

07.12.07 NCCA REPORT FOR NPC-pp FROM MARION LYON

NCCA Junior Cycle Conference

The ERSI report 'Gearing up for the Exams' was launched at the conference as previously reported. I have sent before this a copy of my presentation to the conference. The conference was a major success and as you will see from the feedback from discussion groups there is much still to discuss and work-on with regard to the Junior Cycle. I had a very good response to my contribution. Sinead Breathnach from SDPI is interested in hearing from me of any models of good practice. I.e. induction programmes, information for parents, information nights for the various year groups, collaborative initiatives at school level, so I eagerly await your responses.

1. To what extent has the Junior Certificate been successful in the first twenty years of its existence and what key lessons should be learned to inform future development?

- While the success of unified certification would be acknowledged there are anomalies in what constitutes the 'core curriculum'. There is lack of definition and the core differs across sectors.
- There is a tension between being creative in one's teaching and having to teach to the exam. The school system and exam system tends to dictate success.
- What gets assessed gets taught. If we develop ways of assessing social and personal confidence, leadership etc. then it will get taught.
- We over teach – not enough thinking, independent thinking.
- No more adding subjects please!
- Impact of the change process was underestimated by NCCA
- Curriculum was introduced as a 'stand-alone' in 1980. No thought given to supporting delivery of curriculum – CPD/

school organisational culture/leadership/class organisation.
We know a lot more now! So...

2. Schools experience a range of pressures when deciding on ability grouping. How can schools deal with these pressures and what alternative approaches to ability grouping might they adopt.

- Cooperation between schools is needed to make system less competitive.
- Continuous professional development is needed for teachers in mixed ability teaching and in initial teacher education.
- Parents, especially middle-class parents, like streaming. They choose schools on the basis of results. If they were made more aware of the outcomes of the research, that mixed ability works best, schools could promote it more easily.
- Parents could be informed at 1st year induction that mixed-ability works best. There would also be a need for support in introducing the initiative.
- Teachers need TIME to engage with what research tells them. Long-term planning is needed at school level. There is a need for a whole school to mixed ability. Room size, 40 minutes classes and number of subjects all make mixed-ability methodology very difficult. Need for inservice etc.

3. The research indicates that less than half of students felt that the pace of instruction in third year was about right. What do the findings on pace tell us about the teaching and learning decisions being made at junior cycle?

- Cooperation between schools is needed to make system less competitive.

- To what extent does pre-service training prepare teachers for anything but 'chalk and talk' approach? Most teachers agree that a more activity-based approach is needed.
- Training, resources and networking for teachers who have no extra supportive training since in college.
- Mixed-ability teaching is a challenge. Teachers need a toolkit of resources.
- Pace of instruction is strongly influenced by the teachers' expectations, and is reinforced by streaming. Need to encourage teachers to reflect on the decisions they make about pace and on what these decisions are based.
- If we want quality teaching and learning we need to provide the time and opportunity for teachers to reflect, question, analyse what they are doing. Quality time around teacher professional development.
- Pace too fast – often fast because of content of syllabus, number of subjects in curriculum, exam pressure. Pace too slow – can be a problem where student has been placed in the wrong class grouping. E.g. student is not encouraged to study higher level.

3. What directions should development in curriculum and assessment take to halt the slide towards disengagement and to re-engage those who have already become detached?

- There's a need for greater cooperation between subject department re overlap of key skills. Curriculum should be skills-based rather than knowledge-based.
- The overcrowded curriculum won't be solved by taking bits out. There is need for more fundamental change in the balance of skills/content/knowledge in the curriculum.
- In reducing overcrowding be careful not to limit students' choice and options for the future.

- Do all subjects have to be assessed by a formal exam? Should other criteria be included?
- Literacy and numeracy need to be prioritised from first year. Many students can't access the curriculum, Maths in particular.
- It would be an advantage to have common level courses for most subjects, differentiated papers.
- There should be a broader understanding of curriculum to include elements of the learning and social environment as well as the documentary statement of intentions.
- The quality of engagement between teacher and student is important. Students learn best in an empathetic school and classroom environment where personal development is encouraged.

The feedback highlights some of the pressure areas we have been looking at in NCCA i.e. pressure of assessment, overcrowded curriculum, CPD and on-going support for teachers, information for parents and students, need to look at how new syllabuses and changes to the curriculum are implemented.

I would be very interested in hearing your comments on the feedback and in particular on the point raised on whether all subjects need to be assessed at JC, is there a need for a JC exam? Or are there other means of assessing students that could be deployed? The need for literacy and numeracy to be prioritised from 1st year, would you agree that a strong focus on literacy and numeracy is needed from 1st year? I found it disturbing that the ERSI research shows that a significant number of students were only identified in 3rd year to be in need of support in these areas. There could be a number of reasons for this: schools are now getting additional learning support teachers, the pressure of the exams, or that primary schools/parents are not passing on information to second-level schools.

Junior Certificate Factsheets

Work on the factsheets is progressing and not unusually it is turning out to be more complex than originally envisaged.

- The factsheets should be accessible and easy to reproduce.
- Factsheets for the difference languages should have a coherent approach.
- The sheets would benefit from the inclusion of some images, possibly a cartoon character that would also assist in the 'branding' of the factsheets and possibly highlight the distinctions between them.
- The potential audience is very wide but it is particularly important that the factsheets engage with parents.
- Consideration should be given to producing material describing general aspects of teaching and learning in junior cycle and how students might maximise their involvement.
- Reference could be made to geography's designation as a science subject in the context of satisfying a science subject requirement.
- The sheets will not only be useful to primary school pupils and their parent but also to students in post-primary and those providing them with guidance.
- The use of a student quote in the introductory section might attract the reader's attention more immediately.
- It may not be possible for the factsheets to accomplish all that we would like to communicate to the audience.

Information for parents

Besides the factsheets which will provide information for parents and students, a link on the NCCA website will be developed for both parents and students. **What would you like to find on such a site?** Parents need more information not only on syllabi but also

on the various programmes at both junior cycle and senior cycle – the NCCA/NPC-pp consultation on senior cycle shows us there is a need in this area. Streaming v mixed ability. The consequences of choosing subject levels etc. Homework. How parents can support learning. Guidance. Learning support. The other curriculum components such as PE, RE, and SPHE. Project work, second component assessments etc.