

# Chapter 8

## THE CURRICULUM AND PUPIL ASSESSMENT

### Background

8.1 The introduction of a statutory common curriculum in 1989 formalised and specified the curriculum to which pupils in compulsory education were entitled. The curriculum framework reflected both established and new thinking on the purpose, span and content of children's learning. The framework, comprising a matrix of areas of study, such as English, Science and Technology and the Creative and Expressive areas, and themes, such as health education and education for mutual understanding, was introduced following widespread consultation. The development of attainment targets, the levels of attainment and associated content for each subject in the curriculum, together with the development of an assessment system based on a structure of four Key Stages, was led by the then Northern Ireland Curriculum Council, which was replaced in 1994 by the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

8.2 CCEA provides advice to the Minister for Education on curriculum, assessment and examination matters, conducts key stage assessments, GCSE and GCE examinations, and administers the Transfer Procedure Tests on behalf of the Department of Education. CCEA also has a regulatory role in relation to standards in GCSE, GCE and GNVO examinations offered in Northern Ireland, and provides information and produces teaching materials relating to the implementation of curriculum requirements and assessment arrangements in schools.

### Pressures affecting the Curriculum

8.3 Although the statutory requirements at KS3 and KS4 are intended to occupy about 75% and 65%, respectively, of timetabled time, our understanding is that schools generally are exceeding these guidelines. We have been

advised by teachers that they have insufficient time to develop and introduce new courses and learning experiences in response to pupils' needs and interests. To some extent this pressure results from the erosion of teaching time, and teacher preparation and development time caused by the level of record keeping now required of teachers. The pressure also results from the excessive content in many subject programmes of study, and the competition between schools in the context of market forces and Open Enrolment, in a selective system of education. Other factors have also brought pressure to bear on teachers, for example, the advent of new technology and the drive to develop the role of ICT in learning and teaching. All of these factors have increased the challenges faced by teachers and schools and have led many to conclude that the curriculum is insufficiently flexible, lacking in relevance to pupils' needs, and consequently, demotivating and, in some respects, not fit for purpose. These concerns were a recurring theme during our public meetings and throughout the consultation process.

8.4 While it is widely acknowledged that a primary purpose of education is the personal development of the individual, so that young people are equipped to make productive and positive contributions to society, preparation for earning a living is also an important purpose. At present, there are concerns among employers that this responsibility of the education system is not being fulfilled to the required degree. It is important that young people leave school with the skills and attributes that society and employers expect, for example, good standards of literacy and numeracy, problem-solving skills, the ability to work with others, a capacity for independent learning, self-esteem and respect for others.

### **Review of the Curriculum**

8.5 In response to these concerns and needs, CCEA is currently involved in a major review of the common curriculum. The curriculum review and the Review of Post-Primary Education are inextricably linked. The curriculum has a key role in delivering society's expectations of the education service and how this translates in terms of the outcomes we expect in our young people. We have liaised closely with CCEA on the nature and scope of the curriculum and related assessment proposals which are required to prepare young people for

the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. These, in turn, will contribute, along with the development of the education system and school structures and relationships, to deliver uniformly high standards of education.

8.6 The challenge facing CCEA in developing the new curriculum is to build on the strengths of present provision and to modify and develop the statutory curriculum in response to the changed circumstances in schools, society and the economy, and in a form which will illustrate the practical implications for learners at various stages in their compulsory education. What must be avoided at all costs is the addition of new elements while retaining much of the existing provision. This would exacerbate curricular overload and threaten standards of achievement. It is essential that the revised curriculum has the support of teachers. This will depend on its relevance to the needs of children, the economy and society, on its manageability, and on the support given to teachers in preparing for and implementing the new requirements.

8.7 A fundamental objective of the education system should be to provide learners with a broad and balanced curriculum, together with the opportunity, particularly in the latter stages of post-primary education, to pursue courses which will develop and enhance their individual abilities and life skills, according to their chosen career pathways.

## **Key Stage 2 Curriculum**

8.8 There was criticism and concern, in the consultation process, from parents, teachers and others about the narrowness and imbalance of the KS2 curriculum, exacerbated by an overload of assessment work in P6 and P7, associated with the Transfer Tests and the end of Key Stage assessment. We believe that our proposals for transfer from primary to post-primary schools will go a long way towards removing these pressures and distortions and will free up time for teaching at KS2. Further explanation of how this can occur can be found at Chapter 9.

8.9 We share the view of many primary teachers that the present KS2 curriculum is over-prescriptive and limited in its opportunities for practical activities. It will be important for the curriculum review to address these

concerns and we would support the general principle of changing the curriculum to reduce the extent of the compulsory core and increase flexibility within statutorily prescribed areas. In preparing pupils at KS2 for their transition to post-primary education it is essential that they should enjoy a broad and balanced curriculum which develops their key skills, in particular literacy and numeracy, their confidence and self-esteem. In this context we firmly believe that more opportunity needs to be provided within the primary curriculum for children's emotional development and for the encouragement and development of creativity - through drama, music, art and physical education and the application of creativity in their work across the curriculum.

### Key Stage 3 Curriculum

8.10 Our consultation with the public and with those in the education system gave us many insights into the strengths and challenges of current curricular provision. Commonly, opinion was expressed that, irrespective of the future structure of post-primary education in Northern Ireland, there should be a compulsory common core in the curriculum at KS3. This core should include the knowledge, understanding and skills that all children need for future learning and living. We were told that much of the curriculum at KS3 is perceived as irrelevant by many pupils, has insufficient challenge and is lacking in the necessary coherence between different subjects to establish full understanding of purpose. Some teachers spoke of their pupils' loss of enjoyment in learning and, in a minority of cases, disengagement from learning at a crucial stage in their secondary education. The KS3 curriculum should provide all pupils with experience of a broad range of subjects and competences so that they have the necessary information and incentives to choose KS4 courses which best suit their needs. In summary the curriculum at KS3 should:

- be broad, balanced, relevant and demanding, but with sufficient flexibility to be adapted by teachers to meet the individual needs of all their pupils, and afford them the opportunity to experience success;
- include provision for pupils to develop competence in key skills such as literacy, numeracy, the use of ICT and problem-solving;
- foster self-esteem, self-confidence and the ability to work with others;

- include provision for personal and social education, and meaningful and timely careers education and guidance;
- provide opportunities to learn how to relate to the community and the environment and, in particular, to develop respect for diversity and commitment to contribute to the community and society in general.

8.11 The nature and breadth of the curriculum at this stage is crucial to pupils' preparation for and choice of courses at KS4. There must be sufficient flexibility in the curriculum (and timetabling) to enable pupils with different aptitudes and abilities to have different emphases within their courses. In particular, provision should be included, perhaps in the final year of KS3, for a broad range of 'taster courses' in subjects not previously studied, and which should be available to all at KS4. These 'taster courses' might be of one or two weeks' duration and could be taken in one or more schools facilitated by ICT, with inputs from further education colleges (FECs), training organisations (TOs), business and community organisations, and with support from Careers Officers and the Northern Ireland Business Education Partnership (NIBEP). The provision of these new opportunities for pupils at KS3 would require co-operation within and between schools and other organisations and, in addition to the purpose outlined above, could increase opportunities for contact across the community and the enhancement of understanding, tolerance and respect.

## Key Stage 4 Curriculum

8.12 The revision of the curriculum at KS3 and KS4 will have significant implications for the development of post-primary education in Northern Ireland. Two factors make KS4 a particularly complex and key area of the curriculum: it is the bridge between compulsory education and post-16 education, training and work, and its curriculum is influenced both by statutory provision and by the regulation of the qualifications offered to pupils at age sixteen.

8.13 While the main purposes of the curriculum outlined above for KS3 should be reflected in the programme for each pupil at KS4, the extent of the common core at this stage must be reduced to afford greater choice. It would also allow schools to have greater flexibility in determining what they should offer to

fourteen to sixteen year-olds, in order to allow pupils to follow programmes which are tailored to their individual needs, abilities and career paths. Indeed, this pressure has already been recognised by CCEA and the Department of Education (DE) in the recent decision to permit 'disapplication' of aspects of the statutory curriculum at KS4, to allow some schools to offer different types of provision for some pupils. Our view is that improved relevance, flexibility, differentiation and choice in the curriculum at KS4, supported by co-operation between schools, FECs, TOs, the community and business, will remove the potential weaknesses of the current arrangements and the need for 'disapplication'.

8.14 The review of KS4 curriculum must also have regard to the new Qualifications Framework, introduced in September 2000, which includes qualifications for fourteen to nineteen year-olds in three broad categories - general, vocationally-related and occupational. This change, together with the potential reformulation of GNVOs as Vocational GCSEs and Vocational A levels, reinforces the need for more coherence in the fourteen to nineteen curriculum. An objective within the curriculum at KS4, therefore, should not only be to provide a curriculum with sufficient breadth to allow pupils to follow pathways according to their needs, aptitudes and career aspirations, but also to ensure that the programmes they follow are not exclusively academic or exclusively vocational (in the widest senses of those words) since there is value in all pupils, irrespective of ability, having experience of both aspects of provision.

8.15 At present the capacity of a school to offer a choice of courses, particularly at KS4 and post-16, is related directly to its enrolment and teaching resources. Acting alone, a significant number of post-primary schools would find it difficult at KS4, and virtually impossible at post-16, to provide the breadth and balance of curricular choice necessary to ensure equality of opportunity for their pupils. Our proposals for co-operation and partnership with other schools and with FECs and TOs, described in Chapter 11, would enhance the potential of all schools to offer greater curricular diversity and choice through the fourteen to nineteen continuum. The achievement of these objectives would be greatly enhanced were schools to exploit wholeheartedly the opportunities available through ICT and the associated education technology developments being implemented at present throughout Northern Ireland.

8.16 In endorsing the requests from teachers and schools for greater flexibility in statutory curricular requirements, we must also register our concern about the reduced levels of physical activity in schools, and the associated health risks amongst children and young people. Research into multiple intelligences, the physical fitness of children of school age and a wide range of other health and education issues, is showing that our society needs greater awareness of the importance of physical activity to our well-being and that positive attitudes to and involvement in physical activity need to be inculcated from early childhood. Consequently we believe that appropriate provision for physical activity should be included in the curriculum for all.

### **Pupil Assessment**

8.17 There was a clear view from teachers and others in the consultative process that the purpose and significance of the end of KS2 assessment is undermined by the disruption of the curriculum in P6 and P7, caused by preparation and coaching for the Transfer Tests. This state of affairs cannot reasonably be allowed to continue, given the importance of assessment in measuring progress, diagnosing needs and informing children's learning. Also, enabling teachers to give parents objective feedback on their children's abilities and aptitudes is of particular importance when parents are expressing preferences for post-primary schools.

8.18 There is evidence from our examination of education systems in other countries that if assessment outcomes in primary schools are used by post-primary schools to select children, for enrolment or for the purposes of ability streaming or banding, pressure grows at primary school to coach for assessment tests, and ultimately results in distortions and inequalities in teaching and learning and in access to the primary curriculum. We are aware also that the use of assessment in Northern Ireland in the late 1970s to grade pupils, on the basis of academic ability, resulted in primary school principals being put under extreme pressure by parents to provide an assessment which would improve their children's chances of securing a place at grammar school.

8.19 As is clear above, the overriding purposes of assessment are summative, diagnostic and formative - to measure individual progress, identify learning

needs, and inform teaching. The system of assessment should be learner-centred and should support and promote a broad range of learning experiences for all pupils throughout their compulsory education. The system should also have the capacity to inform the planning and development of curricular provision and pupils' career pathways. It is essential that all parents, pupils, primary schools and post-primary schools should have confidence that the system of assessment is fit for purpose and applied consistently by all schools. This is achieved most straightforwardly when the role of assessment is defined clearly and is restricted when arrangements are made to use assessment for a number of disparate roles.

8.20 While it will be important that there should be breadth of assessment, covering progress and achievement in subjects, skills, aptitudes and attitude to learning, an appropriate balance must be maintained to ensure that the scope of the system is manageable and fit for purpose. Assessment for assessment's sake places unjustifiable pressure on teachers and pupils and undermines the effectiveness and credibility of the overall process. Rather the system should be geared to a continuous assessment of pupils' progress, using a variety of processes, including assessment units and external moderation of standards. The objective must be to develop a holistic assessment system which will have the complete confidence of parents, pupils and teachers, and which will be used by parents and teachers to guide the development of learners throughout all Key Stages, including their transition from primary to post-primary education.

8.21 We recognise that teachers have experienced substantially increased levels of administration and record-keeping and we would not endorse any developments which would add to or exacerbate current pressures. We were impressed by the findings of educational research into the potential benefits of ICT in learning, teaching, administration and management in schools and we value the vision and objectives of the Education Technology Strategy<sup>(1)</sup> currently being implemented in Northern Ireland. The potential of ICT for educational purposes has been receiving a great deal of attention internationally, as is instanced in the forthcoming OECD study, "Quality in Learning with Digital Technology" (in press). Northern Ireland ought to position itself to be at the

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(1) *SGET (1997), A Strategy for Education Technology in Northern Ireland, Bangor: DENI*

cutting edge of best international practice in the utilisation of ICT for the benefit of education. We are convinced that, over time, the use of ICT to record information about progress and attainment, and the development of computer-based assessment systems, for example, the work being taken forward by CCEA and QUB in a joint project,<sup>(2)</sup> will assist in minimising bureaucracy in the classroom and maximising time for learning and teaching.

## The Pupil Profile - Achievement, Aptitude for and Attitude to Learning

8.22 The further development of the assessment arrangements in primary schools will be essential to the success of the process of transfer and the transition of young people from primary to post-primary education that we propose in Chapter 9, and can assist in raising standards generally in all schools. The current statutory assessment at KS1 and KS2 is focused on English and mathematics, and at KS3 also includes science: we propose that the assessment system should be extended and developed, over time, to cover all subjects in the Northern Ireland curriculum, competence in the key skills, and attributes which are fundamental to learning and achievement throughout life.

8.23 The objective of the new system should be to provide a more holistic picture of the individual child, within a **'Pupil Profile'**, which would be used at KS2 to -

- guide parents and children in their choice of post-primary school; and
- support the child's teacher in discussion with the parents, and the child, on the child's learning (strengths, progress, needs); the child's attitude to learning and aptitudes for particular areas of learning; and the educational provision within Collegiates which would match well with the parents' aspirations and the child's preferred learning and career pathways.

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<sup>(2)</sup> *The CCEA/ALTA (Adaptive Learning Teaching and Assessment) Project is a joint initiative of the CCEA and the QUBIS company. Its main aims are to enhance the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of assessment in NI schools through the introduction of appropriate ICT-based materials and systems.*

8.24 At KS2, the Pupil Profile would contain quantitative and qualitative information about a child's attributes, attitude and achievements across the whole curriculum, including the outcomes of teacher Assessment in P5-P7 (ie, as far into P7 as the process for expressing preferences for post-primary schools permits). Also included, where appropriate, would be comment on the child's attitudes to and aptitudes for learning, interests and personal qualities, and needs for any form of learning support. The Pupil Profile would also accommodate most of the existing requirements on schools for recording and reporting an individual pupil's achievements.

8.25 The Pupil Profile would be continued into KS3 and beyond. At this stage its purposes would be to:

- inform the pupil's choice of courses and career pathway at KS4;
- inform discussions involving the pupil, parents, teachers, careers guidance staff and others, as appropriate, about the match between the pupil's progress, aptitudes and needs, and his or her current learning programme. These discussions would take place annually during Years 8, 9 and 10 and could take place in-year, where circumstances warranted;
- inform discussions and decisions about the best options for and transfer, to other courses or schools, of any pupil whose learning needs and career aspirations change during KS3 or subsequently.

We consider also that careers guidance should begin to play a role in the review, and any adjustment, of the child's choice of courses of study and, where necessary, of school during or at the end of KS3. This process would require openness, trust and objectivity from all interests, if the needs and aspirations of the child are to be served fully.

8.26 In considering the arrangements for the development of assessment, we had regard to the guidance on the scope and preparation of the Primary Record of Achievement (PROA). We concluded that much of this would continue to be relevant in the context of transfer from primary to non-selective post-primary education in Northern Ireland, but we believe that a review of the nature and

place of the PROA should be undertaken as the Pupil Profile is developed, to ensure that any risk of duplication of effort by teachers is avoided. We have also examined the aims and purpose of developments relating to the National Record of Achievement (NRA) at KS4. We recognise that the inputs to the Pupil Profile and the PROA are primarily the responsibility of teachers, informed by the views of the parents. We also recognise that as a child matures, its ability to engage in self-review strengthens, and we support the spirit and intentions of the current pilot work on the NRA/Progress File which aims to strengthen the capacity of young people to “develop the skills and confidence to manage their own learning, skills which are essential for lifelong learning, whether in education, training or work”. (CCEA 1999).

**8.27 We recommend that the Pupil Profile should be developed as a matter of priority, on the lines outlined above.** We consider that it would be for the Department, based on advice from CCEA and in consultation with the education partners, to determine the detailed nature and scope of the Pupil Profile.

8.28 Consideration should be given also to the development of appropriate external moderation of the Key Stage Assessment tests in order to provide parents, pupils, teachers and post-primary schools with increased confidence in standards of achievement, etc., across the primary sector. This would be a key factor in ensuring that the Pupil Profile is widely accepted and used by all interests to assist and guide the transition from KS2 and KS3. CCEA would require additional resources for this work. The issues of the timing of the development and introduction of the Pupil Profile and its potential resource implications for schools and CCEA are discussed further at Chapters 12 and 13.

## Summary

8.29 We support greater flexibility in the school curriculum, particularly at KS4, based around a statutory minimum entitlement which would include provision for key skills, personal and social development, creativity and careers guidance, elements which should continue in the curriculum at post-16. Beyond this minimum requirement, schools should be able to shape their curriculum provision to enable pupils to assume greater responsibility for their own

decision-making and to indicate preferences and make choices about the types of courses and qualifications they wish to pursue.

8.30 We recognise that the introduction of a revised curriculum along the lines set out above would require investment in a number of areas, including professional development, school facilities and changes in the organisational and administrative systems in schools, for example, in timetabling arrangements. These changes would be necessary irrespective of the system of post-primary education which is in place. Their successful implementation would require collaboration and support from education partners in the development of teaching resources and the exchange of good practice. We are satisfied that the changes, which we believe to be necessary and urgent, would be achieved more easily in the context of our proposals for a Collegiate structure.