

Real Curriculum:

at the start of Key Stage 3

Report Two from the
Northern Ireland Curriculum
Cohort Study

John Harland, Mary Ashworth,
Ray Bower, Sylvia Hogarth,
Alison Montgomery and Helen Moor

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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THE *REAL CURRICULUM* SERIES

This booklet is the second in a series of reports to be published under the thematic title, *Real Curriculum*. By focusing on pupils' perspectives of what learning in the classroom is like, the reports attempt to look beyond the intended and official versions of the curriculum to the reality of learners' experiences of the whole curriculum. In so doing, it is hoped that the reports will offer analyses that will help teachers, school managers and educational policy makers continue to develop curricular experiences that really meet the needs of children and young people in the 21st century.

The evidence presented in the *Real Curriculum* series is drawn from an extensive longitudinal research project called the Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study. After a pilot phase in which quantitative and qualitative methods were developed (1994–5), the Cohort Study has followed groups of pupils from their final year of primary school in 1995–6 to their final year of Key Stage 3 in 1998–9. Although the evidence reported in the series has been collected exclusively from Northern Ireland schools, it is hoped that the study's methodology and the issues that it raises will be of interest to teachers, policy makers and researchers from other countries and contexts. While there have been other longitudinal studies of pupils' attitudes to schooling, we believe this is the first, in terms of both scale and scope, to focus directly on pupils' perspectives of the central curriculum design concepts such as coherence, relevance, breadth and balance. It is the issues surrounding these and similar topics that are clearly pertinent to all curriculum frameworks.

The first report (*Real Curriculum: at the end of Key Stage 2*) examined the evidence on pupils' experiences of the curriculum in the final years of primary schooling. This second report analyses quantitative findings on pupils' responses to the curriculum they experienced during the first year of the secondary phase – Year 8 in Northern Ireland. Subsequent publications will consist of reports that focus on such themes as breadth and balance, coherence, relevance and pupils' enjoyment of the curriculum. These later reports will cover the whole of Key Stage 3 and will draw on evidence from all available sources, including annual surveys of a large sample of schools and pupils, as well as in-depth interviews and classroom observations in five case-study schools.

If you would like to receive news about forthcoming publications in the *Real Curriculum* series, please contact the NFER at the address provided in the Project Information Sheet reproduced at the end of this report. We would welcome any comments you may have on the reports.

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We would like to express our gratitude to the pupils and staff in the 51 post-primary schools that participated in the survey phase of the research, especially for sustaining their patience and cooperation over the three years of Key Stage 3.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND QUESTIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This report outlines some findings to emerge from the Year 8 Survey of the Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study. The results have been drawn from questionnaires to a representative ten per cent sample of Year 8 pupils in 20 per cent of Northern Ireland's post-primary schools. Researchers administered the questionnaires at the end of the 1996–7 academic year. This summary offers an overview of the results and raises some initial questions for curriculum policy makers, advisers, schools and teachers.

An analysis of the time allocated to different subjects revealed that the amount of time Year 8 pupils spent on different areas of the curriculum varied substantially from school to school. These variations support the view that, at the level of individual pupil's learning, the Northern Ireland Curriculum as a single common entitlement has little basis in reality. Furthermore, many of the schools' Year 8 curricula appeared **unbalanced**: the average post-primary school allocated almost half its total time to English, mathematics, modern languages and science; conversely, art and music each received less than five per cent of the total time. Grammar schools' Year 8 curricula seemed particularly unbalanced.

With regard to **breadth**, Year 8 pupils felt that they spent slightly too much time on RE, English, mathematics and modern languages and too little time on the arts, Health Education, technology, PE and IT, especially the latter two. Grammar school pupils were marginally more likely to express this viewpoint. PE, languages, IT and Personal and Social Education (PSE) topics were high on pupils' nominations of inadequately covered curriculum areas.

- 1. Is the variation in curricula a problem? Does it represent a desirable degree of flexibility and diversity or does it signal a failure to offer pupils a common curricular entitlement?*
- 2. What changes are needed to allow pupils to benefit from a broader and more balanced curriculum and how can government, their advisers and schools foster these changes?*

The majority of pupils conceived of the curriculum in subject categories. Only a tiny proportion appeared to show any awareness of cross-curricular knowledge and skills as a means of appreciating **coherence across the curriculum**. Although pupils generally valued the links they perceived between different subjects (often involving science and geography), the results offered few signs that pupils were being helped to build a coherent map of their learning across the whole curriculum.

3. *Is it an appropriate time to set up a working group or project to consider curriculum frameworks that could offer pupils greater coherence in their learning across the whole curriculum, e.g. perhaps based on cross-curricular skills or Multiple Intelligences Theory (Gardner, 1993)?*
4. *Should such a framework include a regular timetabled opportunity for teachers to help pupils to develop a meta-language and awareness of their learning across the curriculum?*

Pupils observed the highest degree of **continuity and progression** in history, languages, English, mathematics and geography; and the least in practical subjects such as PE, art, music, IT and home economics. Pupils from secondary schools saw less continuity in their lessons during Year 8 than their peers in grammar schools.

5. *What steps can curriculum developers and teachers take in order to strengthen pupils' sense of meaningful progression in their learning?*

In both secondary and grammar schools, English and mathematics were considered the subjects with the greatest **relevance** to their current needs. Subjects concerned with meeting the current needs of physical fitness, well-being and health were also ranked very highly: PE, Health Education and home economics. IT was the other area of curriculum pupils judged to be highly relevant to their current needs – in excess of the amount of teaching time it is currently afforded. A similar picture emerged for relevance to adult life and employment, though the significance of PE and home economics dropped for the latter. Most pupils saw limited relevance in the creative arts and modern languages. Secondary school pupils placed much more value on practical and expressive subjects and generally appeared more inclined to appreciate the vocational relevance of the whole of the curriculum. In contrast, grammar school Year 8 pupils seemed to have adopted the view that practical activities and/or applied vocationalism (e.g. though not IT) have less employment and career currency than the traditional academic subjects. Well over three-quarters of the total sample believed that the majority of subjects were equally appropriate for girls and boys, though technology and PE veered towards the mainly for boys end of the spectrum, while home economics and music were biased in the girls' direction. The tendency to believe some subjects were more relevant to one gender than another emerged more distinctly in grammar schools than in secondary schools.

6. *Given the tendency for many pupils to adopt rather partial and/or instrumentalist views of relevance, along with its implications for motivation, what can be done to nurture a more informed, comprehensive and balanced perspective on the importance of learning in all areas of the curriculum?*

Subjects with higher levels of activity or practical application were generally associated with higher levels of **pupil enjoyment** than subjects considered to be more 'academic'. Overall, PE, IT, art, science and technology were the most liked

subjects; geography, mathematics, modern languages and RE were the least liked subjects. A particularly conspicuous result was that pupils in secondary schools expressed more enjoyment for more subjects than did pupils from grammar schools.

7. *How can we ensure (i) that the drive towards higher attainment is not achieved at the expense of pupils' enjoyment of learning and (ii) that, in the course of each school day, pupils experience a range and balance of learning activities capable of sustaining their engagement in the curriculum?*

With reference to **manageability**, pupils generally felt that the majority of subjects offered either just about the right level of difficulty or tended to be fairly easy. Modern languages alone were perceived to be moderately difficult, while PE was felt to be the easiest subject, followed by IT, Health Education and then drama; art and music were ranked next. Additionally, pupils felt that the amount of work expected of them was about right, though many felt slightly overworked in mathematics and modern languages. They felt correspondingly underworked in art, music, technology and Health Education, and especially in PE and IT. Mathematics was seen to have the most unacceptable amount of homework, followed by modern languages and English.

8. *What systems exist to share the best practice in the mediation of the curriculum?*
9. *Are many pupils insufficiently challenged and stretched in some areas of the curriculum?*

When considering the effectiveness of different forms of **assessment**, the majority of pupils in the sample considered examinations and reports to be very or fairly helpful in providing them with information on their progress. Teachers' written or oral comments on pupils' work and performance were generally considered to be less helpful methods of assessment than the examinations, reports, tests and marks/grades on their work.

10. *What can be done to avoid pupils becoming too focused on examinations and tests as the most appropriate forms of assessment?*

The report summarised pupils' responses relating to IT and Health Education. It was suggested that the Northern Ireland Curriculum, and its mediation, did not appear to capitalise on pupils' enjoyment of these two **cross-curricular themes** and the importance pupils attached to them. The school questionnaire established that Education for Mutual Understanding, Economic Awareness and Cultural Heritage were predominantly taught through subjects and that a comparatively high number of schools did not indicate any method of providing Careers Education. Geography, English and science were the leading carrier subjects for CCTs as a whole. Modern languages, technology and the expressive arts were notably absent as leading carriers of CCTs.

11. What action can be taken to encourage schools to give a higher profile to the aims and areas of the curriculum currently covered by the CCTs?

With regard to **values in education**, the subjects that rated most favourably in contributing to personal development were Health Education, PE, English, home economics and RE. Technology, Irish, music, history, geography and French were identified by pupils as not contributing strongly to personal development. Surprisingly, mathematics and science attracted higher scores for personal development than the expressive arts. Secondary school pupils were more likely to feel that their subjects contributed to personal development than pupils attending grammar schools did.

Half of the sample indicated that they had learnt something that had changed their views. The most prevalent response categories were ‘changes in attitudes towards specific subjects’ and ‘changes in personal behaviour or previous values/morals’. Further analyses suggested that the subjects that were more likely to be associated with changes in personal behaviour and values (the latter category) were (in rank order) RE, English, science and home economics. Pupils expressed quite strong opinions in response to the list of value statements and demonstrated a keen sense of what they perceived to be right and wrong in terms of pupil–teacher relationships, an awareness of community and moral dilemmas. School type and gender, and pupil gender proved to be particularly important variables in exploring variations among pupil responses. For example, the importance of being aware of what is happening in the community was rated much more highly by girls and, in particular, by girls attending a single-sex school; and pupils attending grammar schools rated opportunities to discuss beliefs much more highly than pupils attending secondary schools.

12. Should the area of personal and social development be afforded greater status by including it within any revised curriculum framework?

Further details and interpretations of the results are presented in the main sections of the report.

1. THE YEAR 8 SURVEY IN CONTEXT

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This interim report from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) summarises the early findings to emerge from a survey of Year 8 pupils conducted as part of the Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study. The overall aim of this longitudinal research project is *'to provide evidence, which is generalisable to the whole Key Stage 3 population in Northern Ireland, of the impact of the curriculum as a total package from the perspective of the learner in terms of: breadth, balance and coherence, relevance and appropriateness, enjoyment and manageability'*. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study tracks the experiences of pupils from Year 7 in their final year of primary school to Year 10 when they complete Key Stage 3 in post-primary schools. The main phase of the research was preceded by a pilot study in five post-primary schools (see Harland *et al.*, 1996). Another earlier report outlined the main findings of the case study research on Year 7 pupils in ten primary schools (Harland *et al.*, 1999). This current report complements the previous two by concentrating on the quantitative data collected through a survey of Year 8 pupils in 51 post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. Further details about the study as a whole are presented in Appendix 1.

The following introduction explains the rationale for the selection of schools and pupils involved in the survey. It also describes the design and administration of the questionnaires used in the survey, as well as the procedures for coding and analysis.

Administered at the end of the 1996–7 academic year, the survey consisted of two questionnaires: a Year 8 pupil questionnaire and a questionnaire to a member of the school management with an overview of the Year 8 curriculum. This process will be repeated at the end of Years 9 and 10 as the pupils progress through Key Stage 3.

1.2 SELECTING THE SCHOOLS

In order to produce survey samples which would be both statistically robust, and representative of the Northern Ireland Year 8 school population as a whole, the group of pupils was drawn from a stratified random sample of schools designed to provide a proportionate representation of all types of post-primary school in Northern Ireland (e.g. grammar/secondary, controlled/ maintained, integrated, coeducational/single-sex, size, Education and Library Board (ELB) location). To allow disaggregation by the wide diversity of schools found in the province, it was decided that the school sample should consist of 20 per cent of the 236 post-primary schools together with the five case study schools, giving a total sample of 51 schools. The sample of schools was drawn in February 1997. The sampling frame was based on information about the number and identities of schools obtained from DENI, 1996. Care was taken to ensure that the sample included a broadly proportionate distribution of schools according to size, GCSE performance and type of school within individual ELBs.

The following table gives the numbers in the sample for each type of school, together with the numbers of each type of school across Northern Ireland as a whole.

Table 1.1 Characteristics of the schools in the sample and in the NI school population as a whole

Characteristics	Sample		NI	
	%	(N)	%	(N)
Status				
Controlled	41	(21)	41	(96)
Voluntary	22	(11)	22	(53)
Maintained	33	(17)	33	(78)
Integrated	4	(2)	4	(9)
<i>Totals</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(51)</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(236)</i>
Type				
Secondary	71	(36)	70	(165)
Grammar	29	(15)	30	(71)
<i>Totals</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(51)</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(236)</i>
ELB location				
Belfast	16	(8)	16	(38)
Western	21	(11)	22	(51)
North Eastern	22	(11)	22	(53)
South Eastern	18	(9)	17	(40)
Southern	23	(12)	23	(54)
<i>Totals</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(51)</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(236)</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study and DENI (1996).

As the table clearly demonstrates, the school sample closely matched the distribution of key characteristics displayed by the population of NI post-primary schools.

1.3 SELECTING THE PUPILS

In accordance with the research proposal, the questionnaire was administered to a ten per cent target sample of all Northern Ireland pupils in the Year 8 cohort. Allowing for some attrition and non-attendance on administration days, the size of this target sample was deemed large enough to ensure that the results would be generalisable to the full cohort. Given that DENI statistics predicted that the 1996–7 Year 8 cohort would comprise 26,227 pupils, the target sample was set at 2,623.

To achieve this target, approximately one in two pupils in the Year 8 cohort in each school was included in the pupil questionnaire sample. NFER researchers drew the school sub-samples from lists provided by the schools through a process of random selection. These methods produced an achieved sample of 2,694 pupils.

The number of pupils in each ELB ranged between approximately 500 and 600. Children in secondary schools (1,749) outnumbered those in grammar schools (945) and there were slightly more children in Catholic schools (1,331) than in Protestant schools (1,214). The distributions of pupils and schools according to the gender and size of individual schools are presented in the following tables.

Table 1.2 **Distribution of schools and pupils according to the gender of individual schools**

Gender of schools	Schools		Pupils	
	%	(N)	%	(N)
Single-sex (boys)	16	(8)	15	(418)
Single-sex (girls)	17	(9)	24	(637)
Mixed	67	(34)	61	(1639)
<i>Totals</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(51)</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(2694)</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

Table 1.3 **Distribution of schools and pupils according to the size of individual schools**

Size of schools	Schools		Pupils	
	%	(N)	%	(N)
Small (below 500)	37	(19)	22	(580)
Medium (501-800)	39	(20)	41	(1115)
Large (above 800)	24	(12)	37	(999)
<i>Totals</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(51)</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(2694)</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

As can be seen from Table 1.2, two-thirds of the schools in the sample were mixed schools, with the remainder divided almost equally between single-sex schools for each gender. Three-fifths of the pupils in the sample attended mixed schools and fewer boys than girls attended the single-sex schools. Table 1.3 shows that two-fifths of the sample attended schools of medium size and over a third attended large institutions; less than a quarter attended small schools.

On the basis of their fathers' occupations, 1,062 children were categorised as working-class and 866 children were categorised as middle-class. It was not possible to determine the social class of over a quarter (28 per cent) of the pupils. In order to establish the distribution of pupils in the sample by social class, the relevant biographical data from the pupil questionnaires were cross-tabulated with the other key variables (see Tables 1.4 – 1.6).

Table 1.4 Distribution of pupils in the sample by social class and type of school

School type	Social Class			
	Working		Middle	
	%	(N)	%	(N)
Grammar	38	(293)	66	(769)
Secondary	62	(478)	34	(388)
<i>Totals</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(771)</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(1157)</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

Table 1.5 Distribution of pupils by social class and proportion of pupils in the school eligible for free school meals (fsm)

Proportion of pupils eligible for fsm	Social Class			
	Working		Middle	
	%	(N)	%	(N)
low	34	(320)	63	(469)
medium	33	(302)	25	(191)
high	33	(304)	12	(91)
<i>Totals</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(926)</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(751)</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

Table 1.6 Distribution of pupils by social class and religious orientation of schools

Religious orientation of schools	Social Class			
	Working		Middle	
	%	(N)	%	(N)
Catholic	55	(585)	45	(385)
Protestant	39	(415)	49	(428)
Integrated	6	(62)	6	(53)
<i>Totals</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(1062)</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>(866)</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

From the preceding tables, it can be seen that under two-fifths of the pupils in grammar schools were from working-class backgrounds, while two in every three pupils in secondary schools were working-class pupils. Only 12 per cent of middle-class pupils attended schools with a high degree of eligibility for free school meals, compared with a third of the working-class pupils in the sample.

1.4 QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN AND ADMINISTRATION

It was agreed that the pupil questionnaire should be an appropriately amended and extended version of that used in the pilot phase (see Harland *et al.*, 1996). A copy of the Year 8 questionnaire is reproduced as Appendix 2. The backbone of the instrument consisted of a semantic differential grid, which invited ratings on the key curriculum design concepts (e.g. coherence, appropriateness, continuity, enjoyment, etc.) for all the main areas of the Northern Ireland curriculum, including, wherever possible, the cross-curricular themes. Other items in the questionnaire included: biographical information; the constructs pupils use to describe their learning (e.g. 'subject' or more general vocabularies of experience); pupil perceptions of topics they consider to be insufficiently covered in the curriculum; pupil perceptions of the links in learning associated with different subject areas; pupils' views on the value of different assessment methods; and items on the values and the moral dimension in education.

In each school, a member of the research team carried out the administration. This had the advantage of controlling for variations in administration procedures, reducing teacher influence on the respondents, minimising the demands on schools, and permitting oral explanations to accompany written instructions. In some cases, two researchers visited the school – where the groups of pupils were very large, for example, and the school preferred two simultaneous, rather than two consecutive, administrations, or where pupils with special needs were deemed by the school to need extra help in reading the questions.

During the week of the administration, researchers left a questionnaire for completion by a member of the school's senior management. This requested information on the organisation of the curriculum and timetable for Year 8, such as how the various subject areas were mediated, how much time was allocated to each subject, and how the cross-curricular themes were taught. It also sought to collect key background details on the school, its policies and its environment. This information would set the essential context in which to locate the analysis of the responses to the pupil questionnaire.

In order to prepare the collected evidence for analysis, coding frames were developed and the questionnaire responses were coded prior to data entry. As a result of the initial analyses of the data from the two questionnaires, this report sets out some of the preliminary findings relating to the study's main themes. It should be stressed that the report in its entirety is an interim working paper, the purpose of which is limited to that of offering some provisional evidence for consideration and discussion. It should be stressed that all the areas covered in the report will be subjected to further scrutiny in subsequent reports.

2. BREADTH AND BALANCE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Offering children a curriculum that is both broad and balanced was clearly a fundamental aim of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. This chapter opens with an exploration of how far it has achieved this goal with respect to the curriculum for Year 8 pupils. Given that the amount of exposure to different areas of the curriculum is likely to be a major determinant of the degree of breadth and balance experienced by pupils, it was felt that an examination of the time allocated to each subject was a necessary precursor to any analysis of pupils' perceptions of breadth and balance. Although the analysis was subject to several methodological limitations, the quantity of Year 8 teaching time each school gave to different subjects was calculated and a comparative analysis conducted. The initial results of this analysis are summarised below.

2.2 THE ALLOCATION OF TEACHING TIME

Of the 51 schools in the sample, 48 supplied copies of their teaching timetables for Year 8 – where these varied between forms, multiple versions were provided. Using these timetables, calculations were made for each school of the length of the teaching week and the average time allocated for each subject. A maximum of 25 subjects were included in the analysis, including some which were not part of the compulsory Northern Ireland Curriculum for Year 8 pupils, such as drama, PSE, and form periods, but were common in schools. The amount of time spent on each subject per week was calculated to the nearest minute. In order to standardise the timetables as much as possible, a number of adjustments were necessary (e.g. to allow for carousel modules, conflation to generic categories such as 'science' and 'modern languages').

Total teaching time per week

The number of minutes of total teaching time per week in the 48 schools ranged from 1,650 minutes (27 hours 30 minutes) in one school to 1,440 minutes (24 hours) in another. The maximum difference between schools, three hours and 30 minutes, represented half a day's teaching time. Put another way, pupils in the school with the longest week were experiencing approximately 15 per cent more teaching time than those in the school with the shortest week. The mean value was 1,557 minutes (25 hours 57 minutes) and so, for the purposes of comparisons, the average week was taken to be 26 hours.

There appeared to be a number of features in the Northern Ireland school system which might be associated with the variation in length of week. For example, the mean length of teaching time in grammar schools was 40 minutes longer than that found in secondary schools, though there were appreciable variations between schools of the same type (i.e. an intra-group spread of 65 minutes for grammar schools and 80 minutes for secondary). Comparisons by size of school revealed that the large schools had a mean length of week which was 49 minutes longer

than small schools and 18 minutes longer than medium-sized schools, though again there were appreciable intra-group differences. With regard to variations between Area Boards, the greatest difference in the mean lengths of the teaching weeks was 24 minutes between Belfast and Southern ELBs.

Subject teaching time per week

The mean, maximum and minimum number of minutes per week for the main 20 subjects was calculated for the 48 schools for which data were available (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Year 8 teaching time per week for subjects

Subject	N of schools	Mean	Maximum	Minimum
English	48	197	260	160
Mathematics	48	185	221	150
Science	48	164	210	120
Languages	48	180	350	102
History	48	112	150	90
Geography	48	112	165	90
Technology	48	91	150	31
Home economics	41	81	120	55
Religious education	48	99	175	40
Art	48	76	120	45
Music	48	68	105	35
Drama	17	40	70	13
Latin	1	100	-	-
Classics	3	83	145	35
Physical education	47	92	160	35
Games	13	67	80	35
Computer studies/IT	40	41	77	17
Form period	21	41	150	30
PSE	23	37	67	30
Health Education	3	43	60	35

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 School Survey.

Calculated as a percentage of the total weekly teaching time, these subjects fell into three groups of approximate time allocations in the Year 8 curriculum (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2 Ranges of Year 8 weekly teaching time for subjects

Subjects	Percentage of Weekly Teaching Time	Weekly Teaching Time
High		
English, mathematics, science and languages	10 to 16 per cent	2 hours 36 minutes to 4 hours 10 minutes
Medium		
History, geography, technology, home economics, PE, games, RE, Latin and classics	5 to 10 per cent	1 hour 18 minutes to 2 hours 36 minutes
Low		
Art, music, drama, computer studies/IT, PSE, form period, Health Education	1 to 5 per cent	16 minutes to 1 hour 18 minutes

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 School Survey.

Within-subject comparisons

A striking feature demonstrated in these tables is the wide range in time allocation for many subjects between schools. This clearly shows that the amount of time Year 8 pupils spend on different areas of the curriculum varied substantially from school to school. For example, pupils at some schools (virtually all Catholic ones) studied languages for almost six hours a week, while those at other schools did less than two hours; one school taught 75 per cent more science than another; RE and technology in some schools were given over four times the amount of time they were afforded in other schools; music deviated by a factor of three; the degree of provision of cross-curricular themes like Health Education and IT varied enormously.

These variations, coupled with case study evidence on their implications for the quality of curricular experiences, support the view that, at the level of classroom practice and pupil learning, the Northern Ireland Curriculum as a single common entity or experience does not exist. Consequently, in terms of reviewing the curriculum as implemented, it makes much more sense to talk about Northern Ireland 'curricula' rather than the Northern Ireland 'Curriculum'. The implications of this are considerable. Instead of asking, for example, '*Is the Northern Ireland Curriculum effective in aiding pupil learning and meeting their needs?*', it is far more accurate and helpful to ask '*Which of the Northern Ireland curricula are more effective in aiding pupils' learning and meeting their needs? (To what extent are Northern Ireland pupils' needs the same?) How can the more successful curricula be made more effective? What can the less successful ones learn from those that are more effective?*' It also raises the question of whether

the nomenclature of the curriculum as specified should officially recognise the pluralistic reality of curricula in Northern Ireland.

Between-subject comparisons

The second striking feature demonstrated in Tables 2.1 and 2.2 is several between-subject time allocations. The most marked being that, on average: languages were allocated more time than science; religious education was given more time than technology, art and music; and PE lesson time was greater than that for art or music. Thus, many of the Year 8 curricula appeared unbalanced. The average post-primary school allocated almost half its total time to English, mathematics, languages and science. In the competition for curricular time, the arts fared badly: on average, art and music each received less than five per cent of the total time and drama was only offered as a separate subject in one-third of the sample.

Grammar schools' curricula seemed particularly unbalanced, with (compared with secondary schools) large quantities of time allocated to languages, science and PE/games and less than five per cent assigned to technology, home economics, art and music. In contrast, only one of the statutory subjects (music) had less than five per cent of time in the average secondary school curricula. On average, Catholic schools devoted significantly more time to languages and RE than Protestant schools, while the latter gave appreciably more time to PE/games; though, as with all these comparisons, there were considerable variations between schools of the same type or status which are masked when looking at the mean averages (e.g. pupils in one Catholic school were experiencing twice as much art as their peers in another Catholic school).

Although the amount of time to be given to compulsory subjects was not prescribed in legislation, an advisory paper (NICC, n.d.) recommended minimum percentages of time to be allocated to each subject. The Year 8 data suggest that on average (in order of magnitude), English, mathematics, history, geography and languages (notably not science) received significantly more than the recommended minimums, while art and music were allocated less than the five per cent minimum.

The paper also indicated that approximately 75 per cent of curriculum time was the minimum needed to satisfy the statutory requirements for compulsory subjects. In reality, according to data collected after the Curriculum Review had attempted to streamline the requirements, schools overall spent an average of 88 per cent of their Year 8 curriculum time on compulsory subjects. Thus, only 12 per cent remained for any subject approaches to the cross-curricular themes (e.g. IT) and optional subjects like PSE, home economics and drama.

2.3 PUPILS' PERCEPTIONS OF BREADTH AND BALANCE

One category in Item 2 of the Year 8 questionnaire requested pupils to indicate, on a five-point scale, if they thought that they had 'too much' or 'not enough' of each of their main subjects. Table 2.3 below gives the mean scores for each subject disaggregated by type of school. In using mean scores as a means of providing a

rough summary, it should be remembered throughout the report that means can mask interesting and significant deviations from the mean.

Table 2.3 Year 8 pupils' perceptions of 'too much' or 'not enough' of different subjects by type of school

1 = too much; 5 = not enough

Subject	Overall Mean	(N)	Secondary Mean	Grammar Mean
English	2.7	(2688)	2.7	2.7
Maths	2.7	(2688)	2.7	2.6
French	2.7	(2392)	2.7	2.6
RE	2.8	(2667)	2.9	2.8
Irish	2.8	(728)	2.8	2.9
Geography	2.9	(2670)	2.9	2.9
History	3.0	(2683)	3.0	2.9
Science	3.1	(2685)	3.1	3.0
Home economics	3.2	(2205)	3.2	3.3
Music	3.3	(2671)	3.4	3.2
Health Education	3.4	(290)	3.3	3.9
Technology	3.5	(2684)	3.5	3.6
Art	3.7	(2682)	3.6	3.7
Drama	3.9	(1991)	3.8	4.1
IT	4.0	(2224)	3.9	4.2
PE	4.1	(2653)	4.0	4.2
<i>Total mean</i>	<i>3.24</i>		<i>3.22</i>	<i>3.29</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

The results displayed an overall tendency for pupils to feel that they spent slightly too much time on RE and on three of the four areas of the curriculum recommended to be allocated ten per cent of available time: English, mathematics and languages. Time for the fourth area, science, was generally considered to be more appropriate.

The arts (i.e. music, art and drama), Health Education, technology, PE and IT drew the most dissatisfaction from pupils and were all orientated to the 'not enough' end of the range. The results were most striking for PE and IT, where half the pupils scored the extreme of the five-point range, with two-thirds marking either '4' or '5'.

Although the differences between the means for secondary schools and grammar schools are very small, a fairly consistent trend is evident: relative to secondary school pupils, grammar schools pupils were slightly more likely to consider that they spent too much time on some of the main academic areas (e.g. mathematics, languages) and insufficient time on more practical and active areas such as art, drama and PE, but especially IT.

To explore pupils' perception of curriculum breadth and balance further, pupils were asked if there was anything that they would like to have done or learnt about at school which had not so far been covered sufficiently in their lessons. Pupils were first requested to indicate 'Yes' or 'No' and then, if responding 'Yes', to list up to three skills, topics or subjects that they would like to have done or learnt.

Nearly all (98 per cent) of the 2,694 pupils answered this question, with a very even split in responses: 51 per cent said 'Yes' and 49 per cent 'No'. The 1,350 pupils who responded 'Yes' offered 2,803 suggestions. Another 18 pupils who had circled the 'Yes' option were unable to provide a suggestion. There was a great diversity of responses and the most common ones are set out in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4 **Frequencies of the most common suggestions of curriculum areas for which pupils would like additional provision**

Suggested Subjects or Topics	% of Pupils
PE/sports/games	36
Languages	21
IT/computers	21
Drama	17
PSE (including sex/drugs/Health Education, first aid, lifeskills, childcare)	15
Home economics, baking and cooking	12
Historical subjects	12
Art-related	11
Technology and design topics and practical work	10
Music topics and instruments	8
English	7
Biology, human body, animals and wildlife	6
Mathematics topics and skills	6
Science, including space, astronomy and Earth	5
Trips and going out	3
Religious education	3
<i>N =</i>	<i>1350</i>

Pupils could list more than one topic, so the percentages do not sum to 100 per cent.

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

Thirty-six per cent of pupils suggested specific games or sports. Somewhat surprisingly, 21 per cent of pupils mentioned languages as being insufficient in the curriculum. In some respects, this was not consistent with the responses to Question 2, where most pupils were satisfied with the amount of language teaching or thought that there was too much of it. However, this inconsistency may be a reflection of the variation in the amount of languages experienced by different pupils in different schools as demonstrated in Table 2.1. The next most commonly identified lack was for IT/computers. Finally, as an endorsement of the findings from the Pilot Study, PSE topics were also high on pupils' nominations

of inadequately covered curriculum areas. The arts, particularly in the form of drama and visual art, were seen as another area that warranted increased provision.

3. COHERENCE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

3.1 PUPILS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF THEIR CURRICULUM

The questionnaire started with an open-ended item asking pupils to consider all the things that they had done in their first year and to say what were the most important things they had learnt. In addition to providing information on what curriculum areas pupils considered to be most important (see Chapter 5), this question afforded an insight into pupils' constructions of the curriculum.

Fifty-three per cent, either explicitly or implicitly, mentioned subject matter only; 25 per cent gave a more overarching perspective; and 20 per cent gave responses which included both subject matter and overarching perspectives. Taken together, these data suggest that 73 per cent of pupils had a view of learning that was either solely or partly constructed in terms of 'subjects'.

Out of 2,673 valid cases, 1,198 pupils (45 per cent) gave an account of the most important 'things' learned which included some form of overarching perspective. These pupils could be categorised approximately into five groups. The largest group (70 per cent of the 1,198 subsample) mentioned changes in personality or self-image; their comments included phrases like *'I have become more self-confident'* and *'I get on better with other pupils'*. Forty-five per cent of questionnaires containing an overarching perspective referred to moral messages about good behaviour. A further 43 per cent signalled a pupil perception of change in general attitude, motivation or approach to work (e.g. *'I have learnt that I must try harder'*, *'be more careful with my work'*). Fifteen per cent of pupils gave responses that centred on examinations, revision or assessment-related learning. Finally, and quite remarkably, overarching cross-curricular skills and knowledge, for example *'learnt language skills'*, accounted for only two per cent of cases.

Thus, the preliminary evidence from the Year 8 survey lends support to earlier findings that indicated that the majority of pupils think of the curriculum and their learning in compartmentalised 'subject' categories. Any broader constructs tended to focus on perceived changes in their personality, attitudes to school and normative values – at least in terms of the learning they held to be the most important. Overall, the results offer few signs that pupils were being helped and encouraged to build a coherent map of their learning across the whole curriculum.

3.2 PUPILS' PERCEPTIONS OF LINKS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Pupils were asked if they could think of an example of links between two or more subjects. Just over three-quarters (77 per cent) of the 2,694 pupils in the sample indicated that there were links, although a small proportion (one per cent) of these could not identify specific links. Many (2,049) links were suggested and the responses showed great diversity, and therefore spread, of associations – 181 different types. The most commonly cited links are shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Frequency of most common links between subjects perceived by Year 8 pupils

Linked Subjects	% of Responses
Science/geography	15
Science/technology	10
Mathematics/geography	7
History/geography	7
Technology/art	5
Mathematics/science	5
History/RE	4
English/history	3
Science/Health Education	3
French/Irish	2
English/drama	2
Science/RE	2
English/mathematics	2
English/RE	1
Mathematics/physics	1
Mathematics/technology	1
Mathematics/computer studies	1
French/Latin	1
English/History/RE	1
English/computer studies	1
<i>Total responses</i>	<i>2049</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

The table demonstrates a number of features: the prevalence of science and geography in the most frequently cited links; the paucity of references to the arts, particularly music; limited references to IT; the fact that the Areas of Study framework does not encapsulate some of the key associations perceived by pupils; and the latent capacity of pupils to perceive cross-curricular links when encouraged to focus upon them.

The perceived nature of the links

When asked to say how they linked up, 97 per cent of the pupils who had noticed links were able to describe the type of linkage, although just over ten per cent of those responding stated that there was similar coverage in two or more subjects but they were unable to be specific about the nature of that coverage.

Far and away the most frequently articulated response (48 per cent) was that some common content knowledge, concepts or topics were covered in two or more subjects. An additional two per cent of the sample were specific about this common coverage in relation to similar vocabulary in different languages.

Skills were identified by 27 per cent of the pupils who tackled this section. This included: 13 per cent who mentioned drawing, graphical or mapping skills; nine per cent of pupils who pointed to numeracy skills, such as measuring; four per cent of respondents who nominated literacy skills.

In addition to content knowledge and skills, similarity of learning processes, such as role play or using the same equipment, were mentioned by six per cent.. Also, 28 pupils (one per cent) said that a link was found in a common moral message, such as not to drink or smoke.

Perceived value of links

Pupils were also asked whether the links that they identified helped them with their learning. Just over half (53 per cent) of the total sample confirmed that they did. The most common reason was that the links enhanced their learning, either in quantity, depth or detail, and aided better understanding and progress. Others considered that the links helped them to '*remember better*' and that they assisted with revision. Altogether, 80 per cent of pupils who were able to give an example found the links helped them in their learning.

Twenty-eight pupils (one per cent of the responding sample) said that they were not sure if the links were helpful and the remainder found that the links did not assist learning. The highest percentage (13 per cent) did not give their reasons, while two per cent found the links confusing. Less than one per cent of responses fell into the combined categories of 'waste of time/unnecessary' and 'boring/frustrating'.

In summary, a high proportion of pupils were able to identify links between subjects and found that these associations helped their learning.

4. COHERENCE OVER TIME: CONTINUITY AND PROGRESSION

4.1 CONTINUITY AND PROGRESSION WITHIN YEAR 8

As part of Item 2 in the Year 8 pupil questionnaire, pupils were asked to rate on a five-point scale how far they felt that their lessons had usually built on the last one or had not usually built on the last one during the course of Year 8. Table 4.1 below gives the mean scores for each subject disaggregated by type of school.

Table 4.1 Year 8 pupils' perceptions of the extent to which lessons in different subjects build on the previous one by type of school
1 = usually build on; 5 = usually don't build on

Subject	Overall Mean	(N)	Secondary Mean	Grammar Mean
History	2.3	(2671)	2.4	2.1
French	2.4	(2380)	2.6	2.2
English	2.5	(2681)	2.5	2.6
Maths	2.5	(2671)	2.6	2.3
Geography	2.5	(2668)	2.6	2.3
Science	2.6	(2680)	2.7	2.3
Technology	2.6	(2665)	2.7	2.4
RE	2.6	(2658)	2.7	2.3
Irish	2.6	(725)	2.7	2.3
Health Education	2.8	(290)	2.9	2.1
Home economics	2.9	(2196)	3.0	2.7
IT	2.9	(2215)	2.9	2.7
Music	3.0	(2651)	3.1	2.9
Art	3.0	(2669)	3.0	3.0
PE	3.1	(2638)	3.1	3.0
<i>Total mean</i>	<i>2.69</i>		<i>2.77</i>	<i>2.48</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

The overall mean scores for each subject were mostly lower than the neutral score of 3.0, suggesting that generally pupils found that their lessons usually built on the last one – of the 15 subjects upon which pupils were asked to comment, the overall mean score for 12 of them was less than three. Pupils observed the highest degree of follow-on in history, and this may be a result of the content-focused nature of the subject and the length of time spent on single topics like the Normans during Year 8. Other subjects associated with high degrees of 'follow-on' were French, English, maths and geography. They perceived less continuity in practical subjects, PE, art, music, IT and home economics, and it may be significant that all of these subjects are more concerned with development and practice of skills rather than the accumulation of knowledge and facts: the Year 7

report found that this former kind of continuity was only recognised by the higher attaining pupils.

As the table shows, the type of school which pupils attended made a difference to their perception of the continuity present in their lessons. Pupils from secondary schools saw less continuity in their lessons during Year 8 than their peers in grammar schools. Only in English, art and PE did pupils from both types of school perceive a similar level of continuity in the lessons. In all other subjects, there was a difference between the continuity which grammar school pupils observed in their lessons and that seen by their counterparts in secondary schools: in each case, the pupils from the grammar schools perceived greater continuity, and there was a difference between the groups of 0.3 in the mean scores for maths, technology, history, geography and home economics, and of 0.4 in the mean scores for science, RE and French.

Additionally, pupils in schools with a high level of eligibility for free school meals saw markedly less continuity in their lessons (overall mean score 2.8) than pupils from schools with a low level of eligibility (overall mean score 2.6).

One explanation of these findings may be that teaching in grammar schools achieves greater continuity and progression; another may be that there is a positive association between pupils' high academic attainment and their capacity to perceive continuity and progression. Clearly, there is no evidence here of causality, or even the direction of causality, but it does at least raise the prospect that there could be considerable merit in a stronger emphasis on increasing all pupils' awareness of continuity and progression in their learning.

4.2 CONTINUITY AND PROGRESSION BETWEEN YEARS 7 AND 8

In the questionnaire, pupils were asked to respond to seven statements which compared their last year in primary school with their first year in post-primary school by circling 'agree', 'disagree' or 'not sure'. The basic frequencies of their responses are shown in the table below.

Table 4.2 Year 8 pupils' responses to statements comparing learning in Years 7 and 8

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not sure (%)
I have enjoyed the things I have done in the first year of this school more than the last year of primary school	52	27	21
Many of the subjects this year repeated what I learnt in primary school	30	49	21
The things I did at primary school prepared me well for this school	69	12	19
The things I did at primary school were more enjoyable than what I have done at this school	29	45	26
Most of the subjects done this year followed on well from what I did at primary school	49	18	33
I have learnt more things at this school than I did in my last year at the primary school	78	8	14
I was more interested in my school work in the primary school than here	17	60	23

Base: 2,694.

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

The results show that in comparison with their final year of primary school, pupils were more positive about their first year at post-primary school. This may reflect a genuinely more engaging experience in Year 8, but it may also be the product of the novelty of pupils' post-primary experience, and also the lapse of time between their final year of primary school and their completion of the questionnaire.

Nearly two-thirds (60 per cent) of pupils were more interested in their Year 8 school work than at primary school, and just over half (52 per cent) agreed that they had enjoyed the things they had done in the first year of their current school more than they had done in their Year 7, though it should be noted that just over a quarter of pupils (27 per cent) disagreed. In particular, pupils felt that they had learnt more in Year 8 than they had in their last year of primary school. To some extent, at least, the presence of new subjects like modern languages, home economics and technology in the Year 8 curriculum may account for this perception. It is also possible that the teaching and organisation of the subjects at post-primary level, all taught by subject specialists and in specific timetabled slots, contributed to this result. The relative appeal of the final years of Key Stage 2 may also have been diminished by the pressures and adverse effects of the Transfer Procedures (see the Year 7 report).

Over two-thirds (69 per cent) of pupils believed that what they had done at primary level had prepared them well for their new school, although a sizeable minority were not convinced about this. Moreover, only half (49 per cent) of the sample believed that most of the subjects they had done during Year 8 had followed on well from what they had done at primary school. Similarly, though

49 per cent of pupils did not think that many of their subjects in Year 8 had repeated what they had learnt at primary school, 30 per cent did. This may be generated by teachers' perceived need to go over work from primary school so that they are able to ascertain their new pupils' level of understanding and knowledge.

Pupils from grammar schools were notably less enthusiastic than their peers at secondary school about what they had done in Year 8 compared with their last year in primary school: 40 per cent of grammar school pupils agreed that they had enjoyed the things they had done in their first year of post-primary school more than the things they had done in their final year of primary school and 35 per cent disagreed, whereas among their secondary school counterparts, 58 per cent agreed and 23 per cent disagreed. These data confirm the later findings (see Chapter 6) that grammar school pupils generally find their subjects less enjoyable than their secondary school counterparts. This may be the result of pupils feeling deflated and dysphoric after a demanding routine in the final years of primary school and their success in the Transfer Test. It is also possible that these results point to a comparatively higher degree of dissatisfaction on the part of grammar school pupils with the ways in which the curriculum is mediated at their schools. Grammar school pupils' displeasure with the mediation of the curriculum would appear to be a more likely explanation than general disengagement with the curriculum as specified because, when asked if they had been more interested in their work at primary school than at their post-primary school, there were no conspicuous differences in the levels of agreement between the pupils from grammar or secondary schools.

The size of the school appeared to have an effect on pupils' enjoyment of the things they had done during their first year at their current school compared with their last year of primary school. Forty-two per cent of pupils from large schools had enjoyed what they had done in Year 8 more than Year 7, compared with 57 per cent of pupils in both small and medium-sized schools. This possibly suggests that some pupils may find large post-primary schools more bewildering and less appealing.

Furthermore, a higher percentage of pupils from mixed schools (58 per cent) had enjoyed Year 8 more than Year 7 compared with pupils from all boys' schools (47 per cent), and especially all girls' schools, where only 39 per cent of pupils agreed that they had enjoyed their first year of post-primary school more than Year 7. This may suggest pupils', particularly girls', dislike of the single-sex environment and atmosphere. It is possible that this was most keenly felt by those who had attended mixed primary schools.

5. APPROPRIATENESS AND RELEVANCE

The questionnaire produced two main sources of evidence on pupils' perceptions of appropriateness and relevance. The opening item pinpointed those subjects which pupils considered to be the most important in general terms. The second question, Item 2, included four pairs of antonyms which were intended to address specific areas of appropriateness and relevance. The findings from these two main sources are presented in turn.

5.1 PUPILS' PERCEPTIONS OF IMPORTANT LEARNING IN YEAR 8

The first question asked pupils to consider '*all the things they had done*' in their first year at school, and to write down the most important things they had learned. The four areas of the curriculum with the highest allocation of teaching time were foremost in pupils' responses: mathematics and English were the subjects nominated most frequently in the subject-related responses, with modern languages ranked third and then science. It will be seen from the following sections that the precedence given to mathematics and English, in terms of general importance, remained consistent in relation to more specific aspects of relevance and appropriateness. The considerable gap between these two Transfer Test subjects and the third, science, also recurred in this respect.

It is interesting that modern languages should be deemed above science in general importance. For Year 8 pupils, the 'newness' of the immediate school context may be more likely to preoccupy them, and new subjects in particular may claim relatively more attention than some of the familiar ones. This impression would seem to be borne out by the results for the specific aspects of relevance identified below, where the scores for modern languages were conspicuously low, except for those relating to usefulness in the immediate present. Perhaps the fact that modern languages is an 'academic' subject enhances its importance in the perceived academic context of school or perhaps, in the pupils' minds, the substantial amounts of time assigned overshadow their doubts about its 'real-life' relevance.

5.2 PERCEPTIONS OF RELEVANCE TO CURRENT NEEDS

The categories '*useful for me now ... useless for me now*' attempted to explore pupils' sense of current or synchronic relevance, in either its 'real-life' or academic contexts. The following table presents the overall mean scores for each subject in rank order, together with mean scores disaggregated by type of school.

Table 5.1 Perceived synchronic relevance by type of school
1 = useful for me now; 5 = useless for me now

Subject	Overall Mean	(N)	Secondary Mean	Grammar Mean
English	1.8	(2690)	1.8	1.9
Maths	1.8	(2688)	1.8	1.8
PE	2.1	(2649)	2.1	2.1
Health Education	2.1	(290)	2.2	1.9
IT	2.2	(2221)	2.2	2.1
Home economics	2.4	(2203)	2.3	2.5
Science	2.5	(2685)	2.5	2.5
Geography	2.6	(2676)	2.5	2.8
Art	2.7	(2680)	2.6	2.9
Technology	2.8	(2679)	2.7	3.0
History	2.8	(2678)	2.7	2.9
French	2.8	(2390)	2.7	2.9
RE	2.9	(2666)	2.8	3.0
Irish	3.0	(727)	3.1	2.9
Music	3.0	(2668)	2.9	3.2
<i>Total mean</i>	<i>2.50</i>		<i>2.46</i>	<i>2.56</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

The skewed distribution of the means indicates that Year 8 pupils were generally positive about the usefulness of the curriculum to their current needs. As means, the range represents varying degrees of perceived usefulness for each subject rather than ‘uselessness’ – though, of course, sizeable minorities did register scores at the useless end of the spectrum for certain subjects.

In both secondary and grammar schools, English and mathematics were considered the most useful subjects to their current needs. Rather more surprisingly, a cluster of subjects concerned with meeting the current needs of physical fitness, well-being and health were ranked very highly: PE, Health Education and home economics. The case study evidence underlines the importance Year 7 and 8 pupils attribute to being physically active and to accessing the psychological rewards that can flow from engagement in sport and other physical activities. It may well be worth considering whether the late Key Stage 2 and early Key Stage 3 curriculum fully acknowledges these needs. IT was the other area of curriculum pupils judged to be highly relevant to their current needs, and its place in the ranking is certainly not reflected in the amount of teaching time devoted to it (see Table 2.1).

For pupils in both secondary and grammar schools, art and especially music appeared to be relatively unimportant for immediate purposes. This was particularly the case for grammar school pupils, which is slightly at odds with the conventional wisdom that music as a school subject is valued more in middle-class and academic cultures. Technology, French, RE and history in the Year 8

curriculum were afforded comparatively low synchronic relevance, again especially by grammar school pupils. (However, maintained schools yielded notably more positive responses for RE.) Overall, pupils in secondary schools seem to attach more (synchronic) value to expressive and practical subjects, humanities and modern languages than pupils in grammar schools. Moreover, children in schools with the highest rate of eligibility for free school meals appeared to perceive more synchronic relevance across the whole range of the curriculum than their peers in schools with low or medium rates of eligibility.

5.3 PERCEPTIONS OF RELEVANCE TO ADULT LIFE

This section will examine pupils' attitudes to the future non-vocational value (diachronic relevance) of their subjects, as they were recorded through responses to the categories '*important for adult life ... not needed for adult life*'.

Table 5.2 Perceived importance for adult life by type of school
1 = important for adult life; 5 = not needed for adult life

Subject	Overall Mean	(N)	Secondary Mean	Grammar Mean
English	1.9	(2679)	2.0	1.9
Maths	1.9	(2689)	2.0	1.9
Home economics	1.9	(2203)	2.0	1.9
Health Education	2.1	(293)	2.1	2.0
IT	2.3	(2226)	2.3	2.3
PE	2.6	(2655)	2.7	2.6
Science	2.7	(2686)	2.8	2.7
Geography	2.7	(2679)	2.6	2.8
Technology	2.8	(2680)	2.7	3.0
French	3.0	(2396)	3.0	3.1
RE	3.0	(2665)	2.9	3.0
History	3.1	(2680)	3.1	3.3
Art	3.2	(2681)	3.1	3.4
Drama	3.3	(1986)	3.2	3.4
Irish	3.3	(729)	3.3	3.3
Music	3.4	(2668)	3.3	3.6
<i>Total mean</i>	<i>2.70</i>		<i>2.69</i>	<i>2.76</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

Overall, the Year 8 pupils sample perceived the curriculum to be less relevant to their everyday lives in the future than to the immediate needs of life in and out of school. They awarded the highest ratings for non-vocational relevance to adult life to English and mathematics. As with relevance to current needs, home economics, Health Education and PE also figured highly, suggesting that pupils' interpretation of the term 'adult life' was often quite a literal one, and that physical survival skills were to the forefront of their minds.

Responses concerning the creative arts again may cause concern. As in the results for synchronic relevance, music here emerged as the least valued of all subjects. Drama was included in the semantic grid for this area of relevance, and the mean scores for this arts subject revealed a similar degree of indifference. Comparatively few pupils appear to imagine they will need subjects like history or modern languages (especially Irish) after they leave school. It may also be worth noting that the number of decisively negative responses for languages was relatively high.

5.4 PERCEPTIONS OF VOCATIONAL RELEVANCE

This section briefly considers the second aspect of diachronic relevance explored in Item 2, which was recorded in responses to the category ‘*important for a job or career ... not needed for a job or career*’.

Table 5.3 Perceived vocational relevance by type of school
1 = important for a job/career; 5 = not needed for a job/career

Subject	Overall Mean	(N)	Secondary Mean	Grammar Mean
English	1.5	(2685)	1.4	1.5
Maths	1.5	(2690)	1.5	1.5
IT	1.9	(2226)	1.9	1.9
Science	2.4	(2683)	2.4	2.3
Geography	2.5	(2670)	2.5	2.7
Health Education	2.7	(289)	2.6	3.1
Technology	2.7	(2684)	2.5	2.9
Home economics	2.8	(2207)	2.7	3.1
French	2.9	(2388)	2.9	3.0
PE	2.9	(2653)	2.8	3.1
Art	3.0	(2682)	2.8	3.3
History	3.0	(2677)	2.9	3.1
Drama	3.0	(1989)	2.9	3.3
RE	3.2	(2667)	3.1	3.5
Irish	3.3	(729)	3.2	3.3
Music	3.3	(2664)	3.1	3.6
<i>Total mean</i>	<i>2.73</i>		<i>2.63</i>	<i>2.83</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

Unsurprisingly, English and mathematics elicited extremely positive responses here, followed closely by IT, which was regarded as much more important than technology. Geography and science were perceived to be conspicuously more relevant than history and modern languages. The findings for the creative arts again conveyed an attitude of indifference from the majority, but at the same time the wide range of the responses suggested that, for a determined minority, other

factors, such as aptitude, interest or mediation, should be taken into account. Nevertheless, the arts, especially music, scored badly on all three criteria of relevance. Taking the results for diachronic relevance as a whole, pupils seemed to favour a utilitarian view of art and design, perceiving its relation to a particular job or a career as potentially more important than its intrinsic value for adult life in general.

Secondary school pupils and those at schools with the highest rates of eligibility for free school meals placed much more value on practical and expressive subjects and generally appeared more inclined to appreciate the vocational relevance of the whole of the curriculum. In contrast, grammar school pupils as early as Year 8 seemed to have accepted the view that anything which smacks of practical activities and/or applied vocationalism (e.g. technology, though interestingly not IT) has less employment and career currency than the traditional academic subjects.

5.5 PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER RELEVANCE

In order to ascertain the degree to which pupils felt that subjects in the curriculum were more appropriate and relevant to one gender than the other, the category '*mainly for girls ... mainly for boys*' was included in Item 2. Responses for the majority of subjects in this section tended to cluster round the middle category, suggesting that most pupils perceived most subjects, and academic ones in particular, to be equally relevant for boys and girls. However, there were one or two notable exceptions to this pattern and in several other subjects, minority responses were weighted towards a specific gender.

Table 5.4 Perceived gender relevance by type of school
1 = mainly for girls; 5 = mainly for boys

Subject	Overall Mean	(N)	Secondary Mean	Grammar Mean
Home economics	2.2	(2209)	2.2	2.0
Music	2.7	(2600)	2.7	2.7
English	2.9	(2621)	2.9	2.9
Art	2.9	(2605)	2.9	2.9
Irish	2.9	(663)	2.9	3.0
RE	2.9	(2601)	2.9	2.9
French	2.9	(2513)	2.9	2.9
Health Education	2.9	(291)	2.9	2.8
Maths	3.0	(2616)	3.0	3.0
History	3.0	(2611)	3.0	3.0
Geography	3.0	(2607)	3.0	3.0
Science	3.1	(2620)	3.1	3.1
IT	3.1	(2160)	3.1	3.2
PE	3.2	(2592)	3.1	3.2
Technology	3.6	(2612)	3.6	3.7
<i>Total Mean</i>	<i>2.94</i>		<i>2.94</i>	<i>2.94</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

Well over three-quarters of the sample believed that the majority of subjects were equally appropriate for girls and boys. The most obvious departures from this pattern were evident in the results for technology and home economics. Together these figures testify to persistently traditional perceptions of gender relevance. Examination of other results, particularly for non-academic subjects such as music (deemed more relevant to girls) and PE (deemed more relevant to boys), offer further evidence of this trend, which was first discernible in the Pilot Study. The tendency to believe some subjects were more relevant to one gender than the other emerged more distinctly in grammar schools than in secondary schools.

The mean scores disaggregated by sex of individual pupils confirmed that, while boys and girls are in agreement about the general applicability of the curriculum, both sexes, but girls in particular, have strong views on appropriateness to gender. Thus, home economics was more decisively assigned to girls by girls themselves, while both boys and girls felt that technology was certainly more appropriate for boys. Boys appeared to believe that IT was more relevant to them, while girls regarded it to be equally important for both sexes. Girls regarded both art and Health Education as more relevant to their sex, while boys saw these subjects as equally valuable for both. According to this sample, girls in Year 8 seem to cling more tenaciously than boys to traditional gender stereotypes.

5.6 OVERVIEW

Although the findings recorded above tended to express degrees of affirmation or indifference rather than distinctly negative perceptions, there are messages here which may cause concern. The Year 8 pupils in the sample appeared to believe that the curriculum was much more relevant to their immediate needs in school than to their lives in the future, either at home or at work. Most pupils across all categories saw limited relevance in the creative arts and modern languages. However, with regard to the arts, pupils (especially those in grammar schools) might see more relevance in these subjects if they were allocated more curriculum time.

Although girls' perceptions of the gender relevance of specific subjects seemed more entrenched than those of boys, the latter seemed somewhat less inclined than girls to perceive relevance in the curriculum in general. In view of the current debate on boys' underachievement and their susceptibility to disaffection, this finding may be worth further investigation.

Middle-class pupils, together with those in grammar schools, and in those schools where the degree of eligibility for free school meals was relatively low, appeared to attach greater importance, even at this early stage, to a very narrow range of what, in their experience, had been essentially examinable subjects. Could the perceptions recorded here, which frequently seemed to dismiss the relevance of both the arts and the humanities, be an unintended legacy of the Transfer Test? And is it the case that Year 8 pupils who are socio-economically disadvantaged may more readily appreciate, or be more receptive to, the broader curriculum?

6. PUPIL ENJOYMENT OF THE CURRICULUM

For this section of the report, Year 8 pupils were asked to indicate to what extent they ‘really enjoy’ or ‘really dislike’ each of the subjects within the curriculum. Mean scores were calculated, and the lower the mean score the greater the level of enjoyment for a particular subject. The overall results are shown in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Year 8 pupils’ level of enjoyment by type of school
1 = really enjoy it; 5 = really dislike it

Subject	Overall Mean	(N)	Secondary Mean	Grammar Mean
PE	1.6	(2647)	1.6	1.6
IT	1.8	(2225)	1.8	1.8
Art	2.1	(2680)	2.1	2.1
Science	2.3	(2681)	2.3	2.4
Technology	2.3	(2683)	2.2	2.4
Home economics	2.4	(2207)	2.4	2.6
Health Education	2.4	(292)	2.5	2.1
English	2.6	(2692)	2.5	2.8
History	2.6	(2678)	2.5	2.7
Music	2.6	(2671)	2.5	2.9
Geography	2.7	(2676)	2.6	2.8
French	2.7	(2397)	2.6	2.9
Irish	2.8	(726)	2.9	2.6
Maths	2.8	(2690)	2.6	3.0
RE	3.0	(2664)	2.9	3.1
<i>Total mean</i>	<i>2.45</i>		<i>2.40</i>	<i>2.52</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

Expressed in terms of means, the table clearly demonstrates that pupils generally viewed subjects in a positive light, as the most disliked subject, RE, had a mean score of 3.0. With PE as the most enjoyed subject at a mean score of 1.6, it is evident that enjoyment of subjects fell between higher levels and neutrality.

As PE, IT, art, and technology, equal with science, occupied the top four ranked places, it may be inferred that subjects with higher levels of activity or practical application are generally enjoyed more than subjects considered to be more ‘academically’ orientated. Overall, geography, languages, mathematics and RE were the least liked subjects.

A particularly striking result to emerge from comparison between the two types of school is that pupils in secondary schools expressed more enjoyment for ten of the 16 subjects than did pupils from grammar schools. Of the remaining six subjects,

two were enjoyed more by pupils from the grammar schools and three held equal mean scores. Interestingly, the two subjects for which pupils from the grammar schools indicated more enjoyment than pupils from secondary schools (Irish and Health Education) had a low number of responses and were considered beyond reliable interpretation. Particularly noticeable within nine of the ten subjects found more enjoyable by the secondary school pupils was the margin of difference in mean scores: two subjects (mathematics and music) had mean scores 0.4 lower; two (English and French) had mean scores 0.3 lower.

A number of possible explanations can be posited for this apparent greater enjoyment of most subjects by pupils from secondary schools. It may be that the pressure of studying for the Transfer Test led to those pupils entering the grammar schools experiencing *ennui* for certain subjects, especially English and mathematics where the focus of attention lay. Alternatively, pupils in secondary schools may be more complaisant and compliant, thus indicating higher levels of enjoyment for subjects than might actually be the case. Conversely, the grammar school pupils, having achieved the goal of gaining a place in the school, may feel inclined, or indeed at liberty, to be more critical and 'honest' about their feelings for the subjects. Another explanation may be that the mediation of the curriculum in grammar schools is less stimulating and enjoyable than that provided by the majority of secondary schools.

In keeping with the previous findings, social class as a variable revealed higher levels of enjoyment for working-class pupils over middle-class pupils in more than half the subjects, and pupils from schools with high free school meals eligibility displayed greater enjoyment for all subjects than those in the medium and low eligibility schools. Girls tended to enjoy considerably more subjects than boys; particularly noticeable was the preference of each gender for sex-role stereotyped subjects, such as home economics and technology.

In terms of religious orientation, it emerged that Catholic pupils tended to indicate higher levels of enjoyment compared with their Protestant counterparts. Eight subjects were identified as being enjoyed more by Catholic pupils, three subjects were identified as being enjoyed less by Catholic pupils, three subjects had equal mean scores for both Catholic and Protestant pupils, and one subject, Irish, was not identified for Protestant pupils. Maths, music, PE, IT and RE were all enjoyed more by Catholic pupils than Protestant pupils, where the level of enjoyment differed by a mean score of 0.2 or greater. Of the three subjects enjoyed more by Protestant pupils, Health Education had very low numbers of pupils responding and was considered beyond reliable comparison. The remaining two subjects (history and home economics) had mean score differences of 0.1. The most noticeable of the differences was for RE, where the mean score for Catholic pupils was 0.5 lower, at 2.7, than that for Protestant pupils at 3.2.

7. MANAGEABILITY

Two separate types of manageability were identified in the questionnaire: the first related to the level of work in terms of conceptual difficulty; the other referred to the amount of knowledge and skills which pupils were expected to learn.

7.1 LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY

The first pair of antonyms in Item 2, '*hard ... easy*', focused pupils' attention on the level of difficulty they perceived in each of their subjects. The following table presents the overall mean scores for each subject in rank order, together with mean scores disaggregated by type of school.

Table 7.1 Perceived level of difficulty by type of school
1 = hard; 5 = easy

Subject	Overall Mean	(N)	Secondary Mean	Grammar Mean
French	2.7	(2399)	2.7	2.7
Irish	2.7	(731)	2.6	2.8
History	2.9	(2684)	2.9	2.9
Maths	3.0	(2689)	3.0	2.9
Geography	3.0	(2680)	3.0	3.0
RE	3.0	(2373)	3.1	2.9
English	3.1	(2685)	3.1	2.9
Science	3.1	(2688)	3.1	3.0
Technology	3.1	(2685)	3.1	3.2
Music	3.3	(2671)	3.5	3.1
Home economics	3.3	(2218)	3.3	3.4
Art	3.5	(2681)	3.5	3.4
Drama	3.7	(1997)	3.6	3.7
Health Education	3.8	(294)	3.7	4.0
IT	3.9	(2230)	3.8	4.0
PE	4.1	(2653)	4.1	4.1
<i>Total mean</i>	<i>3.26</i>		<i>3.25</i>	<i>3.12</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

According to the overall mean scores, pupils felt the majority of subjects offered either just about the right level of difficulty or tended to be fairly easy. Modern languages alone were perceived to be moderately difficult, with scores of 2.7 for French and Irish respectively, and a relatively high rate of standard deviation (1.3) for both. It may be worth noting that music consistently evoked the most disagreement (SD 1.4), underlining the crucial need for differentiation in this subject. Perceptions of easiness, as in the pilot study, tended to be more forcefully

expressed than those for difficulty (i.e. scores reached further towards the edge of the scale). PE was felt to be the easiest subject, followed by IT, Health Education and then drama; art, and music, were ranked next. According to results in the previous chapter, these subjects frequently emerged as the most enjoyable.

The data from the mean scores according to the type of school generally reflect the pattern of the overall mean. However, although the overall mean scores for grammar and secondary schools are very close, the results for individual subjects tend to diverge. For example, grammar school pupils felt English was more difficult than secondary school pupils, while secondary school pupils thought music easier than their grammar school peers. It may be worth noting that grammar school pupils expressed the level of difficulty of their subjects in more extreme terms than their secondary school counterparts. Grammar school pupils awarded six subjects (English, mathematics, French, Irish, history and RE) scores between 2.9 and 2.7, yet they gave three subjects (PE, Health Education and IT) scores of 4.0. Secondary school pupils, on the other hand, awarded only three subjects (history, French and Irish) scores between 2.9 and 2.6, and gave just PE a score of 4.1.

The results may perhaps suggest that when pupils rate a subject as particularly easy, this may, to a certain extent, be a relative perception – a reaction, which appears to be stronger in grammar schools, to the level of difficulty and perhaps arduousness experienced in other areas of the curriculum, rather than purely an acknowledgement of the intrinsic easiness of the subject itself. Possible differences in mediation between grammar and secondary schools, and, perhaps, the reluctance of pupils to admit to more than a moderate level of difficulty, may well be important considerations here.

With regard to religious orientation, responses from Catholic schools suggested history and geography were felt to be more difficult in these institutions than elsewhere. Gender differences may invite further speculation. Although both sexes asserted that the level of most of their subjects was manageable or slightly easy, girls were much more tentative than boys in expressing perceptions of easiness. This tendency was particularly marked in single-sex schools. At the same time, perceptions of easiness seemed to be closely associated by boys and girls with perceptions of traditional gender relevance. It seems possible that the size of a school may also affect pupils' perceptions of difficulty: pupils in larger schools appeared to find most of the curriculum slightly more difficult than their peers elsewhere. (The reverse appeared to be the case in relation to IT, where, perhaps, the availability of resources and specialist expertise may affect opportunities for learning.) Pupils in large schools perceived the majority of their subjects to be less easy than pupils in small and medium-sized schools

7.2 AMOUNT OF WORK

Two further pairs of antonyms in Item 2 focused pupils' attention on the amount of work they were expected to cover or complete within a given amount of time, both at school and for homework. The first of these was '*I feel overworked in class ... I feel underworked in class*'.

Amount of work in class

The following table presents the overall mean scores for each subject in rank order, together with mean scores disaggregated by type of school.

Table 7.2 Perceived manageability of workload (in class) by type of school
1 = I feel overworked in class; 5 = I feel underworked in class

Subject	Overall Mean	(N)	Secondary Mean	Grammar Mean
Maths	2.8	(2677)	2.8	2.8
French	2.8	(2374)	2.9	2.8
English	2.9	(2683)	2.9	2.9
History	2.9	(2669)	2.9	2.9
Geography	2.9	(2673)	2.9	2.9
Irish	2.9	(728)	2.9	2.8
Science	3.0	(2683)	3.0	2.9
RE	3.0	(2659)	3.0	3.0
Home economics	3.0	(2196)	3.0	3.0
Technology	3.2	(2667)	3.2	3.2
Art	3.2	(2666)	3.2	3.2
Music	3.2	(2650)	3.3	3.1
Health Education	3.2	(288)	3.2	3.2
PE	3.3	(2613)	3.3	3.2
IT	3.4	(2213)	3.4	3.4
<i>Total mean</i>	<i>3.04</i>		<i>3.06</i>	<i>3.02</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

According to the total mean, pupils felt that the amount of work expected of them was about right. Pupils indicated that they felt slightly overworked in mathematics and modern languages. They felt correspondingly underworked in art, music, technology and Health Education (drama was not included for this pair of antonyms), and conspicuously underworked in PE and IT.

The subjects perceived to have the heaviest workload seemed to be those that also presented the hardest level of conceptual difficulty (see Table 7.1). At the same time, the least demanding subjects in terms of workload were also the easiest in terms of level of difficulty, predominantly the practical, expressive and non-academic areas of the curriculum

The overall mean scores for grammar and secondary schools both reflected the pattern for the sample as a whole. The music results may be worth noting, particularly in conjunction with the results for conceptual difficulty. Secondary school pupils appeared to regard their workload in music as less demanding than

their grammar school counterparts. They also appeared to find it considerably easier.

Pupils in large schools, as with conceptual difficulty, appeared to find the amount of work they were set slightly less manageable than their peers in small and medium-sized schools.

Amount of homework

The second pair of antonyms concerned with workload was ‘*too little homework ... too much homework*’. In administering the questionnaire, problems arose over subjects which routinely do not require the completion of homework (e.g. PE, IT, Health Education). Many pupils appear to have indicated that they receive ‘*too little*’ homework in these subjects (i.e. by circling 1 or 2) as these were the options that most resembled not getting any homework at all. Hence, for these subjects, pupils may have been using the scale to describe the existing reality rather than passing a judgement on the appropriateness of the level of homework they receive in these areas. Consequently, this factor should be borne in mind when interpreting the responses for these particular subjects.

Table 7.3 Perceived manageability of workload (homework) by type of school

1 = too little homework; 5 = too much homework

Subject	Overall Mean	(N)	Secondary Mean	Grammar Mean
PE	1.8	(800)	1.8	1.7
IT	2.2	(1240)	2.2	2.0
Health Education	2.4	(262)	2.3	2.6
Music	2.5	(2397)	2.4	2.7
Technology	2.6	(2584)	2.6	2.6
Art	2.8	(2595)	2.7	2.9
Science	2.9	(2672)	2.8	3.0
RE	3.0	(2629)	3.0	3.2
Home economics	3.0	(2176)	3.0	3.2
History	3.1	(2672)	3.0	3.3
Geography	3.1	(2669)	3.1	3.2
Irish	3.2	(722)	3.1	3.2
English	3.2	(2685)	3.2	3.3
French	3.3	(2378)	3.2	3.5
Maths	3.4	(2679)	3.3	3.6
<i>Total mean</i>	2.8		2.78	2.93

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

According to the overall mean score, pupils appeared to believe the amount of homework they were given was very slightly less than appropriate. However,

upon closer inspection, their apparent satisfaction may be partly accounted for by the very high scores assigned to a small minority of subjects in the 'too little' category. As in the case of conceptual difficulty, positive perceptions were expressed in more extreme terms than the negative ones.

Mathematics was seen to have the most unacceptable amount of homework. Other subjects involving too much homework were modern languages and then English. Subjects where too little homework was felt to be set were PE, IT, Health Education, music, technology and art. Pupils wanted less homework in three of the four curriculum areas with the highest allocations of teaching time, and considerably more in the practical and expressive subjects.

Because of the very high rating (i.e. low scores) in PE and also IT, the overall mean scores by type of school gave the misleading impression that secondary school pupils felt they were given slightly too little homework and that pupils in grammar schools believed they were set just the right amount. Scrutiny of the results for individual subjects revealed not only that secondary pupils felt they were given too much homework in three of their subjects (mathematics, French and English), but, more strikingly, that grammar school pupils felt they were set too much homework in eight of their subjects, especially in mathematics, French, English and history. It is noticeable that the responses from grammar school pupils here were more extreme. The scores for art and music (drama was not included in this item) may lend further support to the notion that grammar school pupils value the arts less than secondary school pupils.

7.3 OVERVIEW

Taken together, the perceptions of Year 8 pupils on manageability may suggest that both intrinsically 'difficult' subjects, that is, those which offer the most uncompromising intellectual challenge, and those which are particularly dense in content, may require a more imaginative and varied approach to mediation to render them less onerous. Pupils' responses registered their enthusiasm for subjects involving practical and expressive activities; perhaps some of these activities could be appropriately integrated into curricula which accentuate the more academic and less active subjects referred to above. More teachers of the latter type of subject may need to explore further opportunities for differentiation, and to adopt a wider range of teaching and learning strategies in order to stimulate motivation, particularly among boys and among pupils in grammar schools. Alternatively, however, teachers of the more practical and expressive subjects which were deemed popular but '*too easy*' and undemanding may need to consider how they could ensure that their subjects challenge and stretch all pupils. Clearly, curriculum designers and INSET providers have important roles to play in supporting teachers in addressing both of these problems.

8. PUPILS' VIEWS ON ASSESSMENT METHODS

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Year 8 pupils were asked to indicate how helpful various methods of assessment were. The pupils could identify the methods of assessment as 'not helpful', 'fairly helpful', 'very helpful', or, if they thought a particular method had not been used that year, they could indicate 'not used'.

8.2 EXAMINATIONS

Table 8.1 Pupils' views on examinations as a method of assessment

	Very Helpful %	Fairly Helpful %	Not Helpful %	Not Used %	No Response %	(N)
Secondary	71	23	4	1	1	(1749)
Grammar	58	35	7	0	0	(945)
<i>Overall</i>	<i>65</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>(2694)</i>

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100 across the rows.

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

The majority of pupils in the sample considered examinations very or fairly helpful. Some differences of opinion were apparent, with secondary school pupils indicating higher percentages than grammar pupils in relation to examinations as very helpful. The highest percentage recorded for examinations considered very helpful was from the high free school meals eligibility group at 76 per cent. These results are in accord with the Pilot Study, which found that, although conventional wisdom suggests examinations to be anathema to children, pupils clearly valued this form of assessment.

8.3 REPORTS

Over two-thirds of pupils from the secondary schools identified reports as a very helpful method of assessment, and slightly less than one-quarter deemed this method fairly helpful; four per cent of pupils felt reports were not helpful. Similarly, a two-thirds majority of pupils from grammar schools indicated this method as very helpful, whilst just over one-quarter (27 per cent) said reports were fairly helpful; six per cent of grammar pupils felt this method was not helpful.

8.4 TESTS AT THE END OF UNITS

Tests at the end of units were less positively received. Pupils from secondary schools were less positive about the helpfulness of tests than they were for examinations and reports, as only half indicated this method of assessment to be very useful. Over a third (38 per cent) of pupils in this subsample considered tests

to be fairly helpful, and eight per cent viewed them as not helpful. Grammar pupils likewise appeared less enthusiastic for this method than for examinations or reports, with 47 per cent considering tests very helpful; 42 per cent thought tests were fairly helpful and eight per cent saw them as not helpful.

8.5 MARKS AND GRADES ON WORK

Marks and grades for pupils' work were marginally better received than tests, but did not generally elicit levels of enthusiasm demonstrated for examinations and reports. Almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of pupils within the secondary sample indicated they considered marks/grades a very helpful method of assessment, and nearly one-third (32 per cent) suggested marks/grades were fairly helpful. Only four per cent of pupils found marks/grades not helpful. Over half the pupils (58 per cent) in grammar schools thought marks/grades were very helpful; over one-third (35 per cent) thought they were fairly helpful; five per cent felt they were not helpful.

8.6 OTHER METHODS

Teachers' written and oral comments and pupils' self review were generally considered less helpful methods of assessment than the above. For example, within the secondary sample, 45 per cent considered written comments very helpful, 41 per cent felt they were fairly helpful, and 11 per cent not helpful. Grammar school pupils held similar views with 43 per cent finding written comments very helpful, 42 per cent fairly helpful, and a high 12 per cent considering them not helpful. Very similar results were obtained with regard to teachers' oral comments and pupils' self-review.

Overall, the early results from the Year 8 survey lend weight to the findings of the Pilot Study that the majority of pupils firmly believe that examinations and reports are the most effective means of identifying their progress and attainment.

9. CROSS-CURRICULAR THEMES

In the questionnaire, pupils who, during Year 8, had done Information Technology (IT) or Health Education (HE) were required to complete a set of semantic differentials for these 'subjects'.

9.1 IT

IT emerged as the second most enjoyable subject after PE. It was deemed the third most important subject, after English and maths, for jobs and careers, and regarded as most important for adult life after English, maths, home economics and Health Education. Further, pupils felt it was useful for their present-day lives. It was also the subject (joint with PE) in which pupils felt they had made the most progress during Year 8. However, IT was the subject in which pupils felt most underworked in class and, after PE, was the subject they thought they did not do enough of and for which they had insufficient homework. It also emerged as the second easiest subject after PE, and as a subject in which pupils perceived a lesser degree of continuity. It might therefore be tentatively suggested that the Northern Ireland Curriculum and schools' provision of the subject do not reflect or capitalise on IT's popularity with pupils or the importance and usefulness they attach to it.

Pupils' gender appeared to make a difference to their perceptions of IT. Whilst both boys and girls regarded IT as important for a job or career and for adult life, in both cases, boys rated it as more important than girls. Girls thought that IT was equally appropriate for both sexes (mean score 3.0), whereas boys were slightly more inclined to see it as a subject for them (mean score 3.2). Boys also found IT easier than girls did. Confirming the trend that boys regard IT more highly than girls, pupils in single-sex boys' schools were more positive about the subject than their counterparts in mixed or single-sex girls' schools. Those in single-sex boys' schools felt more strongly than their peers in single-sex girls' schools that IT was a subject for boys, and were more likely to enjoy it. They also regarded it as more useful for their present-day lives than did their contemporaries in mixed or single-sex girls' schools. Further, they found IT markedly easier than pupils in mixed or single-sex girls' schools, and perhaps because of this felt that they had made more progress. A similar finding emerged regarding the size of school: pupils from large schools found IT notably easier than their peers in small or medium-sized schools, and felt they had also made the most progress. Pupils from large schools also regarded IT as more important for adult life compared with those pupils attending small or medium-sized schools.

Overall, the findings intimated that the majority of pupils were unsatisfied with the amount of IT that they had done during Year 8; this was particularly keenly felt, however, by pupils in grammar schools. These pupils (mean score 4.2) were notably more likely than their secondary school peers to feel that they had not done enough IT (mean score 3.9). They also found the work that they had done

easier (mean score 4.0) compared with their counterparts in secondary schools (mean score 3.7). Similarly, grammar school pupils (mean score 2.0) were conspicuously more inclined to think that they had had insufficient homework for IT compared with their secondary school peers (mean score 2.2). Overall, this may suggest that whilst schools' provision of IT was generally not meeting pupils' demands for it, this was especially the case in grammar schools.

9.2 HEALTH EDUCATION

The main finding for Health Education was fairly similar to that for IT in that the Northern Ireland Curriculum did not appear to capitalise on pupils' enjoyment of the subject and the importance they attached to it. Health Education was regarded by pupils as useful for their current lives (it was third in the ranking of subjects with PE and home economics, after English and mathematics), and, after English, mathematics and home economics (mean score, 1.8), was regarded as the most important subject for adult life (mean score, 2.1). It was the fifth most enjoyable subject, the sixth most important for a job or career, and joint with mathematics, art and home economics, and after PE, the subject in which they felt they had made the best progress. However, it was a subject for which pupils believed that they had too little homework (pupils only felt more strongly about the insufficient amount of homework in PE and IT), and was the third easiest subject and where they felt the third most underworked in class.

As with IT, pupils' gender appeared to affect their perception of Health Education. While boys felt that Health Education was equally appropriate to both sexes, girls felt that it was more a subject for them. Girls also thought that Health Education was more important for adult life than boys. The type of school pupils attended also appeared to impact on their views of Health Education (though it should be acknowledged that whilst 241 secondary school pupils completed this item, only 48 grammar school pupils did so). Grammar school pupils felt that they did not do enough Health Education, and found what they did do more enjoyable and easier than their peers in secondary school. However, secondary school pupils did regard Health Education as more useful for their current lives than their grammar school contemporaries.

Pupils who were from working-class backgrounds, attended secondary schools or those from schools with high eligibility for free school meals were more likely to regard Health Education as important for a job or career, as were those from small schools or Catholic schools. Pupils from schools with high levels of eligibility for free school meals regarded Health Education as more important for adult life than did their peers who were from schools with low or medium levels of eligibility.

Most importantly, when asked to identify any topics that they felt had not been sufficiently addressed in the Year 8 curriculum, Health Education issues, like IT, was high on the list of their unmet needs and priorities (e.g. drugs and sex education, first aid, etc.).

9.3 THE TEACHING OF THE CROSS-CURRICULAR THEMES

In the school questionnaire, respondents were asked how the six cross-curricular themes (CCTs), namely Information Technology (IT), Health Education (HE), Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU), Economic Awareness (EA), Cultural Heritage (CH) and Careers Education (CE), were covered in the Year 8 curriculum. The table below shows how many of the 51 schools indicated the methods by which they covered each of the CCTs: discrete provision or entirely through other subjects or both discrete provision and through other subjects. Some schools did not indicate how they addressed the CCTs.

Table 9.1 Schools' provision of the cross-curricular themes

CCTs	Discrete Provision (N)	Other Subjects (N)	Discrete Provision and Other Subjects (N)	Not Indicated (N)
IT	16	12	21	2
HE	5	35	7	4
EMU	1	43	3	4
EA	1	43	3	4
CH	0	43	3	5
CE	9	26	5	11

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 School Survey.

There were some notable variations in schools' approaches to each CCT. EMU, EA and CH were overwhelmingly taught through other subjects – very few schools made discrete provision for these CCTs, or covered them through discrete provision and other subjects. HE and CE were most often covered through other subjects, though there was greater coverage of these CCTs through discrete provision and discrete provision and other subjects than there was for EMU, EA and CH. The relatively high number of schools which did not indicate any method of provision for CE may, however, intimate that schools do not perceive this CCT as particularly relevant for Year 8 pupils.

IT appeared to be distinct in two ways. Firstly, while the other CCTs were most often covered through other subjects, this emerged as the least common way in which to teach IT. Secondly, the majority of schools covered the other CCTs in the same way, but for IT, schools appeared to differ more in the approach they adopted: 16 schools covered IT through discrete provision, 12 schools covered it through other subjects and 21 schools covered it through both. The higher frequency of discrete provision for IT may suggest the greater importance which schools attach to it compared with the other CCTs. Alternatively, it may be that schools find it more difficult to teach it across the curriculum, perhaps because incorporating IT into another subject might involve booking the computer room or planning work over several lessons so all pupils have time on the classroom computer.

Schools were also asked to identify the four main ‘carrier subjects’ for each of the CCTs when these were covered through other subjects. In total, 14 different subjects were cited by schools as carrying CE and EMU, 13 subjects were highlighted as carrying CH, and 12 subjects EA and HE. Perhaps intimating that schools find it more difficult to incorporate IT into other subjects, only nine subjects in total were cited as carrying this CCT.

The table below shows, for each of the CCTs, the four subjects which were most frequently highlighted as their carrier subjects, and the number of schools which cited each subject.

Table 9.2 The most frequently mentioned ‘carrier’ subjects for CCTs

CCT	Top 4 ‘Carrier’ Subjects	Number of Schools
IT	Science	21
	English	20
	Maths	18
	Geography	12
HE	Home economics	30
	Science	29
	PE/games	26
	PSE/form period	16
EMU	History	38
	RE	33
	English	28
	Geography	14
EA	Maths	39
	Geography	20
	Home economics	16
	Science	10
CH	History	44
	English	32
	Geography	18
	RE	12
CE	English	16
	PSE/form period	11
	Geography	7
	Science	7

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 10 School Survey.

A number of interesting features emerge from this table:

- geography appears in the top four rankings more than any other subject (five out of six themes), followed by English and science (four themes) – these three subjects have a lot of carrying to do;

- modern languages is the only one of the four curriculum areas with the highest teaching time recommendations not to be placed in the top four rankings for any of the CCTs;
- technology and the expressive arts are notably absent as leading carriers;
- EMU and CH share the same four most cited carrier subjects (reflecting the tendency for these CCTs to be viewed as combined into a single theme);
- EMU and CH have a humanities bias, while EA has a mathematics and science bias;
- CE receives few nominations, again suggesting that it may have limited coverage in the Year 8 curriculum.

10. VALUES IN EDUCATION

10.1 SUBJECTS WHICH HELP PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Item 2 in the questionnaire asked pupils for their views on a series of different issues relating to individual subjects in the school curriculum. One of the issues pupils were asked to comment on was the extent to which they felt a particular subject helped them to '*develop as a person*'.

The question was posed firstly to encourage pupils to reflect on the extent to which they felt individual subjects had contributed to their personal development, and secondly to identify which subjects pupils felt contributed most to personal development. In administering the questionnaire, researchers often gave some further clarification to the question by asking if pupils felt a subject '*has helped you to grow or mature as an individual*' or '*helped you to get to know yourself better*'.

Table 10.1 Year 8 pupils' perceptions of personal development by type of school

1 = really helped me develop as a person;
5 = hasn't helped me develop as a person

Subject	Overall Mean	(N)	Secondary Mean	Grammar Mean
Health Education	2.3	(291)	2.4	2.0
PE	2.5	(2647)	2.5	2.5
English	2.6	(2691)	2.5	2.9
Home economics	2.8	(2201)	2.8	3.0
RE	3.0	(2664)	3.0	3.1
IT	3.1	(2221)	3.0	3.4
Maths	3.1	(2682)	2.9	3.5
Science	3.1	(2682)	3.0	3.2
Art	3.3	(2672)	3.2	3.5
French	3.4	(2385)	3.2	3.6
Geography	3.4	(2385)	3.2	3.7
History	3.4	(2678)	3.3	3.6
Music	3.4	(2660)	3.3	3.7
Irish	3.5	(722)	3.5	3.4
Technology	3.5	(2675)	3.4	3.8
<i>Total mean</i>	<i>3.09</i>		<i>3.01</i>	<i>3.26</i>

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

Pupils indicated that Health Education contributed most to personal development; however, only a small subsample actually completed questions relating to this 'subject'. Quite a number of pupils suggested PSE when Health Education was

mentioned, and it may be interesting to discover if pupils would identify PSE as contributing to personal development as strongly as Health Education. PE was identified as the subject that contributed most strongly to personal development by the largest proportion of the sample. The subjects that rated most favourably in contributing to personal development after PE were English, home economics and RE.

Technology was identified as the subject that contributed least to personal development. Irish, music, history, geography and French were also identified by pupils as not contributing strongly to personal development. Quite surprisingly, mathematics and science attracted higher scores for personal development than the expressive arts subjects.

A striking finding apparent in the table is that pupils attending secondary schools were more likely to feel that their subjects contributed to personal development than pupils attending grammar schools. In all, 12 of the 15 subjects listed in the table had lower mean scores for secondary school pupils than for grammar school pupils. In particular, mathematics, geography, French, English, IT, music and technology were rated much more highly in terms of their contribution to personal development by secondary school pupils than by their counterparts in grammar schools.

In responding to RE and its potential for contributing to personal development, there was a significant difference in the responses of maintained school pupils and pupils attending controlled or integrated schools. Pupils attending maintained schools were much more likely to rate RE as really helping or helping them to develop as a person. This perception may relate to the particular nature of mediation of RE in maintained schools and/or to the existence of a '*catholic ethos*' which was seen to be promoted in many maintained schools (Montgomery and Smith, 1997; Harland *et al.*, 1999).

In considering gender differences, with the exception of PE, girls rated all of the subjects listed in the table above more highly in terms of their potential to contribute to personal development than boys. Girls attending single-sex schools again rated all of these subjects, except for PE, more highly than pupils attending boys' schools or mixed schools. (It is perhaps worth noting, however, that only a very small number of boys attending boys' single-sex schools actually completed home economics and Health Education (20).) Following a review of their responses to each of the subjects, boys were most likely to identify or to feel they had some experience of personal development in PE. It is perhaps possible that some boys understood personal development, at least in some measure, as physical development, or it may be that some schools place a more holistic emphasis on development in PE, exploring not only the physical aspects but also the personal, emotional and social aspects.

10.2 CHANGES IN PUPILS' VIEWS

Question 3 stated: '*Thinking about all the things you have done in your first year at this school, have you learnt anything which has changed your views or the way*

you think about things? How have your views changed? Which subjects helped bring about the changes?’

The aim of this question was to discover if pupils felt that what they had learned or studied in the Northern Ireland Curriculum, and in their schools, could affect their own personal views and opinions and if they could articulate how these views or opinions had changed.

In responding to the question, 51 per cent of the sample (1,357 pupils) answered ‘Yes’, they had learnt something that had changed their views. Sixteen per cent said ‘No’, they had not learnt anything which had changed their views and 32 per cent said they were ‘not sure’. It is interesting that quite a large percentage were unsure. This may have been because they felt they had had insufficient time to reflect on a whole year’s work, or that, if any of their views had changed, they were uncertain whether or not particular subjects had been a contributory factor or that they were unsure whether the views which they felt had changed actually constituted a ‘correct’ response to the question.

As expected, the open-ended nature of the question resulted in an eclectic range of responses from pupils. In order to provide some structure and order to these responses, they were grouped under 37 headings and then for the purposes of analysis organised into four broader categories. These are as follows (percentages are based on respondents in the total sample, 2,694):

1. changes in attitudes towards school and school work in general (12 per cent);
2. changes in ways of thinking/intellectual processes (seven per cent)
3. changes in attitudes towards specific subjects (18 per cent);
4. changes in personal behaviour/previous values/morals (20 per cent)

1. Changes in attitudes towards school and school work

These were reflected in a range of fairly general responses that focused on areas such as enjoyment and manageability of the school curriculum (e.g. school is harder/easier than expected). The most frequent type of response referred to having a greater awareness of the importance of achieving good qualifications in order to get a job and realising what is important in order to do well at school (e.g. behaviour in class). Similarly, finding a new purpose in school and taking school more seriously were mentioned by several pupils. Although the actual figures represent a comparatively small proportion of the entire sample, it is perhaps worth noting that the changes in attitudes to school and school work by Year 8 pupils tended overall to be very positive.

2. Changes in ways of thinking/intellectual processes

Under this broad category, pupils mentioned having a greater understanding of more subjects than they had expected: ‘*understanding things in more depth*’ was a frequent observation. Several reported feeling more mature in the way they thought and spoke. Others considered that they had become more ‘*logical*’.

3. Changes in attitudes towards specific subjects

This category included finding a subject more enjoyable, more interesting or more difficult, or conversely less enjoyable, interesting or difficult. Pupils' responses suggested that before transferring to their post-primary school, they had anticipated feeling a particular way about certain subjects and that these apprehensions or expectations had apparently been challenged or changed in some cases.

The two most frequent subcategories of responses were understanding particular subjects in greater depth and enjoying specific subjects more than they had expected.

4. Changes in personal behaviour/previous values/morals

Responses under this category were expressed in a variety of ways. Some pupils' responses were recorded simply as '*see[ing] the world differently*' or '*judg[ing] people differently*'. Other responses indicated that pupils were more aware of other people's views or that they had gained new insights into life. Personal changes were described by a number of pupils in terms of having changed as a person or having experienced changes in the values or morals that they held or in their attitudes about behaviour. Five per cent of the total sample stated that they had changed as a person. This represented the single most common response to the question of change in views and how pupils thought about things. Other changes included references to positive and negative views of foreigners, a need for greater equality and more positive experiences of religious difference in Northern Ireland.

Changes in pupil views and attitudes were clearly of a broad and varied nature, reflecting various levels in the depth of change, from responses focusing on subjects and school, to responses dealing with personal values and self-awareness. It is significant that some pupils felt that various aspects of the school curriculum had impacted on them in quite a profound manner.

The second part of this question asked pupils to state which subjects had brought about changes in their views and the way they thought about things. Table 10.2 below lists the subjects that were recorded most frequently by pupils as having effected changes in their views.

In general terms, it is probably very significant that the ranking of subjects in this table is very similar to the ranking of subjects according to the amount of teaching time they typically receive (see Table 2.1). This suggests that, in Year 8 at least, the degree to which subjects are perceived to have an impact on personal development is partly a product of the amount of time allocated for exposure to particular subjects. Hence, in considering the results set out in the table, it may be profitable to identify subjects that are disproportionately higher or lower than the time-based rankings. English, for example, attracts a higher share of the responses than mathematics or languages.

Table 10.2 Frequency of pupils mentioning subjects that have effected changes in pupils' views

Subject	% of Pupils
English	16
Science	12
Maths	12
RE	10
French	7
History	7
Home economics	7
Geography	6
PE	5
PSE/Health Education	3
Technology	4
Art	3
Drama	2
IT	2
Music	2
No response	51
<i>N</i> =	(2694)

Pupils could list more than one subject, so the percentages do not sum to 100 per cent.

Source: Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study Year 8 Pupil Survey.

Further analyses suggested that the subjects that were more likely to be associated with changes in personal values and development (the fourth category described above) were (in rank order) RE, English, science and home economics.

10.3 PUPILS' RESPONSES TO VALUE STATEMENTS

In this question, pupils were presented with a list of 14 statements and asked to rate how important they felt each one was on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 = 'very important' and 1 = 'not important at all').

The statements addressed a range of issues including pupil-teacher relations, performance, awareness of community, motivation for choosing a career and some moral dilemmas. The purpose of these questions was to ascertain pupils' levels of awareness of some of the issues, and to explore the level of importance they attached to other issues in their first year at post-primary-level education.

For the purposes of this analysis, a selection of the statements included in this question will be explored in order to give a brief overview of the nature of pupil responses. A cursory review of responses to this question indicated that the vast majority (at least 66 per cent) rated all of the statements as either important or very important. Two statements were exceptions. These addressed the importance of after-school activities and the importance of obeying a teacher when the pupil thought s/he was being unfair.

Pupils were quite divided on the **importance of after-school activities**, with 38 per cent stating that they were important, 25 per cent suggesting they were not very important and 18 per cent commenting that they were unsure. When a range of variables were applied to the responses, a number emerged as particularly interesting, including school type, school gender and school size. Grammar school pupils perceived after-school activities as being important more than their counterparts in secondary schools. It is possible that, in pupils' minds, the term 'after-school activities' was interpreted as sports activities and that these were promoted more strongly in grammar schools. Girls attending a single-sex school were least likely to consider after-school activities important, while boys attending a single-sex school were most likely to think that such activities were important. The larger the size of the school attended by pupils, the more likely it was that after-school activities would be considered important. This may have been due to the existence of a greater variety of activities in larger schools and therefore a greater involvement by pupils.

The second statement which was an exception concerned **the importance of obeying a teacher even when it was felt s/he was being unfair**. Thirty-two per cent of pupils were not sure about the importance of this, while 27 per cent thought it was still important to do so. Again, the type of school which pupils attended affected their responses, as did the gender of pupils. There was an appreciable difference between grammar school pupil responses and secondary school pupil responses. The former believed that it was less important to obey a teacher in the given circumstances. These pupils may have given greater thought to the question or perhaps employed a more complex thinking strategy in responding to the question. It may also reflect to some extent on the nature of discipline systems employed in individual schools. Girls tended to believe more strongly than boys that it was still important to obey a teacher even if s/he was being unfair. This may reflect a general perception that girls are generally more obedient or compliant than boys at this particular age.

While pupils tended to rate the remaining statements as important or very important, some significant findings did emerge when different variables were introduced. All of the variables employed in the study produced differences in pupil responses to the question that asked how important **it is to have an opportunity to discuss what you believe in**. Pupils attending grammar schools rated this much more highly than pupils attending secondary schools. It was also considered more important by pupils in maintained schools than those attending controlled or integrated schools. Girls also believed that it was much more important to discuss such issues than boys.

The importance of being aware of what is happening in the community was rated much more highly by girls and, in particular, by girls attending a single-sex school. This may reflect the stereotypical view of a more caring nature in girls or a greater concern by girls for what happens beyond the bounds of school.

Finally, when pupils were asked how important **it is to tell the truth even if it means someone will get into trouble**, 44 per cent of the sample said it was still

very important. A further analysis of these responses using variables indicated considerable differences in every case. Pupils attending secondary schools placed a considerably higher emphasis on the importance of telling the truth than grammar school pupils, as did pupils attending maintained schools. Again, girls attending single-sex schools were more likely to feel that honesty was the best policy than pupils at mixed or single-sex boys' schools. Girls in general, more than boys, felt that telling the truth was important. In terms of social class, pupils who were identified as coming from a working-class background were significantly more likely to believe that telling the truth was important in these circumstances than middle-class pupils.

The findings outlined above give only a brief insight into pupil responses to the value-related questions in the questionnaire. However, it does seem possible to draw a few tentative conclusions.

Personal development did not appear to be something which a clear majority of pupils could strongly identify as being part or not being part of their experiences of the curriculum. While there may have been confusion in some pupils' minds over a definition of personal development, a number of subjects did emerge as contributing more effectively to pupils' personal development. There were also some apparent differences in pupil responses in relation to gender and religious orientation.

Those pupils who felt they had learnt something which helped to change their views, or the way they thought about things, recalled quite a broad range of ways in which they had experienced the curriculum, in terms of how they felt it had impacted on or changed their views, opinions and attitudes. Their responses suggest that there is potential for the curriculum to effect changes in pupils' perceptions of others and the world, and their understanding of themselves.

Pupils expressed quite strong opinions in response to the list of value statements and demonstrated a keen sense of what they perceived to be right and wrong in terms of pupil-teacher relationships, an awareness of community and moral dilemmas. School type and gender, and pupil gender have proved to be particularly important variables in terms of any further analysis of pupil responses.

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APPENDIX 1

THE NORTHERN IRELAND CURRICULUM COHORT STUDY: PROJECT INFORMATION

Background

As part of its remit to keep all aspects of the curriculum under review, the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has commissioned the NFER to undertake a cohort study of pupils, which will complement the Council's curriculum monitoring programme. While the latter furnishes insights into the appropriateness of programmes of study and attainment targets for individual subjects, as well as an overview of the whole curriculum and its appropriateness by key stage, the cohort study also facilitates an evaluative analysis of the coherence of the curriculum as experienced by the learner. The study centres on groups of pupils at Key Stage 3.

Building on a 16-month pilot study conducted in five post-primary schools, the cohort inquiry represents an important and innovative development in the methods used to monitor the implementation of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. These developments in monitoring techniques are significant not only in Northern Ireland, but across the UK as a whole. In focusing on pupils', as well as teachers', perspectives of the whole curriculum and its longitudinal effects on learning, the project addresses a largely unresearched area that offers the potential for many insights and practical benefits to policy makers, schools and teachers.

Aims

The cohort study aims to provide evidence of the impact of the curriculum as a total package from the perspective of the learner in terms of:

- relevance and appropriateness;
- breadth, balance and coherence; and
- enjoyment and manageability.

This evidence should be generalisable to the whole Key Stage 3 population in Northern Ireland. The research will also examine evidence of the extent to which the aims of the Northern Ireland curriculum are evident in its implementation; the extent to which the objectives of cross-curricular themes are being addressed through the curriculum; and the appropriateness of methods of assessment and evaluation. Additionally, in collaboration with researchers from the University of Ulster, the cohort study will include an analysis of the extent to which values are being imparted and assimilated.

Methods

The study will employ both quantitative and qualitative methods and consist of three main strands.

(i) *An annual pupil questionnaire*

A questionnaire will be administered by researchers to the pupil cohort sample towards the end of each of the three academic years in Key Stage 3. The target sample for this questionnaire are pupils who started Year 8 in September 1996 and will complete Year 10 in 1999. The backbone of the instrument will consist of a semantic differential grid, which will invite ratings on the key curriculum design concepts (e.g. coherence, appropriateness, continuity, enjoyment, etc) for all the main areas of the Northern Ireland curriculum, including, wherever possible, the cross-curricular themes. Other items in the questionnaire will include: biographical information; the constructs pupils use to describe their learning (e.g. 'subject' or more general vocabularies of experience); pupil perceptions of topics they consider to be insufficiently covered in the curriculum; pupil perceptions of the links in learning associated with different subject areas; and pupils' views on the value of different assessment methods. In collaboration with CCEA officers and researchers from the University of Ulster, new items on values in education will be developed and included. Most of the questionnaire items will be repeated at each administration in order to monitor changes in pupils' perceptions and experiences. The questionnaire will be completed by a ten per cent target sample of all Northern Ireland pupils in approximately 50 post-primary schools.

(ii) *An annual school questionnaire*

This survey of the same 50 schools will request information from school managers on the organisation of the curriculum and timetable for the pupil year group in question (e.g. how the various subject areas are mediated, how much time is allocated to each subject, how the cross-curricular themes are taught). It will also seek to collect key background details on the school, its policies and its environment.

(iii) *Case study schools*

The case-study component of the study has a pivotal role to play in providing more detailed evidence on pupils' perceptions and experiences than that which can be gained through the surveys alone. The case study fieldwork will be conducted in five schools. Each of the schools will receive a four-day fieldwork visit during November/December and March in each of the three academic years. The basic itinerary for each visit will typically comprise:

- interviews with 12 pupils;
- a full day's pupil pursuit/classroom observation;
- interviews with the observed pupils;
- interviews with teachers, middle and senior managers.

The same 12 pupils in each school will be the focus of longitudinal inquiry throughout the three years. As a result of a preliminary Key Stage 2 Year 7 case study project, most of these pupils were interviewed and observed while they attended feeder primary schools. Consequently, valuable opportunities for comparing the same pupils' perceptions and experiences of the curriculum at Key Stages 2 and 3 have been created.

Outcomes

The main outcomes of the cohort study will comprise:

- an annual report analysing data from the three research methods (i.e. Year 8, 9 and 10 reports);
- a final report analysing all the data from Years 7 to 10;
- conferences with focus groups to disseminate the results and discuss their implications for practice.

Personnel

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Sponsors	Department of Education for Northern Ireland Esmée Fairbairn Charitable Trust Northern Ireland CCEA

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APPENDIX 2

NORTHERN IRELAND CURRICULUM COHORT STUDY

A QUESTIONNAIRE FOR YEAR 8 PUPILS

- ◆ NFER has been asked by CCEA to collect pupils' views on the curriculum. To help us do this, we would be very grateful if you would complete this questionnaire. **We would like to know what you think about the things you do and learn about in your lessons.**

- ◆ Your responses will be completely confidential.

- ◆ The questionnaire should take about one hour to fill in.

- ◆ The researcher in the class with you today will explain how to complete the questionnaire. If you are not sure about any question, please ask the researcher for help.

- ◆ We are interested in YOUR opinions, so please don't discuss your answers with the person sitting next to you.

- ◆ It is not a test. Your replies will not be marked, so don't spend too long worrying about spelling etc.

1 Looking at all the things you have done in your first year at this school, what are **the most important things** you have learned?

11

12

13-14

15-16

17-18

19-20

21-22

2 We would like you to think about what you have done, studied and learnt in each of your subjects **over the past year** (i.e. since September 1996). For each subject, look first at the words at the opposite end of each row, then circle **one** number which best matches what you think about what you have done and learnt in that subject.

Here's an example to complete with your researcher:

	Drama						
hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy	23
important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career	24
important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life	25
too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it	26

Please do the following subjects by yourself, though ask the researcher for help if you need it. Remember to think about the **content** of each subject (i.e. what you have done and learnt).

		English						
	hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy	27
	mainly for girls	1	2	3	4	5	mainly for boys	28
	I really enjoy it	1	2	3	4	5	I really dislike it	29
	important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career	30
	important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life	31
	too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it	32
	useful for me now	1	2	3	4	5	useless for me now	33
really helped me to develop as a person		1	2	3	4	5	hasn't helped me to develop as a person	34
lessons usually build on the last one		1	2	3	4	5	lessons don't usually build on the last one	35
too little homework		1	2	3	4	5	too much homework	36
I feel overworked in class		1	2	3	4	5	I feel underworked in class	37
I've made poor progress in this subject		1	2	3	4	5	I've made good progress in this subject	38
		Maths						
	hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy	39
	mainly for girls	1	2	3	4	5	mainly for boys	40
	I really enjoy it	1	2	3	4	5	I really dislike it	41
	important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career	42
	important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life	43
	too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it	44
	useful for me now	1	2	3	4	5	useless for me now	45
really helped me to develop as a person		1	2	3	4	5	hasn't helped me to develop as a person	46
lessons usually build on the last one		1	2	3	4	5	lessons don't usually build on the last one	47
too little homework		1	2	3	4	5	too much homework	48
I feel overworked in class		1	2	3	4	5	I feel underworked in class	49
I've made poor progress in this subject		1	2	3	4	5	I've made good progress in this subject	50
		Science						
	hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy	52
	mainly for girls	1	2	3	4	5	mainly for boys	53
	I really enjoy it	1	2	3	4	5	I really dislike it	54
	important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career	55
	important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life	56
	too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it	57
	useful for me now	1	2	3	4	5	useless for me now	58
really helped me to develop as a person		1	2	3	4	5	hasn't helped me to develop as a person	59
lessons usually build on the last one		1	2	3	4	5	lessons don't usually build on the last one	60
too little homework		1	2	3	4	5	too much homework	61
I feel overworked in class		1	2	3	4	5	I feel underworked in class	62
I've made poor progress in this subject		1	2	3	4	5	I've made good progress in this subject	63

Technology and Design

hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy	65
mainly for girls	1	2	3	4	5	mainly for boys	66
I really enjoy it	1	2	3	4	5	I really dislike it	67
important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career	68
important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life	69
too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it	70
useful for me now	1	2	3	4	5	useless for me now	71
really helped me to develop as a person	1	2	3	4	5	hasn't helped me to develop as a person	72
lessons usually build on the last one	1	2	3	4	5	lessons don't usually build on the last one	73
too little homework	1	2	3	4	5	too much homework	74
I feel overworked in class	1	2	3	4	5	I feel underworked in class	75
I've made poor progress in this subject	1	2	3	4	5	I've made good progress in this subject	76

History

hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy	78
mainly for girls	1	2	3	4	5	mainly for boys	79
I really enjoy it	1	2	3	4	5	I really dislike it	80
important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career	11
important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life	12
too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it	13
useful for me now	1	2	3	4	5	useless for me now	14
really helped me to develop as a person	1	2	3	4	5	hasn't helped me to develop as a person	15
lessons usually build on the last one	1	2	3	4	5	lessons don't usually build on the last one	16
too little homework	1	2	3	4	5	too much homework	17
I feel overworked in class	1	2	3	4	5	I feel underworked in class	18
I've made poor progress in this subject	1	2	3	4	5	I've made good progress in this subject	19

Geography

hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy	20
mainly for girls	1	2	3	4	5	mainly for boys	21
I really enjoy it	1	2	3	4	5	I really dislike it	22
important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career	23
important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life	24
too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it	25
useful for me now	1	2	3	4	5	useless for me now	26
really helped me to develop as a person	1	2	3	4	5	hasn't helped me to develop as a person	27
lessons usually build on the last one	1	2	3	4	5	lessons don't usually build on the last one	28
too little homework	1	2	3	4	5	too much homework	29
I feel overworked in class	1	2	3	4	5	I feel underworked in class	30
I've made poor progress in this subject	1	2	3	4	5	I've made good progress in this subject	31

Card Two
ID 6-10

Art and Design

hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy	33
mainly for girls	1	2	3	4	5	mainly for boys	34
I really enjoy it	1	2	3	4	5	I really dislike it	35
important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career	36
important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life	37
too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it	38
useful for me now	1	2	3	4	5	useless for me now	39
really helped me to develop as a person	1	2	3	4	5	hasn't helped me to develop as a person	40
lessons usually build on the last one	1	2	3	4	5	lessons don't usually build on the last one	41
too little homework	1	2	3	4	5	too much homework	42
I feel overworked in class	1	2	3	4	5	I feel underworked in class	43
I've made poor progress in this subject	1	2	3	4	5	I've made good progress in this subject	44

Music

hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy	46
mainly for girls	1	2	3	4	5	mainly for boys	47
I really enjoy it	1	2	3	4	5	I really dislike it	48
important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career	49
important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life	50
too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it	51
useful for me now	1	2	3	4	5	useless for me now	52
really helped me to develop as a person	1	2	3	4	5	hasn't helped me to develop as a person	53
lessons usually build on the last one	1	2	3	4	5	lessons don't usually build on the last one	54
too little homework	1	2	3	4	5	too much homework	55
I feel overworked in class	1	2	3	4	5	I feel underworked in class	56
I've made poor progress in this subject	1	2	3	4	5	I've made good progress in this subject	57

PE

hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy	58
mainly for girls	1	2	3	4	5	mainly for boys	59
I really enjoy it	1	2	3	4	5	I really dislike it	60
important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career	61
important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life	62
too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it	63
useful for me now	1	2	3	4	5	useless for me now	64
really helped me to develop as a person	1	2	3	4	5	hasn't helped me to develop as a person	65
lessons usually build on the last one	1	2	3	4	5	lessons don't usually build on the last one	66
too little homework	1	2	3	4	5	too much homework	67
I feel overworked in class	1	2	3	4	5	I feel underworked in class	68
I've made poor progress in this subject	1	2	3	4	5	I've made good progress in this subject	69

RE

hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy	71
mainly for girls	1	2	3	4	5	mainly for boys	72
I really enjoy it	1	2	3	4	5	I really dislike it	73
important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career	74
important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life	75
too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it	76
useful for me now	1	2	3	4	5	useless for me now	77
really helped me to develop as a person	1	2	3	4	5	hasn't helped me to develop as a person	78
lessons usually build on the last one	1	2	3	4	5	lessons don't usually build on the last one	79
too little homework	1	2	3	4	5	too much homework	80
I feel overworked in class	1	2	3	4	5	I feel underworked in class	11
I've made poor progress in this subject	1	2	3	4	5	I've made good progress in this subject	12

Card Three
ID 6-10

French

(if not, alternative language

hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy	13
mainly for girls	1	2	3	4	5	mainly for boys	14
I really enjoy it	1	2	3	4	5	I really dislike it	15
important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career	16
important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life	17
too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it	18
useful for me now	1	2	3	4	5	useless for me now	19
really helped me to develop as a person	1	2	3	4	5	hasn't helped me to develop as a person	20
lessons usually build on the last one	1	2	3	4	5	lessons don't usually build on the last one	21
too little homework	1	2	3	4	5	too much homework	22
I feel overworked in class	1	2	3	4	5	I feel underworked in class	23
I've made poor progress in this subject	1	2	3	4	5	I've made good progress in this subject	24

Irish (if appropriate)

hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy	25
mainly for girls	1	2	3	4	5	mainly for boys	26
I really enjoy it	1	2	3	4	5	I really dislike it	27
important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career	28
important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life	29
too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it	30
useful for me now	1	2	3	4	5	useless for me now	31
really helped me to develop as a person	1	2	3	4	5	hasn't helped me to develop as a person	32
lessons usually build on the last one	1	2	3	4	5	lessons don't usually build on the last one	33
too little homework	1	2	3	4	5	too much homework	34
I feel overworked in class	1	2	3	4	5	I feel underworked in class	35
I've made poor progress in this subject	1	2	3	4	5	I've made good progress in this subject	36

Home Economics						
(if not, alternative subject						38
hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy 39
mainly for girls	1	2	3	4	5	mainly for boys 40
I really enjoy it	1	2	3	4	5	I really dislike it 41
important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career 42
important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life 43
too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it 44
useful for me now	1	2	3	4	5	useless for me now 45
really helped me to develop as a person	1	2	3	4	5	hasn't helped me to develop as a person 46
lessons usually build on the last one	1	2	3	4	5	lessons don't usually build on the last one 47
too little homework	1	2	3	4	5	too much homework 48
I feel overworked in class	1	2	3	4	5	I feel underworked in class 49
I've made poor progress in this subject	1	2	3	4	5	I've made good progress in this subject 50

Health Education						
hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy 52
mainly for girls	1	2	3	4	5	mainly for boys 53
I really enjoy it	1	2	3	4	5	I really dislike it 54
important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career 55
important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life 56
too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it 57
useful for me now	1	2	3	4	5	useless for me now 58
really helped me to develop as a person	1	2	3	4	5	hasn't helped me to develop as a person 59
lessons usually build on the last one	1	2	3	4	5	lessons don't usually build on the last one 60
too little homework	1	2	3	4	5	too much homework 61
I feel overworked in class	1	2	3	4	5	I feel underworked in class 62
I've made poor progress in this subject	1	2	3	4	5	I've made good progress in this subject 63

IT - using computers						
hard	1	2	3	4	5	easy 65
mainly for girls	1	2	3	4	5	mainly for boys 66
I really enjoy it	1	2	3	4	5	I really dislike it 67
important for job/career	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for job/career 68
important for adult life	1	2	3	4	5	not needed for adult life 69
too much of it	1	2	3	4	5	not enough of it 70
useful for me now	1	2	3	4	5	useless for me now 71
really helped me to develop as a person	1	2	3	4	5	hasn't helped me to develop as a person 72
lessons usually build on the last one	1	2	3	4	5	lessons don't usually build on the last one 73
too little homework	1	2	3	4	5	too much homework 74
I feel overworked in class	1	2	3	4	5	I feel underworked in class 75
I've made poor progress in this subject	1	2	3	4	5	I've made good progress in this subject 76

3 Thinking about all you have done in your first year at this school, have you learnt anything which has changed your views or the way you think about things?

Please circle one number.

Yes 1 No 2 Not Sure 3

77

(a) how have your views changed?

78-79, 80
Card Four
ID 6-10
11-12

(b) which subjects helped bring about the changes?

13-14
15-16
17-18
19-20

4 Please say whether you agree or disagree with the following statements by circling one number in each row.

	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	
(a) I have enjoyed the things I have done in the first year of this school more than I did the last year of the primary school.	1	2	3	21
(b) Many of the subjects that I have done this year just repeated what I learnt in primary school.	1	2	3	22
(c) The things I did at primary school prepared me well for this school.	1	2	3	23
(d) The things that I did at primary school were more enjoyable than what I have done at this school.	1	2	3	24
(e) Most of the subjects done this year followed on well from what I did at primary school.	1	2	3	25
(f) I have learnt more things at this school than I did in my last year at the primary school.	1	2	3	26
(g) I was more interested in my school work in the primary school than here.	1	2	3	27

5 Is there anything that you would like to have done or learnt about at school which so far has not been covered sufficiently in your lessons?

Please circle **one** number.

Yes 1 No 2

30

If YES, please list up to **three** skills, topics or subjects that you would like to have done or learnt about:

(a) 31-32

(b) 33-34

(c) 35-36

6 How important do you think each of the following are?
 Think about each of the following statements and rate each one on a scale of 1 to 5. (5 = very important and 1 = not important at all) by circling **one** number in each row.

	Not at all important	Not very important	Not sure	Important	Very important	
(a) being involved in after-school activities	1	2	3	4	5	39
(b) obeying a teacher when you feel he or she is being unfair	1	2	3	4	5	40
(c) getting a well-paid job	1	2	3	4	5	41
(d) getting on well with your teacher	1	2	3	4	5	42
(e) achieving good grades in all your subjects	1	2	3	4	5	43
(f) having the opportunity to discuss what you believe in	1	2	3	4	5	44
(g) being well-behaved	1	2	3	4	5	45
(h) being aware of what is happening in your community	1	2	3	4	5	46
(i) being able to approach a teacher about anything	1	2	3	4	5	47
(j) getting a job you enjoy	1	2	3	4	5	48
(k) being successful, no matter what it takes to achieve	1	2	3	4	5	49
(l) keeping rules even when you think they are silly	1	2	3	4	5	50
(m) helping others out/having consideration for others	1	2	3	4	5	51
(n) telling the truth even if it means someone will get into trouble	1	2	3	4	5	52

7	Try to think of an example when what you did or learnt in one subject linked up with what you did or learnt in another subject or subjects.					
	(a) What were the subjects that linked up?					54-55 56-57 58-59
	(b) Please could you tell us how they linked up? _____					60-61
	(c) Did these links help you with your learning?					62-63
	(d) If you can't remember any link, please tick the box. <input type="checkbox"/>					64
8	(a) Please circle one number in each row to show how helpful you think the following methods of finding out how you are getting on have been in your work this year. If you think a particular method has not been used this year, circle 'not used'.					
		Not helpful	Fairly helpful	Very helpful	Not used	
	Examinations	1	2	3	4	66
	Marks or grades on my work	1	2	3	4	67
	Reports	1	2	3	4	68
	Tests (e.g. at the end of units)	1	2	3	4	69
	Teacher's written comments on my work	1	2	3	4	70
	What the teacher says about my work	1	2	3	4	71
	Looking back at my work myself	1	2	3	4	72
	(b) If you can think of any other ways you find out how you are getting on, please write them in the space below and circle a number.					
	.....	1	2	3	4	73
	.....	1	2	3	4	74
	.....	1	2	3	4	75

(c) Which is the most helpful of all the methods listed in 8(a) and 8(b), and why?

76-77
78-79

Finally, some questions about yourself.

Card Five
ID 6-10

9 **Your name**

10 **Your date of birth**

Date	Month	Year

11-16

11 **Sex** Please circle *one* number.

Boy	Girl
1	2

17

12 **Form** Please write the name of your form in the box.

18-19

13 **Name and place of the primary school you**
went to, before coming to this school

20-26

14 **Please tell us about your parents' (or guardians') jobs.**

If either of them is not working at the moment, please tell us about the last job he or she had. If you can't answer any of the following questions, write 'Don't know' in the appropriate space.

(a) What is the name of the job?

Father

Mother

.....

(b) What kind of work do they do?

28, 29-30

.....

(c) What sort of place or organisation do they work for?

31, 32-33

.....

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR HELP

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Real Curriculum: at the start of Key Stage 3

This booklet is the second in a series of NFER reports to be published under the thematic title, *Real Curriculum*. By focusing on pupils' perspectives of what learning in the classroom is like, the series attempts to look beyond intended and official versions of the curriculum to the reality of learners' experiences of the whole curriculum. In so doing, it is hoped the reports will offer analyses that will help teachers, school managers and educational policy makers continue to develop curricular experiences that really meet the needs of children and young people in the 21st century.

The evidence presented in the series is drawn from an extensive longitudinal research project called the Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study. While there have been other longitudinal studies of pupils' attitudes to schooling, we believe this is the first, in terms of both scale and scope, to focus directly on pupils' perspectives of the central curriculum design concepts such as coherence, relevance, breadth and balance. It is the issues surrounding these and similar topics that are clearly pertinent to all curriculum frameworks.

The second report examines the quantitative evidence on pupils' experiences of the curriculum in the first year of post-primary schooling. Issues covered include:

- the relevance of the curriculum
- the breadth and balance within it
- coherence across the whole curriculum
- continuity and progression in teaching and learning
- cross-curricular themes
- values in education
- whether or not the curriculum was manageable
- whether or not pupils enjoyed the curriculum.

The first report in the series, *Real Curriculum: at the end of Key Stage 2*, analysed the early qualitative findings on pupils' responses to the curriculum they experienced during the final year of the primary phase.

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