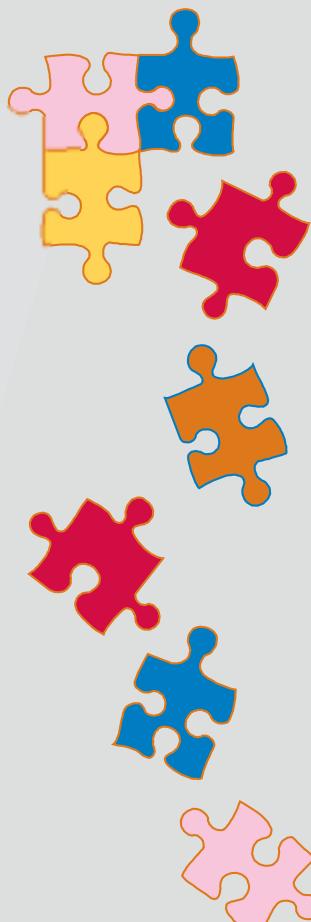


# Going2Secondary

An evaluation of the Going2Secondary website project



Angela Rickard and Nigel Quirke-Bolt, NUI Maynooth



ACT



NUI MAYNOOTH  
Ollscoil na hÉireann M̄ Nuad



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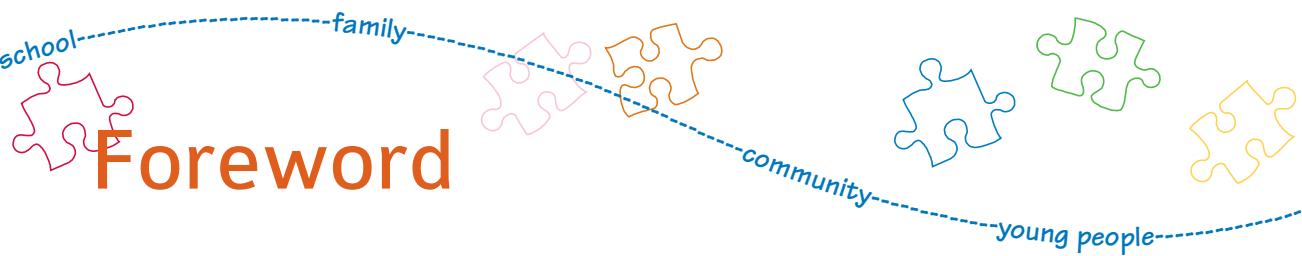
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NUI Maynooth and ACT in association with the HSE and Pobal

# Table of contents

Foreword	2
Acknowledgements	5
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
Background and rationale to the Going2Secondary website project	7
A note on data collection	10
<b>Context</b>	<b>11</b>
Transition from primary to post primary schools: an overview of the research literature	11
Factors affecting pupils at Transition	11
Sharing information	13
Need for continuity	13
Transition literature and the Going2Secondary website project	15
ICT in schools: some issues	17
Social networking sites	17
The integration of ICT	18
<b>The elements of the project</b>	<b>21</b>
The website: design structure and functionality	21
The role of the project manager and teachers	24
The post primary school	25
The primary schools	30
The follow-up process	32
The community-based element	34
<b>Key successes of the project</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Areas for discussion and development</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>38</b>



# Foreword

‘Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.’

Paulo Freire

The charge of producing competent, well-adjusted, functional and confident young people is a crucial task assigned to parenting as well as to society in general. For every young person, the education system is a key aid in this pursuit. Accompanying Ireland’s social and economic transformation from the 1960s has been a phenomenal growth in the provision of and participation in all sectors of education. However, the fact still remains that on average 15% of the population will leave the Irish school system without completing upper second level education. This fact signifies specific continuing dysfunctional components within the educational system. Various longitudinal studies on early school leaving have shown the profound impact it has both on the individual and their community at large, with the key recommendation being that every child be supported by the system to maximise their potential.

To address this issue at local level, Athlone Community Taskforce (ACT) established the Educational Action Research (EAR) Project

in 2005 to conduct a child-centred action research project working with sixth class primary pupils ‘to examine from a young person’s perspective the experience of the transition from primary to post-primary school’. As part of the EAR Project, a new programme called the Going2Secondary website project, the focus of this evaluation report, was introduced during the academic year 2007-08. The overall aim of this new and extremely innovative web-based programme was to create opportunities for sixth class pupils in the greater Athlone area, to experience a positive transition to their second level school through the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Connected through an interactive website being used by the Transition Years in a local second level school, the sixth class pupils from three feeder primary schools in the area posted questions about their prospective new school. Their questions were then answered on the site by the Transition Year boys. The project also used video-conferencing technology to enable primary and second level pupils to converse directly with each other.



After completing its first cycle the obvious question to ask is whether the Going2Secondary website project was a success. In reality, it is difficult to quantify the success of this initiative and decisively comment on whether or not it helped the pupils' transition to second level, without the aid of specific longitudinal outcome measures. Despite this dearth of knowledge, there are two key successes which warrant being highlighted.

Firstly, the website project set out to help smooth the transition for specific sixth class pupils, by helping them identify their concerns and seek help from second level students via ICT. When questioned about their involvement in the programme, the young people were strongly supportive of it and felt that it had placed them in a better position to face the transition to second level. In addition, the teachers who were involved were also extremely supportive of this view. A child-centred approach, which is central to the ethos of the EAR Project, was consistently used in the website project. Therefore, when viewed as a totality, this qualitative data speaks volumes and implies that the project was a success for those involved.

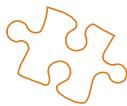
Secondly, the website project helped the young participants become more competent in the use of ICT. On the surface, it provided them with key skills on Internet safety. Scratching below the surface reveals a much more complex, innovative and far-seeing process at work. It is

interesting to observe the way in which the newly elected President of the United States of America, Barak Obama, harnessed the full power of text messaging, emails and social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, to his benefit in the presidential campaign. He realised that one of the core ways to reach young people, who are notoriously disengaged from politics, was via ICT. In the knowledge-based economy we find ourselves in, the need to possess skills in ICT is now not optional, but demanded. Again, the development of competent ICT users in light of this global technology-based climate was a key success of the website project.

Freire suggests in the quotation above, that one of the core tasks of education is to enable men and women to deal critically and creatively with the issues they face and take on the responsibility of transforming the world where needed. One certainty is that the resolution of both personal and social issues will continue to revolve around the use of ICT. The Going2Secondary website project has enabled its young participants to address their specific transition needs and through the knowledge they received, transform their world for the better. The seed of change has now been sown!

3

It is my opinion that the last piece of the jigsaw warrants the Going2Secondary website project to be integrated into the mainstream school curriculum and to be supported by the statutory and

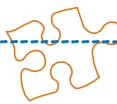


family

school

young people

community



implementation bodies, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE). This step would fit neatly with government policy on ICT and the curriculum, which suggests that students need to be ICT literate by the time they have reached their Junior Certificate. Nevertheless, one of the failings of successive governments in Ireland has been their blindness to the obvious fact that specific initiatives work and if integrated into the mainstream, would be a proactive, preventative step and extremely beneficial to all concerned. My wish is that this blindness does not prevail when reviewing this evaluation report on the Going2Secondary website project.

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4



# Acknowledgements

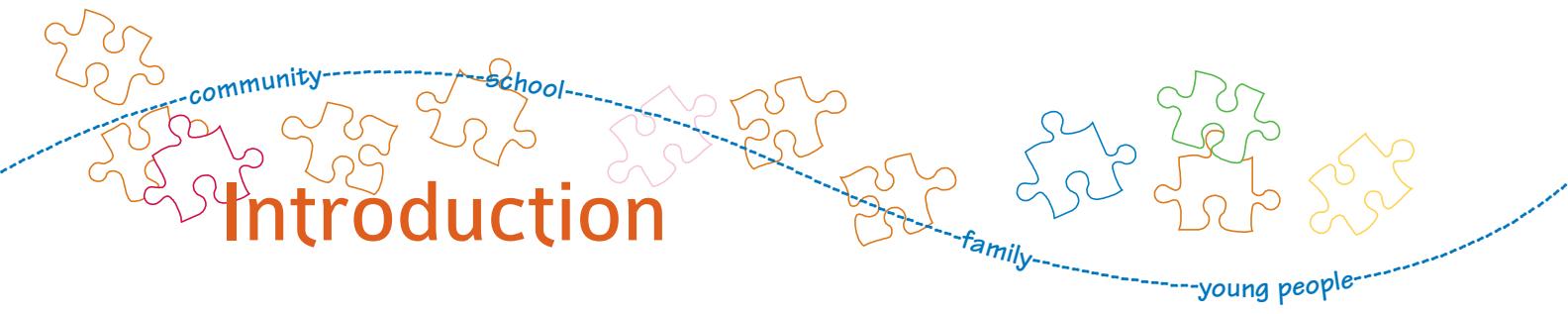
The project manager and authors of this report would like to thank a number of people for their generous and gracious cooperation with the delivery and development of the Going2Secondary pilot project. In particular we are most grateful to Mr. Thomas Blaine, Principal of the Marist College for granting us permission to work with the pupils in the school. Mr. Michael Loftus, Transition Year Coordinator, in the school with responsibility for ensuring that the project was facilitated and supported and who did so in an unstintingly positive manner.

We are also grateful to Ms. Georgina Morris, Science Teacher in the Marist College, who accompanied the project manager during the sessions and supported the smooth operation of the programme.

We are also very grateful to all the pupils whose enthusiasm and commitment made the website a reality: the Transition Year students (2006-2007) in the Marist College and the sixth class boys from St. Clare's, St. Mary's and Oifig4Maistri.

Finally, kind thanks to Mr. Oliver Keating, Ms. Bernie Stapleton and Ms. Laobhaoise Nic Aogáin, the three primary school principals who agreed to facilitate the project in their schools.





The Athlone Community Taskforce (ACT) has commissioned the Education Department in National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM) to evaluate the Going2Secondary website project which it developed in 2007-2008. This report outlines the background and rationale of the project. It situates the project within the context of research literature on the transition from primary school to post primary school in Ireland and vis-à-vis of the provision and use of technology in education. The report describes the preparation, development and delivery of the project as well as the pupils' and schools' experiences in carrying it out.

The Going2Secondary project's principal aim was to create opportunities for sixth class pupils in the Athlone area to experience a positive transition to second level school. Pupils' tasks and the communication between the two school levels were facilitated through the development and use of an interactive website: [www.going2secondary.ie](http://www.going2secondary.ie).

The project was run on a pilot basis during the Spring term of the academic year of 2007-2008 and involved pupils from three primary feeder schools and one post primary school in Athlone. A child-centred approach was adopted to allow children from the primary schools to formulate and ask questions about the post primary school they would be going to the following September and to have these questions answered online by a self-selected group of the post primary pupils. The site provided an innovative mechanism for the post primary pupils to portray their school through the use of text and images of their own choosing, while at the same time

allowing pupils at primary level to explore various aspects of the new school.

All of the data gathered for this evaluation have been examined with a view to firstly exploring the extent to which the project's aspirations have been achieved. Secondly, the report proposes to broaden the discussion to look at the potential of this project to be implemented on a larger scale. Consequently consideration is given in the report to the implications the project's development would have for education in general and for teacher professional development in particular. The data collection methods will be described in detail at the end of the next section.

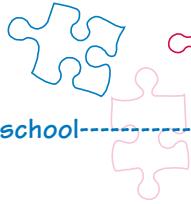




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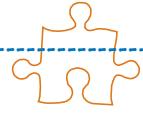
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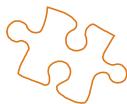
# Background and rationale to the Going2Secondary website project

The Athlone Community Taskforce (ACT) has a long tradition of combating social and educational disadvantage. Established in 1992 as a Rotary Club initiative in the town, its mission is to 'create enterprise and employment opportunities and measures leading to this' and it delivers in the Athlone area the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) funded by POBAL under the auspices of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. In its commitment to tackling unemployment the Taskforce has focused on supporting the educational opportunities for young people in Athlone town. The Educational Action Research (EAR) Project, established in 2005 within ACT's educational remit, was developed 'to examine from a young person's perspective the experience of the transition from primary to post primary school'.

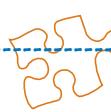
During the academic year 2005-2006 the EAR Project research worked with two primary schools in Westmeath and the report compiled and written by Sheila McArdle (2006) charts the experience of 25 children in those schools making the transition to second level. This research also explored the opinions and experiences of the children's parents. In addition the research involved consultation with parents and teachers from all five of Athlone's post primary schools and with statutory and non-statutory bodies concerned with children's progression through the education system. The research correctly identifies the transition from primary to

post primary education as a critical moment in a child's development and a successful transition at that stage in their lives as a key factor in reducing the risk of early school leaving or educational underachievement.

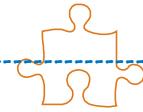
The Going2Secondary website project being evaluated in this report is one of eleven initiatives to have emerged from the EAR project which reported in 2006. All eleven initiatives arising from the EAR Project's activities shared the same overall vision: 'to create conditions to support young people to make a positive transition from primary to post primary school'.



family-----school-----young people



community-----



The website project initially entitled ‘Connect Us?’ and later renamed ‘Going2Secondary’ sees the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as a key component for a person’s successful participation in a society permeated with technology and a school environment where ICT can contribute both to social inclusion and academic achievement. Pupils from low income families and other potentially marginalised groups, who are at risk of underachievement in school, have a statistically higher probability of having limited access to computers in the home and consequently fewer opportunities to develop relevant ICT skills. In keeping with the EAR Project’s focus on educational inequality, and with the Department of Education and Science’s desire for more integrated use of ICT in schools, the project proposes a meaningful way for the educational experience of participating pupils’ (both at first and second level) to be enhanced by the use of technology.

The Going2Secondary website project design therefore combines the use of ICT with the overall vision of creating a positive experience of transition in order to develop additional key skills among pupils; to increase their self-esteem and confidence and to create a meaningful educational role for new media and social networking technology in schools. The design of the project was informed by the NCCA’s guidelines for NGOs and agencies concerning the development of teaching

and learning modules known as ‘Transition Units’ to be offered as part of the senior cycle in post primary schools.

The outcomes for the Transition Year pupils in the post primary school would be the development of effective communication and collaboration skills using ICT in a focused and relevant manner. It would provide them with a structure within which they could offer a supportive and mentoring role; a potentially greater sense of responsibility towards their younger correspondents and an increased awareness of the younger pupils’ concerns at transferring to the ‘big school’. For the Transition Year pupils also this experience of being part of the support network for new pupils, entering their school the following year, would be completely new.

The choice of social networking software for communication has many advantages, not least of which is the opportunity for pupils to feel less inhibited in their communication with pupils from a different age group. For example, the differences in physical size and interests between the two cohorts are greatly reduced and the focus on text in this medium serves to eliminate the usual barriers between them.

The principal focus of the project is the process of transition experienced by the primary pupils. This in itself would be insufficient to attract the attention of many post primary schools whose responsibility in any given year to the new cohort of



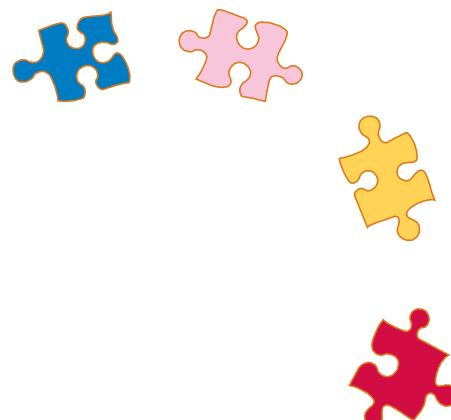
pupils in the school only really begins in September. However, the active engagement in the induction process by the Transition Year pupils while the younger pupils are still in sixth class provides considerable added value to a post primary school if they were to consider it as a way to enhance their existing induction programme. Given that its design is in line with the NCCA's guidelines for the creation of Transition Unit modules, using the Going2Secondary website could potentially form the basis of a module that may be readily implemented in senior cycle. Moreover, it also has potential to be a useful means of fulfilling a number of educational objectives all at once, making it particularly attractive for the post primary school.

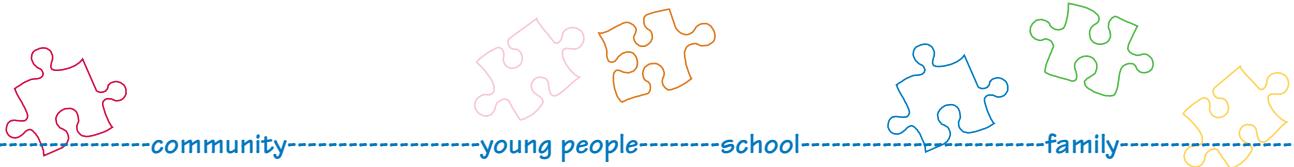
For the pupils at primary level the project needs to be seen as part of a broader framework for the transition to second level which will contribute to their preparation for that move the following September. Gaining skills in using technology appropriately, communicating effectively and working as part of a team were among the desired outcomes for the primary school children involved in the project.

The project has an underlying objective to reduce stress or create resilience among disadvantaged pupils at the transition stage in education. The approach adopted included *all* the boys who would be attending the participating post primary school the following year. In other words,

care was taken not to draw attention to any one individual in particular as being disadvantaged.

On the other hand it was unfortunate that, owing to the second level school being a single sex boys' school, the girls in the primary schools (all of which were mixed gender schools) were by definition excluded from participating. Differences in the attitudes and expectations of the boys and the girls regarding transition to second level, as well as their respective communication styles, might be usefully explored in a future development of the project.





## A note on data collection

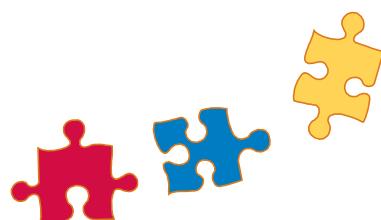
This project was evaluated using material gathered from a number of semi-structured interviews with the project manager which in turn were cross-referenced with a comprehensive review of all the project documentation (such as tender documents, project descriptors, the overall work plan, individual lesson plans, pupil workbooks, etc.). Other material included reference documents (such as NCCA guidelines and the research emanating from the EAR project).

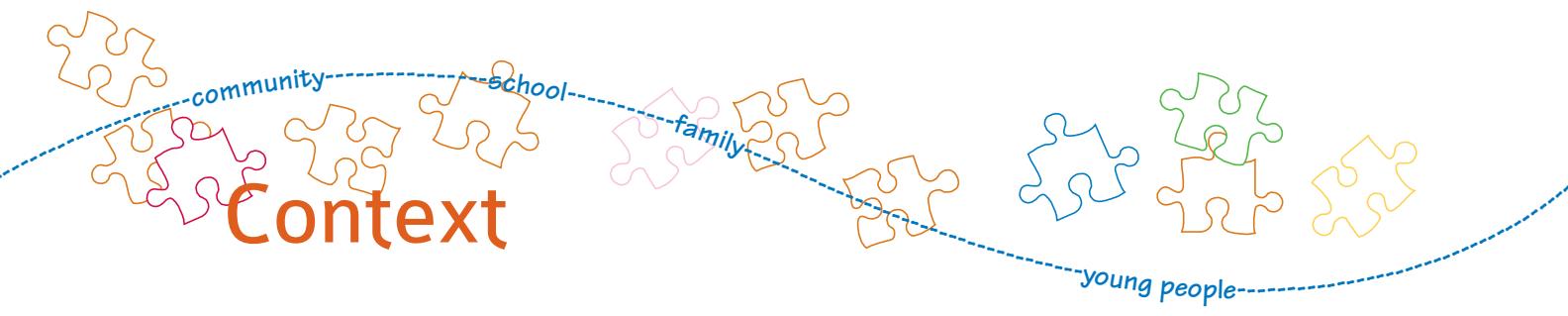
Printouts of the full online interaction using MSN synchronous chat discussions were studied as well as the other pupil online activities (e.g. the forum posts and activity and login histories of the site). Online interactions between pupils were examined for evidence of skill development and the quality of pupil communication.

The authors of this report were present in the school when the project was first presented to the Transition Year pupils and discussions with teachers in the school were conducted at that time as part of the evaluation process. A questionnaire was issued to pupils in the post primary school on completion of the project and a structured interview was held with them to explore in more detail their views on the framework and delivery of the project as well as their perceptions of its effectiveness.

One of the evaluators attended the primary school 'end-of-year' presentation where pupils' views of their experience of the project were delivered to an audience of their peers, teachers and parents/relatives.

The internal evaluations (i.e. based on surveys and feedback from pupils as well as points arising from post-lesson reflections) carried out by the project manager were also used in formulating the views presented in this report.





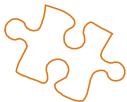
# Transition from primary to post primary schools: an overview of the research literature

The transition from primary to post primary schooling is seen as one of the most significant moments in a child's development, marking as it does the end of childhood and the start of adolescence, when a person's adaptability is significantly challenged by the number and intensity of changes taking place all at once (Delamont, 1991). In addition to the radical changes happening for a child at this important time, the institutional and structural differences between the two school systems induce in them a range of emotions from excitement and hopeful expectation to anxiety and fearfulness. Going to the new school also implies changes to familiar pedagogical approaches and in the underlying educational philosophy of the school, which can have a destabilising effect on pupils (Burke, 1987). Moving to 'big school' also invariably results in a disruption to children's informal networks, and relationships with peers and teachers have to be negotiated anew. Smyth, McCoy, & Darmody (2004) identify the transition from primary to post primary as hugely influential in pupils' 'subsequent academic and social development' and they point out that difficulties experienced by pupils at that stage 'can contribute to later educational failure' (Smyth, *et al.*, 2004: 1).

## Factors affecting pupils at Transition

The EAR Project and the Going2Secondary website initiative are concerned with the building of what the project manager terms 'resilience' among at-risk or vulnerable

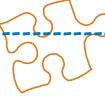
pupils. McArdle's research for the EAR project uses Gilligan's definition of resilience to mean 'the healing potential that may lie naturally within children, in their normal daily experience or their social networks'. Resilience theory is invoked therefore to show how children in sixth class can be enabled to: overcome trauma;



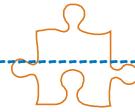
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adapt to situations in spite of stress and obtain better outcomes for themselves than expected (Gilligan, 2001, cited in McArdle, 2006: 10). McArdle found that children in the Athlone area who had fewer sources of resilience in the new school also experienced greater settling-in difficulties (McArdle, 2006: 10). This finding is reflected in the literature on transition more generally. Personal and social factors that influence transition include family background, pupil personality and relationships with peers and with teachers (Kirk, 1994; Galton, Gray and Ruddock, 1999). The preparation they get for school transfer is also a very significant factor and adequate programmes for transition that are multi-faceted, long-term, involve the parents, the children and the school are more conducive to the successful identification of difficulties that can be addressed early on (Smyth, et al., 2004). Research has also shown that programmes focusing on the pupils' own concerns are more likely to be successful (Lucey and Reay, 2000).

The Going2Secondary website project can be seen as having a potentially significant role in a transition programme in schools. It focuses clearly on children's concerns at a critical time in their education. The process is mediated through an innovative environment (online social networking software) that, as well as having an immediate appeal and motivational power, also facilitates the breaking down of barriers and the development of relationships between pupils.

Although only a minority of children experience difficulties with transition from primary to post primary (O'Brien, 2004; Hargreaves and Galton, 2002), it is thought that measures to assist those who do will increase their resilience and consequently create conditions favourable to their better integration in school. O'Brien (2004) identifies pupils in designated disadvantaged schools as having higher levels of anxiety and reluctance to move to the second level school. Factors that contribute to pupils' anxiety include fears for their personal safety, concerns about their ability to form new friendships (particularly where they do not know anyone in the school already) and worries regarding relationships with teachers in the new school. Various 'urban myths' about the new school and stories about initiation rites perpetrated by older pupils, even when unfounded, feature among the fears expressed by pupils in a lot of the research both in Ireland and internationally (Naughton, 2003; Delamont, 1991).

Although it is also argued that these serve a useful psychological function; a way to project and articulate anxieties and need not pose too great a concern for parents, teachers or school managers. Articulating anxieties and projecting fears by recounting 'urban myths' serve to create a 'mental space' for pupils and it is considered a useful process for them to negotiate their feelings about moving on (Lucey and Reay, 2000). A key aspect of the Going2Secondary site is that it offers primary pupils an opportunity to articulate



fears and to receive reassurances from the older pupils. The organisational and institutional aspects of the new school include fears about adjusting to the new timetable, additional homework and finding one's way around the usually much larger school (Brown and Armstrong, 1986). Again it is seen as being useful for children to express these anxieties and to be given assurances that they are not alone in feeling that way; that such feelings are normal and that they will adjust without difficulty or delay.

## Sharing information

The fundamental differences in pedagogic approach that distinguish primary and post primary schools are significant for pupils moving up. Gorwood (1986) has argued that schools need to pay particular attention to the emotional implications for pupils in the transition from primary school and to examine the degrees of continuity or discontinuity across the transfer divide. In a recently completed PhD dissertation, post primary teacher Padraic O'Dowd argues that the discontinuity in the Irish context between primary and post primary schools, both concerning the curriculum and the transfer of information between the two levels, contributes to the negative impact of the transition for many pupils. He details the statutory obligations on schools regarding the keeping and sharing of records but points out that the legislation fails to place an onus on post primary schools to gather information about

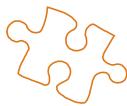
primary pupils transferring to their schools. (O'Dowd, 2008: 48). Smyth *et al.*, (2004) highlight what school principals term the 'inadequacy' of the information provided to their schools. Their research found:

*[O]nly a minority of school principals received information on all their incoming pupils and almost half were dissatisfied with the amount of information they receive. Where information is given to post-primary schools it tends to be verbal rather than written' (Smyth *et al.*, 2004: 56)*

The lack of communication between schools is seen as one of the contributing factors in many cases where difficulties being experienced by pupils in first year are not identified early on. In the UK context, where greater quantities of information are shared, McCallum (2000) reports that very little of this information is actually used and the general view taken was that teachers were unwilling to accept other teachers' assessment of pupils (cited in Smyth *et al.*, 2004: 10). The EAR Project research referred to earlier also highlights the 'need to improve the transfer of student information from primary to post primary' (McArdle, 2006: 12) as one of a number of priorities for Athlone schools.

## Need for continuity

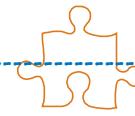
One of the other dominant themes to emerge from the literature on transition is the debate over the need for continuity across the two levels as opposed to definite



family ----- school ----- young people



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and distinct progression in a new and markedly different system. Naughton makes the point that researchers, commentators and some schools are divided between those who think it is better to smooth the transition from primary with measures that reduce the differences between the two levels and those who see the sharp discontinuity between the two as a useful and necessary ‘rite of passage’ marking a person’s entry into adolescence in a culture where traditional initiation rites are absent. The discussion leads to a realisation that a balance needs to be achieved in order for children to negotiate successfully the changes in curricular and assessment approaches and other issues that they encounter on reaching second level. While it is beyond the scope of this report to enter into that debate in any detail, the discussion offers a useful framework to situate the Going2Secondary website project. We agree with the conclusions drawn by Naughton that ‘the achievement of an appropriate balance between the provision of continuity and progression’ (Naughton, 2003: 43) is at the heart of the matter and we suggest that the Going2Secondary project fits very well with this position. To illustrate this we refer to the schematic grid provided at the end of Naughton’s article where he outlines his interpretations of transition difficulties and the related responses they are afforded by schools. We find a close correspondence between the initiatives that Naughton proposes (particularly in the area of ‘adolescent adjustment’ and that of

‘curriculum and assessment’) and the features of the Going2Secondary website project. That is to say, if we examine the project in light of Naughton’s criteria for appropriate responses to transition difficulties we can see that it is a model that encourages the ‘exercise of autonomy and self-directed learning’; it ‘engage[s] the learning interests of adolescents’; it promotes ‘cooperative learning and problem solving’; it creates an ‘authentic’ environment that includes questions and content created by the pupils themselves and therefore encourages a sense of pride in and ownership of the material created (Naughton, 2003: 58). All of the feedback from the pupils in the Marist College concerning their engagement with the project corroborates this. Further detail of the pupils’ responses to the Going2Secondary project will be explored later in this report.

Naughton concludes by saying that a broad conception of transition is required to ensure that a coherent and holistic approach to induction is achieved. He asserts that it ‘should go well beyond the mere provision of information or assuaging of students’ anxieties’ (Naughton, 2003: 61). While not denying their importance, he exhorts educators to look beyond the immediate issues of transition to see ‘how schools and classrooms can best be structured’ and how learning and its assessment can be better designed for adolescents (Naughton, 2003: 61).

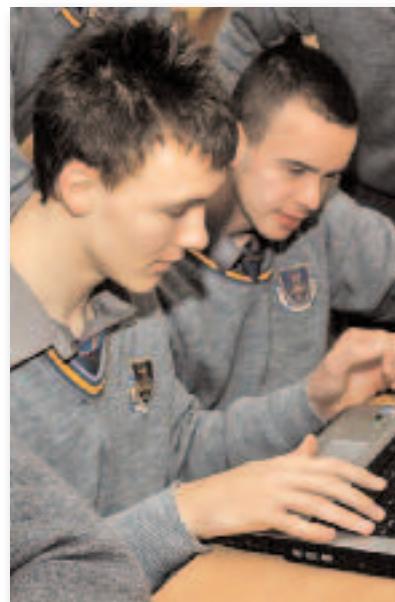


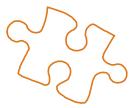
## Transition literature and the Going2Secondary website project

The issues raised in the short survey of the literature on transition above correspond to a number of aspects of the Going2Secondary website project. We believe that the Going2Secondary project is an initiative that can offer insights and lessons for educators wishing to formulate a new approach to foster successful transition. The project is an appealing, multi-faceted and pupil-centred model that has the potential to be a central element of a wider transition/induction programme in schools. It recognises the need for a child-centred approach in helping pupils overcome some of the difficulties with transition to second level. In particular it recognises the need pupils have to articulate their fears concerning the move to second level. Even if their fears are unfounded the site gives them scope to express these fears and to receive reassurances from a 'trustworthy' source they can easily identify with: namely slightly older pupils with 'insider knowledge'.

The site links the two school levels in a virtual way. In addition to the dearth of communication between schools, described above, transition programmes in the primary school and induction at post primary can often operate in isolation from one another. The Going2Secondary project

is by no means the only example of a coordinated approach (City of Galway VEC, 1998), but its innovative use of ICT to bring pupils together in a virtual environment, while successful in its own right, has considerably more potential than it was possible to fully realise in this pilot experiment. Furthermore, using a secure website to facilitate communication among pupils also opens up potential for greater communication between the teachers and managers at both levels, which in turn may address to some extent the issues of lack of communication between post primary schools and their feeder schools.

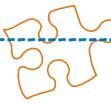




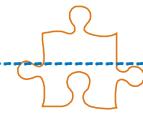
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young people

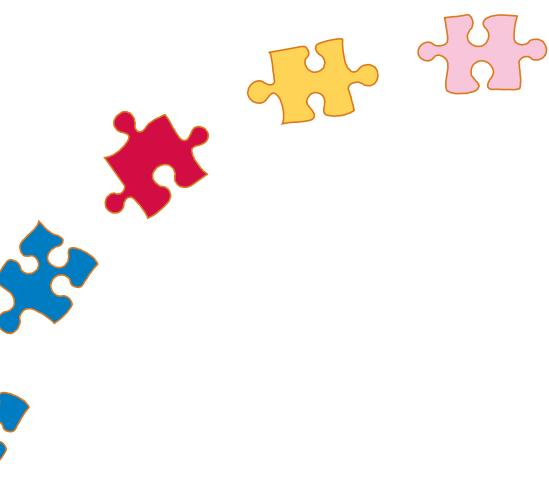


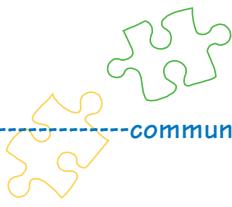
community



The issue of discontinuity between the two school systems cannot be overcome easily. The project may bridge the two school levels; pupils in primary gain real insight into the new school while still in sixth class; pupils in the second level gain an understanding of the issues that preoccupy the younger pupils. (They are reminded, perhaps, of the same issues that they were concerned about themselves prior to coming to the school). In any case, the project creates links while recognizing differences. Furthermore, the approach integrates the use of ICT at both levels in a cross-curricular manner and in this regard

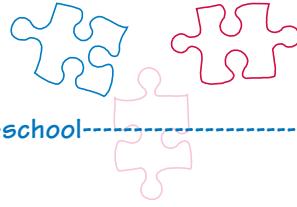
has at least the potential to generate more curricular continuity between the two levels than currently exists. This corresponds to the aspirations of the Department of Education and Science regarding the integration of ICT in late primary and lower secondary school, but it is clear that a considerable level of 'buy-in' by the schools would need to occur before effective communication and collaboration across this platform could be accomplished. It is to the issues pertaining to the use and integration of ICT in education, and the position of the project in relation to those issues, that we now turn.





community

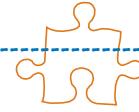
young people



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family



# ICT in schools: some issues

## Social networking sites

The Going2Secondary website project has been introduced at a very opportune time. In addition to the obvious need to facilitate the creative and purposeful uses of ICT in schools, the explosion of teenagers' use of social networking sites and the role they can play in marking adolescent development is in itself a relevant factor in pupils' experience at the time of the transition from primary to post primary schooling. Whether a pupil has a social networking site or not; how they behave there and/or how they are treated in such an online environment are new aspects to young people's experience (Boyd, 2007). Negotiating the transition from primary to post primary school was already complicated, but new technologies now imply a need for a teenager to develop the relevant skills to create and develop their online presence or 'digital body' and to acquire skills in web-based communication.

Another consideration is the fact that in certain instances they may have to deal with issues such as cyber-bullying. Schools are presented with an opportunity to educate pupils and to play a role in building pupils' skills and confidence in dealing with such issues.

Research has shown that computer mediated communication (CMC) has a levelling effect (Collins and Berge, 1995;

McComb 1994; Ruborg and Taylor, 1995): inhibiting factors in face-to-face communication, particularly where there are differences in the status of the participants, are greatly reduced in an online environment (Henri, 1995; Leach, 1996). In this project the use of CMC lessens the disparity of age, physical size and status between the two participating groups: they rely only on the text they see posted in the messages and respond to it. The peripheral aspects of communication such as body language and facial expressions are absent and communication can proceed unhindered by them. In other words, the project allows pupils to create their 'online persona'. This will be different to its real-life counterpart and a greater parity between the 'personas' of the primary and post primary pupils can be achieved when interacting online. For the purposes of the Going2Secondary project this resulted in more vibrant exchange of information and questioning than is likely to have occurred if the two groups had met in a real-life situation, particularly if it were for a group discussion. Moreover, establishing the relationship between the two groups in the secure and unthreatening environment of cyber-space may lead pupils to feel they have created a bond with the other participants.

As mentioned earlier, it is becoming increasingly important for teachers to develop an awareness of the uses (and

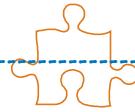
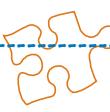


family

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young people

community



potential abuses) of online social spaces. The Going2Secondary website offers a means for teachers to engage in the creation and development of such a site for the support and cohesion of the present and future school community. It also opens up one means of discovering different pupil capacities.

## The integration of ICT

The integration of ICT into the curriculum has been a stated priority for the Irish government for well over a decade. The 1995 White Paper *Charting our Education Future* asserted that 'all students will have achieved competence and understanding in practical skills including computer literacy and information technology' by the time they have completed the Junior Cycle (Ireland, 1995). The first policy document relating to ICT for schools was published in 1997. *The Schools IT2000: A policy Framework for the New Millennium* heralded the investment of 52 million euro for ICT in schools. Since then a total of over 183 million euro has been spent in successive initiatives in this area targeting the development of infrastructure as well as teacher professional capacity in the use of technology in first and second level schools in Ireland.

imperatives of learning with, through and about technology and states that 'if students are to be prepared to lead fulfilled and productive lives in a knowledge-based society they should be ICT-competent on leaving the school system'. (DES, 2008: 5) Although it is hard to disagree with this position it must also be acknowledged that school cultures, in particular teachers' established classroom practices are stubbornly resistant to change (Goodson, 1995). Technology, according to Goodson and others, tends to be co-opted into existing practices and the fulfillment of its potential to change the way teaching and learning is carried out is seldom realised (DES, 2008).

The hefty investments and ambitious policy statements regarding the necessity to embed ICT usage in the curriculum have not resulted in the widespread integration of technology in Irish schools. The 2008 Inspectors' report highlights the lack of teacher use of ICT in general subjects and calls for an improvement of the provision of teacher professional development in relation to technology (DES, 2008). This finding has implications for the successful development of the Going2Secondary project in the future: if one of the challenges for education in Ireland is to build teacher confidence in using ICT generally, it follows that considerable effort will be needed to ensure the successful implementation of initiatives like the Going2Secondary site. The challenge is particularly acute in the second level school



where compartmentalisation of subjects mitigates against the sort of cross-curricular approach that is a central element of the Going2Secondary project.

In addition, the technical skills level required to carry out the project, though not high, was perceived to be so by both teachers and pupils. Discussions with the teachers revealed that while they valued the potential of the project and lauded its aims, they felt that it would require more technical skill than they were capable of at present. The fact that the project manager was asked to undertake the instruction in the post primary school during the pilot confirms this. Pupil responses to the questionnaire also indicated a perception that the technical skills-set required for an instructor to manage the project would prove difficult for most of their teachers. It is in keeping with the Inspectors' report and other studies on the integration of ICT in education that we assert that a wider application of the Going2Secondary experiment would require considerable attention to be paid to the level of teacher ICT capability and the related issue of continued teacher professional development in this area. Our view is that the website provides an excellent mechanism for a meaningful integration of ICT with an important aspect of school life and the resources to implement it on a larger scale ought to be deployed. We contend that the technical emphasis of the project should be minimised in favour of the creative, collaborative and

communicative elements. What is perhaps more important for teachers to develop is not so much the technical skills (these are readily acquired by the pupils themselves) as the pedagogic skills required to integrate a site like this with existing classroom or school-based activities. Rather more challenging is the fact that this project offers an alternative approach to teaching and learning. The post primary pupils considered it to be different to their ordinary classes on the grounds that they had responsibility for the creation of the content themselves, they made the decisions as to what to put on the site, how to gather the information, how and where to display it, etc. This largely pedagogical aspect, more so than the technical skills involved, is what distinguishes the project from existing curricular practice in schools.

In recent years the desired approach to ICT in schools has been to favour its use to support different aspects of the curriculum rather than to treat it as a stand alone subject. The Framework for ICT in Curriculum and Assessment cited in the inspectors' report is simultaneously targeted at both primary and the junior cycle of post primary schools:

*The ICT framework is not designed as a course in ICT but instead is intended to be a cross-curricular support for schools and teachers in developing their students' competence in ICT. It is presented in four inter-related areas of learning, encompassing such attributes as basic*



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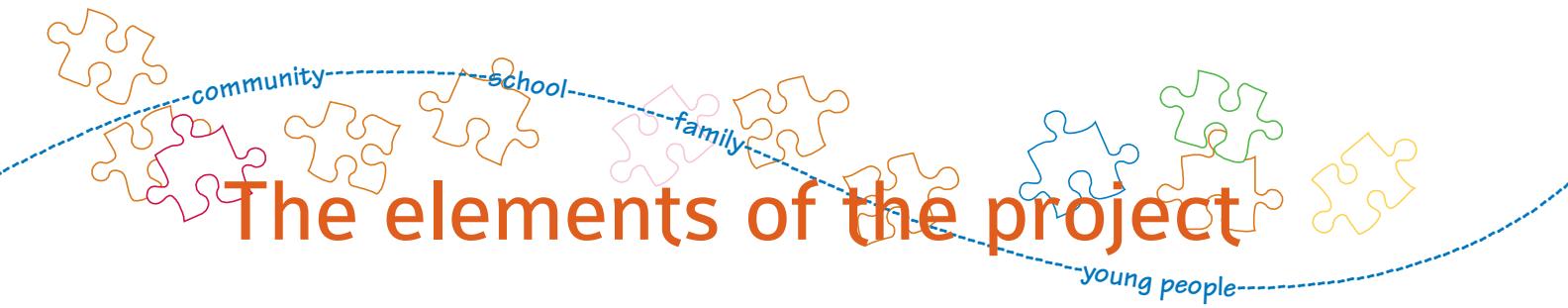
*knowledge and skills, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking and creativity. (DES, 2008: 11).*

The NCCA document adopts a cross-curricular and cross-sectoral approach as it is aimed at both sets of teachers: those teaching upper classes in primary and lower post primary. The intention therefore is to foster an ethos of continuity and shared understanding among teachers of these two different levels. ICT provides a valuable link between primary and post primary schooling and the Going2Secondary website project has the potential to fulfil this function not only for pupils but for teachers as well. In this respect the project is particularly innovative and valuable.

The Going2Secondary website project in its current iteration provides an opportunity to integrate the use of an ICT tool for school life that is purposeful and relevant to a very topical and emotionally charged moment in pupils' lives. Its future development also has enormous potential. The flexibility of the social networking software on which it is based offers creative opportunities for many aspects of school life to be integrated on it. This requires ownership on the part of pupils and teachers. The implementation of this pilot project out of necessity involved little input (although considerable interest) from the teachers in the schools. We suggest that with increased awareness among teachers and pupils, perhaps as a result of a promotional campaign within a

school, the initiative has the potential to become a central focus of the school community. If, for example, all the school societies and clubs were given space on the site, club announcements and images from events were regularly posted by members, a fuller picture of the school would emerge on the site. Different communities could be given access to it, such as current pupils and their parents, prospective pupils and their parents, as well as the teachers and management of the post primary school and the feeder schools. In other words, a site could be designed to support the whole school community and could include (among other things) an area for visitors such as sixth class pupils in feeder schools to make a 'virtual visit' to the school and interact with designated pupils while on the site.

Equally, the site has potential as a cross-curricular project and the key skills pertaining to digital literacy can be developed through it in an authentic and purposeful manner. Again, this raises the issue of the need for support in the area of teacher professional development to ensure its successful integration within a school. The Inspectors' review of ICT in schools would seem to suggest that the context of second level schools may not yet be adequately prepared for this. Future development of the project would require considerable attention to be given to the ways it could be linked to curricular and extra-curricular activities in schools.

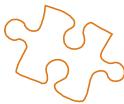


# The website: design structure and functionality

Part of the process leading up to the creation of this project involved detailed consultation with young people involved in the initial EAR research about ways they thought transition to post primary school might be facilitated. An interactive website was proposed by them and the young people were also consulted during the development phase on the design and navigation of the site itself.

The screenshot shows the homepage of the 'Going 2 Secondary' website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for News, Forum, Gallery, Events Calendar, and Video. Below the navigation is a banner featuring a large blue and yellow puzzle piece graphic and the text 'Going 2 Secondary'. To the right of the banner are icons for a globe, a map, a star, and a user profile. On the left side, there's a sidebar with a search bar, a calendar for January 2009 (with dates from 1 to 31), and login fields for Username and Password. The main content area contains several text blocks with bullet points, such as:

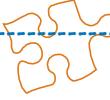
- Name
- Background:  
Athlone Community Taskforce established the Educational Action Research Project in 2005 to work with young people.  
"to examine from a young person's perspective their experience of the transition from Primary to Post-Primary School"
- The Educational Action Research Project delivered a pilot Transition Programme, which involved working with young people, families and schools. At the same time the EAR project networked with different service providers to consider ways of responding to what the young people were saying during the research. A three year action plan was produced called "Going to Secondary". This plan outlines a number of projects with the overall purpose:
- "To create conditions to support young people to make a positive transition from Primary to Post-primary School"
- One of the projects that is based upon ideas and interests of young people involved in the EAR project is the use of information communication technologies.
- This website is for young people.... so enter your school line and enjoy...



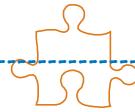
family

school

young people



community



The outcome of the consultative process became a website that is at once a source of information and a means of communication between the post primary pupils and the children in the feeder schools. Interaction is made possible through a number of features such as a forum, a gallery, news pages and video-sharing technology embedded in the site. The site itself was created using *Joomla* software and customised for the project. *Joomla* (<http://www.joomla.org>) is an open-source software template that offers a range of so-called 'Web 2.0' functions or interactive features depending on the needs of the users. For example, it can be made secure: usernames, passwords and other administration and security measures can be created.

The Going2Secondary website was created by a private web-design company and an advanced level of technical expertise would be required for schools wishing to replicate the interface for their school. While this outsourcing was a necessary aspect of this pilot project, the future development of the project would need to allow for the administration and maintenance of the site to be managed by the schools.

A potential role for the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) to recreate the site interface for rollout in schools would be appropriate. The majority of ICT coordinators in Irish schools would have no difficulty in setting up the usernames and administration features of the site once the

initial infrastructure was put in place. The website prototype developed for this project included a number of useful features, and as has been mentioned above, the site development was informed by a consultation with the young people involved in the original EAR research project. The interface is simple, uncluttered, colourful and intuitive. While it includes the option of changing font sizes, there is no 'text view' or 'high visibility' version available. The key features used by the pupils in the pilot were the forum and the gallery and these were reached through a homepage that also served a number of other purposes (e.g. informing the public about the project and acknowledging the provenance of the funding for its creation).

The following points pertain specifically to the website and are worth bearing in mind for any future implementation of the project.

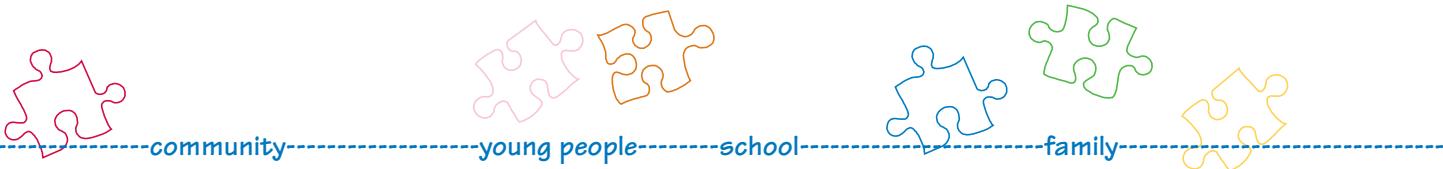
- ▶ Allow schools to customize the design of the homepage (images of the school, the local area, symbolic associations with the school such as famous past pupils, sporting traditions and achievements, etc.). Ensure that the homepage is tailored to the interests of the participants in the project. School insignia or colours could be used to create a greater sense of association with the second level school.



- ▶ Encourage schools to avoid using lengthy sentences on the homepage. Users' actions on and movement around a website is mostly done intuitively and lengthy descriptions of the project will be ignored. Therefore, details about the project (aims, objectives, etc.) could be contained on an 'Information' or 'About' page linked to the homepage.
- ▶ Include accessibility settings (e.g. text view with no images, high definition colours and larger text sizes). This would accommodate users with learning difficulties (dyslexia), visual impairment etc.
- ▶ Include a link to a help page for additional information about the functions on the site to ensure users can if necessary get a full picture of all the features of the site.
- ▶ Provide only one route to other pages linked to the homepage, thereby avoiding duplication and making the navigation through site easier and more intuitive.
- ▶ Clarify what is meant by the 'Rules' link on the Forum page.
- ▶ Provide clear and secure access for teachers to the record keeping or record management system (and ensure these can be printed out).

- ▶ Provide a network version that could be installed on the school network. By doing so pupils could enter messages into the forum without being online. The messages would be uploaded the next time the computer connects to the Internet.

Finally, the issue of moderating forums will require considerable review in the future. How will it be managed? Who will moderate messages? Teachers? Older pupils? A combination of both? Pupil reporting on forum activity presents a potentially valuable opportunity for the older pupils to develop responsibility towards the younger ones. However, this also raises an ethical question about whether this ought to be their responsibility and, if so, what level of responsibility they should have. In any case, while it has pedagogic value in developing older pupils' sense of responsibility and information management skills it also has practical implications concerning the burden of administration for both pupils and teachers.



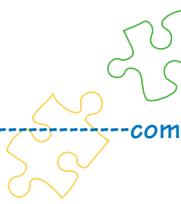
# The role of the project manager and teachers

The schools where the project was implemented were consistently accommodating to the project manager and extremely willing to cooperate both with her and with the project evaluators. Teachers in the post primary school showed a great deal of interest in the project and undertook training in the management and administration of the site. That they didn't actually carry out these functions leaves room for further research on the outcomes for them in practical and pedagogic terms in taking a more active role in the delivery and management of the project.

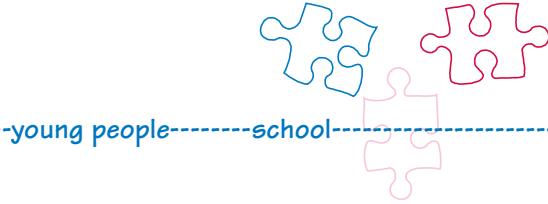
Adequate and detailed attention was paid to getting ethical clearance for the project. This involved written consultation with parents where the purpose of the project and the pupil activities therein were clearly outlined.

The post primary lesson plans in the module devised by the project manager were initially intended to have been delivered by a teacher within the designated school with, presumably, support from the project manager. However, a change to the timetable for this teacher resulted in her being unable to participate and the project manager took on the role of instructor in the absence of another teacher being available. Though not a qualified teacher, registered with the Teaching Council, the project manager has considerable experience in youth work and related easily to the pupils and indeed

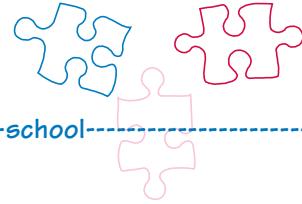
introduced a level of informality to the lessons not usually experienced in second level schools in Ireland (e.g. she introduced herself using her first name), and to which the pupils responded very positively. The module itself had an informal quality, given firstly its position as an optional course on the Transition Year programme, and secondly its emphasis on pupil-generated content. While respect and cooperation were displayed by the boys at all times, the optional and external status of the course mitigated against its smooth delivery and occasionally other priorities (such as match fixtures, external trips and other school events) resulted in sessions being postponed. Consequently, there was a certain lack of continuity in the programme.



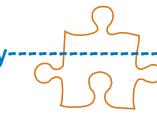
community



young people



school



family

# The post primary school

Although the option to participate in the project was offered to all the post primary schools in Athlone only one eventually became involved namely, the Marist College. An all-boys school the Marist College is an urban, medium-sized voluntary secondary school catering for approximately 400 students with a strong tradition of academic and sporting achievement. The school has a Catholic ethos and a strong tradition of care-giving within the community is encouraged, particularly in the Transition Year.

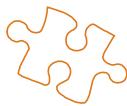
The project work was carried out as part of the Transition Year (TY) Media Studies module which effectively meant that activities could be carried out during school hours.

The role of the TY pupils in the project was to populate the site with relevant information about their school. This choice was based on their own views of what they would have liked to have known about before they had started in second level as well as what they now consider significant about their school and which they think will be of interest to their younger correspondents. Thus areas such as sports, subjects, facilities and extracurricular activities (e.g. the school trip) were typical of the themes chosen. The appeal of the site lies in the flexibility it offers for pupils to choose themes and devise their own way of presenting these using text and images created with the specific audience of the sixth class pupils in mind. The post primary pupils particularly appreciated being able to contribute content themselves. They

enjoyed being allowed full access to the technology including the availability of laptops and digital cameras. They reported having no difficulty handling these and found the site to be intuitive in design.

The lesson plans were carefully drawn up and were comprehensive. They provided clear and well-chosen pupil activities. In the first lesson or session in the post primary school the pupils were given a detailed outline of the project aims. In this initial session also the website was presented and pupils were given access to it. They were asked to identify the characteristics of a good website and most importantly to discuss in detail what they would have liked to have known about their school prior to coming to it.

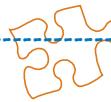
In the second session pupils were given an opportunity to use the Going2Secondary site by typing up text pre-prepared by the project manager and pasting it into the site. Working in this manner they learned one way to populate the site with information.



family

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We would suggest, however, that a written activity profiling the school or indeed themselves, their class or a typical school day might have been more appropriate even at this early stage. This would have got them started on creating relevant material immediately and would have reduced the emphasis on the technical aspect in favour of establishing the link to the other school from the start. Therefore, the focus on the audience of sixth class pupils and the initiation of the relationship between the two groups could have been emphasised from the very first activity. Having said that, however, the exercise was intended to simply get the pupils started and have them see a guaranteed and immediate outcome from their task. In this respect it was successful. Later sessions saw them including material on the site that they had created or chosen themselves that was focused on the theme of the school, its facilities and school-based activities in general.

In session three further features of the site were explored, in particular the 'Events Calendar' and the 'Gallery'. Pupils were shown how to include information in the calendar and how to place images in the gallery. From a user's point of view the gallery is a very attractive feature and in this case images were very well chosen: photos from the school trip were uploaded here, giving a very positive image of the friendship and fun of such a trip.

The gallery feature of the site offers a very creative opportunity for pupils. Given the ubiquitous nature of camera-phones (a commonplace accessory of practically every teenager in Ireland) and the ease of uploading digital images to websites, the gallery's usefulness to display images presenting the school and the pupils is extremely powerful. It also corresponds to an activity favoured in social networking sites of sharing photos and commenting on them.

Time constraints prohibited more being done with this feature than simply posting images. In the development of the project the gallery's potential to encourage pupils to develop evaluative skills could be explored: pupils could be asked, for example, to give a reason for their choice of images and/or to make a selection according to certain criteria and to justify their choice in light of these. This again could assist in redirecting the emphasis from the technical aspects to pedagogical outcomes. A greater use of text on the pictures in the Gallery would also have been much more informative for the primary pupils. There could equally be a role for primary pupils to upload images to the gallery. Making the exchange of images a two-way process may have an impact on the development of pupils' mutual understanding.



Session four focused on the discussion forum feature. Children are largely familiar with online interaction (DES, 2008) and the intuitive design of this website made it easy for them to create and follow discussions. However, the time delay between posting a message and receiving a response can be a disadvantage in this form of communication. It is also imperative that users have a real reason to use the forum and an 'information gap' of some kind is required to make the use of a forum authentic. The sixth class children's

questions about the school and the TY pupils' knowledge of it provide such a gap.

In order to facilitate the continuation of the interaction however, more input by the instructor on the ways to facilitate online communication would need to be integrated in the process. Again, with a greater involvement of teachers and the provision of appropriate professional development in the area of computer mediated communication (CMC), the project has particularly strong pedagogic potential.

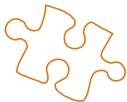
The screenshot shows the 'Going 2 Secondary' website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, News, Forum (highlighted in yellow), Gallery, Events Calendar, and Video. Below the navigation is a logo featuring three interlocking puzzle pieces in pink, blue, and yellow, with the text 'Going 2 Secondary' next to it. A search bar is located above the main content area. The main content area is titled 'Recent Posts' and lists several topics with their details:

Topic	Author	Category	Date	Hits
book	leona	Discussion	Friday, 16 May 2008	3
Bonnie	Niamh	Discussion	Friday, 16 May 2008	3
book	Niamh	Discussion	Friday, 16 May 2008	3
What does language do?	Déagán	Discussion	Friday, 16 May 2008	3
new	Aislinn	Discussion	Friday, 16 May 2008	4

Below the recent posts, there is a section titled 'Going 2 Secondary Forum Stats' with general stats:

- Total Users: 48
- Last User: maphus
- Total Messages: 242
- Total Subjects: 57
- Total Sections: 3
- Total Categories: 2
- Today New: 0
- Yesterday New: 0
- Today Total Active: 0
- Yesterday Total Active: 0
- [View Recent Posts](#)
- [View Active Stats](#)
- [View Logins](#)

At the bottom, it says 'Online 8 Members and 1 Guests' and includes a copyright notice: '© 2008 W3B (www.going2secondary.ie). All rights reserved.'

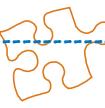


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young people

community



For example, in developing the older pupils' abilities and sensitivities to interaction with the younger pupils, they could learn ways to ensure their language is welcoming and encouraging, non-threatening and unambiguous. The knock-on effect of this could be a reduction in bullying in schools resulting from greater empathy among pupils.

In the final session it was hoped that pupils would learn how to use the video-sharing feature of the site but this proved to be technically difficult and was not pursued. Instead communication via MSN chat and video-conferencing was used. In the feedback from the pupils this proved to be a very popular activity. The immediacy of the interaction and the 'presence' of those at the other end of the line made for a very motivating and enjoyable experience. At this stage the pupils at both levels had already an established contact with each other through the forum; they had a very good idea of the purpose of the interaction and were well prepared to discuss questions relating to the school.

The use of video-sharing technology, much like digital still images, does have great potential but again, more time would need to be allocated to the logistical aspects of this in order to achieve substantial results. It would be feasible to combine a cross-curricular approach where, for example, a video created in another class or by another group in the school was used in the Going2Secondary file-sharing feature. In

this way it would act as another opportunity for the dissemination of the pupils' work. Again, bearing in mind the possibility for the wider community to access the site as suggested earlier (e.g. parents and teachers at both school levels), its suitability as a medium to display pupil work is evident.

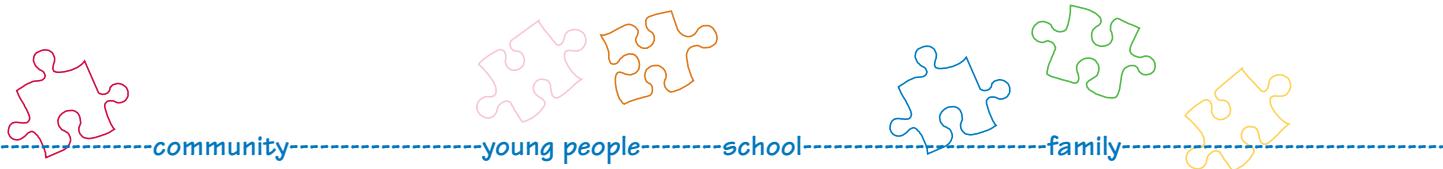
Evidence from the discussions with pupils showed that they had a very clear grasp of the purpose of the project. Their responses to the individual activities were that they were relevant and easy to achieve. They strongly approved of the *raison d'être* of the project, feeling that they were contributing in some way to the improvement of the younger pupils' educational experience. They noted a certain level of frustration, however, at the difficulty the instructor in the primary school had with using the web-cam. The pupils were divided in their views as to which mechanism of communication was most effective: dividing equally in favour of forums, MSN chat and video-conference. The primary pupils were particularly enthusiastic about having had the opportunity to use the medium of video to communicate with the older pupils despite the technical difficulties experienced.

In spite of these reports of satisfaction and approval, we would again argue that more time should be given over to the project (i.e. a longer time-frame) with the participation of other groups: other classes as well as, say, school clubs and societies.



Opening access to it would mean a greater volume of material could be generated. This in turn would lead to more information for the primary pupils to see and ideally give them further scope for discussion. Clearly the implications for coordination of an expanded project are significant and thought would need to be given to how this would be managed and by whom. The outcomes at a number of levels including, the cohesion of the school community and the development among pupils and teachers of relevant ICT skills, would be considerable.





# The primary schools

Three primary feeder schools of the Marist College participated in the project: St. Mary's National School (Garden Vale, Athlone) where 16 pupils took part, Oifig4maistrí Gaelscoil (Retreat Road, Athlone) where three pupils would be going to the Marist College and St. Clare's (Tubberclare, Co. Westmeath) where six pupils were involved. Numbers participating were of course limited to those who planned to go to the Marist College in September 2008, and naturally only included boys.

The work undertaken at both school levels was very task-oriented. At primary level this involved a number of essential elements such as attention to Internet safety and the development of questions for the post primary partners they would meet online. Their work also culminated in a presentation to their class and guests about what they had learnt about their prospective new school and what they had gained from participating in this ICT-based experiment.

Leading up to the presentation the primary pupils undertook tasks such as:

- ▶ discussing their concerns about starting in the new school,
- ▶ devising questions to ask the older pupils, and
- ▶ finding out and discussing the information about the school posted to the site.

The sixth class pupils were presented with certificates acknowledging their

participation. The guests at the presentations were parents and members of the pupils' extended families. The decision to include them at this point is significant in that it underscores the project's commitment to inclusiveness and to the concept of generating greater resilience in potentially marginalised families.

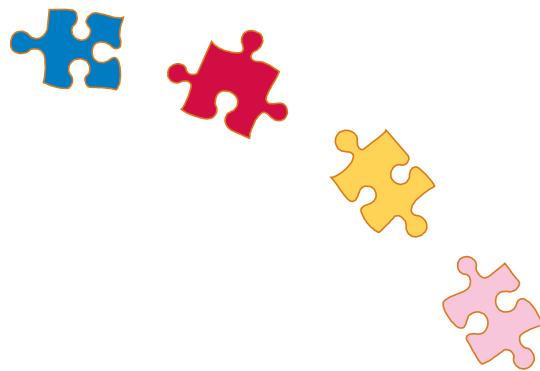
Four sessions in all were planned for the primary schools. These were facilitated by two project workers. This model is based on the existing practice in the Athlone area primary schools of using external facilitators rather than the classroom teacher to help pupils work through the issues related to going to secondary school (e.g. The EAR Project 'Going to Secondary Manual Programme' and the 'Stepping Over to Secondary' project organised by Youth Services).

In the first session pupils explored their expectations and feelings regarding secondary school and were asked to note



what they were already sure of and not so sure of regarding their new school. They worked in pairs or small groups to come up with a final list of questions that they could ask on the site about the secondary school. The second session focused usefully on online safety prior to pupils logging onto the site and posting their questions. There is scope in this session to integrate the excellent materials, such as *WebWise* and other online safety resources, developed by the NCTE. The third session corresponded with the Transition Years' fifth session where they were in contact via MSN chat and video-conference. The primary schools' final session saw them prepare a presentation about the project which would be delivered at the end of the school year outlining what they had learnt about the new school, what they liked most about the project, what aspects they found difficult and or disappointing and how they now felt about moving to the new school.

In some ways limiting the interaction among pupils to the exchange of information led to a somewhat static communication style: once the questions were addressed no further discussion ensued. Again, this highlights the point made above that the pupils needed to be instructed in how to engage in online communication. The scope to develop communication was therefore curtailed, to some extent, by the design of the tasks. Strategies for encouraging interaction particularly among the post primary pupils (e.g. inviting comment; using tag questions, etc.) could be included as a teaching aim in the project. Nevertheless, pupils reported high levels of satisfaction at having achieved what was expected of them. Our view is that more could potentially be expected of them in a situation where additional time was allocated to the work and where the work itself was implemented by teachers in the school.





## The follow-up process

In October 2008 the authors re-visited the Marist College to meet with the erstwhile sixth class pupils, now first years in the Marist College, in order to evaluate the impact the Going2Secondary website project had had on them in making the transition to the secondary school. In order to facilitate a discussion about the experience the boys were asked to note the aspects of the school they had been looking forward to and what had worried them about it during their last term in primary school. We also hoped to establish their views on their settling-in experience in first year in relation to the key issues that pertain to the transition process (namely, teachers, homework, new subjects, relationships, activities, the school building and the journey to school). In the traditional manual transition programme the project manager would use this time to identify whether some pupils were having difficulties with settling-in and would offer to meet these pupils on a one-to-one basis. For the purpose of the evaluation however, the authors' role was to determine whether the Going2Secondary website had made any impact on their experience of preparing for secondary school. The opportunity to have one-to-one discussions with the project manager was offered for a later date.

The class based-activities designed by the authors for this visit revealed that the boys generally felt positive about going to secondary school. Most noted that they were looking forward to making new friends, playing rugby for the school and were excited about learning new subjects, as well as participating in the school tour. Technical Graphics, Woodwork and French were subjects singled out by name. For one pupil 'being out of primary school' was mentioned and 'having more responsibility' was noted by another. The longer lunch break and longer summer holidays were

also mentioned as positive aspects in second level (although perhaps with negative connotations). Finally, as some already knew boys in the school, they mentioned that they looked forward to developing their friendships with them.

The aspects that had worried them ranged from concerns about the building (finding their way); teachers who might be too strict; there being too many teachers for them to cope with and about 'getting into trouble' with teachers. The most frequently mentioned worry concerned homework.



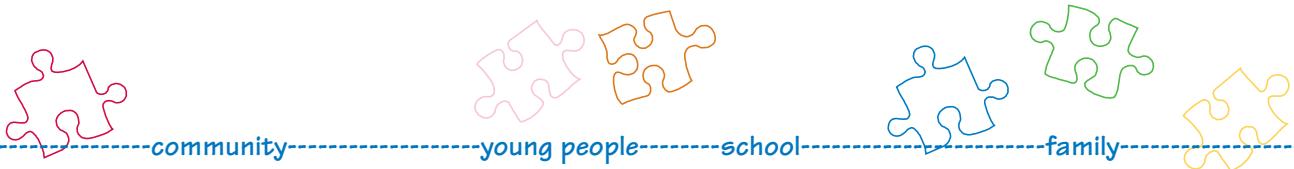
This seems to be more to do with their actual experience of adjusting to the increased level of homework rather than something they had worried about prior to starting. Two subjects (Irish and German) were mentioned as being a source of anxiety, again perhaps more because of their current experience rather than as subjects they would have thought about in advance of coming to the school. A concern about being physically ‘thrown in the bin’ was mentioned by two pupils and having his ‘head flushed down the toilet’ was a concern for another. Some boys indicated that although they had been worried about certain things such as the building they realised that it wasn’t so big after all and they were relieved to find that though they had been worried about settling in they didn’t have any difficulty in the end.

The keywords that pupils wrote down when asked to indicate what came to mind in relation to certain issues relevant to the transition process were also generally positive, friends were ‘cool’, the school in the shape of a cross ‘wasn’t so difficult to get around’ and where homework had been a worry it didn’t turn out to be as bad as they had thought it would be. Finally, where bullying was a worry they had had no experience of it.

These written activities led to a whole class discussion about what had helped them in preparing for second level school. A number of pupils discussed the fact that

they had not felt supported in their primary school and indicated that the Going2Secondary website was the only thing in their school that had helped them get an idea of what second level school was like. They were conscious that what they had learnt in this way came from pupils a little older than them and they said they felt the information could be trusted. The experience had enhanced their feeling of positive anticipation of going to secondary school.

The pupils in one of the schools felt that they had not been supported in sixth class. It is not possible from the data collected (nor is it within the scope of this report to do so) to determine if these pupils had a higher level of anxiety than those of the other schools, but it was clear from the discussion that help with the preparation for second level school would have been greatly valued by the boys: those who had felt unsupported by their primary school in preparing for the transition and expressed their views quite emphatically. The discussion clearly illustrated the need for dialogue between the two school levels and the authors of this report would strongly encourage the development of this website project as a means whereby schools and parents can engage with each other to explore pupils’ needs in preparing for the secondary school.



# The community-based element

Part of the project brief was to include a community-based initiative to encourage the use of ICT among adults who might otherwise not have access to computer training. Free computer classes were offered by word of mouth resulting in the recruitment of eight women. These women participated in a basic computer course over four sessions. The topics covered on the course included an introduction to the word processing package MS Word, the use of e-mail and the Internet.

Of the eight women, seven had children attending National school who were approaching sixth class.

Three of the women had never used a computer even though there was a computer in each of their family homes being used by their children. One woman commented on this situation by saying: 'the kids know what to do, but I wouldn't have a clue'. During the second session of the computer course another woman reported back that she had now used the home computer for the first time.

The remaining five all had access to computers in their homes and had used them. The level of IT skills amongst these five participants was varied, but included using the Internet, accessing social networking sites and being able to produce word processing documents.

The session on the Internet included using the address bar to access sites. A task to access the Going2Secondary website was

completed by all the participants. The site was reviewed and after some discussion the group felt enabled to seek information about schools on the Internet with their child.

The exercise shows, with the support of computer training classes, parents can access information from school websites with their child (or children), explore the 'virtual school environment' and become better able to support their child's or children's transition from primary to post primary school.



# Key successes of the project

Among the key successes of the project was the enthusiastic response to it from the pupils at both levels. Teachers also valued its aims and supported its implementation in their schools.

The primary pupils learnt about their new school and formed impressions based on information posted by the older pupils.

Children's understanding of Internet safety was developed and their ability to use, participate in and navigate social networking sites in a safe way was promoted.

The disparity of age and status between the two participating groups was lessened by the use of online communication.

The project has a potentially significant role to play in transition/induction programmes in schools:

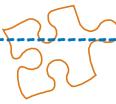
- ▶ It is authentic and focuses clearly on children's concerns at a critical time in their education,
- ▶ It recognises primary pupils' need to articulate fears concerning the move to second level,
- ▶ It facilitates breaking barriers and developing relationships between pupils,
- ▶ It provides post primary pupils with a new mentoring role in supporting younger pupils to prepare for coming to their school,
- ▶ It is innovative and interaction is mediated through a relevant and attractive medium,
- ▶ It encourages pupils to be autonomous, self-directed and collaborative in their work, and to take responsibility for material they create (whether they be at primary or post primary level),
- ▶ It provides a focus for the development of awareness of issues of Internet safety,
- ▶ It has the potential to link teachers, parents and pupils and to create greater cohesion within a school community,
- ▶ It promotes contact between school levels (for managers and teachers as well as pupils and their parents) providing a focus for greater cross-sector and community-based cooperation and communication,
- ▶ It promotes the integration of ICT at both school levels in a cross-curricular manner and has the potential to generate more curricular continuity between the two,



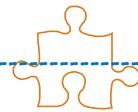
family

school

young people



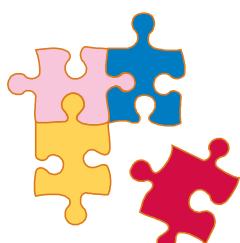
community



- ▶ It provides a useful mechanism for teachers to develop their awareness of the issues pertaining to the use of social networking sites,
- ▶ It has the potential to help develop pupils' higher order skills (synthesising, evaluating, etc.).



36



# Areas for discussion and development

In spite of the high level of interest in the project by the teachers the implementation of the pilot was hampered by its external and optional status. The discussion in this report has referred to the need for the project to be allocated more time, to be integrated with other curricular and extra-curricular areas in the school and for the emphasis on the technical aspects of it to be reduced in favour of more attention to pedagogy.

The use of ICT invariably results in debate over the relative lack of success of policy and investment in technology to have a significant impact in schools. Reports on the use of ICT in Irish schools assert the need for additional support for teachers to engage with technology. The experience of the Going2Secondary project reflects this: teachers' interest in the project was not matched by their confidence to implement it in their school.

The emphasis in this, as in many other ICT-based projects, is on the technical aspects of its delivery. The potential for a change of emphasis is pointed to in this report: the lessons devised by the project manager were realistic, effective and proved satisfactory to the pupils. In the case of the lessons in the post primary school further scope for a focus on skills that are specific to online communication could be developed in the future. Examples suggested in the report include: initiating communication, inviting comment and further discussion, analysing pupils' own choice of material, evaluating material posted to the site, analyzing images and

discussing the role images can play in portraying the school.

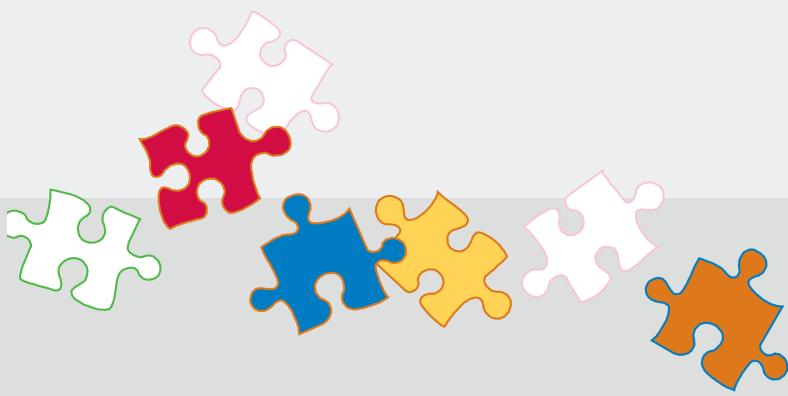
With regard to the website design and functionality, we have outlined the need for schools to manage, administer and customise the site to reflect their pupils' interests and learning needs. The ethical and practical issues involved in moderating pupil interaction on the site were also raised.

We take the view that the project deserves the support of statutory and implementation bodies for education: namely the NCCA and the NCTE. Its design and scope reflects the aspirations of the Department of Education and Science on a number of levels: promoting greater cohesion between school levels, integrating ICT in curricular and cross-curricular work in schools, supporting the transition for primary pupils to post primary school. If an infrastructure for this project were developed and its promotion and deployment in schools were invested in, the benefits to school managers, teachers, pupils and their parents, would be very significant indeed.

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