

Difference

Supporting individual learners within the group

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Differentiation **and much more...**

welcome...

...to the fourth issue of info@ncca at the start of the new school year. It's a busy time for schools but also a time of great hope and expectation as new students are welcomed to school and familiar faces return a few months older and, hopefully, wiser.

Before the summer break some of you were involved in research carried out on our behalf by tnsrmbi and we have taken your feedback on board in planning this issue. We know now that you appreciate the practical approach to curriculum and assessment issues and find our updates very useful but many of you are reporting difficulties accessing copies of the newsletter – a situation that we are working to correct. These and other findings are outlined in the article inside but, as ever, we would appreciate continued feedback and suggestions to ensure that info@ncca continues to be of direct use to you in your teaching.

Interculturalism featured at the top of the list of topics that you wanted to read about and your interest coincides with the publication of the post-primary guidelines, *Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School*. In this issue we bring you some tips from the guidelines about choosing and using resource

materials. We also return to the primary school classroom with an interesting exemplar that demonstrates how the opportunities for incorporating intercultural themes into the curriculum are boundless.

Differentiation is a key area for teachers these days and one that we address in this issue with a general overview of some approaches involved in teaching the class group while supporting individual learners.

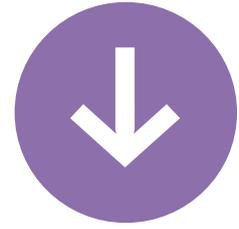
A relatively unfamiliar situation being faced by teachers at the moment is the inclusion in their classes of many pupils and students whose first language is neither English or Irish. We've taken a very practical approach by suggesting strategies that you can use to support children and young people who are learning English as an additional language. These strategies apply in the post-primary classroom as much as they do in the primary context. We would love to hear your views on these practical suggestions and any additional ideas from those of you facing into this challenge.

Finally, a hope that you've arrived at the start of the school year rested and ready and that you enjoy the year ahead. We'll be doing our best to ensure that info@ncca provides a few points of interest and enjoyment through the year, not to mention a few pointers that are of some use to you in the classroom.

John Hammond
DEPUTY CEO
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment



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Supporting teaching and learning...

info@ncca is published three times over the school year, in September, January and April.

Copies are distributed to teachers in every primary and post-primary school in the country. Electronic versions of the newsletter, in both Irish and English, are available to download from our website, at www.ncca.ie. If your school requires extra copies of **info@ncca**, please send your request by email or post.

We welcome articles from teachers as well as comments and queries about content.

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Guidelines

Following the publication of the guidelines on Intercultural Education in the Primary School last year the post-primary guidelines, *Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School*, have now been published and are already available on the NCCA website. Printed copies and a CD will be circulated to schools in October – and the good news is that there will be a hard copy for **every** teacher. Turn to page 6 for further information and tips from the guidelines.



Report card templates

You will have read in a previous issue of *info@ncca* that the NCCA has been developing a range of draft Report Card Templates to help teachers report on children's progress. These draft templates will be available to download from the NCCA website in October, and we would welcome your comments and suggestions on how you have used them. We will also be working closely with teachers, parents and children in a number of schools to use the templates during the coming school year.

Consultation on guidance

The NCCA committee for Guidance in post-primary education has produced a draft curriculum framework which is now ready for consultation. The framework document is aimed at supporting schools in planning their guidance programmes to meet the needs of students in this vital area of their school lives. The consultation document will be circulated shortly to schools and to a range of representative bodies including

parents, students, community and business interests for commentary and recommendations.

Language and literacy

If you are a teacher in an Irish-medium school, either primary or post-primary, or a teacher in an English-medium post-primary school teaching students who have attended primary schooling through the medium of Irish here is your opportunity to have your say on language and literacy in Irish-medium primary schools.

Just complete the online survey at www.ncca.ie. A pdf of the questionnaire may also be downloaded and printed if you prefer a hard copy.

Children in fifth and sixth class and students in post-primary school who attended primary school through the medium of Irish are also welcome to complete the questionnaire.

If you would like to make a submission in response to *Language and Literacy in Irish-medium Primary Schools: Descriptions of Practice*, please note that the **closing date** for receipt of submissions is **Friday 29th September 2006**.

Post-primary Irish

The NCCA has been working on the development of a discussion paper on curriculum provision for Irish in post-primary education which will be published during the first term of this school year. The first phase of the *Review of Languages in Post-Primary Education* was reported on in 2005 and this paper is a response to concerns raised in that report. Of particular concern was the provision of the same curriculum to address the Irish language learning needs of native speakers and second language learners of Irish.

The publication of the discussion paper will be followed by a period of consultation during which you will be able to share your views and ideas on the proposals contained in the paper.

Student voice

A meeting of the participants in CIDREE's *Including the student voice in curriculum development and review* project took place in Cork last April. Representatives attending considered a series of case studies which describe curricular initiatives in which the views and insights of students were



Photo: Patricia Leavey



Photo: Paul Kelly / Studio 3

involved in a significant way. Individual projects from England, Wales, Scotland, Netherlands, Hungary and Ireland were involved. We are currently looking at the features of what works in this area and will be producing a report to present to the General Assembly of CIDREE (Consortium of Institutions for the Development of Research in Education) in November.

Mathematics review

The *Review of Mathematics* consultation report is available on the NCCA website. Proposals for developments in post-primary mathematics were discussed by Council in June; updated proposals will be presented to Council in September and re-structuring and revision work will begin in October. A Board of Studies for mathematics will be established and the course committees will be re-convened to progress the work. Check on the Mathematics Review page of the website for updates on developments.

Curriculum online

Take the pain out of planning for the new school year by visiting Curriculum Online, at www.curriculumonline.ie. The website was developed by the NCCA to house all curriculum and syllabus documents together with the teacher guidelines. It is fully searchable, easy to navigate and a terrific resource for those of you who like to keep everything in one easy-to-access place.

With a wealth of information at your fingertips you can choose to read material online or, with judicious use of cut/copy and paste, you can pick and choose according to your specific requirements and either keep the information on your desktop or print it out – or both!

Research report

The second report from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) into how students experience junior cycle has been published by The Liffey Press. The report, entitled *Pathways through the Junior Cycle: the experiences of second year students* is part of a major research project that follows a group of 900 students in 12 schools from their transition to post-primary school to the completion of the Junior Certificate. The first report, *Moving Up*, published in 2004, focused on the experiences of first-year students.

Phase 2 of the research concerns students' experiences of second year and includes themes such as:

- students' experience of subjects and subject choice
- the allocation of students to class groups and the particular effects of streaming and ability grouping on teacher and student expectations and student self-esteem
- student perspectives on good teaching
- engagement with the curriculum
- students' changing attitudes to school over time.

Short, accessible summaries of both the first and second reports are available to download at www.ncca.ie. They are a 'must read' for year heads, members of the pastoral team, teachers, parents and all involved in making the junior cycle a positive and meaningful experience for students.



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

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

Intercultural education

.....in the Primary school

As the novelty of being back in school with a new class begins to fade, you may be searching for something new and different to do with your class that will fit in with the curriculum and won't waste valuable class time. Or you may be looking for an interesting way to integrate a number of curriculum areas but have run out of ideas for interesting themes. Why not go back to *Intercultural Education in the Primary School – Guidelines for Schools?* The guidelines have plenty of ideas on how the curriculum can incorporate intercultural themes while at the same time addressing the aims of the Primary School Curriculum.

Starting with one of the many interesting exemplars is an easy entry point into the guidelines that introduces the teacher to many interesting ideas. Once you have started, the possibilities are boundless!

Poetry helps children to develop emotional and imaginative skills through language. The starting point for this exemplar could be to work through the poem as part of the English curriculum, through some of the common discussion points identified in the curriculum



All the Ones They Do Call Lowly

Garter snake, garter snake, you hurt no one;
You move on so gracefully through the grass.
Garter snake, garter snake, I'll be your friend
And not run away as you pass.

Grasshopper, grasshopper hopping so high
Away from our crazy feet close to you;
Grasshopper, grasshopper, I'll be your friend;
I wish I could hop as high as you.

Speckled frog, speckled frog, I like your pad;
I don't believe I'll catch warts from you.
Speckled frog, speckled frog, I'll be your friend;
Why should I be frightened of you?

Wiggly worm, wiggly worm, get back inside -
A robin is waiting to take you home;
Wiggly worm, wiggly worm, I'll be your friend;
Above ground you'll be not alone.

All the ones that they do call lowly,
That do no harm to you or me -
Each will be my secret buddy
On grass and water, sand and tree.

David Campbell

– thrust of the poem, looking for the deeper meaning, appreciation of the effects of rhyme and rhythm, recognising the effects of simile and metaphor and examining the effects of alliteration, onomatopoeia, assonance and imagery.



All the ones they do call lowly

From *Intercultural Education in the Primary School - Guidelines for Schools*

Exemplar 18 – PP 145 -146
Suitable for 1st to 4th class



Starting Activity

English

Read the poem and discuss the thrust of the poem, the use of words to achieve particular effects, the effects of rhythm and rhyme, simile and metaphor

Ask children about their experiences of frogs, snakes and worms. Are they all negative? Why is this? Discuss how each verse relates to some of our attitudes to people

- Do we run away from some people?
- Do we ignore some people and think they are not important?
- Are we afraid of some people?
- Can we help people who are alone or lonely?

Making connections: **Science**

Research each animal – find out about its habitat, feeding habits, its role in nature.

What are its positive characteristics? How is this animal our “buddy”?



Making connections: **Art**

Present a visual representation of the research presenting the positive characteristics of the animal.

Discuss the presentations



Making connections: **SPHE**

Discuss how these images and perceptions relate to our attitudes to other people – especially those that we consider to be different.



Intercultural themes

- Identity and belonging
- Similarity and difference
- Discrimination and equality

Other extension activities

How could this be linked in with other curriculum areas?
Check out Chapter 4 [pp88 – 131] for lots of opportunities across the curriculum.
Are there other songs and poems that I could use in this way?

How does an activity like this contribute to intercultural education?

Poems, songs and stories provide excellent vehicles for exploring the normality of difference. In this case difference is explored through looking at and discussing the

different sorts of animals and our preconceptions of them.

- The myths we hear about frogs (giving us warts!) can be used to explore prejudice and stereotyping.
- It can be used to develop a sense of similarity with diverse peoples and an understanding that just

because people are different doesn't mean that they are not valuable.

- It can also be used to develop a sense of empathy and a positive emotional response to those who are discriminated against.



Some other exemplars to get started with

- Who is the real Pocahontas? (p 48)
- Explores how historical evidence can be presented in many different ways and provides some great ways for exploring bias and stereotype.
- First impressions (p 71)
- Helps children to explore how visual images can influence their way of seeing people and the world
- Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica
- This can be used to help children appreciate a range of music styles including folk music from other cultures. They will love learning the song and it provides a great starting point for some class work on human rights and racism.

There are many other interesting exemplars and lots of useful information in your copy of *Intercultural Education in the Primary School*. If you can't locate your copy right now, log on to www.ncca.ie for a PDF version. 

.....in the Post-Primary school

If an important aim of education is the preparation of young people for the challenges of living in the world today then intercultural education is an essential part of that process. It is not another subject added to the curriculum, nor should it be; it is an approach to education that can be integrated across all subject areas.

Benefits of intercultural education

All students have a culture and ethnicity. Learning to value their own culture and ethnicity is central to their self-esteem and sense of identity. Intercultural education facilitates all students in coming to value their own heritage and the heritage of others.

Intercultural education has many benefits.

- It encourages curiosity about cultural and social difference.
- It helps to develop and support the imagination by normalising difference.
- It helps students to develop their critical thinking skills by enabling them to gain perspective on and question their own cultural practices.
- It helps to develop sensitivity and empathy.
- It helps prevent discrimination and racism.

Choosing resource materials

The messages that are communicated through the physical environment of the classroom are very important and the textbooks and resources we use have a great influence on student attitudes. Bias in textbooks can appear in a number of ways, for example, inaccuracy, stereotyping, omissions and distortions and through the use of

What do we mean by racism?

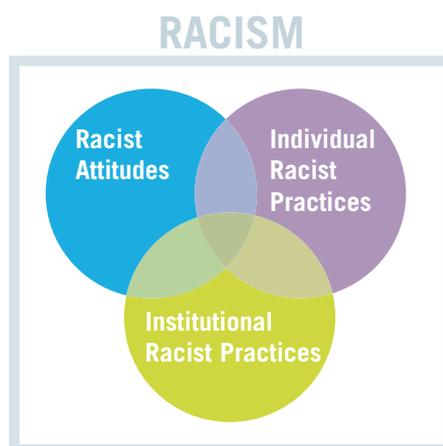
Belief that

- > one culture is inferior or superior to another
- > one culture is primitive or lacks value.



Practices including

- > shunning people
- > name-calling
- > graffiti
- > violence.



Indirect discrimination may include

- > entry criteria that do not allow for nomadic lifestyle
- > indiscriminate use of standardised tests on ethnic minorities that are not normed for that ethnic group
- > development of service provision in a way which reflects only the majority community's culture and identity
- > a lack of positive action to promote equality
- > a lack of professional expertise or training in dealing with diversity in the organisation
- > a lack of systematic data gathering on the impact of policies on minority groups
- > a lack of workable facilities for consultation and listening to minority groups.



biased language. Developing the ability to recognise bias is an important skill to help students become critical readers. This skill can be fostered not just in relation to the reading of books but also in 'reading' the internet, films, videos and other media.

Checklist for choosing and using resources

- Does the resource use examples, stories and images that are reflective of a broad range of cultures?
- Do the images accurately reflect people's current everyday lives?
- Are minority ethnic groups and people from other countries represented in stereotypical ways? For example are Africans largely depicted as living in poverty?
- Are particular groups represented only in terms of their membership of that group? For example, are

Travellers represented in ordinary situations or only in terms of minority issues?

- Does the resource contain information or stories that highlight intercultural issues?
- Are members of ethnic minority groups or people with a disability shown in a variety of settings?
- Are the scientists, historians, politicians and others who have been identified as making a positive contribution to our world drawn from a variety of ethnic groups?

If the texts or resources you are using offer limited perspectives, this in itself can be a valuable resource. Through questioning what perspectives are missing and how the same material might be presented differently we can develop the students' capacity to be critical of the way in which information is presented to them.

For further information on

- resources
- welcoming new students
- supporting second language learning
- including intercultural education in your classroom planning and teaching
- working with exemplar materials, and more...

refer to *Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School* at www.ncca.ie or check in your own personal copy (on the way to you in October).



Primary Curriculum review

Taking stock of SPHE, Gaeilge and Science

We learned a lot about your experiences with the English, Visual Arts and Mathematics curricula during the first phase of Primary Curriculum Review which took place during the school year 2003/2004. The report on that review was published in 2005, and a summary of the findings was sent to all schools. The following are some of the ways the NCCA has responded to those findings:

- **English** – additional support material on the structure of the English Curriculum was sent to all teachers.
- **Engagement with parents** – the NCCA produced and disseminated a DVD for parents: *The what, why and how of children's learning in primary school* to help them support their child's learning in primary school. We have also developed an accompanying web-based information resource for schools to use in communicating with parents (see article in this issue).
- **Methods of teaching and learning** – a new website which will provide practical support to teachers in working with the different teaching approaches and methodologies is under development.
- **Assessment** – draft report card templates and guidelines on assessment are being developed (see update in this issue).

We are now about to begin phase 2 of the review. This time round we're looking at the three subjects SPHE, Gaeilge and Science. Since the Gaeilge Curriculum has been taught for at least four years now and the other two subjects for three years, it's a good time to check in with teachers on your experiences with them.

What does this review involve?

A review like this is really a taking stock. It's a look at how these three subjects are settling in as part of the curriculum for individual teachers and ultimately at how the curriculum is impacting on children's learning in real classrooms. The review will gather information from a large number of teachers across the country. These teachers will be invited to share their experiences in using the curriculum in the three subjects by means of a teacher template study (using a questionnaire) and also through a school case study involving teachers, principals, children and parents.

Why is it needed?

While aspects of Science and SPHE were being taught in classrooms around the country before 1999 when the revised Primary School Curriculum was launched, these two subjects are quite new. The Gaeilge curriculum places great emphasis on the communicative approach. Following in-service and a number of years teaching the subjects, it makes sense to learn what aspects of the subjects have worked well and what challenges they have presented for teachers.



So what will happen as a result of the review?

As with Phase 1, the NCCA will use findings from the review to identify and develop necessary additional supports for teachers, and will make these supports available to schools as soon as possible. We will also disseminate information on what works well for teachers, celebrating good practice. If, in the course of the review we find that aspects of the curriculum are *not* working well we will take another look at what was developed in 1999.

Who will participate in the review this time?

A sample of approximately 170 schools, representative of all school types, has been drawn up by the Educational Research Centre (ERC). If you are a staff member in one of these schools, the NCCA will contact your school in September/October and invite you and your colleagues to participate in the teacher template study. The teacher template study will take place from November to February. A smaller sample of schools will be invited to take part in the school case study later in the school year.

And if my school is not selected, can I contribute to the review?

Absolutely! We'd love to hear about your experiences. You can participate by means of an online facility. The teacher template will be available on the NCCA website for individual teacher participation from October. Ultimately, the outcomes of the review will help to improve teaching and learning across all schools, but will also result in better curriculum supports for each individual teacher.

The templates are useful also in helping you to reflect about teaching and learning in your own classroom with these three subjects. The questions we ask will help you to think about what is working well for you, what you are finding challenging and what aspects of the three subjects you would like to prioritise in your classroom this year.

Where can I find out more?

Email: newsletter@ncca.ie, or phone: 01 661 71777

“ Since the Gaeilge Curriculum has been taught for at least four years now and the other two subjects for three years, it's a good time to check in with teachers on your experiences with them. ”

LIA

An interactive resource for teachers of Irish

The NCCA, in collaboration with the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE), is developing a multimedia interactive website, *LIA (Litríocht Idirghníomhach na hArdteistiméireachta)* to support the teaching and learning of Leaving Certificate Irish literature. The *LIA* website complements the *Treoirínite mar thaca le múineadh an chúrsa leasaithe litríochta* (2004).

To undertake the initial population of this website, a number of teachers were commissioned to develop exemplars of classroom practice illustrating a variety of innovative approaches and methodologies for the teaching and learning of poetry, prose and film. The exemplars contain an array of classroom ideas and activities; a selection of audio and visual resources; interactive and non interactive worksheets and games.

While the materials are based on the current prescribed texts, the aim is to demonstrate to teachers a variety of approaches to the teaching of Irish literature at post-primary level.

The *LIA* website will be dynamic and organic in nature with an inbuilt facility to allow teachers to develop, submit and share their own classroom ideas and activities with colleagues. Some of the resources available on the website will be accessible live on the Internet but most will be available to download and use offline.

The *LIA* website will be launched in the current school term and will be available through ScoilNet (www.scoilnet.ie/lia) and subsequently on NCCA's forthcoming *Curriculum and Assessment in Action* website. 

Popping the question

Assessment for Learning

According to Mike Hughes, author of *Closing the Learning Gap*, the question that should be on every teacher's lips at the end of every lesson is: 'What have they learned?' It's a very interesting question to ask, but not an easy one to answer. In fact it's a bit reminiscent of the advice once given by a supervisor to a trainee teacher:

“Remember, they are always learning; they may not be learning what you think you are teaching them, but they are always learning!”

Assessment for Learning (AfL) places a lot of emphasis on both teachers and students asking questions and it encourages us to vary the kinds of questions we put to students. We are all familiar with closed and open question types. 'What is the capital of Ireland?' is a good example of a closed question in that it anticipates a single, factual answer. 'How do you think the people of Cork might feel about that?' is certainly not a closed question in that it encourages a more speculative response!

So, here are a couple of interesting ideas to try out in the area of questioning – a good strategy is to pick one that applies to class-work, give it a go in a class (any class) and pay attention to the impact it makes.



Use a longer wait time...

'Wait time' is the amount of silent time a teacher allows (insists upon) before accepting an answer to a question. So, next time you ask an open type question (of the type beginning: 'why do you think that...' or 'can you suggest reasons why...' etc.) make sure to leave 3 to 5 seconds of wait time before you begin taking answers. It mightn't sound like a long time to wait but it is longer than most of us wait for an answer before adding further prompts, or even answering the question ourselves! What you are trying to achieve here is that students give more thoughtful answers. One way of increasing the likelihood of this is to ask students to jot down a couple of speculative points *before* giving an answer to the question.

No hands...

Following on from the longer wait time, an effective strategy for ensuring that students give a bit more thought to the open questions you pose (and this is especially with the younger classes in mind) is that you insist that they don't put up their hands to answer. You nominate. That does two things; it prevents 'the usual suspects' from answering every time and it ensures that others in the class pay a little more attention to the answer.

Posing questions with teaching in mind...

It's a good idea from time to time to get students to imagine they will be teaching a topic to a younger person and to anticipate the questions the young person will ask. If group-work suits you (and your students) you can get them to try out their answers to those key questions on one another.

Finally, try this for just five minutes...

It is worthwhile also asking yourself some key questions about your students' learning. So, with cup of coffee in hand (optional!) think of any of your class groups with this question in mind: 'What do successful or effective learners do that other learners don't do, or don't do as well?' It's probably best to focus on a couple of individuals in the class – one a successful learner and the other not so. Avoid thinking of them in terms like "A is more intelligent than B" and so on; instead, focus on the learning patterns or habits they have developed and the ones you would like to encourage or develop in them. It's not as easy as it sounds... Assessment for Learning encourages us to observe and to be aware of **how** our students learn as well as **what** they are learning and anything we can do to increase that awareness is good.



Communicating with parents

A new, customisable resource

Have you ever thought about sending an information sheet or booklet to the parents of children in your school/ class at the beginning of the school year? It's a great time to let parents know what their child will be learning in their new class so that they can begin to support that learning at home. You may also want to use your information sheet or booklet to let parents know about practical things like school closing dates in the coming year or about the best ways to keep in touch with you, the teacher. Well, you may be interested to know that the NCCA has developed an information resource for schools to use, which will help you do just that!

So what exactly is this resource?

In May, your school received its pack of the DVD for parents *The what, why and how of children's learning in primary school* and we hope you are finding it useful. Linked to the DVD, the NCCA has developed an information resource which schools can use in a number of different ways to communicate with parents about their children's learning.

One of the primary concerns in developing this resource was to ensure that it could be customised by individual schools. As the required level of customisation is possible only by using a web-based format, the resource is only available through our website. It can be used by schools, either as a booklet (sent to all parents in the school) or as an information sheet (sent to the parents of children in a particular class). The resource is presented in three sections.

→ **Part A** outlines what children learn, how they learn and the approaches and methodologies used by teachers in the classroom.

It also talks about assessment, homework and the importance of learning at home.

→ **Part B** details for parents what their children learn in each of the six areas in the Primary School Curriculum. It presents this information at each of the four class levels: infant classes, 1st/2nd class, 3rd/4th class, and 5th/6th class, and outlines practical ways in which parents can help their children to learn at home.

→ **Part C** enables schools to add their own information if they wish, e.g. contact numbers, diary dates, arrangements for parent/teacher meetings, etc.

Where can I get it?

The booklet/information sheet is available on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie. Schools can use it in a number of different ways. For example, schools can choose to download, print, copy and give the entire booklet to all parents in the school (which may suit small schools and schools with multiple classes taught by a teacher in the same room). If yours is a larger school, you may

prefer to just copy and give part B containing the information sheet about children's learning at a particular class level to the parents of children in the relevant classes along with part A which provides more general information about the curriculum in schools.

The resource page on the NCCA website presents advice and assistance to help you decide how to use it and to show you how to add information so you can customise it to suit your own school. It will also show you a sample of what a customised information sheet or booklet might look like.

The NCCA welcomes your feedback on using the DVD, the information sheets and/or booklet. You can contact us at: newsletter@ncca.ie  or by phone at: 01-6617177. Your feedback will help us to improve the resource for next year so we're looking forward to hearing from you!

Differentiation

Meeting the needs of all learners

Not all students are alike. Teachers know this and we always teach with this reality in mind – that every class group is really a collection of individuals. In this sense our day-to-day teaching seems to pull us in two directions at once – to teach a class group while supporting individual learners. When we reach out to the individual within the wider group we are engaging in **differentiation**, which relates at its simplest to any **strategies that help a teacher to make a move away from ‘teaching to the middle’ of a class group**, whether or not that class has been streamed or set. We don’t direct a question towards a particular student in a random way; we don’t choose an individual to read or recite in a language class in a random way; and of course we don’t offer supportive feedback to learners in a random way. These almost unthinking teaching activities reflect our instincts to differentiate our teaching.

These days it can be especially interesting to think of the various ways in which we are aware of differences among the groups of students we teach. Students differ from one another in terms of their prior learning or knowledge (what they bring to each new lesson), their readiness to learn, their facility with language, their particular preferences for different styles of learning, and their personal interests. And because Irish society has become so much more diverse of late, a wider range of differences has come into play; students belong to different ethnic groups, come from varying socio-economic backgrounds, come from homes where neither English nor Irish is the first language and have a widely varying range of educational needs. Therefore, it is important that we think of differentiating our teaching (and our students’ learning) in a formal way.

Firstly, it is most helpful to think of differentiation as an approach to teaching and learning that

encourages us to vary what we do in three key areas:

- **content** – the ‘material’ we choose to present or engage students with
- **process** – the methods and activities we use to give students opportunities to practise and learn the content
- **product** – the way students show us that they have learned (this includes assessment of various kinds).

Bearing in mind that to a certain extent we already differentiate our teaching naturally and instinctively, it’s probably best to think of the things that help us to differentiate in effective ways. The first, and arguably most important of these, is **knowledge of the students we are teaching** rather than knowledge of the content we are teaching. Clearly, we learn most about the strengths and needs of our students through assessment – observation, in-class activities, homework, tests and examinations, and so on. One of the ways some teachers use to accelerate the process of getting to know their students (and this is most helpful when you are starting out with a new class group) is to involve the students in getting to know themselves! What you are looking for is knowledge about:

- their prior learning experiences (what they already know or can do)
- their interests (what students like, what they are good at)
- their learning profiles (how and when they believe they learn best).

Example

The following example incorporates some typical ways to differentiate and is intended as a suggestion of some of the possibilities for different approaches to teaching and learning for all students. The class is a mixed ability group of 28 twelve to thirteen year-olds; they might be sixth class primary or first year post-primary students.

The teacher divides the class into four mixed-ability groups with approximately seven students in each group.

Differentiation by teaching style

The teacher ensures that students experience different styles of teaching and learning. She divides the class time into segments of roughly equal length and varies the teaching and learning experiences in this way:



Tic-Tac-Toe task menu

The Tic-Tac-Toe task choice menu is a strategy that can readily be adapted at primary and post-primary level when planning a topic or as a way of differentiating homework. It serves as an important reminder that there are many different ways in which a learning topic can be opened up.

Make something

Model, design, collection of artefacts, artwork of an aspect of your study.

Compare

Teach something you have learnt to someone else or to the class.

Teach or demonstrate

Select and then compare different elements of your study. Find similarities and differences.

Creative recording

Photos, video, collage of your work for a presentation.

Graph

Visual record of some aspects of your work.

Demonstrate

Give a demonstration to show what you have learned.

Survey

Gather people's opinions, feelings about some fact, idea or aspect of your study.

Dramatise

Organise a role-play on something you have learned.

Forecast

Look to the future. How will your topic change in the next 10 years?

- **whole-class teaching** and discussion at the start
- **peer/group work** on different aspects of a given topic
- **students' presentation** (student as teacher)
- **teacher-led tuition** for small groups.

Varying teaching style facilitates the inclusion of students with different learning strengths and styles.

Whole-class teaching

The teacher introduces and demonstrates the topic to the whole class, takes questions and facilitates discussion. This allows her to stress and explain key ideas and objectives in the lesson.

Peer/group work

Now the different groups begin to work on assignments set out on cards handed out by the teacher. The first tasks (problems/questions) on each card are the same. This ensures that each group works on the same material for a time. The later tasks on the cards are varied according to the ability level for each group. The teacher does not expect that all the students in any one of the groups will complete all of the tasks.

The organisation of the group work is interesting, too. The students are given little cards which indicate the role that each one is to play in the group. One will be the recorder, one is to ask

questions, one takes responsibility for the final answers to the questions they answer as a group, one will check the work being done by the groups at the other tables.

Each segment begins with a teacher-designed game or puzzle loosely linked to the topic. Then it moves on to a small number of problems, common to all the groups, which the group members work on together and agree on the answers. The teacher monitors this phase by moving between groups; she offers most support to the lowest-ability groups to ensure that they understand the tasks.

Students' presentation

The agreed answer sheet for each group is then checked by a different group and where mistakes are identified the teacher takes note for later. The student whose responsibility it is to check the work of another group will return the 'corrected' work sheet, point out errors, and explain where the errors have occurred.

Teacher-led tuition

Having worked on the 'team' answers to the problems, the students now set out on the individual tasks in their work sheets. While this is happening the teacher brings one or more of the groups, if she feels they need it, to a separate area in the room (it has its own little blackboard) for instruction based on the shared errors in their work-cards.

Return to whole-class teaching

The class session concludes with the teacher-led revision of the lesson, returning to key ideas and processes, and giving homework. The homework assignments can be varied to suit the ability levels of the students.

As you can see from this brief account the teacher's differentiated teaching is at all times led and informed by the assessment and monitoring of the performances of students in smaller groups. She is getting closer to the individuals and spends less time engaged in whole-class tuition. Her classroom organisation has involved her in a number of key areas of differentiation and shows how differentiation cuts across many dimensions of teaching, from lesson planning to classroom organisation to assessment. It serves as an important reminder that there are many different ways in which a learning topic can be opened up.

This article is intended as a general introduction to some of the territory involved in this activity of 'differentiation'. We will be devoting more space to examples of classroom practice in future issues. So, watch this space. And if there is any particular area you would like to see featured, do let us know.

Senior cycle subject review

Work commences on the Phase One subjects and short courses

Following a year of preparation the NCCA is now ready to roll with the development of the Phase One subjects and short courses (see table below) as part of the development of the curriculum at post-primary senior cycle.

Boards of Studies are now in place for these areas:

- Arts and Humanities
- Languages
- Science
- Mathematics

These boards will meet during September and early October to begin the work. The first meetings of the course committees for each of the subjects involved will follow. The committees for short courses and transition units have also been established and will meet in September.

Phase One Curriculum Components

Subjects to be reviewed	New subjects	Short courses	Transition units (some examples)	Other developments
Mathematics Applied Mathematics Irish English Modern Languages Biology Chemistry Physics	Social and Political Education Physical Education	Enterprise Music Technology Art Technology Mathematical Applications Psychology	Genetics and Biotechnology Classical Studies Performance Arts Sociology of Reality TV Meteorology Sports Science Legal Science Craft Design and Technology Irish Cultural Studies	Social, Personal and Health Education Physical Education Framework

What will be included in the review of subjects?

While it is not expected that there will be major changes in the *content* of many subjects, we are looking towards significant change in how students experience the subject. This approach will include an opportunity for course committees to update syllabuses where necessary, the emphasis being on removing outdated material rather than adding more content.

Key areas for consideration in the review of subjects are:

- necessary updating of the syllabus
- expressing the syllabus in terms of learning outcomes
- embedding key skills in each syllabus and considering how they can impact on the teaching and learning in that subject
- time allocation for teaching the subject – is the current syllabus overloaded?

- how appropriate is the syllabus for Ordinary Level students? Can the experience of the subject be improved for Ordinary Level students?
- the current assessment arrangements and recommendations for improvement. It is proposed that each subject will have two assessment events.

A new subject, Social and Political Education, is also being developed and work in this area will be considered by the Arts and Humanities Board of Studies.

Short courses and transition units

During this initial phase the short course committee will be considering the development of short courses in Enterprise, Music Technology, Art Technology, Psychology and Mathematical Applications.

Sample transition units have been developed and will be available on the NCCA website in October.

Important reminder

All teachers are represented on the Boards of Studies (Teacher Union Representatives) and course committees (Teacher Union Representatives and Subject Associations) so keep in touch with your representative organisations to ensure your voice is heard as the Senior Cycle developments progress.

More information will be available as the work progresses, on www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle.  This will also include a forum where you can express your opinions about what should happen with your subject.

The world in our school

Supporting children from diverse backgrounds

Multicultural, intercultural, ethnic minority, diversity of cultures, multiracial...

Words like these used to describe Ireland's increasingly diverse population are appearing with greater frequency in various publications in recent years. And no doubt as a principal or teacher, you are welcoming newcomer students to your own school or classroom! But how can you really support and embrace Ireland's changing population? Read on for some useful strategies to help get you started.

Create a welcoming and inclusive school climate

Here are some ideas to help you create a more inclusive and intercultural school.

- Set up school displays which embrace the range of languages and cultures in your school.
- Integrate intercultural education across the Primary School Curriculum.
- Develop and use anti-bullying and anti-discrimination codes as part of your school's code of behaviour. You could, for example, establish a school charter that celebrates diversity and promotes equality. A school charter outlines the rights of the children in your school and can be developed with the children. Use the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the Convention on the Right of the Child as a guide (see exemplar lesson on page 66 of the *Intercultural Education in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools*)
- Set time aside for collaborative planning between classroom teachers and support teachers.

Get parents involved

Build up and maintain parent-teacher and parent-school contact by encouraging parents to become involved in school life.

- Invite parents to help out in the classroom, e.g. in music or visual arts work.
- Invite parents to help translate correspondence to parents into their native language.
- Consider the diversity of literacy levels as well as cultural and linguistic diversity when communicating with parents.

Support language learning

There are a number of ways you can support children from diverse backgrounds and for whom English is an Additional Language. In your classroom:

- use pictures/photographs/posters and so on which portray a range of ethnicities
- display information about the birthplaces of the children and the language(s) they speak
- display signs and notices, and phrases commonly used during the school day, in the languages used by the children
- check that library and classroom resources are age-appropriate and available in a range of languages.

A welcoming classroom

Try to create a warm, welcoming and positive environment for individual children in your classroom right from the start.

- Learn to pronounce children's names correctly.
- Find out what language(s) they speak and about their proficiency levels.
- Try to learn some key phrases in their first language.
- Find out what their religion is and how they practise.
- Check out any cultural practices that might influence children's classroom interaction.
- Use co-operative and collaborative group work as much as possible.
- Use gestures to illustrate actions and activities.
- Set time aside for independent and guided reading.
- Set up a buddy system in your classroom where children can support and help each other in their language learning.

To find out more about how you can support our newcomer population in your school and classroom, log on to www.ncca.ie/publications and browse through *English as an Additional Language in Primary Schools: Guidelines for Teachers* or look up your own copy of *Intercultural Education in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools*. You will also find practical support materials online from Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT) at www.iilt.ie.



Going Dutch



Back to school in the Netherlands

Another September, and you're back to school. Run off your feet already? As you hurriedly prepare for the next group of first year students to enter your classroom, have you ever thought: *'Who does the most work in here?'*, and *'Who should be doing the most work?'* Do you find you're working harder and harder, while the students work less and less? Perhaps it's the same everywhere—or is it? If you were a teacher in the Netherlands, for example, what would your expectations be for September 2006?

When first years begin secondary school in the Netherlands they have already been divided into 3 groups, based on standardised tests in the primary school. There is a pre-vocational group, a general education group and a pre-university group. Each group completes a similar basic secondary education for three years, but from there onwards they follow different programmes leading to different qualifications.

There is no state examination at the end of third year (less pressure for you – but less motivation for them!). So how are standards maintained? By Ministry of Education inspectors that check schools to see that students reach the required learning targets in each subject.

The 2006/7 school year will be a time of change, however, because the Netherlands is bringing in a series of educational reforms. Several years ago, a review of basic secondary education concluded that:

- the curriculum was overloaded and fragmented
- teachers were doing more and more work, while students

appeared to be doing less and less...not taking responsibility for their own learning

- the curriculum was so subject focused that students were not developing important problem solving, teamwork and communication skills.

In true Dutch fashion, the response was pragmatic. A law was passed reducing the compulsory curriculum by a third, and schools were given the autonomy and the resources to organise the teaching and learning environment as they saw fit (as long as they covered the core curriculum). The curriculum agency, SLO, provided four models for schools to assist them in their planning.

Models 1 and 2

The first two models involve little change for schools. Subjects remain the dominant feature of the timetable and subject-based teaching continues. But, because learning targets in the new curriculum are less subject-specific, teachers will need to work together more to ensure there's no unnecessary overlap. Students will be doing a lot more cross-curricular

projects, requiring them to get more involved in the planning and organisation of their learning.

Model 3

A Model 3 school is dramatically different in terms of the approach to learning and the school building. Instead of the normal class size of 20+ students you teach 60 students! Well, not on your own, and not in 'your' classroom. A number of classroom walls have been broken down to create 'learning areas' with an open space for students to study in groups of four, a glassed-off area for group teaching, and a set of computer workstations. There is also an office which the teacher shares with two colleagues, one a classroom assistant and the other a classroom coordinator. Both are there to guide the students in their work. You will spend 50 or 100 minutes in the learning area and can decide how you divide that time between subject teaching and working with students individually or in fours. You give your work plan and assignments to the class coordinator who makes out a weekly schedule for the students. The students must take personal responsibility to complete



the assignments in each of their subjects by the end of the week. While classrooms can sometimes be a little noisier than in Ireland, students usually get their assignments completed, if only to avoid having to bring work home!

Model 4

Model 4 could really blow your mind. The first thing you notice is that there are more students and more teachers in the learning area. In fact there are up to 150 students in the class group! Fortunately, you are not alone. You work in a team of ten – a student/adult ratio of 15 to 1. Six of your colleagues are teachers and three are classroom assistants. Your team will have been carefully put together so that expertise in all the necessary curriculum areas is available to students. You and your

colleagues will work exclusively with the same class group for at least a year, if not more! The working day is 8.30 – 5.00pm and you must spend 40% of that in direct contact with students. The rest of the time can be used for planning and attending professional development courses.

The open learning areas in Model 4 schools are arranged with 'islands' – student desks with computers arranged in circles. There are no textbooks, but there is a well stocked reference library. A small 'quiet room' for study is available. Students follow themes instead of subjects. The themes are selected carefully by you and the rest of the teaching team so that students have to draw on knowledge from various fields of study. Within each theme, there are

certain key stages, where students have to consult with you. So, from time to time you will look at each student's work and either give him/her the go ahead to proceed or ask them to stop to review earlier work.

The approach to language learning in Model 4 schools is particularly interesting. Students concentrate on one foreign language in an intensive programme involving four half days a week for 12 weeks. After this block, students move on to another language and so on.

So, as a teacher in the Netherlands, your working experience will depend on the school you teach in, and the model it has adopted. Interesting isn't it? But it could never happen in Ireland. Or could it?



Examining the issues

As the editorial team began preparations for this issue of info@ncca we did so with slightly less apprehension than we experienced with previous issues. New projects always have a certain element of the 'nerve-wracking' about them and in our case the worries centred around whether we were providing you with the kind of reading material that is a) relevant, b) interesting and c) well written. This time round we have a better feeling for what you want to read about because we now have you word/s for it, having carried out research in schools around the country.

We would like to thank all of the teachers who took part in the research, which was conducted by tnsrmbi and some of our part-time education officers. The findings were interesting, encouraging and occasionally caused a slight raising of our collective eyebrows. We know now that the majority of teachers who have read the newsletter

- like the publication in terms of design and layout
- feel that there is a need for such a publication
- welcome the practical approach featured in many of the articles and would like to see more of it
- enjoy the 'Updates', articles on assessment for learning, interculturalism (see this issue) and other curriculum and assessment topics.

In spite of our best efforts to encourage readers to go with our overview of the learner as the central focus even to the dismantling of demarcation lines, post-primary teachers are reluctant to take an interest in primary issues. Primary teachers, on the other hand, appear to appreciate the deliberate mixing of articles in info@ncca.

Another challenge for the team is the fact that the level of computerisation in schools varies widely, as does the level of computer literacy among teachers. Some respondents felt that we should be careful not to over-reference online resources or the use of ICT in the classroom, with this imbalance in mind. It's a thought-provoking issue and one that we will be attempting to partially resolve by referencing offline/non-ICT alternatives where they exist, rather than reducing the use of online references. We feel that as levels of computer provision in schools can only improve, along with the levels of computer literacy among teachers, it is inevitable that online access will gradually become available to all. However, we would welcome your views on the subject, as the in-house debate continues.

At the time during which the research was conducted, Issues 1 and 2 had been distributed to schools. The experience of many of the teachers interviewed was that *info* had failed to fight its way to the top of the pile on the staff room table and we are aware that we are competing for your attention with a multitude of other publications.

Many of you suggested that you would appreciate a personal copy in the post but, while we would like to be in a position to do that, the cost would be prohibitive. Prior to the distribution of this issue you will have noticed a poster on your staff room wall, or elsewhere, reminding you of its impending appearance. If you have any other suggestions as to how we can get your message across, please do let us know.

We know now that you are as keen to read about developments in curriculum and assessment as we are to keep you informed.

So, any more suggestions?

