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Chapter Three

Curriculum Studies

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As a student or practising teacher, you are probably teaching two or three subjects as part of your practicum. These subjects contribute towards the overall curriculum, experienced by your students. This chapter explains the structure and origins of that curriculum. Studying curriculum is a practical undertaking which will enable you to place your classroom experience in context. It is also a theoretical undertaking: the study of philosophy, history, sociology and psychology can all be applied to curriculum. Curriculum studies can be thought of as a place where theories run together to enhance the study of practice. Throughout this chapter exercises are given to help you review the points discussed. Firstly, we will consider the question: What is curriculum?

WHAT IS CURRICULUM?

One of the most frustrating problems in thinking or talking about curriculum is the difficulty in defining exactly what it is. In everyday conversation, the word is used in a variety of ways:

> 'The core curriculum in Ireland includes Gaeilge, English and Mathematics.' NCCA

> 'In this school we have drama and woodwork on the curriculum.' School principal

> 'The biggest problem with the science curriculum is that it is over-loaded with too much information on too many topics.' Science teacher

These three statements come from different levels in the education system and they are also at different levels of generality. The first refers to subjects in the context of a broader vision of the nature and purpose of education, while the second refers to subjects within the programme of a school. The third refers to content within a subject. The white paper Charting our Education Future (Department of Education and Science, 1995) provides a very broad definition of curriculum which draws on the three levels.

The term 'curriculum' encompasses the content, structure and processes of

teaching and learning, which the school provides in accordance with its educational objectives and value. It includes specific and implicit elements. The specific elements are those concepts, skills, areas of knowledge and attitudes that children learn at school as part of their personal and social development. The implicit elements are those factors that make up the ethos and general environment of the school. The curriculum in schools is concerned, not only with the subjects taught, but also with how and why they are taught and with the outcomes of this activity for the learner.

The word 'curriculum' is used in a number of different ways. It is, on the one hand, broader than a syllabus. Since the curriculum in Ireland is set centrally; the curriculum in the classroom must relate to a prescribed syllabus. The syllabus is a list of content to be covered within a subject. Each syllabus is part of a programme (e.g. Junior Certificate or Leaving Certificate Applied). The syllabus document may also contain a list if specific aims for that subject, the learning outcomes that are intended to result from the students' encounters with the content and, very often, some information about the modes and techniques of the associated assessment. The syllabus for each subject can be found online at www.education.ie. The curriculum documents set out the intention that young people participate in certain kinds of learning encounters and gain certain kinds of benefit as a result.

However, the curriculum does not become real until it is enacted in the interactions (Crooks and McKernan, 1984) that take place between teachers and students in the classroom. You plan those interactions when you write a lesson plan. The plan must relate to the overall curriculum intentions and to the reality of your classroom situation.

It then becomes part of the experience (Connelly and Clandinnin, 1986) of students and teachers. This experience is mediated through pedagogy: the way in which the subject content is taught. The experience is also mediated through the prior learning that each student brings to the learning situation and by the tacit assumptions about the subject, about learning and about society that teachers and students bring to the classroom learning situation.

Kelly (2004) suggests a number of different dimensions of curriculum. No matter how well you plan the curriculum, some students will interpret it and experience it differently from the way you expected. Thus, we distinguish between the intended curriculum and the received curriculum. Assessment, and especially formative assessment (Walsh and Dolan, 2009), helps us to identify and bridge the gap between the intended and the received curriculum. The students' experience in your classroom is, however, a part of their total school experience so you will need to develop an awareness of the way subjects and teaching styles fit together and, ideally, complement each other. All the individual subjects on the curriculum are intended to contribute to the overall aims of education and to the programme aims for junior or senior cycle.

Formal learning in the classroom is a key part of the curricular experience of students. This is complemented by the informal (or para-) curriculum. Different

writers take different positions on the meaning of the 'informal' curriculum. For some, it encompasses the kinds of activities sometimes described as 'extracurricular', such as games, choir, drama productions and other enrichment activities. For others, it includes pastoral and disciplinary regulations, external to classroom teaching. In any event, these features of the curriculum may be central to the lives of the students and may have a major influence on their attitudes to school as an organisation. The planned curriculum of a school – formal and informal – does not tell the full story, especially when we think of curriculum as experience. As well as the overt messages conveyed by the curriculum, there are a variety of hidden messages implicit in the way schools are organised and the values and beliefs (Trant, 2007) that are espoused. Eisner and Vallance (1974, p. 74) refers to this as the 'hidden curriculum' which they describe as 'those non-academic but educationally significant consequences of schooling that occur systematically but are not made explicit at any level to the public rationales for education'.

The final dimension of curriculum to be considered here is a strange one – we could call it the curriculum that does not happen – and this is referred to by Eisner (1979) as the 'null curriculum'. This term refers to the subjects, pedagogies and experiences from which all students or certain groups of students are systematically excluded.

Curriculum is, above all, a human undertaking. You, as a teacher, do not just 'deliver' the curriculum. In a very real sense, you *are* the curriculum (or at least a very important part of it) for the students in your classes. If you think back on your own school experience, you will probably find that your memories of encounters with subjects, either as ways of thinking or as content, are coloured by memories, good and bad, of the people who taught them to you.

CURRICULUM IN IRELAND: THE JUNIOR CERTIFICATE

Ireland, like many developed countries, has a centrally defined national curriculum. Secondary education in Ireland is divided into two 'cycles', junior (commencing at age 12 to 13) and senior (commencing after the Junior Certificate) each lasting three years. Each cycle terminates in a formal, externally administered state examination. Junior cycle students follow the Junior Certificate programme which has been in operation since 1989. We will consider each cycle using the framework developed in the last section, that is: as intention, as interaction and as experience.

The Junior Certificate: curriculum as intention

The Junior Certificate is part of the compulsory educational experience of every young person in Ireland, so it must further or contribute to the general aims of education, included in every syllabus document:

The general aim of education is to contribute towards the development of all aspects of the individual, including aesthetic, creative, critical, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, political, social and spiritual development, for personal and family life, for working life, for living in the community and for leisure.

These aims are listed on the inside cover of every syllabus document, and are intended to apply to every subject; at least to some extent.

> • Select the three aims to which your principal teaching subject makes the most significant contribution. How does it do this?
> • Select the three aims to which your subject makes the least significant contribution. How could it contribute more effectively?

The Junior Certificate, constructed as a list of subjects, was developed as a coherent programme and replaced two earlier programmes – the Intermediate Certificate and the Day Vocational (Group) Certificate – and represents an attempt to integrate the more academic programme of voluntary secondary schools with the more practically based and vocationally focused programme of vocational, community and comprehensive schools, in order to create a comprehensive curriculum. You can find the syllabus for your teaching subject(s) at www.education.ie.

The curriculum is more than a list of subjects. It is intended to contribute to the *areas of experience* that people have in their daily lives. These were identified as:

• language, literature and communication;
• mathematical studies and applications;
• science and technology;
• social, political and environmental education;
• arts education;
• physical education;
• religious and moral education; and
• guidance, counselling and pastoral care (CEB, 1984).

Some subjects clearly make most of their contribution in one defined area, but each subject is expected to make contributions to a number of areas, at least to some extent.

> • To which area of experience does your subject make its principal contribution?
> • To which other areas does it also contribute?
> • To which areas does it make no contribution?

The Junior Certificate programme aims to:

- reinforce and further develop in the young person the knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies acquired at primary level;
- extend and deepen the range and quality of the young person's personal and social confidence, initiative and competence through a broad, well-balanced general education;
- prepare the young person for the requirements of further programmes of study, of employment or of life outside full-time education;
- contribute to the moral and spiritual development of the young person and to develop a tolerance and respect for the values and beliefs of others; and
- prepare the young person for the responsibilities of citizenship in the national context and in the context of the wider European Community (www.ncca.ie).

The general principles on which Junior Certificate is based are enunciated as follows:

- Breadth and balance – In the final phase of compulsory schooling, every young person should have a wide range of educational experiences. Particular attention must be given to reinforcing and developing the skills of numeracy, literacy and oracy. Particular emphasis should be given to social and environmental education, science and technology, and modern languages.
- Relevance – Curriculum provision should address the immediate and prospective needs of the young person, in the context of cultural, economic and social environment.
- Quality – Every young person should be challenged to achieve the highest possible standards of excellence, with due regard to different aptitudes and abilities and to international comparisons.

The syllabus also states that:

> The curriculum should provide a wide range of educational experiences within a supportive and formative environment. It should draw on the aesthetic and creative, the ethical, the linguistic, the mathematical, the physical, the scientific and technological, the social, environmental and political and the spiritual domain.

As well as listing the content to be covered in each subject, each subject syllabus must contain 'elements of learning'. These are knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes (CEB, 1986). These elements are encountered by the students in engaging with each subject, in the context of an area of experience. Each subject introduces the student to content knowledge (for example, they will be able to describe the stages in the development of a river), in which over-arching ideas or

concepts (for example, the concepts of deposition and erosion) are embedded. The students will develop specific skills (they will be able to interpret maps and draw sketch maps of rivers) and attitudes (they will understand the social and historical importance of rivers and understand the implications of planning decisions), relevant to each subject area.

> • Take any area of a subject that you teach and analyse the knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes related to it. The syllabus document may be helpful here.

Syllabi are provided at different levels. Most subjects can be studied at either Ordinary or Higher level, but Gaeilge, mathematics and English can be studied at Higher, Ordinary or Foundation level. Civic, social and political education (CSPE) is available as a common level subject.

Curriculum and assessment: the 'backwash effect'

One of the factors that has the most profound effect on the reality of the curriculum in practice is the timing and nature of the assessment which accompanies it. Assessment is intended to establish whether, and to what extent, the curriculum intention has been achieved. However, the two processes, curriculum and assessment, are not independent: those features which are assessed are those on which most emphasis is placed in the classroom. Assessment, which is intended to follow after curriculum, tends to take precedence so that Hargreaves et al. (1996) refer to assessment as the 'tail that wags the curriculum dog'. Broadfoot (1979) refers to the 'backwash effect' of assessment on curriculum – those areas of the curriculum which are difficult or expensive to assess tend to be given less time and attention.

   In this book, 'assessment' refers to any systematic way of estimating how well students have learned material or how well they can accomplish particular tasks. Assessment can be carried by a wide variety of methods, including written examination (see Walsh and Dolan, 2009). In Ireland, formal, terminal, written examination is the dominant mode of assessment, with little use of school-based assessment, such as assignment and project work. There is also a strong belief (Williams, 1992) that assessment for certification purposes must be carried out by someone external to the school. This means that even where project and practical work are used for assessment, the work is sent away to be marked anonymously.

   This has the effect of influencing the teaching methods used, so that certain parts of the curriculum intention are carried out but others (those that cannot be assessed in this way) are under-represented. When the Junior Certificate was first introduced in 1989, it was expected that reform of assessment would quickly follow and syllabi and guidelines were written with this in mind. While changes to the format of the examinations were introduced, and while practical tests were

introduced in certain subjects, the written examination remained dominant. In order to find out whether the curriculum intention was carried out, it was necessary to study curriculum interactions. This aspect is considered below.

Approaches to Junior Certificate: JCSP

The Junior Certificate is part of the compulsory phase of education in Ireland and is a programme for young people in the 12 to 15 age group. Within the programme, there is some choice of subjects but only one programme is available. While this programme is intended to be suitable for all, it is clear that some young people do not benefit from the programme to the extent that was intended. These include:

- students who show clear signs of not coping with the volume and complexity of the current mainstream curriculum;
- students who are underachieving significantly in literacy and numeracy;
- students whose attendance and/or behaviour and attitudinal patterns indicate a marked degree of alienation from school;
- students who have specific disabilities which preclude them from participating in regular courses; and
- students whose social and cultural environment does not equip them for the requirements of the normal Junior Certificate programme.

For these young people, a distinctive approach to the Junior Certificate has been developed and this is called the Junior Certificate School Programme. The programme is described on the NCCA website (www.curriculumonline.ie) as follows:

> The Junior Certificate School Programme is a national programme sponsored by the Department of Education and Science and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. It originated in the early school leavers' programmes initiated by the Curriculum Development Unit. Currently the programme is operating in over 240 schools throughout the country.

The aims of the programme are:

- to provide a curriculum framework that assists schools and teachers in making the Junior Certificate more accessible to those young people who may leave school without formal qualifications;
- to help young people experience success and develop a positive self-image by providing a curriculum and assessment framework suitable to their needs; and

- to provide a fresh approach to the Junior Certificate Programme for potential early school leavers who are struggling to cope with secondary school.

The Junior Certificate School Programme had its origin in a curricular project, the Early School Leavers' Programme developed by the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee Curriculum Development Unit from 1980 onwards. The programme was subsequently developed under a number of names (Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate Elementary Programme, Junior Cycle Schools Programme) and has been in operation under its current name since 1998.

JCSP is an approach to Junior Certificate rather than a separate programme. Students following the JCSP take foundation-level mathematics and English and 'a suitable course' in Irish language and culture. The inclusion of 'school' in the programme title implies that local input at school level will be an important feature of the programme. An evaluation of the programme carried out by the Department of Education and Science (Department of Education and Science, 2005) found that cross-curricular work adds an important dimension to the experience of participants on the programme.

Literacy forms an important dimension of the programme and the approach taken is that 'every teacher is a teacher of literacy'. Since literacy is a dimension of every subject, students taking JCSP are explicitly taught the specific vocabulary for each subject. Posters are available that list the key words that students must learn to make the subject accessible. Materials such as *Who Wants to be a Word Millionaire?* Have been developed and evaluated. Literacy and arts activities are integrated in the annual 'Make-a-Book' competition and exhibition for schools involved in the programme and illustrated and three-dimensional 'books' are displayed to the public. An important dimension of the programme is the JCSP Library Initiative (Haslett, 2005).

A school-wide approach to literacy characterises the programme and numeracy is also emphasised. The numeracy dimension of the programme relates mathematical skills to real-life experience. Students' school experience is enriched by participation in sport and outdoor education and by involvement with arts activities such as music programmes and programmes provided by a community arts groups. JCSP runs parallel to initiatives such as the School Completion Programme and Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme, and shares their philosophy of positive engagement with parents. JCSP has developed an innovative approach to communicating 'good news' to parents via postcards designed by JCSP students. 'Celebration' forms a central part of the JCSP ethos and there is continuing emphasis on finding positive aspects to student activities.

JCSP is supported by a co-ordinator in each school who has slightly reduced teaching hours. There is also a programme support service based in the Second Level Support Service and in the CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit. The Department of Education and Science (DES) makes a time allowance available to schools for JCSP team meetings and there is a small financial allowance for

resources. Schools are allowed by the DES to join the programme on the basis of DEIS (Delivering Equality of opportunity In Schools) status. Evaluations of JCSP and of the library programme have been carried out by the DES and by the NCCA.

JCSP: *assessment and progression*

The emphasis on affirmation is reflected in the assessment modes developed for JCSP, complementary to certification via whichever examinations individual students present for. Each JCSP student constructs a learning profile over the final two years of the course, based on the attainment of 'statements' which set out skill, abilities and tasks that the student has completed. Statements to be attempted are agreed jointly between the teacher and the student in question so that negotiated learning permeates the course. On completion of the programme, students receive a profile which is an official record of their achievements from the Department of Education and Science. Students can progress from the JCSP to the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (see below).

The Junior Certificate: curriculum as interaction

The curriculum comes to life in the interactions that take place in the classroom: between teachers and students, between students and students, and, at school level, between teacher and teacher. These interactions are, to a large extent, hidden from outside scrutiny so, until recently, we have had little research evidence about the actual practices involved in the implementation of the curriculum intention described above. This gap in our knowledge has been addressed by the large-scale longitudinal study carried out by the ESRI between 2004 and 2007 and at international level, by the TALIS (Teaching and Learning in Schools) report for Ireland (Gilleece et al., 2009).

What does the research tell us?

First year: Moving Up
The ESRI study, carried out on behalf of the NCCA, used both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the curriculum realities of Junior Certificate implementation across a comprehensive range of second-level school types, locations, student composition and school size. The study provided a general picture of approaches taken by the majority of schools and teachers and also provided some detail on the experience of individual students and teachers. This latter is described further in the next section.

The ESRI study is reported in three books: *Moving Up* (Smyth et al., 2004b), on the experiences of first years; *Pathways through the Junior Cycle* (Smyth et al., 2006) on the experiences of second years and *Gearing Up for the Exam* (Smyth et al.,

2007). The first phase of the study looked at how schools and students dealt with transition from primary to post-primary. It also explored the number of subjects taken, the issue of subject choice, the provision of taster subjects, ability grouping, literacy and numeracy of students, use of homework, use of class tests, and changes in student attitudes during the course of first year.

The curriculum intention, as discussed above, was that all of compulsory education in Ireland (ages six to 16) would be experienced as a continuum. Moving from primary to post-primary school represents a major challenge to this continuity. Smyth, McCoy and Darmody (2004b) found that a minority of students take a long time (over a month) to settle in and a majority of students still miss aspects of their primary school at the end of first year. Curriculum continuity is difficult to achieve because of the very different structure of curriculum that students begin to experience when they move into second level. They have been accustomed to having one teacher for all subjects and now must adjust to a new teacher at each change of class.

Students are typically exposed to a very wide range of subjects in first year. However, the number provided varies widely from school to school. The minimum number of subjects on offer in the schools surveyed was 11 but the average number provided was 18. A small number of schools offered as many as 23. This very large number of subjects generally implied that students were offered an opportunity to try out new subjects by doing short 'taster' courses. As you might expect, the biggest numbers of subjects are offered in co-educational community/comprehensive schools. In almost three-quarters of schools surveyed, students are offered some exposure to a variety of subjects before they make their final choice of subjects for Junior Certificate. In 20 per cent of schools, students choose their subjects before they begin secondary schooling or immediately on entry. Some very small schools offer no choice at all. Almost a third of students (29 per cent) reported that they felt they were taking too many subjects in first year. Students who felt this way were more likely to say that they were not enjoying first year and that they did not feel prepared for secondary-school work by their primary-school experience.

Ability grouping also has a profound effect on curriculum interactions. There is a considerable body of evidence to suggest that mixed-ability grouping has a positive effect on student performance, compared with strict streaming on the basis of ability. In particular, postponing choice of levels (that is, keeping students at the highest possible level for as long as possible) seems to have a positive effect. This finding has major implications for school organisation and for you, as a teacher (see Walsh and Dolan, 2009). Students in higher and lower streams may interact quite differently with the curriculum. Somewhat surprisingly, students in lower streams reported that teachers went too slowly and that they were bored in class. Students in higher streams were more likely to report that teachers went too quickly and some felt insecure and under threat of being moved to a lower stream if their grades were not good enough.

The TALIS report for Ireland (Gilleece et al., 2009) is based on a questionnaire to 2,227 teachers in 142 schools. The Irish survey is part of a larger study carried out on behalf of the OECD, which compares teaching and learning practices in Ireland with those in five other countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Norway and Poland). In comparison with those countries, Irish teachers report the strongest belief in direct transmission method of teaching (teacher as instructor) and the lowest level of constructivist beliefs (teacher as facilitator of student learning). The study also identified three categories of instructional practices in the classroom, namely: structuring practices (checking homework, testing understanding by questioning); student-oriented practices (small group work, differentiated activities for different student abilities, student input into planning); and enhanced activities (projects, practical activities, debates). Irish teachers reported the highest rate of use of structuring activities and the lowest rate of use of enhanced and student-oriented activities of all the comparison countries.

A number of action research projects have attempted to enhance the capacity of teachers to engage in active learning methodologies and, as Hogan (2005) states, 'to become authors of their own work'. Reports of such projects are given by, for example, Trant (2007), Hogan (2005), Hogan et al. (2007) and Callan (2000, 2006). They all demonstrate that teachers can, given support and encouragement, engage in creative and collaborative practices within the framework of the Junior Certificate.

How do these findings relate to:
- Your memories of your own experience of secondary school?
- Your perception of the teaching strategies used and school management decisions taken in your teaching practice school?

Second year: Pathways through the Junior Cycle

The ESRI study also shows that, for many students, second year is a less positive experience than first year. The percentage of students who find schoolwork interesting falls from a high of 80 per cent at the beginning of first year to just 55 per cent by the end of second year. Attitudes to school are strongly influenced by gender and social class. Girls from professional backgrounds have the most positive attitudes and boys from working-class backgrounds have, on a percentage basis, the most negative attitudes. You will not be surprised to learn that teachers report a decline in student behaviour in second year and that some students report an increase in negative interactions with teachers. While some of this increase in challenging behaviour can be ascribed to adolescent development, the ESRI study highlights the role that curriculum organisation and teaching strategies play in maximising positive learning experiences for students. Students who choose subjects that they like are more positive about school in general. Students who

have little or no choice of subjects, or who choose the 'wrong' subjects, are generally more negative. Students show a preference for subjects that are perceived as practical or active, so subjects such as home economics tend to be popular. It is not, however, the subject itself that determines student attitudes. Students report more favourable attitudes towards any subject that is taught in a practical or active way, involving projects, games or group activity. By second year, students have developed a clear concept of what makes a good teacher. They put particular emphasis on the ability to explain things clearly and on approachability; they like to be able to talk to a teacher and they value a sense of humour. They also like and respect teachers who can keep order. Students particularly dislike teachers who just read the textbook or require them to copy large amounts of material from the board without explanation.

Streaming continues to impact on students' experiences and attitudes. Students are keenly aware of the level they are assigned to and students in lower streams tend to work down to expectations. They do less homework than their peers in higher streams and are less engaged in the classroom. Students in Ordinary and Foundation level classes may have a lower self-image and may not be challenged by the work expected of them. From second year onwards, students are increasingly aware of the impending examinations and of the need to study. Student attitudes to study are, however, quite complex. The need to study and do well is counter-balanced by a need to appear 'cool'. They also admit that they pretend not to study. This has the effect of making it appear that they 'don't care' if they do badly and they are 'naturally clever' if they do well.

> If you are teaching second years, note:
> - Strategies that you use that result in positive engagement with your subject.
> - Strategies used by your student colleagues and by experienced teachers.

The experience of third-year students: Gearing Up for the Exam

The third year of junior cycle tends to be dominated by the Junior Certificate examination and students note a trend of 'teaching to the test', and report that they experience less variety in teaching methods and less 'fun stuff'. A quarter of all students interviewed were taking 'grinds', and two-thirds of these were taking them in mathematics. The pattern was again related to social class: the majority of those taking grinds are from middle-class families. Significantly, a high proportion of students said that they would like extra tuition and cited maths and languages as the subjects they found most difficult. The study also found that patterns of behaviour and engagement with the curriculum, established in second year, continue into third year. Students who become disengaged in second year are likely to drift and students who are negative in second year become more negative. This is an important finding since it suggests that challenging behaviour in second year

cannot be ascribed simply and exclusively to a stage of adolescent development.

Curriculum organisation and interaction appear to play a significant role. A worrying finding is that those students who found first year easier than sixth class primary school achieve lower grades in the Junior Certificate examination. This would seem to indicate that lower teacher expectations result in students underperforming. This is related to streaming and the labelling of students in the lower streams who take subjects at Ordinary or Foundation level. The negative effects associated with streaming are confirmed by the ESRI study of third years. The study has some surprising findings regarding streaming. Students in lower streams report that the pace of instruction is too slow and that they have less access to practically oriented subjects. Students in mixed-ability classes actually outperform those in higher streams when they come to the Junior Certificate examination.

On the positive side, most third-year students are relatively positive about school and about learning. They have further developed their idea of the characteristics of a 'good teacher': explains things well, allows questions, asks for feedback to ensure that students have understood, uses a variety of methods, expects and demands hard work but does not 'give out'. This gives us a clear idea of the kinds of interactions which constitute a good curriculum experience.

- Talk to your co-operating teacher(s) and other experienced teachers in your teaching practice school about the effect the Junior Certificate examination has on their approaches to teaching third years.

The Junior Certificate: curriculum as experience

In this section we will imagine how the curriculum might be experienced by individual teachers and pupils. The case studies here are fictional, but their content is based on the findings from the research described above.

Junior Certificate case study 1: Marita

Marita started secondary school in Mount Armstrong Post-Primary (all-girls', voluntary secondary) school three years ago. She lives in a local-authority house about three streets away from the school with her parents, her younger sister and two younger brothers. Her father works in a factory and her mother works on the checkout of a supermarket three evenings a week and all day Saturday. Her mother chose the school on the advice of a woman up the street who said it was the best school around as her daughter had gone to college from it. It is also the nearest school and Marita had gone to the attached primary school. Both her parents left school after the 'Inter'. Her father started an apprenticeship as a carpenter but never finished it. He is good at making and fixing things and sometimes does jobs for people for extra money. Mount Armstrong, originally a convent school, is an

all-girls' and now has a lay principal, Mrs Burke. It is small with just three class groups in first year and only one Leaving Cert group.

Marita loved secondary school in first year. Her primary-school experience had not been very good. Her class had 32 pupils and the building was old and decrepit. The secondary school building is a bit better and there were 26 girls in her class in first year. The school is designated 'disadvantaged' [DEIS Band 2] – there is a nearby co-educational vocational school to which some of her primary school class went. She knew most of the girls in her first year class, except for three 'posh' girls who came to school on the bus because their mothers had been to school there, and two new girls from other countries: one from Poland and one from Africa. The first year was mixed ability in two classes but there was another class with just 15 girls in it who were doing a special programme.

Marita had to pick her subjects at the start of first year and did not get to try any of the new ones before she picked them. She did Irish, English, maths, history, geography, CSPE, SPHE, PE, home economics, RE, art and business. She had a choice to pick two from science, music, home economics, art and business. She loved art, maths and history because she liked the teachers. She quite liked Irish, English, CSPE and home economics but really hated geography, business and SPHE. She had the same teacher for geography and SPHE and thought that the teacher was really 'mean'. She was disappointed in home economics because there wasn't much cooking in it and her mother didn't always get all the ingredients she wanted. Her partner never brought in her share either. She wished she had picked science because they had a man teacher for science – a young guy who was really cool. She asked her mother to go to the school to see if she could change but her mother wouldn't.

She settled in to secondary school quickly because she knew her classmates and the sixth class in primary school had prepared her well. She found that she was doing quite a lot of stuff that she had already done in primary but that meant that she was often ahead of her class, especially in maths. They didn't get too much homework and often did projects and other fun things. She found she was good at art but didn't get to do much of it at home because her mother said it was too messy and she never cleaned up afterwards. She was still friendly with the same three girls that were friends from primary school and also made friends with the Polish girl, Kamila, although Kamila didn't have much English and it was sometimes hard to talk to her. Kamila goes out for extra English lessons during Irish.

In second year, everything got harder. Marita grew a lot in the summer of first year and her uniform wasn't comfortable any more. She got into the Honours class in Irish and maths and the teachers seemed to be going much faster. They had a new teacher for Irish who would only talk Irish to them and half the time they didn't know what she was saying. The teachers all started to tell them to work harder or they wouldn't be ready for the Junior Cert. They got a lot more homework.

When Marita turned 14 she got a part-time job in the local hairdresser's and she loved it. She was just sweeping up and washing but everyone treated her like she

was grown up and she sometimes got tips. She worked Thursday and Friday nights and all day Saturday. They were starting to get more and more homework in school and sometimes Marita didn't get it all done. She would just do the written work and hope she could learn the other stuff in between classes. She got five notes in her journal in the first term for homework not done or incomplete and her parents sat her down and asked her if she wanted to leave school. She was shocked because she knew she needed qualifications to get a good job and she promised to work harder. Some of the other girls in her class had started messing and giving back cheek and the teachers seemed to be cross most of the time.

Her Christmas tests gave her a shock – instead of As and Bs she was getting Cs and Ds. The Irish teacher's comment suggested that she might like to go back to Ordinary level. She decided to do this and found to her surprise that she liked Irish. She wanted to go to the Gaeltacht at the end of second year, but her parents couldn't afford it. At the end of second year, her report was fairly good and she stayed in the Honours class for maths and English in third year.

In third year, it seems to Marita that the teachers never stop talking about the Junior Cert. They have class tests very often and the 'mocks' will come shortly after Christmas. Marita has cut back a bit on her work hours but she still works all day Saturday. She has given up the Friday night work and goes baby-sitting instead so she can bring her books and do some studying. She hopes to do well in the Junior Cert and maybe go to college.

- In your own reflective journal describe how Marita's curriculum experience compares with your own experience at that age.
- Compare Marita's experience of the curriculum with what you know of that of the students you teach.
- Identify the resources that Marita brings to her schooling experience and the obstacles she must overcome.
- Consider the hidden curriculum of Mount Armstrong School as it is portrayed here. What expectations do you think the school conveys to its students? How do these compare with her parents' expectations? With her own expectations?

Junior Certificate case study 2: Simon

Simon goes to Tiermoghan Community School, a large community school in a big rural town with a socially mixed intake. He lives about three miles from school with his mother who is separated from his father, who is a vet. His mother is a teacher in a primary school in a village about a mile on the other side of the town. His mother drives him to school in the mornings. His parents chose Tiermoghan Community School because they thought he would get the help he needs as Simon is dyslexic and dyspraxic.

Simon does not cope well with change and his father works unsocial hours so Simon seldom goes to stay with him during school term time. In school, he has a special needs assistant who writes down the homework for him and helps him to organise himself. Simon was in a mixed-ability class in first year, a class of 14 girls and 10 boys. He had not done entrance tests prior to entering the school because of his dyslexia but his mother had given the school comprehensive information about his progress and his needs. He found first year very difficult. He doesn't like noise and had attended a small rural primary school. He found the transition to a big, noisy, bright school very difficult at first. The school has a policy of postponing subject choice until second year and offers a wide taster programme in first year. Simon started out in this programme but his dyspraxia made practical subjects difficult and hazardous and the school requested that he drop woodwork and metalwork. His mother reluctantly agreed. She is a tireless advocate for Simon and spends hours helping him with homework, reading books to him and listening to audiobooks with him.

Simon loved science and tolerated maths in first year. He has a vivid imagination and likes to compose and dictate stories. He can do aspects of art that do not involve fine work. He can sing well and has a good sense of rhythm. Somewhat to his parents' dismay, he is fascinated by religion and with his parents' approval, he likes to be involved in social justice issues. He is greatly interested in history and got on very well with his geography teacher in first year. Simon is exempt from Irish but his mother encourages him to listen to Irish language programmes on television. His biggest problem in first year was bullying. He is tall and thin and very conspicuous in the corridors. Other students imitate his unco-ordinated walk and intense adult-focused mode of speech. Because he is exempt from traditional 'male' practical subjects and does art and home economics, a rumour has spread that he is gay. He also hates PE, particularly team games and the PE class is a weekly ordeal for him. He has a short temper and twice in first year was in trouble for fighting, each time hitting a much smaller boy. His mother is not aware of the homophobic bullying and he has taken to finding excuses for missing PE.

Simon spent some time in the summer of first year with his father and discovered some skill with animals. Simon had a somewhat better time in second year. He was allowed to drop some of his most hated subjects and began to make some tentative friendships with boys and girls. He continued with English, maths, CSPE, SPHE, RE, art, science, music, technical graphics, history and geography. He found science practicals and technical graphics difficult but he dropped home economics even though he liked cooking to give himself some 'street cred'. His mother continued to support his education and got him some extra tuition to help him stay with higher level maths. Some other students continued to call him 'gay' but he became more discreet in dealing with the taunts. He also did music and ceramics outside school and went to a computer club. He works tirelessly when motivated by interest. He has begun to spend more time with his father and has

begun to think he might like to be a farrier. His lack of metalwork might pose a problem but the school refused to consider allowing him to take up the subject again. He did not find the work more intense in second year but found himself bored when the rest of the class spent so much time writing.

Simon went to the Gaeltacht at the end of second year but came home after a week because he was bullied and miserable. He spent time working with horses and begged to be allowed to leave school and become a groom. His parents refused to consider this and he is now in third year, preparing for the Junior Cert.

- In your own reflective journal describe how Simon's curriculum experience compares with your own experience at that age.
- Compare Simon's experience of the curriculum with that of Marita.
- Compare Simon's experience with that of any student you teach who has special needs.
- Identify the resources that Simon brings to his schooling experience and the obstacles he must overcome.
- Consider the hidden curriculum of Tiermoghan Community School as it is portrayed here. What expectations do you think the school conveys to its students? How do these compare with Simon's parents' expectations? With his own expectations?
- Reflect on the null curriculum as experienced by Simon. How does this limit his opportunities?

Junior Certificate case study 3: the student teacher

Karen is a student teacher doing her teaching practice in Ticknevin Community College, in a large new working-class suburb in southwest Dublin. Ticknevin Community College is a co-educational school of 620 students with 60 teachers, three guidance counsellors, two learning support teachers, a chaplain and a resource teacher. There are seven classes in each of first, second and third year; two Transition Year classes, four fifth-year and four sixth-year classes. Karen holds a BSc with first class honours in physics, with mathetatics as her minor subject. She has also taken mathematical physics and chemistry, the latter just in first year. She has always been a high achiever and got 480 points from her Leaving Certificate results. She did a very focused Leaving Certificate: Higher level maths, maths physics and physics, chemistry, English and Irish with Ordinary level business and geography. She has now been asked to teach Junior Certificate science and maths to first and second year classes, and one class per week of SPHE to first years. She was delighted when the principal showed her the facilities in the school: four laboratories, all well-equipped and well-kept. There were interactive whiteboards in two of the general classrooms and she was told that she would have the use of these for teaching maths. Karen was delighted to see a poster about Rosalind Franklin in a science lab: she is passionate about encouraging girls

to do science and especially to think about taking physical sciences rather than biology.

Karen's co-operating teacher is Anne who has been qualified for a few years. Karen is delighted to be working with someone young and they have been getting on very well and sharing a few laughs and moans. Just recently, though, things got a little tense when Karen told one of the second years (a really 'bright' student) that she would be wasting her time doing biology for Leaving Cert and going into nursing; Karen thinks she should concentrate on physics and maths. Anne feels really hurt about this and they have been avoiding each other in the staff room. This means that Karen doesn't get to discuss SPHE with Anne and she feels really lost in this subject which she believes is too 'touchy-feely'. She is living in dread of a visit from her college supervisor when she is teaching this subject.

Karen is surprised that so many of her students seem to find maths so difficult. She feels that even though she breaks down each problem really clearly, writing each step on the interactive whiteboard, students sometimes come in without any homework done and say that they couldn't understand it. She does it again patiently, step-by-step, exactly as she did the previous day, and the students say 'yes' when she asks them if they understand. Anne tells her not to worry as they will be covering the material again when they revise for the Junior Cert.

- Note in your reflective journal the ways in which you interact with your co-operating teacher about curriculum issues. Do you agree with the sequencing of material that s/he proposes? Do the sections that you teach draw on your strengths or challenge you in areas where you are less confident?
- Do you agree with her/his pedagogical approach? How do you deal with disagreements?
- How can you use formative assessment to address any difficulties students might have with curriculum content?

THE JUNIOR CERTIFICATE IN THE FUTURE

Evaluations of Junior Certificate have indicated that the programme has not fulfilled all the expectations that were held for it in 1989 when it was introduced. As was mentioned above, the curriculum content was designed separately from the in-service programme and the assessment modes and techniques. It had been anticipated that curriculum reform would be quickly followed by assessment reform but the terminal examination remained the dominant mode of assessment for almost all subjects. In 1999, the NCCA carried out a large-scale evaluation of the Junior Certificate programme, based on a survey of school principals. They found that the curriculum was less suitable for students described as 'at risk' and for those referred to as 'educationally disadvantaged'. They also found that schools made little reference to 'areas of experience' but based their curriculum around separate subjects.

During the 1990s, the focus of curriculum reform was at senior secondary level (see below) and at primary level. The introduction of a new primary school curriculum in 1999 was accompanied by a comprehensive in-service programme which brought teachers together for six days in each school year. The ESRI study (discussed above) demonstrated the lack of cohesion between primary and secondary curricula and emphasised the need for more continuity of experience for students throughout the compulsory period.

The NCCA also found that, since each subject had been developed separately and individually, there was sometimes a lack of co-ordination. As a result some subjects were overloaded with content and there was sometimes overlap between subjects. Following consultation in 2008 (www.ncca.ie), they embarked on a process of 're-balancing' of syllabi which aimed to:

- reduce overload within and overlap between subjects; and
- provide more space and time to have the quality of learning engagement with students that teachers would like.

Five subjects have gone through the rebalancing process: English, history, music, home economics, and art, craft and design.

Rebalancing has involved:

- rewriting each syllabus to a common template;
- writing learning outcomes for each syllabus;
- updating each syllabus and removing unnecessary overlap;
- lining each syllabus up with changes in the primary school curriculum and with any changes at Leaving Certificate; and
- making minor changes to assessment.

The NCCA is currently engaged in a consultation about the shape of junior cycle in the future. The document 'Innovation and Identity: Ideas for a New Junior Cert' can be downloaded from www.ncca.ie. You can be part of the consultation process by completing the online questionnaire. You can also be involved in curriculum decision-making through your teachers' union (ASTI or TUI) and by joining your subject association.

THE CURRICULUM IN IRELAND AT SENIOR CYCLE

As a student teacher or educational practitioner, you are likely to have less experience of teaching at senior cycle than junior cycle. Nevertheless, it is important for you to understand the structure of and rationale for senior cycle curricula, as you will need to be familiar with these issues as a qualified teacher.

The senior cycle: curriculum as intention

Senior cycle in Ireland consists of either two or three years, depending on whether Transition Year is taken. Senior cycle begins after the Junior Certificate examinations and spans the end of the compulsory period (for students not yet 16 at Junior Certificate) and the beginning of the non-compulsory period of education. Because most of the programme is in the post-compulsory phase of education, the overall intention of senior cycle is not expressed in terms of entitlement as is the intention of junior cycle. The senior cycle must also serve a range of different, and sometimes conflicting, purposes (e.g. preparation for adult and working life, preparation for further study). Nevertheless, the general aims of education also apply to senior cycle. In 1993, the NCCA proposed a set of aims for senior cycle which stated that the senior cycle programmes aim:

- to reinforce and provide continuity and progression from the aims and content of the Junior Certificate programme and coherence across the curriculum;
- to prepare the young person in particular for the requirements of further education, for adult life and for working life; and
- to develop in the young person a capacity for self-directed learning and for independent thought.

In 2005, the NCCA expanded that list as follows:

- to ensure coherent and meaningful continuity from the junior cycle of post-primary education and to allow progression to further education, the world of work and higher education;
- to provide a curriculum characterised by breadth and balance, while allowing for some degree of specialisation;
- to ensure improved access to, and equality in, senior cycle education for all, within a context of lifelong learning;
- to contribute to the emergence of Ireland as a knowledge society;
- to educate for participative citizenship at local, national, European and global levels;
- to contribute to each individual's moral, social, cultural and economic life, and enhance their quality of life;
- to ensure that the highest standards of achievement are obtained by every person, appropriate to their ability; and
- to ensure that the educational experience at senior cycle is in line with good practice and developments internationally.

- Do you notice any changes of emphasis between junior and senior cycle aims?
- How do the aims for senior cycle relate to the overall aims of education, listed above?

Until 1994, the majority of students had access to just one senior cycle programme, called simply 'the Leaving Certificate'. During the 1990s, a number of programmes were developed and students now have the option of taking Transition Year (if the school provides it), followed by a choice between Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Established and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.

Extended senior cycle provision and increased uptake of programmes have, however, increased the necessity for more coherence in senior cycle planning and for more clearly defined rationales for any senior cycle and for each of the various options within it. The overall list of aims given above comes from a document which is still under discussion as part of an ongoing review of senior cycle which has involved committees, conferences, the production of discussion documents using scenario planning tools, and online questionnaires and comments. This process has run in parallel with the review of existing syllabi for the Leaving Certificate Established programme, evaluations of the Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational programmes, and major research into the Transition Year programme. Each of these programmes will be considered in turn.

Transition Year

Transition Year (TY) was introduced for the first time in 1974 and, from 1994 onwards, all second-level schools have had the option of offering the programme. The programme remains optional for both schools and students: in 2009–10, more than 27,000 students in 540 schools took part in the programme. Some schools make TY compulsory for all students; the majority of those providing it offer the programme as an option and have a limited number of places. Usually, students seeking a place on the programme are interviewed. Patterns of provision were studied by ESRI (Smyth et al., 2004a). Girls' secondary schools are most likely to provide the programme and over 90 per cent of such schools do so. The lowest levels of provision are found in vocational schools and in designated disadvantaged schools. Jeffers (2002, p. 60) relates the low take up of Transition Year in designated disadvantaged schools to a perception that Transition Year is not an intervention targeted at disadvantage and that its capacity to make a difference is therefore underestimated. The patterns of provision are related to school size, opportunity, logistics, school traditions and 'assumptions about the suitability of the programme for certain groups of students' (Smyth et al., 2004a, p. 21).

Transition Year is unique in Ireland in the degree of freedom allowed to schools to design their own Transition Year curriculum within the overall programme mission statement given in the programme guidelines, namely:

> To promote the personal, social, educational and vocational development of pupils and to prepare them for their role as autonomous, participative and responsible members of society (Department of Education, 1993, p. 4).

The aims listed in the guidelines include 'education for maturity', 'personal development', 'social awareness and social competence', 'general, technical and academic skills', interdisciplinary and self-directed learning', and 'experience of adult and working life' (Department of Education, 1993, pp. 6–14). More than any other programme, Transition Year provides an opportunity for schools to get involved in designing their own curricula. The curriculum is described on the TY website in terms of layers:

- the *calendar* layer consists of once-off activities, such as work experience, trips out, visitors to the school, social outreach, a musical or drama;
- the *TY specific* layer consists of modules and subjects provided in Transition Year only, such as mini company, Young Social Innovators, photography;
- the *subject sampling* layer provides opportunities for students to try out subjects that they might consider taking for Leaving Certificate or for further study, such as physics, Spanish, music or business; and
- the *continuity subject* layer consists of Gaeilge, PE, ICT, mathematics, English and religious education.

In the final two years of senior cycle, students take one of three Leaving Certificate programmes: Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Established or Leaving Certificate Vocational. Each of these will be considered in turn.

Leaving Certificate Applied

The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is currently provided in 368 centres and taken by about 8,000 students (about 8 per cent of the cohort). Most of these centres are second-level schools, but the list of providers also includes a welfare and probation service, youth service, senior education centres (for members of the Travelling Community) and 34 Youthreach centres. The programme is supported by a lower pupil–teacher ratio (PTR), by provision of some funding for resources and by in-career development of teachers carried out by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS). The most recent ESRI survey (Banks et al., 2009) notes that the programme is provided in about 40 per cent of schools. This compares with just 15 per cent of schools in 1997.

  The Leaving Certificate Applied was introduced on a pilot developmental basis in 1995, following intensive work by the NCCA. The programme built on the curricular initiatives, namely the Senior Certificate (developed by the Shannon Curriculum Development Centre) and the Vocational Preparation and Training Programme (VPT1) developed by schools according to guidelines produced by the Department of Education and supported by the CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit. All of these programmes had their origins in concern regarding the suitability or appropriateness of the Leaving Certificate programme in existence (now known as LCE) for those who were taking all or most subjects at Ordinary level and were

unlikely to proceed to study in higher education (Curriculum Awareness Action Group, 1990). A second and more significant factor was concern regarding the levels of youth unemployment throughout Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Prior the Treaty of Maastricht (1991) the EC was precluded from involvement in the education systems of member states but was involved in supporting training initiatives, especially those designed to address youth unemployment. Accordingly, a number of initiatives, based wholly or partly in schools, and containing the term 'training' or 'vocational' in their titles, were developed in member states. All of these programmes, in receipt of EC funding, had a common structural framework of vocational education, vocational preparation and general education. The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is a modular programme described by the NCCA as 'pre-vocational'. Key objectives for the programme are:

- preparing students for adult and working life; and
- meeting the needs of students who are not adequately catered for other Leaving Certificate programmes or who choose not to opt for such programmes (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 25).

LCA is a two-year programme which must be taken as a self-contained option and cannot be combined with elements of any other Leaving Certificate programme. Some schools offer LCA as a choice against Transition Year so that students cannot take both programmes while others appear to give LCA a relatively low profile within the school's activities. The DES survey which evaluated the programme (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 31) reported that some schools had concerns 'that the academic reputation of the school would be diluted by possibly attracting a greater number of students from more disadvantaged areas'.

The two years of the programme are each divided into two half-year sessions. Students take 40 modules, each generally of three to four classes per week throughout the course. The distribution of the modules is as follows: 14 in general education, 16 in vocational education and 12 in vocational preparation. General education incorporates social education (LCA is the only Leaving Certificate programme, at present, to include social education as a discrete, certificated category), courses in conversational Irish (Gaeilge chumarsaideach) and in a modern European language, and leisure and recreation and arts education. Vocational education includes vocational specialisms (students take two options (four modules in each) from a list of 11 options), mathematical applications and information and communication technology. Vocational preparation includes English and communications, preparation for work, work experience, and enterprise.

The structural innovation of the programme is mirrored in its assessment procedures which include seven cross-curricular 'tasks', key assignments associated with the vocational specialism modules and credit for 90 per cent attendance (the

minimum acceptable) in the programme. There are a small number of terminal, written examinations in the language and mathematical areas. The seven tasks include a practical achievement task and a personal reflection task. Certification is only available to students who complete the entire programme and take terminal examinations. Progression to LCA is generally available to JCSP students so that LCA groups will usually contain students who have come from at least two different courses.

The Leaving Certificate Established

The Leaving Certificate Established is the paradigmatic Leaving Certificate programme and until 1995 was referred to simply as the 'Leaving Certificate'. It can fairly be described as a collection of subjects rather than a programme and is perhaps the area of secondary schooling which best exemplifies the tradition of 1878. The LCE is comprised of some 33 subjects, taken by most students over a two-year period, only one of which (Gaeilge) is compulsory. The tide of reform which resulted in the development of the Junior Certificate and a number of other senior-cycle programmes did not result in change in the Leaving Certificate at a programmatic level. Revision of LCE syllabi, however, was undertaken on an individual basis resulting in the introduction in 1995 of new courses in Gaeilge, French, German, Spanish, Italian, accounting, business, and music, and the introduction of Foundation level in mathematics. Further revision followed in most other subjects and the NCCA state that:

> In addition to updating the content and relevance of syllabuses (to the needs of students), the vocational orientation of each subject, where relevant, has also been increased.

The impetus for this revision appeared to come, not so much from the consultative reform process as from the economic imperatives reflected in documents such as the OECD review, the 'Industrial Review Group Report' (Culliton, 1992) and continued by the EU policy documents such as the Lisbon Strategy (2004).
    The new and revised syllabuses introduced are characterised by:

- modernisation and increased relevance;
- an outcomes-based approach to expressing course and assessment objectives;
- increased attention to the vocational aspects of subjects – to the application of learning to real-life situations;
- greater attention to differentiation, often in the form of different learning outcomes for Ordinary and Higher levels;
- broadening of the basis for and the methods for the assessment of achievement; and

- greater consideration of gender issues and of special educational needs (www.ncca.ie).

The introduction of these syllabi has resulted in the provision of in-career development courses for teachers, on a subject basis, on a much larger scale than before. The Leaving Certificate Established plays a pivotal role, different from that of all other programmes, in the Irish education system. Because of its gatekeeper role in controlling access to further and higher education, the Leaving Certificate is a high-stakes examination and the 'points system' exerts an influence on all second-level programmes, and, arguably, even on primary education. Because of this, LCE has been much slower to change and tends to be thought of in terms of separate subjects, rather than as a coherent programme. To remedy this, the NCCA has embarked on a process of embedding key skills across all programmes, but especially in LCE. These key skills are based on the work of Bentley and are identified as: information processing, communicating, being personally effective, working with others, and critical and creative thinking.

- From your experience of senior-cycle programmes, identify where one or more of the key skills can be developed in a subject or module.

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme was introduced in 1994 with a very specific focus on the business and vocational environment into which young people would move. It can be described as a vocational orientation to the Leaving Certificate Established and is sometimes described as the 'Leaving Cert plus'. Students taking LCVP typically take seven subjects from the Leaving Cert Established programme together with two link modules (described below). The subjects taken must include two from either of the Vocational Subject Groupings (VSGs) listed below.

Specialist grouping
1. Construction studies; engineering; design and communication graphics; technology (any two).
2. Physics and construction studies or engineering or technology, or design and communication graphics.
3. Agricultural science and construction studies or engineering or technology or design and communication graphics.
4. Agricultural science and chemistry or physics or physics/chemistry.
5. Home economics; agricultural science; biology (any two).
6. Home economics and art – design option or craft option.
7. Accounting; business; economics (any two).
8. Physics and chemistry.

9.   Biology and chemistry or physics or physics/chemistry.
10.   Biology and agricultural science.
11.   Art – design option or craft option and design and communication graphics.

Services groupings
12.   Engineering or technology or construction studies or design and communication graphics and accounting or business or economics.
13.   Home economics and accounting or business or economics.
14.   Agricultural science and accounting or business or economics.
15.   Art design or craftwork option and accounting or business or economics.
16.   Music and accounting or business or economics.

<div align="right">Source: www.lcvp.slss.ie (2010)</div>

An important dimension was added to the programme with the inclusion of two 'link modules' which link the vocational studies to the other aspects of the programme and to link the in-school and out-of-school aspects of student learning. The content of the link modules is described on the LCVP website as follows.

Link Module I – Preparation for the World of Work
Students will research and investigate local employment opportunities, develop job seeking skills such as letter writing, CV presentation, interview techniques; gain valuable practical experience of the world of work; interview and work shadow a person in a career area that interests them.

Link Module II – Enterprise Education
Students will be involved in organising visits to local business and community enterprises; meet and interview enterprising people on-site and in the classroom; plan and undertake interesting activities that will build self-confidence, creativity, initiative and develop teamwork, communication and computer skills.

The programme is currently provided in 522 schools. The curriculum intention underlying LCVP is that students are educated 'to cope and thrive in an environment of rapid change' (www.lcvp.slss.ie).

Students taking part in LCVP are expected to develop good ICT skills and schools taking part in the programme receive support towards computer facilities. The link modules are assessed by some innovative, school-based assessment techniques including role-play based on a video presentation. Students need to develop a range of information-processing and presentation skills to be able to do this. The link modules collectively constitute a 'subject for points' purposes and are recognised (although at a diminished level in comparison with other subjects, i.e.

80 points for a Distinction (80-100 per cent)) by universities and institutes of technology.

Senior cycle: curriculum as interaction

Transition year
Evidence about curriculum interaction in Transition Year comes from a number of sources. An evaluation of the programme was carried out by the Department of Education. Detailed studies were carried out by Smyth, Byrne and Hannan (2004b) and by Jeffers (2007). These studies note considerable variation between schools in the content, organisation and assessment of Transition Year programmes. Where Transition Year programmes are deemed to have been successful, very positive student outcomes have been observed. Parents and teachers remark on the increase in maturity and the enhanced capacity to engage with adults (Jeffers, 2007) displayed by students who have completed Transition Year, compared to their peers who went directly to fifth year. Strong bonds between students and improved classroom climate have also been noted. The longitudinal study found that students who took TY out-performed their peers who had gone straight to Leaving Certificate by one and a half grades on average. TY students were also more 'educationally adventurous' – they were more likely to take subjects for Leaving Certificate that they had not previously studied at Junior Cert. Students surveyed were very positive about the use of active learning methodologies in TY. Jeffers found, however, that these were not as widely used as was recommended by the DES.

Leaving Certificate Applied

LCA has been evaluated by the inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science (Department of Education and Science, 2000) who established that the key objectives of the programme were being met in most schools. They note (p. 73) that 'the reported retention of many of these students in schools until the completion of Senior Cycle education was an indicator of the success of the programme'. They also remark on the extension of the developmental ethos of the programme to other areas of the school's activities, such as professional development of teachers, personal and social development of students and the development of links with out-of-school agencies in the community and in business. Areas of concern identified include: the selection of students for the programme; the involvement of parents and community interests in the development of the programme; the monitoring of attendance to ensure that the 90 per cent requirement is met; and the provision for social education and for vocational preparation and guidance. More diverse provision of work experience and reduced reliance on part-time work of students to provide this experience was recommended.

The Department of Education and Science (2000, p. 78) survey also made reference to gender differentiation in the provision of vocational specialisms. The recommend that 'gender balance in the uptake of Vocational Specialisms should continue to be a focus for schools in programme planning and implementation'. Since the DES evaluation was based on questionnaires to school principals and teachers together with school visits and some interviews with teachers and principals, the student voice has not informed the findings to any extent. Hence there is no data on the satisfaction levels of male and female students with the courses on offer.

A significant percentage of students in LCA experiences literacy difficulties. The ESRI study found that students who had lower scores in reading and mathematics in first year were more likely to be offered LCA. The programme literature and the DES evaluation make no mention of literacy support. English and communications is an LCA module within the area of Vocational Preparation rather than general education, so its scope to address such difficulties may be limited.

Two aspects of the LCA programme have been particularly controversial and have impacted on the esteem in which the programme is held. The first is the discrete or 'ring-fenced' nature of the programme. Students cannot combine elements of the programme with elements of other Leaving Certificate programmes. This may be limiting for students with specific aptitudes or intelligences who are focused on a vocational option. Their possibilities for continued, lifelong learning in their area of expertise are very limited. The second is the limited range of progression options which follow on from the programme. The Leaving Certificate Applied does not generate 'points' for entry to third-level education. Limited access to further education is available via post-Leaving Certificate courses which link to certificate courses in institutes of technology. The LCA thus has a complex and difficult dual role as a programme which can cater for a diverse range of student abilities and aspirations. On the one hand it seeks to further the education of those students who would find the academic Leaving Certificate Established programme too challenging and who wish to proceed directly to the workplace; on the other, it seeks to provide a pathway of opportunity into further and higher education for those whose engagement with education is mediated through vocational activity. If it were part of the 'points system', the important benefits noted from the programme (e.g. increased self-confidence, motivation, maturity) might be the very features that would be at risk of being lost. The challenge for the LCA is to retain its identity while claiming parity of esteem with other Leaving Certificate programmes.

Leaving Certificate Established

The existence of three Leaving Certificate programme testifies to a level of dissatisfaction with the Leaving Certificate, especially for those who will take the

majority of their subjects at Ordinary or Foundation level. The LCE as a programme, however, has received little systematic evaluation. At the time of writing, the ESRI longitudinal study is nearing completion of its work on LCE.

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

The LCVP has not been studied to the same extent as the programmes named above. Gleeson and Granville (1999) evaluated the in-service provided for teachers of LCVP and noted that while the LCVP is a programme, the term tended to be used in schools to refer to the link modules only. The DES has carried out a number of evaluations of LCVP programmes in schools as part of whole school evaluations, which can be found on the DES website (www.education.ie). Some concerns expressed referred to the way in which the vocational subject groupings are allocated, the need to strengthen the cross-curricular dimension of the programme and the timetabling of the ICT component against other curriculum areas, and the need for support and guidance in subject choice. In most reports, the inspectors noted the use of active learning methodologies and positive awareness of the programme on the part of students.

Senior cycle: curriculum as experience

The student teacher

Evan is a PGDE student doing his teaching practice in Aylmer College, a 600-student all-boys' voluntary secondary school in a large town. He teaches French and history and spent a year abroad teaching English after his degree. He attended a co-educational community school himself and finds himself surprised by some aspects of school life. Relations between staff and students are somewhat more formal than he remembers from his own schooldays and the school places a lot of emphasis on examination results and sporting prowess, especially in hurling. During teaching practice, he has had the opportunity to teach a Transition Year class and has been asked to develop a module on history. He did not do Transition Year himself and was a little apprehensive for a number of reasons. The school puts a lot of emphasis on examination success and he was not sure how best to contribute to this while at the same time giving the students a good experience of Transition Year. He spoke to a colleague in his PGDE class who suggested a module on the First World War. He decided to talk to one of the English teachers in the school and together they put together a module on the poetry of the First World War. The students responded well and contributed pictures and added poems of their own, making links with contemporary wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Evan was delighted but felt very deflated when one of the senior teachers made critical and cynical comments like, 'I wonder how much that lot will remember, they probably think George Bush was in the trenches.' Together with his colleague who

helped him to design the module, Evan decided to upload the module on to the Transition Year website and was delighted to receive feedback by email from a number of teachers.

- Reflect on your own experience in teaching Transition Year or any other area of the curriculum where you had the opportunity to design materials.
- Reflect on ways in which your PGDE colleagues and the teachers in your school have supported you or criticised your work. What have you learned from this?

The student of Leaving Certificate Applied

Amber is a fifth-year student in Ballinafagh Community College. She took JCSP at Junior Cycle and made a lot of progress. She had always struggled with reading but had good friends in primary school and the teachers liked her. She enjoyed the project work in JCSP and her group won a prize in the Make-a-Book exhibition. She went for extra help with reading and got a good mark in Foundation level mathematics. When she was in third year the Leaving Certificate Applied Co-ordinator suggested to her mother that she might do Leaving Cert Applied. Her parents were not very sure what the programme was about or about the implications of doing it. In the beginning, she did not like it much. Her two best friends left school after the Junior Cert and as she is quite shy, she did not find it easy to settle in. She didn't know most of the teachers and found the pace quite fast in some subjects. She no longer has any extra help with reading and finds some of the work difficult. Her vocational subjects are childcare and catering and she really looks forward to the days when she has them. She greatly prefers the LCA approach to the home economics she did for Junior Cert as it is more practical and she doesn't have to write so much. She has been involved in a cross-curricular task which included catering for foreign expert visitors to the school. Her group had to do the budgeting and shopping as well as writing menu cards on the computer. They wrote up a report afterwards. She found some of these tasks challenging but enjoyed working in a group and being treated like an adult. She has done some work experience in a crèche and found she has real aptitude with small children. She had thought of leaving as soon as she turned 16 but now thinks she will stay to the end of the programme and maybe do a Post-Leaving Certificate FETAC qualification in childcare.

- Which elements of the LCA curriculum, in your opinion, would be most challenging for Amber?
- If the LCA counted for 'points' do you think this would have a positive or a negative effect on Amber's experience?

The student of Leaving Cert Established

Joseph is in his second Leaving Certificate year in Colaiste Aonghusa, a 700-student all-boys', fee-paying secondary school. He did 11 subjects for Junior Cert and got eight As and three Bs. He did Transition Year and spent a term in a French school during that time. He was also involved in a mini-company which made and sold picture frames. He greatly enjoyed the experience and found that he had a flair for business.

When it came to choosing his Leaving Certificate subjects, he considered doing LCVP but found that his subject choice would be quite limited. In particular, he found that he would not get as many points for the 'link modules' as he would for a 'regular' subject, no matter how well he did. As he wants to study law, he chose subjects that he felt would give him the maximum points. These included mathematics and physics. He must take a European language, so he chose French. He is doing Higher level English but has decided to drop to Ordinary level Irish, although he got an A in the subject in Junior Cert.

He has chosen subjects where he feels he will get the most points so has opted for accounting and business. He liked art at Junior Cert level and studied piano outside of timetabled classes but no longer takes part in these activities as he wants to concentrate on maximum achievement. He continues to take part in debates as he feels that this will be an advantage in doing law and he plays rugby although he has cut back on training. He attends supervised study every day after school and does a further three to four hours after he goes home. He considers the constraints on his life to be worthwhile if they will enable him to achieve the college course and the career to which he aspires.

- Compare Joseph's school experience with that of Amber, described above.
- Would you enjoy teaching Joseph? Why or why not?
- If you were Joseph's Irish teacher, how would you feel?

RECOMMENDED READING

Websites

This chapter has dealt with the second-level curriculum in Ireland in a largely descriptive fashion, with the needs of pre-service education students in mind. Some of the key references mentioned above are websites.

www.education.ie (website of the DES. Syllabus listings for all subjects; evaluation reports for LCVP; links).

www.ncca.ie (website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Programme information for all major programmes; consultations on areas of development; research results).

www.slss.ie (website of the Second Level Support Service. Programme information on JCSP, LCA, LCVP, TY and subjects for which a support team is in place).

www.curriculumonline.ie (a section of the NCCA website with specific curriculum information).

www.sess.ie (website of the Special Education Support Service).

www.cdu.cdvec (website of the Curriculum Development Unit of City of Dublin VEC; variety of resources, especially for JCSP).

www.esri.ie (website of the Economic and Social Research Institute; research on a number of areas of the curriculum).

www.pisa.oecd.org (website for the OECD's PISA project of international comparisons.

www.oecd.org/country (website that gives OECD statistics for Ireland).

Reports

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Curriculum Awareness Action Group (1990). *Low Achievement in Senior Cycle: a Survey of Principals of Voluntary Secondary Schools*. Dublin: Marino Institute of Education.

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Department of Education and Science (2005). *Building on Success: An Evaluation of the Junior Certificate School Programme.* Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Gilleece, L., Shiel, G., Perkins, R. and Proctor, M. (2009). *Teaching and Learning International Survey (2008): National Report for Ireland.* Dublin: Educational Research Centre.

Government of Ireland (1995). *Charting our Education Future.* White Paper. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

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Haslett, D. (2005). *Room for Reading: JCSP Demonstration Library Project Research Report.* Dublin: JCSP Support Service.

Jeffers, G. (2007). *Attitudes to Transition Year,* Maynooth: NUI Maynooth Education Department.

Smyth, E. (1999). *Do Schools Differ?: Academic and Personal Development among Pupils in the Second-Level Sector.* Dublin: ESRI.

Smyth, E., Byrne, D. and Hannan, C. (2004a). *The Transition Year Programme: an Assessment.* Dublin: Liffey Press/ESRI.

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Some curriculum texts

Text that deal with curriculum in general

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Connelly M. and Clandinnin J. (1986). *Teachers as Curriculum Planners: Narratives of Experience.* Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/OISE Press.

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Sugrue, C. (ed.) (2004). *Curriculum and Ideology: Irish Experiences, International Perspectives*. Dublin: Liffey Press.

Texts dealing with specific curriculum issues

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Ability grouping

Ireson, J. and Hallam, S. (2001). *Ability Grouping in Education*. London: Paul Chapman.

Alternative approaches to curriculum: care and well-being

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