THEMES

During the Pope's visit to Ireland in August 2018, An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar publicly acknowledged the contribution made by the Catholic Church to the building of Irish society, particularly in establishing schools and hospitals when people were in need and the state did not provide.

THEMES CONTENTS

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Children

ENHANCING WELL-BEING ACROSS THE EDUCATION COMMUNITY

Well-being in education can transform children's lives

This article looks to highlight the vital importance, from a children's rights perspective, of actively enabling all members of every school community to improve their well-being. The well-being of school leaders, staff, and students is intertwined with the well-being of parents, members of the board of management, and the local community. Therefore, for a child to fully express their talents and maximise their benefits from education, their well-being and the well-being of all who touch their lives need to be enhanced.

An enormous amount of work is being done to ensure the well-being of our children and young people in the education system and beyond. This is leading to many more schools developing a culture of well-being, which creates a self-sustaining momentum and ensures that all associated with it feel the benefits. This is not only desirable but will also lead to fuller realisation of children's rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

CORE ROLES OF OMBUDSMAN AND HIS OFFICE

The Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) is an independent statutory body that 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 eighteen, 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.

Our remit is limited to the public sector. Since education is an area of the public sector that most children engage with for an extended time, it is necessarily a consistent focus of the OCO's work across our statutory functions. Our recent work includes providing advice to Government on the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2016 and the General Scheme of the Education (Parent and Student Charter) Bill 2016. In the area of complaints, education is the largest category we deal with each year, accounting for 45% of all complaints we handled in 2017.

Through our work we understand that schools occupy a vital place in the lives of children, their families, and communities. Indeed, many young people we meet speak highly of their schools and educators. One of the most remarkable encounters from my time in this role was meeting a seven-year-old girl who had written to the OCO seeking help to find her family a house. I invited her and her mother into the office and she told me about the challenges of being homeless and living in unsuitable emergency accommodation. Although this

child had experienced considerable adversity, she was excited when talking about school and the fun she had there. This shows the profound influence schools have on their pupils.

This example reminds us why schools are, and always have been, at the forefront of efforts to promote well-being among children. We are increasingly confronted with evidence which suggests that growing up today is more complex than it has ever been. Many young people have to deal with issues such as bullying (face-to-face and online), sexuality, transition between school levels, breakups, and blended families. Nevertheless, I am confident that schools have the power and skills to help students navigate the challenges of life in the twenty-first century.

THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S WELL-BEING AGENDA

As all of those working in the field will know, well-being has emerged as a dominant theme in education discourse in recent years. This is reflected by the fact that Goal 1.1 of the Department of Education's Action Plan for Education (2016–2019) is to improve services and resources to promote well-being in school communities. More recently, on 20 July this year, Minister Richard Bruton launched his Department's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023, which adopts a holistic approach to well-being. In keeping with the WHO's definition, it comprises many interrelated aspects, including being active, responsible, connected, resilient, appreciated, respected, and aware. The framework sets out to ensure that by 2023 the promotion of well-being will be at the core of the ethos of every school and centre for education and that Ireland will be recognised as a leader in this area. This is an admirable and ambitious target which suggests that there is a genuine commitment to promoting well-being at government level.

The new Wellbeing Programme will see 300 hours of timetabled learning over the three years of the junior cycle.

This is not to say that schools are only now starting to create a culture of well-being. There are innumerable examples of fantastic school cultures where great thought is given to students' well-being. For well-being to be truly embedded, however, there must be equal value put on the well-being of the whole school community, so that all teachers, pupils, parents, and staff can feel that their welfare is a core consideration. To deliver the objectives set out in this new Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework, the Department must give schools all the additional support they need to sustain and build upon the fantastic work already being done.

WELL-BEING IN EARLY YEARS

The continued extension of the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme means that about 117,000 children are currently benefiting from the two free years service (Irish Government, 2018), and this reflects growing awareness of the immediate and long-term benefits that early years education brings to children and their communities (UNICEF, 2001; Rodgers, 2013).

Participating preschools agree to implement the Aistear curriculum framework. Aistear is based on four themes, one of which is 'Well-being' (NCCA, 2004). This theme aims to help children be strong psychologically and socially, be as healthy and fit as they can, be creative and spiritual, and have positive outlooks on learning and on life. Although high-quality

preschool education has been found to enhance the well-being of all children, it has even greater benefits for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Melhuish, 2014). Thus we welcome this investment as recognition of the importance of strong, positive preventative measures. Speaking before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children, Professor Kevin Nugent, director of developmental medicine at Boston Children's Hospital, said, 'Initiating programmes that meet the developmental needs of children from birth to age three years is as much about building a strong foundation for lifelong physical and mental health as it is about enhancing readiness to succeed in school' (Oireachtas, 2015).

In September 2018, I had the pleasure of seeing evidence of the benefits described above in action when I launched the Young Knocknaheeny Area-Based Childhood (ABC) Programme 'Learning Together' report. It was clear to me then that all those involved in the programme (HSE, Tusla, school principals, crèches, NGOs) are doing tremendous work to respectfully support children and parents to get the lives of the children in the area off to the best possible start. We expect that the Government will approve Ireland's first-ever National Early Years Strategy by the end of 2018 (Irish Government, 2018). This is an important opportunity to invest in the well-being of future generations in a similar manner to what I witnessed in Knocknaheeny and the many other ABC Programmes around the country.

Some of the most vibrant wellbeing initiatives have been developed organically by schools.

WELL-BEING IN PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

One of the most positive partnerships I have been involved with in my current role is the Wellbeing for Teachers and Learners (WTL) Group. Created in 2016, it comprises the Ombudsman for Children's Office, the Irish Primary Principals' Network, the Teaching Council, the National Parents Council (Primary), and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals. The group's objective is to ensure that collective efforts in well-being have a positive impact on the whole school community – teachers, students, parents or guardians, and the wider community. Since its formation there have been significant developments in the area of well-being at both primary and post-primary level.

The Wellbeing Programme, introduced in September 2017 by the Department of Education and Skills (DES), will see 300 hours of timetabled learning over the three years of the junior cycle. From the perspective of the OCO, it is particularly encouraging that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's guidelines for this programme are informed by a rights-based approach to well-being:

A rights-based approach to wellbeing is useful as it reminds us that wellbeing matters not simply because it leads to better educational outcomes or can influence young people's outcomes as adults. Wellbeing matters in the here and now. It is important in its own right because all students have a right to feel cared for in school. (NCCA, 2017, p.10)

Some of the most vibrant well-being initiatives have been developed organically by schools. Corpus Christi Primary School in Moyross, County

Limerick, an area with deeply embedded socio-economic problems, including a history of low educational attainment (Limerick Council, 2013), is a standout example. This school has placed student well-being at the heart of its ethos and developed a number of programmes to promote pupils' mental health. Alongside sports programmes, there is a gardening club, after-school woodwork, and a cookery programme. From a therapeutic perspective Corpus Christi also run art, play, music, and equine-assisted therapy sessions to support pupils' emotional development. I have met with students and parents from this school and have seen first-hand how such interventions helped students to make sense of and express their feelings.

Across the three years I have been in office, I have visited many national and post-primary schools like Corpus Christi Primary School, and each one affirms how a well-considered and enthusiastically supported well-being programme can enhance student outcomes, even in the most challenging educational environments. It also confirms how much was being done in the realm of well-being long before it became a formal programme sanctioned by the DES.

WELL-BEING AND SCHOOL STAFF

Former Cork hurler and mental health activist Conor Cusack has told the story of how, as a young student, he worked on weekends and summer holidays in glasshouses. In the ecology of gardening, if he wanted something beautiful to grow, he knew he had to create the conditions that would allow whatever seed was planted to thrive. He was also taught that if it didn't thrive, the first question asked was: What was wrong with the environment and climate, and why had they not encouraged the plant's healthy development? Did it receive enough water and sunlight? Were there issues with the soil? Invariably, the reason was identified. Cusack made the point strongly that the last question to be asked was: Could there be something wrong with the seed? This highlights the importance of well-being as a culture in schools, because that is what every child lives and breathes every day. If the culture is not healthy, how can the child – or other member of the school community – survive and thrive?

> When schools support staff well-being, there are positive effects on staff retention, job satisfaction, productivity, and student outcomes.

It is therefore vital that we do not lose sight of the fact that any dynamic well-being initiatives must embrace all members of the school community. To this end, the National Parents Council runs a training course to help parents promote their children's well-being and mental health in conjunction with St Patrick's Mental Health services (NPC, 2018).

Staff well-being is an equally important part of a mentally healthy school. All workplaces can be stressful at times, and schools are no different. It is important that schools recognise this and take action to help staff reduce stress and build better ways of coping. Schools and staff need to work together to create a culture where all members of the school community, including staff (teaching, administrative, and maintenance) feel supported and have the opportunity to flourish.

Ultimately, when schools support staff well-being, there are positive effects on staff retention, job satisfaction, productivity, and student outcomes.

PARTICIPATION AND WELL-BEING

The Ombudsman for Children's Office is guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international agreement that sets out the rights to which every child aged under eighteen 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 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.

Irish research has shown potential benefits for students when their opinions are taken into account. These include significant improvement in the quality of their relationships with teachers and their sense of belonging and connectedness to school. Ultimately, the link between student voice and well-being is substantially supported by evidence (Flynn, 2017).

Flynn has observed: 'Embedding these structures [of listening to students] as habitual practice will ensure a sustainable and credible approach to inter-generational dialogue, and a democratic, shared process in curricular and education reform' (2017, p.7). The Education (Parent and Student Charter) Bill 2016 presents the State with a vital opportunity to legislate for mainstreaming a culture of children and young people's participation in school decision-making, in accordance with Article 12. It is crucial that we make the most of this opportunity so that student engagement becomes a 'habitual practice' and can create that sustainable and credible 'intergenerational dialogue' for our whole school community.

CHALLENGES

Recent years have witnessed a groundswell of support for well-being initiatives across the education sector. But many people remain somewhat sceptical of the agenda and raise legitimate concerns about the feasibility of these initiatives. Paul Downes described the DES's Wellbeing Policy for 2018–2023 as largely a repackaging of policy already in operation, and feared that by not fully resourcing second-level schools, 'this national policy risks being merely a sticking plaster' (Murray, 2018).

Meeting the infrastructural and resource demands imposed by well-being initiatives is another challenge. School leaders are right to question how best-practice approaches involving active learning and project-based methodologies can be implemented in overcrowded classrooms or without appropriate outdoor space. Finally, fears of work overload and staff burnout have been raised, particularly among teaching principals (Oireachtas, 2018). Ultimately, unless such concerns are confronted and addressed, well-being risks being seen as another initiative forced upon schools, and uptake will be affected accordingly.

CONCLUSION

Article 29 of the UNCRC tells us that a child's or young person's education should help their mind, body, and talents be the best they can. It should also build their respect for other people and for the world around them. 'Education' in this context goes far beyond formal schooling to embrace the broad range of life experiences and learning processes that enable children, individually and collectively, to develop fully and to live a well-rounded and

satisfying life in society (UN, 2001). By placing well-being at the heart of our education system, we can vindicate this right.

Young people today live in a world characterised by economic uncertainty, academic pressure, and all-pervasive social media. It is unsurprising that reports show an increase in anxiety and mental health difficulties experienced by schoolchildren (Krause, 2017; O'Brien, 2018). We cannot expect schools to solve our mental health problems. But well-being in schools is a powerful component of wider efforts to promote positive mental health in Irish society.

With that in mind, I will finish with an old Zen proverb that encapsulates the strength that can only come to people – children and adults alike – who feel content and confident with who they are: *Only those who are extremely pliable and soft can be extremely hard and strong.*

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RELIGION AND EDUCATION IN IRELAND

A changing and challenging relationship

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We are living at a key moment in the relations between religion and education in the Republic of Ireland. Read any newspaper, turn on the radio, look at Twitter, and there is bound to be something about religion or education or the interrelationship between them. Many claim that the Irish have a greater interest in religion than most. Clearly, education matters to us too. It is crucial that we get the relationship right for our time and for the future.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF IRELAND

There has been great change in Ireland, socially, culturally, and religiously in recent years. Growing diversity has become a reality, in particular through the movement of peoples to Ireland. Economic migrants, refugees from war-torn Syria and elsewhere, and those of means who sense Ireland to be a place of opportunity have come to these shores. The variety of global and social media that we consume every day, and that consume us, can bring us immediately close to the interests and concerns of those on the other side of the world, members of our own families, and people we have never met.

A new openness to secularism has become powerfully influential. The distress caused by sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church, and the inability of Church leaders to deal openly with this issue, have contributed to ambivalence towards religious commitment. The removal by referendum in May 2018 of the recognition of the equal right to life of the pregnant woman and the unborn, inserted into the Constitution in 1983, is a sure indicator of change in the air.

The vast majority of people living in Ireland, however, profess to be Christians and continue to identify with the Catholic Church: 3,729,100 or 78.3% of the population in the 2016 census. Members of the Church of Ireland in 2016 numbered 126,400, while 62,200 Orthodox Christians now live in Ireland. The numbers belonging to other religions have grown from small beginnings, with Muslims in 2016 numbering 63,400, and Hindus 14,300. In perhaps the most dramatic revelation, those with no religion have grown to 468,621 or 9.8% of the total population.

THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN EDUCATION IN IRELAND

The general aim of education in Irish schools as set out by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is a holistic one, seeking to engage with 'all aspects of the individual, including aesthetic, creative, critical, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, political, social and spiritual development, for personal and family life, for living in community and for leisure' (NCCA, 1993, p.26).

The Education Act, 1998, confirms that schools recognised by the state should 'promote the moral, spiritual, social, and personal development of students', and do this 'in consultation with their parents, having due regard for the characteristic spirit of the school' (Government of Ireland, 1998, para. 9d). Parents and the school engage together in providing support for young people according to what they hold dear.

Fundamental questions about the meaning and mystery of life are rooted deep in the human condition. Parents generally value the emphasis placed by schools on helping young people come to terms with such questions, whether or not they or their young people have a particular belief system and faith community: 'Although we may think we are too busy to reflect on them, these are questions which, even when ignored, continue to lie deep in the human heart' (Murray, 2017, p.12).

PRIMARY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION

Following the 1998 Education Act, the new Primary School Curriculum, 1999, featured Religious Education as one of the seven curricular areas mandated for all primary schools. Religious Education at that time came under the remit of Church authorities (Catholic or Protestant) on behalf of the local parish community and its families. Sacramental preparation of Catholic pupils for first Eucharist and Confirmation has thus been facilitated in the Religious Education programme in Catholic schools.

In the Catholic sector, serious questioning is taking place regarding the school-based model of sacramental preparation.

One of the successes in Religious Education in recent years in Catholic schools, still 90 per cent of primary schools in Ireland, has been the ongoing introduction of the new Religious Education programme for Catholic children, *Grow in love*. In the Catholic sector, however, serious questioning is also taking place regarding the school-based model of sacramental preparation. In many cases, neither the parents nor their children participate in their local parish, yet whole class groups of Catholic pupils are being delivered to a once-off celebration in the parish that should be part of a committed process of initiation into full participation in the life and rites of the Catholic community.

In September 2018, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, following a recommendation of the Dublin Diocesan Council of Priests, wrote to all parishes in the diocese issuing guidelines for the enrolment of those wishing to participate in sacramental preparation in their parishes. This may be the start of a growing effort to help Catholic parents and families choose to engage more fully in their parish if and when they decide to put their children forward for the sacraments of Christian initiation, with all the rights and responsibilities they confer.

NEW FORMS OF SCHOOL PATRONAGE

The traditional model involving a close relationship between religion and education in primary schools, dependent on management structures closely associated with local parishes of one Christian denomination or another, remains dominant. But it is not the only way to envisage how religion and education can work together into the future. With the development of new

forms of school patronage, particularly Educate Together, a patron body established without any religious affiliation, the relationship cannot be presumed in its traditional manner.

In Educate Together schools, reference is made to an ethical education curriculum and to the patron's half-hour, rather than to Religious Education. Children are introduced to ethical, spiritual, and environmental themes without engaging, at least at school, with a particular faith community. In some cases Catholic parents, together with their local parish, are encouraged to use the school facilities after school hours for sacramental preparation.

A significant multi-belief approach has also been initiated in new Community National Schools, under the patronage of local Education and Training Boards (ETBs), previously Vocational Education Committees (VECs). These schools, acknowledging the religious diversity in their community, have been working on a Religious Education programme seeking to embrace the variety of religions and worldviews of their students and to celebrate difference in the life of the school. This has not been without its complications. Recent doctoral research shows that while management in such schools seek to promote a mutually respectful approach to different religions and belief systems, it can be difficult to create a level playing field that is equal for all (Mullally, 2018).

A number of ongoing discussions are of interest in seeking to define an appropriate relationship in the future between religion and education in Irish primary schools. In 2017 the NCCA reported on its consultation about a possible Education about Religions and Belief (ERB) and Ethics curriculum, an idea first suggested by the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, 2012. The Forum recommended the divesting of some schools from the Catholic sector to allow for variety of school choice for parents in a local area, and the introduction of ERB and Ethics into all primary schools. It envisaged a smaller number of faith-based schools which would continue with their denominational Religious Education programme, and supplement it with elements of ERB and Ethics not already addressed.

> **A significant multi-belief approach has been initiated in new Community National Schools which are under the patronage of ETBs.**

The NCCA report indicates a number of contextual issues which raise questions about what was proposed: the rights of patron bodies as set out in the Education Act, 1998, questions about the impact of the proposal on the ethos of schools still under denominational patronage, the recognition that much of what was being proposed by this new curriculum is happening in schools already, and the repeatedly voiced concern about time pressure and curriculum overload. Doctoral research completed this year, taking the proposed ERB and Ethics curriculum as an example, has highlighted the importance of genuine partnership in curriculum design in Ireland, but indicates the breakdown of trust that can occur between partners, both those recognised in negotiations and those on the margins, when their voices are not being heard (Sullivan, 2018).

During the past year the NCCA also issued a final report on its consultation on curriculum structure and time in the school week in primary schools. One issue that received particular attention from respondents was the proposal that Religious Education or other patron's programme be designated in so-called 'Flexible Time', a term that was itself questioned. Concerns were expressed that this would lead to downgrading Religious Education in faith-based schools, suggesting that it be considered a discrete subject (as the Forum had done) and thereby undermining the integrity of the characteristic spirit of such schools.

The Education (Admission to Schools) Act, 2018, was also enacted, one of whose effects will be, from September 2019, to prevent schools generally from giving preference at admission to pupils based on their religion – particularly Catholic schools, given the number of such schools, from accepting Catholic pupils first. Preference for members of other faith communities, Protestant, Muslim, or Jewish, for example, will continue to be allowed in their schools in order to maintain the ethos of such minority schools.

SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOLS AND THE NEW RELIGIOUS EDUCATION SPECIFICATION

One way of understanding the second-level schooling system in Ireland is to see it under three headings: voluntary secondary schools, largely Catholic, usually under Trust Boards which continue the work of founding religious congregations and dioceses; ETB schools and community colleges, both formerly managed by VECs; and coeducational community and comprehensive schools, managed on behalf of the state by boards of management with community representatives, often including representatives of religious congregations who had been involved in an amalgamating school, or of the local bishop.

Religious Education is available in Ireland as a state-certified subject, at Junior and Leaving Cert levels, to students of all religions and none.

Religious Education has been available as an optional state-certified subject in Ireland at second level, open to students of all religions and none, since 2000 at Junior Certificate and 2003 at Leaving Certificate level. The development of these NCCA syllabuses, and a curriculum framework for non-exam lessons at senior cycle, has meant that all the textbooks written since have focused on the content material set out in these syllabuses or curriculum framework. Even when the subject is not taken as an exam subject, the syllabuses have generally been followed. At the time of their introduction, the Irish Catholic bishops offered guidelines indicating how this state approach might be employed in Catholic schools and with Catholic students in other schools.

During 2017 and 2018 the NCCA has been leading a review of Religious Education as a state-certified subject for junior cycle, as it has with all junior cycle subjects, in line with the creative teaching and learning approach suggested by the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015. The background paper for Religious Education, reinforcing the value of the subject for all young people, was generally well received. The new specification for Religious Education, due to be implemented in schools in September 2019, addresses

the subject to all students, whatever their religious faith or worldview, seeking to promote mutual understanding.

Research led by this author reveals an appreciation among 13- to 15-year-old students of the learning that comes from Religious Education. The proposal that 'we must respect all religions' was supported by 84% of the 3,000 young people surveyed, with 85% agreeing that studying religion in school helped them towards such mutual understanding (Byrne, Francis, and McKenna, 2018, forthcoming).

Somewhat incongruously, while this review was under way, the then Minster for Education, Richard Bruton TD, chose to issue first one circular letter in this regard, and then a second. Circular Letter 13/2018, published in February 2018, required Community and ETB post-primary schools not only to facilitate the regular opt-out supported by the Constitution when 'religious instruction' in a particular faith tradition is offered by such schools, but to offer another subject alongside it for those opting out.

The Minister not only did not provide any extra resources to schools for this, but contravened, it is said, the need in the Education Act to conduct a consultation with relevant bodies before making such a decision. This circular letter, by referring to both religious instruction and Religious Education without differentiating between them, put in question the Department's own efforts over the years to provide a form of Religious Education at second level for all students, and its importance, as testified to in many other countries since 9/11, for community cohesion and the well-being of society (Cullen, 2018; Religion Teachers' Association of Ireland, 2018).

The second circular letter was issued by the Department of Education and Skills in October 2018, as a result of ongoing requests by those involved in such schools. Circular Letter 62/2018 provides a clarification by the Department that the NCCA Religious Education syllabuses and the new Religious Education specification for junior cycle are intended for students of all faiths and none. The approach indicated for ETB and Community Schools in Circular Letter 13/2018, facilitating the withdrawal of students and provision of other tuition alongside religious instruction, does not, the second letter confirms, apply to NCCA Religious Education. Where religious instruction and worship in accordance with the rites and practices of a particular denomination, however, continue to be offered in ETB and Community Schools, the Department, in Circular Letter 62/2018, indicates a newly required opt-in by parents for their young people.

It will be interesting to see what decisions schools and parents will make in the future. What is important in contemporary society is that all students in all schools be offered a form of Religious Education that gives them the opportunity to reflect on and engage openly from their own perspective with the questions posed for them: 'All schools in Ireland have a duty to young people to help them prepare to live confidently in, and contribute to building up, an Ireland that is not only plural but open and respectful' (Byrne, 2018).

NEW INITIATIVES IN ADULT RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

With all this discussion of religion and education, the question of ongoing lifelong adult religious education and faith development is emerging again as a topic for conversation in some quarters. With the declining numbers of priests and members of religious congregations in the Catholic community, lay people are now taking formal leadership roles as parish pastoral workers and catechists, paralleling the leadership roles lay people have fulfilled in schools over many years.

Share the Good News, the national directory for catechesis of the Catholic Church in Ireland, emphasises the importance of members of the Church engaging in ongoing education and reflection on what their faith means to them, and growing into a deeper sense, too, of Christian community and mission. A postdoctoral research position in adult religious education and faith development, the first of its kind in Ireland, has recently been filled at the Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education, DCU Institute of Education (see www.dcu.ie/materdei.cce).

POPE FRANCIS IN IRELAND

The visit of Pope Francis to the World Meeting of Families 2018 in Dublin provided a unique opportunity, for Catholics and others, to reflect together on Irish society past and present. The formal intervention of Taoiseach Leo Varadkar was significant for the forthrightness of his condemnation of a culture that allowed clerical abuse to go unchecked. His speech was also noteworthy for the generosity of his acknowledgement of how structures put in place over the years by the Catholic Church contributed to building up Irish society when people were in need and the state did not provide, particularly in establishing schools and hospitals.

> **We may have reached a tipping point in Ireland in the relationship between religion and education.**

Pope Francis's well-known commitment to the airing of diverse points of view on Church issues (Dorr, 2018) was evident as he listened carefully. The silent gatherings at the Garden of Remembrance and elsewhere spoke volumes to the whole of Irish society too. The visit of Pope Francis, and his humanity, may encourage those who are convinced that dialogue can heal the human heart and human society.

For Pope Francis it is clear that the Church is called constantly to renewal, to begin again in every generation to offer the service it can give: 'God is eternal newness. He impels us constantly to set out anew, to pass beyond what is familiar, to the fringes and beyond' (Pope Francis, 2018, para. 135). Other Church leaders are following his example in suggesting that the Gospel has new things to say to people interested in building up contemporary society, for example by working to end human trafficking and slavery, and by resisting religious extremism (Nichols, 2017). The Fine Gael think-in, immediately after the visit of Pope Francis and ahead of the new Dáil term, addressed church–state relations. This may signal recognition in government quarters of the importance of such dialogue.

CONCLUSION

We may have reached a tipping point in Ireland in the relationship between religion and education. From now on, religion will have a place in people's

lives when and if it is freely chosen, contributes to meaning in their world, and helps them embrace the mystery of life that lies deep in the human heart. Religion will have an important part to play in education in Ireland if it is judged that the religious, spiritual, and moral values being proposed are loving, just, truthful, hope-filled, transformative, and inspiring.

Education in Ireland will continue to promote dialogue with religion not because the Church says so, or because any other religion or worldview seeks recognition, but in so far as religious conviction can be seen to contribute to the newness, generosity, and wholeness with which Irish society hopes to respond imaginatively to the deep-felt needs of all its people, particularly its young people.

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TRANSITIONS IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

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The Irish school system is not seamless. From the time children enter preschool at the age of three until they complete their formal education, they experience a number of transitions – some more visible and challenging than others. The official designation of the various levels of education – pre-primary, primary, junior cycle second-level, senior cycle second-level, further education, higher education – is not unique to Ireland. A formal classification of levels and sectors (ISCED 0, 1, 2, etc.) has been used by the OECD and the European Commission in recent decades in their publications of international statistics.

STATE-FUNDED NATIONAL SCHOOL SYSTEM
Ireland was one of the first western countries to have a state-funded system of basic education for all: the national school system founded by Lord Stanley in 1831. Higher education in a university setting has existed for many hundreds of years, but until recently it was only for the privileged few – mostly men. A small number of 'Intermediate Schools' (between primary and university), to prepare the elite for university, existed from late medieval times, but state aid was not available for such schools to any significant extent until the latter half of the nineteenth century. Not until the mid-twentieth century did 'free' second-level education become available for all. From a historical perspective, schooling could not be described as 'joined up' until recently.

FOUR CONSECUTIVE SCHOOL SETTINGS
In Ireland today, almost all young people begin their schooling at the age of three in one of the newly funded ECCE centres. After two years there, they graduate to a separate national (primary) school where they spend eight years, then to a second-level school where they spend five or six years, three in junior cycle and then two or three in senior cycle. At the age of eighteen, most young people continue with their education, in either a further or a higher education institution, for another one to six years, sometimes with a transition or transitions during this period. So the average young person is likely to attend at least four different school settings during their formal education. For some, the transition from one level to another is painless – even exciting. But for others it can be challenging and stressful, resulting in a small number of early school leavers.

LACK OF CONTINUITY ACROSS THE LEVELS
Given how the structure of schooling developed, it is not surprising that there was little if any continuity in the past between pupils' learning experiences at the various levels. The primary school curriculum was initially devised to provide a minimum level of numeracy and literacy for a population whose schooling would end

at twelve or thirteen years of age. The secondary school curriculum was drawn up to prepare the elite for university education – with little or no reference to the primary school curriculum.

Universities have always jealously guarded their autonomy and academic freedom, and their curriculum traditionally reflected the academic interests of their individual professors. In recent decades, efforts have been made in most countries to align the curricula of pre-primary, primary, second-level, and higher education, with compromises from all sectors, and Ireland is no exception to this trend. In its recent documentation, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has indicated its commitment to ensuring that there will be continuity in young people's learning experience through all levels of their school life.

Another article in this publication addresses the transition into and out of primary school. This article focuses on the transition between junior and senior cycle and between second level and higher education.

Recent reforms of the junior cycle curriculum reflect the approach that has underpinned the primary curriculum since the early 1970s, which emphasises guided discovery and active learning. The junior cycle framework published by the NCCA in 2011 (Innovation and Identity) focused attention on the 'school as the site of innovation, and on teachers and school leaders as the agents of any change process'. What students would learn was described in twenty-four statements of learning and eight key skills, including literacy and numeracy. A revised assessment structure was introduced that would include classroom-based assessment. After some delays, the revised junior cycle curriculum is finally being implemented, and 2018 saw the first cohort of junior cycle students sitting the new Junior Cert exam, which included a limited number of school-based assessments.

> **Higher order skills are not being assessed because the assessment tools for Leaving Cert are limited for the most part to end-of-cycle written examinations.**

The senior cycle curriculum is in the early stages of revision and reform, and until reform is agreed and implemented there will be discontinuity between junior and senior cycle curricula. The Leaving Cert is a high-stakes exam, given that it is the only 'student performance indicator' used for entry to most third-level courses. Consequently, at senior cycle, assessment is the tail that wags the curriculum dog. Regardless of what skills the Leaving Cert syllabi emphasise, such skills are unlikely to be prioritised by teachers or students, unless they are assessed for certification purposes. Therefore the Leaving Cert exam will effectively determine what teachers teach and students learn at senior cycle level for the foreseeable future.

Employers and third-level academics have for many years been critical of the Leaving Cert's overemphasis on lower-order skills such as knowledge and regurgitation of facts, to the detriment of higher-order skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. An analysis of current Leaving Cert syllabi, carried out some years ago by this author, indicated that in many subjects, higher-order thinking and the skills of application, analysis, critical engagement, synthesis, and evaluation are indeed emphasised in

the syllabi of most Leaving Cert subjects. But some of these skills are not being assessed, because the assessment tools are for the most part limited to end-of-cycle written examination.

'Predictability in the Irish Leaving Certificate' (2014), a study carried out on behalf of the State Examinations Commission by Baird et al.,[1] recommended that more emphasis be placed on higher-order thinking skills in the examinations, in keeping with international trends in assessment. This point was also made in a recent study by Denise Burns et al. (2018, cited in Donnelly, 2018), which quoted students as confirming that memorisation and rote learning dominated their preparation for the Leaving Cert. One student referred to preparing an 'essay pool' of thirty essays on different topics for the English paper, and a Geography student said they did '100 essays in January and learned them off'.[2]

Similar findings emerged from an analysis of Leaving Cert Biology papers over a ten-year period from 1999 to 2008 (Cullinane and Liston, 2016).[3] Their study concluded that 'the examination predominantly includes questions that do not promote higher levels of thinking' and that 'the majority of the marks were allocated to the lower objectives of [Bloom's] taxonomy, suggesting that students can rely on rote learning to succeed when undertaking the biology examination'.

SOLUTIONS TOWARDS ASSESSMENT OF HIGHER-ORDER SKILLS

In the view of this author, actions could be taken to ensure greater congruence between the desired outcomes of the Leaving Cert syllabi and their assessment. The existing exam system could be supplemented with a greater variety of modes and techniques of assessment, to ensure closer alignment between the syllabi and the exams, and to move towards an assessment system that recognises and rewards the skills that have been identified as necessary for lifelong learning, such as analytic reasoning, critical thinking, generation of fresh ideas, and practical application of theory.

> It has been argued that too many students are attending third-level education in Ireland.

Supplemental modes of assessment could include projects, portfolios, and other assignments completed in supervised but non-exam conditions. Essays and open book questions, answered in supervised classroom conditions and externally marked, could also be considered. Instead of requiring students to sit one written exam at the end of the final year, two or more sittings at different points throughout the two-year senior cycle could be an option. New and different forms of assessment might also reduce the current reliance on pen-and-paper tests and allow greater use of new technologies, which might include online submission of essays (written under supervision) and computer-marked multiple-choice questions.

It has been noted that even though the total number of students taking the Leaving Cert increased this year, the number applying for third-level places fell. While the reasons for this are not yet clear, it may well be that students

are beginning to embrace different pathways to employment other than spending three or four years in the third-level sector.

It has been argued that too many students are attending third-level education in Ireland. Currently, more than 60% of the relevant age cohort make the transition from second level. This is one of the highest rates in the EU. By contrast, Ireland has one of the lowest rates of participation in apprenticeships – less than 2–3% of school leavers in recent years. Only 1% of apprentices are female – since until last year almost all apprenticeships were in male-dominated craft apprenticeships such as construction, electrical, plumbing, and carpentry.

Earlier this year, the Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, announced that the government is committed to increasing the number of young people entering apprenticeships, and he pledged to more than double enrolments in what he referred to as 'earn and learn' opportunities by 2020. He announced twenty-six new apprenticeship programmes, varying from two to four years and culminating in awards from Level 5 to Level 10, in areas such as accounting, financial services, cybersecurity, animation, and systems engineering. €122 million has been allocated this year for apprenticeship programmes.

Given the low number of apprenticeships in Ireland to date, an increase makes sense. But a cynic might ask whether this is a covert way for government to get employers to contribute financially to the education of the future workforce. The cutbacks in government funding for higher education have been a source of considerable concern in recent years, with HEIs pointing out that their enrolments have almost doubled in the past decade while government funding has fallen by almost one-third. The era of 'doing more with less' has come to an end, as there is no longer any slack in the higher education system – if there ever was!

A NEW TRANSITION?
And so as we approach the third decade of the twenty-first century, the transition from second to third level and into the labour force is becoming more varied. Transfer is no longer linear. There are many more pathways to employment from second-level education than there were a few decades ago. With the expansion of further education and the growth in apprenticeships, it is likely that the proportion of school leavers entering higher education directly from school will fall and the numbers entering via further education or apprenticeships will grow. In parallel, there is likely to be an increase in lifelong learning opportunities and in the number of mature students re-entering education with a view to re-skilling or expanding the skills and knowledge they acquired earlier in life – a new transition?

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DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND STUDENT LEARNING

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This year has seen a prominent focus in public discourse on digital technologies and their impact on children's development and wellbeing. The debate has often been narrowly concentrated on whether or not to ban mobile phones and other personal devices (in schools and other settings), but commentators have also argued that giving children and young people the skills to use technology appropriately and safely is what really matters.

What does the evidence tell us about the role and impact of digital technologies in children's lives? In order to fully appreciate the complexity of the issues, we need to look at the place and impact of digital technologies in both the school and the outside-school lives of children and young people. This will help in understanding more clearly whether and why technology shapes children's development and learning.

The paper begins by considering the evidence on the role of technologies in the classroom and how such innovations have the potential to enhance teaching and learning for students. It then examines some of the barriers to the effective use of technology in Irish schools. The discussion concludes with some recent research examining the role of mobile phones in children's academic and socio-emotional development. The evidence shows that the issues are complex, not simply reducible to a debate about the merits of prohibition.

DIGITAL STRATEGY FOR SCHOOLS 2015-2020

In the educational space, the *Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020* signalled a renewed focus on enhancing the role of digital technologies in student learning. This policy was envisaged as 'the first step in an exciting and ambitious programme which will further embed technology and digital learning tools in primary and post-primary schools ... [and] greatly enhance the learning experience and lifelong learning skills of all our students' (DES, 2015). While the policy has been criticised as short on concrete plans (Lewis, 2017), it does represent a policy commitment to enhancing the capacity of schools to truly embed technologies in their classrooms. However, in many ways this policy drive really began with the roll-out of high-speed (100Mbps) broadband to all second-level schools, as part of Ireland's National Digital Strategy (DCENR, 2015). This created an impetus for change, perhaps beyond what was initially anticipated.

SLOW BUT DEFINITE PROGRESS

Research tracking the programme illustrated small but tangible ways in which technology was beginning to embed in classroom

life (McCoy et al., 2016). Indeed the high expectations of teachers and principals in terms of what could be achieved with state-of-the-art broadband infrastructure were at least partly realised (Coyne et al., 2016). Schools that received broadband earlier were more likely to report that it had an impact on teaching and learning. Both principals and teachers saw benefits for student learning, through enhanced student participation and achievement, greater collaboration among students and in the development of higher order thinking skills and transversal skills. The findings showed a shift towards more student-centred technology usage over the course of the 18-month study. Through the qualitative research, teachers highlighted benefits in terms of meeting diverse student needs, allowing greater differentiation and tailoring of approach. Digital technologies and online fora, like blogs, also allowed teachers to create a more independent learning environment:

> *It's all about giving the independence back to the students, the independent learning, where they're responsible. If they don't make a certain amount of contributions to the blog over the year then you're looking at the assessment … It's blended learning, its teacher plus tool equals learning* (Teacher)

Teachers also spoke of the role of digital technologies and online resources to support and expand social learning. There was little doubt that an appetite was there among school principals and teachers to embrace the potential of digital technologies to enhance teaching and learning (McCoy et al., 2016).

DES plans to encourage the use of ICT in Continuing Professional Development will need to be realised.

INFRASTRUCTURAL DEFICITS
The investment in broadband infrastructure eliminated one of the biggest barriers constraining the effective integration of digital technologies in school and classroom life, but other infrastructural deficits came to the fore. These include limitations on Wi-Fi and hardware quality and reliability, and insufficient technical support. In many cases schools needed to source funding for pay for the updating and maintenance of hardware (McCoy et al., 2016). In this context, the recent provision of grants to support investment in digital technologies in primary and second-level schools [1] and to support schools in the rollout of Computer Science [2] in the Leaving Certificate are to be welcomed. However, the research has also highlighted constraints in funding and time allocated to the role of ICT co-ordinators. Their role also tends to be largely technical and less about guiding the future direction in digital integration and pedagogical change. Teachers' own skills and confidence in using technology were also central – students were acutely aware, distinguishing between early adopters, 'reluctant' teachers and those who were risk-averse. It is clear that professional development (both initial and continuous) will play a key role in embedding digital technologies within teachers' pedagogical practices, increasing teachers' skills and confidence in using technology and achieving the desired teaching and learning

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1   https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2018-press-releases/PR2018-05-02.html
2   https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2018-press-releases/PR18-07-23.html

outcomes (McCoy et al., 2016). Plans to encourage the use of ICT in CPD design, development and delivery (DES, 2015) will need to be realised.

TECHNOLOGIES CENTRAL IN NEW CURRICULA

Many of the curriculum developments happening, particularly in second-level schools, are strongly focused on embedding digital technologies in the classroom. The new junior cycle will be central in expanding the place and value of digital technologies in teaching and learning, in particular in placing digital technology as central to many of the statements of learning and key skills comprising the programme. The senior cycle review is also worth noting, given that the NCCA is currently 'working with 41 collaborating schools to generate a shared vision for senior cycle and a strong base from which to shape a curriculum that genuinely meets the needs of all learners for years to come', no doubt placing digital technologies at the core. Their approach, drawing on the voices of students and teachers, is valuable, with earlier research highlighting that students provide a unique and valuable insight into the potential for digital technology to enhance their learning (Coyne and McCoy, forthcoming).

The provision of Computer Science as a Leaving Certificate subject represents the latest initiative in the goal of developing 'discrete' digital technology skills and an opportunity to develop critical and strategic learning skills among students (DES, 2015). Students themselves are keenly aware of the importance of digital skills in the workplace, and possess an appetite for formal computer classes throughout their second-level years (McCoy et al., 2016). Thus, it is likely that Computer Science will attract considerable numbers of students once the programme expands beyond the 40 pilot schools, provided curricular content and assessment methodologies are well-designed, and teacher supply constraints are addressed.

> **New curriculum developments are strongly focused on embedding digital technologies in the classroom.**

ONLINE SAFETY

Digital technologies have undoubtedly become an increasing feature of young people's lives, both within and outside of school environments. Most young people today use a multitude of technologies on a daily basis (McCoy et al., 2012). While the evidence highlights the valuable potential of embedding technologies in teaching and learning processes, there is also a need to guard against the dangers of (excessive or inappropriate) technology use, particularly outside of the classroom. The evidence here is scant and somewhat mixed. CyberSafeIreland recently found that 18 per cent of children talk to strangers online every day and one-fifth of 12-year-olds are spending more than four hours a day online. As part of the Broadband Study, focus groups with students in 2nd and 5th year, revealed that students consider 'online' safety to be analogous to 'offline' safety, highlighting how technology has permeated the day-to-day lives of young people (McCoy et al., 2016):

> *Clicking on one of those things is like getting into the car with somebody you don't know* (2nd year student).

> *It's not really much of a difference, I mean you're not going to walk up to a random person in the street and tell them where you live* (5th year student).

Students participating in this study demonstrated an awareness of the risks online, and felt that their schools had offered good guidance through expert speakers, the SPHE programme and peer learning programmes. While these experiences may not represent the experiences of young people across all schools, there was certainly evidence that schools are embracing their role in educating young people for online safety (McCoy et al., 2016; Coyne and McCoy, forthcoming).

MOBILE PHONE TECHNOLOGY

Ongoing research at the ESRI is examining the role of digital technology use in children's socio-emotional and cognitive development, drawing on the Growing Up in Ireland study. The evidence raises concerns: early mobile phone ownership, in particular, has a negative relationship with the academic development of children as they move into adolescence (Dempsey et al., forthcoming)". The persistent presence of mobile phone technology allows it to have an unprecedented impact on children's development. It can seamlessly cross home, school and other settings the child occupies, making it difficult for parents and teachers to supervise and monitor usage.

The frequency of engagement with mobile phone technology is likely to be much greater than for other forms of technology. International evidence suggests that mobile phone usage may impact on children's development through cognitive overload or the negative effects of multitasking, distraction, an impact on memory and learning patterns, an impact on sleep duration and quality, changes in interpersonal interactions, increased anxiety and mobile phone addiction.

International research suggests that mobile phone usage may impact on children's development through cognitive overload, negative effects of multitasking, increased anxiety...

NEED FOR RESEARCH EVIDENCE TO GUIDE PRACTICE

It is clear that schools have a new and evolving role in digital literacy - giving children the skills to critically assess what they view online and make informed choices. Such education should begin in the pre-school years. In moving towards a consultative approach to decision-making, the Minister for Education and Skills recently issued a circular to all schools asking them to consult with parents and students in making decisions on the use of smart phones and personal devices in school. The intention is to promote a shared approach regarding the appropriate use of digital technologies, with buy in from all on the appropriate use of technology within and outside the classroom. The approach is novel and to be commended, but schools are being asked to make decisions in the absence of evidence to guide their deliberations. The dissemination of research evidence on the role and impact of digital technologies on child development and learning would greatly assist schools in their consultations.

ACTION PLAN FOR ONLINE SAFETY 2018-2019

More broadly, it is encouraging that in July of this year, the Government launched the *Action Plan for Online Safety 2018-2019*. The Plan includes actions to enhance resources to support online safety, equip teachers to embed digital awareness and digital citizenship in their practice and support student participation in safer internet day activities and peer-to-peer initiatives. It is particularly welcome that the implementation of

the Action Plan will include consultation with children and young people, through Hub na nÓg, Young Voices in Decision Making.

TECHNOLOGY FUNDAMENTAL IN TODAY'S WORLD

Technology is a fundamental part of the modern world and today's students will have jobs that rely on technology. Knowing how to use technology appropriately and effectively will be hugely important for children as they move into adolescence and adulthood. But protecting them from the dangers is equally, if not more, important, so balancing these competing needs must be paramount. There is little doubt, the challenge for policy is significant, as acknowledged by the Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton:

> *New technology is revolutionising our world bringing with it fantastic opportunities but also challenges. We have an important role in equipping our citizens, in particular our children, with skills to negotiate life in a fast changing 21st century and working together raise awareness to the benefits of new technology while safeguarding our children online.* (Action Plan for Online Safety 2018–2019).

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Award-winning NCAD student

Earlier this year, ESB challenged Irish design students to create a bespoke trophy for international start-up competition, Free Electrons 2018. Diarmuid Farrell from Co Laois, third year student at the National College of Art and Design (NCAD), created the winning trophy from one piece of folded sheet metal.

"The trophy is based on the idea of the big energy companies and small start-ups working together and using innovative new technologies to create clean energy. I feel the augmented reality aspect of the trophy reflects that innovation. I feel very privileged to be part of such an inspiring project. It's really amazing to see all of the work that the start-ups are doing in the area of sustainability", Diarmuid said.

The augmented reality (AR) aspect works by using image targets which a phone can read and project its digital elements in real time.

Congratulating Diarmuid, Jerry O'Sullivan, Deputy Chief Executive at ESB, said: "Innovation is at the very heart of what we do at ESB and we strive to explore and invest in creative ideas and people that will, in turn, benefit our customer... we are excited and proud that Diarmuid's inspiring design took centre stage and his obvious talent was showcased.
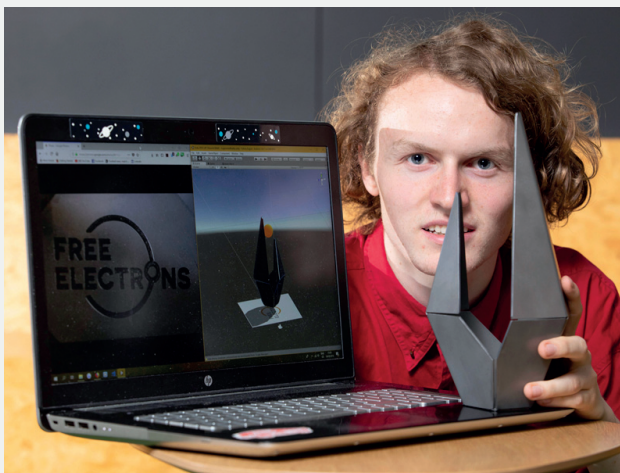
NCAD student **Diarmuid Farrell** with his award winning design for the Free Electrons programme.

Mary Nihill

National Director,
Centre for School
Leadership

EVERY TEACHER A LEADER
Learning to be a school leader in Ireland

Researchers (Leithwood et al., 2006; Day, 2009),[1] policymakers, and practitioners increasingly recognise the role of leadership at all levels in developing high-performing schools. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005),[2] in their study of school leaders and their impact on student achievement, found the average correlation between leadership and student achievement to be 0.25. What this means is that if a school principal were to improve their leadership practices by one standard deviation, then student achievement would increase by ten percentage points.

Unfortunately, the opposite is also true, and the authors warn that if a principal's focus is on the wrong things, student achievement can be negatively impacted. It is therefore important to support teachers in their leadership journey, and to examine what professional learning best equips those aspiring to positions of leadership in schools – as well as those already in leadership positions – to allow them to develop the competencies required to lead schools effectively.

A CONTINUUM OF LEADERSHIP IN IRISH SCHOOLS

There is a growing belief that single-person leadership, such as a principal's, is insufficient to lead learning and teaching in a complex organisation such as a school. Hargreaves and Fink (2006)[3] observed that principals' leadership, and the assumption that school leadership is synonymous with the principal, have preoccupied educational leadership literature for too long.

The growing emphasis on distributed leadership and the recent increased allocation of deputy principals to post-primary schools, combined with the publication of circulars[4] on middle leadership positions for schools, makes this a task of great importance for the Irish school system. The Centre for School Leadership (CSL) has looked at specific leadership areas along the continuum and has identified the following as the leadership positions in schools:

- teacher leaders
- middle leaders
- aspiring senior leaders
- newly appointed senior leaders
- established senior leaders
- system leaders.

It is important that each type of leadership be developed and recognised and that it have its own inherent value in contributing to better learning experiences for students. This identification of leadership 'levels' should not be viewed as a hierarchy with only an upward trajectory as the preferred route to professional achievement.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN IRELAND

In Ireland, the development of the Quality Framework for Leadership and Management, as part of the 'Looking at Our Schools 2016' study,[5] has brought a focus to the importance of leadership for good learning outcomes for students and the need to develop leadership qualities and skills from the outset of a career. It has also given the educational system, and leadership development initiatives in particular, a strong and coherent foundation on which professional development can be based.

The formation of the Centre for School Leadership in 2015[6] was a recognition of the central role of leadership in the task of building schools that promote powerful teaching and learning for all students. The memorandum of understanding between the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the two professional organisations representing school leaders – the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) at post-primary level, and the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) at primary level – clearly articulates the need to 'lead, support and advise on a strategic framework for a continuum of leadership development for schools'.[7]

The discussion on appropriate professional learning for school leadership is important in the development of the Irish education system for a number of reasons. The increased emphasis on whole-school improvement through school self-evaluation (SSE)[8] and the task of managing the quality of teaching and learning in the school have become key leadership functions. The recent leadership and management circulars[9] published by the DES have placed greater emphasis on distributed leadership in schools.

> **The Irish system needs to develop leadership attributes in all staff.**

A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CONTINUUM FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN IRELAND

The Irish system needs to develop leadership attributes in all staff, and to systematically identify and support its future senior leaders. The type of extended professionalism advocated by the Teaching Council as part of its Cosán[10] initiative for all teachers will provide a much stronger pool of potential leaders and will greatly assist in this development.

Therefore, any proposed continuum should look directly at how this leadership can be developed. International examples suggest that good education systems identify effective leaders for today and that high-performing systems grow and develop tomorrow's leaders in a planned and progressive way.

A proposed continuum should aim at developing and fostering the qualities and skills which characterise effective leaders. The people recruited into teaching, their experience in their early years as teachers, and the ways we identify and develop talent across their careers will all contribute to extending the size and quality of the leadership pool.

There is therefore a pressing need to bring more coherence and clarity to the provision of a continuum from teacher leadership through middle

leadership to senior leadership – both on the ground at school level, and by providing a coherent but flexible learning pathway.

COMPONENTS OF AN IRISH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING MODEL FOR LEADERSHIP

Research by the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) has identified a number of key interdependent and interconnected processes that support the professional learning of leaders, both those aspiring to leadership roles and those who already occupy leadership positions. Rather than rely on a single type of experience or a collection of disconnected experiences, CSL is proposing that if change and development of leadership practice in schools is to become a reality, professional learning activities need to incorporate some or all of these components as appropriate to the context and objectives of the professional learning activity, which will be quality-assured by CSL.

This model will develop and enhance leadership practice best in primary and post-primary schools. The CSL leadership continuum is therefore aligned with this model of professional learning and highlights the relationship between learning and practice. The diagram below illustrates this model of professional learning, with grey arrows representing the six levels of leadership that exist in schools. It highlights the components of a proposed Irish model of professional learning, as represented by the coloured circles.
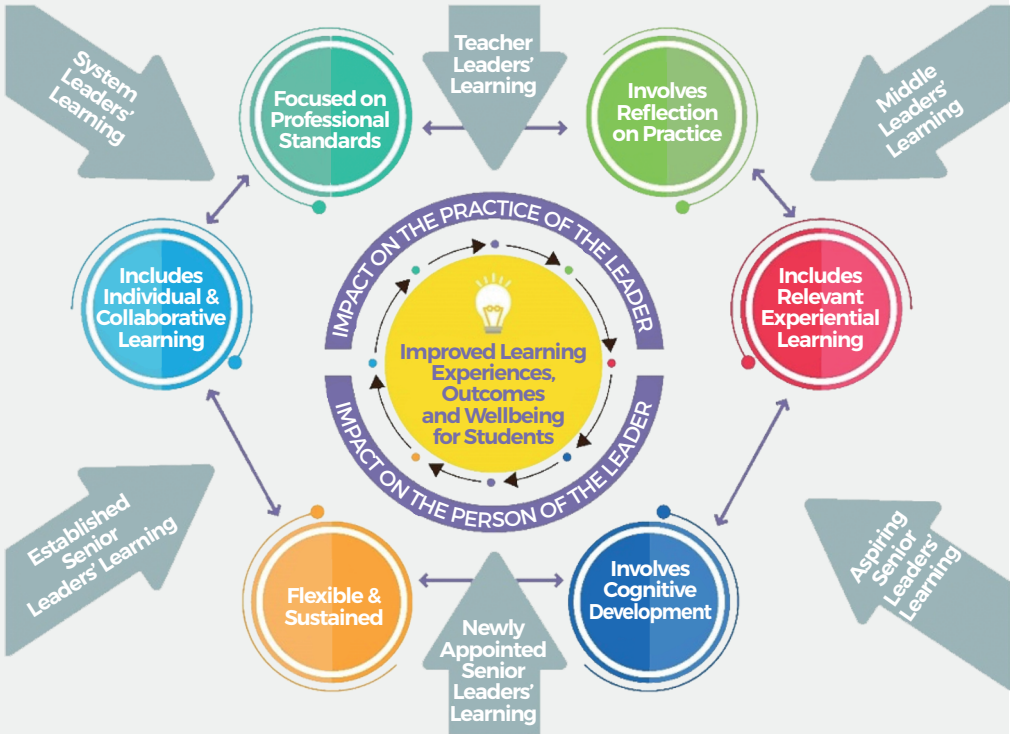
Components of an Irish Model of Professional Learning for Leadership

FOCUSED ON PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

The 'Looking at Our School 2016' framework for leadership and management,[11] published by the DES Inspectorate, is designed for school leaders to use to enhance the quality of leadership in their schools. This publication provides a common understanding of what constitutes high-quality leadership practices. It is therefore important that those involved in developing professional learning programmes and activities use the standards and statements of practice as a basis for planning such learning. The framework highlights the skills and knowledge that are essential elements of good practice. Focusing on the standards outlined in the framework can also give participants tools for reflection as a support in developing their leadership capacity.

The flexibility built into the statements of practice allows school leaders to reflect on and evaluate their own level of proficiency in their specific context. The framework allows for what is most relevant to the specific purpose of individual teachers and schools. It also offers an excellent tool for those providing professional learning to evaluate the strengths of their current provision, and it can be used to explore opportunities for further development. The framework, if used as a guide to identifying good practice in a school as part of school self-evaluation, can be very powerful in developing good leadership practices at a number of levels in schools.

REFLECTION ON PRACTICE

Reflective practice is the ability to reflect on one's actions to engage in a process of continuous learning. According to one definition, it involves 'paying critical attention to the practical values and theories which inform everyday actions, by examining practice reflectively and reflexively'.[12]

High-performing systems grow and develop tomorrow's leaders in a planned and progressive way.

Reflective practice can be an important tool in professional learning settings, where people learn from their own professional experiences rather than from formal learning or knowledge. It is an important way to bring together theory and practice; through reflection a person can see and label forms of thought and theory in the context of their work. A person who reflects throughout their practice is not just looking back on past actions and events but is taking a conscious look at emotions, experiences, actions, and responses, and using that information to add to their knowledge base and reach a higher level of understanding.

A challenging practice for school leaders is to engage in systematic reflection that serves to mitigate time constraints and emotional upheavals of the job and for maximum benefit. Reflection on one's leadership practice should not be seen as a detached or disconnected action but one that is promoted by the culture and structures of the school. Reflection is an inherent component of what it means to be an effective leader. Reflective practice provides a continual means of understanding that translates into renewed action for the individual and the organisation alike. In essence, by engaging in a cycle of questioning, leaders move towards a developmental, non-linear view of leadership that is necessary for a collective sense of direction, purpose, and meaning.

Carroll, Smith, and Whewell (2008)[13] describe reflection as a process to be engaged in rather than a product that can be acquired by ticking the appropriate box. They suggest that asking questions of those taken-for-granted moments acts as a key to reflective practice; tools that can be used include learning journals, critical incident analysis, coaching, and mentoring. Coaching and mentoring are also highlighted as tools for reflective practice in the Cosán Framework for Teachers' Learning.[14]

The emergence of blogging in more recent years is seen as another form of reflection on experience in a technological age. Exploration of models of portfolio-based learning and ICT-based solutions could likewise be helpful tools for reflective practice by both aspiring and established leaders.

RELEVANT EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning can be both formal and informal. It involves action as well as reflection. At an informal level, the learner may decide to make a change in order to improve their leadership practice. They then try out the change and observe and evaluate its impact on their practice and on students' learning outcomes. When experiential learning becomes more formal, it is often a structured professional enquiry combined with action research. The evidence-seeking in this formal process is supported by theory generated from reading and discussion.

Reflection is an inherent component of what it means to be an effective leader.

The Australian Charter for Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders[15] emphasises that professional learning will be most effective when it is relevant, collaborative, and future-focused, and that it needs to address and adapt to the challenges faced by the practitioner. The learning focuses on the identified needs of students, and encourages teachers and school leaders to test out approaches that find new solutions to persistent issues by challenging their assumptions about their practice.

The Cosán framework cites action research projects and piloting of new initiatives as examples of learning processes. The CUREE (Centre for the Use of Research Evidence in Education) report 'Understanding What Enables High-Quality Professional Learning'[16] draws on a range of published research addressing the question: What are the characteristics of high-quality professional learning for practitioners in education? This report highlights the role of structured dialogue and group work in providing opportunities to explore beliefs and assumptions, try out new approaches, give and receive feedback, and explore evidence by trying new things.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

The renewed focus on the school leader as a leader of learning makes the use of new knowledge and the engagement with new ideas and perspectives an important component of professional learning for leadership. Reading and research provide a different lens through which a leader can view their practice. It is therefore important that strong links be forged between those engaged in leadership research that supports evidence-informed practice and those providing professional learning for school leaders. Carroll, Smith, and Whewell (2008) point out that if reflection on practice is not informed

by new ideas and draws only on experiences, its capacity to inform learning is limited.

The CUREE report highlights the importance of support by specialist expertise as an important part of professional learning for both teachers and school leaders. The importance of practice-based current research on effective leadership is a recurring theme found by CUREE when it examined a range of research on what constitutes good-quality professional learning.

The Cosán framework identifies research as a learning process and expands the definition of research to include:

• participation in a research-meet or other research event
• research carried out as part of an academic programme
• membership of a research engagement group
• action research.

The use of relevant research that challenges existing practice and outlines a path towards improvement in teaching and learning outcomes for students is therefore a core element of a quality professional learning activity for school leaders.

FLEXIBLE AND SUSTAINED OVER TIME

Professional learning should be linked to participants' needs and take into account the culture and context in which the teacher or leader works. So it is important that professional learning take account of variables such as career stage, priorities, motivation, and the professional confidence of the learner.

> **The use of relevant research that challenges existing practice is a core element of quality professional learning.**

The Australian research highlights the availability of flexible and non-linear programmes of activity and support as a characteristic of effective professional learning for school leaders. Programmes with fixed start and end dates and linear timetables are increasingly seen as inappropriate for leaders working in relentlessly pressured environments.

Other research highlights the importance of professional learning being available when needed, and stresses that engagement with learning is greatly improved if it addresses a specific need. Building a national strategy for career-long leadership development has to support the role of the individual practitioner in shaping their professional development. More personalised learning approaches are complex and make specific demands on learners. Forde et al. (2013)[17] state that it is important to balance the system need for leadership capacity with scope for the individual practitioner to shape their own professional learning pathways.

Researchers such as Wasik and Hindman (2011)[18] and Tabernik and Williams (2010)[19] found sustained professional learning to be a key characteristic of effectiveness. Teachers and school leaders who received sustained professional learning over time were more likely to put strategies learned into practice. Many of the learning processes cited in Cosán, such as

working as a cooperating teacher, availing of a secondment, and engaging in an externship, fit into the category of sustained professional learning.

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Individual learning has benefits and should be part of all professional learning. It allows leaders to develop a personalised pathway to their goals. Cosán acknowledges this, and in relation to teachers' learning argues for a balance between enhancing their own practice as individuals and creating a responsive and dynamic community of practice.

However, reflection and experiential learning, referred to here as components of a model of leadership learning, depend to a large extent on collaboration for sustained impact on practice. Carroll, Smith, and Whewell stress the importance of considering group dynamics and a safe working environment, with explicit discussions of notions of trust, confidentiality, and power that will allow for better outcomes from the collaboration. A genuine, structured, collaborative process that involves leaders working together, identifying starting points, sharing evidence about practice, and trying new approaches can be a powerful component of any leadership professional learning activity.

CONCLUSION

Providing a clear framework for both aspiring and serving school leaders at different levels allows them to plan their own leadership pathway and opportunities. Learning to be a school leader is not about getting to the next level: it is about developing the skills and capacities to maximise potential at whatever level of leadership a person occupies at a particular time, career stage, or context.

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Stamps issued to honour two famous leaders

On 5 April 2018, An Post issued two stamps in recognition of the life and achievements of international statesmen and Nobel peace prize winners, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was an American Baptist minister, activist, humanitarian and leader in the African-American Civil Rights Movement. He led the August 1963 'March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom' where he gave his famous 'I Have a Dream' speech. King, Jr. received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 for his non-violent campaign against racism. He was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

Nelson Mandela, the anti-apartheid revolutionary spent 27 years in jail as a political prisoner. Following his release in 1990, Mandela became the first black President of South Africa in 1994, serving until 1999. He was jointly awarded the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize with Frederik Willem de Klerk in recognition of the peaceful change-over of government and their efforts to end apartheid.

The stamps are available from main post offices, from the stamp counters at Dublin's GPO, or online at www.irishstamps.ie. Both stamps are intended for international mail and will carry a 'W' designation for worldwide posting.

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND POLICY-MAKING IN IRELAND
Beyond serendipity to strategy

Anne Looney

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Ireland's ambitious *Action Plan for Education 2016–2019* makes several references to research across a number of objectives and targets. Notably, system objective 4, which is focused on building bridges between education and the wider community, includes a high-level goal on research in higher education and the innovation system (DES, 2016, p.13). References in the plan to *educational* research – by this I mean the branch of social sciences research about education – are more granular and action-specific, and most of these are associated with agencies under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills (DES), rather than with the Department itself.

For example, reference is made to research to support the new Leaving Certificate subject in Computer Science and the development of reporting as part of the work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (ibid., p.25). The work of the National Forum on Teaching and Learning to provide an 'evidence base' for higher education pedagogy is mentioned (ibid., p.28) as is the role of the National Council for Special Education in leading research in special education (ibid., p. 30).

The most recent update, *Action Plan for Education 2018*, places more emphasis on research in higher education and refers specifically to post-Brexit scenarios and the need to attract world-leading researchers to Ireland (DES, 2018, p.50). Discussion of educational research is again confined to specific projects: research papers to support junior cycle developments, research to support the implementation of Síolta, the quality framework for early years, research to support the Digital Strategy, and research on the impact of the changes to grading in the Leaving Cert. Development of a 'research-based framework' (ibid., p.43) is proposed to support the evaluation of continuing professional development for teachers working on student well-being.

Both the overarching plan and the most recent 2018 update reference a number of educational research activities and projects. At one level, therefore, educational research *is* part of the national plan, and has a role in making Ireland's the best education and training system in Europe. But the absence of any *strategic* position for educational research, and its assignment to a 'supporting' role for other actions, is striking. And when compared to similar education plans for systems like ours (Scotland and New Zealand, for example), this absence is even more notable.

In New Zealand, the plan for education to 2020 includes the achievement of more evidence-based decision-making by students,

parents, teachers, leaders, providers, and Government, as one of a set of intermediate-level goals (New Zealand Government, 2016, p.9). It goes on to discuss how findings from research, including international research (of particular importance for New Zealand) and system data, should be available at every level of the education system to inform planning and decision-making, from the classroom to the committee table.

The Scottish government launched a strategy for educational research in April 2017, in response to a recommendation by an OECD review of the school system on the need to strengthen evaluation and research, including independent research (OECD, 2015). Across developed education systems, systematic efforts are being made by governments and other stakeholders to improve the links between research and education policy (Brown, 2014).

In Ireland, while there are examples of how research has significantly shaped education policy in recent years, such impact has been more serendipitous than strategic. The serendipitous and the strategic are not mutually exclusive; two examples, discussed later, show that most research impact lies somewhere on a continuum between them.

The next section looks at the complex relationship between research and policy in education from different perspectives and considers the popular concept of 'evidence' in policy talk and policy-making.

THE RESEARCH–POLICY RELATIONSHIP
The relationship between the social sciences and policy-making has not always been cordial. But in the last decade of educational change across the globe, growing attention has been paid to how research is used to inform both policy and practice. This trend has not been confined to education. Health policies have led the way in championing and integrating what have come to be called 'evidence-based' approaches.

These approaches emerged from a convergence of developments. At the start of the millennium, Davies et al. (2000) observed that a well-educated and more informed citizenry with the tools to access and generate data was going to expect more of that data to be referenced in democratic deliberations. At the same time, the research community in the social sciences was growing, and, with the help of new technologies, capable of more sophisticated analyses.

Politically, this was the age of accountability and greater scrutiny of government decision-making, with an impetus towards and expectation of improvements in education outcomes. In the years since Davies and colleagues described the circumstances that gave birth to the turn to evidence, social media and infographics have served to make research evidence far more accessible to wider audiences.

In 2011 the final report of the European Project on Evidence Informed Policy Making in Education in Europe (EIPEE) noted the complexity of the research–policy relationships. Evidence, the report concludes, is just one imperative in effective policy-making. For this reason the authors of the report prefer the term 'evidence-informed', because claiming that policy is 'evidence-based' obscures the fact that sometimes evidence can have a very

limited role in the policy process (Gough et al., 2011). The authors also note that the breadth of what constitutes evidence is wide and dynamic, ranging from published peer-reviewed research studies, to expert knowledge, surveys of public opinion, evaluations of previous policies, and systematic reviews of research literature.

Just as the developments in social media have changed the way research findings are published and shared, an exponential rise in what has come to be called 'grey literature' has reshaped the relationship between research and policy, offering the policy community a new and digestible form of evidence. Although 'grey literature' is variously defined, in general it is understood to mean the wide range of reports, working papers, and other publications not produced by commercial or academic institutions, generally accessible and readily shared.

Literature produced by government agencies (e.g. NCCA or HEA in Ireland) or consultants (e.g. McKinsey or PWC) would fall into this category. Because of its accessibility (usually online) and wide dissemination, it can have a significant impact on policy development and the policy-development community – at all levels. As 'evidence', the quality of grey literature may vary: some of it amounts to little more than op-ed or polemic. But it can also include systematic reviews of a particular field of study or policy. Infographics are popular in this form of evidence, and these graphic representations are popular with social and mainstream media.

An exponential rise in what has come to be called 'grey literature' has reshaped the relationship between research and policy.

CHALLENGES TO THE RESEARCH–POLICY RELATIONSHIP

The term 'evidence' is not without contestation. Further, there is not universal support for a closer relationship between research and the evidence from research, and policy-making. Critics of the evidence-informed approach talk of a narrow view of what counts as 'evidence', and of the risk that only research that can generate 'policy-ready findings' will be funded and commissioned. In education systems that include an evaluation of the research performance of higher education institutions, 'policy impact' is increasingly referenced in evaluation frameworks.

For example, the draft general criteria for the 2021 Research Excellence Framework for the UK include a proposal that 25 per cent of the evaluation should be allocated to significance and impact on the economy, culture, and social and public policy. There is concern in the research community that research in social sciences may be whittled into its most impact-ready forms (usually large-scale population studies), leaving little room for smaller, highly contextualised work. This is in marked contrast to trends in the physical and biological sciences, for example, where the pressure is towards more frontier, basic, and blue-skies research which, by its very nature, may never have impact.

Critics of the evidence-based movement in social policy also point to the risk that professional judgement and the wisdom of practice and experience may be displaced over time (Boaz et al., 2008). Critics also fear that research findings can be used ideologically to give legitimacy to political perspectives. Others view this turn to evidence as technocratic

and overly optimistic in the face of complex social problems. Some social scientists question whether we need more evidence, or whether we need to recognise that the solutions to these complex problems are beyond data or evidence, as they might require reconciling radically different values.

Supporters of the movement reject the accusation of over-reliance on certain narrow types of research findings, or excessive concern with 'what works'. Geoff Whitty (2006), for example, writing about evidence-based policy-making in education, suggested:

> Research defined too narrowly would actually be very limited as an evidence base for a teaching profession that is facing the higher challenges of a rapidly changing world where what works today, may not work tomorrow (p.162).

Writing about the teaching profession, he went on to suggest that any research-based profession must engage with research that questions and challenges prevailing assumptions, think differently, and challenge old myths and preconceptions. For Whitty, the research–policy relationship is not linear: it's not simply a matter of educational researchers generating evidence to use in policies that teachers and others then implement. Rather, research has multiple 'users' in the education system and is 'used' at lots of different phases of the policy process – which is neither linear nor logical. Brown (2014) makes a similar point, noting that research, even if it gets into the policy process, may not have any influence given the range of forces shaping that process.

Any research-based profession must engage with research that questions and challenges prevailing assumptions.

SERENDIPITY AND STRATEGY: TWO EXAMPLES FROM IRISH EDUCATION

While the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) led by the OECD may be the most widely discussed research study in the world, and arguably the most influential on education policy, I want to look at two home-grown examples of the research–policy relationship. The first – very close to home – is the study conducted by Geraldine Scanlon and Grainne McKenna from my own institution, Dublin City University's Institute of Education, on the impact of homelessness on children's educational achievement and well-being.

Conducted on behalf of the Children's Rights Alliance and provocatively titled 'Home Works: A study on the educational needs of children experiencing homelessness', the research report presented data gathered from children, their families, and their teachers on the experience and impact of homelessness. It foregrounded the voice of the children who participated. Launched on 3 July 2018, the research found that children in emergency accommodation were frequently absent from or late for school, fell asleep in class, and had trouble concentrating. Parents reported concern about the impact of poor diet, and everyone – children and adults – reported the stress and embarrassment caused by homelessness (Scanlon and McKenna, 2018).

Reporting in the *Irish Independent* on the day of the launch, Katherine Donnelly described 'the grim litany of suffering and loss being faced by

children caught up in the current homelessness crisis' (Donnelly, 2018). Both authors gave media interviews on the day, and there was considerable coverage on social media, much of it generated by attendees at the launch. The homelessness crisis has continued, and may even have deepened since, but it is interesting that on the afternoon of 3 July, after the study was launched, the Minister with responsibility for housing announced the building of new family hubs across the country. This may well have been scheduled for that week, but the timing could hardly have been coincidental.

Research that is well presented, communicated effectively, and inserted into the news cycle and the social media cacophony may generate an immediate policy response. While the response in this case did not end child homelessness, the research–policy interaction showed that powerful evidence, even from local and contextual studies, can be difficult to ignore.

The second example is a research study that took place in 2002–2010. Its impact continues to be felt: the changes currently being implemented in junior cycle owe much to this research. Indeed, the impetus for change was, to a large degree, fuelled by the research. The longitudinal study of student experiences of post-primary education, funded by the NCCA, was conducted by Emer Smyth and her team at the Economic and Social Research Institute.

Changes currently being implemented in junior cycle owe much to a research study conducted by Emer Smyth and her team at the ESRI, 2002-2010.

It began with a questionnaire distributed to post-primary principals, generating an unprecedented 78 per cent response rate. A stratified sample of eleven schools was then generated for the longitudinal component of the study, and around 1,000 first-year students began their remarkable journey as research subjects. The first publication, in 2004, was about the effectiveness of transition from primary to post-primary schools (Smyth et al., 2004). It described how first-year class groups were organised, how first-year students were tested before and on entry into post-primary school, and how 'settling in' happened for students and teachers.

Standardised tests were administered to the participating students, and this data formed a baseline for future years of the study. The scores showed that first-year students were being sorted into ability groups based on very little evidence, and that once placed in these groups, students had little or no mobility for the rest of their school career. The reports that followed, at intervals of about 18 months as the cohort moved through post-primary education, offered not just insights into the experience of schooling from a student perspective, but compelling evidence of the need for change. This was noted by the NCCA in one report that formed the basis for the current reform:

The evidence from that study has served to confirm what many had already believed about the experience of junior cycle education for students – that it has three distinct phases – a first year about settling in, a third year dominated by the examination, and a second year where students either become more, or less connected to school. The research also showed that the quality of engagement – with the

schools, with teachers and with learning – is central to this phase of education. Disengagement with any of these in junior cycle is not a phase, or a glitch, but a process that will deepen in senior cycle and have consequences well beyond schooling. The disengagement is more acutely marked in boys, and in students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. (NCCA, 2011, p.4)

The commitment to the research project by successive NCCA boards and committees across a ten-year period, and the systematic and consistent use of the research in documents such as the one quoted above, are an example of a strategic research–policy relationship. But it was not without serendipity. Rapid social and economic changes in Irish society also generated pressure for reform. Coming at the same time as the research study gave the findings additional policy power. Similarly, a study that foregrounded student perspectives on their learning, and their reflections on the quality of the school experience at a time of increasing interest in the rights of children and young people, probably got more attention than it might have a decade earlier.

TOWARDS A STRATEGY FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH?

Serendipity may be a constant possibility, but when it comes to connecting educational research and policy, intentional and sustained strategy is a better use of research, and ultimately gives rise to better policies. A measure of the positive response to Scotland's strategy for educational research is that even the researchers like it! Mark Priestley of Stirling University wrote in his popular blog that he was cautiously optimistic about the strategy that saw researchers included as part of the educational community, along with students, families, communities, and policy-makers. The commitment to enhance research infrastructure and encourage independent research to challenge the system was particularly welcome (Priestley, 2017).

Although it is early days for Scotland's strategy, and questions about funding and implementation remain, perhaps Ireland needs to consider something similar? That's a question not just for government but for the educational research community.

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Dr Alison Campbell, Director, Knowledge Transfer Ireland.

New practical guide on the appointment of company directors

A publication aimed at providing guidance to those thinking of taking up positions as company directors and observers in spin-outs and start-ups was launched recently by Knowledge Transfer Ireland (KTI).

"We have developed this simple guide to assist individuals who may be taking on a directorship or observer role, and for any organisation considering appointing one of its staff in these types of positions," said Dr Alison Campbell, Director of KTI.

"We hope that it will be particularly helpful for those involved with spin-out companies from research performing organisations [RPOs].

"Ireland has a very strong spin-out sector, with 113 thriving active spin-out companies in the state last year supporting at least 1600 jobs. In 2017 a further 21 new spin-out companies were formed. Good governance and active support for these spin-outs by founders and RPOs is an important part of their success.

"This guide has been prepared to help those who are looking to engage in the Board of companies understand their statutory and fiduciary duties and the expectations and risks involved."

The KTI Practical Guide: 'The Role of Directors & Observers' is available to download from the KTI website.

WIRED THAT WAY
The origins of our individual natures

Kevin Mitchell

Associate Professor of Genetics and Neuroscience and Senior Lecturer/Dean of Undergraduate Studies at Trinity College Dublin

Any parent with more than one child knows that they don't come out of the womb as blank slates. 'They're like chalk and cheese' is a common refrain, emphasising the innate differences between children and how refractory their individual natures are to parental influences. Teachers, too, are well aware of differences in their young charges – in their personalities, their interests, and their aptitudes.

In a new book, titled *Innate: How the Wiring of Our Brains Shapes Who We Are* (Princeton University Press), I trace the origins of these differences to variation in how our brains get wired during development. Much of this variation arises from genetic differences between people, but inherent variability in brain-development processes also makes an important, and often overlooked, contribution.

HUMAN NATURE IS ENCODED IN OUR DNA

If we think about human nature in general – the range of behavioural tendencies and capacities that characterise us as a species – it becomes obvious that it must somehow be encoded in our DNA. The human genome in any newly fertilised egg cells must contain the instructions to build a human being, with a human brain, that endows that being with human traits.

We know quite a bit about how that works – the bit about building a human being, at least. Developmental biologists have worked out many of the principles and processes by which a developing embryo becomes patterned, with a head at one end, a tail at the other, a heart in the middle, and so on, as well as the molecular mechanisms by which cells decide to become muscle cells or skin cells or bone cells.

When it comes to the human brain, this gets much more complex. It is made up of hundreds of distinct regions and subregions, each with scores of specialised types of nerve cells. And those cells have to be arranged and connected with exquisite specificity to carry out the particular computations that underlie our cognitive functions. All of this requires the actions of thousands of different genes, each of which encodes a specific protein, which interacts with other proteins within or between cells to drive all these developmental processes.

The details of that aren't important here. What's important is that variation in the sequence of DNA that comprises all those genes can affect the outcome. The human genome is a string of 3 billion chemical bases or 'letters' of DNA, in a specific sequence. If you

compare humans to chimps, 98.7 per cent of those letters are identical. The 1.3 per cent that are different – about 39 million differences – are responsible for the *differences* between humans and chimps, including in their brains and respective natures.

The same principle applies to differences between individuals in any given species. The genomes of any two humans are 99.9 per cent identical, meaning there are about 3 million differences between them. As with the differences between humans and chimps, many of the differences between humans affect the genes controlling brain development, and will cause differences in the outcome, manifesting as differences in our respective natures.

FAMILY RESEMBLANCES

If genetic differences cause variation in our traits, then people who are more related to each other should be more similar to each other for those traits. This is exactly what we observe. Advances in neuroimaging let us examine in detail the structure and function of the brain, the way different regions are laid out, and how they are interconnected. These analyses reveal a unique 'neural fingerprint' that characterises each of our brains. That pattern is much more similar between identical twins, who carry all of the same genetic variants, than between fraternal twins or siblings, who have only 50 per cent of those variants in common. The same effect is seen even across distantly related people in the general population (ruling out concerns that twins are somehow a special case).

Our genes direct the wiring of our brains in ways that affect our psychology, endowing us with innate predispositions and tendencies.

With psychological traits, we see the same pattern. For pretty much any psychological trait that can be measured and thus compared between people – including cognitive traits like intelligence, memory, or quantitative reasoning, or personality traits like extraversion, neuroticism, or conscientiousness – people who are more closely related to each other are more similar for those measures. The same is true for the incidence of psychiatric conditions, including autism, dyslexia, and ADHD – all highly genetic conditions. By contrast, it is consistently found in twin and adoption studies that growing up in the same family environment shows a surprisingly small, often negligible, effect on our psychological traits.

Our genes thus literally direct the wiring of our brains in ways that affect our psychology, endowing us with innate predispositions and tendencies. But the effects of our genes are not fully deterministic. The genome does not encode a specific outcome of development, only the rules by which the processes are governed. How that programme plays out will vary from run to run. So even identical twins – while much more similar to each other than unrelated people or regular siblings – are not fully identical in their brain structure or psychological make-up. Chance events during development ensure that by the time they are born, they are already unique.

THE INTERPLAY OF NATURE AND NURTURE

Our stories, as individuals, do not start with a blank page. But of course they also do not end with the first page, or the first chapter. Nature and nurture are typically set in opposition to each other, but in reality there is an

intimate interplay between them. Humans, especially young children, are learning machines. Our protracted development and maturation – taking much longer to reach adulthood and independence than other primates – gives us the opportunity to learn from our experiences and adapt our behaviour accordingly. Given that, you might expect that experience would tend to flatten out or override our innate predispositions. In fact, exactly the opposite tends to happen: our experiences more often amplify these innate differences.

There are several important reasons for this. First, our experiences do not just happen to us – they are also influenced by our genetics. In particular, if personality traits are shared between parents and children, this interaction may amplify the traits of the child. For example, if a naturally cautious child also has overprotective parents, this will reinforce the child's initial temperament. A naturally aggressive child who also has aggressive parents will have that pattern of behaviour consolidated.

In addition, young children with different temperaments evoke different responses and reactions from their parents, peers, teachers, and coaches, which can similarly influence their development. A naturally gifted child – academically, musically, athletically – is likely to receive encouragement from parents and teachers in ways that can lead to a virtuous cycle of increased practice, achievement, praise, and motivation.

As we mature, we become more and more active, autonomous agents who increasingly select our own experiences. An outgoing child will choose to socialise more, and develop more expertise in social skills, while a naturally shy child may lag behind in these skills, due to lack of practice. A child with dyslexia, for whom reading is effortful, will naturally tend to read less and fall further and further behind their peers.

Finally, we learn from reward or punishment – from things feeling good or bad. But the neural circuits that mediate signals of reward or punishment, or that control what kinds of things we pay attention to or find salient, also differ between people. This means that even when two people are exposed to what looks objectively like the same environment or circumstances, their subjective experiences may be highly different. And it is the subjective experience that determines whether we learn from something and how it shapes our future behaviour.

Our innate predispositions are thus crucially important in influencing our habits in response to our environments and experiences. We all start out different from each other, and in many ways we become more so over time – more and more crystallised versions of ourselves.

For educators, recognising this diversity is essential. It can, in the first instance, lead to greater acceptance of the range of behaviours, abilities, aptitudes, and interests that individuals will present in a classroom. And it can help identify children who may benefit from intervention to counteract the vicious cycles that can amplify initial difficulties, if left unchecked.

Dr Treasa Kirk

Assistant Chief Inspector and head of the Gaeltacht Education Unit in the Department for Education and Skills

STRENGTHENING THE QUALITY OF IRISH-MEDIUM EDUCATION IN THE GAELTACHT

From policy formulation to implementation

Out of a population of one million people in the Gaeltacht, just over one in five speak Irish daily (Central Statistics Office, 2017). Despite the decline in the use of Irish in the Gaeltacht, surveys show that people in Ireland value and are positively disposed towards their Irish identity, culture, and language. The significant expansion of Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí is testament to the deliberate choice made by many parents for their children to access Irish-medium education (Ó Duibhir, 2018, p.16). Learners in these schools are dependent on dispersed networks of Irish speakers to come into contact with Irish (ibid., p.22).

A major challenge is to revive and promote the use of Irish as the daily means of communication among people in Gaeltacht areas in Ireland. The education system plays a crucial role in promoting and advancing Irish, our first official language. A community effort is needed in an area where English is the majority language spoken and where learners often have limited access and exposure to Irish outside of school. While native Irish speakers attending Gaeltacht schools are fluent in Irish, there is concern about their levels of language proficiency (Ó Giollagáin & Charlton, 2015; Nic Fhlannchadha & Hickey, 2016, cited in Ó Duibhir, 2018, p.23).

Addressing the challenge of the survival of the Gaeltacht, the commitment to promoting and reviving the Irish language is evident in the '20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030', which led to publication in 2016 of the 'Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017–2022'. The Policy is the first-ever targeted strategy for Gaeltacht education in the Gaeltacht to address the decline in the use of Irish. Its implementation is part of the Department and Education and Skills' (DES) overall plan to make the Irish education and training system the best in Europe by 2026 (DES, 2017c).

The Policy was informed by a comprehensive review of national and international research and case studies carried out by the Inspectorate on primary and post-primary schools in the Gaeltacht (www.education.ie). The extensive consultation undertaken, which generated over 550 responses from stakeholders and Gaeltacht communities, influenced the measures set out in the Policy.

The Policy has been widely welcomed by Gaeltacht communities and has received much media coverage. It provides a clear roadmap for a long-term strategy for action to extend the use of Irish and strengthen Irish-medium education in the Gaeltacht. Its overarching goal is to ensure the availability of high-quality Irish-medium education in Gaeltacht schools and early-years settings,

and in this way to support the use of Irish as the main language of Gaeltacht communities. Specifically, it aims to:

- support and engage school communities in language planning by contributing to the use and maintenance of Irish in the school and local Gaeltacht community
- use lessons from research and on-the-ground experience to implement positive change and increase the number of schools and early-years settings in the Gaeltacht that operate solely through the medium of Irish
- develop networks and support schools in becoming centres of excellence in delivering high-quality Irish-medium education.

MOVING INTO IMPLEMENTATION

Implementing the Policy is challenging, as there is a need to ensure that policy translates into actions that will impact positively on practice. Careful planning is essential to enable Policy goals to be attained and to overcome any obstacles encountered. Implementation began with the establishment of a dedicated Gaeltacht Education Unit (An tAonad um Oideachas Gaeltachta (AOG)) in the DES to oversee, monitor, and support the phased implementation of the Policy. A budget of €1 million was allocated in 2017, which was more than doubled in 2018. Since its establishment, AOG has used its communication, coordination, and planning processes to inform, consult, gather, and disseminate information to steer the Policy implementation.

A Gaeltacht Education Policy Advisory Committee, comprising representatives from a wide range of stakeholders, was established at an early stage. The committee pre-empts and identifies challenges and opportunities, and members provide helpful advice, perspectives, and feedback to support Policy implementation. Such participation, engagement, and professional dialogue have helped establish trust and inform decision-making. AOG is also supported by a team of Inspectors, and positive links have been fostered with the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltachta, An Chomhairle Oideachais Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG), and other agencies.

Implementation of the Policy began with the establishment of a dedicated Gaeltacht Education Unit - An tAonad um Oideachas Gaeltachta (AOG).

GAELTACHT SCHOOL RECOGNITION SCHEME

A Gaeltacht school has traditionally been defined on the basis of geographical location. The Gaeltacht Act 2012 provides for a redefinition of Gaeltacht areas based instead on Irish-language criteria. Under the Policy, schools located in Gaeltacht language-planning areas are eligible to seek recognition as Gaeltacht schools on the basis of implementing specific language criteria (DES 0033/2017 and 0034/2017) and on condition that they are participating in the language-planning processes under the Gaeltacht Act.

The Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme was launched in April 2017. The Scheme is a key action to support Policy implementation to strengthen the quality of Irish-medium education and Irish-language use in primary and post-primary schools. Its objective is to encourage participating schools to achieve Gaeltacht school status over a five-year period. This will be

achieved by implementing specific language-based criteria and a total-immersion approach using an action-planning development process.

The launch of the Scheme was complemented by a coordinated communications strategy, which included the distribution of a comprehensive information pack to schools and parents on the benefits of immersion education. This pack was developed by the Department's Gaeltacht Education Unit in collaboration with the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, COGG, Gaeloideachas, and Údarás na Gaeltachta. This awareness-raising phase had a substantial impact on influencing school communities to participate in the Scheme. Initial uptake was high, with 106 primary schools (79%) and 28 post-primary schools (97%) opting into the Scheme from the outset. Schools chose whether or not to participate, after consulting with their communities, and this has enabled schools and local communities to take greater ownership of the Scheme.

The package of supports provided by the Department was contingent on the quality of schools' engagement with the action-planning process (DES, 2018a, 2018b). A review of schools' action plans was completed by the Gaeltacht Education Unit in collaboration with the Inspectorate, and feedback was provided to schools on the next steps to ensure continuous development. Following this, targeted supports were provided to schools under the Scheme that included additional allocated teaching hours, continuing professional development (CPD) delivered by COGG, Inspectorate advisory visits, and a grant for Irish-medium resources. Schools in Gaeltacht language-planning areas that currently adopt a partial-immersion or bilingual approach are being facilitated to move, on a phased basis, to a total-immersion approach in Irish, through their action-planning process.

Although initial uptake has been very strong, schools on the fringes of Gaeltacht areas that have not yet opted into the Scheme will be given further opportunities to do so over the five-year timeframe of the Policy.

Seminars were provided in all Gaeltacht areas to inform parents of the benefits of full immersion education.

IMPLEMENTING IMMERSION EDUCATION

Implementing immersion education places a particular emphasis on fostering a teaching and learning environment solely through the medium of Irish. One challenge encountered was the need to highlight the benefits of immersion education, to alleviate parents' concerns that their children's proficiency in English would be affected. Schools and their local communities were given brochures, information packs, posters, and frequently asked questions on immersion education. Seminars were provided by COGG and Gaeloideachas in all Gaeltacht areas to inform parents of the benefits of full immersion education in infant classes in Gaeltacht primary schools. In addition, the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and Údarás na Gaeltachta support community organisations in preparing and implementing language plans in Gaeltacht language-planning areas.

AOG has worked closely with COGG in the publication of customised Draft Guides with indicators of good practice for primary and post-primary schools (DES, 2018c, 2018d). These Guides will support schools in the Gaeltacht in their efforts to meet the language-based criteria for immersion

education in order to gain recognition as an Irish-medium Gaeltacht school. It is envisaged that the Guides will enable schools to explore indicators of good practice for immersion education and to identify improvement targets to support the provision of high-quality Irish-medium education. The guides were informed by research carried out by Mary Immaculate College on behalf of Gaeloideachas, and observations and feedback were provided by the Gaeltacht Education Policy Advisory Committee. The Draft Guidelines will be modified on the basis of schools' experience in using the Guides and the feedback provided by schools and different stakeholders.

ADVISORY VISITS TO SUPPORT SCHOOLS

Inspectorate advisory visits play an important part in helping schools to use self-evaluation purposefully to respond to the needs of first- and second-language learners, encourage innovation, and strengthen immersion education. During these visits, the inspector's role is to provide support, advice, and affirmation, monitor progress, acknowledge good practice, and help schools address the challenges on their journey towards achieving recognition as a Gaeltacht school.

ACTION-PLANNING THROUGH SCHOOL SELF-EVALUATION

Schools participating in the Scheme were required to develop action plans for improvement linked to language-based criteria for review and approval by the Department. This was a deliberate action to emphasise from the outset the need for target-focused planning at whole-school level. The monitoring process was implemented to encourage schools to engage in school self-evaluation involving staff, learners, and parents, to increase the likelihood of positive teaching and learning outcomes in classrooms and schools.

OTHER POLICY ACTIONS UNDERWAY

Plans are under way to implement a small-scale, three-year e-hub Pilot Project under the Policy. Its objective is to provide opportunities to link post-primary schools digitally in order to extend the minority subject options for students in post-primary schools in the Gaeltacht. A small number of e-hub post-primary schools selected for the pilot will access additional support to facilitate their participation in the project. If successful, it will be extended to other interested post-primary schools. This will make available additional subjects in a virtual online learning environment through the medium of Irish.

Plans are underway to provide opportunities to link post-primary schools digitally to extend minority subject options for students in the Gaeltacht.

Forás, an Irish-language development programme, is another pilot initiative under way in the implementation phase. It involves providing additional support to two post-primary schools in the Gaeltacht that meet predetermined criteria. This pilot programme will focus on providing support for the Irish-language acquisition and fluency of learners at junior cycle. The results will be carefully evaluated, and the learning gained will inform future practice in Gaeltacht schools.

Following a competitive tendering process, two new Irish-medium teacher education programmes have been awarded. A part-time M.Ed. in Irish-Medium and Gaeltacht Education for practising primary and post-primary teachers and principals began in Mary Immaculate College in September

2018. A new four-year B.Ed. programme through Irish for primary teachers will begin in Marino Institute of Education in September 2019. Additional staffing has also been provided for the Postgraduate Masters in Education programme delivered through Irish at NUI Galway. It is hoped these developments will strengthen the supply of teachers with a high level of proficiency in Irish, to ensure the survival and future of the language.

CONCLUSION

In monitoring the quality of implementation, the challenge will be to sustain momentum and optimum engagement. There will be a need to analyse evidence to establish how the Policy actions affect the use of Irish in school communities. The intended and unintended impact of the Policy on the quality of teaching and learning in Gaeltacht schools will require consideration. For example, how has the Policy affected practice in classrooms? Has it changed the extent to which Irish is spoken and used? How have contextual and other external factors influenced the level of impact of the Policy's implementation? How will the findings inform future decision-making? Are there economic implications? What benefits accrued from the additional supports provided to schools under the Policy? How have schools with challenging sociolinguistic circumstances stepped up to improve the quality of Irish-medium educational provision for learners? To what extent is it possible for these schools to achieve Gaeltacht school recognition under the terms of the Policy?

Policy implementation is dynamic. It requires a flexible, problem-solving approach rooted in foresight to address inevitable roadblocks and respond to unanticipated issues. Implementation plans may need to be adjusted accordingly. A collaborative, interdepartmental approach with a focus on building capacity is essential to bring about sustainable change in practice. Project planning and attention to detail are critical to ensure that outcomes are achieved to best effect.

An Irish version of this article is available at www.education.ie.

Tá leagan Gaeilge den alt seo ar fáil ag www.education.ie.

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Gaeilge 24 Challenge: Speak only Irish for 24 hours

Colaiste Chraobh Abhann, Wicklow, taking part in the Gaeilge 24 challenge to speak only Irish for 24 hours. Over 34,000 students in 32 counties took part in 2018.

WHAT MAKES A QUALITY CURRICULUM?

Experiences from the Irish context

Patrick Sullivan

Director of curriculum and assessment in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

There are many who recommend a simple recipe for a quality curriculum: to a large helping of knowledge add a dash of skills and a pinch of learning dispositions, then season with some key competencies. Authors of such recipes often understand curriculum as a prescriptive, step-by-step mode of transmission, believing that teaching involves pouring the contents of the curriculum into passive students, who wait like empty vessels.

This view undermines the teaching profession, yet it is prevalent in public discourse when debate on a bewildering array of problems inevitably arrives at the seemingly simple solution to 'put it on the curriculum' (Looney, 2014). In this view, teachers are technicians, and practice is focused on 'delivering' the curriculum, following its prescribed contents, ticking off lists of objectives, and routinely completing meaningless paperwork. We need to challenge this view of curriculum.

It is timely to consider what makes a quality curriculum in 2018, given Minister Richard Bruton's ambition to have the best education system in Europe by 2026. Work is well under way, with two major projects initiated: redevelopment of the primary school curriculum, and review of senior cycle at post-primary. So as we begin to think again about the experiences we want for our young people at both primary and post-primary levels, this article offers insight into current thinking on these developments, signposting a way forward towards a quality curriculum.

BEYOND PRESCRIPTION

Teaching and learning are not a linear, step-by-step process. Anyone who has spent time working in a classroom understands there is uncertainty, 'unforeseeability', convergences, and divergences (Priestley & Biesta, 2013). Those with a prescriptive mindset shift the focus of the question *What knowledge is of most worth?* to the assessment question: *Have pupils learned what others have demanded?*

In the Irish case, the dominant role of assessment as 'the tail that wags the dog' (Dysthe, 2008) has been well documented. While assessment reform at junior cycle is a welcome development, the high-stakes Leaving Certificate still dominates the senior cycle experience; mandatory standardised testing in second, fourth, and sixth classes in primary school is also affecting the experiences of children.

For some time there have been calls for teachers to take back the curriculum for themselves and to teach beyond the test scores (Pinar, 2004). Curriculum is not merely what can be measured, nor is it limited to a table of contents. In its broadest sense it can be understood in three ways: the 'intended curriculum': what is intended to occur; the 'enacted curriculum': what actually happens when the curriculum is enacted; and the 'experienced curriculum': what learners experience, construe, and learn (Billett, 2006). The rest of this article draws attention to some features that indicate a quality curriculum in 2018 as intended, enacted, and experienced.

THE INTENDED CURRICULUM

The intended curriculum is the frameworks, syllabi, subject matter, skills, competencies, and values intended to be taught. In the past, the development of the intended curriculum was described as mysterious, something that happens away from the realities of the classroom (Coolahan, 1981; Mulcahy, 1981). Since the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) was established, efforts have been made to shed light on the process, for example through a partnership approach.

Some have called this approach into question, voicing concerns about the influence of powerful partners in brokering a 'cosy consensus' that lacks real ambition and innovation (Gleeson, 2004; Granville, 2004; Sugrue, 2004). However, recent research unearths a more disruptive and potentially innovative understanding of partnership employed by the NCCA (Sullivan, 2018). The emergence of informal processes of curriculum development have broadened the activities of the NCCA and include working directly with schools and supporting participation from students, teachers, principals, and parents throughout the development of curriculum.

> In the Irish case, the dominant role of assessment as 'the tail that wags the dog' has been well documented.

LEARNING FROM SCHOOLS

The question of how best to engage with and learn from the experience of schools is often a conundrum, when developing curriculum is not straightforward. The value of such work is undoubted, but the means by which schools are supported to work with curriculum developers is often contentious. Schools are busy places that focus, rightly, on supporting their students and teachers.

Collaboration takes time and can involve sustained, robust engagement, which can be a big ask of schools. Nonetheless, due to the goodwill and interest of schools, this engagement is an important feature of NCCA's work. Often it involves testing and trialling new specifications; learning from teachers, parents, and students; collecting examples of students' learning; developing support material for teachers; and trying initiatives that share practice among schools.

In 2018, two school forums were established to inform the redevelopment of the primary school curriculum and the review of senior cycle. At senior cycle the schools forum provides opportunity for school-based discussions on developments, which in turn inform national seminars. At primary level the forum takes a community-of-practice approach to generating ideas on the future direction of the curriculum, and is a space to ground research in schools' experience.

Recent developments such as reform of junior cycle and development of the primary language curriculum and primary mathematics curriculum have used networks of schools, ensuring that the developments are grounded in the realities of the classroom. The quality and innovative nature of such developments are testament to the investment of working with schools in a sustained and developmental manner, and can be seen to militate against previous criticism of curriculum development that happens away from the classroom.

Recently, schools have called for greater flexibility with the curriculum they provide. In the past, the volume and prescriptive nature of materials led to a sense of 'curriculum overload', a phenomenon prevalent the world over. Overload squeezes time and space during the school day, leading to 'hurried classrooms' as the teacher attempts 'to cover everything' (Elkind, 2001). This compression is exacerbated by lists of objectives and content that must be ticked off, and by extra paperwork that seems to accompany every new development.

In reviews at primary level, teachers have called for a less crowded curriculum (NCCA, 2005, 2008) and more recently for greater flexibility in how they manage time across the school day, month, and year (NCCA, 2018). These requests ask us to reconsider how best to structure curriculum and how to think more flexibly about the use of time. Time and space are the most important commodities we can give our students. It is time to give the same to our teachers.

The move to a less prescriptive curriculum cannot be made without support for teachers and schools.

Curriculum needs to describe learning in broad terms, and it needs to be lightweight and flexible. It should provide guidance on essential knowledge, disposition, and skills for students, not prescribe thousands of objectives. The recent development of curriculum frameworks such as *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) and the *Junior Cycle Framework* (2015) present the parameters in which learning should take place. They do not have detailed lists of objectives but instead enable teachers and schools to exercise professional autonomy and make key decisions on the content and nature of teaching and learning in the classroom. As schools are given more autonomy, opportunities arise for developing a 'local curriculum' tailored to the context and the needs of teachers and students.

The move to a less prescriptive curriculum cannot be made without support for teachers and schools. Teachers often say they learn best from each other. A quality curriculum provides supports that present the experience of teachers engaging with and teaching the intended curriculum. Capturing the experience from classrooms is important, including the successes and challenges of the curriculum in practice.

In recent years the NCCA has developed such material, which includes examples of student learning, and guidance for teachers on the 'how' of the curriculum. Presenting material online enables teachers to access it when they need it, through an interactive medium, while supporting the notion of an evolving curriculum that changes as students, teachers, and schools require it to.

THE ENACTED CURRICULUM

Prof. Andy Hargreaves (2016) says we are in the midst of a seismic shift in education, moving from an age of achievement and effort to one of identity, engagement, and well-being. For Hargreaves, education systems from 2000 to 2015 were wholly concerned with the questions: How are we doing? How do we know? And how do we improve? The answers have resulted in unprecedented and global educational reforms.

Often these reforms are designed to raise national standards and are driven by internationally benchmarked big-data assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Ireland is no exception, with the implementation of Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011–2020 (DES, 2011), which resulted from the decline in numeracy and literacy scores in Ireland referred to as the Irish 'PISA shock' of 2009.

Reforms of this type have had successes. For instance, Ireland's own interim review indicates significant improvements in English reading and Mathematics (DES, 2017). While progress can be seen, such reforms are essentially narrow in scope and cannot address broader questions posed by wider societal shifts.

Hargreaves contends that Trumpism, Brexit, immigration, social media, and the rise of anxiety in young people indicate a need to address broader questions, including: Who are we? What will become of us? Who decides? To address these questions, we must broaden our approach to educational reform and move away from strategies on individual components of the curriculum, such as literacy and numeracy. Curriculum developments need to support the identity, engagement, and well-being of students by supporting the development of their collective sense of place, their awareness of their impact in the public sphere, their self-awareness, self-confidence, self-esteem, and ultimately their well-being.

> **Curriculum developments need to support the identity, engagement, and well-being of students.**

Renewed focus on these aspects of education are evident with the introduction of the *Wellbeing Guidelines* in junior cycle (2017), *Politics and Society* (2016) and *Social, Personal and Health Education* (SPHE) at senior cycle (2011), the themes of 'Identity and Belonging' and 'Wellbeing' in *Aistear* (2009), the continued work on *Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics* in the primary curriculum, and the beginning of the review of *Relationships and Sexuality Education* (RSE) across sectors. The nature of the learning and development supported by these curriculum developments enable teachers to respond to broader questions on students' identity, engagement, and well-being.

EMPOWERING TEACHERS

Supporting all students in this way demands a lot from our teachers. It requires them not only to have a broad and deep understanding of what,

how, and who they teach, but also to be compassionate and thoughtful, to inspire student engagement and motivation, to promote tolerance and social cohesion, and to make each student feel valued, respected, and included. By any measure, teaching in this context is a demanding prospect, requiring a great deal of professional empowerment to respond successfully.

The twentieth century saw the empowerment of teachers undermined by the prescriptive nature of curriculum. Recently there has been a move to reclaim the professional imperative that underpins the profession. The establishment of the Teaching Council, a self-regulatory professional body, can be seen to further the professional cause in Ireland. Having the authority to make decisions and the freedom to act in accordance with one's professional knowledge are hallmarks of autonomy in action.

In this context, teachers do not do whatever they think or feel is right in a given situation; rather they do what they know is right based on their understanding of professional practice (Schleicher, 2018). Recent developments in professional guidance, such as the Teaching Council's *Code of Professional Conduct* (2012), the roll-out of *Droichead* for the induction of newly qualified teachers (2013), and the ongoing work in *Cosán*, the national framework for teachers' learning (2016), provide the basis for practice to be grounded in a framework of professional standards: important elements to empower the profession.

Giving teachers time and space to exercise their professional autonomy is key to providing a quality curriculum.

Giving teachers the time and space to exercise their professional autonomy is key to providing a quality curriculum. Reducing the level of prescription in curriculum is an important step in this regard. This work is supported by the use of learning outcomes in curriculum specifications. Learning outcomes give teachers flexibility to select what to teach and the best order in which to teach it, to choose appropriate pedagogical approaches, and to identify the most appropriate assessment methods that match the intended learning. This is an important move towards giving teachers more time and space in the curriculum to exercise their professional judgement.

Innovative approaches that support powerful learning include play, collaborative learning, arts-based learning, project work, inquiry-based methods, experiential learning, narrative-based approaches, and algorithmic thinking (Peterson et al., 2018). Many of these have active learning, student interaction, and sustained engagement as consistent features. Opportunities for learning are restricted if teaching is overly focused on narrow objectives and has limited time for engagement. Learning outcomes enable teachers to provide rich learning experiences that support many forms of engagement, representation, and expression, enabling all students to learn and progress.

THE EXPERIENCED CURRICULUM
The experienced curriculum refers to what students learn and construe as a result of the enacted curriculum. Of course, what teachers teach does not always tally with what students learn. Learning thrives when students experience a curriculum that requires them to interact, to think creatively

and critically, to collaborate and take risks in their learning, to build connections across disciplines of knowledge, to connect learning to local and global communities, to share and reflect, and to feel empowered and take ownership of their learning.

STUDENTS' VOICE AND RELATIONSHIPS

We all feel valued and respected when our views are listened to and inform decisions that affect our lives; students are no different. When teachers listen to what students have to say, it can have a profound impact on teaching and learning in the classroom. When you provide space for students to have their say, it does not always make for comfortable reading. In a survey of 3,200 students by Comhairle na nÓg (2017), less than 50% said they learned best through textbooks, 75% through active learning approaches; 64% wished there was more project work in schools, 78% said exams are the greatest source of stress, and only 30% said teachers make learning interesting and fun.

Such findings call into question teaching that focuses on textbook recital with students sitting passively in rows, and prevalent use of summative rather than formative assessment methods. It also asks questions of our curriculum, the types of learning it describes, how it is organised, and how appropriate forms of assessment are supported.

While student councils are a feature of many Irish schools, we now know that support for students to have their say regularly, in the classroom, has the most impact on engagement and learning. Research from Trinity College Dublin found that enabling student voice encourages engagement in learning, enhances agency and leadership, improves student–teacher relationships, encourages active citizenship, and empowers students to participate in school life (Flynn, 2017). Relationships are pivotal when supporting student voice and require openness from both teacher and student.

> **Support for students to have their say regularly, in the classroom, has the most impact on engagement and learning.**

From a child's first day of school, their gender, class, ethnic background, and educational ability directly affect the relationship they will have with their teacher and subsequent teachers (Smyth, 2018). Given the substantial research on the centrality of teacher–student relationships for engagement, motivation, and well-being, this is a worrying statement. Findings from the study 'The Transition to Primary Education' (Smyth, 2018), supported by the NCCA and drawing on the 'Growing Up in Ireland' dataset, indicate that if you are a boy, have a special education need, or are from a lower socio-economic background or an ethnic minority, your relationship with your teacher will be negatively affected from day one of primary school.

The research requires us to consider the white, middle-class, Irish, female composition of our teaching profession. It asks questions of how we encourage teachers to think deeply on their values and how they perceive their students. Such questions are not easily answered and require both personal and professional development in order to break long-held stereotypes that may act as barriers to forming positive relationships with all students.

TOWARDS A QUALITY CURRICULUM

A quality curriculum moves beyond a prescribed list of content or a recipe for learning. Recent developments support the view that a quality curriculum is developed with schools, learning from their experiences, innovations, successes, and failures. It provides flexibility for localised decision-making within a framework of professional standards, empowering teachers in designing classroom-based curricula that meet the needs of all students. It supports powerful teaching methods by giving teachers time and space in the curriculum to create sustained and immersive educational experiences. Perhaps most importantly, it empowers students by giving them a voice in their learning and by supporting their identity, engagement, and well-being through positive relationships with their teachers.

The key messages of this article are informed by discussions and research on developments in the early childhood, primary, and post-primary sectors. It has focused on some lesser-known processes of curriculum development, such as work with schools, teachers, and students. This work supports the more recognised processes such as the incorporation of national and international research in developments, the deliberative structures through which curriculum is approved, and the wide-ranging, ongoing consultation that takes place.

The hallmarks of this lesser-known work are found across many developments from the NCCA, including *Aistear* (2009), the Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teangana Bunscoile (2015), the Junior Cycle Framework (2015), the Level 1 Learning Programme (2017) and the work on transitions from preschool settings to primary schools (Smyth, 2018). As the NCCA begins to redevelop the entire primary school curriculum and look again at the experience of students at senior cycle in post-primary schools, there are exciting possibilities to support teachers' professional autonomy and create a quality curriculum for all students.

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US students explore educational practice in Ireland

In summer 2018, sixteen students from Indiana University Bloomington School of Education visited Dublin, Galway and Belfast to observe the impact that historical factors can have on classrooms.

The 16 students are members of the Living-Learning Centre at Indiana University, which provides cultural immersion opportunities so student-teachers can gain different perspectives on education early in their college careers.

During their 10 days in Ireland, students visited a variety of primary school classrooms, including parochial schools and Educate Together schools.

Final year student Zach Paul noticed an emphasis on mental well-being in Irish classrooms that he hadn't seen in American classrooms. For example, a few times per day in one school visited by the group, a school-wide bell rings, signaling time for students to close their eyes, take a few deep breaths and collect their thoughts. When they are finished with the exercise, students are given the opportunity to debrief and share what is on their minds. Zach said he hopes to incorporate these types of exercises into his classroom one day.

The Living-Learning Centre at Indiana University, USA, provides cultural immersion opportunities for student-teachers to enable them to gain different perspectives on education early in their college careers. Sixteen student-teachers, members of the Living-Learning Centre, visited schools in Ireland in 2018.

Students also took part in a drama workshop for adults with autism spectrum disorders, which Zach found particularly rewarding. He said it allowed him to put into practice the methods he has learned in his special education courses while gaining experience working with an age group that he hadn't taught before.

Student Brianna Leibel observed a difference in that Irish teachers work to make sure children from nomadic populations stay in school, while their American counterparts build relationships that ensure children experiencing homelessness still receive an education.

Source: Indiana University

THE LEGACY OF PROFESSOR JOHN COOLAHAN

Áine Hyland
Emeritus Professor of Education, University College Cork

The death of John Coolahan on 3 June 2018 marked the end of an era in Irish education and in the arts in Ireland. John was a well-known figure in Irish education and arts circles for over fifty years. He played a major part in influencing Irish education policy, both as an 'insider' and an 'outsider', and was actively engaged in various arts initiatives over the decades.

John was born in Tarbert, Co. Kerry, on 9 June 1941. He attended the local national and secondary schools, and in a memoir written shortly before his death, he gave credit to St Ita's lay Catholic Secondary School in Tarbert and to its founder and principal, Jane Agnes McKenna, for his lifelong interest in literary, cultural, and educational matters. After his graduation as a national school teacher from St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, in 1961, where he was awarded the Gold Medal for coming first in the graduating class, he taught for four years as a national school teacher while studying in UCD for a BA, MA, and H.Dip. He then became a secondary teacher and read for a PhD and M.Ed. in Trinity College Dublin.

John was appointed lecturer in education in Carysfort College in 1971, where he remained until 1974, playing a key role in drafting the new three-year B.Ed. programme which was first awarded in 1977. The background papers and draft B.Ed. curriculum that are still extant from that period show that he was the key author of the new B.Ed., which was adopted in all of the colleges of education recognised by the National University of Ireland. The documents provide evidence of a programme based on sound philosophical principles that would prepare the national teachers of the future to teach the Department of Education's 1971 'New Curriculum' – an avant-garde, child-centred curriculum which placed Ireland among the vanguard of educationally progressive European countries at that time.

In 1974 John was appointed college lecturer in UCD, and in 1986 he was appointed statutory lecturer. The following year he was appointed professor of education and head of the Education Department in the National University of Ireland Maynooth (now Maynooth University), a post he held until his retirement in 2004.

His formal academic positions were only one aspect of his enormous and ongoing contribution to education, nationally and internationally. He was exceptionally generous in his willingness to give talks and keynote addresses to a wide variety of groups and associations – from local parent associations, teacher centres, summer schools, and various educational associations to major international conferences and specialised policy audiences. His hundreds of talks

and presentations throughout the decades included keynote addresses to teacher unions, managerial bodies, the Reading Association of Ireland, the National Parents Council, and the Educational Studies Association of Ireland, to name but a few.

At an international level, John spoke at conferences and seminars all over the world, including Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Belgium, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, and South Africa. Through his work with the OECD and the European Commission, he was a key influencer of educational policy in numerous jurisdictions. He carried out no fewer than ten reviews of national education systems on behalf of the OECD in countries as diverse as the Russian Federation, Chile, and the Dominican Republic. He undertook consultancy work for the World Bank and the Council of Europe, and he served as vice president of the European Commission's Consultative Group on Education.

John willingly accepted onerous and demanding roles on a wide variety of government-appointed groups and committees. Politics played no part in his appointments, in that the various Irish ministers for education who appointed him were from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and Labour. In the 1990s, he wrote the background report for an OECD review of Irish education, which focused specifically on teacher education. This report was accepted almost verbatim by the OECD team, to the chagrin of Department of Education officials, who had planned to carry out a cull of university education departments – as they had done with the closure of Carysfort College some years previously.

"The National Education Convention was a landmark event in the shaping of educational policy in modern Ireland."

In 1990, John was invited to write a Green Paper on Education, which, while not initially accepted by government, was to have a decisive influence on Irish education in subsequent years. His acceptance of an invitation from Minister for Education Niamh Breathnach and Secretary General Don Thornhill in 1993 to chair the National Education Convention was a turning point in the history of Irish education. No longer would bilateral negotiations between Church and State about educational policy be carried out behind closed doors – the National Education Convention was the beginning of a transparent and open approach to educational policymaking to which multiple partners could contribute. To quote John himself: 'The National Education convention was a landmark event in the shaping of educational policy in modern Ireland, and its impact was to be very far-reaching and long-lasting.'

A year later, he chaired the roundtable meetings on the regionalisation of education, which focused on the potential role and functions of Regional Education Authorities, which the government of the time had planned to set up. In the event, those authorities were never set up, but the discussions that John chaired in 1993 and 1994 ultimately led to the White Paper on Education and the landmark Education Act of 1998: the first comprehensive Irish education act.

In subsequent decades, at the invitation of successive ministers, John contributed to a strategy for lifelong learning, to the drafting of the

Universities Act of 1998, and to the report of the steering committee on the Establishment of a Teaching Council. In 1998 he chaired the National Forum on Early Childhood Education. He is currently best remembered for his chairing of a National Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector which reported in 2011. This report has had a major influence on government policy on the patronage of primary schools, although its recommendations have yet to be fully realised.

Throughout his long career, John wrote five books and more than 120 articles. His magnum opus, *Irish Education: History and Structure*, first published in 1980, was and continues to be a basic textbook for all teacher education students. He was co-editor, with this author and others, of *Towards a Better Future*, a review of the Irish school system published by the National Association of Principals and Deputy-Principals in March 2017, only weeks before he was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour – the tumour which took his life a year later. Yet the diagnosis spurred him on to an extraordinary spurt of creative energy during the final months of his life, when he delivered on everything he had committed to – talks, lectures, keynote addresses, and publications – even when prolonged periods of engagement were no longer easy for him and his speech and mobility had begun to deteriorate. But his intellectual and mental capacity were unaffected, and some of his finest writings were completed during this period.

John's generosity was boundless. His chairing of various boards, committees, conventions, and forums was all carried out pro bono, as were his countless talks and keynote addresses. He was incomparably unselfish in his willingness to help and advise his friends, students, and colleagues – nothing was too much for him and no request was ever refused. This author is one of many who owe John an enormous debt for his wise and sagacious advice. He advised and mentored me in the late 1970s as I researched and wrote up my own PhD. He invited me to act as a tutor in Carysfort College when he was a part-time lecturer there. He encouraged me to apply for the professorship in UCC in 1993, and he was invariably supportive and helpful to me throughout my academic career.

> Professor John Coolahan's legacy is all-encompassing... there was no area of education in Ireland to which he did not contribute.

John's legacy is all-encompassing. He was passionately committed to the provision of a world-class teacher education system for primary and post-primary teachers – initial, induction, and in-service. He played a major role in bringing the Teaching Council to fruition in the early 2000s, after decades of vacillation on the part of successive governments. He was instrumental in convincing the Department that teacher education could continue to be provided in all the universities, and he helped ensure that the high calibre of Irish teachers was maintained at a time when teaching became a low-status profession in many other parts of the world.

John contributed generously to north–south education initiatives and was a founder and ongoing member of SCoTENS. He was a pioneer in educational research: he set up the Educational Studies Association of Ireland in the late 1970s and never missed the annual conference, attending

the 2018 conference in UCD only weeks before his death. His report on Early Childhood Education contributed in no small way to the (belated) decision by the State to initially fund one year of preschool education and more recently two years.

In short, there was no area of education in Ireland to which Professor John Coolahan did not contribute during his long and incredibly fruitful life. He will be sorely missed in the world of education and the arts.

Ni bheidh a leithéid ann arís. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

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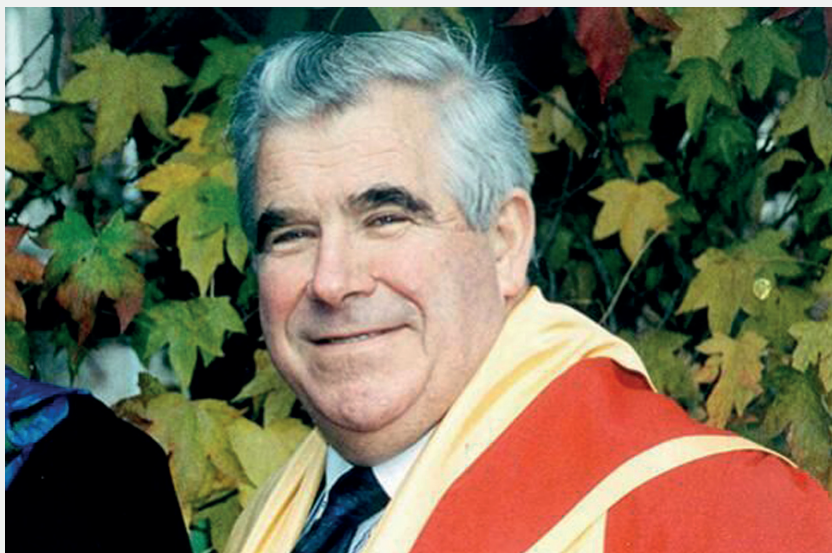
John Coolahan was Professor and Head of the Department of Education at Maynooth University for 17 years.

Maynooth University has now established the "John Coolahan Education Scholarship" to recognise John's long-standing commitment to education.

A quote from John Coolahan on Maynooth University website captures what was at the heart of his many endeavours:

There is a three-letter word which I cherish in the education process, but is rarely expressed, and that is "joy". I consider that education is a joyous, fulfilling activity, and this dimension of joyous engagement should be more emphasised.