# Negotiated Integrated Curriculum – a way to realise student Wellbeing

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## 1. Context

The Junior Cycle Framework (JCF) proposed significant changes in the curriculum for lower secondary school in Ireland. Amongst these is the opportunity for schools to design a junior cycle programme, drawing on different curriculum components, that is engaging, challenging and relevant for their students and thereby supports both student learning and student wellbeing. Schools have significant autonomy and flexibility when it comes to developing their junior cycle Wellbeing programmes. The NCCA's *Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines* set out the principles and steps involved in developing a school Wellbeing programme (p.52-53).

The starting point in planning for Wellbeing needs to be a dialogue with students to help identify their needs, questions and concerns. The *curriculum negotiation* has significant potential in supporting planning for JC Wellbeing while simultaneously providing a practical structure that integrates the learning across the curriculum components that make up the programme.

## 2. Wellbeing – a negotiated curriculum

The work of schools who participated in a project aimed at negotiating an integrated curriculum with their students is captured here: https://www.ncca.ie/en/about/collaborations-and-partnerships/student-voice. The work is detailed in the PhD thesis of Dr. Joanne Fitzpatrick, available here: https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/b98f/9add1de65cd05e4c736e61be7a41e89f3f40.pdf

This paper provides a summary of the steps undertaken by teachers and students.

## 3. Planning for a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum

The work commences by discussing what is meant by the word "concern" and then explaining that students are going to work together to develop learning around issues that are of concern to them. Good Learning Behaviours need to be discussed before forming them into groups of 4 and roles distributed (Leader, Scribe, Presenter, timekeeper).

Ten stages are used to plan the work as follows, with roles rotated periodically.

*Stage One: Personal concerns*

Students individually list personal concerns they have about themselves that they would like to learn more about to facilitate personal engagement with the process.

*Stage Two: Grouping personal concerns*

Students share personal concerns in small groups to establish commonalities and facilitate the social construction of knowledge. It is made clear to students that they can choose what to share and what to keep private. These are presented to the class in mind-map format and the teacher collects the major ideas on the board.
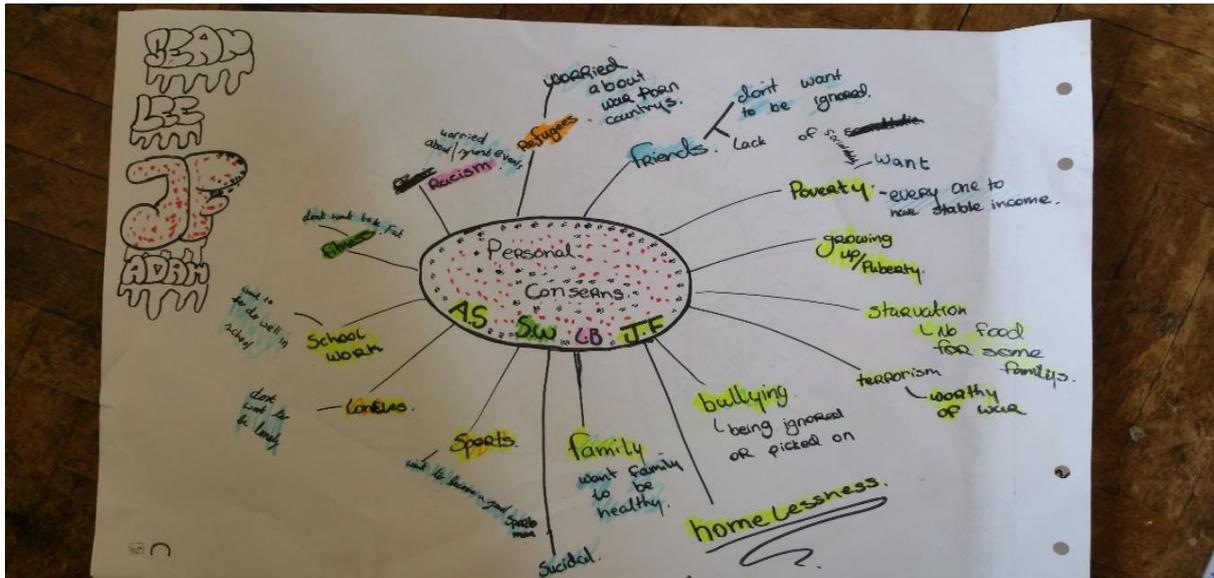
*Stage Three: World concerns*

Students individually list concerns they have about the world around them that they would like to learn more about to facilitate real-life connections with their learning.

*Stage Four: Grouping world concerns*

Students share world concerns in small groups to further facilitate the social construction of knowledge and to provide personal and social significance for the integration of knowledge. These are presented to the class in mind-map format and the teacher collects major ideas on the board.

*Stage Five: Finding themes*

The class discusses what is meant by a theme and then use the material on the board to connect common personal and world concerns.
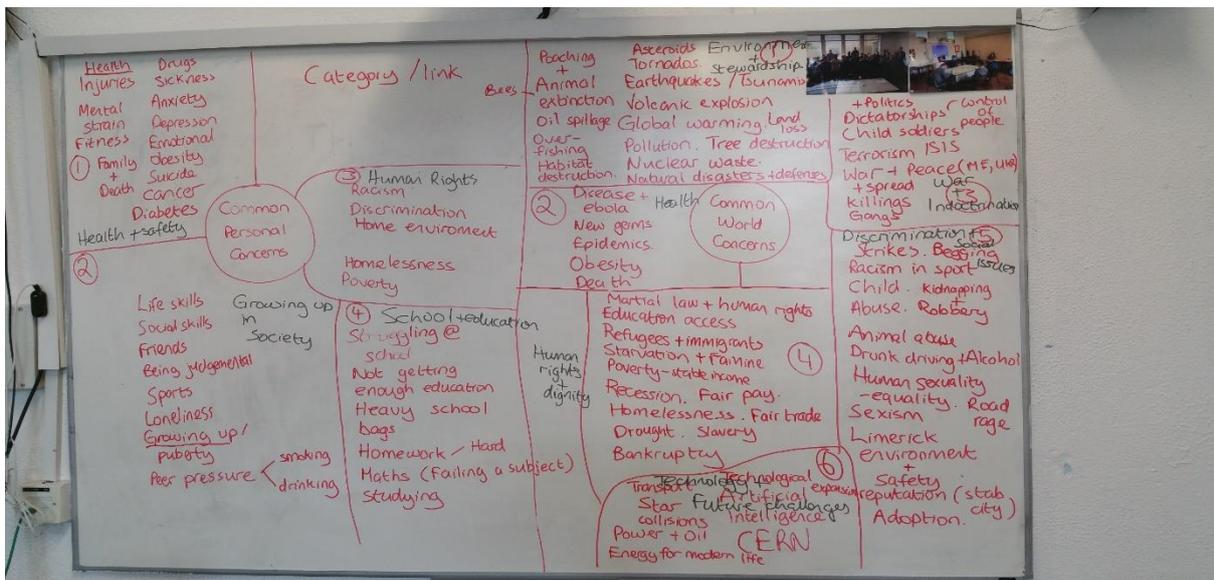
*Stage Six: Sharing themes*

Themes are presented and rationalised to remove repetition and overlap.
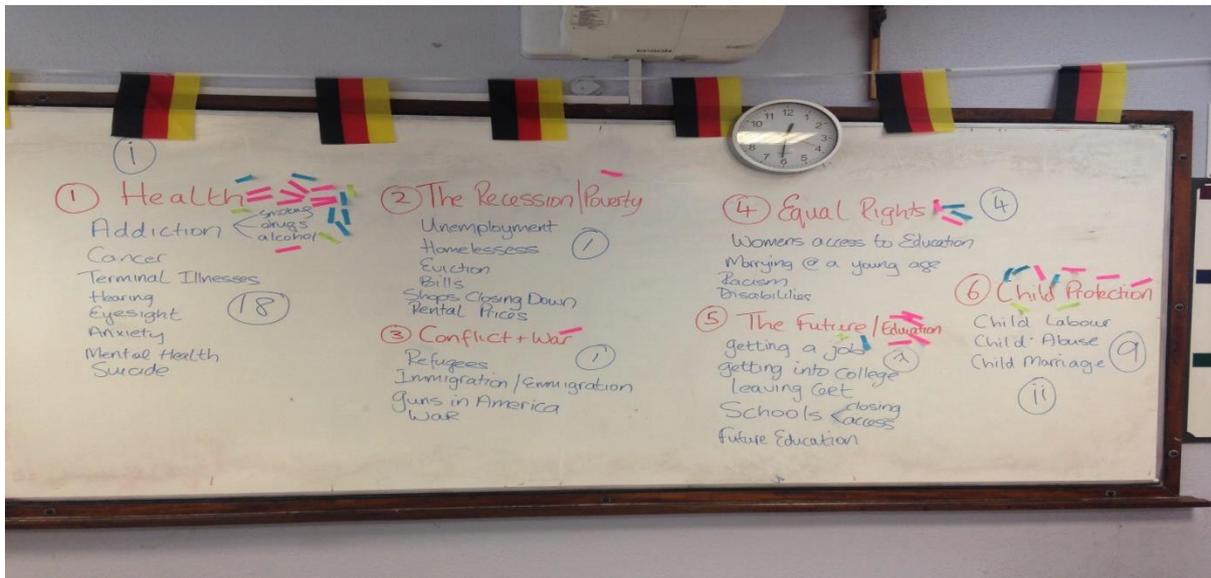


*Stage Seven: Student vote*

Students vote on themes for curriculum development to engage with the democratic process of this work where students have a choice over their learning. Each student writes their top three themes before then placing a sticker on board beside the themes they have selected.

*Stage Eight: Connecting questions to themes*

Students consider what makes a good question.  In small groups they then generate their own questions in relation to the chosen theme facilitating ownership. Questions are pooled from all groups; overlap is removed and then the questions are stuck on posters to the walls of the class.
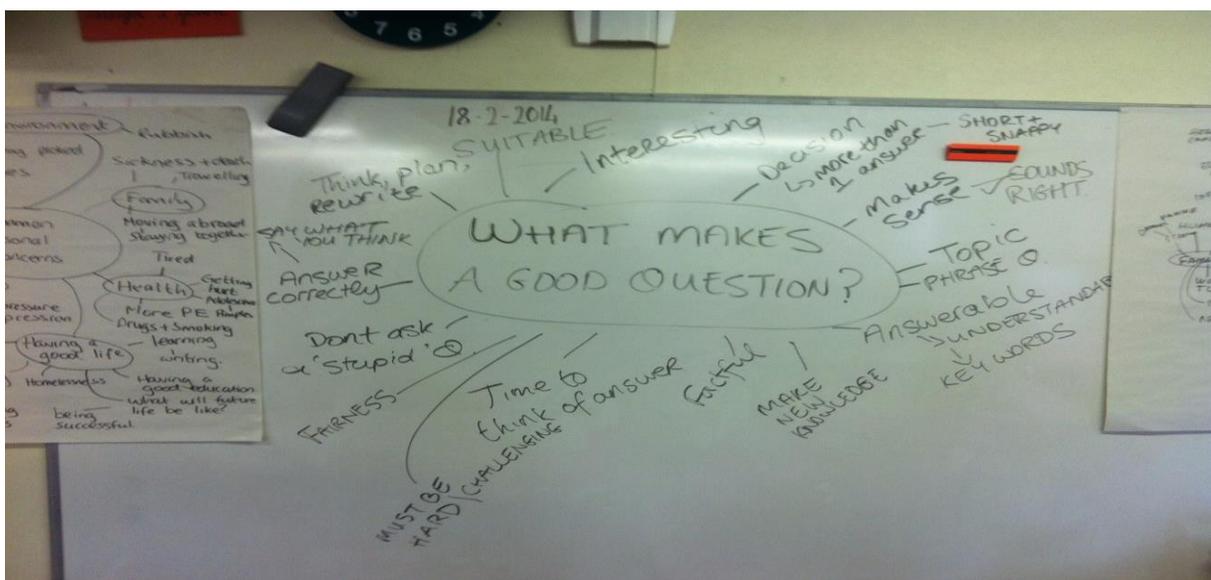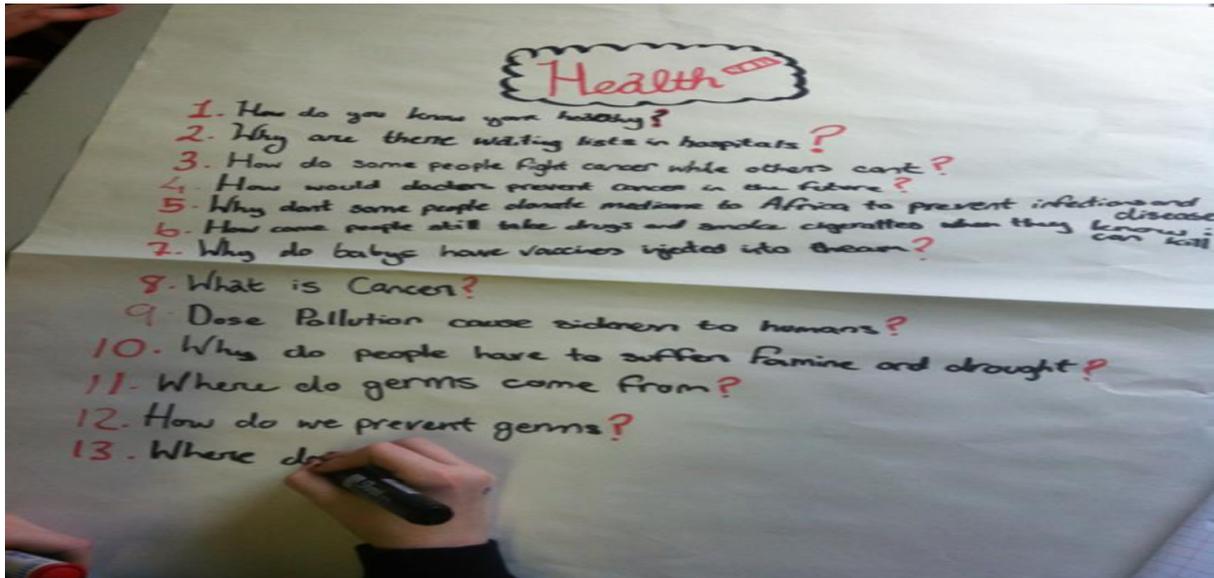
*Stage Nine: Selecting Activities*

Students suggest initial learning activities to address the questions they raised allowing for a sense of learner agency and decision-making. These are written on post-it notes and placed underneath the relevant question.



*Stage Ten: Unit Planning*

Students' questions and activities are used as the basis for curriculum planning by the teacher(s) separate to the students to allow for teacher agency, decision-making and the introduction of some non-negotiables.

### 4. Next steps of a Negotiated Integrated Curriculum

Developing from this shared intent, the second component of a NIC involves teachers inviting students to help construct and enact the learning journey on a continual basis. Learning is predominantly co-operative, allowing for significant differentiation as student groups take on various tasks to contribute to developing collective understanding. NIC does not view disciplines as discrete bodies of knowledge but encourages students to see the interconnectedness and interrelationships among disciplines.  In the secondary schools involved this was practically achieved by requesting the relevant disciplinary teachers to address areas of the existing syllabi or specifications in the light of the questions developed by the students. One SPHE class per week was used to synthesise this learning and allow space for further independent work.

Formative assessment was supported, by regularly visiting four questions: what do I know already? What do I want to find out?  How will I find out? How will we show what we have learned?

Students engaged in research, survey development, interviews, alongside typical pedagogical methods of instruction.



Student work was highlighted on an ongoing basis on a notice board in the staffroom. Students shared the results of their findings with their school communities to include students in other years and their parents/wider communities. This involved presentations including posters, and audio-visual work, all of which was organised by the students themselves with teacher facilitation. As such the schools became knowledge generators in their communities about issues of keen societal concern. Parental interest was significant.

## 6. Core findings relevant to Wellbeing

The NIC process represents an experience in Participatory Democracy to address real issues in a meaningful way.  The impact of NIC extended to other areas of the curriculum

*"I went into it with my eyes closed. I thought: they are only 12, what are they going to know? But I find now as a teacher we don't give them enough benefit for the knowledge they have……I have found that both in my business and my German classes, that they lead the way"*

Suzanne Browne, CBS Sexton Street, Irish Times *"One student, one vote: democracy at work in the classroom"*

The benefits for students included:

- Increased engagement, motivation
- Improvement in capacity to learn, transferred beyond NIC class
- Improved behaviour and socialisation
- Positive disposition towards curriculum for all students in various ways

For teachers:

- Enhanced professional agency: teachers came to trust the place of student voice in negotiating learning: "they lead the way"
- Increased expectation for student capability
- Changes in routines of learning: active, negotiated

Overall the NIC process enhanced student Agentic Engagement: *"Agentic Engagement is manifest when students actively express their thoughts, opinions, and interests during activity, when they direct their own learning, when they engage communally, collectively, and critically with others and when they use culturally relevant tools and technologies"*    (Lawson and Lawson, 2013)


## 7. Practical approaches to using NIC for Wellbeing

The 10-stage process can be used as described to develop units of learning related to Wellbeing. Stages one through four could be achieved over three classes, followed by five through seven in a double or two single classes.  The vast majority of times the themes will be relevant to Wellbeing. Where one or two are not, they can be rejected before voting.  Stages eight and nine warrant a double each while ten involves the teachers planning in their own professional time.  It is crucial to understand that the core learning and impact of NIC begins in these early classes.  Students must see that their ideas are taken seriously and learn ways to start to manage the complexity involved in addressing their concerns.

This serious and meaningful work can be directly linked to the Wellbeing Indicators.  Parents can be involved in the work to a degree that is practical.  The significant achievement that the work represents can be captured in the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement.

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