning. See screen shot below.



The original objective of this eportfolio was that students would develop materials in the following five areas:

- **Me**—a profile of the student's interests, likes/dislikes, hobbies and interests, classroom relationships, events, dreams and aspirations.
- **Learning log**—a reflection on their own learning and how they feel they are progressing in each of their subjects. This provides an insight into the learner's perception of what they see as barriers to their learning, areas that they have found interesting, areas they would like more help on, the degree of interest and so on.
- **Showcase of learning**—this was an online repository allowing learners to archive a range of highlights of their learning and evidence of key skills developed.
- **Time-management tools and target setting**—here learners keep track of their different projects, assignments, linked to personal effectiveness and career.
- **Feedback and assessment for learning**—this is where the learning mentor would give feedback and feed forward to the student.

It was envisaged that this portfolio would be very interactive with students and teachers giving feedback on work and so on. However, the portfolio in reality mainly focused on

the showcase of learning. To this end it was successful, in that students built up a wide range of material over the year. The learning log was not successful as the students could not complete them in real time as the learning was happening; they only had access to the portfolio on Monday afternoon in computer class. In addition, completing the logs was taking up a lot of the computer class and the ICT teacher felt the students could be better served learning other ICT skills. Both students and teachers felt that journaling about learning should happen when the learning was taking place or soon after the learning. One teacher commented that *if students had their own laptops in each class, a few minutes could be given at the end of class for students to reflect on their learning and set targets for the next class and so on, it just didn't work trying to do all the subjects on Monday afternoon*. It was envisaged that the learning log would encourage students to identify skills they were developing. In conversation, students acknowledged the skills development; *in Drama the skills I used were communication, working as part of a team, being effective on stage and interpreting information from the text and making it enjoyable for the audience*. All students talked about their enhanced ICT skills as the greatest benefit of the process. In conversation with the students, they talked about and described the skills, sometimes in great detail.

We each had to research something in History and do up a powerpoint presentation on it for the class. That was difficult as I had to read loads of material on my topic, I picked Solidarity led by Lech Walesa as it was important to my History as I am from Poland. I then had to do a presentation to the class, which was different for me. I found some other presentations really interesting. One lad did it on Queen (the band) and you could see he was passionate and knew his stuff. He just stood up and gave the presentation and did not need to look at the slides, he knew his stuff, others just read from the slides. Some used embedded music and all, really good stuff. You learned a lot from doing your own presentation, but also from looking at and listening to the other ones and we had to ask questions and give feedback.

This kind of activity is a feature of many Transition Year classes. This initiative wanted to take this learning a step further by students showcasing the learning in a portfolio and reflecting on the learning and skills development. To support greater reflection a mentoring process was set up. In addition students produced paper portfolios on themselves as learners. In March the core team had a short input on mentoring.

Following this, each student was assigned a mentor and the mentor and students met on a regular basis. Seven members of staff acted as mentors.

In May, an interview was carried out with the students and with the mentors. Four students agreed to show their portfolios to NCCA and to share them. There was evidence of reflection on learning in the students' portfolios. The students talked about 'good' work and 'only ok' work. They showed pride in other students' work as in *hey, Joe you show her your powerpoint it is much better than mine*, and *eh you have to see the poster he made on Pizza, I could never do it and this might look simple to you, but spreadsheets are really hard to do when you apply formula, wish I had it last year for business...you wouldn't need a calculator at all and I have nothing on drama but he has great stuff* and so on. Having a showcase of learning clearly motivated them to put more effort into each piece of work and to look at other examples from the class. In this way they engaged in both self-assessment and peer-assessment. Even taking the limitation of access to computers into account, the advantages of the process of building up a portfolio are very evident. This revisiting of the portfolio revealed the development, achievements, strengths and weaknesses for the students.

The initial planning with Cork IT has now been completed and a pilot project on eportfolios has been developed. The initiative is part of a joint project hosted by CIT and UCC. CIT has developed an online eLearning facility for DEIS designated schools and they have begun to train teachers and will give on-going support. They have developed virtual labs for the schools to use. See <http://www.scienceweb.ie/> for details of the initiative². This system provides the components needed to create online eportfolios which can be created and shared in real time. It uses social networking tools for reflecting and talking about learning. It offers blogging, micro blogging, file creation and sharing, networking, groups, news collection using feed aggregation and a number of other features. While the focus of this initiative is on science and technology, CIT has assured the school that the site can be used for any number of subject areas.

² This school will have their own eClass section of this VLE. eClass uses the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS). It is designed using a modular system and offers many activities including, lesson, quiz, survey, Wiki, chat and so on. A feature of the VLE is eConnect which uses the ELGG social networking platform.

2.3 The impact of the work

The aim of the work in this initiative was to embed the key skills across the Transition Year curriculum and to use the portfolio as a showcase of the learning in different subjects. The impacts of the work are discussed under two headings skills, for learning and mentoring for learning.

Skills for learning

In TY the students completed a number of courses in partnership with external agencies³. The teachers reported that the key skills were very evident in all these awards where students were very involved in the process of learning. One student reflected that *the skills I developed in first aid is how to stay calm and take control of a bad situation, communicating with someone in distress, acquiring information at the scene, making the right choices quickly*. The use of ICT in other subjects enhanced the key skills, when students had to prepare and present material to their peers, when they had to offer feedback, when they had to make choices about what work to upload and so on. Students' reflections show a degree of self awareness as illustrated by the following example from a reflection on work experience:

I had to communicate with the staff to give them messages. I had to work with staff and the students to get my job done. I was personally effective in working with students. They really liked my personality. The Principal of the school commented on me being personally effective by playing with the young students and helping them.

The lack of access to computers and to the portfolios off site was a challenge to the success of the work. The students could only log into the server on site so could not add to their portfolios from home. This meant that parents could not have access to their students work and teachers had limited access. Ideally teachers should have been able to give feedback on work on a regular basis. Access to computers once a week in school, meant students had to bring along the work from classes and try to do multiple tasks on one afternoon. The students did not like this *it got boring having to write things out first in class and then re-do them into the portfolio*. They could only see each others

³ Such as; Web Design with UCC using INDIE cert, FETAC level 5 Occupational First Aid, The use of AED (accredited by the Pre Hospital Emergency Care Council of Ireland), Drama and stage management, and Science Across the World Project.

work by putting it into a shared folder which meant they had work in two places. Despite these impediments to the work, the students and teachers involved still felt the initiative was worthwhile.

There were some positive outcomes for progress in ICT. All students in a focus group discussion said they had enhanced their computer skills in a major way. One student said *I knew nothing about computers coming into TY, now I can do spreadsheets, menus, edit pictures and a whole lot of stuff.* Another said *I was good on computers coming into TY but not like now, I have learned so much, I had never used Power Point, edited films or pictures, so I learned a lot.* The ICT teacher reported; *you see the LCA students leaving here with very good computer skills and the Leaving Certs are way behind, they do not normally get to do computers in their subjects. This group will have these skills and they will come into play when they are doing up briefs in some subjects...and will stand to them for life.* As the year progressed, students moved from placing the emphasis on the level of computer skills to being able to select meaningful work and share it with others. An essential component of this was the fact that the portfolio was part of the teaching and learning process, even in the absence of the availability of computers and an ideal platform to display work. The students and teachers were aware of the need to have examples of work for the portfolio and therefore, where possible opted to use ICT in learning.

Mentoring for learning

While the mentoring of students was a very useful exercise, it began late in the school year and teachers were not fully trained and prepared for the role of mentor. Students were positively disposed to the process. *I enjoyed the mentoring, as it showed me who I am. The teacher I done it with was good as he explained what the Leaving Cert would demand. I learned what I have to do to get good results and I know what my distractions are.* A small number of the students found the mentoring of little use as they reported; *I already know how I learn best, I got a really good Junior Cert. I know how to study and how to participate in class. This was boring really.* The mentors agreed with the students and felt that some students needed mentoring more than others, or at least different approaches to mentoring. Overall they thought it was a very worthwhile process. The sessions were not run to a common template and this allowed for individual attention as illustrated by the following reflection. *Mentoring sessions did not really help me with*

finding out things I like or I am good at as I already knew these. Instead I found these sessions beneficial as I was given opportunities to speak to someone about careers, universities, country regulations and law. These were things I did not know myself.

In discussion with the mentors, it was agreed that training in mentoring was needed. *It is a different relationship to teaching, you think you have the skills but then a 40 minute discussion with a student is a long time....maybe shorter session would be better, you definitely need training in the one-to-one discussion.* In the mentoring meetings students completed work on learning styles, multiple intelligences, blockages to learning and so on. Mentors felt that they need more material to help students move on after identifying their learning style and blockages to learning. As one student said in the focus group *so I am a visual learner, what should I be doing, what does that tell me, I still have to do the Leaving!* The process was very strong on looking back at their learning, what worked for them in junior cycle and what did not. However, there also needs to be an emphasis on looking forward and planning for learning in the future.

2.4 Plans for the future

The group intends continuing the mentoring into the next school year and would like to expand it out to include third year students. All mentors involved this year have agreed in principle to continue next year. The liaison team has identified a need to get support on training for mentors.

The school plans to continue with the online eLearning facility developed by CIT. The site will be available to students to log into at any time and from any computer and will be moderated by CIT personnel. A number of teachers have had initial training in June and September and further training is planned for the coming year. In time the school hopes to have a full set of laptops for all TY students to facilitate this process.

Case study 3

Loreto College, Crumlin, Dublin

This school is an urban girls' school with 477 students. The school offers Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate School Programme, Transition Year, Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. Due to changes in staffing there was no formalised structure for working on this project within the school during the past year. However, the Principal felt strongly that the school should stay involved in the project as the core objectives of the FLP project were in line with where the school wished to go. She also saw a value in staying connected to a network of schools that were innovating and sharing experiences and therefore led the staff in progressing elements of their agreed FLP.

3.1 Flexible Learning Profile

Mission

Our Flexible Learning Profiles aim to ensure that students will have an experience of learning that will be based on understanding their strengths and weaknesses and structuring learning around them. Flexible Learning Profiles will result in the student experience of school being a positive one and will make our school serve students in a more comprehensive way. Our Flexible Learning Profiles will offer our school an opportunity to take a whole school approach to innovative teaching and learning and in this way improves standards in all areas.

Aims of FLP

- to develop the confidence and competence of each individual learner using teaching and learning strategies that are based on individual needs
- to raise standards by focusing teaching and learning in a way that is based on the interests and aptitudes of the students
- to provide a worthwhile learning experience that will bridge the gap between school and working life.
- to provide a variety of curriculum elements which will be relevant to student needs

- to develop students ability to direct and take control of their own learning
- to encourage students to reach their full potential and ensure that students leave school with a sense of self worth and pride in their achievements.

3.2 Elements of work developed in 2009-2010

The school came to this project with a strong desire to create a more flexible relationship between the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the established Leaving Certificate curriculum. The teachers believe that the LCA programme does not provide sufficient challenge and content to hold the interests of their students and so expanding the options for LCA students became a core focus of their work. In addition, they were keen to encourage greater integration amongst all their students through more innovative time-tabling.

In 2008-2009 LCA students were integrated with fifth year Leaving Certificate students for Religious Education, SPHE and for Leisure and Recreation/PE. This worked well in terms of enabling greater social integration of senior cycle students. During 2009-2010 the idea of expanding the LCA curriculum was explored. As the school is not a FETAC provider, various local colleges of further education were approached to see how they might have a role. In tandem with this, the students were asked if they would be interested in taking a FETAC award and possible areas of interest were explored. This led to a decision to offer all fifth year LCA students a course in Customer Services (FETAC level 5) at a local college of Further Education on Wednesday afternoons. The sixth year LCA students were given the challenge of doing a Personal Achievement class of their own choice in the evening and were compensated for this time by being let home early one afternoon per week (one class period).

The students liked having the opportunity to learn in a new and different environment. Leaving school and being able to wear their own clothes made them feel more like adult learners. This also presented some challenges such as time-keeping and tracking of attendances. These issues were addressed however through good communication between the FETAC programme coordinator in the FE College and the LCA coordinator in the school. The whole process was reviewed by the LCA team which meets weekly and by the students themselves through a diary of their learning experiences. The

FETAC programme coordinator felt that level 5 was a bit challenging for the students and in the future it might be better to begin with level 4. Despite this, students themselves were very positive as illustrated by their comments:

I like doing the FETAC because I like the subject I'm doing. I also like it because it's getting me out of school.

I like it because it is different from anything I did before and it's very interesting.

I think FETAC will help me in the future to get the job I need.

The FETAC facilitator said that the students had gained a range of skills through the course such as taking initiative, problem solving, listening effectively, communicating orally and in writing, working in groups and evaluating the quality of their own learning and achievements.

3.3 The impact of the work

According to the Principal, this work has led to a complete review of the senior cycle programme within the school. *This work has led to an analysis of our three Leaving Certificate programmes in terms of what worked well, what needed to be changed and what resources would be required to help bring about the change. The idea of needing greater flexibility has been the most enduring motivator for the work, while the changes may be small in themselves I've come to believe that small change from within is probably the most effective and lasting.*

The following impacts were listed as significant.

- The school has now taken a more creative approach to timetabling—right across the school, with the aim of creating more integration of students as well as greater flexibility and choice. Junior cycle classes are now mixed ability as a result of thinking and talking about student learning.
- Giving students the opportunity to pursue learning outside of the school environment is helping to break down boundaries and enhancing good relationships that already exist between the school and the wider community.
- Some integration of Leaving Certificate programmes has been achieved, albeit not as much as the teachers feel is needed. The staff would strongly favour the breaking down of the ring-fenced approach to LCA provision.

- There is a changed perception of the typical LCA student. *LCA students are now recognised as needing to be challenged not contained!*

3.4 Plans for the future

The school plans to continue to offer FETAC awards to LCA students in sixth year this year and will consult students in relation to areas of interest. They also hope to pursue further integration and expansion of the LCA curriculum based on the belief that LCA is not challenging enough for students. Ideally the school would like to be able to offer LCA students the opportunity to study established Leaving Certificate Mathematics and English. This is currently not possible due to the current timetabling arrangements of Leaving Certificate examinations. As a result of hearing about the success of Mentoring for Learning in other FLP schools, this school has begun to introduce a programme of mentoring, beginning with all first year students. Nineteen teachers volunteered to participate in the student mentoring programme and have had an introductory session with the NCCA to get started.

Case study 4

Athy Community College

This school is in a small rural town and is a co-educational school with 235 students. The school offers Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Leaving Certificate Applied. FETAC awards are also offered to adult learners. The role of liaison person is shared between two teachers both of whom were involved in the key skills initiative. The liaison team also consists of the Principal, Deputy Principal, LCA coordinator and LCVP coordinator.

4.1 Flexible Learning Profile

Mission

In a caring and innovative school, we are dedicated to fostering educational excellence, empowering all students to reach their full potential—academic and social, physical and spiritual. Through partnership, flexibility, adaptability and co-operation we openly respect and nurture the dignity and uniqueness of each individual.

Aims of FLP

- to provide a positive, relevant, inclusive and meaningful experience for all participants
- to develop individual talents and target individual learning needs of all learners
- to motivate all learners to reach their potential academically and enable them to succeed in the wider community through the development of social and personal skills
- to provide learners with the skills and qualifications to enable them access further education, training or employment and be able to continue learning throughout their lives.

4.2 Elements of work developed in 2009-2010

Unlocking learning using key skills

This school has been implementing key skills across the curriculum since January 2009. A fuller description of this work can be found in the key skills reports available on www.ncca.ie. This experience in developing key skills within the classroom led to a conviction that the key skills framework is a vital component in promoting FLPs as it supports teachers in creating a more student centred classroom as well as prompting continuous reflection on what they are doing. The FLP work was led by the same liaison people who had been involved in the key skills initiative since September 2006. Both teachers are very knowledgeable in the area of key skills and in the learning methodologies that can be used to embed key skills in teaching and learning. In this school year the work was entirely led and supported by the team without external input. While NCCA personnel were present at the staff professional development days in January and April 2009, the events were led by the liaison teachers. They used examples from their own subject areas, Biology and Mathematics, to illustrate what is possible when key skills are used as a framework for planning teaching and learning.

At the next staff event, the leaders used reflections from the teachers and their students from various subject areas. This proved very powerful and feedback from the session was very positive. In the first phase of the key skills work, teachers met as a group once a month for one class and brought along their own reflections and reflection sheets from the students. This generated a lot of paper and was not as focused as the team would have liked. Some people did not get to contribute and the leaders were under pressure to support and give feedback to all teachers. To facilitate a more accessible approach to sharing of ideas, the team set up a blog using www.blogger.com in September 2009. As the liaison person reported;

The idea is that all staff can use the blog to share ideas and read each others ideas more easily. Last year reflections were written during a meeting once a month but staff rarely read other teachers reflections. The blog will allow staff to quickly scan through what other colleagues are doing.

Appendix 1 contains a selection of posts from the Blog. Clearly, the blog was a very useful tool to share ideas and could be expanded to include feedback and discussions on different methodologies.

Mentoring

In January 2010, a mentoring programme was set up for all third year and sixth year students. Most teachers from the staff had between one and four students to mentor. Each teacher was provided with mentoring resources from which they could use any number of handouts or ideas to help their students develop and maintain a study programme. When asked why they got involved in the mentoring programme teachers typically said:

I feel it is important for students to have adult contact in school.

With mentoring, students get individual attention, someone to take a personal interest. They become aware of what they are doing and what they are not doing.

However, there were challenges in particular with time as the meetings all occurred during teachers' free classes and typically lasted longer than 30 minutes. Some teachers also felt that taking students out of classes was not ideal, especially for Leaving Certificate students. Eighty percent of teachers said they will be involved in mentoring next year as they see the benefits of the process. At the end of the year, one of the liaison people said *I think this will be one of the most successful things to come out of all our FLP work.*

The teachers involved also made some suggestions to improve the process such as:

The process needs to start earlier in the year.

We should have a mentoring room/s.

We need more structure; for example, we should introduce students to the process and clearly outline their role and responsibility.

Staff need training in mentoring as it is a different relationship and process than teaching.

Mentors were supported by taking part in three short whole staff meetings on the process where issues were discussed and challenges addressed where possible. Each week the liaison team put reminders about mentoring on the notice board for staff

members. The FLP team was on hand to help teachers whenever they needed it. Parents were informed at the parent teacher meeting about the mentoring process and were very positive about it.

4.3 The impact of the work

The FLP also brought about the idea of student consultation. We found it a really worthwhile exercise to sit down with a focus group of students and listen to what they had to say about their own experience of school and the importance of it as a place not just where they study but where they can grow into mature young adults. While they do have a student council to air their views, this allowed them to see that we were planning something to improve their experience of school and we wanted their input (End of year report).

The impact of the work is discussed under the three main areas of work, mentoring, key skills and flexibility.

Mentoring

While this school has always prided itself on its work with students on personal development, the mentoring approach proved very successful. The focus of the mentoring was on learning rather than behaviour. For this reason teachers were more inclined to get involved, almost all teachers took on mentoring roles and students were much more inclined to open up and discuss their learning and ambitions.

Our mentoring program was piloted this year in the school for exam students and they have had the opportunity of one to one time with experienced teachers to help them form and stick to a study plan. This is the other part of the FLP that has had the biggest impact. We used and adapted the mentoring materials supplied by the NCCA and found it most beneficial when we were working with students. It will need some adjustment for next year but it was undeniably valuable to students (End of year report).

Teachers concurred that the mentoring programme was a very valuable experience. They all agreed that the programme encouraged the students to think critically about their own learning and as a result the students are more focused and taking more

responsibility for their learning. Students reported that mentoring helped them to *organise their priorities, do up a study plan and stick to it, helped me with goal setting. Helped me manage my time. I am not stressed about the exams.* Students asked if mentoring could start earlier in the year and suggested that a study buddy system might help them. In addition, they would like more time with their mentors. Teachers felt being involved in mentoring made them more aware of how students learn and impacted on their teaching and planning for learning.

Key skills

When students were asked about their learning in key skills they reported:

It has made me look up my own information instead of being given to me.

I am better at teamwork and communication, it is a lot more interesting and it makes you think more and understand a topic rather than learning it off by memory.

The impact of using key skills for planning for teaching and learning has been significant and widespread. The two teachers who took on leadership roles in the initiative both reported that the work has had an impact on their classroom teaching and on their wider professional lives. Both have spoken about their experience in a number of fora. This work has highlighted how a different model of professional development where schools take responsibility for leading the process can be very successful. Professional development of this kind which is very context specific in this instance proved very powerful. Teachers shared resources, shared experiences and opened their professional work up to their colleagues. The motivation to take part was the need to enhance and improve the experience for their students.

In feedback from management they reported that *having our own teachers lead professional development events was very significant, we have the expertise in our own staff, and it is more relevant when we are talking about our students. This was a wonderful opportunity for us as a staff to sit down together and share our ideas for teaching and learning with each other. It really motivated the staff.* More feedback on the initiative is available by following video links on the key skills page at www.ncca.ie. The liaison team reported that *the introduction of key skills to the school has brought about a change in our teachers that extends beyond the key skills area and into the vast world of*

research that is out there on learning and helping students get the most out of their education. Key skills are now embedded in the school culture as illustrated in the following quote from the school report on this work.

Parents were informed about key skills at our open night. They were given a presentation on teaching and learning in our school focusing on key skills and the effect on teaching and learning. The incoming first year parents were also given a presentation on key skills.

Curriculum planning for flexibility

In our FLP prototype, we identified the need to build a portfolio of student's talents and skills inside and outside of school to recognise their achievements. So many of our students leave school without us knowing them, even though they sit in front of us for five years. We need to have ways to engage them and build our teaching around them. If we know where their thinking lies; it will make it all the easier to teach them. Planning for FLP work has changed how we deal with students; we now see each individual and try to plan for them (End of year report).

Students were encouraged to take part in courses such as First Aid and GAA coaching. LCA students took courses in areas such as ICT, Art and French (FETAC awards), during the school day. The school has made it possible for students to miss part of the school day provided that they are spending that time pursuing training that will benefit them in their chosen college/career course.

While the curriculum planning may not have turned out as we had envisaged in the beginning, it did show us that there is a world of possibility out there to fulfil almost every type of learner and while we don't have the resources we need to cater to all students, it is not inconceivable that a student with a special talent can do courses outside the curriculum that will be of much more benefit to him than the traditional seven subjects. We are now much more aware of the need to be flexible and to plan around the student where possible since this work has begun. The planning stage of the FLP work has shown us what is possible even within the present system (End of year report).

The overall impact of the curriculum planning has been the realisation that there is a lot a school can achieve on flexibility even within the present system. The introduction of courses in ICT and Health Related Fitness (FETAC awards) was achieved in the present time table. In addition courses in GAA coaching and in occupational First Aid have been incorporated into a more expanded and flexible senior cycle timetable. The school reported that they looked at students with individual needs rather than class groups and tried to plan for this personalisation.

4.4 Plans for the future

Beyond 2010, we would like to maintain the work we have been doing in the area of key skills. It requires a lot of maintenance to keep teachers motivated and interested in improving learning and teaching. The budget we received from the NCCA has been invaluable in providing the facilities for staff training and has contributed to the goodwill factor among staff that keeps the momentum going. If we could keep up the momentum that encourages staff to constantly strive to improve their work, we can turn out students who are independent, well rounded, educated thinkers. What is more important than that? (End of year report).

Consulting with students and parents on particular aspects of their school experience was something that was quite successful for the school. It allowed the students to have some say in how they are taught. The school reported that they like to see more opportunities for this kind of forum. They also wanted to track a group from 1st year to 6th year and study how they move through the school system and how they cope with each new year.

We are moving all the time towards being more student-centred and we would like to continue in this direction. There is a role for the FLP here because some students are sleep walking through the school system and are never asked about their interests or talents. We said in our prototype that we would identify each student from first year on and build up a portfolio of their talents and achievements. There is a need for this kind of recognition for students which makes them a part of the school and allows us to be proud of their achievements while they are able to experience success where otherwise they would slip under the radar unnoticed (End of year report).

Having piloted the mentoring programme, and seen the benefits for both staff and students, the school would like to continue with the mentoring programme into the future. The liaison team reported that *there is definitely a need to continue this program into next year. The question is, if teachers need more time to do it and students want more time with their mentors how can we build a programme that facilitates this?* The school is hoping to move its focus into junior cycle and looking at how they can introduce flexibility, personalisation and so on into this period of learning for their students.

A staff workshop on key skills has already taken place which looked at the role of questioning and assessment in fostering key skills.

Case study 5

Listowel Community College

This is a co-educational school with 50 second level students and approximately 250 PLC students. The school offers Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate School Programme, Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. FETAC awards are also offered to adult learners. The FLP team consists of the Deputy Principal and three other teachers.

5.1 Flexible Learning Profile

Mission

Listowel Community College is informed by a community service ethos and accordingly is open to all members of the community irrespective of age, gender, academic ability, class or creed. FLPs will provide all students with the opportunity to participate in education that will be meaningful, engaging and challenging. FLPs will act as a vision that will inspire the school to move forward in providing a more flexible and personalised education for the 21st century.

Aims of FLP

- to increase the retention in education of 'at risk' and significantly under achieving students
- to provide students with the opportunity to become active participants in their own learning
- to enable students to become more effective and autonomous as learners.
- to provide students with the skills and qualifications to enable them access further education, training or employment and to be able to continue learning throughout their lives
- to involve all the significant partners in progressing the educational development of all the students involved
- to provide meaningful, satisfying and appropriately challenging learning experiences for all the students involved.

5.2 Elements of work developed in 2009-2010

The school came to the FLP project with a strong desire to find new ways of supporting students to achieve success in learning. The small number of second level students enrolled in the school has enabled teachers to adopt a very personalised approach to teaching and learning supported by pastoral care and strong school/home and community links. The school saw the FLP project as a vehicle for enhancing and developing the curriculum choice and flexibility that was already on offer to students. The team also saw the opportunity to put in place a more formal programme of 'Mentoring for Learning' that would support students in reflecting upon and taking greater responsibility for their learning.

The school found that consulting with their students had provided extremely helpful insights about their students' needs and interests. The decision to provide senior cycle students with FETAC awards beginning in September 2009 was informed by these consultations (in particular students saying that continuous assessment suits them better) as well as by the fact that all staff are experienced in teaching these courses.

In this context the school agreed on two areas of work

1. **Expanding the curriculum** through the introduction of a range of FETAC awards for fifth year students
2. **Promoting greater student awareness of and responsibility for learning** through the introduction of a Mentoring for Learning programme.

The following four awards were incorporated into the senior cycle curriculum—Maths (level 4), French (level 4), I.T. and Computer Applications (level 4) and Anatomy and Physiology (level 4). All of these awards were seen as enhancing and supporting the Leaving Certificate subjects already being taught while also giving students 'added value' in their preparation for life after school. These courses were chosen because they could reinforce the learning that students were doing in some Leaving Certificate subjects and at the same time offer a new way of learning and assessment that would respond to students' expressed needs. All courses (except IT) were taught concurrently with the relevant Leaving Certificate subject. For example, the Anatomy and Physiology award was taught by the LC Biology teacher. This is how she explained it; *at the moment*

I am completing each FETAC unit following completion of the relevant section in the Leaving Cert syllabus. It acts like a kind of revision. The French teacher said that there is a big jump level-wise in languages from junior cycle to senior cycle. FETAC fills the gap and students begin to feel successful. Also they get a practice run at an oral French exam.

When students were asked how they saw these courses helping them their responses included:

It's more practical, easier to learn, not a big book like the biology book.

You do the tests as you go along and that counts for the FETAC. You can do as good as you like cause you can redo it again and again if you're not happy.

You don't have to learn it all off.

The teachers too saw benefits related to learning as illustrated by these comments:

It reinforces previous learning.

It's particularly beneficial to foundation students as they get certification even if they may not sit/succeed in the Leaving Cert.

I have seen an improvement in students taking responsibility for their own learning.

They also felt that the learning experienced through the FETAC awards helped improve students' motivation for learning; *students would often forget their books but they seem to have their folders. The students feel that the continuous assessment is a fairer way of assessing them.*

The second area of innovation undertaken during the past year was the setting up of a mentoring for learning programme for all students. This was established after a whole staff training workshop facilitated by the NCCA. Students have responded very well to this and appreciate having someone to talk to about how they are getting on at school. Students have discovered that they all learn differently and understanding how they learn can help motivate students to learn. They have learned how to reflect on themselves as learners and identify their barriers to learning:

I could learn better if it was more oral learning rather than just writing.

I can learn better when there is a diagram or picture to help me.

I need to ask more questions.

For the teachers involved, it has reinforced the importance of building positive relationships with their students. One member of the team wrote; *it has brought home to us that relationships are paramount for student learning.*

5.3 The impact of the work

The team leading the FLP project has identified the following impacts on themselves, their students and the school.

- Teachers are more open to thinking about change and realise that *things can change and nothing is written in stone.*
- Teachers are realising their role in motivating students by varying their teaching strategies and by building more positive relationships with their students.
- Teachers are taking responsibility for reaching all the students in their class and see themselves educating the person not simply delivering a curriculum.
- Students are getting the opportunity to contribute their ideas and experiences about learning and are shaping decisions that affect them more.
- Both the teacher and student voices have expanded on what is being taught. This has led to more ownership of the learning process by teachers and students alike.
- Greater curriculum flexibility is available to students through the introduction of FETAC awards.
- Staff members feel the work has given them a greater understanding of the wider education system and a shared vision of the kind of education that is needed for an emerging Ireland.

5.4 Plans for the future

The programme of mentoring for learning is being offered to all students again since September 2010, using the support materials provided by the NCCA.

The school is continuing to provide courses in Maths, French, Anatomy and Physiology, and Computers and Web Design (FETAC awards). They aim to achieve level 5 awards in these courses with sixth year students and are offering them to fifth years at level 4. Second years are now taking a course in horticulture (level 3). The school is currently

engaged in discussions with the local Institute of Technology to see how Leaving Certificate students can gain credit for FETAC awards when progressing to third level. During the coming year the school plans to continue providing the FETAC awards already introduced while exploring additional awards that might be added to the senior cycle curriculum. They are also considering offering some FETAC Level 3 awards to junior cycle second year students in areas such as horticulture and drama.

Case study 6

Deansrath Community College, Clondalkin

This is an urban co-educational school with 370 second level students and a large number of adult learners taking PLC courses. The school offers Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate School Programme, Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied Programme and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. FETAC awards are also offered to adult learners. The FLP team consists of the liaison person and four other teachers.

6.1 Flexible Learning Profile

Mission

We will provide an educational experience that is relevant and diverse and that will foster the individual talents of the students at senior cycle. The programme will allow for flexibility of choice and will equip the students with a breadth of knowledge that is valuable, practical and meaningful.

Aims of FLP

- FLPs will offer a greater variety of curriculum components in order to make senior cycle more interesting and relevant for the learner.
- FLPs will strive to equip the students with the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes to enter the world of work or pursue further education.
- FLPs will provide guidance for the learner to help him/her make appropriate learning choices and manage their learning and will provide a challenge to all ranges of ability.
- FLPs will strive to bring the community into the classroom by establishing links with outside bodies such as local businesses, sporting and charitable organisations.

6.2 Elements of work developed in 2009-2010

The teachers engaged in consultations with their students in 2007 and 2008 followed by the development of sample learning profiles for five students in 2009. They found this

hugely worthwhile and rewarding. Informed by this work, they decided to begin to expand the curriculum in order to provide greater choice and flexibility within senior cycle and to promote greater social integration of students. In addition they set about introducing a system of student profiling and mentoring for learning.

Expanding the senior cycle curriculum

The school introduced five FETAC awards for all 5th year students in 2009. These are Information Technology Skills (Level 4), Computer Applications (Level 4), Health and Fitness (Level 4), Development Studies (Level 4) French (Level 3). Three awards are incorporated into the timetable with two being taken during the students' own time—French (at lunchtime) and Development Studies (after school).

The feedback from students has been very positive. They are satisfied that these courses are certificated and will complement their achievements in the Leaving Certificate. The majority of the students think that the FETAC awards will improve their overall senior cycle qualification and also increase their chances of employment or their chances of going to further education. For example, one student commented *I may be looking into doing Sports Management after school and this (FETAC award in Health and Fitness) will be valuable on my CV.* Another student said *I like doing FETAC because it has improved my skills hugely.* All students seemed to like the practical element of the awards and were happy to get a certificate at the end. Interestingly, the Health and Fitness award was particularly popular with the girls who teachers felt might not usually be keen on PE but liked the balance of the theory and practical elements within this particular award.

Feedback from teachers was also very positive. They particularly like the fact that the courses are *well structured while allowing good flexibility.* They also noted that *procedures for assessment keep the students focused and motivated.* Another benefit of the expansion of the curriculum has been greater social integration of all senior cycle students studying for the Leaving Certificate and students taking the Leaving Certificate Applied.

Mentoring

A second key initiative that was successfully undertaken during the past year was the introduction of a Mentoring for Learning programme for the entire cohort of third year

students (70). Each of the five FLP team members managed a group of between twelve and fourteen third year students. The programme was initiated with an initial group meeting between the mentor and their student grouping. Thereafter, the mentor met with the students on a one to one basis four times during the year. The weekly Pastoral Care class was also used to allow students time to complete their reflective exercises and any other work agreed with the mentor.

At the end of the year students were surveyed about their experience of mentoring and all the responses were extremely positive. They stated that the mentoring programme taught them to become more focused and involved in what they were learning. They said it showed them how to organise a study time-table and become more pro-active in their study routine. They also reported that they learned to recognise their barriers to learning, both in school and at home. Sample comments include:

I now know not to study when there's an XBox in my room.

I've reflected on what exactly I need to do to get the best grade possible.

It helped a bit to talk about our subjects and the things that hinder us in learning.

The students stated that the Reflective Diary was an important tool in the mentoring programme as it helped them to see what areas they needed to work on. In response to how the mentoring programme could be improved all students said they would like more meetings with their mentor.

Teachers concurred that the mentoring programme was a very valuable experience. They all agreed that the programme encouraged the students to think critically about their own learning and as a result the students are more focused and taking more responsibility for their learning. One mentor commented that *the focused questions in their personal reflection diaries have helped them establish why some classes do not go well and why some classes go well*. She went on to say *I feel that the third years are very focused as a result of the mentoring process*.

Teachers reported improvements in student attendance and in their overall commitment to and application to work. *Since October there has been an amazing increase in attendance in the third year students, and the number of lates has decreased. Test results have improved too! (based on comparisons between their summer and Christmas*

tests 2009). Some difficulties did arise due to students' absenteeism which meant that sometimes scheduled meetings with their Mentor did not happen. The time commitment needed to sustain such a programme is another challenge as teachers meet students during their free classes.

6.3 The impact of the work

In embarking on this project, the school hoped to be able to contribute to a *revamped senior cycle, designed locally, to cater for the needs of our students*. Now four years later, the school is offering a more expanded and flexible curriculum which allows for greater integration of all senior cycle students. They have also initiated a successful programme of mentoring for learning which is keeping a finger on the pulse of students' learning experiences and needs.

The team has identified the following impacts of the work.

- Consulting students about their interests, needs and experience of learning has been the most useful aspect of this work.
- Greater choice and flexibility at senior cycle has been achieved with the broadening of the curriculum through the inclusion of FETAC awards.
- The mentoring programme has been successfully introduced for third year students and there are plans to develop it further and involve more teachers.
- LCA students are now more integrated with Leaving Certificate established students and there are plans to promote further integration.
- Teachers' thinking has changed. The staff is now more open to looking at new ways of doing things and realise the need to constantly review what is being offered to students.

6.4 Plans for the future

In the current year the FETAC awards are being continued for fifth year students and sixth year students will be able to choose from these and possibly advance to level 5. The school is also hoping to extend the range of FETAC awards on offer with the addition of Computer Assisted Design (CAD 3D) and Hair and Beauty awards. LCA students will be placed in work experience for a two-week block instead of one day each

week. The aim of this is to allow for greater integration of LCA and established Leaving Certificate students. This will also allow space for additional curriculum components for LCA students. Mentoring will continue into fifth year with a combination of one-to-one student-teacher meetings and timetabled Pastoral Care classes.

Conclusion

This section sets out some concluding reflections based on what we have learned from the work with these six schools this year. These conclusions should be considered in addition to the conclusions presented in *Senior Cycle Developments: Flexible Learning Profiles Progress Report* (October 2009).

These case studies illustrate that students and teachers have an appetite for change and a desire to move towards more flexible and personalised learning. While the vision of Flexible Learning Profiles involves layers of work and layers of change, already we can see significant change has occurred within these schools. So what are the common threads that we see emerging from this work? We will consider these under the headings of change, students, teachers and curriculum.

Change

This initiative has been very instructive in helping us to identify how curriculum and assessment change happens within schools. It is also interesting to note how the schools' own thinking in relation to change has shifted through the process. Some common messages emerging from the case studies are:

- The participant schools are now convinced of the need for schools to constantly review what they are providing for students. *We must constantly be reviewing what we are doing and what's on offer to the students... We must keep pushing out the boundaries.*
- While at the start of this initiative schools saw the 'system' as needing to change now there is a sense that *we are the system and change begins with us.* Moreover, the participant schools are now convinced and can see evidence that *change is possible.* One important change that is evident in all these schools is the fact that students are now benefiting from a broader and more flexible curriculum and this has been achieved within current structures and resources.
- Schools have learned a lot about how to manage change including issues related to the pace of change that is possible *always slower than we hope for,* the importance of communicating with different stakeholders and the value of distributed leadership.

- Finally, the case studies show that change takes time and investment. *The NCCA people coming out to schools and facilitating discussion about change is very important—both the whole staff workshops and the small group meetings are important—the money provided by the NCCA to support the process within schools was a key factor in enabling the work.*

Students

- The case studies all highlight the value of consulting students. *The most important thing is to consult students about what they are learning, how they are learning and their hopes, interests and experiences.*
- The case studies illustrate how teaching and learning changes when students are the focus of planning for teaching and learning. *There is a lot of rhetoric about learner centred education but in reality the system is geared towards promoting the teaching of subjects.* These case studies also highlight the role that key skills can play in the development of FLPs. *Key skills should be spread throughout the system as it puts learners at the centre of teaching and learning.*
- They also illustrate how schools have developed new perspectives on student diversity. *The deficit model of dealing with disadvantage needs to change so that we take students as they are and instead of trying to fit them into the system we look at how the system needs to change. All students deserve the same high expectations and opportunities for success.*
- Students respond to one-to-one attention that mentoring affords them. The way in which good student-teacher relationships can encourage learning has been evident through the mentoring initiatives described in these case studies and has been highlighted in a number of previous reports.

Teachers

- The model of professional development used in this initiative, of a whole school approach which is supported on a sustained basis and tailored to meet particular school needs, has worked very well at helping teachers to make meaningful change in their schools and classrooms.

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- Providing space for thinking, reflecting and testing out ideas is important but requires stimulus from outside the school.
 - Teachers' ability to take on and grow into roles of leadership and responsibility is evident throughout the work. The need for the system to allow for and prioritise this flexibility is illustrated by the changes introduced in all the settings. Colleagues were very supportive of the teams and agreed to take part in professional development, mentoring, teaching different courses and so on. It is questionable if this motivation to change would have been as smooth and enthusiastic if the impetus for change was externally mandated.
 - Networking between schools is very valuable. All teams involved in this process talked about the importance of talking with colleagues in their own schools and with the other teams from schools. This need to learn from other professionals is very evident in all this work.

Curriculum

- While schools have achieved a significant amount of flexibility in the curriculum offered to students, they have also said that more could be done with more flexible curriculum opportunities. Teachers spoke about the *constraints of the current system*. Schools were also somewhat frustrated at the rigidity of the LCA, where the examinations schedule prevented LCA learners from taking LC Maths or English, for example.
- Considering the needs of learners and personalising their curriculum opportunities has featured strongly in the case studies. Schools referred to consulting students about their interests, needs and experience of learning has been the most useful aspect of this work.
- Two schools have made successful inroads to the integration of learning between the Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied and have found this to be a very worthwhile experience for learners. One has specifically recommended to removal of the 'ring-fencing' of LCA.
- It is interesting to note that five of the schools have introduced FETAC awards for their senior cycle learners and that the main attractors for schools and their students to the courses are the variety of courses, the form of assessment and the shorter timescale.

- Schools have been very consistent in their assertion that all learners should have access to the same opportunities for learning; that the Leaving Certificate should encompass a variety of curriculum components that can be selected as required and desired by learners, rather than tracking learners into programmes of learning that restrict them instead of enabling them.

This initiative has confirmed the view expressed in *Leading and Supporting Change in Schools* (NCCA, 2009) that schools are the most important site of the process of educational change. The initiative has also provided ample evidence of how disposed schools are towards being innovative in their ideas and practices, once they are supported in that process. The need for external support from the NCCA, or from another source of support, in tandem with facilitating networking support and learning between schools is an important finding from this work.

The case studies also illustrate that senior cycle development is happening in these schools and that this work is leading to significant improvements in the experience of senior cycle for learners. Other aspects of the review of senior cycle; the development of short courses, the opening up of assessment methods, the review of the Leaving Certificate Applied, subjects that are more relevant and interesting to learners and that have key skills embedded, will all contribute further to the flexibility that schools have to address the needs of their learners through a diversified, flexible and personalised curriculum.

There is also much to be learned from the case studies and the conclusions drawn here that can contribute to the review of junior cycle. While it took these schools some time to get to a point where change is visible, they have all illustrated that this model of change has had a significant impact on how each school approaches its curriculum planning, how it views its learners and their needs and how it can be innovative in introducing curriculum and assessment flexibility. Once schools are given the time and space to be innovative, combined with some support and guidance, they can and do make a real difference to the learning experience of their students.

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Appendix 1

Selection of posts from the Blog used to support key skills in case study 4

[Jigsaw/dominos maker](#)

Just want to share the name of a program which allows you to create jigsaws, dominos and follow me cards with key facts, question & answer style. It's called Tarsia, just google it to find a download. I created a jigsaw using elements from graphing function and divided the class into four groups to solve the puzzle. It went down a treat. Next step is I'm going to teach them how to use it and they can make a jigsaw for each other! Lots of key skills being used, working with others, critical thinking, information processing.

Monday, March 15, 2010

[Critical Thinking](#)

Topic - Graphing Quadratic Functions. Students were given a solution to a question which had 5 mistakes. Working individually for five minutes students had to identify the errors and correct them. Then working in their groups (3 or 4) they were given a further 10 mins to share their ideas. Then each group was given the opportunity to report to the whole class. All students had a high level of success. Students were asked to mark the solution using blunder and slips as per marking schemes and the majority of students awarded the correct mark. This was a very useful exercise in showing students how to critically examine work in order to achieve a higher grade. Hopefully they will put it into practice!

Posted by Staff member at [8:47 PM](#) [0 comments](#)

Sunday, March 14, 2010

Table Quiz

I organized a table quiz for a 3rd year maths group, I arranged mixed ability teams of 3. The format of the quiz was slightly different to a regular quiz. There were 3 questions per round worth 1 mark (easy), 2 marks (mid range) and 3 marks (difficult). Students had to decide themselves who should answer each question and everyone had to answer one question per round. The nominated student from each team came and sat in the hotseats and wrote their answer on a sheet and showed me their solution. It was a great way to do a quiz because everyone had a chance to be involved. At the end of the class the students were able to pick out how they used the five key skills during the class.

Posted by Staff member at [12:02 PM](#) [0 comments](#)

Snowballing. Junior Cert Business Studies

Topic: Factors to consider when selecting a method of transport.

Students are given a blank sheet of paper. They are asked to write down the factors that should be considered when selecting a method of transport. (There should be 5 factors). They write down as many as possible. They roll up the sheets of paper and place them in a box. Then each student takes out one from the box and they discuss the answers with the student beside them and they try to come up with all 5 factors.

Posted by Staff member at [3:28 PM](#) [0 comments](#)

Working with Others -Geography

At the end of the chapter on Volcanoes, Earthquakes and Fold Mountains students were given a crossword for revision. They were to work in twos to find the answers. Students were paired depending on

their ability. Once they were given time to complete the crossword they then had to compare answers with another group. By doing this the whole class had the right answers and the questions were used as a follow up test in which all the students did very well.

Posted by Staff member at [3:16 PM](#) [0 comments](#)

Blind Date for revision

To revise the topic "digestion" the class was divided into boys/girls. In these groups each student had to come up with 10 different questions and have the answers as well. Each boy was then put at a table with a girl sitting opposite. The boys asked the questions first, after 1 minute the girls had to move to the next boy and answer 10 more questions until each girl had been with every boy!!! The boys then put the results up on the board. Then they switched roles with the girls asking the questions and the boys answering. The results were again put up on the board and the winning team got a prize. All students enjoyed this activity.

The key skills used here were information processing, being personally effective, communication and working with others.

Posted by Staff member at [7:36 PM](#) [0 comments](#)

Personal effectiveness

For the last few weeks I have been using "comment only marking" with a maths class, I have reminded students to read the comments I have written when I returned the copies - they are not inclined to do this automatically!! I have noticed that work is more presentable and the incidence of errors has reduced.

Posted by Staff member at [12:16 PM](#) [0 comments](#)

Communication

Task: to compare the message communicated by Coca Cola v Pepsi labelling/branding.

Method used: Class divided into pairs (one A and one B - random selecton), breaking friendship groupings. Used placemats to brainstorm ideas; then students shared and compiled their pairs' ideas. Students "B" shared ideas with whole class, after rehearsing with partners. Some brilliant ideas emerged.

Follow up: Same question given as a 15minute test during next lesson. All students answered well and 3 students answered exceptionally well - ideas and terminology included - profit margins; sub-liminal messages; advancing and receding colours.

Observation: initially some students really resisted pairings - but the placemat eased shyness.

Posted at [6:17 PM](#) [0 comments](#)

Information processing Religion

Students had to brainstorm questions to be used for a survey on peoples religious beliefs. These questions where then compiled for the survey which was carried out down town. The 5th year group then analysed the answers and compiled the data . The final activity was to show these results in pie charts which they are presently doing.

Students enjoyed having a hands on approach to the topic and said it was more interesting finding out the information themselves than having to listen to me relaying it to them.!!!

Posted by Staff member at [4:57 PM](#) [0 comments](#)

Friday, October 2, 2009

