Real Curriculum:

at the end of Key Stage 2

Report One from the Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study

John Harland, Kay Kinder,
Mary Ashworth, Alison Montgomery,
Helen Moor and Anne Wilkin

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THE *REAL CURRICULUM* SERIES

This booklet marks the launch of 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.

This first report examines the evidence on pupils' experiences of the curriculum in the final years of primary schooling. The second report analyses the early quantitative findings on pupils' responses to the curriculum they experienced during the first year of the secondary phase. Subsequent publications will consist of separate 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1. THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

This paper summarises the interim findings of the Year 7 Phase of the Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study – a major four-year investigation running from September 1996 to March 2000. The aim of the research is to monitor the appropriateness of the Northern Ireland Curriculum by key stage, to evaluate the coherence of the curriculum as experienced by the learner, and to examine the impact of the curriculum, as a whole, from the learner's perspective.

Building on a 16-month pilot study conducted in five post-primary schools, the Cohort Study represents an important and innovative development in the methods used to monitor the implementation of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. In focusing on pupils' perspectives of the whole curriculum and their longitudinal learning experiences, the project addresses a largely unresearched area that offers the potential for many insights and practical benefits to policy makers, schools and teachers. These developments in monitoring techniques are significant not only in Northern Ireland, but across the UK as a whole. Further details about the project are presented in Appendix 1.

A full report of the study will be produced at the end of the four years; in the mean time, a series of interim working papers is being produced. These papers, including this synthesis of the Year 7 Phase of the project, should be regarded as provisional reports which offer exploratory and tentative analyses.

1.2 Background

The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to carry out a pilot phase for the Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study between September 1994 and December 1995. Following the recommendations of the Report on the Pilot Study (Harland *et al*, 1996), the research was extended in order that a sub-set of the cohort sample could be studied before they left their primary schools in June 1996 and made their transition to post-primary schools in September of that year. This sub-set now form a valuable part of the sample to be monitored throughout their Years 8 to 10 as part of the main phase of the Cohort Study.

The need and rationale for a prompt investigation of Year 7 pupils' experience of the whole curriculum was amply demonstrated in the Report on the Pilot Study. It became clear, for example, that pupils' constructs of the whole curriculum at Year 8 were influenced by their previous experiences of classroom organisation and learning. Consequently, in order to analyse the distinctive impact of the whole curriculum at Key Stage 3, it was considered essential to understand what attitudes and conceptual frameworks pupils bring with them from Key Stage 2. If the perceptions and experiences of the current Year 7 pupils could be documented before their transition to post-primary school (i.e. in the summer term 1996), an

important baseline would be established which would pay dividends throughout the full Cohort Study. Furthermore, the pilot inquiry also demonstrated how Key Stage 3 teachers' accounts of such concepts as progression and relevance frequently referred back to pupils' contrasting experiences of learning in the primary phase.

For all these reasons, it was felt that a Year 7 Phase would yield substantial benefits for the analysis of pupils' experiences of the Key Stage 3 curriculum, as well as offer important insights into the curriculum at Key Stage 2 itself.

1.3   Aims and priorities

From the above, it can be seen that the aims of the Year 7 Phase were to provide an important baseline for the Key Stage 3 investigation and to facilitate analyses which would inform CCEA's monitoring programme. Hence, this phase would provide the opportunity for pupils and teachers at Key Stage 2 to comment on a wide range of issues relating to the Northern Ireland Curriculum. However, in keeping with the overall purpose of the Cohort Study, the main aim of the Year 7 Phase was to examine the impact of the whole curriculum on the learner in terms of the following key areas of investigation:

1.   relevance and appropriateness;
2.   breadth, balance, and coherence across the curriculum, including the pupils' conceptions of the 'whole curriculum' and the extent to which cross-curricular skills (e.g. literacy, numeracy, graphicacy and thinking skills) were being addressed and developed;
3.   coherence within subjects, continuity and progression;
4.   manageability (including levels and amount of work);
5.   pupil enjoyment of the curriculum;
6.   the appropriateness of assessment and evaluation methods employed, both statutory and non-statutory;
7.   the extent to which the objectives of the cross-curricular themes were being addressed and met through the curriculum;
8.   the extent to which values and morals were being imparted and assimilated;
9.   the nature of pupils' whole curriculum learning (the 'curriculum as internalised') and its relation to the curriculum as specified, planned, mediated and experienced;
10.   the extent to which the aims of the Northern Ireland Curriculum were evident in its implementation, viz. *'to promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, intellectual and physical development of pupils; and to prepare them for the opportunities and experiences of adult life'*.

At this interim stage in the project, direct analyses of the ninth and tenth areas have not been conducted.

1.4 Research methods for the Year 7 Phase

The Year 7 Phase used a case study methodology. Ten primary schools, which feed the five post-primary schools earmarked for the main Key Stage 3 case study phase, were selected through consultation with CCEA officers. Thus, the sample comprised two primary schools for each post-primary school. In each of the ten primary schools, six Year 7 pupils who intended to transfer to the participating post-primary schools were chosen by the research team, following discussions with the principals concerned. The total pupil sample (n = 60) included an equal number of males and females and incorporated a cross-section of all abilities. Parental consent to interview these pupils was obtained in all cases. Identification of the sample took place after the pupils had been notified of their post-primary school places.

Three-and-a-half fieldwork days were spent in each school. The itinerary consisted of:

- interviews with the principal and the relevant Year 7 teacher (approx. 1 hour each);
- first interviews with the six pupils (approx. 40 minutes each);
- a full day's observation of the classroom experience of the six pupils; and
- second interviews with the six pupils (approx. 40 minutes each).

The interview and observation schedules addressed the ten areas of investigation set out above (1.3). In order to explore pupil constructions of the 'whole curriculum' in more detail, the pupil interviews incorporated some of the indirect techniques, such as concept mapping, explored in the pilot phase.

1.5 The report

The findings for each of the ten areas of investigation are summarised in the following sections. On a number of occasions in the analysis, it proved helpful to adopt a typology presented in the Report of the Pilot Phase. This typology distinguished between five different contextual interpretations of 'curriculum':

- **curriculum as specified** – by government and its official agents (e.g. in the Attainment Targets and Programmes of Study as set out in the statutory orders of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, as well as non-statutory guidance);
- **curriculum as planned** – usually by departments and teachers in schools and summarised in schemes of work;
- **curriculum as mediated** – through the 'delivery' by teachers in the classroom or other learning environments;
- **curriculum as experienced** – by pupils (individual pupils' immediate involvement in and response to classroom learning activities); and
- **curriculum as internalised** – by pupils (how pupils interpret and reconstruct their curriculum as experienced, and what they take away from it in the form of learning outcomes, changed or reinforced attitudes, new awareness or insights and so on).

2. RELEVANCE AND APPROPRIATENESS
This section focuses on area of investigation 1 (see Section 1.3)

The Northern Ireland Curriculum stipulates that every pupil should follow a curriculum which is *'relevant to his or her particular needs'*. It also indicates that every pupil is entitled to a curriculum which promotes their *'spiritual, moral, cultural, intellectual and physical development'* and prepares them for *'the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life'*. However, according to the evidence of this study, Year 7 pupils are currently experiencing a curriculum in which 'academic' achievement is afforded greater status and relevance than other areas of this broader agenda (e.g. other forms of development, preparation for adult life).

2.1   Defining relevance as academic attainment

For most of the Year 7 interviewees, what counted as appropriate and relevant learning (i.e. *'important to me'*) focused predominantly on academic attainment. This contrasted with the perceptions of several teachers, who perceived enjoyment and interest as the most significant consideration in their pupils' learning experience from the point of view of the pupils themselves. For pupils, the first priority was academic attainment. More specifically, in their final term in Year 7, the importance of a particular subject or topic frequently depended on how useful they imagined it would be once they reached their post-primary schools. Significantly, English, mathematics and science featured most prominently in pupils' responses. The fact that these are the Transfer Test subjects suggests that the Test itself sends pupils messages about what will be important and especially relevant to them when they move to their post-primary schools.

A 'narrow instrumentalist' interpretation (Harland *et al.*, 1996, p.18) of the relevance of a subject to the workplace was also extremely common among Year 7 pupils. The mechanistic tone of many of their responses concerning future occupations stood in marked contrast to the more thoughtful engagement of responses concerning issues related to real-life experience, such as personal development or social behaviour. The academic pressure of the Transfer Test was frequently held by principals and teachers to be directly responsible for confining pupils' learning experiences within such limits.

Perceptions of the importance of academic achievement were distributed evenly between both sexes, as were those concerning the relevance of a subject for a particular career. Girls, however, referred to the importance of personal development, social behaviour and religion much more frequently than boys, and were also more aware of the relevance of health and safety issues.

Pupils' references to the relevance of both academic progress and vocational currency, however mechanistic they might be at times, outnumbered their perceptions of other kinds of relevance. According to their responses, the Year 7 curriculum in its present form seems to be under too much pressure to allow pupils more than a relatively narrow space to identify and explore their own

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predilections. Very few individuals attached importance to subjects associated with their own interests. A significant minority referred to learning activities which they had enjoyed, but felt they were unimportant, either because they were not related to the academic curriculum, which they regarded as the first priority, or because they were perceived as irrelevant in a utilitarian vision of the future. By way of illustration, although many pupils referred to their enjoyment of the expressive arts, especially if this was reinforced at home, they regarded them as unimportant. Their value had not been accentuated by teachers and was undermined by the messages, conveyed through the Transfer Test and the statutory assessments, about the relative status of different subjects.

These pupil perspectives were frequently endorsed by teachers. The majority of teachers, including six principals, felt that the Transfer Test forced the curriculum to concentrate on academic relevance to such an extent that it was very difficult to ensure that other areas of relevance, such as the individual's curriculum proficiency, personal development and immediate everyday concerns, were adequately catered for. In some schools, parents' expectations were held responsible for the pre-eminence of academic achievement as a measure of the relevance of the curriculum. According to teachers, parents judged the relevance of the Test as paramount, and some of them questioned the necessity of homework once the Test was over. Moreover, parents of some lower-attaining pupils insisted their children should sit the Test, in spite of the fact that the preparation required was inappropriate to their level of proficiency.

The fact that the curriculum in the latter years of most primary schools *'squeezed out'* subjects not assessed in the Transfer Procedure appeared to have convinced a large number of pupils of the comparative irrelevance of the rest of the curriculum. That some pupils were spending more time on creative studies and topic work in the humanities after the Transfer Test (and at the time of the interviews) seemed to have made little impression in broadening their internalised sense of priorities in the curriculum.

2.2   Appropriate and relevant to whom?

Although, as in the Pilot Study, pupils commented on the relevance and appropriateness of the curriculum to their own curriculum proficiency less frequently than on its relevance to academic progress, a number of individuals throughout the ability range related relevance to manageability. According to their perceptions, some aspects of the Northern Ireland Curriculum itself are felt by learners to be inappropriate for different levels of ability. Some of the work was *'too hard'* for low-attainers; other areas failed to engage high attainers in a sufficiently demanding intellectual challenge.

High-attaining pupils, notably those in mixed-ability classes, frequently expressed a sense of frustration at the slowness of pace they experienced in learning alongside their lower-attaining peers. For them, the relevance of a subject often depended on whether they felt they had learnt something *'new'*. One girl, for example, said the music lesson observed during the previous day was not *'useful'*

for her, because '*the group ... isn't really fast enough, because we go extra slow for the people who can't really do it properly*'.

With regard to lower-attaining pupils, the pressure to cover the prescribed curriculum with the whole class frequently appeared to leave unmet their need for the reinforcement of basic skills and a slower pace. One boy, for example, who was academically very weak, and allegedly received little support from home, was asked whether anything he had learnt in Year 7 had already been useful to him. He said the only useful learning had been with the support teacher, because '*she breaks up words for you and ... then you get the words*'. He appreciated her telling him to '*take a little time*'.

As described earlier, preparation for the Transfer Test was felt by teachers to be inappropriate for lower-attaining pupils, who were at a much lower level of curriculum proficiency than the Test required. Some teachers believed that the whole of the Northern Ireland Curriculum was inappropriate for weaker pupils; there was so much work to cover that little time was left to concentrate on basic skills. The needs of lower-attaining pupils were seen to be marginalised by the pressure to cover the required amount with the higher-attaining majority.

Clearly, achieving simultaneous relevance in terms of curriculum proficiency for both high- and low-attaining pupils emerged as a significant problem at Key Stage 2. There will be further discussion of this issue in the section on manageability.

2.3 Pupil awareness of appropriateness and relevance

In spite of the apparent acceptance, expressed by the majority of pupils, of the collective importance of the curriculum as mediated and experienced, at least half of the total sample could identify subjects or specific topics which they perceived as personally irrelevant or inappropriate. A subject was frequently perceived to be unimportant because it was irrelevant to a future career. One boy was adamant that nothing in P7 had been '*useful*' or '*important to him*'; he worked on his parents' farm and intended becoming a farmer himself. A class at one school had read Seamus Heaney's poem 'The Butter Print' the previous day and had made butter themselves as an associated activity. One boy, however, had apparently not appreciated either of these learning experiences, for their own sake or as they related to each other: '*I never make butter and I don't like poems and I'm never going to write a poem.*' A boy at another school said music was '*not useful unless you wanted to play an instrument*', and a girl elsewhere felt the same about art: '*I wouldn't really do art.*' The perceived neutrality of the interviewer seemed to enable many pupils to criticise the curriculum as planned and mediated; the considerable number of negative perceptions which emerged belie the assertion of many teachers that pupils '*learn blindly*' and without question. The evidence suggests that more communication about, rather than of, the curriculum may be needed between pupils and teachers, in order for pupils to be fully motivated and engaged in their learning. Hence, the problem of limited appropriateness and relevance is not restricted to issues of curriculum specification; there are also major professional development implications for improving the curriculum as planned and mediated.

3. BREADTH, BALANCE AND COHERENCE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

This section focuses on area of investigation 2 (see Section 1.3).

3.1 Breadth and balance

According to pupils, the pressure and monotony imposed by preparation for the Transfer Test made much of their learning both onerous and stressful until it was over. Pupils' responses testified to the very considerable amount of time spent on mathematics and English – unsurprisingly perhaps, given their importance in the Transfer Test, and their role in promoting key skills. One girl put the case for many of her peers:

> *We start at ten past nine in the morning and we wouldn't start a different subject till after break or ... just before lunch. So I think they're trying to stuff too much information into your head at one time. I know they want you to have the best of it and to do well in exams, but ... if you're given too much of one thing, you get sick of the sight of it and then you just don't want to do it, you couldn't be bothered trying.*

Her school was intensively focused on academic achievement. According to her teacher, this girl was very intelligent and well-motivated, and her comments imply that the relentless demands of such an academically weighted curriculum would be even more onerous for pupils less motivated or intellectually oriented.

Pupils' perceptions of over-representation in the curriculum derived either from lack of personal interest or from the experience of two distinct methods of allocating time for aspects of the curriculum which they felt to be inappropriate. These can be depicted as:

(a) **over-representation within a single period of time,**
i.e. the monotony of sustaining the same type of activity and the arduousness of sustaining the same level of concentration;

(b) **regular/predictable over-representation,**
i.e. returning to the same content, task or skill every time a subject occurs in the timetable.

Both types of over-representation may be particularly inappropriate for both high- and low-achieving pupils for different reasons. With reference to type (a), for example, the emphasis on mathematics asserted by pupils in the majority of schools was evident in one school during the observed day; in this particular case, the whole of a mixed-ability class did mental arithmetic before morning break and then mathematics, including fractions, for a whole hour afterwards. They did mathematics again straight after lunch (this time it was measuring and cutting out shapes) until 15 minutes before the end of school. Perhaps not surprisingly, the researcher noted that there was a lot of getting up and down for drinks of water and talking to friends. In another school, one pupil had found a music lesson

'*boring*' because everyone had had to wait and take it in turns at '*playing individually and learning new notes*' for the school show.

Perceptions of over-representation referred as frequently to particular topics within subjects as to the subjects themselves. With regard to type (b) above, four pupils at one school thought they did too much grammar in their English lessons and would have liked to have spent more time on the other non-technical aspects of English, such as reading or writing poetry. Pupils at other schools felt they did too much spelling or punctuation. Instances of type (b) emerged particularly in reference to history: a number of pupils felt they had spent too long on the Victorians, '*cos it all centres round the one theme ... the whole year is the topic of the Victorians and you just get ... there's an awful lot of it.*' It seems worth noting that a teacher at one school agreed that this was certainly '*a bit much*'.

In terms of breadth and balance, every teacher interviewed believed the Transfer Test had an undesirable effect on the curriculum. The three subjects to be tested, English, mathematics and science, dominated the timetable from Easter in Year 6 until nearly the end of the autumn term in Year 7. Consequently, non-tested subjects were neglected during this time and pupils experienced a period of intense concentration on a very narrow curriculum.

The lack of proportion in the curriculum during the autumn resulted in a corresponding imbalance later in the year. In order to compensate for earlier neglect, much more time was spent on history, geography and creative and expressive studies in the spring and summer terms. Although teachers felt that pupils therefore received the balanced curriculum over the course of the year, pupils' responses revealed that a sense of balance needed to be established over a much shorter timescale in order to have meaning from their point-of-view. In some schools, pupils also pointed out that the summer term's emphasis on work for subjects other than English, mathematics and science gave them no opportunity to practise the key skills learnt much earlier in the year and they tended to forget them. Moreover, a significant number of pupils across all ten schools expressed their enthusiasm for 'learning for learning's sake' and a preference for a variety of intellectual challenges throughout the year, rather than the experience of 'academic' and 'less-academic' activities in homogeneous blocks.

Many pupils were reluctant at first to criticise the curriculum in their schools, apparently accepting its implicit unpalatable aspects as an inevitable reality. However, once reminded of specific subjects and activities, a significant number expressed strong opinions, particularly, as illustrated above, in respect of the perceived over-representation of English and mathematics. As in the Pilot Study, there was a conspicuous awareness of the under-representation of expressive subjects, such as art and PE. This was frequently corroborated by the comments of both principals and teachers.

With regard to their wish to study subjects not included in the curriculum, the very small number of responses suggests that, as in the Pilot Study, the demand for a subject is much more likely to be felt where the need has already been stimulated

but not fully satisfied. This hypothesis was reinforced by the nature of the responses which did emerge. Pupils who had been learning to cook, for example, wanted these activities to be included in their timetable. With a little more practice in articulating their views on the curriculum, perhaps more pupils would have been able to offer suggestions, together with reasons, for their own alternative priorities.

3.2 Pupils' perceptions of coherence

Year 7 pupils' perceptions of the 'whole curriculum' were frequently compartmentalised into subject and sub-subject categories, though in some schools certain subjects were not recognised by their formal titles (e.g. the term 'science' was used less often in one school than terms like '*birds and animals and all that*'). This finding is somewhat surprising since it might have been expected that integrated topic work and the preponderance of single class teachers would provide pupils with a more integrated view of the 'whole curriculum' than that evident amongst pupils in Key Stage 3. The evidence, however, suggested that Year 7 pupils' perceptions of the curriculum are as fragmented along subject lines and boundaries as their counterparts in Year 8. There seemed to be two major reasons for this: firstly, the organisation of teaching and assessment into subject, and occasionally sub-subject, categories; and secondly, the restricted use of integrated 'topics' and their apparently limited impact on the development of curriculum coherence amongst pupils.

The organisation of the curriculum varied across the ten schools but, in the majority, English, mathematics and science were taught separately in Year 7; mathematics was a separate subject everywhere. Most schools explained that the nature of the timetable was dictated by the Transfer Test. In some schools, a subject-based timetable was also valued as important preparation for post-primary school, and in two schools, it allegedly allowed pupils the opportunity to benefit from a range of teachers with specialist expertise. In four schools, English and mathematics were divided into sub-subjects. These were separately timetabled as a means of ensuring that the skills in question (e.g. 'mental arithmetic', 'spelling', 'silent reading', 'reading 360', 'comprehension') were adequately catered for. From the pupils' accounts in several schools, clear conceptual distinctions between, for example, 'English' and 'comprehensions' often seemed to be drawn. Similarly, in the pupils' minds, within-subject topics or projects (e.g. 'The Second World War', 'The Victorians') were frequently afforded the same discrete and distinct status as that given to subjects (e.g. '*The Famine and The Victorians are the main two subjects that we've been doing*'). In such a way, numerous quasi- and mini-subjects were constructed for pupils so that arguably the curriculum became more disparate rather than more unified. To this extent, primary curriculum organisation seemed more fragmentary than that commonly offered at Key Stage 3.

In contrast to the use of subject classifications, mediation of the curriculum through across-subject integrated topics was not prevalent in the latter years of Key Stage 2. In the schools where they were employed, their use tended to be restricted to topics that covered history, geography and, perhaps, English (e.g.

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'Japan', 'Evacuees'). In keeping with this practice, 'Areas of Study', with the possible exception of 'The Environment and Society', were not deployed as integrating devices. As suggested above, topic or project titles often took on equivalent, or even greater, conceptual saliency than that of subject categories (e.g. *'We haven't done much geography, but we've done about the area around us, so we have'*). Ironically, it appeared that the children in classes taught by teachers who employed topics and projects had more confused images of the whole curriculum than those taught along formal subject lines, probably because the former had to wrestle simultaneously with several different classification systems: subjects, sub-subjects and across- and within-subject project titles. In view of this process, it is crucial to ask whether such topic or project nomenclature is any more helpful to pupils than subject categories in developing a coherent mental map of the curriculum. Clearly, it raises the question of what vocabularies should constitute the most appropriate language for fostering coherent learner perspectives of the whole curriculum.

Notwithstanding the tendency for pupils to view the curriculum in subject or quasi-subject terms, they demonstrated in the interviews a capacity for seeing links between different subjects. According to the data, pupils perceived aspects of coherence across the curriculum more frequently than their teachers – many of whom were reluctant to alert their pupils to links across the curriculum – understood or appreciated. From the learners' experience of the curriculum as an amorphous whole, which included formal and informal social interaction between pupils and teachers, as well as the skills and content as formally planned and mediated, pupils of all abilities could express individual interpretations of coherence as it had been internalised. One girl, for example 'linked' English with mathematics *'because you answer questions'*, and a boy in another school related *'religion'* to history and English during the observed day *'because we were discussing about different things ... we were speaking our thoughts'*. According to pupils, the most frequently cited connection was that between history and English, while PE and music were perceived to be the subjects most isolated from the rest of the curriculum. By contrast, because of their association of coherence with skills, the majority of teachers seemed unaware of the extent to which pupils perceived links between different subject areas; they tended to associate the perception of coherence with the transfer of skills, and therefore attributed this capacity exclusively to *'the brighter ones'*.

Over half of the pupils interviewed believed that it was helpful or enjoyable to make connections across the curriculum; lower-attaining and less confident pupils in particular found this a reassuring opportunity for learning to be consolidated. One girl, for example, observed that *'it makes you feel a wee bit smarter, and you know what you are doing, because, if you didn't know it, it would take you more time, you know, to settle into the subject'*. Some of the 'brighter' pupils said they found it *'boring'* to encounter the same material in two different subjects. Their contrasting perceptions have implications for differentiation and mixed-ability teaching.

Because pupils' interpretations of coherence were more wide-ranging than most of their teachers', levels of attainment did not emerge as a significant variable in their

responses. Thus, the highest-attaining pupils, at the most academically oriented school, with a rigidly subject-based timetable, perceived very little coherence in their learning. The predilections of individual teachers and the structure of the curriculum itself, in accordance with the priorities of individual schools, seemed much more influential on pupils' capacity and readiness to associate different curriculum areas.

3.3   Cross-curricular skills

Teachers tended to perceive cross-curricular skills as the principal instruments of coherence across the curriculum. However, most pupils had difficulty in conceptualising skills as separate entities within their experience of learning as a whole. Their responses resembled those of Key Stage 3 pupils in the Pilot Study, where it was noted that cross-curricular skills had *'limited phenomenological significance for learners'* and *'did not appear to be playing a conspicuous role in assisting pupils to construct a unified conceptual framework of the curriculum'*. Moreover, many of them equated learning with recognisable improvement, and thus practice, in the sense of using a skill, held little significance. Again, it was lower-attaining pupils who seemed more enthusiastic about opportunities for reinforcement.

4. COHERENCE WITHIN SUBJECTS: CONTINUITY AND PROGRESSION

This section focuses on area of investigation 3 (see Section 1.3).

As in the Report on the Pilot Study, the curriculum characteristics – continuity and progression – are defined here as the 'building blocks of internal coherence' within subject areas. Continuity is depicted as a 'sequencing of related units of content, tasks and skills within the past present and future teaching programmes', while progression is interpreted as the 'unfolding learning achievements of individual pupils'. With the Year 7 sample, as with the Key Stage 3 pupils, the term 'follow-on' was substituted in the interviews for the concepts 'continuity and progression', in order to open up discussion.

During the Pilot Study, some Key Stage 3 teachers had already intimated that 'academic ability' affects pupil perceptions of continuity and progression. The analysis for this report has included an evaluation of the degree to which pupil ability or achievement determines perceptions of follow-on. Issues explored were as follows:

- primary pupils' overview of 'progression' throughout their school experiences to date;
- primary pupils' views of any subject differences in follow-on;
- primary pupils' evaluation of the efficacy of follow-on;
- teachers' perspectives of continuity and progression;
- primary pupils' expectations of post-primary school.

4.1   Continuity and progression: pupils' overview

The pupils conveyed several versions or interpretations of 'follow-on'. These were characterised as **extraneous procession**, whereby follow-on existed by the fact of proceeding through a textbook; **clustering** or continuance of a topic focus for a period of time; and the **incremental acquisition** of new skills and/or knowledge. Some children were able to suggest that curriculum areas operated different kinds of follow-on, and it was found that a large number of pupils agreed that mathematics and music provide follow-on as incremental acquisition.

4.2   Continuity and progression: subject differences

Part of the interview schedule asked the children to identify whether there was 'follow-on' or 'building-on' in each of the subjects within their timetable. While a number clearly had difficulty initially in understanding the concept of continuity and progression, even when expressed in this way, nearly all pupils did volunteer responses. In order to convey a flavour of the responses, an overview of perceptions in relation to follow-on in some curriculum areas is given below.

English
Almost two-thirds of the total sample felt there was follow-on in English and gave a range of different emphases in their elaboration, with some variation in the degree of sophistication in identifying continuity and progression. Four main variants were:

- continuing through 'the [text] book';
- staying with a particular aspect/topic for a certain length of time;
- incremental development of additional skills;
- putting into practice skills learnt.

Thus at the lowest (and most literal) level, three children suggested continuity existed by the fact of proceeding through a pre-set text or textbook: '*Yes*, [there is follow-on]; *we've just really worked on with it, like through the book.*'

This was a view of progression as a particularly extrinsic and perhaps passive experience, in effect implying that continuity was not an internalised, logically sequenced cumulation of knowledge or skills, but rather, at its most extreme, an imposed procession or peregrination through extraneous tasks.

Another of the four main viewpoints was 'staying with a particular aspect/topic for a certain length of time'. Comments such as '*Yes, because the work we do on punctuation carries on for a couple of weeks*' implied that the pupils recognised some periodic connectedness and coherent clustering in the English work undertaken, and hence were an advance on the first response type, where continuity was viewed as an almost entirely adventitious or extrinsic 'procession'. Nevertheless, this perception of follow-on as a temporary clustering of focus upon some aspect of the English curriculum was distinct in that it did not itemise any development in skills or personal progress.

The third category was from three children who described follow-on in the English curriculum as involving some developmental or 'incremental acquisition of skill or knowledge', mostly in the area of grammar: '*Learning the alphabet helps you along with spelling; learning spelling helps you along with sentences.*' This viewpoint suggested that some linked progression in learning was being recognised.

The final category, and perhaps significantly only suggested by four girls, was to describe continuity in terms of putting into practice literacy skills learnt. Comments here included: '*Yes, just really learning about how to use paragraphs and writing a letter.*' This 'putting into practice' definition of follow-on suggests the girls clearly recognise a teaching sequence of initial input and then familiarisation and habituation; in many respects this process represents another variant of the third category, developmental skill acquisition. Such **awareness** of a learning technique is perhaps again a clue to their achievement.

Thirteen pupils felt there was no follow-on in their English curriculum. Where reasons were given, the children's answers indicated that they could not trace any

sequence or internal logic in their curriculum experiences. Thus, two lower-attaining boys suggested there was no follow-on because it was in no way evident from their textbook work: '*No ... because in English, if you do page 48 one day you might have to pick up page 52 the next day.*'

In effect, even the sense of a 'procession' of extraneous tasks (which some pupils did see as progression, albeit a low-level and literal interpretation) eluded these pupils. Others elaborated on lack of follow-on by referring to their experience of the English curriculum continually offering a different content, either because there was no clustering of skill acquisition, or because English lessons covered such a range of inputs from literature to grammar skills. Whatever the explanation, the key issue of why only some pupils seem responsive to identifying certain versions of continuity and progression is raised again.

Mathematics
Nearly three-quarters of the pupils who were asked about this curriculum area said there was follow-on in mathematics, while only five of them (about ten per cent) thought there was not. These were not the same children who gave a negative answer when talking about English. However, three of the six pupils who answered 'sometimes' had also offered this response in English. Thus overall, the increase in the number of pupils was very evident – and all the more stark when a comparison is made between the number of pupils suggesting no follow-on in these two areas. In sum, continuity and progression were more readily identified in mathematics.

Twelve pupils referred to the mathematics curriculum getting harder or increasing in complexity, their answers often giving examples of advancement in learning which indicated they readily recognised the incremental nature of continuity and progression. Their terminology often incorporated the idea of '*going on to*' or '*getting higher*' or '*stepping up*', with a strong sense of the importance of building on from previous learning. These comments were noticeably from high-attaining children, and the high number of girls suggests they recognised progression may be significant. It was not school-specific.

Those children who demurred on progression in their mathematics curriculum offered a range of reasons. In one instance, it was essentially the lack of advancement which was pinpointed: '*I do more sums if we've done sums the week before.*' One boy appeared to attribute lack of follow-on to the mediation of the mathematics curriculum: '*We've done work on percentages before, but not in the same way; what we learnt before isn't helpful to today's lesson.*' The statement perhaps still suggests understanding of the incremental nature or building-on of learning, with a sense that his teacher's mediation had not on this occasion provided appropriate linkage or overlap.

Science
Just over half of the total sample acknowledged continuity and progression in science – a notably lower figure than for English and mathematics. Over a third

said there was no follow-on in science, while three girls said it happened *'sometimes'*. It should be noted that no school had all its pupil respondents answering the same way, which again suggests that children who were offered the same curriculum interpreted and experienced the notions of continuity and progression in science differently.

Overall, it is worth noting that, in comparison with English and mathematics, the responses of the children showed no reference to increase in difficulty in any affirmation of continuity and progression in their science curriculum; any progression was rather the acquisition of more related information. Equally, there was no account which suggested the learning aim of practising for understanding. Indeed, the idea of science process was also notably absent, with no pupil mentioning scientific skills and approaches such as hypothesising, fair testing or experimentation.

History and geography
Perhaps not surprisingly, these two curriculum areas produced fairly similar accounts and interpretations of follow-on, or the lack of it. Considerably fewer children commented on geography than history. Of those who endorsed the idea of follow-on, the majority felt this was because of continuation of the topic. They experienced this as a clustering of subject matter: *'We always do work on the Victorians'* was a typical comment. Some children expressed their dissatisfaction with this version of follow-on; it was experienced as unremitting continuance rather than continuity, topic perpetuity not progression, with references to the subject being boring because *'it's just doing the same work again and again'*. Only three children referred to an accumulation or 'build-up' of knowledge — 'learning more things' — and three mentioned that the work *'got harder'* in geography, when describing map work.

It is at least possible that the pupil responses capture a major issue in primary school humanities, namely the focus on content rather than process militates against pupils experiencing a version of progression which has real meaning for them. A sustained clustering or focus on knowledge-based humanity topics not only can be received without enjoyment or interest, but also, it seems, without any real internalisation of meaning or coherence.

Art and music
Considerably fewer children were asked to comment on the issue of follow-on in these two arts subjects. Of these, just less than half (18 children) felt there was follow-on in art, while nearly three-fifths (20 children) affirmed follow-on in music. Twice as many girls as boys acknowledged follow-on in music, and all but two of these girls also felt follow-on was evident in their art sessions. For each subject, about a third said there was no follow-on: music again showing a more marked gender difference, with nine boys but only four girls demurring.

More than half of the 20 children who suggested music offered follow-on indicated some sense of improvement in skill, learning more, or practice in skills already acquired:

> *Yes, if you did one thing one week, the following week – that you get to do it – you always go back on that bit to make sure you know what it was, and then you do the following-on of it.*

The statements of these children, from at least four different schools, seem to highlight the notion of continuity and progression, and suggest children can readily articulate an understanding of the incremental (habituating) process of learning and teaching. Thus, of all the subjects in the primary curriculum (apart from mathematics), it appears to be music which most easily provided children with this 'meta-cognition' of the most basic process of schooling.

In music and mathematics, both the skills pupils learn, and their application, are relatively easy to identify. This in turn means it is easier for pupils to identify their individual progress. In these two subjects, pupils' views thus coincide with those of many teachers, who, as noted earlier, tended to view the mediation of coherence across the curriculum largely in terms of skills. (The accounts of pupils themselves have already demonstrated that for them coherence across the curriculum is discernible through a much wider range of experiences than teachers appear to be aware of.) Pupils' comments here suggest that they have difficulty in perceiving coherence in content-based subjects, such as science, history and geography, because, through any given sequence of learning experiences, the content *per se* appears to be the focus of attention. Learning is thus internalised as an accumulation of facts in a linear and largely arbitrary sequence, rather than as an analytically reflective, recursive and steadily graduated approach to both new and familiar material. Interestingly, the previous section suggested that when it came to seeing lateral connections across the curriculum, pupils perceived more content-based continuities than skills-based ones.

PE

Out of the total of 38 pupils who discussed this area of learning, two-thirds agreed there was follow-on, while the remaining third denied its presence in the PE curriculum. Where reasons were given for lack of follow-on, the usual emphasis was on no sense of continuity – '*doing different things each week*' – or infrequency – '*not doing the subject very often*'. The majority of those who acknowledged follow-on equated it with the clustering notion of progression (i.e. continuing the same activity over a period of time). However, five children (again high achievers from academic schools) suggested specific skill development as an illustration of follow-on. Again, it seems even in the least academic of subjects, the higher-attaining children can most readily volunteer a recognition of a sequential learning process. And again, continuity and progression are closely associated with skills.

4.3   Continuity and progression: pupils' evaluation

Since the pupil sample had articulated a range of definitions for continuity and progression, and because achievement had certainly begun to emerge as a significant factor, the analysis attempted to examine the responses by correlating the main pupil categories of progression with the attainment cameos offered by teachers on each child, and then by considering the effect of pupil attainment and interpretations of progression on individual evaluations of follow-on.

As the previous section has shown, pupil accounts of follow-on involved several different interpretations – the 'extraneous procession of tasks'; the 'clustering' or 'continuance' of a topic focus; the 'incremental acquisition' of new skills and/or knowledge. While some children had suggested that curriculum areas operated different types of follow-on, an overview of each child's answers to every subject showed that some pupil accounts never mentioned incremental acquisition. Some could see something of this version in virtually all areas of the curriculum, while the interpretation of others fixed virtually exclusively on the notion of follow-on as a procession of tasks or 'carrying on the next day'. Equally, there were a number of pupils who answered in terms of 'clustering' for most of the subjects they discussed.

A rough overview from the analysis of pupil achievement by their depiction of follow-on showed that pupils who were described as 'below average' by their teachers were the only ones to define follow-on as extraneous procession; high-achieving pupils – and nearly all of the sample from the academic schools – defined progression as incremental acquisition; while mid achievers – and even some of those children rated of high ability in non-selective primary feeders – tended most often to interpret follow-on as 'clustering'. Thus, when asked to make evaluative comment, the range of responses reflected these interpretations.

The main views expressed about follow-on were:

- it was helpful to understanding/meant you were learning more;
- it was boring;
- it was enjoyable when it was a subject that was liked.

The main views about lack of follow-on were:

- it resulted in feeling left behind or confused since the work was harder to remember;
- it was pleasing to change to new work;
- it didn't matter/wasn't minded if there was no follow-on;
- the pupil said they didn't know how they felt.

Pupils who indicated they were 'learning more' because of follow-on tended to be high- or mid-achieving, and to be referring to the 'incremental acquisition' version of follow-on. Three low-achieving pupils, commenting favourably on follow-on, replied not in terms of learning or understanding, but that it was *'easier because we've done it before'*. No high-achieving pupil suggested outright that follow-on

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was 'boring'; the 'boredom' of follow-on was a viewpoint held exclusively by mid and low achievers. Significantly, no pupil described incremental acquisition as 'boring' – this remained the descriptor only for clustering.

These trends may begin to suggest there are considerable advantages, even empowerment, for children who can detect or articulate progression in their curriculum experiences. Their world of learning, perhaps, has a meaningful design. For others, it seems there is very much less of a sense of a purposive chronology or accumulation in their curriculum experiences: their discourse on follow-on suggests some bemusement or even ignorance about the unfolding of their learning activities. Hence, their emphasis on the enjoyment of doing something different, rather than pleasure at mastering or improving that which they were already learning. It leaves the important question of whether primary school children **need** to know about continuity and progression, and if so, how that is to be conveyed to them. Equally, does a child's lack of awareness of continuity and progression in their learning carry implications for motivation and subsequent achievement?

4.4 Continuity and progression: teachers' perceptions

In order to set pupils' responses in context, teachers were asked whether they thought that pupils were aware of the continuity and progression built into the Year 7 curriculum. The most notable feature in their comments was the depiction of curriculum continuity and progression as largely extraneous to the individual teacher: it was specified and planned rather than mediated.

In effect, this question was seeking to ask teachers their views on how continuity and progression was experienced and internalised by pupils, and here a startling – and indeed sometimes startled – drift of answers emerged. Something of the same bemusement evident in certain pupils' responses was sometimes replicated here. A number of teachers stated that they themselves had never even thought about pupils' perceptions of progression. Such a concept was absent from their consciousness (**unfamiliarity**, e.g. '... *you know I never really think of pupils' conceptions, so I can't answer that, honestly I can't*'). Others said they felt pupils were not aware. Other negative responses either suggested it was just '*the bright children*' who would take on board the concept of continuity and progression, or rejected the notion that children needed to be aware. (**repudiation** e.g. '*I don't think they're aware of it at all – they just get on and do it*').

Only one teacher unequivocally endorsed its necessity (**advocation** – '*It's vital*'). This teacher, and one other, perhaps significantly both from academically oriented schools, chose to include in their answer an illustration of how they make individual pupils aware of their progress, and the child's reaction. Both teachers equated progression with a child's personal sense of their own progress, and upheld that such an awareness nurtured confidence and self-esteem in the child.

The teachers' responses considered here may give pause for thought for schools and curriculum policy makers. Is this whole area of children's internalisation and

teachers' communication of continuity and progression a much underrated issue — for in-service, and initial, teacher training, for curriculum design, for resource development, and indeed for further research?

4.5   Expectations of post-primary school
This section examines pupils' comments from the final area of discussion, where each child was asked what they knew about their new school and how they felt it might be different from their present primary school. After responding to this open question, the children were encouraged to talk about curriculum issues, particularly the organisation and content of their secondary phase education, in order to see how far their expectations might include notions of continuity and progression in their learning.

Knowledge of the school was bound to vary considerably, given that, at the time of the interview, not all pupils had yet visited their new school. Nevertheless, the question of how post-primary might be like, or different from, their primary school experiences brought out a range of responses, which varied according to both gender and achievement.

Perhaps not surprisingly, as well as commenting on differences in organisation and curriculum content, many of the children chose to mention first the physical size and ambience of their new institution. It was particularly noticeable that girls mentioned how the school would be '*bigger*', and they also outnumbered boys in pointing out there would be '*more teachers*'. Boys alone chose to mention discipline, and how secondary school would be '*stricter*'.

With regard to curriculum organisation, pupils most often referred to the novelty of '*moving around the school*' for their lessons. Having a 'timetable' and '*different teachers for every subject*' was also mentioned. Children's comments on curriculum content most frequently referred to the '*work being harder*' and the fact that there would be '*more/different/new subjects*'. Significantly, no low-achieving pupil indicated awareness of (or interest in) a more varied curriculum diet. However, this sub-sample ranked as the highest respondents in anticipating '*more tests*' and '*more homework*'. Homework did not feature as an issue raised by any child from the four academically oriented primary schools.

The major difference in responses concerning the impending transfer, however, came in the tenor of the answers which predicted the nature of post-primary school work. Thus, low-achieving pupils tended to describe their curriculum futures in somewhat vague and generalised terms, with no further extrapolation beyond '*harder work/harder subjects/*[far] *more work*'. By contrast, the curriculum predictions of the higher-achieving pupils often seemed to employ descriptors which suggested more knowledge of (and perhaps enthusiasm for) the new learning experiences awaiting them. Their projections for the Key Stage 3 curriculum embraced the following challenges:

- **augmentation**: it would be *more advanced/higher levels/greater depth/greater detail/learning more things*;
- **enhancement**: it would be *more interesting/more exciting*; and
- **adjustment**: it would be temporarily *more difficult* or only become more difficult later in their academic career.

Thus, pupil versions of continuity and progression at transfer once more seem to show notable differences: the varying degrees of clarity and enthusiasm discernible in their projections towards future curriculum experience suggest that the perspectives of high and low achievers are far from unified. Again, it seems pertinent to question how far these differences determine aptitude and future achievement.

5. MANAGEABILITY
This section focuses on area of investigation 4 (see Section 1.3).

In accordance with the Pilot Study, two separate types of manageability were identified in the interviews, in order to clarify pupils' perceptions of the learning experience in this respect. The first related to the amount of knowledge and skills within the curriculum; the second concerned the level of work in terms of its conceptual difficulty. As the following discussion will confirm, pupils frequently envisaged these types as interrelated.

5.1 Pupils' perceptions of manageability in terms of the amount of work
Before moving on to pupils' views on the amount of work in general, over the course of the Year 7, reference must be made to the perceived impact of the Transfer Test on their workload during the summer term of Year 6 and the autumn term of Year 7. The observation of one boy epitomised the attitude of many of his peers:

> *When we were doing the test papers for the 11- plus ... two papers a week ... it was getting really hectic ... I knew I had to work that hard but it was just getting a bit annoying ...* [since the Transfer Test] *we still have to work quite hard, but it's been a lot easier.*

The pupil data demonstrated that most primary school pupils welcomed a challenge in their academic work; what they undoubtedly found stressful, however, was the relentless diet of a narrowly restricted range of tasks culminating in a single event which, they were repeatedly told, would have serious and long-lasting implications, both for their academic career and their future employment.

With regard to the amount of work they experienced in the Year 7 curriculum in general, pupils' perceptions related either to mediation, to the nature of the task, or to individual needs and inclinations.

As in the Pilot Study, mediation emerged as a crucial factor in determining manageability. Pupils' comments underlined the importance of both differentiation and time management in ensuring every individual found the amount they were required to do acceptable in the time available to them. Although many pupils initially asserted that their workload had been *'just about right'*, they tended to express reservations once they were encouraged to think about the curriculum in detail. They regarded their work as unmanageable when they felt they had too much to do in the allocated time. A significant number of pupils also referred to occasions where they felt *'underworked'*, and would have liked to have been offered more.

The pace of mediation was identified in the Pilot Study as a highly significant aspect of the interrelatedness of both sorts of manageability. According to the Year 7 data under scrutiny here, slowness of pace could be particularly frustrating for high atttainers in a mixed-ability class. One girl, for example, described how

she would '*ask to go on to another page*' when she finished a set task ahead of the rest of the class. The importance of finishing a piece of work, again noted in the Pilot Study Report, was evident in the observations of many pupils. The variation in pace between individuals could cause significant distress unless the teacher was alert to the need for differentiation in the allocation of time for specific activities. One girl, for example, had missed the first part of a lesson because of choir practice and vividly described her sense of frustration at being unable to finish writing her story:

> *I didn't want to rush it ... I was only half way through when she said 'Now I want you to clear up' ... I would have liked to have got that finished cos it was quite good ... the girl who was sitting beside me had finished and I was ... oh ... struggling to try and get it finished.*

Where pupils felt secure in the knowledge that the teacher had allowed for them to work at their own pace, they seemed readier to suspend their learning until a specifically designated occasion in the future. The practice of finishing off work for homework was common across all schools, although there was considerable variation in the length of time for homework required by the school, and also in the time spent on homework by individual pupils.

Perceptions of the workload varied according to the nature of the task and children's individual interests. As in the Pilot Study, unmanageability was frequently associated with '*too much writing*'. The task of writing was widely experienced as arduous, and lessons where writing was the predominant activity were described as '*hard*' and '*unenjoyable*'. One boy's response to written work was exceptional: '*There's a lot of* [writing] *but I like it and it takes a lot of time to do it.*' His comment neatly demonstrates the influence of individual interest on perceptions of the manageability of a given amount of work.

5.2 Pupils' perceptions of manageability in terms of the level of difficulty

With reference to differentiation, the Northern Ireland Curriculum states its intention that '*pupils should progress at their natural rate*'; accordingly, '*schools will need to consider carefully how best to provide for the differing needs of individual pupils*' (Northern Ireland Curriculum Council, 1990, p.9).

In six of the ten schools, more than half of the children interviewed seemed to think that the level of their work was appropriate for them as individuals. A significant minority of pupils, however, who initially asserted that the level of their work was '*about right*', subsequently qualified their responses when their attention was drawn to specific elements of the curriculum. One girl, for example, reflected that thinking of synonyms in English had been hard, and that the fractions in the previous day's mathematics lesson had been difficult.

The strategy of differentiation was used with varying degrees of success in every school apart from the exceptionally academic institution referred to above (where it was deemed unnecessary). The discrepancy between the ideal of differentiation

and the experience in practice emerged unmistakably in the comments from both high- and low-attaining pupils . One boy said he found it difficult to finish in time in mathematics because the questions were '*hard*'; a girl in another school who said she was in a group which '*suited*' her nevertheless said she found writing a story '*hard*' because she could never think of anything to say. Another pupil in a mixed-ability class, in a third school, felt her work was '*all at the right level except the reading, which I thought was too easy ... I'd rather have the thick novels*' and two boys in the same school agreed: '*We're reading on our own a lot harder books than we'd be reading for school.*' In the very academic school it was notable that references to subjects or topics that were hard were only in relative terms. Thus, concepts such as '*light and sound*' in science were '*hard, but not that hard*', mental arithmetic was '*not too hard, but the hardest*' and long division was '*hard at first, but then when it was explained it seemed okay*'.

Year 7 children also mentioned other aspects of mediation which significantly affected their perceptions of the level of difficulty of their work. An accepting and reassuring atmosphere, together with the willingness to offer structured explanation, was seen as a priority; the provision of variety in the tasks set was also important. Pupils, like their teachers, also recognised that the nature of the task itself influenced the level of difficulty of a given amount of work.

As suggested elsewhere in this report, pupils of all abilities needed to feel mentally stretched in order to gain a corresponding sense of achievement. Some higher-attaining pupils relished the opportunity to extend both their knowledge and their thinking skills. One child had found map reading hard at first: '*It took a while to get used to the different ways of reading, then it was all right and I knew what I was doing.*' Lower-attaining pupils could also respond to a challenge: one girl, for example, had found a word game very difficult the previous day but she would have liked to do more of it because she had enjoyed it.

Skilful mediation is implicit in these pupils' observations. The creation of an environment both stimulating and reassuring had encouraged them to explore and extend their potential. The majority of teachers in this study appeared to believe that the statutory curriculum did allow for differentiation:

> *...the way the curriculum is set out, the slower, weaker*
> *children ... they're allowed to progress at their own level*
> *and the amount of work they cover is suitable to their level.*

In theory, they were in complete agreement with teachers in the Pilot Study, who saw it as their responsibility '*to present conceptual difficulty to all pupils as a challenge to engage their interest, rather than as an experience threatening to undermine self-confidence and expose inadequacy*'. In practice, however, it is clear, that Year 7 teachers had serious reservations about the feasibility of their task. One interviewee '*hoped*' her pupils found the level of their work manageable, but she admitted she found differentiation '*difficult to organise*' because she had a very large class encompassing the full range of ability. According to both pupils and teachers, it seems that either from the pressure to cover a given amount of material within a limited period, or from the difficulties

for a single teacher of managing large mixed-ability classes, a significant number of pupils were working at a level which they felt to be inappropriate.

5.3　Perceptions of manageability related to coherence

Individual pupils varied in their perceptions of difficulty, not only according to ability, but also in relation to personal interests, home background and earlier experience of school. Where these were seen to reinforce current learning, manageability could be enhanced.

In the section on coherence across the curriculum, it was noted that a significant number of pupils believed that a recognition of *links* between subjects enhanced the manageability of their learning. The preceding section demonstrated that coherence through continuity and progression was also perceived by pupils as an important facilitator of manageability. A number of Year 7 pupils accounted for the manageability of particular learning by the fact that they had experienced it earlier on in the school. This perception occurred more frequently among the less confident and lower-attaining pupils. One girl explained that *'some things in English are simple because sometimes we've done it before'* and a boy in another school said that mathematics was easy compared with English *'because some of it I've done before'*. The less academically able the children perceived themselves to be, the more reassuring it was to encounter familiar material.

Continuity and progression was sometimes derived from experience of a subject outside school. Several pupils had extra tuition at home and others attended classes in drama, music or physical activities which developed or reinforced their skills. Most pupils confirmed that their parents helped them, when necessary, with their homework; pupils who received little or no support from parents with their school work had correspondingly greater problems with manageability and tended to be lower attainers.

Some pupils were acutely aware of the consequences for manageability which resulted from missing parts of their lessons (through absence or participation in other events in school): *'I don't like it whenever you have to stop in the middle of something and then you can't remember it the next day.'* A high-attaining girl explained her dislike of science sprang directly from the fact that she often missed parts of science lessons to take part in music and drama activities: *' ... and you don't understand because you've had to rush and the teacher hasn't had time to discuss it with you ... I don't like it because I don't understand what they're going on about.'* The experience of learning is cumulative; even for high attainers, it rapidly becomes unmanageable if developing understanding is dispelled through interruption. Moreover, missing out an essential element of the learning experience adds to the amount to be learned later, accelerates the learning pace, and therefore raises the level of difficulty. This puts pressure on pupils, who, according to this study, perceive the completion of their work as highly desirable.

It seems that pupils will accept conceptual difficulty, as the Pilot Study suggested, provided that it is presented as *'a challenge to gain their interest rather than as an experience threatening to self-confidence'*. A balance between the two kinds of

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manageability needs to be carefully maintained; this would seem to indicate flexibility in the curriculum as specified and subsequently planned, together with self-assured, skilful and sensitive mediation.

5.4 The interrelationship between both kinds of manageability

The pupils' perceptions recorded here illustrate the significance of pace and the close association in their minds between the amount of work *per se* and its level of difficulty. The effects of *'cramming'*, where there is too much to take in in the time available, were noted by a Year 7 teacher of a mixed-ability class in this study, in relation to the Transfer Test: *'It's not that they found the work difficult, but ... it's the pressure that is hard for them to cope* with.' The experience of the Transfer Test demands an acceleration of pace impossible to sustain, as Year 7 teachers readily confirmed.

However, according to a significant minority of Year 7 pupils, there were occasions throughout the year when a heavy workload clearly affected the level of difficulty by requiring them to work faster than their natural pace. This applied to pupils of all abilities, but it is interesting that most of them were girls. This tends to reinforce the notion that girls lack confidence in mixed classes and are more susceptible to feelings of inadequacy than boys. One pupil, for example, had found a comprehension on bicycles *'hard'*; when asked to elaborate, she said she meant it was *'hard to get done in the time'*. A girl at another school also found comprehensions difficult to finish because she usually *'had to read the passage over a few times first'*. A girl in a third school had found history the hardest subject the previous day because *'there was quite a lot to take in'* and it was *'hard to get through'*.

The Northern Ireland Curriculum recommends that pupils should *'progress at their natural rate'*. According to the data here, it seems that pressure for academic success, at its most intense at the time of the Transfer Test, but also, in some cases, throughout the year, compels some pupils to work at a pace which is inappropriate for them. When this occurs, high attainers can become frustrated at being slowed down, while for low achievers both the workload and the level of difficulty may become unmanageable if the pace is too fast for them. Consequently, in some cases, pupils are not only deprived of the satisfaction of completing a given amount of work, but they are also left with an imperfect understanding of the learning involved.

6. PUPILS' ENJOYMENT OF THE CURRICULUM

This section focuses on area of investigation 5 (see Section 1.3).

With regard to enjoyment, it must be remembered that the interviews took place in the final few weeks of the summer term. The pressure of the Transfer Test was over and, as many teachers explained, activities and topics not required for the Test were often introduced at this end of the year. The atmosphere in all the schools was more relaxed; this fact may well have coloured pupils' perceptions of enjoyment, as, at Year 7, initial recall will be more likely to refer to their immediate experiences.

6.1 General attitudes to school

When asked whether or not they liked school, pupils' responses were overwhelmingly positive. Comments from girls to the question *'Is there anything about school you like a lot?'* focused largely on the affective dimension, in particular the social aspect of being with friends and the daily interaction with their peers. Boys focused on this feature of school far less often, frequently identifying PE as the feature of school they liked the most. Two girls, one from a socio-economically disadvantaged area, commented that school *'gets you out of the house'*, and one boy asserted that school *'gets you away from problems at home'* — reflections of the importance of school as a source of support for children experiencing socio-economic or emotional deprivation.

The question *'Is there anything about school that you don't like?'* allowed interviewees to offer more than one response; nevertheless, 18 pupils replied that there was actually nothing about school they did not like. This was the highest-ranking response, significantly more so for girls. Comments from pupils who could nominate sources of dislike tended to refer to personal preferences: one girl identified music because she was *'not really fond of it'*. References to other subjects tended to single out particular topics, such as *'mental'* mathematics or 'the Victorians'. Two pupils, both from more academically oriented schools, identified homework: *'When I'm home from school, I sort of want to rest from work and go out and see all my friends.'* Six pupils nominated organisational procedures such as dinner queues and playtime rules.

6.2 Retrospective attitudes to the curriculum

Pupils were also asked to focus on a particular year or class during their primary education and elaborate on what it was during that year that they had particularly enjoyed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the caveat at the beginning of this section, Year 7 was the highest-ranking response. Almost all the pupils interviewed were able to recall positive experiences during their primary years, and nearly half could not identify any year they had not enjoyed. The intensive preparation for the Transfer Test through Year 6 into Year 7 was highlighted by the teachers in this study, and had certainly been a source of considerable anxiety according to the evidence of the pupils themselves. A number of them remarked on the enjoyable sense of release they experienced once the pressure of the Test had been removed:

'The exam's over now and it's a bit more free.' They also appreciated the change of emphasis following the Test and the increase in variety; two boys at very academic schools had enjoyed doing *'fun activities rather than hard work'* and *'more practical things'*, which were *'good fun'*.

Pupils' comments frequently focused on the mediation of the curriculum. This in turn affected both the experience and internalisation of their learning. During their primary school career, their enjoyment had sprung from the variety afforded by different ways of learning, through more active methods, through doing projects and through learning new techniques. Several also expressed their appreciation of clear and thorough explanation, and of the difference it made when learning was *'fun'*.

6.3 Enjoyment of the curriculum

When pupils were asked to identify what they had enjoyed most of all they had done and learnt in Year 7, the three highest-ranking subjects in their responses were mathematics, art and design, and science. More boys identified mathematics as the area they had enjoyed the most in Year 7, while more girls preferred science; the numbers for art and design were fairly similar.

Pupils who nominated mathematics tended to specify particular topics enjoyed, such as graphs or fractions. Interestingly, one girl said she particularly liked the way mathematics came into so many things, even counting goals in sport. Those who referred to art and design highlighted the *'fun'* aspect of the subject: they enjoyed not only the variety of practical activities, but also the more relaxed atmosphere generated by the opportunity to move around the room and talk to friends. With regard to science, the majority of responses from boys and girls focused on practical experiments, which were much more popular than the writing which generally followed them.

Both history and PE achieved the next highest response rate, nominated by 14 pupils each. The majority of pupils favouring history did so because of certain topics that they had enjoyed. They liked the alternations of activities involved in topic work, such as drawing, writing and working in small groups – *'a mixture of work'*. Interestingly, two girls highlighted the potential in history to make connections with other subjects: one had enjoyed her topic on the Greeks because *'it's linked up with all your subjects and it makes your subjects real fun'*. PE was nominated by equal numbers of boys and girls. Those who elaborated on their choice tended to specify a particular sport; one girl appreciated the fact that their teacher did not force them to undertake any activities unless they felt ready for them, and another girl singled out the collaborative aspect of PE, commenting: *'You get to join in with others and play good games.'*

Almost a third of the total sample asserted that there was nothing they had done in Year 7 that they had not enjoyed. Among the remaining two-thirds, mathematics was most frequently cited as unenjoyable and in general, as in the Pilot Study, these pupils defined topics within subjects rather than the subjects themselves. The fact that mathematics was nominated most frequently for 'enjoyability' and

'unenjoyability' may to some extent be a reflection of its pre-eminence in the timetable, and, thereby, in the curriculum.

For some pupils, as Year 7 teachers confirmed, a lack of ability, in mathematics or PE, for example, precluded enjoyment in particular subjects. Two boys described the effect that lack of ability can have on enjoyment; both of them disliked English – one because he was a slow reader and often had problems finishing work, and the other because he regularly had to do something more than once *'to get it right'*.

6.4   The observed day
During the second interview, after the day of observation, pupils were asked to specify the most enjoyable aspects of the day as a whole. The researcher's own observations were noted throughout the day and these will be referred to here.

The largest concentration of nominations for the most enjoyable lessons came from the most academically oriented school. Five pupils identified music and six referred to technology. They found the practical elements of these subjects particularly stimulating. One boy observed: *'I just liked to see the way the machine worked and then whenever it came out, it was so precise.'* Technology was something new and had taken place at the post-primary school, factors which may have given an edge to its appeal.

It is worth noting that the researcher's observation notes stand in marked contrast to the pupils' perceptions of the lesson. The researcher noted that the teacher favoured a lecturing mode of delivery, quite different from the question-and-answer routine used by their own Year 7 teacher. The post-primary school teacher also referred to quite complicated diagrams on an overhead projector and used complex terms in his delivery. However, no pupils commented that either the content or pedagogy were difficult. This may well have been due to the novelty of learning something different, teamed with the excitement of using unfamiliar tools.

Pupils' perceptions of the observed day offered a significant insight into their dissociation of enjoyment from 'work'. In several schools, for example, being able to talk to friends during lessons was seen as particularly enjoyable: *'It was really fun – you could talk to your friends and all'* was one observation, reinforced by another pupil's comment: *'You don't do any work.'* 'Speaking and Listening' was evidently an invisible element of the curriculum as far as they were concerned. PE was frequently seen in a similar light; *'PE isn't a lesson; it's a kind of pleasure thing'* was a typical judgement. These comments appear to suggest that if pupils feel something is fun and enjoyable, like PE, then they do not perceive it as imbued with the educational value of real 'work'. This view was endorsed by one Year 7 teacher who, the researcher noted, told a class changing for PE that if there was too much noise they would have to do some *'work'*. Evidence of such an approach implies that teachers may play a very influential role in shaping children's definitions of 'education', 'work' and

'enjoyable activities' – with potentially major consequences for pupils' motivation in the future.

It is particularly striking that, in eight of the nine schools, the observations and subsequent interviews showed the very clear preference amongst pupils for practical and active learning approaches. One girl expressed her pleasure in the freedom she enjoyed through working with clay in art: '*If you don't like it, you can just scrunch it back up and make a new one.*' Activities during the observed day had included a variety of tasks, many of which allowed movement and social interaction. This was felt to be much more enjoyable than sitting still for long periods with opportunities for dialogue restricted to those within the formal teacher–pupil relationship.

Negative responses tended to include criticisms of the task involved, particularly when it employed more passive learning methods such as listening, writing or filling in worksheets, which pupils thought were '*boring*'. One pupil referred to a poetry lesson where '*all you were doing was just sitting and listening to a poem and answering questions on it*'. Other criticisms focused on levels of manageability. If pupils had difficulty with a task, they did not enjoy it as much, and if they had not managed to finish the task, this made it even less enjoyable. One girl had not enjoyed the mathematics problems the previous day, because she '*didn't really understand them*'. Negative accounts of the previous day's experiences also referred to repetition, either from one lesson to another, or within a single session; pupils of all abilities found revision and reinforcement very tedious at times; one girl complained of her recorder practice in music the previous day: '*You had to keep repeating it until you got it exactly right ... it was kind of annoying.*'

To sum up, pupils' reflections on the previous day's activities lend substantial weight to those teachers who were convinced that pupils perceived practical '*hands-on*' activities as intrinsically more enjoyable. In every case, the activities preferred by pupils from the previous day had involved the active learning methods favoured by pupils in the Pilot Study – practical or physical tasks, those requiring social interaction with their peers, or open-ended investigation, as in research or creative expression. Where the pupils' role was more passive – listening, writing or filling in worksheets, for example – they had not found the lesson so enjoyable.

6.5 The significance of pupils' enjoyment of the curriculum

It is significant that, according to Year 7 children interviewed for this study, enjoyment can enhance motivation and, therefore, through motivation, understanding:

> *If I don't really enjoy it, I'm not very good at it ... I know about history and I like it and enjoy it so I can learn it better.*

> *I think when you start enjoying a subject, it's easier just to grasp it and just do it. If it's more a fun way of learning it, then it's better.*

[some subjects] ... *I don't like as much as the others and I think that makes me not do as well as I would want to.*

The majority of teachers, in both this study and the Pilot Report, believed that pupil enjoyment of a subject could help to alleviate discipline problems; it was a significant aspect of the learning experience and made an important contribution to the quality of pupils' education. The analysis of pupils' perceptions here corroborates this view.

Many pupils commented on the arduousness of the intensive preparation for the Transfer Test which they had experienced in Year 6 and the first term of Year 7; and they expressed a corresponding sense of relief that the pressure had been removed in the second half of their Year 7 year. Teachers highlighted the Transfer Test as a major constraint on pupils' enjoyment of the curriculum. It was perceived to dictate the learning experiences being offered and meant that those taking the Test missed out on other areas of the curriculum.

According to the pupil data here, enjoyment can enhance both motivation and understanding. What, then, can be done to convince pupils – and, in some cases, teachers – that learning can legitimately be enjoyed? If pupils enjoy active learning methods most, how can these be specified in the Northern Ireland Curriculum?

7. THE CROSS-CURRICULAR THEMES
This section focuses on area of investigation 7 (see Section 1.3).

The Northern Ireland Curriculum: A Guide for Teachers (Northern Ireland Curriculum Council, 1990) states that the cross-curricular themes (CCTs) should be taught mainly through the subjects of the specified curriculum. During the interviews, pupils were asked whether they had learnt anything in Year 7 on the four CCTs at Key Stage 2: Information Technology (IT), Health Education (HE), Cultural Heritage (CH) and Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU). The preliminary results relating to each CCT are presented in turn.

7.1   Information Technology
The Northern Ireland Curriculum requires that *'pupils should develop their knowledge and understanding of a wide range of information technology tools'* (Department of Educaton for Northern Ireland, 1992, p.4). According to the data here, the range of pupils' experience of IT across the curriculum depended to a conspicuous degree on the commitment and competence of individual teachers.

The curriculum as experienced
Pupils' experience of IT varied considerably from one school to another, both in terms of the amount of time devoted to it and the type of provision they received. The differences in the amount of time spent on IT were particularly striking, ranging from the computer being used *'once in a blue moon'* to *'sometimes'* to *'once a week'*. However, plenty of opportunities to access the computer were not in themselves indicative of substantial learning in IT: in one school, for example, the class had weekly sessions on the computers, but these were largely unstructured and the pupils could do whatever they wanted; in another school, the pupils used the computer every day, but only to play games.

Pupils' accounts of their use of computers fell into five categories:

- fill-in time in lessons;
- amusement at breaks/lunchtime;
- finding out information for projects and subjects;
- playing educational games;
- presenting work.

The computer was most frequently used (eight schools) for presenting work. Pupils would word-process assignments such as stories written in English or research for project work. This was then put on display in the classroom. English was the subject which most frequently incorporated IT (seven schools).

Pupils from six schools commented that they used the computer to find out information for projects and subjects. In one school, pupils' extensive use of the computer for this purpose was facilitated by the availability of a CD-ROM in their classroom; in other schools, this could be in another classroom or the library.

Furthermore, their teacher, by her own admission, was keen for her class to regard the computer as a '*tool*' for their subjects rather than as a separate entity.

None of the pupils said they had regular formal sessions where they learned computer skills, though pupils from four schools cited examples of informal learning. In two cases, this had occurred when they were '*stuck*': one boy stated that '*if you get stuck, you learn something*'. This deficit model of teaching could mean that new developments were rarely explored by the teacher. Several pupils referred to the teacher's introduction to the computer at the beginning of the year, when they were shown '*where everything was and how to enter and all*', but there was little evidence of any later elaboration.

Teachers' competence in IT appeared to have a significant effect on what they taught. Four teachers observed that they did not feel confident with certain aspects of IT; of these, three taught very little, including one who was restricted to '*using the computer as a word processor*', because they felt so '*inadequate*'. These three teachers all said they would have preferred to teach a more formal session on computers, suggesting that there may be a link between teachers' self-confidence in this CCT and their ability to apply and develop it in the rest of the curriculum.

The curriculum as internalised
A large proportion of the total sample said they enjoyed IT. The majority of children also viewed the computer as useful. Their reasons fell into three broad categories:

- 18 pupils remarked that learning about computers would be useful for the future, either for jobs, or for post-primary school;
- 11 pupils thought that computers were a useful tool; a typical comment was '*Most people today would use computers, so it was good to know how to use the keys*';
- nine children, whose teachers were among those who used the computer for finding out information or playing educational games, observed that computers were useful, because they were a '*good*' way to learn or to find things out.

These pupils' perceptions imply a link between how children were taught IT and what they thought about it. As one girl pointed out: '... *you find out different information when you need it; I think it's quite handy.*'

Variability in current provision
Experiences of IT across the different schools can be summarised as follows:

- very limited, perhaps tokenistic, IT – pupils seldom had the opportunity to work on the computer and when they did their purpose was restricted to the presentation of work or amusement at breaks;

- regular, but restricted IT – IT integrated into a couple of subjects but the computer generally used for a limited range of purposes such as presenting work;
- extensive IT – the computer regularly integrated into several subjects with opportunities for pupils to experience several different functions of the computer such as CD-ROM and databases, in addition to word processing.

Given the substantial variations in provision, there may be a need for a more detailed programme of study for IT in order to standardise the experiences of all pupils. However, the evidence suggests that unless this is supported by more teacher training, opportunities for pupils in the classroom will continue to vary according to their teacher's expertise.

The preceding section of this report clearly demonstrated the significance of enjoyment in motivation. IT was highly popular with the Year 7 pupils interviewed here. In view of this enjoyment, and of the pupils' evaluation of the importance of computers in their future experience, both within and beyond school, it seems that both the specification, and the mediation, of IT across the curriculum would benefit from further scrutiny.

7.2   Health Education
According to the Northern Ireland Curriculum, the declared intention of Health Education in schools is to develop '*responsible attitudes and the skills necessary to make informed decisions in matters relating to health*' (Department of Education for Northern Ireland, 1992, p.12). Three separate objectives for Health Education are specified:

1.   Health Education in the Context of Personal Development
2.   Health Education in the Context of Social Development
3.   Health Education in Relation to the Environment.

On the whole, pupils referred more frequently to the experience of HE in the Context of Personal Development than to the other two objectives.

The curriculum as experienced
With reference to the specific aspects of Health Education, pupils in all ten schools agreed they had learnt about healthy eating, although this may have been in years previous to Year 7. Drugs, alcohol and smoking had been topics for discussion in five schools. When encouraged by the interviewer, pupils from five schools said they had done work on the environment, and pupils from six schools said they had learnt about personal safety. Interestingly, the majority of pupils saw HE as a discrete subject; only 13 pupils out of 58, from five schools, said they had done HE in science, even though the majority of teachers said they taught HE through science.

Talks from experts were very much a part of the pupils' experience of HE. In five schools, visitors had come into the school and talked to the pupils about a wide range of topics concerned with HE; in three cases, a policeman had given a talk about safety and in two others, health professionals had visited the schools, sometimes over a number of weeks. In one school, a health visitor had met Year 7 pupils regularly, first to promote healthy eating, and later, as one child explained, to talk to them about their bodies and growing up: '*The next week she took us ... just the girls, and told us about girls' stuff and then the boys.*' This pupil felt this had been '*very useful*' and another girl considered it to have been the '*most important*' thing she had learned during Year 7.

In some schools, activities and competitions focused on health education were perceived as particularly stimulating contributions to pupils' experience of HE. In one school, pupils had entered a competition to design a poster against smoking, and in a school where a hospital doctor had been to give a talk on healthy lifestyles, pupils had participated in a 'Health and Fitness Week': '*We have aerobics, that kind of stuff, and we wear tracksuits.*'

A number of pupils gave the impression that HE was something which could be covered and completed 'in one go', rather than continued and expanded throughout their school career. Pupils from three schools commented that they had done work on HE in Year 6 and that they had therefore done less work in Year 7. The view that HE could be finished once and for all was expressed by at least one teacher; she said her class had studied HE in depth in Year 6 and consequently she '*wouldn't spend a long time on it in P7*'. In this respect, HE differed from the other CCTs, which were more likely to be perceived as continuing elements of the curriculum.

The curriculum as internalised
The majority of pupils who were asked said they enjoyed HE. Two pupils referred to the way it was mediated: '*There were lots of experiments ... we had to look through microscopes and things.*' As with the competitions and other activities mentioned earlier, making HE a practical and focused learning experience seemed to engage pupils more effectively than leaving them to listen passively to talks.

Four pupils were ambivalent about HE: one girl, for example, had enjoyed learning about the body, but not about the environment:

> ... *it's not something you want to learn about 'cos you know the way you hear 'Oh, the whole earth's going to ... all the resources are going to run out by this time' – it leaves you scared, sort of ...*

The expression of such concern draws attention to the importance of the ethical dimension in the both the specification and mediation of the HE curriculum.

Over three-quarters of pupils thought that HE was '*useful*'. The reasons most frequently offered focused on the dangers of drugs, the need to care for the

environment and the importance of healthy eating. Among those who did not think HE was useful, one high-attaining boy said '*Look, I think, practically everyone knows that cigarettes give you cancer.*' A girl at another school thought it would only be useful '*if you want to be a doctor or something*'. It is likely that this response was coloured by the fact that her class had taken more of a biological approach to HE compared with other schools, perhaps an indication of the importance of the context of mediation in ensuring the relevance of HE for every child.

The status of HE in the curriculum

There did not appear to be a correlation between the type of school and coverage of HE. On the whole, pupils said they enjoyed it and believed it to be useful. In all cases, their reasons for its usefulness were connected with perceptions of life beyond school, which may reinforce the view of Whitty *et al.* (1994) that one of the distinguishing features of the CCTs is their usefulness for everyday life.

As with IT, the individual class teacher appeared to be a determining factor in affecting HE provision. Most teachers said they taught HE through science, and to a lesser extent through PE and RE. Smoking, the body, hygiene, drugs, exercise and healthy eating were elements of HE that teachers referred to, but schools varied in the degree to which these areas were explored in the classroom. All of these aspects of HE, which teachers talked about teaching, came within the first objective of HE as specified in the Northern Ireland Curriculum, '*HE in the context of personal development*'. None of the teachers referred to aspects of HE stipulated in the two other objectives, '*HE in the context of social development*' and '*HE in relation to the environment*'. However, pupils' accounts indicated that elements of these objectives had been covered in some schools.

Children tended to regard HE as a discrete entity rather than as part of a subject or subjects. Both pupils and teachers found it easy to identify and were clear about its constituents – smoking, healthy eating, drugs and so on. In this way, there seemed almost to be a syllabus for HE, which may also have reinforced the perception of some pupils, and teachers, that HE could be decisively completed rather than continue to be explored. As Whitty (op. cit.) found, health education appeared to be a '*quasi-subject*'.

7.3   Cultural Heritage

The Northern Ireland Curriculum specifies that pupils should learn about: the common experiences of their cultural heritage, the diverse and distinctive aspects of their culture, and the interdependence of the cultural process. There are three objectives:

* pupils should develop an awareness of '*interaction and interdependence, continuity and change in the cultural process*' – this objective is linked to Education for Mutual Awareness (EMU);

- pupils should develop an understanding of the *'shared, diverse and distinctive aspects of their cultural heritage'*;
- pupils should develop an understanding of the *'international and transnational aspects of today's society'* (Department of Education for Northern Ireland, 1992, p.8).

The curriculum as experienced

The most striking feature of the pupils' perceptions relating to their experience of CH is their diversity. This could imply variation between schools in the definition of CH, but it also demonstrated variation in individual pupils' interpretations. Pupils in the same class frequently gave divergent responses concerning what they had done for CH. It is at least possible that the variety in responses was due largely to the uncertainty about what it meant. One girl, for example, when asked if she had done anything on CH, replied: *'We went round a conservation area and found out where the mini-beasts and all the different insects set traps ...'* The interviewers told the pupils that CH entailed such topics as different people's ways of life, the ideas and things that they achieved in the past, and their links with other countries. However, because the majority of the pupils needed to have the term explained to them, it is likely that the explanation coloured how they replied.

The fact that about a third of the total sample, distributed across all ten schools, said that they had not done any CH reinforces the notion that the vagueness of the concept was bewildering for them. The religious denomination of the school did not appear to have significantly affected the responses. Nor did ability appear to be a determining factor.

Across the ten schools, 38 pupils recognised the (prompted) concept of CH in their learning in Year 7. Half of this group referred to learning about the past, including five children who cited elements of Irish history – *'what it would have been like in Belfast in Victorian times'*. Almost half of the group also described learning about other countries and their inhabitants: *'In other countries, the way they talk and the way they write, they write different and talk different'* – here, perhaps, illustrating how CH merges into EMU through learning and understanding why people are *'different'*, and thereby coming to accept and appreciate diversity. In spite of the specific connection between CH and EMU in the Northern Ireland Curriculum, only three pupils explicitly linked the two; they were at integrated schools where EMU was deliberately emphasised.

Only 22 pupils expressly mentioned individual subjects in relation to CH. History was the most frequently mentioned, perhaps understandably, since teachers from all but two schools said they covered CH through history. Geography was mentioned by eight pupils, though five were from the same (very academic) school, and RE was also cited, though less frequently.

The curriculum as internalised

Since less than a quarter of the sample were asked whether they enjoyed CH, and only a third were asked whether they thought it was useful, it would be unwise to draw any definite conclusions from the data. However, it is worth noting that, apart from two who were ambivalent, all those who were asked said they had enjoyed CH; one girl said in relation to the Jewish calendar: *'I wish we'd covered it in a bit more depth. You know, learned about the country and culture and all that.'*

Just over half of the pupils who were asked whether CH was useful, agreed that it was. Interestingly, however, CH was perceived to be less valuable than the other CCTs. This may be due to the fact that relatively few of them were familiar with the term 'Cultural Heritage' and what it entailed. The reasons given for the value of CH related to the work which pupils said they had done as part of CH. Four pupils referred to the importance of finding out about other people's lives: *'... I think it's important to learn about other people's traditions and you need to respect them as well'* – perhaps another reflection of the link between CH and EMU.

The teachers' accounts indicated that CH was taught mainly through history and was primarily concerned with Irish, particularly local, history. A few pupils, quoted above, did seem be making connections between CH and EMU but they were a small minority. Such concentration on these aspects at primary level may indicate that, in practice, teachers either lack the opportunity, or feel unprepared, to address the other aspects of CH, as specified in the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

7.4 Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU)

According to the Northern Ireland Curriculum, EMU is concerned with developing *'self-respect, respect for others and the improvement of relationships between people of differing cultures'* (Department of Education for Northern Ireland, 1992, p.9).

There are four objectives:

- pupils should develop respect for themselves and others and develop the ability to build and manage relationships;
- pupils should develop an understanding of conflict;
- pupils should be aware of the interdependence within the family, in the community and in the world;
- pupils should understand the differences and similarities of the cultural traditions which influence people in Northern Ireland.

These two final aims are closely allied to the objectives of CH. The Northern Ireland Curriculum also suggests pupils should have experience of at least one EMU activity: doing work within the school on, for example, a contemporary

controversial issue; doing work within the school which is *'enhanced by communication between schools'*; and working jointly with other schools.

The curriculum as experienced
As with CH, very few pupils were familiar with the term 'EMU', and some pupils were confused about its meaning; one pupil said that EMU was stamped on tests they did, and another thought she had been on an EMU trip because she had learned *'about the Victorian house ...'*

EMU, like the other CCTs, appeared to be subject to variation in the amount and type of work that pupils had done. In one school, for example, pupils said that Year 7 had involved learning about 'mediation', that they had been on joint school trips and that they had received a lesson on EMU every week. By contrast, five out of six pupils in another school said they could not think of any work they had done on topics associated with EMU. Variation in provision seemed to depend on the nature and ethos of the school. While, for example, the two integrated schools spent a considerable amount of time on EMU, the three academically oriented schools did relatively little work on it, and none of their Year 7 classes were involved in working with other schools.

The majority of pupils who were involved in EMU activities such as trips with other schools were aware of their social purpose: *'It's cross-community — we just make friends'*, as one girl confirmed. Thus, they challenged the assumption of two teachers who believed that their pupils did not *'realise ... that the reason they're doing this is just for mixing-wise, you know, and getting on with other religions'.* Being aware, however, did not necessarily mean that pupils felt the experience was of any real value. One girl was candidly dismissive:

> *... in a way, like, you can see the point of it, you know, trying to get us to mix with different schools and see how they work and things, but it doesn't teach us anything.*

A significant minority among the pupils perhaps more readily appreciated the value of EMU within their own surroundings. They acknowledged that the teacher's classroom management was encouraging them to learn to respect one another. Interestingly, these comments emerged from pupils at the two schools where the teachers observed that EMU had an important role to play in the classroom, and should not be viewed exclusively as a *'religious thing'*.

The curriculum as internalised
Almost three-quarters of the pupils who were asked directly, said they believed EMU was *'useful'*. As with the other CCTs, the way EMU had been introduced to them affected their perception of its value. The majority of pupils who had been involved in activities with other schools seemed to feel the opportunity to mix with other children had been worthwhile: *'... we can be used to being with other people, so that when we grow up and get a job we can mix with other people'* was a typical comment. Pupils were also aware of the value of meeting children of different religions: *'Helps you sort of realise, like, that Protestants aren't bad.'*

Interestingly, however, although pupils were aware of the reason for these joint activities and appreciated their purpose, they did not always enjoy them, as pointed out earlier. Nine out of the 25 pupils who said they had been involved in cross-community activities commented that they did not always get on with their counterparts; as one boy observed: *'We didn't really like them at the start, and then we sort of did like them, but didn't like them that much.'*

Pupils who had been involved with other schools saw the value of EMU in developing better relations between Protestants and Catholics. Pupils who had been less involved in joint activities with other schools, and whose teachers had concentrated on encouraging them to have respect for one another in class, saw EMU as valuable in a more general sense. One boy, for example, believed that listening to others was *'a good way of understanding people and respecting them'*. Those pupils who had been involved in mediation work felt it was very helpful in resolving disagreements between other pupils; one girl perceived EMU as the most important thing she had learned in Year 7: *'It helps you understand people's problems as well and you may be able to help them ... and they're different skills that you will need when you're older.'*

The place of EMU in the curriculum
EMU as a CCT was distinctive in that very few pupils perceived it to be taught through subjects in the curriculum; RE was the only subject they identified as a medium for EMU. This perception was corroborated by the fact that only three teachers said they taught EMU through subjects. According to the data here, it seems that EMU is communicated primarily as a set of values, with much less factual content than the other CCTs.

Contrary to the assumptions of at least some of their teachers, pupils could identify the reason for their involvement with other schools, and, to a large extent, were aware of its value. However, it appears that joint activities do not necessarily generate the positive attitudes which EMU endeavours to promote. In some schools, EMU focused on activities with other schools, but was supported by the integration of EMU during everyday life in the classroom. Significantly, pupils from these schools restricted their perceptions of EMU to the out-of-school events, suggesting that these trips overshadow EMU work done in class. Given the disadvantages of these latter experiences, as reported by the pupils themselves, it seems important to ensure that EMU activities extend beyond occasional inter-school collaboration, valuable although the majority of pupils believed this to be. According to pupils, the importance of nurturing respect and self-esteem in the classroom may well match the value of cross-community cooperation.

7.5   Summary
The degree to which the four CCTs were covered varied according to the priorities of individual schools, to the resources available, and, in particular, to the commitment and expertise of individual teachers.

IT appeared to be the theme which was most easily integrated as it was incorporated into the largest number of subjects. HE was generally covered through science and CH through history. EMU, however, was rarely taught through subjects, and was more frequently approached through special events such as trips with other schools, through the teacher's management of the classroom, and in two schools through special teaching programmes in 'mediation'.

The majority of pupils enjoyed the work they did on the CCTs and, for the most part, believed it was useful. HE was the theme they seemed able to talk about most easily, and CH was the one they found most difficult to conceptualise and the least useful.

The effect of teachers' competence, confidence and commitment on the mediation of the CCTs was particularly striking, and the degree to which teachers taught particular themes in depth varied considerably. IT was the theme affected most by teachers' lack of competence and self-confidence.

Pupils whose teachers found the CCTs difficult generally found it harder to communicate their views, and it may be the case that the more integrated the teacher's approach, the more difficulty pupils have in identifying the themes in their learning. This might explain why pupils who had experienced EMU both in the classroom and on trips with other schools chose to discuss the latter during the interview.

The provision of CCTs across the ten schools fell into four categories:

- schools with limited provision of the CCTs (four schools) – in all cases there was virtually no coverage of at least one of the CCTs;
- schools with mixed coverage of the CCTs (one school) – in this case, the most academically oriented school was distinct, because, although its coverage of HE, CH and EMU was fairly limited, its provision of IT was extensive and versatile;
- schools with fair coverage of the CCTs (three schools) – a consistent amount of coverage of all four CCTs over the school year
- schools with good coverage of the CCTs (two schools) – thorough coverage of all of the CCTs, although in both cases there was one which was perhaps less well covered than the other three. In one school, although the class regularly used the computer, they were left to do whatever they liked on it. In the other school, HE was probably the least covered because the class had done most of the work in Year 6; they did, however, do a considerable amount of work on the environment.

The findings reported here suggest that the curriculum as specified may need further clarification to ensure that pupils experience clear and consistent mediation of the CCTs across the curriculum. Moreover, teachers need to feel competent and confident in relation to the CCTs, in order to communicate them effectively. With a demonstration of commitment and continuing support from school management, appropriate staff development might offer teachers time for

reflection on the curriculum as a whole, and an opportunity both to define their own perceptions of the CCTs and to acquire the professional expertise the CCTs demand.

8. THE VALUES DIMENSION: EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT MESSAGES IN THE CURRICULUM

This section focuses on area of investigation 8 (see Section 1.3).

In addition to the provision of a broad and balanced curriculum, schools are required by DENI *'to develop in young people the values, attitudes and standards they need as responsible members of society'* (Department of Education for Northern Ireland, 1994, p.9). Research undertaken in the pilot phase of the Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study presented an opportunity to analyse in some detail the extent to which values are imparted and assimilated in classrooms and schools. This analysis has been extended through an investigation of the values discernible in the observations of Year 7 pupils here.

The following discussion summarises some of the perceptions and attitudes held by pupils regarding the nature of values which permeate teaching and learning, and the school environment. It also examines pupils' reactions to bullying, their expectations of teachers and their views on appropriate punitive strategies.

It is important to remember the context in which these concerns were presented to pupils. They were located in quite a challenging interview schedule, composed mainly of subject- and timetable-related questions. Pupils' conceptualisation of their learning experiences was therefore directed along a particular path, and defined within specific categories which either relate to the Northern Ireland Curriculum and/or to the curriculum themes discussed in this paper. Pupil responses to questions on values and value-related issues should therefore be interpreted within this particular context.

8.1 Pupils' perceptions of teachers' values

The purpose of this question was to ascertain whether pupils could identify and articulate what was important to their teachers. There was also an attempt to discover what children were internalising as 'important' messages from Year 7 teachers. Pupils were then asked if they agreed with what their teachers felt was important, and whether they felt their friends and family would also agree. The majority of pupils made some response to this question; only four out of the 58 in the sample submitted a 'don't know' response. Almost all of the responses divided into two categories:

* subjects in the Northern Ireland Curriculum;
* issues relating to behaviour and discipline.

Over 60 per cent of pupils identified individual subjects from the Northern Ireland Curriculum as being important to their teachers. Forty per cent mentioned English, mathematics or science, or some combination of these three subjects, most commonly English and mathematics. Pupils often associated these subjects' importance for teachers with the frequency with which they were studied in class: *'We do them a lot'*; *'We have to do them every day.'* Nineteen pupils reported that their teacher said these subjects were *'important'* in order to do well at their

'*next school*', '*to get a job*', or simply to '*get on*'. There were also instances of negative reinforcement: if they failed to work hard at these subjects they said that the teacher '*got cross*' or shouted at them. Pupils tended to agree with whatever was important to their teacher and were in many cases able to offer some explanation for this: for example '*You need* [those subjects] *to get a job.*'

Almost 50 per cent of pupils tendered responses which related to some aspect of behaviour and discipline; in some cases, these were mentioned in addition to subjects, while in others they were referred to alone. Almost all these pupils commented that their teacher thought it was important that they learnt '*how to behave*', '*how to conduct yourself*' and '*good manners*'. An ability to work quietly was evidently important in many classrooms: '*He likes it when we don't talk.*' A few pupils also mentioned how their teacher thought discipline, rules and '*no bullying*' were important. When asked how they knew behaviour and discipline were important to their teachers, pupils were almost unanimous in their responses. Ninety-five per cent made some reference to their teacher's reaction to bad behaviour, and in particular to noise, failure to listen and bad manners. They commented that '*he gets cross*', '*he shouts at you*', '*he gets very, very mad*' and, perhaps more ominously, that '*you'd know about it*'.

According to pupils, male teachers were greater disciplinarians than their female counterparts; pupils taught by female teachers on many occasions reported that friendship, consideration for others and trying hard were important:

> '*She told me it was important to make friends with X, so I did.*'
> '*She thinks helping others out is important.*'
> '*She says if you're stuck, make sure you ask.*'

While behaviour and discipline were recognised as being important to teachers, pupils did not necessarily concur, and many of them certainly did not consider them to be *the* most important things which they were learning. Only two pupils alluded to '*respect*' and '*manners*' when asked what important things they had learnt in Year 7. Nineteen respondents identified issues such as health, relationships ('*learning to be kind, helping classmates*') and the environment.

While it is essential to bear in mind the context of these questions, the findings do appear to offer further evidence of the largely utilitarian nature of pupils' constructs of the curriculum. Lessons and activities were apparently only perceived to be of value if they could somehow facilitate the individual's academic or vocational development, either now or at some time in the future.

8.2 Pupils' views of what was important to their friends and family

Pupils did not always answer this question very fully or very confidently. Many gave the impression that they did not explicitly discuss issues which were important to their teacher or themselves with their friends, and 12 respondents said they had no idea if their friends shared the same views of what was important as their teacher. Considering the average age of the pupils in the sample, this is perhaps not surprising.

Pupils who had identified English, mathematics or science as being important to their teacher usually felt that these subjects would be important to their friends too. Over 50 per cent of pupils who had agreed with the importance of good behaviour felt their friends would hold the same view. They pointed out that friends also wanted '*to be treated well*' or '*like you to be nice to them*'. However, almost a third revealed that they did not feel their friends attached much significance to good behaviour at all.

From pupils' responses, it appears that parents were more likely to talk about and actively reinforce good behaviour than to discuss specific subjects from the Northern Ireland Curriculum. Thirty-seven pupils who had identified good behaviour as being important to their teachers commented that '*Mum and Dad say that too*', or '*good manners are definitely important at home*'. Several pupils noted that their parents would think good behaviour was very important, because ultimately '*it is their responsibility if I misbehave*'.

Pupils were less convinced of the importance of individual subjects in the Northern Ireland Curriculum to parents. Their responses suggested that parents were more likely to communicate the value of school work by stressing the need to work hard and complete homeworks. Almost 40 per cent of pupils said that their parents would frequently ask '*if I've done my homework*', or would say '*Make sure I concentrate when doing my homework*' or '*Give me help with my homework*'. Several children said their parents wanted them to '*get a good job and car*', and one girl concluded that education was important to her family because they had arranged for her to have a tutor. A small number of pupils confessed they did not know if these things were important at home, although a few then added: '*But they would be annoyed if I got bad marks.*'

There was no perceptible difference in pupils' responses to this question on the basis of gender or school type. It was interesting, though, that the two male Year 7 teachers who were identified as strong disciplinarians seemed to command considerable support from pupils' parents. Seventy-five per cent of pupils at these two schools made reference to their encouragement and expectations of good behaviour.

8.3 Principals' and teachers' views on values

Principals and teachers were in broad agreement that values were inherent in all areas of teaching and school life. The concept of '*ethos*' featured strongly in many principals' portrayal of the kinds of values which were upheld in their schools and the type of school appeared to have some impact on the nature of its ethos. This point is illustrated in the responses from principals at maintained and integrated schools, where ethos was often more clearly defined. There did appear to be broad agreement amongst teachers from all schools regarding the importance of a '*community*' ethos, and, in particular, the establishment and maintenance of open and supportive relationships with parents.

Class teachers were more likely to highlight values which they were attempting to encourage in pupils than to discuss values which informed their teaching practice. Values were evidently not a common topic of conversation in the staffroom, and for some teachers, this study provided their first opportunity to reflect on this area.

8.4 Values and a specific issue: bullying

Incidents of bullying were of considerable concern to a large number of pupils. An overwhelming majority of pupils selected one or two strategies, or a combination of both, as their most likely response to incidents of bullying. Seventy-five per cent of pupils said that they would do one of the following:

- tell a teacher;
- try to sort it out themselves;
- try to sort it out themselves and, if this was unsuccessful, tell a teacher.

Pupils' reasons for selecting one of the three main options mentioned above were based on the perception that someone could get hurt, or that they did not want to get into trouble themselves. Further analysis revealed a difference in the strategies adopted by girls and boys. Girls were more than twice as likely to approach a teacher in the first instance, while boys preferred at least to attempt to sort it out themselves before going to a teacher. For a large number of boys, it seemed that fetching a teacher was a last resort.

Approaching a teacher, however, was generally regarded as the most effective means of dealing with bullying. When asked what they thought their teacher would be likely to do, almost 58 per cent of pupils approved of whatever actions they believed their teacher would take. According to pupils, teachers were most likely to issue a detention and/or severe reprimand to the offending pupil. Thirteen children felt that the measures their teachers would adopt were not the most appropriate, either because they were not severe enough, or because the measures would not dissuade a bully from reoffending. They spoke of *'having to make sure they will never do it again'*, or *'finding a punishment to fit the crime'*. A relatively large proportion of pupils felt that parents should be made aware of their children's misbehaviour immediately.

To sum up, bullying was widely recognised as an incident with which pupils wished to be dissociated. It was clearly perceived by the majority of pupils as 'wrong' and something which should be actively discouraged. The presence of a teacher was generally considered as the most powerful measure towards terminating incidents of bullying, but children were anxious that some kind of mechanism should be found which would eradicate such incidents permanently, together with the suffering they imposed.

8.5 Pupils' perceptions of the Transfer Procedure

Although pupils were not asked directly about any aspect of the Transfer Procedure, they demonstrated varying levels of awareness of its import and of

what their teachers considered valuable as they prepared for the Tests. Pupils, and high attainers in particular, acquiesced in the intense preparation preceding the Tests, which included extra work, evening tuition and Saturday morning classes. They also understood that they had to concentrate more on English, mathematics and science, because, as one pupil remarked: *'You don't get asked about geography in the Transfer Tests.'* They explained, usually in the words of their teachers, that *'it* [would] *all be worthwhile in the end'*. These responses reflected a strongly utilitarian approach to the curriculum, where pupils only identified subjects or topics as important if they featured in the Transfer Tests.

As reported in earlier sections of this paper, teachers were often scathing in their criticism and disapproval of the Transfer Test and the selection process – as one teacher said *'It's a pernicious, awful system.'* They referred to negative effects such as the distortion of the curriculum and the impact of the pressure on pupils: *'It's just too awful for them if they fail to have to deal with that.'*

However, Year 7 pupils (particularly those from more academic schools) measured success and achievement in terms of performance in the Transfer Tests, and the type of post-primary school where they gained a place. Their responses communicated an implicit awareness of the values system underpinning the Transfer procedure, which was often expressed through references to comments made by their teachers. Pupils who did not achieve a grammar school place generally made fewer references to the Transfer Procedure. They tended to focus more on aspects of their learning which they felt would be important at their post-primary school.

8.6 Summary

Pupils' responses displayed a keen awareness of what was considered important in Year 7, and in particular what they felt was important to their teachers. They interpreted the structure and emphasis of the curriculum in Year 7 (and, some pupils suggested, in Year 6) to be starkly focused on English, mathematics and science. Pupils noted that other subjects were not as important because they would not be included in the Transfer Tests, and they could be 'put on hold', to be studied again after the Tests. Moreover, higher-attaining children were able to justify the extra work, the sense of pressure and their parents' insistence on extra tuition, because it would *'all be worth it'* when they secured a place in a grammar school. Even pupils who were not expecting to attend grammar school felt it was important to acquire the knowledge and skills associated with the Transfer Tests, as they would *'need to know them'* at their post-primary school.

These comments from pupils, and corresponding observations made by teachers, indicate the existence of a strong values system underpinning the Year 7 curriculum. An emphasis on a utilitarian approach to learning, coupled with a preoccupation with academic achievement, was internalised by many pupils, and in particular by those pupils from more academic primary schools. *'Hard work'*, *'performance'* and a *'competitive atmosphere'* were all associated with success at the end of Key Stage 2. In many cases, 11-year-olds were describing a curriculum which concentrated on intellectual and cognitive development, and gave only

minimal attention to physical, social, moral or spiritual advancement. Many teachers acknowledged, openly or tacitly, that they were working in a system with which they vehemently disagreed.

A number of pupils communicated feelings of anxiety and even fear, when they discussed the Transfer Procedure. Children in more academic schools seemed acutely aware of the importance of achieving a place at a grammar school and of teacher and parental expectations. There was an implicit 'secondary', or inferior, label attached to secondary schools in some pupils' responses. It would be interesting to explore the origins and development of such perceptions in greater detail.

The apparent tendency of pupils to internalise the values system implicit in the Northern Ireland Curriculum is an important consideration in the light of the Government's growing concern about moral and values education, including plans to produce materials based on a statement of consensual values. If an explicit values agenda were to be devised and implemented, it would appear crucial that this was consistent with the implicit values system or hidden curriculum underlying the mediation of the Northern Ireland Curriculum and the Transfer Procedure. The findings from this study would suggest that the values implicit in at least some aspects of the Key Stage 2 curriculum, and in the nature of the Transfer Procedure as a whole, may conflict to some extent with the explicit values of moral education proposals. There appears, therefore, to be a need to reflect more deeply on the types of value messages which are communicated through the curriculum, and to consider the extent to which these are identified and internalised by children.

9. THE APPROPRIATENESS OF ASSESSMENT
This section focuses on area of investigation 6 (see Section 1.3).

A wide range of assessment methods is currently in operation in Northern Ireland primary schools. These include pupil self-assessment, continuous teacher observation in class, teachers' oral and written responses, numerical marking, and tests of varying degrees of formality, length and frequency, the most formal being the Transfer Test.

Although the demands of a lengthy list of themes to be discussed with the pupil interviewees left very little time to explore issues relating to assessment in any depth, their thoughts on this topic were collected through three main avenues:

- incidental comments on assessment in response to other items (the most frequent point of reference in this category was the Transfer Test);
- (time permitting) each of the 'pursued-pupil' interviewees was asked if they found any observed forms of assessment *'fair and helpful'*;
- (time permitting) each of the 'pursued-pupil' interviewees was asked; *'Can you tell me how you find out how well you are getting on with your learning? How do you find out whether or not you've learnt something properly in different subjects?'*

9.1 Pupils' perceptions of assessment methods

Apart from some complaints about the demanding, onerous and monotonous nature of the work associated with the preparation for the Transfer Test, this sample of Year 7 pupils appeared to accept it as an unquestionable reality in the closing years of their primary schooling. Certainly, there was no evidence from the pupils of the disdain for the Transfer Procedure displayed by several teachers and principals. Indeed, and rather worryingly so for some teachers, several pupils had clearly grown to enjoy and look forward to the competitive and clearly visible 'right or wrong' qualities of test practising and coaching. In a few cases, however, there were signs that the emotions surrounding the subjective experience of 'failure' (including being awarded a B rather than an A grade) were too private and complex to open up for a brief moment in a busy interview with a comparative stranger. For such reasons, it appeared that the breadth and depth of the issues involved in understanding the impact of the Transfer Procedure on pupils warranted a full study in its own right – the brief for this project was to look at the range of assessment methods (not just the Transfer Test) as a small and necessarily limited part of a much more detailed examination of the curriculum as experienced by pupils.

Most pupils were aware that they had experienced a range of assessment methods during their last year in primary school, and, with one or two exceptions, they seemed to regard them as fair and reasonable. According to the pupils' accounts, some teachers relied more heavily than others on one particular form of assessment, such as either awarding marks or writing comments for written work. Again, it seems that pupils' learning experience was determined to a considerable

extent by the inclinations of individual teachers and/or the policies of individual schools.

It was noted earlier, in reference to breadth and balance, that pupils can usually only appreciate the value of a subject (and say they would like to do more of it) if they have actually experienced it. From pupils' views here, it seems a similar principle holds true for assessment. Even among the relatively small number of children (30) who expressed a preference for a single, particular method, clusters of pupils from the same class tended to favour the method they predominantly experienced in their teacher's practice. Those children, for example, whose accounts suggested that their teacher engaged in generous amounts of oral explanation and discussion, both with individuals and the class as a whole, were conspicuous in recommending it as the most helpful means of letting them know how they were *'getting on'*.

Year 7 children in two schools, whose teachers frequently checked their work in progress by walking round the classroom, all agreed that this was very helpful:

> *... if you're sat there for a long time you wouldn't get your work done ... and then you write something down ... no good. Miss X came round a bit ... you'd know what to do.*

The knowledge that their teacher was readily, and in terms of specific assessment, uncritically available to keep them on the right track seemed particularly reassuring to less confident children. The boy quoted here, for example, liked oral comments, as in his art lessons, best of all, *'because it makes me think I can do some things better than other people'*.

In one school, where pupils seemed to agree that a specific mark was the normal method, four out of six pupils said this was helpful. As their most familiar form of feedback, perhaps this is not surprising, because it would be the method which they understood best and which would make them feel the most secure. Given that oral commentary was one of the two most appealing methods overall among the sample as a whole, the fact that one other pupil in this class, while agreeing that marks were helpful, observed that she found oral comments even better reinforces the impression that pupils need to experience an assessment technique in order to appreciate its potential to help them.

Out of the 30 pupils in Year 7 who could decide which method of assessment they preferred, ten chose oral comments and discussion with their teacher, and ten opted for specific marks. It may be significant that seven of those who preferred precise marks were boys, and that six of those who favoured open-ended oral comments were girls. Of those who thought marks were best, one pupil said that ticks were the most helpful because they told her which was *'right and wrong'*, and because that kind of assessment was not as hard to do as tests. A high-attaining boy at the most academically oriented school remarked that while he found written comments most helpful on written work, he preferred marks for oral and practical activities because they were more accurate. A well-motivated boy at a less academic school said he liked best to have both a mark and a written

comment in his exercise book. His comment is typical of a number of pupils who appreciated a combination of assessment techniques and liked to be assessed in whatever way they felt was most appropriate for a specific task or subject. Of those who preferred oral comments, one high-attaining boy explained that '*if ... they say to you that you've done very well, that always makes me feel good and then makes me want to do it even better next time*'. Oral comments in front of the whole class, however, particularly when they exposed some inadequacy, could be a source of resentment; one or two pupils thought this was unfair and preferred a mark on the page which they could respond to in private.

Tests and written comments were the next most popular methods among this sample, both favoured by equal numbers of boys and girls. One boy was convinced of the value of testing because '*it makes you learn ... in a test you wouldn't be able to use a book or something and that is a way of making sure that you are taking in the learning*'. He also commented on the value of the related activity of revision. It is unclear whether the learning he referred to involved thorough understanding or – a more disturbing alternative – the rote learning perceived by many teachers as the inevitable and undesirable result of the 'cramming' demanded by the Transfer Test, and at other points in the year, by an overloaded curriculum.

Three pupils – two girls and one boy, all at different schools – found tests either unfair or unhelpful or both. One girl, who found tests an ordeal herself, pointed out that '*some people can be nervous and then they can't get as good marks, and it doesn't really show how good they are because they could be better in class than they are in the test*'. A high-attaining boy at the most academic school thought tests could frustrate the will to learn '*because during a test, if you get it wrong and you don't understand it, then you don't know*'. Another girl, who said tests made her '*frightened and nervous and stuff*', explained that they were only a help if the teacher '*goes over them*' and then they '*learnt a bit*'.

The focus of this paper is pupils' own perceptions of their learning. It was particularly striking that five pupils identified, in their own language, an 'informal' method of self-assessment unnoticed, or at least not voiced, by teachers. These five pupils expressed the satisfaction they experienced when they recognised their understanding was equal to the task in hand. Their comments can be interpreted as a further reminder of the number of pupils, of all abilities, who acknowledged the pleasure of overcoming a challenge for its own sake. Four of the pupils in this case were girls, who suggested that the pleasure they experienced was partly due to a sense of relief. One girl, for example, explained: '*I sort of feel it; I could feel in the mathematics that I already knew it and it was quite easy*' and later: '*I sort of know that I don't know or I do know it, and yesterday I did know it, so I'd learnt it properly.*' Similarly, a high-attaining girl at another school judged her understanding of a topic by whether she could explain it clearly to a friend.

Only one pupil regarded the best method to be the more 'formal' self-assessment undertaken by pupils marking their own work in class:

*Usually, after we've finished our work we usually mark it, so then I can
see whatever I get, say it was out of eight, and I didn't do very well, say
four out of eight or something, then I'd know I'd have to work on that a bit
more.*

None of the pupils who contributed preferences identified end-of-term reports as
particularly helpful. As these are relatively infrequent, appear just before a
holiday and are addressed primarily to parents, their impact may lack the
immediacy needed to make them as relevant as some other forms of assessment to
the everyday life of the classroom.

9.2 Assessment and ability

There was no clear correlation between ability and methods of assessment. The
comments from high and low attainers, even within this small sample, suggest that
the variety of responses to different methods of assessment requires a
corresponding range of instruments.

One high-achieving girl at the most academic school felt that comparing her own
marks and pieces of work with those of her peers was the most effective method;
her preference appears to be a positive reflection of the competitive spirit
encouraged in such an academic community. The observation of an equally high-
attaining boy in her class makes an interesting contrast. Although he thought it
was useful in art to compare his work with that of someone else who was '*quite
good*', he felt that generally the best method was '*compliments from teachers*',
because they spurred him on to further achievement:

> *... if you're doing pretty well and then you do excellently and they say to
> you that you've done very well, that always makes me feel good, and then
> makes me want to do even better next time. So I think that helps ...*

In his case, the enhancement of self-esteem sprang from competing against
himself — a comparatively rare observation in a system that evidently promotes
norm-referenced comparisons. The competitive spirit was by no means restricted
to the academically oriented schools. While another girl at such a school
remarked that you knew you'd done well if you were moved to '*a higher group*',
exactly the same observation was volunteered by a girl in a more open
environment.

Some low attainers were as convinced as some high achievers of the value of tests.
One boy, who wanted to be a farmer and did not enjoy school, perceived tests as
both '*helpful*' and '*fair*', because '*you know what you're doing and you know how
well you're getting on*'. Again, it seems to be the unambiguous, unequivocal
aspect of tests which he finds appealing. This particular child said he did not
mind the lack of testing in art and history, because he disliked them. He wanted to
be tested in mathematics, science and English because he thought they were
important. As a boy who did not like school, his approach may have been
deliberately perfunctory.

In the same way, a low-attaining boy in a school where marking was the predominant method asserted that marks and '*doing corrections*' were '*very helpful*'. A child with a very difficult home background, he, too, seemed to prefer a straightforward transaction rather than more open-ended written or oral comments, which he may have found harder both to understand and to implement, unsupported, in his pieces of work. Bearing in mind the low self-esteem of many low attainers, and the pre-eminence of oral assessment in pupils' perceptions overall in this sample among those who had experienced it, it seems that it might well be worth creating opportunities for teachers to engage in oral assessment more frequently, and privately, with lower-attaining pupils, in order to fully explain and expand on the shortened form of encouragement which higher-attaining pupils evidently found so rewarding.

9.3   Summary of pupils' views

It is noteworthy that very few of the pupils who were asked believed that any form of assessment was unfair. Moreover, they agreed overwhelmingly that it was helpful to know how they were '*getting on*'. But one of the most striking features of children's responses to assessment considered here was their variety. This was undoubtedly a problem for their teachers, and one which most teachers readily acknowledged.

9.4   Teachers' perceptions of the appropriateness of assessment
The Transfer Test

Teachers' perceptions of the Transfer Test have recurred throughout this paper. Suffice it here to underline their strongest and most frequent objection – the unrelenting pressure exerted by the preparation for the Test on 11-year-old children:

> *The Transfer Test is most traumatic, and I would use that word deliberately ... I have seen children over the years decimated by the Transfer Test.*

Apart from the disapproval of the Test *per se*, expressed by the majority of teachers and principals, it is significant that a number of teachers across the sample as a whole pointed out that the timing of the Test was inappropriate. They felt that this could be a crucial factor in the severity of its effect. If, for example, the Test was in March, as one teacher proposed, there would be less pressure associated with covering the curriculum and fewer problems with sustaining motivation afterwards.

Variation between individual schools and teachers

The range of responses to assessment was not limited to the reactions of pupils themselves. In spite of adherence to statutory requirements, schools varied in their emphasis on different assessment methods according to their own priorities, academic or otherwise (two schools, for example, concentrated particularly on the nurturing of self-esteem). In the same way, individual teachers tended to rely on

the methods of assessment most congenial to their teaching style. Unsurprisingly, the most academic schools were heavily committed to testing, and other methods seemed to be used for incidental support. In other schools, the pupils' experience of assessment seemed to be related more closely to the disposition of the individual teacher. Children in one school, for example, testified to a considerable degree of self-assessment (marking their own work), while in another they agreed on the predominance of numerical marking by their teacher.

In general, all teachers valued continuous informal assessment and regular testing, provided the children were not subjected to any pressure. There was some variation in the forms and extent of testing favoured: daily spelling and mental arithmetic tests, end-of-topic tests, Assessment Units and standardised testing were commonly approved, though Assessment Units prompted some concern regarding the workload for the teachers themselves. In considering the relative merits of quantifiable tests and qualitative continuous assessment, the conviction of one teacher spoke for the majority: both types of assessment were *'definitely'* necessary.

10. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

To draw together the main threads of the report, we conclude with a brief consideration of the findings' implications for the ninth and tenth areas of investigation, namely pupils' overall learning experiences at the close of Key Stage 2 and the extent to which the curriculum as mediated meets the aims of the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

With regard to **relevance and appropriateness,** it was found that Year 6 and 7 pupils were experiencing a curriculum in which 'academic' achievement (principally in English, mathematics and science) was afforded greater status and relevance than other areas of the broader agenda set out in the statement of aims for the Northern Ireland Curriculum. A significant minority referred to learning activities which they had enjoyed, but felt they were unimportant, either because they were not related to the academic curriculum, which they regarded as the first priority, or because they were perceived as irrelevant in a utilitarian vision of the future. The responses highlighted the relative status of different subjects and the comparative irrelevance of the curriculum not assessed in the Transfer Procedure. A narrow instrumentalism was evident in the responses concerning future occupations. Girls, referred to the importance of personal development, social behaviour and religion more frequently than boys, and were also more aware of the relevance of health and safety issues. Very few individuals attached importance to subjects associated with their own interests.

Half of the sample could identify subjects or specific topics which they perceived as personally irrelevant or inappropriate. Some aspects of the Northern Ireland Curriculum were felt by learners to be inappropriate for different levels of ability. Some of the work was '*too hard*' for low attainers; other areas failed to engage high attainers in a sufficiently demanding intellectual challenge; clearly, achieving simultaneous relevance in terms of curriculum proficiency for both high- and low-attaining pupils emerged as a significant problem at Key Stage 2.

Curriculum **breadth and balance** in the latter years of Key Stage 2 were seriously disrupted by the Transfer Test. According to pupils, the pressure and monotony imposed by preparation for the Transfer Test made much of their learning both onerous and stressful until it was over. Although teachers often used the post-Test period to address areas of the curriculum that had been neglected during Years 6 and 7, pupils' responses revealed that a sense of balance needed to be established over a much shorter timescale in order to have meaning from their point-of-view. In some schools, pupils also pointed out that the emphasis on other work in the summer gave them no opportunity to practise the key skills learnt much earlier in the year. A significant number expressed strong opinions about the over-representation of English and mathematics. Pupils' perceptions of over-representation in the curriculum derived either from lack of personal interest or from over-representation within a single period of time (e.g. mathematics for long periods) or regular and predictable over-representation (e.g. perceived accentuation on grammar at the expense of poetry/creative writing). There was a conspicuous awareness of the under-representation of expressive subjects, such as art and PE.

As well as these imbalances, the whole curriculum learning experience of Year 7 pupils also lacked lateral **coherence**. Their perceptions of the 'whole curriculum' were predominantly compartmentalised into subject and sub-subject categories — as fragmented along subject lines and boundaries as their counterparts in Year 8. 'Areas of Study' categories were rarely deployed and cross-curricular topics and skills seemed to play limited roles in helping pupils construct lateral connections in their learning. To this extent, primary curriculum organisation and mediation seemed no more cohesive than that commonly offered at Key Stage 3.

The evidence relating to **continuity and progression** in their learning experiences showed that pupils who were described as 'below average' by their teachers were the only ones to define follow-on as extraneous procession; high-achieving pupils saw progression as incremental acquisition; while mid achievers tended most often to interpret follow-on as 'clustering'. While perceptions of follow-on varied from subject to subject, most believed that mathematics and music provided follow-on as incremental acquisition. Pupils' comments suggested that they have difficulty in perceiving progression in content-based subjects, such as science, history and geography, where there was a tendency for the content *per se* to be the focus of attention and for learning to be internalised as an accumulation of facts in a largely arbitrary sequence, rather than as an analytically reflective, recursive and steadily graduated approach to both new and familiar material and skills. Interestingly, the results tentatively suggested that while lateral coherence tended to be associated with content-based connections, temporal coherence (i.e. continuity and progression) was more readily recognised in skills-based terms. Generally, a sense of progression in learning was valued by pupils, though, surprisingly, few teachers deemed it to be a crucial aspect of effective teaching. Anticipations of post-primary schooling varied according to achievement, with high achievers focusing on the type and level of learning experiences awaiting them, while low achievers centred on the relative demands of the work ahead, homework and school discipline.

On the question of **manageability**, as a general rule, most pupils considered that the amount of work they were required to do was reasonable and in six of the ten schools, more than half of the children interviewed seemed to think that the level of their work was appropriate for them as individuals. The data demonstrated that most pupils welcomed a challenge in their academic work; what they undoubtedly found stressful, however, was the relentless diet of a narrowly restricted range of tasks aimed at success in the Transfer Test. Moreover, according to both pupils and teachers, it seems that either from the pressure to cover a given amount of material within a limited period, especially for the Transfer Test, or from the difficulties for a single teacher of managing large mixed-ability classes, a significant number of pupils were working at a level and a pace which they felt to be inappropriate. Unmanageability was frequently related to '*too much writing*'. Pupils' comments indicated how learning can be made more manageable through effective strategies in facilitating curriculum coherence, differentiation and time management.

Turning to **enjoyment of the curriculum,** it should be stressed that the majority of pupils were very positive about their general experiences of school, citing social benefits, active learning and specific elements of the curriculum (e.g. PE) as particularly enjoyable. Mathematics, art and design, and science received the most nominations for the most enjoyable subjects. Disliked aspects of school included the anxieties and pressures generated by the Transfer Test, organisational procedures (e.g. dinner queues, playtime rules) and certain areas of the curriculum (e.g. 'mental mathematics', 'the Victorians'). Mathematics was also identified as the least liked subject. The pupil-pursuit data showed a very clear preference amongst pupils for practical and active learning approaches, and those requiring social interaction with their peers, or open-ended investigation, as in research or creative expression. Teachers felt that the Transfer Test placed a major constraint on the scope for such learning activities. Strong criticisms from pupils were levelled against tasks that employed extended periods of more passive learning methods such as listening, writing or filling in worksheets. Other criticisms focused on inappropriate levels of manageability and unnecessary repetition.

The extent to which the four **cross-curricular themes** formed part of a pupil's learning experience varied according to the values and priorities of individual schools, to the resources available, and, in particular, to the commitment, expertise, values and confidence of individual teachers. The coverage of the themes across the ten schools was very patchy and highly variable in terms of both quantity and quality of learning experiences associated with them. The effect of teachers' professional competence and confidence on the mediation of the CCTs was particularly striking; IT seemed to be the theme most affected by teachers' lack of competence and self-confidence. The majority of pupils enjoyed their work on the CCTs and, for the most part, believed they were useful. HE was the theme they seemed able to talk about most easily, and CH was the one they found most difficult to conceptualise and the least useful.

The **values dimension** of Year 7 pupils' experience of the whole curriculum included learning through implicit and explicit messages, often referred to as the hidden and overt curriculum. The former was found to be very influential in shaping pupils' perceptions of the value systems held by their teachers. For example, the amount of time spent on certain subjects and their place in the Transfer Test (implicit messages) signalled the school's and teachers' definition of the relative status and importance of different areas of the curriculum. Coupled with explicit justifications for these values (e.g. English, mathematics and science are important for jobs and careers), these twin message systems appeared to act as powerful determinants of pupils' views on what was deemed to be important to their teachers. As a result, the majority of these Year 7 pupils felt that the most important things for their teachers were certain subjects (principally, English and mathematics, and sometimes, science) and values relating to behaviour and discipline. Male teachers were thought to be greater disciplinarians than their female counterparts, who were more likely to be associated with the values of friendship, consideration for others and trying hard. The evidence also alerts us to the fact that there is no automatic transfer from the curriculum as mediated and experienced to the curriculum as internalised: exposure to transmitted values does not guarantee their assimilation by the learners. Rather than identify behavioural

and discipline-related values as important things learnt in Year 7, many pupils cited alternative attitudinal themes such as health, relationships and the environment. Notwithstanding this, an accentuation on a utilitarian approach to learning, coupled with a preoccupation with academic achievement, was internalised by many pupils. *'Hard work'*, *'performance'* and a *'competitive atmosphere'* were all associated with success at the end of Key Stage 2.

As already evidenced above, **assessment,** especially in the form of the Transfer Test, had a major 'backwash' effect on the nature of pupils' whole curriculum learning experience. According to the accounts of many pupils, the Year 6 and 7 work associated with it was onerous and monotonous, it encouraged a competitive ethos and fostered a rigid and categorical view of learning and knowledge. The use of other forms of assessment showed considerable variation between teachers and schools, corroborating earlier evidence (e.g. regarding the CCTs) on the extent of divergence in pupils' learning experiences. While the vast majority of pupils felt that the forms of assessment they experienced were fair, it was clear that many classes were not experiencing a diverse and comprehensive range of assessment methods. In other words, the variations in the uses of different forms of assessment were greater between classes than within them.

Overall, the evidence presents grounds for fearing that the reality of most pupils' whole curriculum learning experiences was falling short of the aims of the Northern Ireland Curriculum in the latter years of Key Stage 2. From the learners' perspective, breadth and balance in Years 6 and 7 were almost certainly compromised. Relevance was heavily skewed towards academic criteria; the importance and relevance of subjects other than English, mathematics and science were undermined; topics perceived to be irrelevant were frequently identified; and pupils' personal interests were not seen as important or relevant to learning and the curriculum at school. At an experiential level, the curriculum lacked lateral coherence and although most mid- to high-achieving pupils perceived a valuable sense of progression in their learning, this was noticeably absent or poorly formed in the experience of lower-attaining children.

As a consequence of this line of analysis, it is arguable that while the academic orientation of the Year 6 and 7 curriculum as mediated and experienced may address several aspects of the *'intellectual'* development of pupils, other forms of intelligence (e.g. visual/spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal) are being overlooked and undervalued to a considerable extent. Furthermore, the patchy implementation of the CCTs suggests that the *'spiritual, moral,* [and] *cultural'* development of pupils is not uniformly receiving the amount of attention intended in the aims of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. Similarly, while the emphasis on academic and utilitarian values may prepare children for certain aspects of adult life (e.g. higher education, the key skills of literacy and numeracy, enhanced career opportunities), other vocationally related knowledge and skills seem under-represented (e.g. IT competency, team work, creativity, etc.), as do life skills and the personal, social and affective domain. Together, these results pose serious questions about the extent to which the aims of the Northern Ireland Curriculum are evident in its implementation during the latter stages of Key Stage 2.

Clearly, some of the problems highlighted by the early phase of the study could be tackled through revisions to the design of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. For instance, alternative frameworks that offer greater experiential coherence for learners could be considered; a more balanced curriculum could be achieved by giving more attention and status to the kind of under-represented areas identified above; and better continuity and progression could be encouraged by including within the curriculum as specified materials that develop pupils' reflexivity and awareness of progression in their learning. However, the research suggests that merely modifying the curriculum as specified may not significantly enhance the prospect of achieving the aims of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, since several of the cardinal problems identified in the study related to execution or implementation issues rather than curriculum design ones alone. Two prominent examples were the need for the development of the Northern Ireland Curriculum to be fully supported by an integrated programme of teachers' professional development (e.g. regarding the CCTs or progression) and the deleterious effect of the Transfer Procedure on the context in which the implementation of the Northern Ireland Curriculum at Key Stage 2 is being attempted. In fact, so frequent and widespread were the Transfer Test's impediments to the desired curriculum outcomes, that it seems appropriate to conclude by asking whether the exigencies of the Transfer Procedure could ever be compatible with the fundamental aims of the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

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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.

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Duration September 1996 – March 2000

Sponsors Department of Education for Northern Ireland
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Real Curriculum:
at the end of Key Stage 2

This booklet marks the launch of 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 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 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.

This first report examines the evidence on pupils' experiences of the curriculum in the final years of 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
- the impact of the Transfer Procedure on the curriculum
- whether or not the curriculum was manageable
- whether or not pupils enjoyed the curriculum.

The second report in the series analyses the early quantitative findings on pupils' responses to the curriculum they experienced during the first year of the secondary phase.