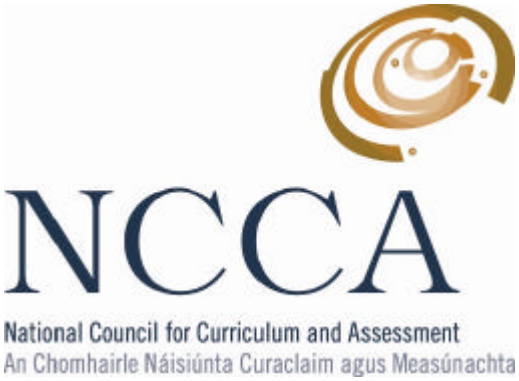

NCCA commentary on ESRI research into the experiences of students in the second year of junior cycle

May 2006

1. Introduction

In early 2002, as part of the review of junior cycle, NCCA commissioned the Educational Policy Research Centre of the ESRI to engage in a longitudinal study of students' experiences of curriculum in the first three years of their post-primary schooling. The overall purpose of the research is to inform the NCCA's advice on the type of curriculum provision that best ensures that all junior cycle students experience a high-quality education. The first year study, completed in 2003, focused on the experiences of students making the transition from primary to post-primary education from the perspective of principals, teachers, parents and the students themselves. It looked at curriculum provision in the different schools and at students' academic progress, level of motivation and changing attitudes towards school over time. The study highlighted the ways in which post-primary schools can ease the transition process by having developed integration programmes in place and by fostering a positive climate within the school. It emphasised the value of ensuring a continuity in students' learning experiences from primary to post-primary school and the importance of subject choice, particularly access to more practically orientated subjects.

The aims of the second year study, which is the subject of this commentary, were twofold—to capture second year students' experiences of teaching, learning and the curriculum, and to trace the changes in students' attitudes to school and schoolwork over the course of second year. The study provides a unique insight into the 'middle year' of early Post-primary education in an Irish context.

This commentary will highlight findings of the research of particular relevance to the current work and advice of the NCCA in relation to the different strands of the junior cycle review. It will also seek to identify a number of other issues raised in the research that merit further consideration and discussion.

The research is longitudinal, and the findings under consideration in this commentary are from the 'middle year' of the study. As a consequence, this commentary should be viewed as interim in nature. When the student experiences of third year have been analysed, the NCCA will be in a position to develop these interim observations into more definitive recommendations.

2. How classes are organised in second year

The study looked at the ways in which the 12 case study schools organised students into class groups. Six schools continued their first year policy of streaming or banding.[1] It is of note that four of these had a working-class social mix, and three were also designated disadvantaged. While the other six schools retained mixed-ability base classes, students were set,[2] according to ability, into higher and ordinary level classes in Irish, mathematics and, to a lesser extent, English.

Streaming

What emerges in the research findings in relation to the effects of streaming on teaching, learning and student motivation merits particular consideration, and gives some cause for concern. While schools may believe that streaming enables them to better meet the learning needs of particular students (for example the first year study attributed the adoption of ability-based differentiation in working class, disadvantaged schools to a response to relatively high levels of literacy and numeracy difficulties[3]) the second year study shows that the practice may benefit the more able students, but *does not* benefit students in the lower streams. Instead, it contributes to lower educational aspirations, and increases disaffection from, and disengagement with school life. The vast majority of students who are placed in lower streams in first year remain there through to the end of second year. There is little evidence of students moving between streams, and it is this 'cementing' of students position in ability groupings that appears to have the most negative consequences. The findings of the third year of the study should add significantly to our understanding of the impact of streaming.

> In first year … they're streamed and then basically it's the same for second year and third year except guys, maybe two or three, might be moved up or down, depending on their exam results. (Teacher, Park St.)

[1] Streaming involves placing students into ability groups ranked from higher to lower streams; banding is looser and, for example, may involve having two 'higher' and two 'lower' classes.

[2] Setting involves students moving to higher and ordinary level classes in particular subjects, most commonly Irish, English and mathematics. It is more flexible than streaming in that a student may be in the higher mathematics class but be in the lower English class.

[3] Smyth et al., 2004, *"Moving Up, The Experiences of First Year Students in Post-Primary Education",* The Liffey Press

Students in the lower streams are more likely to be male and working class; they are offered fewer subjects, experience more didactic teaching, receive less homework and spend less time doing it. They are more likely to feel that the pace of classwork is too slow, indicating perhaps that teachers have lower expectations of students in lower streams or feel they need to spend more time reinforcing coursework.

Comparing the first and second year findings, it appears that students are being channelled at an early stage in their schooling into specific learning tracks—a practice that may have long term implications for their educational experience and prospects. In addition, the first year study found that in many of schools nationally, students are streamed on the basis of school-devised tests. Standardised tests in reading and mathematics conducted by the researchers found that the range of ability between students placed in 'high' and 'low' streams was sometimes quite narrow.

Class grouping is also predictive of the level at which a student takes subjects, especially in what are often viewed as the 'core' subjects, English, Irish and mathematics. In fact, few students in lower streams have access to *any* higher-level courses in junior cycle subjects.

> They are streamed and it would be mainly [the top class] group that would be taking the higher level subjects. (Teacher, Hay St.)

The findings in relation to class grouping raise an important question: *'If streaming is not serving the students well, why is it continuing?'* While schools do not want their students to fail, they can find it difficult to change established structures and practices. There can be a variety of background factors that militate against change. Adopting a mixed-ability approach to teaching is challenging, requiring significant support and professional development at school level. Schools may come under pressure from parents, the community or within the school itself to maintain the status quo, and may fear (and face) cream-off of more able students to nearby schools.

It is important for the system to encourage and support schools in meeting these challenges—through disseminating good practice, through support for school planning, and by provision of appropriate professional development support for teachers.

3. Subjects and subject choice

The first year study revealed both wide variations in the number of subjects offered to students and differences in the timing of subject choice. The study also found marked differences in students' perspectives of and interest in individual subjects, and that these changed over the course of the year.

The second year study found that the average number of subjects taken by students was 12. In contrast with first year, there is little variation between schools, most likely because, by second year, the subjects that students will take to the Junior Certificate examination have been determined. While there are few differences *between* schools, some differences emerge *within* school. It would appear that *the experience of the curriculum is determined by what class students are in, rather than what the school offers.* Students in lower streams, students from Traveller backgrounds, and those who are receiving learning support tend to take fewer subjects. This may reflect the fact that some of these students are withdrawn from classes for learning support or are allowed to drop some subjects. In addition, students in lower streams report having restricted access to subjects, particularly the practically-orientated subjects.

A large proportion of students (58%) reported that there was a subject they would like to have taken but could not. These were predominantly subjects with a practical orientation, such as Materials Technology (Wood), Metalwork, Home Economics, Computer Studies and Art. The main reasons for this were that the subject was not available in the school (57%), the students weren't allowed to take it by the school (13%), or the subject clashed with other subjects on the timetable (12%). A total of 52% of students reported taking subjects they wished they had not taken in second year—these turned out to be predominantly the 'core' subjects and languages.

Favourite subjects in second year mirrored those most frequently mentioned in first year. Once again the practically orientated subjects dominate. Having taken taster subjects in first year did not appear to have any significant effect on students' positive or negative perceptions of subjects in second year. In addition, students did *not* feel that they were taking too many subjects in second year. It would appear that, contrary to the perception of schools and teachers, students do not feel that the curriculum is overcrowded.

Languages

It is of concern to note that of the top six subjects listed by students as subjects they wished they had not taken, three of them were languages. The most frequently mentioned subjects were French (18%), Business Studies (17%), Irish (15%), Science (14%), German (11%) and History (10%). Students gave a variety of reasons for preferring not to take a subject, such as finding the subject boring, too hard, too much to learn and not being good at the subject.

When asked to report the two subjects they liked least in second year, the most frequently mentioned subject was Irish (mentioned by 32% of those taking the subject) followed by foreign languages. Irish and French were also seen as the most difficult subjects, followed by Science and Maths. Also of interest was the finding that 22% of second year students in lower streams did not take Irish at all.

When students were asked about the pace of instruction in subjects generally, the majority felt that the teacher went at about the right speed. However, over a quarter of students thought that the teacher went too quickly in French (as well as Maths and Science) and over a fifth found this to be the case in German (as well as History and Geography). In particular, students who considered themselves below average ability in their year group felt that the pace of instruction was too fast in the languages (English, French and German) as well as History.

These findings raise important issues relating to syllabus content, teaching methology and assessment in languages at junior cycle. The NCCA is currently reviewing languages, including Irish, in the post-primary curriculum. The review will be informed by the findings of this research. In addition, the NCCA will shortly publish a paper about the nature of the Irish syllabus for native and non-native speakers.

4. Subject levels

The findings in relation to the levels at which students intend to take Junior Certificate subjects represent one of the most interesting outcomes of the ESRI research. Arguably, they also have the greatest implications for the educational future of the

students. Class allocation is found to be predictive of the level at which students expect to take Junior Certificate subjects. Lower stream students are more likely to expect to take foundation or ordinary level in English, Irish and mathematics. The long-term effects of this were borne out in the NCCA's longitudinal study, *From Junior to Leaving Certificate (1999)*[4]. This study reported a lack of upward movement from Ordinary level in the Junior Certificate to Higher level in the Leaving Certificate and the implications of this for the placing of students on entry to junior cycle and the choice of level at which a subject is taken or offered.

The findings also bring into question the influence that Higher and Ordinary level, and, in some cases, Foundation level courses in Junior Certificate subjects may have on student grouping. Are syllabus levels contributing to, or being used as a justification for streaming?

The intended purpose of the different levels in Junior Certificate subjects is to allow all students to experience success. Syllabuses that are structured into Higher, Ordinary and, sometimes, Foundation levels can accommodate a greater diversity of learning styles and capabilities, and open up a wider range of possibilities for differentiated teaching and assessment. Although not the original intention, the structuring of syllabuses into different levels allows easily for grouping by student ability. Differentiated teaching and assessment might be the intended goals but the question arises as to whether streaming emerges as an unintended consequence of such differentiation.

The 'school' effect

The study has found evidence of a *'school effect'* over and above the levels of ability of students in the school. Levels at which students expect to take subjects appear to be influenced by social class mix, by school expectations and policy regarding access to higher level.

[4] NCCA, 1999, *"From Junior to Leaving Certificate: A Longitudinal Study of 1994 Junior Certificate Candidates who took the Leaving Certificate Examination in 1996, Interim Report"*

An example from the research highlights this. All the students in Fig 1 below here were of comparable reading ability when tested at the beginning of first year.

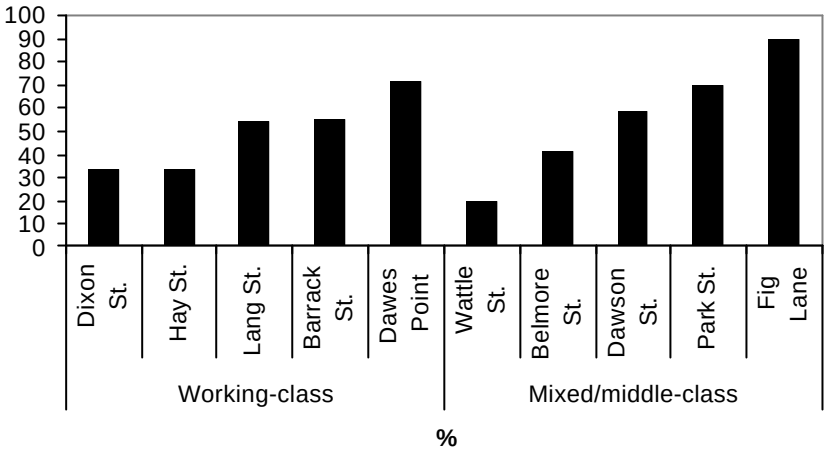

Fig 1 Proportion who expect to take higher level English among second lowest reading group

The expectations of students in Park Street differ markedly from those of students of similar literacy level in Wattle Street—both boys' secondary schools with a mixed social intake. Clear differences also emerge between student expectations in Lang Street and Hay Street—both schools with a working class social mix.

While there is undoubtedly a range of possible contributory factors, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that there is a 'school effect' operating when it comes to the expectations of students among case study schools of similar intake and social class background. It is arguable that policy and practice regarding access to higher level subjects, teacher encouragement and the school's expectations is likely to contribute to underperformance among students and may affect their long term educational and career options.

Students' expectations are also differentiated by social class background, by gender, by ability and by class grouping. Educational aspirations are lower in working class and streamed schools overall, with students in these schools more likely to say that they want to leave early. The majority of students (70%) expect to go on to third-level education, but girls have higher educational aspirations than boys: 59% expecting to reach degree level compared with 39% of boys. However, when it came to career

aspirations, boys are more likely to aspire to higher professional occupations than girls, who also tended to mention many careers traditionally seen as 'female' such as nursing and teaching.

5. Student perspectives on teaching and learning

One of the most interesting research findings relate to the students' views on how they are taught, how they learn, what they learn, what they enjoy learning, what they find easy and what they find hard to learn.

Students have very clear opinions about what makes for effective teaching. The most effective teachers, in their view, are those who explain things well, enjoy teaching their subject, view learning as fun, encourage students to ask questions, praise good work and don't give out.

> Interviewer: And thinking about your teachers this year, what do you think makes a good teacher?
>
> Student: If they explain well, and if you ask them again that they do not mind explaining it again. (Belmore Street, Girls' School, mixed ability class).

Poor teachers are perceived as those who don't explain things in class, whose pace of instruction is too fast, who set too much work, give out to or ignore students, use an uninteresting style, rely heavily on the textbook, and who cannot maintain order in class.

> Student: And I think it's bad as well a teacher like kind of teaching method is really bad, you just read from the book, just doesn't explain anything, keeps going page by page and everyone's just sitting there. (Harris Street, Girls' School, mixed ability class).

Students feel that they learn best in subjects they like, are good at, and in which there are plenty of practical activities. The approaches and methodologies identified by students as conducive to learning include: activity-based learning, discussions, teachers using different teaching styles rather than from the book, and teachers making the subject interesting. Students express a preference for working in groups as the exchange of ideas made the work easier.

> Student: It'd be better if we could have more kind of activities in class because like it can be real boring.
>
> Student: And you'd learn a lot more as well, we did something in French and we did a whole activity on like learning these French verbs or something and everyone knows them now even though we learnt them in class like and everyone learnt them and we didn't even try to, it was just a game really. (Argyle St. School, coed school, higher band).

The recent review of the Primary School Curriculum found that teachers used a limited range of methodologies in the teaching of mathematics, English and visual arts. The review concluded that 'greater direction and guidance should be provided for teachers to enable them *'to extend their repertoire of teaching approaches and methods to include greater use of collaborative learning, including group work and pair work'*.[5]

When students were asked to specify what single factor helps them learn best in class, 25% reported that a teacher explaining things well was the most important factor in their learning. It is noteworthy that very few students mention 'traditional' (more didactic) classroom styles as the most important factor in their learning. The current discussion document supporting the NCCA review of post-primary mathematics notes that while the mathematics curriculum places increased emphasis on a practical hands-on approach to the learning of mathematics, classroom practice continues to be largely 'traditional' involving teacher exposition followed by individual pupil work.[6]

In the coming year, NCCA will be liaising with primary and post-primary support services in providing online support for teachers and schools in the area of teaching and learning. This will take the form of a 'curriculum in action' website, which will house exemplars of methodology and practice in support of teaching, learning and assessment for learning.

6. Assessment and homework

Two thirds of students are positive about assessment. They report that tests and exams make them work and that doing homework makes them learn. Students tend to spend more time on homework if they feel it is a productive type of learning. However,

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5 NCCA, 2005 *" Primary Curriculum Review, Phase 1: Summary of Findings and Recommendations",* p.9

6 NCCA 200,5 *"Review of Mathematics in Post-Primary Education: a discussion paper",* p. 17

many students feel homework is rote in nature and does not enhance learning. Students who rate themselves 'above average' spend most time on homework per night (95 minutes) while students who rate themselves 'below average' spend least (60 minutes). A considerable proportion of students would like extra help with homework within the school.

While teachers regularly mention the Junior Certificate examinations, second year students feel it is too early to consider them. They are viewed as remote by even the more academically able students.

Peer influences also emerge as a strong, but sometimes contradictory, influence on students' 'public' attitude to study and tests. While students generally think it's a good idea to study most say they do not study. Students are often caught between wanting to be seen to do well in class and not wanting to be labelled a 'show-off'. Many students pretended they hadn't studied for tests even though they had. It appears that students are sometimes afraid they will be jeered for studying, and don't want others to know in case they do badly.

Teachers reported that they gave class tests as well as having formal tests in the school throughout the year. Tests were normally given at the end of a chapter or unit of work. While tests were used to monitor students' progress and to provide feedback to students, teachers did not report using the outcomes of assessment to inform their own practice.

The aim of the NCCA's developmental initiative in Assessment for Learning in junior cycle is to support teachers in adopting classroom-based assessment practices that promote teaching and learning. An important emphasis of the initiative is to encourage teachers to involve students more in the learning process, to provide better feedback to students on their work and to adjust their teaching to take account of the results of assessment. The NCCA newsletter, info@ncca, has included a series of articles on assessment for learning in the classroom.

7. Students' perspectives on school and school life

The study found that most students have a positive relationship with their teachers, but 25% reported that they had never been praised for their answers or written work. Students who had lower reading and mathematics scores in first year reported more positive interaction with teachers. The experiences of these students would appear to be due to a positive relationship with learning support teachers in first year. Students who described themselves as 'above average' also reported more positive interaction with teachers than those who described themselves as 'below average' in ability.

Students also reported on negative interaction with teachers and with the school. Students in lower stream classes in streamed schools reported the highest levels of negative interaction with teachers, with the lowest levels reported in mixed ability classes. Negative interaction was greatest in schools with a concentration of working-class students.

Students reported higher levels of misbehaviour in second year. Seventeen per cent said that they had skipped classes and 10% said that they had been suspended at least once during the course of the year. A third reported that had disobeyed school rules, 25% that they had been given lines, 15% detention and 20% extra homework three or more times during the year. Students from working class backgrounds were more likely to report having been suspended than students from other social class groups. Boys, and those who described themselves as 'below average' in ability reported higher levels of misbehaviour than other students. To some extent, this misbehaviour may be seen as both a reaction to, and a cause of, academic underperformance.

The issue of unequal treatment of groups of students was raised by some students in the research. Students in streamed schools perceive that teachers favoured hard-working students and clever students. Boys are more likely to report being given out to by teachers than girls, as are those with lower literacy and numeracy scores and those who rate themselves as below average in ability.

> If a teacher didn't like someone now and they didn't have their homework done they'd get killed and if someone that he liked didn't have their homework done he'd just say do it the next day, that's unfair. (Lang St. school, boys' school, lower stream)
>
> Student: But favourites are always more likely to be girls, that's what I think anyway, very few lads [are] favourites. (Fig Lane, mixed ability class, co-educational school).

What emerges in the research is evidence of a widening gap in student experiences on the basis of gender, ability grouping and social class background—with those on 'the wrong side' of this gap likely to underachieve, become detached and disaffected with school life, and ultimately to want to leave school before they attain their Leaving Certificate, and possibly even before their Junior Certificate.

8. School support structures for second year students

The interviews with key staff in the case study schools focused on the types of support in place for second year students, the perspectives of staff on the adequacy of that support and their views on second year students generally.

Seven schools are described by the researchers as having strong support structures and five as having weaker structures. In some schools the support represented a continuation of a strong integration programme already in place for first year students. The smaller case study schools tended to have weaker formal support structures but this may be because smaller size facilitates more informal contact between staff and students. All the schools operated a Year Head/or and Class Tutor system, with further assistance being provided by other personnel such as the guidance counsellor, chaplain, matron or home-school-community liaison officer. Student councils were in operation in the majority of the schools but only one had a specific focus on second year students.

There was little evidence of integration of support structures in most of the schools, and only one school held a regular pastoral care meeting for support personnel. Within some schools, class tutors had different interpretations of their role—whether administrative, disciplinary, pastoral or a combination of the three. For some, having a dual role (disciplinary and pastoral) was seen as a barrier to approachability. Others

observed that the line between educating students and caring for their pastoral needs was becoming increasingly blurred.

Schools identified a number of needs in relation to support. These included better provision of external psychological support, additional guidance hours and the provision of home-school-community liaison. Class tutors expressed the need for more time to carry out their duties.

Staff viewed second year students as having a distinct identity. They said that students were more likely to misbehave in second year, for a variety of reasons—adolescence, greater self-confidence, increasing desire to challenge the system, having no exam focus. Bullying was also seen by key personnel to increase in second year and to change in nature, with an increase in the amount of jeering and decrease in physical bullying. Key personnel in the schools said that they continued to experience difficulty in dealing with bullying, and, in all but one school bullying was viewed exclusively as a discipline issue. The following quote is indicative of this approach:

> All the students are spoken to and told what's acceptable, given whatever punishment, I suppose every situation is different but we try to deal with that straight away and stop it, stamp it out immediately, there's just a zero tolerance policy as regards bullying. (Park St. School)

Belmore Street School, a girls' school with highly integrated support structures for students, was the only school to talk about responding to the bully in a pastoral as well as a disciplinary sense:

> You are suspended for bullying and the parents are sent for. … And we have our pastoral care committee and it deals with incidents where it definitely is bullying to try and to rehabilitate the person who is becoming the bully, as well as the discipline. (Belmore St. School).

In summary, second year is perceived as being a very challenging year—a fork in the road, where one group of students is becoming more engaged in learning and school life and another group is disengaging and becoming more disruptive. Support structures on their own are seen to be of limited value in isolation from the broader

climate of the school. What appears to matter more to students is the social climate of the school.

While second year is a difficult year for teachers and students, it is also a year in which real insights can be gained into the junior cycle experience, as students are not influenced by transition issues as in first year or examination pressure as in third year. The study shows that a majority of students are positive about school, get on well with their teachers and are engaged in the learning process. But it also identifies a significant minority of students who do *not* have a positive experience of school, who are progressively disengaging from school life and who are likely to drop out of school completely. This is a cause for concern.

9. First and second year experiences compared

One of the strengths of this longitudinal study is the opportunity it provides to trace the different pathways taken by students from their point of entry into post-primary school to their Junior Certificate year, and to explore the way in which student outcomes are shaped by their experience of school structures and processes, their social class backgrounds, their gender and their ability levels. While the study is not yet complete, it is worthwhile commenting on some of the patterns that have emerged in relation to the first and second year research. What follows is a summary of these patterns.

1. Students' attitudes to all aspects of school become significantly less positive over the course of first and second year. Finding schoolwork interesting declines from 80% at the beginning of first year to 50% at the end of second year. The greatest decline is among male students. Attitudes to teachers show a similar decline and the prevalence of students being 'given out to' by teachers increases considerably across the two years.

2. Students in higher stream classes and those who have received praise and positive reinforcement from teachers have a more positive attitude to school. The opposite is true of students in lower streams and those who report they are regularly 'given out to' by teachers. Decline in 'academic self-rating' is the largest change in student attitude between first year and second year. A notable exception is students who have received learning support in first year.

3. Students' attitudes to and interest in the different subjects remains relatively consistent from first to second year, indicating that students' first experiences of subjects may be formative. Students' attitudes at the end of first year generally are highly predictive of attitudes in second year.

4. The social climate of the school greatly influences student attitudes in first and second year. Positive teacher-student interactions and a challenging but supportive learning environment lead to a more positive academic self-image and higher educational expectations.

10. Next steps

Over the coming months NCCA will consider the implications of the research findings and identify priority areas for action. As a first step, the survey findings will be disseminated to all schools and educational organisations through *info@ncca.* As with the first year study, the second year report will be published in book form. A summary of the findings, will be published on the NCCA website. Analysis of data from the third year cohort, which will complete the junior cycle study, is now well underway and the NCCA has secured continued contributing funding from the Gender Equality Unit of the Department of Education and Science to continue the study into the first year of senior cycle.