

Curriculum Development: A Framework for the Future

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LUCY FALLON-BYRNE is Assistant Chief Executive of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

THE ROLE OF THE NCCA

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Work completed to date has included a restructuring of the Leaving Certificate programme including the innovative Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programmes. The introduction of Foundation and Elementary levels at Junior Certificate has opened up a whole new range of choice for students in the early years of post primary. These developments are also relevant to many children with special needs as it is hoped that access to such programmes will provide them with the possibility of achieving national certification in a meaningful and achievable context.

In exploring curriculum development in relation to special education I will concentrate in the first instance on the changes that are evident in the revised mainstream primary curriculum and give an overview of the changes that are forthcoming. This curriculum will be of immediate relevance to all the diverse sectors of special education since it will be a rich repository of new thinking and approaches as well as a framework for the development of models suitable for special needs.

This address to your annual conference is timely as the NCCA is at present putting in place arrangements for the development of support structures to cater for the needs of special education in the context of the introduction of a revised curriculum. The immediate task, however, is the completion of the general curriculum statements and guidelines in all subject areas before the end of 1997.

As the design and developmental phases of curriculum revision are now nearing completion I would like to focus on some of the areas of particular relevance to your members and to outline the shape and format of documentation that schools may expect as part of the package of curriculum revision. The second part of my address will deal with the role of the NCCA in supporting the process of curriculum development for special needs and the challenge of planning for diversity of provision.

CURRICULUM PLANNING

The revised primary curriculum is an inclusive curriculum which is child-centred and designed to meet the needs of all children and all schools. Within this broad framework there is enough flexibility and choice to enable each school to plan for implementation in accordance with its own unique needs and circumstances. In the design and development of the curriculum, various strategies are incorporated to assist schools and teachers in the planning and implementation processes. Among these are the following:

- a clear and structured statement of content
- menu-style options to afford flexibility and choice
- guidelines on curriculum and organisational planning
- exploration of a wide variety of approaches and methodologies.

The clear and structured statement of content will provide the basis for successful planning at school and class level. The accessible and user-friendly format will be of value to all those involved in the provision of special needs education as it will facilitate the selection of content suitable to the aptitudes and interests of the children. The content is set out in strands and strand units and is delineated in a spiral and sequential structure for each of the four class levels. This will provide a reference in planning as well as allowing for sufficient flexibility to cater for diverse needs. The clarity and accessibility of the curriculum will be the starting point for successful implementation in all schools including those catering for children with special needs.

Many subjects by their nature present an extensive area of learning from which a number of topics can be chosen. The menu-style approach is designed to allow for a comprehensive treatment of key areas while at the same time avoiding over-prescription and overload. The range of choices and options can be adapted to suit the differing environmental and operational circumstances within which schools operate, as well as affording guidance and choice in meeting the needs of special education.

A central focus in the teacher guidelines is the section devoted to school planning in each subject area. The key curricular priorities are set out to provide a clear focus for planning and to encapsulate the essence and special nature of the subject. The organisational considerations provide for a collaborative and consultative approach to planning amongst all the partners as well as giving recommendations regarding resources and support for the curriculum.

NEW APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGIES

The revised curriculum explores a wide range of approaches and methodologies that concentrate on new emphases and thinking. The richness and variety of these approaches will be welcomed by teachers and will be an invaluable support in the process of curricular change. Some of the main emphases are:

- hands-on approaches and the use of practical concrete materials

- the priority given to problem solving and the exploration of a variety of strategies
- co-operative learning
- the centrality of the local environment
- the use of a variety of methods of recording including verbal and pictorial representation
- the emphasis on pupil/pupil and teacher/pupil discussion
- the importance of skills development and the need to maintain a balance between skills and the acquisition of knowledge
- the integrated nature of language, and the integration of oral language, reading and writing in a coherent language learning process
- the central place given to oral language throughout the curriculum
- a new emphasis on social, personal and health education
- the importance of understanding the creative process and the underlying elements of art
- an emphasis on science education and the skills of scientific enquiry.

These represent only a brief summary of some of the new emphases in the curriculum that inform the selection of content and underpin new approaches and methodologies. The revised curriculum will, therefore, form a rich resource for further development across the spectrum of special needs education.

THE SHAPE AND FORMAT OF THE DOCUMENTATION

The following documentation is currently being prepared by the NCCA and it is envisaged that these will constitute the main body of primary curriculum materials:

- an over-arching curriculum statement and introduction
- a curriculum statement in each of seven subject areas
- teacher guidelines in all seven subject areas
- assessment statements and guidelines
- a series of issues booklets.
- parental guidelines.

Over-arching statement

The over-arching statement will give an overview of the philosophy, principles and operational framework of the primary school curriculum. It will outline the rationale for change, underline new emphases and approaches and will place the curriculum in the context of the educational needs of the 21st century.

Curriculum Statements

The main body of the documentation comprises the curriculum statement for each of seven subject areas Irish, English, Mathematics, SESE (History, Geography and Science), Physical Education, SPHE and Arts Education (Visual Arts, Music and Drama). All subjects are laid out in a common format for the purpose of clarity and to ensure accessibility and ease of reference.

The content is delineated in a clear structure which indicates the spiral and sequential development from infants to sixth class. The curriculum in each subject attempts to encapsulate both the learning outcomes to be expected and the educational experiences through which the child will progress. Listed objectives and extensive exemplars help to make clear both what the child is to learn and how this might be achieved in a child-centred curriculum.

Teacher Guidelines

Teacher guidelines provide practical guidance to the content and methodology in each curricular area. The planning sections of these guidelines are designed to assist schools in planning a programme of work and in choosing a range of topics and options that are suitable to their environment and the particular needs of the children. They are practical and user-friendly and will not be overly long as it is important that teachers will not find the documentation overwhelming. They will give useful guidance on classroom practice and organisation and will include exemplar materials on new areas and approaches.

Assessment

Assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process and is an important element of the revised curriculum. Each curriculum statement will include a statement of assessment that will outline the importance of assessment and give an overview of methods and approaches pertinent to that subject area. In addition teacher guidelines will contain information and practical guidelines on assessment.

Special issues booklets

In addition to the curriculum statement and teacher guidelines there are a number of areas that will require additional treatment. These will include, among others, Information Technology, integration, the European dimension and interculturalism. The preparation and drafting of issues booklets will not be undertaken in the course of the current year's work because of the urgency of completing the main curricular documents in each subject area. It is important, however, to recognise

the need for such booklets and to assure teachers that they will be made available as part of the process of curriculum change.

Parental guidelines

The revised primary curriculum is of great significance to parents. They have been involved in a direct and meaningful way in the design and development of the curriculum and their support and participation will be critical to ensure successful implementation. There is a need for clear and accurate information to be available specifically for parents. Not only must they be aware of changes taking place, they must be facilitated in playing an active role in ensuring that their children derive the greatest benefits from the new programme.

THE DIVERSITY OF SPECIAL NEEDS

Special education has a wide diversity of needs that are not easily met. The NCCA fully acknowledges this diversity and the great challenge it presents to curriculum development. Any review of existing provision will have to consider a variety of approaches including the development of teacher guidelines and the involvement of teachers in school-based curriculum development projects. Wilf Brennan has said

“Special needs are personal needs, and personal knowledge of the pupil concerned is essential for appropriate and correct curricular decisions. That is why the responsibility must remain in the school.”

The challenge is therefore to provide support for local and school-based initiatives.

A set of guidelines for children with a moderate mental handicap already exists but these need to be updated. There are many local and school-based initiatives and projects which are doing excellent work in the area of curriculum development. These include using the internet to network special schools for children with a mild mental handicap where teachers can contribute to the development of a framework curriculum. Other schools have developed projects to bridge the gap from school to adult living. Excellent work is already being undertaken by individual schools and teachers but it is important that this good practice be identified and the results disseminated. Many schools are already sharing resources and participating in joint ventures. Teachers dealing with special needs should have access to those experiences.

There is no one way of dealing with the challenge of meeting the needs of special education. The advantage of the revised curriculum is that it provides a clear curricular framework and a structure with which to cater for many of the needs of special education.

Transfer to post-primary

One of the objectives of education for many children with learning difficulties is to facilitate their participation in mainstream education and where possible successful transfer to post-primary school. In order to achieve this objective, access to a broad and balanced curriculum must be provided. The new Elementary level of the Junior Certificate helps bridge the gap between primary and post-primary education and will assist the successful participation of some pupils with special needs at post-primary level. It is an intervention programme that adheres to the same principles as the conventional Junior Certificate but allows schools to interpret the content by integrating subjects. The NCCA recognises that the area of special education must be examined in the context of both primary and post-primary provision.

Although the Junior Certificate Elementary programme targets, among others, children who have specific learning difficulties, more research is required to establish how suitable it will be for special classes at post-primary level. Access to this programme for children in certain special schools will also need to be investigated. Furthermore, if we are to encourage mobility and successful transfer to post primary education then children must have completed at least part of the general primary curriculum.

Special classes and mainstreamed children with learning disabilities

Schools which cater for children with a mild mental handicap can benefit from school-based curriculum development. There should also be greater communication between such schools, teachers of Special Classes and teachers who are teaching children with mild mental handicap in mainstream classes. Teachers who have children with special needs integrated in the regular classroom will need support and access to materials. The area of pre-service training in special needs in colleges of education will have to be addressed if the policy of mainstreaming children with special needs is to be pursued.

Teachers of special classes, resource teachers and mainstream teachers who have children with special needs in their classes are particularly isolated as they are generally operating alone and have little access to information. One problem for

such teachers is the wide age and ability range they may have in one class. Another challenge is to balance the presentation of a full curriculum with providing functional literacy, numeracy and social skills.

Special schools

Provision for teachers of children with moderate, severe and profound mental handicap, autism and emotional and behavioural disorders should be provided through school-based curriculum development which would reflect the specific needs of each particular group and access the wealth of innovation and development which is already taking place. Information technology could be used to facilitate communication and sharing of ideas. However, children with disabilities still need personal and social education, independence training and direct skills training. A multi-disciplinary approach is necessary and this must take into consideration the important contribution therapies make to the education of the child.

THE CHALLENGE OF CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT FOR SPECIAL NEEDS

It is not feasible or desirable to provide a centrally-designed curriculum for all areas of special education. The NCCA is setting up a structure at present to examine how best it can assist in curriculum development for teachers of children with special educational needs. It is in the process of appointing an education officer whose brief is to research the area of special education and to service a committee which will investigate the production of meaningful guidelines. All options, including school-based curriculum development will be considered. This is at an early stage as it was necessary to develop the mainstream curriculum before commencing discussions on how it can be mediated in special needs settings.

The NCCA will be examining group moderation models such as the clustering or networking of schools with similar needs as well as the development of curricular guidelines. Curriculum overload is a big problem in special education but we must not deny children the chance to develop their potential as fully as possible in all areas of the curriculum. The need for flexibility and curricular balance is relevant to all children.

The Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People in Britain states:

“The purpose of education for all children is the same; the goals are the same. But the help that individual children need in progressing towards

them will be different.... for some, knowledge will not be spontaneously acquired and has to be elaborately taught.”

Special education has always embraced change and innovation. The changing nature of the population of that sector has meant that teachers must be flexible and creative. Very often the teachers themselves are the *only* resource in the classroom. They have to create programmes which allow for the huge variety of individual difference within the children they teach. Children with special needs are not a homogenous group, they display the same diversity of individual difference as any other group of children. The need for communication and the sharing of good practice between teachers is paramount. Fortunately the goodwill and willingness to adapt is already there. Organisations such as the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE) and the Irish Learning Support Association (ILSA) have been leaders in providing a forum for teachers in special education. They have been a lifeline to many.

In summary the NCCA is committed to a thorough investigation of the special needs sector and will endeavour to set in place structures and practical guidelines that will be of real help to teachers both in mediating the revised curriculum and in supporting the development of new framework curricula for specific areas. It also would hope to work closely with existing networks of special needs groups to help to disseminate examples of good practice.

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