CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Views on a core curriculum in junior cycle of post-primary education in Ireland
Authors	Hyland, Áine
Publication date	1986;1986
Original Citation	Hyland, Á. (1986) 'Views on a core curriculum in the junior cycle of post-primary education in Ireland', Compass: Journal of the Irish Association for Curriculum Development, 15(1).
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Rights	© 1986, Áine Hyland.
Download date	2026-11-16 14:22:19
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/18063



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Áine Hyland

"Views on a Core Curriculum in the Junior Cycle of post-primary education in Ireland"

published in

***Compass* Vol. 15, No. 1**

(Dublin: Irish Association for Curriculum Development, 1986).

Abstract:

This paper was written when the author was a member of the Curriculum and Examinations Board which had been set up by Minister Gemma Hussey in 1984. She was chair of the board's Joint Committee which reviewed the primary and junior cycle curriculum. The paper includes a brief historical background to the development of junior cycle curriculum in Ireland since 1922. It draws on the experience of other jurisdictions to suggest how Ireland might reform its curriculum for 12- to 15-year-olds.

Views on a Core Curriculum in the Junior Cycle of post-primary education in Ireland.

Áine Hyla
(July 19

A definition of Core Curriculum

Different curriculum theorists define the concept of a "core curriculum" in different ways. Some use it in a broad sense to indicate that all children at a given level are exposed to a similar range of courses or subjects.[1] For others, the word core implies "a selection from within a common curriculum related to certain essentials and based upon a certain degree of agreement".[2] Others define core curriculum in terms of prescribed learning outcomes. For the purposes of this paper, a core curriculum is seen in terms of educational offerings rather than as prescribed learning outcomes. One might then define a core curriculum as "the areas of planned educational experience which every pupil should have during the period of compulsory schooling".[3]

Historical background to the post-primary curriculum in Ireland

The concept of compulsory schooling is a relatively recent one in Western civilisation. In Ireland, the first compulsory school attendance act was passed in 1892 and its powers were effectively limited to urban areas.[4] It was not until 1926 that all children between the ages of 6 and 14 were required by law to attend school (the upper limit being raised to 15 in the early 1970's).[5] Until relatively recently, most young people attended only primary school - secondary education being the prerogative of the affluent who could afford to pay fees and the very small number of very bright children who won scholarships. Consequently, the curriculum of secondary schools was developed in the context of applying to only a minority of the population.

State involvement in secondary education in Ireland dates back to 1878. With the passing of the Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act in

that year, a system of grant aid linked to an examination system was inaugurated. Under this system, results fees were paid to schools on the basis of the results of their pupils at annual examinations. There were originally three examinations - junior, middle and senior grades. In 1892, a fourth examination was added - preparatory grade - but this was dropped in 1913. The examination syllabuses for these examinations, which lasted until 1924, largely determined the curriculum of secondary schools. For examination purposes, the subjects were arranged in seven divisions as follows: Greek, Latin, English, modern languages, mathematics, natural sciences, music and drawing. During the early years of the system, subjects such as English and the classics received the most favourable mark weighting and the highest results fees.[6] This gave a "grammar school" or academic-type bias to the secondary school programme which persisted until 1924 and which influenced the development of secondary education in the Free State until the 1960's.

After 1922, the curriculum of secondary schools in the Irish Free State underwent significant change. Under the Intermediate Education (Amendment) Act of 1924, the three grades of results examination were abolished and they were replaced by two certificate examinations - the Intermediate and the Leaving Certificates. To obtain a pass in the Intermediate Certificate examination, a pupil had to pass five subjects which had to include the following categories: (1) Irish or English, (2) a language other than that taken at (1), (3) Mathematics or (for girls only) arithmetic with any one of science, domestic science or music, (4) history and geography.[7] From 1929 onwards, pupils also had to pass Irish to pass the intermediate certificate. This remained the situation until the early 1970's.

Developments in technical and vocational education in Ireland from the beginning of the century also influenced second-level curriculum.

The Agriculture and Technical Instruction (Ireland) Act of 1899 marked the beginning of state aid to technical education in Ireland. The Vocational Education Act of 1930 distinguished between continuation education and technical education and in the act, continuation education was seen "to continue and supplement education provided in elementary schools and to include general and practical training in preparation for employment in trades etc." In 1947, the Group Certificate Examination was introduced, to be taken by pupils at the end of a two year continuation course.[8] The approved course for the Group Certificate must include Irish, English and Civics and a group of subjects from a list of twenty two subjects.

In 1947, the I.N.T.O published a "Plan for Education" in which the curricula of both primary and second level schools were criticised. They were seen as too narrow and bookish, with an undue emphasis on academic performance. The I.N.T.O felt that

> "education should be a preparation for complete life. It should cater not only for man's economic needs, but also for his individual personal needs - spiritual, mental, physical - and also for his needs as a member of a community and as a citizen of the State. It is concerned primarily with human beings, rather than subjects, and its aim should be development and enrichment of the whole human personality".[9]

They pressed for a review of "the content and technique of all education, primary and post-primary" and held that "there must be a fusion of the present divergent systems into one integrated system.....". In a chapter entitled "The Curriculum up to 16" it was argued that all children should study Music, Drama, Art, Science, Physical Training and some form of manual training as well as the more traditional subjects such as Irish, English, Mathematics, History, Geography, Religion and Civics.

The I.N.TO's views on a broad curriculum for pupils from 4 to

16 were echoed in a report which was drawn up during the same period by a committee within the Department of Education.[10] This report, which was never published, recommended that the school-leaving age should be raised to 16 and that a new type of school to be known as a "Senior School" should be set up. (These schools would be the equivalent of the newly set-up Secondary Modern Schools in England). Pupils would transfer from the National schools (which would be renamed " Junior Schools") to these new Senior Schools at about the age of 12. This committee held the view that pupils in this age group should continue to follow a broadly based curriculum and the following framework was recommended for pupils in the proposed new Senior Schools:

Boys (hours per week)				**Girls** (hours per week)			
Subjects	1st Yr.	2nd.Yr.	3rd Yr	Subjects	1st Yr.	2nd Yr.	3rd Yr.
Irish	5	4	3	Irish	5	4	4
English	5	3	2	English	5	4	3
H. & G.	2	2	2	H.& G.	2	2	2
Maths.	5	4	4	Arith. & Accounts	5	3	2
Drawing	2	2	2	Drawing & Craftwork	2	3	3
Singing	1	-	-	Singing	1	1	1
P.E.	2	2	2	P.E.	2	2	2
Man. Tr.	3	4	6	Dom. Sc.	3	6	8
Gen. or Rur. Sc.	-	4	4				
Rel. In.	2.5	2.5	2.5	Rel. In.	2.5	2.5	2.5
(TOTAL: 27.5 hours per week for boys and girls.)							

In 1950, a Council of Education was set up by the government and in its report on the Curriculum of the Secondary School, completed in 1960, it addressed the question of a desirable core curriculum for second level schools.[11] It failed to come to any decisive conclusion on this issue but in reply to the question: "what in practice constitutes 'general'

education?" it stated as follows:

> "Here again abstract theorising could be very unprofitable; far more helpful is it to observe what has been accepted in the traditional schools of Europe. In the primary and secondary schools of the European continent the essential core of the curriculum up to sixteen years of age is: religious and or moral instruction; command of the native language in speech, writing and literature; a reasonable outline of history and geography; elementary mathematics; drawing; singing; and some initiation into science. To this basic core are added other subjects, languages particularly, according to the objectives of the particular school and the needs of pupils".[12]

No significant changes were made in either the primary or secondary curricula as a result of the reports of the Council of Education and a government-sponsored report in the mid-1960's found many shortcomings in the curriculum at all levels.[13] The curriculum of the majority of second-level schools was found to be very limited. In boys' secondary schools, a considerable amount of time was devoted to Classics, with 95% of boys taking Latin for the Intermediate Certificate. Very few boys studied modern languages. Science and Mathematics, particularly at higher level, were taken by very few girls and in general, it was found that the time spent on aesthetic and practical subjects was limited.

The present situation in Ireland

During the late sixties and early seventies, many changes took place in Irish education. The rigid barriers which had existed between secondary and vocational education were removed in the early 1960's when pupils in vocational schools were allowed to sit the Intermediate and Laeving Certificate examinations. Free post-primary education was introduced in 1967 and by the early 1970's, the numbers of pupils in second-level schools had grown very significantly. Many of the subject syllabi at second- level were revised and in 1971 a radical new primary curriculum

was introduced. This new curriculum echoed many of the recommendations of earlier reports, specifically the INTO Plan for Education and the report of the Council of Education. It was a broadly-based, child-centred curriculum, which recognised that "the young child is not conscious of subject barriers; he views knowledge as a key to life and his questions concerning the world around him range over the whole field of knowledge". It was pointed out that "the curriculum should reflect this attitude of the child". The necessity of curricular continuity between primary and post-primary education was also emphasised: "The child's education should be an organic development and should not involve a significant change of method and matter for him in passing form one stage to the next, from one class to the next or from the primary to the post-primary school."[14] However, no radical reappraisal of the second-level curriculum as a whole was undertaken during the 1970's - although virtually 100% of an age-cohort now transferred automatically to second-level schools, compared to less than two-thirds of a cohort before free education had been introduced. Many people felt that a curriculum which had originally been designed for the more academically oriented was not suitable for all young people and that a review particularly of the junior cycle curriculum should be undertaken.

The lack of formal continuity between the primary and the secondary curriculum to-day is evident when one compares the "core" curriculum for primary schools with the "core" curriculum for secondary schools as set down in the present Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools.[15] The 1971 Teachers Handbook arranges the primary school curriculum under seven aspects:- Religion; Language; Mathematics; Social and Environmental Studies; Art and Craft Activities; Music; Physical Education. The Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools define an approved course for pupils following the Intermediate Certificate programme as follows: Irish, English, Mathematics, History and Geography, Civics and not less than two other subjects from a list of sixteen subjects.

In addition, it is stated that the curriculum should include provision for Physical Education and Singing. If one were to ask then what constitutes a "core" curriculum for pupils in the junior cycle of second level schools in Ireland to-day, one would find that there are only three subjects which are compulsory for all pupils (both those following Group Certificate and those following Intermediate Certificate courses) in terms of the regulations of the Dept. of Education. These are Irish, English and Civics. In practice however, virtually all pupils take Mathematics, 96% take History and Geography or an integrated Humanities course, 85% take a Science course, 85% take Physical Education, and almost 75% take French. In addition, 58% of pupils take Commerce, and 45% take Art.[16] A smaller proportion take subjects such as Mechanical Drawing, Woodwork, Music etc.

Most schools offer a reasonably wide range of subjects at junior cycle. All schools offer English, Irish, Maths, History/Geography or Humanities or Environmental Studies, virtually all schools offer a course or courses in Science, 96% offer French, 90% offer Commerce, 77% offer Art, 72% offer Home Economics, 45% offer Music.[17]

There would appear to be a strong case for revising the required official "core" curriculum for pupils in junior cycle to reflect the reality both in terms of the range of subjects being offered by the majority of second-level schools and the choice of subjects being taken by pupils in these schools.

Philosophical justification for a broadly-based curriculum

Philosophers throughout the ages have supported the theory that there are different forms of knowledge - these included early Greek and Roman philosophers and later philosophers and educators such as John Henry Newman, Maritain, Phenix, Lonergan and Hirst. Paul Hirst refers to seven Forms of Knowledge; Maritain has four degrees of knowledge; Phenix has

six realms of meaning; Lonergan writes of ten differentiations of consciousness. It has been pointed out that "there is a remarkable convergence in the principle that human knowledge is not a uniform thing, that there exist varieties of human knowing and that the full development of a human being requires that all of his knowing capacities be exercised".[18] One could argue that if the primary aim of education is the development of the whole person, then education should contribute to the development of all aspects of the person - affective, emotional and moral and physical as well as cognitive and intellectual.

Those who approach curriculum planning from the point of view of cultural analysis come to a similar conclusion. Denis Lawton suggests that there are good anthropological and sociological reasons for sub-dividing the cultural system into the following eight structures or sub-systems:[19]

1. social structure / social system
2. economic system
3. communication system
4. rationality system
5. technology system
6. morality system
7. belief system
8. aesthetic system.

He argues that a satisfactory educational programme must pass on the essentials of the eight systems, unless there are other agencies within society better equipped for that aspect of cultural transmission.

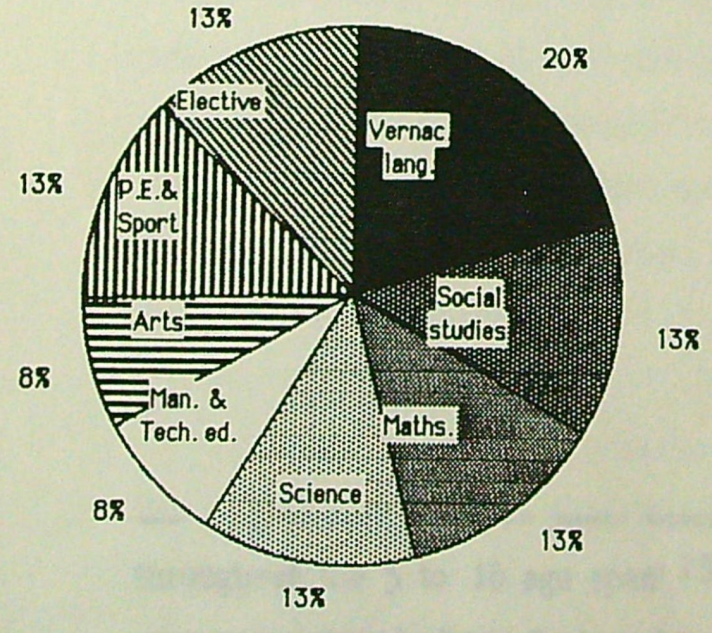
The situation in other countries

Most Western societies require that a broad core curriculum be followed by pupils at junior cycle level. The following table lists the main subject areas in the core curriculum in a number of countries:[20]

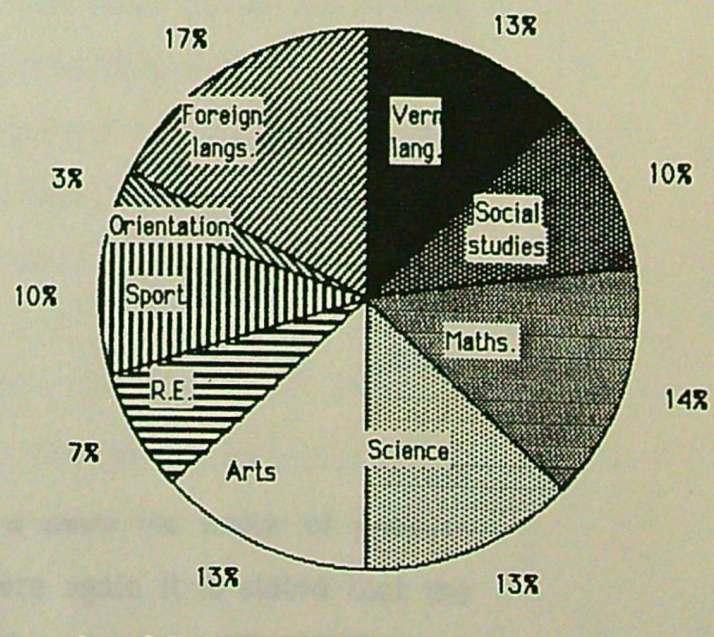
countries	first language	foreign language	mathematics	nat. sciences	social studies	health education	physical education	expressive arts	religious education	technology	practical studies	career	play	interdisciplinary work
AUSTRALIA	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x
BELGIUM	x	x	x	x	x		x	x						
CANADA														
British Col.	x		x	x	x	x	x	x				x		
Ontario	x		x	x	x		x	x		x	x			
DENMARK	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x			x
FRANCE	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x				
FRG	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x				x
ICELAND	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x			
ITALY	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x		x	
JAPAN	x	x	x	x	x		x	x						
THE NETHERLANDS	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
SWEDEN	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x			
UNITED KINGDOM														
England and Wales	x		x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x			x
Scotland	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x				x
USA	x		x	x	x	x	x	x			x			

The above table suggests that the core curriculum in most of these countries contains the following subjects: the mother tongue, mathematics/ arithmetic, physical education, expressive arts, human and social sciences and natural sciences. Some, but not all of these countries include a foreign language, technology and/or practical studies in the core. The proportion of time spent on the different areas varies in different countries. The following diagrams indicate the proportion of time spent on different areas of the curriculum in the first year of junior cycle (or the equivalent) in four countries - France, Germany, Japan and Norway.[21]

FRANCE

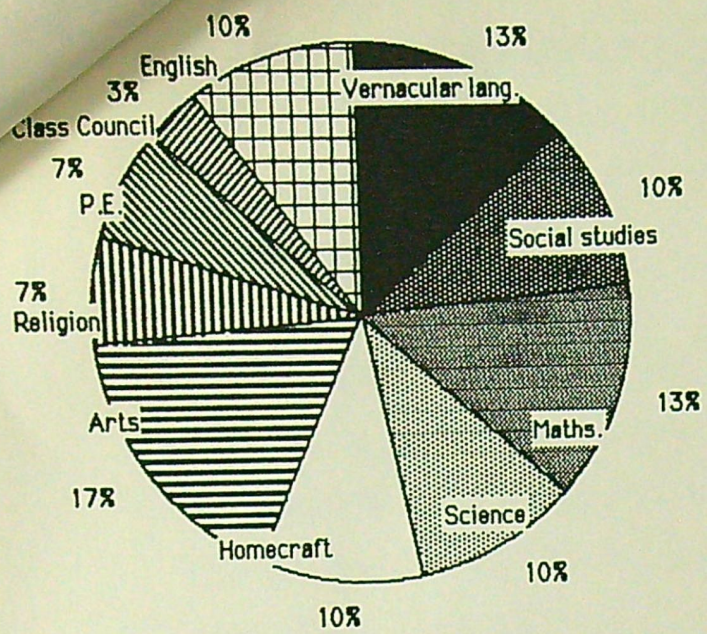


GERMANY

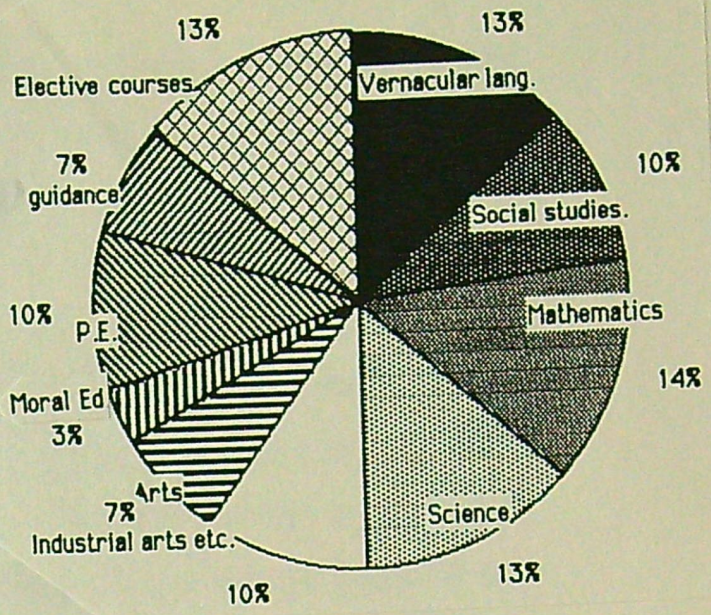


curriculum should aim to be broad and balanced and it is sugggested that

NORWAY



JAPAN



In recent years, curriculum reform has been a live issue in Gt. Britain and Northern Ireland. A number of documents have been published by curriculum bodies in these countries and the influence of a cultural analysis approach can be seen in many of these. In its recent publication entitled "Planning the curriculum 11 - 16",[22] the Northern Ireland Council for Educational Development supports the concept of a common curriculum which should (a) introduce young people to a width of experience and to a range and depth of knowledge (b) make them aware of the kind of society in which they live and are going to live and (c) assist the formation of those positive attitudes which pupils will need to contribute to society as it now is and as it may develop. NICED argues that there should be balance, breadth, progression and relevance in the curriculum from 11 to 16. It suggests that a convenient way of approaching a common curriculum is through the consideration of eight areas of experience - aesthetic, ethical, human and environmental, linguistic, mathematical, physical, scientific and technological, and spiritual.

In England, in a publication entitled "The Curriculum from 5 to 16", the inspectorate stresses that "there is a need for unity of purpose throughout the 5 to 16 age span".[23] Here again it is stated that the curriculum should aim to be broad and balanced and it is sugggested that

the curriculum of all schools should involve pupils in each of the following eight areas of learning and experience: aesthetic and creative; human and social; linguistic and literary; mathematical; moral; physical; scientific; spiritual; technological.

Similarly, in Scotland, the recently introduced common curriculum for pupils in junior cycle, requires pupils to experience the following seven curricular "modes": Linguistic and Literary Studies; Creative and Aesthetic Studies; Mathematical Studies; Physical Activity and Leisure; Religious and Moral Studies; Scientific Studies; Social Studies.

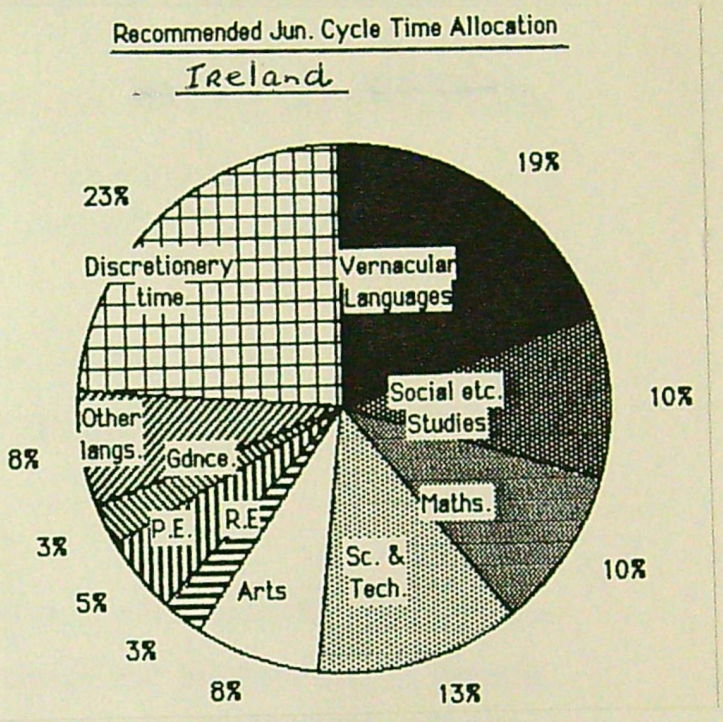
Reports of the Curriculum and Examinations Board in Ireland

With the setting up of the interim Curriculum and Examinations Board in Ireland in January 1984, the Minister for Education, Ms. Gemma Hussey indicated that the time was ripe for a fundamental review of the curriculum at second level. The terms of reference of the Board laid particular stress on the need for a review of the junior cycle curriculum and much of the work of the Board during the past two years has focussed on this area.[24] In a consultative document "Issues and Structures in Education" a possible junior cycle framework was suggested.[25] This framework, while deriving from an analysis of the Irish situation and based on Irish needs, bore many similarities to the Scottish model. Recognising the need for a broad junior cycle curriculum, it presented the curriculum under eight categories - Communication, language and literature; Creative and Aesthetic Studies; Guidance and Counselling; Mathematical Studies; Physical Education; Religious Education; Science and the New Technologies; Social and Political Studies - distinguishing within each category between subjects or courses which would constitute a core curriculum and those which might be offered as additional contributions.

Many of those who responded to the document felt that the model

was too rigid. It was argued that any attempt to categorise subjects in this way failed to recognise the inherent breadth of so many subjects and the extent to which these subjects could contribute to many areas of experience. Respondents generally favoured a broad curriculum at junior cycle but felt that the framework should recognise the reality of the situation in Ireland. In the Board's more recent document, "In Our Schools",[26] the notion of a common core curriculum is approached "from two essential and complementary perspectives". The Board recommends that the junior cycle curriculum of all schools should involve pupils in each of the following areas of experience: Arts education; Guidance and Counselling ;Language and Literature (a) Irish and English and (b) other languages; Mathematical Studies; Physical Education; Religious Education; Science and Technology; Social, Political and Environmental Studies - while at the same time including the following four key elements of learning - knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes. The document recognises that many of the traditional subjects can and do contribute to more than one area of experience and that schools which may not have the resources to offer a large number of subjects or courses may nevertheless provide a wide range of experiences for their pupils by fully exploiting the potential of the subjects which they are in a position to offer. Minimum and maximum time allocations for the different areas of experience are suggested. The suggested time framework leaves considerable discretion to schools in the implementation of a broad curriculum - almost 25% of the time is discretionery and may be used by different schools and by different pupils in different ways. Some pupils may opt to spend much of this time on creative and aesthetic studies; others may spend it on science and technology; others may spend it on language, either the vernacular languages (Irish and English) or European languages or classics. There are a considerable number of options available both to schools and potentially to pupils within the suggesetd time framework.

It may be of interest to compare the suggested minimum and maximum time allocations for the various areas of experience with the situation in junior cycle in other countries as presented above. A comparable diagrammatical presentation of the suggested Irish framework would be as follows and one can see from this that there are many similarities between what is now suggested for Ireland and what has become established practice for other Western countries:



The implementation of the framework

It is one thing to set out on paper what might be regarded as a desirable curriculum. The implementation of such a curriculum is an entirely different issue. Curriculum change will only come about if society (which includes parents, teachers, school management, employers) is convinced of the need for change. Even when this is the case, it can take a long time for the education system to respond to this need. In the mid-sixties an American researcher, Paul Mort, analysed more than 150 studies of educational innovation, published between 1930 and 1957.[28] He found that on the average it took fifty years for a new idea or a new trend or a new discovery, after its acceptance in society, to be translated into a proposal for specific change in education. It took fifteen more years for the innovation to gain acceptance in three per cent of the nation's schools, and another five years to become fashionable, making a total time-lag of

seventy years.

In the earlier section of this paper, it has been shown that the need for reform of the curriculum for pupils aged 12 to 16 was recognised in Ireland over forty years ago. It is heartening to find that in recent years schools have begun to respond to the need for change. A recent survey has indicated that

- Principals have overwhelmingly expressed a desire and willingness to see change in the provision of curriculum in their schools
- The development of the curriculum in some form or other is taking place in a majority of schools in the country
- Principals favour change towards a broader and more comprehensive curriculum yet one which is more diverse and varied to allow for local needs and ranges of ability.[28]

There is no doubt that the time is ripe for curriculum change. The need is there, the ideas are there, schools and teachers are, in general, willing to implement change. The necessary support both in terms of structures and resources must now be made available to enable the willingness to become a reality.

References

1. Kelly, A.V., The Curriculum, Theory and Practice (London: Harper, 1982).

2. Goodlad, J.I., A Place Called School, Prospects for the Future (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983).

3. Crooks, T. and McKernan, J., The Challenge of Change (Dublin: I.P.A., 1984). See also Curriculum and Examinations Board, Issues and Structures in Education, (Dublin, 1984).

4. Dept. of Education, Report of the Council of Education on (a) the Function of the Primary School and (b) the Curriculum to be pursued in the primary school (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1954), p. 56.

5. Ibid., p.72.

6. Coolahan, J., Irish Education - history and structure (Dublin: I.P.A., 1980), p. 63.

7. Ibid., p.77.

8. Ibid. p. 110.

9. Irish National Teachers' Organisation, A Plan for Education, (Dublin, 1947).

10. Report of the Department of Education Committee set up in March 1945 "to examine the existing educational system, primary, secondary, technical, vocational and the provision available for university education and to make recommendations as to what changes and reforms, if any, are necessary in order to raise the standard of education generally and to provide greater educational facilities for our people". (Unpublished , 1947).

11. Dept. of Education, Report of the Council of Education on the Curriculum of the Secondary School (Dublin, Stationery Office, 1962).

12. Ibid.

13. Investment in Education, Report of the Survey Team (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1965).

14. Primary School Curriculum, Teacher's Handbook, part 1. (Dublin, Dept. of Education, 1971).

15. Dept. of Education, Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools 1985/6 (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1985).

16. Dept. of Education, Statistical report, 1982-3 (Dublin, Stationery Office).

17. Ibid.

18. J.V Rice, On Re-Inventing the Wheel, in Studies in Education, Vol.3, No.1, Spring 1985.

19. Lawton, D., Curriculum Studies and Educational Planning (London; Hodder and Stoughton, 1983).

20. Eddy O.I. Jozefzoon and Ruud J. Gorter, Core Curriculum - a comparative analysis (Netherlands; National Institute for Curriculum Development, 1985).

21. It will be appreciated that an exercise such as this can only provide a broad comparative guideline. Statistics from different countries are usually presented in different formats and a precise comparison is not always feasible. For further elaboration of the curriculum situation in these coutries see Murphy, D., Comparative Trends in Post-primary Curriculum Reform, in Studies in Education, Vol.1, No.1.

22. Northern Ireland Council for Educational Development, Planning the Curriculum 11- 16, Curriculum Papers, Part 1 (Belfast, 1986).

23. Her Majesty's Inspectorate, The Curriculum from 5 to 16, Curriculum Matters 2, (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1985).

24. Curriculum and Examinations Board, Newsletter No. 1, (Dublin: May 1984).

25. C. & E. Board, Issues and Structures in Education, a consultative document (Dublin: Sep. 1984).

26. C. & E. Board, In Our Schools, a framework for curriculum and assessment (Dublin: March 1986).

27. Reference in a paper read by Goble, Norman M., entitled Innovation - What and Why? at the European Seminar of the World Confederation of Organisations of the Teaching Profession on The Role of Teachers and Their Organisations in Educational Innovation, Athens, May 1984.

28. Crooks and McKernan, op. cit., pp. 130-131.