

Editorial

Pasi Sahlberg, speaking at the annual WISE conference (World Innovation Summit for Education) in Qatar some years ago, suggested that the reason Finland was topping the international charts in education at the time was more to do with *who* than with *what* or *how*. To an international delegation visiting Finland seeking the formula to replicate their success, he suggested that it was grounded in teachers' status in Finnish society. To become a teacher in Finland, he said, you had to attain the highest educational standards, and only the brightest and the best succeeded in becoming teachers in their country.



Dr Brian Mooney

Editor of *Ireland's Education Yearbook*

Ashling Murphy personified all that is best in Irish education

I thought of Pasi's comments as I reflected on the all-too-short life of Ashling Murphy. As we all followed the harrowing legal proceedings following her death, we saw a picture of Ashling emerge which clearly demonstrated that she was indeed the brightest and the best of her generation, whether in her role as a loved teacher to her young pupils, as a gifted musician, or as a sportswoman with the GAA.

No words from me can ease the painful loss that her family and grieving partner will live with forever, but they can take some comfort from the fact that during her short life, she set an example for the next generation of children to emulate: in music, in sport, and in her chosen profession of teaching.

The value placed on education in Irish society

Ireland has excelled in educational outcomes at all levels in the first hundred years of its existence as an independent nation. I am immensely proud to be a small part of that story through my grandfather Daniel Mc Sweeney, who served as a teacher and principal of a

small school in Tralee for the first 30 years of the State's existence, on down through three of his children, Daniel, Maureen, and Brigid, who emulated him as model teachers and school leaders, and yours truly since I entered the profession in 1976.

Notwithstanding all the failings and imperfections in our education system, which are regularly pointed to by teachers' union representatives at early childhood, primary, post-primary, further, and higher education levels, we have one of the most highly educated populations on the planet. Recently published PISA data (Programme for International Student Assessment) from the OECD confirms our place among the elite of educational outcomes.

Paul Crone in his overview of second-level education in this edition of *Ireland's Education Yearbook*, points out that at an international level, we are deemed to have 'mastered school leadership'. To quote Paul directly, 'The Irish system is held in high regard, and I was surprised that our colleagues abroad are looking to Ireland as an exemplar of best practice on the operation of schools and the delivery of effective school leadership.'

Although how we manage our schools, what we teach in our classrooms, and how our pedagogy in doing so at all levels are central to our educational success story, the real key to our success is that we continue to attract the Ashling Murphys of this world into the profession.

How do we ensure that our appreciation of education at all levels persists?

What is it about the island of Ireland, and who we are as a people, that we continue to have such a deep respect for the profession of teaching, and that generation after generation of our youth choose to follow a career in teaching after completing their second-level education? This is not an insignificant question, given how important a high-quality education system is to overall national wellbeing. We must protect and nurture that which inspires a love of education in our people.

Thankfully, many of those on whose shoulders rest the decisions that shape society now and into the future, and education's place within it, started their lives as teachers before being drawn into serving their community as political leaders. Many of them directly shaped the ongoing development of the system as ministers for education: Micheál Martin, Noel Dempsey, Mary Hanafin, and Norma Foley, to name but a few.

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Embracing a far wider meaning of the concept of education

Micheál Martin set the establishment of a second department of education, to deal with further and higher education, as a condition for entering the current government. His foresight has been richly rewarded through the initiatives of Minister Simon Harris, as outlined by him in his foreword in the current *Yearbook*.

Every child is a unique creation, with skills and talents which – with an appropriate education in the original Latin sense of *educere*, ‘to bring out, to lead forth’ – can be fulfilled in their working lives. For too long, many parents saw success for their children only in terms of a narrow range of options centred on literacy and numeracy skills and delivered through academically oriented university educational options. It was not so much a case of ‘leading out or bringing forth’ as of imposing a definition of success onto the child, irrespective of their innate skills and talents.

We are seeing the emergence of a truly holistic education system to enable all citizens to find appropriate educational opportunities when and where they need them.

With the advent of the five new technological universities, the expansion of the apprenticeship model to cover over 73 options, and the introduction of the new tertiary degrees this September to provide third-level degree access outside the CAO system, we can clearly see that people of all ages and circumstances are now engaging with education in its broadest sense.

As Andrew Brownlee reports in his overview of the further education and training (FET) sector, 2023 has seen a surge in participation at all levels of FET. We are seeing the emergence of a truly holistic education system to enable all citizens to find appropriate educational opportunities when and where they need them.

Education – a process rather than a product

In the past, we tended to see education as a product to be acquired on a scale from 1–10, as per the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) framework of qualifications. But real life is ever-changing, and even those with PhDs may find that their skills become obsolete as they age. What of those in mid-career who are struggling with the advances in technology or in the transition from full-time employment to a more eclectic lifestyle in their 60s? For too long we have paid lip service to the concept of lifelong education while in practice ignoring mature adults.

Thankfully, we are coming to terms with the fact that in our ever-changing world, educational opportunities in a healthy society must be in fact lifelong. At a recent board of management meeting of a further education college that I am privileged to chair, the principal informed the board that a full class group for

the Tour Guiding course was already in place for September 2024. The average age of that class group is in the mid-60s.

A public, high-quality early childhood education is still some way off

Much progress has been made in developing Ireland's early childhood education system over recent years. But as Mathias Urban writes in his overview of the sector, 'A truly *public* system requires active government involvement in all aspects of the system, including service delivery, planning, regulation, monitoring, and evaluation. It includes the State taking responsibility as employer of educators.' As yet, there does not seem to be the political will to provide such a high-quality education for our youngest children.

Research in Ireland is central to the growth and development of our society and economy

As Dr Peter Brown points out in his overview article, the key focus for Ireland's research system in 2023 was to develop legislation that will provide for a new agency, to be named *Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland*, amalgamating the functions of the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland. The bill is currently being finalised for cabinet approval.

Free schoolbooks plus wellbeing and mental health support at primary level

Minister Norma Foley established a scheme in 2023 to cover the cost of all schoolbooks, workbooks, and copybooks for children in primary and special schools. She also decided to provide primary schools in seven counties with a programme of counselling, wellbeing, and mental health supports, including access to one-to-one counselling. These groundbreaking commitments were much welcomed by hard-pressed families.

The emergence of AI as a dark cloud over education worldwide

As technological advances have accelerated and platforms such as ChatGPT reshape how society interacts with data, there has been much wailing and gnashing of teeth from all sectors of the education system about the dangers of this technology to how we assess students' work.

A truly public system requires active government involvement in all aspects of the system, including service delivery, planning, regulation, monitoring, and evaluation.

It is true that the rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) threaten the existing models of how we educate at all levels. This is not new: how we interact with data has been changing rapidly throughout my lifetime. During my undergraduate years in University College Dublin (UCD) in the mid-1970s, I vividly remember sitting towards the back of a lecture theatre so that I could dash to the library to get my hands on the single copy of a book named by the lecturer. Very often the book was not available, as someone from the previous year's group had skilfully cut out the relevant pages with a blade.

We have come a long way from those days; access to all sources of information is now available online to everyone. The current advances in AI simply accelerate the pace at which we can interrogate and analyse data. It is already revolutionising medical research, enabling data to be processed at previously unimaginable speed, leading to the creation of new drugs for the treatment of disease.

Surely our task as educators should be to teach students to embrace this technology and engage with the fruits of its potential.

What the advance in AI will do is radically alter the process of education. We must never forget that we educators are preparing our students for the world in which we live. Yes, this may mean that we must change both how we interact with our students in the education process itself and how we assess their progress.

We can continue to build programmes to identify students who have presented online content as their own work, and punish them for doing so. But surely our task as educators should be to teach them to embrace this technology and engage with the fruits of its potential, in a way that enables them to acquire the relevant skills to use the technology effectively in the future world of work which they are about to enter.

It may mean that exams by interview board or by presentation, followed by questioning to determine the level of a student's comprehension of a topic, will become more prevalent in our assessment processes at all levels.

Teacher supply shortages

As Teresa O'Doherty points out in her overview of primary-level education, it is becoming progressively more difficult for many principals to secure teachers at early childhood, primary, and post-primary levels. There are a wide range of reasons for this situation.

At early childhood education, the problem is driven by the lack of a pay scale that is in any way comparable to that paid to teachers at primary level. Many qualified early childhood teachers are progressing into the 18-month conversion programmes to become primary school teachers in order to secure a living wage.

At second level, the problem is both general and specific to certain subject areas. Some curricular subjects have an acute shortage of graduates seeking careers in teaching. In others, such as Home Economics, graduates are being enticed into careers in hospitality and the food industry the moment they graduate.

By far the biggest problem is that teachers are paid the same salary wherever they live and work. With the average cost of a starter home in urban areas circa €450,000, it is next to impossible to build a family life in many areas of Ireland today.

Grappling with the consequences of Ireland's educational success story

The problems that we are grappling with today arise directly from our educational achievements over the past hundred years. The Irish education system has become a victim of its own success. Having brought over 95% of each year group to Leaving Cert level, and two thirds of that number on to further and higher education, the country has one of the most dynamic economies in the world, employing over 2.6 million people and requiring the inward migration of over 40,000 additional workers annually to continue to service its needs.

The difficulty for any government, current or future, in facilitating any public servant in securing accommodation is stark in an economy which has added 350,000 additional jobs in the past five years, and where, according to Revenue estimates, there has been a rise of 50% since 2022 in the number of 'tax units' – individuals or jointly assessed couples – with an income over €100,000.

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Resistance to change is an innate human response which must be handled sensitively

No more than educators who may see technological advances that disrupt their current lifestyle and work practices as negative developments, communities experiencing rapid change – including the arrival of many new, unfamiliar faces – may see the fruits of our success in growing our economy and employment opportunities in a negative light, if it contributes, as it inevitably has, to an acute shortage of housing.

All of us are going to have to accept that if we want young people to be able to establish families and live in our cities working as teachers, nurses, gardaí, and so on, we are going to have to accept radical change to housing and transport, to name but two areas.

Outlook

Following two very difficult years, in which the education system navigated the choppy waters of the pandemic, we have emerged in 2023 with by far the strongest and most effective education system that Ireland has ever possessed.

As we enter 2024, the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the Leaving Cert, and face into a series of elections that will shape all our lives, both in Ireland and in the EU, we should reflect on the fact that the real problems we face as a society are the fruits of a hugely successful education system. That system has transformed the quiet backwater of my youth, which raised its children for the emigrant boat to England and the United States, into one of the most vibrant countries on the planet, where we are grappling with the consequences of our educational achievements.

The secret of our success is that education in Ireland is a team effort, with every voice listened to respectfully – from the parent, the student, the teachers and lecturers in our schools and colleges, the civil and public servants who manage the system and its delivery, and the ministers in government with responsibility to decide on future policy. Long may it continue.