

The Discover Primary Science Course  
at Fota Wildlife Park runs  
from September to April

# CHAPTER 2

## PRIMARY



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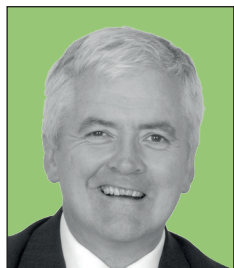
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Áine Hyland

# A 'Curate's Egg' of a Year

Grand plans must be backed up with finance



**Seán Cottrell**

retired CEO of  
Irish Primary Principals' Network

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**S**éán Cottrell provides a lively overview of the year in primary education with vital information and commentary on new and ongoing initiatives, including roll-out of Financial Support Services Unit, new Special Education Needs Model, Mentoring and Coaching for School Leaders, the Droichead induction process, Vetting, Action Team Partnerships, and more.

When a late-19th-century bishop apologised for serving a young curate a less-than-healthy egg, the timid underling hastened to reassure his superior by saying the egg was 'good in parts'. This was immortalised in a cartoon printed in the British satirical magazine *Punch* in 1895.<sup>1</sup> Curate's egg is a phrase much loved by opposition politicians seeking to undermine government budget proposals and by theatre critics not entirely convinced of the quality of a performance. It is an apt idiom with which to describe the primary sector education year 2017.

According to Minister Richard Bruton's ambitious Action Plan for Education, launched in 2017 and modelled on a similar plan for jobs introduced in his time as Minister for Jobs, his aim is to make the Irish education and training service the best in Europe by 2026. As educators, we hope that such grand plans are backed with the requisite finance to make them happen. In short, we hope the minister will prove to be a good egg.

## Financial Support Services Unit (FSSU)

DES Circular 0060/2017 legislates for the roll-out and operation of the Financial Support Services Unit (FSSU) from September 2017 over a three-year school period. It guarantees compliance with Section 18, Education Act 1998, to ensure that appropriate accounting and financial procedures are in place in schools. Following a bedding-in period for the new regulations, all schools will be expected to have appropriate accounting and financial procedures in place with full financial accounting compliance by 2019 – twenty-one years after the groundbreaking Education Act 1998. 'Twenty-one years is a mighty long time,' as Johnny McEvoy might still sing. While schools in the main have very good established practices of accounting, the FSSU can be expected to bring certainty to an area that caused schools considerable concern. The annual presentation of accounts by 2019 may also help to highlight how grossly underfunded primary education is and how much of the shortfall is made up from school fundraising activities.

The publication is a comprehensive overview and analysis covering contemporary early childhood, primary, and second-level education in Ireland.

### Review of the Irish school system

This year saw the seminal publication of 'Towards a Better Future: A review of the Irish school system'. It resulted from an initiative jointly supported by the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), who were in turn inspired by a similar review of the Finnish education system by the renowned academic Dr Pasi Sahlberg. The publication is a comprehensive overview and analysis covering contemporary early childhood, primary, and second-level education in Ireland. The work was carried out by five distinguished educationalists – Professor John Coolahan, Professor Sheelagh Drudy, Dr Pádraig Hogan, Professor Aine Hyland, and Dr Seamus McGuinness – who, to their enormous credit, all worked voluntarily on the project. The review was conducted independently of the commissioning organisations and provides a conspectus for policy-makers, practitioners, and participants of the comprehensive range of issues and concerns relevant to achieving the ongoing reform programme.

The review comes almost 20 years after the 1998 Education Act and reflects on the many subsequent changes and reforms, including continual primary curriculum reform, substantial growth of national and international forms of assessment, school development planning, school self-evaluation, the formation and growth of IPPN and NAPD, the subsequent establishment of the Centre for School Leadership (CSL), the establishment of the Teaching Council, and substantial reforms in teacher education. Many of these reforms and changes came about as Ireland was experiencing unprecedented economic growth. When the Celtic Tiger economy collapsed in 2008, the financial, social, and employment consequences were devastating. Cutbacks affected many services, including education, bringing great stress at all levels to staff, pupils, and parents. It is a credit to all involved in education that significant reform took place in spite of the economic downturn, the fruits of which we enjoy today as the economic recovery continues.

Schools no longer need to wait for the arrival of a psychologist's report to support a child with obvious needs.

### Special Education Needs model

September 2017 saw the roll-out of the new Special Education Needs (SEN) model. It is designed to provide more equitable access to services for those most in need. Schools no longer need to wait for the arrival of a psychologist's report to support a child with obvious needs. Each school has secured its allocation for two years based on last year's resource allocations. No school lost out immediately, but the concern remains for those schools due to lose supports in September 2019.

All procedural change comes as a result of a process commenced in 2013 when the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) began a major review of special education. They consulted widely with all partners, and the most profound difficulty identified was the lack of clarity about which organisation was responsible for what service. The then Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan TD, agreed with the proposal that the Special Education Support Service (SESS), the National Behaviour Service (NBSS) and the Visiting Teacher Service for children who are deaf or hard of hearing and blind or visually impaired (VTSVHI) should join NCSE to form one support service for special education. On 20 March 2017, NCSE



assumed management of these services and since September has been providing support to schools.

### Centre for School Leadership

The Centre for School Leadership (CSL) has existed for only two years, but already much has been achieved in support of principals, particularly newly appointed ones. A total of 285 primary mentors have been trained, 135 of them matched with newly appointed principals this year. Newly appointed principals must engage with the Misneach programme to avail of mentor support. Mentoring involves a monthly meeting lasting up to two hours, phone contact fortnightly, and rules, procedures, and record-keeping for everyone's protection. The relationship begins in September and formally ends in June. Each mentor in turn has a cara from whom they get support and advice.

### Coaching

Coaching for school principals is a new and welcome support. It can be accessed through the CSL website, is freely available to 400 principals, and is aimed at those wishing to move their practice to a higher level or who are finding the role very challenging. Those availing of the service can have six free sessions with a coach they select, a service that is often seen as prohibitively expensive.

A level 9 postgraduate programme for aspiring school leaders is also available through CSL. The content is delivered by a consortium of UCD, UL, and NUIG, and is based on the Quality Framework for Leadership and Management. The course is part-time and blended and costs €2,000.

### Vetting

Vetting continues to be part of the egg that the curate might baulk at. The question is still asked why substitute teachers, SNAs, and sports coaches need to be vetted individually for every school they work in. Is there not a system whereby they can present a renewable card to all schools, clubs, or places where minors gather, guaranteeing their bona fides in child protection issues? One diocesan secretary reported processing a vetting application form for a substitute teacher on 16 occasions over a short period. It is in everyone's interest to create a more clear-cut and user-friendly process to alleviate the extra workload such duplication creates.

Retrospective vetting of teachers is expected to be complete by the end of 2017. By 11 September, 83 per cent of the 97,000 registered teachers had been vetted, with the remaining teachers receiving notice requiring them to complete the process within 28 days.

### National Induction Programme and Droichead

The National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT) continues to provide a quality support service for newly qualified teachers and the mentors and Professional Support Team (PST) who assist at school level. Since 2013, NIPT has been responsible for training PSTs in schools offering the Droichead process, with over 720 NQTs inducted via Droichead since 2015. Droichead remains a bone of contention for many principals in particular, who cite workload, staff relations, and fears over quality assurance as key issues. Many young teachers prefer it to the

Coaching for school principals is aimed at those wishing to move their practice to a higher level or who are finding the role very challenging.

Droichead remains a bone of contention for many principals.

traditional model involving the inspector and see it as a way to learn more collaboratively from colleagues.

Droichead is now national policy and, from this year, is the only route to induction for NQTs in schools of 24 classroom teachers or more and for all teachers in SEN settings. Two years from now, all schools with an administrative principal will be expected to provide their NQTs' induction. Those teachers on a school's PST will receive four days' training with sub cover to equip them with the skills and knowledge required to guide the NQT through the process. NIPT also provides advisory visits and support for PST members.

The Droichead process itself happens over an agreed time of not less than 60 consecutive days, if the PST decides the time is appropriate. The NQT will get a chance to observe quality teaching from experienced colleagues and be observed in turn by them. The NQT will keep a Taisce to document learning and reflective practice. At the end of the process, a joint declaration is signed by the NQT and PST confirming they have 'engaged in a quality teaching and learning process'. Doubts remain about the process, however, and many questions remain on the logistics of carrying through the Droichead process in a small school with a teaching principal.

### Children First Act 2015

Children are the primary focus of all schools, and their protection is paramount. The Children First Act 2015 will be fully commenced in November 2017. It places an obligation on all mandated persons (registered teachers) to report child protection concerns that meet or exceed defined thresholds. The Children First Act will function in tandem with Children First Guidance. Department of Education and Skills procedures are currently being revised in accordance with Children First. The role of the Designated Liaison Person does not change with the introduction of obligations on mandated persons.

Many young teachers prefer it [Droichead] to the traditional model involving the inspector.

### Children and Young People's Services Committees

Another positive development has been the Children and Young People's Services Committees. CYPSCs are a key structure identified by the government to plan and co-ordinate services for children in every county in Ireland. The overall purpose is to improve outcomes for children and young people through local and national interagency collaboration. The main statutory, community, and voluntary providers of services to children come together to co-ordinate activity to ensure that children and their families receive improved and accessible services.

Some counties have prioritised initiatives locally with success. In south County Dublin, for example, the CYPSC has worked to improve critical incident protocols by developing a community response. Cork has prioritised well-being, while Meath has concentrated on the transition from primary to second level. Through IPPN, a school leader in each county is appointed to the committee. Other agencies involved include Tusla, local authorities, HSE nominees, Education and Training Boards (ETBs), Gardaí, City or County Childcare committees, NEPS, Department of Social Protection, third-level institutions, and NAPD, as well as local community organisations and Local Development companies.

## Action Team Partnerships

Action Team Partnerships is a National Parents Council initiative which enables the whole school community to work together to improve teaching and learning. Members include teachers, support staff, parents, and members of the local community. They support the school plan practically by working on two academic areas and one behavioural area and making the school a more welcoming place. If the focus is on literacy, for example, the group might organise a storyteller, library visit, book fair, or website work. A behavioural area might include an anti-bullying week or games in the school yard. Though the project is in its infancy, it has the potential to involve many more people locally in the education of children.

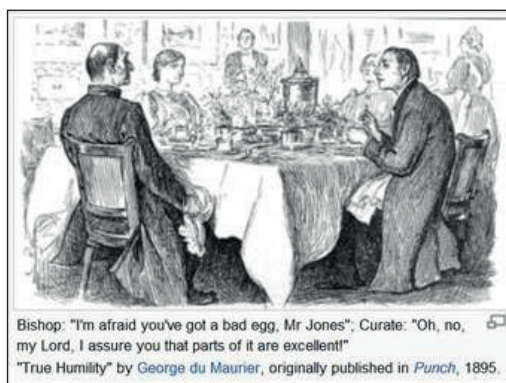
Though the project [Action Team Partnerships] is in its infancy, it has the potential to involve many more people locally in the education of children.

## Conclusion

Perhaps the curate was right. There is more to be positive about than negative. However, I wouldn't want any positivity to hide the simple fact that more money must be allocated to primary education, if the initiatives continue to arrive and costs continue to rise. We all know that implementing change is extremely challenging. Machiavelli said that the people who gain most from change are the ones who give the least support in bringing it about. In schools, sustainable change can come about only when staff is involved in identifying what must be changed, and takes ownership and responsibility for it.

In the Theory of Reciprocity, as outlined in IPPN's 'Quality Leadership – Quality Learning' study, every unit of capacity demanded of the school by the system must be provided in equal ratio to the school. Otherwise the natural conclusion is that constant change, which is often repetitive and time-demanding, results in the inevitable diminution of the school's core business. Too much of that egg would make anyone ill.

- 1 The origin of the phrase curate's egg is the George du Maurier cartoon 'True Humility', printed in the British satirical magazine *Punch* on 9 November 1895. The cartoon gives fuller insight into its meaning, which relies to some extent on an appreciation of irony.



Right Reverend Host: 'I'm afraid you've got a bad egg, Mr. Jones.'  
The Curate: 'Oh no, my Lord, I assure you! Parts of it are excellent!'

# Health and Well-being of School Leaders

Survey reveals urgent need to address structural problem



**Páirc Clerkin**

CEO, Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN)

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**P**áirc Clerkin outlines here the startling results to date of a survey being conducted by Dr Philip Riley from Monash University in Melbourne, Australia and commissioned jointly by primary and second level principals' networks, IPPN and NAPD. The findings highlight the pressing need for a reassessment of the punitive workload of principals, especially teaching principals.

Principals, deputy principals, and teachers deal daily with the lives and potential futures of the young – in which parents' greatest hopes and deepest fears are invested. This is an enormous responsibility which is taken very seriously and which, like all professional responsibilities, can be a heavy burden to carry. The *Irish Principals' and Deputy Principals' Health and Wellbeing Survey*, commissioned jointly by the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), aimed to understand the occupational rewards and risks of this important role. The results presented here are taken from the survey, conducted by Dr Philip Riley, Principal Researcher, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

The research revealed that more than half of school leaders in Ireland work more than 41 hours a week during term, with almost one in five working more than 56 hours and nearly one in ten working more than 60 hours – that's 10 hours a day, 6 days a week. During school 'holidays', more than a fifth work more than 25 hours a week. It seems there is an issue with rest and recuperation, which we know is a recipe for poor health.

The sheer volume of work necessitating the long hours is the greatest stressor. The second-highest stress factor is the lack of time to focus on teaching and learning. Administration is consuming too much of school leaders' time. This is disproportionately affecting teaching principals, who have less dedicated time for administrative tasks. This is a structural problem in the system that needs addressing, because we know from 40 years of international workplace research that this kind of strain predicts increased coronary heart disease. One resource that can reduce health risks associated with high-stress work is professional support. Teaching principals report less support than their administrative colleagues, while all school leaders told us they need more support from their employers.

Irish principals and deputy principals score well above average on all the negative elements in the survey (burnout, sleeping troubles, somatic and cognitive



Irish principals and deputy principals score well below average on positive measures (self-rated health, mental health, coping, relationships, self-worth).

The research presented suggests that bullying and violence are a system-wide problem.

stress) and below average on positive measures (self-rated health, mental health, coping, relationships, self-worth). This is despite the fact that in general they have good support at home, relatively good remuneration, they are well-educated and in secure employment. School leaders have all the attributes of people who should be scoring well above average on these measures, but they are collectively below. Dr Riley's research identifies the extreme demands of the job as the likely cause.

### **What can be done immediately to deal with the stress?**

The medical profession tells us that stress increases cortisol production in the body. Cortisol is your enemy. It suppresses the immune system, decreases bone formation, and is correlated with diabetes, memory difficulties, heart disease, and increased chance of miscarriage. Too much of it and you cannot sleep properly, to recover and replenish your system. Cortisol levels naturally fluctuate during the day but need to be low enough at night for you to sleep well. Dr Riley suggests that mindfulness is an effective means of controlling cortisol levels. Mindfulness is really as simple as being fully present and aware of what is going on around us right now. We build up ways of operating in the world that become habit, and we become 'mindless'. Mindfulness is the opposite of that – it is a concentrated form of rest and recovery, the opposite of the fight/flight response.

### **Recommendations of the study**

#### **A. Increase professional support**

The survey shows that principals and deputy principals who avail of the least professional support have the greatest challenge in maintaining their mental health.

#### **B. Increase professional learning**

Provision of ongoing professional learning will help principals and deputies to deal with the identified stressors.

#### **C. Review the work practices of teaching principals**

The role of school leader has become increasingly complex over the last 15 years. The number of teaching principals deciding to step down, despite the consequent loss of seniority and negative financial impact, indicates that decision-makers need to do a lot more to support them, if we are to avoid further deterioration in morale and potentially a mass exodus from the role.

#### **D. Address bullying and violence**

The research presented in this report suggests that bullying and violence are a system-wide problem and therefore require a national approach.

Compared to other groups, principals and deputy principals experience nearly twice the prevalence of threats of violence and actual physical violence at work.

#### Snapshot of survey results:

- » 404 administrative and 284 teaching principals, as well as 38 administrative and 105 teaching deputy principals took part. 65% were from the primary sector. 40% were based in cities or large towns, 49% in small towns or villages or rural locations. 62% were female.
- » Average age: 48 years.
- » Most were quite experienced, averaging 12 years in leadership after 13 years in teaching.
- » They work long hours: 43% work more than 46 hours a week during term and just over 15% work more than 56 hours a week.
- » 37% volunteer their time for community support outside of their role.
- » 41% are active members of a formal community or sporting association.
- » They are generally very positive about their job, scoring higher than average.
- » Compared to other groups, principals and deputy principals experience nearly twice the prevalence of threats of violence and actual physical violence at work. The prevalence is higher for women.
- » Despite having many predictive attributes for high scores on well-being and quality of life, school leaders collectively score lower than average on both. Their mental health ranges from very good to very poor.

#### Wellbeing for Teachers and Learners Group

Members of the Wellbeing for Teachers and Learners Group (WTL) at their Wellbeing Seminar in Croke Park Dublin on Saturday 18 November 2017:

(L-R) Niall Muldoon Ombudsman for Children, Angela Lynch IPPN, Shay Bannon and Clive Byrne NAPD, Áine Lynch National Parents Council Primary, Tomás Ó Ruairc The Teaching Council, and Maria Doyle IPPN.



# The Devil's Advocate

Saying no to non-essential change



**Seamus Mulconry**

General Secretary, Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA)

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**A**s general secretary of the CPSMA, an organisation that supports the boards of 2,800 primary schools across Ireland, Seamus Mulconry has a unique perspective on the primary system. His proposal is unique also - establish a person or a unit to test to destruction the new initiatives before allowing them through.

## Primary system working despite the odds

There is virtually a universal consensus that the Irish primary system is working. Though chronically under-resourced, it is delivering a high-quality education for most of our children. The available evidence supports this belief. For example, the chief inspector's report 2010–2012 clearly indicates that the overwhelming majority of parents and pupils find their schools to be well managed and welcoming. It states:

Some very positive findings were reported about the management of pupils in primary schools in the period 2010–2012. During notified Whole School Evaluations (WSEs), 96% of schools were found to be managing their pupils effectively by, for example, fostering pupil–teacher interactions, by cultivating an inclusive, child-centred ethos, and by using positive strategies to promote good behaviour. Incidental inspections similarly found that the management of pupils was effective in practically all (96%) of the classrooms visited.

The success of the Irish primary system is down to the quality and commitment of the people who teach in, lead, and manage our schools. As general secretary of the Catholic Primary School Management Association, I have a somewhat unique perspective on the primary system. CPSMA supports the Boards of 2,800 primary schools with training and advice. Our main service is a helpline which handles over 8,350 calls a year from principals and chairs of boards of management (BoMs) seeking advice on issues such as HR, governance, parental complaints, and child protection.

Most of our contact with primary schools is providing assistance when something goes wrong. One might think, therefore, that the perception of CPSMA staff would be focused on negative aspects of primary education, on all the problems that need to be solved. In fact, my experience has been the opposite – I have been filled with admiration for the principals and BoM chairs who routinely go the extra mile to provide

a quality education for children and who are dealing (and coping) with an increasingly complex and demanding environment.

The one observation I would have is that most principals and chairs get themselves into bother, not because they don't care about their work, but because they care too much and bend over backwards trying to accommodate the needs and requests, and occasionally demands, of parents and pupils (and sometimes members of staff). I mention this because the holy grail of public sector modernisation is to get to a place where the public no longer complain about you. The public will rarely praise a public service, but if they are not complaining, not only are you doing something right, you are doing a lot of things right.

Most principals and chairs get themselves into bother... because they care too much and bend over backwards trying to accommodate needs and requests.

The most recent figures from the Children's Ombudsman annual report 2016 indicate that education accounted for 46 per cent (754) of the 1682 complaints received. However, since 2012 the Ombudsman has found it appropriate to investigate only three complaints relating to primary schools. Given that there are over half a million children in the primary system, these figures are a ringing endorsement.

That is not to say the primary system is perfect: there are many challenges from lack of resources, especially for special needs education and in the ongoing shortage of teachers. The primary system cannot rest on its laurels. Like all systems, it must either improve or begin to fail: it cannot stay in stasis.

The external environment in which primary schools operate is changing rapidly, and the schools must change and adapt if they are to flourish. Intelligent policy-making is needed to support such change and adaptation. However, it is not easy to formulate and implement policy to drive positive adaptive change in complex systems.

### Operation Cat Drop

Anyone who has worked in public policy will be familiar with the story of Operation Cat Drop. In the 1950s the Orang Ulu people of Sarawak were suffering from an outbreak of malaria. The World Health Organisation (WHO) sprayed the area with the insecticide DDT, successfully killing the mosquitoes responsible for transmitting the disease.

The outbreak ended but roofs started caving in, the thatch having been eaten following an infestation of caterpillars – the DDT had killed the wasps that had kept the caterpillar population in check. Worse was to follow. Geckos ate the poisoned wasps, and cats ate the poisoned geckos. With the cats gone, the rat population exploded, leading to an outbreak of the plague. In the end, the WHO was forced to parachute cats into the area.

### Do good carefully

Who would have thought that a measure designed to kill mosquitoes would end in an outbreak of plague and parachuting cats? Perhaps as a result of this experience, the Orang Ulu people of Sarawak have a saying: *Do good carefully*. Well-intentioned changes to complex systems have unexpected consequences, which can often be serious. Education is nothing if not a



The Orang Ulu people of Sarawak have a saying: Do good carefully.

complex system, and the consequences of changes in education can be both unexpected and serious.

To take another example, on a lighter note, Alex Ferguson has claimed that Margaret Thatcher was the reason for the decline in the number of British footballers in the Premier League. He said, 'Following an industrial dispute with the government, many teachers stopped organising extracurricular sports activities. It had disastrous consequences.' The discipline instilled by teachers was lost, and the influence of family members increased.

Ferguson said, 'My experience was that young boys paid careful attention to their school teachers, and many of them became acquainted with the need to train and acquired substantial skills, discipline, and youthful experience playing in front of critical and demanding eyes. Much of that evaporated, and school teachers were replaced by fathers, uncles, and grannies.' Ferguson recognised that they were well meaning, but competitive school football was lost, leading to a decline in the quality of players coming through the system.

While there are undoubtedly other reasons for the decline in the number of British players in the Premier League, Ferguson's claims have a ring of truth. The anecdote illustrates not only how subtle changes can affect the educational system, but also how changes in the system can profoundly affect the wider community. Education matters, and policy-makers must be careful to 'do good carefully'.

### Strategy to drive positive change

So how do you drive positive change in complex systems? General George C. Marshall was one of the most successful managers and bureaucrats in history. He oversaw the growth of the US Army from 190,000 personnel to over 8 million – entailing profound organisational, cultural, and logistical challenges – and picked the men who would lead it to ultimate victory. His keys to success were simple: pick the best people you can, give them the authority to make decisions, hold them accountable, and support them with all of the resources at your disposal.

Marshall was particularly impressed by a letter sent by the Duke of Wellington to the government in London, which he forwarded to his staff for their guidance:

If I attempted to answer the mass of futile correspondence that surrounds me, I should be debarred from all serious business of campaigning.

I must remind your Lordship – for the last time – that so long as I retain an independent position, I shall see that no officer under my Command is debarred by attending to the futile drivelling of mere quill driving in your Lordship's Office – from attending to his first duty – which is, and always has been, so to train the private men under his command that they may, without question, beat any force opposed to them in the field.

These sentiments, expressed by Wellington and admired by Marshall, would probably be strongly endorsed by school principals around Ireland

who find themselves drowning in a sea of paperwork, form filling, and box ticking. The administrative burden on principals and BoMs has soared in the last 20 years, driven by new legislation, more emphasis on parental and pupil rights, and greater focus on transparency, openness, accountability, and measurement in the public service.

### Legislation since 2011

Since the 1998 Education Act, at least 19 pieces of significant legislation have impacted on schools. The next year or two will see the enactment of General Data Protection Regulation (EU) May 2018, Admissions Bill, and the Parent and Student Charter. Since 2011 schools and principals have also had to cope with:

- » 2011 Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011–2020
- » 2012 Report on Standardised Testing
- » 2012 School Self-Evaluation
- » 2013 Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools
- » 2013 Procurement
- » 2013 School Uniform Survey and consequential changes in uniform policy
- » 2014/15 SEAI Reporting on energy performance
- » 2015 Primary Online Database
- » 2015 Droichead
- » 2016 Primary Language Curriculum
- » 2017 Implementation of New Model for Allocating Resource Teaching to Pupils.

Principals... are spending so much time proving they are doing the right things, that they are losing the focus on doing the right things.

### Measuring or Managing?

From a government perspective, to manage you need to be able to measure. What happens, though, when the measurement is so onerous that what is measured starts to suffer? There is a widespread feeling amongst principals that they are spending so much time proving they are doing the right things, that they are losing the focus on doing the right things.

The world outside schools has changed and is changing greatly. Most of the focus and discussion has been about immigration and religion, but the growth in family diversity has posed major challenges for schools. Principals are now having to become experts in the intricacies of family law. In fact, over the last four years the fastest-growing type of query to CPSMA has been family law queries.

The growing complexity which schools have to deal with has driven a 72 per cent increase in the number of calls to CPSMA over the last four years. If CPSMA is a finger on the pulse of primary education, then it is clear that the pulse is racing faster than ever.

The policy environment has also changed. In the past, the Department of Education and Skills was the main policy agency, but in recent years a host of new actors have joined the policy community. These range from the NCCA to numerous NGOs who all believe that the solution to the problem they were set up to solve lies in education, and especially in changes to

Policy entrepreneurs tend to forget that the average 12-year-old spends less than 12 per cent of time in school.

If an idea is robust enough to survive rigorous interrogation, it could then proceed to official examination by the Department or other state agencies.

primary education. One small indication of this growth in outside interest in schools is that there are now approximately ten school flag schemes and two plaques (schools have run out of flag poles).

Primary schools are seen by some politicians and policy-makers as the one-stop-shop solution to all of society's challenges, from obesity to mental illness, to digital inclusion. These policy entrepreneurs tend to forget that the average 12-year-old spends less than 12 per cent of their time in school. The clamour for changes in the curriculum and in schools operations too often forgets that. Policy focus needs to shift to initiatives in the other 88 per cent of children's time and to take proper account of parental duties and responsibilities.

So what does all of this have to do with policy-making? Firstly, we all need to recognise and appreciate that the system is broadly working. What is needed is evolution, not revolution.

Secondly, we need to recognise that the great strength of the system is the quality of the people who teach, lead, and manage our schools. They have successfully absorbed an incredible amount of change over a very short period, and in doing so they have ensured that the system has adapted to change. However, if we load too much on them, we risk breaking the system.

Thirdly, the absorptive capacity of any system (and the people in that system) is limited. Given the rate of social and legislative change, it may well be wise to limit the number of initiatives hitting schools at any one time. In short, a policy of masterly inactivity for a period, to give principals the time to breathe, would greatly benefit the schools.

### The concept of the Devil's Advocate

This is where the concept of devil's advocate could be valuable. The *Advocatus Diaboli* was formerly an official position in the Catholic Church: one who 'argued against the canonisation of a candidate in order to uncover any character flaws or misrepresentation of the evidence favouring canonisation'.

What I am suggesting is that we need a person or small unit to test education policy initiatives to destruction, and act as a counterweight to the growing number of policy initiatives from NGO think tanks, the NCCA, and reflex-driven politicians. We need the policy equivalent of a devil's advocate. If an idea is robust enough to survive rigorous interrogation, it could then proceed to official examination by the Department or other state agencies.

This would kill bad ideas before they hit they system, not prevent innovation. Innovation in most industries is driven not by lone geniuses in the attic or expert academics pushing the latest theories, but by practitioners in the field. We need to find better mechanisms to identify and share best practice from the real experts in education: teachers in the classroom. Let teachers drive the change.

'The pressure on leaders to do 984 different things is unbearable, so the effective ones learn how to say no and stick with it.' - Peter Drucker

Furthermore, we need to focus on easing the administrative burden on principals, allowing them to focus on teaching, learning, and leading schools, not 'driving quills'.

Some initiatives, such as child protection measures, have to be progressed, but we need an agreed critical path that ensures the schools know what change is coming and when, rather than the current model of continuous change with no time for rest or reflection. The management guru Michael Porter said that the essence of strategy is choosing what not to do.

The educational system needs a strong voice, a devil's advocate, to say no to non-essential or non-productive change so that teachers, principals, and boards of management can focus on building on existing strengths, and on the things that matter, to deliver a better education for our children.

Peter Drucker once observed, 'The pressure on leaders to do 984 different things is unbearable, so the effective ones learn how to say no and stick with it.' Education needs to learn to say no, not in order to prevent change but to make sure we make the right changes and build on the very real strengths of primary education.

Minister for Education and Skills Richard Bruton with the winners of the Art Competition organised by the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association with the theme for 2017 'Celebrating our Local School'.



The Junior Category winner was Isabelle Maher, Senior Infants, St. Brigid's NS, Co. Westmeath; Special Education Category winner was Rebecca Hynes, Fifth Class, St. Patrick's NS, Co. Galway; Senior Category winner was Vicky Zimeng Lin, Sixth Class, Stanhope Street NS, Dublin 7. Stanhope Street NS also scooped the prize from Recreate.



# A Redeveloped Primary Curriculum

## Moving Forward

**Arlene Forster**

Deputy Chief Executive;

**Patrick Sullivan**

Director, Curriculum  
and Assessment;

**Iain Burns**

Former Education  
Officer;

**Dr Derek Grant**

Education Officer

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**T**his article provides a comprehensive overview of the wide-ranging work accomplished to date by the NCCA in devising a redeveloped primary curriculum. The work so far includes in-depth consultation with children, parents, teachers, researchers, and members of the public.

### Introduction

This year marks the eighteenth birthday of the primary school curriculum. Since its publication in 1999, the curriculum has underpinned teaching and learning in our schools. Informed by feedback from teachers and new research, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) subsequently developed supplementary curriculum and assessment materials which have supported teachers and principals in their work providing a quality primary education for children. These materials included guidelines on intercultural education (2005) and assessment (2007), as well as online tools such as the Curriculum Planning Tool ([www.nccaplanning.ie](http://www.nccaplanning.ie)) and the Report Card Creator ([www.reportcard.ncca.ie](http://www.reportcard.ncca.ie)).

In 2011, the NCCA issued an open invitation to interested individuals and organisations to have their say about priorities for a primary curriculum. Over a twelve-month period, 960 responses were received, analysis of which highlighted six key priorities and spotlighted ways the current curriculum could be improved. The results of that consultation, two curriculum reviews (NCCA, 2005, 2008a), and work with schools and other primary developments, have provided direction for NCCA's continued work in curriculum and assessment development.

### Curriculum developments

In the years since the primary school curriculum was published, there have been significant developments that affect the curriculum and how it is used in classrooms. For example, the implementation of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) and a programme of reform at Junior Cycle create a need for greater curriculum alignment and continuity as children move from preschool to primary school and on to post-primary school. The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011–2020 called for a revision of the contents of the English and Mathematics curricula using a learning outcomes approach and providing samples of students' learning that demonstrate achievement of those outcomes (DES, 2011). The new Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile (PLC/CTB) (2015) for English and Irish

has been developed by the NCCA for use in the junior primary years. The new PLC/CTB for the senior primary years and new Primary Mathematics Curriculum are currently under development.

### Changing classrooms

Primary classrooms have changed significantly over the years. They are now more dynamic and busier places in which teachers support and respond to a greater diversity of learners, helping each to grow and develop. The last ten to fifteen years have also brought unprecedented technological advances, changing the way we communicate; the way we access, process, and manage information; and the way we ultimately think about and view the world around us.

This period has also seen significant change in social structures and situations. These changed and changing circumstances impact both positively and negatively on children's experiences of childhood and families' experiences of life. But the last two decades have seen not only significant change in who inhabits classrooms and the types of experiences they bring with them, but also increasing demands being made of the curriculum by a changed and changing society and its expectations of the education system. All of this creates an opportunity for revisiting and checking in with the primary curriculum to see if it is still fit for purpose. This posits the question: How can it be improved to support children's learning into the next decade?

### Consultation proposals

To support an initial conversation about the future of the primary curriculum, two sets of proposals were published by the NCCA, in December 2016, about (1) how the primary school curriculum should be structured, and (2) how time might be used across the curriculum. The proposals became a lever for all interested stakeholders to consider how a future curriculum can best support children's learning and development in a way that continues to engage and challenge them, and supports greater school autonomy in curriculum development. The proposals recognised acceleration in the volume of research on children's learning and development in their early childhood and primary school years.

While the proposals didn't indicate how new curriculum areas and subjects might be incorporated into a redeveloped curriculum, they did provide a space to consider the calls for more time to be allocated to existing curriculum areas such as Language and Mathematics; Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE); and Physical Education (PE), and to consider also demands for the inclusion of new curriculum areas such as Coding, Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, Modern Languages, and Well-being. These requests make reviewing and redeveloping the primary curriculum an important priority for the education system. A detailed description of the proposals is published in 'Proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum: For consultation (2016)', available at [www.ncca.ie/timeandstructure](http://www.ncca.ie/timeandstructure).

To support an initial conversation about the future of the primary curriculum, two sets of proposals were published by the NCCA in December 2016.

The first set of proposals suggested moving away from subjects in early primary education, replacing them with themes or with curriculum areas.

A range of consultation formats using English and Irish were used to support dialogue and engagement with children, parents, teachers, researchers, and members of the public.

The first set of proposals considered the structure of a redeveloped primary curriculum. These proposals suggested the possibility of changing from the current structure of four two-year bands (infants, junior, middle, senior) to a new incremental structure of either two or three stages encompassing the two years of the *Early Childhood Care and Education Programme* (see Appendix 1). The proposals also suggested moving away from subjects in early primary education, replacing them with themes such as those in Aistear or with curriculum areas. In particular, respondents to the consultation were asked to consider:

- » Moving from the current curriculum structure of four two-year bands to an incremental model with either two or three stages
- » The benefits and challenges of the proposed models
- » Themes, curriculum areas, and subjects as curriculum organisers in the primary school.

The second set of proposals considered a different way to think about and use time in the school day. The proposals were designed to give schools more flexibility in deciding how best to use time to support children in their learning. Using time more flexibly may also give schools more support in using teaching methodologies such as child-led play in the early years of primary school, and projects in later years (see Appendix 2). In particular, consultation respondents were asked to consider:

- » Giving schools more flexibility in how they allocate time across the curriculum (see Appendix 2)
- » The possibility of having weekly time allocations for only language and mathematics
- » The possibility of having monthly or termly time allocations for all other areas of the curriculum
- » How much of the school week should be available for schools to use as they choose, and for what purposes schools might use this time.

### Consultation formats

The consultation on the proposals took place from January to June 2017. To ensure it was as far-reaching as possible, materials were developed to support all interested parties. The main section of the NCCA website was updated with a specific area on the consultation. The education correspondents of news media were informed, and articles were subsequently published in the national press. Partner networks also supported the dissemination of the proposals. A Twitter campaign was undertaken to generate interest and participation.

A range of consultation formats using English and Irish were used to support dialogue and engagement with children, parents, teachers, researchers, and members of the public regarding the proposals. What emerged was rich discourse, focusing not only on the proposals but on many other aspects of educational endeavour in primary education. The consultation formats, described in more detail below, consisted of:

- » Bilateral meetings with 33 stakeholders
- » Consultative conference in Dublin Castle for 190 delegates
- » Consultative meetings with children in three schools

- » 2,084 completed online questionnaires
- » Seven focus groups involving 48 teachers and principals
- » 109 written submissions.

### **Bilateral meetings**

Bilateral meetings with a wide range of interest groups took place throughout the six-month consultation period. Many organisations participated, either by invitation or through an expression-of-interest request, sharing their views about aspects of the proposals in which they had particular interest. Before the meetings, each organisation was given information detailing the consultation proposals. The meetings supported discussion, reflection, and commentary on both sets of proposals contained in the consultation document.

### **Consultative conference**

A consultative conference took place on 28 March in Dublin Castle and was attended by delegates including teachers, principals, early childhood practitioners and managers, parents, researchers, policy-makers, and members of the wider public. John Hammond, chief executive of the NCCA, opened the conference, and Arlene Forster, deputy CEO, gave an overview of the consultation to date. Fergus Finlay, CEO of Barnardos Ireland, gave a keynote which was followed by children, teachers, and principals sharing experiences of the primary curriculum. These contributions provided food for thought, and delegates then participated in two discussion group sessions as they explored the proposals on structure and time in detail. A panel discussion in the afternoon provided an opportunity to continue the conversation on certain themes arising from earlier sessions. The Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton TD, addressed delegates in the afternoon, before Brigid McManus, chairperson of the NCCA, closed the event.

### **Consultative meetings with children**

Another significant aspect of the consultation involved conversations with primary school children. This work didn't focus explicitly on the consultation proposals, but instead invited children to share their thoughts on curriculum content and pedagogy – why they thought school was important, what they liked doing at school, how they liked to learn, and what they would like to do more of. To support children in sharing their views, NCCA worked with schools on an ongoing basis to develop trust and build a rapport with the children. Previous work in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, which involved consulting with children, informed the process. The work included children in four schools across the contexts of English-/Irish-medium, DEIS/non-DEIS, and urban/rural. The children came from junior, middle, and senior classes.

### **Online questionnaires**

An online questionnaire was developed with the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). It was available in Irish and English throughout the consultation period. The questionnaire was designed primarily for educators, to gather their professional opinions on curriculum change, and focused on the following three areas:

A significant aspect of the consultation involved conversations with primary school children.

- » Structure and time in the 1999 curriculum
- » Proposed changes to the structure of the primary curriculum
- » Proposed changes to time allocation in the primary curriculum.

There were also questions about respondents' profiles. Respondents tended to be early-career to mid-career teachers, and there was a good representation of respondents across the years of primary education.

Teacher focus group meetings were another important feature of the consultation.

### Teacher focus groups

Teacher focus group meetings were another important feature of the consultation in supporting teachers to voice their views and responses to the proposals. The Association of Teachers' Education Centres in Ireland (ATECI) helped to organise and inform teachers about the meetings. Seven focus groups took place between 15 February and 15 March involving teachers and principals, in Cork, Drumcondra, Ionad Mhúinteoirí Chonamara, Limerick, Navan, Sligo, and Waterford.

Seven other groups were cancelled because of low numbers expressing interest. This may have been due to the busyness of schools at this time of year, or to the level of consultation more generally in the education system in recent times. In the case of these seven groups, teachers and principals who indicated their intention to attend were encouraged to use the online questionnaire to share their views on the proposals. The INTO and CPSMA also organised focus group meetings and shared feedback from teachers and principals.

### Written submissions

A facility for representative bodies, interest groups, and individuals to provide written submissions on the proposals was available on the NCCA consultation webpage. A template was provided to help respondents structure a written response. Some used an alternative structure. Written submissions were received by post and through a dedicated email address.

A number of key themes emerged. These will be presented in a report due for publication by the NCCA in late 2017 or early 2018.

### In conclusion

The significant engagement across the consultation formats generated rich data, and a number of key themes emerged. These will be presented in a report due for publication by the NCCA in late 2017 or early 2018. The themes, which focus on structural and organisational aspects of the curriculum, will feed into the next phase of work in redeveloping the primary curriculum. This follow-on phase will focus on further significant areas for consideration, including:

- » the purpose of a curriculum for this phase in a child's educational journey, taking account of policy developments in early childhood and at junior cycle
- » theories of learning informing the curriculum and resultant principles underpinning it
- » pedagogical approaches shaping teaching and learning.

Research, consultation, and work with early childhood settings and schools will continue to inform the NCCA's work on redeveloping the primary curriculum. See [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie) for updates on the work and how you can stay involved.

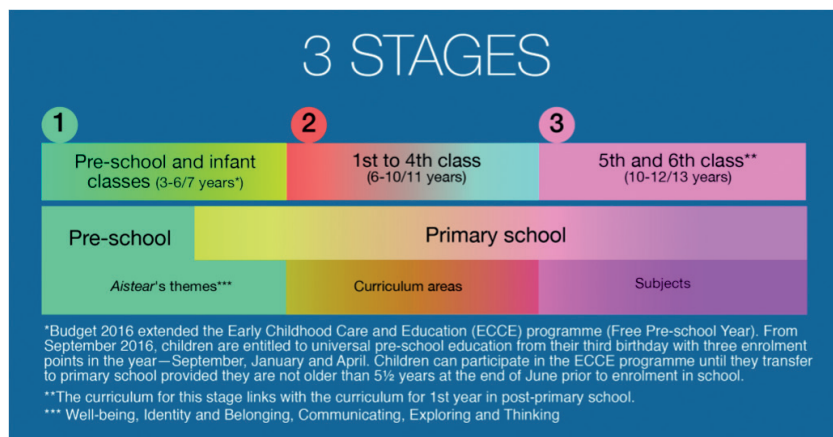
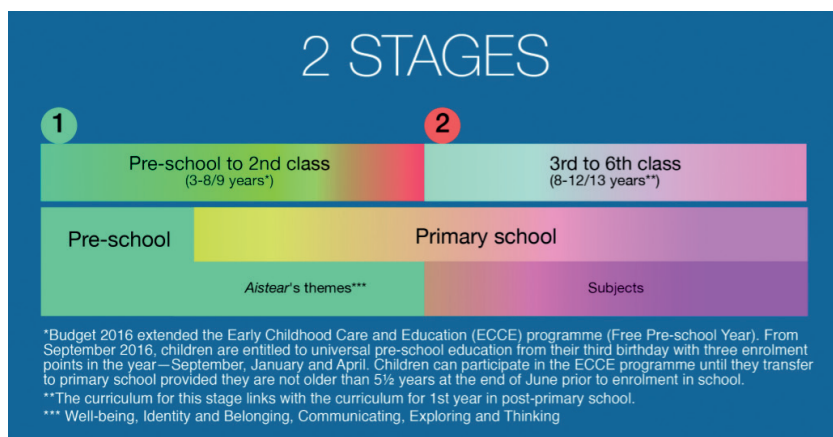


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## Appendix 1: First set of proposals on curriculum structure

The proposals recommended moving from four two-year stages to an incremental model which uses a differentiated curriculum structure. Two options were presented for consideration: a two-stage model and a three-stage model.



## Appendix 2: Second set of proposals on time allocation

The consultation proposed using two categories to present time during the school day: minimum state curriculum time and flexible time.

### Minimum state curriculum time

(60% of school time)

Including language, mathematics, social, personal and health education, social, environmental and scientific education, arts education, and physical education

The proposals referred to a:

- » Minimum allocation for language and maths on a weekly basis
- » Minimum allocation for other themes/areas/subjects on a monthly basis.

### Flexible time

(40% of school time)

Including discretionary curriculum time, patron's programme, recreation, breaks, assemblies, and roll call

Sean Cottrell, retiring CEO of Primary Principals' Network, shares a word with Minister for Education and Skills Richard Bruton.



# STEAM-in-a-box

## Co-Teaching Inspires Children's Creative and Critical Thinking



**Alice D'Arcy**



**Colette Murphy**



**John O'Halloran**

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**S**TEAM Education<sup>1</sup> aims to inspire the next generation of scientists and artists using fun, hands-on, 'in-a-box' programmes. Co-teaching partnerships of science and arts professionals and academic experts, with teachers, are facilitated to deliver these programmes and enhance STEAM education in primary schools.

The vision of STEAM Education Ltd is to inspire our young children to become the next generation of Scientists, Technologists, Engineers, Artists, and Mathematicians. We develop innovative, fun, engaging educational resources in these areas specifically for upper-level students in primary schools. We facilitate co-teaching partnerships of science and arts professionals and academic experts with teachers to deliver these programmes, multiplying the benefits to all actors involved: the children, teachers, and outreach experts. To date we have delivered programmes to over 5,000 children in primary schools, with the support of over 20 companies, a number of higher education institutes<sup>2</sup>, a science foundation<sup>3</sup>, city and county councils, and private donors.

STEAM-in-a-Box (SIAB) was first introduced in a small school in west Cork in 2006. It was the brainchild of a parent-scientist, Seamus Devlin, who wanted to try teaching rocket science to children in fifth or sixth class aged 10–12 years. Each week, the scientist arrived with a box of science materials (including sheep's eyes!), many of them tailor-made for children to take home or to use in the classroom.

*'We need desperately to nurture the next generation of innovators, and this means starting at the earliest practicable age.'* — Seamus Devlin, co-founder and director, STEAM Education Ltd

From this small beginning in one primary school class, STEAM Education has gone on to develop a number of programmes and a framework for their delivery in schools around the country, supported by industry and other sponsors.

In Ireland, STEM has been the subject of increasing focus in recent years. We are directly addressing some of the proposed actions published in the STEM Review Group's recent report on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Education in Ireland (2016)<sup>4</sup>. For example, we:

- » ‘Avail of partnerships with STEM enterprises (e.g. within the national Smart Futures initiative) to promote STEM careers at all levels in education.
- » Develop extensive curricular materials for teachers that operationalise learning outcomes in STEM subjects at primary and post-primary levels.
- » Promote and facilitate the “adoption” of a school, or a cluster of schools, by a local STEM industry/enterprise.’ (p. 45)

**Quote from an industry sponsor and mathematics co-teacher:**

*‘Personally what I find with the co-teaching was that it added a lot of value back to the community. ... I got a lot of satisfaction out of it. ... It is something I would recommend anybody to get involved in. From a company perspective there’s been a lot of advantages for the employees – there are other CSR initiatives but perhaps they are not as close to home as this one.’ —Dana Kelleher, data scientist at Trend Micro*

STEAM-in-a-box was the brainchild of a parent scientist, Seamus Devlin, who wanted to try teaching rocket science to children aged 10-12 years.

In addition, since our work entails co-teaching between primary school teachers and STEAM experts, we are also enhancing primary teacher Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in these areas, in relation to another issue identified in the STEM Review Group’s 2016 report:

An expansion of Science-based CPD and better use of CPD days would lead to improved science teaching in primary schools. Better use, and stakeholders, such as enterprise partners, will support CPD. (p. 33)

Research on co-teaching science in primary schools shows that extraordinary results can be obtained through external specialists working closely with the normal classroom teacher (Murphy, 2016)<sup>5</sup>. Murphy’s work also shows that co-teaching via shared expertise provides a pedagogy which can be used to promote both teacher and student development of 21st-century learning skills, which include skills in critical thinking and problem-solving, collaboration across networks, curiosity and imagination, empathy, persistence, grit, and global stewardship. In addressing these needs, the SIAB programme hopes to provide a sustainable solution to these problems.

**Quote from a principal involved in the pilot Science-in-a-Box programme:**

*‘The STEAM programme has surpassed our expectations in terms of: the level of scientific content and insights which the pupils have gleaned; the collaborative nature of the programme, which permeates throughout all aspects and interactions (tutor/teacher, tutor/class, and organisation/school); and the professional detail and attention afforded to the organisation, timetabling, resources, school/organisation feedback meetings, and other practical elements of the programme. STEAM has been a most impressive and beneficial learning experience at many levels for both pupils and staff. It will serve the sixth-class pupils well as they transition to secondary school in September, and I have no doubt that it will add to their interest in science. While at an early stage in its development, its impressive fledgling efforts bode well for the future of science in primary schools.’ —Diarmuid Hennessy, principal, Scoil Mhuire na nGrást, Belgooly, Co. Cork*

We also want to increase the focus on how the arts and creative thinking are addressed in addition to STEM.

We also want to increase the focus on how the arts and creative thinking are addressed in addition to STEM, and to supplement progress in STEAM development in primary schools. We do this by incorporating elements of art and design in each of our STEAM programmes, as well as developing Arts-in-a-Box programmes which incorporate elements of STEM.

In recent years, the very notion of science has been broadened to incorporate the other STEM/STEAM subjects of technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics. Collaboration in science education research and practice has also been broadened to include industry, along with academics and government agencies.

The importance of Arts to STEM is not a new idea. More than five centuries ago, the work of Leonardo da Vinci (1492–1519) combined art and science. More recently, C. P. Snow's lecture *The Two Cultures* (1959) spoke passionately against the fracture of intellectual life between sciences and the arts and humanities.

STEAM collaborations are even more relevant now in light of the need to find solutions to our most complex problems, such as climate change and achieving UN sustainability development goals. The arts and humanities disciplines can be energised by scientific understanding and by exploration and discovery; science can be improved through engagement with ethical and aesthetic insights, as well as uncertainties over the impact of science on society, and vice versa.

**Quote from a teacher involved in our Engineering-in-a-Box programme on the importance of arts in the approach:**

*“When I asked a few of the girls if they were interested in science and engineering, they said they hadn’t been but this year (through Engineering-in-a-Box) it had really come to life for them. They love art and creativity, doodling and drawing, and that aspect of STEAM has really appealed to them.” –Miriam Long, sixth class, Crosshaven NS, Co Cork. Sponsored by DePuy Synthes for Engineering-in-a-Box.*

The importance of Arts to STEM is not a new idea. More than five centuries ago, the work of Leonardo da Vinci (1492–1519) combined art and science.

We have developed a unique partnership that unites actors from STEAM research, science education research, formal and informal science education, artists, designers, and industry with one vision – to excite, inspire, and educate primary school children in STEAM through a direct connection with frontier research and development. The programmes, called STEAM-in-a-Box (SIAB), bring the relevant real-life experts into primary classrooms week after week during the academic year, with specially designed tools and content for each lesson, to co-teach STEAM with the primary teacher using 21st-century pedagogical approaches.

This connects industry and third-level institutions with schools to disseminate knowledge and leverage the capacity of our experts to enhance the education of our children and the capacity of our primary teachers. It also creates the pipeline for highly skilled graduates who will be required for future jobs.

Our framework seeks to make a step change in STEAM education in Ireland through new investment and the leveraging of existing resources.



SIAB also sets out an ambitious programme of research through practice that will have high impact and will be transformative in the science curriculum in Ireland.

We have shown already that some of the outcomes of the national STEM Review Group support our current approach and model. We hope this will help us reach as many schools in Ireland as quickly as possible. We suggest that policy-makers consider deeply and support projects such as STEAM-in-a-Box, which have been developed and refined in collaboration with industry, academic experts, and schools.

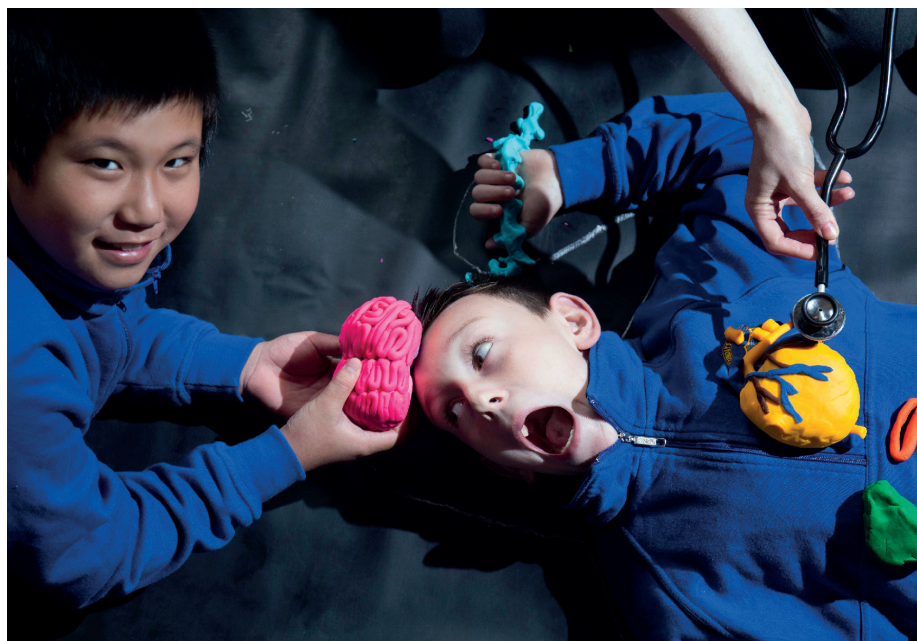
The ultimate goal of SIAB is to harness and share expertise via this public-private-industry collaboration to improve the STEAM learning of all students at every primary school, and thereby to increase diversity in STEAM fields and the STEAM literacy of the Irish nation. SIAB also sets out an ambitious programme of research through practice that will have high impact and will be transformative in the science curriculum in Ireland, with further opportunities for a global impact.

## FOOTNOTES

1. STEAM Education Ltd is a not-for-profit company operating out of UCC Gateway Incubation Centre. [www.steam-ed.ie/](http://www.steam-ed.ie/).
2. Prof. John O'Halloran, UCC, and director of STEAM Education, on 'Why STEAM Matters': [www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7gE3juU0qM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7gE3juU0qM).
3. [www.thenaughtonfoundation.com/resources/science-in-a-box](http://www.thenaughtonfoundation.com/resources/science-in-a-box).
4. [www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/STEM-Education-in-the-Irish-School-System.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/STEM-Education-in-the-Irish-School-System.pdf).
5. Murphy, C. (2016). *Coteaching in Teacher Education: Innovative Pedagogy for Excellence*. St. Albans: Critical Publishing

STEAM programmes provide fun hands-on learning experiences that promote creative and critical thinking in science, technology, engineering, arts and maths. This workshop was a colourful interactive exploration of human anatomy - and careers in medical science.

## STEAM introductory workshop at Sundays Well Boys' N.S, Cork



# Digital Strategy for Schools

2017 was the year when use of technology resources went mainstream



**Simon Lewis**

Principal at Carlow Educate Together School  
and Editor of Anseo.net

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**T**echnology is back on the agenda in the primary sector with the new digital framework and the delivery of grants to schools. Simon Lewis examines the technology landscape in primary education and the difficulties of school leaders as they forge their way haphazardly through increasingly complicated terrain.

With the new framework for ICT published in late 2015, and ICT grants delivered to schools in the last school year, technology is back on the agenda in education around the country. However, the landscape has changed considerably since the last tranche of funding came. How do school leaders navigate this area that has become even more complicated?

The Digital Strategy for Schools 2015–2020 was the latest attempt by the government to come up with a strategy for the use of technology in education. It was possibly of more interest to school leaders because, for the first time in many years, it was accompanied by money.

The strategy itself is a rather long document but very short on concrete plans. For the last number of years, primary school leaders have been calling for decent broadband, a good Wi-Fi infrastructure, funding for technology, and centralised technical support. However, apart from the money, primary schools were to be disappointed, with no clear indications that anything else would be forthcoming.

Schools were not going to refuse a cheque, however, no matter how small. Receiving a few thousand Euros per annum for a few years was welcomed, and it put technology onto the agenda of many schools for the first time in many years. 2017 was the year that school leaders were able to invest in new technology for the first time in nearly a decade.

The question most school leaders had was how to spend their money. Since the last technology grant, the whole technological landscape has changed and become much more complicated. For example, there are now at least three main providers of technology: Windows, Apple, and Google, each with its own strengths and weaknesses in what it provides.

The Internet has revolutionised how schools work. Until recently, if the connection went down, it might have been days before anyone noticed. These days, one almost has to close the school, we have become so dependent on the Internet for running everything:

2017 was the year that school leaders were able to invest in new technology for the first time in nearly a decade.

Many schools have all their policies and plans in online folders like Google Docs.

from student management systems with all the pupils' data, to accessing all the interactive lessons on the 'cloud'.

Tablets have been knocking at the classroom door since 2010 without much success, mainly because schools had no money to buy them. There are dozens of brands of tablets out there, including iPads, Androids and Surfaces, all of which have their strengths and weaknesses.

After the craze of interactive whiteboards in Ireland from 2008 to 2012, when over 90 per cent of schools scraped together money from cake sales and Who Wants to be a Thousandaire charity nights to have boards in their classrooms, in 2017 the interactive screen, if we are to believe the hype, has become the new must-have accessory of the primary classroom.

All this has given school leaders many questions to ask themselves, especially with the added pressures of all the companies trying to sell these new devices. 2017 was a year of many decisions, and schools unfortunately had to rely on the same haphazard approach as they have been relying on with every digital strategy published by the Department of Education.

Thankfully, many schools have been able to navigate the choppy waters of 2017, and there have been excellent examples of how technology has been integrated into the daily lives of primary school pupils around the country. Primary schools have grasped the power that technology allows them, and children have been able to create and share some valuable lessons that wouldn't be possible without it.

For primary school leaders, 2017 has seen a number of excellent technological advances, with more and more schools signing up to student management information systems such as Aladdin and Databiz. Many schools have signed up to either G Suite for Education (formerly Google Apps) or Microsoft Office 365, leaving behind the need for software on computers and switching over to completely cloud-based systems. It is now common for schools to communicate exclusively by email or online message boards.

Many schools have all their policies and plans in online folders like Google Docs, which can be edited by different users at the same time. Behaviour policies are integrating technological resources such as ClassDojo, while maths plans now contain links with services such as Mathletics and Khan Academy. Parental involvement has also become more technologically advanced, with schools using electronic forms to communicate with parents. More schools are surveying parents in areas such as school improvement plans. While many of these services have been available for years, 2017 could be said to be the year they went mainstream.

Principals have taken the leap in many cases and have invested in hardware in 2017, with a big interest in mobile devices such as tablets and laptops. Many schools have purchased class sets of iPads or Chromebooks and are using them to do many of the tasks mentioned above.

Activities in classrooms are being recorded by teachers in Ireland on a daily basis, and the results are being posted up on YouTube, ClassStories,

Twitter, and Facebook. In 2017, video was by far the most transformative tool used in classrooms. As a new generation of social media-savvy teachers cements itself into the educational landscape, their comfort with filming their worlds is combined with the same natural impulse as their pupils. Short, snappy videos of performing a poem or taking part in something like the 'mannequin challenge' are two examples of how video is becoming a central methodology in classrooms.

In an era of celebrity, when people can become famous overnight for a niche area, the Irish primary teacher has not been left behind. There are over a dozen Irish primary teachers with huge followings on the Internet, specialising in areas such as infant teaching, visual arts, and resources for Special Educational Needs. These teachers have thousands of followers who hang on their every word as they share their wisdom from their own classrooms, perhaps even more so than the government's own trainers in the PDST. They are able to speak the language and display their materials in a way that official lines cannot, and this is both an opportunity and a challenge for the school leader and the educational landscape in general.

The government must now prioritise the rollout of fast broadband to all primary schools as quickly as possible.

The year has ended with much talk about coding in schools. While many schools have been programming away for the last decade, government policy seems to be shifting towards adding a coding module to the Maths curriculum. This is an area of grave concern to school leaders, as it threatens our holistic primary system, bowing to the short-term demands of large multinational industries. It has never been more important for schools to ensure they teach children the skills they need for the 21st century, and coding in its current form does not offer these skills. We need to teach children how to think critically and creatively, not to become coding monkeys.

2017 has been a very exciting year to be involved in technology in education, and there is a positive feeling that this might have been the year when we have graduated from its infancy to embedding it into our everyday practice. Having a little bit of money to replace older equipment has further aided this. However, we have been relying on the goodwill and good luck of the educators who are bringing these developments to the fore.

Ultimately, schools cannot continue to prosper without basic foundations. For technology to become completely embedded in all schools, investment is not only needed in hardware; the government must now prioritise the rollout of fast broadband to all primary schools as quickly as possible. A Wi-Fi infrastructure is becoming as important as having a heating or plumbing system in a school. Similarly, not having technical support for when computer equipment breaks down is akin to not having a caretaker or cleaning staff. These areas must be provided for urgently.

The Digital Strategy for Schools gives little in terms of promises in these areas, but it does recognise that they are areas of need. In the meantime, however, it looks like we will have to continue to navigate our way haphazardly through the technology landscape and keep up the cake sales to pay for it.

# Proposed New ERB and Ethics Curriculum

Who Is It For? Who Will Avail of It?



**Dr Anne Marie Kavanagh**

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**T**he proposed ERB and Ethics curriculum has been a hugely significant issue in 2017, not least because of the emotive and polarising nature of the debate surrounding the place of religion in primary schools. This article explores some of the complexities surrounding this debate, critically engages with developments in 2017, and asks questions relevant for 2018.

How nations facilitate the moral, ethical, and spiritual development of children is socially, politically, and culturally significant. It is especially so in an era of increasing ethnic and cultural diversity, as nations seek to reconcile unity and diversity (Parekh, 2006) and provide an education for children that is both inclusive and pluralistic (Irwin, 2015).

## Deficiencies in system's response to diversity

The Irish education system's deficiencies in responding to diversity, particularly increased religious diversity and secularism, have long been recognised (Coolahan, Hussey & Kilfeather, 2012; Irwin, 2015; Darmody & Smyth, 2017). Indeed, the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism report (2012) clearly highlights the system's inadequacies and cites the imperative for it 'to meet the needs and rights of citizens in a more pluralist society' (Coolahan et al., 2012, p. 53). One of the key shortcomings outlined in the report is the continued use of a confessional religious approach to children's moral and ethical development in approximately 90 per cent of primary schools, despite significant demographic change. Encouragingly, however, since the report's publication, the system has gradually begun to adapt – although it lacks the pace and radical approach which many individuals and interest groups argue is essential.

## Thrust towards pluralism

A range of recent developments appear to signify what Irwin (2015, p. 51) describes as 'a genuine thrust towards pluralism and progressive change in Irish schools'. 2017 has been a particularly significant year in this regard. Among the changes which have taken place this year have been the expansion of the multi-denominational Community National School (CNS) model of patronage and further development of its ethical curriculum; the proposed removal of the 'baptism barrier' by current Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton TD, so that Catholic primary schools will no longer be able to discriminate on the basis of religion in their admission policies; and the continued development of a new State curriculum in ERB (Education about Religion and Beliefs) and Ethics, which is the focus of this article.



Both the NCCA and ERSI reports indicate that not all believe that the [ERB and Ethics] curriculum is necessary or indeed appropriate for all children.

### **New State curriculum**

The proposed new curriculum in Education about Religion and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics was recommended by the Forum report with responsibility for its development assigned to the NCCA. This is a challenging and problematic endeavour given the complexities of the current system, the emotive and polarising nature of the debate on religious pluralism and the place of religion in schools, and the range of epistemological and ethical issues which such a curriculum would likely engender. Following publication of the draft curriculum in November 2015, public consultation took place which culminated in the largest volume of submissions ever received by the NCCA in March 2016, highlighting the high level of interest in the area but also ensuring that a diversity of views could inform the new curriculum's development. A report by the NCCA based on this process and a report by the ESRI which analysed the views of teachers, parents, and the general public regarding the curriculum were published in early 2017.

### **Not everyone is on board**

The reports' findings indicate strong support for the broad aims of the proposed curriculum, the interactive teaching and learning methodologies proposed, and the skills and dispositions outlined, particularly those which enable children to flourish in a multicultural society (e.g. empathy, respect for diversity, acceptance, openness). Unsurprisingly, concerns were raised by those who engaged with the process around issues such as school ethos, curriculum overload, and time constraints. The opportunities and challenges presented by the curriculum as perceived by those who contributed to the public consultation lead to questions that are central to this article, as does the academic literature: Who is the curriculum for? Who will avail of it? The NCCA and ESRI reports indicate that not everyone believes the curriculum is necessary or indeed appropriate for all children, which leads to another salient question: Why is it important that all children have access to and avail of this curriculum?

### **A curriculum for all children**

From the outset, the advisory group to the Forum argued that the curriculum was for all children. Indeed, the group argued that children had a right to education in ERB and Ethics and that the State had the responsibility to provide it. The argument that all children should have access to Ethics and ERB is also supported by the literature, which, in short, argues that ERB and Ethics contribute to children gaining a deeper understanding of themselves, their peers and the wider world; facilitates moral development; provides opportunities to explore their own and others' value systems through respectful dialogue; encourages respect for the 'otherness of others'; challenges all forms of discrimination; and promotes development of the skills and dispositions necessary to live as proactive, empathetic citizens in a multicultural society, thereby contributing towards integration, peaceful co-existence, and social cohesion (OSCE & ODIHR, 2007; Arigatou Foundation, 2008; Fisher, 2008; NCCA, 2015). Engagement with such a curriculum therefore has the capacity to contribute to both the public and private good. Research also shows that children want to learn about other religions and to do so in a classroom context (Smyth & Darmody, 2010, cited in Darmody & Smyth, 2017). Indeed, consensus is growing internationally on the need for secular

Research shows that children want to learn about other religions and to do so in a classroom context.

ethical education. The UAE, for example, recognising the importance of this type of education, introduced its first ever curriculum in moral and citizenship education in September 2017.

### **Will all children be enabled to avail of ERB and Ethics?**

Despite the large body of evidence which attests to the benefits of secular ethical education, the question remains: Will all children be able to avail of this curriculum? This arguably depends to a large extent on the powerful interest groups involved in primary education, particularly the churches. The introduction of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics would mark a significant change to policy and to the status quo, that is, changes to a predominantly denominational system that has historically facilitated children's moral and ethical development through a confessional approach. Indeed, the ESRI points out the likelihood 'that some individuals or groups may actively oppose the introduction of the new curriculum' (p. 56). This would undermine the capacity of all children to avail of the curriculum given the significant number of schools under denominational patronage. However, it also depends on the NCCA and the Minister for Education and Skills and the extent to which they are willing to push the boundaries of the current system so that all children can avail of their right to education in ERB and Ethics.

### **ERB and Ethics should be discrete mandatory subjects**

While it is desirable that both Ethics and ERB would become discrete, mandatory subjects on the primary curriculum, it is likely that without radical reform, this is not a viable option, given the particulars of the current denominational system and resistance by powerful actors in key interest groups to the proposed curriculum. Instead, the NCCA has already capitulated to a certain degree and is proposing that 'the types of teaching and learning that received broad support in the consultation become a feature of primary education' as the structure of the primary curriculum is reviewed and redeveloped (2017, p. 52). If embedded in a revised primary curriculum, it should ensure that all children have access to and can avail of aspects of the curriculum, at least in theory. However, without skilful integration on the part of the NCCA, it is likely that the aims of moral education will be greatly undermined and may be entirely lost.

### **Conclusion**

If this proposed curriculum is to succeed, the NCCA will need to engage in a campaign to bring schools, teachers, parents, interest groups, and teacher educators along with them and draw on the available evidence to persuade those who are sceptical of the merits of this type of education in 2018. Moreover, precedent shows that significant Continuing Professional Development (CPD) which increases educators' knowledge, skills, and confidence in this area is essential. Rather than being seen as a threat to religious communities, this curriculum should be seen as offering a space for children to connect with and develop an understanding of themselves, their friends, peers, and others from different cultural and social groups who hold divergent values, beliefs, and perspectives, without having to compromise their identities, values, and sense of self.

If this proposed curriculum is to succeed, the NCCA will need to engage in a campaign to bring schools, teachers, parents, interest groups, and teacher educators along with them.

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Archbishop Eamon Martin, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, addressed the Irish Catholic Conference on Education on 26 October 2017. Speaking about Catholic Schools, he said:

"For decades the Catholic schools of Ireland have played an essential role in supporting parents and families in their role as first educators of their children. Despite a changed context, Catholic schools remain as vital centres for evangelisation and catechesis, closely linked to parishes and local communities. It is reasonable, then, for boards of management of Catholic schools, in establishing their admissions criteria, to be concerned about ensuring that pupils from the local parish, or group of parishes, are able to access their Catholic school."

# Children's Rights Online

## The Critical Role of Teachers and Education



**Edel Quinn**

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**F**or the first time, an age of digital consent will be in place in Ireland as new EU data protection laws come into force from May 2018. How will this be implemented at school level, and what implications will it have for teachers and schools using technology to teach? In this article, Edel Quinn discusses the central role of education in ensuring that children will benefit safely from the opportunities that technology and digital media provide.

In 2017, children and young people in Ireland were more active online than ever before. Access to digital media is a major learning resource for children of all ages but it can also be the source of a new frontier of child protection concerns. A balanced approach must be taken to ensure that children can participate in and benefit from the opportunities that new technology and digital media provide, but in a safe way.

The Children's Rights Alliance believes that central to this is education: education on the rights of children online (the right to education, to play, to participate, to express themselves, to access information for example), education on critical digital literacy, on how to participate safely, as well as avenues of support if they are bothered by something they have come across in the digital space. Education should be provided not only for children and young people but for parents and in particular for teachers. In fact, recent research reveals that almost 70 per cent of teachers do not feel adequately prepared to effectively deliver internet safety education (CyberSafe Ireland, 2017).

While the Department of Education and Skills has undertaken welcome initiatives to address issues such as cyberbullying, the development of an overarching strategy is essential given the wide range of areas of a child's life that can be affected by digital media. This should bring all relevant government departments to the table with clear roles and commitments on their remit for children online. Education for children in this area should start early, in primary school. The Special Rapporteur on Child Protection recently suggested it should begin in pre-school. Given the myriad of issues that are impacted by digital media, education about the rights of children online could be an integrated part of related subjects. Given the centrality of the role of digital media in the lives of children, it should also be compulsory. In order to inform strategy or curriculum development in this area, research will have to be undertaken to develop an evidence base for the direction taken and consultation with children and young people, as well as teachers, must play a key element.



Underpinning all this must be the Continuous Professional Development of all teachers to ensure that they are ready to deal with the issues that are likely to arise with regard to child safety online. However, it needs to go beyond the narrow spectrum of online safety and incorporate areas relating to mental health, sexual health, civic participation and data protection, for example. The latter will come into sharp focus in May 2018 when new EU data protection laws come into force setting in place, for the first time, an age of digital consent in Ireland. This means that a parent or guardian will have to give permission for a child under 13 to access online services (where their personal data will be used). How will this be implemented at school level and what implications will it have for teachers and schools using technology to teach?

Today's children are the first to grow up online, to live and learn in a digital space. This is a new and evolving policy issue which will impact children in ways we cannot predict. This is why the role of education, and teachers, is critical to successful outcomes for children.

The Ulster Museum was one of the many venues across Ireland that opened its doors to Maths Week 2017.

Maths Week Ireland is an all-island celebration of Maths which promotes awareness, appreciation and understanding of the subject through a huge variety of events and activities. It is a partnership of over 50 groups - universities, institutes of technology, colleges, museums, libraries, visitor centres, professional bodies. Any group that sees the importance of maths and of promoting maths is eligible to participate.





# Quality Assurance in Schools

## 'Looking at Our School 2016' and School Self-Evaluation



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### **L**ooking At Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Schools

by the Department of Education and Skills provides a coherent set of standards in the two core dimensions of the work of schools: teaching and learning, and leadership and management.

2016 marked an important year for quality assurance in the Irish school system. It saw the publication of a set of significant documents: a Guide to Inspection, School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016–2020, and *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Schools*. These were prepared by the Inspectorate as part of an overall process of reform in the education system, and were published in primary and post-primary versions on the Department of Education and Skills website ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)).

### How the quality framework has evolved

These publications do not mark the beginning of quality assurance in our schools, nor should they be viewed as the end of the road. Rather, they are a stage in the evolution of a quality assurance system that aims to help provide the best possible education for all our children and young people. We believe that articulating standards is fundamental to a quality assurance system. That's why we published the first *Looking at Our School* in 2003 and why a quality framework for teaching and learning was published in the school self-evaluation guidelines in 2012.

The content of the 2016 publications builds on previous guides and frameworks, and has benefitted from recent international research as well as feedback from schools, guidance from advisory groups, and extensive consultation with the education partners. We have learned from listening to schools and partners that a quality framework needs to be simple and clear. It needs to focus on the core work of schools, and it needs to provide meaningful guidance to school leaders and teachers as they develop and improve their practice. The intention in publishing *Looking at Our School 2016* is to better meet these needs.

The publication of the framework should help parents and others to understand the evaluative judgements in inspection reports and in schools' self-evaluation reports. It provides a common language which facilitates meaningful dialogue between teachers, educational professionals, parents, pupils/students, and school communities.

The framework will support the system in reaching its long-term goal: a situation where external inspection and school self-evaluation operate as complementary processes, giving schools increased autonomy while ensuring transparency and accountability.

### How the quality framework is structured

*Looking at Our School 2016* replaces earlier frameworks. It provides a unified, coherent set of standards under four domains in each of the two core dimensions of practice in schools: teaching and learning, and leadership and management.

The four domains of teaching and learning – learner outcomes, learner experiences, teachers' individual practice, and teachers' collective/collaborative practice – are particularly pertinent to schools as they engage in school self-evaluation (SSE).

The four domains of leadership and management – leading teaching and learning, managing the organisation, leading school development, and developing leadership capacity – will become increasingly important as schools review the role of their in-school leadership and management teams.

Each domain has a set of standards that encapsulate the qualities and actions relevant to that area of practice. And each set of standards is accompanied by statements of practice at effective and highly effective levels.

### How the quality framework can be used

The framework is designed for teachers and schools to use in implementing the most effective and engaging teaching and learning approaches and enhancing the quality of leadership in their schools. The descriptions of 'effective practice' and 'highly effective practice' should help schools identify their strengths and areas for development. This process should help schools to embed in their practice school self-evaluation, reflective practice, and responsiveness to the needs of their pupils and students.

The framework is also used to inform the work of inspectors as they monitor and report on quality in schools. Used in a range of inspection models, the framework helps ensure consistency across all external evaluations.

During the 2016/17 school year, inspectors and schools became increasingly familiar with the quality framework. The Inspectorate responded to many requests for input on *Looking at Our School* from a range of leadership and management groups, and from national support services and individual schools. These inputs provided an ideal opportunity to indicate how inspectors would use the domains and standards in the various inspection models. They also enabled inspectors to illustrate how the standards might be used in school self-evaluation, especially those in the dimension of teaching and learning, and in the domain of leading teaching and learning in the leadership and management dimension.

The framework is designed for teachers and schools to use in implementing the most effective and engaging teaching and learning approaches and enhancing the quality of leadership in their schools.

The quality framework recognises the importance of quality teaching on learner achievement, not only in academic success but also in developing aspects of well-being such as self-awareness, resilience, respect, and responsibility.

Some schools have been slow to engage with SSE.

## How the quality framework supports school self-evaluation

Crucially, the Inspectorate inputs facilitated discussion about how schools could use school self-evaluation and the relevant sections of the quality framework to introduce, develop, or advance new elements of work. The six-step SSE process, now familiar to many schools, provides a structure for schools to gather evidence about current practice in order to determine where change is needed.

In primary schools, for example, evaluating current learner outcomes in oral language will help to identify the elements of language teaching that are working well and are consistent with the requirements of the Primary Language Curriculum, and the elements that need to be developed. For post-primary schools, the teaching and learning domains and standards in the quality framework align well with the changes required in teaching, learning, and assessment practices in the Framework for Junior Cycle.

Likewise, the quality framework helps schools to focus on learner well-being as part of their SSE. The quality framework takes a holistic view of learning and the learner, emphasising the need to develop a broad range of skills, competences, and values. It sees learner well-being as intrinsic to this holistic view of learning, as both an outcome of learning and an enabler of it. Thus, the quality framework recognises the importance of quality teaching on learner achievement, not only in academic success but also in developing aspects of well-being such as self-awareness, resilience, respect, and responsibility.

## SSE: Where are we now?

So where are we now with SSE? Experience from other jurisdictions tells us that embedding SSE is a long-term process requiring ten years or more. While recognising the reality of that timeframe, we can also point to real progress.

SSE now has recognition and currency in our schools. Schools are taking ownership of the process to identify areas for improvement in their teaching and learning practices, and to plan, implement, and monitor the actions required to bring about improvement. And the SSE circulars and guidelines for 2016–2020 encourage schools to make the process their own.

We are aware that, for a variety of reasons, some schools have been slow to engage with SSE. The Inspectorate continues to provide advisory visits to schools, and the support services offer a range of professional development opportunities for school leaders and others who wish to strengthen the SSE process in their schools. Schools should now turn their attention to the requirements of the current circulars (0039/2016 and 0040/2016), bearing in mind that literacy and numeracy remain a consistent and continuing focus of SSE in all schools.

The publication of *Looking at Our School 2016* has provided clear and transparent benchmarks of effective practice in schools, which can be applied both by the schools themselves and by the Inspectorate. This shared quality framework promotes professional dialogue and enables

The Department's SSE website ([www.schoolself-evaluation.ie](http://www.schoolself-evaluation.ie)) provides a central location for information and resources, and a platform for sharing good practice.

schools to use external evaluation to inform their own improvement plans.

The Department's SSE website ([www.schoolself-evaluation.ie](http://www.schoolself-evaluation.ie)) provides a central location for information and resources, and a platform for sharing good practice. Sample templates seek to guide schools in areas where there have been difficulties in the first SSE cycle, such as the summary report and plan for parents and the school community. And schools have been generous in sharing their own SSE stories both in videos and in resources they have developed.

One of the most influential aspects of the SSE journey for many schools has been the extent to which pupil/student voices have become a guiding force in evaluating and developing teaching and learning practices. Interestingly, this was one of John MacBeath's key messages when he spoke at the Inspectorate national seminar on school self-evaluation in 2014, and it is central to learner well-being. Some of the school stories shared on the SSE website provide rich evidence of the powerful positive impact of learner voice on the development of really effective teaching and learning practices, and this is an area that we will continue to promote.

And so the journey continues, as schools gain confidence and reassurance from the positive impacts that are already evident: increased professional collaboration among teachers, greater understanding of the value of whole-school approaches to developing more effective practice, the positive and constructive involvement of learner voice, and a more structured inclusion of parents in their children's learning.

#### IPPN LEADERSHIP AWARD 2017

The recipient of the IPPN Leadership Award 2017 was Siobhan Keenan Fitzgerald, Principal of Eglish National School in Ballinasloe, Co Galway. This Award honours and recognises a school leader who demonstrates exceptional leadership qualities and influences others through their actions.



# Educational disadvantage and the DEIS programme



**Dr. Emer Smyth**

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**A** review of the DEIS programme was completed in 2017 (DES, 2017) and a new way was introduced to identify schools eligible for support.

The DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme is the successor to a series of schemes designed to target additional resources to schools serving disadvantaged populations. 2017 saw a review of the programme (DES, 2017) and the introduction of a new way of identifying schools for support. It is therefore timely to look at what we know about the impact of DEIS.

## Background

In 2005 the Department of Education and Skills (DES) published 'DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion' and introduced the programme from the academic year 2006/07. The plan brought together a number of schemes aimed at tackling educational disadvantage under a single framework, the DEIS School Support Programme (SSP). It was motivated by the fact that 'rates of educational underachievement and early school leaving remain much higher for pupils from disadvantaged communities than for other pupils' (DES, 2005, p. 8).

The case for targeted support was also based on the emergence of research indicating a 'multiplier effect': the effects of disadvantage on educational outcomes are worse if students attend a school with a concentration of other disadvantaged students (Educational Disadvantage Committee, 2003). A concentration of disadvantage in certain schools reflects two main factors: social segregation in residential patterns, with more marginalised groups concentrated in certain neighbourhoods; and the existence of active school choice, particularly at second-level, with parental choice patterns and between-school competition resulting in the concentration of more disadvantaged students in certain schools.

Initially, selecting schools for additional support through DEIS was mainly based on school principals' reports of the socio-economic profile of their student population (including unemployment, social housing, etc.). For second-level schools, objective information on rates of early school leaving and exam performance was also used. This approach proved controversial,



however, with much discussion of lack of transparency and instances of schools serving the same local area having different statuses.

### **New approach for selecting schools**

The DEIS review in 2017 led to the introduction of a new approach which uses data from the Population Census. This has the advantage of being based on objective information which can take account of changes in school intake characteristics and the establishment of new schools. The new identification process confirmed that most DEIS schools had levels of disadvantage which warranted their receipt of support, but also identified other schools with relatively high levels of disadvantage that had not been receiving such support. As a result, some new schools were included in the scheme and some were reclassified. The Department decided to maintain supports for schools already in the scheme, at least for the moment.

### **Evaluation**

Evaluation was built into the DEIS programme from the outset, with a number of evaluation studies conducted by the Educational Research Centre and thematic reviews carried out by the Inspectorate of the DES (DES, 2009, 2011a, 2011b). These evaluations have largely focused on the impact on student academic achievement, especially at primary level. There has been significant improvement over time (2007–2013) in the literacy and numeracy test scores of students in DEIS urban primary schools, with greater increases for literacy (Weir, 2011; Weir and Denner, 2013). National Assessment data from 2014 indicates an improvement in literacy and numeracy test scores for all primary schools, most likely because of the national literacy and numeracy strategy. Therefore, the gap in outcomes between urban DEIS and non-DEIS primary schools has remained relatively stable and performance levels remain particularly low among those in Urban Band 1 schools (Shiel et al., 2014).

Students attending rural DEIS schools were found to have significantly higher achievement test scores than their counterparts in urban DEIS schools (Shiel et al., 2014), a pattern that appears to reflect how cultural resources (such as reading behaviour and parental expectations) in rural households appear to compensate for low levels of income (Weir and McAvinue, 2013). Increases in test scores have been greater among lower-achieving students, most likely because of the targeted nature of literacy and numeracy initiatives. Differences have been greater for younger cohorts, suggesting the cumulative impact of exposure to interventions over the course of primary education. A further round of testing took place in urban DEIS primary schools in 2016 (Kavanagh et al., 2017). Results indicated a further improvement in reading and maths test scores between 2013 and 2016, but this improvement was much more modest than that found between 2010 and 2013. As before, test scores were lower in Urban Band 1 schools than in Urban Band 2 schools.

Among second-level schools, there was a slight but significant narrowing of the gap in average Junior Certificate grades as well as in English grades between DEIS and non-DEIS schools from 2003 to 2011 (Weir et al., 2014). There was no real change in Junior Cert Mathematics performance. Information has not been published to date on differences in Leaving Cert grades; this information would be very useful given the role of exam

grades in influencing access to post-school education, training, and employment.

Evaluations have also indicated an improvement in attitudes to school, reading, and mathematics among students in urban DEIS primary schools from 2007 to 2016, with a significant improvement in the level of student educational aspirations (Kavanagh et al., 2017). Attitudes to school are similar to those found across all primary schools, though fewer children in urban DEIS schools expected to go on to higher education than in other schools.

## Outcomes

Attendance rates have improved over time in Urban Band 1 primary schools. Trends in attendance levels in second-level DEIS schools are less clear-cut, though with some improvement in the most recent years (up to 2014/15, the most recent year for which data is available) (Millar, 2015). DEIS second-level schools have much lower rates of retention than non-DEIS schools; among those who entered second-level education in 2009, 97.3 per cent of non-DEIS students completed junior cycle compared with 94.3 per cent of DEIS students, while senior cycle completion was 92 per cent in non-DEIS schools and 82.7 per cent in DEIS schools (DES, 2016). It is positive to note that the gap in retention rates has narrowed significantly over time, from 22 per cent at upper secondary level for the 1995 school entrant cohort to 10.7 per cent for 2009.

In sum, research on the DEIS programme points to some improvements in attendance levels in Urban Band 1 schools, and in retention rates and overall Junior Cert grades at secondary level. Literacy and numeracy levels have improved in DEIS primary schools, although the gap in achievement between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has not narrowed over time. The DEIS programme has involved the provision of additional funding and multifaceted supports to schools serving disadvantaged populations, which means it is not possible to disentangle which elements of the programme work best (Smyth et al., 2015). It is likely that any changes in student outcomes reflect the comprehensive nature of supports, including the provision of additional resources, a focus on planning for teaching and learning, and schools offering socio-emotional as well as practical support (e.g. school meals) for students and their families.

The new approach to identifying schools provides a more objective and transparent way of targeting resources towards schools with a greater concentration of disadvantage. Research points to further lessons for the future development of policy. ESRI research points to the complexity of need in Urban Band 1 schools, with a greater representation of children from migrant and Traveller backgrounds and those with special educational needs. This suggests that the scale of additional DEIS funding may not be sufficient to bridge the gap in resources between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged settings (Smyth et al., 2015). Furthermore, there is much less evidence of an achievement gap in rural DEIS schools.

It is clear that policy approaches to countering educational inequality cannot necessarily rely on targeting individual schools alone. Research indicates that over half of disadvantaged groups attend non-DEIS schools;

Growing Up in Ireland data indicates that over two-thirds of children from semi-skilled or unskilled manual or non-employed backgrounds attend non-DEIS primary schools. Patterns are roughly comparable for second-level schools. Thus, a significant group of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are not currently receiving any additional support on the basis of that disadvantage, an issue which needs to be reconsidered in the future.

### Role of school policy and practice

Finally, international research points to the significant role of school policy and practice in shaping student outcomes, so reducing social inequality in educational outcomes will depend on the extent to which school processes support that goal. Existing research points to a number of ways to further enhance practice in DEIS schools. Firstly, DEIS schools are more likely to use rigid ability grouping (streaming) than non-DEIS schools, and those allocated to lower-stream classes have worse academic outcomes than their peers (Smyth, 2016). Moving away from streaming is therefore likely to improve student achievement.

Secondly, working-class boys are more likely to get caught up in a negative cycle of acting up and being reprimanded by teachers, a process that often culminates in early school leaving or underperformance. A more positive school climate, based on positive feedback rather than negative sanctions, is therefore likely to promote student engagement, as is fostering high expectations for all students. More generally, efforts to tackle educational disadvantage need to be underpinned by broader policies to promote equity, with much greater potential for adopting joined-up thinking in policy development to promote social inclusion.

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### **'Providing for the Special Needs of Students with Gifts and Talents'**



This book, just launched, is a collection of essays by international experts in gifted education covering topical issues such as motivating gifted students and supporting their positive psychological growth and development. The book is aimed at researchers who wish to increase their knowledge of this important area of special education and also to support parents, educators and counsellors to help gifted students to fulfil their potential.

The book is edited by Dr. Colm O'Reilly of CTY Ireland at Dublin City University and Professors Tracy Cross and Jennifer Cross from the Center for Gifted Education at the College of William and Mary.

Dublin City University (DCU) hosts the largest programme for gifted students in Europe, while the College of William and Mary is the main provider of curriculum resources for gifted children in America.

This book is essential reading for anyone with an interest in gifted education.

Pictured at the launch of the book in DCU on 24 November 2017 are (left to right): Ciaran Cannon TD Minister of State in Department of Foreign Affairs, Professor Tracy Cross Executive Director Center for Gifted Education, College of William and Mary; Dr Colm O'Reilly Director CTY Ireland, Dublin City University; Professor Brian MacCraith, President, Dublin City University; Dr Jennifer Cross, Director of Research, Center for Gifted Education, College of William and Mary.

# Citizenship and Human Rights Education

The State has a duty to deliver



**Brian Ruane**

Co-Directors of the Centre for Human Rights and Citizenship Education, DCU Institute of Education



**Fionnuala Waldron**

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**T**he authors argue that the state's obligation to put children's rights at the heart of education has yet to be realised. They see current proposals as opportunities but also as causes of concern. They are resolute that, in any new frameworks that arise, attention must be paid to ensuring that children's rights are respected, promoted and fulfilled.

## Introduction

The current global climate of growing inequality, racism, Islamophobia, and populism, allied with the mounting threat of climate change, requires a response at all levels of education. In a world that is progressively more polarised, where equality, human rights, and global solidarity are increasingly seen as antithetical to national self-interest, the role of education in promoting values of inclusion, justice, and caring grows in importance. Nationally, the importance of schools and classrooms in promoting cross-community understanding and respect has been foregrounded as part of recent historical commemorations. The decade of centenaries has renewed public discourse on the nature of citizenship in Ireland, on what it means to be Irish, and on inclusion, exclusion, and social justice. Schools, in this context, become important sites where school communities and children can explore and envision their preferred futures, identifying shared values, key issues, and possible actions. This year is also the 25th anniversary of Ireland's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), and it is important to mark it by refocusing on the realisation of children's rights and children's rights education.

Across the sector, education is experiencing change under the banner of reform. At primary level, this includes a focus on curriculum. Responding mainly to claims of curriculum overload, the current Primary School Curriculum (PSC) (NCCA, 1999) has been deemed to be no longer relevant in terms of its research base (NCCA, 2017a, p. 1), though this claim is questionable. Given the many strengths of the current PSC and the Aistear Framework (NCCA, 2009) in recognising children's agency and capabilities, and their openness to children's rights (Waldron, Ruane, and Oberman, 2014), this article argues that children's rights should remain central to the reform, and human rights should be explicitly identified as an underpinning framework for primary education in any emerging curricula. Two consultative documents important in the current curriculum reform were published in 2017: 'Proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum:



The state has a duty to ensure that from an early age all children have access to human rights education and human rights in education, including rights of participation

Green-Schools committees provide one of the few structures where children's participation is systematically promoted.

For consultation' (NCCA, 2017a) and 'Consultation on the proposals for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics: Final report' (NCCA, 2017b). They present opportunities and concerns for children's citizenship.

### Children's learning, rights, and democracy

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is multidimensional in its approach to rights, but for this article the focus will be on rights of participation and voice (Art. 12, UNCRC) and on children's right to know their rights and to have access to education which is consistent with those rights (Art. 42 and 29). The state has a duty to ensure that all children from an early age have access to human rights education and human rights in education, including rights of participation. The view of education put forward by the UNCRC is elaborated on by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2001). It includes a commitment to the holistic development of the child in contexts that are inclusive, non-discriminatory, and child-centred, with structures and processes that are empowering, rights-respecting and 'consistent in all respects with the dignity of the child', including children's right to 'participate in school life, the creation of school communities and student councils, peer education and peer counselling' and in school disciplinary structures. This offers a framework through which children can learn about and experience citizenship.

In recent decades, the idea of children as capable, competent social actors who have ideas about the world and emerging capacities as active citizens has gained traction in education (Prout and James, 1997). This has challenged, and largely replaced, more traditional, deficient views of children as incapable, with predefined, universal, and generally inflexible pathways of development. Rather than seeing citizenship as an adult status, the idea has emerged of children as present citizens with rights of participation and capacities for action (Howe and Covell, 2005; Waldron et al., 2014). This changing conceptualisation of children is evident in active and participatory pedagogies and in ideas such as child-led learning, where educators recognise children as citizens in the present, and enable them to experience and practise democracy as part of their everyday lives.

Although children's participation in their own learning is now a dominant idea in education, their engagement in school structures and decision-making requires attention and development. While the Education Act 1998 allows for student councils at second level only, some primary schools have established student councils or other representative structures. For most schools, however, Green-Schools committees provide one of the few structures where children's participation is systematically promoted. Indeed, the strong role played by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as An Taisce, and by state bodies such as Irish Aid and the Ombudsman for Children, in promoting citizenship and human rights education in Irish schools is a notable characteristic of the system (Hammarberg, 2008; Waldron et al., 2014). This is welcome, but in the absence of more formal structures of participation, children's rights under the UNCRC are not being realised.

### Curriculum reform

The recent publication of 'Proposals for structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary curriculum: For consultation' (NCCA, 2017a) merits

The conceptualisation of children as rights-holders and citizens is notably absent.

Tensions between the views of the patrons of denominational schools and Irish children's rights to access rights-based education have yet to be resolved.

close attention as a pivotal moment in primary education in Ireland. The document makes visible many assumptions about how children are viewed as thinkers and learners and about what areas of learning are seen as valuable. While a full critique is beyond the scope of this article, some points are worth flagging: the reduced emphasis on the principle of children as co-constructors of knowledge about the world, which is strongly present in the current curriculum; the lack of acknowledgement of children as citizens and rights-holders, with the exception of a passing reference (p. 4); and the suggestion that different kinds of learning should predominate at different stages of education, leading to the potential absence of critical thinking or enquiry-based learning in early primary. Yet such approaches to education are crucial in challenging the early emergence of stereotypes, bias, and racism (see, in an Irish context, Ruane et al., 2010; Connolly and Hosken, 2006). Critically, the conceptualisation of children as rights-holders and citizens, which is fundamental to providing education that respects, protects, and fulfils their rights, is also notably absent.

The proposed restructuring of the PSC is occurring at the same time as the debate over how Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics will be implemented in Irish schools (see Anne Marie Kavanagh, this issue). Arising from the recommendations of *The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Report of the Forum's Advisory Group* (Coolahan et al., 2012), ERB and Ethics can be seen as a manifestation of the rights of all children in pluralist societies to moral education and education about religions beyond a denominational, faith-based space, and also as a potential site of human rights education. However, as the 'Consultation on the proposals for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics: Final report' (NCCA, 2017b) makes clear, ERB and Ethics is a contested space. The report shows the widespread support for children to have opportunities to develop dispositions on social justice, human rights, equality, empathy, non-discrimination, and tolerance (NCCA, 2017b, p. 57). Many respondents also noted the potential of ERB and Ethics to 'cater for the human rights of all children' in an Irish context. As one educator noted, ERB and Ethics 'offers schools like my own an opportunity to be more inclusive of children whose families do not conform to the single-faith ethos of the school and in so doing that ethos will become more welcoming and embracing' (p. 30).

These submissions are consistent with the Toledo principles (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007), which represent the international consensus on how pluralist democracies should integrate ERB and Ethics into education systems, and which were very evident in the recommendations of the report of the Forum (Coolahan et al., 2012). It is noticeable, however, that these legal obligations were not emphasised to the same degree in the consultation document. This is in the context of other submissions which argued that the human-rights-based approach, embodied in the Forum report, was incompatible with denominational education (p. 26). Tensions between the views of the patrons of denominational schools, as expressed in the consultation report, and Irish children's rights to access rights-based education have yet to be resolved, and this is a concern.

Schools should be required to create, and be supported in creating, participative structures for children.

## Conclusions and recommendations

This remains a period of considerable potential for children's rights and citizenship. Children's participation, for example, has seen several gains: their routine involvement by the NCCA in all consultations on curriculum change; the prioritisation of 'listening to and involving children and young people' as one of the six goals of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020 (DCYA, 2014); the commitment to student councils at primary level as part of that framework; and the launch in June 2015 of a National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making, 2015–2020 (DCYA, 2015).

This article has highlighted the range of reform processes which offer most challenges and opportunities to the full realisation of children's citizenship and education rights. It recommends that there be explicit reference to human rights and human rights education in any new framework that emerges for young children. It recommends also that ERB and Ethics should sit within a human rights framework, and that schools should be required to create, and be supported in creating, participative structures for children.

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# Children's Participation in Decision-Making

## The proposed Parent and Student Charter



**Niall Muldoon**

Ombudsman for Children

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**N**iall Muldoon explains his core roles as Ombudsman for Children along with the work of the Ombudsman's Office where education is the largest category in the area of complaints dealt with each year. He discusses children's right to be heard and advocates for stronger legislative provision for children and young people to be heard in school settings. He welcomes the proposed Parent and Student Charter which will provide for consistency across all schools without curtailing the unique characteristics of each school.

### Core roles of Ombudsman

The Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) is an independent statutory body, which was established in 2004 under the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002. As Ombudsman for Children, I am accountable to the Oireachtas for the exercise of my statutory functions. My core roles are to promote the rights and welfare of children up to the age of 18 living in Ireland, and to deal with complaints made by or for children about administrative actions of public bodies that have, or may have, negatively affected a child.

Because our work focuses on the public sector, and education is the area of the public sector that most children engage with for an extended time, education is necessarily a consistent focus of the OCO's work across our statutory functions. In the area of complaints, education is the largest category we deal with each year, accounting for 46 per cent of all complaints we handled in 2016. In the area of policy, we give advice on legislative and public policy developments affecting children's education; our recent work includes advice on the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2016 and the General Scheme of the Education (Parent and Student Charter) Bill 2016. We also engaged with the Department of Education and Skills' consultation on the role of religion in school admissions. In the context of our role to promote awareness of children's rights, we run education workshops for children and young people visiting us through their schools, and we are developing a new suite of materials on children's rights for schools to use in curriculum teaching and learning.

Through this work, we understand that schools occupy a vital place in the lives of children, their families and communities. We understand the significant roles that principals, teachers, and other professionals in schools play in children's and young people's lives and the different ways in which schools promote and protect children's rights on a daily basis. In this regard, we see schools using varied and innovative approaches to supporting children and young people to be heard in different areas of school decision-making.

A core principle of the UNCRC, set out in Article 12, is that every child with the capacity to form a view has a right to express their views freely.

At a legislative level, there are significant deficits in provision for children and young people to be heard in the context of their formal education.

## Children's right to be heard in schools

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an international agreement that lists the rights to which every child under the age of 18 is entitled. By ratifying the UNCRC in 1992, Ireland made a commitment under international law to respect, protect, and fulfil the rights of children set out in the Convention.

A core principle of the UNCRC, set out in Article 12, is that every child with the capacity to form a view has a right to express their views freely and to have due weight given to their views in all matters affecting them. Among the wide-ranging recommendations that the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child made in 2016, following its examination of Ireland's progress in fulfilling its obligations to children under the UNCRC, was that the State should strengthen legislative provision for children and young people to be heard in school settings.

At a national policy level, the national policy framework for children and young people, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, recognises the importance of children and young people having a voice in decision-making in their schools. *The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making* identifies schools and the formal education system generally as one of four priority areas for actions focused on children and young people's participation in decision-making that affects their individual and collective lives.

At a legislative level, however, there are significant deficits in provision for children and young people to be heard in the context of their formal education, when viewed against the standard set by Article 12. For example, Section 27 of the Education Act 1998 permits students in post-primary schools to establish a student council and requires boards of management to encourage and help them to establish and operate it. However, the provision is limited to post-primary schools, additional mechanisms for hearing the views of students are not contemplated, and student councils are required to promote the interests of their school rather than those of students. While Section 28 of the 1998 Act never came into effect, it is noteworthy that it precludes young people under 18 from making a complaint to their board of management.

It is almost twenty years since the 1998 Act was enacted. The Education (Parent and Student Charter) Bill 2016 presents a vital opportunity for the State to legislate for mainstreaming a culture of children and young people's participation in school decision-making, in accordance with Article 12. In my view, it is crucial that we make the most of this opportunity.

## Participatory approaches to decision-making in schools

Children's right to be heard is not contingent on the added value that hearing any child's views may bring for the child, the decision-maker, or the wider environment in which decisions are made. While it is essential to remember this, it is also worth recalling the benefits that can accrue from taking participatory approaches to decision-making affecting children. Everyone who has developed effective ways of doing this knows that hearing children's views can support the development of their



Hearing children's views can support the development of their confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, as well as their communication, cooperation, negotiation, and problem-solving skills.

Among the proposals for the Charter that I particularly welcome is that schools will actively seek to address the concerns of parents and students and to provide redress, as appropriate.

confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, as well as their communication, cooperation, negotiation, and problem-solving skills. It can support more fully informed, child-centred decision-making and, with that, help improve policies, procedures, and practices affecting children and young people. Hearing the views of children and young people can also contribute to growing a cohesive community, which children and young people can feel a shared ownership of and stake in.

The proposed Parent and Student Charter provides a useful framework for promoting a culture of participation in schools and supporting efforts by schools to strengthen a sense of participatory belonging among all members of the school community. The fact that schools will be required to develop a Charter and to do so with the active participation of parents and students is welcome, since it provides for consistency across all schools without curtailing the unique characteristics of every school.

### Dealing with concerns and complaints

It is envisaged that Section 28 of the Education Act 1998 will be repealed and that alternative provisions will be made through the proposed Education (Parent and Student Charter) Bill for complaints-handling by schools. Among the proposals for the Charter that I particularly welcome is that schools will actively seek to address the concerns of parents and students and to provide redress, as appropriate. In light of our experience of dealing with thousands of complaints, I fully support an approach that focuses on the early resolution of concerns, and prevents their escalation into formal complaints where feasible. This approach is in the interests of all concerned, including the child or children affected.

The OCO's experience of dealing with complaints, including complaints about schools, also underscores the importance of schools having procedures in place, for formal complaints and corresponding appeals, which are accessible, transparent, and fair to the whole school community.

This autumn, we published a guide for public bodies, including schools, on child-centred complaints handling. I brought the principles set out in this guide to the attention of the Department of Education and Skills to encourage their incorporation, as appropriate, into the Education (Parent and Student) Charter Bill. One of these principles is participation: I firmly believe that a child or young person under 18 should be permitted to make a complaint to their school themselves, just as they can to the Ombudsman for Children's Office and indeed to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

### Conclusion

28 September 2017 was the 25th anniversary of Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC. Two important ways to mark this occasion would be for the Minister for Education and Skills and his department to seek the views of children and young people at primary and post-primary level on the proposed legislation, and for the government and the Oireachtas to ensure that the version of the Education (Parent and Student Charter) Bill they enact gives full legislative effect to providing for children's right to be heard in school decision-making.

# Buntús Cainte

Caoga Bliain ag Fás



**Áine Hyland**

Emeritus Professor of Education, University College Cork

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**A**ine Hyland (née Ní Dhomhnalláin), is a daughter of the late Tomás Ó Domhnalláin, creator of *Buntús Cainte*, a graded course in Irish for beginners. Fifty years after it was first published, she tells the success story of both her father and the publication itself, which continues to receive a 5-star rating on Amazon.

1967 was an auspicious year for Irish education, with the introduction of free post-primary education and free transport to post-primary schools. It was also the year the first edition of *Buntús Cainte* was published, a graded course in Irish for beginners, written by my father, Tomás Ó Domhnalláin. Fifty years later, *Buntús Cainte* continues to enjoy unprecedented popularity. It has been reprinted regularly – most recently in 2017 – and millions of copies of the book have been sold since its first publication. It is probably the most popular Irish language course ever produced.

*Buntús Cainte* is a self-taught language programme for adults, and was broadcast on RTE television from 1967 to the early 1970s. The accompanying books were produced by An Gúm (later the Stationery Office), eventually in three volumes. In later years, tapes and CDs were provided as a backup to the written text.

*Buntús Cainte* was based on a scientific analysis of the daily conversation of adults in Gaeltacht areas of Ireland. That scientific study had been published a year earlier, in May 1966, under the title *Buntús Gaeilge*. It was the culmination of three years of research carried out in An Teanglann, Gormanston, by An tAthair Colmán Ó hUallacháin, OFM,<sup>1</sup> Fr Fidelis MacEnrí, OFM, Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch,<sup>2</sup> and my father, Tomás Ó Domhnalláin, an inspector in the Department of Education.

The research was initiated by the Department of Education in 1963, following the recommendations of the *Commission on the Restoration of the Irish language* that a linguistic analysis of Irish as a spoken language be carried out, with the objective of devising a graded course of instruction in the language. A White Paper on the Restoration of the Irish language, published in 1965 during George Colley's period as Minister for Education, endorsed this recommendation.

The *Buntús Gaeilge* team researched the structures and vocabulary of informal spoken Irish by recording the conversations of some 180 native Irish speakers, young and old, in their own environments in the different Gaeltacht areas. A corpus of speech amounting to over 100,000 words in then-current

A corpus of speech amounting to over 100,000 words in then-current usage was analysed.

usage was analysed, focusing particularly on the frequency of specific speech structures and items of vocabulary. Each speech structure and item of vocabulary was written on an index card and coded manually. My younger sisters remember sitting around the table at home with my father, sorting and counting the cards and occasionally being paid a few pennies for their labour!

Computer analysis of the data would show that 50 per cent of this corpus of the casual conversation of native Irish speakers was made up of speech structures and vocabulary items utilising just 42 words in all, that is, the first 42 words on the frequency list. A person who knew the top 100 words on the list would, in theory, recognise 65 per cent of the conversation of a native Irish speaker – without reference to the issues of pronunciation and phonology that are a fundamental component of speech. 150 words would enable them to follow 75 per cent of a conversation, and 500 words would enable them to follow 90 per cent.

The research methodology of *Buntús Gaeilge* was similar to that applied in other countries, where research on the usage of other languages in their native contexts had been carried out. *Buntús Gaeilge* included academic references to G. Gougenheim, author of 'Le français fondamental', and to Noam Chomsky's early work on language acquisition.

While the basic work which resulted in the publication of *Buntús Gaeilge* had been carried out by the team in An Teanglann, subsequent work on developing Irish language programmes for primary classes I and II and classes III and IV (*Hóra, a Pháid!* and *Dúisigh, a Bhríd!*) was carried out by the primary school inspectorate in the Department of Education, initially led by Tomás Ó Domhnalláin. When Tomás was appointed by the Department as its first audio-visual officer (Oifigeach Closamhairc) in 1966, Seán de Búrca, inspector, took over the leadership role. Courses for post-primary students were subsequently developed by the post-primary inspectorate (*Bunsraith Gaeilge* and *Téanam Ort*), and the methodology was also used to develop courses in other European languages: *Écouter et Parler* (French), *Verstehen und Sprechen* (German), and *Entendir y Hablar* (Spanish). In an essay for a collection in memory of Conn Ó Cléirigh, who had been chair of An Institiúid Teangeolaíochta, Tomás Ó Domhnalláin later wrote that he had reservations about using the list of most frequently used words for courses for pupils up to age 14 or 15.<sup>3</sup> He felt there should have been greater progression for older pupils to include less frequently used words and phrases.

The work involved in developing the new Buntús school courses was considerable.

The work involved in developing the new Buntús school courses was considerable. As well as writing the script for the lessons, and preparing audio tapes for each lesson, visual aids were also provided in the form of 'deilbhíní' – cardboard cut-outs backed with Teflon and stuck on to black felt. The idea came from a visit by An tAthair Colmán to Morocco, where similar objects were being used to teach French to schoolchildren. For the Buntús courses, more than 600 separate illustrations were developed for each textbook. An alternative to the deilbhíní was provided in the form of filmstrips (stiallscannáin), for teachers who had access to a projector and screen. Material for the written elements of the course also had to be prepared, as well as handbooks for teachers.

In his now famous speech to the National Union of Journalists in Dún Laoghaire on 20 September 1966, where he announced the introduction of free post-primary education, the Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley, referred to the development of the Buntús school courses. Having reassured his audience that he 'had not come to the post of Minister for Education to preside over the obsequies of the national language', he elaborated on the new method of teaching Irish through the *Buntús Gaeilge* method. All one had to do was to learn 900 words and phrases, 'and one can converse widely in Irish'. He explained that a pilot project was under way in 150 primary schools and 50 second-level schools using this method and that further trials would follow shortly.

Following the introduction of the school courses, Seán Mac Gearailt, then Assistant Secretary of the Department of Education, suggested to Tomás Ó Domhnalláin that he should consider developing a course for adult learners. By this stage Tomás was the audiovisual officer and was no longer involved with his fellow inspectors in developing or implementing language courses. On the other hand, he continued to be very interested in language teaching and learning, and the development of a course for adult learners would be a new challenge.

All one had to do was to learn 900 words and phrases and one could converse widely in Irish - Donagh O'Malley

During the subsequent months, Tomás immersed himself in this new task, which resulted in the three volumes of *Buntús Cainte*. These were entirely Tomás's work and were conceived and written in his spare time, outside of office hours. This fact was acknowledged by the Department. Tomás worked with William Bolger, whose unique illustrations, both in the book and on the RTÉ programme, became national favourites. RTÉ expressed an interest in broadcasting *Buntús Cainte* as a television programme and offered to pay Tomás £3 for every script, that is, one for every viewing. This was subsequently raised to £5 per script. In total, Tomás was paid about £700 by RTÉ for the three series of programmes (a series for each volume), which were broadcast in 1967, 1968, and 1969.

In August 1969, Tomás signed over the rights to the three volumes of *Buntús Cainte* to the Minister for Education for the sum of £654. The contract covered all aspects of Buntús and read as follows:

*Sannadh chun an Aire ar é sin uile an t-aoncheart chun Leabhair 1, 2 agus 3 den saothar dar tideal Buntús Cainte a chlóg agus a fhoilsiú i bhfoirm ar bith (lena airítear an ceart chun taifeadáin agus téipeann a dhéanamh agus cearta teilifíse and craolacháin) ar feadh iarmhar uile an téarma cóipchirt iontu ...*

*(This assigns to the Minister the sole rights to Books 1, 2 and 3 of the work entitled Buntús Cainte, its printing and publication in any form (including recording, the making of tapes, television and broadcasting rights) for the term of its copyright ...)*

All subsequent editions of the *Buntús Cainte* booklets indicate that the copyright is vested in the Government of Ireland (Rialtas na hÉireann), and Tomás Ó Domhnalláin never received royalties.

When the first edition of *Buntús Cainte* was published in 1967, 185,000 copies were printed. Each volume sold for 1 shilling and sixpence. On 8

November 1967, in a Dáil question to Donogh O'Malley, then Minister for Education, Oliver J. Flanagan TD asked if the minister 'was satisfied with the national response to the *Buntús Cainte* lessons; if he feels the lessons have been a success to date; and if 185,000 copies of the booklet have in fact been purchased'. O'Malley replied:<sup>4</sup>

*I am well satisfied with the national response to the Buntús Cainte lessons. All the reports which I have received, and they are very many indeed, indicate that this series of lessons and the television programme related to them, have been received with the greatest enthusiasm. The fact that the lessons are scientifically based and provide adults in a pleasant way with the minimum amount of spoken Irish necessary for everyday conversation are two major reasons for their success. The third is the high degree of good will for the language which exists among our people. In order to meet the demand for the booklet it has been necessary to produce five editions of it. To date, 218,000 copies have been sold and the sales are continuing.*

A short debate in Irish followed this reply, including contributions from Dr Patrick Hillery, Charles Haughey, and Mr Dillon, as well as Minister O'Malley and O.J. Flanagan. There seemed to be cross-party praise for the new *Buntús Cainte*.

Today, fifty years later, *Buntús Cainte* continues to sell well.

Today, fifty years later, *Buntús Cainte* continues to sell well. With an accompanying CD, each volume now costs €10. It is available for purchase online from the Stationery Office in Dublin, from Amazon, and in bookshops throughout the country. The popularity of the series continues unabated. At the time of writing this article, it receives a five-star rating on the Amazon website, with comments as follows:

*'I would strongly recommend Buntús Cainte to anyone starting to learn Irish.'*

*'An excellent publication. Easy to follow with excellent quality CDs.'*

*'Exercises are straightforward both for written and spoken Irish. Ideal beginners' book.'*

*'Great cartoons.'*

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## FOOTNOTES

1. An tAthair Colmán was appointed by the Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley, as the first Director of An Institiúid Teangeolaíochta in 1967.
2. Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch was subsequently appointed as Professor of Folklore and Ethnology in University College Cork. During his career there, he was also visiting professor in Cornell University, UCLA, Boston College, and Notre Dame.
3. Anders Ahlqvist and Vera Capkova (eds.), *Dán do Oide: Essays in Memory of Conn Ó Cléirigh 1927–1999* (Dublin, ITE 1997).
4. *Dáil Éireann*, vol. 230, 8 November 1967.