IRELAND'S EDUCATION YEARBOOK 2024

Founder and Publisher **Phyllis Mitchell**
Editor **Dr Brian Mooney**

Introduction

Early Childhood

Primary

4

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2024**
YEARBOOK

5

Second Level

8

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2024**
YEARBOOK

9

Research

10

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2024**
YEARBOOK

11

Our Advertisers

Editorial: Education Crises, Reforms, and Funding Challenges

10 key issues facing the next government

Dr Brian Mooney
Editor, *Ireland's Education Yearbook*

The people have spoken at the ballot box, and in January 2025 the TDs elected to the 34th Dáil will choose a Taoiseach who will nominate Ministers with responsibility for guiding the development of all elements of our education and training system for the next five years.

The manifestos of the main political parties put an emphasis on boosting funding for the broader education sector. But what will the new government be able to deliver? Housing and the economy may have dominated the election campaign, but education and its transformative power will be key to the most pressing challenges facing Irish society.

Talking of transformative initiatives, 2024 will be remembered as the year when the decision to extend the free books scheme introduced by Minister Foley was extended to all students up to Leaving Certificate level. But eaten bread is soon forgotten, so here are 10 key educational issues that the next administration will need to focus on.

1. Delivering affordable, high-quality early childhood education and care

The manifestos of the main political parties all put an emphasis on childcare – but the scale of ambition varies. If there is one decision that could match Donogh O'Malley's in its capacity to be truly transformative, it is putting early childhood education and care (ECEC) to the fore.

Micheál Martin, in his last contribution to the outgoing 33rd Dáil, referenced the transformative effect of 'free' second-level education on his life. Will he, in his leadership of this government, do something equally

pioneering in ECEC? It is universally accepted that the first two to three years of a child's life fundamentally shape all that follows.

The incoming administration will have an opportunity to establish a universally accessible, high-quality, public ECEC system. It could become an essential component of Ireland's social and economic infrastructure and result in wide-ranging benefits for children, families, and society.

Transitioning from the current publicly funded system – where the State contributes to the cost of providing the service – to a public system, where the State would take responsibility for delivering ECEC to all children as a right, would offer an effective way to address several interconnected issues, such as allowing both parents to participate fully in work, education, and society. The existing ECEC scheme, the 'free preschool year', does not solve this, as it is limited to three hours per day.

2. Overcoming the teacher supply crisis

Teacher supply is a key challenge facing both our primary and post-primary education systems. The Department of Education has commissioned a UNESCO team to review this, but it is not due to report until late 2026. A taxable €2,000 incentive payment for newly qualified teachers who take up full-time posts in 2025 is a small step in addressing the issue.

As reported recently by my *Irish Times* colleague Carl O'Brien, an internal Department report says there were 400 second-level teaching posts unfilled and 800 occupied by teachers not qualified in the subject they were tasked to teach – including the core subjects of Irish, English, Maths, and European languages, alongside Physical Education, Home Economics, and Guidance Counselling. The problem is most acute in the Greater Dublin region.

As Professor Teresa O'Doherty writes in her overview of primary education in this edition of *Ireland's Education Yearbook*, citing the OECD's *Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland* (2024):

> The shortage of teaching staff is significantly more pronounced in disadvantaged schools – the difference is among the largest observed in OECD countries. The [OECD] team wrote that DEIS schools face challenges attracting and retaining staff and sometimes fail to fill positions because they may be perceived as difficult teaching environments.

The underlying problem of both the supply and cost of housing was a key issue in the general election and will determine the success or failure of the incoming government.

An internal Department report says there were 400 second-level teaching posts unfilled and 800 occupied by teachers not qualified in the subject they were tasked to teach.

There is no simple solution to staffing our essential public services in high-cost urban settings, whether in education or health or across the public service. But the chronic daily shortage of teachers in our classrooms must be addressed urgently by the appropriate incoming Minister.

3. Addressing the school funding problem

Teresa O'Doherty writes in the present *Yearbook*:

> School funding (capitation, ancillary, minor works, etc.) was reduced significantly during the financial crisis, and although it has increased slightly in recent years, it remains at 2011 levels. Yet the cost of utilities (heating, electricity) has increased by an average of 35%–37% in the last two years. Inadequate funding, and stress and worry over money, are causing many principals to feel burned out and dissatisfied with their role.

The recent OECD report on the resourcing of schools was broadly positive about the current DEIS programme, which provides enhanced funding for schools in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage. However, the report recommends better targeting of resources towards those in greatest need.

The establishment of a DEIS-plus scheme was included in six of the main political party manifestos before the election. There now seems to be a consensus that there is a set of schools from the most disadvantaged areas which need enhanced support. Establishing such a scheme will serve as a mechanism to deliver additional resources.

The recent OECD report on the resourcing of schools was broadly positive about the current DEIS programme, which provides enhanced funding for schools in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage.

4. Delivering on Leaving Cert reform

The Leaving Cert is 100 years old, and many parts of the curriculum are 30 or 40 years old. Two new subjects, Drama, Film and Theatre Studies, and Climate Action and Sustainable Development, are being added in 2025. Revised syllabi in Biology, Physics, Chemistry, and Business are due to commence in September 2025 for incoming Leaving Cert students.

Students want reforms, and the need to update the Senior Cycle is clear. However, the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) and Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) want to pause this redevelopment work, particularly in the sciences. They claim, with much justification, that moving from an assessment system based on a terminal written paper to one with a 40 per cent project-based assessment in science subjects will create huge difficulties, given the disparity in school laboratory facilities and the training or upskilling on offer to teachers to carry out the mandatory experiments that are central to such a revised syllabus.

14

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION 2024
YEARBOOK

15

Allocating a minimum of 40 per cent of marks for externally assessed work by students during the two years of the Senior Cycle is a worthy goal, but its implementation requires far more resources and training than has been provided to date. The incoming Minister needs to avoid direct confrontation with a very united teaching force on this issue.

5. Meeting the demand for Irish-language schooling

We have a 20-year strategy for the Irish language (2010–2030), and we have the Gaeltacht Act (2012). Much progress has been made in providing Gaelscoileanna at primary level throughout the country, but there is an acute shortage of Gaelcholáistí – secondary schools where students are taught subjects through Irish.

Having created a cohort of young people confident and comfortable in conversing in their first official language, we are leaving them with no meaningful option to continue their education through Irish, through a lack of any local second-level options even where the numbers are present to justify opening such a school. As a result, children and young people who receive their primary education in Gaelscoileanna are meeting a dead end when attempting to continue their education through Irish. These children inevitably lose their proficiency, progression, and potential in the Irish language.

Will the incoming Minister support initiatives such as the one advocated since 2020 by the Gaelcholáiste Mhaigh Eo campaign – which aims to establish an Irish-medium second-level school in Castlebar – and other such initiatives nationwide? There are currently 664 students enrolled in Gaelscoileanna throughout County Mayo. Do these children, and thousands of others throughout the country, not have a right to an education in our first language?

The recent shortlisting of a film by Belfast's Irish-language rappers Kneecap for two Academy Awards shows us what can be achieved when commitment and passion for the Irish language are adequately resourced. Do our Belfast cousins have to show us the way, Minister?

6. Tackling funding deficits in higher education and research

The next Minister for higher education will have to honour the outgoing government commitment to bridge a €307 million gap in core funding for higher education on a phased basis from 2025 to 2029. Budget 2025 saw the welcome announcement of a €50 million increase in annual core funding of higher education for 2025, to rise to €150 million by 2029 under Funding the Future. All the main political parties have committed to delivering on this.

Having created a cohort of young people confident and comfortable in conversing in their first official language, we are leaving them with no meaningful option to continue their education through Irish, due to a lack of any local Gaelcholáiste.

The outgoing government also amalgamated Science Foundation Ireland and the Irish Research Council into a newly formed body, Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland. Established on 1 August 2024, Research Ireland now holds a mandate to oversee competitive research funding across all disciplines, ranging from science and engineering to the arts, humanities, and social sciences, and across the full spectrum from curiosity-driven to applied research.

But as Michael Horgan, chairperson of Taighde Éireann, writes in the present *Yearbook*:

> With a unified funding body, Ireland can project a more cohesive identity on the global research stage, making the country a more attractive destination for international researchers and collaborative projects. Yet [. . .] balancing the needs of various research fields, evaluating interdisciplinary projects equitably, and maintaining Ireland's competitive edge in science and technology are all complex tasks that will require strategic oversight and thoughtful planning. . . .

> The challenge for Research Ireland is to position our nation as a leader in research and innovation, fostering a knowledge-driven society that values not only technological progress but also the cultural and ethical insights offered by the arts and humanities.

Established on 1 August 2024, Research Ireland now holds a mandate to oversee competitive research funding across all disciplines, ranging from science and engineering to the arts, humanities, and social sciences, and across the full spectrum from curiosity-driven to applied research.

Investment in university research will therefore have to be a priority for the new higher-education Minister. The Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions, which saw €1.2 billion invested in research and innovation between 2000 and 2015, has been a big contributor to economic development and foreign direct investment. The end of this fund led to the depletion of research equipment and infrastructure across the university system. A programme of research investment is needed if universities are to continue to produce work-ready graduates. There is an urgent need for a new funding programme to upgrade research infrastructure.

7. Continuing to address educational disadvantage

The OECD's 2024 report on the resourcing of schools in Ireland, Teresa O'Doherty writes, 'clearly states that the fragmentation of services, and the lack of counselling, psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, and so on, impacts hugely on children's capacity to learn', and 'the shortage of teaching staff is significantly more pronounced in disadvantaged schools – the difference is among the largest observed in OECD countries'.

Minister Foley took a significant first step in addressing this over Christmas 2024 when she announced a recruitment campaign for therapists to work in schools with children. The therapists will be part of the new Educational

16

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2024**
YEARBOOK

17

Therapy Support Service (ETSS) established in June 2024. The campaign will see the permanent appointment of 39 occupational and speech and language therapists and five behaviour practitioners to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). These positions' previous temporary-only status made them more difficult to fill. According to the government:

ETSS therapists will work with teachers in classrooms to collaboratively design and deliver educationally relevant interventions for students with a range of needs. This will allow, for example, a teacher and an occupational therapist to explore opportunities to integrate more movement into learning to support regulation, or for a speech and language therapist to model evidence-based vocabulary strategies in the classroom.

This service is an addition to HSE [Health Service Executive] Primary Care and Children's Disability Network Teams, which will continue to offer children one-to-one appointments with therapists. The staff in the ETSS will support special schools, and this will be in addition to the government pilot for enhanced in-school therapy support in 16 special schools which was announced in August 2024 and has commenced in Dublin, Galway and Cork.

8. Expanding special-education provision

In 2024, €2.7 billion was spent in special education: just over a quarter of the Department's budget. There are now around 3,000 special education classes operating. Significant additional resources and funding have been allocated to the NCSE in recent Budgets to expand its services. In 2024 the NCSE made significant progress in recruiting additional special education needs organisers (SENOs), team managers, and advisors. It now has 120 SENOs nationwide, up from 65.

The additional therapists mentioned above will be an integral part of that expansion. As the Department of Education details, they will be embedded across the NCSE's regional team structure and will also work with school communities and, where appropriate, the National Educational Psychological Service and Health Service Executive. The Department states:

The Educational Therapy Support Service provides two strands of support:

1) A sustained in-school therapy for a period of 24 months, which has already been successfully used during the School Inclusion Model (SIM) pilot

2) Regional therapy support which includes teacher professional learning seminars with follow-up in-school implementation support and the design and development of therapy resources with education colleagues.

In 2024 the NCSE made significant progress in recruiting additional special education needs organisers (SENOs), team managers, and advisors.

9. Addressing access by children to inappropriate content online

How can we best protect children from harmful online content? Research indicates that many children from age eight upwards have unlimited access to such content. In my career guidance work I have observed growing stress and anxiety in children in the past 10 years, which I attribute to the effects of social media exposure at an age when children have not yet developed the psychological or emotional skills to cope with adult content.

In a world-first law, the Australian Parliament in November 2024 passed a social media ban for children under 16. The law will make platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, Reddit, X, and Instagram liable for fines of up to 50 million Australian dollars for systemic failures to prevent children from holding accounts. Companies have been given one year to implement the law.

In Ireland, Minister Foley published guidelines for parents and parent associations who wished to create and implement voluntary codes on smartphone use among primary school children. She announced an investment in phone pouches for second-level students in an effort to mitigate potential negative impacts of social media on young people's health and wellbeing. Post-primary schools have policies that aim to control the use of phones in school, but these have no meaningful effect on young people's exposure to inappropriate content or online bullying.

In my career guidance work I have observed growing stress and anxiety in children in the past 10 years, which I attribute to the effects of social media exposure.

Ministers for Education have but one voice at the cabinet table, and Ireland has a very small input into overall EU deliberations on how to regulate social media. But history will judge how society responds to the destructive effect of social media on young minds. The whole world will watch how the Australian legislation is implemented in practice. Protecting our children must be the first priority of any incoming Minister or government.

10. The implications of AI

Generative AI (genAI) tools such as ChatGPT are often seen as a huge challenge to our existing model of education at all levels, particularly to models of assessment, which in truth they are. But this is to miss their transformative potential for our lived experience, which they patently also have. Artificial-intelligence technology can improve quality of life, making it easier, safer, and more productive, which suggests we should embrace it.

But it's not as simple as that. Everyone with an interest in our education system, from the child entering preschool to the Minister trying to devise technological regulations, will be affected by its development, which will be transformative. How do we restructure the way we educate at all levels to integrate these

advances in technology, while ensuring that real learning is taking place and assessment methods are effective?

In my youth, teaching was about the transmission of information from the person with the knowledge to students who did not have access to it. You nominated the textbook, which the student acquired, and collectively you attempted to transfer the knowledge through teaching. You then assessed the success of the process primarily through a written exam.

Today, through search engines, a great deal of information on any possible question is instantly available. So what is the central role of the educator, and how does one assess the competence of the learner?

The Minister for Education paused the roll-out of her Leaving Cert reforms in 2024, in terms of teacher-based assessment, due to her concerns over the implications of genAI for the integrity of the process. Of all the challenges facing every new Minister with responsibility for any element of education or training over the next five years, the most challenging will be how to successfully integrate genAI technology into our education system to the benefit of learners and educators, how to upskill those involved in teaching, and most importantly how to devise methods of assessment which fairly assess students' understanding and comprehension of learned content.

<div align="center">✱✱✱</div>

Of all the challenges facing every new Minister with responsibility for any element of education or training over the next five years, the most challenging will be how to successfully integrate genAI technology into our education system to the benefit of learners and educators.

A National Children's Science Centre

The plans for a new landmark in Ireland's educational infrastructure

Ireland is the only country in the OECD and one of the few countries in the developed world without a National Children's Science Centre. Even countries with less developed economies, such as Brazil, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia, have recognised the role that such centres play in encouraging and supporting interest in and enthusiasm for science among young people. Happily, this gap in Ireland's infrastructure is about to be addressed, with the development of a national interactive science centre for children in the National Concert Hall building in Dublin.

For 25 years, discussions have been ongoing between the government and a charitable organisation, the National Children's Science Centre (NCSC), to set up such a centre. In 2013 an agreement was reached between the Office of Public Works (OPW) and the NCSC to locate the centre on Earlsfort Terrace. The unused north wing of the National Concert Hall will be restored and renovated by OPW, and the NCSC will equip, manage, and run the centre. After many delays, planning permission was finally granted in March 2024, and it is planned to open the centre by 2028.

Áine Hyland
Emeritus Professor of Education, University College Cork

Ireland is the only country in the OECD without a National Children's Science Centre. That will soon change, with a new centre planned for completion by 2028. This article describes the proposed centre's structure, purposes, activities, and ethos.

Cutting-edge facilities in a historical location

Totalling almost 10,000 sq. m, the development will include a state-of-the-art planetarium at the west end of the site, and the restoration and conversion of the Real Tennis Court on its northern boundary into Exhibit 15, an outreach programme of exhibits that will also travel throughout Ireland. Within the centre there will be exhibit rooms, a large lecture theatre, a specially designed science laboratory, activity rooms, and spaces for continuing professional development courses for teachers.

National Children's Science Centre (NCSC) Artist Impression

It is particularly appropriate that the building on Earlsfort Terrace, which was constructed in the second half of the 19th century to house the International Exhibition for the Arts and Manufactures, is now being restored as a centre where STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and the Arts) will be celebrated.

Key role in Ireland's STEM education

The proposed new NCSC will play a crucial role in helping to achieve the Irish government's vision for STEM education, that:

Ireland will be internationally recognised as providing the highest quality STEM education experience for learners that nurtures curiosity, inquiry, problem-solving, creativity, ethical behaviour, confidence, and persistence, along with the excitement of collaborative innovation. (Government of Ireland, 2023a)

In its STEM Education Implementation Plan to 2026, the Minister for Children, Roderic O'Gorman, said:

The STEM Education Policy statement acknowledges that there is a need to enhance STEM learning for learners of all backgrounds, abilities and gender, from early learning and care through to post-primary. The focus on STEM in early learning and care settings highlights how important that first engagement with education is for young children. (ibid.)

The plan to set up the centre has been widely welcomed in the world of education. In 2023, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education recommended that the centre, 'in gestation for many years, should be opened as a matter of urgent national priority' and that 'it will send out a message that Ireland is very serious about science education for primary and post primary students'.

Exhibits and educational programmes

The centre will include interactive science-based exhibits and activities for children and young people. It will provide issues-based immersive and interactive exhibitions and events for adults ('the curious of all ages'), and will also focus on visitor participation through debates, discussions, blogs, and so on.

The planetarium will enable visitors to become virtual space travellers, exploring the solar system and the stars. Events and programmes will be provided for students, teachers, and the general public – in person and online. Talks and programmes will be provided for preschool children, and for primary and second-level classrooms based on the school curriculum and the STEM Education Implementation Plan.

The National Children's Science Centre will be an invaluable source of teacher training and education, at both pre-service and in-service level, including summer courses.

Given the limited science education available in pre-service training for preschool and primary school teachers, the NCSC will be an invaluable source of teacher training and education, at both pre-service and in-service level, including summer courses. Residencies and internships will also be available for third-level students, and special arrangements will be made to engage Transition Year students.

To achieve its vision and mission, the NCSC will combine elements of third- and fourth-generation science museums (Pedretti & Iannini, 2020). As well as presenting scientific ideas and topics through interactive, immersive, and hands-on exhibits and activities (the aim of third-generation museums), the NCSC will also include issues-based exhibitions and events (characteristic of fourth-generation museums), focusing on visitor participation through talk, interaction, and the potential for decision-making about significant science-related issues.

Commitment to equality and inclusivity

The NCSC will have a policy of equality, diversity, and inclusion in terms of access and engagement. It will have a particular focus on ensuring access for people from disadvantaged backgrounds and with different abilities and disabilities. This is in keeping with the Department of Education's (2023)

22

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION 2024
YEARBOOK

23

National Children's Science Centre (NCSC) Artist Impression

Recommendations on STEM and the Arts in Education: 'the provision of equitable access for all learners to experiences of STEM and the Arts within formal and informal settings is necessary to promote the development of critical and creative thinking skills'.

As well as ensuring that all parts of the centre are wheelchair accessible, every effort will be made to ensure there are no barriers to access or engagement by those with visual or hearing impairment or with neurodiverse needs. The exhibits and events will be planned and delivered in accordance with universal design for learning – a set of principles that give all people equal opportunities to learn.

Because the NCSC will be the national science centre for Ireland, it will include exhibits and events based on discoveries by Irish scientists. It will highlight female scientists such as Ellen Hutchins, Mary Ward, Kathleen Lonsdale, and Jocelyn Bell-Burnell, as well as male scientists and discoverers such as William Rowan Hamilton, George Boole, John Tyndall, and Ernest Walton.

The exhibits will be informed by the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 and will be aligned with the major transformations that science tells us are urgently needed to build a fairer and more sustainable world. These transformations will help to address challenges such as the digital revolution, human capacity and demography, consumption and production, decarbonisation, food, biosphere and water, and smart cities. A focus on these themes will not preclude the inclusion of other themes and topics, now and in the future.

By constantly evolving to reflect advances in science and technology, the NCSC will remain a relevant and engaging resource for children, educators, and the wider public.

The success of the National Children's Science Centre and its continuing ability to attract visitors will depend on its flexibility and creativity and its innovative approach to embracing and discussing new and emerging issues. By constantly evolving to reflect advances in science and technology, the NCSC will remain a relevant and engaging resource for children, educators, and the wider public.

REFERENCES

Government of Ireland (2023a) 'Minister Foley and Minister O'Gorman launch STEM Education Implementation Plan to 2026'. Press release, 2 March. www.gov.ie/en/press-release/9b0f2-minister-foley-and-minister-ogorman-launch-stem-education-implementation-plan-to-2026/.

Government of Ireland (2023b) *Recommendations on STEM and the Arts in Education: March 2023.* STEM Education Policy. www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4d40d5-stem-education-policy/.

Pedretti, E. and Iannini, A.M.N. (2020) *Controversy in Science Museums: Re-imagining Exhibition Spaces and Practice.* Routledge.

✱✱✱

Paschal Naylor Joins the Board of the National Children's Science Centre

Dublin, Ireland — 16 October 2024 — The National Children's Science Centre (NCSC) is pleased to announce the appointment of Paschal Naylor to its board of directors. With planning permission now secured for Ireland's first national science centre for children, Paschal's extensive experience will be invaluable in helping the NCSC achieve its mission of inspiring and educating the next generation of scientists, engineers and innovators.

Paschal brings an impressive background in the technology sector to the NCSC. He is currently an Advisor to Presidio Europe and the co-founder of Arkphire, a leading Irish IT consulting and managed-services company. Under Naylor's leadership, Arkphire grew to become a €160m business and was acquired by the US tech firm Presidio in 2021. Paschal brings to the board many useful qualifications, including FCCA, MII Grad., a BA in Psychology and an IOD Diploma in Company Direction.

Paschal, an accomplished business leader and advisor, is excited to join such an inspiring initiative. "I am honoured to be part of the National Children's Science Centre," said Naylor. "This science centre will spark curiosity and foster a love for science and technology in young people across Ireland and beyond. I look forward to working with the board and our partners in government to fulfil our ambition to deliver this exciting and innovative project."

Paul Duffy, Chair of the National Children's Science Centre, commented on the appointment, saying, "We are delighted to have Paschal Naylor join our board. His deep expertise in business, combined with his commitment to science and innovation, make him an invaluable addition to our board. As we move closer to the opening of Ireland's first children's science centre, Paschal's insights and leadership will be hugely valuable in realising our vision of inspiring a new generation of STEM enthusiasts."

The Deputy Principal: Some Indicative Challenges

On the work of deputy principals in Irish primary and post-primary schools

This article builds on and develops research reported in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2023* on the work of deputy principals in Irish primary and post-primary schools. We present on themes developed from analysis of 120 survey responses and subsequent interviews with 10 deputy principals, focusing on three issues: tasks and time; communications and relationships; tensions and stresses.

Gerry Jeffers

Education Department, Maynooth University

Carmel Lillis

Education Department, Maynooth University

Majella Dempsey

Education Department, Maynooth University

Introduction

This article builds on and develops research reported in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2023* (Jeffers et al., 2023) on the work of deputy principals in Irish primary and post-primary schools. Here we present on three themes developed from analysis of 120 survey responses (49 primary, 71 post-primary) to an online questionnaire and subsequent interviews with 10 deputy principals (five primary, five post-primary).

A published report (Jeffers et al., 2024) offers a comprehensive literature review and an account of the research methodology and the extensive data directly from the voices of deputy principals. Here we offer three key points arising from this scoping study that could benefit from attention by practitioners and policymakers.

Tasks and time

The experiences of working at primary and post-primary level are quite different: more than 90% of primary deputies have full-time teaching duties, whereas their post-primary counterparts generally don't. There are also similarities: both groups identify long lists of tasks, often unanticipated but important for the smooth functioning

of the school, as features of deputy principalship. Both groups derive satisfaction from similar aspects of the job: seeing children and young people develop and flourish; being part of a team; making a difference.

The practicalities of maintaining a smooth working day in school are generally regarded as central to the deputy's position. These includes timetabling, arranging substitution for absent staff, other scheduling and planning, student and staff safety, nurturing a caring and trusting environment, monitoring and responding to student behaviour and discipline, and so on. As schools have become more inclusive, some primary deputies also take on the role of special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), which brings increased responsibilities.

Extensive tasks and demands can exhilarate but also frustrate. Many report feeling that there is never enough time to respond adequately to all the administrative, management, and leadership responsibilities and expectations associated with the role.

More than 90% of primary deputies have full-time teaching duties, whereas their post-primary counterparts generally don't.

Síle works in a primary school with about 375 children:

> It's almost like I'm all things to all people, but I don't have time to listen. So I feel like I can never be fully present with the children I'm teaching. They're compromised in the school of this size, because inevitably there are issues that have to be sorted out. I'm never fully present to my colleagues, because when I'm trying to arrange things and do things for them, I'm trying to do it after school. When I'm trying to do it, they're not available, and I'm never fully present to the principal because obviously I have to prioritise the children I teach. (Síle, primary, interview)

Our data on the multiplicity and range of tasks resonate with research findings across the world. In this study and internationally, deputy principalship is strongly associated with a vagueness or lack of definition of the role (Tahir et al. 2023). But this may not be such a bad thing. Loose role definitions can give schools flexibility so that a deputy principal's position can be shaped to both address the context of a specific school and complement the skills and competencies of the incumbent principal and, increasingly in larger schools, fellow deputies. When aspects of our research were shared with educational leaders at a seminar in Maynooth University in September 2024, a message of 'Don't over-define the role' was loud and clear.

From the data, most deputies indicate a nuanced awareness of how each school's history, context, and culture shape their priorities and challenges. Responsiveness to the unexpected is a critical feature of the role and very dependent on local knowledge.

Communications and relationships

Deputy principals are at a critical intersection in a school's formal and informal communications traffic. The role involves intense collaboration with staff, the leadership and management team, parents/guardians, and students. Developing and maintaining professional relationships, while juggling a multitude of tasks, can be challenging.

Nearly half a century ago, Lortie (1975, p.56 ff.) identified key characteristics of teaching, including 'individualism'. For some at second level, navigating their way from a highly structured individual timetable to a less predictable and more responsive role as part of a school's senior management team can present fresh challenges.

The term 'distributed leadership' features prominently in the international literature on school leadership and in recent Irish policy documents. But the near-invisibility of the deputy principal in the discourse on distributed leadership is striking. While the *Looking at Our School* documents (DES, 2016a, 2016b; DE, 2022a, 2022b) signify a noticeable difference in awareness of deputies' existence, it is not easy to see much advancement in role clarification. While the evidence points to deputy principals being a key asset in schools, it also suggests this is sometimes underappreciated and even hidden.

Many respondents and interviewees recognise the value of teamwork – 'We can put our heads together to create the best outcome' – but also how this is not always easy to sustain. Effective teamwork can be nurtured by clear, open communication and conversations. Cillian, one of three deputies in a large post-primary school, talks about the value of the principal and deputies sharing their thinking as they travelled together for a day of professional development:

> Those moments are golden because there is no distraction. . . . What we tend to actually talk about is the vision for the school. (Cillian, post-primary, interview)

In the complex web of communications and relationships, the data reinforce the idea that for a deputy principal, a good working relationship with the principal is vital, characterised by frank professional conversations, with both parties working towards a shared vision for the school. Without that, a school will be in trouble.

Tensions and stresses

Juggling multiple tasks and maintaining positive relationships almost inevitably leads to tensions, stresses, even contradictions, for deputy principals. One informant, talking about special educational needs provision, said, 'We are left

While the evidence points to deputy principals being a key asset in schools, it also suggests this is sometimes under-appreciated and even hidden.

to mediate the failures of the system to parents/guardians'; another said that if asked to sum up their job in two words, it would be 'unfinished conversations'. At a time of significant change in Irish society and schooling, including moving from a traditional, hierarchical, authoritarian model to a more inclusive, participative, and collaborative one, deputy principals need to be aware of these trends and clear about their own values. They should also be supported and guided towards these new interpretations of their role.

Tensions can also arise in communications. An ability to engage in professional educational conversations, including difficult, challenging, and conflictual ones, is crucial. This facility extends across the diverse members of the school community, including teachers, special needs assistants, administrative staff, students, parents/guardians, and community interests.

Participants in the research indicate that being part of an in-school team that works well together can reduce the stresses and tensions of the position. Some are critical regarding opportunities for ongoing professional development, while others express appreciation of the professional networks provided by various partners. That some deputy principals need more formal professional development in leadership, as some aspire to become principals but lack structured preparation for the transition, is a notable theme in the literature (Kwan, 2009; Grant, 2014).

Participants in the research indicate that being part of an in-school team that works well together can reduce the stresses and tensions of the position.

At primary level, deputies recall the benefits that arose when, during the Covid-19 pandemic, they were released from teaching duties for 5–16 days, depending on school size. Increase in such administrative support could not only lessen stress but also increase effectiveness of the leadership exercised by deputy principals.

While the position of deputy principal involves a combination of administrative, management, and leadership activities, sometimes the boundaries are unclear; it might be best viewed as an overlapping and interacting continuum rather than three distinct types of activity.

Conclusion

A deputy principal 'occupies a position of vital importance within the senior leadership team in a school' (DES, 2018a). Many job descriptions state that a crucial task of the deputy is to cooperate with the principal in the fulfilment of their role and to deputise in their absence (ibid.). Participants in this scoping study point to significant satisfactions in the job. However, a combination of systemic structures, school-specific difficulties, and personal limitations can restrict, frustrate, and challenge. Here we have focused on three issues: tasks and time; communications and relationships; tensions and stresses. The full report explores these and related issues in more detail.

REFERENCES

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide.* London: Sage.

Department of Education (DE) (2022a) *Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools and Special Schools.* Dublin: DE.

Department of Education (DE) (2022b) *Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools.* Dublin: DE.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2016a) *Looking at Our School: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools.* Dublin: DES.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2016b) *Looking at Our School: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools.* Dublin: DES.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2018a) Circular Letter 0070/2018: *Leadership and Management in Primary schools.* Dublin: DES.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2018b) Circular Letter 0003/2018.

Grant D. (2014) 'Becoming a primary school principal in Ireland: Deputy principalship as preparation', *Irish Teachers Journal,* 2(1), 85–101.

Jeffers, G., Lillis, C., and Dempsey, M. (2023) 'Deputy principals: A hidden asset in schools?' In: B. Mooney (Ed.), *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2023*, pp. 204–208.

Jeffers, G., Lillis, C., and Dempsey, M. (2024) 'Deputy principals: A hidden asset in schools?' Research Report, Maynooth University.

Kwan P. (2009) 'The vice-principal experience as a preparation for the principalship', *Journal of Educational Administration*, 47(2), 191–205.

Lortie, D. (1975) *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tahir, L.M., Musah, M.B., Hassan, R., and Ali, M.F. (2023) 'Published articles on deputy principals from 1980 to 2020: A systematic literature review', *SAGE Open*, 13(4). DOI: 10.1177/21582440231202848

Navigating a Changing World: Ireland's Vision for Lifelong Guidance 2030

Lifelong Guidance: Policy and Practice

Introduction

Guidance services in Ireland are inherently holistic and encompass developing three distinct yet interconnected aspects of one's life: personal and social, educational, and career. It has long been understood that to reach these aims, guidance services should empower individuals to make decisions informed by an understanding of themselves, the options available to them, and what the future might hold.

In today's increasingly globalised and digitalised world, evolving work patterns in a growing number of careers and jobs require people to continually upskill, retrain, and engage in lifelong learning. The concept of a 'job for life' is increasingly obsolete, with people needing to anticipate transitions between multiple roles throughout their career. Guidance services must therefore be proactively accessible and available throughout one's life, not just at the common pressure points where their importance becomes most visible.

Five years ago, the Indecon review (2019) found that while Ireland had some quality guidance services, there was a less-than-coherent multiplicity of policies, representative bodies, and delivery methods. Indecon considered this a barrier to effective lifelong guidance, leading to people receiving uncoordinated and ad hoc guidance throughout their life, and made recommendations to address it. Since then, much progress has been made, and this article chronicles that progress.

National Policy Group for Lifelong Guidance

Over the past decades, Ireland has developed a guidance support system across post-primary education, further

Dr Carol Guildea
Guidance Unit, Department of Education
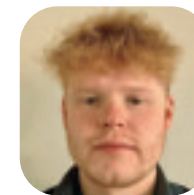
Manus De Paor
Guidance Unit, Department of Education

This article tells the story of lifelong guidance in Ireland and how it is evolving through implementation of a cross-governmental policy, subsequent to the Indecon review of career guidance in 2019.

education and training, and higher education. But the range of state involvement in career guidance extends far beyond that, and this breadth of policy was identified by Indecon (2019) as a challenge to forming a coherent national long-term policy.

Additionally, in late 2020, the Department of Education and Skills evolved into two Departments: the Department of Education (DE) and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). This presented further challenges to ensuring that guidance services were complementary rather than overlapping.

Cognisant of the Indecon recommendations and the need to homogenise the planning of guidance services, while ensuring they are truly lifelong, government departments and other organisations, such as Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), restructured many guidance-related responsibilities. This included new supports for the development of guidance counsellors and whole-school-guidance teams in post-primary schools through Oide, the formation of the new centralised policy- and decision-making Guidance Unit in DE, and the establishment of the new National Policy Group for Lifelong Guidance, all in 2022.

This National Policy Group was established to steer the development of a coherent long-term strategic framework for lifelong guidance, and to ensure that the response to Indecon's recommendations was consistent with national and international approaches. It comprised senior officials from five government departments: DE, DFHERIS, Department of Social Protection (DSP), Department of Children, Equality, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), and Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE).

It was with great dedication that we in the Guidance Unit led the work of this group, which proved a very successful and productive collaboration, beginning with the public consultation on lifelong guidance in early 2023.

National Framework for Guidance – public consultation

With any major reform in policy or governance, it is vital to listen to *all* voices most affected. For this reason, our work began with a broad public consultation that prioritised flexibility and equity of access.

A wide range of stakeholders were invited first to read a consultation paper (DE, 2023b), which outlined the background of guidance in Ireland, provided a rationale for developing lifelong guidance, presented international perspectives on guidance policy, and outlined the vision for lifelong guidance in Ireland. They were then invited to discuss these and could contribute their views in various

The National Policy Group was established to steer the development of a coherent long-term strategic framework for lifelong guidance.

The framework looks to establish clear standards and to ensure consistency across providers by defining what constitutes high-quality guidance.

ways. In total, DE held 11 focus groups and received 61 written submissions and 611 online survey engagements.

The feedback was a comprehensive, conclusive, and invaluable resource with which we could build the foundations of our National Strategic Framework (DE, 2023c). It showed clear support for the draft vision for lifelong guidance and highlighted many areas of concern. These included the need to clearly define the role of guidance counsellors across different sectors, raise awareness of guidance services available beyond educational settings, create stronger links between employers and guidance services, and improve many other important aspects.

National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (2024–2030)

Drawing on insights from the public consultation, the National Policy Group members, and an advisory group of representatives from 12 stakeholder groups, the ambitious 'Vision for Lifelong Guidance' was developed to its full potential into the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (DE, 2023c) and its accompanying Strategic Action Plan for Lifelong Guidance (DE, 2023d).

The framework envisions deliberate and systematic coordination of guidance services across all sectors, while acknowledging the need for varied support at the many stages in all education and career pathways. It understands that people may require different forms of guidance to address their unique needs throughout their lives, regardless of their circumstances, previous experiences, educational level, or other factors.

The framework looks to establish clear standards and to ensure consistency across providers by defining what constitutes high-quality guidance, while improving, encouraging, and facilitating the continuing professional

32

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2024**
YEARBOOK

33
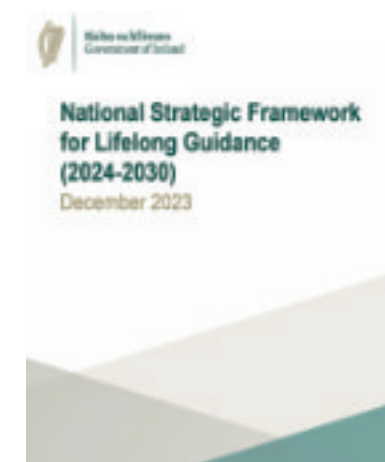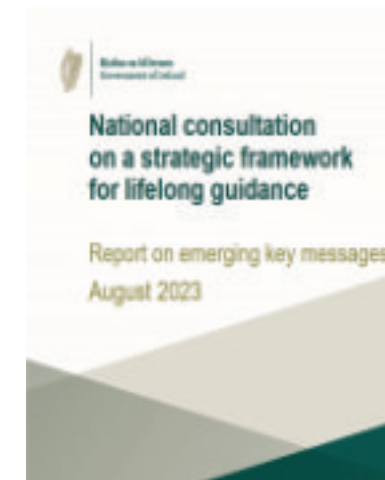
development (CPD) of guidance practitioners. It emphasises the implementation of person-centred, universal-design principles and inclusivity policies across the guidance space.

Further to its holistic aims, the framework engages with the workforce-development agenda by strengthening links between industry, educational institutions, and guidance services, and improving the navigability of learning and development opportunities for those entering, already in, and transitioning between careers and employment.

Ultimately, it outlines the vision, pillars, objectives, and outcomes of lifelong guidance in Ireland. Four pillars support the framework:

1. Visibility and awareness of lifelong-guidance services and information provision
2. Standards and quality throughout the lifelong-guidance system
3. Access, inclusion, and universal design
4. Career-management skills and lifelong career mobility.

Under these pillars are eight objectives:

1. Enhance cooperation and coordination between those responsible for lifelong guidance with clear division of responsibilities and strong coordination.
2. Ensure greater awareness and access to lifelong guidance to make meaningful, well-informed, and conscious decisions about education and careers in an ever-changing world.
3. Embed lifelong guidance within the world of work.
4. Improve clarity around standards and quality in lifelong guidance.
5. Further develop evidence-based policies that will improve the quality and impact of lifelong guidance.
6. Promote inclusion and equity of access through the provision of lifelong guidance, underpinned by a universal-design approach.
7. Strive to ensure that career planning and management skills will be a consistent focus of guidance provision.
8. Support career mobility for individuals through guidance provision throughout the lifespan. Target dates are allocated to each action.

With these pillars and objectives, the framework strives for more visible, accessible, streamlined, and complementary provision of guidance throughout Ireland. They provide a critical building block towards further developing and enhancing guidance services across the country. This is substantiating itself, even at this early stage, through the ongoing implementation of the framework's accompanying strategic action plan.

Ultimately, the framework outlines the vision, pillars, objectives, and outcomes of lifelong guidance in Ireland.

National Strategic Action Plan for Lifelong Guidance (2024–2030) and policy implementation

The National Strategic Action Plan for Lifelong Guidance (2024–2030) outlines the strategic actions being undertaken at national level to achieve the identified outcomes in the strategic framework. It provides a roadmap for lifelong guidance and draws on the approach of the National Policy Group by assigning government departments to lead collaborative approaches on actions outlined in the plan.

Under the four strategic pillars, 35 actions are outlined and are being delivered by the National Policy Group and stakeholders such as Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Oide, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), and ETBI. The advisory group supports this work at important moments. Implementation of the strategic action plan began immediately, and a strong and meaningful start has been made.

The culmination of this work was presented at a national forum in Dublin Castle in summer 2024. A total of 140 stakeholders representing 60 organisations came together to reflect on, develop, promote, and disseminate new knowledge and learning throughout all aspects of lifelong guidance, in accordance with action 5.2.

Department of Education

The DE Guidance Unit is actively engaging to progress actions in different areas of post-primary guidance. For instance, the DE has committed to increasing the supply of guidance counsellors by funding a new training programme at Maynooth University, starting in January 2025 (action 4.3). Those already qualified and employed in recognised post-primary schools are continuing to receive CPD aligned with their training needs in all aspects of guidance (action 4.1). Efforts are under way to ensure that guidance support for students in special schools is provided by appropriately trained professionals (action 2.6).

The DE is exploring ways to ensure high-quality standards and consistency in guidance provision for post-primary schools (action 4.4), while we continue to develop and share new resources to enhance guidance practices in these schools (action 4.6). We are committed to developing new supporting materials that incorporate learnings from existing programmes in special and post-primary schools. These materials aim to facilitate clear planning and positive transitions to further education, employment, or disability day services as appropriate (action 2.9). Transition Year micro-modules that support teaching and learning in areas such as career exploration and work experience are under development (action 2.8).

The Department of Education has committed to increasing the supply of guidance counsellors by funding a new training programme at Maynooth University, starting in January 2025.

34

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2024**
YEARBOOK

35

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

DFHERIS has outlined the steps it is taking to implement the recommendations of the *OECD Skills Strategy Ireland* report, including those on guidance. These steps include a clear focus on career information and the navigability of information available on career options and the choices offered by the skills ecosystem (action 1.2). Along the same lines, DFHERIS is working to further develop the careers information portal (action 2.2). The ambition is to engage with users in an accessible format and provide up-to-date information on careers and training opportunities at all career stages.

To progress all other actions in the action plan, DFHERIS collaborates with DE and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN), which is supported by DETE and includes industry representatives (action 3.2). Over the years, the EGFSN has made recommendations on the need for better career guidance and the benefits of having industry participate in conversations with students about careers.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

The DETE highlights the importance of guidance provision through the work and reports of the EGFSN, which frequently recommend the promotion of career opportunities and pathways. Industry stakeholders often say they see great value in connecting with schools to explain career opportunities to students and observe that a coherent approach to lifelong guidance is consistent with the EGFSN's goals to minimise future skills gaps. DETE officials collaborate with DFHERIS and DE on all actions relating to lifelong guidance in the action plan.

Department of Social Protection

DSP has provided an overview of the Public Employment Service, provided by Intreo and Intreo Partners, in the context of the Pathways to Work Strategy 2021–2025. The aim of this service is to support jobseekers to obtain sustainable employment, with an emphasis on providing individualised employment supports. DSP's work here is pivotal to progressing action 8.1, 'to enhance the provision of access to guidance at key stages so that an individual may upskill and retrain, thereby enabling career mobility of the workforce'. For example, when a jobseeker is preparing to become 'job ready', their employment personal adviser or job coach will help them develop a personal progression plan that will identify if they require further training or education first.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Across DCEDIY, work is ongoing to ensure better access to information and supports, particularly for young people embarking on their careers. Under the

DFHERIS is working to further develop the careers information portal with the aim of engaging with users in an accessible format and providing up-to-date information on careers and training opportunities at all career stages.

Guidance Framework (action 2.9), DCEDIY supports DE in developing materials to help transitions from special and post-primary schools to further education, employment, or disability services. In keeping with action 3.4, DCEDIY is leading discussions across government for developing Ireland's next National Disability Strategy and recently published the new National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024–2028.

The disability strategy will operate as a plan for implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and a framework for coordinating disability policy across government. The Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy outlines key government objectives in those communities, such as reducing unemployment, supporting self-employment, addressing labour market barriers, and building inclusive workplace cultures. Further, the new Autism Innovation Strategy (DCEDIY, 2024a) aims to improve mainstream service provision for autistic people, focusing on equal access to public services, education, and employment.

The Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy outlines key government objectives in those communities, such as reducing unemployment, supporting self-employment, addressing labour market barriers, and building inclusive workplace cultures.

Conclusion

We are pleased with the progress that has been made, and is continuing to be made, by the working group on the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance and accompanying action plan. We intend for a transformative shift in lifelong guidance policy and therefore in guidance services that can make meaningful improvements in society, the economy, and people's lives.

A strategic emphasis on equity and inclusivity not only looks to guarantee that everyone has access to the resources and supports they need to succeed, but also fosters social cohesion and narrows the often-discriminatory gaps between education and employment opportunities, contributing to a more just and equitable society.

Through collaborative efforts, we look to align skills development with industry needs, reducing skills gaps and enhancing workforce mobility. By encouraging stronger links between education, guidance services, and industry, we can promote a more resilient and adaptable economy, better equipped to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing global landscape.

REFERENCES

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2024a) *Autism Innovation Strategy.* Dublin: Government of Ireland.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2024b) *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024–2028.* Dublin: Government of Ireland.

Department of Education (DE) (2023a) *National Consultation on a Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance – Report on Key Messages Emerging August 2023.* Dublin: Government of Ireland.

Department of Education (DE) (2023b) *National Framework for Lifelong Guidance* Consultation Paper. Dublin: Government of Ireland.

Department of Education (DE) (2023c) *National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (2024–2030).* Dublin: Government of Ireland.

Department of Education (DE) (2023d) *National Strategic Action Plan for Lifelong Guidance (2024–2030).* Dublin: Government of Ireland.

Department of Social Protection (DSP) (2024) *Pathways to Work 2021–2025 – Updated Strategy Following Mid-Term Review.* Dublin: Government of Ireland.

Indecon (2019) *Indecon Review of Career Guidance Final Report.* Dublin: Indecon.

* * *

On 20 November 2024, South East Technological University (SETU) hosted the launch of TU RISE (TU Research and Innovation Supporting Enterprise), at its Cork Road Campus.

The event brought together industry leaders, academics, and policymakers to celebrate the transformative impact of TU RISE and its role in driving regional development.

SETU President, Professor Veronica Campbell, said:

"The launch of TU RISE is a defining moment for SETU... As we continue to build and grow this initiative, we must remember that it is only through collaboration, curiosity, and bold thinking that we will achieve the transformative impact we seek."

Disabled Students' School and Post-School Careers

The number of young people identified with additional needs has increased dramatically. But how do they fare after second-level education? This research-based article looks at how disabled students are supported, or not, to pursue further education and training or higher education and to develop their self-determination skills. It also outlines the essential elements of such support.

Selina McCoy
Head of Education Research, Economic and Social Research Institute

Eamonn Carroll
Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Economic and Social Research Institute

Keyu Ye
Research Assistant, Economic and Social Research Institute

Introduction

Like many countries, Ireland has seen substantial reform in inclusive education provision in recent decades, which has led to additional autonomy, and responsibility, for schools in distributing resources. The number of children and young people identified with additional needs has increased dramatically over the past two decades, making up over a quarter of the school population today (McCoy et al., 2019).

Despite stated policy aspirations, we have a 'multi-track' approach to the provision for students with additional needs, with a steady enrolment in special schools and rapid expansion in special-class provision across primary and second-level settings (Kenny et al., 2020). In the 2023/24 school year, about 2.7% of the overall student population was in a special class or special school, projected to rise to 5% by the end of the decade; 1,700 special classes have been established over the last five years (Department of Education, 2024).

In the context of these trends, it is important to ask: How do young people experiencing a range of additional needs and disabilities fare as they progress through and beyond the school system?

Challenges

The evidence shows the multiple challenges facing disabled young people in Ireland, in particular reflecting the direct and indirect impact of socioeconomic disadvantage at family, school, and community levels. Of particular note is the importance of attendance, engagement, and achievement during primary and early second-level years, and of parental expectations, for later outcomes. Across a diversity of studies, expectations are key – the importance of high expectations for all students, regardless of background and the role of disability or SEN (special educational needs) labels in impacting on the expectations held for children and young people, is repeatedly highlighted.

The evidence also shows the disproportionate representation of disabled students in DEIS schools and in economically vulnerable households, and the significance of these factors in students' school and post-school pathways. While the DEIS programme has shown impact in tackling gaps in achievement, attendance, and engagement (OECD, 2024), adequately supporting the complexity of needs that their students are facing demands more resources. A proposed 'DEIS+' category attracting greater resources is warranted. The evidence also points to higher DARE (Disability Access Route to Education) application rates among disabled students in non-DEIS schools, raising questions about the effectiveness of the programme in meeting intended needs.

Resource constraints faced by both schools and wider youth mental health services create challenges for schools in supporting student wellbeing. Only 46% of students feel that their school provides adequate wellbeing supports, with disabled students faring less well. The evidence points to the importance of identifying those most vulnerable to poorer wellbeing, listening to what students need, supporting teacher professional development in wellbeing, and embedding a whole-school approach, as the best ways to foster wellbeing in schools (Dempsey & McCoy, 2024). The evidence also highlights the urgent need for professional, therapeutic supports for children and young adults, supports which follow them as they move through and beyond the educational system (McCoy et al., forthcoming).

Only 46% of students feel that their school provides adequate wellbeing supports, with disabled students faring less well.

Trajectories

While students' life trajectories are shared in many ways through school, they diverge significantly upon leaving. All else being equal, children who are identified with socio-emotional or behavioural difficulties are less likely to progress to higher education in Ireland. Research also shows that disabled students reflect less positively on how well school prepares them for adult life, independent living, and career decisions. Students with complex needs, in particular, are less likely than their peers to report being encouraged to pursue education or training and to feel well-supported in such decisions. Open days in non-mainstream post-school settings, mentoring programmes, and work experience opportunities are all essential in ensuring informed choices (McCoy et al., forthcoming).

Self-determination skills are essential in the post-school transition period, for accessing post-secondary opportunities and achieving success in them. Such skills are particularly crucial for disabled students, enabling their access to support services and accommodations for their disabilities, navigating institutional infrastructure, communicating with instructors, and engaging in academic and social activities. Evidence reveals wide disparities between disabled and non-disabled students in perceived school support for self-determination skills development, as well as among disabled students in school support for this skills development. Notably, positive school engagement, student–teacher relationships, and enhanced self-concept emerge as protective factors, highlighting the pivotal role of supportive and inclusive school climates, positive interpersonal relationships, and individual beliefs in nurturing decision-making agency (Ye & McCoy, 2024).

Self-determination skills are essential in the post-school transition period, for accessing post-secondary opportunities and achieving success in them.

There has been an expansion in the range of post-school opportunities for disabled young adults, alongside valuable HSE supports for leavers from special schools to ensure that placements align with individual needs and interests, within the constraints of what is available. The evidence largely points to positive learner experiences across a range of settings, including further education and training programmes and the National Learning Network, with disabled young adults reporting positive engagement and enriching programmes. However, challenges with staffing shortfalls in some programmes, particularly relating to adult day services, mean that transitions are delayed or disrupted, having a real impact on young adults' personal and learning progression and social engagement. The absence of accessible public transport and transport supports on leaving school are also key barriers for many disabled young adults. Finally, flexible study options, including online courses, and tailored post-school pathways are essential in meeting the increasingly diverse needs and preferences of disabled young adults (McCoy et al., forthcoming).

REFERENCES

Carroll, E., McCoy, S., and Ye, K. (2024) '"Embracing diversity in all its forms": The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education', ESRI Research Series 182, Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute. DOI: 10.26504/rs182

Carroll, E., Ye, K., and McCoy, S. (2022) 'Educationally maintained inequality? The role of risk factors and resilience at 9, 13 and 17 in disabled young people's post-school pathways at 20', *Irish Educational Studies*, 41(3), 573–594. DOI: 10.1080/03323315.2022.2093257

Carroll, E., McCoy, S., and Mihut, G. (2022) 'Exploring cumulative disadvantage in early school leaving and planned post-school pathways among those identified

40

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2024**
YEARBOOK

41

with special educational needs in Irish primary schools', *British Educational Research Journal,* 48(6), 1065–1082. DOI: 10.1002/berj.3815

Dempsey, C. and McCoy, S. (2024) 'Getting the most out of wellbeing in schools', *Leader*, autumn 2024. Dublin: National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals.

Department of Education (2024) 'Ministers Foley and Naughton announce plans to establish five new special schools'. Press release, 18 October. www.gov.ie/en/press-release/fb21f-ministers-foley-and-naughton-announce-plans-to-establish-five-new-special-schools/.

Kenny, N., McCoy, S., and Mihut, G. (2020) 'Special education reforms in Ireland: Changing systems, changing schools', *International Journal of Inclusive Education,* pp. 1–20. DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2020.1821447

McCoy S., Shevlin, M., and Rose, R. (2019) 'Secondary school transition for students with special educational needs in Ireland', *European Journal of Special Needs Education.* DOI: 10.1080/08856257.2019.1628338

McCoy, S., Ye, K., and Carroll, E. (forthcoming) *Paths, Tracks, Gaps and Cliffs: Supporting the Post-School Transitions of Students with Special Educational Needs.* Dublin: National Council for Special Education.

OECD (2024) *OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage.* Paris: OECD. www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-review-of-resourcing-schools-to-address-educational-disadvantage-in-ireland_3433784c-en.html.

Ye, K. and McCoy, S. (2024) 'Examining the post-school decision-making and self-determination of disabled young adults in Ireland', *Disabilities,* 4(3), 459-476. DOI: 10.3390/disabilities4030029

* * *

ICO's Choral Christmas in Limerick

Irish Chamber Orchestra

On 19 December 2024, the Irish Chamber Orchestra presented a Choral Christmas with the Irish Youth Choir, featuring some of Ireland's finest young voices under Director Patrick Barrett. University of Limerick is home to Ireland's National Chamber Orchestra (ICO) which also regularly tours Ireland and nternationally. The Irish Chamber Orchestra (ICO) is funded by the Arts Council of Ireland.

New Government Must Prioritise Inclusivity in Education

An opportune time

The publication of this edition of *Ireland's Education Yearbook* comes as a new government looks ahead to its new term and the priorities it will pursue. So it is an opportune time to detail what my office believes needs to be prioritised in education. And where better to begin than with the voices of the key stakeholders in our education system, the children themselves.

Last summer, our office surveyed over 1,000 secondary school children from across Ireland, to get their views on what they would like to see for the future of Ireland on a number of key issues, including education. Our *Tomorrow Starts with Us* survey found that the majority of students (62%) are happy with their education (stating it was Good or Very Good) and that 71% agree that 'Ireland is a good country to reach your full potential'. Some of the children we spoke to even described Ireland as 'class', 'welcoming', and 'wonderful' – so I am certainly not going to say that education in Ireland is anything less than very good.

Ireland consistently scores well in our testing on reading, maths, and science compared to other OECD countries (PISA scores), especially when it comes to top-performing students. Overall, 92% of our children who start second level (but just 86% of DEIS students) complete the Leaving Certificate. We are also now beginning to rethink how we test and evaluate our teenagers, through Senior Cycle reform. We have started to offer therapy in primary schools, which is a major step forward in our battle to help children with their mental health. So education is in a very positive space at present.

But (and you all knew I would have to have a 'but') I now believe it is time to put a lot of energy into the 10%–15% of our children who are *not* able to fully access and benefit from education due to a range of different issues.

Dr Niall Muldoon
Ombudsman for Children

Ireland's education system is performing well overall, with positive developments in evaluation and provisions. But some children still cannot fully access and benefit from education. This article outlines three clear actions for the new Minister for Education in their first 100 days in office. No child with special educational needs should be left without a school place next September; children with disabilities need to be supported; and mental health supports need to be expanded across all schools.

These might include disabilities (physical, emotional, or intellectual), poverty and disadvantage (we perform well internationally on headline PISA scores, but students from disadvantaged backgrounds consistently do worse than their peers), a lack of support at home, and pressure to leave school or to engage with criminality. The individual issues for students might revolve around sexuality, identity, or ethnicity, and negative experiences at school due to racism, discrimination, or bullying. The most upsetting stats from our survey are that 36% reported experiencing discrimination, and 15% experienced racism.

Inclusive education

I was asked to write this article as a list of actions that will be needed when the new government comes into being. I hope this can act as a guide for a Programme for Government in relation to education. For me, there is one crucial commitment, made by the last government, which has not been followed through on as promised: *'Ensure that each child with a special educational need has an appropriate school place, in line with their constitutional right.'* For the past three years, inclusive education has been a strategic focus of my office. Despite some progress, the government has fallen well short of this commitment.

In June 2022, we published *Plan for Places*, our report on forward planning for children with special educational needs (SEN). In it we highlighted an unacceptable situation that saw a number of children left in limbo and facing into the new school year with no school to go to. The issue dominated the headlines and focused government attention on what was an emergency situation, particularly for children in provision black spots such as Dublin and Cork. Promises were made that no child would be left without a place that September.

Two years on, we published an update report. There is no doubt that things have improved; however, despite these positive strides, we can't forget that we were coming from a situation that was simply unacceptable for children with SEN, and one that unfortunately hasn't gone away. On 2 September 2024, the Department of Education told us about 126 children who have no school place this year.

Added to the lack of forward planning for school places is the poor access to support services for children due to the complete farce surrounding the Assessment of Need (AON) process. Access to the services are the true key to unlocking the value of education for *all* children, and it starts with early intervention.

In 2020, when the Programme for Government was published and a commitment was made to reduce the waiting times for AON, just over 6,000

On 2 September 2024, the Department of Education told us about 126 children who have no school place this year.

children were waiting for an assessment. By 2022, the number had reduced significantly, but after a High Court ruling that the HSE's standard operating procedure was not compliant with the Disability Act 2005, the number began to rise again, rapidly.

Now, with the HSE estimating that over 20,000 AONs will be due for completion by the end of 2024 (HSE, 2024), the time has also come for us to face the truth: that as a nation we have deliberately designed our legislation to save us money rather than help children with disabilities.

The Disability Act 2005, which allows for an AON to be completed for a child within six months from date of request, was deliberately written to exclude the provision of services following such an assessment. This needs to be reviewed, as it provides for a diagnosis-led, rather than a needs-led, model which is not in line with a rights-based model under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It is also not acceptable that the provisions for an educational needs assessment under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, which is the responsibility of the Department of Education, have not been progressed.

The new government needs to grasp that nettle and recognise that the majority of parents, who are investing enormous amounts of energy and money – both of which are likely to be in short supply when they have a child with a disability – into seeking an AON, would much rather that their child is given access to services they need.

As a nation we have deliberately designed our legislation to save us money rather than help children with disabilities.

I believe that fixing the AON situation will require a whole-of-government approach and joint work between the Departments of Education, Health, and Children, via the HSE. It is no longer tenable that they should each be working on this via parallel systems. The children, and their parents, deserve to know that the two main providers of services are trying to resolve it as a single issue. If the new government were to remove this obstacle for so many children, they will be progressing education enormously and making space for those children to begin to fully reach their potential. It is the very definition of game-changing.

We need to work towards a future where all children living within a community enter through the same local school doors and are given an equal learning experience in an environment that accommodates their individual needs. Only then can we say we have the truly inclusive education system that every child is entitled to.

Three clear actions

In the past few months, my office has been raising these concerns and our solutions with political parties as they prepare their election manifestos. Our

aim is that the next Programme for Government is child-rights-centred, and by the time this article is published, my hope is that we will have strong commitments from the new government that are actionable immediately, to ensure that Ireland can uphold every child's right to good-quality and inclusive education.

In the first 100 days of office for the Minister for Education, I want to see three clear actions.

Firstly, I want to see a clear plan to ensure that September 2024 is the last time any child is left without a school place. The time for excuses has long passed. Data, resources, and political will are all needed to achieve this.

Secondly, when it comes to supports for children with disabilities, we must work together to meet the immediate needs of children through additional service provision in the short term. In tandem, I want to see a medium-term strategy with a robust statutory underpinning for the provision of assessments and services to children which is child-centred and rights-based. This must include the review and commencement of the EPSEN Act.

Finally, I want to see the progress on mental health supports in school built upon in the next government by continuing to invest in the in-school therapy supports at primary level and expanding it to all secondary schools as well.

As we look towards the next five years and consider the future of our education system, hopefully through the long-promised Citizen's Assembly, it is essential that children and young people have a seat at the table from the outset. Just 7% of children and young people in our survey said they believe their opinions are considered by politicians and policymakers when making decisions about children. We all have to do better; this isn't an optional extra. Children have a fundamental right to have their views respected, as outlined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The next Minister for Education must recognise children and young people as the primary stakeholders in the education system and put their interests first.

We must work together to meet the immediate needs of children through additional service provision in the short term.

REFERENCE

Health Service Executive (HSE) (2024) Letter from the Office of the Assistant National Director, National Disability Team, 16 July. www.hse.ie/eng/about/personalpq/pq/2024-pq-responses/july-2024/pq-28813-24-richard-boyd-barrett.pdf.

Education Programme for Government: A Summary

The education section of the new Programme for Government (PfG) is quite extensive at first reading, but for someone as familiar with the education landscape as I am, it reads very much like 'steady as she goes'. I read carefully through the entire documents and highlighted the proposals relevant to education which, in my opinion, required a new decision or an ongoing action of some nature. Below is a condensed list of those highlights.

Dr Brian Mooney

Editor, *Ireland's Education Yearbook*

If I were in the shoes of any of the senior or junior Ministers recently appointed to implement the PfG and looked for something to get stuck into delivering, I might find that within my areas of responsibility the actions proposed had already commenced or were within the relevant department's internal consideration processes. This programme is therefore a good summation of what's currently happening across all the relevant departments and sections – which in many ways may not be seen as a negative.

What it does give incoming Ministers is the freedom either to watch the engine of education governance purr gently away, while attending all the daily conferences and other events within their brief, or to look critically at their specific areas of responsibility and ask themselves, now that they have the freedom to innovate: What fresh thinking can I bring to my area of responsibility that can have lasting benefit for Irish society?

For any incoming Minister, a leisurely review of the Yes Minister box set might give them some insight into how to actually see through to fruition any innovative initiatives they may suggest over the next few years.

Early Childhood Education

» Publish a detailed action plan to build an affordable, high-quality, accessible early childhood education and care (ECEC) system, with State-led facilities adding capacity.

» Explore making available an extra hour of ECEC each day in the second year of preschool.

Primary and Second Level Education

» Continue the programme of reform of Senior Cycle.

» Embed information and communication technologies (ICT) and coding in the curriculum.

» Expand the teaching of modern foreign languages in primary schools.

» Hold a convention that brings together all stakeholders in education.

» Expand the school transport service to include 100,000 additional students by 2030, reduce distance criteria, and expand eligibility.

» Introduce new music education hubs.

» Expand opportunities for students to attend Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí.

» Continue to increase the number of schools offering Physical Education (PE) as a Leaving Certificate exam subject. Prioritise the development of PE halls and sporting facilities (including yards and play areas) for schools, in conjunction with the Sports Capital Fund, to deliver for both schools and communities.

» Reduce the general pupil–teacher ratio at primary level to 19:1 over the term of government.

» Roll out common school-application systems nationwide to reduce stress on parents and students.

» Increase funding supports for student teachers, working to increase supply and diversity in the profession.

» Establish a new DEIS-plus scheme to support schools with the highest level of educational disadvantage to improve educational outcomes, particularly in literacy and numeracy.

» Enhance guidance services in schools to ensure that all students have access to high-quality guidance. Provide career guidance in special schools.

» Continue to expand and improve the free School Meals Programme and ensure that suppliers adhere to robust guidelines on the nutritional value of meals, dietary requirements of students, reduction of food waste, and use of recyclable packaging.

» Provide free schoolbooks to all children in the free education system, and introduce changes as needed to the operation of this scheme.

» Provide free period products in schools to ensure that no student is held back due to period poverty.

» Continue to increase the number of special schools and special classes across the country to ensure that children can go to school in their local community.

» Introduce a new common application system for children applying to special schools and classes to make it more straightforward for parents.

» Create a dedicated national therapy service in education, beginning with special schools. Double the number of college places for speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, educational psychologists, and any other specialists required.

» Create new expedited qualification routes for professionals with relevant skills and experience. Examine the provision of funding supports for those seeking to upskill into therapy programmes. Provide therapy assistant posts in the education sector to maximise therapists' ability to deliver bespoke therapy services. Ensure that the model of therapy provision allows children in special educational needs (SEN) and mainstream classes, and those in special schools, to access essential therapies.

» Make special education modules and placements in special schools or classes a universal part of initial teacher training that will be subject to assessment.

» Introduce a specific programme to support students with exceptional abilities.

» In State examinations, develop an appropriate mechanism to allow additional time for students with specific needs and in certain circumstances, and also ensure that those who use assistive technology can do so.

» Complete the special needs assistant (SNA) workforce development programme, providing clarity on their role and career paths.

» Work with school leaders to ensure that schools are smartphone-free zones to protect student wellbeing and learning.

» Promote digital literacy and online safety education in schools, especially through Webwise in collaboration with Coimisiún na Meán and other organisations, to ensure that children understand online safety risks and to increase supports against bullying and online abuse, and expand counselling resources.

48

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2024**
YEARBOOK

49

» Introduce a comprehensive wellness approach, focusing on physical activity, nutrition, emotional wellbeing, and positive social behaviour in schools, promoting at least 60 minutes of physical activity throughout the full day for children of all abilities.

» Complete the passage of legislation to provide supports to survivors of abuse in industrial schools and reformatories.

» As a priority, establish and support the work of a commission of investigation as agreed by the Cabinet in September 2024.

Further and Higher Education

» Unlock the National Training Fund.

» Develop a borrowing framework for technological universities to access capital funding for initiatives, including student accommodation.

» Ensure that where a higher education institution operates across multiple campuses in a region, there is balanced senior-management representation based across the campuses.

» Continue to reduce the student contribution fee over the lifetime of the government, to ease the financial burden on students and families at the start of each academic year in a financially sustainable manner.

» Examine the introduction of a placement grant for students on mandatory placements.

» Increase financial support to postgraduate students, particularly in areas of critical skills shortages.

» Increase the number of third-level pathways outside the Leaving Certificate points system, and introduce a single application process for apprenticeships and further and higher education.

» Introduce a 'second chance' to ensure that students repeating a year or changing courses on one occasion can access the Free Fees Initiative, to avoid them being penalised and having to pay higher rates of fees.

» Expand the Programme for Access to Higher Education (Path 4) courses to ensure equity of access to further education.

» Expand the CAO system to include more apprenticeship options.

» Expand the skills categories that can avail of the National Training Fund to include sectors such as healthcare and education.

» Grow apprenticeship registrations to at least 12,500 by 2030, and develop and launch a new five-year Apprenticeship Action Plan for 2026–2030 to set a strategic vision for the sector and expand the skills categories.

» Work with the National Skills Council to update apprenticeship curriculums to meet today's industry standards.

» Ensure new courses in green skills supporting Ireland's transition to a green economy, and establish industry centres of retrofitting excellence nationwide.

» Double the number of places in high-demand healthcare professions, such as speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, and physiotherapists.

» Continue to invest in the National Construction Training Centre at Mount Lucas, Co. Offaly, to address future demands for construction skills.

Research and Innovation

» Continue to fund Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland to maintain Ireland's global competitiveness.

» Ensure that distinct funding programmes for research in the humanities and social sciences are maintained.

» Work with industry and higher education institutions to provide expanded programmes of short and micro-credential courses to upskill and re-skill our pool of talented people for future jobs.

» Enable the transformation of technological universities to more comprehensively deliver on skills and innovation by introducing new academic career paths, contracts, and professorships in TUs.

» Strengthen all-island collaborations and continue to support the North–South Research Programme through the Shared Island Fund.

New Student Accommodation

» Develop a multi-annual plan to urgently deliver new student accommodation, including through state-financed, purpose-built student accommodation on public or private lands.

» Enable technological universities to borrow funds to provide for on-campus student accommodation.

» Examine measures to boost the take-up of the Rent-a-Room relief scheme.

» Ensure that student accommodation leases align with the academic year, making it easier for students to secure housing only for the months they need.

***

Evaluation of the *Time to Count* Programme

(standing L-R) Andrea Lazenby Simpson, BITCI Head of Education; Molly Fitzgerald, ESB; Orla Gallagher, ESB; Rachel Treacy, ESB; Melanie Flynn, BITCI; (seated) Authors Bernie Collins and Therese Dooley.

The *Time to Count* programme aims to build children's confidence around numbers, to reinforce their conceptual understanding around numbers, and to support them in mathematical problem solving. This is done by pairing companies with 3rd class pupils in a local DEIS school, and providing company volunteers to deliver 10 sessions with the class using maths games, activities, and challenges.

The programme has grown exponentially since it began in 2013, and is now nationwide. In 2024, up to 1000 students participated through more than 50 partnerships between businesses and schools.

Key findings from the external evaluation conducted by DCU found:

» High level of satisfaction with the programme from all participants.
» Teachers and volunteers were very positive about the impact of the programme on children's confidence with numbers.
» The relationship with the volunteers was also a significant positive factor in developing social skills and confidence and in acting as role models.
» The programme delivers on reinforcing children's conceptual understanding of numbers as well as other strands of mathematics, for example money management.
» The programme contributes to children's perseverance in problem-solving.
» The programme covers all strands of the Primary Maths Curriculum and recommends an expansion of the programme's objectives to include the social aspects of learning.

The *Time to Count* evaluation was conducted by Therese Dooley and Bernie Collins from Dublin City University (DCU).

The *Time to Count* programme is funded by An Post and the Department of Education (through the Dormant Accounts fund).

Addressing Ireland's Lifelong Educational Challenges

Five Ministers driving Education across the Lifespan

Norma Foley

Minister for Early Childhood Education
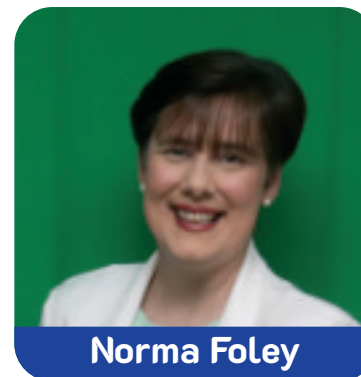
Norma Foley was appointed Minister for Education in June 2020. She is passionate about ensuring that the student voice is at the heart of education, delivering excellence and equity in education and in promoting STEAM. She has greatly expanded the DEIS programme, aimed at tackling educational disadvantage, and has announced the free books scheme for students and significant reforms to Ireland's Senior Cycle and terminal second-level exams.

Minister Foley was elected to represent the Kerry constituency in the 2020 general election. A graduate of University College Cork and a teacher by profession, she was a member of Kerry County Council until her election to Dáil Éireann and has served as mayor of both Tralee and Kerry.

Helen McEntee

Minister for Primary and Second Level

Helen McEntee is Minister for Education and Youth, and Fine Gael TD for Meath East. She was first elected to Dáil Éireann in a by-election in 2013 and was re-elected in the 2016 general election. She was appointed Minister of State for Mental Health and Older People in 2016, Minister of State for EU Affairs in 2017, and Minister for Justice in 2020. She served a term as vice president of the European People's Party, elected in 2019.

Helen graduated from Dublin City University with a bachelor's degree in Law, Politics, and Economics, and holds a master's degree in Communications and Journalism. Before becoming a public representative she worked in the Department of Agriculture and previously for Citibank.

Junior minister with responsibility for Special Education

Michael Moynihan was first elected to Dáil Éireann in the constituency of Cork North West in 1997 and has been re-elected on each occasion since then. In the current Dáil he has been appointed Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth with special responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion.

Michael was chair of the Oireachtas Disability Matters Committee in the 33rd Dáil, and he has previously been chair of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and the Committee on Economic Regulatory Affairs. He has also served on other Oireachtas committees, such as Agriculture and Food, and Heritage and the Irish Language. Michael comes from Kiskeam in Co. Cork, where he lives with his wife and their two children.

Michael Moynihan

Minister for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)

James Lawless was elected to Dáil Éireann to represent Kildare North in 2016, 2020, and 2024. Before that, he was a councillor on Kildare County Council. In 2024 he was promoted to Minister of State at the Department of Transport, and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. James was honoured to be appointed Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in January 2025.

As a former Mayor of Naas, James is passionate about urban regeneration. He studied maths and computer science at Trinity College and law at King's Inns, where he qualified as a barrister. James lives in Sallins with his wife, Ailish, a primary school teacher, and their two daughters. In his downtime he enjoys local park runs, gardening, and sports.

James Lawless

Junior minister with responsibility for Further Education, Apprenticeship, Construction and Climate Skills

Marian Harkin was elected to Dáil Éireann as an Independent TD for Sligo-Leitrim in 2002, 2020, and 2024. Pending new legislation, she will be a junior minister in the Department of Higher Education with responsibility for further education, apprenticeships, construction, and climate skills.

Marian was born in County Sligo, she studied Chemistry and Mathematics at University College Dublin, and she was a secondary school maths teacher in Mercy College, Sligo, for 23 years. She was a Member of the European Parliament from 2004 to 2019 and was deputy leader of the European Democratic Party. Marian has a deep interest in balanced regional development across all sectors, from infrastructure to health to education. In 2011 and 2012 she was awarded MEP of the Year for her work in the European Parliament.

Marian Harkin

Early Childhood

New Beginnings? Overview of Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland

Real potential for change

Another year has drawn to a close, presenting me with the annual task to provide an overview of the state of affairs in Irish early childhood education and care (ECEC), to appraise collective achievements, and to outline challenges and possibilities for the year ahead. As always, the difficulty is where to start. It has been another active year for a vibrant and fast-developing part of the Irish education system, for sure!

One way of establishing the vibrancy of the field is to look at the breadth of contributions to the early childhood section of this *Yearbook*. It shows that early childhood has, as I suggested in an earlier edition, firmly established itself as a profession that *speaks and thinks for itself*.

However, my task is not to introduce or summarise the articles in this section. Rather, it is to identify key aspects that characterise how we, and others, speak and think about the sector, its current state, and its future. The present analysis adds to a picture that has emerged over many years; I have written about it in this *Yearbook* since I started providing my annual overview in 2018. What's new, then?, I imagine you asking. A lot, and not so much, from my point of view.

2024 has brought us to a critical juncture for the future of ECEC in Ireland. Decisions taken now will determine whether we can future-proof the early childhood education system and meet our shared responsibilities to *all* children, their families, and society as a whole. It has long been clear that the early childhood system is in serious crisis. There is now, too, real potential for change. Two fundamental stages are required, I suggest, to realising the necessary systems change. Both are on the table now.

Mathias Urban

Desmond Chair of Early Childhood Education, Early Childhood Research Centre, Dublin City University

In this overview article I trace the shift from denial (of an issue) to acknowledgement (of a problem), to a programme for action in the 2024 general election manifestos of the two parties that have presided over the Irish early childhood system for years and their commitments to reform it over the new term of government. I find both ambition and lack thereof, and map out what we should really be talking about in 2025.

1. From denial to acknowledgement

The early childhood sector has long been in crisis; this has been documented at every level for years by internal and external observers, including the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Eurofound, and of course everyone trying to access early childhood services or to pursue a career as a professional early childhood educator in Ireland. The main systemic challenges have long been identified:

» fragmentation
» governance
» accessibility
» affordability
» quality
» working conditions.

What has changed, profoundly, is that there is now a broad consensus by all actors, and across the entire political spectrum, that (a) we have problems and (b) we can address them. In retrospect, we might record 2024 as the year of *We can't continue as we are!*

2. From acknowledgement to action

If there is one indication of political commitment, it might be found in the change of discourse across the political spectrum. Unthinkable only a few years ago, all parties now argue for much stronger, *hands-on*, State involvement in ECEC. The arguments extend to calls for *public* early childhood provision complementing – or even, in the long term, replacing – the current fragmented picture, with its over-reliance on private for-profit provision.

At the Early Childhood Research Centre in Dublin City University, we have long argued for necessary systems change towards a universal, rights-based, public ECEC system. Together with others, we have laid out the arguments and evidence for such a shift, and provided the road map for transition. Observing the changed political discourse in the run-up to the 2024 general election, it would be tempting to say we have won the argument. But have we?

Let me take a look at the two parties that are, at the time of writing, about to form the new government. What have they promised in their election manifestos, and what might we expect to see enshrined in the programme for government?

Unthinkable only a few years ago, all political parties now argue for much stronger, hands-on State involvement in ECEC.

The manifesto promise is to keep course and 'continue to grow State involvement and investment in the sector'.

What are they saying?

Both parties give prominent space to early childhood in their manifestos – so far, so good. There are, however, some fundamental differences that have the potential to create tensions in a programme for government, and there are critical issues not addressed by either party. (I limit my analysis to the manifestos of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, as they are likely to be the largest partners in government. I am aware that other parties have explicit positions on ECEC.)

Fianna Fáil

The Fianna Fáil (FF) manifesto *Moving Forward. Together* (Fianna Fáil, 2024) places early childhood at the centre of the party's commitment to 'ensuring that Ireland is a good place to raise a family, and that all children are afforded an equal start in life and equal opportunities throughout their lives' (p.71). The document then refers to past achievements, including a doubling of investment in 'childcare' by the last government, thus taking credit for the successful advocacy of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), headed by outgoing Green Party minister Roderic O'Gorman.

The manifesto promise is to keep course and 'continue to grow State involvement and investment in the sector'. Stated main objectives are to achieve 'access, affordability and quality'. The manifesto is clear about the party's priorities:

» They refer to the sector as 'childcare', thus obscuring the fundamental educational function of early childhood education and care.
» Private provision 'plays a very significant role' in FF's plans; 'there can be no overnight abandonment'. However, there will be a 'ramping up' of 'state-led provision, particularly in areas where there is insufficient supply'. What I find remarkable here is the apparent inability to distinguish between the different types of 'private' provision: small services and community-based providers are clearly part of the solution. Large, corporate, for-profit providers are very much part of the problem. Remarkable, too, is the implicit acknowledgement that the existing system of largely private provision is failing children, families, and entire communities, as it is incapable of ensuring 'sufficient supply'. It is hard not to read this as the familiar call for the State to pick up the pieces where the private sector fails.
» There is recognition of the critical role of early childhood educators, though they are framed as 'childcare workers', and of their unsustainable 'pay and conditions'. It is concerning that the FF strategy to address this is to rely further on Employment Regulation Orders (EROs), which keep early childhood educators in a low-skill, low-wage bracket indefinitely, and to channel future increased funds through 'childcare providers'

instead of direct State payment of wages and aiming for pay parity with equally highly qualified graduate professionals.

» The final commitment is to parents' 'flexibility and choice' in choosing their 'childcare arrangements' – again rejecting the responsibility of the State to ensure children's rights to early childhood education. Reference to 'education' is made only once when, under 'affordability', the manifesto promises (without specific details) to 'put the ECCE scheme on legislative footing'.

Fine Gael

Fine Gael (FG), in their general election manifesto *Securing your future* (Fine Gael, 2024), make some interesting choices. First, the manifesto refers to *Early Childhood Education and Care*, setting the tone for a government taking responsibility for ensuring the right to education for all its children, from birth. The confusion quickly returns, however, as other parts of the text refer to services as 'childcare' and to educators as 'childcare educators'. Second, the manifesto boldly places children at the very beginning of their election promises. *Giving our children the best start in life* is the opening section of the entire manifesto (p.7), with *Better early childhood education and care* the first election priority.

FG's approach appears to be based on a number of important positions:

» Policies outlined in the manifesto seem centred on children first, not on 'childcare arrangements' only.
» FG also acknowledge that the task at hand is holistic, as 'the first five years are critical, shaping future health, education, and well-being. A happy, nurturing environment during these formative years can set a child up for lifelong success (p.7). The statement seems to connect, without specifically naming it, to the priorities of the existing *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children, and Their Families.*
» Like FF, the manifesto then introduces a triple focus on *accessibility, affordability,* and *high quality*. The overall aim, here, is stated as *empowering parents, grandparents and carers* – which implicitly recognises the complex and unsustainable current realities of Irish 'childcare arrangements'.

Building on these opening statements, the FG manifesto lists 13 concrete actions the party promises to take in a new government. These include a commitment to 'capping costs' at €200 per child per month, creating 30,000 public 'early learning places', extending the 'free' ECCE scheme by one hour, and making ECCE a legal entitlement.

Two of the announced policies stand out, from my point of view, as they allude to necessary systemic changes:

The Fine Gael manifesto refers to Early Childhood Education and Care, setting the tone for a government taking responsibility for ensuring the right to education for all its children from birth.

» 'Fair, progressive wages' will be established for 'childcare workers in public services'.
» The Childcare Facilities Guidelines for Planning Authorities, dating back to 2001, will be reviewed 'to ensure childcare spaces are provided and put into use'.

A preliminary verdict, and what to expect

At first glance, there is a lot of overlap between the two manifestos; this is probably not a surprise. There is broad agreement that early childhood will require significant attention and investment from the yet-to-be-formed government. This increases the likelihood of a prominent place in the programme for government. There also appears to be a more explicit recognition of the complexity of the task, requiring a whole-systems approach to reforming ECEC. As advocates, scholars, and professionals arguing for systems change, we might indeed have won the argument!

There are also significant differences between the two party positions – none of which are insurmountable. While both parties argue for more hands-on State involvement, including State provision of early childhood services, FF seem inclined not to challenge the reliance on the private sector. FG, if only tentatively, refer to ECEC as public service.

As for the persistent crises of the workforce – recruitment, retention, pay and conditions, professional recognition – FF rely on the existing ERO process. While the ERO has secured some minimal increase in hourly rates, it has locked early childhood educators in a low-wage bracket, with no pathway towards full recognition as a qualified, graduate profession. I predicted as much; it has now come to pass. FG, in contrast, seem committed to reviewing (and therefore potentially changing) the ERO process, and to creating facts on the ground by paying educators as public servants.

The commitments stop short of full-scale systems reform: a roadmap to a rights-based, universal, public ECEC system is nowhere to be seen.

The messages coming from the two parties may appear like a quantum leap compared to previous years, and could even signal a period of new beginnings for ECEC. Yet they should be read with a note of caution. While recognising that *something* has to be done, and even offering some concrete action, the proposals' lack of ambition is worrying, considering the scale and urgency of the task.

First, neither party acknowledges its role in presiding over a failed system for years – decades – that does not result in an *equal* (FF) or *best* (FG) *start in life* for children. Second, the commitments stop short of full-scale systems reform: a roadmap to a rights-based, universal, public ECEC system is nowhere to be seen. Third, the elephant in the room: neither party seems aware of, or concerned about, the damage to service provision caused by corporatisation, financialisation, and speculation. Following a deeply worrying international

pattern, Ireland is at acute risk of sleepwalking into a collapse of the corporate, for-profit 'childcare' similar to that of Australia in 2008.

Going forward, what should we be arguing for?

1. A programme for government that is serious about the need for – and the possibility of – fundamental change to a rights-based, universal, public ECEC system, enshrined as a legal entitlement in national legislation.
2. A clear political statement spelling out the direction of travel.
3. A road map with measurable milestones, fully funded over the full term of government.

What else should we be talking about, in 2025?

All of the above are crucial to turn around the early childhood education and care system. Yet the much-needed systemic policy change does not replace an equally needed and much more fundamental discussion. We are now at the beginning of the second quarter of the 21st century. Many of the underlying assumptions of what ECEC is about are firmly rooted in the 20th century. But the world has changed profoundly, requiring us to re-evaluate and re-imagine the purpose of education in general, and of early childhood education more specifically.

The world that young children are born into is one with a perfect storm of mutually reinforcing existential crises for humanity, most if not all of them self-inflicted: climate catastrophe, loss of biodiversity, forced displacement and mass migration, war, violence, and genocide, dysfunctional global capitalism, threats to democracy, and breakdown of international institutions and rules. The *polycrisis* (a term coined by Edgar Morin) severely impacts the lives of young children, present and future. It is now urgent that we initiate and engage in open democratic debate about how we, as a society, relate to all young children, and reclaim the purpose of early childhood education as a common good.

It is urgent that we initiate and engage in open democratic debate about how we, as a society, relate to all young children, and reclaim the purpose of early childhood education as a common good.

REFERENCES

Fianna Fáil (2024) *Moving Forward. Together. General Election Manifesto 2024.* https://7358484.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net/hubfs/7358484/FF%20Manifesto%202024_V4_Screen%5B45%5D.pdf.

Fine Gael (2024) *Securing your future. General Election 2024 Manifesto.* www.finegael.ie/app/uploads/2024/11/Fine-Gael-General-Election-2024-Manifesto.pdf.

Introducing the Updated *Aistear*
Key messages informing the curriculum framework

Background

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework was introduced to the early childhood sector in 2009, marking an important shift in early childhood education and care in Ireland. It established a vision of the confident and competent child from birth and provided a framework to support and nurture learning and development in early childhood. Much of what we have come to know and understand about *Aistear* provides the solid foundation of the updated framework (Government of Ireland [GoI], in press). The update was necessary to respond to changes in Irish society, advances in policy and research, and the professional profile of educators engaging with *Aistear*.

In line with the processes of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the consultations sought to incorporate the many voices of those who could inform and inspire the NCCA's work (French & McKenna, 2022; Carolan et al., 2023; O'Toole et al., 2023; O'Toole et al., 2024). These voices provide insights into the life experiences of babies, toddlers, and young children; what care and education looks like in the setting-based and home learning environments; the supports and guidance that are essential for learning and development; and the importance of relationships.

Findings from focus groups, questionnaires, and written submissions led the NCCA to delve deeper to understand what *Aistear* needed to do to support the learning and development of babies, toddlers, and young children. Targeted focus groups with families and educators living and working in areas of social disadvantage provided perspectives that informed how *Aistear* could provide meaningful and participatory learning experiences. Feedback from educators in diverse settings gave insight into how

NCCA
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Dr Sharon Skehill
Education Officer, NCCA

Donna Carolan
Acting Director, Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA

Dr Mary Daly
Education Officer, NCCA

Lorraine Farrell
National Aistear Development Officer, NCCA

This article illustrates the interconnectivity between the vision, principles, and themes of *Aistear* through discussion of the rights of babies, toddlers, and young children, the role of the agentic educator, the importance of relationships, and the value of play. These concepts will be developed further through consideration of the new Guidance for Good Practice for educators engaging with the updated *Aistear* framework.

Aistear could be understood in different learning environments to respond to the rights, needs, and wants of children.
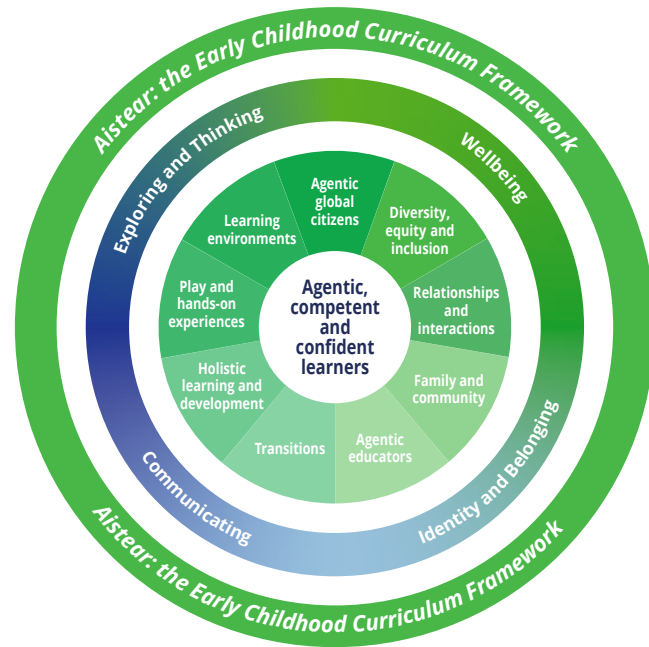
Figure 1: Aistear's contents

Vision

The updated *Aistear* (GoI, in press) foregrounds a rights-based approach and celebrates a vision of the baby, toddler, and young child as agentic, competent, and confident (Figure 1). Being agentic means they have voice and influence over their own learning (Lundy, 2007; DCYA, 2015). This vision places real value on creating time and space for kind and loving interactions and relationships with the children's educators. That kindness is interwoven throughout the principles of *Aistear* and brings meaning to an understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the framework.

The child-voice statements in the principles present the rights of each baby, toddler, and young child, while simultaneously drawing attention to the educator's role in supporting and nurturing early learning and development. Equity is understood in the way educators notice what is important and what is fair for each child, responding to their unique life stories.

The updated Aistear celebrates a vision of the baby, toddler, and young child as agentic, which means they have voice and influence over their own learning.

The vision of the educator presents them as agentic, competent, confident, and reflective. Within this vision, educators genuinely believe in the competencies of babies, toddlers, and young children, holding them in a respectful and protective space. *Aistear* places value on the centrality of such relationships and the importance of nurturing care in early childhood. It recognises the educator's intentionality in planning a curriculum through which every child can thrive and flourish.

Slowing down and being present with children is valued and recognised as crucial to learning and development.

Important messages from the principles in *Aistear* about children's rights, inclusion, relationships, and play are interwoven throughout the themes of Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. Through the aims and learning goals, babies, toddlers, and young children are supported to reach their potential through participation in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum, underpinned by play and relationships, in meaningful and enjoyable ways.

There is an understanding of the learning environment as encompassing not only the physical space and resources, indoors and outdoors, but also the daily routines and the important relational space that nurtures friendships and connections. An understanding of slow relational pedagogy is embedded in the framework, taking inspiration from research (French & McKenna, 2022). Slowing down and being present with children is valued and recognised as crucial to learning and development. Learning experiences are noticed throughout the daily routines: how a baby is supported to feel secure, being held in their key person's arms; how a toddler learns to make healthy choices in nutrition by helping at mealtime; and how a young child and their key person learn about life on land by watching a snail crawl across a rock.

Figure 2: Play and playful experiences

Free play, guided play, and educator-led playful experiences provide a basis for daily routines (Figure 2). By noticing what is important and meaningful for children, educators can nurture learning and development. Nurturing is about recognising, naming, and affirming learning, and encouraging active participation in everyday experiences and opportunities.

Goals

Aistear's Guidance for Good Practice (GoI, in press) presents a reflective cycle of planning and assessing which describes how educators can notice, nurture, respond to, and reflect on learning and development (Figure 3). The updated learning goals describe opportunities in daily routines and provide inspiration for learning about sustainability, nature, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and maths), literacy, language, and the arts. Through intentionality and pedagogical knowledge, the educator knows the value of preparing the environment and setting out and setting up provocations to support children to be curious about our world.
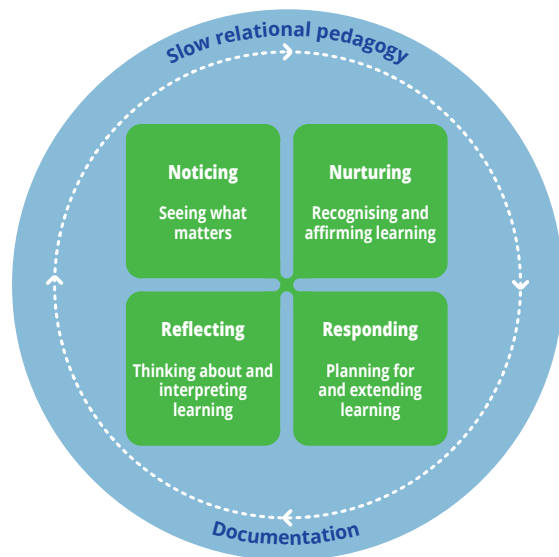
Figure 3: Reflective cycle of planning and assessing

The updated *Aistear* is inspirational and aspirational. It has been developed with an understanding of the crucial importance of positive experiences in early childhood, and the central role of the educator in supporting babies, toddlers, and young children during this time. Updating *Aistear* has provided a strong basis to ensure it will continue to impact positively on the early learning and development of agentic, competent, and confident

Free play, guided play, and educator-led playful experiences provide a basis for daily routines.

children, supported by agentic, competent, confident, and reflective educators.

REFERENCES:

Carolan, D., Fallon, J., Farrell, L., Grant, D., and Skehill, S. (2023) 'Updating *Aistear*: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.), *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2023*. Dublin: Education Matters.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2015) *National strategy on children and young people's participation in decision-making 2015–2020*. Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/publication/9128db-national-strategy-on-children-and-young-peoples-participation-in-dec/.

Department of Education (2023) *Primary Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: Government publications. https://curriculumonline.ie/primary/the-primary-curriculum-framework/.

French, G. and McKenna, G. (2022) *Literature Review to Support the Updating of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/en/resources/literature-review-to-support-the-updating-of-aistear-the-early-childhood-curriculum-framework/.

Government of Ireland (GoI) (in press) *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: Government publications.

Government of Ireland (GoI) (in press) *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework: Guidance for Good Practice*. Dublin: Government publications.

Lundy, L. (2007) '"Voice" is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–942. DOI: 10.1080/01411920701657033

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: NCCA. https://curriculumonline.ie/early-childhood/.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Consultation Report on Updating Aistear: Phase 1*. Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/media/6091/consultationreport_phase1_ua_en.pdf.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2024) *Consultation Report on Updating Aistear: Phase 2*. Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/media/nkmbnj0o/phase-2-updating-aistear-consultation-report.pdf.

O'Toole, L., Walsh, G., Kerrins, L., Doherty, A., Forde, D., Kelleher, F., McCartney, S., Stafford, P., Stokes, T., Matson, S., and Mooney, E. (2023) *A consultation with babies, toddlers and young children to inform the updating of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009): Phase 1*. Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/en/resources/phase-1-consultation-by-maynooth-university-stranmillis-university-college-and-early-childhood-ireland-with-babies-toddlers-and-young-children-to-include-their-voices-in-the-updated-aistear/.

O'Toole, L., Ward, C., Walsh, G., Stokes, T., McCartney, S., Kelleher, F., Forde, D., Doherty, A., and Winter, F. (2024) *A consultation with babies, toddlers and young children to inform the updating of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009): Phase 2*. Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/en/resources/phase-2-consultation-with-babies-toddlers-and-young-children/.

'It Makes Us Happy, and That's Good!'

The child's voice in democratic practices, through the lens of *Aistear*

This research explores children's perceptions of the *Aistear* curriculum framework, to better understand how children interpret its four themes: Wellbeing, Communicating, Identity and Belonging, and Exploring and Thinking. This article outlines the research background and methodology, and describes its findings for each of the four themes.

Paula Kelly
ECEC Educator, St. Nicholas Montessori

Dr Tasha O'Donnell
ECEC Lecturer, Marino Institute of Education

Jane Craven Swan
Preschool Deputy Principal, St. Nicholas Montessori

Introduction

The early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector strives to support meaningful change in the lives of children and families. A review of *Aistear*, the curriculum framework, began recently. *Aistear* is adaptable, designed to enhance child-led pedagogical practices. It creates space for the child's voice, facilitating innovation and promoting participation (I'Anson, 2013).

The *Aistear* Principles and Themes state that the opinions of children 'are worth listening to' and that 'they have a right to be involved in making decisions about matters which affect them' (NCCA, 2009, p.8). While empowering, this is dependent on an educator's recognition of children as capable and able to competently make sense of and share their views (Murray, 2019). Furthermore, it is essential that children see their views responded to, feel heard, and recognise themselves as agents of change. This active participation enhances their ability to flourish (Dobson et al., 2023) and facilitates the tailoring of experiences, resulting in meaningful learning (Murray, 2019).

To successfully implement *Aistear* in a manner which best supports each child, educators benefit from a greater understanding of how children interpret and engage with its four themes: Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communication, and Exploring and Thinking.

The research

This research exploring children's perspectives of *Aistear* was conducted in an urban Montessori preschool with 24 children, aged 3–6 years, attending an ECEC state-funded class. The researchers were also educators and had a pre-existing relationship with the children, some of whom were neurotypical, neurodiverse, or did not speak English as a first language.

The children recognised being calm as 'wellbeing for your whole body', and understood preschool fire drills as 'keeping us safe, so that's wellbeing'.

The children were invited to participate in focus group discussions, to share as they wished and leave at any time. Both parental consent and child assent were sought, meeting the preschool requirements for ethical practice. The children were invited to describe how they 'see' each theme of *Aistear*, the results being documented and read back to the children to offer them an opportunity to confirm or edit their comments.

Analysis was conducted under three themes: prosocial behaviour, interpretation of space, and socio-cultural creativity. The findings, presented below, captured children's insights and revealed innovation in their interpretation of the themes of *Aistear*. The findings were then used to inform preparation of the environment and the planning of meaningful playful learning opportunities.

Findings

Wellbeing

The children suggested that wellbeing 'keeps us healthy and feels good'. Along with healthy eating, they acknowledged 'helping each other', providing the example of reminding each other 'how to be safe'. This shows that the perception of wellbeing spans both the physical and the emotional, encompassing a duty of care for each other. The children described the library as a place to 'relax . . . and read books' and considered music 'good for your brain'. They insightfully recognised 'being calm' as 'wellbeing for your whole body' and understood preschool fire drills as 'keeping us safe, so that's wellbeing'.

Identity and Belonging

The children recalled 'letting other people visit our school' and 'when the football team came to teach us about football', capturing their sense of belonging within their preschool and the wider community. Their description of celebrations 'like Australia Day when our classroom was a beach' indicated appreciation of shared cultural experiences. Profound self-awareness was evident as they discussed how 'teaching people about stuff helps them belong' and acknowledged being 'kind and we help each other'. Further insight was

evident in their recognition of 'working together' while also 'respecting people if they want to work on their own'.

Communicating

The children initially focused on verbal communication, such as 'greetings' and 'discussing our work'. However, they also noted that educators 'don't really use words for some work, they just show us . . . communicating with no words'. More abstractly, they identified art as a form of communication, 'because sometimes you paint stories'. Shared values were evident in 'communicating how to play nicely with each other' and 'how to be a good friend'. They further said, in dialect, 'We be'd kind by listening' – recognising this as an important component of communicating.

Exploring and Thinking

The children showed cognitive awareness of behaviour: 'we think about being a friend and being nice'. They also presented themselves as agents of change, saying, 'we decide the type of classroom we want and how to keep our classroom the way we want it'. They recognised their autonomy and indicated responsive pedagogy, noting the importance of 'talking about the stuff we want to learn about, and then the teachers help us'. Their understanding of the wider community was evident as they discussed 'places we might like to visit'. They highlighted the significance of creativity, enquiry, and concrete experiences, as they spoke of 'making stuff, that's exploring', appreciating the autonomy to produce work of their own, 'like when we made a cloud rainbow'.

Conclusion

This research investigated children's perceptions of *Aistear*, the curriculum framework for ECEC. It showed children's innovation in their interpretation and better positioned educators to support child voice and agency in democratic preschool environments. By providing time and space for children to reflect on and discuss *Aistear*, a shared understanding emerged, empowering children and educators.

This collaboration, founded on mutual respect, enhanced children's wellbeing and allowed educators to better understand children's perceptions of their ECEC experiences and how they make sense of issues important to them (Dobson et al., 2023). The data that was generated informed the provision of tailored learning opportunities and framed assessment in a manner recognising the strengths of each child. It reaffirmed for each child that their views matter and that they have autonomy to shape both their learning and the environment in which it takes place.

By providing time and space for children to reflect on and discuss Aistear, a shared understanding emerged, empowering children and educators.

REFERENCES

Dobson, M.R., Absalom-Hornby, V., and Baca, E. (2023) '"Be beside me": Exploring children and young people's visions for belonging and citizenship', *Issues in Educational Research*, 33(4), 1362–1379.

I'Anson, J. (2013) 'Beyond the child's voice: Towards an ethics for children's participation rights', *Global Studies of Childhood*, 3(2), 104–114.

Murray, J. (2019) 'Hearing young children's voices', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 27(1), 1–5.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009) *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: NCCA.

✳✳✳

Naíonra

A fly-on-the-wall heartwarming three-part series where TG4 cameras follow all the action in two Naíonraí over the course of one year.

From Naíonra Chaitlín Maude, Tallaght, Dublin: Senan Byrne, Ruby Sheenhan, Halle Redmond, Freya Dowling, Kanan Selby, Phoenix Blu Clare, Millie Rose O'Hanlon Barnwell (photo credit Bryan Brophy)

For the first time in Ireland, we get a fly-on-the-wall insight into a small world where big things happen – welcome to the wonderful world of the Naíonra. In this heartwarming three-part series, cameras follow all the action in two Naíonra over the course of one year, one in Tallaght, Dublin, and one in Mallow, County Cork.

Aisling Breathnach is director of Naíonra Chaitlín Maude in Tallaght. She "loves the honesty of the kids and how they make her laugh".

Máire Uí Bhriain is director of Naíonra Thomáis Dáibhís in Mallow. She "relishes connecting with the children by connecting with her own inner child".

Aistear and Development Education: Insights from Trócaire

Applying sustainability in the early years

As an early years development educator with Trócaire, my role is focused on raising awareness of and engaging in-service and pre-service early childhood professionals in learning about development education concepts in a way that is meaningful to their professional practice. *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) is an integral part of this professional practice.

The development education concepts I refer to when creating links to Aistear are: exploring inequalities at local and global levels; taking a human-rights approach rather than a charity approach; recognising diverse perspectives on development in the context of global citizenship; considering the everyday reality for people experiencing poverty; and valuing our unique identity and encouraging us to respect the unique identity of others (Trócaire, 2009, 2018; IDEA, 2017).

Aistear is currently being updated (Fallon et al., 2021). The updated framework will support me as a development educator to continue to create meaningful connections, because the links to the development education concepts are more explicit. Among the nine updated Aistear principles are two of particular significance: the principle that regards babies, toddlers, and young children as 'agentic global citizens', and the principle 'diversity, equity and inclusion', which highlights their right to have access to and opportunities to participate meaningfully in experiences that help to fulfil their potential as unique individuals (NCCA, 2023, p.12; see Figure 1).

Colette Saunders

Early Years Development Education Officer, Trócaire

The article briefly explores the interrelatedness of Trócaire's development education concepts and the proposed updated *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. It considers Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education, in the context of the transformative power of education. It concludes with a short reflection on the author's role and how it may be understood within the framework of early childhood practice.
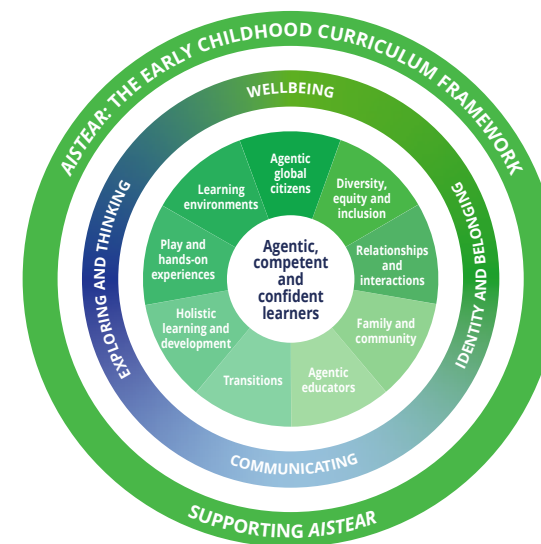
Figure 1: Proposed updated Aistear (NCCA, 2023)

Giving children time to reflect and equipping them with skills to do so is hugely important.

Reflection (Lindon & Trodd, 2016) in the early childhood context is significant when building awareness of development education, because it is understood to support critical thinking which involves active engagement with 'big ideas' (Roche, 2015, p.15). Giving children time to reflect and equipping them with skills to do so is hugely important. When they engage with society as active citizens (ibid., p.14) in a way that is meaningful to them, it supports their developing sense of who they are and their place in the world.

In the early years setting, this may be achieved when skilful professionals recognise opportunities for sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) and teachable moments (Ephgrave, 2018) in order to introduce and develop awareness of these big ideas. Van Oudenhoven and van Oudenhoven (2019) suggest, 'it is in these informal [early childhood] spaces that the attitudes and dispositions related to global citizenship education are most successfully cultivated' (p.39). They suggest a 'culturization' of early childhood development, meaning that early childhood education programmes seek to focus on supporting children as they participate in, contribute to, and give direction to cultural activities. In this way, 'if we "let children be children", then the foundation for global citizenship will be laid, without specifically aiming for it' (ibid., p.41).

An important question is how can we achieve 'development', as proposed by the development education concepts, which 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs?' (WCED, 1987). The answer for me will always be through education. It is in everyday interactions with children that early childhood professionals may

support children in their role to 'address issues relating to the active role of citizens' (Bamber, 2020, p.xxiv); for example, drawing on perceptive teaching skills (Dolan, 2014) when identifying opportunities to introduce ideas of social justice, such as sharing, listening to each other, and ensuring that every voice is heard.

This insight relates to Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education, which commits to ensuring a more inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all (UNESCO, n.d.; see Figure 2). A line from the United Nations, which touches on this transformative nature of education, is the focus of SDG4: 'Education must fully assume its central role in helping people to forge more just, peaceful, inclusive and sustainable societies' (United Nations, n.d.). From my own learning experiences, I will add that individuals also need a certain willingness to 'embrace ambiguity' (Feldman, 2023) to help them to engage in co-creating the learning experience (Freire, 2017).

Figure 2: SDG4 (United Nations)

My background in early childhood education and care is very much to the fore when I introduce development education concepts during outreach. Recognising opportunities to engage children in this learning will continue to be a key skill for those working with young children because, as Maria Montessori, wrote, 'children have an absorbent mind. They absorb knowledge from the environment without fatigue. . . . This is the moment in the life of man when we can do something for the betterment of humanity and further brotherhood' (Association Montessori Internationale, 2024).

REFERENCES

Association Montessori Internationale (2024) *Montessori Quote of the Day.* Maria Montessori 150. https://montessori150.org/maria-montessori/montessori-quotes.

Bamber, P. (2020) T*eacher Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship: Critical Perspectives on Values, Curriculum and Assessment.* Oxon: Taylor and Francis.

Dolan, A.M. (2014) *You, Me and Diversity: Picturebooks for Teaching Development and Intercultural Education.* London: Trentham Books.

Ephgrave, A. (2018) *Planning in the Moment with Young Children: A Practical Guide for Early Years Practitioners and Parents.* London: Routledge.

Fallon, J., Farrell, L., Grant, D., and Daly, M. (2021) 'Updating *Aistear*: Reflecting on the rationale and process for updating Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.), *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2023.* Dublin: Education Matters. https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/downloads/IEYB2021/YB2021-Early-Childhood-04.pdf.

Feldman, A. (2023) 'Decolonial practice in global citizenship education'. IDEA: Irish Development Education Association. Webinar, 13 October. www.ideaonline.ie/webinar-decolonial-practice-in-global-citizenship-education.

Freire, P. (2017) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (reprint). Ireland: Penguin Classics.

Irish Development Education Association (IDEA) (2017) *Development Education in Ireland: Report.* https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/9e15ba29/files/uploaded/Development_Education_in_Ireland_Report_Final.pdf.

Lindon, J. and Trodd, L. (2016) *Linking Theory and Practice: Reflective Practice and Early Years Professionalism*, 3rd edn. London: Hodder Education.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.* Dublin: NCCA. www.curriculumonline.ie/Early-Childhood/.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *NCCA Draft Updated Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for Consultation.* NCCA. https://ncca.ie/media/6362/draftupdatedaistear_for-consultation.pdf.

Roche, M. (2015) *Developing Children's Critical Thinking through Picturebooks.* London: Routledge Taylor and Francis.

Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, S., Muttock, S., Gilden, R., and Bell, D. (2002) *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) DfES Research Report 365.* HMSO London: Queen's Printer.

Trócaire (2009) 'What is development education?'. Trócaire. www.trocaire.org/sites/default/files/resources/edu/what-is-development-education.pdf.

Trócaire (2018) 'Trócaire and development education: Remembering the past, signposting the future'. Trócaire. www.trocaire.org/sites/default/files/resources/edu/trocaire-history-development-education.pdf.

UNESCO (n.d.) 'Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4)'. UNESCO. www.unesco.org/sdg4education2030/en/sdg4.

United Nations (n.d.) 'Global Citizenship Education'. Geneva: UN. www.un.org/en/academic-impact/page/global-citizenship-education.

Van Oudenhoven, N. and van Oudenhoven, R.J. (2019) 'Global citizenship in a fragmenting and polarizing world', *Childhood Education*, 95(3), 39–43.

World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (1987) 'Our common future'. Geneva: UN. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf.

An Equal Start? Poverty and Social Exclusion in Early Childhood

Introduction

In 2024, by all accounts, the 'boom is back'. Ireland presents as the post-pandemic poster child of economic resilience and recovery. Employment rates are at an all-time high, we are spending more money than ever before, and the government boasts a bumper budget surplus of €25 billion to be put aside for a rainy day. Despite this bright economic forecast, dark clouds of inequality loom, and the benefits of economic growth have yet to trickle down to Ireland's most vulnerable citizens, in particular, children living in the shadow of poverty.

Children are the largest demographic group at risk of poverty and deprivation in Ireland (CSO, 2024). Despite its position as one of the wealthiest countries in the world, over 260,000 children have first-hand experience of financial distress and the persistent, harmful impact of poverty (ibid.). Since 2022, an additional 30,000 children have been experiencing material deprivation, with particularly high rates of income poverty for households where the youngest child is aged five or younger (Roantree et al., 2024). Thousands of families are struggling to keep their homes warm and to provide nutritious food for their children. One-off costs such as a broken washing machine, urgent car repair, or worn-out furniture can generate significant financial stress and tough choices about where money can be spent.

Preventing and combating child poverty: The European Child Guarantee

While poverty is most commonly 'measured' by a family's income, it is more than just lack of money: it is lack of access to adequate housing, healthcare, educational opportunities, and community involvement that deepens and intensifies inequality and social exclusion. Research

Grainne McKenna
Assistant Professor, Dublin City University

As Ireland prepares for a new Programme for Government in 2025, with obligations at EU level to reduce child poverty and combat social exclusion, this article comments on the increasing numbers of children experiencing material deprivation, which is detrimental to their development and well-being. The Equal Start model offers hope of greater access and participation in early childhood education and care, but is it enough to address inequality for our youngest citizens?

exploring intergenerational poverty in Ireland speaks of far-reaching harmful effects across the lifespan and the importance of investment in interventions to reduce and prevent the harmful effects of inequality (Curristan et al., 2022).

The EU Child Guarantee aims to reduce child poverty and social exclusion based on three pillars: access to resources, access to quality services, and children's right to participate (European Commission, 2021). Ireland signed up in 2021, committing to combat social exclusion by ensuring children have access to the services and supports they need for the best possible start in life. Despite this and the establishment of a dedicated Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach in 2023, there has been little progress on targeted support for children experiencing poverty and deprivation.

There has been little progress on targeted support for children experiencing poverty and deprivation.

The recent Budget 2025 included a cost-of-living package purported to offer several measures to address child poverty. However, only half of the €2.1 billion cost-of-living measures were directed to low-income families, with the remainder allocated to universal measures such as energy credits, double child benefit payments, and free school meals and books. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) has said that Budget 2025 is unlikely to impact the increased rates of child poverty and material deprivation, describing the overall budget packages as a 'missed opportunity' to lift thousands of children out of poverty (Curran, 2024).

An 'Equal Start' for children experiencing disadvantage?

If the political mantra of making Ireland 'the best country in which to be a child' is to be realised, then the government must prioritise investment in housing, education, healthcare, pathways to parental employment, and targeted income assistance for children and families at risk of poverty.

The Equal Start funding model, launched in May 2024, was established to improve access to and participation in high-quality early childhood education and care for children experiencing poverty. Equal Start provides early childhood settings operating in areas of socio-economic disadvantage with an increase in Core Funding (8%–15% increase based on minimum staff hours). It hopes to assist 'priority cohorts', including children living in homeless accommodation, Traveller and Roma children, and those seeking international protection. Participating services will also receive additional support, including;

» access to 'family link workers' and Traveller and Roma advisory specialists
» participation in Early Talk Boost, a programme to support children's early language development
» training in Meitheal, a case coordination process that brings together expertise, knowledge, and skills to meet the needs of the child and family in their local community (DCEDIY, 2024).

The introduction of Equal Start is a crucial step in meeting Ireland's obligations under the EU Child Guarantee and policy commitments in *First 5*, the 10-year whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children, and their families (2019–2028). Despite this, Equal Start received just €17.2 million in Budget 2025, a disappointing allocation which appears particularly paltry when compared to other budget priorities such as €19.82 million for greyhound racing, €27 million for preserving national monuments, and €9 million for phone-storage pouches in schools.

This low level of investment in a much-needed model that hopes to disrupt inequality raises fundamental questions about the government's prioritisation of reducing child poverty and meeting obligations under the EU Child Guarantee. As Ireland prepares for a new Programme for Government in 2025, we can only hope that the sunny economic outlook and rainy-day fund can be redirected towards better outcomes and brighter futures for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

REFERENCES

Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2024). Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023. Cork: CSO. www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenforceddeprivation2023/.

Curran, I. (2024) 'Budget likely to push more elderly and people with disabilities into poverty—ESRI', *Irish Times*, 4 October. www.irishtimes.com/business/2024/10/04/budget-likely-to-push-more-elderly-and-people-with-disabilities-into-poverty-esri/.

Curristan, S., Maître, B., and Russell, H. (2022) 'Intergenerational poverty in Ireland'. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute. DOI: 10.26504/rs150

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2024) Equal Start: A model to support access and participation in early learning and childcare for all children. Dublin: DCEDIY. www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/293503/ec7f976c-294f-4c04-9e20-3035943f2b9f.pdf.

European Commission (2021) 'Recommendations: Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee'. *Official Journal of the European Union.* https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/51d267dc-1642-4f20-a34f-02003ea88db8_en?filename=celex_32021h1004_en_txt.pdf.

Roantree, B., Maître, B., and Russell, H. (2024) 'Poverty, income inequality and living standards in Ireland: Fourth annual report'. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute. DOI: 10.26504/jr7

The Impact of the Recruitment Crisis on Our Young Children

The crisis

In current times, hardly a day passes without a news article highlighting what we now know to be the 'childcare crisis'. The issues that prevail are widely reported across media platforms and are complex. There are no quick-fix solutions to this problem, which has existed for decades.

The existing system of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is fragmented and was built on unstable foundations. Three quarters of ECEC providers operate privately for profit, while one quarter are community-based and not for profit (Pobal, 2024). The system is market-based and market-driven, held up by public funding without parental or child rights to access. Parents are at the mercy of the market.

The issues

Publicly funding a market model may not have the desired outcomes for the State or for society as a whole in the longer term. A better-thought-out system is needed. There is no doubt that a crisis exists, and a big part of it relates to staffing and the current recruitment crisis in ECEC in Ireland.

SIPTU (2024) reports the main reason for the crisis to be low pay. Educators cannot afford to work in ECEC. Current rates of pay for educators with an accredited level-5 qualification in ECEC start at €13.65 per hour. A lead educator with an honour's degree will be paid €16.28 per hour. Graduates can obtain higher salaries in areas other than ECEC, where remuneration rewards qualifications, such as the Early Years Inspectorate in Tusla, Pobal, or other public-sector roles. It is reported anecdotally that a large number of ECEC graduates are taking up roles as special needs assistants in primary schools, where pay is higher and conditions are of a higher standard.

Valerie Gaynor
Manager, Creative Kids & Co. Preschool and School Age Childcare Service

There is a sector-wide recruitment and retention crisis in early childhood education and care (ECEC), with many services closing rooms, and parents not being able to access childcare for their children. This article discusses the crisis, its complexities, and its impact on the children who are attending ECEC services.

SIPTU's recent survey found that 69% of services surveyed had staff leave in the previous 12 months; 42% cited pay and conditions as the reason. Staff shortages were a serious issue in 65% of those surveyed. Though these statistics are widely reported, it is clear there is not enough funding in the sector (0.3% of GDP compared to 1% in the OECD). There are not enough staff or places to meet the needs of parents and society as a whole.

The impact

Little is spoken or reported about how this is affecting children. The recruitment crisis, the insufficient funding, and the low wages have a detrimental impact on the wellbeing of children. In the SIPTU survey, 66% of respondents said the recruitment crisis is negatively impacting on quality experiences for children.

It is well researched and documented that the first five years of a child's life are the most important period, and the critical development period is the first two years. We have a whole-of-government strategy, *First 5*, to support children and their families during this period of life, yet many children are spending these critical years in understaffed ECEC services without a consistent caregiver.

Relationships and attachments are particularly important for infant and toddler mental health. In the absence of the parent, it is crucial that there is a consistent and caring adult working and being with the child. A slow relational pedagogy cannot exist if relationships cannot be developed. It is common for a young child to have multiple caregivers, many of whom do not know the child, as services struggle to maintain staffing and ratios.

There is evidence to suggest that this is damaging to the child's emotional wellbeing in the long term and can have a detrimental impact on outcomes for them. Children become fearful and reluctant to leave their parents when they have not formed a bond with their educator in the ECEC setting. Parents have no choice but to leave their child in a system where educators report being understaffed, under pressure, and burned out.

Conclusion

Welcome policy developments in recent years and increased funding have created a high demand for places in ECEC. Parents are now receiving sizeable reductions in their monthly childcare bill through the National Childcare Scheme. Little has been implemented to support the recruitment, and more importantly retention, of quality, qualified early years educators. Expanding services without focusing on quality provision will not deliver good outcomes for children and society (OECD, 2023).

SIPTU's recent survey found that 69% of services surveyed had staff leave in the previous 12 months; 42% cited pay and conditions as the reason.

Turnover in many services is at 25%. Working with babies, toddlers, and young children is undoubtedly challenging. It requires dedication, commitment, and high levels of patience and understanding of how children learn and develop. Educators need to be supported holistically in their role. The workforce is currently 98% female. These educators are earning little above minimum wage for a role that requires a multiplicity of skills, values, and knowledge, yet the reward for this most important job is lower than that of many unskilled workers.

It is time to reflect on the value that our society places on our children and the educators who support their learning and care for them in our ECEC services. It takes a village to raise a child, and it takes a society to ensure that those who deliver this on the ground every day are respected and remunerated for their commitment and dedication to our future generations. We must not underestimate the impact of high staff turnover, low pay, and burnout on our youngest citizens, both now and in the longer term.

REFERENCES

OECD (2023) *Early Childhood Education and Care Policy Review: Ireland*. Paris: OECD. www.oecd.org/en/publications/strengthening-early-childhood-education-and-care-in-ireland_72fab7d1-en.html.

Pobal (2024) *Early Learning and Childcare Data*. Dublin: Pobal. www.pobal.ie/childcare/earlylearningandchildcaredata/.

SIPTU (2024) *Early Years Professional Survey 2024: Analysis of Staffing and Recruitment Issues in ECEC*. Dublin: SIPTU. www.siptu.ie/earlyyearsunion/.

Tusla (2023) *Early Years Inspectorate: Annual Report*. Dublin: Tusla. www.tusla.ie/publications/annual-reports-of-tusla-child-and-family-agencys-early-years-inspectorate/.

Considering the Publicness of Early Childhood Education and Care

With some notable exceptions, Ireland has not yet teased out deeper questions of what is meant by 'publicness' in early childhood education and care (ECEC). This article discusses that topic by offering an overview of themes explored in a recent symposium in Trinity College Dublin, which aimed to draw ECEC into the wider conceptualisation of public education.

Introduction

Ireland has seen substantial recent investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC). But in 2024, debate on public ECEC became mired in disputes about how money was allocated and spent. With some notable exceptions, such as Urban (2023), we have not yet teased out deeper, arguably more important, questions of what is or could be meant by 'publicness' in ECEC, or asked whether 'public' and 'publicly funded' mean the same thing.

There is rich scholarship on publicness from other educational levels that has not been widely applied to ECEC. Those conceptualising 'publicness' in education tend not to consider ECEC, and those conceptualising ECEC tend not to draw on the literature on publicness, leading to missed opportunities for understanding public ECEC.

This article gives an overview of themes explored in 'A New Publicness for Early Childhood Education and Care', a symposium that took place on 30 May 2024 in Trinity College Dublin, aiming to draw ECEC into the wider conceptualisation of public education.

Georga Dowling
Maynooth University

Tracy McElheron
Maynooth University

Nóirín Hayes
Trinity College Dublin

Carl Anders Säfström
Maynooth University

Leah O'Toole
Maynooth University

More than a question of funding

Beyond practical issues of funding, the symposium explored what is at stake when addressing public ECEC. In his presentation, Carl Anders Säfström identified issues concerning *borders* (who is included/excluded), *identity* (who are they who are included/excluded), *history* (how is the story of Ireland told so that some children are included and others excluded?), *power* (who are elevated to decide over others, and how?), and *ethics* (based on what values?), and whether those values marry with democracy and equality. The value that society places on education as a public good can determine its visibility, perception, and place in society.

Discussions from the authors and attendees questioned whether ECEC is as visible and valued as other educational levels in Irish society. Primary and secondary school (in the most part) are mandatory. Third level is optional but valued as a pathway to a career. ECEC is not mandatory and is often viewed as a commodity that parents may or may not be able to afford.

O'Toole and colleagues (2023) highlighted that much of the narrative in recent policy documents centres on affordability of childcare for working parents in the context of the need for early childhood educators to be paid a living wage. Policymakers' arbitrary introduction of a new term, 'early learning and care' (ELC), removing the word 'education', and the invisibility of pedagogy and even of children in many policy documents are telling.

Hayes argued that 'early childhood education and care' is a 'controlled vocabulary' accepted internationally. It provides a common terminology to emphasise that care and education are inseparable concepts in practice (Neuman, 2019). Consolidation of the identity of various services under this title has led to growth in research into the value of ECEC, while raising the status of this unique period of education (OECD, 2018). 'Care' remains undervalued, with priority investment in services directed to the 'educational' dimension for older 'preschool' children. Combining education and care, ECEC has a distinctive theoretical and pedagogical character which is served by educators with distinct qualifications.

Nevertheless, ECEC is also integral to the wider continuum of lifelong learning. If education is a human right, why should that right begin at five years of age? Children's brains develop rapidly in their first five years through positive interactions, relationships, and learning experiences (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020). Why is their education and care seen instead as a *commodity*?

> *ECEC is not mandatory and is often viewed as a commodity that parents may or may not be able to afford.*

A new publicness for ECEC

Public education is more than funding: it is an understanding of the relationship between education and society (Biesta, 2012). Contextualising each child within the bioecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) emphasises that each child is an individual embedded in a socio-cultural context: a family and a society. This provides a means of examining how different levels of society impact on the design, quality, and experience of early childhood services, with consequences – some perhaps unintended – for children, educators, and families.

Using Biesta's framework, O'Toole et al. (2023) argued that *considerations* of ECEC should be guided by equity, plurality, and communal ownership and commitment. At the symposium, the authors developed these ideas. Focusing on principled rather than pragmatic notions of ECEC, they proposed that to establish a meaningful 'publicness' of ECEC, it is necessary to fundamentally change how it is viewed and shaped by society, parents, and those directly involved.

Despite consultations on ECEC in Ireland over the years, it has never been deeply considered through the lens of publicness – only in terms of market demands and private interest. A new publicness might 'consider' ECEC through four lenses: child, parent, educators, and community. This would include considering children as full citizens with insights and agency; educators and educational settings with expertise, insights, and agency; the genuine financial pressure experienced by families; and the community of ECEC as a 'public good' working towards a fairer society.

ECEC is a public good that affects everyone in society. It also gives hope that things can be positively different for the individual, the collective, and society. Education is defined by pointing out that culture and the making of society are not given by blood, by position, or by developing 'inner natural abilities' and are not inherited but *taught* in principle to anyone in every new generation. That means there can be no public education if the public good is excluded (Säfström, 2023).

Defining what is in the interests of the public good is difficult, because people perceive the purpose of ECEC differently. This can create tensions and challenges for developing a coherent, sustainable system. But if public education is essential for the materialisation of values and educating in a democratic society, this makes public ECEC contested by its nature, since a democracy must allow for many voices to be heard.

We envisioned the symposium as an opportunity to provoke debate on unpacking Ireland's tensions – politically, culturally, pedagogically – to help us

Combining education and care, ECEC has a distinctive theoretical and pedagogical character which is served by educators with distinct qualifications.

understand the ownership and public visibility of ECEC. We invite readers to continue the conversation.

REFERENCES

Biesta, G. (2012) 'Becoming public: Public pedagogy, citizenship and the public sphere', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 13(7), 683–697.

Bronfenbrenner, U. and Morris, P. A. (2006) 'The bioecological model of human development'. In: R.M. Lerner and W.E. Damon (Eds.), *Handbook of Child Psychology: Vol. 1*, 6th edn., pp. 793–828. Chichester: Wiley & Sons.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2020) *Connecting the Brain to the Rest of the Body: Early Childhood Development and Lifelong Health Are Deeply Intertwined. Working Paper No. 15.* www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

Neuman, M. (2019) 'Improving policies for young children through comparison and peer review'. In: N. Hayes and M. Urban (Eds.), *In Search of Social Justice: John Bennett's Lifetime Contribution to Early Childhood Policy and Practice,* pp. 10–23. London: Routledge.

OECD (2018) *Early Learning Matters.* Paris: OECD.

O'Toole, L., Dowling, G., and McElheron, T. (2023) 'A new publicness for early childhood education and care in Ireland'. In: C. Anders Säfström and G. Biesta (Eds.), *A New Publicness for Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland,* pp. 68–82. London: Routledge.

Säfström, C.A. (2023) *Education for Everyday Life. A Sophistical Practice of Teaching.* Springer.

Urban, M. (2023) 'Beginning is the hardest part: A critically sympathetic view on the early childhood education and care landscape'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.), *Ireland's Education Yearbook, 2023*, pp. 37–44. Dublin: Education Matters.

Investing in Early Years and School-Age Care as a Public Good

Background

The concept of regarding the early years and school-age care system as a public good has gained momentum in Ireland in 2024. As we go into 2025 with potentially a new government and Minister, it is important to maintain this momentum. During 2024 we have witnessed a perceptible shift in public discourse on early years and school-age care, state involvement, and who the system should benefit.

In 2021, the expert group responsible for developing *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare* argued that children's participation in high-quality early years and school-age care delivers benefits to society. Current public discourse indicates that this has now been recognised, leading to growing acceptance that our early years and school-age care system is a public good.

Results of marketisation

But the question posed by Professor Eva Lloyd and others is one we should scrutinise: Can a marketised system fully deliver high quality and a public good? And is this a reasonable expectation? It's worth considering these questions through the lens of the recruitment and retention issues that perennially affect the system, its capacity, and its impact on children and families. The educators and practitioners who are the backbone of a high-quality system remain undervalued in a marketised system that has consistently delivered low average wages, precarious employment, and poor terms and conditions.

The Employment Regulation Order, with which settings must comply to participate in Core Funding, and which was increased in 2024, stands at €13.65. This is €0.95

Greg Merrin
Policy Manager, Early Childhood Ireland

Workers in the early years and school-age care system in Ireland remain undervalued in a marketised system. This article shows how regarding the system as a public good has gained momentum in 2024, and it makes the case for investing in the sector to deliver on the promise of high-quality provision, despite the bias towards capital expenditure on infrastructure rather than human capital.

above the national minimum wage – an indictment of how society values these professionals, without whom consistent, high-quality provision is impossible. Furthermore, the Living Wage Technical Group's estimate of the 2024–25 Irish living wage stands at €14.80, outstripping the agreed rates for the recognised roles of educator, school-age care practitioner, school-age care coordinator, and lead educator. The national living wage is due to replace the national minimum wage in 2026.

Many employers exceed these rates and work hard to value their employees, but the negotiated rates are what the system has delivered to date. To fully deliver high quality for children, we need to carefully consider if the public good can be served by the system as it is. Will a marketised system ever value these professionals and elevate them to the status that reflects their qualifications and experience and the high quality they are expected to deliver?

The educators and practitioners who are the backbone of a high quality system remain undervalued in a marketised system that has consistently delivered low average wages, precarious employment, and poor terms and conditions.

Worth the investment?

Research confirms that funding for an early years and school-age care system is one of the highest-returning large-scale investments for government. Some governments view this as contributing to the development of human capital, as it lays the foundation for skills development and lifelong learning. Any educator will agree. Studies estimate that such investments yield high societal returns, surpassing even those associated with infrastructural projects, for example.

However, in Ireland, like the UK, there remains a bias towards capital expenditure on fixed assets such as roads, buildings, and other infrastructure projects, rather than on human capital. The argument then is one of how we view investment in the system, and whether such funding really will deliver the benefits associated with a public good. As supported by much research, my view is that our early years and school-age care system *is* an asset to Ireland, and is a public good that provides benefits – social and economic – to all society.

Conclusion

What 2024 has made clear is that the thinking around the early years and school-age care system in Ireland has shifted. The system, delivered by providers, educators, practitioners, coordinators, and managers, has begun to be recognised as a public good – the public good is becoming public knowledge. There is now political impetus to move this forward, with most of the major political parties setting their sights on overhauling the system.

But to truly reap the benefits of this public good, full recognition is needed, and more work needs to be done. A public good to vindicate the right of every child to access high-quality experiences in an equitable system needs to become

normalised by those who work in it, and by policymakers, advocates, and the public. We should consider whether the current system will deliver this public good; after all, according to systems thinking, *the purpose of a system is what it does.*

Elevating the workforce to the level of primary school teachers and recognising their centrality to this public good is a vital first step. This will enable the expansion of capacity which, alongside better planning, will enhance the delivery of an early years and school-age care system that is fit for purpose. This can be achieved through a political vision for the system, and by increasing the investment targets to bring us in line with our EU neighbours.

✳✳✳

Challenges facing the Early Childhood Care and Education sector

The Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth published its Report on the challenges facing the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector.

A report, ***Challenges facing the Early Childhood Care and Education sector***, from the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth, was published in March 2024.

The Report made a series of recommendations.

Speaking about the report, Deputy Kathleen Funchion, Cathaoirleach of the Committee said:

"We are at a point in time when there is unanimous acknowledgement of the value of positive early interventions in children's lives."

"Investment in children's early years is the greatest leveller in terms of delivering positive outcomes. The starting point for addressing these issues is now children's rights, which is a marked improvement on former attitudes towards Early Childhood Care and Education as a 'women's issue' or a labour activation tool."

Home Visiting as a Grassroots Method of Community Change

Creating a more restorative community in Dublin's inner city

Background

Early childhood home visiting (ECHV) in Dublin's inner city is a prime example of grassroots community development and how prevention and early intervention work for children, families, communities, and government. With support for parents as the primary educators of their children a priority, involving local people as co-constructors of programmes and using community action research (CAR) decision-making processes are key to improved educational outcomes and the creation of open-minded, tolerant, welcoming learning environments in families and on the streets.

This paper outlines the innovative CAR process used since 2008 in Dublin's inner city, and how local home visitors – all of whom are women employed by National College of Ireland (NCI) – provide diverse, inclusive, crucial supports for families through good times and bad, while acting as ambassadors and levers for educational change in their communities. NCI is a third-level learning, teaching, and research institution, whose mission is to 'change lives through education'. Its community outreach, Early Learning Initiative (ELI), delivers an integrated prevention and early intervention programme of activities, training, and support for children, parents, and educators, with ECHV at its core.

CAR was chosen as the most appropriate method to deliver long-term sustainable change, while allowing enough flexibility to respond systematically to emerging issues (Bleach, 2013, 2016, 2024). Acknowledging, respecting, and using local expertise and experience are at the heart of CAR, which incorporates continuous capacity-building, data collection, restorative conversations, shared learning, and innovation. It has evolved from a simple 'plan, do, review' model (Lewin, 1946) into a developmental process of incremental change, informed by data, experience, and judgement,

Dr Josephine Bleach
Director, Early Learning Initiative

Early childhood home visiting in Dublin's inner city is a prime example of grassroots community development and how prevention and early intervention work for children, families, communities, and government. This article describes how involving local people using community action research has improved educational and other outcomes in this area. It outlines the innovative home visiting programmes undertaken and highlights the impact of these initiatives.

leading to significant evolution in its theory, practice, and programmes (Patton, 1994).

For NCI, employing local people as home visitors was critical to local engagement and ownership and the effectiveness of our CAR. Easily recognisable in their distinctive uniforms, the home visitors are ambassadors for children's education on the street and provide an accessible point of contact, information, and referral for families. Since 2007, they have supported families through many challenges: intergenerational poverty, unemployment, social isolation, trauma, mental health issues, educational disadvantage, homelessness, violent feuds, Covid-19, and long waits for disability and other child services (Bleach, 2024). Despite all that goes on in Dublin's inner city, including the November 2023 riots, parents continue to sign up for the programmes, with 5,602 families involved in 2023–24 (ELI, 2024).

Research and innovation

With a mission to 'save the next generation', home visitors are researchers and innovators as well as practitioners. Their voices, informed by their experiences in local homes, have been critical to the identification of gaps in service provision and subsequent innovations. Starting with ParentChild+ in 2007 (a two-year literacy and parenting programme for children aged 16 months to 3 years), they have led the development of a suite of programmes that address emerging local needs.

In 2011, funded by the National Early Years Access Initiative, the home visitors embedded STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) into all ELI programmes. In 2014, seeing the need for parent support from birth, home visitors, in collaboration with the local public health nurses, developed the Area-Based Childhood (ABC) 0–2 Programme; now, through Sláintecare, they have integrated it into the national Community Families programme.

With the increase in families in homeless and emergency accommodation, the programmes Home from Home (adapted from ParentChild+) and My Place to Play (play pack promoting child–parent educational interactions and a safe, hygienic place for babies to play) were developed. At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, home visitors switched to virtual and outdoor visits, developing their pedagogy to ensure quality, fidelity, and consistency in service delivery. The Stretch Graduate programme was also developed and provides differentiated transitional supports to families who have finished our ECHV programmes.

With the growing waiting list for assessments and services for children with a disability, our home visiting team, with support from Late Late Toy Show funding, developed the Parenting365 programme, which supports families with children with additional needs. Since 2016, home visitors are involved with the

With a mission to 'save the next generation', home visitors are researchers and innovators as well as practitioners.

Professionals notice the gains made: teachers see children entering school ready to learn.

North East Inner City (NEIC) Initiative, its critical incident group, and other relevant local networks. As conflict, trauma, and violence increased in the area, they incorporated restorative practice, trauma-informed practice, and infant mental health into their work. Through the Home Visiting Alliance, they are involved in the development of the national approach to home visiting as part of the First 5 strategy (DCEDIY, 2018), which will inform the government's vision for home visiting, shaping its delivery for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

Evaluations, both internal and external, continually highlight the positive impact of ELI's home visiting programmes, with parents learning a different and more enjoyable approach to relating, talking, reading, and playing with their children. The children are developing on a par with their peers, and the benefits extend to siblings and extended family. Professionals notice the gains made: teachers see these children entering school ready to learn.

Successful change is complex. While positive change in one family is always welcome, it is the collective impact on local communities and Irish society that is important. Parents tell us repeatedly: 'I love my child. I want them to do well, but I don't know how. I never had it as a child.' Community action research enables us to collectively figure out how in an ever-changing context. It supports reflection on experience and practice, and the collection of data to measure progress, assess impact, and develop theories and innovations to address emerging needs. Together with government and local partners, home visitors are creating a more restorative community in Dublin's inner city that is responsive to its youngest, most vulnerable population.

REFERENCES

Bleach, J. (2013) 'Improving educational aspirations and outcomes through community action research', Educational Action Research, 21(2), 253–266. DOI: 10.1080/09650792.2013.789726

Bleach, J. (2016) 'Community action research in Ireland: Improving educational outcomes through collaboration in the Dublin docklands'. In: L. Rowell, C. Bruce, J. Shosh, and M. Riel (Eds.), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Action Research*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: 10.1057/978-1-137-40523-4_11

Bleach, J. (2024) 'Early childhood home visiting: A critical lifeline for families in Dublin's inner city'. Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 4 June. www.jcfj.ie/article/early-childhood-home-visiting-a-critical-lifeline-for-families-in-dublins-inner-city/.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2018) *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028.* Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/publication/f7ca04-first-5-a-whole-of-government-strategy-for-babies-young-children-and/.

Early Learning Initiative (ELI) (2024) *End-of-Year Report 2023–24.* Unpublished report, National College of Ireland.

Lewin, K. (1946) 'Action research and minority problems', *Journal of Social Issues*, 2(4), 34–46.

Patton, M.Q. (1994) 'Developmental evaluation', *Evaluation Practice*, 15(3), 311–319. DOI: 10.1177/109821409401500312

Schön, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action.* Temple Smith.

✱✱✱

National College of Ireland's Early Learning Initiative contributes at 12th ARNA Annual Conference

Dr Josephine Bleach, Director of the Early Learning Initiative at NCI, receiving the inaugural Paul McNaughton Award from basis.point in May, 2024.

"CAR in Community: Transformative Possibilities" was the theme of the 12th ARNA Conference which took place in June 2024 in Eastern Michigan University.

Community Action Research (CAR) is an alternative research method that gathers data from members of the community. It is especially significant because it gathers crucial information from real people who are being impacted by the issues being studied. It follows therefore that the results of CAR can be used to find solutions to issues being faced by people in local communities.

In preparation for the ARNA Conference 2024, seven Early Childhood Education scholars from across Europe met in August 2023 to discuss the possible development of a small-scale collaborative project to share at ARNA 2024.

Dr Josephine Bleach, Director of the Early Learning Initiative at NCI, and Dr Meera Oke, Associate Professor in Early Childhood Education and Care at NCI, were members of this hybrid party of seven.

Group members participated in online sessions throughout the year to develop a critical theme that would reflect their action research project. They decided on the topic of teacher burnout and poor work-life conditions in three countries. While teacher burnout is not a new point of discussion, it has become notably more serious post-pandemic, and is worsening worldwide.

The theme of the 12th ARNA Conference, based at Eastern Michigan University 7-8 June 2024, was 'Community Action Research (CAR) in Community: Transformative Possibilities". Presenters (including Dr Josephine Bleach and Dr Meera Oke) shared a rich and varied program with papers, presentations, workshops, and panels.

The Benefits of Parental Engagement: Nigerian Mothers' Perspectives

Parental engagement

This article gives an insight into Nigerian immigrant mothers' perceptions of the benefits of parental engagement in early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ireland. Fifteen mothers of Nigerian descent who had children availing of a free preschool programme in Ireland during 2020–2022 participated in doctoral research at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. The research used a qualitative enquiry based on one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate the many benefits of parental engagement in ECCE for Nigerian mothers and their children.

Parental engagement, also called parental involvement or family engagement, is a complex and largely undefined term. It encompasses both home-based and preschool-based engagement, and research shows that it often involves mothers rather than fathers. Inspired by the work of Kim et al. (2018), the definition used here includes parents' commitment to and acts of engagement in their children's lives at home or school, to influence their children's overall actions and developmental outcomes; for instance:

» collaborating with early years educators to promote positive learning outcomes
» participating in preschool-based events
» creating a conducive learning environment at home
» engaging in home-based activities such as reading and playing with children
» talking with children about preschool during drop-off and pick-up time.

Parents' engagement in their children's education benefits both parties (Sohn & Wang 2006). It can positively impact children's developmental outcomes and protect against socio-economic disadvantage (Leitão, 2023). It is essential in early childhood education, as it broadens the

Florence Ajala
Assistant Lecturer and Doctoral Researcher, Mary Immaculate College

This article gives an insight into Nigerian immigrant mothers' perceptions of the benefits of parental engagement in early childhood care and education in Ireland. It reports on doctoral research into this topic and describes the main benefits perceived for both parents and children, supported by the participants' own voices.

child's horizon, improves reading scores, enhances social relationships, and promotes self-esteem and self-efficacy (Fagbeminiyi, 2011; Mishra, 2012). It enables parents to share information about their children with educators and get acquainted with the preschool and their children's actions there (Symeou, 2007).

Benefits of engagement

This study revealed the benefits of parental engagement in ECCE. Nigerian mothers indicated that these benefits are: bonding with their children, knowing their children's capabilities and needs, improved development for their children, and boosting of their children's self-esteem and confidence.

Bonding with children

Engaging with their children's ECCE created opportunities for participants to bond with their children, allowing them to connect, communicate, and do things together. It also built friendships and trust between them and their children:

Especially like in Ireland, where it's just you and your children. . . . So you have all the time, especially as a stay-at-home mom that I am, for now, I get all the time to engage with my child positively in something that is good to do. It brings up friendship between you and your child, and the child gets to connect to you.

I would say if you are fully involved in your child's life . . . the trust of the child not being scared to come up to you and tell you things happening around. I mean, because in a world that we are living today, abuse is inevitable, you know, sometimes you get to see some kids . . . not being bold enough to come up to their parents, to tell them things happening in their lives, all because of that bond is not there.

Understanding children's capabilities and needs

Participants get to know their children better when they engage in their ECCE. This engagement gave them opportunities to understand and know their children's abilities, capacities, and needs, easing parental stress:

It is beneficial for me because I know their capacity, I know their abilities, their gifts, because I have always been engaging in their lives. I know what they can do, and most especially, I know what they cannot do.

Benefits of parental engagement as cited by Nigerian mothers:
- bonding with their children,
- knowing their children's capabilities and needs,
- improved development for their children,
- boosting of their children's self-esteem and confidence.

Evidence from this doctoral research suggests that parental engagement in ECCE positively impacts children's learning outcomes and holistic development.

You get to know the child better. Yes, there are lots of benefits to it. Yeah, getting to know the child better also helps you as a parent to know what activity to even plan for the child.

Improved development

Engaging with their children's ECCE improved the children's development. Participants said it made their children independent and better prepared for society:

Okay, it developed the skills of the children as well. . . . I think it's advanced your children; it makes them learn more. It widens their horizons.

The benefits are massive. It teaches the child independence, like now, 'T' can put on her jacket, she knows she's going to the crèche, carry your bag and all that, you know, independence.

Self-esteem and confidence

Parents engaging with their children's ECCE boosted children's confidence and self-esteem to relate freely with them and others:

I think it helps the child's self-esteem and development processes. And for example, something happened in my child's preschool, and I had to be involved. And at the end of the day, I see that it helps her confident, to tell me things in case anything happened in future because I said to her, 'It's not your fault.'

It gives the child that confidence that at least I have somebody who trusts me, who can encourage me, who can support me.

Conclusion

Evidence from this study suggests that parental engagement in ECCE positively impacts children's learning outcomes and holistic development (Oke et al., 2021; Oostdam & Hooge, 2013). It shows that this engagement establishes a connection between home and school and brings to light children's needs and capabilities (Peck, 2018; Spreewenberg, 2019).

REFERENCES

Fagbeminiyi, F.F. (2011) 'The role of parents in early childhood education: A case study of Ikeja, Lagos State, Nigeria', *Global Journal of Human Social Science*, 11(2), 43–52. https://globaljournals.org/GJHSS_Volume11/6-The-Role-of-Parents-in-Early-Childhood-Education.pdf.

Kim, Y.A., An, S., Kim, H.C.L., and Kim, J. (2018) 'Meaning of parental involvement among Korean immigrant parents: A mixed-methods approach', *Journal of Educational Research*, 111(2), 127–138. DOI: 10.1080/00220671.2016.1220355

Leitão, C. (2023) 'Supporting parents with young children in Ireland: Context, policies and research-supported interventions', *Irish Studies Review*, 31(4), 571–589. DOI: 10.1080/09670882.2023.2265834

Mishra, L. (2012) 'Parental involvement in early childhood care education: a study', *International Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences*, 2(2), 22–27. DOI: 10.5923/j.ijpbs.20120202.04

Oke, A., Butler, J.E., and O'Neill, C. (2021) 'Identifying barriers and solutions to increase parent–practitioner communication in early childhood care and educational services: The development of an online communication application', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 49, 283–293. DOI: 10.1007/s10643-020-01068-y

Oostdam, R. and Hooge, E. (2013) 'Making the difference with active parenting: Forming educational partnerships between parents and schools', *European Journal of Psychology Education*, 28, 337–351. DOI: 10.1007/s10212-012-0117-6

Peck, A. (2018) 'The importance *of parent involvement in early childhood education',* Hello Motherhood, 18 December. www.hellomotherhood.com/article/75306-definition-parent-involvement/.

Sohn, S. and Wang, X.C. (2006) 'Immigrant parents' involvement in American schools: Perspectives from Korean mothers', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 34(2), 125–132. DOI: 10.1007/s10643-006-0070-6

Spreeuwenberg, R. (2022) 'Why parent involvement is so important in early childhood education', *Himama*, 18 February. www.himama.com/blog/why-parent-involvement-is-important-in-preschool/.

Symeou, L. (2007) 'Cultural capital and family involvement in children's education: Tales from two primary schools in Cyprus', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(4), 473–487. DOI: 10.1080/01425690701369525

Childminding Counts: Policy Learning from an Erasmus+ Project

The thousands of children who participate in childminding services, and their childminders, have been invisible in policymaking until recently. Ireland can learn from European experiences in formalising and developing the quality of such services. This article reports the findings of an EU-funded project to stimulate reflection and debate and inspire practice, research, and policy. It focuses on childminder–child ratios and a qualified and supported workforce.

Liz Kerrins
Director of Research, Early Childhood Ireland

Aoife Horgan
Researcher, Early Childhood Ireland

Lauraine Giacovazzi
Researcher, Early Childhood Ireland

Introduction

Almost 53,000 children aged 0–15 years participate in childminding services in Ireland (CSO, 2023)[1]. Census 2022 was the first time this number was counted: childminders and children in childminding services have been invisible politically and in policymaking. The number of services is unknown, as they are largely unregulated. But if each childminder cares for four children on average, there may be around 13,000 services nationally.

Childminding's invisibility is ending, as policymakers reform and transform Ireland's early years system through *First 5* (Government of Ireland, 2019), supporting childminding into the system through the *National Action Plan for Childminding* (DCEDIY, 2021). The plan commits to regulating all childminding services, providing training and quality development support, funding, and financial supports.

Ireland can learn from European experiences in formalising and developing the quality of childminding services. Early Childhood Ireland led the EU-funded Quality in Family Day Care (QualFDC) project, partnering with Aarhus University, Denmark, and VBJK and Vlaams

Welzijnsverbond in Belgium in 2022–2023, to stimulate reflection and debate and inspire EU practice, research, and policy.

QualFDC partners concluded that the minimum preconditions for quality include low adult–child ratios, a qualified and supported workforce, understanding of childminding's specificity, and a competent, well-funded system. This article summarises the learning on ratios and the workforce, providing examples of promising and effective policies and implementation, and considers the implications for Ireland.

European cooperation

QualFDC activities involved three three-day learning, teaching, and training activities (LTTAs) in Belgium, Denmark, and Ireland, attended by the partners and stakeholders; country reports and fact sheets; reflection reports from each LTTA; and a final learning report and video (QualFDC, 2024). Each LTTA comprised visits to centres and childminding settings, and presentations by and discussions with policymakers, agencies, and stakeholders.

All partners learned from the differences between our systems and the similarities of our challenges, which shaped the themes discussed: professionalisation and quality development, recruitment and retention, and governance and management. Our aim was to learn and develop our respective organisations' capacities to advocate for high-quality childminding.

Preconditions for quality

Low adult–child ratios

Ireland's complex regulatory ratios have been based on the mix of child ages in childminding at any one time, extending to 1:12 when children are school-age only. Denmark's regulatory ratio is 1:5 (although in practice often 1:4); Flanders's is 1:8, or 2:18 where two childminders cooperate. Childminding primarily serves children under the age of three in both countries.

Influenced by our learning, Early Childhood Ireland's advocacy for reform has focused on a maximum regulatory ratio of 1:4. (At the time of writing, Ireland's first childminding-specific regulations were published, setting it at 1:6.) Policymaking and advocacy continue to be impacted by an international research gap on the effects of varying ratios and group sizes on measures of quality and outcomes in centres and childminders' homes (Dalgaard et al., 2022; Early Childhood Ireland, 2024).

In Ireland, a childminder can work her whole life alone at home, without any support or oversight agency.

Flemish childminders work under the guidance of a Family Care Organiser that unites childminders and parents, pays childminders, and invoices parents.

QualFDC partners shared experiences on the negative impacts of too many children per adult: caring and mealtime routines can become automatic; children may lack a warm relationship with childminders; childminders may not have time to play with children, support outdoor play, or engage in the community. The role becomes one of 'guarding' rather than education.

A systematic review affirmed the importance of a relational pedagogy, where positive interactions and respectful relationships can determine quality experiences and holistic outcomes for children (Early Childhood Ireland, 2024). Positive interactions, such as responsiveness and story-reading, are linked to better language and social outcomes. Negative interactions and lack of engagement are associated with poorer outcomes.

Qualified and supported workforce

An undesirable outcome of the lack of regulation in Ireland is that a childminder can work her whole life alone at home, without any support or oversight agency. In Denmark and Flanders, childminders also generally worked alone at home, but both countries have developed support systems, inspiring the Irish participants.

All Flemish childminders work under the guidance of a family care organiser, operating through non-governmental agencies that select, supervise, monitor, and educate them. They unite childminders and parents, pay childminders, and invoice parents. Flanders recently established a system of publicly funded pedagogical coaching, provided by local nonprofit agencies, stimulating childminders' reflection and practice. A key lesson for Ireland is the importance of a trusting relationship between coaches/mentors and childminders. That the coaching happens in the home means childminders' practice can be developed in their real-life context.

In Denmark, professional learning communities are facilitated by pedagogical coaches, employed by municipalities, who demonstrate practice and support reflection with groups of 5–7 childminders and the children, one day a week, in a 'play hub' located centrally in the community. Children can play together and get to know other children and childminders. If a childminder is on leave, children can go to a guest childminder's home – one of the 5–7, whom they already know. This system is why a service might operate at a ratio of 1:4, to allow slack to accommodate a guest child.

The level of qualification or specific training for childminders in the three countries is low; none has yet set a regulatory minimum. The extent to which Danish municipalities offer initial training and continuing professional development (CPD) to childminders is patchy. Irish plans to develop an initial registration foundation training for all childminders and proposals for a qualification were of great interest to partners.

This lack is challenging, as childminders with appropriate, relevant qualifications, training, and CPD are better equipped to provide high-quality care and education (Early Childhood Ireland, 2024); the specificity of training plays a crucial role in shaping interaction quality. Childminders were also enabled to manage stress and challenges effectively, further improving the environment for children and potentially recruitment and retention.

Conclusion

This article summarised some of the learning from an Early Childhood Ireland–led project that aimed to stimulate reflection and debate on childminding. It focused on low childminder–child ratios and a qualified and supported workforce – two preconditions for accessible, affordable, high-quality provision. Ratio levels and the specificity of training and CPD also influence childminders' wellbeing, which can impact recruitment and retention.

Childminders should be considered professionals, as childminding is more than guarding. Childminders provide care and education before compulsory formal education in many EU countries. QualFDC partners stressed the specificity of childminding services. A childminder's home is an authentic pedagogical environment. It is no better or worse than group-centre-based services, and both must be of high quality to benefit children. Childminders should become reflective practitioners, aware of their pedagogical and social role. Well-qualified staff are therefore needed. This implies good working conditions with decent and fair pay, working hours, and pension, and a work environment that supports their wellbeing.

QualFDC concluded that the development and sustainment of high-quality, accessible, affordable childminding provision that benefits children requires a competent system with sufficient public funding. Achieving it depends on policy choices and political will. Childminding counts.

QualFDC concluded that the development and sustainment of high-quality, accessible, affordable childminding provision that benefits children, requires a competent system with sufficient public funding.

REFERENCES

Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2023) *Census of Population 2022 Profile 3 – Households, Families and Childcare.* www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp3/censusofpopulation2022profile3-householdsfamiliesandchildcare/childcare/.

Dalgaard, N.T., Bondebjerg, A., Klokker, R., Viinholt, B.C.A., and Dietrichson, J. (2022) 'Adult/child ratio and group size in early childhood education or care to promote the development of children aged 0–5 years: A systematic review', *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 18(2). DOI: 10.1002/cl2.1239

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2021) *National Action Plan for Childminding*, 2021–2028. Dublin: DCEDIY.

Early Childhood Ireland (2024) *The determinants of experiences and outcomes for children and young people in childminding: A rapid review of the research literature.* Dublin: Early Childhood Ireland.

Government of Ireland (2018) F*irst 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, 2019–2028.* Dublin: Stationery Office.

QualFDC (2024) *Quality in Family Day Care: Final Learning Report.* https://projects.au.dk/qualfdc.

Endnotes

[1] *Childminding services in Ireland are provided in the childminder's home. Childminders are self-employed, operating small businesses. The legal and regulatory context differs from that of nannies and au pairs, who care for children in the children's own home and are directly employed by the parents.*

✱✱✱

Centre for Inclusive Pedagogy launched in DCU's Institute of Education

Dr Joseph Travers, Professor Mel Ainscow, Dr Aoife Brennan and DCU President Professor Daire Keogh at the launch of the DCU Centre for Inclusive Pedagogy.

Training the Trainers in Delivery of the Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Programme

Introduction

In 2006, Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers were developed in consultation with the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector, recognising the need to address diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) in early childhood (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006). This development was supported by the Éist project in Pavee Point. The guidelines were never appropriately resourced or mainstreamed, although the Éist project provided DEI training nationally.

In 2016, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, as part of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), revised and updated the 2006 guidelines to the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (DCYA, 2016). It provided a DEI 'Train the Trainers' programme to City and County Childcare Committee staff and subsequently DEI training to educators to support the implementation of the guidelines in the sector. The DEI training was built on the Éist training manual *Ar an mBealach* (Murray et al., 2004) and grounded in an anti-bias educational approach (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020). In-person training was delivered nationally.

This article shares findings from a research project undertaken between October 2021 and October 2023 as part of a postgraduate degree at Technological University Dublin. It examined both the trainers' and ECEC educators' experience of the DEI training. It focused on how the Train the Trainers programme supported trainers to deliver the content and how educators used their learning to implement the DEI Charter and Guidelines.
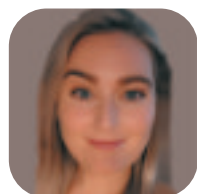
Claire Crawford
Youth Justice Worker, Foróige

Dr Colette Murray
Lecturer, Technological University Dublin

This article reports on research at Technological University Dublin that examined the impact of 'Train the Trainers', a Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) programme from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. It looks at how trainers were supported to deliver the content and how early childhood educators used their learning to implement the DEI Charter and Guidelines in their practice. It concludes with some key recommendations from the study.

The research

Using a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2014) nine trainers and nine educators were interviewed in four focus groups. For more detailed discussion, six educators were interviewed individually. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the resulting data, with six themes outlined below.

1. Impact of training on understanding DEI

The DEI training for educators takes place in person for 15 hours over four days. It is not accredited, and services receive no extra capitation for attendance, unlike the Leadership for Inclusion in Early Years (LINC) training programme (Murray, 2019). The training follows a sequence but not a didactic approach. It uses experiential exercises that build on each other in a safe and supportive environment. It focuses on disrupting assumptions, enables unlearning, and fosters empowerment and transformation.

The training explores DEI educational approaches, terminology, and concepts, the anti-bias approach and its goals, equality-proofing the physical environment, and policies. Personal and professional attitudes and values are emphasised.

The findings indicate that the trainers and educators found the Train the Trainers and DEI training programmes engaging, empowering, and in some areas transformative. Key findings show that the sequencing and experiential nature of the training was valued and gave participants confidence as they built their understanding. DEI training can be challenging, so working in person with peers was appreciated.

2. Engaging with anti-bias approach

The anti-bias approach has four goals for both adults and children (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020); see table (DCYA, 2016):

The research project examined the experience of both the Trainers and ECEC Educators in relation to the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) training.

GOALS FOR ADULTS	GOALS FOR CHILDREN
1. To be conscious of one's own culture, attitudes and values, and how the influence practice.	1. To support each child's identity (individual and group) and their sense of belonging.
2. To be comfortable with difference, have empathy and engage effectively with families.	2. To foster children's emphaty, an support them to be comfortable with difference.
3. To critically think about diversity, bias and discrimination.	3. To encourage each child to critically think about diversity and bias.
4. To confidently engage in dialogue about issues of diversity, bias and discrimination. Work to challenge individual and institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination.	4. To empower children to stand up for themselves and others in difficult situations.

Trainers and educators, using the goals for adults, said they became more conscious of their own biases and more confident in recognising prejudice and discrimination. Some felt more confident to stand up against injustice in their personal and professional lives. Trainers spoke about their commitment to supporting educators to embed the anti-bias approach in the whole service.

However, while the educators engaged fully in goals 1 and 2 for children, most had not embedded the approach holistically in their service. This is unsurprising given the short length of training. The conceptual and sociological unlearning in DEI work takes time.

3. Creating an inclusive physical environment

Equality-proofing ECEC settings was a key learning experience. The exercise raises awareness about representation of children and families in society and ECEC settings, giving educators tools to create a more inclusive environment. Educators expressed concerns about the lack of high-quality inclusive books for children in the Irish context. They made changes in their environment and recommended that the DCEDIY provide funding for inclusive material and books.

4. Supporting diverse families

Educators found that Covid-19 had decreased parental connection and involvement. The training supported them to reconsider their approach for working with parents. They became more mindful of the cohort of children in the service. This awareness enabled them to communicate confidently and effectively with all families, use accurate language, represent families appropriately, and address challenges conversations.

The training supported them in reconsidering their approach towards working with parents.

5. Developing and implementing an inclusion policy

Some educators felt they had little involvement in developing their inclusive policy and acknowledged the need to change this. Many changed their policies significantly during the training. They found that having an inclusion policy helped to work through challenging issues with parents.

6. Further support

Educators and trainers made the case for fully mainstreaming the training, saying it should be mandatory, incentivised, and accredited and that all staff, including the manager, should attend it. They recommended a mentoring programme to support educators to embed the work in their service. Many recommended extending the training time or adding refresher courses.

Recommendations and conclusion

The research shows that the training had a positive impact on the attitudes of the trainers and educators and that it strengthened their commitment to supporting an anti-bias approach.

Key recommendations from the study are outlined below. For detailed recommendations, please contact the authors.

Policy:

» Provide incentives for all staff to attend the DEI training.
» Develop a mentoring programme.
» Resource reflective time in services and inclusive materials.

Training:

» Review the Train the Trainers programme regularly.
» Resource refresher courses for trainers and educators.
» Continue face-to-face training, the sequence, and the experiential exercises in any revision of the training.

Practice:

» Resource regular staff meetings to support educators to explore the critical questions in the DEI Charter and Guidelines.
» Provide an online platform with DEI resources and a place to share and develop knowledge and stay connected.

The research shows that the training, though just 15 hours long, had a positive impact on trainers' and educators' attitudes and their commitment to supporting an anti-bias approach. Since the research, Equal Start, a new funding model and set of universal and targeted measures, has been designed for children experiencing disadvantage (DCEDIY, 2024). One strand includes

embedding inclusion in ECEC settings by reviewing and extending the DEI and LINC training and revising the DEI Charter and Guidelines. This is to be welcomed, and we look forward to the developments in the coming year.

REFERENCES

Crawford, C. (2024, unpublished) An Exploration of How the National Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Training is Supporting the Implementation of the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines in the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector.

Creswell, J.W. (2014) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed-Method Approaches*, 4th edn. California: Sage.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2024) Equal Start. www.gov.ie/en/publication/9d498-equal-start/.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2016) *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education.* Dublin: Government publications.

Derman-Sparks, L. and Edwards, O.J. (2020) *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves,* 2nd edn. New York: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Murray, C. (2019) 'Diversity, equality, and inclusion in early childhood: A conceptual shift from needs to rights'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.), *Ireland's Yearbook of Education 2019.* Dublin: Education Matters.

Murray, C., Cooke, M., and O'Doherty, A. (2004, rev. 2010) *Ar an mBealach: 'On the Way': Diversity and Equality Training for Early Childhood Trainers.* Dublin: Pavee Point.

Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) (2006) *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers.* Dublin: Stationery Office.
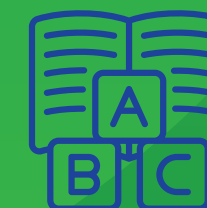
Primary
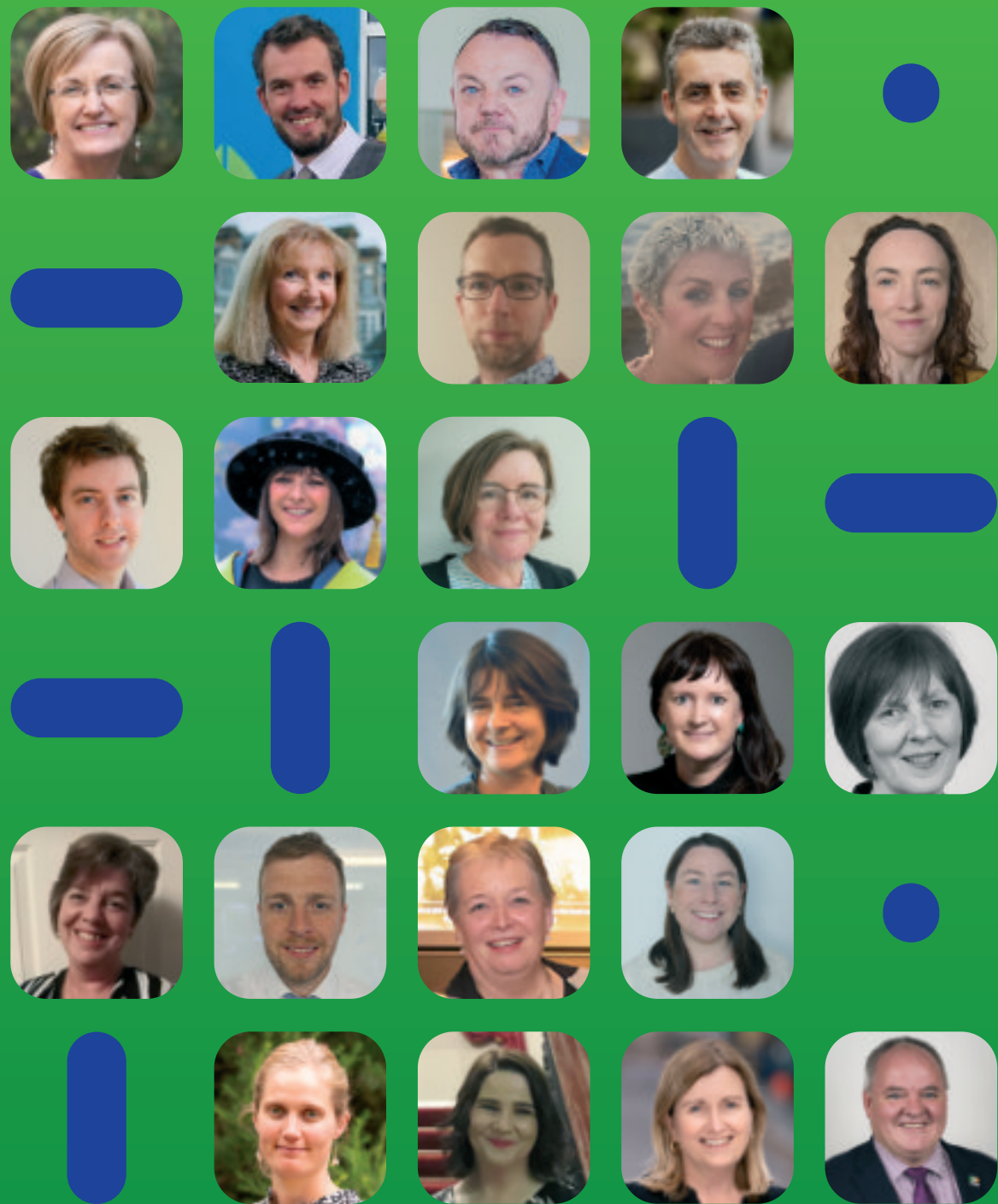
Overview of Primary-Level Education in Ireland in 2024

In 2024 the Department of Education celebrated the centenary of its foundation. Over the last one hundred years there has been much to commend, as Irish children, their teachers, and schools continue to perform well above average OECD standards – not just in literacy, numeracy, and science but also in wellbeing and equity matrices. However, gaps identified recently in mathematics and science achievement by sex (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study [TIMSS] 2023) need to be monitored.

We have one of the highest retention/school completion rates internationally, with strong transfer rates to third-level education, and we continue to attract high-performing people to become teachers. In the primary sector, 2024 represented a period of evolution rather than revolution. There was evidence of steady progress on the delivery of many priorities identified in the Department of Education's strategic plan for 2023–2025. The *Forbairt Annual Statement of Priorities* and the quarterly progress reports published by the Department are replete with actions completed, and it is good to acknowledge how much has been achieved.

In an election year, education was not directly one of the controversial topics challenging candidates – rather, poverty and inaccessibility of housing were matters of concern. Because little airtime was given to education, and because of the general acceptance that education in Ireland is of a high standard, it could be argued that a sense of complacency has developed in the political arena and that the crises being experienced every day by parents, teachers, principals, and school communities are not that real or urgent.

In the next section I will look at some achievements in 2024, then identify essential reading which could usefully inform the next Minister about the urgent challenges to be addressed.

Prof. Teresa Doherty
President, Marino Institute of Education

The centenary of the Department of Education's foundation is an opportune moment to take stock of Irish primary education. This overview of the sector considers recent progress and achievements and, with a new government imminent, recommends some reports that will be essential reading for the new Minister in addressing the main challenges, including special educational provision, teacher supply, school finances, educational disadvantage, and principals' wellbeing.

Achievements to celebrate

Roll-out of the redeveloped primary curriculum

Schools have embraced the new primary language and maths curricula. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has consulted widely on the draft specifications for other areas, with input from teachers, parents, and children. The recognition of teachers' agency is welcome. The shift to a learning outcomes approach relies on teachers' judgement, and, to ensure the success of this exciting curriculum, substantial face-to-face professional development should be provided for teachers.

Schools are inclusive and diverse communities

The inclusion and celebration of all children is one of the hallmarks of Irish schools, whether they have additional needs or are English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) learners, migrant children, new arrivals from war-torn regions, or children who are experiencing homelessness. By February 2024 we had 11,288 Ukrainian pupils enrolled in primary schools. A report into their experiences commented positively on the quality of teaching and learning observed and commended schools for their inclusive practices, with 90% of the Ukrainian children found to be studying Irish and participating in extracurricular activities.

Irish-medium education policy consultation

Public consultation took place on the development of a policy on Irish-medium education outside of the Gaeltacht. The Department commissioned a literature review on Irish-medium and minority-language education. The first report in this series presents evidence of effective practice in 10 different jurisdictions where education is provided through minority languages. This data will inform the development of the emerging policy.

Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Strategy

The Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy strategy for 2024–2033 was launched in May, seeking to include all learners and their parents and teachers in supporting children's key skills in these areas. Associated with this policy was an investment of €50m in ICT (information and communication technologies) grants for schools to support digital learning. The Minister published guidelines for parents and parent associations who wished to create and implement voluntary codes on smartphone use among primary school children. She announced an investment in phone pouches for second-level students in an effort to mitigate potential negative impacts of social media on young people's health and wellbeing.

To ensure the success of this exciting curriculum, substantial face-to-face professional development should be provided for teachers.

One of the strengths of the Department's work, and that of its agencies, is that they engage in research-based policy development.

Investment in special education

Funding allocated to special education has continued to increase: €2.7 billion will be spent in special education in 2024, equating to 26% of the Department's budget. Depending on how it is spent, this level of funding could provide a significant base on which to build a more inclusive system. Around 3,000 special classes are now in operation, with six new special education schools announced during the year. An additional €11m was allocated in October to provide additional administrative deputy principal posts and a further 100 teaching posts in special schools. The revised structure of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) will result in a 60% increase in the number of special educational needs organisers (SENOs) across the country. This decision aims to create a more localised service to support families and schools.

Recommended reading for the Minister

One of the strengths of the Department's work and that of its agencies is that they engage in research-based policy development. By commissioning research and publishing high-quality and informative reports, they are providing a useful platform for action. The time has come for decisive action on many fronts. I have selected just six reports published this year, all freely available, which I believe are essential reading for the new appointee.

1. *Special Education in an Independent Ireland 1922–2022: Insights from a Journey Through the Century* (2024) by Emer Ring with Patrick F. O'Donovan, Maurice Harmon, and Lisha O'Sullivan, commissioned by the NCSE, provides a clear and honest appraisal of the evolution of special education provision over the last century. It identifies the advocacy of parents and litigation as drivers of policy development, giving impetus to the system to secure the educational rights of all children. Following Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018, the authors state unequivocally that segregation of special education is no longer compatible with our societal identity.

2. Following Ireland's ratification of the UNCRPD, the Minister sought policy advice from the NCSE. This much-anticipated advice, titled *An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society*, was published in May 2024 and sets out how the state is progressing to fulfil its obligations under the UNCRPD. It gives a valuable insight into the current approach to addressing the urgent and ever-increasing complexity of needs in the system, advocating for a process that requires time and the establishment of a planning group to identify the steps in this multi-year plan, which should be piloted in several schools. There are many worthy recommendations, but no immediate actions.

3. *Education Indicators for Ireland* (March 2024) is an in-depth source of data underpinning every aspect of education in Ireland and is a must-read for the new Minister. It is impossible to do justice to it here, but the following figures on special educational needs (SEN) are illuminating:

	2018	2022
Children in special schools	7,722	8,424
Children in special classes in mainstream primary schools	6,229	10,123
Children with SEN using school transport	12,751	16,401
Special needs assistants (SNAs) in special schools	2,521	2,900
SNAs in primary schools	9,309	12,242
Students with direct involvement from NEPS psychologist (primary and post-primary casework) *	8,561	7,211
Days dedicated to support and development activities in schools (primary and post-primary) by NEPS psychologists	5,285	5,312

* The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) supports the wellbeing, academic, social, and emotional development of all learners. NEPS prioritises support for the wellbeing and inclusion of learners at risk of educational disadvantage and those with special educational needs.

It is clear that resources are being invested in special education classes, special education schools, and particularly SNAs. But most children with additional needs are in mainstream classes, where class sizes are large, students' learning needs are increasingly complex, and the expectations on teachers to address these needs are escalating. In light of the limited availability of NEPS support and the absence of adequate therapeutic and behaviour supports for schools, the elevated expectations on teachers increases their already heavy workload. It also negatively affects their wellbeing and that of school leaders, on whose shoulders the responsibility rests.

Also notable is the number of children transported by bus or taxi to schools away from their home locality to access special education classes or schools. The normalisation of segregating children based on their abilities – that our most vulnerable children are leaving their homes in the early morning to travel to schools that can provide an appropriate education – must be addressed immediately.

Teacher supply is a crisis in Irish schools, and these figures illustrate why:

	2018	2022
Teachers in mainstream primary classrooms (full-time equivalents)	22,747	23,596
Other primary teachers*	14,594	18,027
Children in primary school	567,772	558,143
Children in DEIS schools	110,969	153,790

* These include special education teachers, English language teachers, support teachers, administrative principals, and home school community liaison (HCSL) teachers, as well as any other full-time teaching staff.

While the number of children in DEIS schools has increased by 39% from 2018 to 2022, the number of mainstream teaching posts has increased by just 3.7% in the same period. Equally, the number of posts belies the number of teachers needed to fill these posts. The level of outflows of teachers due to various leave options, which are common in all Irish workplaces, translate into a much higher number of qualified teachers required.

Inadequate funding, and stress and worry over money, are causing many principals to feel burned out and dissatisfied with their role.

The Department has commissioned a UNESCO team to review teacher supply, which will probably not report until autumn 2026. In the interim, there is plentiful data available to (a) recognise the actual levels of demand, (b) support an immediate increase in the number of teachers being educated, and (c) take urgent action to retain teachers in the system and attract back those who have emigrated.

4. My fourth recommended reading is the *Survey on School Finances* by the Catholic Primary School Managers' Association (CPSMA), published in May 2024. The state invests less than the OECD average in education. Our schools are highly efficient, ensuring that our children are attaining learning outcomes on a parallel with those of Finland, for example, against whom we are often benchmarked, despite our much lower rates of investment. A recent CPSMA survey provided evidence of the financial circumstances of primary schools. Completed by 1,440 primary principals, it found that more than 70% of schools have fallen into deficit over the past year and are maintaining schools from scarce cash reserves. School funding (capitation, ancillary, minor works, etc.) was reduced significantly during the financial crisis, and although it has increased slightly in recent years, it remains at 2011 levels. Yet the cost of utilities (heating, electricity) has increased by an average of 35%–37% in the last two years. Inadequate funding, and stress and worry over money, are causing many principals to feel burned out and dissatisfied with their role. An increase in the student capitation, to reflect that available to second-level schools, is urgently required.

The OECD's *Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland* (2024) examines the day-to-day experiences of children, families, and their schools. It explores the complex range of children's educational, mental, and physical needs in our schools and clearly states that the fragmentation of services, and the lack of counselling, psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, and so on, impacts hugely on children's capacity to learn.

The rise in the level and complexity of children's needs experienced in DEIS schools, and the level of support that schools are expected to provide in the absence of other supports, places huge pressure on teachers and schools to deliver a holistic education, which addresses not only children's learning but also their wellbeing. The shortage of teaching staff is significantly more pronounced in disadvantaged schools – the difference is among the largest observed in OECD countries. The review team wrote that DEIS schools face challenges attracting and retaining staff and sometimes fail to fill positions because they may be perceived as difficult teaching environments.

This report sets out enriching opportunities that would strengthen learning opportunities for all children, such as breakfast clubs, after-school sports activities, and music clubs. It argues that we need to ensure that highly disadvantaged students can have the same access to these resources, regardless of their enrolment in DEIS or non-DEIS schools. The authors write:

> *Resources appear to lack coordination in how they deliver support to the students that need it. It would be important, for all of the relevant government Departments of Health, Education and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to collectively deliver on a joint policy, such as is the "Young Ireland 2023-2028" policy framework. Aligning adequate supports and resources for children with additional need, while simultaneously working to improve the system of support, so that barriers to access are removed, is fundamental. (p.32)*

5. My final recommended reading is the *Sustainable Leadership Project: Progress Report,* published in November 2024 by the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN). Based on independent research by a team from Deakin University, this report describes the negative impact of workloads and the work environment on primary principals' wellbeing. The IPPN's 2024 report *Irish Principals' and Deputy Principals' Health and Wellbeing* reveals that the levels of burnout and stress experienced by principals are double those of the healthy working population. Schools' effectiveness and children's outcomes depend on the capacity of principals. Urgent, substantive, and meaningful action must be taken to support our school leaders.

DEIS schools face challenges attracting and retaining staff and sometimes fail to fill positions because they may be perceived as difficult teaching environments.

Other areas, such as school patronage, also need reform. Prof. Áine Hyland's 10-year review of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022* would provide context for the Minister.

Our incoming Minister needs to have an ambitious vision for Irish education. They might get inspiration from these reports, but equally they might look back at the Proclamation of Independence from 1916, which committed to 'cherishing all the children of the nation equally'. Our early politicians recognised the education system as the foundation block of our society. The Minister might also take inspiration from the 1960s, when the *Investment in Education report* spurred radical reform of the system.

But the Minister needs to have the courage to take action rather than commission more reports. The data does not lie, and we have plenty of data. In an era when Ireland has the financial capacity to do so, we need the Minister to embrace the Department's mission, 'to ensure that all children and young people have access to a positive learning experience to realise their full potential and contribute to Ireland's social, economic and cultural development'.

***

Over 400 primary schools nationwide were recognised for their participation in science, technology, engineering and maths.

Pictured with Minister O'Donovan are two 1st class pupils from Kilbehenny National School, Co Limerick.

On 14 June 2024, Patrick O'Donovan TD, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, announced SFI Curious Minds awards for 419 schools nationwide for their efforts in science, technology, engineering and maths.

Gen Free: Free to Be Kids

Mobilising politicians, parents, and health professionals to change our attitude to phone use and social media

Introduction

Gen Free started in Waterford in August 2023. It was a primary-school-led initiative that hoped to create space for parents to discuss their children's use of mobile phones and social media, and to agree not to purchase a smartphone for their children or allow them on social media while they were in primary school.

Among the group of principals and primary school teachers, there was a shared concern about the effects that social media and excessive screen time were having on pupils. The story across all schools – urban, rural, DEIS, big, or small – was the same: children are being affected negatively by being online and on social media.

International trends

How the use of smartphones and related technologies affects children's wellbeing and learning is a concern for educators, parents, and policymakers alike. A CyberSafeKids report (2024) found that 94% of 8- to 12-year-olds in Ireland own their own smart device, while 82% have their own social media account. Ireland is part of a trend across OECD countries, where more than 90% of teenagers report owning or having access to a smartphone (OECD, 2018). On average, teenagers spend three hours online per day outside of school (OECD, 2019). UNESCO (2023) recently called for smartphones to be banned from schools globally to tackle their disruptive influence and to reduce cyberbullying.

Abrahamsson (2024), in her study of smartphone usage with teenagers in Norway, found that banning smartphones from school caused a decrease in the number of girls seeking psychological health care. She also found that cyberbullying decreased. Girls' academic achievement increased, and these effects were larger for girls from low socio-economic backgrounds. Interestingly,

Dr Brian Barron
Principal, Portlaw NS, Co. Waterford

This article describes the work of Gen Free: Free to Be Kids, which started in Waterford in 2023 and has grown to be a national lobbying group encompassing non-governmental organisations, health professionals, educators, and parents. It outlines the group's aims, and it offers an overview of the research supporting these aims.

she found that the ban had no impact on boys' mental health or academic performance. Dempsey et al. (2020) asked if girls suffer more anxiety linked to mobile phones because of the expectation that they are always accessible and on.

Jonathan Haidt's book *The Anxious Generation* (2024) calls for the rewiring of childhood and the removal of smartphones and social media for under-16s. He notes that since 2012, anxiety in undergraduates in the US has risen by 134%. He calls for a dual solution: removing screens and social media and reinstating more traditional play and exploration for children.

Starting Gen Free

In August 2024, the primary school principals of Co. Waterford had a press event where we launched the idea of Gen Free. Each school in the county had committed to take it on in their own context, so it would not be controlled centrally. Each school worked with its parents association and tried to get parent engagement and feedback. The response varied between schools and between parents. Some schools got very high adoption numbers straight away; others were more of a slow burn. Some parents were very enthusiastic, while others chose not to engage.

A variety of responses was to be expected, and 100% buy-in from all parents was never the goal. The goal was to create space for parents who wanted to buck the growing trend and say no to smartphones and social media for their children. There was some inevitable pessimism about 'the train having left the station' on this issue, but we pushed the message to parents that they did not need to get every other parent to sign up to Gen Free, just the parents of their children's friends. This micro-focus empowered parents to see the solution as a local one, within their influence.

Launching Gen Free was remarkably easy, with lots of early adopters and enthusiasm. The challenge became how to sustain that enthusiasm and keep the initiative on parents' radar. Yearly reminders from schools to parents and new families might help keep it fresh in their minds. However, in Waterford we felt there needed to be a national, societal, and legislative answer. We needed to make the internet and app providers responsible to protect young people online.

Free to Be Kids

By January 2024 there was a national appetite for action on smartphones and social media. I was being contacted regularly by schools and personal assistants (PAs) looking to replicate Gen Free. Greystones had their own It Takes a Village

In August 2024, the primary school principals of Co. Waterford had a press event where the idea of Gen Free was launched.

initiative, and it was through collaborating with some of their founders and with CyberSafeKids and other interested parties that Gen Free became a national movement with three simple asks for the government:

1. Regulation: Specific and effective legislation to protect children online.
2. Education: Smartphone-free primary and secondary schools. The resourcing of educational programmes for parents.
3. Supports: A public awareness campaign aimed in particular at parents on the pitfalls of the online world and excessive screen time. Wellbeing training and support services for schools.

In September 2024, three weeks after the Irish Medical Organisation described smartphones and social media as a public health emergency, Gen Free was launched as a national lobbying movement. The Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, attended the launch and gave it his full support. There followed a robust engagement with parents through schools and PAs, asking them to email government leaders and local politicians.

Gen Free continues to work with policymakers and power brokers in the hope to create a safe, regulated space for our young people. But the power to influence change is still with individual parents and citizens to demand that policymakers put the necessary protections in place.

REFERENCES

Abrahamsson, S. (2024) 'Smartphone bans, student outcomes and mental health'. *NHH Department of Economics Discussion Paper* no. 01. DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.4735240

CyberSafeKids (2024) *Left to Their Own Devices: The virtually unprotected lives of kids in Ireland.* Dublin: CyberSafeKids.

Dempsey, S., Lyons, S., and McCoy, S. (2020) 'Early mobile phone ownership: Influencing the wellbeing of girls and boys in Ireland?' *Journal of Children and Media*, 14(4), 492–509.

Haidt, J. (2024) *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness.* Random House.

OECD (2018) *Children & Young People's Mental Health in the Digital Age: Shaping the Future.* OECD Publishing.

OECD (2019) *What Do We Know about Children and Technology?* OECD Publishing.

UNESCO (2023) *Global Education Monitoring Report 2023: Technology in education: A tool on whose terms?* UNESCO.

Vision into Practice: Design Principles to Support the Enactment of the Redeveloped Primary School Curriculum

This article, written by the four members of the Primary Advisory Panel of the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment, advocates for effective enactment of Ireland's redeveloped Primary School Curriculum. It argues that traditional implementation models should give way to curriculum enactment, where teachers, children, and other stakeholders collaboratively adapt and construct the curriculum based on local contexts while maintaining fidelity to core curriculum principles.

Prof. Jim Spillane
Northwestern University, Chicago

Prof. Dominic Wyse
University College London

Prof. Louise Hayward
University of Glasgow

Dr Thomas Walsh
Maynooth University

Curriculum redevelopment

The primary school curriculum in Ireland is changing. In recent years, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has undertaken redevelopment work, informed by research, consultation, work with schools and settings, and deliberation with stakeholder groups. The shape and structure of the curriculum were formulised in the Primary Curriculum Framework, published by the government in March 2023. Work has continued with the development of curriculum specifications for the remaining areas, which will be introduced in the 2025/26 school year.

The Primary Curriculum Framework emphasises teacher and child agency, and in doing so challenges traditional notions of *implementation* as being mostly about faithfully putting a prescribed national curriculum into practice. Instead, curriculum *enactment* is the focus, whereby teachers, children, and stakeholders actively adapt and construct curriculum based on local contexts, priorities, and needs – and where *integrity* to the curriculum principles is the central aim. Central to curriculum enactment is the notion of sense-making, where

educators use curriculum documents not only for guidance but also for the purposes of making and crafting curriculum locally through collaboration and learning together *by all*.

Considering this new paradigm, this article draws from evidence-informed design principles to elicit the conditions that can effectively prepare and support the enactment of the primary school curriculum. Key assumptions that underpin this approach include:

» Curriculum enactment as learning *together by all*: Viewing curriculum enactment as a process of continuous learning for teachers and stakeholders, incorporating formal and informal learning opportunities informed by adult learning principles.
» Engagement of prior knowledge, practices, and beliefs: Acknowledging the role of teachers' prior knowledge, beliefs, and practices in shaping curriculum enactment efforts, and leveraging constructivist approaches to facilitate learning.
» Focus on implementation integrity: Emphasising the importance of alignment between local adaptations and the curriculum principles and guidance as outlined in the Primary Curriculum Framework and specifications.

Evidence–based design principles for curriculum enactment

This article builds on these foundational assumptions to propose six interconnected design principles for supporting the effective enactment of the redeveloped primary school curriculum. These principles are grounded in adult learning theories and empirical research, aimed at fostering pedagogically sound environments that can nurture both individual and collective learning among educators and stakeholders (National Academies of Sciences, 2018).

Building on prior knowledge, practices, and beliefs

Recognise and actively engage teachers' knowledge, practices, and beliefs in learning from their curriculum enactment efforts. Using constructivist and socio-constructivist approaches to engage teachers' existing knowledge and beliefs in their ongoing collective sense-making about revising their instructional practices as they enact the new curriculum framework and specifications (ibid.).

Addressing cognitive and affective dimensions

Attend to teachers' emotional and motivational states alongside their cognitive development in their learning about and from enacting the new curriculum framework. Implementing supportive frameworks that attend to and alleviate

This article draws from evidence-informed design principles to elicit the conditions that can effectively prepare and support the enactment of the primary school curriculum.

anxiety and facilitate the adoption of new pedagogical strategies and content knowledge (ibid.).

Designing educative curriculum materials

Develop curriculum documents and other materials that educate by providing ongoing, job-embedded, discipline-specific, professional learning tools for teachers as they enact the curriculum in practice. Educative curriculum materials enhance subject-matter knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and self-efficacy among educators (Davis et al., 2017; Furman et al., 2022).

Promoting collective sense-making

Foster collaborative environments where teachers learn together and co-construct understandings of the reforms from their engagement with the curriculum materials in their efforts to enact the curriculum in practice. Studies highlight the positive impact of peer collaboration on curriculum enactment, leading to improved pedagogical practices and outcomes (Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Spillane et al., 2018).

Sustaining continuous professional development

Provide professional learning opportunities that are curriculum-content-focused, involve active learning, support collaboration, include reflection and feedback, incorporate coaching and models of effective practice, and are ongoing. Effective continuing professional development (CPD) is crucial for supporting teachers' collective sense-making and learning as they enact and adapt curriculum reforms over time (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; McLure & Aldridge, 2023).

Engaging all stakeholders in sense-making

Engage diverse stakeholders - teachers, children, parents, school leaders, special needs assistants and support personnel - in sense-making and learning about curriculum enactment.

Engage diverse stakeholders (e.g., teachers, children, parents, school leaders, special needs assistants, and support personnel) in sense-making and learning about and from curriculum enactment from inception, including opportunities to learn together that cross roles and responsibilities. Cultivate a sense of collective ownership and responsibility to foster efficacy and sustainable curriculum implementation (Gouëdard et al., 2020).

Redesigning school system structures

Adopting new approaches for supporting curriculum enactment that embed the six design principles in practice involves rethinking existing structures and creating new ones that facilitate collaboration. Professional learning communities and design-based implementation research offer frameworks

that foster collaboration among different stakeholders, allowing for joint learning and iterative improvement through curriculum enactment (Stoll et al., 2006; Penuel & Fishman, 2012).

Specifically, curriculum enactment is enabled when school systems create structures that bridge different communities of practice (inspectorate, school leaders, teachers, parents, etc.) through intentional use of boundary practices (e.g., CPD, inspections, off-site school visits), boundary objects (e.g., curriculum documents, school self-evaluation, student work), and boundary spanners (e.g., inspectorate, coaches) (Spillane et al., 2018). Such system redesign work will require audits of existing structures to assess their support of curriculum-enactment goals. Based on these audits, strategic plans can be developed to restructure norms, roles, routines, and materials, ensuring a cohesive approach to supporting effective curriculum enactment.

Conclusion

Effective enactment of the redeveloped primary school curriculum in Ireland hinges on embracing evidence-informed design principles that promote continuous learning together among educators and stakeholders, through ongoing sense-making, collaboration, and adaptation. By adopting evidence-based approaches and negotiating the necessary structural change, educators can better navigate the complexities of curriculum enactment, ensuring that reforms are translated locally into meaningful educational experiences for all stakeholders, especially children attending primary and special schools in Ireland.

REFERENCES

Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M.E., and Gardner, M. (2017) *Effective Teacher Professional Development.* Learning Policy Institute.

Davis, E.A., Palincsar, A.S., Smith, P.S., Arias, A.M., and Kademian, S.M. (2017) 'Educative curriculum materials: Uptake, impact, and implications for research and design', *Educational Researcher*, 46(6), 293–304.

Furman, M., Luzuriaga, M., Gómez, M., and Duque, M. (2022) 'Educative curriculum materials and their role in the learning of science teachers'. In: J.A. Luft and M.G. Jones (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Science Teacher Education.* Routledge.

Gouëdard, P., Pont, B., Hyttinen, S., and Huang, P. (2020) 'Curriculum reform: A literature review to support effective implementation'. OECD Education Working Papers. DOI: 10.1787/efe8a48c-en

Government of Ireland (2023) Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools. Dublin: Government publications.

McLure, F.I. and Aldridge, J.M. (2023) 'Sustaining reform implementation: A systematic literature review', *School Leadership & Management*, 43(1), 70–98.

National Academies of Sciences (2018) *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures.* National Academies Press.

Penuel, W.R. and Fishman, B.J. (2012) 'Large-scale science education intervention research we can use', *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 49(3), 281–304.

Ronfeldt, M., Farmer, S.O., McQueen, K., and Grissom, J.A. (2015) 'Teacher collaboration in instructional teams and student achievement', *American Educational Research Journal*, 52(3), 471–514.

Spillane, J.P., Hopkins, M., and Sweet, T.M. (2018) 'School district educational infrastructure and change at scale: Teacher peer interactions and their beliefs about mathematics instruction', *American Educational Research Journal*, 55(3), 532–571.

Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., and Thomas, S. (2006) 'Professional learning communities: A review of the literature', *Journal of Educational Change,* 7(4), 221–258.

✳✳✳

EXPLORERS EDUCATION PROGRAMME

Dr Caroline Cusack and Denise O'Sullivan from the Marine Institute with Cushla Dromgool Regan, Explorers Education manager and lead author.

The Marine Institute's Explorers Education Programme is pleased to announce the launch of its innovative 'Superhero Climate Change' educational resources. This comprehensive suite includes:

- interactive presentations,
- teacher guides,
- lesson plans,
- activities designed for thematic and cross-curricular learning in primary schools.

These resources offer a unique opportunity for teachers and pupils to engage with the complex issue of climate change in a practical and enjoyable way.

Marine Institute CEO, Dr Rick Officer, said:
"This wide range of content helps to demystify global warming and the impacts of climate change, presenting them in a way that both teachers and children can easily understand and enjoy. The learning and engagement process also inspires creative solutions to tackle this global challenge."

Restoring and protecting the Earth's land, ocean, and biodiversity, as well as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, are priorities echoed in key messages from recent UN climate summits. These summits have called for international collaboration to galvanize world climate and environmental goals.

122

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION 2024
YEARBOOK

123

Teacher Involvement and Engagement in Primary Curriculum Consultations

Curriculum change and reform can be challenging and complex. The development and dissemination of the Primary Curriculum Framework marks a critical period of curriculum change in Ireland, which impacts greatly on primary education. This article draws on the author's doctoral research, undertaken at Mary Immaculate College, into the design and development of the first phase of the Primary Language Curriculum, to examine how consultation processes have developed in the last decade (McGarry, 2017).

Conducting nationwide consultation is an onerous task but is a critical element of curriculum reform. It is therefore necessary to examine the approach adopted by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) during the design of the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) and the Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF).

Following the initial design of the PLC, where teachers were represented through language development groups, educational committees, and a cluster of network schools, the NCCA endeavoured to consult all primary school teachers on the first phase of this curriculum design. This wider consultation involved posting a draft of the PLC on the NCCA website and inviting teachers to complete a 24-question survey (NCCA, 2014). Teachers were also encouraged to email their views to the NCCA. The NCCA's communication strategy used social media, web pages, events, and partner organisations (NCCA, 2018).

There was a poor response to this wider consultation, however, with an interim NCCA report (2014) suggesting that only 871 teachers engaged – less than 3% of the primary teaching population. This was a significant limitation (McGarry, 2017). The report acknowledged that 'every consultation has its limits' and posited several possible factors in the low response rate, including timing (it was the final and busiest term of the school year) and
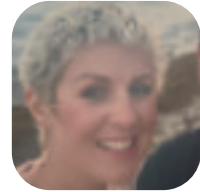
Caroline McGarry

Lecturer in Education, South East Technological University

The development of the Primary Curriculum Framework marks a critical period of curriculum change in Ireland. This article draws on the author's doctoral research into the design and development of the first phase of the Primary Language Curriculum, to examine how teacher consultation processes have developed in the last decade and to reflect on broader systemic issues of teacher autonomy in Ireland.

the process of facilitating teachers to share their views (NCCA, 2014). Other possible barriers, proposed in my doctoral work, included lack of awareness of the curriculum change or consultation, and perceived lack of time by teachers. There may also be disparity in how teachers' roles and responsibilities are perceived by external and internal stakeholders (McGarry, 2017).

Consultation during the design of the Primary Curriculum Framework incorporated additional measures in an effort to enhance teacher engagement. For example, it was designed to focus on six key messages associated with the draft framework. Data was gathered through bilateral meetings, online focus groups, and questionnaires (NCCA, 2023). At this point in the PCF development, however, the number of teachers engaging in the wider consultation remains relatively low, with 1,178 teachers having completed online questionnaires at the time of writing.

The fact that the vast majority of primary school teachers did not engage in the wider consultation during either curriculum change necessitates reflection. Could it indicate a lack of interest among teachers, who are happy to leave decisions to the experts? It could be argued that it calls into question the NCCA's overall approach to wider consultations, whereby teachers may not be receptive to reading and responding to curricular materials. It may also raise questions about broader systemic issues concerning teacher autonomy.

REFERENCES

McGarry, C. (2017) 'In between the lines of the primary language curriculum: Teacher involvement in the process of curriculum change'. PhD thesis, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. http://hdl.handle.net/10395/2099.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2014) *Consultation on the Draft Primary Language Curriculum: Junior Infants to Second Class: Interim report.* Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/media/2046/consultation-on-the-draft-primary-language-curriculum-interim-report.pdf.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2018) *Primary Developments: Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile: Report on the consultation on the draft curriculum for Stage 3 and 4/Céim 3 agus 4.* Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/media/3626/plc_consultation-report.pdf.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2022) *Technical Report: To accompany the report on the consultation on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework.* Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/media/5884/technical-report-to-accompany-the-report-on-the-consultation-on-the-draft_december-2022.pdf.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Report on the consultation on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework.* Dublin: NCCA. https://ncca.ie/media/5902/consultation-on-the-draft-primary-curriculum-framework_december-2022.pdf.

Maths4All: Supporting Teachers in Implementing the New Primary School Mathematics Curriculum

Developing active communities focussed on mathematics teaching practice

The Maths4All project, funded by Science Foundation Ireland and led by Siún Nic Mhuirí and colleagues in the Institute of Education at Dublin City University, seeks to support the development of high-quality mathematics teaching at preschool and primary level. We support primary teachers in enacting research-based pedagogies at this pivotal moment of curriculum change.

The project was established in 2020 with the goal of supporting primary school teachers with implementation of the new mathematics curriculum. Professional development opportunities were offered via webinars and learning communities, while sample lesson plans, videos, and other materials were provided through the Maths4All.ie website. To date, feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

Central to the project's success was the establishment of a professional learning community (PLC) centred on teachers' classroom practice. Many early PLC participants now lead PLCs themselves, and many participant-authored lesson plans have been added to the Maths4All website.

We have partnered with the Early Childhood STEAM Network to create learning opportunities for early years educators. To address the professional development of primary teachers, our initial partnership with Clare Education Centre expanded to include Navan and Tralee Education Centres, serving to support wide engagement and dialogue at different levels.

Our webinar series gave teacher educators and researchers opportunities to speak directly to teachers. TeachMeets allowed teachers to engage with each other.

Siún Nic Mhuirí

Lecturer, Institute of Education, Dublin City University

Fionnán Howard

Postdoctoral Researcher, Institute of Education, Dublin City University

The Maths4All project, established in 2020, offers webinars, learning communities, videos, sample lesson plans, and other resources to educators and researchers. Its main aim is to support primary school teachers with implementing the new mathematics curriculum, and it has grown to over 3,500 members. This article describes the project's activities and development.

And in our PLCs, teacher educators worked with small groups of teachers to trial and reflect on innovative lessons and create and share records of practice, such as lesson plans and work samples. Finally, we continue to build the professional development resources available on Maths4All.ie. The project has always aimed to engage teachers as co-creators of a wide range of resources, including videos, posters, and activity plans.

This multipronged approach appears to be effective. Maths4All activities serve as catalysts for ongoing teacher inquiry, which the website supports, building a platform for long-lasting impact on teachers' practice, knowledge, and communication. There are currently 3,503 members (membership is free, but registration is necessary to view videos), and the number of participants in various events from January 2022 to June 2024 indicates a high level of interest: 423 in PLCs; 61 in TeachMeets; 687 in webinars. Furthermore, most participants said their involvement in Maths4All events encouraged them to try new or challenging activities in their classroom (see graph).

Did the event encourage you to try new/challenging activities in your classroom?
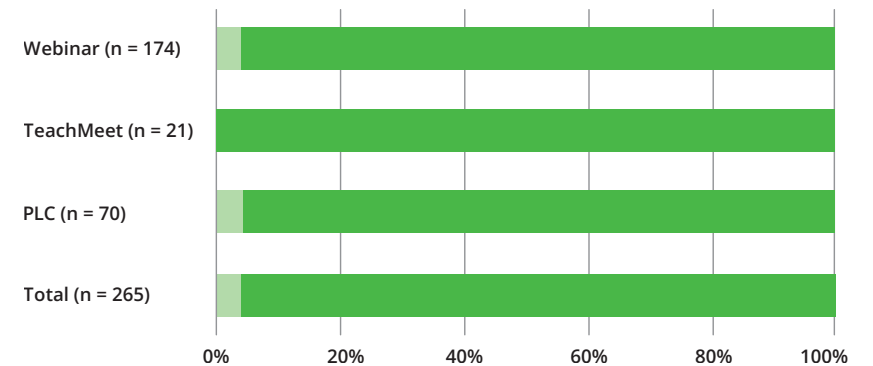
Responses to evaluation question

In summary, the Maths4All project has successfully engaged teachers in thinking about their practice and trialling new activities in their classrooms. It seems likely that the vibrant, and increasingly self-sufficient, community of teachers who have contributed to Maths4All will play an important role in the ongoing engagement that is needed to sustain teacher development in the context of curriculum change.

School–University Collaboration in Teaching Fractions in Senior Primary Classrooms

This article describes a collaborative partnership between a team of primary school teachers at Scoil Chrónáin SNS and educators based at Dublin City University, from the perspective of participating teachers. It outlines the project's development, and it reports teachers' reflections on their experience of the school–university partnership. Thematic analysis of meetings, initiated by the school team and enabling the teachers to review and reflect on the evolving process, informs the emergent findings. The article explores the nature of the collaboration and the school-based practices that have emerged from the partnership.

The school–university collaboration between Dublin City University and Scoil Chrónáin SNS spanned two years. The school had identified a challenge in teaching fractions and arranged a meeting with the university-based educators. From the outset, planning and project design were *symmetric*, emphasising equal commitment and attention to both parties' needs and conditions (Säfström et al., 2021). The university-based educators, using their expertise, developed four lessons and provided professional development to volunteering teachers, which explored pedagogical approaches therein.

The lessons were trialled, and reflections and discussions informed refinements. A team-teaching approach was then piloted to enact two further cycles of the project. Pre- and post-tests were conducted, and university-based educators explored potential mathematical learning outcomes. Regular visits and meetings between the university and school strengthened positive relations and meaningful collaboration.

In their reflections, teachers commended the inclusion of rich tasks and open-ended questions in lessons and highlighted the opportunities for developing maths-talk

Patrick Neary
Scoil Chrónáin SNS

Jane O'Toole
Scoil Chrónáin SNS

Jennifer Holligan
Scoil Chrónáin SNS

Louise O'Driscoll
Scoil Chrónáin SNS

This article reports on a school–university partnership in mathematics education, drawing on participating teachers' reflections. It outlines the project's development and discusses the features that make it work. In so doing, it explores the nature of the collaboration and the school-based practices that have emerged from this timely and creative collaboration.

and reasoning. The need to make the lesson plans more succinct emerged, and subsequent collaborative reworking provided opportunities to explore key components of the primary mathematics curriculum of 2023. Thus, participants developed an evolving understanding of best practice in relation to teaching fractions and, more broadly, the curriculum. This suggests that the project outcomes surpassed the initial scope of the school–university partnership (Hamilton et al., 2021).

Consistent engagement between parties is a characteristic of this partnership. During reviews, teachers praised the richness of the initial university-educator-led pedagogical exploration and appreciated the regularity with which university-based educators visited the school to collaborate and support lesson implementation. This consistently rich exchange of ideas and insights between teachers and mathematics education experts characterises *complementarity* – the co-creation of expertise from different perspectives – and has initiated a culture of active engagement with mathematics pedagogy and practice in the school. Teachers identified their university colleagues as valuable partners who shared expertise, training, and ongoing support. Relatedly, teachers perceived that their own practice-based expertise was highly valued by the university-based educators during the project.

Overall, our shared exploration of mathematics pedagogy has empowered our participating team of teachers to collectively interrogate mathematical theory in the context of school-based practice. Our evolving school–university partnership represents a timely and constructive approach to unpacking theory and practice in mathematics education.

REFERENCES

Department of Education (2023) *Primary Mathematics Curriculum*. Dublin: Government publications.

Hamilton, M., O' Dwyer, A., Leavy, A., Hourigan, M., Carroll, C., and Corry, E. (2021) 'A case study exploring primary teachers' experiences of a STEM education school–university partnership', *Teachers and Teaching*, 27(1–4), 17–31. DOI: 10.1080/13540602.2021.1920906

Säfström, A.I., Palmberg, B., Granberg, C., Sidenvall, J., and Lithner, J. (2021) 'Initiating teacher researcher collaboration to support students' mathematical problem-solving', *Nordic Studies in Mathematics Education*, 26(3–4), 131–151.

Irish and Modern Foreign Languages: Third Wheels or Central Cogs for Language Learning?

Primary school children in Ireland are now formally exposed to a minimum of three languages in Senior Cycle, and many also speak another language at home. This article offers a timely account of theoretical considerations for third-language learning and outlines their practical implications for any policy and practice that aims to support plurilingual competence in Irish primary schools.

Dr Aoife Merrins

Primary School Teacher, and PhD graduate of the Institute of Education, Dublin City University

Primary school children in Ireland are now formally exposed to a minimum of three languages in Senior Cycle: English, Irish, and a modern foreign language (MFL). Almost one in ten also speaks another language at home, according to the Central Statistics Office in 2024, highlighting the potential for exposure to four or more languages for some pupils. This short article offers a timely account of theoretical considerations for third-language (L3) learning and outlines their practical implications for any policy and practice that aims to support plurilingual competence in Irish primary schools.

Theoretical views on third-language acquisition (TLA) recognise that previously acquired languages (L1, L2) have a cumulative or consolidation effect when learning an L3, or emphasise that an L2 plays the strongest role for L3 learning (see figure).

Cumulative enhancement model	L2 status factor hypothesis	Typological primacy model
All previously learnt languages may influence the development of subsequently acquired ones (Flynn et al., 2004)	TLA is strongly affected by L2 during many stages of L3 learning (Bardel & Falk, 2007)	TLA is affected by the similarity of previously acquired languages (L1, L2) to new language (L3) (Rothman, 2011)

Third-language acquisition theories

Each view varies, but there is consistent emphasis that an L3 is a central cog for language learning, because it can support learners in identifying and using skills from previously acquired languages. Third-language acquisition occurs in Irish primary classrooms with the teaching of an MFL to native-English speakers (L1: English; L2: Irish), and of Irish to English-as-an-additional-language speakers (L1: language other than English or Irish; L2: English).

L3 learning brings many benefits, including more experience and success with language learning compared with monolingual peers, as L3 learners have broader linguistic repertoires, stronger metalinguistic awareness, wider-ranging content for cross-linguistic transfer, and more strategic learning approaches (Cenoz, 2013; Jaensch, 2013). Thus, teaching and learning MFL and Irish in linguistically diverse classrooms are further supported as central cogs for language learning.

These findings inform the following recommendations for policy and practice:

Policymakers are encouraged to ensure:

» teacher professional development opportunities for L3 teaching and learning
» opportunities for TLA beyond the classroom (e.g., funding for student immersion in Irish-medium/MFL environment for L3 consolidation).

Practitioners are invited to adopt:

» integrated language-teaching practices (use all languages as learning capital)
» strengths-based approach to peer tutoring – native-English speaker as lead peer tutor for English-language lessons; EAL speaker as lead peer tutor for Irish-language lessons.

Third-language acquisition is an undeniable strength in language learning classrooms. It is important that policy and practice draw on the theories and benefits of this phenomenon for the benefit of all children in their classrooms.

REFERENCES

Bardel, C. and Falk, Y. (2007) 'The role of the second language in third language acquisition: The case of germanic syntax', *Second Language Research*, 23(4), 459–484. DOI: 10.1177/0267658307080557

Cenoz, J. (2013) 'The influence of bilingualism on third language acquisition: Focus on multilingualism', *Language Teaching*, 46(1), 71–86.

Flynn, S., Foley, C., and Vinnitskaya, I. (2004) 'The cumulative-enhancement model for language acquisition: Comparing adults' and children's patterns of development in first, second and third language acquisition of relative clauses', *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 1(1), 3–16. DOI: 10.1080/14790710408668175

Jaensch, C. (2013) 'Third language acquisition: Where are we now?', *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 3(1), 73–93.

Rothman, J. (2011) 'L3 syntactic transfer selectivity and typological determinacy: The typological primacy model', *Second Language Research*, 27(1), 107–127. DOI: 10.1177/0267658310386439

Relational Pedagogy in Primary School: What Can We Learn from ECEC?

Relational pedagogy is about what happens among and between all the people in a class group. This falls outside the remit of curriculum-focused pedagogy, although a classroom's curricular and relational demands are deeply intertwined. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ireland has undergone immense change in the last 20 years, with two significant emphases: that early childhood is a time of profound educational development, and that a relational approach must be the starting point for any caring and educational endeavour with a child.

Emer Byrden

Deputy Principal, Carlow ETNS, and PhD student, Maynooth University

Nóirín Hayes, who has been to the forefront of changes in provision, argued from the start that the caring relationship was also educational, and that the educational relationship should be one of care (Hayes, 2008). She developed the concept of a nurturing pedagogy to encompass both the caring and educational nature of the relationship between children and early years caregivers. This emphasis centred the child in all educational and caring decisions.

This aligns directly with the centrality of the child in the 1999 revised Primary Curriculum Framework and the new framework, and calls to mind the influence of Montessori, Dewey, Froebel, Freinet, and Pestalozzi on 20th-century primary pedagogy. Aistear, the play-based curriculum framework for early childhood, was the first pedagogical project in Ireland that operated in both ECEC settings and primary schools (NCCA, 2009). Bridging this divide brought Ireland more in line with provision in most of Europe, where official school does not start until the child is seven. However, I would argue that the educational needs of early childhood do not stop at this artificial age limit.

Looking at Our School 2022, the Department of Education Inspectorate's key-performance-indicator document for schools, refers repeatedly to quality, without defining what it is. Hayes (2013) contends that quality requires

Nurturing pedagogy has been used to describe the slow relational pedagogy that best suits early childhood. This article argues that a similar approach is also desirable in primary school but is not currently viable. The fundamental needs of belonging and play do not stop at an arbitrary age in childhood but remain throughout our lives. This must be acknowledged when considering the infrastructure required to support quality primary education.

space and time, particularly relational space and time in the childhood context. Increased student–teacher ratios in ECEC allow for a flourishing of the relational space in which quality education and care can take place. This ratio changes completely in primary schools, which has an immediate detrimental effect on the space and time available to teachers to develop the secure relational bonds with students in which education thrives.

Belonging, being held in positive regard by another, and play are identified in ECEC as fundamental needs of the child. These needs do not stop at the end of early childhood but remain throughout our lives. The structure of our primary provision has not altered much since 1831. Despite the recognition of childhood as a distinct developmental phase, we still educate young children largely in confined spaces for much of the day, with little space or time for a healthy relational environment beyond the magical age of seven. Our desire for quality primary education needs the infrastructure to support it, and can learn from ECEC how to truly develop a child-centred pedagogy.

REFERENCES

Hayes, N. (2008) 'Teaching matters in early educational practice: The case for a nurturing pedagogy', *Early Education and Development*, 19(3), 430–440. DOI: 10.1080/10409280802065395

Hayes, N. (2013) *Early Years Practice: Getting It Right from the Start.* Gill & Macmillan.

Department of Education Inspectorate (2022) Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools and Special Schools. www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/232720/c8357d7a-dd03-416b-83dc-9847b99b025f.pdf#page=null

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. Dublin: NCCA.

The Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot

A landmark initiative of counselling and wellbeing supports

Introduction and research

Nationally and internationally, there is growing concern about children's mental health and wellbeing. Demand has increased for services to support these needs, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic. This article highlights recent research and outlines some steps the Department of Education is taking to address these concerns.

In a Growing Up in Ireland study (Nixon, 2021), 7% of children were categorised as having social-emotional and behavioural difficulties at both 9 and 13 years. The study said these were the group we should be most concerned about, as their difficulties were likely becoming more entrenched. Children in Second Class were found to have higher levels of worry and anxiety in 2023 than in 2019, and their anxiety levels increase as they progress through primary school (Sloan et al., 2024).

There is an emerging body of literature on the efficacy of school-based interventions to support children's mental health and wellbeing (Sanchez et al., 2018; Grant et al., 2021; Finning et al., 2022). There is also growing evidence that young people's mental health is linked to educational success. Students experiencing any type of mental health difficulty are more likely to experience learning difficulties and to underperform academically (Cefai & Cavioni, 2015; Agnafors et al., 2021). Most importantly, early intervention brings many advantages, including preventing problems becoming entrenched, reducing the burden on children and their families, and reducing the costs of treating mental health disorders (Clarke et al., 2022).

Department of Education's response

The Department of Education recognises the key role of schools in promoting mental health and wellbeing for

Sharon Eustace

Assistant Director, National Educational Psychological Service

Nationally and internationally, there is growing concern about the mental health and wellbeing of children. Demand has increased for services to support these needs, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic. This article outlines recent research and some of the steps the Department of Education is taking to address these concerns, in particular highlighting two strands of the Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot 2023–2025.

children and young people. It has a broad range of policies, action plans, and services to support the wellbeing and mental health of school communities. The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2019) aims to mitigate young people's mental health challenges and to promote the wellbeing of the whole school community.

Aligned with this are a number of supports offered to schools to promote wellbeing and mental health, including *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying*, support from Oide (the teacher professional learning service), the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), and guidance counsellors at post-primary level. Jigsaw this year has been engaged to work with the Department to further support wellbeing and mental health in post-primary schools.

In May 2023 the Minister for Education announced the establishment of a €5 million investment in piloting a landmark programme of counselling and wellbeing supports for primary schools, which will run until 2025. Schools in pilot areas have warmly welcomed the two distinct strands of the Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot (CPS-P) 2023–2025.

Nationally and internationally, there is growing concern about children's mental health and wellbeing.

The Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot

In developing the pilot, the Department, through NEPS, conducted a synthesis of selected theory and research on supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools. The research indicates that schools require a flexible approach to meeting children's different needs. Such a continuum of support includes psycho-education to promote wellbeing and prevent mental health difficulties, alongside targeted, group, and individualised early intervention to address specific difficulties when they arise. Two distinct strands to the Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot were developed.
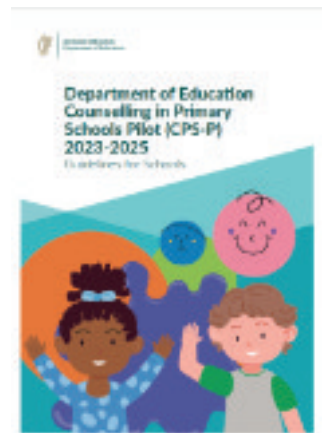
Strand 1 is the provision of one-to-one counselling to support small numbers of children in all primary and special schools in Longford, Leitrim, Laois, Mayo, Monaghan, Tipperary, and Cavan. Schools are allocated blocks of up to six counselling sessions per child, and county panels of preapproved private counsellors provide the counselling in the schools. A child is prioritised for counselling after a period of school-based intervention with evidence that, following intervention, the child has not made adequate progress. NEPS psychologists are supporting schools to identify and prioritise children to access the counselling, subject to consent from the parent/guardian. The counselling

sessions with children are bookended by a pre- and post-session meeting with parents/carers and relevant school staff.

The counselling service provided under the pilot is not a substitute for HSE Primary Care Psychology or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) led by the Department of Health. The pilot is an interim measure intended to supplement these services while demand for support remains high.

Strand 2 sees the establishment of education wellbeing teams to support schools in cluster areas in Cork, Carlow, Dublin 7, and Dublin 16. Twenty practitioners work under the direction and supervision of lead NEPS psychologists. The wellbeing team is an innovative approach to provide enhanced in-school support. The practitioners support the schools to strengthen their whole-school preventative approach to promoting wellbeing and mental health, in line with the Department's wellbeing policy. They provide psycho-educational support for parents, school staff, and pupils, and preventative, evidence-based interventions to prevent mild and emerging social and emotional difficulties. Strand 2 is being delivered with Cork Education and Training Board as a strategic partner.

The pilot aims to ensure that children in participating primary schools are provided with responsive supports to allow them to reach their educational potential and experience improved wellbeing. Through the pilot and subsequent evaluation, the Department will gather valuable learning that will inform future policy and a roadmap for future provision.

The wellbeing team is an innovative approach to provide enhanced in-school support.

REFERENCES

Agnafors, S., Barmark, M., and Sydsjö, G. (2021) 'Mental health and academic performance: A study on selection and causation effects from childhood to early adulthood', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 56(5), 857–866. DOI: 10.1007/s00127-020-01934-5

Cefai, C. and Cavioni, V. (2015) 'Beyond PISA: Schools as contexts for the promotion of children's mental health and well-being', *Contemporary School Psychology*, 19(4), 233–242.

Clarke, H., Morris, W., Catanzano, M., Bennett, S., Coughtrey, A.E., Heyman, I., Liang, H., Shafran, R., and Batura, N. (2022) 'Cost-effectiveness of a mental health drop-in centre for young people with long-term physical conditions', *BMC Health Services Research*, 22, 518. DOI: 10.1186/s12913-022-07901-x

Department of Education (2022) *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying*. Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/publication/52aaf-cinealtas-action-plan-on-bullying/.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2019) *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023: Revised October 2019*. Dublin: DES.

Finning, K., White, J., Toth, K., Golden, S., Melendez-Torres, G.J., and Ford, T. (2022) 'Longer-term effects of school-based counselling in UK primary schools', *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 31(10), 1591–1599.

Grant, C., Blackburn, R., Harding, D., Golden, S., Toth, K., Scott, S., Ford, T., and Downs, J. (2021) 'Impact of counselling provision in primary schools on child and adolescent mental health service referral rates: A longitudinal observational cohort study', *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 28(2), 212–220. DOI: 28. 10.1111/camh.12519

Nixon, E. (2021) *Growing Up in Ireland: Social-emotional and behavioural outcomes in early adolescence*. Dublin: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Sanchez, A.L., Cornacchio, D., Poznanski, B., Golik, A.M., Chou, T., and Comer, J.S. (2018) 'The effectiveness of school-based mental health services for elementary-aged children: A meta-analysis', *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 57(3), 153–165. DOI: 10.1016/j.jaac.2017.11.022

Sloan, S., Martinez Sainz, G., Devine, D., Symonds, J., Ioannidou, O., Moore, B., . . . and Farrell, J. (2024) Children's School Lives: *Children's Wellbeing in Irish Primary Schools* (2019 to 2023). UCD School of Education, Report no. 7.

✳✳✳

Dublin City Council introduces Communications Boards in Libraries

Libraries staff, including City Librarian Mairead Owens, with the Communications Boards and AAC devices

Dublin City Council is pleased to announce that it has introduced Communications Boards in some of its libraries, making it the first public library service in the country to do so.

The Communications Boards and augmentative and alternative communications (AAC) devices are of particular benefit to children or adults who are either pre-verbal or non-verbal and/or have communication difficulties.

The Communications Boards were designed in association with Finding Charlie's Voice, a charity addressing the barriers facing children with speech and language needs.

The AAD devices include Lightwriters, which are text to speech devices, and TD I-110 devices, which are touch screen speech-generating devices.

What We Mean When We Talk about Inclusion

Moving away from short-term fixes

I am often struck by the seemingly polarised debate on inclusive education and the oversimplification of a subject that has fundamental consequences for our children and society. Special schools versus 'mainstream', advocacy organisations versus teachers. At Inclusion Ireland, we are often asked to take sides or contribute to this unhealthy framing, and it is a battleground we refuse to enter. Often it is the child's voice that is lost – repeating shameful historical patterns in Ireland of ignoring the ones we need to hear the most.

In 2024, it has never been clearer that we have a long road to travel to real inclusion. Time and time again we hear of disabled children forced to move schools because the supports are not available, children travelling 1.5 hours in a taxi to access their right to education, children on reduced timetables or even suspended. I am struck by the quote from Desmond Tutu: 'There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in.'

In a world that seems to value quick fixes and sticking-plaster solutions, it is beyond time we demand upstream thinking from our leaders and politicians. It is always a danger in advocacy to tell a single story, when we should widen the lens and dare to think big. The questions we need to ask are complex: Does our society value all children equally? What role does patronage have to play? What kind of competencies will our schools need in order to support all children, no matter their race, religion, or disability? How can we build empathy and understanding that inclusion is a good thing for all children, not a charitable act? It suits a broken system to divide us, but together educators, children, families, and advocates need to be heard and to demand better.

To survive and thrive in a world that will be challenged by climate crisis and deepening economic divides, we need children to become young adults who are empathetic,

Derval McDonagh
CEO, Inclusion Ireland

This article from Inclusion Ireland says we have a long road to travel to real inclusion in education in Ireland. In a world that seems to value quick fixes and sticking-plaster solutions, it is beyond time we demand upstream thinking from our leaders and politicians. The article calls for a citizen's assembly on education, to figure out a pathway towards a more inclusive education system, one that includes *every* child.

creative, and understanding of difference. Doesn't inclusion teach us that? To be alongside our fellow humans in all their diverse glory and figure out a way to play together, learn together, and eventually live and work together.

At Inclusion Ireland, we have more questions than answers, and perhaps that is where we need to be as a society. To humbly say, we do not know, we haven't gotten it right yet, but we are willing to listen. For this reason we are calling for a citizen's assembly on education, where we can take stock and figure out a pathway towards a more inclusive education system. This path must include every child – especially those who experience multiple and intersectional barriers in accessing what should be a basic right: their right to education, and more profoundly their right to belong.

***

The Wellbeing of Irish Primary School Leaders: A Shared Responsibility

As the professional body for Irish primary school leaders, and as an officially recognised Education Partner, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) advocates for and supports effective school leadership. It is well established that effective school leadership leads to effective schools, and in turn to improved outcomes for children.

In the context of wellbeing as a stated priority in Irish education, the IPPN published its position paper *Wellbeing of School Leaders* in June 2024. Developed by the Advocacy and Communications Committee of the IPPN's National Council, which comprised administrative, teaching, and deputy principals in schools in every kind of context, the paper articulates the collective wisdom of primary school leaders throughout Ireland.

Since publication of the Department of Education's *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* in 2019, school leaders have been tasked with developing and implementing structures to enhance the wellbeing of everyone in the school community.

Drawing on data from independent research carried out by Deakin University as part of the IPPN's Sustainable Leadership project, *Wellbeing of School Leaders* explores why and how wellbeing pertains to effective school leadership. Frighteningly, the data show that more than half of primary school leaders are now in the severe or high categories of burnout, due to workload and lack of time and space to lead.

The question may reasonably be asked: How can school leaders effectively promote the wellbeing of all other members of the school community if their own wellbeing is so significantly compromised?

School leaders recognise that there are things they can do to improve the sustainability of their roles. Legislation demands that employers fulfil their duty of care to

Catríona O'Reilly

Chairperson, Board of Directors, Irish Primary Principals' Network

---

Effective school leadership leads to effective schools and in turn to improved outcomes for children. Such leadership depends on the wellbeing of school leaders. Towards that end, the IPPN, drawing on independent research, published its position paper *Wellbeing of School Leaders* in June 2024. This article reflects on the paper's findings and recommendations, and makes the case that creating conditions conducive to effective school leadership is a shared responsibility.

---

employees by implementing interventions that prevent, manage, and minimise the risk of unabated stress caused by workload and work environments. The IPPN acknowledges that this can be enormously challenging for boards of management, as they have little control over school leaders' workloads. In this regard, the Department of Education (DE) shares responsibility for the impact that an ever-increasing workload and role expansion has on school leaders' wellbeing. The DE-funded Employee Assistance Service is the only support available to all school leaders as a matter of right.

Having examined the supports provided to school leaders in other jurisdictions, the IPPN outlines its advocacy for greater role clarity, time, and space to lead and for a review of the current school governance structure. In advocating for school leaders, the IPPN has always sought to put forward solutions and recognises that creating conditions conducive to effective school leadership is a shared responsibility.

Wellbeing of School Leaders makes proposals and recommendations for school leaders, boards of management, the IPPN, and the DE. In doing so, the IPPN's aim is to encourage school leaders to take actions to enhance their own wellbeing and to provide a basis for future engagement between stakeholders and school leaders.

REFERENCES

Arnold, B., Rahimi, M., Horwood, M., and Riley, P. (2023) *Irish Primary School Leaders' Wellbeing Metrics 2023: A National Survey of Educators' Health and Wellbeing.*

Department of Education and Skills (2019) *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023.* Dublin: Government publications.

Irish Primary Principals' Network (2023) *IPPN Position Paper: Wellbeing of School Leaders.* Cork: IPPN.

Teacher Workload: An INTO Research Project

Background

The Teacher Workload Research Project arose from a 2018 Congress resolution calling for an independent study on the increase in teacher workload and its impact on teachers' health and working conditions. It called for the findings to inform and support actions by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) to protect members against increasing demands being placed on them, and for a deceleration of curricular change and initiative overload.

A working group drawn from INTO national committees along with the president and vice president oversaw the project. Retired members appointed to facilitate project workshops and other elements ensured an independent dimension. There were four phases:

» workshops identifying workload and exploring potential solutions
» preparation and dissemination of questionnaires based on emerging solutions
» focus group discussions and preparation of recommendations
» finalising conclusions and recommendations.

The survey, sent electronically to all primary and special schools, received a 36% response rate. Respondents had a range of teaching experience and held both administrative and teaching roles. DEIS schools and Gaelscoileanna were also represented.

Administration

Previous INTO research indicated that principals lack time to lead teaching and learning. In this research, they noted the benefits of weekly leadership and administration days with substitute cover. They agreed that their deputies should be released weekly from teaching duties to assist with school leadership and administration.

Máirín Ní Chéileachair

Director of Education, Equality, Research, and Learning, Irish National Teachers' Organisation

This article reports on the INTO's Teacher Workload Research Project, an independent study on the increase in teacher workload and its impact on teachers' health and working conditions. It describes the scope and phases of the project, and it outlines the main findings, alongside suggestions for how teacher workload might best be reduced in practice.

Acknowledging the role of teaching principal as challenging, 93% agreed that schools with ten or more staff, and all schools with special classes, should have administrative principals, and that every school should have a qualified secretary paid by the Department of Education. Because much of the work of voluntary boards of management can fall to principals, 67% agreed that boards should be shared among schools.

Preparing school policies, often arising from national initiatives, is a major source of workload. To reduce this, 98% of principals agreed that all Department circulars should include policy templates. Other suggestions to reduce workload (from 914 respondents) included delegation and distributed leadership, greater administrative support, technology and online tools, networking and professional supports, and centralisation of summer works and capital projects.

Teaching and learning

Previous INTO research identified curriculum overload as a significant source of workload, but there was little consensus on solutions to address this. When asked why schools participated in initiatives which add to workload, principals cited benefits to pupils, publicity, competition with other schools, parents' expectations, and teachers' personal interests.

One of the greatest challenges is time for collaborative work, meetings, planning, and continuing professional development; 97% agreed that all schools should have a bank of substitute days to release teachers to participate in CPD. Principals suggested dedicated regular planning time with substitute cover. Some suggested longer working hours for which teachers should be paid. Employing specialist teachers for some subjects, freeing up class teachers, was a popular solution.

For the full report, see:
www.into.ie/media-centre/publications/other-publications/.

Give Us a Break: Irish Primary School Teachers' Experiences Supervising the Schoolyard during Breaktimes

Introduction

School should be a safe place where all children can develop intellectually and socially. Breaktime is an often-overlooked aspect of school life. It is the main setting where play occurs, though children's activity levels vary greatly. Breaktime offers one of the few times in the day when children engage in unstructured activities with peers and get relative freedom from intense adult supervision. It is also widely regarded as where the majority of conflict and behavioural issues occur; many children consider the schoolyard at playtime as the most dangerous place for them.

In one Irish study, at least half of children associated negative emotions or anxiety with joining in with peers during breaktimes (Tatlow-Golden et al., 2016). Peer rejection and arguments are common; triggers include ethnic background, space in the yard, rules of games, affluence of school location or area, and external factors such as cyberbullying. Less supervision and unstructured activities are also reasons for more frequent bullying and conflict at breaktime. Teachers find it difficult to establish what constitutes oppressive behaviour, as it is often discreet, whether it is physical oppression (pushing, fighting, scratching) or verbal (name-calling, threatening, laughing at).

Children progress socially at different rates, so some lack the social skills to solve problems and resolve conflicts independently. Conflicts can have negative effects on a child's experience in school, distract them from learning in class, and, for some victims of bullying and witnesses to incidents, lead to long-term emotional scars.

Conflict-prevention strategies and whole-school intervention approaches and programmes have had

Damian Fitzgerald

Principal, Cushinstown National School, County Wexford

Dr Anne Graham Cagney

Faculty of Education and Lifelong Learning, South East Technological University

Breaktime is an often-overlooked aspect of primary school life. One of the few times in the day when children engage in unstructured activities with peers, it is also where most of the conflict occurs. This article describes a research study exploring six Irish primary school teachers' experiences managing the schoolyard during breaktime. It reports the study findings and makes practical recommendations to minimise conflict during breaktime.

varying degrees of success in maintaining a calmer playground. However, there is no focus on how school leaders can contribute to organising supervision during schoolyard breaktimes, nor how principals should interact with students and supervising teachers in this context.

Baines et al. (2020) identified the shortage of information on school breaktimes as evidence of the lack of importance attributed to this aspect of primary education by government, decision-makers, and education management. They explored teachers' experience of yard duty in order to share the voice, knowledge, and experience of teachers on how to improve current schoolyard management during breaktime: a voice that is missing to date from the discussion.

Research

Our qualitative study conducted semi-structured interviews with six primary school teachers (Table 1). Thematic analysis of the data identified three core themes: schoolyard organisation, the link between breaktime and the classroom, and schoolyard incidents.

Participant	Gender	Current class	Previous classes taught	Years teaching	School type ethos	Approximate school size
A	Male	4th	SEN teacher, 2nd, 5th, 3rd	12	Catholic,mixed	420
B	Male	5th	IT/SESE resource, 4th, 2nd	10	Catholic,boys	530
C	Male	4th	2nd, 3rd, 5th	6	Catholic,boys	230
D	Female	1st	5th, Senior Infants	7	Church of Ireland,mixed	200
E	Female	6th	Senior Infants, Junior Infants, 3rd, EAL support	10	Educate Together,mixed	460
F	Female	5th	EAL support, 4th, 6th	9	Educate Together,mixed	450

Table 1: Participant information. [SEN: special educational needs. SESE: social, environmental, and scientific education. EAL: English as an additional language.]

Discussion

Teachers described first-time schoolyard supervision experiences as 'daunting'. Better supervision training programmes are needed to improve teachers' understanding of the everyday running of the schoolyard and dealing with conflict.

Schoolyard organisation, the link between breaktime and the classroom, and schoolyard conflict have an influence on children and the teachers who supervise them during breaktimes. A well-organised schoolyard and breaktime contributed to the smooth running of a school day.

Two pandemic-enforced changes in schoolyard organisation practices have continued since Covid-19 emerged (Table 2). First, split or staggered breaks, implemented under pandemic guidelines on class bubbles, have led to increased supervision because there are fewer children in the yard at a specific breaktime, resulting in fewer incidents.

Second, schools experienced fewer incidents of conflict where structured play units and specific activity zones were continued, such as Gaelic games, soccer, basketball, fixed playground, playground games, and a climbing wall. Children visited these areas on a rotational basis.

Participant	'Split Break'	More space	Different zones	More supervision	Lower student-teacher ratio	Footballs removed
A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
B	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
C	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
D	✓	✓		✓	✓	
E	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
F	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Table 2: School changes to breaktime organisation during Covid-19

Breaktime is an invaluable part of the school day: something both students and teachers need, enjoy, and learn from. Children develop their social skills through friendships, problem-solving, and dealing with peer conflict. Teachers observe the children, see their dynamics, and learn new things about them; they also gain insights into the changes they will need to make in their pedagogical practices when they move to teaching a different year group: 'You

Baines et al. (2020) identified the shortage of information on school breaktimes as evidence of the lack of importance attributed to this aspect of primary education by government, decision-makers, and education management.

get to talk with and see the other children . . . because sometimes we close our classroom door and that's all we see.'

Ways to improve schoolyard conflict management include:

» Have informal conversations with children, because it 'affords them the right to tell their side and to be listened to'.
» Ensure enough time for non-rushed handovers and updates between teachers. This reduces time spent in class resolving matters that arose during breaktime, particularly with older children.
» Strong leadership from the principal, using different strategies and ways to get involved, sets a good example for staff and students to act appropriately.

When children have more space, supervision, and structure, fewer incidents occur. We suggest the following practical steps to minimise the level of conflict that teachers experience while supervising the schoolyard:

» continually review organisational structures
» improve supervision training and standards
» allow time for teacher collaboration and handovers
» unwavering commitment from leaders and managers.

Final thoughts

Ensuring a safe, inclusive, high-quality schoolyard environment is challenging but provides many benefits for children, including social interaction, exercise, problem-solving, communication skills, and informal learning. A well-organised schoolyard aids the smooth running of a school day and is important in developing the informal relationships between students and teachers. Extra planning, resources, and conversations for breaktime organisation, procedures, and supervision can only improve school practices and enhance the educational experience of children in our primary school sector.

REFERENCES

Baines, E., Blatchford, P., and Golding, K. (2020) 'Recess, breaktimes, and supervision'. In: S. Hupp and J. Jewel (Series Eds.) and P.K. Smith (Volume Ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Child and Adolescent Development Part 1 (Child)*, vol. 6. New York: Wiley-Blackwell.

Tatlow-Golden, M., O'Farrelly, C., Booth, A., O'Rourke, C., and Doyle, O. (2016) '"Look, I have my ears open": Resilience and early school experiences among children in an economically deprived suburban area in Ireland', *School Psychology International*, 37(2), 104–120.

Global Citizenship Education: Opportunities and Challenges for Primary Schools

This article shares insights from Global Village research and its application to Global Citizenship Education (GCE) in primary schools. Global Village is the strategic partnership for GCE in primary schools in Ireland between Irish Aid at the Department of Foreign Affairs and a consortium of four partners: Dublin City University (DCU), Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), and Trócaire.

GCE is an active and creative educational process to increase awareness and understanding of the world, develop critical thinking skills, support learners to make connections between their lives and international social justice issues, and foster collective action for justice and change. Global Village draws on existing research, and undertakes new research, to shape its programme for primary schools.

Research carried out by Maria Barry and colleagues at DCU (Barry, Mallon, et al., 2023), on behalf of Global Village, surveyed primary school teachers in Ireland on their GCE-related needs, values, attitudes, and practices. Answers from 288 teachers, deputy principals, and principals revealed that most had never attended a professional development course in GCE. A correlation was identified between higher teacher self-assessment of pedagogical skills and the amount of time likely to be spent teaching GCE per week.

Participants' ratings of their knowledge, confidence, and pedagogical skills in GCE (averaging 3.20–3.61 out of 5) were significantly lower than their rating of its perceived importance (averaging 4.49–4.66). This suggests that 'any issues related to the teaching of GCE may not be explained by teachers' indifference', but rather 'it appears as though teachers do not feel as though their ability to teach the subject matches its importance' (ibid., p.16).

Claire Glavey
Education Officer, Global Village

This article shares insights from recent research by Global Village and its application to Global Citizenship Education in primary schools. This form of education is an active and creative process to increase understanding of the world, develop critical thinking skills, support learners to make connections between their lives and international social justice issues, and foster collective action for justice and change.

The most prevalent features of participants' descriptions of GCE were global issues, diversity, and a cosmopolitan outlook with strong connections to the idea of a global community. Sustainability-related concepts, including climate change, were not prevalent, and 'there was a significant absence of explicit references to rights' (ibid., p.18).

For Global Village and others working at primary level, these findings suggest both an opportunity to harness teachers' recognition of the importance of GCE, and a challenge in tackling their self-identified gaps in GCE knowledge and confidence. Global Village is responding by offering a suite of professional development opportunities to foster teachers' knowledge, confidence, and pedagogical skills in GCE. This includes staff workshops, a community of practice, outdoor education events, an annual TeachMeet, an annual School Leadership Symposium, and an accredited summer course. These offerings emphasise the rights framework underpinning GCE and the strong connections between GCE and education for sustainable development.

For the full research report and more information on Global Village, visit www.globalvillageschools.ie. There you can also find the 2023 scoping study of current practices and future possibilities for Global Citizenship Education in early childhood education (Barry, Farrell, et al., 2023).

REFERENCES

Barry, M., Mallon, B., Bourke, A., Usher, J., and Daly, A. (2023) *Teachers and Global Citizenship Education: Values, Attitudes and Practices – A Research Report on a National Survey of Irish Primary Teachers and Global Citizenship Education.* Global Village. https://globalvillageschools.ie/teaching-resource/needs-analysis-by-dcu/.

Barry, M., Farrell, T., Mallon, B., and Daly, A. (2023) *Global Citizenship Education in Early Childhood Education: A Research Report on a Scoping Study of Current Practices and Future Possibilities.* Global Village. https://globalvillageschools.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/TRO23001-GCE-in-ECE-report-ONLINE.pdf.

Methodological Considerations in Consulting with Children as Part of the Redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum

This short article discusses key methodological considerations in consulting with children about the current primary school curriculum redevelopment in Ireland. Speaking to the literature on student voice (Kiely et al, 2022; Lodge, 2005; Ring et al, 2018; Ruddock, 2007), it is based on two projects conducted by a team of researchers in Marino Institute of Education, commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

Informed theoretically by Laura Lundy's (2007) model of child participation and methodologically by Clark and Moss's (2011) Mosaic approach, the consultations aimed at gaining children's experiences of curriculum to inform the redevelopment work. They did so using different methodologies. The first consultation was carried out by classroom teachers on behalf of the research team (Kiely et al., 2022).

The second consultation was conducted by the researchers themselves through a two-pronged approach: class interviews, and a case study design involving a method chosen by the children from a suite of methods designed by the researchers (Kiely et al., 2024). The child-chosen methods included themed drawings (likes and dislikes in a subject area), conversation and mind maps, emoji stickers on aspects of the physical learning environment, and tours around the school.

Key findings focus on the suitability and efficacy of research methodologies and design used in the projects as meaningful forms of consultation with primary school children. Our findings suggest the following:

» Meaningful consultation with very young children is complex and requires extensive engagement by researchers and teacher-researchers over time to build rapport.

Maja Haals Brosnan
Marino Institute of Education

Miriam Colum, Joan Kiely, Claire Dunne, and Andrea Uí Chianáin
Marino Institute of Education

This article discusses key methodological considerations in consulting with children about the current primary school curriculum redevelopment in Ireland. It is based on projects conducted by researchers in Marino Institute of Education and commissioned by the NCCA. It outlines the main findings from the consultations with children, and their implications for primary school curriculum redevelopment.

» Teachers-as-researchers are valuable in consulting children when integrated with a wider approach, where lead researchers also engage with the children.

» Best practices for engaging teacher-researchers in their classrooms include online training, support sessions, and a clearly structured research protocol.

» Online questionnaires can be used successfully with students in the senior end of primary school, who can give honest, insightful answers about their experiences. It is important that teachers are trained on answering students' queries and that students are seated apart so as not to 'parrot' answers or feel peer pressure.

» Interview-based methods must be supplemented with methods that mirror active learning strategies, to prod children's memories and reflection on experiences of content and pedagogies.

» Class-based interviews must be supplemented with more individual methods so that children who may experience peer pressure or be influenced by what they expect the teacher, peers, or researchers to want to know can express their views in private where such pressures are not felt. Such methods include themed drawings, mind maps, short stories, and use of emojis on physical aspects of the learning environment.

» Non-classroom-based methods are effective in helping students feel at ease and reflect on more embodied aspects of their curriculum experiences.

REFERENCES

Clark, A. and Moss, P. (2011) *Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic Approach.* National Children's Bureau.

Kiely, J., Haals Brosnan, M., Colum, M., Uí Chianáin, A., and Dunne, C. (2024) *Consultation with Children as Part of the Redevelopment of the Primary School Curriculum* (Research Report). Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

Kiely, J., Haals Brosnan, M., Uí Chianáin, A., Colum, M., and Dunne, C. (2022) *Consulting with Children on the Draft Primary Curriculum* (Research Report). Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

Lodge, C. (2005) 'From hearing voices to engaging in dialogue: Problematising student participation in school improvement', J*ournal of Educational Change*, 6(2), 125–146.

Lundy, L. (2007) '"Voice" is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', B*ritish Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–942.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2020) *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework for Consultation.* Dublin: NCCA.

Ring, E., O'Sullivan, L., Ryan, M., and Burke, P. (2018) *A Melange or a Mosaic of Theories? How Theoretical Perspectives on Children's Learning and Development Can Inform a Responsive Pedagogy in a Redeveloped Primary School Curriculum.* Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

Ruddock, J. and McIntyre, D. (2007) *Improving Learning through Consulting Pupils.* London: Routledge.

It Starts with You: Student Participation in the Department of Education

Introduction

Children and young people's involvement in decision-making is both a human right and an essential factor in creating better policies and services. When the views of children and young people are at the centre of decision-making, the outcomes are more responsive, inclusive, and sustainable, and better aligned with their needs and experiences. Involving children meaningfully in decision-making improves outcomes for them and for society.

The Department of Education recognises and values deeply the involvement of children and young people and has set a deliberate strategy to engage and consult with them and to improve and build on its work in this area. The *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying Implementation Plan 2023–2027*, published in 2023, committed to establishing a dedicated unit to promote their voice and ensure they have meaningful input into department policies.

A Student Participation Unit was established in April 2023. The Minister then established an expert group to advise the department on how to improve its work on involving children and young people in its policy development and on embedding a culture of participation in policymaking across the department.

The expert group was chaired by Professor Laura Lundy and included department officials along with experts from the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; Hub na nÓg; National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment; National Parents Council; Ombudsman for Children's Office; experts in children's rights; and student representatives from the Irish Second-Level Students' Union.
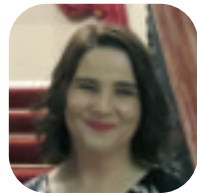
Mary Lawless
Student Participation Unit, Department of Education

Professor Laura Lundy
Queen's University Belfast and University College Cork

The Department of Education has set a deliberate strategy to engage and consult with children and young people. The voice and influence they have had reflects the department's dedication to embedding a culture of participation in policymaking. This article follows the journey from an initial commitment in Cineáltás, to a dedicated Student Participation Unit, and publication of an expert-group report and implementation plan on student participation.

Expert group on student participation

The expert group reviewed how the department currently meets its obligations, including under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making (2015–2020), and National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making (2021).

Assessing existing structures, systems, processes, and practices across the department, the expert group found evidence of both good practice and areas that need further development. It considered national and international best practice and relevant research. National and international experts were invited to share insights on the participation of children and young people in policy and decision-making in education.

Professor Lundy and members of the child advisory group from St Ciaran's NS, Baylin, Athlone, during a panel discussion at the Department of Education in October 2024.

Consulting with children and young people

The expert group oversaw an extensive consultation with children and young people from diverse backgrounds and education settings. From November 2023 to February 2024 it oversaw a programme of online consultation, large in-person focus groups, and in-school engagements in primary school with a special class, a special school, alternative education settings (including temporary education provision for Ukrainian young people), a Gaelscoil, and an

all-girls post-primary school offering a support programme for Traveller and Roma young people, known as the STAR programme.

The methodology used was based on the child rights model of participation developed by Professor Lundy (the 'Lundy model'). A child advisory group and youth advisory group guided the approach.

The focus group discussions with the children and young people explored:

» their preferred ways of offering their viewpoints to the department (Space)
» how they could be supported to give those views (Voice)
» how they would know that their views have been listened to (Audience)
» how they would know that their views have been acted upon by the department (Influence).

The advisory groups also discussed the findings from the consultations, gave feedback on recommendations and on the report of the expert group, and advised on implementing the recommendations.

The expert group oversaw an extensive consultation with children and young people from diverse backgrounds and education settings.

Findings from consultations

Ten themes emerged from the data collected. These were grouped under the Lundy Model's four areas. Below are some examples of what the children suggested.
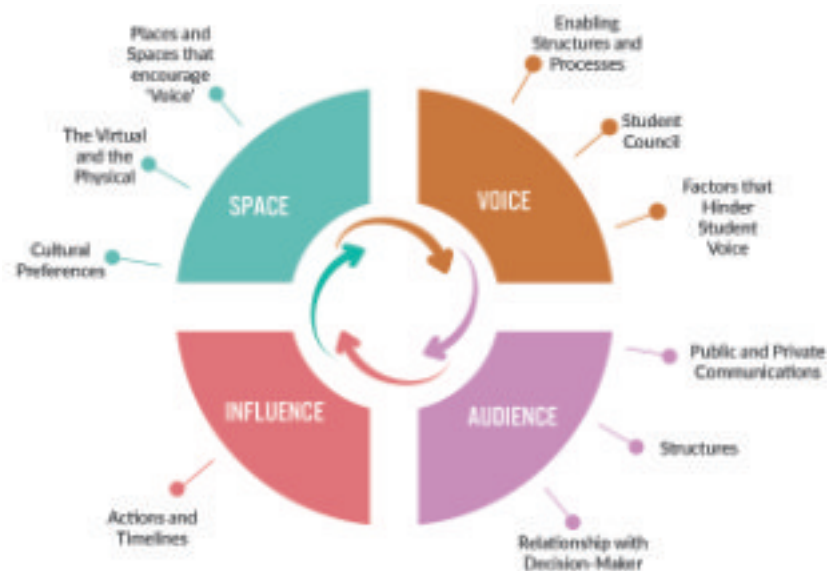
Visual overview of themes within the Lundy Model

Space: Children and young people prefer a variety of ways to express their views, such as virtual, in-person, indoor, and outdoor spaces. Cultural preferences, maturity levels, and socio-economic backgrounds were also highlighted.

Voice: Focus on simple language and diverse methods of expression. Small groups allow drawing, scribe, and Irish Sign Language assistance.

Audience: The presence of the Minister was valued, and a video address was suggested.

Influence: It is important that there are multiple approaches to show children and young people that their views are taken seriously, including a timeline for implementing their ideas and reasons for not implementing ideas.

Recommendations

The five strategic recommendations made by the expert group are that the department:

1. builds on its understanding
2. develops its processes
3. communicates with children and young people
4. promotes good practice
5. holds itself accountable.

Making student participation happen

The Department of Education has been working to enhance its efforts and approaches to child participation, and the expert review and implementation plan are landmarks on this journey.

In October 2024 the department published the Report of the Expert Group on Student Participation, written for easy access by students as rights-holders, and an implementation plan of 50 actions for completion by 2026. Actions include an annual participation plan, provision of training for staff, and a commitment to communicate to children and young people showing how their views have influenced policy.

Conclusion

The Department of Education has been working to enhance its efforts and approaches to child participation, and the expert review and implementation plan are landmarks on this journey. The department aspires to be at the forefront of approaches to engaging with student voice across the world. There is much to be done, but this is matched by commitment and enthusiasm to give due weight to the views and insights of the many children and young people who took part in the consultations that have informed the expert review.

REFERENCES

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2021) National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making. https://hubnanog.ie/participation-framework/.

Department of Education (2023) Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying Implementation Plan 2023–2027. www.gov.ie/en/publication/f3fbe-cinealtas-implementation-plan-2023-2027/.

Department of Education (2024a) *Report of the Expert Group on Student Participation in the Department of Education.* www.gov.ie/en/publication/a77d9-student-participation-in-education/.

Department of Education (2024b) *Background Report of the Expert Group on Student Participation in the Department of Education.* www.gov.ie/en/publication/a77d9-student-participation-in-education/.

Department of Education (2024c) Student Participation in the Department of Education Implementation Plan 2024–2026. www.gov.ie/en/publication/a77d9-student-participation-in-education/.

Department of Education (2024d) *Report on Consultations with Children and Young People to inform the work of the expert group on student participation.* www.gov.ie/en/publication/a77d9-student-participation-in-education/.

Lundy, L. (2007) '"Voice" is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *British Educational Research Journal*, 33, 927–942.

United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child. www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child.

United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities.

The More Things Stay the Same, the More They Change

Reflecting on 30 years of leading a primary school

Beginnings

I'm not sure I ever envisioned writing a piece reflecting on 30 years of principalship by mentioning elephants in the first line. There I was, an excited passenger in a safari jeep pursuing decent photographs of Kenya's most spectacular creature, when somehow the internet connected long enough for an email to arrive. It was Aladdin telling me I had been removed from access to my school's information management system, and assigning the blame to my school's faithful secretary. The curt message bore no signs of emotion, possibly due to AI input.

A safari would never have been possible before the status of my gratuity changed from impending to imminent. Lack of money would have come second only to lack of time. Twenty days away from home would have been unconscionable for a principal, even during the summer holidays – a misnomer thanks to staff appointments, summer camps, building repairs, courses, and other activities. Smiling through gritted teeth at reminders of your luck in having such a long break every year.

I was appointed principal on 28 June 1994. I can be specific about the time too. It was 6:30 pm, just after Ireland had drawn with Norway to reach the second round of the World Cup. It was probably the worst match of the tournament. I remember it only because five minutes after the long whistle, a short phone call from the parish priest of Killeigh informed me that, from 1 September, I would be the new principal in the village school.

I was 28 years old, with seven years of teaching experience in three schools and now, within six weeks of my wedding, I was drawn into further uncharted waters. My fiancée, Marguerite, and I were teaching in the suburbs – she in Leixlip, me in Castleknock, and were

Damian White

Retired Principal, Scoil Shinchill, Offaly

After 30 years as a primary school principal, the author, recently retired, reflects on how he came to lead a school in the Irish midlands in the mid-1990s. The article examines the school leadership role and how it has changed in the years since, comparing the challenges then with now and casting an eye to the future of school leadership in Ireland.

making plans to live close to both. As we were both from Offaly, with a free site at home, it made economic sense to look at our long-term future in the midlands. The call that day, following disappointments elsewhere, changed everything and brought forward our plans for a homeward move. Marguerite soon also secured work in Offaly, and days after our honeymoon we started our new jobs, with me as the rawest of new school leaders.

I arrived into a school with 182 pupils, six teaching staff, and a learning support teacher shared between three local schools. The building had been completed just six years previously. Photographs on the walls indicated a proud community at its opening. This added to the pressure in my head, hoping I could live up to the expectations of these people who had lobbied politicians, organised raffles, collected money, and now trusted me to lead the learning of their children in their beautiful new school.

I had no training or preparation for being a principal, other than working under very good ones. It would be six more years before the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) was founded. The only opportunity for professional engagement with other principals came at Cumann na mBunscol or Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) meetings or events promoting Green Schools or other initiatives, which were always held after school. I did however appreciate the opportunity I was given, in the parish next to home, and I vowed to give the job every joule of energy I could generate to make it the best school it could be for every child coming through the door.

Then and now

As I write, the post-Budget discussions are about €9m for phone pouches and all the other priorities that could have been addressed, including access to special educational needs professionals and supports, class size, leadership support, and full restoration of posts of responsibility. Thirty years in principalship has taught me to treat budgets, circulars, announcements, and ministerial priorities as just news, neither good nor bad. Allowing blood pressure to increase over such matters only affects one adversely. But of course we can react, express disappointment and displeasure over the lack of what we see as appropriate and necessary resources.

When I compare today with conditions in 1994, the 1994 me would be quite happy with how the job of school leader has evolved. Back then, having 182 pupils allowed us six teachers – 10 more pupils were necessary for the next appointment. A senior-class pupil could figure that to mean an average of 30.3 children per class. There were no special needs assistants. There was no secretary, caretaker, or office. The only computer had come via Quinnsworth vouchers. On the principal's desk sat the school phone.

I had no training or preparation for being a principal, other than working under very good ones... I did however appreciate the opportunity I was given and I vowed to give the job every joule of energy I could generate to make it the best school it could be for every child coming through the door.

I wasn't long in the school before finding myself in the role of Cumann na mBunscol secretary. To contact one school, I had to call the village phone box, positioned conveniently outside the school, where an open window in the principal's classroom allowed one pupil to race out and answer it. By today's standards this was completely unacceptable, but it was not untypical of issues faced by principals then. Letters to parents were handwritten and photocopied. To have a substitute teacher paid, a long form had to be filled out and signed by the board of management chair.

There were more jobs than teachers then, bearing in mind the vastly smaller number in special education teaching. A young teacher I appointed to a career-break vacancy told me she and her college friends picked Tullamore as a base, before seeking jobs, such was their confidence in securing work.

The inspector called regularly. I heard afterwards from a trainee cigire (inspector) that when shadowing our guy, he was told that Killeigh always had nice biscuits. Mariettas were discussed as a strategy but never replaced the Hobnob – it was too big a price to pay!

Eighty per cent of funding was from the Department of Education, based on enrolment; the rest came from the parish or through the patron body. This cost in many cases was passed on to families.

Eighty per cent of funding was from the Department of Education, based on enrolment; the rest came from the parish or through the patron body. This cost in many cases was passed on to families.

Sustainable leadership

I share this snapshot of school life 30 years ago knowing that changes have brought huge improvements in learning and working conditions and created many challenges to test the sustainability of school leadership into the future. Yet the recent major Irish Principals and Deputy Principals Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey carried out through Deakin University shows that on a scale of 1–10, principals' opinion on the role's sustainability is just 3.61. Why? The question is comprehensively explored in IPPN's research-based report on the sustainability of school leadership, published in 2022, with two progress reports published since.

Primary School Leadership: The Case for Urgent Action – A Roadmap to Sustainable Leadership delves deep into leadership of primary schools today. It draws meticulously from each piece of enacted legislation, department circular, and policy guideline, the tasks and duties falling to the principal, and cross-references them with the Quality Framework for Leadership and Management detailed in Looking at Our Schools (2022), assigning each to the most appropriate of the four domains identified.

In an ideal world, Leading Teaching and Learning is the domain where the principal and school leadership team will do most of their work. However, the

162 documents explored by researchers identify only 25% of the duties and responsibilities listed as falling under this domain. Leading School Development and Developing Leadership Capacity account for only 18% and 16%, respectively. The standout detail is that 100% of all documents detail duties and responsibilities that fall under Managing the Organisation.

After 30 years leading the same school, I would probably score my sustainability as a principal at higher than 3.61. The school context, local knowledge, experience, positive parent/staff/pupil relationships, supportive board, and feedback from inspections have all been reassuring and affirming, leading to high job satisfaction at the end of my time as principal.

I have concerns for the future of school leadership ... the pile-up of duties is unsustainable..

However, I have concerns for the future of school leadership. As a leader, I saw few tasks as undoable, or targets as unreachable, when looked at individually. But the pile-up of duties is unsustainable. It's akin to the game of Buckaroo, where various objects are attached before the spring activates, throwing everything off. Like the principal, the normally compliant beast of burden can only take so much before it all becomes too much.

Discussing a recent appointment of an excellent young teacher with a principal recently, we agreed that her qualities would see her enjoy a successful career in leadership. It is essential that people like her see leadership as rewarding and seek to fulfil their potential in it. Her career path could be a litmus test for recruiting and retaining school leaders as we head towards the middle of the 21st century.

And when she gets an email around 2060 informing her that her access to school records has ceased, she too can smile as she reflects on a rewarding career leading the learning of the next generation. If she is on safari when that occurs, a very old elephant may just remember the last time they saw a similar human smile and conclude that she too has loved her time as a school leader.

Second Level

Overview of the Second-Level Education Sector in 2024

Introduction

A quote by American motivational writer William Arthur Ward resonated in the context of Irish education in 2024: 'The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails.'

Reflecting on 2024 in Irish education, the winds of change are blowing. There is a sense that we need to keep moving forward, to continually strive to be better, and to build the structures in our system to allow our schools to flourish. We are all part of this system and have a role to play. Every voice is equally important, and it is our responsibility to listen, respond, and take action. However, we all must be the realist and adjust our own sails, with the understanding that all education stakeholders are working together towards the common goal of delivering the world-class education system our students deserve.

Context

2024 marks the hundredth year of the Department of Education. At a commemorative ceremony in the Clock Tower there was genuine acknowledgement of the many achievements to be proud of and some to look back on with regret and shame. There was a clear sense of an emerging vision to help move Irish education forward while remembering and acknowledging legacy issues. There was an evident aspiration towards a new way of collaboration and partnership, with a commitment to putting students at the centre of everything we do. This is refreshing and most welcome.

2024 saw a shift in the Department of Education's engagement with stakeholders, with an increase in the number of working groups, steering groups, and collaborative forums engaged in decision-making for change initiatives. There has been an increase in the frequency of structures to capture the voices of those

Paul Crone
Director, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals

This overview of second-level education in Ireland in 2024 looks at the main issues, developments, and challenges in the sector, providing historical context for the current state of Irish post-primary education. Among the topics addressed are updates to curriculum and guidelines, smartphones, grade inflation, inclusion, and student participation.

invested in our system, coupled with the Department's intention to respond positively whenever it can. This is a clear adjustment of the sails, to respond to new ways of working, and it is building optimism for the future of Irish education.

Missed opportunity

The coalition government's programme included a commitment to hold a Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Education (CAFE). It is regrettable that this did not happen in 2024. This is a missed opportunity to stimulate a national discussion on the collective vision for Irish education, to engage with Irish citizens on what they want from our education system, and to scrutinise things we have long taken for granted, such as the Leaving Certificate, the curriculum, and school patronage.

We must ensure that our education system is innovative, agile, and responsive to the needs of students in the 21st century. A national discussion is essential to bring everyone on this journey to future-proof our system. At the time of writing, there is hope that the Citizens' Assembly will take place in 2025, as these discussions are vital to the continued success of our education system.

Change initiatives

Curricular change continues in the form of Senior Cycle redevelopment, the launch of the tranche 1 subject specifications, the Transition Year specification, and the welcome introduction of the new subjects, Climate Action and Sustainable Development, and Drama, Film, and Theatre Studies. The redevelopment is gaining momentum as more subject specifications are reviewed, and we will see its implementation recommence next year.

Other significant changes have occurred. Bí Cineáltas, the new anti-bullying procedures, was launched in June. This new policy document and associated procedures highlight the significant negative impact that bullying can have on students and creates the framework to support schools to tackle it.

The Code of Behaviour guidelines, which have not been updated since 2008, are being reviewed. Updating the guidelines to reflect the changes that have occurred in our schools is timely and most welcome. The final draft is expected shortly.

The report on Out-of-School Education Provision to support students who have not experienced success in their mainstream school is another positive initiative.

At the time of writing, there is hope that the Citizens' Assembly will take place in 2025.

Smartphones are distracting, reduce concentration, decrease interpersonal social interaction, and are central in many incidents of bullying.

Work on the development of the special needs assistant (SNA) workforce plan will provide a framework for the almost 22,000 SNAs in our schools. Work has also begun, with UNESCO support, on strategic workforce planning for teachers in Ireland. These works will build the foundations for our system, as teachers and SNAs are two of the greatest resources available to our students.

Schoolbooks

A stand-out initiative in 2024 was the provision of free schoolbooks to all Junior Cycle students, with extension to Senior Cycle students announced in October. This is one of the most significant developments since the introduction of free post-primary education in 1967. It is a huge support to parents and delivers on the government commitment to free education. Providing every student with books and stationery means they can engage fully with their learning, and it brings Ireland into line with many of our European counterparts.

The scheme's late implementation did create significant logistical issues at school level and for schoolbook sellers, such as procurement, storage, and administration; these were initially underestimated, yet post-primary schools managed to deliver for their students.

Smartphones

Smartphones play an important part in the lives of our young adults and indeed ourselves. We have all become reliant on them for connectivity, access to information, navigation, and even simple tasks like telling the time. Yet smartphones are distracting, reduce concentration, decrease interpersonal social interaction, and are central in many incidents of bullying. Teachers anecdotally describe smartphones as the 'scourge of the classroom', the single biggest impediment to deep engagement in classroom activities and learning. 2024 has seen a spotlight placed on smartphones with the announcement of a national ban and the Budget's provision of pouches to every post-primary student. These headline-grabbing initiatives have not been universally welcomed in schools.

Every post-primary school in Ireland has a mobile-phone policy that endeavours to remove the phone from use in school. Development and implementation of the policy is done in partnership with parents and students. These policies work when everyone understands the rationale. Preparing students for the challenges they face in their study, work, and personal lives must be our priority; we need to approach the smartphone from an education perspective and embrace the learning opportunity presented. 2024 has raised more questions than answers about smartphone use in post-primary schools.

Grade inflation

One of the hangovers from Covid-19 has been grade inflation, whereby students' Leaving Cert results have been artificially inflated to compensate for the increased grades given to students when they could not sit the exam and grades were calculated by their teachers. This was seen as essential at the time, and the grades have remained artificially inflated every year since so that one group of students will not be negatively impacted.

This is highlighted when some students with higher grades fail to secure their place in higher education, and it underscores the need to review selection procedures for higher education. These procedures must take into consideration students' aptitudes, abilities, and interests. When admissions procedures are expanded, there will be a reduction in students' anxiety associated with performance in the terminal exam, and grade inflation will cease to be the significant issue it currently is.

Inclusion

A total of 136 additional special classes opened in post-primary schools in 2024. The increased incidence of students with additional educational needs is beginning to impact in schools and is in general being warmly welcomed. There is a move away from mere integration to genuine inclusion, with school communities reporting enriched learning environments as all students are welcomed and their needs met in mainstream school. A consensus has emerged, largely due to the work of the National Council for Special Education, that every school must cater for the educational needs of every student.

Yet challenges remain. The publication of the Behaviour of Concern guidelines, on strategies to support schools to manage difficult behaviours, is a welcome and challenging addition. The publication of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy in August has been positively received, as every student has the right to have their educational needs met in their school.

Student participation

The launch of the student participation unit in the Department of Education is the culmination of a significant body of work over recent years. Embracing students as significant stakeholders is the logical step forward and is key to future-proofing our education system for the next generation. Student involvement is essential for the success of all change initiatives.

This is also being reflected at school level with initiatives such as Student Perspectives On Teaching and Learning In The Educational space (SPOTLITE),

The launch of the student participation unit in the Department of Education is the culmination of a significant body of work over recent years.

which embraces the student voice on improving the quality of teaching and learning. These initiatives are quickly becoming more common and are to be complimented.

Conclusion

The old political slogan 'A lot done, more to do' is equally relevant to education in 2024. There has been a lot of change, initiatives, and discussion. As I reflect on where schools stand in 2024, it is timely that we start to view them as more than just a collection of classrooms. They are complex organisations, public bodies subject to the scrutiny of any small to medium enterprise. Schools need to be resourced appropriately; this includes being funded to provide the best service to their students, staffed to deliver on their administrative and compliance obligations, and resourced to be able to prioritise their core work of delivering excellence in teaching and in-depth learning for their students.

The winds of change are blowing, and we are adjusting the sails. They are not yet fully adjusted, but there is a feeling of optimism that we are going in the right direction.

REFERENCES

Department of Education (2019) *Cumasú: Empowering through Learning – Action Plan for Education 2019*. Dublin: Government publications.

Department of Education (2023a) *Statement of Strategy 2023–2025.* Dublin: Government publications.

Department of Education (2023b) 'Senior Cycle redevelopment – What it means for me'. Dublin: Government publications.

Department of Education (2024a) 'Student participation in education'. Dublin: Government publications.

Department of Education (2024b) *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy.* Dublin: Government publications.

Department of Education Inspectorate (2022) *Chief Inspector's Report: September 2016 – December 2020.* Dublin: Government publications.

Government of Ireland (2020) *Programme for Government.* Dublin: Government publications.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2017) *The Learner Voice Research Study: Research Report.* Dublin: NCCA.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2021) *Senior Cycle Review Advisory Report.* Dublin: NCCA.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2022) 'Background paper and brief for the review and revision of the Transition Year Programme Statement'. Dublin: NCCA.

166

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2024**
YEARBOOK

167

Mapping the Implications and Potential of Generative AI in Post-Primary Education

Introduction

Generative AI (GenAI) has become a heated topic in education both nationally and internationally. In post-primary education, it has been a topic of concern particularly for project assessments. With the Leaving Certificate on the cusp of reform, not least in the area of subject assessment, this article explores the implications and potential benefits for students of using GenAI in respect to assessment in post-primary education.

The revised syllabi for Leaving Cert that were introduced in the early 2000s are being replaced by Senior Cycle specifications. In some subjects, this has already occurred. In 2025, 12 more subjects (including Biology, Physics, Chemistry, and Business) will fall under the new Senior Cycle reform (DE, 2024a). The reform dictates that all subjects implement an additional assessment component(s) (AAC), 'designed to assess students' skills and key competencies developed through the study of their chosen subject, in a way that a final written examination cannot' (DE, 2024b). These AACs will be worth at least 40% of the available marks. Many education stakeholders are concerned that the use of GenAI may mean that the results of the project assessment will not be representative of a student's ability.

AACs are to build on existing knowledge and skills gained from classroom-based assessments (CBAs) in Junior Cycle. However, unlike CBAs, these Senior Cycle projects are worth at least 40% of a student's overall grade. Syllabus reform is a long process requiring input from many educational stakeholders. The introduction of GenAI, alongside its initial advancements and ease of access, could not have been foreseen by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and partners. One cannot predict what discoveries or

Ryan Gallagher

Lecturer in Science Education, University College Cork

Leaving Certificate reform dictates that all subjects implement an additional assessment component(s), to be worth at least 40% of the available marks. Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), while potentially transformative, is limited by certain factors, including how students use it. Though there is no concrete evidence that GenAI can achieve maximum marks with shallow engagement, this article argues that 40% assessment for projects is too high in light of GenAI.

technological advancements will be developed in the future, and therefore syllabus design should not be shackled to potential 'what ifs'.

It is worth noting that the Minister for Education, Norma Foley, announced this 40% AAC in September 2023, by which point GenAI capability was already relatively well established and being discussed in education circles. There is further concern among students, teachers, university representatives, and the general public over the proportion of marks to be awarded for AACs and the logistical challenges they pose (Hyland, 2024; Kennedy, 2024).

The capabilities of GenAI

Generative AI is often described by those selling it and by tech enthusiasts as transformative in every aspect of life. This may be true to some degree, but what are the actual capabilities of GenAI in education, particularly post-primary? The truth is complex, as it usually is in education. There is currently no concrete evidence that GenAI can achieve maximum marks for a research-based assessment. So if a student were to type a project title into a GenAI software program, they would be given information, but the likelihood of them achieving maximum marks are slim.

GenAI should be seen as a tool, and as with all tools, some skill is required. The real question is: How many marks could be obtained using GenAI? This of course depends on what the topic is, to what extent GenAI is used, and, more importantly, how it is used. Some GenAI programs may also be more effective than others. Unfortunately, research is relatively limited by the newness of GenAI, and the vast majority of research to date is university-based.

GenAI can quickly generate a basic overall structure and identify some relevant points – but students need to be informed of its limitations. GenAI is dependent on the data it is trained on, so any biases in that data (or in the practices of the data programmers) will be present. Sources programmed into AI may be months or years out of date, so recent key information or developments may be missing. GenAI can 'hallucinate', or fabricate false information, although this is consistently being improved upon. Crucially, GenAI cannot understand the quality of data. AI tools cannot 'think': they cannot critically evaluate information to arrive at a conclusion, nor can they apply information to real-world contexts (University of Leeds, n.d.). These limitations are why a student would be unlikely to achieve a high result without detailed knowledge and adequate engagement when using GenAI programs.

Students may misinterpret a question, use the wrong equation, or input the wrong information. The old saying that a good craftsman never blames his tools is apt in this case. The use of GenAI is only as effective as how the student uses the program. Adolescents will still need to demonstrate skills such as critical

AI tools cannot 'think': they cannot critically evaluate information to arrive at a conclusion, nor can they apply information to real-world contexts.

thinking, to ensure they use the correct prompts; evaluation, to determine the quality of the text generated; data collection; attention to detail; and data analysis. Similarly to internet use, the better students will use GenAI as a support, whereas the less able students may use it as a crutch. Shallow engagement with GenAI should result in a flimsy assignment and will be marked as such.

Final thoughts

Personally, I echo concerns that the 40% assessment for projects is too high in light of GenAI. It is necessary to be pragmatic about this situation. Subject specifications cannot be changed overnight, but perhaps reducing the marks awarded to 20% would alleviate the genuine concern among teachers and education stakeholders. Then, with the benefit of time, the true capabilities of generative AI in education can be established, and the marks awarded for project assessment could be discussed.

REFERENCES

Chiu, T.K.F. (2023) 'The impact of Generative AI (GenAI) on practices, policies and research direction in education: A case of ChatGPT and Midjourney', *Interactive Learning Environments*, 1–17. DOI: 10.1080/10494820.2023.2253861

Department of Education (DE) (2024a) 'Minister Foley welcomes publication of 12 new and revised Leaving Certificate subjects and Senior Cycle programmes'. Press release, 2 September. www.gov.ie/en/press-release/89ea0-minister-foley-welcomes-publication-of-12-new-and-revised-leaving-certificate-subjects-and-senior-cycle-programmes/.

Department of Education (DE) (2024b) 'Senior Cycle Redevelopment – What it means for your young person'. Press release, 9 April. www.gov.ie/en/publication/6505a-senior-cycle-redevelopment-what-it-means-for-your-young-person/#senior-cycle-changes.

Hyland, A. (2024) 'Assessment for equity and excellence?', *Leader*, Autumn, 26–29.

Kennedy, D. (2024) 'Draft Leaving Certificate Biology, Chemistry and Physics syllabi: Cause of serious concern for school leaders', *Leader*, Spring/Summer, 48–52.

University of Leeds (n.d.) 'Strengths and weaknesses of Gen AI'. Generative AI at the University of Leeds. https://generative-ai.leeds.ac.uk/intro-gen-ai/strengths-and-weaknesses/.

Second-Level Student Experiences in a Time of Change

Background

The Irish education system has seen considerable change, as curricular reforms embed alongside efforts to create a more innovative school system. Schools are at the forefront of Ireland's efforts to integrate migrant families, build an inclusive society, and tackle persistent social inequalities. They are also arenas for debate over social questions like the place of faith and secularism in public institutions and the best path to ensuring that young people flourish. Schools are responding to these debates under the legacy of the pandemic and its lasting effects, while navigating the complexities of the digital world and its risks and potential for student learning and wellbeing.

As the dust settles on the implementation of the new Junior Cycle curriculum, and as plans for Senior Cycle redevelopment start to take shape, recent research at the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) (Carroll et al., 2024) provides a timely opportunity to assess how students across different school contexts are faring. Commissioned by the Joint Managerial Body (JMB) for Voluntary Secondary Schools, the study took place in spring 2023 in 21 schools chosen to reflect diversity in the sector. Second- and Fifth-Year students participated through surveys and semi-structured focus groups. School leaders, guidance counsellors, special educational needs coordinators, teachers, board of management members, parents, and key stakeholders also participated.

The data spans a diversity of themes, including teaching and learning experiences, school ethos, and the role and impact of school gender and social mix. While voluntary schools have traditionally drawn more from middle-class families, there has been a convergence in the social profile of sectors over time, alongside growing diversity in the voluntary sector.

Professor Selina McCoy
Head of Education Research, Economic and Social Research Institute

As the Irish education system undergoes reform, a recent study at the Economic and Social Research Institute provides a timely opportunity to assess how students across different school contexts are faring. This article focuses on two themes from the findings: how school social mix shapes student experience, and how students are experiencing the revamped Junior Cycle programme.

The study provides rich evidence and reflections from a multitude of perspectives. Here I focus on two themes: how school social mix shapes student experience, and how students are faring in the revamped Junior Cycle programme.

At the launch of '"Embracing diversity in all its forms": The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education', Europe Hotel, Killarney, May 2024.

(L–R) John Curtis, former General Secretary of JMB, Deirdre Matthews, General Secretary of JMB, John Barry, President of JMB, and Professor Selina McCoy, ESRI.

Findings

Schools were seen to play a vital role in supporting students to flourish, regardless of background and need. The study particularly highlights the profound importance of the DEIS programme. Students attending these schools benefited in terms of curricular provision, a strong emphasis on literacy skills, opportunities to participate in sports (particularly for girls), their role in decision-making, and the positive nature of their interaction with teachers.

However, concerns were raised over the responsiveness of the DEIS school identification system – also identified by the OECD (2024) – and the struggles that some non-DEIS schools faced in meeting high levels of student and family need. More broadly, school infrastructural deficits and teacher supply problems are impacting, notably on schools' capacity to offer diverse curricular and extracurricular activities, which are critical in supporting engagement for the most vulnerable. Given that the system relies on volunteerism to provide extracurricular programmes, there are valid concerns over the sustainability of

this model. Wider challenges in the recruitment and retention of teachers, the lack of diversity in the teaching profession, and risks from work overload and burnout across the school community are also ever-present.

The evidence highlights the intersectionality of disadvantage and the complexities in understanding how different students fare. For example, school absence is closely related to gender, special educational needs (SEN) status, and socioeconomic background, with higher absenteeism rates among girls, students with SEN, and those from disadvantaged families. While students generally held positive attitudes towards school, distinctive differences are associated with family background and SEN status. However, schools play an important role in shaping these student experiences. Positive teacher interactions enhanced school experiences, shaped by positive academic self-image, high teacher expectations, and the presence of a student-led ethos at school. These findings highlight the influence of school climate and student dynamics over individual or school characteristics.

There were calls for the types of learning experienced at Junior Cycle to be followed through to Senior Cycle.

The student voice was powerful in relation to the Junior Cycle programme, in its second year since it was fully rolled out. While reflections were broadly positive, the evidence points to some changes that are needed – an important finding as the redevelopment of the Leaving Certificate progresses. Overall, students enjoyed the programme and the learning opportunities provided, and highlighted the value in moving towards more experiential, student-centred learning, a key objective of the programme. The introduction of tailored programmes for students with additional learning needs is a particular strength, and planned follow-on programmes at Senior Cycle will be hugely valuable in supporting learning and achievement for all students. The removal of foundation-level papers has received criticism, and impacts can be seen on the accessibility of the main curriculum and student confidence levels.

In confining change to Junior Cycle level only, the research highlights mismatch and a lack of preparedness as students move into Fifth Year. There were calls for the types of learning experienced at Junior Cycle to be followed through to Senior Cycle. Classroom-based assessments attracted much attention; this study shows that the CBAs are not being experienced positively by some students and teachers. They are seen as an important assessment and are, as a result, a source of stress. However, the perceived low weighting afforded to CBAs, in comparison to the workload attached, is creating difficulties. The evidence suggests a need to mark the CBAs as part of the final result.

Conclusion

As educational systems increasingly focus on international standardised assessment measures, like PISA, this study highlights the importance of holistic student development in Irish schools. It brings to life the breadth of impact that

schools have in their students' lives. They are not just places where young people learn testable subject matter; they are a dense web of educational experiences and social relations where children are shaped into adults.

A new report, "Embracing diversity in all its forms - The Voluntary Secondary Sector in Irish Education", was launched in the Europe Hotel, Killarney in May 2024.
Report Authors pictured here (L–R): Professor Selina McCoy, Dr Eamonn Carroll, and Ms Keyu Ye.

REFERENCES

Carroll, E., McCoy, S., and Ye, K. (2024) '"Embracing diversity in all its forms": The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education', ESRI Research Series 182. Dublin: ESRI. DOI: 10.26504/rs182

OECD (2024) *Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland* Paris: OECD. www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-review-of-resourcing-schools-to-address-educational-disadvantage-in-ireland_3433784c-en.html.

Defining Wellbeing in Irish Post-Primary Schools

Introduction

There is a lack of consensus in the literature on what wellbeing is and how it should be defined (Burke, 2020). Definitions are blurred and too broad to understand (Forgeard et al., 2011). This can have adverse consequences when perceptions of the term are not addressed (Thorburn, 2018).

Though wellbeing is not a new concept, it has become more important in the educational context in recent times, evident in its inclusion on agendas of international organisations such as the UN (1989), UNICEF (2016), and WHO (2020). Nonetheless, teachers and school management struggle to grasp its meaning (Doran et al., 2023), which makes the implementation of a wellbeing policy and framework in schools more difficult (Camfield et al., 2009).

The research

The research described here focused on how teacher wellbeing is perceived by key stakeholders, principals, deputy principals, and teachers in post-primary schools in Ireland. Phase two examined the similarities and differences in these perceptions of wellbeing. All key stakeholders in post-primary education in Ireland were invited to participate, and participants included the Teaching Council, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI), Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI), Joint Managerial Body for Voluntary Secondary Schools (JMB), Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), principals, deputy principals, and teachers.

Through the lens of dialectical pluralism, 13 interviews and a focus group were used to gather further data. Principals and deputy principals were from Munster and Leinster and had a variety of management experience, up to 20 years. The focus group consisted of seven post-

Dr Annemarie Doran
Assistant Professor, Hibernia College

The lack of consensus on a definition of wellbeing makes implementation of a wellbeing policy and framework in schools more difficult. This article explores the problem by reporting on the findings of a research study involving a wide range of educational stakeholders. It stresses the importance of a collaborative and agreed definition of wellbeing in the educational context.

primary teachers from seven different schools. Participants were aged 23–60, with teaching experience ranging from less than one year to over 20 years. They were employed in both private and public schools (Education and Training Boards, voluntary secondary schools, and community colleges), in areas with widely varying socioeconomic circumstances. Thematic analysis was used to determine the key themes, including how wellbeing is defined.

Findings

The findings showed that to enable a school to follow a wellbeing policy and framework, a clear definition of wellbeing is imperative, as there are adverse consequences when individual perceptions of the term are not addressed (Thorburn, 2018) and when a common definition is not outlined to ensure that everyone is working towards a common goal.

The research found confusion among all participating groups about the definition of wellbeing in the school context, with little empirical evidence on the definition of teachers' wellbeing and limited knowledge on how it is measured (McCallum et al., 2017). It is widely accepted that wellbeing is important in the school environment, with links to students' outcomes, yet there is still much confusion about what it means.

While it is clear that wellbeing is a growing concept, theory-based formulations of wellbeing are absent in both research and practice. The lack of a clear definition creates difficulties for many aspects of school culture, including management decisions, legal responsibility, and blurred boundaries of accountability. It was well noted in the findings that wellbeing is also a personal journey and something that all participating groups aim for, yet it is unique to everyone.

The research stresses the importance of a collaborative approach from all key stakeholders on agreeing to a definition of wellbeing, and the need to embrace a series of components. Participants acknowledged how fluid and diverse wellbeing can be. It can be relative to a teacher's career stage and experience, as it encompasses individual elements that interact across a lifespan (McCallum & Price, 2016). Wellbeing can perhaps then be described only in very broad terms.

The study emphasised the difficulty of defining wellbeing in the school context, because it is experienced differently by different people. This relates to Dierner's (2009) definition, where wellbeing needs to be considered in relation to how an individual – in this context a teacher – feels and functions across several areas, such as cognitive, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. This approach is supported by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), which stresses the importance of studying an

Study participants are challenging principals and deputy principals to centre teacher wellbeing as an integral part of the school's community structures.

The research stresses the importance of a collaborative approach from all key stakeholders on agreeing to a definition of wellbeing.

individual in the context of the multiple environments in which they are positioned (Darling, 2007), not just one specific setting.

Conclusion

When formulating a definition for teacher wellbeing, perhaps the key stakeholders need to consider it in this context. Schools are central to promoting the wellbeing of children, young people, and teachers, so it is no surprise that the study participants are challenging the educational stakeholders, particularly principals and deputy principals, to centre teacher wellbeing as both a foundation to and an integral part of the school's community structures. To achieve this, however, a collaborative and agreed definition of wellbeing needs to exist. This is the challenge, and it is necessary in order to move forward in supporting teacher wellbeing effectively.

REFERENCES

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1992) 'Ecological systems theory'. In: U. Bronfenbrenner (Ed.) (2005), *Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development*, pp. 106–173. Sage.

Burke, J. (2020) *The Ultimate Guide to Implementing Wellbeing Programmes for Schools*. Routledge.

Camfield, L., Streuli, N., and Woodhead, M. (2009)' 'What's the use of "well-being" in contexts of child poverty? Approaches to research, monitoring and children's participation', *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 17, 65–109.

Darling, N. (2007) 'Ecological systems theory: The person in the centre of the circles', *Research in Human Development*, 4(3–4), 203–217.

Diener, E. (2009) *Assessing Wellbeing: The Collected Works of Ed Diener*, vol. 331. Springer.

Doran, A., Burke, J., and Healy, C. (2023) 'The domino effect: The impact of school leadership on teachers' wellbeing', I*rish Teachers' Journal*, vol. 11.

Forgeard, M.J., Jayawickreme, E., Kern, M.L., and Seligman, M.E. (2011) 'Doing the right thing: Measuring wellbeing for public policy', *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 1(1).

McCallum, F., Price, D., Graham, A., and Morrison, A. (2017) 'Teacher wellbeing: A review of the literature'. Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales.

McCallum, F. and Price, D. (Eds.) (2016) *Nurturing Wellbeing Development in Education: From Little Things, Big Things Grow*. Routledge.

Thorburn, M. (Ed.) (2018) *Wellbeing, Education and Contemporary Schooling*. Routledge.

UNICEF (2016) *Strategy for Health 2016–2030*. New York.

United Nations (UN) (1989) *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Geneva: UN publications.

World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) 'Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak'. 18 March. Geneva: WHO. www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-MentalHealth-2020.1.

SUSI

National Student Grant Awarding Authority

About SUSI

SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) is Ireland's national awarding authority of all further and higher education funding. SUSI offers support to all types of students, form school leavers to mature students returning to education.

What funding is available?

Course Type	Postgraduate Course	Full Time Undergraduate Course	Undergraduate Course (in the EU/UK)	Part Time Undergraduate Course	PLC Course
Maintenance Grant	✓	✓	✓		✓
Student Contribution and/or Fees	✓	✓		✓	

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible for a grant, the applicant must meet all of the following criteria:

Nationality and Residency:
· Applicants must be an Irish, EU, EEA, UK or Swiss national or have specific leave to remain in the State as granted by the Department of Justice.
· Applicants must also be ordinarily resident in Ireland, the EU, EEA, UK or Switzerland for 3 of the last 5 years.

Course:
· Applicants must be progressing in education and increasing their National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) level.
· Applicants must be attending an approved course in an approved institution.

Income:
· The reckonable income, as calculated for grant purposes, must fall under specific thresholds.
• This income will be a factor in determining what type of funding applicants may receive.
• Applications are assessed with regard to gross household income from the previous year.

HOW TO APPLY

Applications can be made online at www.susi.ie

Step 1
• The applicant registers a SUSI account online at www.susi.ie
• The applicant completes and submits the application.
• Applicants must apply each year to renew their application.

Step 2
• Based on the information provided in the application, the applicant will receive either a decision letter or a letter requesting documentation so that SUSI can complete its assessment of the application.

Step 3
• Once the supporting documents have been reviewed, the applicant will be advised of the decision on their grant application by post.

Step 4
• To receive payment, awarded students will need to have:
  • Registered with their college for the new academic year;
  • Been confirmed by their college as registered/attending;
  • Submitted their bank details through their online SUSI portal.

Contact us:

✉ support@susi.ie   f /susisupport

☎ 0818 888 777   𝕏 @susihelpdesk

Student Universal Support Ireland

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

City of Dublin
Bord Oideachais agus Oiliúna
Education and Training Board

Lasair: Supporting Principals and Deputy Principals as Instructional Leaders

Introduction

Three organisations – the Instructional Leadership Programme/Education and Training Boards Ireland (ILP/ETBI); Društvo Ravnatelj, Slovenia; and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) – in conversation recognised the lack of professional learning opportunities for principals and deputy principals as instructional leaders. Highlighting the need to develop a programme of support as a priority, ILP/ETBI in partnership with Društvo Ravnatelj applied to Léargas for funding, and both partners received funding for January 2023 – June 2024.

The aim of the project was to develop a programme to give post-primary principals and deputy principals an opportunity to develop core skills and competencies in the leadership of teaching and learning, and to give them appropriate resources in this area. In so doing, it aimed to contribute to improving school outcomes by creating an environment in which principals and deputies, and their teachers, engage in conversations and practices to enhance teaching and learning and ultimately the learning outcomes of students.

Background of project

Leithwood et al. (2009) identified the teacher's instructional repertoire as the top predictor of student achievement. The second most powerful factor is the principal's support for teachers in refining and extending their instructional practices. This puts an onerous responsibility on principals and deputy principals. Yet these roles are overloaded in both Ireland and Slovenia, and the job is more time-consuming with increasing administrative and managerial workloads, which deflect time and attention away from the role of instructional leader (OECD, 2018).

Dr Sharon Coffey

Principal, Grennan College, Kilkenny, and Member of the Steering Committee for the Instructional Leadership Programme

This article explores the pilot programme Lasair, designed to support principals and deputy principals as instructional leaders. Lasair aims to provide school leaders with key skills, competencies, and resources in the leadership of teaching and learning, thereby improving school outcomes by creating an environment in which the senior leadership team and teachers engage in conversations and practice to enhance teaching and learning.

School leaders should be given ongoing professional learning opportunities on instructional leadership, to help them develop and enhance their instructional knowledge and skills. Communities of practice provide opportunities for school principals to improve their instructional leadership (OECD, 2020).

Despite the fact that support and training in the ongoing development of school leaders' knowledge and skills in leading learning are essential to their complex roles, anecdotal evidence in both countries suggests that the support is not available to them. In response, and to address the priorities identified by the OECD, the project partners sought to establish communities of practice in each country, and to develop a programme of professional learning aimed specifically at enhancing the core skills of principals and deputy principals and provide them with relevant resources.

Objectives

The aims of the programme were to:

The project partners sought to develop a programme of professional learning aimed at enhancing the core skills of principals and deputy principals.

» develop an understanding of effective teaching and learning and how national and European policy define it
» develop a deep understanding of what instructional leadership is, why it is important, and what it looks like
» understand how to foster a culture of highly effective teaching and learning practices in their school
» support senior leaders in embedding highly effective teaching and learning practices in their schools by developing their skills to lead teaching and learning
» develop and share resources to support principals and deputy principals as instructional leaders
» develop a deep understanding of reflective practice and the skills to engage in it
» support the participants in developing a deep understanding of educational change and the skills to lead and manage instructional change.

Two stakeholder events were held with members of NAPD, ETBI, unions, National Council for Special Education, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Teaching Council, Oide, Department of Education, and the Inspectorate in attendance. At each event we shared our experience of the programme, provided interim research reports, and outlined the next steps and future delivery. The programme was officially launched in Ireland at the NAPD conference in October 2024.

Programme content

The pilot programme, which was residential, operated over a six-month period. Participants attended three two-day sessions, exploring together the importance of school leaders being at the centre of educational change in their school. The programme gave them the opportunity to carry out a collaborative inquiry, engage with instructional research, analyse case studies, and explore school culture.

The programme aligned with national policy in the form of *Looking at Our School 2022* (Department of Education, 2022) and *Cosán* (Teaching Council, 2016). This gave participants an opportunity to explore leadership skills and styles, to explore the impact of professional learning on the whole school, and to plan for a school-based change initiative that was relevant, important, and unique to each school.

Over the three sessions, participants engaged in 10 modules: professional reflection; understanding instructional leadership; using national policy to inform the role of principals and deputy principals as instructional leaders; school culture; conducting a school situational analysis; understanding educational change and how people respond; leading instructional change: leadership characteristics, styles, and approaches; facilitating difficult conversations; celebrating and acknowledging good teaching; and showcase of learning.

The roles of school leaders are overloaded with increasing administrative and managerial workloads, which deflect time and attention away from the role of instructional leader (OECD, 2018).

Next steps

Both partners will refine the programme, then it will continue to be made available in both countries. Research has been conducted during the life cycle of this project. Articles and academic papers will be drafted and made directly available to Léargas, the partners, pilot participants, and stakeholders, before being published.

REFERENCES

Department of Education (2022) *Looking at Our School 2022.* Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/publication/b1bb3-looking-at-our-school-2022/.

Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A., and Hopkins, D. (2009) 'Seven strong claims about successful school leadership'. National College for School Leadership.

OECD (2018) *Education at a glance.* Paris: OECD.

OECD (2020), *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume II): Teachers and School Leaders as Valued Professionals*, TALIS. Paris: OECD.

Teaching Council (2016) *Cosán: Framework for Teachers' Learning.* Maynooth: Teaching Council. www.teachingcouncil.ie/professional-learning/cosan/.

Why an Up-to-Date Acceptable Use Policy is Critical for the Whole School Community

Introduction

The first acceptable use policies (AUPs) on school websites appeared in the early 1990s. As schools started to go online, there was a growing need to establish guidelines for appropriate and responsible use of digital resources. AUPs were developed as part of the broader effort to educate students, teachers, and staff on the ethical use of the internet and to protect users and the institution from misuse (Perks et al., 1997).

In 2018, the Department of Education advised schools to create a comprehensive policy on tablet and smartphone use, integrating technology into teaching and learning. Schools were encouraged to consult the entire school community to ensure that the policy met the school's needs, and advised to regularly review and update the policy.

It was noted that this consultation may require revisions to existing policies, such as acceptable usage, anti-bullying, data protection, bring-your-own-device, and wellbeing policies. In October 2019, there were 32 post-primary schools in Ireland with 1,000+ students. In October 2023 there were 49. An AUP is crucial for all schools but particularly for larger schools. Yet many have not regularly reviewed or updated theirs since 2020.

An acceptable use policy is crucial because it sets clear guidelines for the responsible use of technology. It helps protect students from online dangers such as cyberbullying, inappropriate content, and privacy breaches. By outlining acceptable behaviours, it promotes a safe and productive learning environment. It educates students on digital citizenship, teaching them to use technology ethically and responsibly. It protects the school legally by ensuring compliance. It fosters a culture of respect and accountability, essential for preparing students for the digital world and their careers. It

Ann Marcus-Quinn

Associate Professor in Technical Communication and E-learning, University of Limerick

Schools should regularly review and update their acceptable use policies (AUPs) to reflect emerging digital trends, cyber threats, and legal requirements. This article reports on a review of AUPs from 32 large schools. It describes common issues, makes recommendations, and points to resources to help schools craft policies that foster a safe, responsible, and inclusive digital environment.

supports a school's mission of providing a safe, respectful, and effective educational environment.

Outdated AUPs

An outdated AUP poses significant challenges for teachers. Firstly, it may fail to address new technologies and trends, leaving teachers without clear guidelines for managing current digital tools and platforms. This can lead to inconsistent enforcement of rules, and confusion among students about acceptable behaviour. Secondly, it may not cover emerging online threats, putting students and the school's network at risk. Teachers may struggle to protect students from new forms of cyberbullying or inappropriate content that were not anticipated in the old policy. Legal and regulatory standards evolve, and an outdated AUP may not comply with current laws, potentially exposing teachers and the school to legal liabilities.

An outdated AUP can also undermine teachers' authority and credibility, as students may view it as obsolete, reducing their adherence to rules and respect for digital citizenship. Finally, students can be negatively impacted when an outdated AUP does not explicitly address smartphone and tablet usage in certain areas. Students can be reprimanded for using their smartphone in a common areas (e.g., corridor, locker area) despite the AUP containing no guidelines on this, leading to unnecessary student confusion and parental complaints.

Larger schools have more students, teachers, and staff, increasing the likelihood of varied behaviours and potential misuse of technology. A comprehensive AUP helps manage these risks by setting clear expectations. Larger schools typically have increased network traffic, which can increase vulnerability to security breaches or misuse. An AUP helps ensure that everyone understands the rules on network use, which is critical for maintaining network integrity and performance. In larger schools with a wider range of technology and online resources, an AUP ensures that users understand how to use these appropriately.

Larger schools face greater scrutiny of their legal and ethical responsibilities. An AUP shows the school's commitment to protecting students, staff, and the institution from legal issues related to inappropriate use of technology. In larger schools, managing technology use becomes more complex, with potentially hundreds or thousands of devices and users. An AUP provides a framework for consistent management and helps pre-empt issues. With more students and staff, the amount of sensitive data stored increases, making it a more attractive target for cyber-attacks. A robust AUP can include provisions for safeguarding personal data, mitigating these risks.

An AUP helps ensure that everyone understands the rules on network use, which is critical for maintaining network integrity and performance.

Webwise, funded by the Department of Education and the EU, is an Irish internet safety initiative that provides resources, support, and education to help schools in developing and maintaining AUPs.

Common problems

In summer 2024, I reviewed the AUPs for 32 of the largest schools in Ireland and found many shortcomings. The main issues identified include:

1. *Lack of consistency and comprehensiveness:* One school lacked a dedicated AUP, distributing relevant content across multiple outdated documents. Some AUPs appeared as unedited templates, indicating poor review or oversight.
2. *Accessibility problems:* Four schools provided AUPs as scanned PDFs, violating accessibility standards.
3. *Policy scope and updates:* Many AUPs were outdated, lacked consistent updates, and failed to address current trends like mobile data use that bypasses school filters.
4. *Content gaps:* Not all AUPs detailed content-filtering levels, and guidelines on personal device use were inconsistent. Some did not address rooted or jailbroken devices.
5. *Sanctions and legal compliance:* Most AUPs included sanctions for violations but varied in requiring parental and student signatures, which are crucial for accountability.
6. *Naming and navigation issues:* Document-naming conventions were inconsistent, complicating access and usability. Some documents were embedded in paged viewers, making navigation cumbersome.
7. *Educational and safety measures:* Only six schools explicitly integrated internet safety education in their curricula, highlighting a gap in systematic educational efforts.
8. *Cyberbullying and social media:* While many schools had separate anti-bullying policies, coverage of cyberbullying in AUPs was inconsistent.
9. *Review and monitoring:* Most AUPs claimed annual reviews, but many were outdated, some referencing obsolete technologies (including floppy discs), indicating a lack of active policy management and stakeholder involvement.

Available supports

Webwise, funded by the Department of Education and the EU, is an Irish internet safety initiative that provides resources, support, and education to help teachers, parents, and young people navigate the internet safely and responsibly. It supports schools in developing and maintaining AUPs. It provides a free AUP generator tool for customising policies, along with detailed guidelines and templates covering rights, responsibilities, and sanctions related to internet use. Webwise also offers workshops, training, and support for teachers and school leaders.

A recent report on the Irish voluntary secondary sector found that while students generally have a positive view of how their voices are acknowledged in the school environment, there is room for improvement in decision-making

(Carroll et al., 2024). This research suggests that schools could further empower students by creating more opportunities for them to actively participate in decisions that affect their educational experiences. Updating the school's AUP would be an ideal opportunity to enhance students' sense of agency and engagement, leading to a more inclusive and democratic school culture.

REFERENCES

Carroll, E., MacCoy, S., and Ye, K. (2024) '*Embracing Diversity in All Its Forms': The Voluntary Secondary Sector in Irish Education*. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.

Department of Education and Skills (2018) Circular 0038/2018: Use of Smart Phones and Tablet Devices in Schools. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/circular/circular-0038-2018/.

Perks, D.J., Gavitt, D.R., and Olivo, J.J. (1997) 'Do you have an internet acceptable use policy?', *Computers & Education*, 29(4), 147–151. DOI: 10.1016/S0360-1315(97)00039-0

Webwise (2022) *Acceptable use policy guidelines: Guidelines for developing an acceptable use policy in school*. Dublin: Department of Education. www.webwise.ie/aup.

<p align="center">✱✱✱</p>

The **Irish Science Teachers' Association**, Eol Oidí na hÉireann, is the professional association for teachers of science in the Republic of Ireland. As such it is represented on the relevant subject development groups of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Since its foundation in 1961 it has been providing continuous professional development and support for its members at both national and branch levels.

The Association has close affiliations with the Association for Science Education in the UK and is a founding member of ICASE, the International Council of Associations for Science Education. It is also represented on SCIENTIX which promotes and supports a Europe-wide collaboration among STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) teachers, education researchers, policymakers and other STEM education professionals.

Members are also supported and informed of developments through the Association's website (www.ista.ie) and social media platforms. We also publish a Journal, SCIENCE, which is posted to members twice a year.

The major national ISTA events are the Senior Science Quiz – normally held during Science Week since 1990, the national photography competition and the Annual Conference which provides members with the opportunity to hear and meet national and international experts in areas relevant to science education. The next conference will be held in **Maynooth University** on **5th April 2025**. The theme will be: **Adapting to a Changing World in Science Education.**

For up-to-date information visit:
Website: www.ista.ie
Twitter/X: @IrishSciTeach
Facebook: www.facebook.com/IrishScienceTeachersAssociation
Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/irishscienceteachers

Peer Instructional Coaching and Conferencing

Teachers supporting teachers: A powerful, strength-based model for teacher professional learning.

Introduction

Reciprocal peer coaching – teachers supporting teachers – is a powerful, strength-based model of teacher professional learning and is well supported by research (Showers & Joyce, 1996; Joyce & Calhoun, 2018; Alam et al., 2020; Yee, 2016). Though commonly used in countries such as Australia and Canada, to date it remains a relatively new form of teacher professional learning in Ireland.

When introducing peer coaching to teachers, they tend to relate it to the well-known concept of sports coaching, where an 'expert' directs the work of a less-experienced novice. Reciprocal peer coaching is different in that involves two colleagues coming together to guide each other, in a reciprocal or equal manner, through structured conversations. Neither is considered an 'expert': they are there simply to guide each other through a respectful, supportive, metacognitive process.

Joyce and Showers (2002) first highlighted the impact of peer coaching to support teacher instructional change initiatives. Their research, outlined in Table 1, revealed that when peer coaching was combined with other professional learning strategies, it had a significant impact on helping teachers transfer new learning into practice – increasing the likelihood of sustaining change.

Dr Rebecca Saunders
Acting Vice Dean, Mary Immaculate College

Reciprocal peer coaching is a powerful way to support teacher change and is well supported by research. Yet it remains a relatively new form of teacher professional learning in Ireland. This article outlines a recent pilot programme with teachers, deputies, and principals who explored peer instructional coaching and conferencing and trialled it in their schools. It considers the potential of this support strategy in relation to Ireland's current educational policy landscape.

Training components and attainment of outcomes (% of participants)			
Components	**Knowledge of content**	**Skill implementation**	**Classroom application**
Study of theory	10%	5%	0%
Demonstration	30%	20%	0%
Practice	60%	60%	5%
Peer coaching	95%	95%	95%

Table 1: Training components and attainment of outcomes (adapted from Joyce & Showers, 2002)

Pilot programme

Over a nine-month period in 2023–2024, a pilot programme supported by Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) brought together 43 principals, deputies, and teachers from 13 schools to pilot the use of peer instructional coaching and conferencing. The aim was for teachers to (a) assess the usefulness and value of peer coaching and conferencing as a support strategy, and (b) trial the strategies in their schools.

Teachers attended three two-day workshops in school-based teams, where they developed coaching skills and learnt how to supportively 'conference' a peer. Adapted from Hunter (1980), conferencing is a process of gathering observational classroom data and providing structured feedback to a peer on an aspect of practice they would like to develop. Table 2 outlines the broad similarities and differences between peer coaching and conferencing adopted for the programme.

Peer instructional

Coaching	Conferencing
Consists of three 'types' of coaching dialogue: 1. Planning-focused 2. Solution-focused 3. Reflection-focused	Consists of five 'types' of conferencing models: 1. A – Non-evaluative 2. B – Generating options 3. C – Problem-solving 4. D – Evaluative 5. E – Professional growth
May or may not invite a peer into the classroom	Invites a peer into classroom
May or may not use criteria (rubrics, critical attribute list) to guide dialogue	Uses agreed criteria (rubrics, critical attribute list) to guide conference
May or may not use data during dialogue	Uses data-gathered processes, agreed by peer prior to conference
Peers select who they want to work with and set their own goals	
Peers work intentionally to support one another in instructional change	
A framework is used to help guide peers through the process	
Peers refine and use specific interpersonal skills, such as active listening, open questioning, paraphrasing, and wait time	
Peers develop positive, agentic relationships and build trust and empathy	

Table 2: Comparing peer coaching and conferencing (Saunders, 2023)

Between each set of professional learning sessions, the teams returned to their schools to trial their newfound skills and reflect on their experiences in relation to relevant research and literature. Feedback from those involved aligns with findings from numerous studies showing that coaching and conferencing are beneficial and effective at fostering teacher agency and growth. Participants reported that the teacher-led processes provided a much-needed structured, collaborative safe space for professional conversations about developing instruction and reduced feelings of 'implementation isolation' in the classroom. All those involved in the pilot went on to establish some form of coaching and conferencing programme in their schools.

Conclusion

With the recent review of Junior Cycle, and the current Senior Cycle redevelopment, Ireland is witnessing unprecedented curriculum reform (Gleeson et al., 2020). Now more than ever, teachers need support to enact the changes demanded of them. While mentoring is firmly established in the Irish educational landscape and is widely acknowledged as an effective mechanism to support teacher induction (Smyth et al., 2016; Nally & Ladden, 2020), there remains a gap in the widespread use of similar structured collegial support structures for experienced teachers.

Cosán reminds us that teachers are 'autonomous and responsible professionals' who are ideally situated to decide what learning most 'benefits them and their students' (Teaching Council, n.d.). Feedback from the schools in this programme revealed that reciprocal peer coaching and conferencing are powerful tools that create highly collaborative teacher-driven learning spaces and have the potential to support teachers and schools to achieve sustainable change. The benefits gained from working collegially and focusing on professional growth are well worth the investment for schools, teachers, and most importantly, students.

REFERENCES

Alam, J., Aamir, S.M., and Shahzad, S. (2020) 'Continuous professional development of secondary school teachers through peer observation: Implications for policy and practice', *Research Journal of Social Sciences and Economics Review*, 1(1), 56–75.

Gleeson, J., Klenowski, V., and Looney, A. (2020) 'Curriculum change in Australia and Ireland: A comparative study of recent reforms', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 52(4), 478–497.

Hunter, M. (1980) 'Six types of supervisory conferences', *Educational Leadership*, 37(5), 408–412.

Joyce, B. and Calhoun, E. (2018) 'Peer coaching in education'. In: S. Zepeda and J. Ponticell (Eds.), *The Wiley Handbook of Educational Supervision,* pp. 307–328. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Joyce, B. and Showers, B. (2002) *Student Achievement through Staff Development*, 3rd edn. London: Longman.

Nally, M. and Ladden, B. (2020) 'An exploration of an induction programme for newly qualified teachers in a post-primary Irish school', *International Journal for Transformative Research*, 7(1), 19–25.

Saunders, R. (2023) 'Peer Instructional Coaching and Conferencing'. *Leading Learning: Instructional Leadership Programme Newsletter*, 16 (April issue), 19–20. www.instructionalleadership.ie/il-newsletter-issue-16/.

Showers, B. and Joyce, B. (1996) 'The evolution of peer coaching', *Educational Leadership*, 53, 12–16.

Smyth, E., Conway, P.F., Leavy, A., Darmody, M., Banks, J., and Watson, D. (2016) *Review of the Droichead Teacher Induction Pilot Programme*. University of Limerick.

Teaching Council (n.d.) Professional Learning (Cosán). Maynooth: Teaching Council. www.teachingcouncil.ie/professional-learning/cosan/.

Yee, L.W. (2016) 'Peer coaching for improvement of teaching and learning', *Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Education* (JIRE) ISSN, 2232, 0180.

A Snapshot of Inclusion in Irish-Medium and Gaeltacht Post-Primary Schools in 2024

Research suggests there has been an increase in the prevalence of additional educational needs (AEN) in Irish-medium (IM) and Gaeltacht post-primary schools over the last 20 years (Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Nic Aindriú, in press). These schools are catering for an increasingly diverse student population with a range of AEN. This article draws on research on inclusive practices and policies in IM and Gaeltacht schools throughout the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and Northern Ireland (NI).

Surveys (n = 29; 38% of RoI schools), focus group discussions, and individual interviews (representatives from 20% of RoI and NI schools) were carried out with principals and teachers in early 2024. These provided a snapshot of the positive practices in place in schools, the benefits of IM education for students with AEN, and the challenges that schools face in meeting the needs of all students.

Dr Sinéad Nic Aindriú

Assistant Professor, Institute of Education, Dublin City University

Katie Ní Mhaoláin

Research Assistant, Institute of Education, Dublin City University

This article provides a snapshot of the inclusive education landscape in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht post-primary schools in 2024. It discusses the positive practices in place in these schools, the benefits of this form of education for students with additional educational needs, and the challenges that schools face in meeting the needs of all students.

Positive practices and benefits

Internationally, a growing body of research suggests that students with a range of AEN (e.g., autism, and speech and language difficulties) can become bilingual and that there are many benefits – including cognitive, social, and cultural – in their doing so (Bialystok, 2009; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2016). Participants in this study reported that IM and Gaeltacht schools offer students with AEN the opportunity to learn Irish and become bilingual, which may not be available to them in an English-medium school, due to the exemptions offered to students with AEN from studying Irish (DES, 2018).

It was clear from the findings of the study that these schools have many positive practices in place to meet the needs of all students, as recommended by the Department of Education (DES, 2010). They reported

having clear, whole-school policies for planning, assessment, teaching, and learning which are implemented consistently throughout the school, thus creating positive outcomes for students with AEN. This in turn has a positive impact on students' wellbeing, sense of belonging, and self-esteem (Allen et al., 2021). Participants spoke about how students feel they belong in the school, have positive and trusting relationships with staff, and are motivated to learn.

Challenges

As with inclusion in all forms of immersion education, IM and Gaeltacht schools reported several challenges in meeting the needs of all students. Most of these challenges were systemic and outside of their control (Nic Aindriú & Ó Duibhir, 2023).

A significant difficulty for staff in these schools is a lack of appropriate Irish-language assessments, interventions, and resources. Few assessments are available through Irish to post-primary schools, meaning that Irish–English bilingual students are not being assessed in the school's language of teaching and learning. This has negative implications for assessment results, because if bilingual students are being assessed in only one of their languages, results are unlikely to provide a true overview of their abilities (Hambly & Fombonne, 2014). This may lead to a disproportionate number of students being referred with AEN.

These schools also have trouble accessing external professionals, such as educational psychologists or speech and language therapists with Irish and an understanding of bilingualism or IM education (De Valenzuela et al., 2016). Furthermore, many schools experienced difficulties sourcing appropriate and up-to-date textbooks in Irish and were often faced with little choice compared with English-medium schools. Teachers frequently find themselves needing to translate or create resources themselves, causing additional stress and a huge drain on valuable teacher time.

Conclusion

This study highlights both the positive strides and the significant challenges facing Irish-medium and Gaeltacht post-primary schools in fostering inclusive education. The increased prevalence of additional educational needs in these schools reflects a more diverse student population, which has been largely embraced through dedicated whole-school inclusive practices implemented by schools.

However, systemic issues such as insufficient resources, inadequate assessments in Irish, and lack of access to Irish-speaking educational professionals hinder

Many schools experienced difficulties sourcing appropriate and up-to-date textbooks in Irish.

schools' ability to fully support their students. Addressing these barriers through better government investment, up-to-date resources, and tailored teacher training is essential to ensure that all students can thrive in IM and Gaeltacht educational settings.

Acknowledgements

REFERENCES

Allen, K.A., Kern, M.L., Rozek, C.S., McInerney, D.M., and Slavich, G.M. (2021) 'Belonging: A review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research', *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 73(1), 87–102.

Bialystok, E. (2009) 'Bilingualism: The good, the bad, and the indifferent', *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 12(1), 3–11.

De Valenzuela, J.S., Bird, E.K.R., Parkington, K., Mirenda, P., Cain, K., MacLeod, A.A., and Segers, E. (2016) 'Access to opportunities for bilingualism for individuals with developmental disabilities: Key informant interviews', *Journal of Communication Disorders*, 63, 32–46.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2010) *A Continuum of Support for Post-Primary Schools: Resource Pack*. Dublin: Government publications. https://assets. gov.ie/40658/f896b4d014464ad1b9241e91c5405370.pdf.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2018) *Review of policy and practice in relation to exemptions from the study of Irish*. Dublin: Government publications. https://assets.gov.ie/30515/68a5644a015c4ee18fab3c9ed8a8ff0d.pdf.

Hambly, C. and Fombonne, E. (2014) 'Factors influencing bilingual expressive vocabulary size in children with autism spectrum disorders', *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 8(9), 1079–1089.

Kay-Raining Bird, E., Genesee, F., and Verhoeven, L. (2016) 'Bilingualism in children with developmental disorders: A narrative review', *Journal of Communication Disorders*, 63, 1–14.

Mac Donnacha, S., Ní Chualáin, F., Ní Shéaghdha, A., and Ní Mhainín, T. (2005) *Staid Reatha Scoileanna Gaeltachta 2004: Léargas ó na Príomhoidí, na Múinteoirí agus na Tuismitheoirí Tuarascáil don Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta*. Dublin: An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta. www.cogg.ie/wp-content/uploads/staid-reatha-scoileanna-gaeltachta-2004-leargas-o-na-priomhoidi-na-muinteoiri-agus-na-tuismitheoiri.pdf.

Nic Aindriú, S. (in press) *Special Educational Needs in Gaeltacht and Irish-medium post-primary schools and all-Irish units*. Dublin: An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta.

Nic Aindriú, S. and Ó Duibhir, P. (2023) 'The challenges facing Irish-medium primary and post-primary schools when implementing a whole-school approach to meeting the additional education needs of their Students', *Education Sciences*, 13(7), 671.

Teaching Consent for Healthy Relationships

Why sexual literacy is an important part of the new Relationships and Sexuality Education curriculum

Introduction

There's nothing like controversy and current events to kickstart conversations! It seems we're getting agitated about consent. And we've moved into an era of extremes – some parents are fighting for better Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), while others are looking to protect children's innocence by not mentioning certain aspects of sexuality. This need, or fear, to protect childhood appears to be based on the idea that there is something corrupting about sex. But sex is not the problem; rather it's how we talk about relationships and sexuality to children that's causing controversy.

Starting from the premise that ignorance is not the same as innocence, knowledge protects children from being vulnerable to abuse by or of others. If talking about sexuality is stigmatised, controlled, or forbidden, it doesn't mean young people don't experiment with being sexual. In societies where holistic styles of RSE are delivered, there are fewer teen pregnancies, sexual assaults, and sexually transmitted infections among under-20-year-olds (Shutt, 2023).

As children, we wanted to know how babies were made; as teenagers, we wanted to know how to be good at sex, to avoid embarrassing mistakes. The only thing that has changed is that if we don't answer those questions for today's young people, there is now a vast array of less-than-savoury sources accessible on phones. If that is their source, we miss an opportunity to share how to express and explore sexuality in healthy and positive ways, when or if they ever want to. The messages from pornography and social media appear to be making it almost impossible for young people to talk openly about what they want, don't want, or might be willing to try, when it comes to being intimate.

Siobhan O'Higgins

Training and Education Lead, Active* Consent Programme, University of Galway

Internet access means that the days of 'if we don't talk about it, it doesn't happen' are gone. This article outlines how education on consent and sexual literacy can help young people make informed decisions that respect themselves and others and lead to healthy attitudes and relationships.

Growing up

Growing up includes establishing independence and creating relationships beyond the family. Adolescents move from the relatively secure and known world of primary school to the completely different social world of secondary school, 'dumped into a society of peers' (Coleman, 1961). From being taken to and from social events, they begin organising socialising between themselves – unstructured and unsupervised. Parents soon don't know many of their friends' names or who their child is with at any one time.

Hence, school and all that happens there becomes a vital source of support and non-judgemental information to counter all the misinformation that teenagers are exposed to. Most of the ideas they buy into about how to be male or female get heightened by media that portray girls' biggest asset as sexual attractiveness while penalising them for expressing their sexuality; many boys, with no information on the importance of consent, feel pushed to see their role as sexually aggressive:

School becomes a vital source of support and non-judgemental information to counter all the misinformation that teenagers are exposed to.

> *Rather than teaching girls about pleasure, we teach them fear and self-hatred. And rather than teaching boys about responsibility, we teach them suspicion and slut-shaming. (Penny, 2014)*

This becomes even more complicated for non-heterosexuals, who have few, if any, examples of how to gradually, openly, and honestly explore expressing their sexuality that doesn't border on kink. Even when non-binary young people find high-profile role models, these may be miles away from their own reality. One's orientation or identity isn't the only deciding factor – it's about being able to express desires and boundaries, while learning to read and care about the other person's experience.

> *I wish we could view consent as something that is . . . more about care for the other person, the entire person, both during an encounter and after, when we are often at our most vulnerable. (Sender, 2018)*

Even as an adult, it's not easy to speak up about consent. The essence of respectful, healthy, and positive intimacy lies in everyone being able to express their desires, likes, and needs, and considering the thoughts, feelings, and values of others without letting their own be compromised to fulfil someone else's expectations. That is a huge ask if adults are not prepared to discuss any of this with young people. There certainly isn't much space to find useful, factual, non-judgemental information from peers or the internet, which again highlights the importance of school.

Learning sexual literacy

Active* Consent, and others, create resources for the Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) programme to build 'sexual literacy', addressing:

» how to communicate for mutual consent and enjoyment
» how sexuality is individual and can change throughout a lifetime
» how some people are very active in their sexual self-expression, while others prefer not to express it at all
» how every choice is healthy and normal as long as no one is being hurt and everyone involved is freely giving their clear, ongoing consent.

Sexual literacy is about understanding the different components of sexuality, from sexual feelings to anatomy and physiology, consent to contraception. It's about understanding all the factors that shape one's sex life and that allow for healthy choices that will improve overall wellbeing. Feeling nervous or insecure is normal at first. If sex is a journey of discovery, it helps to have an idea of where someone would like to go by understanding their body. Knowing one's own boundaries is so important.

We need the confidence to share with our young people that taking things slowly and letting tension and desire build is what lovemaking is all about. It would be great if young people were confident to communicate 'This is my first/second time', 'I may change my mind, and I need you to be okay with that', and partners listened. Media creates the fiction that people will know telepathically what another person wants, but in the real world, it's totally okay to ask.

Young people nowadays, as soon as they go online, are bombarded with inappropriate videos that can alter or create ideas of what behaviours are okay for them and others. Our best line of defence is to repeat our values, both in school and at home. We want them to make informed decisions as teenagers and adults, respecting themselves and others, and having happy and healthy relationships. The days of 'If we don't talk about it, it doesn't happen' are gone. We have a short window to instil safe and healthy behaviours; if we don't, internet algorithms and social media will do it for us.

Sexual literacy is about understanding the different components of sexuality, from sexual feelings to anatomy and physiology, and consent to contraception.

REFERENCES

Coleman, J. (1961) *The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and Its Impact on Education.* Free Press of Glencoe.

Penny, L. (2014) *Unspeakable Things: Sex, Lies and Revolution.* Bloomsbury Publishing.

Sender, C. (2018) 'He asked permission to touch, but not to ghost', *New York Times*, 7 September. www.nytimes.com/2018/09/07/style/modern-love-he-asked-permission-to-touch-but-not-to-ghost.html.

Shutt, R. (2023) '5 reasons why good RSE is not only important but essential', blog post, Brook Young People. www.brook.org.uk/blog/why-good-rse-is-not-only-important-but-essential.

WorldWise Global Schools: Bringing the True Meaning of Sustainability to Irish Secondary Schools

Pillars of sustainability

Every day we hear something about sustainability. Whether it's the banks, grocery chains, fashion companies, or oil corporations, everyone is bragging about how 'sustainable' they are. Sustainability is about meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. It is therefore of the utmost importance for us to define the true meaning of sustainability in our teaching and learning, so we do not send that future generation down the wrong track. Wellbeing of people as well as planet should be front and centre of any sustainability agenda.

WorldWise Global Schools (WWGS), Ireland's national Global Citizenship Education (GCE) programme for post-primary settings, considers all pillars of sustainability when it comes to its programme of teacher training, events, resources, and small grant funding. There has been much focus on environmental sustainability in the past decade. This is of course hugely welcome, but it has left social, cultural, and economic pillars relatively overlooked.

With the sustainability element running through both Junior and Senior Cycle subjects, and the government's Education for Sustainable Development strategy, it is essential that we think about what it truly means to be sustainable. The WWGS guiding principles help schools to critically think about and question the world around them and to look at sustainability through a global lens:

1. unlearning and reconstructing
2. finding root causes
3. prioritising human rights
4. making local to global links
5. acting in solidarity.

Lizzy Noone
Education Officer, WorldWise Global Schools

WorldWise Global Schools, Ireland's national Global Citizenship Education programme for post-primary settings, supports hundreds of schools to take a whole-school approach to sustainability and issues of global justice and equality. It considers all pillars of sustainability in its programme – not just environmental but social, cultural, and economic. This article outlines its work and details some of the projects undertaken by schools.

Case studies

WWGS works with over 200 schools directly to build their capacity to take a whole-school approach to sustainability and issues of global justice and equality through the Global Passport framework. Here is a flavour of what is being done in schools and how it's about the whole school.

Environmental sustainability at North Wicklow Educate Together Secondary School

In May 2022, North Wicklow ETSS launched its Global Garden. Students developed a biodiversity garden area, researching native plants and habitats that will sustain wildlife throughout the year. Students carry out citizen science research by collecting scientific data for Biodiversity Ireland's National Biodiversity Data Centre, recording the plants, flowers, insects, birds, and animals that visit the area.

Students work in a variety of subject areas to develop local and global connections to their project, for example Geography (the harm of industrial agriculture on people and planet, climate, soil depletion), Science (seed germination, genetically modified crops), Art (the work of artist and activist Kui Hua Zi), English (newspaper articles on global food security, in particular the research of Vandana Shiva), and History (famine, monoculture, seeds, biodiversity around the world).

Social sustainability at Naas Christian Brothers School

> *It's so important to look at racism in mainstream school, to discuss it in class, and to be educated by someone who knows to get to the truth, instead of listening to online information – you don't know where it comes from or what's real fact. —Christopher Young, Transition Year student, Naas CBS, and director and scriptwriter of the film Unity*

At Naas CBS, all subject teachers were encouraged to engage with the theme of racism and discrimination in class during the anti-racism week. Messages challenging students to reflect on and critically evaluate racism and its root causes were shared on the school intercom and at assemblies. Discussions also happened at assemblies, centred on rejecting racism, and aligned the Edmund Rice values of care and solidarity with global-justice themes of inclusion, human rights, and empathy. All year groups did workshops with Show Racism the Red Card, Sports Against Racism Ireland, or Kildare Traveller Action Group.

> *I've seen a real change. Some students can be quite blasé in their language. They don't fully grasp what they're saying and who it affects. This project has given an understanding of the global and local impact of their words. Simple is powerful – it's helped them to think about their language. And they've learned so much about the causes of racism – the Jim Crow Laws. They were*

World Wide Global Schools (WWGS) works directly with over 200 schools to build their capacity to take a whole-school approach to sustainability and issues of global justice and equality.

genuinely shocked. —Denise Fenell, CSPE (Civic, Social, and Political Education) teacher

Social sustainability at Millstreet Community School

> *Our challenge is to assist our students to see that the reasons why people migrate are complex. To take this on board requires dismantling and reconstructing ideas that may have been held to be the truth in a particular situation for years. —John Magee, lead teacher, Millstreet Community School*

Millstreet Community School, a co-educational school in North Cork, has been host to a Direct Provision Centre for over 20 years.

Millstreet CS is a co-educational school in the north Cork town of Millstreet, which has been host to a Direct Provision Centre for over 20 years. Its history of cultural diversity, inclusion, and migration provides a context for the school's engagement with GCE.

When Millstreet CS became aware of the work of WorldWise Global Schools and GCE, it had already been hosting an annual Language and Culture Night, a celebration of cultural diversity. But there had been growing awareness among the event's organisers that it was not reaching far enough into the school and local communities or building solidarity. This was coupled with the understanding that a single annual event lacked the potential to explore in depth the global-justice issues surrounding migration, diversity, and inclusion.

The school was open to rethinking the event and worked closely with WWGS education officers to question and reflect on the impact of the event. The emphasis shifted from a one-night celebration to creating time and space to develop new and different perspectives on migration, diversity, and inclusion, bringing a whole-school approach to this important issue.

More case studies can be found on the WorldWise Global Schools website at www.worldwiseschools.ie/category/case-studies/. The website also includes resources (per subject theme and Sustainable Development Goal), recorded continuing professional development, and much more to help your school get sustainability right! We also offer advice and training, both centralised and in-service workshops, for teachers.

One Hundred Years of Curriculum-Making in Ireland: What Have We learned in Science Education?

Dr Majella Dempsey
Associate Professor, Maynooth University

Dr Thomas Delahunty
Assistant Professor, Maynooth University

Figure 1: Proposed Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools (Department of Education, 1924)

One hundred years ago, the *Proposed Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools* was published (DE, 1924; see Figure 1), outlining the syllabi for the Leaving Certificate (LC) science subjects over eight pages. Each science syllabus runs to little over a page: Physics on pages 43–44, for example. The first LC examination was held in 1925 (Malone & Murray, 2016).

Fast-forward to 2024, and we have 12 new and revised subjects for LC to be implemented in September 2025 as part of the redevelopment of upper secondary education, including new science specifications (NCCA, 2024). Curriculum-making involves decisions about what is taught (content), how it is taught (pedagogy), how learning is assessed and reported, and the broader purpose of education (Dempsey, 2023). The *Programme's*

This article looks at curriculum development in upper secondary education in Ireland. It seeks to problematise the partnership model used by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, where all voices are not equal. In particular, it focuses on the neoliberal influence on STEM education, where there is an unhealthy focus on qualifications.

hundred-year anniversary is a salient time to examine how curriculum-making has evolved in Ireland.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), established on a statutory basis in 2001, develops curriculum and assessment policy. The work is led by an executive working with subject development groups (DGs), with ultimate decisions on the advice sent to the Minister for Education being made by a 26-member council. The work is informed by research, deliberations, consultation, and work with networks of schools and early childhood settings. The Minister can take the advice and implement change, or may ignore it, as was evidenced by the Junior Cycle History debate (DE, 2019).

Partnership underpins the NCCA's work. This provides space for representative bodies to talk through and consider all aspects of proposed change in specification content and to give advice on assessment at DG meetings. The NCCA education officer actions the decisions made, and this cycle continues until a draft specification is agreed upon. Figure 2 provides an overview for science subject specification development between 2019 and 2024, using Biology as an example. Public consultation occurs at two points: before work on development begins, and after publication of the draft specification.

Partnership underpins the work of the NCCA.
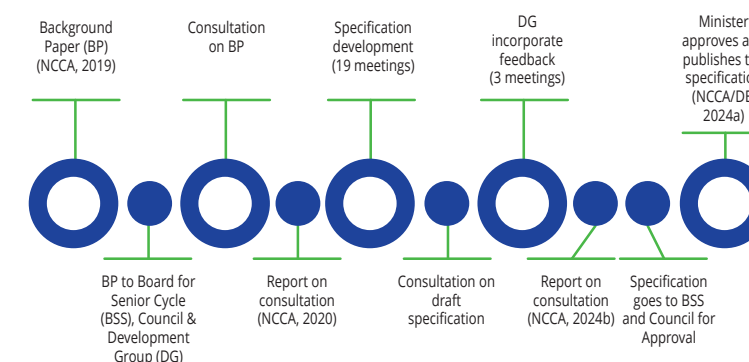
Figure 2: Example of curriculum development for LC science subjects

In all discussions, the members of the development groups bring their expertise as subject specialists and the views of their organisation. Their work may be considered as a form of horizontal partnership (O'Riain, 2006), where each voice is equal and focused on the development of a specification that is, ideally, focused on qualification, socialisation, and subjectification (Biesta, 2020).

The qualification aspect is about progressing to further study and work. The socialisation aspect is about, among other things, a way of thinking like a biologist, incorporating topics such as health and sustainability; it is

underpinned by the knowledge, skills, and traditions of science education. The subjectification aspect is about living in and with the world as a person.

A significant body of educational scholarship tells us that changes in curricular focus since the 2008 financial crisis have intensified an authoritarian, neoliberal turn, which not only over-determines the purpose of education as qualification (Delahunty, 2024a) but mutates praxis to instrumentalism (Todd, 2022) and increases focus on performativity in large-scale assessment (Kirwan & Hall, 2016). It is not that qualification is unimportant, but an overemphasis on this purpose is tantamount to narrowing education's role in facilitating the holistic, democratic growth of students – which, as recent far-right emergences have shown, has never been more important.

Struggles with the vertical dimensions of partnership are evident in recent curriculum development. Following publication of the three science specifications, the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) and Irish Universities Association (IUA) representatives said they wished to dissociate themselves from the implementation (Grenon et al., 2024, p.5). These representatives were part of the DG deciding on the curriculum in the specifications, so one can only conclude that the partnership model is not working as it should be.

Do we have democratic decision-making through this partnership model, or do some voices seek to exert more power than others, and in particular disciplines such as science? Though the NCCA is a representative structure, based on a particular partnership model of policy development, and though it is a policy space where curricular concerns are raised and negotiated by education partners at DG stage, at the board for Senior Cycle, and at council, this does not guarantee agreement on proposals.

Some of these tensions are evident in the Irish Science Teachers' Association's (ISTA) (2024) response to the draft specification, where they attest that 66.7% of the learning outcomes in the Biology specification lack clarity, and they call for a list of mandatory experiments – calls we would describe as focused on the content of the specification with little attention given to the purpose of education. Delahunty (2024b), through critical analysis of recent official discourses from the ISTA, among others, has uncovered an overemphasis on detailed learning outcomes as a symptom of the neoliberal coloniality in contemporary policy positions, which seeks to further suppress the potential for plurality of curricular approaches and to tie education increasingly to the servitude of market logics.

The ISTA finishes with the line, 'We hope that all science teachers will be treated with respect and that their opinions valued in this spirit of partnership' (ISTA, 2024, p.14). This ostensibly showcases a concern with professional respect; however, the notion of increasing the specificity simultaneously works to

A significant body of educational scholarship tells us that changes in curricular focus since the 2008 financial crisis have intensified an authoritarian, neoliberal turn, which over-determines the purpose of education as qualification.

crystallise curricula as central to governance of educational subjectivities (teachers and students) and to de-professionalise teaching to policy actors of service delivery.

The brevity of this article means it cannot fully explore the issues with the partnership model of curriculum-making in Ireland; rather it serves to point out some challenges faced in the process. We have moved a long way in how we develop and present curriculum from 1924, when content was listed over one to two pages and teachers were arguably trusted to make pedagogical decisions on how to teach a curriculum. The inclusion of all interested groups on various DGs, boards, and council in NCCA has ensured a rich and deep engagement with curriculum-making but has not ensured a smooth pathway from the written to the enacted and experienced curriculum, nor a guarantee that all voices are included or heard equally.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) (2024) 'ASTI calls on education Minister to defer revised Leaving Certificate science subjects'. Press release, 26 June. Dublin: ASTI.

Biesta, G. (2020) 'Risking ourselves in education: Qualification, socialization, and subjectification revisited', *Educational Theory*, 70, 89–104.

Delahunty, T. (2024a) 'The convergence of late neoliberalism and post-pandemic scientific optimism in the configuration of scientist learnification', *Educational Review*, 1–23.

Delahunty, T. (2024b) 'Unearthing the coloniality of neoliberalised curricular discourses to promote a public orientation towards secondary science education', *International Journal of Science Education*, 1–20.

Dempsey, M. (2023) 'Curriculum: The great public project'. In: C.A. Säfström and G. Biesta (Eds.), *The New Publicness of Education: Democratic Possibilities after the Critique of Neo-Liberalism*, pp. 39–54. London: Routledge.

Department of Education (DE) (1924) *Proposed Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools.* Dublin: Government publications.

Department of Education (DE) (2019) 'Minister McHugh announces decision following Review of History in Junior Cycle Framework'. Press release, 3 October. Dublin: DE.

Grenon, M., Kennedy, D., and McCauley, V. (2024) *Report submitted to the NCCA in response to the Leaving Certificate Biology, Chemistry and Physics Draft Specifications, by the IUA Representatives to these Subject Development Groups.* Dublin: Irish Universities Association.

Irish Science Teachers' Association (ISTA) (2024) *Report presented to the Minister for Education and NCCA in response to the 2023 draft specifications (syllabi) in Leaving Certificate Biology, Chemistry and Physics.* February. ISTA.

Kirwan, L. and Hall, K. (2016) 'The mathematics problem: The construction of a market-led education discourse in the Republic of Ireland', *Critical Studies in Education*, 57(3), 376–393.

Malone, D. and Murray, H. (2016) *Archive of Mathsy State Exam Papers.* Maynooth University. https://archive.maths.nuim.ie/staff/dmalone/StateExamPapers/.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2024) *Curriculum Specification for Leaving Certificate Biology.* Dublin: NCCA.

Ó Riain, S. (2006) 'Social partnership as a mode of governance: Introduction to the special issue', *Economic and Social Review*, 37(3), 311–318.

Todd, S. (2022) 'Reframing education beyond the bounds of strong instrumentalism: Educational practices, sensory experience, and relational aesthetics', *Educational Theory*, 72(3), 333–347.

<p style="text-align:center">**✳✳✳**</p>

ASTI/ TUI leaders to join teachers protesting outside Dublin school

19th November at Coolmine Community School in Dublin 15.

TUI President David Waters and ASTI President Donal Cremin joined teachers protesting outside Coolmine Community School on 19 November 2024 in a bid to delay the implementation of Senior Cycle redevelopment.

Upwards of 30,000 second-level teachers participated in lunchtime protests all over the country.

The nationwide demonstration followed a decision to 'accelerate' Senior Cycle redevelopment plans. Teachers are gravely concerned that aspects of the plans pose a threat to education standards, fairness and quality for Leaving Cert students. They also have concerns about the current system capacity to accommodate such major change.

Teaching How to Think B!G

Creative thinking skills are not a 'nice to have' but a core element of education

Background

'Imagination is only intelligence having fun.' At The B!G Idea, we couldn't agree more with critic George Scialabba (a version of the line is often attributed to Albert Einstein). We are big believers in injecting fun into learning – but not fun for the sake of it. When we're enjoying ourselves and completely immersed in an activity, learning comes more easily and naturally.

Today's students, possibly more than ever, will need to channel all their creativity to tackle the pressing issues of life. They will need keen problem-solving abilities – be that in further study, in their careers, or simply in navigating the complexities of life. But how will they know how to use their innate creativity without the skills and knowledge to unlock it?

In 2021, The B!G Idea was born. Inspired by industry methodologies, and using principles of universal design for learning, The B!G Idea is a collaborative, creative-thinking skills programme supported by academia and businesses. It is a 25-workshop programme, facilitated by Transition Year (TY), Leaving Cert Applied (LCA), and Northern Ireland teachers, as well as Youthreach tutors and coordinators, that teaches teens how to think creatively about problems affecting their communities.

It gives students experience working as a team and learning from failure. It nurtures empathetic leadership and the development of ideas into workable solutions to challenges such as hidden poverty, climate change, disability, and artificial intelligence. We connect each student team with industry professionals who mentor and guide them, providing feedback, advice, and encouragement.

Inspiration

For the next generation to truly thrive, Ireland must invest in cultivating creative thinking and innovative skills. The World Economic Forum and Forbes, among others, agree

Kim Mackenzie-Doyle
Founder and CEO, The B!G Idea

The B!G Idea programme, launched in 2021, gives students first-hand experience of combining imagination with logic and the messy, nonlinear nature of real-world problem-solving. It supports teachers and mentors through online resources and a free professional development workshop on creative skills. This article outlines its structure, results, and aims for the future.

that creative thinking is the top skill required by businesses by 2025, surpassing even technical skills.

I also know from experience that traditional, formal education techniques don't suit everyone. I learn from doing – I need to get actively involved, and there are many people like me. As a three-year-old, I experienced a trauma that set me back. I lost speech and developed a speech impediment. School was a challenge. I struggled with sitting for long periods of time, I fell behind my peers in all aspects, and there was little expectation of me succeeding academically. My guidance counsellor jokingly told me to 'marry well'!

I eventually found my way, learning a particular set of creative-thinking, problem-solving skills that helped me develop a successful career in product design. They also developed something more crucial: resilience and an awareness of my potential to help others.

From that experience, and a desire for young people to have the chance to develop their own creative-thinking skills, resilience, and empathy, The B!G Idea grew. I imagine a world where every young person in Ireland is equipped to tackle the challenges in their lives, workplaces, and communities, and to make a positive and lasting impact.

Feedback from participating teachers and students has been encouraging and drives us onwards. Students love the programme while learning valuable skills and techniques. For me, one of the initiative's most inspiring impacts is how it has given students confidence and belief in their abilities and uncovered leaders who didn't realise their innate capacity to nurture and encourage others:

'We learned that nothing is impossible and to trust the process.' —Team 'Connection Through Community', Tullamore CTC

'It really helped me to get out of my shell and to understand myself better.' —Sarah, Kilkenny Youthreach

'Being nominated as team leader helped me practise important leadership skills, like listening to others, stepping back a bit, and letting others take control.' —Roise, St Joseph's Grammar School, Tyrone

'We learned that making mistakes along the way can improve your learning.' —Team Miraculous, Mercy Secondary School, Ballymahon

'Students are becoming more independent thinkers, critical thinkers . . . they are using their creativity every single day in class, and they're relying on each other.' —Michele Daly, Teacher, Coláiste Iósaef Community College

'They've completely changed their mindset on their lives and their goals. They now know they can have dreams.' —Michelle Howard, Tutor, Tullamore Community Training Centre

I know from experience that traditional, formal education techniques don't suit everyone. I learn from doing – I need to get actively involved, and there are many people like me.

We need to create an environment for young people to realise their potential and become change-makers, capable of improving their communities and wider society.

Thinking differently

We must think differently about the role of education. We need to create an environment for young people to realise their potential and become change-makers, capable of improving their communities and wider society. For them to do that, we need to integrate new ways of learning – not just rote learning, which doesn't accurately reflect the reality of life or work.

Cultivating creative thinking – developing innovative solutions to challenges – makes sense from an economic and business perspective. It's also a critical skill for society and communities, supporting people to navigate life's inevitable challenges. But it is not yet firmly embedded into our education policies.

The B!G Idea is bridging the gap between education and business so that young people learn cutting-edge methodologies to develop solutions to local and global challenges that reflect the UN Sustainable Development Goals. With support and advice from industry professionals across Ireland, students gain experience of combining imagination with logic and the messy, nonlinear nature of real-world problem-solving. The programme supports teachers and mentors through online modules and classroom resources, as well as a free professional development workshop on creative and critical thinking.

We're proud that our accessible initiative was recently praised in an OECD report for promoting creative-thinking skills in formal education as part of Ireland's strategy to reduce the negative impact of student assessment regimes on the practice of creative thinking.

Since its launch, 10,000 students in 23 counties, with support from more than 1,000 industry mentors, have taken part in The B!G Idea. We want to reach even more. Our vision is a world where our young people, no matter their background, have the creative-thinking ability to tackle and solve the complex challenges they will face. We want to democratise the teaching of creative thinking so that every young person in Ireland is empowered with this critical life skill and nurtured to reach their full potential.

The B!G Idea is a free, all-Ireland programme open to Transition Year, Leaving Cert Applied, and Northern Ireland students, as well as Youthreach and Community Training Centre learners. Visit www.thebigidea.ie for more information. Teachers can register their class or group of students at https://teachers.thebigidea.ie/.

'There is no doubt that creativity is the most important human resource of all. Without creativity, there would be no progress, and we would be forever repeating the same patterns.' — Edward de Bono

***

206

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2024**
YEARBOOK

207

Teen-Turn Student Awarded Trane Technologies Thermoking Scholarship to Pursue Engineering at ATU Galway

Orlaith Heaney recipient of Trane Technologies Thermoking Scholarship 2024

Orlaith Heaney, from County Mayo, is the proud winner of a prestigious €24,000 scholarship from Trane Technologies Thermoking.

This scholarship - designated for students in Teen Turn - will provide Orlaith, a former student at Mount Saint Michael Secondary School, with €6,000 annually over the course of her four-year engineering degree at Atlantic Technological University (ATU) Galway.

A friend introduced Orlaith to Teen-Turn's afterschool program and she has been engaged with the organisation since she was in first year. She had many successful projects during her years of attendance at the afterschool programs including participation in Technovation, Scifest and BT Young scientist. Most recently Orlaith was honoured with a National Garda Community Safety Award.

Orlaith progressed to attending Teen-Turn PLUS Saturday clubs, which deliver advanced learning in subjects that are not universally offered in all-girls' secondary schools in Ireland, including foundational skills critical for engineering and technology courses at the university level.

It was through Orlaith's participation in Teen-Turn's PLUS program that she discovered a strong passion for engineering, with a particular interest in robotics, automation and manufacturing engineering. Securing a 'Teen-Turnship', a 2 week summer work placement in Trane Technologies in Galway in the summer of 5th year, further cemented Orlaith's desire to study Engineering.

Orlaith applied to the common engineering programme at ATU Galway City, which will allow her to experience various branches of engineering in her first year before deciding on her specialisation.

"Teen-Turn gave me opportunities I never would have had, from coding to building robots and learning from real engineers," Orlaith said.

"These experiences showed me that engineering is where I want to be and I am excited to bring what I have learned into my studies at ATU. Teen-Turn's programs helped me discover my love for robotics and automation and I am eager to explore all branches of engineering in my first year at ATU. I cannot wait to dive into a career where I can make a real impact."

Further Education & Training

Further Education and Training in 2024: A Journey of Transformation, Growth, and Reform

Introduction

SOLAS and our partners, the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), have been on an incredible journey of transformation, growth, and reform over the last five years. *Future FET: Transforming Learning*, the second national further education and training (FET) strategy, has guided our course over that period, and as it comes to its conclusion at the end of 2024, it is a perfect time to reflect on its successful implementation and to consider what comes next.

This includes important progress on how FET is delivered, widening participation to those most marginalised in our communities and ensuring that FET becomes a valuable and recognised learning pathway in Ireland. Preliminary figures show that we will reach record numbers of people engaged in FET, apprenticeships, or construction skills schemes in 2024. Indeed, one in ten adults now engage in learning supported by SOLAS in some way.

The delivery of the FET strategy hasn't been without its challenges. Dealing with the uncertainty of a global pandemic tested the sector in ways we could never have imagined, with restrictions putting enormous strain on the system that resulted in losing 10–15% of the learner base in 2020 and 2021. However, by the end of 2022 we had already bounced back to pre-Covid-19 levels, and in the course of 2023 and 2024 the FET learner base has grown by a quarter.

As the state agency responsible for FET in Ireland, much of SOLAS's focus has been on driving the innovation, transformation, and sustainability that can grow and maintain this footprint. The commitment and courage of our colleagues to do things differently has enabled us to reach a place where we have a more strategic, visible, and integrated sector of which we can be very proud. This has

Andrew Brownlee
CEO, SOLAS

Katie O'Rourke
Communications Manager, SOLAS

This article offers an overview of further education and training (FET) in Ireland in 2024 and details a year of steady growth and expansion for the sector. It describes the key achievements in FET and apprenticeship during the year and over the lifetime of the FET strategy, and it looks ahead to the future possibilities.

allowed us to make real changes – always with an unwavering focus on the needs of learners, as they are at the heart of everything we do, and they will continue to inspire us as we push on to our next stage of evolving the sector.

Highlights of 2024

In 2024 we are at a stage where school leavers are increasingly choosing FET and apprenticeships as a first destination; where there are clear, accessible pathways between FET and higher education; and where FET is becoming the go-to place for upskilling and re-skilling, and a resource that can respond to the critical skills needs in Ireland.

For the first time ever, over 400,000 FET places were taken up in 2024. Other highlights of the year include:

» *Construction and green skills*: Around 140,000 cards have been issued across our construction skills schemes, fuelling the workforce in this critical industry, with around 6,423 trained in essential zero-emission-building and retrofitting skills by the end of November 2024. A new national FET green-skills strategy to 2030 was also produced, which maps out the provision and skills required for taking effective climate action and positioning Ireland as a leader in emerging green industries and occupations.

» *Flexible, online learning*: There is now a thirst for online learning like never before, with enrolments in eCollege up by 47% to 36,717 in 2024 as it diversified its offering. This takes us beyond even the levels of mass demand seen during the height of the pandemic, when we made the online resource free for everyone. There has also been important work to enhance and embed digital learning throughout the delivery of all FET, with a framework in place and work progressing on FET digital identity, common standards for FET digital learning, and professional development to ensure that the expertise exists to innovate and reform the FET offering.

» *Apprenticeship*: Working in partnership with the Higher Education Authority to manage the National Apprenticeship Office, we have seen a record 9,352 new apprentices registered and phase 2 craft apprenticeship capacity expanding by 45% in a single year. There are now 77 different apprenticeship offerings, and close to 10,000 apprentice employers with apprentices working for them. Work is also continuing on implementation of a plan to realise a single, integrated apprenticeship system, which will be a key focus of 2025.

» *FET College of the Future*: There have been record levels of capital investment in FET this year, with six flagship FET College of the Future projects also moved to design stage. These new colleges – in Bray, Cavan, Clonmel, Cork, Kilkenny, and Newcastle West – will serve as beacons of

There is now a thirst for online learning like never before, with enrolments in eCollege up by 47% to 36,717 in 2024.

The vision for Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) is coming to fruition, with real progress on linking education to health, social protection, local government, community development, and family services at local, regional, and national levels.

learning and enterprise in their communities, driving lifelong learning and workforce transformation, and providing the flexible upskilling and re-skilling we will all need to respond to this fast-changing world. A second phase of project proposals will be considered in early 2025.

» *Adult Literacy for Life*: The vision for Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) is coming to fruition, with real progress on linking education to health, social protection, local government, community development, and family services at local, regional, and national levels. The national and regional infrastructure is now in place to effect real change in this regard, with regional coordinators, coalitions, and action plans in place to drive and monitor progress. The need for this joined-up, cross-government, cross-society, cross-community approach has never been more apparent, with the first Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIACC) survey in 12 years confirming that one in five people still struggle with literacy, and one in four with numeracy.

» *School leaver choices and tertiary pathways*: An aim throughout the last five years has been to 'move the dial' on school leaver choices and to show the value of alternative pathways. Major growth in demand for post–Leaving Certificate (PLC), apprenticeship, and new tertiary degree programmes in 2024 means that since 2019 there has been an 11.8% increase in those choosing alternative pathways to direct university entry.

» *FET for enterprise*: FET is becoming a go-to place for enterprise, with 25,000 employees upskilling through Skills to Advance in 2024 (and over 83,000 since the initiative began). An exciting new funded partnership with Enterprise Ireland was also launched, to expand access to companies, with particular targeting of the clients of Local Enterprise Offices.

» *Strategic impact*: There is ongoing transformation across the FET system, with funding model reform, consistent learner support, and a new community education framework. With the *Transforming Learning* strategy concluding, the regional strategic agreements with 16 ETBs also came to an end. Over the period 2022–2024, national system targets were met for widening participation, progression through FET, certification of transversal skills, employee upskilling, tailored re-skilling support for the unemployed, lifelong learning participation, literacy provision, and delivery of critical skills needs. A new round of strategic dialogue with ETBs is putting plans in place for 2025 onwards.

Another bumper year for FET, apprenticeships, and construction activity across the country is a great way to close out *Transforming Learning*. But attention has already turned to how we sustain this momentum, grow our footprint further, and shape the strategy for FET in Ireland over the next five years.

The future of FET

Our focus is now set firmly on the future of FET, with a legislative mandate to produce a new FET strategy for 2025–2029. In 2024, we undertook an extensive strategy consultation with stakeholders, including industry, FET sector partners, and learners, to help us carve out a clear vision for future growth, transformation, and development.

While much progress has been made in ensuring that we can respond as a sector to the critical skills needs in Ireland, megatrends like climate action, digital transformation, global disruption, and ageing demographics have already had a major effect on FET, and this will only intensify in the years to come. We are also facing challenges like artificial intelligence and its impact on learning, on learners, on the skills needed for work, and on the wider world. It is vital that the next FET strategy is agile and allows us to pivot and adapt to new challenges as we face them.

As well as our ambition for growth in the sector, we also want to take the next steps to becoming an OECD world-class skills leader and increasing our lifelong learning participation rate. To meet our 2030 EU target for lifelong learning, an additional 560,000 learning places (estimated by the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit) will have to be made available, and FET will have to be a core driver of this additional provision.

Taking this into account, key themes over the next five years, which you will see framed within a new FET strategy in the first half of 2025, will include:

» leading the way on the green and digital skills essential for our economy and society to survive and prosper
» fundamentally changing how further education and training is delivered
» powering workforce transformation and lifelong learning, including the further development of specialist skills capability
» ensuring access to education for all by linking our learning to the wider supports and services required by those at greatest risk of marginalisation and exclusion.

This exciting agenda will ensure that 2025 can take FET and apprenticeships to even greater heights, where it becomes valued as an increasingly essential piece of national infrastructure in the same way that housing, transport, or health is valued.

To meet our 2030 EU target for lifelong learning, an additional 560,000 learning places will have to be made available, and FET will have to be a core driver of this additional provision.

Online Learning and FET: Challenges and Opportunities

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 necessitated a transition to online delivery for teaching and learning from primary to third-level education in Ireland and across the developed world. A wide range of studies have since emerged on the impact of this pivot on teachers and learners (Kessler et al., 2020; Lemay & Doleck, 2020; Quezeda et al., 2020; Flynn, 2021).

The pandemic brought uncertainty, isolation, and stress to many, not least to learners, who must learn to navigate new technologies to keep pace (Flynn et al., 2022). Since then, the rapid evolution of digital technologies has transformed the landscape of education globally, with online learning emerging as a component of further education and training (FET). This shift has brought both significant challenges and remarkable opportunities, particularly in the context of expanding access to education, enhancing learning experiences, and addressing the diverse needs of learners across Ireland.

Dr Joe Collins
Director of Further Education and Training, Education and Training Boards Ireland

This article explores the shift to online education during the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting both challenges and opportunities for further education and training. Key challenges include the digital divide, lack of learner engagement, quality assurance, and the need for additional support systems. Opportunities include increased access, personalised learning, global collaboration, innovation in teaching, and lifelong learning. The article emphasises the importance of addressing these challenges to create an inclusive and adaptable education system for all learners.

Challenges

1. Digital divide

One of the most pressing challenges in the adoption of online learning in FET is the digital divide. While online platforms offer flexibility and accessibility, not all learners have equal access to the necessary technology or reliable internet connections. This disparity can exacerbate inequalities, particularly among rural communities, low-income households, and marginalised groups, limiting their ability to fully participate.

2. Engagement and motivation

Online learning often requires more self-discipline and motivation from learners compared to traditional classroom settings. The absence of face-to-face interaction can lead to feelings of isolation, which may

impact engagement and retention rates. Educators face the challenge of creating interactive and engaging content that keeps learners motivated and connected throughout their educational journey. Locke (2015) argues that classroom structures and the physicality of teaching spaces are not benign but rather confer their own pedagogical value. In this way, buildings 'convey their own messages, solidified and materialised through physical walls and demarcated spaces' (Locke, 2015, p.596). Similarly, Gieryn (2002) writes that buildings 'stabilize social life. They give structure to social institutions, durability to social networks, persistence to behavior patterns.'

3. Quality assurance and pedagogical shifts

Ensuring the quality of online education is another significant challenge. Traditional pedagogical approaches may not always translate effectively to digital platforms, requiring educators to rethink and adapt their teaching methods. Additionally, institutions must ensure that the online courses they offer meet rigorous academic standards and provide the same level of educational value as in-person learning.

4. Support systems

Online learners often require additional support to navigate the digital learning environment. This includes technical assistance, academic advising, and mental health resources. The challenge lies in providing these support systems in a way that is accessible and responsive to the unique needs of online learners, particularly those who may be balancing education with work or family responsibilities.

Opportunities

1. Increased access and flexibility

Online learning has the potential to significantly increase access to FET by removing geographical barriers and offering flexible scheduling options. This is particularly beneficial for adult learners who may be juggling work, family, and other commitments. The ability to learn at one's own pace and from any location can make education more accessible to a broader audience, including those who may have previously been unable to pursue further education.

2. Personalised learning

Digital platforms enable personalised learning, where content can be tailored to meet the specific needs and learning styles of individual students. This approach allows learners to progress at their own pace, focus on areas where they need improvement, and access a wide range of resources that cater to

Online learners often require additional support to navigate the digital learning environment.

their interests and goals. Personalised learning can lead to more effective and engaging educational experiences.

3. Collaboration and global connectivity

Online learning platforms facilitate collaboration and communication among learners and educators from diverse backgrounds and locations. This global connectivity can enrich the learning experience, exposing students to different perspectives and ideas. Online learning communities can also provide valuable networking opportunities.

4. Innovation in teaching and learning

The shift to online learning has spurred innovation in educational practices. Educators are increasingly adopting new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and gamification, to create dynamic and interactive learning environments. These innovations have the potential to enhance the quality of education and to provide learners with skills that are relevant in a digital world.

5. Lifelong learning and upskilling

Online learning supports the concept of lifelong learning by making it easier for individuals to continuously update their skills and knowledge throughout their careers. As the demand for new skills in the workforce grows, online FET programmes can provide timely and relevant training opportunities, enabling learners to stay competitive and adaptable in an ever-changing job market.

Educators are increasingly adopting new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and gamification, to create dynamic and interactive learning environments.

Conclusion

The integration of online learning into FET presents both challenges and opportunities that are shaping the future of education in Ireland. While there are significant hurdles to overcome, particularly in ensuring equitable access and maintaining engagement, the potential benefits of online learning are vast. By embracing these opportunities, we can create a more inclusive, flexible, and innovative education system that meets the diverse needs of all learners.

It is essential that we continue to address the challenges while leveraging the opportunities to ensure that online learning fulfils its promise as a transformative force in FET. We continue to consider the best means of delivery for all learners' emotional and psycho-social needs, and to put their interests at the forefront of our decision-making. In this sense, we are interested in maintaining a relational approach, as 'it is important to establish a pedagogy that is critical, emancipatory and relational' (Wals, 2020).

REFERENCES

Flynn, S. (2021) 'Academia in liquid modernity: Digital overload, cultivation, and authenticity in teaching work', *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 45(1), 90–106. DOI: 10.1080/10714413.2021.2007208

Flynn, S., Collins, J., and Malone, L. (2022) 'Pandemic pedagogies: the impact of ERT on part-time learners in Ireland', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 41(2), 168–182. DOI: 10.1080/02601370.2021.2022792

Gieryn, T.F. (2002) 'What buildings do', *Theory and Society*, 31, 35–74.

Higher Education Authority (2015) *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019*. Dublin: HEA.

Kessler, A., Barnes, S., Rajagopal, K., Rankin, J., Pouchak, L., Silis, M., and Esser, W. (2020) 'Saving a semester of learning: MIT's emergency transition to online instruction', *Information And Learning Sciences*, 121(7/8), 587–597.

Lemay, D. and Doleck, T. (2020) 'Online learning communities in the COVID-19 pandemic: Social learning network analysis of Twitter during the shutdown', *International Journal of Learning Analytics and Artificial Intelligence for Education*, 2(1), 85–100. DOI: 10.3991/ijai.v2i1.15427

Locke, K. (2015) 'Activating built pedagogy: A genealogical exploration of educational space at the University of Auckland Epsom Campus and Business School', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47(6), 596–607. DOI: 10.1080/00131857.2014.964159

Quezada, R.L., Talbot, C., and Quezada-Parker, K.B. (2020) 'From bricks and mortar to remote teaching: A teacher education programme's response to COVID-19', *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 46(4), 472–483. DOI: 10.1080/02607476.2020.1801330

Wals, A.E.J. (2020) 'Transgressing the hidden curriculum of unsustainability: Towards a relational pedagogy of hope', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 52(8), 825–826. DOI: 10.1080/00131857.2019.1676490

***

Pictured here are Leo Clancy, CEO of Enterprise Ireland, and Andrew Brownlee, CEO of SOLAS

On 24 October 2024, SOLAS and Enterprise Ireland announced the launch of a Strategic Partnership between them to widen access to up-skilling programs for small, medium and micro enterprises and to help drive their growth and competitiveness in Ireland.

SOLAS is Ireland's Further Education and Training Authority, and Enterprise Ireland is the Irish Government's enterprise development agency.

Transforming Learning: Transformation of the FET Sector, 2020–2024

Introduction

2024 is an important year for SOLAS and the further education and training (FET) sector, as it marks the end of the current FET strategy, *Future FET: Transforming Learning*, which centred on the three pillars of building skills, fostering inclusion, and facilitating pathways. We are now focused on strategy development for the next five years (2025–2029), which will set a clear roadmap of our future goals and ambition. This also gives us an important opportunity to reflect on how far the sector has come and to acknowledge some of our collective achievements in transforming learning.

As the state agency responsible for FET in Ireland, SOLAS drives the innovation, transformation, and sustainability of the sector and works collaboratively with our key stakeholders and partners, including the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), to ensure that FET and apprenticeship provision can deliver to its full potential. Over the last five years, we have achieved significant progress through implementing the FET strategy, focusing on reviving and repairing our economy and supporting our communities across the country since the emergence of Covid-19.

The strategy set out a strong mandate for reform and performance improvement to ensure we could deliver a more strategic, visible, and integrated sector, offering learning opportunities for everyone. To achieve this ambitious goal, SOLAS set about securing increased investment in recurrent and capital funding and established a project management office to progress key actions in the strategy. This helped us put in place structures and processes to work towards consistency and accountability across all FET providers.

There is now increased awareness of the exciting opportunities offered by FET and apprenticeship, which

Nessa White
Executive Director for Transformation, SOLAS

This article offers a snapshot of developments in further education and training (FET) in Ireland. It details how SOLAS and key partners have driven the transformation and reform of FET and apprenticeships during delivery of the FET strategy, *Future FET: Transforming Learning (2020–2024)*.

have seen unprecedented growth and demand. Last year, the learner base grew by 17%, with one in ten adults now engaged in FET and apprenticeships – something we are really proud of. The sector's transformation is a result of our collaborative approach: with our sector partners we have co-developed and co-designed innovative ways of delivering FET. The incredible support from our colleagues has enabled us to make real changes resulting in positive outcomes for learners, such as widening participation and providing a range of accessible pathways.

FET for transformation

Future FET: Transforming Learning has given us a wide-reaching and visionary strategy to work from. Over its lifetime, we have driven change and reform across the FET system, providing easier access, simplified pathways, a consistent learner experience, and a stronger identity, while empowering ETBs to respond to skills gaps at local level. Key achievements include the following:

Performance targets

National FET system performance targets have played a vital part in ensuring that we provide for the reform and realisation of the ambition of the FET strategy across the 16 ETB regions. The agreements between SOLAS and ETBs highlight priority areas, such as employment outcomes, progression to higher education, and lifelong learning, while also incorporating national priorities such as green skills and workforce reskilling. They have supported development and fostered innovation across the system and provided an important link between local needs and national priorities.

Funding model reform

Implementation of funding model reform with the 16 ETBs is moving towards effectively linking the resourcing of FET and apprenticeships directly to outcomes. This approach also enables the sector to respond promptly to FET demand and to address immediate needs and priorities that arise at local and national level.

FET college of the future and capital programme

Over the course of this strategy, SOLAS secured a specific capital allocation for vital investment in FET. This has resulted in many exciting projects, including an allocation for minor works, devolved grant allocations to ETBs, and a dedicated health and safety programme. These initiatives will help us build college identities for FET and ensure that ETBs can provide learners with quality learning environments and spaces that reflect current provision.

There is now increased awareness of the exciting opportunities offered by FET and apprenticeship, which have seen unprecedented growth and demand.

SOLAS is leading Adult Literacy for Life, a 10-year, whole-of-government and society approach to ensuring that everyone has the literacy skills to meet their needs.

FET for enterprise

The diversity, flexibility, and wide availability of FET provision locally mean it is uniquely placed to respond to critical skills needs in Ireland and will play an important part in addressing future skills needs such as digitisation, decarbonisation, and demographic change.

We have ramped up provision to ensure that the sector can provide enterprise with the necessary skills and career opportunities for their employees, so they can thrive in the Irish economy. This includes developing targeted and flexible upskilling options under the Skills to Advance initiative, including FET micro-qualifications to ensure that enterprise can respond to the rapidly changing world of work.

FET for communities

The importance of FET for inclusion has been maintained throughout the strategy's implementation. We recognise the valuable role that FET plays in local communities across Ireland: it not only benefits learners and communities but also supports a cohesive society:

» We have continued to support thousands of Ukrainians with English-language and other skills, helping them integrate into communities.
» In 2024 we launched the Community Education Framework to ensure a more consistent approach to SOLAS-funded community education across Ireland. We are now focused on implementing its actions, and in collaboration with local providers we will create structures that support and foster innovative ideas and best practice.
» SOLAS is leading Adult Literacy for Life, a 10-year, whole-of-government and society approach to ensuring that everyone has the literacy skills to meet their needs, and that this is valued and supported at every level of society.

SOLAS also continues to support the National Apprenticeship Office in delivering the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021–2025, with apprenticeships now considered a major route to skills development in Ireland. Another key outcome in progressing the strategy's facilitating-pathways pillar is the establishment of the National Tertiary Office, which provides accessible options for learners outside the traditional systems.

The future of FET

With one in ten adults in Ireland – some 425,000 – now impacted in some way by the learning supported by SOLAS, our ambition is to grow this to half a

million by 2026. To achieve this, we will require additional funding so we can provide the extra places by 2030. We will also need to focus on investment so we can respond to the rapidly evolving skills environment, ensuring that FET can deliver for the workforce transformation.

SOLAS, along with our key partners, has been on a journey of transformation, and while we have achieved a great deal, it is important that we continue on this trajectory so that we can be a pivotal driver of equality and inclusion, ensuring access to education for all and pathways that will allow everyone to realise their true potential.

***

NATIONAL CHAMPION IN THE WORKPLACE AWARDS 2024

80 nominations nationwide with seven individual/team award winners, and one overall winner.

(L-R) Mary-Liz Trant, Director of the NAO, Lorraine Powell, Stryker Ireland, and Pat O'Doherty, Chairman of the National Apprenticeship Alliance

Stryker Ireland's Lorraine Powell was announced overall winner of the national Generation Apprenticeship Champions in the Workplace 2024 Awards at a spectacular ceremony on 5 December 2024.

Now in its sixth year, the awards celebrate exceptional businesses across the country passionate about supporting and developing the talent and success of apprentices. Representing their company, six outstanding employees and two teams received category awards at the ceremony, including Lorraine Powell, who was also presented with the Apprenticeship Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Advocate category for her work advocating for inclusion in Stryker Ireland.

The apprenticeship route is growing in stature nationwide. This year, over 10,000 employers are investing in apprentices across 75+ occupations to find and retain talent and support Ireland's economy and society.

Reflections on Ten Years of Apprenticeship Expansion and Change

Introduction

Apprenticeships have been part of the education and training landscape in Ireland since the end of the 19th century, with periods of significant change and expansion over subsequent decades, including in the 1970s after the introduction of the Industrial Training Act, 1967. This legislation continues to underpin the system. The most recent period of transformation began after publication of the comprehensive *Review of Apprenticeship Training in Ireland* (Government of Ireland, 2013a). The review was influenced significantly by an EU apprenticeship renaissance at the time and by the imperative for Ireland to mobilise on skills investment and development as it emerged from a deeply damaging recession.

The review included far-reaching recommendations on the evolution of apprenticeships in traditional craft areas, and expansion into new areas, with further and higher education providers to play a key role in supporting industry to design, develop, and deliver apprenticeship training and keep it up to date. It underlined the need for a more open and agile model and the importance of employers and industry, commenting that employers 'should be firmly in the driving seat' (ibid., pp. 19–20).

Dr Mary-Liz Trant
Director, National Apprenticeship Office

This article reflects on the expansion of the national apprenticeship system in Ireland since publication in 2013 of the milestone report *Review of Apprenticeship Training in Ireland*. It offers a summary account of the major developments during that decade of transformation, and it points to the resilience and innovation at its heart, continuing to shape the apprenticeship system into the future.

Development

When the recommendations from the 2013 review began to be implemented, Ireland was still in the shadows of the recession. There were 7,000 apprentices in training and fewer than 3,000 apprenticeship employers. Almost every apprentice was under 25 years old and male, with only 30 women out of c.7000. They were participating in just 27 programmes, in the traditional craft areas of construction, electrical, engineering, and motor. All apprenticeships led to awards at level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

2024 IRELAND'S EDUCATION YEARBOOK

Implementation of the 2013 report has effectively been under way for the past 10 years. A national Apprenticeship Council was set up in 2014 to drive implementation. It oversaw the introduction of new apprenticeships and expansion into areas including technology, biopharma, hospitality, international finance, insurance, advanced manufacturing, and engineering. These new apprenticeships would lead to awards from levels 5 to 10 on the NFQ.

In line with the 2013 recommendations, each new apprenticeship is overseen by an industry-led consortium, which includes a coordinating training provider generally drawn from further or higher education. In 2016, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) produced a set of statutory guidelines for apprenticeships, including guidance on the new model of industry-led consortia and coordinating providers. This marked a departure from the more centralised approach that continued for craft apprenticeships, where the further education and training agency SOLAS remained the coordinating provider.

Current status

As we approach the end of 2024, and in a prospering, full-employment economy, the figures tell their own story. As of the end of September, there are over 28,400 apprentices in training – close to 2,500 of them women – employed by some 9,300 employers. Annual registrations hit a record 8,712 in 2023 and 9,352 in 2024. There are 77 national apprenticeship programmes, spanning a broad range of industries, over 25 of which lead to degree and master's awards, and one at PhD level. A further 23 programmes are due for launch over the next 12–18 months.

All this expansion is the result of an enormous amount of work and commitment from what is now an apprenticeship community of 50,000, including apprentices, employers, social partners, training providers, and support personnel across further and higher education. Increased State investment via the National Training Fund has been crucial, going from €88m in 2013 to €298m in 2024 and with €78m of additional funding confirmed in Budget 2025.

As of the end of September 2024, there are more than 28,400 apprentices in training employed by some 9,300 employers. Of the 28,400 apprentices, 2,500 are women.

Action plan

In April 2021, the government published a new *Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021–2025*. Its aim is to fully achieve the vision for a flexible system as set out in the 2013 review: 'This plan seeks to provide a single system for the future which builds on the well-established strengths of craft apprenticeship and the learning from five years of consortia-led apprenticeship' (Government of Ireland, 2021, p.14). Later, it states:

It is evident from the extensive consultation with stakeholders in the development of the new plan that it will not be viable to significantly expand and develop the apprenticeship system over the next five years without addressing the disparities in governance, funding and responsiveness [between the craft and consortia-led models]. (ibid., p.17)

New governance structures in the plan included establishment of a new National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) to oversee and manage the system as a whole, and a new advisory body, the National Apprenticeship Alliance, to include key employer, apprentice, social partner, and training provider representatives, building on the work of the previous Apprenticeship Council.

The plan includes 63 actions that aim to 'deliver an apprenticeship system that is flexible and responsive, providing a strong value proposition for employers and potential apprentices, is attractive and easy to engage with, and delivers high standards and sought after qualifications' (ibid.).

The goal at the heart of the plan – to create a single integrated system for apprenticeship – is the most transformative and has received perhaps the most intensive debate among partners. The main rationale for creating the integrated model is to ensure that the system is future-proofed and agile. That requires a system with industry at the heart of design and delivery, supported by expert education and training providers and adequate investment to enable growth and continuous enhancement of the experience for both apprentices and employers.

The main rationale for creating the new single integrated model is to ensure that the system is future-proofed and agile.

Parity in funding supports for employers is sought as part of the new model, along with updated governance arrangements for industry-led consortia working with the NAO, and reconfiguration by SOLAS of its involvement in craft apprenticeships, with transfer of its coordinating-provider role to education and training providers. The awarding body or bodies for craft apprenticeships are also being considered; in the future, QQI may no longer be the sole awarding body.

Conclusion

Throughout this period of change, a sense of history is so important and useful. History reminds us that the apprenticeship system has in fact been characterised by periods of transformation since the late 19th century. The ability of not just the system but the people in it to adapt and show resilience and innovation is what has created the highly successful system we have today, and it will support the important work in the coming years to fully achieve the vision set out in 2013 for Ireland's apprenticeship system.

REFERENCES

Government of Ireland (2021) *Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021–2025.* Dublin: Government publications.

Government of Ireland (2013a) R*eview of Apprenticeship Training in Ireland.* Dublin: Government publications.

Government of Ireland (2013b) B*ackground Issues Paper: Apprenticeship Training in Ireland.* Dublin: Government publications.

McCarthy, T. (1977) 'Apprenticeships in Ireland', *Studies Social Policy Series 1977: 33.* Commission of the European Communities.

National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) (2022) *Annual Report and Plans 2023.* Dublin: NAO.

National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) (2023) *Annual Report and Plans 2024.* Dublin: NAO.

National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) (forthcoming) *Plan for a single integrated apprenticeship system in Ireland.* Dublin: NAO.

Women in Learning & Leadership (WILL)

A network to support and inspire future female leaders in education

Female leaders in Irish education

Sharing leadership stories and experiences is a powerful tool for human connection and growth. They can inspire, build empathy, and enable learning. Building strong relationships through networking can also open doors to new opportunities, collaborations, and invaluable support for a leadership journey.

Ireland has a rich history of female leaders who helped shape the landscape of Irish education. A notable first mention is the late Niamh Bhreathnach, best known as the Minister for Education who abolished third-level fees in 1996. Other attributes of her legacy for progressive educational reform include increases in education spending, the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme, and making the Transition Year programme available to all second-level schools. During her time as minister she also introduced the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme, which provoked controversy at the time. Niamh was elected the first woman chairperson of the Labour Party in 1990, and she was a real advocate of the Educate Together movement at a time when the debate on patronage was difficult but vitally important.

Prof. Áine Hyland, former vice president of University College Cork, is another inspiring female leader with a passion for inclusion, a true pioneer in her vision for education at all levels from primary to higher education. Áine was a founder member of the Dalkey School Project during the 1970s, Ireland's first multi-denominational national school since the foundation of the state. She has made an impactful contribution to research, teaching and learning, and to national policy, especially in the areas of investment in education, higher education accreditation, multiple intelligences, and educational disadvantage.

WILL NETWORK

Dr Kathryn Corbett
Co-founder, WILL Network

Rachel O' Connor
Co-founder, WILL Network

Irish education has had many inspirational female leaders. The Women in Learning & Leadership (WILL) Network was set up to share their leadership stories and provide networking opportunities for future leaders in the system. This article describes the importance of sharing leadership stories and the power of networking to inspire future female leaders in education.

For International Women's Day 2023, a momentous panel discussion took place in Maynooth University with a group of female university presidents, which included Dr Linda Doyle (first female provost of Trinity College Dublin), Prof. Kerstin Mey (president of University of Limerick), Prof. Maggie Cusack (president of Munster Technological University), Prof. Eeva Leinonen (president of Maynooth University), and Dr Orla Flynn (president of Atlantic Technological University). Just four years previously, Ireland had not had a single female university president in its 400-year history of higher education. Panel members spoke about their career journey and the importance of developing the pipeline for what comes next for women in leadership in education.

The WILL Network

The education profession in Ireland has a significant female majority, but this is seldom reflected in leadership positions – either in primary, post-primary, further, or higher education. To further explore the barriers and bridges, both personally and professionally, for female leaders in education, the Women in Learning & Leadership (WILL) Network was launched on 8 March 2022. It was founded by Dr Kathryn Corbett, principal of a large senior primary school in Dublin, and Rachel O' Connor, then principal of a large post-primary school in Wexford (her current role is deputy director of the National Association of Principals and Deputies).

The WILL Network was created to provide opportunities for aspiring and inspiring female leaders in education to connect, in order to share their stories about their career journey and leadership style, to discuss their role models, inspirations, and aspirations, and to have important conversations about the sustainability of a leadership role.

We are fortunate that there is no shortage of inspiring female leaders in Irish education. Guest speakers at WILL Network events have included Prof. Patricia Mannix McNamara (head of School of Education, University of Limerick), Dr Lynn Ramsay (director of the Teaching Council), Dr Arlene Foster (director of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment), Niamh Fortune (head of Froebel Department, Maynooth University), Dr Mary Kelly (dean of Hibernia College), Dr Ciara O'Donnell (former director of the Professional Development Service for Teachers), Dr Rachel Farrell (founder of Cyberwise), and Máirín Ní Chéilleacher (assistant secretary general of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation).

Branching out

To broaden perspectives on leadership, the WILL Network has also invited guests from outside the education sector. These have included Claire McGee

The education profession in Ireland has a significant female majority, but this is seldom reflected in leadership positions.

The WILL Network was created to provide opportunities for aspiring and inspiring female leaders in education to connect and to have important conversations about the sustainability of a leadership role.

(Ibec), Maria Walsh MEP, Marguerite Brosnan (CEO of AXA Ireland), Mary Mitchell O'Connor (former Minister of State), Grace Fanning (captain of an Irish naval ship), and Verona Murphy TD. All have generously shared their leadership experiences and habits and talked about the significance of authenticity, creativity, and resilience.

After just two years, the WILL Network has over 2,000 members. It aims to be both responsive and creative in providing a range of connection opportunities for members:

WILL Chats is a live, online, podcast-style conversation with female-leader guest speakers from education, politics, business, and other sectors. Topics have included role models, motivation, sustainable leadership, and women's health.

WILL Clicks is a monthly e-newsletter with relevant leadership finds (such as new resources or information), book reviews, and a spotlight on members' leadership journeys.

WILL Brunch is an in-person event that takes place three times a year. Guest speakers are invited to share their insights on a particular leadership theme.

WILL Chapters is the network's book club. Leadership reads are discussed and shared on a live social-media feed.

Much has been written recently about leadership sustainability in the education sector. Gender is an important aspect of this conversation. While there are many inspirational female leaders in education in Ireland, there is huge value in providing a network where their stories can highlight the real and perceived barriers that exist for women, and how these barriers can be addressed at system level and in terms of leadership professional learning and development. As the saying goes, 'True leaders don't create followers. They create more leaders.'

Reasonable Accommodations in FET

The need for strategic efforts to achieve consistent support for disabled learners

Good progress has been made in introducing a universal-design approach to the further education and training (FET) sector, but significant gaps remain in the provision of more individualised support services for disabled learners. This article shares the findings of research by AHEAD and ETBI on reasonable accommodations in FET and explores a programme of work to address the recommendations made.

Dara Ryder
CEO, AHEAD

Dr Richard Healy
Research and Policy Officer, AHEAD

Fergus Craddock
Inclusion Manager, Education and Training Boards Ireland

Introduction

Further education and training (FET) is acknowledged as an important pathway into employment and further study, in particular for marginalised groups such as disabled learners (DFHERIS, 2022). Across the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), which enrol almost 200,000 learners annually (SOLAS, 2023b), 6.8% of the learner population disclosed a disability through the Programme for Learner Support System in 2021/22 (SOLAS, 2023a). If rates of non-disclosure of disability are like those in higher education (AHEAD, 2024a), it's likely that the real proportion of disabled FET learners is more than twice that figure.

The FET Strategy 2020–24 states that 'addressing the needs of people with disabilities will be a primary focus' and commits to providing 'consistent learner support' (SOLAS, 2020). To achieve this, the *Learner Support in Further Education and Training* framework (SOLAS & ETBI, 2024) proposes a three-tiered model of support (Figure 1).

Figure 1: FET learner support pyramid (SOLAS & ETBI, 2024)

At the base layer, 'supports for all' are driven by universal design (UD) and mainstreaming inclusion initiatives, ensuring that the mainstream learner experience is as inclusive and accessible as possible. In the upper layers, more individualised supports are provided to smaller cohorts of learners with specific needs.

Under the Equal Status Acts, disabled learners have a legal right to these supports, which are known as 'reasonable accommodations' and are designed to level the playing field for them. Examples of common accommodations include assistive technology, extra time in exams, learning support, and personal assistants or interpreters.

Good progress has been made in promoting a UD approach in tertiary education in the base layer of the pyramid, particularly in the area of increasing professional development (Healy et al., 2023). However, reviews of Youthreach, the Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Specific Skills Training, and post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) programmes have all highlighted

inconsistency in provision of individualised disability supports (Indecon, 2020a, 2020b; McGuinness et al., 2018).

That's why AHEAD and ETBI, with support from SOLAS, joined forces to conduct research to better understand the systemic issues acting as barriers to consistent learner support, and plan to address them.

Scoping survey

This research, designed by AHEAD with support from ETBI, used a quota sampling methodology to gather data from ETBs and colleges/centres, exploring the delivery of disability supports from a systems perspective. While the *Reasonable Accommodations in FET* report (AHEAD, 2024b) presents findings at both regional ETB and local college/centre level, this article focuses on ETB-level findings, and implications for national policy.

The research highlighted a general culture of inclusion in FET, but also identified significant gaps in provision of consistent learner support across the sector. See Figure 2 for key quantitative findings at ETB level.

Research highlighted a general culture of inclusion in FET, but also identified significant gaps in provision of consistent learner support across the sector.

Reasonable Accommodations in FET - Key ETB Level Findings

Reasonable Accommodations Policy
75% have a reasonable accommodations policy

Needs Assessment Procedures
47% of policies contain guidance/ procedure for Needs Assessment

Dedicated Staffing
60% have dedicated contact point re provision of disability support

Resourcing/Funding Challenges
52% cited resources for dedicated staffing as biggest challenge to providing consistent support

Communicating Supports
50% have info about disability supports published on website

Figure 2: Key quantitative ETB findings (AHEAD, 2024b)

Policies and procedures

While 75% of ETBs reported having a policy on reasonable accommodations, significant inconsistencies were identified in what the policies covered. For example, just 47% contained a needs assessment procedure, a process widely considered central to developing an appropriate support plan for disabled learners. Qualitative data showed that many existing policies are limited to covering supports provided in assessment, omitting the wider learning experience.

> *There is a policy in development for reasonable accommodations for assessment and examinations. There is a need for a policy on the provision of reasonable accommodations for overall learning. —ETB respondent*

Staffing and professional development

The presence of dedicated staff acting as a contact point in ETBs to coordinate the provision of disability supports varied, with 60% reporting they had such staff. For those that did report a position, their titles varied significantly.

At college/centre level, dedicated staff members were more likely to exist in PLC colleges than other centres.

At college/centre level, dedicated staff members were more likely to exist in PLC colleges than other centres. Where none existed, myriad roles were reported as having responsibility to coordinate supports, including external contractors. Just over half (52%) of ETBs cited a lack of resources for dedicated staffing as the biggest challenge to providing consistent learner support.

Just 45% of ETBs reported that training was provided to relevant staff on provision of reasonable accommodations, and where it was provided, it was sometimes deemed insufficient:

> *Yes, we do provide training, but it is totally inadequate for the needs now facing staff in the college. Need a much more comprehensive CPD plan. — college/centre respondent*

Funding of supports

Inconsistent coverage of the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD), which only covers learners in PLC courses, was widely reported as a barrier to providing consistent support. Respondents reported this leading to different support outcomes for students with similar needs, depending on the FET programme they were undertaking.

The different sources and methods of funding often led to confusion or lack of clarity in colleges/centres about whether and how accommodations were funded:

We don't [access funding for accommodations], and I am unsure if we can access funding for this purpose. I will need to consult the FET director. — college/centre respondent

Communication of supports

Only 50% of ETBs reported having information about the kinds of disability supports that learners can access, and how to access them, on their websites.

There is not clear information published on our website on what learners should do to access disability supports. —ETB respondent

Recommendations and next steps

Key recommendations of the report at national level are shown in Figure 3:

DFHERIS/SOLAS	ETBs	AHEAD
Review and bolster disability support staffing as part of FET Staffing Review. Expand the FSD across all levels of FET to offer consistent access to all FET learners who need it. Reducate barriers to accessing funding, e.g. examine FSD requirement for medical evidence or verification.	Implement/review and update ETBs Reasonable Accommodations Policy. Review ETB web communications - provide clear, consistent information on disability support. Develop communities of practice and foster collaboration between individual colleges/centres on support provision.	Develop guidance/on-demand training for support staff in FET. Gather and share good-practice case studies across the sector. Create ETB self-review tools for reasonable accommodations policies and communication of supports.

Figure 3: Key recommendations (AHEAD, 2024b)

Following publication of the report, AHEAD and ETBI formed the Reasonable Accommodations in FET Feedback Group, consisting of 28 representatives from AHEAD, ETBI, SOLAS, and ETBs across Ireland. Its role is to advise AHEAD on the development of outputs supporting ETBs to self-review and to address ETB-level recommendations in the report. Examples of outputs include a maturity model for ETB disability support services, a reasonable accommodations policy review checklist, a communication of supports checklist, and a self-directed short course for support staff.

Conclusion

With the next FET Strategy 2025–2029 in development, the time is right to embed clear goals in it which drive improvements in the quality and consistency of disability supports across FET. Education and Training Boards across the country are ready to play their part in creating a better FET for learners with disabilities, and AHEAD is ready to support them!

REFERENCES

AHEAD (2024a) *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2022/23.* AHEAD Educational Press.

AHEAD. (2024b) *Reasonable Accommodations in FET Scoping Survey Report.* AHEAD Educational Press. Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) (2022). *Funding the Future: Investing in knowledge and skills: Ireland's competitive advantage.* Dublin: Government publications. https://assets.gov.ie/222798/56d15094-5221-42ba-935a-943970e044e5.pdf.

Healy, R., Ryder, D., and Banks, J. (2023) 'Universal design for learning policy in tertiary education in Ireland: Are we ready to commit?' In: L. Dukes and J. Madeus (Eds.), *Handbook on Higher Education and Disability.* Elgar Publishing.

Indecon (2020a) *Evaluation of Specific Skills Training.* SOLAS. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/9aa70231b7/sst-independent-evaluation-_2020_indecon.pdf.

Indecon (2020b) *Evaluation of Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS).* SOLAS. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/91bd5a18cc/independent-indecon-vtos-report-to-solas.pdf.

McGuinness, S., Bergin, A., Kelly, E., McCoy, S., Smyth, E., Watson, D., and Whelan, A. (2018) *Evaluation of PLC Programme Provision.* Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/83dc934f29/esri_plc_evaluation.pdf.

SOLAS (2020) *Future FET: Transforming Learning, The FET Strategy.* SOLAS. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf.

SOLAS (2023a) *This is FET: Learners with Disabilities 2022.* SOLAS. https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/dfa32cd975/disabilities-fet-report.pdf.

SOLAS (2023b) *This is FET: Facts and Figures 2022.* SOLAS. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/bf2a524405/solas_facts_report_2022.pdf.

SOLAS and ETBI (2024) *Learner Support in Further Education and Training: Towards a Consistent Learner Experience Position Paper.* SOLAS. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/564b3f2877/solas_position_paper_.pdf.

234

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2024**
YEARBOOK

235

A Tertiary Programme Partnership

Milestones, achievements, and factors for inclusion in tertiary development

This article outlines the new national tertiary programme and the partnership between the National Tertiary Office, Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board, and Technological University of the Shannon. It highlights some challenges, milestones, and achievements to date, and some factors for consideration in tertiary development, including universal design for learning and recognition of prior learning. Transversal skills and competences are increasingly recognised and coveted in the workplace, and the article concludes with some of their salient features.

Dr Declan Blackett

Regional Tertiary Manager, National Tertiary Office; Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board; and Technological University of the Shannon

Dr Sarah O'Toole

Regional Tertiary Manager, National Tertiary Office; Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board; and Technological University of the Shannon

Introduction

On 6 December 2022, the then Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), Simon Harris, announced a new policy for the development of a unified tertiary education sector. A new National Tertiary Office (NTO) was soon established within the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Its function was to support arrangements between Education and Training Boards (ETBs), further education and training (FET), and higher education institutions (HEIs), leading to the development of further and higher education degree programmes.

In its first year, or proof-of-concept phase, tertiary degree courses were planned in Business, ICT, Arts, Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction, Health and Welfare across 11 locations, including five HEI–ETB partnerships. With the NTO responsible for coordinating and supporting the development of policy on the initiative, the collaboration between HEIs and ETBs would mean students could start higher-level education in further education and complete their degree in a partner HEI.

LCETB–TUS–NTO partnership

Since 2015, Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board (LCETB) and Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (TUS) have collaborated closely across a range of undertakings. This was strengthened in 2018 and reviewed in 2022. So when the tertiary programme (TP) was set in motion, it continued this collaboration. Key milestones include:

Collaboration in the partnership

» Memorandum of understanding and joint controller agreement establishing the tertiary partnership between LCETB–TUS and the NTO.
» Tertiary steering group to lead a strategic process of substantive progress and collaborating in education and training provision across the region.
» Tertiary working group to operationalise strategic aims and objectives, via a working plan and audit of activities.
» Courses agreed for progression and a memorandum of agreement and due diligence processes developed.
» Coordinated with the Quality Assurance Support Service to capture learner and staff experiences of the TP to date.
» Contributions made to FET quality assurance for planning examinations, internal verification and external authentication, final-year assessments, repeat examinations, and progression to stage 2 of the tertiary degree.

Collaboration across the sector

» Tertiary data-sharing agreements and GDPR controllers established across the partnerships.
» NTO and tertiary management meetings held with Department of Education and HEIs, Regional Skills Forum, CORU (the Health and Social Care Professionals Council), and the Health Service Executive, to foster future collaborations.
» Inputs made to tertiary programme policy: *Tertiary Framework, Communications Strategy, Funding Matrix, Tertiary Risk Registers*, and *Guidance Toolkit for Schools.*

In September 2023 the first students began the programmes after induction sessions. Programme team interactions and collaborations were encouraged and fostered. In the pilot year, two degree programmes began in Business Studies and Computing. For 2024–2025, three degree courses are in place, with requests for others.

The pilot presented logistical, administrative, and operational challenges. However, it also provided a space for partners to reflect on the challenges and opportunities, including for a more robust TP. A key strength has been the pilot's position as part of a multi-sectoral initiative, informed by inputs and expertise

> *The collaboration between HEIs and ETBs would mean students could start higher-level education in Further Education and complete their degree in a partner HEI.*

from partners the NTO, DFHERIS, HEA, and SOLAS. Evaluations of this phase have informed and will enhance subsequent tertiary developments.

Going forward

Current developments include regional and national efforts to identify and include additional ETB or HEI partners, and new tertiary degree courses. Potential factors for consideration in tertiary development include universal design for learning (UDL), recognition of prior learning (RPL), and transversal skills and competences (TSCs).

Universal design for learning

UDL places students at the centre of educational programmes and makes provision for flexibility in how students are taught and engaged with, how information is provided, and how learners respond to and demonstrate their knowledge and skills (Quirke & McCarthy, 2020, p.3). Through multiple means of engagement, representation, action, and expression, UDL presents opportunities for more inclusive learning. It can support teachers/lecturers to anticipate and support a broader range of students, ensuring that they learn more from college instruction (Scott et al., 2003). UDL underscores a commitment to inclusivity, and, as highlighted in the *National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education* (Banks et al., 2024), incorporating UDL principles in tertiary programmes will enhance not only learning environments but also learning experiences, making them more meaningful, beneficial, and productive.

Recognition of prior learning

As we move towards becoming a lifelong learning society (OECD, 2010), students will increasingly be able to take formal, informal, or non-formal education throughout their lives. Lifelong learning opens 'pathways to enrol in institutions at various levels based on RPL' (Staunton, 2021, p.9). RPL incorporates formal, informal, and non-formal learning and is increasingly used nationally and internationally to evaluate knowledge and skills acquired outside the classroom, for recognising competence against a given set of standards, competencies, or outcomes (ibid., p.6). Even though Ireland is 'without a national policy on RPL from which education providers can draw' (ibid., p.9), as the tertiary programme becomes more embedded in the educational landscape, RPL will have an increasing role in facilitating access and ensuring greater take-up of higher education degrees.

Incorporating UDL principles in tertiary programmes will enhance not only learning environments but also learning experiences, making them more meaningful, beneficial, and productive.

Tertiary programmes enable access and widen participation in Higher Education. They are structured to facilitate seamless progression from FE to HE.

Transversal skills and competences

TSCs are 'learned and proven abilities which are commonly seen as necessary or valuable for effective action in virtually any kind of work, learning or life activity' (Hart et al., 2021, p.5). They are termed so because they are not exclusively related to any particular context – occupation, academic discipline, civic or community engagement group, etc. (ibid.). The literature provides some broad categories of TSCs (Skills and Education Group, 2019; Hart et al., 2021; SOLAS, 2023), including problem-solving, critical and innovative thinking, presentation and communication skills, and teamwork and leadership skills. Also included are self-discipline, enthusiasm, perseverance, self-motivation, tolerance, openness and respect for diversity, intercultural understanding, the ability to locate and access information, and the ability to evaluate media content.

In Ireland, SOLAS (2023) has highlighted that certain TSCs made up around two-thirds of all the skills and competences mentioned in recent online job adverts. Developing TSCs not only adds to the quality of a course but has enduring benefits for students and society. A main focus of higher education is to enable students to become graduates with the knowledge, skills, and competences for their own enhancement and that of the world (OECD, 2023). This behoves colleges engaged in tertiary programmes to foster more graduate attributes related to TSCs development in their programmes.

Conclusion

Tertiary programmes enable access and widen participation in higher education. They are structured to facilitate seamless progression from FE to HE and enable students to achieve their learning potential. Through FE–HE collaborations, higher-education opportunities are delivered regionally and in local communities. This collaboration also reflects a unified tertiary education sector. Going forward, integrating UDL, RPL, and TSCs development can lay the foundations for more holistic tertiary degree programmes.

REFERENCES

Banks, J., Burke, K., Cooney, R., Haran, M., Healy, R., Kennedy, A., McHugh, D., Neenan, C., Northridge, J., O'Shaughnessy, T., Plunkett, N., Reale, J., Ryder, D., and Tierney, C. (2024) *ALTITUDE: The National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education: Technical Report.* AHEAD Educational Press.

Hart, J., Noack, M., Plaimauer, C., and Bjørnavoid, J. (2021) *Towards a Structured and Consistent Terminology on Transversal Skills and Competences.* 3rd Report to ESCO Member States Working Group on a Terminology for Transversal Skills and Competences. European Commission: Cedefop.

Higher Education Authority (2022) *National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022–2028.* Dublin: HEA and DFHERIS.

OECD (2010) 'Lifelong learning and adults', *Education Today 2010: The OECD Perspective.* Paris: OECD.

OECD (2023) *OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 OECD Learning Compass 2030.* https://issuu.com/oecd.publishing/docs/e2030-learning_compass _2030-concept_notes?fr=xKAE9_zU1NQ.

Quirke, M. and McCarthy, P. (2020) *A Conceptual Framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for the Irish Further Education and Training Sector: Where Inclusion Is Everybody's Business.* Dublin: Government of Ireland and ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014–2020.

Scott, S., McGuire, J., and Shaw, S. (2003) 'Universal design for instruction: A new paradigm for adult instruction in postsecondary education', *Remedial and Special Education*, 24(6), 369–379.

Skills and Education Group (2019) *Transversal Skills: What are they and why are they so important?* Nottingham, UK: Skills and Education Group.

SOLAS (2023) *Winter Skills Bulletin 2023: Transversal Skills in Ireland's Labour Market* (Q4 2022 – Q3 2023). Dublin: Skills and Labour Market Research Unit, SOLAS.

Staunton, C. (2021) *The Recognition of Prior Learning in the Community Education Sector: The European Agenda for Adult Learning.* Dublin: AONTAS, with funding from the European Commission and SOLAS.

--- ✱✱✱ ---

National Talent Academies

Calling All Creatives

NEWS

NTA Animation and NTA Film & TV Drama Welcome Applications to First Credit Short Film Scheme and Short Film Fund, Now in its Second Year

Psychological Capital
A critical component for FET success

Psychological resources in FET

Funding of Irish further education and training (FET) is driven by labour-market activation policies and prioritises courses linked to employability outcomes. This means that adult learners may successfully acquire a qualification yet lack the hope, agency, persistence, or confidence necessary to compete for and retain employment. While standard education practice accepts the predictive power of qualifications (Steadman, 1995), we argue that this exclusive focus does not fulfil desirable learner goals.

Personal skills and psychological resources are critical learning areas that should not be ignored. Previously, such resources were dismissed by many FET funders and providers as 'touchy-feely' approaches. However, psychological resources – in particular, psychological capital – are now empirically proven to be robust, reliable, and measurable predictors of desirable academic, career, and life outcomes (Brennan & O'Grady, 2022).

SOLAS (2020, p.28) alludes to the desirability of personal resources in terms of 'improved learner confidence, empowerment and engagement; increased appetite for additional study; community development; and enhanced societal engagement and integration'. Yet, at the time of writing, its data collection on the Programme and Learner Support Systems (PLSS) database concentrates exclusively on performance and progression, and it does not require Education and Training Boards (ETBs) to address these aspects in their strategic performance agreements.

These omissions fail to recognise, capture, or fund the development of psychological resources that are critical to maximising learner success over a lifetime. Current stakeholder work to address, capture, and measure the wider benefits of learning also appears to be limited to community education rather than encompassing the full gamut of FET provision.

Dr Aislinn Brennan
Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme Coordinator, Enniscorthy FET Centre, Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board

Dr Maeve O'Grady
Retired Senior Lecturer, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, South East Technological University

Qualifications are valuable as a critical outcome in education practice, based on their predictive power for learners' future. To leverage learner success, attaining qualifications must be combined with developing personal and psychological resources. This article highlights the potential of psychological capital as a robust framework for providers and practitioners to support measurable outcomes of learner success .

Measurement metrics reflect funding priorities, and inevitably FET providers submit their proposals and programme plans to SOLAS in alignment with their understanding of priorities and targets. This places a myopic focus on progression outcomes in the cognitive and psychomotor domains, which are embedded in FET curricula learning outcomes, and neglects the affective, psychological learning domain.

Tending to the psychological is thus neither guaranteed nor consistent but depends largely on individual ETB and practitioner values and resource allocation. Desirable models of transformative education are underpinned by a conscious focus on the psychosocial aspects of teaching and learning (Wells and Claxton, 2002; Baker et al., 2004; Illeris, 2009).

It is often assumed that all FET practitioners have this awareness and agency in their classroom planning and practice. However, many feel confined by the ostensible rigidity of Quality and Qualifications Ireland's (QQI) programme learning outcomes and do not recognise their agency to transcend these. This inconsistent FET process determines the quality and type of outcomes achieved.

There is an appetite among practitioners, providers, and funders to tend to the psychological learning domain. For example, a discussion on the need to widen definitions and measurement was the focus of the *Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education* (2022). A reliable development and measurement framework is now required, and psychological resources – specifically, psychological capital – can offer a robust and rigorous framework that has been successfully used in other countries.

Psychological capital

The idea of psychological capital, also known as PsyCap, originated in positive psychology and comprises four interconnected components: hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, known as HERO.

» *Hope* has the two elements of agency and pathways. Agency means that a person has 'a sense of successful determination in meeting [their] goals', and pathways give 'a sense of [the individual] being able to generate successful plans to meet [those] goals' (Snyder et al., 1991, p.570).
» *Efficacy*, also referred to as confidence in the literature, concerns a person's judgement of their own capacity to execute a task, achieve an outcome, or succeed at an endeavour.
» *Resilience* is a person's capacity to adapt to challenging circumstances in their lives and essentially whether they can bounce back.

The idea of psychological capital originated in positive psychology and comprises four interconnected components: hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism, known as HERO.

» *Optimism* is 'the current expectancy that positive outcomes will occur in the future' (Higgins et al., 2010, p.61); Brennan (2017, p.226) describes optimistic individuals as 'flexible, hopeful, motivated and persistent'.

PsyCap is a proven predictor of academic performance and engagement, flourishing, interdependent happiness, positive affect, employability, career success, and wellbeing (Brennan & O'Grady, 2022). Increasing international research and practitioner focus on PsyCap across educational levels means the topic has become part of the educational leadership discourse. It is malleable, has valid and reliable measurement scales (ibid.), and is aligned with FET strategic priorities. FET practitioners, providers, and funders need to work together to enhance the HERO in FET learners and staff.

The following diagram depicts areas of action, routes to action, and outcomes of action.

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

242

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2024**
YEARBOOK

243
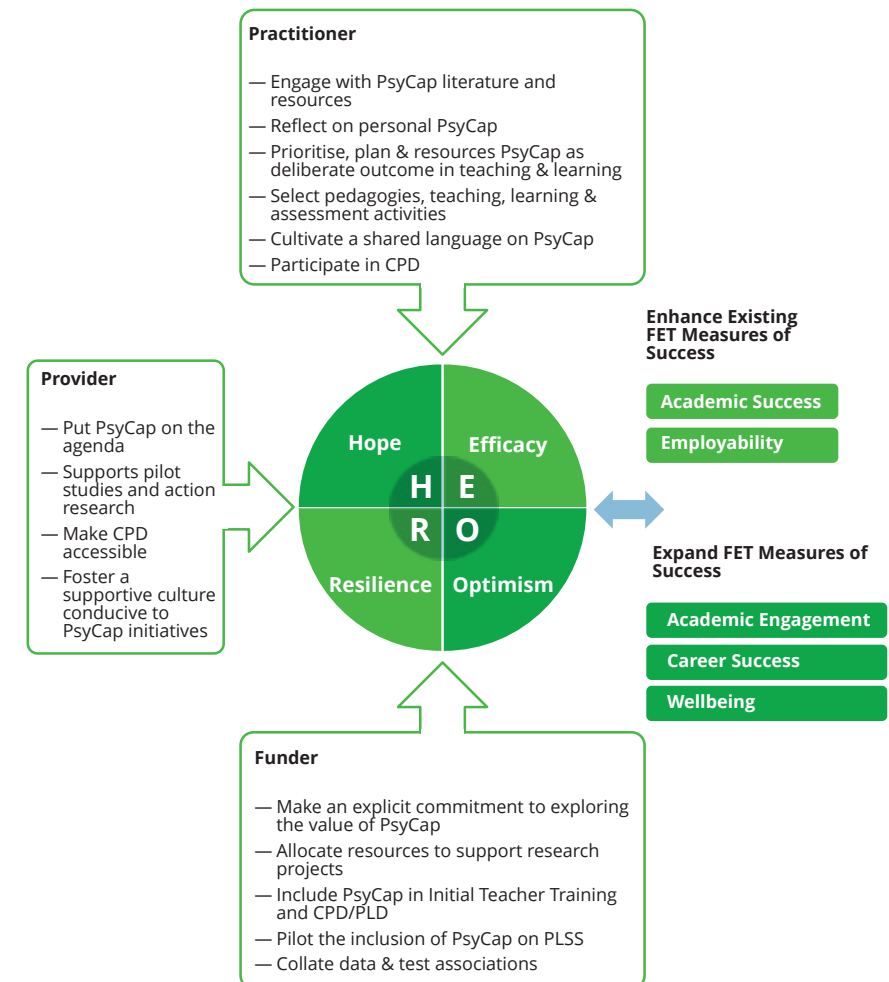
We call for FET stakeholders to advance and measure learners' hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism by using intentional interventions and to join the global community of research and practice in leveraging PsyCap for educational successes.

REFERENCES

Baker, J., Lynch, K., Cantillon, S., and Walsh, J. (2004) *Equality: From Theory to Action.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Brennan, A. (2017) 'The mediating role of optimism on the relationship between leader- member exchange (LMX) and employee engagement: Evidence from the Irish further education and training (FET) sector', Waterford Institute of Technology. https://repository.wit.ie/3262/.

Brennan, A. and O'Grady, M. (2022) 'Psychological capital: The missing link', *The Adult Learner: The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education 2022,* pp. 46–67.

Higgins, M., Dobrow, S.R., and Roloff, K.S. (2010) 'Optimism and the boundaryless career: The role of developmental relationships', *Journal of Organizational Behavior,* 31(5), 749–769.

Illeris, K. (2009) 'A comprehensive understanding of human learning'. In: K. Illeris (Ed.), *Contemporary Theories of Learning*, pp. 7–20. London: Routledge.

Snyder, C.R., Harris, C., Anderson, J.R., Holleran, S.A., Lori, M., Irving, L.M., Sigmon, S.T., Yoshinobu, L., Gibb, J., Langelle, C., and Harney, P. (1991) 'The will and the ways: Development and validation of an individual-differences measure of hope', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 60(4), 570–585.

SOLAS (2020) *Future FET: Transforming learning.* www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf.

Steadman, S. (1995) 'The assessment of outcomes'. In: J. Burke (Ed.), *Outcomes, Learning and the Curriculum: Implications for NVQs and Other Qualifications*, pp. 201–212. London: Falmer Press.

Wells, G. and Claxton, G. (Eds.) (2002) *Learning for Life in the 21st Century: Sociocultural Perspectives on the Future of Education.* Oxford: Blackwell.

The Importance of Listening to the Learner Voice in FET

Introduction

Learner voice is a concept in education which recognises that learners should influence the education system and be valued as partners throughout design and decision-making. Research increasingly suggests that when learners shape their own education, we see benefits for learners, educators, the institution, and the education system (Davies & Yamashita, 2007).

The move towards a learner-driven culture recognises that learners are part of a community, and the best way of empowering communities is to listen to them and act upon their views. When people have a voice and an influence on decisions and outcomes, they are more likely to participate and thereby to learn. They can be more active in their learning and shape their own outcomes (Walker & Logan, 2008).

Purpose of adult education and learner voice

It can be helpful to consider what the purpose of adult education and learner voice is. The Irish adult education system has an interesting history and is understood differently by different people. Community education is deeply rooted in feminist and working-class social movements (Connolly, 2010). At the same time, some programmes concentrate on vocational education and prioritise skills and employment.

In 2014, the Economic and Social Research Institute found that most stakeholders viewed FET as addressing both social inclusion and labour market agendas. This is reflected in key policies, including the Programme for Government (Government of Ireland, 2020), and the 'Future FET' strategy (SOLAS, 2020). State agencies including SOLAS and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) have learner voice representatives on their boards.

Dearbháil Lawless
CEO, AONTAS
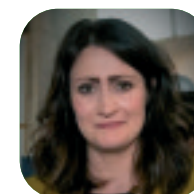
Dr Lindsay Malone
Director of FET, Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board

This article explores the concept of learner voice in adult education, highlighting its importance in allowing learners to shape their educational experiences and decisions. It looks at learner voice initiatives, both local and national, in the further education and training sector, and it illustrates the value of partnerships in fostering meaningful learner involvement.

However, in adult and community education programmes underpinned by social-justice values, learner voice is often viewed as an activity that creates representative opportunities for people from marginalised communities (McLeod, 2011). It is a space to listen to the voices of the 'seldom heard' (Tangen 2009; Flynn, 2013). Angus et al. (2013) argue that 'the voices of disadvantaged and marginalised students can help to provoke the kind of social, economic and political reform that can result in a more democratic society in which social justice and equality can prevail' (p.572).

Lundy's (2007) model for voice informs the practice of the FET Learner Forum. She argues that space must be provided to express views, voice should be facilitated, views must be listened to, and contributions must be acted upon, as appropriate. While there are diverse intentions and understandings at play in the sector, learner voice is vital in improving the learner experience and the quality of programmes, and it contributes to democracy.

What's happening across FET?

The FET sector has seen significant growth in learner voice activities recently as a result of the National FET Learner Forum, under 'Future FET' (SOLAS, 2020). This Forum is led by AONTAS and delivered in partnership with the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). A grassroots approach is used to ensure that FET policy continues to respond to learners' needs. The Forum has reached thousands of learners since its launch.

The FET sector has seen significant growth in Learner Voice activities recently as a result of the National FET Learner Forum, under 'Future FET' (SOLAS, 2020).

The project consists of a national event and a series of regional events held at ETBs across Ireland each year. Adult learners' experiences are shared with SOLAS and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science to ensure change from the ground up. Nationally, organisations such as the National Adult Literacy Agency and AHEAD also contribute to learner voice. Some ETBs have facilitated learner voice councils or groups; others undertake learner surveys. A diverse array of learner voice activities takes place locally across adult education provision.

The importance of partnership

The Forum has enabled adult learners to influence FET policy in a structured way for the first time in Ireland. This evolved through the development of the SOLAS FET Strategy (2014–2019), as a commitment was made to listen to, and consult with, learners in FET. This commitment is exemplified in the strategy's objective to 'respond to the needs of learners', which identified the establishment of a National FET Learner Forum as an action.

Learner Voice, at one end, is about keeping learners informed on how decisions are taken. At the other end, it focuses on learner empowerment, where decision-making about education is negotiated and shared with learners (Walker & Logan, 2008).

Local initiatives are happening across the ETBs, such as the 'My Voice, My Choice' initiative developed by Waterford and Wexford ETB with support from South East Technological University (SETU). The initiative shows an inclusive approach to engaging learners with intellectual disabilities in higher education. Learners were registered to FET programmes at QQI levels 2 and 3, and their classes were delivered on the SETU Waterford campus. Learners could engage in relevant QQI programmes while having a university experience. This initiative reflects the importance of including learners in decisions about where they feel they belong and where they want to learn.

Considered as a continuum, learner voice, at one end, is about keeping learners informed on how decisions are taken. At the other end, it focuses on learner empowerment, where decision-making about education is negotiated and shared with learners (Walker & Logan, 2008). Learners are offered greater opportunities to have their voices heard, affect outcomes, and bring about change.

Where to next?

ETBs remain well-positioned to facilitate local learner forums and councils while working with AONTAS as part of the National Learner Forum. Internationally, the 'Voice of the Learner 2.0' project is in development between AONTAS and CINOP (an education consultancy and research institute) and the ABC Foundation (an advocacy group that supports people with literacy). The aim is to develop a learner voice model that can be replicated across Europe (AONTAS, 2024a), offering new opportunities to examine and evolve our learner voice practices in Ireland.

REFERENCES

Angus, L., Golding, B., Foley, A., and Lavender, P. (2013) 'Promoting learner voice in VET: Developing democratic, transformative possibilities or further entrenching the status quo?', *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 65(4), 560–574.

AONTAS (2024a) Enhancing Learner Voice Across Europe: The 'Voice of the Learner 2.0' Project. www.aontas.com/knowledge/news/enhancing-learner-voice-across-europe-the-voice-of-the-learner-20-project.

AONTAS (2024b) Learner Voice. www.aontas.com/community/learner-voice.

Connolly, B. (2010) 'Community Education: Perspectives from the Margins'. In: P. Peterson, E. Baker, and B. McGaw (Editors-in-Chief), *International Encyclopedia of Education*, third edition, pp. 120–126.

Davies, L. and Yamashita, H. (2007) *School Councils – School Improvement.* School Councils UK.

Flynn, P. (2013) 'Authentic listening to student voice and the transformative potential to empower students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties

in mainstream schools'. PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin. http://hdl.handle.net/2262/67953.

Government of Ireland (2020) Programme for Government: Our Shared Future. www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e05d-programme-for-government-our-shared-future/.

Lundy, L. (2007) '"Voice" is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–942

McLeod, J. (2011) 'Student voice and the politics of listening in higher education', *Critical Studies in Education*, 52(2), 179–189.

SOLAS (2020) Future FET: Transforming Learning. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf.

Tangen, R. (2009) 'Conceptualising quality of school life from pupils' perspectives: A four-dimensional model', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 8, 829–844.

Walker, L. and Logan, A. (2008) *Learner Engagement*. UK: Future Lab.

✳✳✳

Influencing, inspiring, and shaping the direction of FET in Ireland

On 27th November 2024, up to 100 adult learners From Dublin met at the Maldron Hotel in Tallaght for a regional National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum meeting. The event provided a platform for learners to share their experiences and contribute to the future direction of further education and training in Ireland.

The National FET Learner Forum is a collaborative initiative involving AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation; SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority; and local Education and Training Boards.

Every year, thousands of learners from across Ireland participate in the forum, sharing their educational experiences and insights.

Harnessing the Power of Immersive Virtual Reality

A case study in healthcare assistant training

Introduction

Immersive virtual reality (IVR) is increasingly a feature in education and training. It is therefore important to understand the role it can play in facilitating learning. IVR can place learners into an environment to participate in realistic and interactive scenarios. One of its most important contributions is that it offers learners repeated, safe practice of complex and demanding tasks.

In education, IVR can transform how learners learn by making the experience more engaging and interactive. This helps them understand subjects better by linking what they learn in theory with practical applications. It prepares them with the confidence to tackle future challenges (Marougkas et al., 2023).

Case study

In 2024, Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board launched its immersive virtual reality content required for two skills demonstrations which are part of the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) level 5 Full Healthcare Support Award. These skills demonstrations are: (1) Carry out a care check on a patient, and (2) Carry out a bed bath on a patient. The creation of these scenarios in a virtual hospital room is facilitating teaching, learning and assessment of learners.

Three modes of delivery are available. Practice mode includes visual and auditory prompts to help teach learners the correct steps in the task. Revision mode enables the task to be practised without the visual and auditory prompts. Exam mode, which is without any prompts, is accessed when the learner is carrying out their final assessment. Learners are externally displayed as avatars in the virtual hospital room, and the sessions are recorded and used as evidence to show completion of the skills demonstrations to an external authenticator.

Mary Walsh O'Shea

Adult Education Officer, Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board

Immersive virtual reality is increasingly a feature in education and training. It is therefore important to understand the role it can play in facilitating learning. This article reviews a case study from Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board, with learners performing tasks in a virtual hospital room and providing feedback on the experience.

Learners' insights and experiences

In April 2024, learners began their healthcare module feeling a mix of excitement, curiosity, and some nervousness about using this new technology. Feedback was collected through interviews after completion of the module. Common themes emerged: learners found real engagement through interaction, presence, and autonomy. They highlighted that the realistic environment allowed them to actively participate by using items like blood pressure monitors and thermometers, checking pulses, and observing chest wall respirations.

Learners spoke about a stronger sense of presence because of the interactive and realistic environment, which enriched their learning experience. One learner discussed career paths, noting how IVR mimics real-world settings so accurately that it might help people make wise career decisions. Another learner, who had no prior knowledge of working in healthcare, felt that the authentic appearance of the virtual hospital room would benefit her when she begins working in healthcare.

The ability to perform tasks autonomously, free from distractions, was crucial for some learners. They felt that when they donned the headset, they were truly immersed in the environment, with no sense of being observed, as the outside world was completely out of sight. This allowed them to focus on their tasks; even if they made mistakes, there were no consequences, but another opportunity to practise and get it right.

Challenges could arise for learners if they had never used IVR before. Getting accustomed to using the controllers for picking up objects or navigating the room required a certain level of skill. While this was not viewed negatively, it was noted that time for practice needed to be included. Transitioning from the virtual environment back to the real world could require some adjustment, which learners felt needed to be taken into consideration.

Alignment with educational theories

From the learner feedback presented here, the immersive experience mirrors principles of experiential learning, where learning occurs through active participation and direct engagement with real-world scenarios (Dewey, 1938). Dewey advocated for authentic learning experiences, believing that education should incorporate real-life environments and challenges. The authentic layout of the virtual hospital room provided learners with a practical and genuine context, fostering deeper understanding and facilitating meaningful learning experiences, in alignment with Dewey's educational philosophy.

Transitioning from the virtual environment back to the real world could require some adjustment which learners felt needed to be taken into consideration.

One of the main benefits of incorporating immersive virtual reality into education is that it offers a more engaging learning experience, allowing learners to be transported to realistic environments.

Autonomy was identified as an important part of the experience. Putting on the headset effectively isolated learners from the real world, allowing them to focus solely on the task at hand. This can be connected to principles of constructivist theory, as it emphasises how autonomy enables learners to explore and engage with the environment independently, crafting a personalised learning experience that fosters deeper understanding. The absence of distractions is essential in facilitating the construction of knowledge and learning.

Situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) works alongside the virtual environment here, where learners can realistically simulate tasks. This theory supports the idea that this immersion can help them not only acquire practical skills but also gain insights into the nature of the profession. This could also be linked to social cognitive career theory, which looks at how people decide on careers (Lent et al., 1994).

Conclusion

One of the main benefits of incorporating immersive virtual reality into education is that it offers a more engaging learning experience, allowing learners to be transported to realistic environments. Feedback from this case study showed learners' positive experiences, and this article has shown how these experiences link with established educational theories.

It is important for educators to incorporate emerging technologies that enhance teaching, learning, and assessment. If IVR is to be considered a serious pedagogical tool in education, consideration must be given to how and where it aligns with educational theories. Thorough induction is essential for learners to become accustomed to the virtual environment, allowing them to navigate and interact confidently without too many challenges.

REFERENCES

Chang, A.A., Kazemi, E., Esmaeili, V., and Davies, M.S. (2023) 'The effectiveness of virtual reality training: A systematic review', *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*, 1–19. DOI: 10.1080/01608061.2023.2240767

Dewey, J. (1938) *Experience and Education*. Simon & Schuster.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge University Press.

Lege, R. and Bonner, E. (2020) 'Virtual reality in education: The promise, progress, and challenge', *The JALT CALL Journal*, 16(3), 167–180. DOI: 10.29140/jaltcall.u16n3.388

Lent, R.W., Brown, S.D., and Hackett, G. (1994) 'Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance', *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, 45(1), 79–122. DOI: 10.1006/jvbe.1994.1027

Marougkas, A., Troussas, C., Krouska, A., and Sgouropoulou, C. (2023) 'Virtual reality in education: A review of learning theories, approaches and methodologies for the last decade', *Electronics (Basel)*, 12(13), 2832. DOI: 10.3390/electronics12132832

Towards Consistent Learner Support in Further Education and Training

Lessons from other sectors

The newly published position paper 'Learner Support in Further Education and Training: Towards a Consistent Learner Experience' from SOLAS and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), and the accompanying framework, are very welcome documents. Our hope is that they will start a strong national conversation on what we want supports for adults in further education and training (FET) to look like.

The publications touch on many aspects of learner support, without getting lost in the sheer variety of educational settings that FET operates in. This article will not focus on guidance or disability supports, as both topics warrant separate treatment and we would be unable to do them justice here.

We are delighted across the sector to have the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) expanded to include all FET learners, but this will require significant increases in the associated budget. Similarly, while we want guidance to be uniform across all FET provision, the steps to achieve this are beyond the scope of this article. Instead, we will focus on the revolution in supports in post-primary, professional learning and development for staff, personal assistants, and overall student experience.

Importance of consistent supports

Consistent supports in FET are crucial. Some courses may be provided in multiple centres across the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Different managers may emphasise different aspects of education, such as experience, wellbeing, or sports, but they have limited resources to create both the academic and social aspects of their college.

Blake Hodkinson

Director of Operations and Quality (FET), City of Dublin Education and Training Board

The recently published position paper 'Learner Support in Further Education and Training: Towards a Consistent Learner Experience', and its accompanying framework, present a valuable opportunity to reshape supports for adults in further education and training (FET) in Ireland. This article looks at the potential next steps on the journey.

Imagine a learner who attends a centre where the supports are less developed than they require, or perhaps more specialised. This learner might have had a better outcome at a college offering the same qualification in the same ETB but with differently designed supports. Every ETB needs to ensure that supports in each centre are as similar as possible, providing roughly equal opportunities for success.

Learning from post-primary

The introduction of the General Allocation Model (GAM) marked a sea change in student support in the post-primary sector in Ireland. For example, learners no longer had to be assessed to access supports; schools were allocated teaching hours and distributed them as the students required. As a principal managing a post-primary and FET college, I witnessed firsthand how evidence-backed approaches can transform schools and education delivery. We need a similar revolution in FET.

Let's invite the inspectors who researched the GAM to share their knowledge and discuss what FET learner supports might look like. In Marino College, we changed the format of learning support by replacing a referral-only system to a drop-in support room. We redecorated the room and put in cool chairs and PCs. Teachers were in the room at dedicated times to help learners. They were led by a teacher who had recently completed a master's in Inclusion and Special Education.

In Marino College, we changed the format of learning support by replacing a referral-only system to a drop-in support room.

These changes led to significant improvement in certification rates, from 60% to 82% for the long-term unemployed on the Back to Education Initiative courses in one academic year. This was universal design for learning (UDL) at its finest – it was not about being referred but about students seeking assistance. Sometimes it was on how to structure an assignment, where, with the right advice, the learner might not need to visit the support room again that year.

Staff professional development, and learning assistants

What qualifications should FET staff have to work in learning support? We have been driving professional learning and development across the sector, but what should we aim for in qualifications? Over the last 10 years, we have encouraged staff to engage in special and inclusive education, with some studying at diploma and master's level. In the City of Dublin, we teamed up with Trinity College Dublin to develop a certificate, diploma, and master's in Inclusion and Diversity for FET Practitioners.

We think ETBs are inclusive, but we need to unpack what inclusive really means and see how we can do more. The bigger question is what qualifications we

want staff to have to ensure consistency of learning support. We have been engaging heavily in UDL through AHEAD and University College Dublin, which has helped staff become more aware of the simple things we can do to improve the quality of the learning environment. As a sector, we feel there should be a conversation on what training or qualification will help us deliver the goal of consistent learner supports.

There is also the question of learning assistants for the few learners who need additional supports. ETBs do not currently have a staff category of personal assistant or special needs assistant–type grade that might aid students. ETBs have to contract in the service, which makes them vulnerable to not having supports in place when learners begin their journey. We need to discuss how a personal assistant for an adult should perform their role so that the learner's experience is enhanced but not dominated by the support.

Enhancing the learner experience

I'd like you to close your eyes and remember the best memory you have from college. For most of us, it is likely a sporting or cultural memory. From my college days, I have few fond memories of econometrics or microeconomics but dozens of rich kayaking memories. Without these sporting and cultural engagements, I might have faded from college.

As an ETB, we run an annual calendar of weekly events, such as a Zombie Run at Halloween, to enrich the learner experience. Learners from different courses become involved in the event, from event managers to beauty or music students, all raising money for charity. Focusing on the student experience in FET can help more learners achieve their goals by encouraging them to feel part of something bigger than just the qualification.

Focusing on the student experience in FET can help more learners achieve their goals by encouraging them to feel part of something bigger than just the qualification.

Conclusion

FET has a chance to make similar improvements to those made in post-primary education in providing learner support. We are in the fortunate position of being able to learn from their experiences and have a faster revolution. The following steps need to occur:

1. We need to have a national conversation to discuss what we want consistent supports to look and feel like across all FET settings.
2. We need to determine the qualifications we want to promote across the ETB sector to achieve consistent learner support.
3. We need to define the role of personal assistants across the sector and the qualifications we would like those staff to have.

4. We need to focus on the learner experience, including all cultural and sporting activities.
5. We should leverage the ground-breaking work of the post-primary inspectorate by arranging for them to share key insights from their national transformational journey, which will inform the FET changes.

REFERENCES

SOLAS and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) (2024a) 'Learner Support in Further Education and Training: Towards a Consistent Learner Experience. A Framework Guide'. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/acc9ed44ba/solas_framework_.pdf. Dublin: SOLAS.

SOLAS and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) (2024b) 'Learner Support in Further Education and Training: Towards a Consistent Learner Experience Position Paper'. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/564b3f2877/solas_position_paper_.pdf. Dublin: SOLAS.

✳✳✳

Free Pre-University Programme for Mature Learners

Mary Immaculate College Limerick offers a free 24-hour certificate programme aimed at mature learners over the age of 22.

The programme runs over eight weeks and features core subjects including History and Philosophy, and skills in Academic Writing.

On successful completion of the programme, learners receive a Level 6 Special Purpose Award.

Dr Paul O'Brien, Coordinator of the PUP Programme, explains:

"We look forward to offering this programme to those in our communities whose educational experiences and opportunities in their earlier years may have been limited, and who wish to continue their education through creating a progressive pathway into university."

Classes take place in MIC Limerick, one morning per week, 10.00am to 1pm.

For further information contact rachael.finucane@mic.ul.ie

QQI Level 6 OEM Engineering Apprenticeship

OEM Engineering Apprentices study a diverse range of engineering modules including mechanics, electronics, hydraulics, pneumatics, robotics and PLCs.

Increasingly, more school leavers are choosing apprenticeship programmes where they get to experience practical training alongside academic study rather than pursuing more traditional full-time third level courses.

The apprenticeship route offers an opportunity to gain real world experience and develop an expertise in a chosen field, while gaining valuable hands-on experience. One of the most attractive aspects of apprenticeship programmes is getting paid to learn, while gaining an industry recognised qualification that offers great employability prospects.

The OEM Engineering Apprenticeship, managed by Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board in collaboration with Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board, is a three-year, QQI Level 6 programme. The course consists of on-the-job learning which takes place within the company and 16-weeks annually attending college at either the Monaghan Institute Campus or Raheen Training Centre in Limerick.

The OEM Engineering Apprenticeship was designed by industry, to meet current needs within the OEM sector and to help futureproof local and national companies going forward in terms of both human skills and technical skills.

The programme is suitable for those currently employed in OEM companies, school leavers, career switchers and mature applicants wishing to pursue a career as a qualified OEM Engineering Technician. On completion of this programme, the learners will receive a QQI Level 6 Advanced Certificate in OEM Engineering and will be qualified as OEM Engineering Technicians, a widely sought-after skill set in the manufacturing, installation, servicing and commissioning sectors, both nationally and globally.

Johnson & Johnson, Irish Rail, Combilift, Dennison Trailers and Abbey Machinery are just a few of the employers currently recruiting for OEM Apprentices.

🌐 www.oemapprenticeship.ie
✉ oemapprenticeship@cmetb.ie
📞 047 84900

Higher Education

A Transformative Year in Higher Education in Ireland

Introduction

Investment in higher education is a commitment to support the country's future economy and society. I write this overview article for *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2024* in the immediate aftermath of Budget 2025, during which the welcome news of a €50 million increase in annual core funding of higher education for 2025 was announced, with this to rise to €150 million by 2029 under *Funding the Future*. This additional funding goes towards closing the funding gap that was originally identified by government in 2022 and will help ensure that universities can effectively support student success and thus produce quality graduates to meet the needs of industry and society.

Future skills

The relationship between universities and the labour market has been a focal point in recent years. Irish universities continue to liaise closely with industry partners to align educational programmes with the needs of the modern economy, particularly in high-growth sectors such as technology, biotechnology, and the green economy. Initiatives like the Human Capital Initiative (HCI) aim to future-proof graduates by equipping them with the skills needed for the jobs of tomorrow. The *2023 National Skills Bulletin* reports that an increase in the supply of skilled workers will be needed in areas such as engineering, science, and healthcare over the coming years.

The demand for apprenticeships in higher education, to serve national priorities such as construction and renewable energy, continues to grow, with over 27,400 apprentices currently contributing to Ireland's skilled workforce. The voice of industry, via Ibec, in supporting the call for investment into higher education via the National Training Fund (NTF) in its pre-Budget submission, strongly reflects the importance of the skilled

Professor Veronica Campbell

President, South East Technological University

This overview article reflects on trends in higher education in 2024 and comments on Budget 2025's implications for the sector. Progress has certainly been achieved, with commitment from government to digital transformation, research excellence, partnership with enterprise, and internationalisation. For the trajectory to continue, Irish universities must play an ongoing role in addressing social mobility, national competitiveness, and the global challenges of the 21st century.

talent pipeline for many enterprise sectors across Ireland and the criticality of workers who possess specific skills and knowledge alongside digital and green literacies.

One specific national skills deficit, recently identified, is in veterinary medicine, given Ireland's buoyant agri-food sector, pending retirements in the veterinary profession, and the numbers of students studying veterinary medicine outside of Ireland. In September 2024, Ministers O'Donovan and McConalogue announced during the National Ploughing Championships that South East Technological University (SETU) and Atlantic Technological University (ATU) would each provide a new degree in veterinary medicine. As president of SETU, this was certainly a moment of great celebration, but it also reflects an endorsement of the technological universities (TUs) and, most importantly, a step towards ensuring sufficient places for prospective students with the passion and aptitude to study veterinary medicine in the south-east and north-west regions as well as in University College Dublin.

Technology

The rapid evolution of digital technologies such as generative artificial intelligence has been to the fore in universities this year as the associated challenges and opportunities have been explored. The GenAI: N3 project, funded by N-TUTORR, is a national project involving the technological higher education sector and is an example of a collaborative initiative that is supporting students and staff in the applications of GenAI, including in the context of assessment frameworks.

Technology in the classroom continues to stimulate innovation in teaching, learning, and assessment practices. The blending of online and face-to-face learning allows students to access materials at their own pace while benefiting from in-person tutorials and practical workshops. This flexibility is particularly beneficial to students who are also working adults and part-time students, aligning with Ireland's commitment to lifelong learning. However, challenges remain, particularly in ensuring equal access to technology for all students and addressing the digital divide.

Access and inclusion

Ensuring participation in higher education remains a national priority under the *National Access Plan 2022–2028*. Significant progress has been made, with more institutions offering scholarships, mentorship programmes, and support services tailored to the needs of marginalised students. Technology has also played a role, with digital learning tools making education more accessible to those with physical or learning disabilities.

One specific national skills deficit, recently identified, is in veterinary medicine, given Ireland's buoyant agri-food sector and the numbers of students studying veterinary medicine outside of Ireland.

Several degree programmes are now available through a new further to higher education access and progression route administered by the National Tertiary Office aligning to the unified tertiary model. Now in the second year of intake, the insights from the pilot phase, including the student experience, will provide an informative evidence base. Sarah Sartori's article in this edition of *Ireland's Education Yearbook* will share her perspectives and experience with this new access scheme.

One key area of concern in access to higher education remains the availability and cost of student housing. The rising cost of living, particularly, has placed a strain on students from lower-income backgrounds. While the government has committed to building more affordable student accommodation, supply has not kept pace with demand, making it difficult for some students to fully engage in university life. Addressing these challenges is critical if Ireland is to fulfil its goal of creating a truly inclusive higher education system.

In August 2024, Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland came into existence as Ireland's new research and innovation funding agency.

Research and innovation

In August 2024, Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland came into existence as Ireland's new research and innovation funding agency, with a central role in realising the ambitions of *Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy*.

Irish universities are strong research hubs, contributing to advances in fields ranging from the sciences to the humanities. Irish institutions play a pivotal role in global research networks, with an increasing emphasis on research that addresses societal challenges such as climate change, health disparities, and digital transformation. *Quantum 2030*, Ireland's first national strategy for quantum technologies, was launched in 2024, and Ireland also joined CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research. These developments demonstrate the key role that Irish research must play in technological advancement.

One component of *Impact 2030* relates to the new TUs' contribution to the research and innovation ecosystem. This is to be enabled, in part, by the TU-RISE scheme, launched in 2024, with a focus on capacity-building and research in support of enterprise.

It is important to also recognise the importance of humanities and social sciences in addressing societal challenges. As Ireland faces complex issues such as migration, political polarisation, and a rise in mental health problems, universities have a role in contributing to public discourse and engaging in research that informs policy decisions. Universities are increasingly adopting open-access policies, making research more widely available to the public and contributing to a broader culture of knowledge-sharing. This shift reflects

Ireland's commitment to fostering an inclusive and democratic research environment, where knowledge is seen as a public good.

Global perspectives

The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* identified internationalisation as a key priority, and by 2024, Irish institutions have strongly embraced this vision. The launch of *Global Citizens 2030: Ireland's International Talent and Innovation Strategy* aims to position Ireland as the preferred destination for international learners, researchers, and innovators. Most of Ireland's higher education institutions (HEIs) are already members of vibrant partnerships in the European University Alliance, a flagship EU initiative to build a European Education Area. A global perspective is essential for a flourishing Irish higher education environment by creating opportunities for student mobility, collaborative research projects, cross-border academic networks, and joint programmes that collectively enhance Ireland's global profile.

Irish HEIs' deep engagement in the European University Alliance creates immense opportunity for our students and staff. As part of *EU-CONEXUS*, the European University for Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability, students from SETU recently developed a seawater drone in Ireland and brought it to the coast of Spain for prototype testing in partnership with students and staff from other universities in a European University Alliance. Relationships were formed, pan-European perspectives were shared, and an applied research project was advanced!

Outlook: opportunities and challenges

Much has been achieved in higher education in 2024: a new national research agency; allocation of funding from the NTF; the unified tertiary system; expansion of human and animal healthcare programmes; the European Universities; ongoing development of the TUs; and focused effort on inclusion, lifelong learning, and skills – to highlight a few.

As we look ahead to the future of higher education in Ireland, several opportunities and challenges stand out. The sector is well positioned to continue its trajectory of development and innovation. The commitment to digital transformation, research excellence, partnership with enterprise, and internationalisation provides a solid foundation for future success. The increasing focus on inclusion, lifelong learning, and sustainability ensures that Irish universities will play an ongoing role in addressing social mobility, national competitiveness, and the global challenges of the 21st century.

A global perspective is essential for a flourishing Irish higher education environment by creating opportunities for student mobility, collaborative research projects, cross-border academic networks, and joint programmes that collectively enhance Ireland's global profile.

Significant challenges must also be addressed. Student housing, the digital divide, and adequate investment into the higher education system are critical issues that will require ongoing attention. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, Irish higher education must navigate the complexities of globalisation, ensuring that it remains competitive while safeguarding the values of equity and access.

The developments in Irish higher education in 2024 reflect a sector that continues to embrace innovation, inclusion and belonging, and global engagement. Irish universities are at the fulcrum of preparing students for the challenges of tomorrow and shaping a more equitable future for all.

*** *

Anna May McHugh awarded honorary doctorate by SETU

Anna May McHugh, managing director of the National Ploughing Association (NPA) and a trailblazing advocate for the Irish agricultural industry, was awarded an honorary doctorate by SETU at a ceremony at the Kilkenny Road Campus in Carlow on Friday, 1 November.

This honorary doctorate, the most prestigious accolade a university can bestow, was presented to the Laois-native in recognition of her exceptional contributions to the agricultural community and her leadership in promoting the industry.

Anna May has dedicated her career to enhancing the visibility and viability of agriculture in Ireland. Under her stewardship, the NPA has expanded its reach and influence, transforming the National Ploughing Championships into one of Europe's largest outdoor events, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. This event not only showcases Ireland's rich agricultural heritage, but serves as a vital platform for education, innovation, and networking within the industry.

Designing Futures at University of Galway

Promoting student success, engagement, and belonging

Introduction

In 2020, the Irish government, through the Higher Education Authority (HEA), funded 22 projects across Ireland's higher education ecosystem, with the goal of transforming key aspects of students' tertiary-level educational experience. The HEA's Human Capital Initiative, Pillar 3, emphasised a strong focus on the graduate attributes and skills required by industry and society, and for living and thriving in the complex and challenging world of today and tomorrow.

Designing Futures (DF) at University of Galway is funded with €7.57m for five years, 2020–2025. It is designed to achieve key performance indicators across five priorities for higher education. Its central remit is to promote student engagement, success, and belonging, enriching students' experience and helping them develop the attributes and skills they will need to maximise their potential and college experience, and their life and career beyond academe. DF works closely with industry and creative and enterprise partners, including Aerogen, Boston Scientific, Channel Mechanics, Galway International Arts Festival, Mbryonics, Medtronic, Veryan, Rent the Runway, and SAP.

Domains of innovation

Designing Futures' successful proposal conceptualised the five areas of innovation as a connected design, in a mutually supportive configuration. Each DF domain aligns with national and international educational policy and the latest research on how tertiary education should be conceptualised and augmented to achieve important economic and societal objectives, including UN Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education.

Michelle Millar

Professor of Political Science and Sociology, University of Galway, and Programme Lead, Designing Futures

Professor Tony Hall

Professor of Education, University of Galway, and Director of Educational Design Research, Designing Futures

The Designing Futures project at University of Galway is designed to support the development of students' graduate attributes and skills required by industry and society, and for living and thriving in a complex and challenging world. Alongside transforming the student educational experience, Designing Futures is also enhancing faculty collaboration and innovation in teaching and assessment. This article describes how it works

The first domain in which DF has innovated learning and teaching at University of Galway is the IdeasLab on campus. Promoting student entrepreneurship, particularly in partnership with enterprise and society, is vital to higher education. Closer working with the innovation sector and industry, including in co-designing and co-delivering modern, skills-oriented curricula, is centrally important for students to possess the attributes and skills to enable them to fully participate and become future leaders.

At IdeasLab, students tackle real-world challenges while collaborating with industry partners. Through design-centric activities and enterprise-specific programming, students hone their creative and entrepreneurial skills. This fosters empathic understanding and strengthens their connections with industry. One of IdeasLab's flagship innovations, Empathy Studio, won the Galway Chamber Award for Innovation in 2023. Its 'Empathy in Action' module enables students to apply empathy in real-world contexts by collaborating with diverse communities. In 2025, this will expand with a new module in the College of Medicine, Nursing, and Health Sciences.

The 'Empathy in Action' module enables students to apply empathy in real-world contexts by collaborating with diverse communities.

The second domain in which DF has innovated higher education at University of Galway is in fostering and promoting learning and teaching across academic disciplines. Complex challenges such as climate change require synthesis of multidisciplinary ideas. Through Designing Futures, University of Galway has developed sustainable transdisciplinary modules (TDMs) that bring together diverse perspectives to address critical global issues, for example the 'From Steam to Green' module on developing sustainable energy.

The third domain is in introducing authentic, research-led teaching, where students work with their lecturers and professors in tackling important research questions. This is modelled on the Vertically Integrated Projects (VIPs) originally developed at Georgia Institute of Technology; Designing Futures is consequently part of the global VIP consortium of higher education institutions. This peer-to-peer style of learning introduces students to a new approach to teaching and assessment, through which they develop key attributes in collaboration, innovation, and research.

Designing Futures also prioritises students' holistic development. Their academic, personal, and professional education are central to the programme. Student Success Coaching provides tailored guidance to help students design their own pathways through university and beyond. This is underpinned by a for-credit Life Design module – the first in an Irish university. Through this element, DF is a member of the international research working group on Life Design, convened by Stanford University's Life Design Lab.

The University Skills Passport is a new innovation in digital credentialing, addressing the need for higher education to emphasise key skills for student success. This software-as-a-service-supported platform allows institutions to

prioritise employer-valued skills across curricular and co-curricular activities. It places University of Galway at the forefront of skill development in Ireland's higher education landscape.

L–R: Tony Hall and Michelle Millar, HEAd'2024 Best Paper Award winners, with Josep Domènech, HEAd general chair, and Giulia Milani, Student Paper Award winner.

Recognition

Of the 5,230 students who have engaged with Designing Futures, 460 have contributed to the DF evaluation research. DF evaluation has also engaged with faculty. The resultant database shows how innovations can be developed in higher education which are directly linked and relevant to the government's published research priorities, including: 'blue-skies thinking' and how we can mobilise transformation in higher education; concrete, impactful examples of how the tertiary sector can contribute to individuals and society; ways to advance strategy for tertiary education, particularly for student belonging, inclusion, and engagement; graduate attributes and skills; labour market needs; and research-led collaborative learning for sustainability.

The scholarship of teaching that underpins Designing Futures has gained international recognition. At the 10th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'24) in Valencia, Spain, in June 2024, Hall et al. (2024a) won the Best Paper Award from over 288 submissions from 56 countries. This underscores Designing Futures' contributions to academic discourse and its impact on global practices (Kernbach et al., 2023; O'Regan, Ferguson, et al., 2023, O'Regan, Walsh, et al., 2023; Hall et al., 2024b; Meade et al., 2024).

Hall et al. (2024a) won the Best Paper Award from over 288 submissions from 56 countries at the 10th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'24) in Valencia, Spain, in June 2024.

For more about Designing Futures, visit: www.universityofgalway.ie/designingfutures/.

REFERENCES

Hall, T., Millar, M., and O'Regan, C. (2024a) '(Re-)discovering the treasure within: The contribution of a Design Your Life module to undergraduate education', Editorial Universitat Politècnica de València. DOI: 10.4995/HEAd24.2024.17139

Hall, T., Millar, M., and O'Regan, C. (2024b) 'Designing futures through student engagement: A policy futures perspective', *Policy Futures in Education*, 22(4), 677–691. DOI: 10.1177/14782103231181617

Kernbach, S., Hall, T., Perry, M., Walsh, N., Lamb, L., Millar, M., McBride, D. and O'Regan, C. (2023) 'Assessing Life Design and evaluating its impact on the learning experience: A conceptual overview and emergent framework based on the Designing Futures Programme at University of Galway, Ireland'. European Academy of Management Annual Conference (EURAM), June. https://researchrepository.universityofgalway.ie/server/api/core/bitstreams/6545138f-906f-4815-8b20-ec76519f203f/content.

Meade, O., Millar, M., Hall, T., O'Regan, C., and O'Hora, D. (2024) 'Problem-based, research-led learning for our times: The case of Vertically Integrated Projects in higher education'. Editorial Universitat Politècnica de València. DOI: 10.4995/HEAd24.2024.17138

O'Regan, C., Ferguson, N., Millar, M., Mullery, J., Walsh, N., and Hall, T. (2023) 'EPIC in action: Measuring entrepreneurial competencies in higher education'. Editorial Universitat Politècnica de València. https://archive.headconf.org/head23/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/16121.pdf.

O'Regan, C., Walsh, N., Hall, T., Mannion, G., and Millar, M. (2023) 'Conceptualising student engagement as a theoretical framework for innovative higher education practices – a literature review', *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education*, 15(2). DOI: 10.62707/aishej.v15i2.743 .

'Mind the gap!' Unified Tertiary Degrees as a Holistic Approach to Progression from Further to Higher Education

Introduction

Further education and training (FET) students continue to report obstacles to pursuing higher education (HE), including structural, institutional, and social barriers, together with the financial challenges of juggling work, family, and care responsibilities (Sartori & Bloom, 2023). In order to 'mind the gap' in terms of who gets to go to university and who doesn't, we need to continue to review and adapt how we do things.

The primary aim of unified tertiary degree provision, where students start a degree in their local FET college and complete it in a HE institution, is to develop clear and additional pathways, while addressing many of the barriers by providing direct, local access without fees. Tertiary degree programmes aim to guarantee not only seamless progression and transition but also access for students to the full range of supports and services from both the Education and Training Board (ETB) and the HE institution (Maloney, 2023).

This article considers what we mean by progression, while presenting from the position that unified tertiary degrees have the potential to provide a holistic approach to educational transition, through paying particular attention to the student experience and post-graduation destination. This, Fleming et al. (2017) would say, enables students as agents of equality.

It is just over a year since Simon Harris launched the initiative in summer 2023. This article offers insights from research carried out with students on one of the first unified tertiary degrees, between South East Technological University (SETU) and Laois and Offaly

Dr Sarah Sartori
Higher Education Strategic Project Lead,
South East Technological University

Further education and training (FET) students continue to report a range of obstacles to pursuing higher education. This article tackles the myth of linear progression and argues that tertiary degrees can provide a more holistic approach to progression from FET to higher education, through paying particular attention to the student experience and post-graduation destination.

Education and Training Board (LOETB), to see if we are making a difference and minding the gap.

The myth of linear progression

I did first and second year [in university], so I was really caught, and I thought I'd never get back, so this was like, yeah! (SETU–LOETB tertiary student research participant)

Maria Montessori told us in 1946 that progress is not linear, yet we still get surprised by findings that show large groups of learners in FET moving both up and down the National Framework of Qualifications availing of learning, upskilling, and re-skilling opportunities (DES, 2020, p.23). The conceptualisation of learner progression as exclusively upwards is legacy thinking – but rooted in legal definition and policy, with implications for the student, as SUSI grant eligibility requires upwards-only progression (Peck & Stritch, 2023).

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) has been described as fragmented and difficult to navigate for learners and staff in an Irish context (Edge & Mernagh, 2023). It is even more so for students from other countries, who are sometimes caught in the double bind of not having their degree recognised but also being unable to avail of free fees by virtue of having a degree.

Because I come from another country, and I have a degree from my country. So like, for me, I was applying to CAO and I was like, my grades aren't going to match. But this programme was way more straightforward. (SETU–LOETB tertiary student research participant)

An evaluation of tertiary student intake on SETU and LOETB programmes for 2023 found that 31% had previous experience of higher education. As highlighted by the quotes above, for some of these students, a tertiary education programme made the difference in enabling them to continue their education, by filling in some of the potholes on the pathway.

'A good job'

Unified tertiary programmes provide a scaffolded pathway to higher education, whereby students begin their degree in the smaller and more intimate setting of an FET college and, through campus visits, dual registration, and contact with lecturers and staff, are simultaneously initiated into the university.

I've done university before and how it can be so big and everything. The fact that like this is such a smaller group it just feels very nice because you do talk to everybody. (SETU–LOETB tertiary student research participant)

> *Unified tertiary programmes provide a scaffolded pathway to higher education, whereby students begin their degree in the smaller and more intimate setting of an FET college and, through campus visits, dual registration, and contact with lecturers and staff, are simultaneously initiated into the university.*

We have our own thing here. Yeah. And obviously, we'll be integrated in third year. (SETU–LOETB tertiary student research participant)

However, the number one reason students chose to do a unified tertiary degree programme with SETU and LOETB was to get 'a good job'. The National Tertiary Office is tasked with leading the strategic development of these programmes across disciplines and specialisms focused on meeting skill needs (Maloney, 2023); to date, this development has largely been between ETBs and technological universities (TUs).

The career-related approaches that prepare students for the workplace, coupled with close industry ties, do make TUs stand out in terms of bridging the gap between classroom and career (Gleeson, 2024). But in terms of bridging the gap between FE and HE, so too do the strong and established links to further education and post–Leaving Cert (PLC) provision.

Conclusion

The FET Strategy 2020–2024 committed to ensuring that 'people will move seamlessly between FET and HE with clear transition criteria in large numbers' by 2024 (SOLAS, 2020). But a skewing of emphasis on entry into HE and access targets, rather than on student experience and post-graduation destination, can have a conveyor-belt quality to it that creates perversities in the labour market, and ironically does not "produce the diverse workforce necessary for the balanced and productive society for which it was designed and on which it relies (Conover, 2016). Added to this is the uncomfortable truth that the value of a degree is considerably lessened in a vastly credentialled world (Sartori & Bloom, 2023), but within that, the university experience still needs to fulfil students' expectations and develop their capacity to achieve their objectives.

Unified tertiary degree provision ambitiously aims to draw the best of what FET and HE have to offer through a learner-centric approach to degree provision outside the CAO. Student voices in this proof-of-concept or pilot phase indicate that taking a more holistic approach to progression between FET and HE is indeed minding the gap. Tertiary student intake into SETU for 2024 has tripled, though relatively speaking these numbers are still small, and stitching the FET and HE sectors together seamlessly is no small feat. All indications suggest that unified tertiary provision is on the threshold of something bigger, though how we measure its success may also require a more holistic approach and, as Verna Myers (2015) reminds us, a move beyond counting to cultivating.

Unified tertiary degree provision ambitiously aims to draw the best of what FET and HE have to offer through a learner-centric approach to degree provision outside the CAO.

University of Galway celebrates 175 years of welcoming students

Pictured here is the family of Alexander Anderson, Irish physicist and President of Queen's College Galway (1899-1934), including Emily Anderson, the German Professor and celebrated code-breaker, one of the University of Galway's most renowned graduates.
Photo taken in 1904 at the front door of the President's residence at the University.
From the College Photographs Collection at the University of Galway Library.

A LEGACY OF LEARNING commemorates the first enrolments in 1849, four years after the establishment of the University

On Wednesday, October 30, 2024, University of Galway announced a series of creative efforts to mark a milestone anniversary - 175 years of educating students.

At midday on October 30, 1849, the first students walked through the historic Archway into the Quadrangle to begin studying and learning, four years after the University was established as Queen's College Galway (1845).

In 1849, 68 students passed their matriculation exams. They progressed to studies in 21 subjects ranging from Greek Language to Logic and Metaphysics in the Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Law, and the Schools of Civil Engineering and Agriculture.

To mark the anniversary, University of Galway launched several celebrations under the banner "A Legacy of Learning: 1849-2024".

Professor Peter McHugh, Interim President of the University of Galway, said:

"At the height of the Great Irish Famine, a moment of profound social and ecological crisis, 68 students began their education at our University with the courage to hope for a better life and the desire to play their part in improving the world.

"Today's students, including the 3,368 who registered to commence their first year of undergraduate study with us this year, are carrying on that long tradition of courage, hope and desire. Our Legacy of Learning anniversary celebrates those intentions and the pursuit of excellence in teaching, learning and research."

The University of Galway was established by the Colleges (Ireland) Act in 1845. The University was first known as Queen's College Galway, along with its sister colleges in Cork and Belfast. It was established to provide a non-denominational university education to Ireland's emerging middle class.

Time to Start Planning Your WIL
The rise of work-integrated learning

Introducing WIL

The concepts behind work-integrated learning (WIL) are familiar to us all, but the terminology may be less so. For educators, the terms used most commonly are often specific to the programme of learning: *clinical placements, academic internship, work experience.*

One advantage of finding and defining a common umbrella term may be that it enables the creation of a framework at programme, institutional, or sectoral level. This can surface, value, and evaluate occurrences of WIL and also, accordingly, give opportunity to the evolution of our curricula and associated learner experiences. However, use of the term *WIL* should not be at the expense of current terminology that is often linked to disciplinary identity and may better describe the experience that a learner is about to encounter.

The rise of WIL

WIL as an overarching educational construct is relatively young, though the experience it attempts to define has been around for centuries. One of its earliest mentions is in the *Journal of Cooperative Education*, where Coll (1996) wrote that universities need to respond 'by providing the skills that employers require to university graduates, and providing training to them to find employment', then described a BSc (technology) degree programme that included 'cooperative education, involving work-integrated learning' (ibid., p.34).

Coll and colleagues (2008) later described WIL as 'an educational strategy in which students undergo conventional academic learning with an educational institution, and combine this with some time spent in a workplace relevant to their program of study and career aims' (p.38).

Professor Jason Last

Dean of Students, University College Dublin

The further and higher education sector is familiar with the importance of experiential learning, particularly in professional and STEM disciplines. This article explores the emergence of an umbrella term, *work-integrated learning*, that frames these pedagogical strategies for the purpose of enhancing the acquisition of graduate attributes.

A search of ERIC shows *work-integrated learning* appearing in the educational literature in 1995, initially in just one or two papers a year but rising steadily to a peak of 84 sources in 2020. While there are often attempts to distinguish between academic internships, work experience, and clinical placements in professional health degrees, WIL allows these experiences to be contrasted and compared, with learnings shared across an institution rather than being confined within disciplinary boundaries. Ebrall et al. (2008) wrote that the university had undergone a fundamental shift to view clinical education as work-integrated learning and described WIL as the most appropriate pedagogy to facilitate deeper learning.

WIL I am?

There are many definitions of WIL in the literature. The one adopted by the *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning* (formerly Asia-Pacific *Journal of Co-operative Education*) comes from the *Routledge International Handbook of Work-Integrated Learning* (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p.38):

> *An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development . . .*

The authors complete the definition by further explaining the learning theories underpinning WIL and its associated approaches. 'Integration' into the curriculum is key with this term, emphasising the importance of a seamless approach connecting to theory and practice. The roles of students, external stakeholders, and the higher education institute are also a key aspect.

To help contextualise all these and WIL-related forms of learning, University College Dublin (UCD) Teaching & Learning has created a graphic representation of WIL in UCD with an eye to future sectoral alignment (O'Neill, 2023, 2024). The table, adapted with permission from O'Neill (2023, 2024), attempts to summarise a complex paradigm. Many more examples of WIL could be included, but in each institution there will be variations in nomenclature, form and place of assessment, and the degree to which an overarching architecture guides and measures its presence.

Coll and colleagues (2008) described WIL as 'an educational strategy in which students undergo conventional academic learning with an educational institution, and combine this with some time spent in a workplace relevant to their program of study and career aims'

	WIL - Off Campus		WIL - On Campus	
	Type 1 Primarily Assessed by Host	**Type 2** Primarily Assessed by HEI	**Type 3** HEI Assessed Major Host Input	**Type 4** HEI Facilitated Minor Host Input
Accredited Curriculum	Clinical Placements	Academic Internships	Live Case-based Learning	Guest Speakers
	Professional Placements	Cooperative Learning	Live Work Projects	Interactive Simulations
	Apprenticeship	Community Work Experience	Entrepeneurship Projects with Partners	Enquiry or Problem Based Learning
	Work Placements		Field Trips	Laboratory Learning
Non-Accredited Curriculum	Volunteering Summer / Part-time Work		Conference Attendance Society, Club or Student-led Group Participation	

Summary of WIL at UCD

The table shows examples of the spectrum of authentic and experiential learning associated with WIL in UCD and its alignment with both curricular and co-curricular/extracurricular learning opportunities. Types 1, 2, and 3 are recognised as WIL experiences in the international literature; type 4 is an example of the broader spectrum of experiential learning. The term *host* is used to broadly represent industry, enterprise, and external stakeholders involved in WIL.

Final WIL

Academic internships in UCD have doubled over the last 10 years, notwithstanding a dip due to Covid-19. The reasons for this growth are many, but there is no doubt that domestic and international government strategies are supporting greater inclusion. Clinical and work placements are also increasing, due to growth in numbers of students and of modules and programmes that include these or similar experiences. Previously seen as the domain of professional, scientific, business, and engineering programmes, it is now becoming more challenging to find a programme that does *not* have a WIL experience at least as an option.

The presence of WIL does not guarantee success, however, with significant questions being asked of higher education about the application of universal design principles to enhance equity of access and experience (Rao et al., 2024). We also know that more could be made of these experiences, from pre-WIL preparation to post-WIL reflection, such that the opportunities optimally yield the desired outcomes, including those of career readiness and employability.

In preparation for the wave of Human Capital Initiatives from the Higher Education Authority in Ireland, each of our institutions went through a phase of preparation; in UCD, one of these was deep consultation with students, staff, and industry. In most of the conversations with industry employer

QQI, Ireland's state agency responsible for quality in further and higher education, is now also interested in WIL and has tendered for the development of statutory quality-assurance guidelines on work-integrated learning.

representatives, when asked what the university could do to support the development of attributes in graduates, transversal skills were mentioned as often as industry-specific skills. Communication, presentation, teamwork, and leadership skills were keenly sought, along with a desire to instil resilience, digital literacy, empathy, self-care, and care for others. These are attributes that have long been associated with WIL.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Ireland's state agency responsible for quality in further and higher education, is now also interested in WIL and has tendered for the development of statutory quality-assurance guidelines on work-integrated learning. This is a further sign that *WIL* as an umbrella term is finding traction in enabling improvement and enhancement in an increasingly prevalent and important component of higher education provision. Have you planned your WIL?

Note: The author acknowledges with deep gratitude the support of Dr Geraldine O'Neil, Mr Jeremy Britton, Dr David Foster, and all involved in leading and contributing to work-integrated learning in association with University College Dublin.

REFERENCES

Coll, R.K. (1996) 'The BSc (technology) degree: Responding to the challenges of the education marketplace', *Journal of Cooperative Education*, 32(1), 29–35.

Coll R.K., Eames, C., Paku, L., Lay, M., Ayling, D., Hodges, D., . . . and Martin, A. (2008) 'Investigating the "integrated" in work-integrated learning'. *Working Together: Putting the Cooperative into Cooperative Education*, pp. 38–41. Conference Proceedings. NZACE: New Zealand Association for Cooperative Education. New Plymouth, 23–24 April.

Ebrall P., Draper B., and Repka A. (2008) 'Towards a 21st-century paradigm of chiropractic: Stage 1: Redesigning clinical learning', *Journal of Chiropractic Education*, 22(2), 152–160

O'Neill, G. (2023) *Work-Integrated Learning*. Dublin: UCD Teaching & Learning. www.ucd.ie/teaching/resources/moduleandprogrammedesign/curriculumresearch/work-integratedlearning/.

O'Neill, G. (2024) 'Authenticity and consistency in the assessment of work-integrated learning: Getting the balance right', *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning* (in press).

Rao, K., Garant-Jones, E., Dean, B.A., and Eady, M.J. (2024) 'Applying universal design for learning to work-integrated learning: Designing for inclusion and equity', *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, 25(1), 67–81.

Zegwaard, K.E., Pretti, T.J., Rowe, A.D., and Ferns, S.J. (2023) 'Defining work-integrated learning'. *Routledge International Handbook of Work-Integrated Learning*, 3rd edn., pp. 29–48. Routledge.

Academic Integrity and Online Assessment

Faculty and student perspectives

This article explores academic integrity in relation to online assessment. It describes a UCD-based study that explored students' experiences of online assessment and their perspectives on various forms of academic misconduct. It reports the study findings and suggests ways to best safeguard academic integrity in future online assessment.

Deirdre Stritch
Postdoctoral Fellow, School of Education,
University College Dublin

Caoimhe Rehill
Senior Governance Programme Manager,
University College Dublin

Marie Clarke
Dean of Undergraduate Studies,
University College Dublin

Introduction

This article explores academic integrity in relation to online assessment, in the context of a University College Dublin (UCD)-based study funded by Quality and Qualifications Ireland's (QQI) Anniversary Funded Proposals to support assessment and confidence in higher-education qualifications in 2023. The project explored the interrelationship between online assessment and student academic integrity. It aimed specifically to enhance our understanding of students' experiences of online assessment and their perspectives on academic misconduct, such as plagiarism, contract cheating, collusion, unauthorised use of artificial intelligence (AI) generators, and exam cheating.

Literature

Interest in academic integrity and the prevention of academic misconduct has expanded significantly in the past 20 years. Early research focused on plagiarism (Drinan & Bertram Gallant, 2008), while more recent literature has focused on contract cheating or 'essay mills' (Bretag et al., 2018) and online learning and assessment (Watson & Sottile, 2010). There is widespread consensus that higher education institutions (HEIs) should take a holistic approach and embed a culture of academic integrity at every stage of the student journey. This is not without challenges (QQI, 2021).

A number of legal approaches have been adopted in Ireland (2019), Australia (2020), England (2022), and the EU (2023) to minimise the risk to academic integrity. The EU AI Act took effect in the 27 member states without needing to be transposed into national laws (McElligott, 2023). There is greater international cooperation by quality assurance agencies, national regulators, and academics to address this issue. The European Network for Academic Integrity brings together researchers, educators, and policymakers to promote academic integrity. The European Network for Quality Assurance has fully engaged in the issue. Since legislation was introduced in Ireland in 2019, the National Academic Integrity Network was established and Academic Integrity Guidelines and Academic Integrity Principles and a Lexicon of Common Terms were published.

Online assessment

Interest in academic integrity and the prevention of academic misconduct has expanded significantly in the past 20 years.

Since Covid-19 there has been considerable interest in academic integrity as it applies to online assessment. Holden et al. (2021) identify particular forms of academic misconduct which are common online, including tampering with a user device or test management system, impersonation, leaking test material, using prohibited resources, conducting internet searches, communicating with others, buying answers, accessing local or external storage, or accessing a book or notes.

Tsigaros and Fesakis (2021) argue that focusing on technical solutions to prevent misconduct is not as productive as developing new teaching and alternative assessment methods. The benefits and drawbacks of proctoring online assessments (using video summarisation [AI] software or web invigilation, both live and recorded) to counter misconduct is well considered in the literature. While proctoring is viewed as an important feature of online assessment, criticism has centred on the ethical aspects of student privacy and possible discrimination. As an alternative, Cluskey et al. (2011) propose online exam control procedures to minimise misconduct.

There is concern at the potential impact of AI tools on online assessment. While software has been developed to detect the use of AI, there is little confidence in its effectiveness (Share, 2023). Discussions on how HEIs should respond include options such as revising assessment methodologies and incorporating AI into teaching and learning strategies. With knowledge and experience expanding rapidly in this area, further guidance and discussion on how HEIs may best respond to AI generators while safeguarding academic integrity are emerging and being continually updated.

Study context

This research was part of a suite of initiatives introduced in UCD focusing on academic integrity and ethical practice. It began with a consultation with the Teaching & Learning Committees at 37 schools in UCD on faculty experiences of, and perspectives on, the move to online learning in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The study surveyed students to explore their experience of online assessment and academic integrity, collecting data from programme stages and demographic profiles across all six colleges in UCD.

A total of 1,972 students undertook the survey, representing a 77% response rate and 6.5% of the 21,979 taught undergraduate and 8,560 taught graduate students enrolled on the Dublin campus in 2023/24. Approval was granted by the UCD Human Research Ethics Committee.

Findings

Faculty observed an increase in academic misconduct with the shift to online assessments during the pandemic, and attributed it to factors such as lack of knowledge about academic integrity, excessive assessment demands, time pressure, external pressures, and limited assessment time frames. They recommended increased and obligatory education and training on academic integrity for students, stricter penalties for misconduct, and measures to ensure the integrity of online assessments, such as physical invigilation, monitoring of UCD-owned devices, and e-proctoring.

The vast majority of survey participants had engaged in online assessment, mostly quizzes and submission of assignments. Similarly, students across all categories expressed strong knowledge and understanding of academic integrity and the majority of related terms, with the exception of collusion and contract cheating. Most students considered exam cheating, plagiarism, and contract cheating to be unethical, to varying degrees. They perceived cheating to be uncommon in in-person exams but extremely common (14%) or very common or common (48% combined) in quizzes and short exercises. Time pressure (tight or concurrent deadlines), lack of knowledge on academic integrity and what constitutes misconduct, lack of confidence in own ability, and perception that other students are cheating were identified as the factors most likely to induce a student to engage in academic misconduct.

Asked what resources, guidance, or information UCD could provide to reduce academic misconduct, students highlighted a need for improved assessment design and delivery; better, more, or repeated academic-integrity guidance and training; better guidance on assessment requirements and how to address them; mainstreaming of use of AI tools; better spread of assignments and

Faculty observed an increase in academic misconduct with the shift to online assessments during the pandemic.

reduced assessment load; improved assessment feedback; and greater clarity and consistency of academic integrity rules and regulations.

Conclusions

This research indicates that, in line with international findings, online assessment – particularly exams and quizzes – is more likely to be the subject of academic misconduct than in-person assessment modes, especially when unsupervised. As a result of these findings, UCD is developing new approaches to online assessment.

Mitigating and addressing academic misconduct is possible by modifying assessment design and delivery (within a wider reflection on course design and content), including assessment spacing and timing and direct and continuous student-facing messaging on all aspects of assessment, academic integrity, and related processes in the university. Collusion, sharing work, or selling past work, and the unauthorised use of AI tools are areas where students lack both knowledge and understanding.

Students requested greater clarity on assessment requirements and institutional expectations around the use of AI. The UCD Academic Integrity Policy approved by Academic Council in March 2024 provides clear guidance for faculty and students on these issues so that a holistic approach is adopted in learning and online assessment contexts.

The UCD Academic Integrity Policy approved by Academic Council in March 2024 provides clear guidance for faculty and students on issues such as assessment requirements and institutional expectations around the use of AI.

REFERENCES

Bretag, T., Harper, R., Burton, M., Ellis, C., Newton, P., van Haeringen, K., and Rozenberg, P. (2018) 'Contract cheating and assessment design: Exploring the relationship', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 44(5), 676–691.

Cluskey, J., Ehlen, C., and Raiborn, M. (2011) 'Thwarting online exam cheating without proctor supervision', *Journal of Academic and Business Ethics*, 4, 1–7.

Drinan, P.M. and Bertram Gallant, T. (2008) 'Plagiarism and academic integrity systems', *Journal of Library Administration*, 47(3–4), 125–140.

Holden, O.L., Norris, M.E., and Kuhlmeier, V.A. (2021) 'Academic integrity in online assessment: A research review', *Frontiers in Education*, 6, 1–13.

McElligott, B. (2023) *The EU Artificial Intelligence Act.* Mason Hayes & Curran. www.mhc.ie/hubs/legislation/the-eu-artificial-intelligence-act.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2021) 'Detecting and Investigating Contract Cheating Cases and Supporting Students through the Process' [summary of presentation given by Prof. Cathy Ellis]. Dublin: QQI. www.qqi.ie/news/Detecting-and-Investigating-Contract-Cheating-Cases-and-Supporting-Students-through-the-Process.

Share, P. (2023) *Artificial Intelligence and Academic Writing: A Consideration of the Issues for Teaching, Learning and Assessment.* https://sway.office.com/EeGUKxyxDJeXUEEi.

Tsigaros, T. and Fesakis, G. (2021) 'E-assessment and academic integrity: A literature review'. Technology and Innovation in Learning, Teaching and Education, Second International Conference, TECH-EDU 2020, pp. 313–319. Vila Real, Portugal, 2–4 December 2020.

Watson, G. and Sottile, J. (2010) 'Cheating in the digital age: Do students cheat more in online courses?', *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration,* 13(1).

***

Traveller Pamela Cullotty graduates from SETU with a Bachelor of Arts degree

Leanne Duffy, Pamela Cullotty and Marie Moylan

Pamela Cullotty was among the 26 An Cosán graduates who received a BA Degree from South East Technological University (SETU)

Pamela Cullotty is among the 1.4% of Travellers who complete third-level education.

In 2024, she graduated from South East Technological University Carlow (SETU) with a BA in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development.

A native of Donegal, Pamela undertook the degree with *An Cosán,* Ireland's largest community education organization. *An Cosán* provides blended and flexible adult community education programmes to adults across Ireland. Its higher education programmes are accredited by South East Technological University (SETU) and are delivered online, enabling them to be undertaken from anywhere in the country.

An Cosán's *BA in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development,* along with its BA in Leadership and Community Development, aims to equip graduates with the necessary knowledge, competencies and skills to enable them to make a professional contribution to communities, groups and organisations in a local community context.

Pamela was one of twenty-six An Cosán graduates from thirteen counties who celebrated their achievements in Carlow, joined by proud family members and friends, as well as members of An Cosán staff. Many of the graduates, including Pamela, are already involved in their local communities.

Pamela paid tribute to the unwavering support of An Cosán staff members.

"I felt An Cosán never gave up on me and, compared to experiences I have had with other education settings, I never ever felt anything but high expectations for me. I wasn't just a part of a class, I was also an individual."

An Cosán Chief Executive Officer, Heydi Foster, expressed her gratitude to SETU Carlow for their ongoing support of An Cosán and their dedication to adult learners.

"This dream that has been realised for our 26 graduates today would not have been possible without our collaborative partnership with South East Technological University dating back to 2008," she said.

Strategic Use of Learning Technologies in Irish Higher Education

It's time to move from small-scale innovation to major strategic initiatives

Introduction

We have managed to squeeze a bit more money out of a government facing an election. So have a lot of other people. The politicians will have to deal eventually with the increased borrowing this temporary generosity has caused. There is little prospect of it being extended again next year. This is the scenario facing those of us in higher education in the short term. The long-term prognosis is not great either. Changing demographics will reduce the number of young people going through the Leaving Certificate, and will increase the number of older people depending on the state for pensions and ever-more-sophisticated healthcare interventions.

Alongside our pressing need for increased investment in housing, we will also have significant investment needs around the energy transition for decades to come (KPMG, 2023). Then, of course, there is the eventual reckoning of the debt built up through government generosity to the many lobby groups over the years. So it is unlikely that higher education will be at the top of any list of government spending priorities in the foreseeable future. Added to growing demands for serving a larger and more diverse set of stakeholders is a corresponding ratcheting up of accountability expectations, and we have our work cut out for us. We have much to do to make the processes of higher education more efficient and more effective – to 'do more with less'.

The need for digital transformation

Success here won't be about just incremental gains but transformational strategies. While learning technologies have often been touted as a way to increase efficiency, in

Brian Mulligan
Consultant, Education Futures

Irish higher education faces increasing financial constraints and must adopt transformative strategies to thrive. While learning technologies have often raised costs, they can be harnessed strategically to improve efficiency, access, and quality, as this article shows. By embracing large-scale digital transformation, Irish universities can remain competitive in a global education market.

many cases they've actually raised costs. When done wisely, however, they can help hold down costs, expand access, and reinvent the delivery of education.

The private sector provides valuable insights into digital transformation. Companies that harnessed technology to fundamentally reshape their business models have consistently outperformed those that only refined existing processes (Bloomberg, 2022). Higher education must adopt a comparable strategy. Merely incorporating technology into conventional teaching methods will not be enough. Institutions must welcome innovative educational models that can revolutionise the delivery of learning.

At present, universities tend to implement minor changes such as staff training, pilot programmes, and integration of digital tools. To tackle financial challenges and increasing demands, senior leadership needs to strategically embrace new models that prioritise not just quality but also expanded access, lower unit costs, and greater affordability.

Finding new ways forward

There are models of international success that Irish institutions could follow. One possibility is international online programmes, aligned with an institution's research strengths. Irish universities are strong in areas such as biotechnology and nanotechnology, which are very suitable for high-quality online undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Such programmes can reach out to world markets, generating revenue and enhancing the institution's reputation.

Internationalisation presents a unique opportunity for 'teaching at scale'. For example, the Georgia Tech online Master of Science in Computer Science costs less than €6,000 and has more than 15,000 students enrolled to date; it shows how online education scaling can reduce costs and increase access, creating surplus revenue. Such international programmes could become a strategic priority for Irish institutions, leveraging research strengths to offer broader access and minimising fees.

Another model is integration of education with the workplace. Work placements improve employability and make learning more relevant. Many vocational programmes already include an element of internship, but institutions could go further in delivering whole degrees within the workplace.

In this model, the school leaver would go directly into the workplace, working part-time while studying online. This method enriches education by better connecting theory with practice. It democratises education, since students generate income while studying, often within the home. And it benefits

When done wisely, learning technologies can help hold down costs, expand access, and reinvent the delivery of education.

Flipped learning might evolve into project-based learning, where learners would study their content online, coming onto campus to work on projects that integrate knowledge from a number of modules.

institutions with reduced congestion on campus, sharing resources, and integrating online courses into lifelong learning.

Campus alternatives and emerging methods

Campus-based education excludes people with disabilities, caring responsibilities, or unpredictable, precarious lives. In hybrid models, students view and participate in classes on campus or online – or may switch freely. Greater access and even unit-cost reductions through increased enrolment may be enabled by expanding hybrid programmes.

Flipped learning, where students review recorded lectures before class and participate in applied learning during the session, significantly enriches the educational experience. Institutions might embrace it as their primary approach, allowing instructors to dedicate more time to interactive teaching. Moreover, recorded materials can offer robust support for flexible and cost-effective educational delivery across a variety of formats. Reduced in-class time alleviates pressure on physical space and can reduce students' on-campus days, lowering commuting and accommodation demands.

Flipped learning might evolve into project-based learning, where learners would study their content online, coming onto campus to work on projects that integrate knowledge from a number of modules. This engages learners more deeply with their learning and mirrors real-world problem-solving. It can also support flexible, cost-efficient education by reusing materials across programmes and promoting collaborative learning environments.

These are just a few examples of new models emerging globally, with more continuing to develop. Artificial intelligence (AI) presents both challenges and opportunities for higher education. While it has the potential to disrupt conventional teaching methods, it also offers tools to improve student support, automate administrative processes, and personalise learning experiences. Incorporating AI into higher education could help address financial and operational challenges, allowing institutions to deliver more efficient and high-quality services.

Strategy for the future

The pressures on Irish higher education – reduced funding, increased competition, and rising expectations – make the strategic adoption of learning technologies imperative. It is no longer sufficient simply to conduct small-scale experiments. Institutions will have to scale up, adopt global models, and consider redeploying resources to maintain quality of education while managing costs efficiently.

The future of higher education is in transformation, not digitalisation. Irish institutions can flourish in an increasingly competitive, resource-constrained world by adopting technology in strategic ways.

REFERENCES

Bloomberg, J. (2022) 'Digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation: Confuse them at your peril', *Forbes*, 14 April. www.forbes.com/sites/jasonbloomberg/2018/04/29/digitization-digitalization-and-digital-transformation-confuse-them-at-your-peril/.

KPMG (2023) 'Budgets under pressure: Long-term fiscal challenges in Europe'. KPMG, September. https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/uk/pdf/2023/08/budgets-under-pressure.pdf.

***

Dr Neasa Ní Chuaig has been appointed as the new Head of the Department of Language and Literacy Education at Mary Immaculate College

Neasa has been with MIC since 2017 as a lecturer in Education with expertise in Irish. Prior to this, she taught in the University of Galway, as well as Dublin City University, Maynooth University, and St Mary's University, Nova Scotia, Canada.

Neasa received her undergraduate degree in Irish and Legal Science from the University of Galway and went on to receive a Masters in Modern Irish in the same University, having grown up in the Galway Gaeltacht. She also completed teaching qualifications in the University, including a Professional Diploma in Education and a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) certificate.

She went on to complete her doctorate in Dublin City University under the supervision of Professor Pádraig Ó Duibhir and Dr Eithne Kennedy. On completion of her PhD, she began working with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment as an Education Officer, where her main role was the development of the Primary Language Curriculum from Third to Sixth class.

She is very much looking forward to the new role and to working with colleagues to develop and champion aspects of language and literacy within the department and the wider college community. Speaking about her appointment to the role, Neasa said:

"I am delighted with this new role and proud to have the opportunity to work with my colleagues to develop opportunities and tackle the challenges associated with the work of our department".

Dr Angela Canny, Acting Dean of Education at MIC added: "We are delighted to welcome Neasa as our new Head of the Language and Literacy Department in the Faculty of Education. Neasa has been a valued member of our Faculty for a number of years and she brings a wealth of experience to this role."

Complicated Conversations: Decolonising Psychology of Education

Dr Aoife Lynam
Assistant Professor, Psychology of Education, Trinity College Dublin

Dr Lucie Ehiwe
Researcher, Trinity College Dublin, and Psychotherapist

Prof. Conor Mc Guckin
Associate Professor and Director of Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, Trinity College Dublin

Dr Patricia McCarthy
Associate Research Fellow, Trinity College Dublin

Geraldine Fitzgerald
Subject Librarian for School of Education and School of Psychology, Trinity College Dublin

The psychology of education has long been shaped by ethnocentrism, its theories and practices developed from a narrow, male, Western perspective, leaving gaps in how psychology accounts for the diverse experiences of people worldwide. This article considers the impact of colonialism on higher education and describes a project at Trinity College Dublin to address and undo these systemic biases by decolonising the Psychology of Education programme's reading lists and curricula.

Introduction

This article considers the impact of colonialism on higher education and examines perspectives on decolonisation of curricula. The field of psychology has long been shaped by ethnocentrism, with most theories developed from a Western perspective. Theories and practices have often reflected the privileged viewpoints of middle-aged, Western, Caucasian males, leaving significant gaps in how psychology accounts for the diverse experiences of people worldwide.

In a co-construction approach with lecturers and students, the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) has taken steps to address these biases by decolonising the Psychology of Education programme's reading lists and curricula. It has used reflexivity and incorporated diverse perspectives, particularly from marginalised groups, to create a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of psychology of education through a universal design for learning (UDL) lens.

Why was this project needed?

The purpose of our research was to explore the need to decolonise the Psychology of Education curricula in an Irish setting. This context differs from much of the literature, as Ireland has a relatively recent and unique history of British colonialism, and a lack of decolonising of psychology from an initial teacher education perspective. While Ireland has experienced some of the same cultural impacts as other formerly colonised people (e.g., language loss, identity development), the ethnicity of Irish people is less easily distinguished at first glance .

Lopes Cardozo (2012) discusses the importance in Bolivia of both intra-culturalism (development of skills relating to other cultures) and inter-culturalism (reflection and growth with respect to one's own identity). The need for both seems appropriate in the Irish context.

The project was timely due to the structure of academic knowledge in psychology, which has historically been produced by a narrow demographic, primarily middle-aged white males, leading to biased understanding of human behaviour (MacDonald, 2006). Over-reliance on WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich, democratic) populations in research compounds this (Henrich et al., 2010) and prevails in higher education curricula today.

This bias exacerbates a gap in how psychology accounts for cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity, which limits the field's relevance and applicability in global contexts. The predominance of Western male scholars implicitly reinforces a hierarchy that prioritises certain voices and experiences and marginalises or ignores others. This not only limits students' understanding but impacts their sense of belonging in academic spaces.

The aim of decolonising education is to reverse the harmful effects of colonisation on marginalised groups, create a more inclusive, equitable learning environment (Phiri et al., 2023), and encourage students to replicate this social-justice perspective beyond the lecture halls. Reading lists and curricula are a critical starting point for this work. Examining how colonialism has shaped education in politics, O'Neill (2024, p.1) argued for a need to 'interrogate, and transform, the coloniality and whiteness of UK Higher Education'. Including the voices and experiences of students from racial minorities, she suggests, is critical to decolonising the field and challenging existing ideas.

Here, however, the pitfalls of white saviourism come into focus. Common in humanitarian work, this is a dynamic where white people cast themselves as heroes, 'saving' non-white people. It perpetuates a power imbalance by stripping agency from those who become passive recipients of so-called benevolence; after all, achieving personal agency is a hallmark of psychology.

The purpose of our research was to explore the need to decolonise the Psychology of Education curricula in an Irish setting.

The problem with white saviourism lies in its superficial engagement with social problems (Cole, 2012). Rather than seeking to dismantle the structural causes of inequality, it offers an emotional experience for the white saviour, validating their privileges.

These isolated acts of charity do little to address systemic issues, ultimately reinforcing the disparities they purport to alleviate (Aronson, 2017). White saviourism may derive partly from assuming one knows what's best without recognising one's biases. An important initial step is to unlearn previously held ideas. The research team acknowledge the ironic nature of their composition, noting their personal and professional privilege in this project and continuing their own journeys of positionality and reflexivity.

Unlearning

Scholars emphasise the need for 'unlearning' as part of decolonising higher education.

Scholars emphasise the need for 'unlearning' as part of decolonising higher education. Le Grange (2023) discusses three main steps in teacher training: currere, complicated conversations, and land education. Currere, developed by Pinar (1975, 2011), is an autobiographical approach with four parts:

1. *Analytical*: Consider one's educational past, present, and future
2. *Synthetic*: Look at fragments of experience, politics, and culture
3. *Regression*: Return to autobiographical and educational past
4. *Progressive*: Turn to an imagined future.

Currere can be undertaken by everyone, including teachers in training, to unlearn Westernised biases (Le Grange, 2023). Complicated conversations can occur 'when scholars of curriculum/teacher education engage with peers (particularly those with different histories, beliefs, and ideas, such as Indigenous scholars), in national and international spaces, and listen respectfully so as to interrogate their own understandings of self and the field' (ibid., p.16). Such conversations may be facilitated with talking circles, based on equality and shared power, where participants can speak without interruption.

The way forward?

This initiative is grounded in UDL, which aims to make education more inclusive (Quirke et al., 2022, 2023). It is well placed for decolonising the Psychology of Education curriculum, as it prioritises inclusivity and reflexivity, essential for dismantling biases. The reflexive approach to UDL and inclusion supports educators in critically examining their practices, helping to identify and remove colonial influences, thus fostering a more inclusive, accessible, and culturally responsive curriculum.

286

IRELAND'S
2024 EDUCATION
YEARBOOK

IRELAND'S
EDUCATION **2024**
YEARBOOK

287

Guided by Quirke et al. (2023), the first challenge is the difficult process of self-reflection to identify our own prejudicial thinking, which may result in inadvertent discriminatory behaviour. Next, decolonise the lecture material and co-create reading-list material with students, incorporating non-Western voices, to ensure diverse perspectives on psychology and education.

Adopting interdisciplinary approaches would encourage intra- and inter-cultural engagement, allowing students to reflect on their cultural identities while developing an understanding of others' (Lopes Cardozo, 2012). As educators, we should actively interrogate our positionality and privilege to avoid a white-saviour narrative. Finally, fostering spaces for dialogue through methods like talking circles or communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) would enable meaningful, equitable conversations among students and faculty from different backgrounds. This collective reflection and unlearning of biases can support a more integrated, inclusive learning environment where all students feel represented and a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

The project resulted in increased awareness and meaningful understanding of the complexity of equality, diversity, and inclusion in Psychology of Education. It emphasised continual understanding of our positionality through critical reflexivity, with the goal of amplifying the voices that need to be heard. This is not an all-encompassing solution to the complex issues of decolonisation, but rather a critical and practical first step towards personal, professional, curricular, and institutional responsibility in addressing these matters and initiating actions that can produce immediate results.

Note: This project was funded by the Trinity Inclusive Curriculum Project as part of its Inclusive Initiatives programme.

Fostering spaces for dialogue through methods like talking circles or communities of practice would enable meaningful, equitable conversations among students and faculty from different backgrounds.

REFERENCES

Aronson, B.A. (2017) 'The white savior industrial complex: A cultural studies analysis of a teacher educator, savior film, and future teachers', *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis,* 6(3).

Burgstahler, S. (2007) 'Who needs an accessible classroom?', *Academe*, 93(3), 37–39. www.jstor.org/stable/40253051.

Cole, T. (2012) 'The white savior industrial complex', *The Atlantic*, 21 March. www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/2/.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation.* Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511815355

Le Grange, L. (2023) 'Decolonisation and anti-racism: Challenges and opportunities for (teacher) education', *The Curriculum Journal*, 34(1), 8–21. DOI: 10.1002/curj.193

Lopes Cardozo, M.T. (2012) 'Transforming pre-service teacher education in Bolivia: From indigenous denial to decolonisation?', *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education,* 42(5), 751–772.

MacDonald, K. (2006) 'Psychology and white ethnocentrism', *Occidental Quarterly*, 6(4), 2007.

Meyer, A. and Rose, D. (1998) 'Learning to read in the computer age'. In: J. Chall (Series Ed.) and J. Onofrey (Ed.), *From Reading Research to Practice.* Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

O'Neill, S. (2024) 'Decolonising politics curricula: Exploring the experiences and views of racially minoritised students', *Learning and Teaching in Politics and International Studies,* pp. 1–19. DOI: 10.1177/0263395724127606S

Phiri, P., Sajid, S., and Delanerolle, G. (2023) 'Decolonising the psychology curriculum: a perspective', *Frontiers in Psychology,* 14, 1–6. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1193241

Pinar, W.F. (1975) 'The method of currere'. Paper presented at annual meeting of American Educational Research Association, Washington, DC.

Pinar, W.F. (2011) *The Character of Curriculum Studies: Bildung, Currere, and the Recurring Question of the Subject.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Quirke, M., Mc Guckin, C. and McCarthy, P. (2022) 'How to adopt an "inclusion as process" approach and navigate ethical challenges in research', *SAGE Research Methods Cases.* London: SAGE. http://hdl.handle.net/2262/100275.

Quirke, M., Mc Guckin, C., and McCarthy, P. (2023) *Adopting a UDL Attitude within Academia: Understanding and Practicing Inclusion across Higher Education.* London: Routledge.

Story, M.F., Mueller, J.L., and Mace, R.L. (1998) T*he Universal Design File: Designing for People of All Ages and Abilities.* Revised edition. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED460554.pdf.

TOBAR: One Project's Role in Supporting Traveller Communities to and through Initial Teacher Education

Addressing Irish Traveller representation in the teaching profession

This article presents an overview of TOBAR, a shared project between Marino Institute of Education and Trinity College Dublin that supports Irish Travellers to and through initial teacher education (ITE) programmes. TOBAR was a response to the Higher Education Authority's PATH 1 initiative, aiming to begin to address the lack of Irish Traveller representation in ITE and the teaching profession.

Miriam Colum

Senior Lecturer and TOBAR Project Coordinator, Marino Institute of Education

Tara Niland

TOBAR Project Officer, Marino Institute of Education

Introduction

Dating back to the 12th century, the Traveller community in Ireland were described as follows: 'the community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and by others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions including, historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland' (Giraldus & Dimock, 1867).

Irish Travellers were officially recognised by the Irish State as an indigenous ethnic minority in March 2017. The census of 2022 indicates there are approximately 32,949 members of the community in the Republic of Ireland (CSO, 2022). Despite their long-standing historical presence in Ireland, the Traveller community faces inequality, discrimination, and marginalisation in society. In education, barriers are visible from early childhood through to further and higher education (Colum & Collins, 2021).

PATH initiative

In response to the challenges and barriers faced by underserved and underrepresented groups in education, the Irish government, in collaboration with key stakeholders, created targeted initiatives aimed at widening participation in further and higher education.

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) initiative, a fund established by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in 2017 and overseen by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), set out to address challenges and provide higher education opportunities for all. PATH 1, strand 1, centred on supporting students from underrepresented groups in accessing initial teacher education (ITE), in partnership with higher education institutes across the country.[1]

An example of PATH 1, strand 1, is the TOBAR project at Marino Institute of Education (MIE, 2024). It focuses on bespoke academic, personal, and financial supports for members of the Traveller community who wish to become primary and post-primary teachers, with an emphasis on developing trusting and lasting relationships with the Traveller community (Colum & Collins, 2021; Colum & Brennan, 2022; Uí Choistealbha & Colum, 2022; Burns et al., 2023).

To date, from 2018 to 2023, TOBAR has supported six members from the Traveller community in becoming primary teachers and one as a post-primary teacher. The current phase of TOBAR (2021–2025) is a partnership between MIE and Trinity College Dublin (TCD). It continues to support students to and through primary and post-primary ITE and includes a PhD scholarship for a candidate from the Traveller community. Initiatives such as TOBAR begin to address some of the challenges the community faces in accessing education.

To date, from 2018 to 2023, TOBAR has supported six members from the Traveller community in becoming primary teachers and one as a post-primary teacher.

TOBAR

TOBAR emphasises the importance of including voices from the Traveller community in furthering project goals. Promotion and outreach, engagement with parents and students, and collaborating with Traveller advocacy groups are central aspects of the project. Time is spent visiting schools and workshopping with students in upper primary and post-primary settings. These workshops are informal, allowing students to ask specific questions about pursuing careers in teaching.

Traveller students tend to feel 'very much on their own' (McGinley, 2024, p.80), so current TOBAR students participate in school visits, speaking with pupils from the community. This encourages primary and post-primary pupils to see themselves as future student teachers. Another important aspect of the work is mentoring current students in MIE and TCD. Working closely with students

helps the TOBAR team see college life from their perspective and to provide individual supports to enhance their overall experience.

TOBAR understands that trust is essential in the relationships between families and third level (Colum & Collins, 2021). Collaboration with Traveller colleagues, community members, and advocacy groups reinforces the project's efforts to align with the community's priorities. Regular community feedback ensures that the project remains responsive to evolving needs. TOBAR students are welcomed to speak at public events about their experiences with the project, amplifying Traveller perspectives.

Widening participation

TOBAR begins to address gaps in the representation of Irish Travellers in ITE programmes and in the teaching profession. Its success to date highlights how targeted support is essential for lessening the distance from third-level education often felt by the community (ibid.). TOBAR can be perceived as a model for promoting equity and diversity in education and in the teaching workforce, and it is demonstrating that barriers to education can be dismantled, thus widening participation for underrepresented groups in further and higher education settings.

TOBAR students are welcomed to speak at public events about their experiences with the project, amplifying Traveller perspectives.

REFERENCES

Burns, G., Colum, M., and O'Neill, G. (2023) '"No one sees a Traveller at the top of the class": Experiences of Irish Travellers on programmes supporting teacher diversity'. In: E. Keane, M. Heinz, and R. Mc Daid (Eds.), *Diversifying the Teaching Profession: Dimensions, Dilemmas and Directions for the Future*, pp. 155–165. Routledge. https://doi.org/jdv4

Collins, A. (2022) *Travelling Community: Teaching Resource.* College Awareness Week. https://collegeaware.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Links-Travelling-Community-Teaching-Resources.pdf.

Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2022) *Census of Population 2016 – Profile 5 – Diversity, Migration, Ethnicity, Irish Travellers & Religion.* Dublin: CSO.

Colum, M. and Brennan, A. (2022) 'Embedding diversification practice in Irish teacher education supporting Irish Traveller student access and engagement in ITE'. In: E. Meletiadou (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Practices for Advancing Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education*, pp. 171–187. IGI Global.

Colum, M. and Collins, A. (2021) 'Conversations on Covid-19: A viewpoint on care, connections and culture during the pandemic from a teacher educator and an Irish Traveller', *Irish Educational Studies*, 40(2), 295–302.

Giraldus, C. and Dimock, J.F. (1867) *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera: Topographia Hibernica, et Expurgation Hibernica.* London: Longman, Green, Reader, and Dyer.

Government of Ireland (2000) Equal Status Act, 2000. No. 8/2000. Electronic Irish Statute Book. www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2000/act/8/enacted/en/html.

Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2024) PATH: Programme for Access to Higher Education. Dublin: HEA. https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/path/.

Marino Institute of Education (MIE) (2024) Tobar. Dublin: MIE. www.mie.ie/en/study_with_us/diversity_and_inclusion_programmes/tobar/.

McGinley, H. (2024) '"Hand the shame back": A qualitative study of Traveller experiences across the education continuum – enabling a university for all'. UCD Access & Lifelong Learning. Dublin: UCD.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2019) *Traveller Culture and History in the Curriculum: A Curriculum Audit.* Dublin: NCCA.

Ui Choistealbha, J. and Colum, M. (2022) 'You can't be what you can't see: How the Irish education system is supporting Irish Travellers to participate in ITE programmes'. In: J.A. Boivin and H. Pacheco-Guffrey (Eds.), *Education as the Driving Force of Equity for the Marginalized,* pp. 113–134. IGI Global.

Endnotes

[1] The centres of teaching excellence that participate in PATH 1, strand 1, are Dublin City University, Maynooth University, National Institute of Studies in Education, University of Galway/St Angela's College, University College Cork, Marino Institute of Education/Trinity College Dublin, and University College Dublin/National College of Art and Design (HEA, 2024, p.16).

✱✱✱

New UL doctoral graduate aims to make an impact on 'global energy challenges'

Inspired by his community's energy crisis, a University of Limerick graduate has become the pride of his hometown in Pakistan as he becomes the first person from the community to earn a PhD.

Muhammad Muddasar, originally from a small rural village in the Jhang District in Pakistan, graduated with a Doctorate in Sustainable Materials from UL's Faculty of Science and Engineering and has made history as he becomes the first ever person from his village to earn a doctorate.

Growing up, Muhammad's daily family life was disrupted by regular power shortages. Motivated by his circumstances, he vowed to find solutions to energy problems from an early age.

The 1916 Bursary: A Fund for Students Underrepresented in Higher Education

Introduction

The 1916 Bursary is a financial award that aims to encourage the participation and success of students from sections of society that are significantly under-represented in higher education, including the most socio-economically disadvantaged. It is part of the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) in the fourth National Access Plan (HEA, 2022). The bursary was launched in 2017 to commemorate the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising. It is co-funded by the Irish government and the EU through the Department of Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS).

From 2017 to 2023, the 1916 Bursary was operated by six regional clusters of higher education institutions (HEIs), where applications were assessed in six separately run schemes. In 2023, the City of Dublin Education and Training Board (ETB), having been asked by all the participating HEIs, agreed to provide administrative support so that the bursary could be run centrally in a single application and assessment facility.

Bursary tiers

In 2023, DFHERIS secured additional funding from the European Social Fund so that the number of tier 1 bursaries could be increased from 250 to 400. The tiers are currently as follows. Tier 1: €5,000 a year, awarded to 400 new entrants in 2023/24. Tier 2: €2,000 a year, awarded to 200 new entrants in 2023/24. Tier 3: a once-off bursary of €1,500, awarded to over 800 students for 2023/24 only.

Tier 1 and 2 bursaries are also paid to students progressing into postgraduate study. This means that students already receiving a 1916 Bursary and who are

Declan Reilly

1916 Bursary National Coordinator, Irish Universities Association

The 1916 Bursary is a financial award to encourage the participation and success of students from sections of society that are underrepresented in higher education, including the most socio-economically disadvantaged. It gives up to 400 students annually a €5,000 award for each year of their course. This article describes the bursary's structure and scope.

completing their undergraduate studies can continue to receive it for postgraduate study.

Eligibility

To be eligible for a 1916 Bursary, applicants must meet financial, priority-group, and college entry eligibility criteria. Each participating college has a limited number of bursaries, which are awarded to the eligible applicants that present the greatest need.

The 1916 Bursary is open to students entering year 1 of an undergraduate programme, full-time or part-time, with a household reckonable income equivalent to the Student Grant Scheme (SUSI) special rate of grant for the year before their course begins. For 2024/25, the applicable financial year is 2023, and the SUSI special rate had three thresholds based on how many dependent children are in the household: fewer than 4: €26,200; 4–7: €28,715; 8 or more: €31,128. The income threshold increased by €4,950 per additional person in college.

Students who are directly entering year 2 of a programme can also apply, as can part-time students, second-chance mature students, and students on tertiary education programmes co-designed and delivered by an ETB and a HEI.

Eligible 1916 Bursary applicants must be from one or more of the following priority groups:

Students who are directly entering year 2 of a programme can apply, as can part-time students, second-chance mature students, and students on tertiary education programmes co-designed and delivered by an ETB and a HEI.

» Students from communities, groups, or areas that are socio-economically disadvantaged or have low levels of participation in higher education, including those who have experienced homelessness, the care system, or the criminal justice system, or who are survivors of domestic violence.
» Students who qualify for the special rate of maintenance grant under SUSI or are receiving a Department of Social Protection (DSP) payment.
» Socio-economically disadvantaged mature students who were 23 years or older on 1 January of their year of entry to higher education, and never previously accessed higher education.
» Second-chance socio-economically disadvantaged mature students. Such students may be considered for a bursary where they have previously attended but not completed a course, had a three-year break in studies since leaving the course, and are returning to attend an approved course.
» Students with a disability.
» Members of the Irish Traveller community.
» Members of the Roma community.

» Further education and training award holders progressing to higher education.

» Students who are carers, confirmed by the DSP as holding a long-term means-tested carer's allowance.

» Lone parents or teen parents, confirmed by the DSP as holding a long-term means-tested social welfare payment. At least 20% of tier 1 bursaries will be targeted at lone parents.

» Students who are migrants or refugees or from ethnic minorities who are lawfully present in the State.

To be eligible for a 1916 Bursary, applicants must be a new entrant pursuing an undergraduate course and progressing to higher education for the first time or by advanced entry to year 2; they must have been a resident in the Irish State for three of the past five years; and they must be studying an approved full-time or part-time undergraduate course.

Applicants for a 1916 Bursary must apply online and are advised to read the guidelines first. An application, once started, can be reopened anytime and edited up until submission or the closing date. Only one completed and submitted application per applicant will be assessed for a 1916 Bursary. For more information, visit: https://1916bursary.ie/.

To be eligible for a 1916 Bursary, applicants must be a new entrant pursuing an undergraduate course and progressing to higher education for the first time, or by advanced entry to year 2.

REFERENCES

Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2022) *National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022–2028.* Dublin: HEA. https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/national-access-plan-2022-2028/.

New Initiatives in Third-Level Student Retention

The Social Science Retention Project at Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest

A new initiative is under way at Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest to reduce student attrition rates, which are recognised as a problem both in Ireland and internationally. This article describes the Second Shot project, shows the data behind its early positive impact, and outlines the next steps.

Vincent O'Connor
Lecturer, Technological University of the Shannon

Valerie Besler
Lecturer, Technological University of the Shannon

Imelda Cooke
Lecturer, Technological University of the Shannon

Caroline Coyle
Lecturer, Technological University of the Shannon

Janice Hughes
Faculty Office Manager, Department of Social Sciences, Technological University of the Shannon

Owen Ross
Head of Transitions and Student Success, Technological University of the Shannon

Noelin Fox
Head of Department of Social Sciences, Technological University of the Shannon

Audrey O'Beirne-Cleary
Lecturer, Technological University of the Shannon

Context

Student attrition in higher education institutions has been recognised as a problem both in Ireland (HEA, 2018) and globally (OECD, 2019). High dropout rates are detrimental for economies, societies, and the institutions (Tinto, 1993). For the student dropping out, it is at best a missed opportunity (Johnson, 2012). Retention rates differ substantially in different regions, although direct international comparisons are complicated by methodological approaches.

In October 2021, Athlone and Limerick Institutes of Technology merged into the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS): Midlands Midwest. The university has approximately 14,000 students across seven campuses: three in Limerick City, one each in Athlone, Clonmel, Ennis, and Thurles. The Athlone campus is known as TUS Midlands. Seeking to improve student retention, TUS approved a new *Transitions and Student Success Strategy* in 2023.

TUS Second Shot

The strategy identified a requirement for TUS to focus on improving student performance in the autumn repeat examinations. A new multi-annual project, TUS Second

Shot, was launched in April 2023 aimed at reducing attrition rates by improving participation and success levels in these exams.

The project adopts 'dual-level engagement'. The entire student body is offered supports from university central functions, such as a series of motivational text messages transmitted during the summer to all students who failed exams. Localised targeted interventions are offered to students in the relevant faculty or department, such as specific tutorials and advisories on approaching repeat assignments. An evidence-based approach was adopted to offer help to students as problems arose. The Second Shot project is supported by a specially designed computer program offering swift access to information on student exam marks.

It is hoped the project will achieve significant results over time. Results in 2023 were encouraging: TUS registered a 2.5% increase in student participation in autumn exams and a 0.7% increase in pass rates. Crucially, TUS has gone from having 14.8% of registered students (excluding trade apprentices) without full credits after the autumn exams in 2022 to 14% in 2023. The gain of 124 students was primarily driven by improved performance in both summer and autumn exams.

Student Retention Project

The Department of Social Sciences resides in the larger Faculty of Science and Health in TUS Midlands and currently has 540 students enrolled, including 135 first-years. Many factors influenced a 5% increase in its attrition rate in 2021. The introduction of failed elements as part of the new CORU regulations in 2022 made it more challenging for students to pass.

External factors also affected performance. The accommodation crisis has increased the cost of rooms in Athlone and greatly reduced their availability. Many students must now commute long distances to lectures, which affects their assessment and exam results. Recent inflationary trends and the cost-of-living crisis have forced many to take up part-time or full-time employment, which can decrease their attendance and available study time.

Programme staff report numerous first-year students who are finding the transition to third-level education challenging, as they enter with low self-esteem (Mendes et al., 2021). Experience shows that intervention early in the academic year substantially increases the likelihood of students successfully completing the year (Ross, 2023).

Departmental results from the first iteration of TUS Second Shot were very encouraging, with repeating students' success rates improving by 11.2%. The department convened retention workshops in October 2023 to build on this,

A new initiative is under way at Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest to reduce student attrition rates, which are recognised as a problem both in Ireland and internationally.

and initiated a Social Science Retention Project in February 2024 seeking to improve student experience and reduce attrition.

Strategy

Because timely intervention by academic staff really matters to students (Meehan & Howells, 2018), the project appointed six student retention lecturers. Their responsibilities include communicating regularly with students, identifying appropriate supports, providing targeted tutorials, and proactively organising retention events to increase students' level of belonging and wellbeing.

This project is supported by two communities of purpose. The student retention lecturers meet regularly to discuss possible courses of action and measures they consider effective. A wider departmental retention group, comprising these lecturers, the programme coordinators, and the faculty administrator, also meets to determine the targeted measures to be prioritised.

Early stages of the project prioritised offering support to students in the context of TUS Second Shot. Student retention lecturers met students and encouraged them to engage with the numerous supports that TUS offers.

Conclusion

Measuring progress was considered important from the outset of the Social Science Retention Project. Its efficacy is measured using the non-progression rate, autumn repeat exam participation rate, and autumn repeat exam success rate. Impact from the early stages has been positive, especially for autumn repeats. Student performance improved by a further 1.5% in 2024 – a 12.7% improvement in two years.

The retention project is in its infancy. Each year offers a new opportunity to improve it and potentially benefit more students. It may take time to improve processes and procedures to the optimal benefit of students. The 2024/25 iteration aims to see staff adopt positive measures to increase students' sense of belonging.

To disseminate the project actions, a series of reports and papers will be issued to examine the role that lecturers and administrators can play in supporting retention initiatives. This will inform the wider institutional retention efforts before the next iteration of the *TUS Transitions and Student Success Strategy*.

The responsibilities of the student retention lecturers include communicating regularly with students, identifying appropriate supports, providing targeted tutorials, and proactively organising retention events to increase students' level of belonging and wellbeing.

REFERENCES

Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2018) *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education 2014/15 to 2015/16.* Dublin: HEA. http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/05/HEA-Progression-Report-2018-FINAL.pdf.

Johnson, N. (2012) *The Institutional Costs of Student Attrition.* Washington DC: American Institutes for Research.

Meehan, C. and Howells, K. (2018) '"What really matters to freshers?": Evaluation of first year student experience of transition into university', *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 42(7): 893–907. DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2017.1323194

Mendes, P.R., de Araújo, A.T., Bastos, P.B.V., Neuhauss, E., Monteiro, L.Z., and Rauber, S.B. (2021) 'Perceived self-esteem, resilience and stress of students entering a nursing degree', *Acta Scientiarum – Health Sciences,* 43, 1–6. DOI: 10.4025/actascihealthsci.v43i1.55004

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2019) 'Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators'. Paris: OECD.

Ross, O. (2023) 'A mixed-methods approach evaluating the impact of the Faculty of Business and Hospitality's student success model within the Department of Business and Management, in Athlone Institute of Technology, over eight academic years'. Dublin City University.

Suhlmann, M., Sassenberg, K., Nagengast, B., and Trautwein, U. (2018) 'Belonging mediates effects of student–university fit on well-being, motivation, and dropout intention', *Social Psychology,* 49(1), 16–28. DOI: 10.1027/1864-9335/a000325

Tinto, V. (1993) *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition,* 2nd edn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

A Case for Change: An Evolving Model of Online Placement Assessment for Early Childhood Education Degree Students

This article opens up a discussion on the quality of professional placement for early childhood education students. It recognises the role of mentoring in enhancing students' quality of experience. It challenges the traditional observation assessment method and argues for considering online professional dialogue as an alternative form of student assessment. The study draws from research and evaluation conducted over five years of one higher education institution's experience implementing progressive and innovative change to enhance students' professional practice experience in the early years.

Aishling Silke
Assistant Professor, Dublin City University

Marlene McCormack
Assistant Professor, Dublin City University

Introduction

Professional practice (practicum or placement) is critical to the formation of early childhood (EC) student educators, supporting the development of their values, confidence, competence, and professional identity. Yet despite its acknowledged impact, the practice and processes of placement have remained largely unexamined.

This article briefly reports on a participatory action research study undertaken by one higher education institution (HEI) over five years, as a programme of innovative professional practice was implemented. Findings call into question established approaches to professional practice, challenging methods of assessment and making a compelling argument for improved student mentoring.

These proposals begin to unsettle long-established patterns of professional practice, but they are timely given

learning from the Covid-19 pandemic and an increased policy gaze. We argue for an alternative online form of student assessment and for building mentoring capacity in early childhood education (ECE) settings. It is time to start the conversation on the quality of professional placement for EC students in the Irish context.

Our research confirms that the most influential contributor to the quality of experience and student outcome is the quality of mentoring during professional practice. Mentoring is complex, as students need nurturing relationships to address pedagogical fears, appropriate levels of challenge, and coaching to develop an agentive identity (Recchia et al., 2018). The launch of the Workforce Development Plan (Government of Ireland, 2022) begins to acknowledge the importance of mentoring in early childhood, yet a gap exists between the rhetoric and practice.

There have been repeated calls for professional development for mentors working with students (Sewell et al., 2017). Glynn and Ferguson (2021) note a global need for better support for mentors of ECE students on professional practice. Student mentors undoubtedly need to be professionally prepared, yet current supports are woefully inadequate (Darling-Hammond, 2010). These realities reflect the Irish context and have led us to ask, How can we better support student mentoring in early childhood settings?

We began our research (Figure 1) with the belief that supporting mentors would strengthen students' pedagogy and at the same time build capacity in the ECE profession. We focused resources on building mentors' capacity to work with students. A level 9 (master's) module on leading and mentoring was developed and offered as a stand-alone module and a core element of a full master's in education programme – indicating the growing qualification levels in the profession.
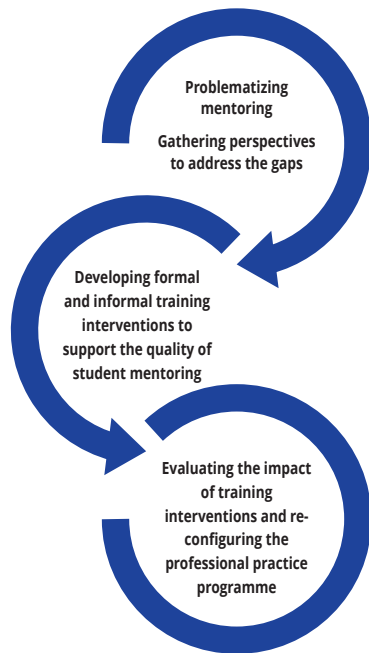

Figure 1: Action research cycles

Our research confirms that the most influential contributor to the quality of experience and student outcome is the quality of mentoring during professional practice.

Assessment

Covid-19 presented a challenge to student assessment. The established approach hinges on observing students in practice and subsequent dialogue between the educator mentor (supervisor) and HEI representative (placement tutor). Responsibility for assessment lay firmly with placement tutors. Student mentors felt uncomfortable assessing students, wanting to leave this responsibility with HEIs (Hall et al., 2019). Equally, tensions can arise when the placement tutor straddles the role of mentor and assessor. This approach has been critiqued as being an individualised practice, mainly summative, and lacking collaboration and transparency (Aspden, 2017).

Our values, our research findings, and the pandemic-induced need for innovative approaches enabled us to take a risk and reconfigure professional practice and its assessment (McLaren et al., 2022). We moved assessment online, to 'a third space' (Bhabha, 1994) where the student, mentor, and placement tutor engage in professional conversations. Placement tutors underwent training as preparation. Before meeting online for the assessment, tutors reviewed students' e-portfolios that showcased their work and used this to create probing questions to structure authentic professional conversations.

Placement tutors reported a positive experience of the online assessment, noting the level of students' preparation that facilitated deeper discussion, drawing out students' understanding of theory and practice, compared to traditional observation and discussion (Doyle et al., 2024). Students highlighted the link between increased mentoring support and the move away from classroom observation, which improved the quality of their pedagogical practice and professional placement experience.

Increased supports for mentors improved their skills in working with students and grew their confidence in engaging in professional pedagogical conversations as part of assessment. Placement tutors saw students' work not through a snapshot in time where anxieties may dominate, but through documentation created over time, their reflections, ability to articulate their pedagogy, and capacity to explicitly link theory with practice. In this approach, we argue that creating the conditions for professional dialogues is critical in supporting the development of student educators (Gravett & Ramsaroop, 2015).

There is a dearth of literature and research on professional placement in the Irish context.

Conclusion

HEIs have the potential to act 'as test beds for new ideas, with the ability to lead by example and to share and implement research findings and technology with wider society' (Shawe et al., 2019, p.87). Doyle et al. (2024) write that 'to return to traditional placement experiences alone and ignore the digital "third space"

and changes in assessment would facilitate the loss of opportunities, which emerged during COVID-19 and opened up a new dimension for authentic partnership and communities of practice with practising teachers' (p.17).

Over one-third of all EC degree programmes in Ireland must be allocated to professional placement. Yet there is a dearth of literature and research on professional placement in the Irish context. We need to reconsider traditional structures and conceptualisations of professional practice. It is time to give professional placement due academic attention. We invite others to partner with us in this discussion.

REFERENCES

Aspden, K.M. (2017) 'The complexity of practicum assessment in teacher education: An examination of four New Zealand case studies', *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 42(12), 128–143.

Bhabha, H.K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2010) 'Teacher education and the American future', *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(1–2), 35–47.

Doyle, A., Conroy Johnson, M., Scanlon, D., Logan, A., Silke, A., Gorman, A., . . . and O'Grady, S. (2024) 'Reconceptualising school placement assessment in initial teacher education: A figurational perspective', *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 47(2), 305–329.

Glynn, M. and Ferguson, P. (2021) *Mentorship in Early Childhood Education: A literature review*. Dublin: Dublin City University.

Government of Ireland (2022) *Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Development Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022–2028*. Dublin: Government publications.

Gravett, S. and Ramsaroop, S. (2015) 'Bridging theory and practice in teacher education: Teaching schools – a bridge too far?', *Perspectives in Education,* 33(1), 131–146.

Hall, K., Murphy, R., Ní Áingléis, B., and Rutherford, V. (2019) 'Mentoring and assessing student teachers on school placement: Integrating theory and practice', *Education Research and Perspectives*, 46, 75–107.

McLaren, M.R., Scott, C., McCormack, M., and Silke, A. (2022) 'It started with a blog: How international connections were made and sustained in a global pandemic', *World Studies in Education*, 23(1), 115–134.

Recchia, S.L., Shin, M., and Snaider, C. (2018) 'Where is the love? Developing loving relationships as an essential component of professional infant care', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 26(2), 142–158.

Sewell, A., Hansen, S., and Weir, K. (2017) 'Enhancing the capabilities of associate teachers in the practicum: A New Zealand case study', *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies,* 52, 21–39.

Shawe, R., Horan, W., Moles, R., and O'Regan, B. (2019) 'Mapping of sustainability policies and initiatives in higher education institutes', *Environmental Science and Policy*, 99, 80–88.

The Mature Student Experience of Blended Learning

A provider perspective on factors that can prevent or enable participation

Mature students

Previous research found that Irish mature students were satisfied with their experience of blended learning, compared with face-to-face learning, due to ease of access and degree of control (O'Connor McGowan, 2020). Some professions have established specific access routes for mature students, to increase diversity. Hibernia College operates a blended learning model underpinned by universal design for leaning. Here we seek to integrate published evidence with our own perspective, informed by learners' lived experience.

Mature students are defined by the Higher Education Authority as anyone above the age of 23 on 1 January of the year of their entry into higher education (HEA, 2021). Given the wide chronological bracket, mature students' backgrounds will vary significantly, and this will shape their experiences.

Broadly speaking, mature students may fall into several categories: 1. professionals seeking career advancement; 2. individuals seeking a career change; 3. individuals returning to education; and 4. first-time students. These categories are fluid and overlapping. For example, while 1 and 2 may share characteristics of age, domestic arrangements, and so on, financial constraints may be more evident and acute in category 2.

All students, irrespective of discipline, face multiple challenges. However, mature students can face unique combinations or exacerbated challenges to full engagement in their studies, arising from financial hardship, social or peer interactions, health and welfare concerns, domestic or family responsibilities, integration to the academic environment, and technological difficulties.

Dr Robin Flynn
Quality, Enhancement and Registrations Manager, Office of the Registrar, Hibernia College

Ms Elva Casey
Director of School Placement, Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, Maynooth University

Blending learning has particular benefits for mature students because of the unique or exacerbated challenges they experience. This article looks at the complex ecosystem of factors that must be considered in order to attract and support mature learners in a blended environment. It integrates wider research with Hibernia College's model, which has evolved with technological and social developments.

Moreover, these challenges are often intersectional. For example, financial difficulties magnify difficulties with social integration (Creedon, 2015), and challenges can be pronounced in cases where mature students also identify as disabled (Thompson, 2021).

The promise of blended learning

Blended learning – learning in both physical and online environments – has evolved from earlier iterations that involved distance learning and open education efforts. Blended learning as we currently understand it came into being as technology-enhanced learning matured (Friesen, 2012). It provides advantages to some students through greater flexibility, inclusivity, and personalisation. The extent to which these are felt by a student depends on their circumstances and the constraints of a particular provider or programme.

It is therefore reasonable to expect that blended programmes may meet the needs of mature learners joining study for the first time or after a gap and for those who are continuing study. Likewise, providers who operate with validation or accreditation may have conditions attached to their institute or to particular programmes that limit mature-student participation, despite the attraction of blended learning.

On balance, however, the effectiveness of blended learning has been demonstrated through student learning outcomes (Han, 2023), improvement in self-study abilities (Tong et al., 2022), and student satisfaction (Melton et al., 2009).

The effectiveness of blended learning has been demonstrated through student learning outcomes (Han, 2023), improvement in self-study abilities (Tong et al., 2022), and student satisfaction (Melton et al., 2009).

Push and pull

Nationally, the rate of mature-student engagement with higher education has declined from a peak in 2010/11 to 2018/19 (HEA, 2021). This is a result of improvement in the national economy, fewer learners in further education and training, and other factors. The same HEA report, however, notes that blended learning may attract more mature students.

Mature students identified the most significant barriers as financial cost (67%), family responsibilities and commitments (42%), job commitments (33%), and distance to study (26%). The barriers to their participation in higher education may therefore be overcome, in full or in part, through blended delivery.

There is clearly a complex ecosystem of factors, external and internal, which must be considered carefully to create a balance that attracts, supports, and sustains mature learners in a blended environment. Something that attracts one student may hinder another – or the same learner if it is not managed

carefully. This push and pull of the mature student in the blended learning environment is represented in the figure below.
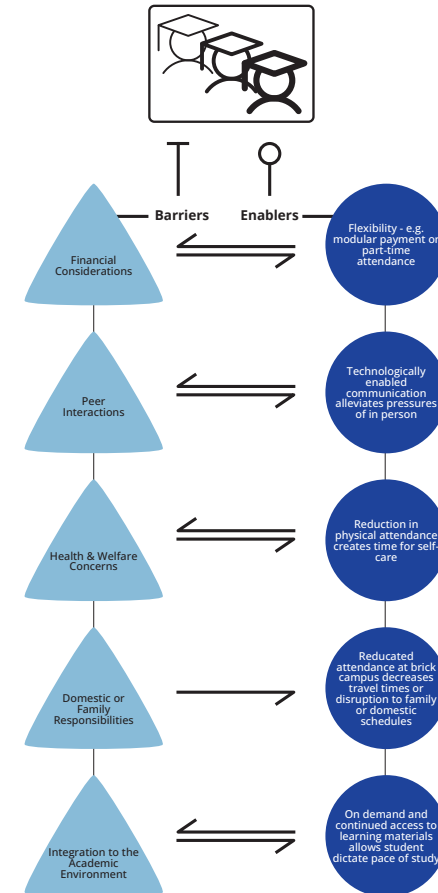
Institutional perspective

Since its inception, Hibernia College has offered blended learning, and this has evolved as technology has matured alongside a student-centred digital learning environment (Hibernia College, 2019–20). This has allowed students to:

» set their own pace of study, enabling student-led integration into the academic environment: 'The course offered me the freedom to create my own study timetable and hours tailored to my lifestyle'
» undertake a career change: 'I loved my work but always wanted to teach younger children, at primary-school level'
» engage in study alongside managing domestic or family responsibilities: 'gave me the flexibility I needed to work around my own three children'.

While the experiences of those seeking flexibility in returning to study or advancing their career are positive, we must be cognisant of the need for flexibility and the potential for impacts on academic success that come with setting a personalised pace of learning. This is acute where there are time limits on study or external registration requirements.

Future considerations

For blended learning to fully realise its potential in the inclusion of all mature students in higher education, a balancing act is required. The factors that overcome traditional barriers must be leveraged in a personalised way to ensure they do not counter their intrinsic benefits. This may involve developing

and setting personalised learning plans based on programme requirements being aligned with students' circumstances.

At systems level, there is more scope for focused monitoring, from admission to graduation, assessing the impacts of these enablers and barriers on mature students' engagement and success. Comparing providers and programmes will uncover universal elements and may also reveal previously unidentified barriers to engagement with particular programmes or professions.

REFERENCES

Creedon, D. (2015) 'The experience of financial hardship on mature students' social and academic integration', *International Journal for Cross-Disciplinary Subjects in Education*, 5(2), 2471–2481.

Friesen, N. (2012) *Defining Blended Learning.* Boise.

Han, X. (2023) 'Evaluating blended learning effectiveness: An empirical study from undergraduates' perspectives using structural equation modeling', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1059282

Hibernia College (2019–20) *Annual Quality Report.* Dublin: Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2021) *Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education: What Are the Challenges? Recommendations for the Future.* Dublin: HEA.

O'Connor McGowan, S. (2020) 'A case study exploring mature students' expectations and experiences of the fully online mode of learning in a higher education institution in Ireland'. PhD thesis, Dublin City University.

Melton, B., Graf, H., and Chopak-Foss, J. (2009) 'Achievement and satisfaction in blended learning versus traditional general health course designs'. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 3(1).

Thompson, C. (2021) 'From self-doubt to self-belief: The experiences of mature students with disabilities in higher education in Ireland', *AHEAD Journal*, 13.

Tong, D.H., Uyen, B.P., and Ngan, L.K. (2022) 'The effectiveness of blended learning on students' academic achievement, self-study skills and learning attitudes: A quasi-experiment study in teaching the conventions for coordinates in the plane'. *Heliyon*. DOI: 10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e12657
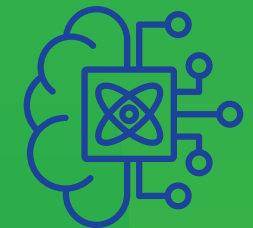
Research

# Research and Innovation in Ireland: A New Era

Impact 2030

When Simon Harris, the then Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, launched *Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy* in 2022, he declared that it marked a significant inflection point in the development of research and innovation in Ireland.

According to the plan, 'Impact 2030 positions research and innovation at the heart of addressing Ireland's societal, economic and environmental challenges.' The Minister promised to bring 'a landmark research bill to government' to create a new competitive research and innovation funding agency. He delivered on that promise.

Ireland's research and innovation system made a significant pivot in 2024 with the enactment of the Research and Innovation Bill. This legislation represents a major shift towards a more integrated research ecosystem, bridging previously distinct streams of scientific enquiry and knowledge generation.

The Act provided for the amalgamation of two research funding bodies, Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and the Irish Research Council (IRC), into a newly formed body, Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland. Established on 1 August 2024, Research Ireland now holds a mandate to oversee competitive research funding across all disciplines, ranging from science and engineering to the arts, humanities, and social sciences, and also across the full spectrum from curiosity-driven to applied research.

Initial priorities for Research Ireland have been embedding the new organisation internally and within the research system, supporting staff from the two previous agencies through the transition, and – critically – ensuring continuity of funding to the research community.
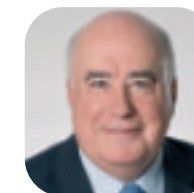
Michael Horgan
Chairperson, Taighde Éireann
Research Ireland

With the amalgamation of Science Foundation Ireland and the Irish Research Council into a new research funding body, Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland, the country's research and innovation sector enters a new era. This article provides an overview of Research Ireland's priorities, aims, opportunities, and challenges at this critical juncture.

Fusion

The merger of SFI and IRC into Research Ireland reflects an awareness of the growing importance of interdisciplinary research in addressing complex societal challenges, such as climate change, healthcare, and technological ethics. Many of these challenges require knowledge and insights that cut across traditional academic boundaries.

By creating a single entity responsible for funding all areas of research, the government aims to encourage cross-sectoral collaboration, streamline administrative processes, and ensure more equitable access to funding by all. As the Minister put it at the time: 'This is an exciting opportunity to place all research on an equal and statutory footing and to drive a step-change in interdisciplinary research activity.'

This fusion of research bodies encourages collaborative projects that leverage the strengths of different fields, fostering innovation that might not arise from single-discipline efforts.

For example, a research project addressing climate change could involve not only scientists and engineers but also economists, sociologists, and historians. Such a comprehensive approach can generate more nuanced solutions to complex problems and ensure these solutions are ethically grounded and socially responsive, while also enhancing Ireland's overall innovation potential.

With a unified funding body, Ireland can project a more cohesive identity on the global research stage, making the country a more attractive destination for international researchers and collaborative projects.

Challenges

Yet, as with any major reform, there are challenges and uncertainties that must be carefully managed. Balancing the needs of various research fields, evaluating interdisciplinary projects equitably, and maintaining Ireland's competitive edge in science and technology are all complex tasks that will require strategic oversight and thoughtful planning.

Also, we are, today, at an early stage in our cross-sectoral collaboration journey, and there remains some distance to travel to reach a point where collaboration potential, efficiencies, and outputs are maximised.

A key challenge for Research Ireland will be to fairly and appropriately allocate funding across the agency's broad remit and to meet the diverse needs of the research community, enterprise, government, and other stakeholders, while also delivering sustainable impact for Ireland.

By creating a single entity responsible for funding all areas of research, the government aims to encourage cross-sectoral collaboration, streamline administrative processes, and ensure more equitable access to funding by all.

A particularly intriguing avenue for Research Ireland's future lies in fostering public engagement with research.

The primary determinant in how our budget is dispersed is the level of funding received annually by government. For our newly established agency, the many dynamic factors that consequently stem from that annual allocation include the spread across research disciplines, geographical areas and career stage, award scale and duration, national strategies and priorities, programme objectives, predictability, and flexibility.

Research Ireland's more inclusive mandate offers opportunities to enhance research-led teaching and provide students with exposure to diverse perspectives across disciplines. This may encourage students to pursue interdisciplinary studies, preparing them to tackle complex real-world issues and enhancing their employability in a rapidly evolving job market.

Integration

A particularly intriguing avenue for Research Ireland's future lies in fostering public engagement with research. Initiatives that bring citizens into the research process – whether through citizen science projects, public discussions on ethical questions, or community-based participatory research – could democratise the benefits of research, fostering a society that both understands and actively shapes scientific and social progress.

The challenge for Research Ireland is to position our nation as a leader in research and innovation, fostering a knowledge-driven society that values not only technological progress but also the cultural and ethical insights offered by the arts and humanities.

This new era of integration invites researchers, educators, policymakers, and society as a whole to envision a future where knowledge flows freely across disciplines, uniting efforts to address the multifaceted challenges of our time. With Research Ireland, we have an opportunity to become not just a participant but a leader in the global research community, increasingly focused on interconnected, interdisciplinary solutions. The world of research is evolving, and Ireland is poised to be at the forefront of this transformation.

Taighde Éireann Research Ireland

Aligning PhD Education with the Demands of the Modern Research Ecosystem

Introduction

Postgraduate research (PGR) by PhD students is integral to a flourishing research ecosystem. These students are not only at the forefront of expanding new knowledge but also pivotal in contributing to pioneering research that drives advances across various fields. Ireland's national research and innovation strategy, Impact 2030, emphasises PGR as a cornerstone of the country's future development. It aims to increase the number of researchers in the workforce from 9.52 per 1,000 in 2015 to 15 per 1,000 by 2030. This ambitious goal reflects growing recognition that PhD graduates are likely to pursue careers outside traditional academic pathways.

At Maynooth University, through broad and extensive engagement, a common and resounding need has emerged, which has led us to carefully reconsider how we equip PGR students for success. Our new Graduate Research Academy aims to address the evolving needs of our students by aligning our PhD programmes with the evolving research ecosystem. This will empower students to excel in their research by facilitating interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral research, building strong peer research communities, and equipping them with an integrated skill set necessary for successful careers in academia and beyond. This marks a significant shift in how research and higher education are intertwined with industry, policy, and societal impact.

Misalignment of the traditional PhD experience

Historically, the PhD experience has been centred on a deep, specialised research project in a narrowly defined field, typically conducted in a higher education institution (HEI) under the mentorship of an academic supervisor. It usually spans 3–6 years and involves not just research but often teaching responsibilities and participation in the

Professor Rachel Msetfi
Vice President Research and Innovation, Maynooth University

The article discusses the need to align PhD education with the demands of the modern research ecosystem, recognising that PhD graduates increasingly pursue careers outside traditional academic pathways. It outlines Maynooth University's vision for its new Graduate Research Academy, and it advocates for a PhD experience that is more adaptable and supportive, allowing students to thrive in both academic and non-academic environments.

academic community. Its culmination is a doctoral thesis that contributes new knowledge to the field.

Some students are self-funded; others avail of scholarships by HEIs or funding agencies, receiving a modest stipend to cover living expenses. The intellectual rigor of the PhD, together with financial pressures, makes it particularly challenging. Traditionally, this was seen as appropriate preparation for a career in academia, where resilience and independence were valued.

However, the landscape of research and employment is continually changing. The traditional model is increasingly misaligned with the current research ecosystem, which demands that research outcomes – whether related to policy, innovation, health, or education – be planned with impact in mind and partially implemented during the course of the research.

Moreover, PGR education is no longer reserved for the privileged. Maynooth University is committed to supporting all students with the potential to undertake PGR studies. This commitment to inclusivity not only democratises research but also brings diverse perspectives, insights, and experiences into it, enriching the overall impact and expanding the talent pool.

At Maynooth University, through broad and extensive engagement, a common and resounding need has emerged which has led us to carefully reconsider how we equip Post Graduate Research students for success.

Addressing the challenges

To realise the full potential of a diverse PGR cohort, enhanced funding models are crucial. Expanding the number and diversity of students is meaningless if support structures are not adequate. Research by Grant-Smith et al. (2020) shows the importance of equity in postgraduate education: without sufficient support, efforts to widen participation may inadvertently widen existing gaps.

Completion rates and outcomes for PhD students are significantly influenced by factors such as student quality, academic environment, and financial conditions (Skopek et al., 2022). Non-completion is a personal and professional setback for students, and a significant loss of public resources. This emphasises the importance of providing robust support systems for students and their supervisors.

External factors such as economic shifts, job-market fluctuations, and housing availability can also impact students' ability to engage in and sustain their PGR. While these are often beyond the control of educational institutions, they highlight the need for more resilient and adaptable PhD funding models.

PhD training also needs to be re-evaluated given that around half of doctoral graduates gain employment outside academia, with two-thirds of these engaging in research as part of their work (Hnatkova et al., 2022). These statistics highlight the need to enhance PhD training to better prepare

graduates for careers in non-academic settings. This should include experiential learning opportunities, mobility inside and outside Ireland, collaborations with non-academic sectors, and career-focused development programmes. Such training is particularly crucial for graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds, who, on average, earn significantly less than their more affluent peers.

The need for intersectoral mobility is also emphasised in the OECD's *Skills Strategy Ireland* report (2023), which calls for stronger connections between academia and other sectors, including industry, public service, and the voluntary sector. In response, Maynooth University's vision is to develop doctoral programmes that are integrated with non-academic sectors while maintaining academic excellence.

Our vision

Our vision for PhD education in our Graduate Research Academy is one that is inclusive, flexible, and supportive of all students. This requires personalised support, beginning with tailored needs analyses that ensure that every student embarks on the programme that will empower them to succeed. We envision flexible and adaptable PhD programmes that enhance career opportunities in academia and beyond. These might include cross-sectoral supervision, international and sectoral mobility opportunities, and non-traditional study modes that accommodate the diverse needs of students.

To ensure that graduates are well equipped for the current research ecosystem, we propose the development of training pathways that focus on impact, policy, and innovation. These pathways will help students develop the skills to navigate and contribute to the complex landscape of modern research. Importantly, this vision also requires that staff receive adequate support and training to guide students effectively.

Flexibility in PhD programmes will allow students the time and space to support themselves financially. While the traditional model may remain the best option for some students and projects, for others a PhD that extends beyond the campus and integrates with the professional world may be more appropriate. For instance, work-based PhD programmes allow students to complete their studies part-time or full-time while remaining employed, focusing on research that is directly relevant to their field of employment. These programmes, often sponsored by employers, represent an investment in both the students and the knowledge generated through their research. This approach enhances the financial model for both student and employer and ensures that the research has immediate relevance and impact.

Work-based PhD programmes allow students to complete their studies part-time or full-time while remaining employed, focusing on research that is directly relevant to their field of employment.

A PhD experience that is more flexible, supportive, and integrated with relevant sectors will produce graduates who are better equipped to work in diverse environments and generate impactful research. This approach may extend the PhD but will ultimately lead to a more fulfilling and less stressful experience for students. By aligning PhD education with the demands of the modern research ecosystem and ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed, we can foster a new generation of researchers who can drive meaningful change.

REFERENCES

Grant-Smith, D., Irmer, B., and Mayes, R. (2020) *Equity in Postgraduate Education in Australia: Widening participation or widening the gap?* National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE). www.acses.edu.au/publication/equity-in-postgraduate-education-in-australia-widening-participation-or-widening-the-gap/.

Hitchings, C. (2022) *Strengthening the Role of Training Needs Analysis in Doctoral Training.* UK Research and Innovation. https://policycommons.net/artifacts/2471829/strengthening-the-role-of-training-needs-analysis-in-doctoral-training/3493834/. CID: 20.500.12592/t2b9ht.

Hnatkova, E., Degtyarova, I., Kersschot, M., and Boman, J. (2022) 'Labour market perspectives for PhD graduates in Europe', *European Journal of Education*, 57, 395–409. DOI: 10.1111/ejed.12514

OECD (2023) *OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations.* Paris: OECD. DOI: 10.1787/d7b8b40b-en.

Skopek, J., Triventi, M., and Blossfeld, H.P. (2022) 'How do institutional factors shape PhD completion rates? An analysis of long-term changes in a European doctoral program', *Studies in Higher Education*, 47(2), 318–337.

***

Enhancing the Employability of PhD Graduates

Munster Technological University (MTU) offers valuable opportunities for PhD students to engage with employers across academia, industry, government, and entrepreneurship.

Through its strong ties to regional business and innovation ecosystems, the University aims to enable postgraduate researchers to gain hands-on experience and build valuable industry connections throughout their studies.

MTU is a participant in the national roll-out of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Odyssey Programme, a new initiative aimed at enhancing the career development of PhD students. In joining the programme, MTU is aligning with the national ambition of IMPACT 2030 – Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy – which seeks to improve career pathways and maximise the impact of researchers across various sectors.

Dr Siobhán Mac Sweeney, Head of Research at MTU's Kerry Campus and Coordinator of the MTU Odyssey Programme. *Photo by Pauline Dennigan*

Supporting Parents to Navigate the Modern Digital Ecosystem

A research project on parental attitudes to STEM and digital technologies

Parents have a profound impact on children's learning, interests and educational/career outcomes. This article describes our community action research project at National College of Ireland, which we are conducting with parents in Dublin's north inner city. It explores their attitudes to and awareness of STEM, to discover how best to support parents in keeping their children safe, engaged, and learning in the modern digital ecosystem.

David Mothersill

Associate Professor of Psychology, School of Business, National College of Ireland

Nikki Ryan

Researcher, Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland

Céilim Rowsome-Kelly

Research Intern, Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland

Paul Stynes

Professor and Dean of School of Computing, National College of Ireland

Josephine Bleach

Director, Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland

Introduction

Over the past 10 years, National College of Ireland (NCI), with support from Science Foundation Ireland, has enabled 3,000 children annually to access Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education, develop digital skills, and build positive STEM identities. Over 20,000 parents have engaged, with 94% satisfaction rates. We are now exploring how to develop parenting support programmes focused on building parents' capacity to navigate the modern digital ecosystem for themselves and their children.

Early learning is a child's foundation for all future learning (Heckman, 2006). Early learning and ability in STEM is a strong predictor of future success, both academically and in a range of careers, including future careers in areas such as artificial intelligence (AI) (Hinjosa et al., 2016). Parents play a critical role in motivating children to learn STEM. Parents' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours can increase their child's motivation and self-efficacy in areas that are often perceived as intimidating at first (Bandura, 1997).

However, parents in disadvantaged communities often do not have the knowledge or skills in STEM to encourage children in these areas (Early Learning Initiative, 2012). Dublin's north inner city is one of Ireland's most disadvantaged communities, impacted by educational inequality, inter-generational poverty, homelessness, addiction, crime, early school leaving, and immigration. To improve access to early learning in STEM in this community, NCI has offered a range of programmes since 2008 (Darmody et al., 2022; Darmody et al., 2023; Alcala et al., 2024).

Given parents' critical role, and the speed at which STEM is changing, there is a need to better understand parental attitudes to and awareness of STEM so that we can bring them in to help design programmes. This approach, called community action research, involves the community in decisions, design, and conducting of research, and has been used by NCI to develop grassroots STEM family learning programmes (Bleach, 2013; Bleach & Stynes, 2024). However, more evidence-based clarity was needed on how parents in this community think and feel about STEM.

This article will describe our new research project, *Participatory research on parental attitudes and awareness of STEM and digital technologies*, and present initial findings. The project aims to better understand parents' perceptions of STEM in Dublin's inner city, identify barriers to their engagement with STEM, and inform NCI programmatic development. It is hoped this research will help us design new and more effective programmes and increase parents' engagement, skills, and knowledge in STEM, thus influencing early learning in these areas.

Interview questions were developed based on the parent socialisation model (Eccles et al., 1983), according to which parents' beliefs and values influence parenting behaviours, which in turn influence children's competence and beliefs.

The research

The research is a collaboration between NCI's Early Learning Initiative (ELI), School of Computing, and School of Business. We aim to conduct 10 semi-structured interviews with parents based in Dublin's north inner city. Interview questions were developed based on the parent socialisation model (Eccles et al., 1983). According to this model, parents' beliefs and values influence parenting behaviours, which in turn influence children's competence and beliefs.

We conducted three pilot interviews, whose transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which revealed several themes. When they hear the term 'STEM', multiple parents reported a feeling of fear, linked to being bad at maths. Similarly, when asked what they know about digital technology, there was a perception of not being good at it, despite reporting everyday use.

Parents see a balance of positive and negative results of technology: they acknowledge how it helps with everyday tasks, but are aware it can take time from more face-to-face interaction with family and friends. They know how important early learning of STEM in school is, and that schools should start

STEM education earlier but are under-resourced. Finally, parents need more information on AI, and simplification, but they tend to think it is mostly positive for children and those with additional needs.

Discussion

The pilot interview themes are consistent with previous surveys by National College of Ireland, which highlighted that parents had high aspirations for their children's education but were not confident they had the skills to support it (Dartington Social Research Unit, 2006). As such, there is a clear rationale for our STEM family learning programmes, and for adding new programmes designed to engage parents of young children in STEM and digital technologies.

We are now looking forward to the results of the full research project. This includes our survey on parental attitudes to and awareness of STEM, which we hope to distribute to 200 parents, and the results of a further 10 semi-structured interviews. We aim to complete the project by late 2024 and to use this research to inform new programmes soon after.

When they hear the term 'STEM', multiple parents reported a feeling of fear, linked to being bad at maths.

REFERENCES

Alcala, A., Bleach, J., O'Neill, J., Kane, T., Hennessy-McCann, E., Booth, J., Darmody, K., Pathak, P., and Stynes, P. (2024) 'STEM Play & Learn: A Summer Family Learning Programme in Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Communities'. IEEE Frontiers in Education Conference 2024 (FIE 2024), 13–16 October, Washington, DC.

Bandura, A. (1997) *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. W.H. Freeman and Company.

Bleach, J. (2013) 'Improving educational aspirations and outcomes through community action research', *Educational Action Research Journal*, 21(2), 253–266.

Bleach, J. and Stynes, P. (2024) 'Using Community Action Research to develop grassroots STEM Family Learning Programmes'. Proceedings of the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN 2024), 24–26 October, Malmo University, Sweden.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Early Learning Initiative (2012) 'Submission to the Joint Committee on Jobs, Social Protection and Education on Educational Disadvantage' [Unpublished Report.] National College of Ireland.

Darmody, K., Booth, J., O'Toole, F., Alcala, A., Bleach, J., Stynes, P., and Pathak, P. (2022) 'A STEM family eLearning framework to increase family engagement in disadvantaged communities'. IADIS 16th International Conference on e-Learning, 19–21 July, Lisbon.

Darmody, K., Booth, J., Bleach, J., Pathak, P., Stynes, P. (2023) 'Work in Progress: A Virtual Educational Robotics Coding Club Framework to Improve K-6 Students Emotional Engagement in STEM'. 2023 IEEE World Engineering Education Conference (EDUNINE), IEEE, Bogotá, Colombia, pp. 1–4.

Dartington Social Research Unit (2006) National College of Ireland Early Learning for Children in North Docklands: Report of Findings. [Unpublished Report.] National College of Ireland.

Eccles, J.S., Adler, T.F., Futterman, R., Goff, S.B., Kaczala, C.M., Meece, J.L., and Midgley, C. (1983) 'Expectancies, values and academic behaviors'. In: J.T. Spence (Ed.), *Achievement and Achievement Motives*, pp. 74–146. W.H. Freeman.

Heckman, J.J. (2006) 'Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children', *Science*, 312(5782), 1900–1902. DOI: 10.1126/science.1128898

Hinojosa, T., Rapaport, A., Jaciw, A., LiCalsi, C., and Zacamy, J. (2016) 'Exploring the foundations of the future STEM workforce: K–12 indicators of postsecondary STEM success (REL2016–122)'. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest.

✱✱✱

Howard Foundation extends support of Chair in Human Nutrition at SETU

Pictured at the Nutrition Research Centre Ireland at SETU's West Campus: (L-R) Jonathan Howard, Professor John Nolan, Julie Lambert.

The Howard Foundation has extended its support of Professor John Nolan at South East Technological University (SETU) as Howard Chair until 2031, allowing him to continue to expand into new frontiers of research for the benefit of society.

Over the last two decades, Professor John Nolan has led research on the study of nutrients for human health and function. This work, conducted at the Nutrition Research Centre Ireland (NRCI) at SETU, has had significant impact for science and society.

Professor Nolan and the late Dr Alan Howard, founder of the Howard Foundation, an English charity, collaborated on many scientific projects leading to seminal research publications, patented scientific discoveries, and setting up an international conference for scientists in the field (see www.bonconference.org). Their main area of study identified how certain nutritional supplements improve quality of life for patients with age-related macular degeneration and Alzheimer's disease.

Empowered by the support of the Howard Chair's funding, Professor Nolan has been able to develop the Research Centre to a level that is renowned and connected worldwide. Researchers at the centre continue to identify new technologies and strategies using nutritional bioactives known as carotenoids (the coloured pigments found in fruits and vegetables) and co-nutrients (e.g. omega-3 fatty acids, form fish and algae) to support human health.

Experiential Learning through Field Visits in Early Childhood Education and Care

The realm of learning and connection

This article reports on a research study exploring first-year students' experiences of early childhood education and care (ECEC) field visits. It describes the benefits and challenges encountered, and summarises the findings. These include enhanced student motivation and the importance of preparing students adequately for field visits. The study suggests that such experiential learning could foster student engagement and professional development, enhancing their overall outcomes.

Siobhán Canavan

Adjunct Assistant Professor, National College of Ireland, and Part-Time Assistant Lecturer, South East Technological University

Anna Barr

Assistant Professor and Programme Director of the ECEC programme, National College of Ireland

Introduction

This article describes research findings from a small-scale study that explored first-year students' experiences of early childhood education and care (ECEC) field visits in a bachelor of arts (BA) (honours) programme at the National College of Ireland (NCI). As lecturers teaching on the programme, we explored the value of field visits and experiential learning in programme development.

Experiential learning through field visits is a learning tool that allows students to apply their classroom-based knowledge in real-life contexts, making learning more practical and meaningful. Research suggests that this approach significantly increases students' retention of knowledge, as they engage in immersive, hands-on experiences (Campbell & Gedat, 2021). It fosters a deeper level of learning and the development of responsible attitudes and positive behaviours in students (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2009).

However, the success of field visits is not guaranteed. It requires careful planning, clear goals, and reflection or debriefing, which are crucial for ensuring that the learning is not just temporary (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014; Foo & Foo, 2022).

The research

This mixed-method research engaged 25 first-year ECEC students at NCI in an online survey. Combining qualitative and quantitative data allowed a more holistic approach to understanding the students' experiences. The surveys included open-ended, multiple-choice, and dichotomous questions. The responses were analysed to determine the core themes that emerged.

28% found that their understanding of theoretical concepts and classroom applications deepened significantly, such as seeing Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in action.

Five themes were identified when students were asked about the highlights of their field visits (Figure 1). They highlighted various engaging experiences; most notably, 31% found that interactions with children and staff were the highlight. The students illustrated positive interactions by describing how they played with the children, read stories, sang songs, and spoke with and learned from the educators. Five per cent said they appreciated the opportunity to see what they were learning in college come to life; 28% found that their understanding of theoretical concepts and classroom applications deepened significantly, such as seeing Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in action; and 18% said their highlight was working with the children.
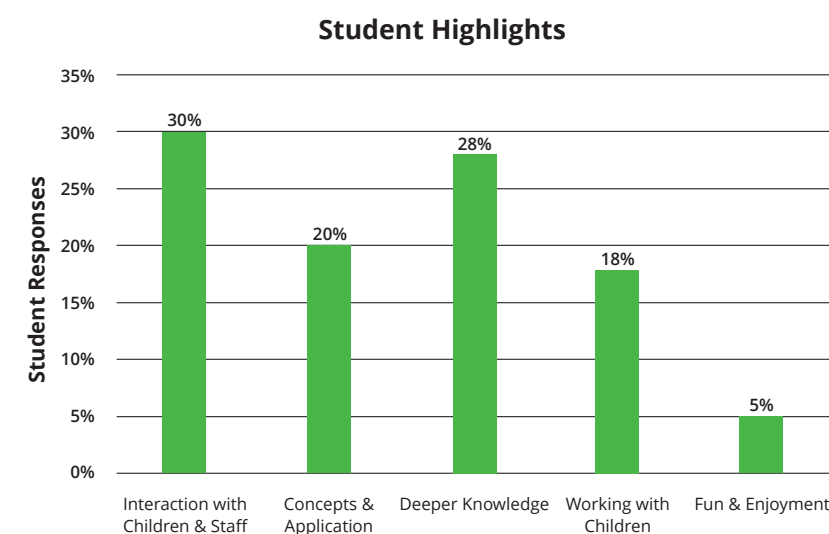
Student Highlights

Figure 1: Student highlights

The students were asked if the field visits impacted their motivation to learn: 96% (n = 24) said they had. The most significant finding underpinned by motivation to learn was the impact on students' career path: 33% said the field visits increased their interest in the ECEC degree programme and motivated them to keep learning about babies and young children, so that one day they would become early childhood educators.

Fourteen per cent said their motivation to learn during the field visits enhanced their personal and professional development, 17% felt it fostered a strong desire to learn and showed how educators impact children's lives, and 19% found they improved their understanding of classwork (Figure 2).

Motivation to Learn

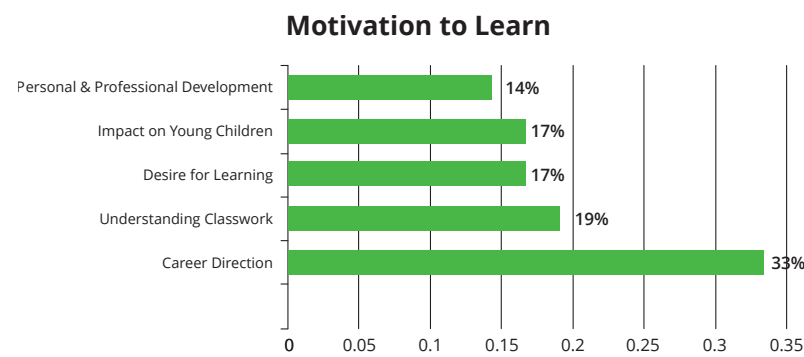| Theme	Value
Personal & Professional Development	14%
Impact on Young Children	17%
Desire for Learning	17%
Understanding Classwork	19%
Career Direction	33%

Figure 2: Motivation to learn

The students also encountered challenges. Students on the BA (honours) ECEC programme do not formally attend professional practice placement until second year, so it wasn't surprising that 28% in this study reported that uncertainty with daily routines and practices was a challenge. Twenty-two per cent reported travelling long distances to their field visits and worried about being on time, 22% were shy or overwhelmed by this new experience, and 6% said it was difficult to connect with staff (Figure 3).

Challenges

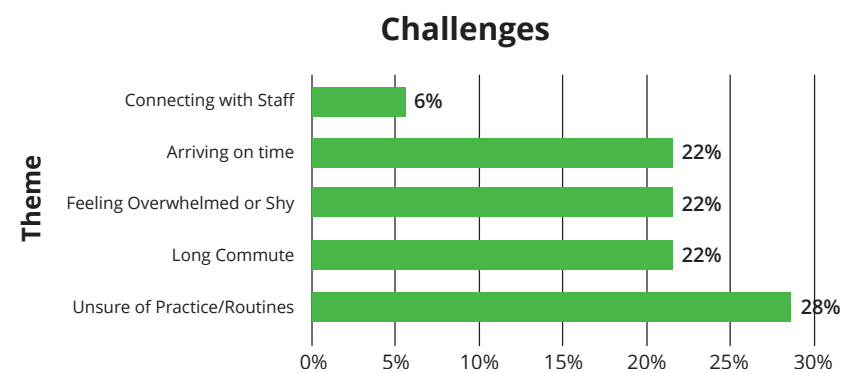| Theme	Value
Connecting with Staff	6%
Arriving on time	22%
Feeling Overwhelmed or Shy	22%
Long Commute	22%
Unsure of Practice/Routines	28%

Figure 3: Challenges faced

The most significant finding was the impact on students' career path: 33% said the field visits increased their interest in the ECEC degree programme and motivated them to keep learning about babies and young children, so that one day they would become early childhood educators.

Higher education institutions should consider the experimental learning approach in the medium of field visits as a successful component of students' learning and development and as an integral part of their programmes.

Discussion and implications for practice

Unsurprisingly, our findings highlighted student learning benefits during ECEC field visits, consistent with existing literature. However, as lecturers, we were surprised by the discovery of personal and professional development under the finding of motivation to learn. In their open-ended responses, students used professional language to describe their experiences and could identify professional values in their descriptions and responses. This suggests that students, from the start of the BA programme, absorb information, begin to understand theory and concepts, and effectively convey knowledge quickly. Additionally, students showed increased confidence in discussing their experiences upon returning to class. They could understand and apply knowledge and concepts gained from field visits to other modules throughout the programme.

We agree with Behrendt and Franklin (2014) that the advantages and potential of field visits to enhance student outcomes don't always guarantee success. Without proper reflection or debriefing, the learning or interest gained may be short-lived. Therefore, it was important for us to allow students time and space to reflect on their experiences.

We have also developed a Field Visit Report as part of an assessment attached to the Foundations of ECEC module to embed learning further and maintain interest. The challenges for students in this study highlighted that it is essential to support their confidence before the field visits so they do not become overwhelmed. We must therefore prepare students adequately during our induction class. To alleviate long commutes and decrease students' anxiety about arriving late, field visits to ECEC settings must be located nearer to NCI.

Nevertheless, it was inspiring to us as lecturers that our study noted many benefits for students' learning and successful outcomes during their field visits, particularly around their motivation to learn. It showed that students chose the correct career path and wanted to graduate as early childhood educators. Higher education institutions should consider the experimental learning approach in the medium of field visits as a successful component of students' learning and development and as an integral part of their programmes.

REFERENCES

Behrendt, M. and Franklin , T. (2014) 'A review of research on school field trips and their value in education', *International Journal of Environmental & Science Education*, 9(3), 235–245.

Campbell, Y.M. and Gedat, R. (2021) 'Experiential learning through field trips: Effects on educational, social and personal development among linguistics majors', *Journal of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development*, 7(2), 131–144.

Foo, S.C. and Foo, K.K. (2022) 'Purposeful field trip: Impact on experiential learning opportunities and critical thinking skills', *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 30(1), 1–30.

Wurdinger, S.D. and Carlson, J.A. (2009) *Teaching for Experiential Learning: Five Approaches That Work.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

The TUTOR Project: Reimagining Inclusive Education in Second Level and Further Education

An innovative, Europe-wide model for continuing professional development

Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the need for innovative professional development for educators has never been more critical. The Erasmus+ funded TUTOR project (Teachers' Upskilling aiming aT a hOlistic inclusivity in leaRning) addresses this need by developing a comprehensive continuing professional development (CPD) programme and a central hub for Europe-wide teacher exchanges, sharing of resources, and communities of practice focused on integrating innovative pedagogies and inclusive teaching practices.

By connecting educators from diverse backgrounds, the TUTOR project aims to enhance the quality of teaching and learning across Europe. This article will describe its objectives, methodologies, and anticipated outcomes, highlighting its significance for educators and students alike.

What is the TUTOR project?

Initiated in 2021 and funded by the Erasmus+ programme, TUTOR is a three-year project that draws on the partnership of expert groups and institutions across Ireland, Austria, Greece, Turkey, and at EU level. Maynooth University is the Irish partner. The objective is to create partnerships of initial teacher education and CPD training providers to establish teacher academies to support teachers to develop their capabilities in understanding and developing more inclusive learning environments.

Dr Sinéad Matson
Postdoctoral Researcher, Maynooth University

Bernie Grummell
Associate Professor, Maynooth University

The need for innovative professional development for educators has never been more critical. The Erasmus+ funded TUTOR project addresses this need by developing a comprehensive continuing professional development programme and a central hub for Europe-wide teacher exchanges, sharing of resources, and communities of practice. This article introduces and describes the TUTOR project structure, aims, and hopes.

The TUTOR project views inclusion as the process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of learners, particularly its three target groups of students from LGBTQI+, migrant and ethnic minority, and socio-economically disadvantaged communities. We draw on transformation education theories and combine the multidisciplinary knowledge of advocacy groups and NGOs working in partnership with universities to develop and deliver a CPD programme for educators in second level and further education and training (FET), situated in current knowledge, context, and practice.

We aim to promote the adoption of innovative pedagogical approaches that enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. As an example, see our workshop Empowering Every Student (TUTOR project, 2024a) with Dr Katriona O'Sullivan, which examined inclusive education practices for students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

TUTOR is a three-year project that draws on the partnership of expert groups and institutions across Ireland, Austria, Greece, Turkey, and at EU level.

How did we create our CPD programme?

To create a CPD programme that was relevant and addressed the real needs of current educators and educational establishments, we first carried out a needs assessment. This involved five steps:

1. A desk-based literature review was carried out at national and EU level examining the research, policy, and best-practice examples to establish the desired state of affairs (TUTOR project, 2023).
2. Surveys were sent out to second-level schools and FET centres nationwide.
3. Focus groups were held in Maynooth University with stakeholders, including educators, leadership, and advocates from several advocacy agencies.
4. In-depth interviews were conducted with educators, leadership, and advocates. The surveys, focus groups, and interviews were used to establish the existing state of affairs (TUTOR project, 2024b).
5. An analysis on the gaps between the desired state of affairs and the existing state of affairs was conducted, resulting in a needs analysis report (TUTOR project, 2024c).

Based on the needs assessment, the project team spent several months developing a suite of training resources and teaching materials for the CPD programme.

What is in the CPD programme?

TUTOR's Inclusive Education CPD programme is a blended learning programme comprising one introduction course and three specialisation courses. Each

specialisation course focuses on a target area (migrants and ethnic minorities, LGBTQI+, socio-economically disadvantaged).

The programme will be piloted by selected parties who express an interest in doing so. This will allow the project team to gather feedback from participants, refine the training materials, and assess effectiveness, ensuring our commitment that the project remains responsive to the evolving needs of educators and the inclusive education landscape.

Students from the LGBTQI+ community

Students with migrant background

Students facing socio-economis disadvantages

What are the opportunities for educators?

Educators from second level and FET are invited to take part in the inclusive education training programme free of charge. Candidates, on application, will be asked if they would like to undertake the training as educators or to apply for a limited place on a train-the-trainer programme.

Trainers will be chosen and undergo further training, funded by the project. The other applicants will undergo the programme as students. All applicants who successfully finish the programme will be invited to apply for the opportunity to travel in Erasmus mobilities to Turkey, Greece, and Austria, fully funded by TUTOR, for further face-to-face training.

What do we hope will happen?

The TUTOR project anticipates several positive outcomes that will significantly impact teacher training and educational practices across Europe. We hope for enhanced teacher competence, increased collaboration among educators across Europe, the adoption of more inclusive teaching strategies, and sustainable professional development.

TUTOR seeks to establish a sustainable model for professional development that can be adapted to educators' changing needs in relation to inclusive education. By creating a robust network of support and resources, TUTOR aims

All applicants who successfully finish the programme will be invited to apply for the opportunity to travel in Erasmus mobilities to Turkey, Greece, and Austria, fully funded by TUTOR, for further face-to-face training.

to ensure that teachers have ongoing access to high-quality training throughout their careers.

With this in mind, the project website will have an internationalisation box that will host information about institutions and schools across Europe that are willing to host or send staff for learning opportunities through Erasmus+ mobilities, information on how to conduct an Erasmus+ funded mobility, and an online professional community of practice for educators. Please see the website for more information: https://tutor-project.eu/.

Conclusion

The Erasmus+ funded TUTOR project is a significant initiative to enhance teacher training and professional development across Europe. By focusing on developing a comprehensive competence framework, creating modular training programmes, fostering collaboration, and promoting inclusive pedagogies, TUTOR aims to empower educators to thrive in today's dynamic educational landscape. As the project unfolds, its impact on the quality of teaching and learning promises to be transformative, paving the way for a more inclusive future in education.

REFERENCES

TUTOR project (2023) 'Desired Status Report'. https://tutor-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/D2.1.-Desired-Status-Report.pdf.

TUTOR project (2024a) 'Empowering Every Student: Reimagining Inclusive Education'. Facebook Live event, 15 May. https://tutor-project.eu/tutor-project-facebook-live-event-empowering-every-student-reimagining-inclusive-education/.

TUTOR project (2024b) 'Existing Status Report'. https://tutor-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/D.2.2.-Existing-Status-Report.pdf.

TUTOR project (2024c) 'Training Needs Analysis Report'. https://tutor-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/D.2.3-Needs-Analysis-Report.pdf.

The Teachers' Research Exchange (T-REX)

Transitioning into phase 3 of the project

About T-REX

The Teachers' Research Exchange (T-REX) is a non-profit online community that was established to facilitate and support interdisciplinary collaboration on evidence-based practice and education research across numerous professional boundaries in Ireland. The project, led by Mary Immaculate College, is a strategic partnership with Dublin City University, Marino Institute of Education, University of Limerick, University of Galway, the Education Support Centres of Ireland, and Oide. Along with financial support from the participating higher education institutes (HEIs), funding is from a consortium of the Department of Education, the Teaching Council, and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

T-REX is an open-membership network for those studying or working in the early years, primary, post-primary, further education, higher education, and educational support services. Members of the platform can avail of a myriad of learning material and support, collaborate on projects, engage in professional dialogue on topics of interest, and multiply the value of their research activity by sharing outcomes in accessible and practical formats. Members vary in their experience of educational research: some are research-curious, while others are actively engaged in or leading on research projects. All are welcome!

2024 was a significant year for T-REX, which transitioned into phase 3 and saw two major developments during this time. First and foremost, the consortium was strengthened by the addition of a new HEI partner in the Dublin City University Institute of Education, and by the significant support of Education Support Centres in Ireland and Oide, both of which have a clear remit in supporting the professional learning of teachers and school leaders.

Ms Barbara Mulvihill
National Coordinator, T-REX

Dr Marek McGann
Project Lead, T-REX

The Teachers' Research Exchange (T-REX) is a non-profit online community that was established to facilitate and support interdisciplinary collaboration on evidence-based practice and education research across numerous professional boundaries in Ireland. This article outlines the key features of T-REX and discusses the significant developments that occurred in 2024 during phase 3 of the project.

Secondly, the appointment of Barbara Mulvihill as national coordinator marks the first full-time employee on the project. Barbara's work primarily entails liaising with the professional learning community from early years to further education, raising the platform's profile, encouraging its adoption, and facilitating its use by new users. The role involves advocating for teacher research and, in collaboration with other members of the project team, establishing and strengthening networks with research-active teachers.

Educational research: value and challenges

In 2024, students, teachers, and educational professionals have been engaging in different ways with new curricula. This has required critical engagement with educational research to determine how best to implement effective and relevant programmes in the classroom. Teachers' research engagement typically consists of two main activities: they engage with research when they read, listen to, and discuss published research; and they engage in research when they plan, undertake, and reflect on research projects (Xerri, 2021). Such activities can support deep, reflective learning, enhance collaboration, and lead to greater job satisfaction (Sharp, 2007).

Engaging in and with educational research while teaching full-time is challenging. It is vital, however, that teachers' voices be at the forefront of conversations about teaching and learning. Ensuring that teachers' professional learning is 'evidenced-based and adapted to the identified needs of the school' (Department of Education, 2024, p.35) requires time. Given the constraints of the working day, research engagement often takes place individually, after school, which can become an isolating experience.

Accessing appropriate research material can also be difficult, as it is often presented in academic journal articles whose language may differ from the professional language used by practising teachers. The perceived 'research–practice gap' (McGann et al., 2020) adds another layer of complexity. This term is used to describe the fact that no clear framework exists by which research findings become integrated systematically into educational practice, nor is educational practice integrated systematically into developing and answering research questions.

Benefits of joining T-REX

Becoming a T-REX member is free of charge and easy to do via an online registration form at www.t-rex.ie. Membership enables teachers to:

» link with other educational researchers across the continuum of teacher education

Members of the platform can avail of a myriad of learning material and support, collaborate on projects, and multiply the value of their research activity by sharing outcomes in accessible and practical formats.

» avail of supports on a spectrum of learning and engagement activities

» share their research outcomes in accessible and practical formats, and learn from others' research findings.

T-REX hosts brief, asynchronous courses. Getting into Research is designed for anyone at the early stages of research engagement. Critically Reviewing Research Literature provides practical resources, and questions to keep in mind when reading a research article, which helps teachers build expertise to make informed decisions on how best to use and engage with research. Some courses are designed to support engagement in research. Classroom-Based Research and Professional Enquiry helps members find strategies to formulate the right research question and progress that into an actionable research plan. For teachers engaged in or starting formal postgraduate studies, resources can be downloaded and printed (e.g., Guidance on Identifying an area of Focus, Research Question Examples, Ethics Reflection Tool, Interview Schedule Templates).

T-REX also provides a place for teachers to share their research findings on their own terms. Templates and step-by-step guidelines can be used for research dissemination. Research material can be accessed in various formats, including posters, audio recordings, videos, magazine articles, book chapters, and journal articles. Schools and organisations can create their own group on T-REX, where discussions can take place privately or publicly. There are many special-interest groups open to new members, including the recently formed Research in Coaching and Mentoring group.

We invite new members to join our community by registering at www.t-rex.ie. Should any reader wish to discuss how T-REX could support them as an individual teacher or school community, or if they are looking for specific supports that are not currently available, please email barbara.mulvihill@mic.ul.ie. The T-REX project team congratulates teachers on their engagement in and with educational research in 2024 and seeks to support and celebrate teachers' research endeavours in 2025.

The T-REX project team congratulates teachers on their engagement in and with educational research in 2024 and seeks to support and celebrate teachers' research endeavours in 2025.

REFERENCES

Department of Education (2024) *Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools and Special Schools. Updated January 2024.* www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/232720/c8357d7a-dd03-416b-83dc-9847b99b025f.pdf.

McGann, M., Ryan, M., McMahon, J., and Hall, T. (2020) 'T-REX: The Teachers' Research Exchange. Overcoming the research–practice gap in education', *TechTrends*, 64(3), 470–483. DOI: 10.1007/s11528-020-00486-4

Sharp, A.M. (2007) 'Education of the emotions in the classroom community of inquiry', *Gifted Education International*, 22(2–3), 248–257.

Xerri, D. (2021) 'Teacher research engagement'. In: H. Mohebbi and C. Coombe (Eds.), *Research Questions in Language Education and Applied Linguistics.* Springer. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-79143-8_133

Policy for Equity in Education
A critique of selected developments in 2024

Findings were published in 2024 from a review by the OECD which examined resource allocation to schools to address educational disadvantage, focusing on Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS). National commentary also considered DEIS monitoring and evaluation, noting limitations with data and methods (Gilleece & Clerkin, 2024). Also in 2024, there were several equity-related education policy developments, including *Equal Start: A model to support access and participation in early learning and childcare for all children* (DCEDIY, 2024), *the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030* (Government of Ireland [GoI], 2024a), and *Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024–2033* (GoI, 2024b).

In this article, we reflect on some of the OECD findings for DEIS and consider their relevance to other policies. We also consider how some issues raised in the context of DEIS may be addressed by approaches used in related policies.

May 2025 marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of *DEIS: An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion* (Department of Education and Science, 2005). This was updated in 2017 and refined in 2022, when the number of participating schools was further increased (DES, 2017a; DoE, 2022). A key change was the use of the Pobal HP deprivation index to identify schools for DEIS (DoE, 2022). The new *Equal Start* model uses a similar approach to DEIS to identify 'priority settings' for early years – those operating in the context of concentrated disadvantage (DCEDIY, 2024).

One benefit of the HP index is that its use enhances trust and support for the DEIS identification process (OECD, 2024), although the OECD points to an ongoing need for refinement and validation of the social disadvantage indicator(s) used. To support ongoing continuity between approaches used in *Equal Start* and DEIS, we propose that

Lorraine Gilleece
Research Fellow, Educational Research Centre

Sharon M. Nelis
Research Associate, Educational Research Centre

Ireland's DEIS policy (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) is approaching the 20th anniversary of its publication. Findings from a recent OECD review will undoubtedly influence its future. This article highlights how some of the issues raised in the review also apply to other policies, and it considers how learning from related policies may usefully inform DEIS.

any future refinement to DEIS identification should consider potential implications for Equal Start, and vice versa.

Equal Start notes that 'priority setting' numbers will be updated annually, with designation retained for two years. Settings not meeting the threshold after the two-year cycle will have one year to transition out (DCEDIY, 2024). In contrast, while DEIS has expanded considerably over time, no schools have lost their DEIS status. The need for a more dynamic DEIS resource allocation model is noted by the OECD, which also flags the need for a gradual phasing out of supports for schools where needs have diminished over time. We suggest that the proposed cyclical identification process for *Equal Start* may provide lessons for DEIS in future.

The OECD (2024) notes Ireland's strong expertise in DEIS monitoring and evaluation but identifies limited use of administrative data and of statistical methods that allow for causal inference; it indicates that opportunities exist to build school capacity in data use. Gilleece and Clerkin (2024) flagged data limitations as a challenge to examining outcomes for subgroups of pupils in Ireland, such as Traveller or Roma students. The *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy* commits to expanding data-collection systems to enable monitoring of attendance patterns for such students (GoI, 2024a). More broadly, it commits to continuing 'to develop the range of data related to Traveller and Roma education that is collected, analysed and published . . . increasing the range of disaggregated and qualitative data' (ibid., p.33). Although the strategy emphasises attendance and retention data, it gives less attention to achievement outcomes.

One of the indicators of success in *Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024–2033* (GoI, 2024b) is improved mathematics and reading performance by learners in DEIS schools. While specific targets for achievement in DEIS schools were outlined in earlier policy in this area (DES, 2017b), such targets are no longer included. Nonetheless, the strategy indicates that results from national and international assessments at primary and post-primary levels, and other relevant data, will serve as benchmarks for assessing progress. It seems likely that monitoring the strategy's progress for learners in DEIS schools may suffer from the types of limitations with data and methods referenced elsewhere (e.g., Gilleece & Clerkin, 2024; OECD, 2024), given, for example, fluctuations in the numbers of DEIS schools participating in different cycles of international studies, the lack of oversampling of DEIS rural schools in national assessments (Nelis & Gilleece, 2023), and the lack of comparability between various primary-level standardised tests (DES, 2016).

In summary, while monitoring and evaluation are embedded in recently published equity-related education policies, limitations with data and methods described in the context of DEIS are likely to apply more widely, despite efforts to improve data availability. As DEIS approaches its 20th anniversary, its future

One of the indicators of success in Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024–2033 (GoI, 2024b) is improved mathematics and reading performance by learners in DEIS schools.

---

direction should be influenced by learning not only from international and national reviews but also from related policies.

REFERENCES

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2024) *Equal Start: A model to support access and participation in early learning and childcare for all children.* Dublin: DCEDIY. www.gov.ie/pdf/293503/.

Department of Education (DoE) (2022) *The Refined DEIS Identification Model.* Dublin: DoE. https://assets.gov.ie/220043/d6b98002-a904-427f-b48a-0fa0af756ea7.pdf.

Department of Education and Science (2005) *DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion.* Dublin: Government publications. https://assets.gov.ie/24465/40677432ed49418d8c27bfb524f12a7b.pdf.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2016) *Standardised achievement tests: An analysis of the results at primary school level for 2011–12 and 2012–13.* Dublin: DES. www.gov.ie/en/publication/c27a52-standardised-achievement-tests-an-analysis-of-the-results-at-primary/.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2017a) *DEIS Plan 2017: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools.* Dublin: DES. www.gov.ie/en/publication/0fea7-deis-plan-2017/.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2017b) *National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011–2020.* Dublin: DES. https://assets.gov.ie/24960/93c455d4440246cf8a701b9e0b0a2d65.pdf.

Gilleece, L. and Clerkin, A. (2024) 'Towards more robust evaluation of policies and programmes in education: Identifying challenges in evaluating DEIS and Reading Recovery', *Irish Educational Studies*, pp. 1–29. DOI: 10.1080/03323315.2024.2334704

Government of Ireland (GoI) (2024a) *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030.* Dublin: GoI. https://assets.gov.ie/299047/fb05ed48-5f86-4b50-a410-98b44cf101d5.pdf.

Government of Ireland (GoI) (2024b) *Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024–2033: Every learner from birth to young adulthood.* Dublin: GoI. https://assets.gov.ie/293255/a509a8d7-a4ac-43f9-acb0-29cdc26a1327.pdf.

Nelis, S.M. and Gilleece, L. (2023) *Ireland's National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading 2021: A focus on achievement in urban DEIS schools* Dublin: Educational Research Centre. www.erc.ie/NAMER2021DEIS.

OECD (2024) *OECD Review of resourcing schools to address educational disadvantage in Ireland.* Paris: OECD. DOI: 10.1787/3433784c-en

The Role of the Guidance Counsellor in Supporting Student Wellbeing in Schools

Introduction

Guidance counsellors play a vital role in supporting the wellbeing of students across schools in Ireland. Though often associated with the vocational and career aspects of their role, their work encompasses far more. This article highlights how guidance counsellors support students' emotional wellbeing and educational development, fostering a more balanced and supported experience for our young people.

Guidance counselling is recognised as a key part of the school guidance programme, offered to individuals or groups as part of developmental learning, and during moments of personal crisis (Government of Ireland, 2023). It aims to empower students to 'make decisions, solve problems, address behavioural issues, develop coping strategies, and resolve difficulties they may be experiencing' (DES Inspectorate, 2005, p.4).

This dynamic role spans three interlinked domains: personal/social, vocational/career, and educational guidance – highlighting the holistic nature of guidance and its critical role in facilitating life choices and supporting students' wellbeing. The holistic approach recognises the interdependence of wellbeing and education and a student's personal, educational, and social worlds (O'Toole & Simovska, 2022), and aligns with the Department of Education's emphasis on wellbeing as central to student achievement and growth.

Wellbeing

Promoting student wellbeing in schools has received increasing focus (McLellan et al., 2022). Its inclusion in the curriculum *Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines* (NCCA, 2021) and other relevant policies provides direction on the integration of whole-school approaches to wellbeing

Dr Eimear McDonnell

Researcher, Institute of Guidance Counsellors

Guidance counsellors in schools play a pivotal role in supporting student wellbeing across personal, social, educational, and career domains. Their holistic approach helps students make decisions, cope with emotional challenges, and navigate their educational and career paths. However, limited guidance hours and inadequate resources highlight the need for increased support and recognition of their essential contributions to student wellbeing.

---

incorporating guidance: *Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools (*DES et al., 2013), and *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023* (Government of Ireland, 2019).

The student support team plays a vital role in promoting wellbeing, adopting a whole-school approach that significantly contributes to 'supporting and promoting wellbeing in education' (DE, 2024a, p.8). Through the continuum of support, the team addresses students' social, emotional, behavioural, and learning needs (NEPS, 2021). The guidance counsellor contributes significantly to these efforts. Activities that can be documented in the whole-school guidance plan, as part of the Junior Cycle programme, include guidance-related learning and school-developed short courses and units of learning focused on wellbeing-related areas, such as study skills (NCCA, 2021). The team also collaborates with external services, developing referral pathways to ensure students receive appropriate support beyond the school environment.

Personal/social support

One of the most significant roles of the guidance counsellor is offering a supportive space for students to address personal challenges, which today are immense compared to those of previous generations (Dooley et al., 2019; O'Sullivan et al., 2021). The Institute of Guidance Counsellors' National Survey 2022/2023 (IGC, 2024a) found that participants (n=254) encountered mental health issues more frequently in second-level schools and colleges than in career decision-making. The top two issues reported were 'mental health concerns, such as anxiety, self-harm, and suicide ideation' (97.6%) and 'career decision-making' (97.2%); 92.5% reported daily or weekly issues related to 'self-esteem, self-confidence' and 'family, friendships, or relationships'.

The top two issues reported were (i) mental health concerns such as anxiety, self-harm and suicide ideation (97.6%); and (ii) career decision-making (97.2%).

These evolving challenges underscore guidance counsellors' critical role in supporting student wellbeing. The safe, confidential setting with a skilled guidance counsellor can empower and support the student (DES, 2016). Establishing the core conditions, such as empathic understanding, congruence, and unconditional positive regard, allows the student to speak about their difficulties without fear of being criticised or judged (IGC, 2016). Guidance counsellors are often the 'one good adult' who offers early intervention, reducing the need for more intensive interventions later (Choi, 2018). An appointment could be for career, educational, or personal/social purposes, which makes it easier for an anxious student to seek help. Early intervention is critical to long-term wellbeing, and guidance counsellors are instrumental in identifying at-risk students and providing timely support.

Educational and career guidance

Guidance counsellors are also central to helping students navigate their educational and career paths (IGC, 2024a). Through one-to-one appointments

and group settings, they help students develop study skills, manage time, and set goals. This is essential in helping students build the confidence and resilience necessary to achieve their academic potential. By guiding students through career decisions that are often overwhelming, guidance counsellors can help students gain the knowledge and skills they need to make informed choices.

Allocation challenges

Despite their crucial role, many guidance counsellors face challenges in the allocation of hours to enable them to perform their roles fully and meet the demand for their services (ibid.). The IGC urges a review of guidance allocation to ensure equal access to guidance across the lifespan. Many guidance counsellors have only partial guidance hours or are timetabled to teach non-guidance-related subjects as part of, and external to, guidance allocation (ibid.). The whole school guidance team is well positioned to meet the school's needs. However, guidance counsellors should have the flexibility to prioritise one-to-one guidance appointments and the organisation and work of the student support team, ultimately leading to better outcomes for student wellbeing.

While the IGC appreciates new initiatives and services, such as the announcement of Neart awarded to Jigsaw (DE, 2024b), it appeals to policymakers to recognise school guidance counsellors' skills and competencies (IGC, 2016). The existing infrastructure of guidance counsellors should not be overlooked, since they are often the only members of the student support team with a qualification in counselling skills (DE, 2023).

Their multidimensional role can be misunderstood, and their contribution to personal/social development is not always acknowledged (Aontas, 2023; ETBI, 2023; Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023). Accordingly, in advocating for guidance counsellors, the IGC recognises the importance of promoting clear understanding of the role (IGC, 2024b) and emphasises the need for a robust and consistent message.

Conclusion

Guidance counsellors play a multifaceted role in supporting student wellbeing by addressing personal, social, emotional, educational, and career-related challenges. Providing early intervention, promoting wellbeing initiatives, and working collaboratively with the student support team are essential to students' holistic development. As schools continue to emphasise the importance of

Providing early intervention, promoting wellbeing initiatives, and working collaboratively with the student support team are essential to students' holistic development.

wellbeing, it is crucial to ensure that guidance counsellors are adequately resourced and recognised for their vital contribution to students' lives.

REFERENCES

Aontas (2023) *FET Learners and Mental Health in Ireland.* SOLAS, Government of Ireland, Jigsaw. www.aontas.com/assets/resources/AONTAS-Research/Mental%20health%20report_FINAL.pdf.

Choi, A. (2018) *Emotional Well-Being of Children and Adolescents.* Paris: OECD. DOI: 10.1787/41576fb2-en

Department of Education (2023) *Information Note TC 0008/2023: Information Note for Schools in Relation to Personal and Social Guidance Counselling.* https://assets.gov.ie/265848/9245ad29-dab5-45b6-be60-72017e84637e.pdf.

Department of Education (2024a) *Information Note TC 0001/2024: Information Note for Principals, Guidance Counsellors and Guidance Teams in Relation to Whole-School Guidance.* www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/280269/2f131b7c-9a00-4f26-b8da-d4770733b19f.pdf.

Department of Education (2024b) 'Minister Foley announces Jigsaw as successful bidder to deliver new programme to support wellbeing and mental health'. Press release, 27 September. www.gov.ie/en/press-release/057c4-minister-foley-announces-jigsaw-as-successful-bidder-to-deliver-new-programme-to-support-wellbeing-and-mental-health/.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2016) *Programme Recognition Framework: Guidance Counselling, Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers.* www.gov.ie/en/publication/dce0a0-programme-recognition-framework-guidance-counselling/.

Department of Education and Skills (DES), Health Service Executive (HSE), and Department of Health (DOH) (2013) *Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention.* Dublin: DES.

DES Inspectorate (2005) *Guidelines for Second Level Schools on the Implications of Section 9 (c) of the Education Act 1998, Relating to Students' Access to Appropriate Guidance.* https://assets.gov.ie/15383/e1246a14da804faa942221abe2809f0a.pdf.

Dooley, B., O'Connor, C., Fitzgerald, A., and O'Reilly, A. (2019) *My World Survey 2. The National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland.* www.myworldsurvey.ie/content/docs/My_World_Survey_2.pdf.

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) (2023) *Framework for Further Education and Training. Learner Mental Health and Wellbeing.* Inclusion Unit. https://library.etbi.ie/ld.php?content_id=34608199.

Government of Ireland (2019) *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023, Revised October 2019.* https://assets.gov.ie/24725/07cc07626f6a426eb6eab4c523fb2ee2.pdf.

Government of Ireland (2023) *National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (2024–2030).* https://assets.gov.ie/279193/8b0c3c0a-380f-4c82-9a7e-35af3432a318.pdf.

Houses of the Oireachtas (2023) 'Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science: Mental Health Supports in Schools and Tertiary Education January 2023'. https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_education_further_and_higher_

education_research_innovation_and_science/reports/2023/2023-01-25_report-on-mental-health-supports-in-schools-and-tertiary-education_en.pdf.

Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) (2016) *Guidance Counselling: Core Competencies and Professional Practice.* https://igc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Guidance-Counselling-Core-Competencies-Professional-Practice-1.pdf.

Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) (2024a) *IGC National Survey 2022–2023 Report.* https://igc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IGC-National-Survey-2022-2023-final.pdf.

Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) (2024b) IGC Strategic Plan 2024–2027. https://igc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/*IGC-Strategic-Plan-2024-2027*-1.pdf.

McLellan, R., Faucher, C., and Simovska, V. (2022) 'Wellbeing and schooling: Why are cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary perspectives needed?' In: R. McLellan, C. Faucher, and V. Simovska (Eds.), *Wellbeing and Schooling: Cross Cultural and Cross Disciplinary Perspectives*, pp. 1–17. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-95205-1_1

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2021) *Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines.* https://ncca.ie/media/5062/updated-guidelines-2021_en.pdf.

National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) (2021) *Student Support Teams in Post-Primary Schools.* https://assets.gov.ie/40693/a844644485444034bb6a33b2e90cb2f2.pdf.

O'Sullivan, K., Clark, S., McGrane, A., Rock, N., Burke, L., Boyle, N., Joksimovic, N., and Marshall, K. (2021) 'A qualitative study of child and adolescent mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health,* 18(3), 1062. DOI: 10.3390/ijerph18031062

O'Toole, C. and Simovska, V. (2022) 'Wellbeing and education: Connecting mind, body and world'. In: R. McLellan, C. Faucher, and V. Simovska (Eds.), *Wellbeing and Schooling: Cross-Cultural and Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*, pp. 21–33. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-95205-1_2

* * *

Fears of being left behind by AI are causing organisations to focus on staff's technical skills

According to the annual survey from the Learnovate Centre, organisations are increasingly concerned that they will be unable to compete in the market because they have failed to develop workers' technical skills in response to advances in Artificial Intelligence and other technologies.

The Learnovate Centre is a global future-of-work and learning research hub funded by Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland and based at Trinity College Dublin. The centre's Learning Signals Survey was designed to gain insight into the experiences of learning professionals and those who work in companies that create learning technology or content.

The Learnovate Learning Signals Survey 2024 polled more than 140 individuals involved in various industry sectors and found that the number of respondents who plan to prioritise the development of their technical skills increased from 33% to 41% in the past 12 months. Learnovate believes this is due to AI's growing role in the market.

The Learnovate Centre Director Nessa McEniff

Creating Inclusive Schools: Enhancing Educational Opportunities for Migrant and Refugee Children in Ireland

The article examines the integration of migrant and refugee children into Ireland's education system, focusing on the challenges they face and strategies to improve their academic and social inclusion. It emphasises the importance of cultural integration programmes and partnerships with mental health professionals to create an inclusive environment. It argues that addressing these challenges is essential for the success of migrant and refugee children and fostering a more inclusive and cohesive Irish society.

Borui Zheng
Researcher in Psychology of Education, Trinity College Dublin

Dr Aoife Lynam
Assistant Professor in Psychology of Education, Trinity College Dublin

Prof. Conor Mc Guckin
Associate Professor in Psychology, Trinity College Dublin

Introduction

With an increasing number of migrant and refugee children entering Ireland's education system, the challenges and opportunities presented by this demographic shift are becoming more apparent. These children, particularly those fleeing conflict, bring diverse cultural backgrounds and unique educational needs. This article examines their integration into Ireland's education system and proposes strategies to enhance their academic and social inclusion.

In the year to April 2024, 149,200 people immigrated to Ireland, marking a 17-year high (CSO, 2024). Approximately 26% of international protection newcomers are children (Government of Ireland, 2024). Ireland, historically a nation of net emigration, is now experiencing an unprecedented influx of migrants.

While initial solidarity was strong, especially for Ukrainian refugees, the ongoing housing crisis and strain on public services have sparked anti-immigration protests, with slogans like 'Get them out' and 'Ireland is full' highlighting local concerns over resources and perceived threats to

safety (Carroll, 2023; McCallig, 2024). Even as data shows that most Irish citizens support migrants, protests suggest this support is being tested (Laurence et al., 2024). Migrant and refugee children now face greater challenges in feeling welcomed and integrated.

Key challenges

One of the most pressing issues for migrant and refugee children is language acquisition. Many arrive in Ireland with limited English, creating barriers to academic success and social integration. While English as an additional language (EAL) programmes have improved under the Migrant Integration Strategy, resource limitations hinder their effectiveness (Darmody et al., 2022). Expanding EAL services, especially in schools with many non-English-speaking students, is essential for inclusion and preventing academic underperformance (Government of Ireland, 2020). Many migrant and refugee children also face educational gaps due to interrupted schooling. Schools are doing their best but would benefit from further resources and professional development to address these needs.

Ireland's education system is founded on principles of equality and inclusion, which are crucial for integrating migrant and refugee children. Schools are increasingly incorporating intercultural education through cross-cultural projects and anti-racism workshops that foster empathy and understanding (Devine, 2017; Horgan et al., 2022). The National Action Plan Against Racism calls for schools to embed anti-racism and intercultural principles into everyday learning, supporting greater societal cohesion (Government of Ireland, 2023).

The wellbeing of migrant and refugee children is critical to their integration. Many have endured trauma from war, displacement, or family separation, affecting their mental health and ability to learn (Watters et al., 2022). Addressing these needs is vital for creating a supportive school environment. Trauma-informed care has gained attention, but schools often lack the resources and specialised staff to support children with complex emotional needs.

Migrant and refugee children consistently report lower levels of happiness than their Irish peers (Government of Ireland, 2019). Strengthening mental health services can directly enhance students' academic performance, as wellbeing and cognitive function are closely linked (Richter et al., 2022).

Key actions

To improve the inclusion of migrant and refugee children, several actions can be prioritised, as seen in successful models worldwide. Intensive language

Migrant and refugee children now face greater challenges in feeling welcomed and integrated.

As migration continues to shape Ireland's future, prioritising the integration of migrant and refugee children is essential for building a nation enriched by its diversity.

programmes can be introduced (Pashang et al., 2018). Teachers and staff can receive comprehensive training in trauma-informed care (Miller et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2019). Schools can collaborate with mental health professionals to offer regular workshops, as seen in Canada and the US (Barrett & Berger, 2021). Relationships with migrant families can be strengthened through cultural integration programmes, such as Norway's Introduction Programme and Germany's parental integration courses. Finally, partnerships with local mental health providers can relieve pressure on school staff and ensure students receive necessary support, as in the UK's Place2Be programme and Australia's Headspace initiative.

Conclusion

Ireland's education system has made meaningful strides in supporting migrant and refugee children, yet persistent challenges remain. Expanding EAL services, providing trauma-informed care, and strengthening mental health support are vital not just for supporting these children but also for fostering a more inclusive and cohesive society.

As migration continues to shape Ireland's future, prioritising the integration of migrant and refugee children is essential for building a nation enriched by its diversity and grounded in the values of equality, inclusion, and shared opportunity. The success of these children is not only their own but Ireland's as well.

REFERENCES

Barrett, N. and Berger, E. (2021) 'Teachers' experiences and recommendations to support refugee students exposed to trauma', *Social Psychology of Education*, 24(5), 1259–1280. DOI: 10.1007/s11218-021-09657-4

Carroll, R. (2023) '"There is no room": Anti-immigration protesters march in Dublin', *The Guardian*, 22 January. www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/22/anti-immigration-protesters-march-dublin-ireland-refugees.

Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2024) *Population and migration estimates*, April 2024. Cork: CSO. www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-pme/populationandmigrationestimatesapril2024/keyfindings/.

Darmody, M., McGinnity, F., and Russell, H. (2022) *Children of Migrants in Ireland: How Are They Faring?* Dublin: Economic and Research Social Institute. DOI: 10.26504/rs134

Devine, D. (2017) 'Migrant children in urban schools in Ireland', in W.T. Pink and G.W. Noblit (Eds.), *Second International Handbook of Urban Education*, pp. 1103–1124. Springer. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-40317-5

Government of Ireland (2019) Healthy Ireland Framework 2019–2025. Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/publication/e8f9b1-healthy-ireland-framework-2019-2025/.

Government of Ireland (2020) Migrant Integration Strategy. Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/publication/5a86da-the-migrant-integration-strategy-2017-2020/.

Government of Ireland (2023) National Action Plan Against Racism. Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/publication/14d79-national-action-plan-against-racism/.

Government of Ireland (2024) Statistics 2004 to 2024. International Protection Accommodation Services, and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. www.gov.ie/en/collection/90641-statistics/#latest-ipas-statistics-weekly-report.

Horgan, D., Martin, S., O'Riordan, J., and Maier, R. (2022) 'Supporting languages: The socio-educational integration of migrant and refugee children and young people', *Children & Society*, 36(3), 369–385. DOI: 10.1111/chso.12525

Laurence, J., McGinnity, F., and Murphy, K. (2024) *Attitudes towards Immigration and Refugees in Ireland: Understanding Recent Trends and Drivers.* Economic and Research Social Institute, and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. DOI: 10.26504/jr5

McCallig, E. (2024) 'Ireland is turning violently against migrants', *Tortoise*, 19 July. www.tortoisemedia.com/2024/07/19/ireland-is-turning-violently-against-migrants/.

Miller, K.K., Brown, C.R., Shramko, M., and Svetaz, M.V. (2019) 'Applying trauma-informed practices to the care of refugee and immigrant youth: 10 clinical pearls', *Children*, 6(8), 94. DOI: 10.3390/children6080094

Pashang, S., Biazar, B., Payne, D.E., and Kaya, Z. (2018) 'Teaching English as an additional language (EAL) to refugees: Trauma and resilience'. In: S. Pashang, N. Khanlou, and J. Clarke (Eds.), T*oday's Youth and Mental Health: Hope, Power, and Resilience,* pp. 359–378. Springer DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-64838-5_20

Richter, A., Sjunnestrand, M., Romare Strandh, M., and Hasson, H. (2022) 'Implementing school-based mental health services: A scoping review of the literature summarizing the factors that affect implementation', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(6), 3489. DOI: 10.3390/ijerph19063489

UNESCO (2019) *Education as Healing: Addressing the Trauma of Displacement through Social and Emotional Learning.* Global Education Monitoring Report, policy paper 38. www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/node/86.

Watters, C., Mowlds, W., O'Connor, A., and Sarma, K.M. (2022) '"The last arrival point": The refugee experience of resettlement in Ireland', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 88, 66–76. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijintrel.2022.03.009

Understanding How Student Teachers Engage with 'Big Picture' Thinking as Part of the History Junior Cycle Specification

The focus of this research builds on the new Junior Cycle History specification, which examines how 'big-picture' thinking can be used in Irish post-primary classrooms. This article examines the experience of student teachers in navigating the new specification and suggests possible supports to assist them in their practice.

Ruth Ferris
Lecturer in History Methods, School of Education, University College Dublin

John Dredge
Lecturer in History Methods, School of Education, University College Dublin

Ger O'Sullivan
Acting Director, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Big Picture research project

In *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2023*, we wrote about research that interrogated our understanding of 'big-picture' thinking. relating to the experience of first-year History students in Irish post-primary schools. We now report on the experience of student History teachers on the Professional Master of Education (PME) programme, interrogating their own understanding of big-picture thinking and the challenges they face.

In England, Kate Hawkey (2015) found that the most significant change and challenge for history teachers is the scale of perspective required in interrogating 'big pictures' in history. The Big Picture research project at University College Dublin questions student teachers' conceptual understanding of big-picture thinking and seeks to identify the supports they need in developing such understanding in their Junior Cycle students.

PME History student teachers, representatively sampled from single- and mixed-gender comprehensive colleges, community schools, voluntary secondary schools, and Gaelscoileanna, were invited to participate. Semi-structured qualitative interviews interrogated their experience of the History curriculum and their

understanding of big-picture thinking. After coding and data analysis, a conceptual framework emerged.

Student teachers were asked: What is your understanding of the expression 'big picture of the past'? How would you sum up your own 'big picture' of the past? And what do you think you will need to do to help your students develop a workable 'big picture' of the past? Criteria characterising a clear understanding included awareness that a big picture is one that encompasses the 'broad sweep' of the past, helping students 'make connections' between 'events and developments in different times and places'.

Findings

For most of the student teachers, the conceptual, broad-based type of framework that facilitates historical connections began to take shape only at undergraduate level. Most had difficulty outlining their own big-picture construct. Some pointed to the lack of big-picture focus in their own history education; others admitted that their big picture was fragmented, usually linking this to the selective and topic-focused nature of history teaching and learning. There was no cohesive framework with discernible stages of development, 'turning points', or other distinctive markers. Some participants were even apologetic about perceived gaps in their historical knowledge.

High unanimity was found in response to the third question, inviting strategies to help their students develop big-picture understanding. Classroom use of timelines was a popular response: 'use of timelines and drawing connections between topics studied allows the student to be aware of the fact that more than one element of history may be happening at a given time'. The significance of timelines was demonstrated through models and applications. Interactive timelines, which could expand and contract, were coupled with partial timelines which required completion by students. Timelines were linear and layered as students navigated chronology in the new Junior Cycle specification. Complementary use of visual sources, to help students develop a 'sense of period' or reinforce their understanding of 'how we know what we know', was identified as important.

For some student teachers, temporal and spatial awareness were coupled in understanding big pictures in history. One used the image of a globe in conjunction with timeline work, as a symbol of the big picture. She also linked these with historical causation:

> . . . the importance of knowing what is coming before and after. So what was before? Did it have an impact, yes or no? Did the beginning of that event, and then in turn the conclusion of that event, did that kickstart anything in the following?

'A big picture is one that encompasses the broad sweep of the past, helping students make connections between events and developments in different times and places.'

Phase 2 of the project involved constructing a 'Big Picture Framework' - a visual representation of 10 distinct eras with identifying images and descriptors.

One student noted the challenges for students with additional needs, for whom visual prompts may have limited impact.

Two of the three elements deemed necessary for big-picture understanding have been noted: an appreciation of the 'broad sweep' of the past, which facilitates 'making historical connections'. The third relates to disciplinary awareness that a big picture is not developed in a vacuum but is part of a broader understanding of what the discipline of history entails. This element was implicitly identified as intrinsic to big-picture understanding, linked to students' ability to analyse change; the development of historical empathy in students is closely allied to their ability to 'understand these bigger connections'.

Several respondents said their knowledge of 'modern' history (20th–21st century) is stronger than that of earlier history. This may present challenges in helping students to develop a practical, everyday 'big picture' of the past, particularly if teachers' own historical knowledge is similarly orientated and lacks an overarching dimension.

Big Picture Framework

Phase 2 of the project involved constructing a 'Big Picture Framework'. This classroom resource was a visual representation of 10 distinct eras with identifying images and descriptors. It was anticipated that the student teachers would use it regularly, working with students to locate and orientate subject matter in the appropriate era. It was designed to help students process episodes in time, in terms of historical process and change, which would help them make connections between eras as learning outcomes. This could prevent students from seeing history as a series of stand-alone events. The student teachers were asked to work with the experimental framework, providing data on the level of support it offered in classroom practice.

Summary findings suggest that perhaps the biggest challenge in helping student teachers develop stronger big pictures of the past among their class groups is ensuring that they themselves have the necessary understanding, so that pedagogical approaches and resources used are most likely to be successful. This would inform methodology and promote confidence in dealing with big-picture learning outcomes. There was awareness of the need to help students see the wider context in which events occur, and their wider repercussions. Widespread adoption of an appropriate framework for classroom use was a useful step in equipping student teachers to help their students achieve big-picture learning outcomes.

These findings align with other history research projects working with scaffolds and frameworks in England (Shemilt, 2000), USA (Ryley, 2013) and the

Netherlands (De Rooy Commission, 2001). The challenge for the future is how to encourage the widespread use of frameworks in History classroom in Irish post-primary schools, to help student teachers develop more robust big pictures. This requires planned and meaningful attention in initial history teacher education courses and the provision of continuing professional development programmes.

REFERENCES

Department of Education and Skills (2017) Junior Cycle History. Dublin: Government publications.

De Rooy Commission (2001) History Maker. Histoforum. https://histoforum.net/2009/historymaker.html.

Dredge, J., Ferris, R., and O'Sullivan, G. (2023) *Big Pictures of the Past Research Report.* Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. https://ncca.ie/media/u12pxhin/big-pictures-of-the-past_nccar.pdf.

Hawkey, K. (2015) 'Moving forward, looking back – historical perspective, "Big History" and the return of the *longue durée*: Time to develop our scale hopping muscles', *Teaching History*, 158, pp. 40–46. London: Historical Association.

Ryley, M. (Ed.) (2013) *A Compact History of Humankind: The History of the World in Big Eras.* Los Angeles: National Centre for History in Schools.

Shemilt, D. (2000) 'The Caliph's coin: The currency of narrative frameworks in history teaching'. In: P.N. Stearns, P. Seixas, and S. Wineburg (Eds.), *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, pp. 83–101. New York University Press.

✱✱✱

PROMOTE Event for Early Career Female Researchers

L-R: Dr Sinead Ni Murchadha, Róisín Shanahan, Nicola Kelleher, Eoin Molly and Dr Aisling O'Neill from WETB (Waterford Education & Training Board)

On 13 November 2024, South East Technological University (SETU) welcomed early career researchers to their third PROMOTE Project training session.

PROMOTE is an initiative involving four partner universities that provides guidance on career progression for female researchers in the early stages of their careers.

The event aimed to showcase the wealth of skills and experience researchers bring to diverse sectors, both within and outside academia, and inspire attendees to explore various career opportunities.

Autistic Student Experiences of Post-Primary School

Creating a space for autistic students to be heard

Introduction

The last three decades have seen unprecedented change in how students with special educational needs (SEN) are supported in educational settings. Ireland has progressed a multi-track system for supporting such students, including autistic children and young people. Special classes in mainstream settings have been a feature of the system since the 1970s but began to expand rapidly in the 2000s. Special classes specifically for autistic children and young people have grown from 214 in 2010 to 1,463 in 2022, a 584% increase (NCSE, 2024). As of 2020, 85% of all special classes in Ireland are designated for autistic students.

A key factor in the expansion of these classes is parents and advocacy groups who have been fighting for their autistic children to have a place in their local school. However, each year we read about extreme stress endured by parents attempting to find a suitable school place for their child with SEN. At the time of writing, September 2024, some 160 autistic students are without a suitable school placement.

In January 2024, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) affirmed its commitment to progressively becoming a fully inclusive education system, whereby all students will attend their local school alongside their peers in accordance with the vision of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which Ireland ratified in 2018. Such ambition will undoubtedly see further developments in our education system.

Finbar Horgan
Education Officer, AsIAm, and PhD Candidate, Dublin City University

Dr Paula Kennedy-Flynn
Special Education Teacher, Templeogue College

Drawing from the first author's doctoral research, this article summarises the current and unique obstacles facing autistic young people enrolled in mainstream post-primary educational settings in Ireland. It highlights the urgent need to create a space for these students to be heard on matters affecting their lives.

Autistic students' experiences

Against the backdrop of rapid changes to educational provision, a growing body of research suggests that autistic students, particularly those enrolled in

mainstream settings, often report negative experiences and pervasive barriers to their inclusion (Horgan et al., 2022). International empirical research has consistently shown that autistic students are more likely than their non-autistic peers to experience bullying, social isolation, rejection, school distress, and attendance difficulties. Given the degree and rapid pace of policy change in relation to how autistic children and young people are supported in schools, coupled with reported negative experiences and outcomes, we must ask ourselves, where are the voices of the students in all of this?

The missing voices

Influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, there has been a growing emphasis on the importance of children's rights. Article 12 of the Convention enshrines the right of children to express their views freely on matters affecting them and to have their opinions given due weight, commensurate with age and maturity – encompassing the inclusion of student voices in education discourse. The benefits of student voice work are well established in the research literature. Student participation in decision-making, for example, has wide-ranging benefits at societal, school, and individual level, including increased motivation and engagement in school, improved student–teacher relationships, and a greater sense of school-connectedness (Fielding & Bragg, 2003; Flynn, 2016).

Yet despite the increasing emphasis on student voice, the voices of marginalised students are seldom heard on important matters impacting their lives (Tangen, 2009; Flynn, 2017). Instead, the voices of adult stakeholders are often prioritised and dominate in debate and discourse relating to inclusive and special education.

Voices of inclusion

In 2019, the lead author was fortunate to be awarded a full academic scholarship from Dublin City University to pursue doctoral research on autism and inclusive education. My primary aspiration was to authentically listen to the voices of a group of autistic students about their experiences of mainstream secondary schools, to identify the supportive and unsupportive aspects of their educational placement. Authentic listening requires a shift from the act of simply listening to a shared experience and understanding (Flynn & Hayes, 2021).

Four mainstream secondary schools expressed interest in participating. After a rigorous recruitment process, 19 autistic students assented to participate in the project (see table), which involved semi-structured interviews and optional drawing and ranking activities. In total, 48 student interviews were conducted.

Student participation in decision-making has wide-ranging benefits at societal, school, and individual level, including increased motivation and engagement in school, improved student–teacher relationships, and a greater sense of school-connectedness (Fielding & Bragg, 2003; Flynn, 2016).

The research described shows that by authentically listening to the voices of autistic students, we can better understand the unique and often overlooked obstacles they may encounter on their educational journeys.

Age	Gender	Enrolment
Average age: 15.8 years	Male: 12 Female: 5 Transgender: 2	Mainstream only: 4 Dual enrolment (accessing an autism class): 15

Table: Profile of participants

What did the students say?

Analysis of transcribed interviews indicated that while each student had a unique and personal experience of school, some potential obstacles and supports to their inclusion and participation were identified.

The most challenging aspects included: lack of understanding of autism and associated needs; not being 'heard' when encountering problems; loud and chaotic environment, including hallways and general purpose areas; visibility of adult support (special needs assistants) in mainstream classes; fast-paced nature of mainstream curriculum; and experiencing stigma, judgement, and bullying. These challenges, often encountered by students, impacted directly on their experiences, sometimes leading to social isolation, anxiety, low self-esteem, and frustration.

Students also described supportive aspects that made school more enjoyable, protected them from isolation and bullying, and contributed to a sense of school connectedness. These included: having friends at school; positive relationships with wider peer group; positive student–teacher relationships; being treated with high expectations; subtle and skilful delivery of adult support; and provision of accessible, safe, and quiet spaces.

Conclusion

The research described shows that by authentically listening to the voices of autistic students, we can better understand the unique and often overlooked obstacles they may encounter on their educational journeys. Given the degree of policy change in Ireland towards a more inclusive system, it is imperative that these students be empowered to have their say on these important matters, which impact directly on their lives. Such a vision resonates with Flynn's (2016) contention that 'a student voice approach is fundamental to the development of an inclusive learning environment for the benefit of *all* students'.

REFERENCES

Fielding, M. and Bragg, S. (2003) *Students as Researchers: Making a Difference.* Pearson.

Flynn, P. (2016) 'Whose voice, who's listening? Student voices in research and practice; embedding a culture of listening in education discourse'. In: B. Mooney (Ed.), *Education Matters Yearbook 2015–2016.* Dublin: Education Matters.

Flynn, P. (2017) *The Learner Voice Research Study: Research Report.* Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

Flynn, P. and Hayes, N. (2021) 'Student voice in curriculum reform: Whose voices, who's listening?' In: D. Murchan and K. Johnston (Eds.), *Curriculum Change within Policy and Practice.* Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-50707-7_3

Horgan, F., Kenny, N., and Flynn, P. (2022) 'A systematic review of the experiences of autistic young people enrolled in mainstream second-level (post-primary) schools', *Autism*, 27(2), 526–538. DOI: 10.1177/13623613221105089

National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2024) *An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society: Policy Advice Paper on Special Schools and Classes.* Dublin: National Council for Special Education.

Tangen, R. (2009) 'Conceptualising quality of school life from pupils' perspectives: A four-dimensional model', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13, 829–844. DOI: 10.1080/13603110802155649

✳✳✳

Teacher Professional Development and Immersion Education

Spotlight on an Irish-medium teacher development programme

Introduction and research base

This article presents key messages from the international research base on teacher professional development (PD) in general and on immersion education PD. It spotlights a programme in Trinity College Dublin for teachers in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools, describing its focus and design and outlining key principles underpinning it. It underscores the importance of collaborative learning, building leadership capacity in and through the programme, and the crucial role of practice and practitioner research to develop participants' adaptive expertise and agency to realise national policies on school evaluation and language education.

Teacher professional development can be summarised as 'the ability to improve teaching' (Sims et al., 2023). A consensus view of effective PD suggests it is sustained over time, involves teacher collaboration, has teacher investment and endorsement, balances subject knowledge and general pedagogical techniques, involves external expertise, and has practical application (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021).

Sims et al. (2023) acknowledge the challenges in designing PD that results in 'sustained improvements in teaching' through changes in teaching practices. In their guidance report for the Education Endowment Foundation, they suggest four mechanisms for effective PD:

1. building knowledge and insight
2. motivating teachers
3. developing teaching techniques
4. embedding practice.

Gavin Murphy
Assistant Professor, Trinity College Dublin

This article spotlights a programme in Trinity College Dublin for teachers in Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools, outlining its key principles in the context of an international research base on teacher professional development and immersion education. It underscores the importance of collaborative learning, building leadership capacity in and through the programme, and the crucial role of practice and practitioner research.

The international research base examining approaches to immersion education teachers' PD is somewhat limited. Tedick and Wesely (2015, p.36) argue that 'there is still a notable lack of research on a wide variety of topics relating to teacher development, including pre-service teacher preparation, [and] the professional trajectories of immersion . . . teachers'. They deem such developmental activities as crucial, both practically and theoretically, for immersion educators. From a contextual standpoint, there are specific calls for Irish-immersion teachers to have ease of access to quality, specialised, and targeted PD, as well as considerations about barriers to participation, such as time and cost (Nic Aindriú et al., 2022, 2023).

Across all sources of literature presented here, particular levers of effective professional development that improve student learning experiences and outcomes are highlighted, including: realistic implementation strategies for instruction, support in embedding and sustaining instructional practice, a focus on motivating participants through goal-setting and reinforcement opportunities, and opportunities to learn collaboratively with and from other educators on the programme. These factors capture the overarching evidence-based approaches and underlying mechanisms that foster enhanced practice through quality PD.

Programme for teachers in Irish–medium and Gaeltacht schools

The M.Oid. san Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge agus Gaeltachta is a programme designed for teachers and school leaders in Irish-language immersion schools or Gaeltacht schools, giving participants the opportunity to reach the highest standards of Irish language as well as educational practice in their school contexts. The programme is deeply rooted in the Teaching Council's (2011) Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education, which champions 'innovation, integration, improvement' and nurtures 'reflective, enquiry-oriented, life-long learners'.

This foundation is complemented by other key policies such as Looking at Our Schools 2022 and the Cosán Framework for Teachers' Learning, ensuring that our approach is both comprehensive and contemporary. At the heart of our programme lies a research-informed theory of action that embraces participative, experiential, and constructivist approaches to PD. Its aim is to facilitate not just learning but transformation – personal and professional – for every participant. To bring its vision to life, a suite of practical processes that weave through the programme have been designed, including:

» critical reading tasks from a broad research base, paired with structured reflection prompts, encouraging deep learning through research-led

'There is still a notable lack of research on a wide variety of topics relating to teacher development, including pre-service teacher preparation, and the professional trajectories of immersion teachers'. (Tedick and Wesely (2015, p.36)

The role of digital technology to enhance the PD experience for national reach cannot be overstated.

teaching with both content and personal growth, engaging both role and identity considerations

» enquiry-based learning tasks, using various paradigms to hone research and decision-making skills crucial for school improvement

» collaborative learning, challenging personal and professional beliefs

» digital tools and platforms to develop the contemporary professionalism required in the Covid-19 era

» sustained engagement with established and emerging policies and frameworks, ensuring learning is authentic and applicable to participants' professional contexts

» consistent focus on equity and inclusion to challenge and sensitise participants to critically examine blind spots and become agents of positive change

» portfolio-based learning, with an emphasis on language development, allowing participants to document their progression and identify areas for further growth.

Throughout the programme, participants' adaptive expertise is fostered, and they are prepared to lead in the unique contexts of immersion and Gaeltacht education to be equipped with the tools, mindset, and confidence to make a lasting impact in their schools and the broader education system.

Looking ahead

The research base on effective PD is still nascent, particularly for immersion and Gaeltacht education. But based on our ongoing experience and evaluation, the significance of collaborative learning and building leadership capacity, and the role of digital technology to enhance the PD experience for national reach, cannot be overstated. This is particularly the case in a sector experiencing ongoing demand for growth and the same complexity and challenge as the English-speaking part of Ireland's education system – but often without parity of provision in professional development, especially in harder-to-reach areas, where some school communities may be located.

Trinity College Dublin's M.Oid. programme exemplifies a locally conscious and globally outward-looking programme that adopts a research-driven approach to developing participants' adaptive expertise, while enhancing their language proficiency. This approach builds bridges between the international and national research base, the national policy context, and school and classroom realities, integrating several key mechanisms of effective PD. The success of any programme like ours, including less-formal approaches to PD, will rest in its ability to be rigorous and at the same time responsive to participants' contexts, and to be focused on nurturing both individual capacities and systemic capacity for the success of immersion education.

REFERENCES

Nic Aindriú, S., Connaughton-Crean, L., Ó Duibhir, P., and Travers, J. (2023) 'The design and content of an online continuous professional development course in special education for teachers in Irish immersion primary and post-primary schools', *Education Sciences*, 13(3). DOI: 10.3390/educsci13030281

Nic Aindriú, S., Ó Duibhir, P., Connaughton-Crean, L., and Travers, J. (2022) 'The CPD needs of Irish-medium primary and post-primary teachers in special education', *Education Sciences*, 12(12). DOI: 10.3390/educsci12120909

Sims, S. and Fletcher-Wood, H. (2021) 'Identifying the characteristics of effective teacher professional development: A critical review', *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 32(1), 47–63. DOI: 10.1080/09243453.2020.1772841

Sims, S., Fletcher-Wood, H., O'Mara-Eves, A., Cottingham, S., Stansfield, C., Goodrich, J., Van Herwegen, J., and Anders, J. (2023) 'Effective teacher professional development: New theory and a meta-analytic test', *Review of Educational Research*. DOI: 10.3102/00346543231217480

Teaching Council (2011) *Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education.* Maynooth: Teaching Council. www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Publications/Teacher-Education/Policy-on-the-Continuum-of-Teacher-Education.pdf.

Tedick, D.J. and Wesely, P.M. (2015) 'A review of research on content-based foreign/second language education in US K-12 contexts', *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 28(1), 25–40. DOI: 10.1080/07908318.2014.1000923

***

Dear Friends in Education,

As the Founder and soon-to-retire Publisher of *Ireland's Education Yearbook*, I sincerely thank the many people who have participated in and supported the Yearbook over the decades. It has been an amazing journey for me - sometimes challenging, sometimes exhilarating, and always fulfilling.

What future do **you** visualize for *Ireland's Education Yearbook*?

Please share your thoughts in an email to info@educationmatters.ie

Sincerely,

Phyllis Mitchell

IRELAND'S EDUCATION YEARBOOK