

The Need to Invest in Education

A lesson from Covid-19



Kieran Christie
General Secretary
of the Association of
Secondary Teachers,
Ireland

This article sets out some key issues in education and the teaching profession in Ireland that have been prominent during the pandemic. It argues that significant investment is required if we are to make worthwhile progress on what we have learned from Covid-19 across the second-level school system.

The pandemic has prompted a full-scale rethink across all aspects of society. There has been a lot of talk of a 'new normal'. In the world of education, an 'education-led recovery' and 'building back better' have characterised the lexicon emerging in the debate that seeks to reimagine the future in our schools. What might it all mean? This article makes some observations on three areas that gained particular prominence during the pandemic and about which hard decision-making is inevitable.

Investment is the key

The pandemic has fully exposed the deficiencies in investment in our social infrastructure: in hospitals, elder care, family services, services for people with disabilities – and in our schools. The digital divide in education effectively highlighted the other divides created by economic inequalities, social marginalisation, and lack of social inclusion.

It will be interesting to see how government policymakers will act once the pandemic, which has inflicted enormous harm and trauma on individuals and school communities, is consigned to the past. School communities will not resilie in the coming months and years without state intervention and renewed investment to address the 'learning loss'. The EU Education and Training Monitor 2020 report stated that learning loss can be detected throughout the entire lifetime of affected students.¹ The task now is to prevent the emergence of long-term structural inequalities for the current generation of learners. One would hope that government will not revert to type and invoke austerity, the usual *modus operandi* favoured by neoliberal economics.

The OECD has consistently reported that Ireland trails the field for investment in education as a percentage of GDP. The OECD Education at a Glance 2021 report ranks Ireland last out of 36 countries for investment in second-level

education. This is simply unacceptable: underinvestment in education is not only socially indefensible, it is economically short-sighted. All the literature on education and economic growth shows that quality of schooling is a powerful predictor of the wealth that a country will produce in the long run.

If Budget 2021 was anything to go by, the omens are not good. From the perspective of the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI), it was another missed opportunity to begin the necessary redress. Investment in schools will be vital to support any hopes of realising a vision for Ireland as an inclusive society. Smaller classes, improved buildings, safer school buildings, investment in digital technology, and restored guidance counsellor and middle management posts simply must be delivered to build a quality education system.

The government must invest in education into the future to ensure a sustainable, equitable, education-led recovery. It must put in place a comprehensive package for financing second-level education to support recovery and offset the damage of historical underinvestment. The ASTI has argued that the additional supports and funding provided during the crisis must be maintained and built upon. It would be reprehensible to withdraw these supports given the deficiencies in school financing that they are currently addressing.

“Investment in education must also explicitly focus on investment in the teaching profession.”

Invest in teaching

Investment in education must also explicitly focus on investment in the teaching profession. The shift to remote education vividly demonstrated the importance of schools and the complexity of teachers' work. Contemporaneous academic research mirrored the public discourse, identifying teachers' high standards of professionalism, their capacity to adapt to change, their readiness to upskill and, above all, their ethical concerns about the holistic wellbeing of their students as key drivers in managing the shift to remote education.²

Education policy should aim at sustaining teacher professionalism by addressing issues such as workload, work intensification, declining teacher wellbeing, job satisfaction, and morale. ASTI-commissioned research has found that teachers' job satisfaction dropped from 77% in 2009 to 48% in 2020. It identified that teachers are working an average of 40-plus hours per week, with most non-teaching hours spent preparing for classroom teaching.³ This finding in itself indicates the complexity of teachers' work in the classroom and the need to reduce class-contact hours to give teachers professional time to manage their multiple professional roles.

Investing in the profession must also address the need for policy alignment and attention to system capacity. Teachers and school leaders have repeatedly identified 'innovation overload' as problematic. There is a need for a top-level policy dialogue on this systemic problem in advance of any new national strategies or change projects in our schools.

As part of this, the Department of Education must enlarge its vision for teachers' professional learning. It must move beyond a provider role (the

provision of support services or agencies) to an enabling one, namely creating and maintaining the conditions for career-long teacher learning. The literature on teachers' professional learning is unequivocal on the importance of transformative rather than transmissive modalities.⁴ The current Departmental research evaluation on teachers' professional learning is highly important in this regard.⁵

The introduction of unequal pay scales in 2011 remains a corrosive influence across the profession. The situation is not just deeply resented by the thousands of teachers who have entered service since 2011 and do the same work for less pay. The whole profession is concerned about its impact on the attractiveness of teaching to graduates and on the overall status of the profession. It is a key driver of the current teacher supply problem.

Future-oriented digital learning strategy

The pandemic has accelerated the digital transition.⁶ The digital and economic transitions must be underpinned by a well-resourced education system. The pandemic has also confirmed that a healthy and balanced society does not just require universal public services: it also needs values and a commitment to the common good as a counterbalance to the market and its ideology of monetisation. In this regard, the digital divide in education must be a matter of concern.

“ The introduction of unequal pay scales in 2011 remains a corrosive influence across the profession.

A new national digital-learning strategy by the Department of Education must be innovative and sustainable and must address the inequalities so dramatically exposed by the pandemic. It must also address the wider social, ethical, and political issues created by digital technologies, and the extension of AI across all domains of society. The 2020 OECD report 'Educating 21st-Century Children: Emotional Wellbeing in the Digital Age' sets out high-priority issues for policymakers that are relevant to the development of Ireland's digital strategy.⁷ Equally significant is the PISA-based 2021 OECD report '21st-Century Readers: Developing Literacy Skills in a Digital World'.⁸

Systemic challenges to be tackled include financing to strengthen ICT infrastructure; ensuring that all teachers and students have laptops and adequate digital devices; investing in the teaching profession by providing professional time, reducing workload, and ensuring access to professional learning beyond the transmission of information; increasing the number of leadership posts in schools; developing a vision for digital literacy; and providing guidance on its integration into subjects and the wider curriculum.

A further requirement is alignment with other Departmental strategies, most notably the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice, the revised Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, and the Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development.

Assessment and curriculum change

The adoption of the school-based calculated-grades model for the Leaving Certificate exam in 2020 and the dual Leaving Cert/accredited-grades model in 2021 has renewed the focus on assessment. A disturbing feature of curriculum reform over the last decade has been the sense of alienation among the profession from the wider change project. Notwithstanding the partnership nature of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and other education agencies, at the level of the school – where curriculum reform hits the road, so to speak – teachers feel that their professional expertise and deep experiential knowledge are not sufficiently taken into account.

This is a problem. Transformative curriculum change takes place in the classroom, and ultimately the teacher is the mediator of this change. But this is predicated on teachers' support for the rationale for change, their engagement in the change process from the beginning, and their willingness to effect pedagogical and other professional practices in their day-to-day classroom teaching.

In its submission to the NCCA's Senior Cycle Review Consultation Document in October 2019, the ASTI noted that the strengths of the current model of external assessment of the Leaving Cert exam have been strongly endorsed in the consultation paper. These include a high level of public trust, its capacity to serve as a valid and objective statement of students' academic achievement, and its fairness, impartiality, and transparency. At the same time, there is a need to broaden the range of assessment to ensure that all aspects of students' learning are validated and recorded. The proposal to explore the role of second-component assessment for all subjects should be considered, as should the weighting of such components.

The ASTI has a distinguished tradition of contributing to the development of education policy at all levels and has implemented change across the decades. In a context where there will always be concern that the proverbial baby will be thrown out with the bathwater, it is worth reflecting on the conclusions reached by Professor Áine Hyland in her paper on entry into higher education. Namely, much of the stress and pressure on senior cycle students results from the role ascribed to the Leaving Cert exam: that of gatekeeper to entry to higher education as regulated by the CAO points system. Prof. Hyland's report stated:

The examination becomes the determinant of what is studied and how; non-examination subjects get little or no attention and, in many cases, broader co-curricular activities are ignored or minimised. Student stress levels increase as the June examination looms and for some students their final year in school is an unhappy experience which they simply want to get through as quickly as possible.⁹

She concluded that an analysis of the current curriculum and its syllabi suggests the curriculum itself is not the key problem. Rather, the various subject syllabi are written in such a way as to require students to engage critically with subject content and to apply higher-order thinking skills.

Wise words. We have much to reflect on as we move forward with the review of the senior cycle curriculum.

ENDNOTES

1. European Commission (2020) Education and Training Monitor 2020, Investment in education. <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2020/en/chapters/chapter3.html#ch3-2>.
2. Trinity College Dublin (2020) Covid-19: How Trinity's researchers in the School of Education are responding. www.tcd.ie/Education/research/covid-19/. Dempsey, M. and Burke, J. (2021) Lessons Learned: The experiences of teachers in Ireland during the 2020 pandemic. Maynooth University. <http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/13914/>.
3. Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI) (2018) Teachers' Work: Work Demands and Work Intensity. www.asti.ie/document-library/teachers-work-work-demands-and-work-intensity-march-2018/.
4. Kennedy, A. (2014) 'Understanding continuing professional development: The need for theory to impact on policy and practice', *Professional Development in Education*, 40(5), 688–697.
5. Educational Research Centre (2021) Development of an evaluation framework for teachers' professional learning in Ireland – publication of Phase 2 report. www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/TPL-Wellbeing-Phase-2-Report-Press-Release.pdf.
6. UNESCO (2021) Fostering innovation and inclusive digital transformation for sustainable development. <https://en.unesco.org/ci-programme/innovation>.
7. Burns, T. and Gottschalk, F. (eds.) (2019) Educating 21st Century Children: Emotional Well-being in the Digital Age. OECD Educational Research and Innovation. https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/educating-21st-century-children_b7f33425-en.
8. OECD (2021) 21st-Century Readers: Developing Literacy Skills in a Digital World. www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/a83d84cb-en.pdf.
9. Hyland, A. (2017) Entry to Higher Education in Ireland in the 21st Century. Higher Education Authority (HEA) and National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), p. 4. https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/Aine-Hyland_Entry-to-Higher-Education-in-Ireland-in-21st-Century-2011.pdf.

“ Much of the stress and pressure on senior cycle students results from the role ascribed to the Leaving Cert exam: that of gatekeeper to entry to higher education as regulated by the CAO points system.”

Kieran Christie