# Curriculum Change within Policy and Practice

## Reforming Second-Level Education in Ireland

*Edited by*
Damian Murchan
Keith Johnston

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**Clive Byrne** is Director of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, representing school leaders in almost all post-primary schools in Ireland. A nominee of the Minister for Education and Skills on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, he has been involved in negotiations on a range of key national initiatives, including Junior Cycle reform. He has just finished his second term as President of the European School Heads Association, the representative body for school leadership organisations across primary, secondary and vocational educational levels in 31 countries.

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**Paula Flynn** is an assistant professor at the Institute of Education, Dublin City University. Her research and teaching interests include student/learner voice, children's rights-based methodologies, inclusive education and leadership for learning. Her student voice research has appeared in, for example, *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* (2014), *Routledge International Companion to Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties* (2013) and *Radical Collegiality through Student Voice* (2018). She led National Council for Curriculum and Assessment research on consulting post-primary students in Junior Cycle curricular development (2014–2017) from which she refined a framework for sustainable and authentic student voice engagement in local and national education discourse.

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**Nóirín Hayes** is a visiting academic, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, and Professor Emerita, Centre for Social and Educational Research, Technological University Dublin. Working within a bio-ecological framework of development and through a child rights lens, she studies early childhood education and care pedagogy and policy. Her recent publications include co-editor of *Research and Evaluation in Community, Health and Social Care Settings: Experiences from Practice* (2018) and *In Search of Social Justice: John Bennett's Lifetime Contribution to Early Childhood Policy and Practice* (2018). She is convenor of the Researching Early Childhood Education Collaborative (RECEC) at Trinity College Dublin.

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**Marita Kerin**   is a former primary and second-level teacher and Assistant Professor of Music Education at Trinity College Dublin. Wishing to create a cultural movement that includes the arts, sciences, humanities and technology, Marita is committed to creating and promoting dynamic co-teaching/co-learning teaching and research partnerships. Two such projects include *Quavers to Quadratics* and *Coteaching Primary Music*. Recent research collaborations include *The Scholarship of Reciprocity: Extending the Vision of Ernest Boyer* and *The Multiplier Effect of an Authentic Scholarship of Engagement.*

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**Noel Ó Murchadha** is Assistant Professor of Language Education at Trinity College Dublin. He teaches courses on bilingualism and multilingualism in education, language pedagogy and research methods in language and language education. Previously, he taught at University College Dublin, the University of Toronto and the University of Limerick. His research focuses on aspects of language policy, especially language attitudes and ideologies. He has completed projects on teenagers' and educators' perceptions of linguistic variation in Irish and on the standardisation of Irish. His research examines the changing relationship between self and society in late modernity and how this is negotiated through language.

**Eileen O'Connor** is a former Director of the Drumcondra Teacher Education Centre and is a part-time lecturer in the Masters in Education Programme at Trinity College Dublin and at the University of Iceland, Reykjavik. She is also a part-time facilitator for School Leaders with the Department of Education and Skills Junior Cycle Reform initiative. Her areas of interest and ongoing research include school and middle leadership development and post-primary teacher continuing professional development. Her most recent publication in *Irish Educational Studies* focused on distributed leadership and middle leadership practice in schools.

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**Maija Salokangas** is a senior lecturer in the Department of Education, Maynooth University. Her research focuses on the interplay between education policy and practice, with a specific focus on agency and autonomy. Maija's recent book *Inside the Autonomous School: Making Sense of the Global Educational Trend* (with Mel Ainscow, 2017) critiques the international school autonomy movement.

**Wieland Wermke** is an associate professor at the Department of Special Education at Stockholm University, Sweden. His research focuses on teachers' work and professionalism from a comparative perspective. He recently led a research project on teacher autonomy in Sweden, Finland, Germany and Ireland. His work has been published in several prominent journals including the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* and the *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*.

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# Reforming Curriculum: Policy Optimism Meets Practice

**Damian Murchan and Keith Johnston**

## Introduction

Education systems generally aim to better the lives of citizens and provide a competitive edge to national prosperity. Governments internationally frequently look to the education system for solutions to a variety of perceived economic, social and health challenges and opportunities (Ward and Eden 2009). Traditionally, systems have differed significantly in how they structure, manage, and provide educational opportunities for learners. Recently we see increased convergence in reform agendas globally in response to widely shared concerns about standards, fitness for purpose of curricula, and the quest for so-called twenty-first century skills such as problem-solving, creativity, and entrepreneurial spirit (Wiseman 2013; Waldow et al. 2014; Care et al. 2017; Partnership for 21st Century Learning 2019). Policy agendas, framed in part by supranational organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

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Development (OECD), have placed greater emphasis on issues such as school improvement, preparing students for the future, and equity and inclusion. In outlining a vision to inform education systems about providing for children now entering school, the OECD (2018, p. 3) sounds a cautionary warning that 'in the face of an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, education can make the difference as to whether people embrace the challenges they are confronted with or whether they are defeated by them', a sentiment framed in advance of the COVID-19 pandemic, but more relevant than ever as a result of the crisis.

Key policy initiatives are developed to make education systems future-ready. Policies include building a system-level and school-level evaluation architecture, enhancing approaches to student assessment and promoting teacher capacity through changes in initial and continuing teacher education. Developments in the Republic of Ireland reflect such thinking. Ireland has a very open economy, buoyed by the highest predicted growth in gross domestic product (GDP) prior to the onset of COVID-19, bringing benefits in terms of economic agility and attractiveness to investors but challenges also in relation to dependence on global markets (European Commission 2020). That openness in economic policy is reflected also in education where initiatives are frequently borrowed from other education systems and transnational organisations, illustrated by initiatives recently in relation to school evaluation, data-driven instruction, mathematics curriculum, learning trajectories, key skills, and initial teacher education (Murchan 2018).

Policy priorities within Irish second level education reflect priorities internationally. Areas include addressing disadvantage and inclusion, ensuring quality in education, making learning relevant to students' needs, embedding technology-enhanced teaching and learning and developing teacher capacity. COVID-19 has introduced additional priorities and urgency to educational planning. This volume explores efforts to realise many of these long-established priorities through fundamental reform of curriculum at lower secondary level, termed *Junior Cycle* in Ireland. The collection of chapters offers a case study of curriculum reforms, developed around an amalgam of policy priorities identified in Ireland but resonating also with priorities in many education systems. A range of contributors focus on antecedents to, processes associated with

and ongoing implementation of the Irish Government's efforts to evoke fundamental realignment of curriculum at junior cycle. Set against a backdrop of fluctuating economic fortunes, concerns about academic standards and policy enthusiasm for twenty-first century skills, Irish policymakers embarked on an ambitious change agenda. This initiative generated unparalleled debate and controversy within the system that reverberate still, within junior cycle education and in relation to subsequent efforts to reform upper secondary education.

## Overview of Educational Reforms at Junior Cycle in Ireland

Junior cycle is equivalent to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) level in the UK, serving students aged approximately 12–16 years. Students enter the three-year junior cycle of second level education after eight years of primary education. Following this they move to senior cycle (upper secondary), a programme of two or three years' duration, depending on whether or not students enrol in an optional one-year 'transition' programme. Responsibility for the development of curriculum rests with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), a statutory agency that advises the minister for education and skills on matters of curriculum and assessment. There are 722 second level schools serving a student population of 362,800 (DES 2019) and the ownership and management of individual schools varies, some being private and others run by the State or local communities. At the conclusion of junior cycle, student achievement has been certified nationally on the basis of assessments and examinations organised by the State Examinations Commission (SEC), a statutory agency responsible for the operation of key State examinations largely at the secondary level. Whereas the stakes attached to the Leaving Certificate Examination at the end of senior cycle are high, Junior Certificate Examination grades (junior cycle) are not, particularly as over 90% of students move on to complete upper secondary education in the same school (DES 2015a). The junior cycle qualification is aligned with Level 3 of the Irish National

Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), a 10-level scale that describes education and training qualifications, providing clarity about learners' knowledge, skills, and competencies at each level on the scale (QQI n.d.).

Following a previous reform of lower secondary education in the late 1980s, students typically studied 11 or 12 subjects, with tiered pathways within each subject at two or three different levels of challenge: *higher*, *ordinary*, and *foundation*. Student achievement was assessed largely using examinations at the end of the 3rd year, along with some additional assessment components in some subjects. The further reform of junior cycle has been a priority of policymakers since 2010, prompted by a series of reports and publications (e.g., DES 1995, 1999; NCCA 1999) which highlighted many challenges. Issues included the over-reliance on terminal assessment and the desirability of incorporating a greater variety of continuous and school-based assessment (SBA) strategies. Review of the student experience in school signalled the need for reform also (Smyth et al. 2006, 2007). This work highlighted the disengagement of some students in the early stages of junior cycle, the dominating effect of the Junior Certificate examination on teaching and learning practices within schools, use of a narrow range of assessment strategies, and limited time for students to engage with deep learning. Review by the NCCA in 2010 recommended a more learner-centred curriculum, greater autonomy for schools to design a programme aligned to the needs of their students, and the potential for assessments beyond the standard terminal examination, with schools having greater choice as to how they can generate evidence of their students' learning.

An extensive consultation phase with the education partners and wider society, including publication of two consultation papers (NCCA 2010, 2011), resulted in publication by the government of a *Framework for Junior Cycle* in 2012, and subsequently revised in 2015 (DES 2012, 2015b). A phased introduction of specific reform proposals, first introduced to schools in September 2014, continued until September 2019 and the final subjects implemented will be examined in 2022. What is to be learnt overall by students over the three years is expressed in a number of high-level ideas designed to guide teaching and learning (DES 2015b). These include

- Eight principles designed to underpin the planning, development, and implementation of junior cycle programmes in schools
- Twenty-four statements of learning that schools can use to build their programme, select what subjects to offer, and design additional learning activities
- Eight key skills that students require in order to engage in successful learning across subjects and beyond formal schooling.

Course specifications (syllabi) have been updated for all existing full subjects (200/240 hours of timetabled student engagement), and in the main, these are offered at one common level/tier, except for English, Irish, and Mathematics, which are offered at two levels. A new curriculum area entitled *Wellbeing* has been introduced as a compulsory component for all students. The latter incorporates areas of Physical Education; Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE); Civic, Social, and Political Education (CSPE); and Pastoral/Careers Guidance. The programme also includes provision for the introduction of optional short courses (half-length/100 hours). These include centrally designed courses such as Coding, Digital Media Literacy, Artistic Performance, and Philosophy and other courses designed by schools to align more closely with the interests of their student cohort. Two separate *Learning Programmes* for students with special educational needs have been developed. These programmes allow schools to customise the broader junior cycle curriculum for students with special educational needs in the range of low moderate to severe and profound disability (LPL1) and for students with a general learning disability in the higher functioning moderate and low functioning mild range (LPL2). These are aligned with Levels 1 and 2 on the NFQ.

Proposed changes in respect of assessment, including teachers' role in the assessment of their own students, provided the most challenging and controversial aspect of the reforms culminating in a period of industrial unrest involving teacher unions and the Government. Following a period of negotiation and compromise, a twin track system of assessment emerged whereby examinations set and marked by the SEC are retained at the end of the final year of the junior cycle. Typically, 10% of this grade is allocated to an in-class *Assessment Task* (AT) taken in most subjects in

the third year. These examinations are complemented by SBA in the form of *Classroom-Based Assessments* (CBAs), which assess students in areas of learning not covered by the terminal assessments. CBAs are developed by the NCCA and are completed in class by students to a set timetable and are assessed by teachers using prescribed criteria. A somewhat revised form of certification has emerged. After completion of the programme, students are awarded the *Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement* which records the results of the exams and ATs graded by the SEC along with the results of the CBAs and any other areas of learning recorded by the school. Moderation of the SBA is facilitated by implementation of a *Subject Learning and Review* (SLAR) process whereby teachers in a school meet to discuss standards and calibrate results provided to students.

The implementation of reform of junior cycle has been underpinned by a number of key communications to schools in the form of *Circular Letters* from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) that detail arrangements for implementation. Updated subject specifications and related assessment guidelines have been provided to schools by the NCCA. Additional support for teachers has been provided by the *Junior Cycle for Teachers* (JCT) professional development initiative that has provided an annual continuing professional development (CPD) schedule for schools, incorporating whole school planning workshops, subject cluster meetings, and online subject-based webinars aligned to the phased introduction of subjects.

The reforms in Ireland are consistent with many similar reforms internationally, yet the specific educational, social, and political contexts pertaining in Ireland have resulted in unique outcomes in relation to the proposals, as outlined in the current volume. Much of the debate is centred on reform of existing assessment and certification practices, generating significant conflict between teacher unions and the DES. This resulted in reshaping of the reform proposals between 2012 and 2017 when the first phase of the reform was finally fully implemented in schools. Whereas the extent to which the eventual outcome departed from the policymakers' original plans is not really in doubt, the implications of those amendments for students, teachers, secondary education, and wider society remain to be seen and this is explored in the chapters in this volume.

# Enacting Policy in Practice

Contributions in this edited volume provide insight into the policy level and practical experiences and implications of educational change at scale in Ireland. Why and how such a policy momentum for more fundamental change emerged can be framed within some broader considerations underpinning educational reforms. These considerations are set out and addressed in the sections which follow.

## Improving Education

In many countries, education and its improvement frequently arise in political debate, as contenders for office seek to position themselves as 'safer' on education and more likely to raise standards. Since 2005, the Gallup World Poll tracks issues affecting the lives of people globally, including their satisfaction with their education and school systems. Across 43 countries in 2018, two-thirds expressed satisfaction on average (OECD 2019). This proportion varies from country to country and varies over time, suggesting some ongoing level of concern amongst the public. In response, proponents of a 'back-to-basics' movement promote emphasis on core subjects whereas others offer a more holistic concept of education associated with the broader development of the individual through a range of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills. The Irish reform of 2014–2022 sits somewhere in between, recognising the need to prepare students for a competitive globalised knowledge economy while also supporting and promoting student wellbeing. Framing this successfully in the form of a robust, deliverable curriculum architecture requires care, especially in an education system that prizes high-stakes examinations in second level education. Teachers are central to successfully embedding policy in practice, regardless of the level of professional autonomy and discretion granted to them in their work.

## Convergence of Curricula Globally

Early conceptualising around education reform within a system typically rests on a mix of locally relevant research alongside review of 'international best practice' in relation to curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment. The reform of junior cycle in Ireland illustrates both approaches. Ample research and reports prepared locally over an extended period informed policymakers' thinking about the need for change and this was fused with illustrations of practice internationally to bring about specific proposals for change. This suggests the existence of a global curriculum consisting of 'what gets taught and how' (Sparapani et al. 2014, p. 2) that helps shape developments in and across education systems. Prominent elements of the global curriculum recently include an emphasis on key skills, assessment, and alignment of subject content and skills. National updating of subjects such as language, mathematics, science, and the arts is frequently undertaken by reference to the 'content' of such subjects in reference jurisdictions, such as other OECD member states and high-performing systems on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Such international benchmarking of proposed curriculum change has a long history, stretching back to the earliest cross-national studies of achievement in the 1960s (Murchan 2018).

## The Processes of Curriculum Reform at Second Level in Ireland

Since 1987 most of the main initiatives for curriculum renewal and development at early years, primary and second levels in Ireland, have emerged from the NCCA who provide advice to the minister who retains responsibility for the policy. In a pattern that mirrored broader social partnership involving government, employers, and workers, curriculum development has been characterised by relatively inclusive structures that afford many representative stakeholders direct or indirect input into the process of reform (Granville 2004). Although helping to achieve wider stakeholder consensus on proposals for submission to the minister, adoption of a representative rather than a more expert-driven approach may

result in somewhat more conservative outcomes at the expense of much fundamental change (Gleeson 2010). The story of the recent junior cycle reform offers analysis of how partnership approaches fare and fray when policymakers push more fundamental alterations to existing policy and practice and where powerful stakeholders such as teacher unions are not in agreement. The current reform sets out to cede some limited local responsibility for curriculum development and student assessment to schools. That so much of the challenge in translating the policy into practice centred on issues of greater autonomy for teachers illustrates the complexity of reforms in practice and the need to consider important issues of teacher identity alongside the conceptualisation of the reforms.

## National and International Drivers of Change

Systems tend not to change by themselves but instead require application of pressure or incentive. Such triggers for change can emerge from within a national education system or from external forces. In the Irish context, internal drivers include research conducted by the NCCA, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and others over an extended period, as well as government policy papers and consultations with stakeholders. Other internal factors include change elsewhere in the system (e.g., at primary level and upper secondary level) and ongoing monitoring by relevant regulatory agencies such as the Inspectorate. Key personalities also play a part, as evidenced in the role played in the junior cycle reform by a number of education ministers and officials with deep commitment to reform, especially Ruairi Quinn whose proposals launched the reform agenda in 2012.

Alongside such internal influences, a range of factors initially residing outside the system can influence policy also. International agencies and organisations such as the OECD, United Nations (UN), World Bank, European Commission and others have broad reach in political, economic, social, and educational arenas within individual countries. In addition, the presence of multinational corporations within a country provides a point of external reference as a policy is being considered, especially in the context of a more globalised economy where education

systems are perceived and expected to play a significant part in equipping young people with relevant knowledge, skills, and competencies. Some factors span both the national and international space, such as the banking recession of 2008 (when collapse of banks internationally prompted a financial crisis in Ireland) coinciding with unexpectedly low performance by Irish students in PISA 2009. Such contextual backdrops highlight how policymaking is a carefully calibrated process, finely attuned to and influenced by a range of local and not-so-local influences.

## Promoting and Managing Change

Whatever the aims and nature of changes proposed, strategies enacted to communicate, promote, and manage change ultimately become crucial to its success. This challenge is magnified as societies become more diverse and stakeholder expectations around consultation and involvement in policy development increase. Driving reform requires clear understanding of the purpose and value of change at the policy level, development of appropriate structures and supports to facilitate change at the broader level of stakeholders who are expected to implement it, and ensuring that other policies that also impact on practice align with or at least do not conflict with the proposed change. Such systemic approaches require significant buy-in and commitment by a range of actors and stakeholders. It requires recognition of the implications of any change for teachers' confidence, self-efficacy, identity, and workload because harnessing teacher agency in productive directions holds the key to successful reforms. Given their close relationships with teachers, students, and parents, school leaders have much to contribute to the messaging around change and promotion of goodwill towards it. Effective communication with all stakeholders and the wider public is essential if they are to be convinced of the value of the reform and are to be open to it. Educational leaders, including policymakers, need to create the conditions to allow the change to proceed from policy through implementation without being modified to the extent that it no longer resembles what was intended or does not address the concerns identified initially. This involves building stakeholder

understanding and commitment to the change to ensure that the change does not stall at the stage of policy aspiration.

The principal purpose of this book is neither to criticise the reform of junior cycle nor to laud it. We adopt the more pragmatic position that there has been insufficient scholarly analysis of the reform to date to justify either position. Yet, the reform has drawn enormous energy from the policy community, from school communities and from the wider public over the past two decades and since 2012 in particular. Therefore, in advance of reaching the crucial stage of embedding the reform and before that same coalition embarks on reforms of upper secondary education, such an analysis is timely.

## Structure of the Book

The book is structured in three parts that reflect key aspects of junior cycle education and reforms. In Part I, 'Perspectives on Junior Cycle Reform', chapters focus on some of the voices and narratives that shaped development and implementation of the change. Education is a normative process, situated in national and local culture, context, and identity, and is dependent on a variety of stakeholders who individually and collectively shape the process of change. Education systems involve and impact on large proportions of a population, so it is not surprising that adjustments are subject to intense scrutiny by teachers, students, parents, and the wider public. The enormous exchequer costs associated with education also ensures that any change attracts considerable attention.

In unpacking the perspectives of parents and students, Chap. 2 utilises a sociological lens to conceptualise factors influencing their levels of influence and involvement vis-à-vis the influence of teachers. Although change can facilitate greater agency in teachers' professional role, it also brings risk of failure and challenge to the existing role and identity of the teacher. Whereas parents' views can influence their children's perception of education, parental involvement in reforms is determined by sociological and practical factors. Levels of cultural, social, and economic capital are differentially available to parents and this can attenuate or amplify their involvement in system-wide consultations with implications for

voice. That issue of voice is revisited in Chap. 3 where it is positioned within a 'children's rights' viewpoint that cherishes a more democratic process of curriculum development, that simultaneously empowers students and enhances schools and education more broadly. The chapter highlights how incorporation of the student voice, while conferring a legitimate and authentic role for students in educational decision-making and contributing to student wellbeing, can challenge existing power relations. In detailing a limited process of student consultation as part of the junior cycle reforms, the chapter proposes a dialogical learner voice model that casts student and adult stakeholders as 'learners'. Stakeholders are also visible in Chap. 4, where the story of the junior cycle reform as represented by the Irish newsprint and online media is discussed. Prominent actors in this story include teachers, students, principals, and policymakers, and much of the plot centres on the issues of student assessment and the simmering relationship and protracted negotiations between teachers and government. Devitt shows how the media can frame the debate, in the Irish case shifting public awareness away from philosophical and educational rationale for change to more procedural telling of key events along the way.

Part II of the book ('Reforming Curriculum and Pedagogy') explores the enactment of junior cycle refracted through selected areas of curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy. With few exceptions at scale internationally, second level education, and the staffing of schools, is structured around the teaching of subjects, 'notwithstanding the strong endorsement of the need for a broader range of skills by global and regional organizations and by individual countries' (Care et al. 2017, p. 4). Chapter 5 takes up the call by Care and colleagues to go beyond the '*whats*' of skills and address *how* they can be aligned with and integrated in pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment, including implications for building teacher capacity. Johnston positions junior cycle key skills in relation to competencies identified in several related key-skills frameworks, highlighting the role of technology as both a driver and an enabler of key skills-based curricula, along with the potential benefits of key-skills approaches in relation to student wellbeing.

Chapters 6–8 illustrate the junior cycle reform at the more granulated level of individual subjects. Spanning all languages offered at junior cycle

and with reference to developments in early years and primary education, Chap. 6 interprets the reform through the lens of translanguaging. The analysis relates curriculum reforms to broader policy contexts such as the recognition and promotion of a multilingual society. In evaluating junior cycle specifications for English, Irish, and modern foreign languages, this analysis highlights some lost opportunities to integrate language learning, particularly within the sociolinguistic reality of increasingly diverse language use in Ireland, a phenomenon that is evident also internationally. Focusing on mathematics, Chap. 7 contextualises the recent reform longitudinally along a continuum of change stretching over five decades. The authors recognise the complex role of teachers, sometimes proactive agents of change, sometimes resistors to change, all set against varying approaches to curriculum development. This can involve an iterative and participative process of negotiation with key stakeholders or, alternatively, giving greater prominence to experts, 'best practice' internationally and research reports. The chapter identifies benefits and challenges with different approaches to curriculum development, amply illustrated with reference to two contrasting approaches within the very recent past in Ireland, an unusually short interval between reforms that threatened to induce change fatigue amongst teachers. Such change fatigue is certainly less likely for teachers of music, the subject explored in Chap. 8 and not updated, until the recent reforms, in almost 30 years. Like the chapter on language, this chapter takes a cross-level perspective, exploring alignment of music curricula across primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary levels. Set in the context of recent interest in Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) education, the reforms are characterised as sufficient enablers of creativity and personal development to attract interest in the subject from a wider cohort of students, in part due to important changes in content, assessment, and pedagogy.

Straying beyond an individual subject, Chap. 9 addresses the most contested aspect of the revised junior cycle, focusing on how assessment and particularly proposed teacher involvement in the assessment of their own students catalysed tension amongst stakeholders, generating the type of media narrative alluded to earlier. As with the mathematics chapter, a longitudinal analysis traces the national and international drivers for change, stretching over two decades, culminating in assessment

proposals designed to enhance students' learning experience. Factors evident internationally such as teaching to the test, rote learning, and PISA shock fermented a narrative around SBA as part of the solution to perceived ills, a solution accepted by most stakeholders but, crucially, not by teachers. In juxtaposing the patient building of a research-based argument for SBA with the supercharged atmosphere of fraught industrial relations involving strong teacher unions, the chapter reflects the messy complexity of translating assessment policy reform into practice.

The final part of the book, 'Planning and Implementing Change', builds from the concluding chapter in Part II, taking a broader look at the political processes, comparative underpinning, and organisational efforts and challenges associated with reform of junior cycle. As outlined earlier, education and educational change impact a range of stakeholders, and, therefore, a variety of interest in and response to the change is to be expected. Some of this diversity is captured in Chap. 10 which revisits key stakeholder reaction to the junior cycle reforms from the perspective of education leaders and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) in particular. This chapter charts the role played by ministers for education and national agencies such as the NCCA within a school landscape characterised by several sectoral organisations and representative agencies, each with their own sometimes competing views. Against this fragmented backdrop, the chapter analyses the role and significance of effective leadership to help teachers implement and embed reforms at the school level, along with requirements for related resources and supports. Chapter 11 also focuses on implementation challenges, drawing on interview data to address how second level teachers in Ireland, Finland, and Sweden perceive their role in relation to student assessment. It is argued that how decisions about assessment are controlled in different jurisdictions, along with the associated complexity and risks for teachers inherent in assessment, mould teachers' perceptions of their own decision-making capacity. The analysis positions Irish teachers mainly as deliverers of the curriculum, their work highly controlled externally, with relatively fewer professional risks than their Scandinavian peers. Staying with the mechanics of reforms, Chap. 12 adopts a change theory perspective in analysing the implementation phase. A number of supports and pressures typically found to underpin change are related to

the Irish case. Key drivers include: clarity of policy and supporting resources; capacity building through individual and collaborative teacher learning, professional learning communities and support for school leadership, adoption of systems thinking at the macro level and provision of time and support at school and subject levels. A reform requires ongoing review, feedback, and revision over many years to help ensure that it is embedded successfully in the medium to long term. Finally, Chapter 13 distils and reflects on the key messages and themes emerging from the preceding chapters. The analysis adopts a future-orientated perspective by identifying the key lessons from the story of junior cycle reform that may apply to future reforms in Ireland and to any system engaged in fundamental educational change. Analysis includes: the impact of both local and global contexts; the importance of *personality* in reforms where change is received, interpreted, mediated, and implemented by actors who have agency; and the challenges resulting from the development and implementation of reforms.

Taken together the three sections and 13 chapters contain a collective review of a fundamental re-envisioning of one national curriculum. The analyses represent the authors' interpretation of a lengthy and complex curriculum development and implementation process that was not without its dramatic moments and is not yet complete. The analyses are offered in the spirit of generating continued reflection and scholarly debate on the recent reforms in Ireland and similar reforms elsewhere. We encourage you the readers to draw your own conclusions and frame your own interpretations.

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# 2

# Teachers' and Parents' Perspectives on Curriculum Reform

**Melanie Ní Dhuinn, Chris Byrne, and Mark Prendergast**

## Introduction

In keeping with existing research and current international practice, the junior cycle curriculum in Ireland focuses attention on the school as the site of innovation, and on teachers as the agents of change. Sociologists view the role of the school as an instrument within the social stratification system. Ballantine and Spade (2015) refer to Parsons (1959) who views the function of schools as helping to hold society together by passing on the knowledge and skills necessary for children to fit into society. Education in a twenty-first-century society is fundamentally different

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from formal education in preceding societies which drew, in the main, on local and national trends, needs and priorities to shape school curricula and influence educational outcomes. At a local or meso level, the junior cycle framework presented opportunities for teachers and parents to engage with curriculum development. However, this was dependent on both the school and parents engaging in meaningful dialogue about the educational needs of their students. At a supra level, contemporary societies must also consider global educational trends to inform curriculum progression, in what could be seen somewhat paradoxically, as both an expanding and a contracting education landscape. Globalisation has not only brought the world of education closer, but it has also exposed our school curriculum to other influences. There is now greater interconnectedness and greater responsibilities to prepare students for their future in a global community, which will require new forms of knowledge, new skills and new competencies. Hargreaves (1999) alluded to the knowledge-creating school in response to the demands of a knowledge-based economy which required the introduction of new and innovative methods and pedagogies in school classrooms. More recently, Dempsey (2016), while discussing a neo-liberalism discourse surrounding Irish education reforms and the demands of a knowledge-based economy, refers to Granville (2011) who contends that the rhetoric of the knowledge economy in Irish policy documents is "problematic and surprisingly uncontested" (p. 386).

The need for a new approach at junior cycle that "places the student at the centre of the learning process and envisages a modernised curriculum across all subjects" (DES 2015, p. 2) has been well documented. From a reporting perspective, the junior cycle affords parents and students a broader view of learning and achievement throughout the first three years of second level education rather than a single summative outcome. This represents a response not only to local needs and priorities but also to global developments and future requirements in a post-modern world. Such a shift in curriculum reform is part of a wider global trend. Priestly and Biesta (2014, p. 3) refer to "a culture of policy-borrowing" leading to resulting idiosyncratic features among several international curricula. Large supra organisations including the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization also influence the direction of global educational policy. Such influence from international governmental organisations (IGOs) has led to global networks and to the homogenisation of educational policy. This raises an interesting question of what is it that drives curriculum reform and for whom is it intended? Bouhali (2015) maintains that although changes appear to operate in the best interest of the students and their communities, neo-liberal global educational policies also serve the requirements of IGOs. MacDonald (2003) claims that "underpinning curriculum reform is a contest over what is chosen, by what processes, by whom, with what intent, and with what result. Struggles over curriculum and its management are, in a sense, struggles over what education is for, and whose knowledge is of most worth—learners', parents', teachers', or curriculum authorities'?" (p. 140). This is an interesting starting point for this chapter and raises a question about tensions and struggles that underpin curriculum reforms in general. Our concern in this chapter is primarily with *teachers* and *parents*, but that is not to say that "learners" and "curriculum authorities" are insignificant. All stakeholders are interconnected and related and exert influence on each other.

## Teachers' Role in Education Reform

Teachers are undoubtedly central to any educational change. Handelzalts (2019) positions teachers at the forefront of curriculum improvement as they are "central agents" in the overarching trio of "system, school and classroom". Recent shifts in educational policy have acknowledged the importance that teacher agency plays in shaping new curricula (Priestley et al. 2015). Teachers possess social, cultural and economic capital which enables them to enact their agency in their professional role. Handelzalts (2019) refers to "the need for synergy and productive relationships at various levels (system, school and classroom) between curriculum development, professional development of teachers and school development" (p. 160) for optimal curriculum reform. However, this "(re)turn to teacher agency" (Priestley et al. 2015, p. 2) represents a significant shift in

teachers' role in educational reform. Research has also found that reform brings a certain amount of anxiety and can be very threatening to teachers (Guskey 1986). To change or to try something new means to risk failure and there is also the danger that students might learn less well than they do under current practices. Hence, teachers are sometimes reluctant to adopt new practices or procedures unless they feel sure that they can make them work (Lortie 1975).

This shift towards teacher agency is exemplified in the junior cycle framework and represents a significant change to the identity and role of the teacher as an educator. It requires teachers to embrace a new perspective, one which longstanding embedded schemas of their duties and responsibilities may not align with, thus resulting in the unintended dilution of the implementation. Essentially, this may result in nothing more than surface change and a continuation of old practices in all but name. Thus, teachers' perspective of their role as an educator is central to the success of the new junior cycle framework.

## Teachers' Perspectives

Teaching is a constantly evolving profession with new demands making the job more complex and challenging (Day 2000; European Commission 2007; Larrivee 2000). New approaches within the junior cycle curriculum represent a significant transformation in lower secondary education that is both exciting and challenging. The changes outlined later in this section represent a shift not only in content but also in curriculum structure and modes of assessment, which require teachers to adopt a new perspective and new practices. Arguably, teachers may well be regarded as agents of change while they are also regarded as playing a conservative role in the process, regularly resisting and opposing its introduction (Duke 2004). There is often an expectation that a new curriculum will be adopted and implemented without difficulty in all classrooms (Mendoza 2011). This is based on the simplistic assumption that teachers will alter their behaviours simply because they are told what is good for them and for their students (Handal and Herrington 2003). However, this is a narrow view. Several studies have highlighted how the intended curricula do

not reflect what is implemented (Orafi and Borg 2009; Smith and Southerland 2007). Fullan and Pomfret (1977) state that "even the most carefully worded and strongly supported legislation is unlikely to be implemented as planned" (p. 335). Teachers seldom implement a curriculum exactly as stated in curriculum policy documents (Ma et al. 2006). They further define and shape the intended learning objectives while transforming them into actual learning experiences (Mendoza 2011). This is often referred to as a mismatch between the intended and the implemented curriculum (Cuban 1993). The intended curriculum is the one prescribed by policy-makers and the implemented curriculum is the one that is actually implemented by teachers in their classrooms (Handal and Herrington 2003). There are a wide range of interlinking factors which can account for the divergence between the intended curriculum and the curriculum which teachers implement (Orafi and Borg 2009). However, ultimately it is teachers' personal theories about teaching and learning which influence how they value and implement reform curricula (Manouchehri and Goodman 1998).

## Changes to Curriculum Structure

The junior cycle promotes the school-based curricula within a central framework, placing the teacher at the centre of curriculum and affording them significant agency in their role. In this model, teachers and schools can design and tailor a curriculum to the needs of their students while also affording curriculum development bodies or government influence over their national or regional curriculum. This approach enables schools to identify the needs of the local communities, as well as national objectives, and incorporate them into their curriculum. Such a system allows quick reactive change to new innovations that would generally take much longer to be adopted within a central system (Snyder et al. 1992). It also permits governments or central curriculum bodies to maintain control over some aspects of the curriculum (Kärkkäinen 2012).

This newly afforded agency in the junior cycle framework enhances the role of teachers in both the curriculum development and implementation process. As is almost always the case with reforms, the junior cycle

framework places new demands on how Irish second level teachers plan their classes. Like many other countries such as Scotland, England, Wales, Australia, New Zealand and the United States, which have recently opted for structural changes and new approaches to their curricula, the new junior cycle also employs an outcome-based education (OBE) approach. This allows policy-makers to permit schools' self-determination while also ensuring that their overall objectives are reached. It helps teachers in the planning process as they are provided with a list of learning objectives or outcomes. These statements describe what the learner is expected to know at the end of the learning process. As such, the statements drive curriculum development at school level and allow teachers the flexibility to decide how they will achieve the outcomes. These learning outcomes have been strongly promoted by IGOs such as the OECD (Tiven et al. 2018). Learning outcomes are set within the context of key competencies. Although the emphasis may identify by different names across curricula they are essentially very similar. For example, in Scotland, the new *Curriculum for Excellence* enshrines the goals of students becoming *successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors*. In New Zealand, the development of *Thinking; Using Language, Symbols, and Texts; Managing Self; Relating to Others; and Participating and Contributing* is central to their ideology. In the case of the new junior cycle, these competencies are labelled key skills and include *Communicating, Being Literate, Managing Myself, Staying Well, Managing Information, Being Numerate, Being Creative and Working with Others*. These learning outcomes are often based on the perceived knowledge, skills and attitudes that students will require. This shift towards key competencies is again driven by global network policy though the OECD twenty-first-century skills (OECD 2018). However, there is considerable similarity between the junior cycle key skills and those detailed in the report by Ravitz et al. (2012) on project-based learning to teach twenty-first-century skills.

The junior cycle not only is concerned with teachers planning the content and pedagogy of a lesson, but also focuses on addressing the attitudes and values which students are expected to embrace. Biesta (2009 p. 9) describe this as a trend "which verges on turning education into a form of therapy that is more concerned with the emotional wellbeing of pupils

and students than with their emancipation". In order to enact these changes successfully, supports for planning, pedagogy and practice are required for teachers.

## Changes to Assessment

The previous junior cycle curriculum culminated in a summative assessment. This represented the end of a three-year curriculum for both the students and their teachers who guided them along this path. As such, this set of examinations was habitually seen as a metaphorical finish-line where the "success" or "failure" of the student (and the teachers) was measured based on the examination results achieved. However, one of the purposes of the new curriculum has been referred to as a move from "high" to "low stakes" examinations (Flynn 2012; McGuire 2012). Thus, changes to the assessment process were not only significant in structure, but also in importance. Murchan (2018) identified this change in the stakes associated with junior cycle assessment as coming into conflict with the identity and role of the teacher. This new perspective requires support for teachers, not only in terms of teaching practices but also in terms of how they view their role as an educator and measure their success.

Arising from the concerns about the summative and narrow range of assessment in junior cycle, Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs) were proposed to broaden the assessment approach and to facilitate all students. Initially, it was proposed that teachers would set and correct both the CBAs and a summative assessment at the end of the three-year curriculum. This resulted in widespread resistance from teacher unions (Murchan 2018) and culminated in strike action. Political influence on curriculum reform by the teacher unions diverted the original intended assessment approach in a different direction resulting in an eventual compromise where teachers would only assess their students in CBAs and these would be non-certified areas of examination. The introduction of CBAs represents a considerable change to the original assessment practices and an additional element in the workload of Irish second level teachers. It would be imprudent to think that such a change would not

require support structures for teachers. Hargreaves et al. (2001) describe how teachers need to be supported through the emotional and intellectually challenging process of educational change.

## Support Structures

External support structures such as professional development and professional learning communities have also been shown to develop teachers' content knowledge and the skills required to implement curriculum change (Vrasidas and Glass 2004). In their study of teachers' concerns, O'Sullivan et al. (2008) found that there was a consensus amongst teachers "that professional support and development were essential factors to assist them in their implementation of such major reforms" (p. 176). Furthermore, Lumpe et al. (2014) found that teacher professional development can increase self-efficacy, thus helping to lower the initial concerns of teachers during the implementation phase (Ghaith and Yaghi 1997; Gordon et al. 1998). However, Van den Berg and Ros (1999) and Charalambous and Philippou (2010) note that if teachers are not supported to overcome their concerns around curriculum change, then they may not see value in the reform. In a study carried out with Irish second level teachers, Byrne and Prendergast (2019) found that teachers' concerns can linger for several years' post-implementation and such concerns can be attributed to the unsuccessful implementation of an innovation. Van den Berg et al. (2000) found similar results when surveying teachers concerns in the Netherlands. These findings are also consistent with Constantinos et al. (2004), who found that in the absence of continued professional development and support measures, the concerns of teachers may not abate.

As outlined in Chap. 12 of this volume, it is currently planned that Irish post-primary teachers will receive Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to support junior cycle implementation up until 2022, with two training days each year in their subject area. At that point, a decision will be made to either continue or curtail the support. This represents a significant provision of CPD for some teachers who were part of the early rollout of subjects (junior cycle subjects were introduced

in five phases starting with English in 2014). However, for subjects included in the last rollout in 2019, they will receive far less training if supports services end in 2022.

## Conclusions on Teachers' Role

With a growing trend towards enhancing teacher agency, it is important that teachers' views on change are considered in a meaningful manner before and during the development process. The junior cycle framework places new and extensive demands on teachers. Changes both in curriculum structure and assessment represent a significant shift in their role. In the absence of support for teachers, curriculum developers run the risk of a continuation of old practices under a new name. Teachers must be supported to understand the rationale behind changes and have a clear interpretation of how to implement it. Understanding teachers' concerns and areas of ambiguity about the proposed curriculum changes affords curriculum developers an opportunity to focus on the provision of meaningful professional development opportunities for teachers and to devise and implement support strategies to bridge existing gaps in knowledge or to understand where they exist.

## Parents' Role in Education Reform

The family is acknowledged by the Irish State in the constitution Bunreacht na hÉireann, Article 42 as the "primary and natural" educator. Walsh (2012) notes how the Constitution stresses the predominant rights of parents in relation to education while emphasising the subsidiary role of the State. Coolahan (1981) noted that despite the Constitution setting forth some fundamental principles with regard to the rights and responsibilities of the State and its citizens relative to education, there has been a paucity of educational legislation. This observation is well made as he also notes how the system relied heavily on the use of memorandums, rules and circulars issued on behalf of the Minister for Education (Coolahan 1981). The Education Act (1998) made Boards of Management

a requirement for all schools where possible (Darmody and Smyth 2013) and conferred a statutory partnership role on parents/guardians of students attending all primary and post-primary schools in the form of membership of the Boards of Management of the schools. In effect, the Act unlocked access for all families through parent/guardian representatives to the decision-making platform of the second level school. The inclusion of parents as decision-makers in the management of the school is significant and represents a democratic and inclusive approach.

Similar to teachers and schools, parents are also "central agents" with a specific agency and capital. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) emphasise the influence of families' social, economic and cultural capital in shaping students' educational choices. Myers and Myers (2015) argue that social capital within the family is usually measured by the quality and activities of the parent-child relationship, whereas social capital that is external to the family is measured in terms of parents' connections to other parents and to institutions that promote educational outcomes. Parental support increases students' confidence to explore options, including options that they may previously have thought to be inaccessible and to engage in career planning (Turner and Lapan 2002). Parents' views have also been identified as a significant influencing factor in shaping their children's perception of education (Green et al. 2007). Despite this, there are many "roadblocks" to parental involvement in education at both school and policy level. In her book *Worlds Apart: Relationships Between Families and Schools*, Lightfoot (1978) noted that the home and the school, the two main developmental contexts of childhood, have been set into two separate spheres; which are separated by powerful barriers that have been erected between them. Dowling and Osborne (1994) argue that not enough has been done to bring the two systems together with insufficient cross-fertilisation between them.

## Parents' Perspectives

It is challenging to define and measure parental engagement and to capture and record parents' perspectives on educational matters (Neymotin 2014). Barriers to parental engagement in schools identified in the

literature include socio-economic status and associated resources of time, money and education and institutional practices of schools that may be mismatched to parental resources (Stacer and Perrucci 2013). Studies examining the effect of socio-economic status on parental involvement indicated that low-income parents were less involved in their children's education than high-income parents (Trotman 2001; Heymann and Earle 2000; Griffith 1998; Grolnick et al. 1997; Lareau and Shumar 1996; Lareau 1987 in Stacer and Perrucci 2013). Lareau and Horvat (1999) determined that low-income parents face greater barriers to involvement than high-income parents in relation to time constraints, paid leave, work flexibility and parents' views of their own role in the education of their children (Stacer and Perrucci 2013). Myers and Myers (2015) also emphasised that the class position and education levels of the parents is also an important variable relative to engagement with the school. This supports a US study carried out by Lareau (1987) who found that middle-class parents had educational skills and occupational prestige that matched the teachers and critically they had the economic resources that enabled them to be fully engaged in their children's schooling. Byrne and Smyth (2010) refer to a collective method of engagement of parents with schools through The National Parents Council of Ireland (incorporating NPC (primary) and the NPCpp (post-primary)). These bodies support parents' engagement in their children's education drawing on a collective agency to achieve optimal educational outcomes for students. Parents' Councils possess a collective capital distributed across both primary and post-primary sectors which when harnessed collectively may be utilised to advocate, represent, negotiate and enact the collective agency of all parent members. Collective capital is always stronger than individual capital. Accumulated capital is significant in making connections, in decision-making and in engagement with the education system.

Lyons et al. (2003) conducted an Irish based study that highlighted the variety of cultural capital, social capital and economic capital that parents possessed and how they made use of it. In their study, they categorised the parents as "Insiders", "Intermediaries" and "Outsiders". Insider parents were characterised by their comprehensive knowledge of the education system, their own high levels of education and the interventions they made with regard to their children's education. Intermediary parents

represented those who were between the Insider and Outsider group and while they understood certain aspects of the education system, they did not have the cultural or financial resources of the Insiders. The Outsiders are described by Lyons et al. (2003) as being "outside the system" and characterised by lower levels of knowledge of the education systems, lower education levels themselves and low levels of intervention. "Insider" parents engage and intervene as required in their children's education. This includes engaging in and responding to school communications and national consultations. For example, the NCCA ran a consultation process with stakeholders, including parents regarding the junior cycle curriculum change. The next section explores this consultation and its impact on the change process.

## Consultation Process

During the development of the new junior cycle framework, a consultation process was opened to the public between April and December of 2010. This resulted in the collection of the views of 445 members of the public through the NCCA's website of which 19% ($n$ = 85) were parents and guardians (NCCA 2011). Considering the significance of the proposed changes, this is a somewhat underwhelming response rate. The data revealed that "word of mouth" (a form of cultural capital) and the NCCA website were the two leading factors in gaining the responses. This signifies a disconnect in awareness about the change process between active and inactive citizens (Insiders, Intermediaries and Outsiders) in the realm of curriculum reform. Such a premise is supported anecdotally by the criticism from teachers that they were not involved in any consultation, even though the process had taken place. It is open to speculation as to whether those who engaged were "Insiders", "Intermediaries" or "Outsiders" but as the literature evidences there tends to be a socio-economic disparity in parental voice. If parents' and teachers' perspectives are to be valued more in the future, bridging these gaps is essential and necessitates that the NCCA take a more active role in raising awareness and highlighting such consultation initiatives.

Some of the above issues resonate with MacDonald's (2003) thoughts regarding struggles over curriculum and its management, in a sense, struggles over what education is for, and whose knowledge is of most worth—learners', parents', teachers' or curriculum authorities'? The focus here is on curriculum authorities and the response rate to their consultation process which informed the curriculum reform. Connectivity with the stakeholders seems to have been a challenge which furthers MacDonald's view about whose knowledge is of most worth, was it the learners, parents or teachers or was it the curriculum authority? Other issues in the public consultation process included the way some questions were presented to participants. In some cases, the participants were presented with a statement such as "junior cycle education, in Ireland and beyond, is sometimes said to lack a clear identity" (NCCA 2011, p. 27). Such statements can bias the reader towards agreeing that there is a clear lack of identity in the current system. Such predisposition can lead participants towards a certain answer (Dempster and Hanna 2016; Salant and Dillman 1994).

## School-Level Curriculum Development

At a local or meso level, the junior cycle framework also presents an opportunity for parents to engage with curriculum development. However, this is dependent on both the school and parents engaging in meaningful dialogue about the educational needs of their children. The greater flexibility provided by the new curriculum allows schools to consider the "local context and the backgrounds, interests, and abilities of their students when planning their junior cycle programme" (DES 2015, p. 27). In particular, the area of short courses presents the opportunity for parents and schools to engage in meaningful development of the requirements of their children. If the school decides they wish to provide short courses as part of their junior cycle curriculum, they may implement a maximum of four courses. Each course requires 100 hours of class contact time over the three years of junior cycle. The purpose of these courses is to "broaden the learning experiences for students, address their interests and encompass areas of learning not covered by the combination of

curricular subjects available in the school" (DES 2015, p. 21). Schools are also encouraged to develop their own specifications in areas where they feel meet the requirements and interests of their students. Examples of possible short courses include psychology, philosophy, local history and Crime Scene Investigation (CSI) forensic science. Other less traditionally "academic" options could also include animal welfare, dog grooming and so on. Deciding how to best meet the needs and requirements of the students could be done in consultation with their parents and guardians. Prioritising the needs of the majority may however be problematic.

An issue arose about the initial omission of subjects such as Physical Education (PE), Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Civic Social and Political Education (CSPE) for the junior cycle. Following considerable representation from several groups including teachers' unions, the area of wellbeing was added to the revised curriculum in 2015. The revisions required schools to implement 300–400 hours of "support to make positive responsible decisions relating to their [the students] health and wellbeing and the wellbeing of others" (DES 2015, p. 22). While retaining PE, SPHE and CSPE is widely welcomed, it significantly reduces the time available for schools to introduce other short courses. Thus, this limits the intended purpose of short courses and the ability for teachers and parents to tailor the curriculum towards the needs of the student.

## Conclusions on Parents' Role

Parents play a significant role in the education of their children by drawing or not drawing on the many forms of parental cultural capital. Their socio-economic status and social context is a significant factor in their involvement. Hence, students from less well-off backgrounds can often face greater challenges. As such, additional efforts are required to enhance the potential collective capital of parents from this group. To do so will take an understanding from both the parents and curriculum developers of the value that they can bring to their children's educational outcomes. It would be useful to review the full extent to which parents were actually

consulted in the consultation phase of the junior cycle development and moreover if parents' views were fully considered and where they are evident in the final curriculum specifications. Although there have been improvements in modes of consultation by curriculum developers both nationally and internationally, opportunity remains for further enhancement. The senior cycle consultation process, which is currently underway, presents further opportunity for progression along this path. It is also important to remember that schools have a significant role to play in the process of joint consultation too and require more training and resources in this area.

## Summary

In the 1990s and early 2000s, several supports aimed at achieving equality of educational outcomes in the Irish education system were introduced. The DES at that time popularised the concept of "partnership" in education between schools and parents, a strategy that is evidenced in the White Paper on Education *Charting our Education Future* (DES 1995). The publication recognised "continuing evidence of a desire on the part of parents and teachers to develop and foster constructive cooperation" (DES 1995, p. 139). However, the engagement of parents in their children's education has generally focused on families' cultural capital and socio-economic status. The literature suggests that cultural capital is centred on inequality based on the fit between the individual's culture and the culture of the institution within society (Calarco and Lareau 2012). In terms of the educational system, levels and types of cultural capital possessed by parents allow them to interact differentially, involve themselves in and comply with the regulations of the institution. The ways in which schools (and curriculum authorities) initiate parental engagement favour those who have greater cultural capital (Calarco and Lareau 2012). Thus, in the absence of statutory support for real and inclusive partnership in education, parents with high levels of cultural capital and agency ("The Insiders") interact differentially with the institution in order to accrue academic capital and progression within the system while other parents remain on the outside. The parent typology constructed by Lyons

et al. (2003) highlighted the differences between the three groups from the perspective of knowledge of the education system, educational levels of the parents themselves and the interventions they made in their children's schooling. Whereas the Insider parents possessed the cultural and financial capital to ensure that they could support their children in all aspects of their schooling, the Intermediary parents and the Outsiders did not have the "package of cultural, social and economic capital that would enable them to assume control over their children's learning environment" (p. 356). These differences in social origin impact on students' educational outcomes and contribute to the reproduction of inequality (Byrne and Smyth 2010).

The junior cycle curriculum presents the opportunity for enhanced educational outcomes for all. Implementation to date has been challenging however and there exists a view that the many perspectives of teachers and parents were neither considered nor facilitated within the implementation phases. Looking ahead to the development of the senior cycle curriculum it is clear that meaningful, proportionate consultation with all stakeholders before and during development coupled with increased support mechanism for implementation is required to ensure a smooth transition from the existing curriculum to the next curriculum phase. Understanding and interpreting the perspectives of all stakeholders is vital to this process not only during the planning and development stage but also throughout the curriculum implementation process.

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# 3

## Student Voice in Curriculum Reform: Whose Voices, Who's Listening?

**Paula Flynn and Nóirín Hayes**

## Introduction

At the time of writing, there is a paucity of international research indicating any routine collaborative engagement with students in second-level education on curricular development. Almost two decades ago, Rudduck and Flutter concluded that young people have important insights on the teaching and learning environment which may serve as a 'commentary on the curriculum' but asserted that there are difficulties in eliciting their views on the curriculum beyond 'bits and pieces' such as, what does or does not engage them (Rudduck and Flutter 2004, p. 75). Consequently,

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they argued the necessity to support students in developing a language for 'talking about learning and about themselves as learners, so that they feel it is legitimate for them actively to contribute to discussions about schoolwork with teachers' (Rudduck and Flutter 2004, p. 76).

A significant motivation to support students to confidently engage in opportunities to change curriculum and instruction is the contention that this experience can foster in students a greater understanding of *how* they learn and lead to a stronger sense of their own abilities (Mitra, 2003). Furthermore, there is a body of literature which argues that student voice work should go far beyond ascertaining perspectives from young people on their experience of education and move towards a democratic process of shared curricular development and co-construction, as well as a collective responsibility for developing solutions in education environments (Bovill et al. 2011; Fielding 2015; Shirley 2015). Findings from an Irish study conducted with the National Council for Curriculum Council (NCCA) focusing on a consultative process with post-primary level students on junior cycle reform, argues for encouragement and inclusion of student perspectives in education discourse at the national policy level within a framework that provides equally for input on decision-making amongst all education stakeholders (Flynn 2017). Crucial to that inclusive decision-making space, both at system and school levels, is the necessity for steps to be taken to 'co-construct' language, ensuring a common understanding of communication and vocabulary dependent on the ages of young participants. It is also essential to mitigate adult interpretations of students' perspectives within this discourse (Flynn 2017, p. 30).

This chapter begins by positioning student voice with respect to 'children's rights'. International policy driving the consultation of children in matters that affect them (UNCRC 1989, Article 12) contextualises that discussion and leads on to an examination of the relationship between 'Voice and Power'. The next section of the chapter focuses on 'Student Participation in Curricular Development' and draws evidence from the NCCA consultative project as part of junior cycle reform, in which more than 350 students in second-level education participated. This evidence prioritises the insights of students consulted on the development of junior cycle specifications. Findings from that study will inform the argument to foster a more democratic engagement in school activity for all

stakeholders. This includes the interrogation of an inclusive framework for moving towards a sustainable process of authentic engagement with students on meaningful issues such as curriculum reforms.

## Student Voice and Children's Rights

There has been a growing recognition both nationally and internationally of the importance of children's rights especially influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). The UNCRC challenged societal behaviour and attitudes towards children as a group and sought to improve this by affirming their right to 'special consideration' enshrined in the articles of the Convention.

The Irish socio-political landscape responded to Ireland's ratification of the UN convention in 1992 with the publication of a ten-year National Children's Strategy (Government of Ireland 2000). In accordance with Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989), the first goal stated that 'Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity' (Government of Ireland [GoI] 2000, p. 11). This commitment generated a number of important developments for children including an amendment to the Irish Constitution in 2015, which led to the insertion of a new section relating to children's rights. Such developments represent extensive policy commitments providing a variety of contexts and opportunities in accordance with Article 12 to hear the voices of children and young people 'in decisions that affect their lives' (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA] 2015, p. 2).

Lundy (2007) highlights a common and cogent criticism levelled at Article 12 of the UNCRC, namely how easy it is for adults to comply with outward signs of consultation and yet ultimately ignore children's views. She explains that tokenistic or decorative participation not only is in breach of Article 12 but can be counter-productive in giving children a false sense of having been consulted or having participated in a meaningful way. An essential element within the student voice engagement must involve a commitment to 'authentic listening' which is realised only through 'acknowledgement and response to the views expressed and

suggestions made by student participants' (Flynn 2014, p. 166). This is integral to Lundy's (2007) children's rights–based framework for participation which emphasises four essential elements: space, voice, audience and influence. Within this framework, Lundy stresses the importance of:

- Space: Rights-holders must be given the opportunity to express views
- Voice: Rights-holders must be supported to express their views
- Audience: The view must be listened to
- Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate

Lundy's (2007) framework has been adopted by the Irish DCYA in the recent National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (DCYA 2015). In 2020, the DCYA and Department of Education and Skills are collaborating in their support of student voice initiatives, such as a project initiated by Comhairle na nÓg[1] on improving opportunites for student voice in schools.

## Voice and Power

Engaging voices of children in student voice work challenges power relations and the privileging of one voice over another. The authority of the adult role in relation to the child is imbued with social legitimacy (Cruddas 2007). While actively accessing children's and young people's voices is laudable, there are a number of different interpretations of the multi-dimensional concept of 'voice' which can impact the process. One approach is to talk about 'giving voice' or attending to the 'voice of the child'. Here, voice is used as a noun which, paradoxically, locates the speakers as passively enabled to express views, removing agency from the speaker. An alternate conceptual understanding of voice is inherent in its verbal form, 'to voice'. This approach recognises the active agency of the speaker and implies an active reaction—'to listen'. A significant element of this conceptualisation, in the context of student voices and education, is the assumption that having a 'voice' infers having a 'legitimate perspective and opinion, being present and taking part, and/or having an active role in decisions about and implementation of educational policies and

practice' (Holdsworth 2000, p. 355). When accessing student views in education discourse, it is important to acknowledge that students will each interpret the world with respect to their own relative experiences which will not necessarily yield a uniform interpretation despite commonalities within the sample group. Therefore, it is more appropriate to acknowledge the 'voice**s'** of students or indeed students' voices rather than the illusory pursuit of a homogenous voice (Flynn 2017).

Fielding and Bragg (2003) conclude that some of the benefits of consulting students and involving them in organisational and pedagogic decision-making include; improved academic, communication and civic skills amongst students, as well as an increased sense of agency, motivation and engagement with school affairs. Leitch and Mitchell (2007) support that conclusion and point to extensive evidence demonstrating that schools are likely to increase the effectiveness of individual and group learning as well as student motivation by means of active consultation processes with students. However, they caution that although it has been demonstrated that student consultation can help teachers and students achieve more collaborative learning cultures in schools, students are typically seen as the potential beneficiaries of change rather than as genuine participants in the process.

It is important therefore that any attempt to understand or indeed interpret the views of children is conducted with *their* support and approval as otherwise it would be too easy to transpose 'adult' rationality and inference (Flynn 2013). Listening authentically requires subsequent affirmation from the young person to confirm that what has been heard is interpreted as it was intended to be received. This necessitates more than 'listening' but rather, a shared experience of understanding or indeed a co-construction of language. Such a shift requires changes in the power relations of discourse across education stakeholders both at national/policy level and within schools.

The powerful impact evident from opportunities for shared understanding and discourse across education stakeholders is evident from Irish research where students realised potential benefits when their opinions were heard and they encountered an authentic response to their views and research input (Flynn 2014). These benefits include:

- a significant improvement in the quality of their relationships with teachers and their sense of belonging and connectedness to school (Tiburcio and Finch 2005; Flynn 2013);
- an improvement in self-reported levels of confidence and wellbeing (Anderson and Ronson 2005); and
- a heightened sense of being 'cared for' and general experience of comfort in their education environment (Noddings 2005).

The development of caring relations and eliciting dialogue between and with students is important for the engagement of personal intelligences, the development of empathy and awareness of their rights and the rights of others (Smyth et al. 2010). The potential significance of student voice work and its impact on both student-teacher relationships and wellbeing is substantially supported in evidence from international research (ERO 2015; Simmons et al. 2015). In their study which elicited perspectives from students on high stakes testing at second level in Ireland, Smyth and Banks (2012) note that their data concur with international findings in highlighting the importance of students' experience of care, respect, trust and confidence in their relationships with teachers. Smyth (2015) draws on data from the longitudinal *Growing up in Ireland* study which clearly indicates the centrality of student-teacher relationships and classroom climate as crucial influences on children's self-image and wellbeing. This is further corroborated in evidence from international research, which includes the United States, Britain and Australia, indicating a strong association between the quality of student-teacher relationships and 'a number of outcomes, including socio-emotional wellbeing, engagement in schoolwork, feeling a sense of belonging in the school, levels of disciplinary problems and academic achievement' (Smyth 2015, p. 3).

The potential link between student voice and empowerment can only be achieved if the students themselves know that they have been heard and experience an acknowledgement of their views and opinions. Whether the experience has been 'authentic' and how to measure any consequential change may be determined only by the children and young people involved in the process, as it has been demonstrated that there is an inherent danger in this type of engagement research whereby wholly

adult interpretation could lead to an '***adult***eration' of the findings (Flynn 2013). Ivor Goodson (2002) observed that it was dangerous to believe:

> …that merely by allowing people to "narrate" that we in any serious way give them voice and agency. Transformation requires an interruption to the regularities of school life—a rupturing of the ordinary—that enables teachers and students to "see" alternatives; and requires, ultimately, a coherent institutional commitment. (Goodson, 2002, in Fielding and Rudduck 2002, p. 5)

This partnership of 'interruption' and 'seeing' is about responding to the insights of young people and changing the power relationship between students and all other education stakeholders both at systemic and school levels, so that learning and attitudes to learning become more of a shared responsibility (Rudduck and Demetriou 2003, p. 154). However, facilitating 'a coherent institutional commitment' necessitates an obligation to promote demonstrable and, ultimately, political change (Flynn 2013).

## Student Participation in Curricular Reform

O'Brien (2008) acknowledges the correlation between connectedness (sense of belonging), having a voice in school and respectful relationships as shown from research evidence in Canada (Anderson and Ronson 2005) to enhance wellbeing. In one Australian study involving 606 students between the ages of 6 and 17, Simmons et al. (2015) investigated how wellbeing is understood and facilitated in schools. Findings showed that students placed particular emphasis on the importance of opportunities to 'have a say' in relation to these matters.

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* establishes 'wellbeing' as one of the eight core principles of junior cycle education, envisaging that the curriculum should contribute 'directly to the physical, mental and social wellbeing of students' (DES 2015, p. 13). Taking 'action to safeguard and promote their wellbeing and that of others' is identified as one of the 24 statements of learning with which junior cycle students are expected to engage as 'essential for students to know, understand and value' (2015,

p. 14). The Learner Voice Research Study (Flynn 2017) conducted on behalf of the NCCA, set out to consult students on the process of curriculum co-construction and development within the context of junior cycle reform. The potential relationship between wellbeing and facilitating student voice was a significant factor in this study which explored the impact on students as a consequence of their involvement and engagement in this curricular consultation.

The NCCA Learner Voice Study set out to facilitate a process of student consultation on the development of new junior cycle curriculum specifications (subject syllabi) and determine a sustainable process for including and listening to student voices in education discourse at systemic (e.g. NCCA) and local (school) levels. Opportunities to involve students in curricular development and co-construction embody democratic, collective responsibility for education reform. The significance of supporting students in building confidence and co-constructing language in order to meaningfully engage in curricular development and co-construction was central to the consultative process pursued within this study. The consultative process prioritised the input of young people in second-level education and consequently, neither parents nor teachers participated in this study. The remit of this study was to consult students on the development of new specifications rather than the broader issue of junior cycle reform. Most particularly, the study provided opportunities at the conclusion of focus group meetings and across wider organised events, for feedback on their experience of being involved in this consultation process and 'having a say' with respect to curricular development.

## The Learner Voice Research Study

Initiated in September 2014, the study concluded in May 2017. The methodology was predominantly qualitative within which a mixed methods approach was utilised to both triangulate evidence and generate depth and breadth across that evidence. The tools employed included questionnaires, focus group interviews and individual interviews. Students, teachers and principals from 20 geographically dispersed schools participated in the study at different data gathering stages. The

participating schools represented a geographical span that includes the midlands, the south, the west and the east of the country. The profile of participating schools included 3 Irish medium second-level schools, 6 urban schools designated as Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), 2 rural-based DEIS schools, 14 co-educational schools and 6 single-sex schools.

Participants from across those schools took part in group interviews, individual interviews and completion of questionnaires. Group interviews were also conducted with NCCA education officers, a sample of subject specification development groups, and the Board for Junior Cycle (Flynn 2017). In total, more than 350 students participated across the various stages of the consultations. Volunteer groups of students across participating schools were consulted on the development of new subject specifications for junior cycle and their perspectives were shared with subject development groups tasked with compiling input from a broad range of stakeholders towards developing the final specifications for junior cycle curriculum and assessment. An NCCA education officer with expertise in each particular subject area wrote the final specification for that subject following year-long deliberations and consultations. Student input in the final versions of the specifications was reflected differently depending on the format chosen by each education officer. Some NCCA officials chose to include a separate section in specifications which reflected student choices, while others integrated the views of all participants in the consultation process. The specific choices or elements of student voice which impacted on final specifications were not the remit of the Learner Voice Research Study for which the process of consultation and impact on participants was the primary focus.

A number of activities were organised between May 2015 and March 2016 which included seminars, workshops and the meetings of an NCCA initiated student voice forum. The purpose of these activities was to support the research process in providing opportunities for schools to plan and share ideas on embedding a culture of listening and engagement in schools. It also allowed the research team to listen to the perspectives of students on proposed developments in relation to curriculum and assessment, thereby pursuing a methodology for including the perspectives of a sample of student voices in the NCCA junior cycle reform.

It must be emphasised that, in this study, as with much qualitative research, there is no 'representative student voice' (Flynn 2013) and consequently, students' participation in this study was invited in order to elicit a sample of student feedback and perspectives. Consulting students on important issues in education should provide opportunities for young people to offer a range and similar sample of student voices rather than any expectation of a 'homogenous voice'. In the words of one participant, 'it shouldn't matter if there isn't a lot of us involved, it's more important that we **are** involved' (Flynn 2017, p. 6).

Data synthesised from student questionnaires and interview questions indicated that young people were very positive about the experience of participating in the consultation groups and that, during the process, they believed they were heard and that their input had the potential to make a difference. They further insisted that they had important contributions to make in education discourse and, consequently, *should* be heard. In line with findings from Tangen (2009), students acknowledged the positive impact of being heard on their relationships with teachers and their peers as a consequence of the consultative process. This was also evident within the opportunities taken in schools to discuss and prepare for meetings on curricular reform as well as the process of sharing and hearing each other's perspectives. During focus group interviews, a common view that was shared across students from different schools was that they believed there was significant potential for young people to have a greater appreciation of curricular content upon realising that students had participated in the process of reform and development, 'Even if students doing the new junior don't like some bits of the courses, if they know that some students got a chance to make changes I'd say they'll be more interested and even curious' (Flynn 2017, p. 31). One of the most prevalent themes that emerged from the data was the positive link made between students' experience of being heard to their levels of self-confidence and 'sense of value': for example, 'I feel valued'; 'This made me feel important'; and 'My confidence has improved' (Flynn 2017, p. 31). Students also acknowledged their appreciation for some degree of formality within the consultative process as an indication that their input and perspectives were taken seriously. This resonates with the importance for young voices to have an audience and to experience the potential of

their perspectives to influence change (Lundy 2007). Despite the positive experiences of their involvement in these consultations, some students expressed frustration at not having a chance to 'do more' or to pursue the consultative process further. This desire to 'continue the conversation' and realise student impact on curricular change as well as policy development for further planning was also acknowledged across participant education officers and development groups. In focus group feedback on the study, many of these adult participants were keen to explore more opportunities for working closely with students, beyond access to them as 'sources of data' (Fielding 2015) revealing the success of this intervention in progressing attitudes on the importance of deeper engagement with students in curricular co-construction and partnership processes.

Recommendations of this study included the importance of following up with student participants as an opportunity to check summation and interpretation of their input, in addition to clarifying their impact on curricular development. Where opportunities were taken to provide these clarifications or check interpretations, these were greatly appreciated and acknowledged by student participants. Thus, it was recommended that such activity be included always in review processes. This would provide an important opportunity to progress discussions in dialogue rather than through a medium of 'reporting' and would support the cultivation of 'learner partnership' deliberations across stakeholder development groups most particularly at systemic discourse level across different working groups.

The challenge of determining how to embed a culture of listening and a sustainable structure to support and respond to student voices for schools at a national level in curriculum development was an overriding objective of this study. Participants from the 20 schools in this study on occasion compared their progress in this regard as significantly different from one another. The most significant influence on schools, however, was witnessing concrete examples of good practice shared by students and teachers with whom they could relate and the opportunity to question and discuss the development of these structures. It was also acknowledged by participants as a consequence, that this was not something which could be done *for* a school but necessitated a team effort from within.

In order to embed a culture of listening in national policy and education discourse, findings from the NCCA study recommended strongly the necessity to adopt an approach across state agencies, leading by example in such activities to include students as a matter of course and consistency. Adult participants in this research focus and others (Flynn 2014, 2017) acknowledged the expert insights on the part of students when they are given the opportunity to have a say on education matters, however, it is incumbent upon all participants to ensure that this is not an experience which is confined to research and occasional projects. Moreover, embedding a structure both in schools and on a national level to ensure sustainability requires a dialogical process in partnerships with students, where all parties in this dialogue acknowledge that their roles are that of 'learners'.

## The Learner Voice Space

Analysis of the consultative process between education stakeholders in the NCCA study, led to the design of a dialogical learning space model with a presumption to influence change and transformative practice, and foster leadership and agency within that experience (Flynn 2017, p. 30). This 'Learner Voice Space' framework (Fig. 3.1) has since been adapted and refined (Flynn 2019) to emphasise the inclusive nature of the model and acknowledge all 'learner roles' in dialogue together, which at school level may include students, parents and all teaching members of staff, and at system level, the addition of policy makers and state agencies, equally as learners. Consequently, the framework necessitates an interrogation and awareness of power relations to ensure an equitable experience of listening and 'being heard' across all of the learner roles. Thus, the emphasis is on the process and experience of dialogue in pursuit of sustained practice across participants as optimal to the achievement of short term goals.

The 'Learner Voice Space' is an inclusive framework in which any student can be heard. It is predicated on the Lundy (2007) model for children's rights participation with an emphasis on the importance of 'space, voice, audience and influence'. However, it expands upon this model to
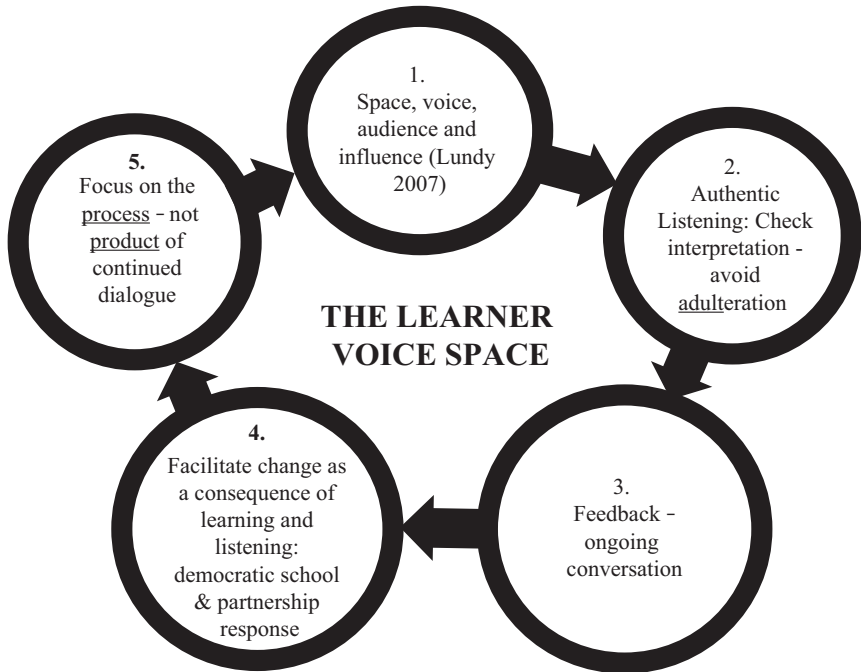
**Fig. 3.1** The Learner Voice Space, adaptation of 'transformative dialogue' diagram. (Flynn, 2019, p. 39)

provide a *space* in which all participants, that is, children/young people and/or adults, are in dialogue together. Significant to this model is the presumption for 'learning' from each other as a consequence of 'listening', and therefore, all parties are 'learners'.

Any interrogation and understanding of 'voice', most particularly for societal groups, including students who are seldom heard, must also take into account the right to be heard but in protecting that right, mitigate for the potential power imbalance that may be experienced between the one that is speaking and the person who chooses to listen. The Learner Voice Space consequently requires us to ensure that any presentation or interpretation of what has been heard is authentic, to prevent the possibility of 'over-interpretation' or synthesis to the point that voices are lost. Application of this theoretical framework is also relevant to mitigate

potential 'selectiveness' across understanding and representation in dialogue with any under-represented or potentially marginalised group (Flynn 2019). It also provides for the establishment of a dialogical space in which each participant is contributing, listening and as a consequence, learning. From this, the concept that all parties are 'learners' and consequently co-learning and co-teaching is derived. Underpinning the 'Learner Voice Space' model places an emphasis on process rather than product, impressing the necessity for sustainability in practice, rather than engaging with a new initiative and most particularly, the establishment of a partnership response to managing and developing change, within a culture of embedded listening.

## Summary

Data collected from students involved in the NCCA study on student connections with junior cycle reform reflect national and international literature on the links between 'having a say' and wellbeing, identified most particularly in comments which link the sense of 'feeling valued' with being heard (Flynn 2013; Simmons et al. 2015). Opportunities for students and teachers to share ideas and discover commonalities in aspirations and goals for learning within curriculum, provided tangible evidence of potential benefits in shared opportunities for communication, listening and being heard. These benefits were acknowledged by students and adults as part of this experience and resonate with Fielding's (2015) argument for '…an increasing reciprocity between generations … [and] … dialogue promoting active listening, recognition of shared concerns and collective responsibility for developing solutions' (p. 26).

Ascertaining the political and policy impact on curricular development as a consequence of the 2017 study is yet to be determined and will not emerge conclusively until curricular review and reform at both junior and senior cycles are further developed and revisited. At the time of writing, student consultation is ongoing in the Republic of Ireland on curricular development which has progressed to 'senior cycle review'. This is being conducted between the NCCA and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). At the onset of this senior cycle review,

students who had participated in the junior cycle reform study (Flynn 2017) were invited to a meeting of the NCCA Senior Cycle Board to share their views on the experience of being consulted on curricular change with a view to planning for the next stage of consultations.

The inherent challenge in fostering a climate of listening for students in education discourse is in the maintenance and progression of structures to ensure an authentic response to what has been heard. Embedding these structures as habitual practice will ensure a sustainable and credible approach to intergenerational dialogue and a democratic, shared process in curricular and education reforms.

## Note

1. Comhairle na nÓg are local councils comprised of children and young people under the age of 18 and provide opportunities to become involved in the development of local services and policies.

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# 4

# Media/ting Educational Reform: Junior Cycle Reform in the Media

## Ann Devitt

## Introduction

The manner in which the media frame current events has been the subject of extensive research, particularly in recent years where the power of the media in influencing political processes has come to the fore (Fairclough 2000). At a time when the role of the broad media landscape in shaping public discourse is in focus, this chapter aims to explore how educational reform in Ireland, specifically with regard to the junior cycle, has been represented in the national media. This chapter adds to a small but growing body of literature that investigates the interactions between the media and education. The chapter explores this existing literature, highlighting the processes and effects of media representation of education and educational processes globally and in Ireland specifically. The interpretive corpus analysis approach taken is set out with details of the

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composition and analysis of a one-million-word corpus of national news media articles on the junior cycle from between 2009 and 2019. The chronology of junior cycle reform and associated events is presented and findings discussed in relation to what is foregrounded, what is backgrounded and whose perspectives are presented in the Irish national media representations.

## Education in the Media

There is an emerging literature on how media can shape and influence educational discourse, policy and practice as evidenced by special issues in education journals in recent years dedicated to the topic (Thomson 2004; Gerstl-Pepin 2007). While the volume of news about education in the media is typically very small (Coe and Kuttner 2018), in countries such as the UK and the USA coverage has become increasingly politicised since the 1980s (Shine 2019). Blackmore and Thorpe (2003, p. 580) have used the term "media/tion of educational policy" to express the multifaceted role of the media in influencing, shaping and directing public opinion and debate in relation to education. Entman's concept of "framing" has been widely used in the literature in exploring media representations of events and themes (Entman 1993, p. 52): "To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them particularly salient in a communicating text. … Frames then define problems …, diagnose causes …, make moral judgments … and suggest remedies".

Frames allow us to conceptualise how the media can influence ***what*** its readers and audience think ***about*** but also ***how*** they think about it. Going back 40 years, the role of the media in affecting public awareness and setting the agenda for what is important in educational policy has been widely acknowledged (Rhoades and Rhoades 1987; Gerstl-Pepin 2007). Given the important role of the media in agenda setting, it is disappointing that the little coverage there is of education in the media is typically not focused on topics such as teaching, learning and curriculum (Coe and Kuttner 2018). Instead reporting on education tends to be procedural, focused on events (e.g. in Ireland, the leaving certificate examinations or the release of national test scores) (Shine 2019) and is

typically lacking in context and not informed by evidence of good educational practice. For example, assumptions prevalent particularly in the American and British media about the value of testing as the way to improve education are not supported by evidence-based research but such questions are usually absent in media articles on the topic (Cohen 2010). There is a growing body of literature on this largely coming from the USA, Australia and the UK often taking a critical discourse analysis approach to examine what thematic and event frames are dominant in media discourses on education. The literature would strongly suggest that media reporting on education tends to be perceived as "persistently negative" (Shine 2017). Studies have identified how a discourse of education and/or society in crisis has been promulgated through the media particularly in relation to results on large-scale standardised testing and to educational reform (Anderson 2007; Berliner and Biddle 1997). The crisis is often, though not exclusively, framed in terms of falling "standards" where standards are understood as some form of the 3Rs (i.e. literacy and numeracy) (Thomas 2003). Furthermore, what is termed a "discourse of derision" (Parker 2011, p. 413) has been identified in relation to schools and educators which frames teachers as caring but ineffective and schools and teachers as "to blame" for outcomes which may relate to broader questions of social structural inequality (Cohen 2010). In particular the portrayal of teachers in some jurisdictions has been very negative, termed "teacher bashing" in the UK (Hargreaves et al. 2007, p. 9) or a war on teachers in the US context (Goldstein 2015). These discourses of crisis and derision often set the frame for discussions of accountability and educational reform in the media, in particular in the USA, the UK and Australia. In this context, teachers are often presented as resisting change and not innovative. Teacher unions in particular are presented as obstructive and resisting change while the reform project tends to be presented as innovative and effective (O'Neil and Kendall-Taylor 2011).

Studies have identified how the authoritative voice in discussions of education is often positioned outside the education system while actors within the system, such as teachers, are positioned as "to blame" or voiceless (Thomas 2003). The voices of teachers as critical and authoritative stakeholders are largely absent in the media (Cohen 2010). Within a procedural, events-based approach to educational coverage, the substance

of educational reform is often simplified or obfuscated within the cultural frames of "falling standards" or "system in crisis".

## Education in the Media in Ireland

The literature discussed above is largely focused on jurisdictions where educational reform has become highly politicised, such as the UK, the USA or Australia. The literature on media coverage of education in Ireland is much more limited, though there is some emerging (discussed below). As in other jurisdictions, there is considerable focus on national test scores, in particular The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, exemplified in 2009 with a "kneejerk reaction of the media" (Cosgrove 2015, p. 30) to negative results within the *falling standards of a system in crisis* frame. Ireland is almost unique in the "inordinately high levels of media interest in the Irish State examinations" (O'Donoghue et al. 2017, p. 145), comparable only to Egypt and New York state. The extent of media focus on the Leaving Certificate in particular was described as exceptional by the expert panel reviewing predictability in the examination (Baird et al. 2015). It could be considered both a symptom and a cause of the focus on high stakes terminal examination as the dominant mode of assessment at post-primary education (O'Donoghue et al. 2017).

There is little published critical analysis of media reporting of education in Ireland, but as a key component of the public sector in Ireland, media representations of the public sector in general are highly salient. A small but pertinent body of literature has provided a detailed analysis of how the public sector or aspects of it were represented by the media during the years of austerity post-2008 (Cawley 2012; Murphy 2010; Marron 2012). These analyses identified features of the discourse of derision discussed above with the public sector being consistently portrayed as failing and obstructive. O'Flynn et al. (2014) draw on these analyses to identify how through a process of "othering" a "public versus private dichotomy was maintained" (p. 928) rendering the public sector a visible scapegoat for the economic crisis of the time. As regards a focus on education in the media specifically, Tuffy (2018) focuses on junior cycle reform.

Her critical analysis of media representations of teacher unions in the year 2016 highlights how the Irish media deployed the standard negative frame of teacher unions as obstructive, disruptive and resisting innovation in their reporting (O'Neil and Kendall-Taylor 2011). Consistent with the literature on education in the media, Tuffy found that media reporting tended to be procedural (in dealing with events), rather than substantive (addressing underlying issues or the rationale or context for the reform process). This chapter extends the work by Tuffy in terms of both the time period from 2012 to2017 and the broader focus on overall coverage of the reform process.

## The Study

### Research Approach

This chapter aims to examine how the mainstream newsprint and online media has situated and represented the junior cycle curriculum reform process. The studies of educational journalism discussed above have typically taken a Critical Discourse Approach to examine in-depth how meaning is constructed and interpreted through different media. This study takes a different approach and uses corpus linguistic analysis methods which treat the texts for analysis as quantitative rather than as qualitative data. Corpus analysis is a form of content analysis. It is a quantitative and often computational exploration of words and sequences of words in a corpus, a collection of texts from a particular register or genre. The overall approach remains interpretivist in its goals and processes as the corpus analysis findings require interpretation in their context of their original use (Hunston 2002). This study contributes to a very small but growing number of studies deploying this methodology in the field of educational research such as Mulderrig (2009) and Burns et al. (2018).

Corpus analysis is based on the premise that language is not neutral in its representation of events. The lexical and syntactic choices of authors of text carry meaning and when texts are analysed collectively as a corpus it is possible to generalise over these individual choices to identify global

characteristics of the corpus which also carry meaning. If a corpus is representative of a domain then corpus analysis can allow us to identify quantifiable features of language in the corpus texts in an objective fashion which may constitute a linguistic signature. The linguistic signature can reveal key concepts or preoccupations within a domain, its implicit biases and assumptions and how it differentiates itself from other domains. For example, the lexical choice between referring to individuals in a conflict as "rebels" or "fighters" can reveal much in terms of the orientation of the writer to the conflict. If the lexical choice is established across a domain, the simple lexical choice may reveal assumptions and biases that are being communicated consistently to audiences. These choices contribute to the construction of "frames" for communication (Entman 1993).

Corpus analysis provides a means of generalising over linguistic data to yield quantitative results which can then be interpreted in the context of their original use (Hunston 2002). The term corpus analysis in fact encompasses a range of techniques both manual and computational which entail an exploration of a large body of text, usually representative of a text genre or domain. The analysis focuses on identifying lexical choices and structures which are distinctive to the study corpus in contrast to general language. The analyses conducted can vary but often include identification of keywords, collocations (common word combinations), common syntactic patterns or features and so on. While corpus analysis can provide some context for interpretation, it does abstract away from specific texts and does not conduct a fully contextualised analysis of individual texts as in, for example, critical discourse analysis. Furthermore, this approach does not make any claims about the effect of corpus documents on a reader (Allen 2017). However, the potential to draw on very large datasets of text over extended time periods making generalisations over texts not through inference but through computation is valuable.

## The Corpus

This study focuses on the Irish national newspaper media representations of the junior cycle reform process. In order to capture that, a

corpus of Irish national news media texts was collected from the news database LexisNexis (https://www.lexisnexis.com) which includes 47 Irish national and regional print and online news outlets. Texts were selected for inclusion in the corpus on the basis of a keyword search for articles containing the term "junior cycle" from the following national news sources: *Irish Daily Mail*; *Irish Independent*; *The Irish Times*; *The Herald*; *Irish Daily Sun*; *Irish Daily Mirror*; *Irish Examiner*; *Irish Daily Star*; *Sunday Independent*; *The Sunday Times*; *Sunday World*; *Irish Mail on Sunday*; *The Sunday Business Post*; *The Irish Sun on Sunday*; BreakingNews.ie; Raidio Teilifís Éireann, Ireland's national television and radio broadcaster (RTE) News; and *The Irish Sunday Mirror*. The date span for the corpus was from January 2009 to July 2019 to set the main years of the reform process (2012–2017) within the context of general reporting on education in Ireland. The analyses presented below mainly focus on the period 2012–2017. 2045 articles, totalling over one million words, were identified, downloaded, trimmed of meta-data and lemmatised (removal of inflexions, e.g. verb endings). The distribution of the number of articles per year across the 2009–2019 timespan is presented in Fig. 4.1.
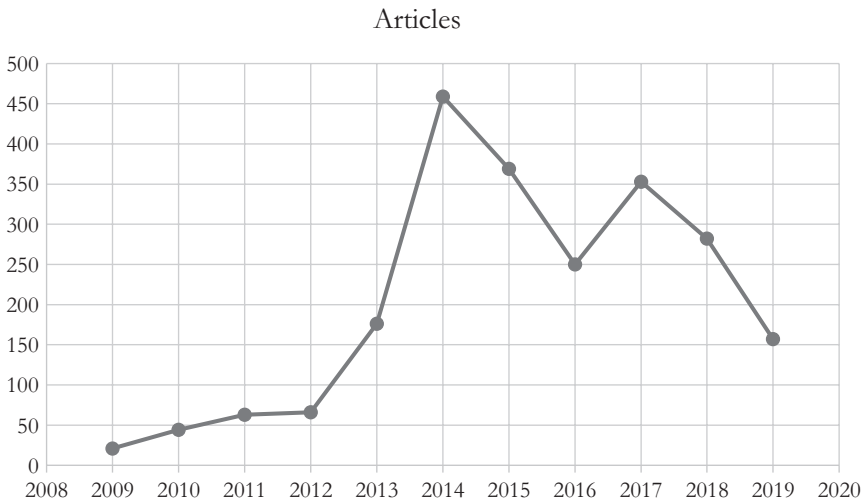


**Fig. 4.1**   Number of articles per year from 2009 to 2019

## Corpus Processing and Analysis

Corpus analysis draws on automated text analysis techniques as well as advances in text digitisation and storage. For the purposes of this analysis, the corpus was lemmatised using SpaCy's lemmatiser in Python and the AntConc software (Anthony 2019) and SketchEngine (Kilgarriff et al. 2014) was used for keyword and collocation analysis. The reference corpus in AntConc was the British National Corpus (BNC) (2007). A stop list was added manually to eliminate function words. The frequency word list and keyword list were generated. All outputs were saved and the process was repeated each year. AntConc generates keywords, words that have significantly higher frequency in the study corpus than general language, using log likelihood, an effective test for distinctiveness of words within a corpus (Kilgarriff 1996). The P value was set to $p < 0.05$ (+ Bonferroni), setting the critical value at 3.84 (the 95th percentile) to reduce the likelihood of anomalies due to chance. Sentiment analysis was performed with TextBlob (https://textblob.readthedocs.io) in Python which generates a sentiment polarity metric between -1 and 1.

# The Chronology of Junior Cycle Reform

The chronology of the reform in terms of the timing of key documents and curriculum roll-out has been set out elsewhere in this volume, for example, in Chaps. 9 and 12. This section sets this reform timeline in the context of broader junior cycle–related events, in particular the context of austerity and the chronology of the industrial relations dispute associated with the curriculum implementation and related industrial action. This narrative is essential to understanding the media coverage of the reform process. The social and economic backdrop to the reform process had major implications for how it was received and presented within the education sector but also by the media and the public at large. Following the banking crisis in 2008, Ireland entered a period of recession with a severe programme of austerity. In the years that followed, the education sector, along with all other public services, underwent significant cuts to

funding and teacher pay with a highly contentious lower pay scale introduced for new entrants to the teaching profession. At the height of austerity in 2011 (following poor results in PISA 2009 which received wide coverage in the national media), the Department of Education and Skills launched a literacy and numeracy strategy with far-reaching targets across all levels of the education system. Junior cycle reform had been in incubation for many years and the literacy and numeracy strategy acted as a catalyst for its launch in 2012. The chronology of subsequent events is set out in Table 4.1. Figure 4.2 presents the timeline of events against a time-series plot of numbers of articles per month (represented as an s-score of the count) of the corpus.

# Representations of Junior Cycle Reform in the Media

The chronology of the reform process is set out above. This section presents the corpus analysis findings as to how this was portrayed in the news media from 2012 to 2017.

## Areas of Focus: Keyword Analysis

Figures 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5 set out the top 20 keywords, the top 20 multiword key phrases and the top 10 keywords per year of the corpus respectively. The keyword analysis (Fig. 4.3) of the full corpus attests to media coverage broadly centred on those most affected by junior cycle reform: the teachers, students and schools. In addition, the teacher unions are prominent as is the theme of assessment.

The multiword analysis (Fig. 4.4) which identifies phrases that are distinctive in the corpus highlights the explicit and extensive focus on the theme of assessment, specifically school/classroom-based assessment as the only aspect of the reform agenda discussed with any regularity. The only other aspect of curricular reform discussed relatively frequently is the junior cycle short courses, in particular the new Chinese and coding

**Table 4.1** Timeline of junior cycle reform–related events

| Date | Event |
| --- | --- |
| Oct 2012 | 1/10 minister launches framework for junior cycle |
| | 24/10 primary and post-primary teachers protest austerity cuts |
| Jan 2014 | Junior Cycle Student Award (JCSA) implementation paper |
| | Unions ballot members re industrial action |
| Mar 2014 | Department of Education and Skills (DES) sends circular to schools regarding junior cycle implementation |
| | Unions vote for industrial action |
| Jul 2014 | Minister Ruairi Quinn resigns, minister O'Sullivan appointed |
| Sep 2014 | Junior cycle English starts in schools |
| | Talks ongoing between minister, department and unions |
| Oct 2014 | Unions vote to extend industrial action |
| Nov 2014 | Talks on junior cycle reform with unions and department |
| 02-Dec 2014 | Strike action by Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) and Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI) |
| 22-Jan 2015 | Strike action by TUI and ASTI |
| Mar 2015 | Travers report "A way forward for Junior Cycle (JC)" |
| 22-May 2015 | Minister announces breakthrough in junior cycle reform |
| 14-Jul 2015 | Agreement reached with TUI union on all aspects |
| 29-Aug 2015 | ASTI decides to put proposal to a vote |
| Sep 2015 | ASTI rejects department proposals for junior cycle |
| Oct 2015 | ASTI rejects Landsdowne road proposals |
| Jan 2016 | First junior cycle English Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) |
| | ASTI issues letter to members not to engage with junior cycle |
| Feb 2016 | JC science and business specifications published |
| Mar 2016 | Circular to schools re junior cycle implementation, ASTI junior cycle conference |
| Sep 2016 | Junior cycle science and business studies start |
| | ASTI ballot to continue industrial action |
| Oct 2016 | ASTI votes for industrial action and announces seven strike days |
| Nov 2016 | ASTI-DES dispute, followed by talks and statement of assurances from DES |
| 12-Jan 2017 | ASTI recommends rejection of DES proposal |
| 02-Feb 2017 | ASTI rejects DES proposals |
| May 2017 | ASTI announces special convention to suspend industrial action |
| Jun 2017 | ASTI suspends industrial action |
| | First junior cycle English exam |
| Sep 2017 | JC Irish, Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), art, wellbeing start |
| 01-Nov 2017 | ASTI votes to continue to suspend industrial action |
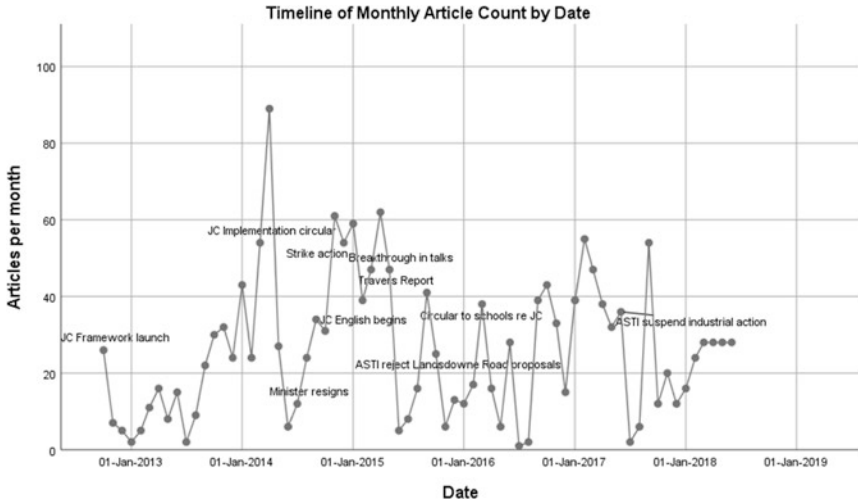
**Fig. 4.2** Timeline of junior cycle events with monthly news article count

| school | student | teacher | junior | year | education | cycle | new | union | level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ASTI | ireland | exam | reform | subject | cert | one | assessment | work | learn |

**Fig. 4.3** Top 20 keywords in junior cycle corpus

| (new) Junior Cycle (reform) | industrial action | school-based assessment | general secretary | strike action | senior cycle | second level | continuous assessment | classroom-based assessment | primary level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| third level | second level education | external assessment | secondary school | continuous professional development | short course | school management | new curriculum | education system | classroom assessment |

**Fig. 4.4** Top 20 key multiword phrases in JC corpus

courses created by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). These keyword and multiword phrases demonstrate the narrow focus on the reform agenda evident in the media. The focus on industrial action and unions illustrates the predominance of events (procedural frame) in relation to reform and an emphasis on the major contentious issue—changes to assessment—as opposed to a broader discussion of the reform context and goals. While assessment is critical to curriculum reform and enactment due to the backwash effect of assessment methods

| 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| •Irish | •ASTI | •teacher | •teacher | •ASTI | •ASTI |
| •all | •member | •junior | •union | •union | •member |
| •course | •course | •education | •reform | •exam | •time |
| •Quinn | •Quinn | •cycle | •minister | •member | •pay |
| •Euro | •history | •union | •assessment | •pay | •English |
| •cost | •per cent | •minister | •teachers | •question | •action |
| •short | •concern | •reform | •plan | •section | •science |
| •Chinese | •Road | •Ireland | •O'Sullivan | •over | •result |
| •old | •Haddington | •Quinn | •strike | •strike | •language |
| •institute | •deal | •change | •travers | •mark | •industrial |
| •book | •agreement | •plan | •proposal | •action | •dispute |

**Fig. 4.5** Top ten keywords for each year of the junior cycle corpus

on teaching and learning, the narrowness of coverage of curricular reform in the media could not provide the public with a broad and balanced view of the reform agenda. Furthermore, the discussion of assessment focused on the industrial relations dispute rather than engaging with an evidence base around the issue, exemplifying Gerstl-Pepin's notion of the media as "thin public sphere" where "the media operate more as a billboard of opposing viewpoints" (2007, p. 4).

The procedural, events-based approach (what Anderson [2007] calls a spectacle) is further demonstrated in the year-on-year keyword analysis illustrated in Fig. 4.5 which highlights a focus on the events and protagonists in the reform dispute. The reform itself fades into the background. It becomes merely context to a newsworthy industrial dispute affecting the nation. The prominent players are Minister Quinn, Minister O'Sullivan and the unions, with the ASTI particularly prominent as the ASTI dispute extended into 2016–2017. The theme of assessment is still dominant in 2015 and 2016 (with the keyword "mark") as this was the focus for the industrial action. The keyword "pay" only emerges in 2016–2017 as the industrial dispute impacted on pay for supervision for ASTI union members as the dispute escalated. Schools and students are no longer keywords nor is learn. The focus for coverage is not the reform itself but the negotiation around reform. This limited representation of what junior cycle reform really entailed could have significant implications for public opinion and the reform process, given that the public and even teachers often learn about major curriculum change through the news media (Shine 2019).

## Sentiment Orientation to Reform

Figure 4.6 sets out the automatically generated monthly sentiment measure for the corpus articles as a moving point average, a graphic representation which smooths out short term fluctuations and highlights long term trends. The graph demonstrates the trajectory of peaks and troughs from launch through an increasingly negative media around 2013, reflecting not only negativity to junior cycle reform but also to austerity and the public service more generally. The initial industrial dispute with both teacher unions through 2014 follows another dip in sentiment with its nadir as the teacher strikes took place in December 2014–January 2015. The subsequent period with the publication of the Travers report, talks and possible breakthrough points in negotiations shows a gradual upswing in sentiment. This is followed by a period of ever-increasing negative sentiment only reaching a turning point with renewed optimism over talks in January 2017. This aligns with Tuffy (2018) who found consistent negative framing of the teacher unions in her analysis of the media representations of ASTI during this period of significant negative sentiment in 2016.
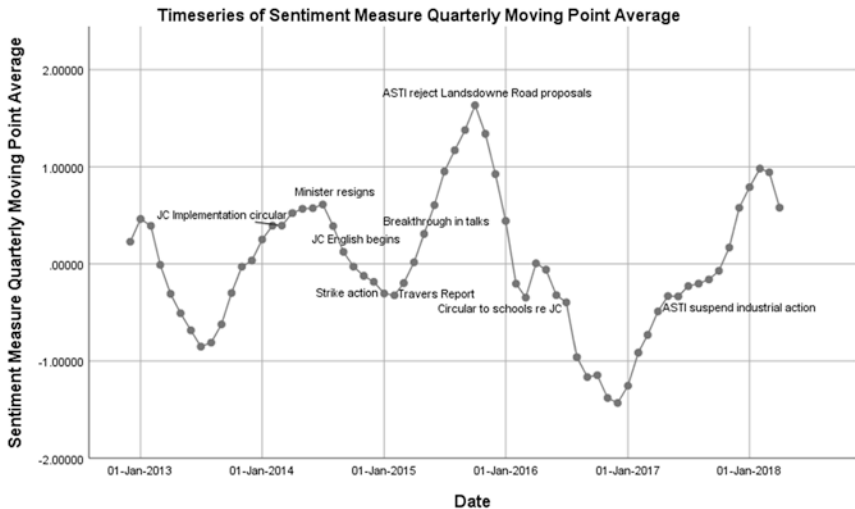


**Fig. 4.6** Timeseries plot of monthly sentiment measure

## Stakeholder Perspectives

This chapter also sets out to identify which of the stakeholders within the reform process (officials, teachers, students and parents) are most prominent and how their perspectives are represented in the media. This was explored through collocation analysis for each stakeholder group, examining which words most frequently co-occur with the stakeholder label and in what grammatical structure. This provides an insight into whether different stakeholders are represented as active or passive and how/whether their views are communicated.

Teacher:    The word teacher occurs 5151 times in the corpus, 4182 times as plural "teachers" and 969 times as singular "teacher". Approximately 200 instances of the word teacher in the entire corpus refer to actual teachers being quoted or interviewed. This would strongly suggest that while teachers as a group (e.g. "many teachers" occurs 61 times) are highly prominent in the media coverage (in particular as a unionised group), individual teachers are not. The voice of teachers is represented via the teacher unions and via the education journalists but rarely in discussion with individuals who are teachers. The predominance of instances of actual teachers' voices in the articles is at the times of the teacher conferences where teachers are easy for journalists to access. As regards the major themes discussed in relation to teachers, again "assess" is the most frequent verb (100 instances) that co-occurs with "teacher" in subject position, "mark" accounts for 29 co-occurrence instances, illustrating the dominant concern with the assessment theme in junior cycle reform. Similarly, among the most common modifiers of the noun "teacher" is "own" which occurs in sentences related to teachers assessing their ***own*** students' work. Nouns modified by teacher demonstrate the focus on the industrial action with common collocations including "union", "concerns", "strike" and "opposition". Interestingly, the relative frequency of

modifiers "new" and "young" which co-occur over 120 times with the word "teacher" illustrates the dispute over lower pay scales being introduced for new teachers during austerity which was contemporaneous with the junior cycle reform process and related industrial action.

Students:    Students also are highly prominent in the media coverage of junior cycle, with 5677 instances of the word student and 688 instances of the word pupil. However, while the students are discussed throughout the corpus, individual student voices are all but absent from the media coverage. Given that the argument against school-based assessment often centres on its impact on the student-teacher relationship, the perspective of the student should be critical to understanding this. This is hence a notable absence.

Parents:    The term "parent" understandably is less prominent in the news coverage with only 948 instances of the term in the corpus, most commonly co-occurring with the word student(s). Other common collocations emphasise parental concerns ("anxious", "needs" and "concerns", etc.). Again, the voices of actual parents are typically not represented but rather a generic parent body ("many parents" and "most parents") is presented.

Principals:    School management (62 instances), management bodies (45 instances) and principals (455 instances) have some visibility in the corpus. Interestingly, of the 185 instances of the word principal in the singular, almost half refer to named principals discussing relevant issues. In contrast with teachers who are clearly the main focus for media coverage, individual principals' voices are given greater prominence.

In summary, teachers are not represented as knowledgeable contributors but rather as a homogeneous protagonist group in the key dispute around assessment and pay. Principals on the other hand are given somewhat privileged status of critical and knowledgeable stakeholders with valuable commentary on the issues. The absence of student and parent voices indicates their representation as passive participants, rather than

active agents in events. Again, this analysis of stakeholder representation points to a procedural frame for reporting on junior cycle reform with a narrow focus on events and protagonists in relation to the major contentious issue with little engagement with the broader research agenda.

## Discussion

This chapter set out to explore how junior cycle reform was framed in the Irish national news media in order to consider media influence on public discourse in relation to this topic. The corpus analysis presented here clearly identifies that the media framed the reform process as focused primarily on one key theme, that of assessment. This emerged in the keyword, multiword and stakeholder analyses. This prioritisation of assessment aligns with the well-documented exceptionally intensive Irish media coverage of the State examinations process in Ireland each year (Baird et al. 2015). It also is in consonance with the testing focus in the US and UK media (Cohen 2010). Assessment is presented as the subject of conflict in an overall procedural or event-based frame for coverage of the reform process. Within this, there is little evidence of a critical discussion of the evidence base for different models of assessment. Given that the media are often the main source of information on major curriculum change for the public and even teachers (Shine 2019), this narrow focus on assessment and the limited critical engagement with even this topic would not provide support for well-informed public debate on this pivotal dimension of the reform agenda.

While the corpus analysis strongly suggests that the reform process is presented within a shallow procedural frame with limited substantive engagement with the reform agenda, the coverage of junior cycle reform in the media did not utilise the *system in crisis* frame which is very common in other contexts (Anderson 2007) and in the coverage of the public service more generally (Cawley 2012; Murphy 2010) and especially the health service (Marron 2012) during this period in Ireland. Nor was there a specific focus on assessment as the mechanism to improve a failing education system as promulgated in the US and UK news media (Cohen 2010). Importantly there is also no evidence of a "discourse of derision"

(Parker 2011, p. 413) in relation to schools and teachers utilised by mainstream media in other jurisdictions, such as Australia or the UK. This is not to say that the coverage of educational professionals is positive in the news media. The sentiment analysis presented above does indicate a negative orientation in coverage of events, particularly at the critical periods of the industrial dispute. The analysis of the stakeholder perspectives strongly suggests that the media does not represent teachers as knowledgeable, critical *individuals* with insights into the reform process and agenda. Teachers are represented in the context of the teacher unions and industrial action and as noted in Tuffy (2018), the media deployed the standard negative frames of obstructive, resistant teacher unions. However, the voices of individual *principals* in the media coverage did provide a space for educational professionals as stakeholders with a valued contribution to make on the process that could inform public opinion and debate.

The analysis demonstrates that, while the media coverage of the reform agenda was shallow and limited in its capacity to inform public debate, it did not position the education system as a failing and ineffective system. The coverage would do little to inform public debate but was not overtly structured to orient public opinion against the education system as a whole.

## Summary

This chapter identified how the coverage of junior cycle in the Irish news media was very much "events-based", focusing on the industrial relations issue and how the context, rationale and content of the reform were largely obscured. The changes to teaching and learning and curriculum content received little attention in contrast to a primary focus on assessment, a common topic in educational journalism and the focus for the industrial dispute. The discussion highlighted how this representation mirrors international trends in journalism to take a procedural rather than critical approach to educational reform and education more generally. Such a representation in the media skews the portrayal of the reform and of the teaching and learning process to the public. While there were

some early pieces about the broader reform agenda, the news coverage quickly focused on the assessment and industrial relations issues. Furthermore, the authentic and individual voices of the key stakeholders in junior cycle reform, the students, parents and teachers, are largely absent from the media coverage. Clearly, the complexity of the reform agenda and the requirement for changes to beliefs as well as practice in teaching and learning require a more engaged and critical discussion in the public arena. Simplistic and un-nuanced coverage of education in the media has prompted recommendations for specific education-related training for journalists focusing on a deeper understanding of fundamental issues such as standardised testing (Shine 2019). For example, the Media Centre for Education Research Australia (https://www.mcera.org.au/) was established in 2017 to communicate educational research evidence to the media and foster more informed debate on educational policy and practice. Against this backdrop, the author echoes recent calls for educators (Thomas 2011) and students (O'Sullivan 2014) to reclaim the discourse on education, to provide counter-narratives based on lived experiences, to engage with the media and to move the debate from a "thin" public sphere to a richer arena for public debate.

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# Part II

**Reforming Curriculum and Pedagogy**

**5**

# Key Skills in the Context of Twenty-First-Century Teaching and Learning

**Keith Johnston**

## Introduction

As reflected in the junior cycle reform agenda recent years has seen educational aspirations expressed in respect of the development of certain key skills complementary to more traditional content-based learning. This has been driven by changing global priorities particularly in respect of the preparation of students for the world of work and participation in society as well as the fostering of economic competitiveness when viewed from the national or systems level perspective (Dede 2010). The emphasis on key skills has in part been facilitated by developments in respect of digital technologies which have enabled access to significant quantities of information and have enabled all citizens to become potentially both creators as well as consumers of such information (Davidson and Goldberg 2010). Such trends are reflected in the junior cycle reform efforts which

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have set out eight key skills to be embedded in the curriculum and related learning experiences (DES 2015a). Working with digital technology forms part of each of the skills. This chapter addresses key skills in the context of twenty-first-century teaching and learning and is comprised of the following three main sections:

- Section 1: The Global Context for Key Skills–Based Reforms
  This section sets junior cycle aspirations in respect of key skills in the global context of reform agendas predicated on key skills development. It explores and critiques the rationale for a key skills–based approach, and describes/critiques the particular key skills identified as being pertinent in the junior cycle reform efforts.
- Section 2: Key Skills, Digital Technology and Wellbeing
  This section addresses the role of digital technologies with respect to the realisation of key skills. It explores the links between key skills, digital technologies and wellbeing.
- Section 3: Realising Key Skills—Implications for Practice
  This section explores the implications of the adoption of a key skills–based approach with particular reference to school organisation, pedagogy (including teacher and student roles) and assessment. Potential challenges and benefits are identified and addressed leading to recommendations at the levels of policy and practice.

## The Global Context for Key Skills–Based Reforms

Since the early 2000s, there has been a reorientation globally towards aligning curriculum reforms on the basis of certain key competencies or skills in addition to more established content-based outcomes. This reorientation has been influenced by both public and private sectors and reflected in the generation of a reasonably significant body of literature which typically presents frameworks for such competencies and which

reflects and employs the developing body of related terminology. The presentation and conceptualisation of such competencies as 'twenty-first-century competencies' is a ubiquitous feature of work in this area, reflecting perceived changes and demands in respect of the world of work and facilitated by developments in respect of digital technologies. The influences of globalisation and of international comparative assessments (particularly Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)) are also evident in trends towards the conceptualisation of key competencies/skills.

## What Are Key Skills?

Much of the initial work with regard to the identification and conceptualisation of twenty-first-century competencies can be traced back to the OECD (2005) *Definition and Selection of Key Competencies* (DeSeCo) project which set out to develop the theoretical and conceptual foundations for key competencies. The initial DeSeCo work identified three categories of key competencies related to the broad demands of modern life that individuals should be able to: use a wide range of tools and adapt them for their own purposes; engage and interact with others in socially heterogeneous groups; and act autonomously by taking responsibility for managing their own lives in the broader social context (Rychen 2003; OECD 2005). The resultant OECD framework set out skills which have been characterised by Voogt and Roblin (2012, p. 300) as being transversal (relevant across many fields), multidimensional (include knowledge, skills and attitudes) and higher order in nature (reflecting application and transfer). Since this initial framework, many different lists of twenty-first-century skills and competencies have been proposed, with significant overlap between them. Based on a content analysis of several proposed lists of twenty-first-century skills, Pellegrino and Hilton (2012) identified three broad domains of competence: the cognitive involving reasoning and memory, the intrapersonal involving metacognition and emotion, and the interpersonal involving expressing

ideas and interacting with others. Around the same time, Voogt and Roblin (2012) conducted an analysis of international frameworks for twenty-first-century competencies which found significant alignment across the various frameworks as to what they are and why they are perceived to be important but less alignment with regard to practice and implementation.

This work by Voogt and Roblin (2012) also identified and reflected the various terminologies used within and across these frameworks, with twenty-first-century competencies, twenty-first-century skills and twenty-first-century learning most commonly employed. Similar to Dede (2010) the key findings of this work identified how competencies in the areas of collaboration, communication, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) literacy and social skills were evident in all of the frameworks reviewed. Competencies in creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving were also highly regarded being evident in most of the frameworks. Learning to learn and self-direction were amongst the skills identified as having less priority in the documentation reviewed. In addition, Voogt and Roblin (2012) identified some further differences and similarities between frameworks: the differences related to the ways of categorising competencies as well as the importance afforded to them, and whether or how they were related to 'core curriculum'; the similarities related to the prominence afforded to ICT within frameworks and the fact that most frameworks referred to three related literacies: information literacy, technology literacy and ICT literacy. Further follow-up work by Voogt et al. (2013, p. 404) identified how across frameworks it is generally agreed that collaboration, communication, digital literacy, citizenship, problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity are considered essential for living in modern society. However, some such as Mishra and Kereluik (2011) cited in Voogt et al. (2013, p. 404) argue that these competencies are not unique in their application to the twenty-first century but that the current focus on these skills reflects a greater emphasis on their application and relevance for all learners as distinct to having being considered important previously for a minority or sub-section of learners.

## Key Skills in Policy Development

These trends towards the identification and adoption of key competencies have been reflected in policies orientated towards educational reforms initiated by many governments worldwide in recent years. Some evidence as to the extent of this has been provided by the OECD Policy Outlook (2015) which detailed how: 'In terms of content, more and more countries tend to use the concept of 21st century competencies as part of curriculum design, referring to core skills in numeracy, literacy and problem-solving as well as communication and social skills that enable students to work and adapt to rapidly changing environments' (OECD 2015, p. 82). The Skills for a Changing World Study (Care et al. 2017) found that in 2016 a review across 113 countries identified that there was a shift in aspirations as to how education should equip students for the future: 'skills were mentioned in about 40 percent of the countries' vision or mission statements and in about 55 percent of their curriculum documents' (Care et al. 2017, p. 5). Whilst Care et al. (2017) found differences across countries in factors deemed to characterise student success and the skills that are valued by countries they highlighted that twenty-first-century skills were unanimously identified by countries as the most important skills for learners: 'in line with current global dialogue and the growing recognition at the country level concerning the importance of 21st century skills' (Care et al. 2017, p. 60).

## Key Skills in the Junior Cycle

In the Irish context the Department of Education and Science (DES) (2015a) identified the following eight skills in its work aimed at reforming the junior cycle: Being Literate, Managing Myself, Staying Well, Managing Information and Thinking, Being Numerate, Being Creative, Working with Others and Communicating (DES 2015a). This move towards key skills in the context of the junior cycle reforms can be understood and positioned in the context of prevailing global curriculum reform agendas. Reforming curricula to incorporate a key skills dimension is not unique to the Irish context and the eight key skills (and their

elements) set out in the Framework for Junior Cycle (DES 2015a) reflect many of the skills prioritised across frameworks globally, as identified in the work of Voogt and Roblin (2012) and Voogt et al. (2013) amongst others. Amongst the most commonly prioritised skills evident in the key skills of the junior cycle (DES 2015a) are communicating, working with others (typically referred to as 'collaboration' in similar frameworks), literacies with both 'being literate' and 'being numerate' identified as separate key skills, being creative and managing information and thinking. In addition, 'managing myself' and 'staying well' are identified as key skills reflecting an emphasis on enabling the development of the individual to incorporate self-reflection and metacognition. Whilst digital literacy is not positioned as a separate key skill, it is incorporated as an element within each key skill thus reflecting the emphasis typically afforded in such frameworks.

In terms of the overall *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES 2015a) the key skills are presented alongside 8 principles of learning which underpin the entire framework and 24 statements of learning which are set out as informing the planning and enactment of the students' experience of the junior cycle programme. The principles, statements of learning and key skills are set out as being 'given expression through' (DES 2015a, p. 10) the learning outcomes for each subject specification providing some sense of how the key skills are positioned in the milieu of curriculum intentions—that is, they are intended to be mediated in a curriculum/subject context: 'The key skills will be embedded in the learning outcomes of every junior cycle subject and short course. Thus, teachers will have a clear understanding of how they fit into a subject, short course or priority learning unit and how to build the skills into class planning' (DES 2015a, p. 14). Although the clarity afforded to teachers is overstated here, the framework recognises the developmental nature of the identified skills setting out the aspiration that students will acquire and enhance their proficiency in these over the course of the junior cycle. The framework also sets out to link and position these skills with regard to what has been achieved in primary education and to dovetail with the skills required at senior cycle, as well as identifying a close link to the national *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (DES 2011) in the consolidation of literacy and numeracy as key skills across the junior cycle curriculum.

# Key Skills, Digital Technology and Wellbeing

Developments in respect of digital technologies, globalisation and perceptions regarding changing demands in the world of work have been identified as significant influences on a reorientation of curricula to incorporate a key competencies (or skills) dimension. This section addresses the particular influence of digital technology on a realignment of curricula towards key skills and the potential role of technology in enabling the realisation of such skills, mindful that in the context of junior cycle reforms, digital technology appears as an element within each of the eight key skills identified. This section will also address the links between technology-related key skills and promoting student wellbeing.

Most, if not all, of the frameworks which address twenty-first-century competencies list digital technology and related digital literacy as essential for twenty-first-century living, and indeed digital technology can be considered as both a driver and enabler of such key skills acquisition. The early OECD (2005, p. 11) work identified how technology was placing new demands on individuals both inside and outside the workplace due to the potential to access vast quantities of information and to interact with others in networks online. Such capabilities lead to the consideration of related digital competencies and to making the curriculum more relevant for students in light of changing demands in the world of work. However, in addition to economic or workplace-related drivers, initial work underpinning thinking in respect of digital competencies also reflected a social vision reflecting concerns of equity and student wellbeing in addition to more overt economic drivers.

## Enhancing Human Capital Through Digital Upskilling

Indeed while the economic rationale and application of key skills are often most prominent in the literature, Rychen (2003) writing in the context of the initial stages of the OECD DeSeCo project (OECD 2005) indicates a more socially orientated vision based on 'What competencies are needed for an overall successful life and for a well-functioning

society?' (Rychen 2003, p. 110). Furthermore, Rychen articulates the view that key competencies should be considered as resources which contribute to important outcomes in the context of human capital formation rather than as ends in themselves. Such perspectives provide an illustration of a rationale for key competencies–based approaches that is more aligned with the needs of the learner and which may support the development of learner agency and wellbeing as distinct to being purely based on preparation for the world of work and the related economic benefits. This view positions key skills as bringing individual and social benefits including better wellbeing and improved social engagement. This may be understood against a backdrop of increased interest in wellbeing across education systems influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) in which education, student wellbeing and learning are connected. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2017) details how the promotion of key skills within teaching and learning has an important part to play in supporting student wellbeing, as when teachers plan skills-rich lessons, students are more actively engaged, feel more positive and take more responsibility for their learning.

## Digital Literacy

The emphasis on digital literacy within twenty-first-century competencies frameworks is presented by Voogt et al. (2013, p. 405) as arguing for a more comprehensive approach to understanding digital literacy which encompasses students having the capacity not only to critique the material they access online but also to understand and critique the impact of the technology they are using both on themselves and on society. The technical skills to do so are considered a mere aspect of such understandings of digital literacy. Digital literacy is thus a broad and evolving concept which may entail a number of aspects and which may have a different meaning or interpretation in various contexts. Recent work by Van Laar et al. (2017) details how Ng (2012) distinguished between three intersecting dimensions of digital literacy, those being the technical, cognitive and social-emotional dimensions and presented digital literacy as being

an overall mindset which allows users to perform intuitively and effectively in digital environments. The work by Van Laar et al. (2017) positioned twenty-first-century digital skills as a sub-set of twenty-first-century skills and produced a detailed framework for digital skills/literacy which included (amongst others) technical, information management, critical thinking, ethical awareness and self-direction components.

The development of new technologies provides an ongoing challenge to the conceptualisation of 'digital literacy' although core aspects related to a critical capacity are understood as having greater long term application than more technically orientated aspects. A current challenge for educators is that of conceptualising and facilitating digital literacy education in a world dominated by social networking and social media. An awareness of the potential negative affordances of such media supports the understanding of digital literacy and digital literacy–based key skills as underpinned by a rationale grounded in supporting personal health, agency and wellbeing. This can be understood as being reflected in the junior cycle key skills elements (DES 2015a) 'Being Responsible, safe and ethical in using digital technology' and 'Using digital technology to manage myself and my learning'. In addition, the role of technology/digital literacy education and the existence of a 'techno-subsystem' are acknowledged in the NCCA *Draft Guidelines on Wellbeing in Junior Cycle* (NCCA 2016).

## Enabling 'Innovative Practices' Using Digital Technology

Digital technologies, in addition to providing for certain key skills or a literacy to be mastered, are also positioned as having a potentially significant role to play in the realisation of key skills generally through their potential to enable learning experiences which require collaboration, communication, problem-solving and creativity amongst learners. Such experiences are typically conceptualised as underpinned by a 'constructivist pedagogical orientation' (DES 2015b) are technology mediated and position the teacher as facilitator of learning. The articulation of such approaches has reflected a certain reorientation of the discourse around school reforms and has given

rise to the term 'twenty-first-century teaching and learning' to denote learning experiences which bear the aforementioned characteristics. The adoption and implementation of such experiences by educators is associated with the need for 'innovative practices' within schools in which technology is employed as an enabler of learning experiences and in which students are creators and potentially sharers of their own content. This reflects a progression in the role of the learner from content consumer and emphasises an active rather than a passive learner experience. The OECD (2018) suggests the significance of learner agency which can be applied in the context of such experiences. This concept of agency implies the learners' responsibility to participate and to form a purpose and identify actions to achieve a goal: it is understood as supplemented by co-agency which reflects the network of teachers, peers, parents and others which provide the relationships which underpin learning. In addition to underlining links with digital literacy and wellbeing, two factors which enable learner agency are identified as follows:

> The first is a personalised learning environment that supports and motivates each student to nurture his or her passions, make connections between different learning experiences and opportunities, and design their own learning projects and processes in collaboration with others. The second is building a solid foundation: literacy and numeracy remain crucial. In the era of digital transformation and with the advent of big data, digital literacy and data literacy are becoming increasingly essential, as are physical health and mental well-being. (OECD 2018, p. 4)

## Technology-Mediated Learning to Promote Key Skills

Some evidence of the implementation of technology-mediated learning to promote key skills in the context of junior cycle is provided by Johnston et al. (2015). This work focused on a particular approach to learning, 'the Bridge21 model' (Lawlor et al. 2010) which integrates the following key components: technology mediated, project based, innovative learning space, teamwork, skills focused, social learning, teacher as facilitator and/or mentor and learner reflection. The Bridge21 model may be considered as one of a number of similar models which aim to enact

'twenty-first-century teaching and learning' approaches. Learner participants created technology-based artefacts such as a multimedia resource document, a character or thematic blog, or a five-minute video. The activities took place across a range of subject areas that were designed and scaffolded by their teachers and adhered to the characteristics of the Bridge21 model generally.

The study had a particular interest in whether the approach employed gave rise to any change in students' awareness and acquisition of three key skills (being creative, working with others and managing information and thinking) by utilising a questionnaire instrument pre- and post-implementation. The overall results showed that students were positively disposed and enthusiastic regarding the overarching learning approach. Statistically significant gains were evident in respect of 6 of the 11 selected key sub-skills with no gains evident in respect of the other 5. Gains were evident in respect of the sub-skills: exploring options and alternatives; implementing ideas and taking action; co-operating; using ICTs to work with others; using information to solve problems and create new ideas; and thinking creatively and critically. It was not clearly discernible from the data as to why gains were evident in respect of some sub-skills but not in respect of others but the work overall did provide evidence to support the appropriateness of such approaches with regard to the realisation of key skills.

The role of technology was also reflected as a significant finding with the data reflecting increased and enhanced use of technology such as laptops, personal computers (PCs) and digital cameras although teachers considered the approach to be enabled and enhanced by technology, rather than being technology dependent. The composition of student groups, the nature of the project or task undertaken and issues related to timeframe and structure were also identified by teachers as areas for consideration in future adoptions of the learning model.

## Realising Key Skills: Implications for Practice

There are many perspectives to be had on the actual implementation of key skills–based curricula in schools and the implications of their adoption for school leaders, teachers and students. Such perspectives typically

draw attention to the need for a reorientation of the dominant learning paradigm to one in which students become more active learners. The need for assessment practices to be realigned in line with key skills–based approaches is also commonly reflected in discussions regarding key skills implementation.

## Key Skills Pedagogy

There is generally a consensus about the types of pedagogy needed to promote the realisation of twenty-first-century key skills, that is, pedagogy which is learner centred, is task or problem based, involves co-operative or group-based learning and, as detailed in Section 2, is technology mediated (Voogt and Roblin 2012). The relevance of the pedagogies identified above was borne out in the key skills initiative undertaken by the NCCA (2009) in which teachers in a number of schools worked to embed key skills in teaching and learning. Teachers found that developing key skills required less whole class content-based teaching and more learner-centred active learning methodologies. In this context, teachers reported using more group work, pair work, class discussion, peer teaching and peer assessment. Whilst teachers recognised the additional work involved, they indicated that there were benefits to students' learning as reflected in greater student engagement and deeper understanding of material post teaching. The potential for deeper understanding resonates with Pellegrino (2017) who associates twenty-first-century skills with 'deeper learning' with a particular emphasis on students developing transferable knowledge 'that can be applied to solve new problems or respond effectively to new situations' (p. 228). Similar findings to the NCCA (2009) were reported by Dempsey (2016) who found that students in schools which were implementing a key skills intervention reported experiencing more student-centred approaches than students in control schools, and that teachers changes their practices when afforded relevant professional development opportunities underpinned by a constructivist philosophy. However the key finding of this work was how the current culture of schools, and particularly the priority afforded to high stakes external assessments, is incompatible with key

skills–based approaches and that as developed in the following paragraphs, changes are necessary in respect of curriculum and assessment to enable the full embedding of key skills into teaching and learning practices.

As outlined by Voogt et al. (2013, p. 404) few of the key skills frameworks provide detailed descriptions of clearly elaborated curriculum standards or detail what the curriculum experience will resemble if the aims of these frameworks are to be realised. They further elaborate that despite a reasonable consensus regarding what the competencies/skills are and how they can be achieved, they are generally not well implemented in educational practice. This suggests the need for a greater level of clarity in relation to what key skills implementation entails in practice and how the realisation of key skills sits in the wider curriculum context: how are teachers supposed to address key skills alongside or in addition to established expectations regarding (subject) curriculum coverage? Whilst there are a number of possible ways in which key skills can be addressed within curriculum (ranging from new offerings within existing organisation structures to more transformational approaches encompassing a full reconceptualisation of school and curriculum structures), Voogt and Roblin (2012) detail how the integration of key skills as cross-curricular competencies within existing school subjects is the most common approach adopted. The commonality of this form of approach also indicates the role and significance of all subject teachers with regard to key skills implementation.

## Developing Teacher Capacity to Implement Key Skills

In addition to addressing and defining how key skills sit with respect to core curriculum there is also a strong consensus that teachers need to be supported to make related changes to their pedagogical practice. The NCCA (2009) identified three aspects to teacher change with regard to key skills implementation: the personal, the interpersonal and the organisational. This implies that any such change at the school level needs to involve related professional development at the individual level, the creation of time and space for teachers to meet to discuss their teaching and

the creation of a school culture which supports and values such approaches. The significance of leadership is also evident in this context: both school leaders who value and support such change as well as teachers who are prepared to become leaders by developing new approaches to support their curriculum delivery. In the junior cycle reform Continuing Professional Development (CPD) relating to key skills has been provided to teachers under the umbrella of 'whole school' CPD. Workshop sessions for teachers provided information on the various key skills to be embedded within the curriculum (drawn from the Junior Cycle Framework), addressed formative assessment in the context of key skills and aimed to support teachers in planning for key skills in the context of their subject area via the provision of some generic strategies and resources for key skills implementation. Activating the digital elements of key skills was addressed as a constituent element of one such CPD workshop (JCT 2016).

## Assessing Key Skills

Voogt et al. (2013) detail that the implementation of twenty-first-century key skills requires a restructuring of the curriculum so that key skills are not disconnected from core curriculum subjects. However, Dede (2010) identifies that the curriculum is already overcrowded and that there is a major challenge in deciding what to deemphasise in order to make room for students to master core twenty-first-century competencies. A further perspective provided by Dede (2010) and Dempsey (2016) is that classrooms typically lack an emphasis on twenty-first-century teaching and learning as high stakes assessments currently do not assess these outcomes. Dede (2010) proposes that valid, reliable and practical assessments of twenty-first-century skills are needed to help improve this situation. The need for new assessment frameworks is, along with the need for new pedagogies, highly prominent in the literature. One example is the aforementioned Voogt et al. (2013) call for new assessment frameworks to be developed to assess twenty-first-century competencies. Such frameworks may include developing authentic computer-based literacy assessments which can assess areas such as problem-solving and

digital literacy. In similar vein Voogt and Roblin detail how current assessment models assess only discrete subject bound knowledge acquisition and are thus incompatible with the assessment of complex competencies. Recognising the challenge associated with developing appropriate new assessment procedures and instruments, they detail that such assessments 'require complex tasks to provide students with the opportunities to apply and transfer their understandings to real world situations, to solve problems, to think critically and to work in a collaborative way' (Voogt and Roblin 2012, p. 312). A move towards more formative approaches to assessment (encompassing learner feedback) is also prominent in the discourses relating to the assessment of such twenty-first-century competencies.

## Technology and Key Skills

In addition to the implementation challenges identified and addressed in respect of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, systems of education have yet to fully draw on the potential of technologies to enable learning experiences which are technology mediated and contribute to the individual and collective realisation of key skills encompassing digital literacy (Dede 2010). This may include the potential for learning which can take place anywhere, at any time and involve others which are not in geographical proximity. Some authors such as Zhao (2015) argue that the preparation of twenty-first-century learners needs a new paradigm rather than trying to tweak or fix an existing paradigm which has little or no chance of adequately preparing citizens for the twenty-first century. Such a perspective seeks to challenge many of the taken for granted characteristics of twentieth-century systems of education such as the presence of a set curriculum, the idea of the class and the subject and that learning takes place at a certain time and in a set location, that is, the school. On the other hand, such a view extenuates personalising education and empowering learners through giving them ownership of their own learning, aspirations underpinned and mediated by a technology dimension. Such perspectives draw attention to a 'technology gap' with regard to the implementation and potential assessment of key skills outcomes. This is

recognised, in the context of junior cycle reforms, by the provision of the Digital Learning Framework (DES 2017) which sets out how technology can be an enabler of such reforms by providing school leaders and teachers with a framework to guide and inform their related curriculum planning.

## Classroom-Based Assessment

There are thus many challenges to the implementation of key skills–based approaches at the macro and micro levels within systems of education. The core challenge can be considered as one of alignment—to align curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to the 'new' conceptions of worthwhile learning as articulated and reflected in key skills. In the context of junior cycle reforms changes in respect of assessment have seen the introduction of a greater emphasis on continuous assessment via Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA). CBAs are reflective of formative assessment and map onto the identified priorities for learning for each subject including the related key skills. They are typically task based, enable a level of student choice and autonomy and can be completed collaboratively. The introduction of such assessments provides an illustration of attempts to achieve greater alignment between identified priorities and pedagogy/assessment in the context of the reformed junior cycle. More generally, the following implications for policy and practice are evident from a synthesis of the literature with regard to the implementation and realisation of key skills:

- Promote schools as learning organisations and develop a culture of learning which reduces the significance placed on high stakes external assessment
- Reorientate the dominant learning paradigm to one which reflects greater learner activity and autonomy
- Provide teachers with CPD underpinned by a constructivist pedagogical orientation

- Establish greater clarity regarding the implementation of key skills in practice and how key skills sit in the curriculum milieu vis-à-vis content- and subject-based learning
- Develop new assessment frameworks and processes which can appropriately assess key skills
- Utilise appropriate technologies to enable the types of pedagogies and assessments which align with key skills

## Summary

This chapter has traced the relatively brief and recent history of curriculum reforms underpinned and influenced by aspirations in respect of key skills. The emphasis on key skills has been driven in part by a reconsideration of priorities within formal education and facilitated by developments in respect of digital technologies. The role of political and economic imperatives is evident with regard to key skills. This is reflected in the significant influence of agencies such as the OECD which have been to the fore in initiating and sustaining the key skills movement since the mid-2000s and in the related influence of the business and industry sectors interested in creating a skilled workforce for economic competitiveness. Whilst the economic rationale is often considered as most prominent, the social and educational rationales are also evident in the discourses underpinning key skills: such rationales promote key skills on the basis of life competencies in their broadest sense and on the enhancement of individual wellbeing. There is a global dimension to developments in respect of key skills with many different yet overlapping frameworks underpinning curriculum reforms internationally. Developments in the Irish junior cycle can thus be understood and positioned against the backdrop of this global context.

Implementation of key skills–based curricula requires a realignment of the dominant approaches to teaching, learning and assessment to reflect approaches which are learner centred, are task or project based and which utilise technology in an enabling capacity. There are as yet few, if any, examples of fully functioning curricula based on key skills. One of the key implementation challenges is to overcome the constraints imposed

by current systems of assessment which do not align with or reflect key skills–based approaches. In the Irish junior cycle context, this is being addressed to some extent by the introduction of a greater emphasis on continuous assessment via CBAs. However, there remains scope for further investigation into the extent to which key skills have been embedded into practice at the school, teacher and student levels: Whole School Evaluation (WSE) mechanisms do not currently reflect an emphasis on learning by students in the context of key skills.

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**6**

# Opportunities and Challenges in the Reform of Junior Cycle Language Curricula

**Ann Devitt and Noel Ó Murchadha**

## Introduction

The reform of language curricula at junior cycle (JC) in Ireland is situated within a wider set of reforms to the architecture of language and language educational policy in Ireland over the last ten years. Language learning curricula and policy have been subject to ongoing multi-strand reforms across primary, second and third levels. These reforms are being negotiated within the context of shifts in linguistic diversity nationally. These include the proliferation of languages other than English and Irish as home languages and the changing dynamics of the Irish language within/outwith the traditional Irish-speaking communities of the Gaeltacht. Within this environment, there is the potential for curriculum reform to more closely align language educational provisions with the linguistic needs of diverse learner cohorts.

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This chapter uses the lens of translanguaging (language as integrated and interdependent repertoires of linguistic competencies) to examine these multi-strand reforms, with a particular focus on junior cycle. The chapter first sets out the theoretical framework of integration, transfer and translanguaging and the sociolinguistic context for language learning in formal education in Ireland. The second half of the chapter interrogates the junior cycle specifications for English, Irish and modern foreign languages (MFLs) to determine their alignment with the key principles of an integrated approach to language. The analysis of junior cycle is set in the context of the language policy reforms over the last decade, particularly the development at primary school level of an explicitly integrated language curriculum. This chapter closes with a summary and recommendations for the development of language curricula in Ireland into the future.

## Developments in Language Pedagogy: From Discrete Entities to Integrated Repertoires

Language curricula have historically operated a strict separation of named languages in education (García 2009; Littlewood 2014), encouraged maximum immersive exposure to the target language and have overtly discouraged the use of languages other than the target language in the classroom (Cummins 2017; Wei 2018). This approach emerges from the understanding that successful language learning requires extensive input in the target language, in a similar fashion to learning a home language (Leung and Valdés 2019), that is, implicitly and through immersion. This approach is also related to an inherent belief in languages as bounded entities that can and should be separated and distinguished from one another in all circumstances, including in education (García and Lin 2017; Wei and Ho 2018). At primary and second level education in Ireland, language curricula for English, Irish and MFLs have, until recently, been committed to the separation of named languages in curriculum design and especially in pedagogy. This approach has a strong

foundation in tradition and in the research literature. However, it is at odds with a plurilingual perspective on society and education, as advocated by the Council of Europe (CEFR 2018), with current understandings of linguistic proficiency (Cummins 2017) and with a social justice perspective on the experiences of multilingual learners, particularly migrant and minority language users (Poza 2017).

An alternative approach to language pedagogy has appeared in the literature from the end of the 1970s. Rather than seeing named languages as parallel and discrete entities, this approach recognises the interconnectedness of language proficiency and aims to leverage new linguistic competencies off learners' existing abilities in all of their languages. Cummins' (1981) Interdependence Hypothesis and the related Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model propose that although languages may appear quite different on the surface, there are many aspects of linguistic proficiency that are not specific to individual, named languages, but rather are common and interdependent across languages. Cummins (1981) thus argues that linguistic interrelatedness allows for transfer, specifically the transfer between languages of cognitive, academic and literacy-based proficiencies. Subsequent empirical work confirms that positive cross-lingual transfer can occur from one language to another in a range of sociolinguistic environments (Wei 2018). For this reason, it is argued that language curricula should aim to capitalise on cross-lingual transfer by specifically teaching for transfer in language education (Ó Duibhir and Cummins 2012). This can be achieved, for example, by drawing explicit attention to similarities and differences between features and structures of a new language and a student's existing linguistic repertoire. Although the idea of cross-linguistic transfer has been around for some time, it is only much more recently that it has been more widely and explicitly promoted as a pedagogical approach in the literature (Leung and Valdés 2019) and that it has been included as part of curriculum design (Ó Duibhir and Cummins 2012). The incorporation of transfer and interdependence into curriculum design is co-occurring with, and is related to, the burgeoning body of research on translanguaging.

Translanguaging has been defined in a number of different ways, with a consistent focus on the process of meaning making whereby

multilingual speakers use their full linguistic repertoire as an integrated resource for communication, including home and additional languages. Following García and Lin (2017), there is a 'weak' version of translanguaging which accepts the boundaries between named languages but where it is seen as pedagogically advantageous to soften the boundaries between them in educational contexts and to explicitly focus on their interrelatedness (Leonet et al. 2017; Cenoz and Gorter 2017; Lewis et al. 2012). This perspective takes translanguaging as an academic scaffold in the language learning process. Adherents of the 'strong' form of translanguaging, on the other hand, contend that named languages are socio-political, sociocultural constructs (Wei 2018; Leung and Valdés 2019; Otheguy et al. 2015, 2019) and that the established boundaries between different named languages are artificial and arbitrary (Otheguy et al. 2015). Although recognising that students can and should be taught about named languages and their structures, researchers who subscribe to a so-called strong form of translanguaging also often advocate for providing instructional spaces in which seemingly hybrid language practices are celebrated and developed (García and Lin 2017; Otheguy et al. 2019). Such an approach recognises the validity and legitimacy of hybrid language practices and provides formal opportunities for students to mix elements from different linguistic systems, as in code-switching and code-mixing. This stance generally maintains a social justice and critical pedagogical approach in relation to language inequalities. Whether instrumental as in the weak version or critical as in the strong version, translanguaging pedagogy and research aligns with a plurilingual perspective as articulated in the Council of Europe Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR 2018; Vallejo and Dooly 2020).

The research on translanguaging has mainly been investigated in bilingual educational contexts with more work now emerging in more traditional language-as-a-subject contexts (e.g. Wei and Ho 2018). The literature acknowledges gaps in the research in relation to the enactment of sustained translanguaging practices in schools (Llompart et al. 2020), on the 'tangible barriers' (Vallejo and Dooly 2020, p. 9) to teachers adopting such practices and the profound changes required to transform assessment instruments (García and Li 2014). Furthermore, there are limitations discussed also in terms of the transformative potential (Jaspers

2018) or desirability (De Meulder et al. 2019) of translanguaging practices from a language inequality perspective.

Despite these limitations, the literature has demonstrated that there are significant benefits to adopting translanguaging practices in language education. Although named languages have generally been separated in formal education, research has illustrated that both students and teachers tend to blur the boundaries between languages in education. In bilingual educational contexts, students and teachers are shown to integrate their entire linguistic repertoire to aid content learning (García 2009; Ó Duibhir 2018). In the context of language-as-a-subject in mainstream education, research also illustrates that students (Wei and Ho 2018) and teachers (Littlewood and Yu 2011; Leung and Valdés 2019) draw on the language that they know already to scaffold their learning of the target language. Furthermore, as argued by Littlewood and Yu (2011, p. 71), the use of any language that students know already can:

- provide psychological reassurance for them
- convey meaning efficiently, allowing students to progress more quickly to internalisation and active use
- provide effective stimulus
- create contexts where the target language has a meaningful role
- provide a bridge to the target language, allowing students to take ownership over their learning and to personalise the learning experience

Recently, curricular reforms in Ireland have begun to incorporate aspects of transfer and translanguaging theory in their design. This is an acknowledgement of developments in the literature, but it is also taking place in the context of a new sociolinguistic reality in Ireland today.

Since the early 2000s, Ireland has seen significant increases in inward migration. In Census 2016, 17.3% of the population is reported as being born outside of Ireland (Central Statistics Office 2017). Two hundred different nationalities are recorded and over 612,000 individuals are returned as speaking a language other than Irish or English in the home (Central Statistics Office 2017). In total, 183 languages are recorded in Ireland, with notable numbers of individuals who speak Polish, French, Romanian and Lithuanian in the home (Central Statistics Office 2017).

At the same time, English remains the overwhelmingly dominant language in Ireland and Irish remains the national and first official language. While Irish is spoken on a daily basis outside the education system by just less than 74,000 people, the language also serves a symbolic, identity function for the majority of the population and has enjoyed consistent and significant support among the general public in language attitudinal research over the course of more than four decades (e.g. CILAR 1975; Darmody and Daly 2015; Ó Riagáin 1997, 2007). Despite noteworthy numbers of users of Irish outside the Gaeltacht who acquire Irish to high levels of proficiency, the language remains under pressure as a community language in the traditional areas of the Gaeltacht. This sociolinguistic context of increasing linguistic diversity nationally, alongside language shift in the Gaeltacht, forms an important background to the reform of junior cycle languages in recent years, as does the broader language policy context described in the next section. Language education policy and practice require an approach that acknowledges and values the realities of the multilingual context of life in Ireland today, both from a social justice and an educational outcomes perspective.

## Language and Language Education Policy Context in Ireland

The reform of language curricula at junior cycle is part of the wider reform of junior cycle education in Ireland. In addition, the reform of the English, Irish and MFL curricula is situated within the context of a broader suite of language and language educational policy initiatives, as represented in Fig. 6.1. Until 2010, national curricula in Ireland had been relatively stable phenomena. The primary school curriculum had been running since 1999. The junior certificate syllabus had been established in 1989 and remained largely unchanged until the reform process of the early 2010s. Although the leaving certificate programme underwent changes in some curricular areas, the language syllabuses have remained largely unchanged since the late 1980s.

| Early Years and Primary | Junior Cycle | Language Policies more broadly |
|---|---|---|
| ↓ | ↓ | ↓ |
| 2009 Aistear | 2012 JC Framework Document | 2010 20-year strategy for the Irish language |
| ↓ | ↓ | ↓ |
| 2015 Primary Language Curriculum (Junior Infants to 2nd class) | 2013 JC English specification (roll-out 2014) | 2011 National Literacy and Numeracy strategy |
| ↓ | ↓ | ↓ |
| 2019 Primary Language Curriculum (revision for all years) | 2015 JC MFL specification (roll-out 2017) | 2016 Gaeltacht Education Policy |
| | ↓ | ↓ |
| | 2017 JC Gaeilge T1 and T2 specifications for Irish and English medium schools (roll-out 2017) | 2017 Languages Connect, Ireland's strategy for Foreign Languages in education |
| | ↓ | |
| | 2018 JC English revision | |

**Fig. 6.1**  Timeline of language curriculum and policy reforms (2009–2019)

The launch of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Department of Education and Skills [DES] 2011) provided a major catalyst to accelerate curriculum reform processes already underway. In addition to this, the 20-year strategy for the Irish language (Government of Ireland 2010), the Policy on Gaeltacht Education (DES 2016) and Languages Connect, Ireland's strategy for foreign languages in education (DES 2017) framed the policy context for language curriculum change in the education system. While all four strategies are language-focused, each strategy delineates a very discrete and specific policy remit.

The 20-year strategy for Irish takes a holistic, cross-departmental perspective on supports for Irish across different branches of the state. It has implications for both educational policy and language policy more broadly. However, these are restricted to the Irish language. Similarly, the Policy on Gaeltacht Education focuses on provisions for the Irish language in the Gaeltacht, isolating Irish from English in that context and distinguishing Gaeltacht education from other areas of education in Ireland. The literacy and numeracy strategy is effectively a language strategy for the two languages of schooling in Ireland; English for English-medium schools and Irish for Irish-medium schools. The teaching and

learning of literacy skills in Irish as a second language is explicitly excluded from the literacy strategy as it states that this is addressed in the 20-year strategy for Irish. The literacy strategy launched at the height of austerity coincided with the abolition of the very successful Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative in 2012, that is, a reduction in language education provision at primary level to prioritise English language literacy. Languages Connect launched towards the end of the period of austerity and explicitly excludes Irish and English from its remit but includes other 'foreign' languages taught or spoken in Ireland including curricular languages in the education system and other languages used amongst the general population.

While the existence of a language strategy of any kind in Ireland has been long awaited, the fragmented policy approach in recent years goes against many developments in language education research, such as translanguaging theory, that argue for increased integration of languages. The policies thus do not address calls for an integrated approach to language education that have appeared in reviews of education policy in Ireland (Little 2003; Council of Europe 2008). This is despite the pedagogical and social justice advantages of such an approach described in the review of translanguaging theory above. As the next section illustrates, the balkanised policy approach at a national level is mirrored in the structure and outcome of the reform of junior cycle languages curricula.

## Junior Cycle Reform and an Integrated View of Language

A focused analysis of the junior cycle framework document and subject specifications for English, for Irish in both Irish-medium and English-medium schools, and for MFLs was carried out for this chapter. The analysis reviewed the framework document key skills and statements of learning and the rationale, aims and progression statements for the specifications. A further in-depth interrogation was conducted of the specification learning outcomes as the main drivers of curriculum enactment through teacher planning and formal and informal assessment processes. The analysis of learning outcomes sought to:

- identify shared learning outcomes or parts of learning outcomes between the languages in second level education to evaluate opportunities for cross-linguistic transfer, and
- identify any explicit reference to, or any clear opportunity for, transfer and translanguaging in any of the curriculum documents to evaluate how and where transfer and/or translanguaging could be operationalised within a junior cycle context.

The findings indicate that while there exist ample opportunities for the explicit recognition and support for language transfer and translanguaging, this is not systematised across the various junior cycle language specifications. The call for an integrated approach to language education policy in Ireland pre-dates the Junior Cycle reforms (Council of Europe 2008). Furthermore, the development of the first language specification for junior cycle English was contemporaneous with the development of the primary language curriculum. The primary curriculum had a clear integrated perspective on languages, as evidenced by the referencing of National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) primary language research syntheses in the English briefing papers and consultation documents. However, the topic of language integration and transfer which was central to the primary curriculum development process is not consistently prominent in the junior cycle language development process. This is evidenced in the artefacts of the development process: background papers, consultation reports and development group meeting minutes for English, Irish and MFLs. The artefacts of the development process for English demonstrate significant engagement with the issue of transition from the new primary curriculum and with monoglossic literacy but not with an integrated view of language proficiency. The Irish background paper acknowledges the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the plurilingual perspective on language learning but little more and the consultation report looks to emphasise the value of learning Irish over and above learning languages more generally. The MFL development process, on the other hand, perhaps reflecting the unified specification for all MFLs and the development group from multiple language stakeholder groups, does engage

with this topic and, as demonstrated below, this is realised in the curriculum specifications for MFLs.

As a result, the principle of integration across languages and the focus on students' full linguistic repertoires are not equally explicit across all language curricula or across all levels. All junior cycle language specifications reference the principle of integration across languages but crucially this is not represented in the specifications where they will be enacted, that is, in the learning outcomes. The present analysis revealed that this is particularly absent in English where there is only a passing mention of the importance of other languages in the rationale and nothing in the learning outcomes related to opportunities to engage with or leverage other language competencies. Given that the study of junior cycle English does not occur in a vacuum but parallel to the study of Irish and MFLs, and given that many students in Ireland today have diverse linguistic backgrounds, the negligible attention paid to integration across languages in the English specification is striking.

As regards cross-linguistic transfer, there are many opportunities for transfer in shared specification learning outcomes. The English specification and the Irish L1 specification, for Irish in Irish-medium school contexts, share a number of partial or complete learning outcomes across language skills, language awareness and learner strategies, as do the MFL specification and the specification for Irish as L2 in English-medium school contexts. Most of these shared learning outcomes are cross-linguistic skills that can potentially be leveraged across all languages. The examples below provide the code or numbering for specific learning outcomes in the relevant language specification documents. For example, there are a number of transfer opportunities for pragmatic aspects of language use: under writing, English and Irish as L1 have explicit learning outcomes in relation to the writing process (English Writing 1 and Irish 1.28) and Irish L2 and MFL share learning outcomes in relation to reading for gist (Irish 1.8 and MFL 1.6) and reading for detail (Irish 1.7 and MFL 1.7). The potential efficiencies for teachers and learners in leveraging these cross-linguistic skills are only explicitly and positively noted in the MFL specification under Strand 2 Language Awareness, in particular Learning Outcomes 2.2 and 2.6.

Both the Irish and MFL specifications include learning outcomes relating to metalinguistic awareness and cross-linguistic transfer. Crucially, however, these are framed very differently. The Irish specification emphasises negative transfer that may lead to errors and inaccuracies (Irish Learning Outcomes 2.3 and 2.5). In the MFL specification, a positive emphasis is placed on comparison and contrast to explore languages as systems (Learning Outcomes 2.4 and 2.5). The tendency in the Irish specifications (for both Irish-medium and English-medium schools) is to reference inward to the language community, native culture and the characteristics of Irish rather than outward to comparisons with other languages and cultures evident in the MFL specification. This purest, insular approach to Irish is perhaps best understood as a protectionist response to the minoritised status of the language. On the other hand, the Irish specification alone has explicit learning outcomes in relation to developing an understanding of multilingualism and acknowledges the centrality of language in relation to identity. The junior cycle language specifications, although acknowledging a shared understanding of languages and language learning, are positioned differently in relation to a linguistically diverse reality: English acknowledges the existence of other languages but no more; Irish aspires to a bilingual context but from a defensive standpoint; while MFL looks to leverage all language learning in the service of new linguistic competencies.

As regards translanguaging practices, there are many opportunities to incorporate these but none of the specification learning outcomes explicitly references them. Many of the learning outcomes discuss articulating responses to texts but there is no explicit mention for example of responding to texts in other languages. Similarly, there is explicit reference to students choosing their own reading material and extending their range of sources but no reference to leveraging opportunities to engage with materials in other languages also. Opportunities to broaden and deepen linguistic repertoires outside of the named language focus are not acknowledged within the language specifications. Even the language learner awareness aspects of the specifications are discrete and focused on the specific named language which raises the possibility of learners writing discrete language learner reflections for each language instead of

drawing together their learning from all languages, as is currently the case with the Classroom-Based Assessment 1 reflection templates.

The lack of explicit support or structure for cross-linguistic transfer and translanguaging is a missed opportunity in the junior cycle framework. Key skills offer cross-curricular alignment, but this is not leveraged for languages. The key skills of literacy and communication offer this possibility but do not express it overtly by acknowledging students' broad linguistic repertoires of integrated cross-linguistic skills. This is despite the fact that the literature suggests that it is more so at later stages of multilingualism that full benefits of transfer can occur (Cummins 1976). The discrete nature of subjects at second level in terms of specifications and personnel mitigates against an integrated approach to language, even though a translanguaging pedagogical approach does not require teacher language proficiency in all the classroom languages (Llompart et al. 2020). The potential efficiencies of teaching for transfer are not explicitly identified in curriculum documents, however. This is exacerbated by school structures where typically planning for teaching, learning and assessment happens within separate English, Irish and MFL departments. A truly programmatic approach at junior cycle which leverages the key skills across the curriculum and across languages would allow for efficiencies in teaching, learning and, particularly, in assessment. In view of the splintered approach to language policies nationally, the fractured nature of the reform of languages at junior cycle is somewhat unsurprising. They are part of the same established tendency in language policy in Ireland. Although there are many barriers to implementing a translanguaging approach at junior cycle, there is evidence from other areas of language educational policy in Ireland illustrating that it is possible to operationalise this model.

# Language Curricular Reforms Across Sectors in Ireland (2009–2019)

As noted earlier, the curriculum reform at junior cycle is not occurring in a vacuum. It is situated in a somewhat fragmented language policy landscape but also in the context of significant change underway or in preparation at primary and senior cycle levels in Ireland. In relation to languages, the curriculum reforms outside of junior cycle of recent years include the introduction of (1) the Aistear Framework for play-based early years education (NCCA 2009); (2) the new Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (NCCA 2015), its implementation from junior infants to second class and its revision and expansion to include all years of primary education (NCCA 2019); and (3) a revision of MFLs at senior cycle which had been commenced but has been integrated into the full review of senior cycle at consultation phase.

## Shared Understanding of Language Across the Curriculum

In terms of the theory and approaches underpinning junior cycle language specifications, the PLC and the Aistear framework, there is a shared understanding of language and a shared basis for change, as demonstrated by the NCCA-commissioned reports on language learning (Ó Duibhir and Cummins 2012; Shiel et al. 2012; Kennedy et al. 2012; Harris and Ó Duibhir 2011). Elements include:

- a common understanding of language competence comprised of reciprocal integrated skills—listening AND responding, reading AND writing
- a common commitment to learning through meaningful communication
- commitment to the key role of learner autonomy and learner metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness in language learning
- acknowledgement of language as a key element in identity formation

Across all curriculum documents, there is a shared acknowledgement of the relevance and importance of students' linguistic repertoires (including English, Irish, Irish Sign Languages, other curricular languages as well as students' home languages) and an acknowledgement of common processes across linguistic repertoires.

## Integration Across Languages

It is within the early years and primary curriculum documents in particular that students' broad linguistic repertoires are explicitly the focus for development. In recognition of the linguistic diversity that exists in Ireland today, described above, both the Aistear framework and the PLC emphasise the importance of supporting the development of all home languages in formal education in the early years. This includes official languages (English, Irish and Irish Sign Language) as well as those that do not have official status in Ireland but that are nonetheless spoken in children's homes. This is an additive and integrated approach to bi/multilingual language development. Support for additional home languages stands alongside support for the development of proficiency in English and Irish as the official languages of schooling. Indeed, this is seen as a necessary step to allow children to become confident and competent language users. The approach aligns well with principles of cross-linguistic transfer and translanguaging pedagogy. Support for the development of children's proficiency in additional named languages does not detract from their progression in other languages (Cummins 1981). Learning Irish does not detract from the development of English language skills, for example, nor does support for other languages that may be spoken in the home inhibit the learning of English or Irish. Instead, when children receive adequate and appropriate support to develop all of their languages, the process becomes complimentary, allowing children to fully develop all of their multilingual repertoire.

The PLC (NCCA 2019) exemplifies principles of cross-linguistic transfer and translanguaging explicitly and systematically. It is designed for transfer between languages, in particular between the languages of schooling, drawing on Ó Duibhir and Cummins (2012). Opportunities

for cross-linguistic transfer are explicitly denoted in the curriculum through hyperlinks associating related learning outcomes for English and Irish. The curriculum also includes learning outcomes that explicitly reference transfer across other languages, for example, students' home languages. For stages 1 and 2 (junior infants to second class), these are focused in the area of engagement and motivation, supporting children to value, enjoy and become aware of characteristics of English, Irish and other languages where appropriate. While other languages will not be explicitly taught and therefore do not have learning outcomes in relation to linguistic competencies, they are acknowledged and supported in the curriculum as an essential part of the language learning experience of the child.

For stages 3 and 4 (third to sixth class) learning outcomes within each strand of the curriculum explicitly denote translanguaging processes, for example where children can demonstrate understanding in response to texts in other languages and use language creatively across named languages. Furthermore, the PLC support documents begin with explicit support for teachers in multilingual classrooms and provide examples of translanguaging practices facilitated by teachers. The Aistear framework and the integrated PLC provide a theoretical framework and explicit support and structure for language transfer and translanguaging practices to be implemented across early years and primary education. As explored above, the junior cycle specifications acknowledge but do not consistently reference or leverage transfer opportunities. In addition to Aistear and the PLC, recent developments at senior cycle demonstrate explicit support for the multilingual repertoires of learners in our classrooms. The NCCA is in the process of developing curricular specifications for Polish, Portuguese and Lithuanian, given the large population of heritage language users of these languages in Ireland. These new specifications offer an opportunity to prioritise an integrated view of language at post-primary.

# Summary

This chapter has described how the reform of language curricula at junior cycle in Ireland has resulted in a disparate set of specifications for English, Irish and MFLs. This approach is out of step with the literature on translanguaging pedagogy. It is set in the context of broader trends in language and language education policy that have not often taken a holistic view on linguistic development. As sketched above, the contemporary sociolinguistic context of Ireland is increasingly complex and dynamic. Clearly, the diverse ethnolinguistic background of the population and the different profiles of the languages that have a presence in education mean that a nuanced approach is required in the way that named languages are managed in educational policy. Nevertheless, the isolation of language groupings into policy silos, with scant regard for the integrated nature of linguistic multicompetence, risks impacting negatively on the educational experiences of an increasingly diverse population. The result may be that language education policies are sub-optimal and do not recognise the integrated nature of language abilities and, as a result, do not leverage the possible efficiencies of an integrated understanding of language. The explicitly delineated named language remit in policies and curricula can lead to fragmentation in policy enactment.

The new Aistear framework and particularly the PLC, however, demonstrate that an integrated approach is possible in language curriculum design in Ireland. The main recommendation from this chapter is that language and language educational policy at a national level ought to take place within a holistic framework that recognises the interconnectedness of linguistic proficiency across named languages. Junior cycle language specifications would benefit from more explicit alignment between the different language specifications and from adopting an integrated understanding of language development. This can be supported through (1) shared and cross-referenced learning outcomes across language subjects (as well as explicit alignment of learning outcomes for progression across sectors); (2) an extension of the language-related key skills definitions to include explicit reference to language repertoires; (3) explicit translanguaging opportunities within language subjects to be referenced in

learning outcomes; and (4) consultation or integration across language curriculum development groups, including English, Irish and MFLs. Although the development and roll-out of a translanguaging approach depends largely on the pedagogical practices of teachers, a necessary first step towards a more integrated approach to language at junior cycle is the explicit articulation of translanguaging principles in subject specifications. Through embracing such an approach at junior cycle, continuity can be achieved from pre-primary, through primary and second level education in Ireland. In this way, language education at junior cycle can be brought into closer alignment with the language educational needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

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# 7

# Reforming Junior Cycle: Lessons from Project Maths

**Chris Byrne, Mark Prendergast, and Elizabeth Oldham**

## Introduction

It is well established that the success of any reform depends on the teachers who will access, interpret and enact it (Spillane 1999). The success of the new junior cycle specification for mathematics is no different. While teachers are often referred to as agents of the change process (Kärkkäinen 2012; Schoenfeld 2014), they are also regarded as playing a conservative

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role in educational change by regularly resisting and opposing its intro-duction (Duke 2004). This is because educational reform brings a certain amount of anxiety and can be very threatening to teachers (Guskey 1986). Implementing a new curriculum often demands major adjust-ments to their thinking and practices (Orafi and Borg 2009). This inevi-tably leads to concerns on pedagogical issues such as the reasoning behind the reform, the implications for their classroom practices, the conse-quences for their students and their ability to implement the changes (Prendergast and Treacy 2018). In the past decade, mathematics teachers in Ireland have been through a major curriculum reform, "Project Maths". The aim of this chapter is to explore what lessons can be taken from this experience considering the further changes brought about by the intro-duction of the more recent junior cycle specification for mathematics. The focus is on the process of change and on major trends in mathemat-ics education and pedagogy, rather than on mathematical detail.

The first section of the chapter provides the historical background of junior cycle mathematics, setting out reforms that took place from the 1960s. This sets the scene for an overview of Project Maths, which was one of the most multifaceted curricular reforms in Irish education. The following section gives a brief overview of some of the details of the new junior cycle specification for mathematics and outlines the main similari-ties and differences when compared to Project Maths. Finally, the chapter concludes by exploring lessons for the current reform from recent experi-ences with Project Maths.

## The Historical Context

In the period 1960–2000, there were four revisions of the Irish junior cycle mathematics curriculum, introduced to first-year students in 1966, 1973, 1987 and 2000, respectively. Each change, except for the last, led to a revision of the senior cycle curriculum, brought in after a full itera-tion of junior cycle had been completed (Oldham 2019).

The context for the *revision of 1966* was set by international trends in the mathematics curriculum, introducing the so-called modern mathe-matics. This was based on a philosophy of mathematics itself (rather than mathematics education) that viewed the subject as the study of *structures*,

highlighting concepts and their inter-relationships rather than computational procedures. The approach was meant to enhance understanding through emphasis on mathematical coherence (Howson et al. 1981; OECD 1961; Walmsley 2007). The philosophy originally targeted third-level curricula and was not devised for some of the school settings in which it was adopted. In Ireland, the "modern" approach was strongly endorsed by the Department of Education. The reforms at both junior and senior cycle were intended to update content; they also aimed to focus on understanding and to decrease over-emphasis on procedures. Teachers were offered professional development that dealt with the new content but did not address pedagogical issues or the underlying rationale. Thus, the intended focus on structures and understanding in the syllabuses (Department of Education n.d. [1974]) was never fully implemented in many classrooms (Oldham 1980). Moreover, implementation was hampered by a dearth of purpose-written textbooks.

With widening participation in education in the late 1960s and 1970s, the abstract and formal emphasis became less suitable, especially for students taking what was then known as the Lower rather than the Higher course. Rather than addressing the issue, the *revision of 1973* (Department of Education n.d. [1974]) continued the "modern" trend, so pressure built up for further change. The *revisions of 1987* (Department of Education n.d. [1989]) *and 2000* (Department of Education and Science DES 2000) had rather limited briefs, but again aimed to promote understanding; successively, they removed aspects of "modern" mathematics and other material that had proved too abstract or complex for many students. The 1987 revision also introduced what became known as the Foundation level course (Department of Education and Science/National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [DES/NCCA] 2002, Oldham 2007).

Significantly, in the period covering the latter two revisions, and especially after the inception of the NCCA in 1987, there were developments in the *model of curriculum change*. It moved increasingly towards *negotiation*, with the representatives of "teacher" stakeholders, notably the unions and the Irish Mathematics Teachers Association (IMTA), proactive alongside Departmental and managerial representatives on the curriculum development committees (Oldham 1992). For both Junior and Leaving Certificate in the 1990s, emphasis was placed on producing successive curriculum drafts, each meant to be shared by representatives with

their constituencies, with feedback helping to shape the next draft. Final versions were accompanied by documentation on how the new curriculum differed—in detail as well as in general outline—from its predecessor (see e.g. DES/NCCA [2002]). Practitioners had a strong voice in the process. This aided production of curricula that could be implemented faithfully in classrooms, but perhaps caused undue focus on details of inclusions and exclusions and on what might be tested in the state examinations. Moreover, it militated against considering international trends in mathematics education. The growing emphasis on problem-solving, contexts and applications (Herrera and Owens 2001; Walmsley 2007) was not reflected in the Irish curricula, and the style of the state examination papers remained predominantly formal and abstract (Oldham 2007, 2019).

In the case of the 2000 curriculum, the accompanying Continuous Professional Development (CPD) emphasised pedagogy, notably encouraging active learning for understanding (DES/NCCA 2002). However, the intended approaches were not mirrored in the state examinations, which therefore discouraged implementation. Moreover, time allocated to mathematics in the junior cycle was cut in many schools from the envisaged five periods per week (Oldham 2007). Not surprisingly, student attainment in the Junior Certificate examinations did not reflect the hoped-for improvement. This was one factor leading to initiation of Project Maths, described in the following section.

## An Overview of Project Maths

Project Maths was an ambitious reform of the Irish post-primary mathematics curriculum and involved changes to what students learnt, how they learnt it and how they were assessed. It was a complete revision that changed both the junior and the senior cycle curricula in a manner not experienced since the 1960s. In the early 2000s, evidence was accumulating that attainment in Irish mathematics education was unsatisfactory. The NCCA produced a discussion paper that examined the problems and identified international trends in mathematics education poorly reflected in the Irish curricula (NCCA 2005). They followed this by issuing a

substantial research report (Conway and Sloane 2006). It noted "a general move towards reform of mathematics internationally as education systems geared up for a globalised economy" (p. 12)—which had an increasing reliance on "cross-border trade, foreign investment, cooperation between governments and international market stability" (Byrne 2016, p. 225)—and advocated a move towards more context-based, real-world and problem-focused mathematics. The economic theme provided a backdrop to the system-level support given to Project Maths and the public discourse around it (Kirwan and Hall 2016); however, detailed curriculum development was guided mainly by theories on mathematics education and pedagogy.

Work took place over a couple of years, reshaping the curriculum in line with a philosophy of mathematics education that highlighted *solving problems, especially those set in real-life contexts*. Thus, the intention was that teaching and learning would emphasise not only conceptual understanding but also real-life applications (to a far greater extent than for previous intended curricula), and that assessment would mirror this emphasis (DES 2013). Rather than following the detailed "negotiation" model of curriculum change from the 1990s, the process gave greater prominence to consideration of research and good practice in other countries; also, by providing less detailed documentation on exactly what might be examined, it discouraged undue focus on "teaching to the test". Nonetheless, the work was intended to be teacher led and student focused. To promote this, a series of ten CPD workshops was run for teachers over the course of the implementation period to explain the philosophy and explore the different pedagogical approaches of the revised curricula.

Following an initial phase that started in 2008 and involved 24 schools, the eventual outcome was a curriculum that was introduced to all other schools nationally on a phased basis from Autumn 2010, as presented in Table 7.1.

The initial phase was intended to allow the teachers involved to play a particularly active role in helping to shape the initiative. The launch of different strands (or topics) over a three-year period aimed to give a gentle introduction to dealing with new pedagogical approaches and also new content where relevant. This allowed for acclimatisation to a changed style of examining. The structure was novel, imaginative and exciting.

**Table 7.1**  Phased rollout of Project Maths

| Phase | Curriculum strands | Phase 1 schools—curriculum introduced | Phase 1 schools—first examination | Other schools—curriculum introduced | Other schools—first examination |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Probability & *Statistics* and *Geometry & Trigonometry* | Autumn 2008 | JC [a] 2011 LC[b] 2010 | Autumn 2010 | JC 2013 LC 2012 |
| 2 | *Number* and *Algebra* | Autumn 2009 | JC 2012 LC 2011 | Autumn 2011 | JC 2014 LC 2013 |
| 3 | *Functions* (and calculus at LC) | Autumn 2010 | JC 2013 LC 2012 | Autumn 2012 | JC 2015 LC 2014 |

[a]Junior Certificate
[b]Leaving Certificate

However, the intended benefits from the overall approach can be balanced against some problems in the implementation. First, as indicated above, teachers had become used to clear specification of changes to content before new curricula were launched. Also, textbooks had been published in advance of material being taught; sample examination papers had set clear targets for state examinations. The less detailed documentation for Project Maths created uncertainty and stress for teachers and students. Reports released at the time noted teachers' concerns that textbooks were not of a satisfactory standard (Cosgrove et al. 2012; Lubienski 2011), and the IMTA (2012) pointed out several resource-related problems including the late issue of sample examination papers. Secondly, the phased introduction prolonged and complicated the change process. Teachers going from year group to year group needed to switch between different versions of the new curriculum and prepare students for state examinations, the structure of which changed annually. The simultaneous launch of the junior and senior cycle curricula—a break with previous practice—meant that students entering the new Leaving Certificate curriculum in its early years had not experienced the approach that was intended to be developed by the junior cycle. It was June 2017 before a cohort of students (other than the small number in Phase 1 schools) had

experienced all five strands of Project Maths throughout their second-level education.

A substantial overview of Project Maths up to that time, including focus group studies with 76 teachers, was conducted in preparation for the junior cycle reform (Shiel and Kelleher 2017). Early evaluations of Project Maths provided evidence of the positive impact on students' attitudes towards mathematics and their achievement at an individual strand level (Jeffes et al. 2013). However, there were indications of problematic areas. The research identified differences between the intended and implemented curriculum (Jeffes et al. 2013; Prendergast and Treacy 2018); teachers were still "not really 100% sure what to do" (Prendergast and Treacy 2018, p. 138). Teachers' wish for more CPD around the changes was notable (Cosgrove et al. 2012; Shiel and Kelleher 2017). Indeed, a study carried out by Byrne and Prendergast (2019) showed that significant self and task concerns remained among many mathematics teachers even several years after the implementation. Also, in addition to the resource issues noted above, lack of time to implement the curriculum fully was a major issue (IMTA 2012; O'Meara and Prendergast 2018; Shiel and Kelleher 2017). While the examination papers contain more questions than before requiring the solution of extended problems set in contexts, it remains unclear whether teachers and students have really bought into the underlying philosophy or are teaching or learning to the (revised) test without a full appreciation of the rationale (Shiel and Kelleher 2017).

## An Overview of the New Junior Cycle Specification for Mathematics

While Project Maths arose from subject-specific considerations, the next round of changes was part of a wider reform of junior cycle. One of the most significant changes brought about by the Junior Cycle Framework (DES 2015) is the move to outcome-based education (OBE). This is a departure from the more traditional content approach to curriculum design used in previous curricula. Such a curriculum is intended to give more agency to teachers but still preserve some control over the skills and

knowledge that students learn. It encourages teachers to be more creative in how they teach their classes, but presents them with a notably increased workload, especially in the planning stage. According to the Junior Cycle Framework, the most significant changes are in assessment. Some classroom-based assessments (CBAs) have been introduced into the certification of student achievement at junior cycle, culminating in the awarding of the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA).

Considering the recent implementation of Project Maths, it is unsurprising that many aspects of the new curriculum represent evolution rather than revolution. The objectives of the old curriculum are now the aims of the new one. The specification divides the course content into mathematical strands similar to those for Project Maths, with four strands covering, respectively, number; geometry and trigonometry; algebra and functions; and statistics and probability. Running across these is a new "unifying" strand, composed of six elements (see Fig. 7.1), applicable to
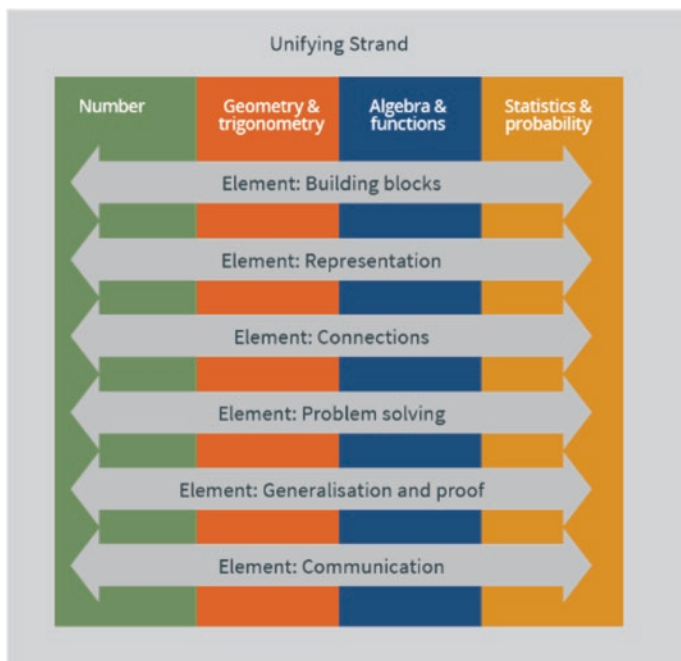


**Fig. 7.1** Six elements of the unifying strand. (NCCA 2017, p. 9), with permission of the NCCA

all the other strands. The formulation is an attempt to connect "mathematical knowledge and skills to solve a problem or to communicate mathematics" (NCCA 2017, p. 10) across various topics. Thus, it is in keeping with the key skills set out in the Junior Cycle Framework (DES 2015) and provides an example of how the new curriculum is attempting to embed the principles of connections between topics and the principles of active learning into the written formulation. However, the "learning outcomes" are specific to each of the mathematical strands, and perhaps their full impact on teaching and learning will be seen only through implementation of new aspects of assessment.

The changes in assessment are especially significant for mathematics. The subject never had a coursework element, so this is a major difference between Project Maths and the new junior cycle curriculum. There are two CBAs as outlined in Table 7.2.

As in other subjects, the CBAs will be undertaken by all students and will be marked at a common level by the classroom teacher. In addition, the second CBA has an additional written Assessment Task that will be marked, along with the final examination, by the State Examinations Commission (SEC). The task will be specified by the NCCA each year and will be related to the learning outcomes on which the second CBA (the Statistical Investigation) is based. The Assessment Task is worth 10% of the grade certified by the SEC. A second major change affecting mathematics assessment concerns the final examination. The Foundation level has been removed, and the time allocated to examinations has been reduced: from as much as five hours at Higher level—two papers of two

**Table 7.2**  Requirements for mathematics CBAs

| Type | Detail | Time taken | Completion |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mathematical investigation | Students will follow the problem-solving cycle to investigate a mathematical problem. | Three-week period | End of second year |
| Statistical investigation | Students will follow the statistical enquiry cycle. | Three-week period | End of first term of third year |

NCCA (2018)

and a half hours each—to a single two-hour paper for each of the Higher and Ordinary levels. This raises questions about what content can and will be assessed every year. If certain topics are not assessed regularly, will they be ignored by teachers? Such changes in assessment practices are areas of concern for mathematics teachers. At the time of going to press (late 2020), the first cohort of students taking the new curriculum are only starting third year. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of schools in March 2020 for the rest of the academic year, with teaching and learning taking place remotely and, inevitably, considerable time being lost. As a result, many students have not completed their first CBA in mathematics, and those in first year may have missed out on essential groundwork. Temporary arrangements are being put in place for the present third-year cohort, but the full implementation of coursework assessment as originally intended for Mathematics has been significantly set back. Also, aside from the concerns around grading their own students' work for certification purposes, teachers have yet to see sample examination papers, so they are operating in an atmosphere of some uncertainty. Table 7.3 outlines some of the key points of consistency and difference between Project Maths and junior cycle mathematics.

So far, there has been very little research reflecting the current views of teachers about the new junior cycle mathematics specification. As part of a small study, Walsh (2019) ran a focus group on the topic with a group of seven mathematics teachers. He found that some aspects of the changes, such as combining the algebra and function strands, including the unifying strand and the introduction of CBAs, were welcomed. Overall,

**Table 7.3** Overview of main aspects of Project Maths and the junior cycle specification

|  | Project Maths | Junior cycle mathematics |
|---|---|---|
| Year of (main) introduction | 2010 | 2018 |
| Introduced on phased basis | Yes | No |
| Outcome-based education | No | Yes |
| Coursework assessment component | No | Yes |
| Simultaneous with senior cycle reform | Yes | No |
| Simultaneous with junior cycle reform | Yes | Yes |

however, Walsh's findings indicate negative perceptions; the teachers expressed concerns about the lack of coherence between junior cycle and senior cycle and the lack of class time for the subject, particularly given the introduction of the CBAs, and were very sceptical about the reduction in examination time from five hours to two. They also believed that the removal of Foundation level does not align with the belief that this new curriculum caters for all students. Walsh's study raises the question of whether the second major curriculum reform in mathematics over a decade may be a step too far for some teachers. Thus, it is important that some lessons are taken on board from the recent experiences of Project Maths, and these are highlighted in the next section of the chapter.

## Lessons from Project Maths

The new Junior Cycle Framework represents a substantial change to the traditional philosophy of education in Ireland and is more in line with current international trends in other countries within the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), such as the move towards a school-based curriculum within a central framework and an OBE approach. Priestley et al. (2012) point out that such changes place the teacher at the centre of curriculum development. There is often an expectation that curriculum reform, such as the changes brought about by Project Maths and the new Junior Cycle Framework, will be adopted and implemented without difficulty by teachers in all classrooms (Scheker-Mendoza 2011). This is based on the simplistic assumption that teachers will, machine-like, alter their behaviours because they are told what is good for them and for their students (Handal and Herrington 2003). However, it fails to consider lessons from previous iterations of educational reforms and especially from the Project Maths initiative. Lessons can be distinguished in four areas: the scope of the initiative, the model of curriculum change, features of the curriculum design and aspects of its implementation particularly regarding CPD. They are discussed in turn.

# Scope of the Project Maths Initiative

As indicated above, the scope and scale of the Project Maths initiative were much greater than those allowed by the briefs for revisions in the preceding 30 years: revolution rather than evolution. This may well have succeeded better in bringing about meaningful alterations in practice but at the cost of considerable stress for teachers. Moreover, while the aims of Project Maths were desirable for many students, not everyone agreed with the philosophies behind them. Together with some issues in implementation of the reform, these aspects had a negative effect on people's perception of the changes and undoubtedly affected their introduction. This provides overarching lessons; aspects of which are highlighted below.

## The Model of Curriculum Change

Several issues are relevant here. One is the *swing away from a focus on negotiation* via *stakeholder representatives towards greater reliance on expert input*. Project Maths made a conscious effort to counteract the limiting effect of the focus on detail and negotiation over successive drafts of the curriculum that had developed in the 1990s. However, this led to limited dissemination of information to stakeholders before and during implementation and contributed to teachers' (and students') anxiety. If the culture of over-focus on detail for assessment has now been broken, perhaps a better balance can be struck in future in keeping participants informed. The involvement of focus groups of teachers, a feature of the current model, is a step in that direction. A second issue is *phasing and alignment*. The phased introduction of the Project Maths strands was not replicated for the new junior cycle specification: perhaps a general feature of junior cycle reform and a consequence of less radical content change than for Project Maths, rather than a lesson learnt. However, the launch of the Project Maths Leaving Certificate curriculum at the same time as that for Junior Certificate meant that the philosophy of the former was poorly aligned to that of the outgoing junior cycle curriculum. This was a major challenge for students and teachers in the lead-up to the high-stakes Leaving Certificate examination. The new junior cycle

specification does present a problem with curriculum alignment, and this is not unique to mathematics; the OBE-style curriculum and the introduction of new forms of assessment mean that it is currently not fully aligned with the senior cycle programme. However, this may alter with forthcoming revisions to the senior cycle. At least, the changes are coming in the more natural order. Thirdly, there were *resource* issues. Project Maths and allied developments around lesson study (https://www.projectmaths.ie/for-teachers/lesson-study-library/) have encouraged teacher autonomy and collaboration with colleagues in creating resources. However, the delayed production of curriculum aligned textbooks and sample examination papers—reminiscent of the 1960s—caused major stress for teachers. For the new junior cycle curriculum, uncertainty around the CBAs and the final examinations at the time of writing suggests that some lessons have not been fully absorbed or applied.

## Curriculum Design

Curriculum design involves—inter alia—content, teaching, learning and assessment. The first three and the last are considered in turn. For *content, teaching and learning*, the design of Project Maths and that of the new junior cycle mathematics curriculum reflect similar philosophies of mathematics education and pedagogy, emphasising problem-solving, connections and investigative work. It is widely accepted that, unless content is significantly reduced, more time is required than for expository teaching. Teachers reported lack of time as a major issue for Project Maths, and this lesson may not have been fully applied. The student investigations associated with the CBAs in the new junior cycle will impinge upon class time, perhaps benefiting from double periods. However, a recent study conducted by O'Meara and Prendergast (2018) found that the scheduling of double periods in mathematics continues to be an uncommon practice in an Irish context. This is particularly the case at junior cycle where only 8.9% of mathematics teachers reported a double period on their timetable. One of the achievements of Project Maths was to align *assessment* more closely with the aims of the curriculum, and in particular to break the pattern of predictability that had beset previous attempts—albeit at

the cost of increased stress for students as well as teachers. The trend in alignment is continued for the new curriculum by the introduction of the CBAs. However, as indicated above, at the time of writing there is still uncertainty about their implementation and the shape of the examinations, and lessons may yet need to be fully learnt in this area. As assessment has been one of the most significant areas of teachers' concerns (Murchan, 2018), this should be a particular focus for support bodies such as Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT).

## Support for Implementation

This chapter chronologically exhibited repeated failed attempts in the past to fully implement some curricular aims. This proved to be especially difficult if there was a mismatch between, on the one hand, curricular philosophy and pedagogical intentions and, on the other, the teachers' knowledge, beliefs and assessment practices—especially in the absence of extensive CPD. The introduction of Project Maths did result in increased emphasis being placed on CPD, but teachers wished for more. In the very early stages of implementation, Lubienski (2011) warned that the CPD planned would not be sufficient to facilitate such a substantial change. Byrne and Prendergast (2019) highlighted the importance of CPD and support structures in alleviating Project Maths teachers' ongoing concerns and achieving the intended aims of curriculum change. For the new junior cycle specification, the introduction of the CBAs is a marked difference from the norm for all mathematics teachers in Ireland. The provision of adequate and sustained CPD to support teachers in appreciating the rationale and adopting new practices will be very important.

## Summary

The context for this chapter was set by tracing curriculum changes in the 50 years before the Project Maths initiative. Although there were repeated attempts to encourage a culture of teaching for and learning with

understanding, they achieved limited success. The Project Maths initiative aimed at a more radical development. Its model of curriculum change was markedly innovative, and the increased emphasis on problem-solving and applications was supported by changes in assessment. However, difficulties arose from the scope and scale of the developments. While the aims of Project Maths were desirable for many students, there were issues with the style and implementation of the reform, and this led to anxiety and negativity. The recently revised junior cycle mathematics specification shares many features with the Project Maths curriculum, and in many ways has had a smoother introduction; however, the impact of new assessment practices remains to be determined. Familiar lessons can be drawn from the Project Maths initiative; they include the importance of communication amongst stakeholders, the provision of adequate teaching time for faithful implementation, the key role of assessment in realising the changes and the need for extensive CPD especially in the context of changes in philosophy and pedagogy. It is to be hoped that they will benefit ongoing and future reforms.

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# 8

# Putting the A in STEAM: Arts Education in Junior Cycle

**Susan McCormick and Marita Kerin**

## Introduction

This chapter should be considered in light of recent movements towards a philosophy of education, which values the integrated teaching of skills and content particularly within a real life context (Department of Education and Skills [DES] 2017c). Whilst this movement was initially predicated on the fusion of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) more recent developments have considered the addition of arts based subjects, including music, thereby providing the enhanced acronym STEAM. Research from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the Arts Council confirms that arts and cultural participation leads to a range of positive outcomes for children, both in terms of their cognitive development and their well-being (Smyth 2016). Arts education forms a compulsory part of primary level

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education in Ireland and is thought to be 'integral … in helping to promote thinking, imagination and sensitivity, and arts activities can be a focus for social and cultural development and enjoyment in school' (DES 1999, p. 2). While the primary level arts curricula are detailed and systematic, the implementation of these curricula, particularly that of the music curriculum, presents challenges. The many challenges reported by primary teachers in relation to teaching music impacts on the quality and quantity of music education received by students and in turn impacts on the uptake of music at junior cycle level (McCarthy 1999).

The current Junior Certificate Music Syllabus (JCMS) is increasingly viewed as outdated and narrow (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] 2015). As part of the wider reform of junior cycle a revised programme has been designed to appeal to a broader cohort of students, with creativity and personal development at the core (NCCA 2017b), reflecting the emphasis on key skills development outlined in Chap. 5 of this volume. After an initial examination of the concept of STEAM education, this chapter will focus on music as part of the reform of junior cycle. This analysis (1) investigates the rationale for reform at junior cycle, (2) explores music curriculum development in Ireland outlining the main changes in content, pedagogy and assessment, (3) identifies if the new Junior Cycle Music Programme (JCMP) is in keeping with international best practice and current developments in music education and (4) considers potential outcomes of the reform.

## STEAM Education

STEM is seen as 'a central preoccupation for policymakers across the world' (Clarke 2019, p. 225). In this context, Irish policymakers have promoted STEM to enrich the skill set of the workforce (DES 2016) and launched the STEM Education Policy Statement (EPS) 2017–2026 (DES 2017c) and Implementation Plan (IP) 2017–2019 (DES 2017b). Although there has been a major focus on STEM education in recent years, Clarke (2019, p. 227) observed that a 'shift in emphasis to

innovation and creativity on the part of policymakers has led to a renewed focus on the arts and humanities'. This shift was inspired by the desire to produce graduates who are creative, innovative, curious and self-motivated (Land 2013). During the consultation process for the development of the STEM EPS and IP, it was suggested that the acronym 'STE(A)M' be considered 'as the Arts and creativity are very much integral to the notion of STEM education' (DES 2017a, p. 11). While this suggestion was not applied, the EPS and IP reports do, however, include partnerships with the arts within their objectives and indicators of success. The STEM Education in the Irish School System Report (DES 2016, p. 48) also acknowledges the benefits of the inclusion of the arts and recommends 'that any future strategy for STEM in Ireland takes account of the STE(A)M hybrid'.

The concept of creativity is one of the principles and key skills at the core of recent reform at junior cycle level in Ireland (DES 2015). With the arts lending themselves very naturally to the concept of creativity, educational reform in Ireland acknowledges the significance of fostering and encouraging this through the arts (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht DAHG/DES 2012; NCCA 2017b). In September 2018, a reconceptualised post-primary music programme was introduced based on the principle that 'learning about and through the arts is fundamental to an education that aspires to nurture and support the development of the whole person' (NCCA 2017b, p. 4). With creativity and personal development at its core, this new programme was designed to appeal to a wide cohort of students and teachers. It encourages students to make and create music in a variety of ways and grants significant freedom of choice. While previous second-level music curricula tended to be largely subject-centred (as discussed later), the JCMP is more akin to the primary school music curriculum and is aligned with its aim of placing the student 'at the centre of the educational experience' (NCCA 2017b, p. 3). The difference in focus between the student-centred approach of the primary school curriculum and the subject-centric approach of previous second-level music curricula is one of the factors that contributed to a 'fractured continuum in school music education in Ireland' (Heneghan 2001, p. 49).

## The Rationale for Reform of Music Edcation in Ireland

In 1985, the *Deaf Ears?* report (Herron 1985) observed a poor state of music education in Ireland pointing to a lack of accessibility and inclusivity. Concerns relating to the state of music education continued to be expressed in the years following this damning report. During the forum for the Music Education National Debate (MEND 1995–1996) Frank Heneghan remarked that 'a continuum in music education between primary and secondary education is virtually impossible under current circumstances' (MEND 1996, p. 16). Though Heneghan (2001) believed that the curriculum revisions of the 1990s addressed the fracture, this has not proved to be the case. Although music is a compulsory element of the primary school programme the quantity and quality of music education at primary level (which in most cases is delivered by a generalist teacher) is questionable, and huge inconsistencies continue to exist (Kerin 2019; Smyth 2016). This is due to a number of factors, including teachers' self-perceived confidence deficits in music (Hennessy 2000; Russell-Bowie 2009; Wiggins and Wiggins 2008) and diminished access to music pedagogy during pre-service teacher education (Mills 1989).

The varying levels of music education encountered by students during their primary school years strongly determines the profile of the post-primary school music student and the first year music class is often characterised by extreme levels of disparity rarely reported in other subjects. This presents a challenge to teachers in ensuring that all students, regardless of prior experience and current levels of expertise, are facilitated. The varying levels also impact the number of students choosing to study music at second-level (Smyth 2016). Music is sometimes perceived as a subject solely for the 'talented', rather than one that can be accessed by all (Regelski 2009). Furthermore, while most adolescents enjoy musical activities, this is often considered 'separate' or 'different' to formal music education. As Heneghan (2001, p. 27) points out 'the

problem in general education is to establish a convincing relationship between school music and the perception of the learners as to how music matters to them in real life'. The JCMS, which has been criticised for being 'old fashioned and lacking in relevance' (NCCA 2015, p. 21), perhaps reinforces a sense of distance between how students engage with music on a daily basis and how music is presented within the classroom. The relevance and appeal of a music programme to students is not only connected with previous music experience and self-perceived ability, but also to the type of music that is offered. Research suggests that the JCMS fails to stimulate or engage the student (Smyth et al. 2006). Although it includes a wide variety of musical genres, the relatively fixed nature of the syllabus means that much of the content, even the so-called popular songs, is alien to the average twenty-first-century student (NCCA 2015).

## Music at Junior Cycle: Changes in Curriculum

The JCMS was introduced in 1989 and was intended to be more appealing, approachable and accessible than its predecessor, with a musical rather than academic focus (NCCA 1989a, 1989b). The previous 'music and musicianship' programme (1972) was divided into two different syllabi, one of which had a practical performance element (NCCA 2015). The 1989 syllabus saw the introduction of two different levels of study (higher and ordinary) and is divided into three core areas: listening, composing and performing. The presentation of the 1989 syllabus is strongly exam orientated, with little encouragement to explore beyond the syllabus itself. The JCMP, introduced to schools in 2018 (NCCA 2017b), represents a change from previous music curricula. Perhaps the most obvious shift is that from subject focused to student focused, with a great deal of exploration and discovery being required of the student. Table 8.1 highlights the main features of the 1989 and 2018 curricula.

**Table 8.1**  Main features of recent music curricula at junior cycle

| 1989 JCMS[a] | 2018 JCMP[b] |
|---|---|
| Three main parts:<br>• Listening<br>  – Set songs + works<br>  – Choice songs + works<br>  – Irish music<br>  – General listening skills<br>  – Dictation<br>  – General study<br>• Composing<br>  – Triads<br>  – Harmony<br>  – Or free composition<br>• Performing | Three interwoven strands incorporating creating and exploring; appraising and responding; participating and music-making:<br>• Procedural knowledge<br>  – Imagination<br>  – Creativity<br>  – Music literacy<br>  – Music skills<br>• Innovation and ideation<br>  – Composing<br>  – Arranging<br>  – Performing<br>  – Technology<br>• Culture and context<br>  – Music from various eras<br>  – Music from various cultures<br>  – Music from different genres |
| Offered at two levels: higher and ordinary | Offered at one level: common |
| Subject-centred | Student-centred |
| Exam-focused | Learning outcome based |
| Prescribed learning (for the most part) | Greater freedom for teachers and students in choosing content |

[a]Junior Certificate Music Syllabus
[b]Junior Cycle Music Programme

The new programme (offered at common level only) emphasises three interconnected strands: procedural knowledge; innovation and ideation; and culture and context. It involves a number of statements of learning and key skills, which are linked to musical activities. Like the 1989 syllabus, students will continue to engage in performing, listening and composing activities, but these activities are accorded more liberty and expression. During curriculum development, many stakeholders engaged with the junior cycle music consultation process (NCCA 2017a). Respondents, including the Post Primary Music Teachers Association, the Arts Council of Ireland and the Society for Music Education in Ireland, raised a number of issues, including the level of freedom associated with the course content, though such freedom reflects international practice, for example, in Estonia and Finland (Sepp et al. 2012). The new

curriculum specification suggests a number of learning outcomes relating to three areas: creating and exploring; appraising and responding; and participating and music-making. These areas are not dissimilar to the three core components emphasised in Hungarian music education: create, appreciate and recognise (Music Education Network, online). Music-making is a practice that is central to the Finnish (Sepp et al. 2012) and Swedish systems (Georgii-Hemming and Westvall 2010) of music education and is also advocated by Musical Futures—an approach to music learning that aims to be relevant, inclusive and sociable, and is motivated by the musical culture of students (D'Amore 2014; Musical Futures n.d. online).

## Music at Junior Cycle: Changes to Assessment

Educational assessment receives much attention and debate, including assessment in music education (Fautley 2010). Curriculum reform has resulted in some corresponding changes in assessment procedures, and key elements of these are presented in Table 8.2.

**Table 8.2** Main features of assessment in music: 1989 and 2018 music curricula

| 1989 JCMS | 2018 JCMP |
|---|---|
| Exam-focused | Learning outcome based |
| Summative assessment | Formative + summative assessment |
| • Practical performance exam (25%)<br>  – Two (ordinary level)/four (higher level) songs/pieces<br>  – Maximum of two different performing activities<br>  – Unprepared test: aural memory test/sight test<br>• Written exam (75%)<br>  – Listening<br>  – Composing | • Practical performance exam (30%)<br>  – Three songs/pieces<br>  – Various combinations of performing activities possible<br>  – Unprepared test: aural memory test/sight test/improvisation<br>• Written exam (70%)<br>  – Based on a selection of learning outcomes<br>• Two classroom-based assessments (descriptive comments)<br>  – Composition portfolio<br>  – Programme note |
| SEC assessed | SEC and teacher assessed |

Assessment of the 1989 JCMS consists of a performance exam and a written exam, both of which are marked externally by the State Examination Commission (SEC). There has been much criticism in relation to the written assessment of the JCMS, with only a fraction of what is studied appearing on the exam (NCCA 2015). Furthermore, the chosen song or work functions entirely as a memory exercise, with students being required to identify features without any aural assistance. One report noted a concern that in some cases the 'assessment outcome [was] not used to enable students' progress' (DESc 2008, p. 34). This highlights the importance of using assessment for formative, rather than summative purposes. The summative procedures used in assessing the JCMS consider the final product only, an approach not without its critics (Fautley and Daubney 2015; Elliott and Silverman 2015). Irish policymakers have identified links between formative school-based assessment and high educational standards in countries such as Finland and New Zealand (DES 2012, p. 4), and sought to incorporate this type of assessment into the new music programme.

Within the 2018 curriculum, students will engage in two classroom-based assessments (CBAs): a composition portfolio and a programme note to accompany the performance exam. The CBAs are to be assessed by the class teacher, though these will not contribute to the overall grade certified by the SEC. Internal assessment is a practice also evident in the assessment of music at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) level in England (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance [AQA] 2019), Wales (Welsh Joint Education Committee [WJEC] 2019) and Northern Ireland (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments 2017). Teachers of the JCMP will be provided with an Assessment Toolkit and will also attend Subject Learning and Assessment Review meetings where they will discuss proposed marks with colleagues. In assessing the portfolio teachers must decide whether they think the content is 'exceptional'; 'above expectations'; 'in line with expectations'; or 'yet to meet expectations'. This is very similar to practice advocated by curriculum advisers in England where teachers are encouraged to grade outcomes according to a three-point scale and are provided with descriptors and indicative examples on a range of assessment criteria (Fautley

and Daubney 2015). At the end of the three-year JCMP students will complete a written exam (contributing to 70% of the overall mark)—intended for students to 'engage with, demonstrate comprehension of, and provide written responses to stimulus material' (NCCA 2017b, p. 24)—and a practical performance exam (contributing to 30% of the overall mark), both of which will be assessed externally by the SEC (see Table 8.2). External assessment of the performing element of the JCMP is unlike the system used at GCSE level in England (AQA 2019) and Wales (WJEC 2019) where such exams are recorded, internally marked and externally moderated. The first JCMP exams will take place in 2021.

## Music at Junior Cycle: Changes in Pedagogy

The DES inspectorate (DESc 2008) highlighted a number of concerns in relation to the implementation of the 1989 JCMS. While noting some good practice, inspectors also highlighted a 'lack of practical music-making experiences' (p. 29), with the 'integration of performing, composing and listening in the teaching and learning of music' (p. 41) often not being considered during planning stages. This suggests that students are not always given the opportunity to experience musical concepts for themselves and that the three main parts of the course (performing, composing and listening) are seen as separate entities, rather than interconnected. The report also points to the individuality of students not necessarily being sufficiently supported or acknowledged, with a 'lack of consistent profiling of students' musical competencies' (p. 36). Furthermore, it raised concerns that musical development is being compromised as a result of the exam-focused nature of some teaching.

The filtration of the exam-driven nature of the JCMS into the teaching of music often results in a teacher-led classroom. An exam-focused curriculum often gives the teacher a sense of security in that they know precisely what is to be taught. The JCMP places the teacher in a more precarious position and forces them out of their comfort zone. Moving from an exam-focused teacher-led environment, the JCMP places the student at the centre of their educational experience, with a shift towards informal learning—an approach adopted in a number of countries, such

as Sweden (Georgii-Hemming and Westvall 2010). Informal learning is championed by Lucy Green (2008) and is at the heart of Musical Futures. Ruth Wright (2016) notes that 'alternative approaches to music education such as informal learning and non-formal teaching have had dramatic effects on music education in many parts of the world including the United Kingdom, Australia, United States, Singapore, Cyprus, and Canada' (p. 3).

Teachers of the JCMP may now find themselves in a new space, with the role of the teacher as 'sage on the stage' being challenged. Research shows that while relinquishing some control can be daunting for teachers, with their role potentially being 'unclear and sometimes [lacking] validity' (Georgii-Hemming and Westvall 2010, p. 21), it can also provide them with opportunities to understand more about the learning practices of their students (Hallam et al. 2017). Furthermore, it can enhance communication between student and teacher, which helps to develop relationships and to build trust. Teachers also have the opportunity to act as a musical model. While the JCMP is in its infancy, and some concerns were raised during the consultation process, early anecdotal indications suggest that the new programme has encouraged teachers to ensure that tasks are approached in fun, interactive and creative ways It would also appear that teachers are experimenting more with technology, incorporating the use of digital applications and various software programmes. While this is a necessary development given the place of technology in twenty-first-century music production, inadequate resources in some schools will result in a lack of opportunity to engage with such technology. In order to avoid a disparity in the opportunities available to our students, this issue requires consideration.

## Potential Outcomes of the JCMP

While previous music curricula may be at odds with the musical lives of students the incorporation of music in the 2018 JCMP that is familiar to students together with music that may be unfamiliar will provide space for them to begin to make connections between music inside and outside of school, which in turn opens up a wealth of opportunities and allows

for deepened understanding and enlightened perspectives. Allowing students to engage with music with which they already have a relationship encourages, motivates and empowers, while the inclusion of unfamiliar music broadens students' horizons and possibilities.

The 2018 JCMP not only encourages teachers to consider the musical preferences of students, but also to provide 'equality of opportunity, participation and outcome for all' and to be 'inclusive of all students' (NCCA 2017b, p. 3). In contrast, the somewhat restricted nature of the JCMS may be confining and somewhat frustrating for the very experienced student, while its formality may be daunting and foreign for the inexperienced student. The level of flexibility that the JCMP affords has the potential to allow students to move at their own tempo, thus challenging students of all levels of experience and expertise. While the programme lends itself well to the use of differentiation, it also appears to align itself with the three core principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)—multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation and multiple means of action and expression—and incorporates many associated UDL approaches including 'the use of technology, multiple modalities of instruction … and group activities to give students choices and provide them with opportunities to empower themselves as learners' (Spencer 2011, p. 10). UDL is thought to 'improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people … [and to] eliminat[e] barriers to students' learning' (Lieberman 2017, p. 5).

In contrast to the JCMS, which often denies students the opportunity to broaden their knowledge outside the realms of the curriculum itself, the JCMP actively encourages exploration and experimentation and affords the student the power to make decisions and to take risks. Through engaging with music in this open way, students are likely to take ownership of their work, to develop autonomy and to feel pride in their progress. This in turn contributes to the development of a student's musical identity: 'As students gain experience through their creating, participating and appraising of work … they will be developing their critical skills and allowing their musical selves emerge' (NCCA 2017b, p. 13). Encouraging students to connect with and to develop their own musical identity will ensure that they have a lifelong relationship with music.

The move towards a student-centred environment, whereby the teacher may adopt a more informal role will also open up opportunities for the student. Research on Musical Futures (Hallam et al. 2008, 2017; Moore 2019) demonstrates a large number of positive outcomes associated with its implementation, including: enhanced music learning, collaboration, increased confidence and motivation, democratic and inclusive pedagogy, peer learning, assessment for learning and consideration of the individual (Moore 2019). Research also found an average increase of 42% in the uptake of GCSE music after implementation of the Musical Futures programme (Hallam et al. 2008). National statistics in Ireland (SEC, online) show that there is falloff of approximately 40% between students who sit the JCMS exam and those who sit the Leaving Certificate music exam. While acknowledging that not all schools offer music as a Leaving Certificate subject, it nonetheless raises questions as to the reasons behind this considerable decrease. As some of the core values of Musical Futures—inclusivity, relevance and sociability—are reflected in the JCMP, the new programme may help to increase the uptake of music at junior cycle and could in turn impact on the number of students choosing to study music for Leaving Certificate.

Consideration of the individual is emphasised in the JCMP, which notes the importance of 'the development of the whole person' (NCCA 2017b, p. 6), and social, physical and mental well-being. North et al. (2000) support a notion proposed by Mills (1997) that 'secondary music teachers [should] give less emphasis to teaching music, and greater emphasis to teaching pupils' (p. 270). However, Georgii-Hemming and Westvall (2010) observed that a reliance of the musical interests of students and a 'focus on personal social development' (p. 21) led to limitations of repertoire, content and teaching methods in the Swedish music education system. If a strong continuum between junior and senior cycle is to form it is vital that the development of the whole musician (Hallam 1998) is not overlooked. The role of the teacher is crucial in ensuring that students are prepared for the demands of the Leaving Certificate music programme and that music literacy, aural and musicianship skills are not neglected in the quest to connect with the external social and musical worlds of students. As the Leaving Certificate music course is not dissimilar to the 1989 JCMS in terms of its structure, and prescribed and

exam-focused nature, teachers may be forced to apply some of the pedagogical principles of the JCMP to the Leaving Certificate programme and may be inspired to approach the content in a more creative and interactive fashion than the syllabus itself perhaps encourages.

## Summary

Despite the numerous criticisms directed at music education provision in Ireland over the past number of decades reform has been slow. Prior to the implementation of the JCMP, music at junior cycle had not changed in 30 years. In contrast, the last three decades have seen much development in terms of our understandings of best pedagogical practice, assessment procedures, subject content and student well-being. This chapter has highlighted the need for an inclusive and relevant programme that appeals to a broad range of students and in acknowledging the diversity of previous experience in music participation accommodates individual needs. It has also highlighted the importance of creating a programme that may go some way towards mending the existing fractured continuum which has been created by factors such as inconsistent music education at primary level, and the perception amongst students that 'school music' is outdated. The JCMP cannot ensure that all primary school students have access to music education. However, by aiming to be relevant and inclusive and by promoting student agency it does perhaps have the potential to cater for all, and therefore could perhaps not only mend the 'fractured continuum', but could also function as a starting point in the study of music for some. The JCMP reflects international trends towards student-centred informal learning, with collaborative and inclusive learning environments, a level of flexibility in course content and the incorporation of continuous assessment. In comparison with the majority of other classroom subjects music often takes a back seat, but the recent acknowledgement of the importance of the place and value of the arts particularly in the context of a STEAM education policy is encouraging in this regard.

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**9**

# Bearing the Lion: Reforming Assessment in Junior Cycle

**Damian Murchan**

## Introduction

Nothing encapsulates the drama, tension and acrimony of junior cycle reform more than the debate about proposed changes in assessment. Even before the change was formally introduced in Minister Quinn's *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES 2012), long-standing positions were evident that did not bode well for a smooth implementation. That there was need to reform the curriculum and assessment was not in serious dispute. Concern about the form and function of assessment at junior cycle emerged in almost every review of curriculum since its introduction in 1989 and there was widespread criticism of the negative influence of assessment methods on curriculum, teaching and learning (CEB 1984a; OECD 1991; Government of Ireland 1992; NCCA 1999; Smyth et al. 2007). The changes proposed by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in 2012 sought to rebalance that examinations system and give

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teachers the opportunity to take more control over how their students are assessed, through introduction of some elements of school-based assessment (SBA) for certification purposes. Analysis of why teachers preferred to continue with external, centralised forms of assessment reveals assumptions and challenges underlying trends in many countries for greater teacher involvement in high-stakes assessment and for the need to ensure that policy takes adequate regard of local situational contexts and cultures, both educationally and socially.

Debate about assessment in Ireland is not new. Ireland has a long history of public education stretching back to 1831 in the case of primary schooling. Public secondary education came later, as did evaluation and certification, initially accompanied by a payment-by-results incentive system for primary and secondary teachers that did little to foster child-centred educational experiences for learners. Soon after establishment of the independent Irish state in 1922, the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate exams were introduced, without the payment-by-results. The Primary Certificate Examination was introduced in 1929, followed by the Group Certificate in 1947, at the end of two years vocational education. These and later iterations of the exams were to form the template for certification at second level right up to the present day. Over the decades, there were several changes in curriculum, but relatively little change in assessment. A study of the Leaving Certificate by Madaus and Macnamara (1970) queried the suitability of the exam on a number of grounds, including the reliability of results and over-emphasis on student memorisation of knowledge. One study of the Intermediate Certificate (Heywood et al. 1980) found similar issues and proposed the inclusion of more varied forms of assessment, including SBA. The recommendations were largely ignored but the report, authored by academics in the School of Education, Trinity College, reflected many of the proposals made decades later by the DES in 2012 and 2015. Despite consistent reservations amongst the research community about the suitability of existing assessment arrangements at secondary level, the system remained relatively unchanged until the emergency temporary arrangements for assessment put in place for junior and senior cycle in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Murchan 2020a).

Successful curriculum change needs to be systemic, accompanied by changes in teaching, learning, resources and assessment. Education systems are shaped by how society prioritises aims, purposes and methods at given points in time. Much of the current assessment architecture was developed to align with behaviourist views of learning and teaching prevalent in the mid-twentieth century. Newer sociocultural interpretations of learning and teaching require corresponding adjustments to assessment, without which there remains a disjoint between what and how students learn and how they are assessed (Shepard 2000), a concern likely to apply equally to curriculum reforms in Ireland. Modern interpretations of assessment place it as an integral part of teaching and learning (Lysaght et al. 2019). There was relative agreement on this in relation to junior cycle, where the concept of "classroom assessment" proved far less contentious than assessment as part of certification processes, the latter traditionally developed, administered and scored by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) rather than by teachers. As the debate about assessment of junior cycle achievement evolved, a key issue became the role of the SEC in externally grading students' work, or looked at another way, the role of teachers in assessment for certification. This suggests the need to take a sociocultural perspective that considers issues from the perspectives of different stakeholders, including teachers. Black and Wiliam (2005) highlight the influences of political, societal and cultural factors on assessment practice across different jurisdictions, influences that resonate with the junior cycle reform process in Ireland.

The story of junior cycle reform in Ireland provides interesting illustration of the conceptualisation, implementation and outcomes of assessment reform at the system level. This reform was well conceptualised, planned and research-led and seemed, at the outset, to enjoy widespread support. It was an ambitious agenda developed by people keen to see it succeed and included a commitment to large-scale professional development for teachers. And yet it became mired in controversy in relation to proposed changes in assessment, resulting in delay and significant change to the original plans. The initiative provides an interesting glimpse of scaled-up educational reform in practice, illustrating the complexity of reform and the ways in which policy proceeds through layers of scrutiny and amendments before emerging as embedded practice in schools and classrooms.

# Assessment in Lower Secondary Education Internationally

When originally developed as the Intermediate Certificate Examination in 1924, the assessment at the end of lower secondary education was administered to the relatively small proportion of the cohort remaining in school at that age. For most examinees, it was a terminal exam marking the end of their formal education as they moved on to employment. A century later, enrolment patterns have changed dramatically, with almost the entire cohort completing junior cycle, consistent with an average enrolment of 95% in lower secondary education across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2019). Furthermore, over 90% of students in Ireland remain in school beyond junior cycle to complete the Leaving Certificate Examination (DES 2015b).

Some, but not all, education systems assess student performance towards or at the end of lower secondary education. Around the age of 16, students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, for example, take the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). This qualification offers students a range of subjects and recent reforms in England mean that much of the assessment is in the form of terminal exams scored by the awarding bodies on a scale from nine (the highest score) to one (the lowest). In France, students finishing lower secondary education may elect to be awarded the Diplome National du Brevet (DNB) at age 15. This qualification is based on performance in a number of subjects with grades coming from a combination of continuous assessment throughout Year 9 and some terminal examinations. However, as in Ireland, given the proportion of students proceeding beyond lower secondary education, "the Brevet may be regarded as approaching obsolescence" (Cros 2009, p. 16). Salokangas et al. (Chap. 11, this volume) highlight practices in Finland and Sweden where assessment of student achievement in lower secondary education is conducted either entirely by teachers themselves or through teacher grading of state-developed national curriculum tests. Students in Singapore receive GCSE qualifications in the form of the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of

Education Ordinary Level (GCE O-Level), an exam that largely mirrors the GCSE offered by Cambridge Assessment in the UK, with some greater local control by the Singapore Ministry of Education (SEAB 2020). Overall, internationally, there is varied practice in relation to the certification of student achievement at lower secondary level. Some systems such as Ireland and parts of Britain are quite centralised, either through national or approved awarding bodies, favouring externally marked examinations. Other systems leave such assessment and certification in lower secondary education to teachers and schools.

## Rationale for Reform in Ireland

### National Debate

As noted previously, discussion about reform of curriculum and assessment at lower secondary level long preceded the eventual proposals from the DES in 2012. One report on the Intermediate Certificate Examination (Department of Education 1974) highlighted possibilities for reducing the reliance on essay-type questions through more widespread use of objective items. Later that decade, a series of reports from the Public Examinations Evaluation Project (PEEP) recommended introduction of SBA by teachers as part of student certification (Heywood et al. 1980), but the reports, presented to the Minister, came to nothing in the prevailing educational policymaking of the time. Consultative reports from the fledgling Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB 1984b, 1986) highlighted possible radical changes to assessment, but these did not survive the morphing of the CEB into the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 1987. Surprisingly, little consideration was given to assessment in developing the Junior Certificate Curriculum, first introduced in 1989. However, once the curriculum was introduced into schools greater attention was paid to assessment.

Original conceptualising around the junior certificate envisaged some element of SBA but this was dropped by the time the first cohort of students was examined in 1992. The new curriculum was already in its first

year of implementation before serious debate began in relation to how it would be assessed and the need to think beyond traditional written terminal examinations. Provision for optional orals in some language subjects and optional projects in subjects such as geography received negligible uptake by schools and written and externally scored exams dominated. As the new curriculum bedded in, a number of reports explored issues of assessment. Table 9.1 provides an overview of reports that focused on perceived challenges with curriculum and assessment at junior cycle level. Data in the table suggest that the new programme had hardly started when policymakers began to query the effects of restricted assessment techniques on programme implementation. Only one cohort had been examined when the NCCA (1993, p. 34) called for SBA in the form of "greater diversification of assessment modes [at] school level" supported by continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers and appropriate moderation systems. Similar views emerged also in a government white paper (DES 1995) that highlighted a number of concerns and recommendations including:

- a mismatch between junior cycle objectives and assessment approaches (essentially a test validity concern)
- adverse impact of the examination on teaching methods and student learning
- need to introduce some SBA, along with the far more remote goal that "internal assessment" might also form part of the Leaving Certificate.

Further review and consultations proceeded over a period of two decades, including some research by the Economic Social and Research Institute (ESRI) commissioned by the NCCA.

In an analysis of policy development throughout this period, Murchan (2018) identified two overall conclusions drawn by policymakers from this debate:

- existing approaches to assessment had an adverse impact on teaching, learning and the curriculum itself
- some level of SBA as part of assessment would attenuate that impact.

**Table 9.1** Paving the way for reform of assessment and certification: selected reports on the Junior Certificate (JC), 1992–2012

| Date | Agency and report | Selected issues identified | Relevant recommendations |
|------|-------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1992 | Government of Ireland. *Green Paper* | Nature of the JC exam compromises many approaches and methodologies associated with the revised subject syllabi. | Certify via a mix of external exam and SBA |
| 1993 | NCCA. *A programme for reform* | Restricted range of assessment approaches has an adverse effect on teaching methods and classroom organisation. JC is not an exit exam for students so schools should have flexibility in assessment. | More SBA with associated CPD and moderation |
| 1994 | National Education Convention (1994). *Report* | Exam inhibits realisation of aims and objectives of JC curriculum, promoting subject-based rather than cross-curricular learning. Rewards rote learning and distorts students' curricular experience. Teachers have concerns about SBA. | Role for a mixture of SBA and external exam |
| 1995 | DES. *White Paper* | Assessment methods should promote learning of a diverse range of objectives and encourage teaching approaches consistent with those objectives. | New assessment methods and increased role for SBA. Retain stakeholder confidence. |

**Table 9.1** (continued)

| Date | Agency and report | Selected issues identified | Relevant recommendations |
|------|-------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1999 | NCCA. *Junior Cycle Review* | Mismatch (1) between JC aims and assessments and (2) between students' experience in primary and JC.<br>Terminal exams encourage rote learning by students; *process* of students' learning not captured by exams.<br>Adverse impact of exams on students from disadvantaged backgrounds.<br>Relevance of JC as a high-stakes qualification has ceased.<br>Tension between teachers' role as professionals and excessive focus on exam preparation but teachers have reservations about SBA. | Introduce some SBA as part of JC |
| 1999 | DES (1999). *Issues for Discussion* | JC is not a terminal qualification for most students. Recognises challenges in altering state examinations, perceived as "national icons".<br>Exams can induce student stress. | Introduce combination of external exams and SBA |
| 2004 | NCCA (2004). *Update on JC review* | Terminal exams not serving a broad-based curriculum.<br>Exams narrow teaching, with an over-emphasis on product. | Increased role for A*f*L. Smaller core JC course with additional optional subjects. |

(*continued*)

**Table 9.1** (continued)

| Date | Agency and report | Selected issues identified | Relevant recommendations |
|------|-------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 2004–2007 | ESRI. Three reports from longitudinal study<br>Smyth et al. (2004)<br>Smyth et al. (2006)<br>Smyth et al. (2007) | Student interest in and liking for school and teachers decreases during JC.<br>Evidence of ability-based streaming by some schools, especially for boys.<br>Teaching narrowed to focus on exams; dominance of traditional teaching methods.<br>In-class tests the most frequently form of assessment<br>3rd year focus on preparing for terminal exam.<br>Students like subjects offering opportunity to use active learning methods.<br>Some students increase engagement with school over time but some disengage. Boys and students from working-class backgrounds particularly at risk. | Assessment system is part of but not the entire problem.<br>Schools can promote more student engagement through a number of structural and pedagogical reforms. |
| 2010 | NCCA (2010). *Innovation and identity* | Need to focus on the student experience of the JC as a programme separate from primary and senior cycle curricula. | Offers five scenarios for reforming the JC. |

(*continued*)

**Table 9.1** (continued)

| Date | Agency and report | Selected issues identified | Relevant recommendations |
|------|-------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 2011 | NCCA. *Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle.* | Further focus on student experience. Schools should have more flexibility to design their own JC programme for students. Need to change the assessment system to bring about real change. Assessment of JC should support learning in JC rather than prepare students for state exams at the senior cycle level | Introduce Short Courses. Offer most subjects at one level only. Provide national certificate based on externally set and marked exams (60% weighting) and SBA (40%). |
| 2012 | DES. *A Framework for Junior Cycle.* | Accepts overall analysis of NCCA 2011. Assessment as the key lever of change. Sees DES mainly in advisory role to monitor school and national patterns of results. | School certificate, rather than national. Certify via exams set and marked by school (60%) and SBA (40%), moderated within school. |

What was missed, however, was the latent misgivings teachers had about the second part of that argument, reservations that would prove pivotal in a titanic struggle between the DES and teachers subsequent to publication of the reform proposals in 2012.

The next section of the chapter explores a wider range of international influences that, it is argued, helped shape the initial debate around curriculum reform and the focus on SBA. Lessons and influences from abroad about educational curricula, assessment and certification are heavily referenced in the two final publications listed in Table 9.1: the NCCA advisory paper of 2011 and the DES policy of 2012.

## International Influences

Several educational factors trending internationally informed the national debate about curriculum and assessment at junior cycle. The revised junior cycle includes eight key skills, drawing on twenty-first-century competency models developed by the OECD (2001) and the European Union (2006) and on practices in a number of other countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand (Halbert 2011). Despite much policy enthusiasm, widespread illustration of cross-curricular competencies in practice is difficult to find (Voogt and Roblin 2012) and the assessment of such learning "remains the single biggest barrier to international efforts to integrate 21st century competences into school curricula" (Lysaght et al., 2019, p. 20). Assessing cross-curricular competencies using terminal, external exams poses particular conceptual, technical and logistical challenges.

Another international influence was the relatively poor performance by Irish student on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009, especially in Reading and Mathematics. This issue entered the policy and public debate just as the junior cycle review was reaching a crucial stage. Of the Irish sample in 2009, almost six in ten students were in 3rd Year (Perkins et al. 2010), placing considerable spotlight on junior cycle. These results generated significant impact, prompting introduction of a national literacy and numeracy strategy (DES 2011) and informed decision-making in relation to junior cycle reform at the highest levels within the DES (Murchan 2018). Part of the solution, according to the policymakers, lay in greater use of SBA in schools, in keeping with practice in a number of education systems that performed well in PISA. Systems such as Finland (ranked 3rd in Reading achievement in 2009 amongst all countries participating), Hong Kong (4th), New Zealand (7th) and Queensland (Australia 9th) were significantly above Ireland's ranking of 21 (OECD 2010) and were highlighted as systems where SBA played a positive role.

# Balancing the Formative and Summative Purposes of Assessment

Assessment serves a range of purposes in education (Murchan and Shiel 2017; Newton 2007), exerting a powerful influence on teaching, learning and achievement (Black and Wiliam 2009; Hattie 2009). Teachers can use the results of assessments in class to gauge how students are learning and adjust teaching accordingly; students can self-check their understanding of concepts and address any misconceptions identified, thus engaging in self-regulation of their own learning; policymakers can use the results of national and international assessments to estimate achievements levels for the population and subgroups of students and frame appropriate policy response. Different stakeholders involved in education have different purposes for assessment, some of which are termed formative, others summative.

## Formative Assessment

This chapter uses the terms *formative assessment* and *assessment for learning* interchangeably, setting aside nuanced differences outlined in Wiliam (2011). Similarly, the term *summative assessment* is used for *assessment of learning*. Formative assessment is primarily focused at the individual student level and has as its primary function the improvement of student learning. Thus, the strategies that teachers typically use in class to check on students' understanding of a topic and help them in their work constitute formative assessment. So too do the increasing number of digital assessments that accompany learning materials, with a view to helping students achieve mastery of concepts. Such approaches aim to "identify gaps between student understanding and intended learning outcomes and to adapt teaching and learning so as to close any gaps" (Looney 2018, p. 129). Research indicates that formative assessment benefits student learning, motivation, behaviour and ownership by students of their own learning with evidence of particular gains for low-achieving students (Black and Wiliam 1998; Wiliam 2011; Faragher 2014). Additionally, assessment-rich classrooms foster more positive, dynamic and

collaborative teacher-student interactions, lower levels of disruption in class and greater levels of teacher autonomy in relation to their own professional practice.

## Summative Assessment

Teachers, students and parents are also familiar with summative assessment, for example, the term and end-of-year tests frequently administered in schools, along with state examinations at the end of junior and senior cycle. Though summative assessment is frequently interpreted as based on exams, tests or other "performance" undertaken by students, it also includes teacher judgments of students' work based on indicators of quality relating to a wide range of student engagement and learning (e.g. homework, portfolio, project, group/class participation, etc.). Summative assessments have as their primary function the identification of students' present level of understanding, skill, performance and competence in relation to intended learning outcomes. Results of such assessments are frequently communicated in the form of marks, grades or descriptors, which when clearly understood by the relevant audience, provide succinct description of students' achievement, frequently in relation to the achievement of other students or groups of students. Benefits attributed to summative assessment include offering a fair and efficient method for grading students and providing motivation to students to engage with learning (Brown and Hattie 2012; Morris 2011). In a review of 670 studies, Phelps (2012) found positive effects in relation to student motivation, active engagement with information, capacity to remember information, teaching strategies and alignment of teaching with curriculum specifications. He concluded that

> one hundred years' evidence suggests that testing increases achievement …
> [and that] ... studies finding positive effects on achievement exist in robust
> number, greatly outnumber those finding negative effects, and date back a
> hundred years. (pp. 39–40)

In a similar vein, the OECD (2013) highlights four potentials of summative assessment:

- Signal high standards and expected performance
- Motivate students to increase effort and achievement
- Provide information about performance to students, parents and others
- Certify learning and award qualifications

## Tensions Between Formative and Summative Purposes of Assessment

High-stakes exams have a strong impact on what is taught and learned in school, exerting "strong pressure on students, their parents, teachers, and schools but also [having] serious consequences for users of results and for governments or examination agencies that implement them" (Kellaghan and Greaney 2020, p. 1). Outcomes from school-leaving exams with gatekeeping functions to college and employment are critical to students' life chances and to the reputation of schools in which they are enrolled (Isaacs 2018). Therefore, despite the evidence that formative assessment promotes learning and the existence of policy initiatives to embed formative assessment in educational systems (OECD 2013) there is frequent tension between the formative and summative purposes of assessment in school (Harlen 2005; Looney 2011) with teachers frequently under pressure to ensure that students do well on high-stakes exams. Ratnam-Lim and Tan (2015) highlight the pervasive influence of high-stakes examinations in Singapore and the challenges faced by policymakers and teachers trying to introduce greater levels of formative assessment in classrooms. Similarly, policymakers in Hong Kong, another system with a high-stakes assessment culture, have struggled to promote formative assessment practices in schools (Berry 2011). There are frequent complaints from teachers and students that the pressure of terminal exams and other summative assessments dominate curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment. This reflects concerns expressed about students' experience of junior cycle where pressure of the exam gradually led to a "reduction in more engaging student-centred" teaching and learning in favour of more didactic methods based on teaching-to-the-test (Smyth and Banks 2012, p. 300). This was exactly the type of challenge underpinning Irish policymakers'

view that "unless the examination changes, nothing else will" (NCCA 2011, p. 5).

## Balancing External and Internal Assessment

Another dichotomy in educational assessment, relevant to the story of junior cycle, focuses on who undertakes the assessment or, specifically, who grades the work of students? Whereas teachers are central to the process of formative assessment, this is not necessarily the case for summative forms, especially high-stakes exams used to certify student achievement at the end of second-level education. Questions of interest include:

- Who develops the assessment task?
- Who marks the student work?
- Who provides quality assurance for the grading?

In many education systems including most of Europe, Africa, South Asia and China, a central authority (e.g. ministry, national examinations agency or licenced provider) develops the assessment task to ensure standardisation across all candidates (Kellaghan and Greaney 2020). In other systems, such as Finland tasks and marking criteria are developed locally by teachers or schools, who evaluate students' work. Thus, in high-stakes assessment environments, marking of student work can be undertaken by the central agency exclusively (as in Ireland and France), by students' own teachers (Finland and some German states) or a combination of both (Queensland). Practice in relation to quality assurance varies, with some systems adopting a centralised state system of moderation while others depend on teachers within or across schools to undertake this work.

Concern about the extent to which external exams can adequately capture the diversity of learning outcomes has prompted systems to introduce elements of SBA so that student certification is based on a combination of external and internal (teacher-supplied) marks. Kellaghan and Greaney (2020) highlight several advantages and challenges associated with SBAs (see Fig. 9.1).

|  | Advantages | Challenges |
|---|---|---|
| | • Increased scope of learning that can be assessed | • Unreliability of teacher grades |
| | • Positive impact on learning | • Teaching-to-the-assessment (SBA) by some teachers |
| | • Professional autonomy for teachers | • Pressure on teachers to award high grades |
| | • Represents a form of CPD | • Teacher workload |

**Fig. 9.1** Advantages and challenges associated with SBA. (Adapted from Kellaghan and Greaney 2020)

The weighting of the SBA component varies across systems and across subjects within systems, with figures of 20–40% typical in England, with 20% more typical in Irish state exams. In Queensland, where for years certification was based on SBA exclusively, there has been re-weighting of the system to include a measure of external assessment, a pattern evident in the reduction of "controlled assessment" in the GCSE in England since 2015 (Ofqual 2013). Despite the challenges associated with SBA, Kellaghan and Greaney (2020) propose a number of steps that can be taken to ensure its effectiveness and acceptability to stakeholders as part of high-stakes certification of students. Approaches include clear specification of assessment tasks and scoring criteria; provision of support materials and CPD to teachers; careful communication with students and parents; and moderation and/or statistical adjustment of teacher marks.

## Achieving Assessment Balance in Junior Cycle

The pre-reform junior certificate typically involved students studying 11 or 12 subjects which were offered at two or three tiers or levels, *higher*, *ordinary* or *foundation*. For the most part, students were "formally assessed largely on the basis of written exams at the end of third year" at the conclusion of three years lower secondary education (Smyth et al. 2007, p. 2). Student work was assessed externally and anonymously by teachers

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ancient Greek | Art, Craft, Design[1] | Business Studies | CSPE[1] |
| Classical Studies | English | Environmental & Social Studies | French[2] |
| Geography | German[2] | History | Home Economics[1] |
| Irish[2] | Italian[2] | Jewish Studies | Latin |
| Material Technology (Wood)[1] | Mathematics | Metalwork[1] | Music |
| Religious Education[1] | Science[1] | Spanish[2] | Technical Graphics |
| Technology[1] | Typewriting | | |

**Fig. 9.2** Pre-reform junior cycle subjects and associated mandatory[1] and/or optional[2] coursework/oral components

hired by the SEC and teachers did not assess the work of their own students. There were some elements of externally assessed orals, coursework and projects in some subjects, as outlined in Fig. 9.2. Whereas projects and coursework were part of subjects, such as Religious Education (20% weighting) and Science (35%), concerns were expressed about the extent to which these reflected genuine engagement by students with learning outcomes as opposed to memorisation of procedures to include in project notebooks and reports.

Given the perceived dominance of summative assessment, policymakers sought to make dedicated space for formative assessment in the revised programme. Initially termed *classroom assessment* (DES 2012, p. 20), further revision introduced the nomenclature of an *ongoing assessment* (DES 2015a, p. 36), with a focus on providing feedback to students, planning next steps in teaching and learning and improving teaching and learning. The proposals for formative assessment were generally welcomed, alongside calls for appropriate CPD for teachers. What generated more interest and controversy were proposals intended to provide evidence for

- Introduction of standardised tests for Year 2 students in reading, mathematics and science

- Use of Classroom Based Assessment (CBA) (40%) to certify student achievement, internally moderated within school.

- Remainder of assessment via exams (60%), set and marked by school

- Monitoring role for DES, to advise schools based on national patterns.

- *Junior Cycle School Award* (Certificate) issued to students by the School

- Phased implementation period 2014 – 2020.

**Fig. 9.3** Key assessment elements in *Framework for Junior Cycle*. (DES 2012)

certifying student achievement at junior cycle and reporting to parents. The 2012 proposals placed responsibility on schools themselves to assess and certify students, after a brief transition period where the SEC would be involved. Key aspects relating to assessment are included in Fig. 9.3.

Overall, the DES policy of 2012 differed in small but ultimately important ways from the proposals one year earlier from the NCCA (2011). The key points of difference were around (1) the exam component (externally set and marked under the NCCA proposals) and (2) moderation of the SBA (externally by SEC in the NCCA proposal). Over subsequent months and years, these changes became key to negotiation and acceptance of the reforms, especially by representatives of teachers, who argued that the changes were "educationally unsound" (TUI 2014) and that teachers "cannot be advocate and judge" for students and thus should not be responsible for assessing their own students (ASTI 2013, p. 24). Several arguments were advanced by teachers, the most enduring of which centred on the need to retain public and parental confidence in the integrity of marks from junior cycle assessment and maintain existing relationships between teachers, students and parents. Overall, representatives of teachers queried the extent to which pubic trust in the impartiality of teachers could be maintained in a school-based assessment system used for junior cycle certification. Just as viewpoints differed across

stakeholders such as policymakers, parents, students and teachers, different views emerged amongst teachers themselves, with the larger union, the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI), engaging in the most sustained opposition to assessment proposals whereas the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) found greater merit in the revised proposals and engaged with the reforms at an early stage.

Given teachers' opposition, the DES revised the proposals and Fig. 9.4 presents a summary of the main adjustments in relation to assessment. Key to the proposals was introduction of a form of SBA termed *Classroom-Based Assessment* (CBA) in each subject. CBAs were intended to assess aspects of students' learning that were difficult to demonstrate using exams. Tasks for the CBAs would be developed by the NCCA, completed in class by students over a defined time period according to a national timetable and assessed by teachers using prescribed criteria. Results would be communicated directly to students and parents but

- Students complete 2 CBAs per subject, one each in Years 2 and 3.

- Students complete one in-class written *Assessment Task* (AT) in most subjects in Year 3. Similar to controlled assessment. Worth 10% of SEC grade (exam = 90%).

- Terminal exams retained, set and graded by SEC. Exams offered generally at one level, of 2 hours duration.

- Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings involving relevant staff in school to discuss CBA standards and marks.

- *Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement* (Certificate) issued to students by the School. This contains results of exams and ATs graded and certified by SEC, along with results of CBAs and other information provided by school.

- Phased implementation period 2014 – 2022.

**Fig. 9.4**   Key assessment elements in *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*. (DES 2015a)

would not form part of state certification. Such certification would come in the form of (1) a modified version of the traditional terminal exams, set and scored by the SEC and (2) one written Assessment Task in most subjects (controlled assessment) to be taken in class by students in 3rd year but, crucially, scored by the SEC. In effect, a two-tier system was created, whereby a different scoring scale was developed for the CBA and the SEC dimensions of assessment. Described as a "dual-currency solution" (Murchan 2015), this ensures that a composite "score" for a student cannot be compiled from the school-based and SEC results.

The changes, based on an agreement in principle between the unions and the DES (TUI et al. 2015), assuaged some but not all teacher concerns, particularly amongst members of the larger teacher union the ASTI, and the dispute about the assessment proposals continued and widened to include some separate concerns of teachers around pay and conditions. This resulted in some closures of schools due to industrial action in 2016. Further negotiations and concessions, including the granting of 22 hours non-teaching time to teachers annually to enable them, in part, to engage with the SLAR process, eventually resulted in agreement just before students were to sit the first (English) exam under the revised junior cycle in June 2017.

Negotiations about the nature of the reforms extended from publication of the initial policy in 2012 to the 2016–2017 school year, passing through many obstacles along the way. A phased implementation was planned, involving sequential introduction of subjects to incoming first year students beginning with English in September 2014 to 2019–2020. It was also planned to offer CPD to teachers and school leaders in advance of and during implementation (see Chap. 12 in this volume for details). With the final set of subjects introduced in September 2019, the first cohort of students to complete the full junior cycle, including assessment elements, will graduate in June 2022. As new subjects are examined for the first time, issues emerge. For example, based on sample papers provided by the SEC during 2019 teachers questioned the suitability of the Irish exam paper planned for administration to students in June 2020, an external exam that was cancelled, in any event, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers also expressed reservations about junior

cycle assessment that they believed focuses more on literature than the previous version where 40% of marks were awarded for an oral examination (Ó Caollai 2019).

## Summary

The debate, disagreements and compromises associated with junior cycle reform provide useful insights into the practical realities of introducing fundamental change in curricula and assessment at scale in any school system. Agreement seemed easier to reach in some areas than others. Proposed change that had proceeded in what seemed to be a reasonably confident manner ran into difficulty as it got closer to implementation. All parties to the process agreed that change was necessary and that the quality of education for students is of the highest priority. The importance of assessment was widely acknowledged yet agreeing the specific nature of change was and continues to be difficult to achieve in practice.

This chapter addressed the most contested aspect of junior cycle reform, analysing a dispute around assessment that threatened to derail the entire reform initiative. Topics in the chapter focused on a number of themes that relate assessment reform in Ireland to global trends in assessment. Assessment practices at lower secondary level in several education systems were reviewed, highlighting a diversity of practice. The case for reform of junior cycle assessment was analysed in relation to national and international influences. These included concerns articulated and sustained over a two-decade period that highlighted the adverse impact of the extant assessment system in terms of narrowing of teaching, learning and the curriculum itself. International influences were also reviewed, including the impact of Ireland's version of PISA shock in relation to the 2009 survey results in reading and mathematics and a perception that some education systems regarded as "high performing" incorporated elements of school-based assessment. The chapter also focused on the tensions that exist between formative and summative assessment and how this played out in the Irish context where disagreement about how student achievement would be certified side-lined serious discussion about the potential for assessment to facilitate students' learning. Contrasting views also emerged amongst different stakeholders on the

appropriateness of school-based assessment for state certification purposes, an argument that teachers won. The story of reforming assessment at junior cycle has implications for reform at senior cycle, where the stakes are genuinely high for students, teachers and the system as a whole. Teachers are demanding that a full evaluation of the effectiveness of change at junior cycle be undertaken prior to any changes at senior cycle. Whereas it is difficult to predict the shape of eventual proposals at senior cycle, the lessons from the junior cycle and from the implementation of calculated grades to replace the 2020 Leaving Certificate exam due to COVID-19 (Murchan 2020b) suggest that they may be less ambitious. What this will mean for students as they negotiate their way towards the end of second-level schooling and on to higher education and/or employment remains to be seen.

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# Part III

## Planning and Implementing Change

# 10

# The Politics of Educational Reform

## Clive Byrne

## Introduction

As President of the European School Heads Association, I frequently attended conferences where I was questioned about Ireland's education system. I explained that of the cohort of students that start off in our schools aged four, 90% of them are still in the system aged 18 (DES 2017a). This is an unusually high retention rate in many of the 40+ national associations that represent second level school leaders in over 30 countries throughout Europe. When I explained that nearly 70% of that 90% go on to some form of third level education you could see colleagues nod in admiration at an effective education system. You could understand their surprise then when I went on to explain that in Ireland a good education is synonymous with good exam results (not mutually exclusive I'll admit) but good exam results are often the result of a skewed education system where teaching-to-the-test is valued rather than the more

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rounded education to which we all aspire. Immigrants who have been drawn to Ireland since the economic boom of the 1990s bring the richness of cultural diversity and a longing for education which, when matched with the traditional value Irish society has for education, create the conditions to make Ireland an educational powerhouse for generations to come. However, the current perception of a good teacher is one who can reduce course content to a minimum, suggest exam questions to be learned off by heart and reproduced. In Irish secondary education students stand or fall based on how they perform in a single terminal exam. Talented students are not best served by this approach. Education is not a political football in Ireland. Here, the phrase 'things have always been thus' can readily be applied. There is a national consensus that our education system is good so, as a society, we have been reluctant to change a system which appears to be 'not broken'.

Most children start school aged 4 and enter second level at around 12 years of age. There has been a significant increase in the numbers attending primary school in recent years and this bulge will continue working its way through the post-primary system until 2024–2025 (Central Statistics Office n.d.-a [online_a]). State policy emphasises inclusion at both levels and this has led to a situation where almost 20% of education investment is in the Special Education Needs (SEN) sector. Austerity measures and cutbacks were the order of the day when Ruairi Quinn was appointed as Minister for Education and Skills in 2011. His predecessors, Mary Coughlan and Batt O'Keefe had considered changes to junior cycle so reform was already on the agenda by the time Minister Quinn came into office. A former Minister for Finance, Minister Quinn realised that reforms to our education system were necessary to meet the needs of the economy and in October 2012 he announced that the current Junior Certificate programme would be phased out and that the existing terminal examinations system would be replaced by a school-based model of continuous assessment.

# Pressures Prompting Reform

On the basis of the 'if it's not broken don't fix it' attitude, there is no doubt that our complacency as a nation was jolted in 2009 by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) findings that showed a drop of 12 places in literacy performance. The PISA study gauges the learning outcome of students aged 15 in mathematical, scientific and reading literacy. The foremost aim in PISA is to gauge students' knowledge and competencies in contexts as close to real-life situations as possible. The consternation caused by the drop of 12 places in Ireland's literacy performance was palpable. With the country in recession, the results were viewed as a national calamity. The Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) and Minister for Education and Skills Mary Coughlan officially commenced discussion on junior cycle developments in April 2010. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) had previously carried out research over several years on the experiences of students in junior cycle (Smyth et al. 2007). Key points of concern which emerged from the research included:

- inadequate time for engagement with deeper learning
- the dominating effect of the Junior Certificate examination on teaching and learning practice
- the perception of an inflexible and overcrowded curriculum
- the disengagement of many students at an early stage of junior cycle
- the narrow range of assessment activity
- limited access to a single qualification.

In addition, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) engaged in extensive discussions with interested groups in the hope of agreeing a new junior cycle which would see:

- schools having a greater freedom to design their own junior cycle programme
- movement away from the Junior Certificate being the sole method of qualification from the junior cycle to the introduction of a qualification which could relate to several forms of learning

- a junior cycle with flexible boundaries between 6th class and senior cycle
- learners having a greater role in their learning with more emphasis on student reflection, cooperative learning and self-directed learning
- schools having a wider choice as to how they can generate and use evidence of their students' learning
- schools having an increased role as curriculum developers and as designers of their own junior cycle programme according to the needs of their learners.

The PISA results matter in the boardrooms of multi-national businesses where key investment decisions are made. Unfortunately, the stand out headlines only refer to national rankings and should the news be good there can be complacency, should the news be grim, the headlines will make adverse comments on the quality of an education system and of those working in it. On foot of the PISA results Minister Quinn decided the time for action had come and announced changes to the Junior Certificate. His announcement was controversial and unexpected. The teacher unions believed that the speed with which the NCCA's advice was to be adopted and implemented as policy was unhelpful and they called for further discussions. However, the Minister was not for turning and a period of protracted industrial unrest began in schools. During an address in October 2012 to the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) National Executive, I gave the following comment endorsing Minister Quinn's proposal to reform the Junior Certificate:

> We need joined up thinking between the primary and second level. The move to reform the Junior Cert can't come soon enough. We also need to stop using the Leaving Cert as a filter for third level because what happens at Leaving Cert governs everything else that's taught down the line. High performing systems allow schools to design curricula and assessment policies. We need to trust our schools, our school leaders and our teachers more and stop harping on about how great we are. The way the country is now—average isn't good enough. (Byrne 2012)

# Stakeholder Involvement

Key players needed to be kept onside to enable the reforms to succeed. Among these were the school leaders, teacher unions, the parents, the management bodies and the school students and the following sections detail the reactions and involvement of these key stakeholders as the reforms moved along.

## School Leaders

School leaders are vital to the successful implementation of any initiatives. By and large, principals were in favour of any reform which would enable them to be responsible for the educational outcomes of their students. Finding time to be the leader of learning eluded many due to being bogged down in paperwork and other administrative tasks. In response, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) sanctioned the creation of additional in-school management posts to ease this burden. These included the appointment of new deputy principals and middle leadership posts.

## Teachers

The teacher unions have served Irish education well. Despite the current teacher shortage, teaching is a well-regarded profession with good social status and pay scales that compare well internationally (OECD 2018). However, as a key player in the context of education reform, as the recession hit and severe cuts were implemented on salaries across the public sector, industrial relations in the education sector became tetchy and downright hostile when it came to curricular reform. This made the task of implementing the junior cycle reforms very difficult and led to ongoing industrial action by the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI) which adversely affected the school climate in the majority of schools. Teachers employed in schools run by Education and Training Boards (ETB) were not directly involved in the industrial action as these

teachers were represented by a different union, the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI), which adopted a more positive view of the reforms. At the heart of the dispute was the unwillingness of ASTI members to assess their own students for the purposes of state exams. They saw themselves as advocates for the student rather than judges and refused to mark their own students' work for state examination purposes. Teachers are an enormous asset in Irish education but their refusal to make professional judgements when assessing students is unusual when compared to other countries where, as professionals, teachers are quite willing to make and stand over their assessments of the standards reached by their students (see Chap. 11 in this volume for an international comparison). Opposition to junior cycle reforms acted as a focal point for teacher anger and resentment over several years. In 2017, the DES asked schools to ensure that teachers were granted 22 hours non-teaching time annually, within their existing contracted hours, to undertake professional collaborative activities with colleagues, designed to support teaching and learning on the revised junior cycle (DES 2017b).

## Parents

The parent voice is represented by two organisations in Irish education, the National Parents Council Primary (NPC) and the National Parents Council Post-primary (NPCpp). Both groups are represented under legislation on key agencies such as the NCCA and the Teaching Council of Ireland. Junior cycle reforms was a post-primary initiative, and while the NPCpp, by its sectoral and fragmented nature, might not be as effective or as representative as its primary counterpart, it was forceful in favour of the proposed reforms. In the initial stages of the reform process, some parents throughout the country supported the ASTI position that teachers should not be involved in the assessment of their own students. There was dissension in the ranks, but in general, the vocal support of NPCpp officers was a key factor in Minister Quinn seeking to progress his reforms.

## Students

As highlighted in Chap. 3 in this volume, student voice has emerged as a key dynamic in the educational debate. The Irish Second-level Student Union (ISSU) although a fledgling organisation came out strongly in support of the proposed junior cycle reforms and were to the fore in advocating a move away from the rigid exam-based structure most were used to. As the group most likely to be affected by the changes, their voice was a powerful antidote to the strong opposition expressed by many ASTI members seeking to challenge the reforms.

## A Fragmented Second Level System

The junior cycle reforms were planned nationally and intended to be implemented in a secondary school system that is itself not uniform in terms of ownership or management. The managerial ownership (in Irish terms, *patronage*) of Irish schools is fragmented, with each second level school operating under the aegis of a Patron Body. The largest such group is the Voluntary Secondary Sector under the control of the Churches and religious Trust Bodies. The second largest operates under the control of the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) which control vocational schools and community colleges. The Community and Comprehensive Sector is the smallest of the Patron Bodies. Of the 722 second-level schools, 378 are in the Voluntary Secondary Sector, 248 are in the Education and Training Board sector and 96 in the Community and Comprehensive Sector (DES 2019). In Ireland, the state pays for education but does not control the schools. Each school is controlled by a Board of Management, and as a result, the second level system is driven by competition between schools rather than by schools collaborating. Grants to schools to pay the costs of student enrolment and staffing allocations to schools are linked to student numbers so schools always compete for students to the detriment of positive collaboration between them.

Early in the reform implementation phase, the ETB sector was less affected by industrial unrest. This sector benefited from the more pragmatic view of what was best as held by the TUI whose members were

mostly teaching in the ETB schools. These teachers were permitted to attend courses by the new Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) professional development agency which meant that the reforms were embedded earlier and more effectively than in the other sectors. The management bodies played an important role in the roll-out of the reforms in that they were involved at every stage of the industrial relations talks with the teacher unions. The NAPD does not have an industrial relations remit and was consulted but not included in discussions with the unions. This area became more blurred as the opposition to the reforms continued until a *modus vivendi* emerged. This enabled the NAPD to participate fully in discussions with the DES and the management bodies but not attend meetings with the unions, thus enabling progress to be made. The following section explores additional efforts by the NAPD to support junior cycle reforms.

## Supporting Education Reform

To frame the national debate on education, the NAPD hosted a symposium entitled 'Good Policies produce Better Schools' in 2011. Eamon Stack, former Chief Inspector, presented on the 'lessons of high performing education systems' based on the work of Fenton Whelan from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Barber and Mourshed 2007). He listed Whelan's seven priorities and emphasised the need for strategic thinking and planning. Whelan called for fewer but better teachers, attracting higher calibre applicants to become teachers, effective leadership in every school, proof that high standards are achieved, empower teachers to be accountable and collaborative, build teachers' professional knowledge and challenge inequity in pupils' outcomes. In his presentation, Professor Tom Collins, then Interim President of Maynooth University, spoke of 'A way forward for Ireland? Or the Future and Education'. He questioned whether schools, as they are, are fit for purpose, querying assumptions sometimes made. These assumptions include the following: knowledge is beyond the power of students and none of their business; recall is the highest form of achievement; authority is to be trusted more than independent

judgement; one's own ideas are inconsequential; there are single unambiguous answers to every question; and passive acceptance supersedes active criticism. Collins viewed *creative cultures* as the way forward. He maintained that Ireland lacks an effective model of innovation and that social networks are needed because minds, not databases, are the creators of knowledge. He finished by saying:

> if we go after the junior cycle with the actual focus on saying let us create experiences, students can create their own learning in new ways, rather than under the direction of their teachers, in interaction with the community inside the school and outside then we really are beginning to challenge the syllabus and curriculum of the future. (Collins 2011)

Teachers were forbidden by an ASTI directive from participating in Continuous Professional Development (CPD) organised to further the roll-out of the junior cycle initiative. The NAPD decided to establish a Leading 4 Learning Work Group to explore and develop the many strands of the junior cycle initiative. The essential Leading 4 Learning message is outlined below.

- Our core purpose as leaders is to ensure the highest possible standard of learning in all our classrooms.
- Leaders need to initiate and sustain a dialogue about learning in our schools.
- Concrete things can be done to promote teaching and learning dialogues in each school.
- Leaders need to place learning to learn on the school's agenda.
- Leaders must embrace the new Junior Certificate as a once in a lifetime opportunity for reform.
- Now is the hour to ensure that learning is enjoyable.
- Making change is just not simple.

Professor Guy Claxton from Winchester University became a key ally in the Leading 4 Learning network. His focus on embedding the development of lifelong learning dispositions in the culture of schools (e.g.

Claxton 2008) resonated with the work of the NAPD. He identified several related key phrases in the junior cycle documentation, as follows:

- being flexible,
- being positive about learning,
- knowing when and how to make use of your imagination,
- exploring options,
- taking the right kind of risks,
- being adventurous in your attitude to learning,
- being good at learning with and from others in all kinds of different ways,
- being curious,
- being proactive about your learning,
- being able to be your own first marker and
- to reflect on and evaluate learning for yourselves.

He reminded listeners that it is the detail of teaching that makes all the difference. He quoted Dylan Wiliam, speaking at the Secondary School Admission Test (SSAT) national conference in 2009, who summarised the significance of the classroom experience: 'An effective school is a school full of effective classrooms. It matters much less which school a child attends than which classroom they are in in that school. In England there is a fourfold difference between the most effective and least effective classrooms'.

Seminars were organised throughout Ireland by Paul Ginnis Rest in Peace (RIP), Graham Powell and Mike Hughes. The Powell workshops on 'Building the Learning Powered School' and Hughes workshops using the 'Magenta Principles' learning methodologies were taking place as the junior cycle reforms were being implemented in schools. Seminars were offered to a member of the senior leadership teams in schools accompanied by three or four colleagues. However, due to the negative industrial relations climate at the time junior cycle reforms per se was not mentioned at the sessions. The workshops were extremely practical and interactive, and the idea was to encourage teacher professional development by engaging in professional dialogue. Hundreds of NAPD member

schools participated in these workshops which helped change teaching and learning methodologies as well as spreading the word in individual schools.

## Implications for Educational Leadership

Evidence used to support the case for junior cycle reforms (e.g. Smyth et al. 2007) suggested that the curriculum, assessment and associated teaching approaches promoted teaching-to-the-test, rote learning, memorisation and competition within and between schools and, of course, league tables. A reformed Junior Certificate was intended to encourage teacher-supported self-directed learning as well as innovation, experimentation, self-discovery and collaboration within and between schools. The role of the teacher would fundamentally change to become a facilitator of student learning. Classrooms would have less teaching and more learning. The big challenge for Principals was to convince teachers, parents and students of the need for change and to enable teachers engage with the new pedagogy and how it will change classroom practices and improve the nature and quality of learning. In addition, since Ireland has little history of inter-school collaboration—mainly due to local competition for student enrolment—developing collaboration between and within schools is both a challenge and an opportunity. The Junior Certificate will now make learning the activity of the learner who will be active in constructing sense from the classroom environment and not passively receiving it. Teachers will be encouraged to collaborate with learners about the sequence of topics in the curriculum and to collaborate with learners on how they learn most effectively. The current system, oriented towards scores, grades and exam results, reinforces the idea that ability leads to success and is about *proving* competence which leads to assessment *of* learning. What is needed now is for the Junior Certificate to *improve* competence, to instil assessment *for* learning. The 'new' Junior Certificate is oriented towards learning and has at its heart a belief that effort leads to success.

It is important that, before embarking on further system-wide reform at senior cycle, parents and educators are assured that the reforms proposed in junior cycle work. The system can afford to be imaginative in the

reforms, provided school leaders are adequately resourced to deliver the new model. The Junior Certificate is no longer a terminal exam because about nine out of ten children who start school stay there to complete the Leaving Certificate. Research from the Economic and Social Research Institute (Smyth et al. 2004) found that many students in their first year of secondary school make little or no progress in reading and maths. In the second year, many become disengaged and some of them rarely reconnect with school. Reform of the junior cycle curriculum, along with associated changes in teaching approaches, should address such matters. As things change, it is important to be mindful of what is working within the system. Ireland has talented teachers and school leaders who care about the students and who have demonstrated creativity and innovation in straightened economic times. The 'old' junior cycle restricts teachers' professional autonomy, judgement, creativity and passion with packed prescribed curricula. The 'new' junior cycle will allow schools to develop their own programmes and make the best use of the passion and creativity of staff. Principals must be helped to understand, and in turn help teachers, students and parents understand, why Junior Certificate reform must be prioritised. Such a reform is deliverable, provided it is supported by adequate resources. The integrity of the education system must be upheld, and standards not dumbed down. By trusting teachers and challenging pre-conceptions, Ireland can aspire to a second level system that is responsive to societal needs and stands on its own educational merits.

At one level, it seems that the junior cycle debate was reduced to a row over assessment. However, at the heart of the reform is the devolution of greater autonomy to schools to develop and resource a curriculum which meets the students' needs. Minister Quinn's original intention was that schools would have the autonomy to decide which eight subjects a student would offer for assessment by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and the remaining time on the timetable would be made up by students selecting up to four short courses in areas such as Coding, Philosophy, Chinese or other areas depending on the context of the school or the expertise of the teachers locally. Such a decision, if implemented, would have forced schools to offer more radical timetables with wider choice to students but the subsequent decision made by the Minister to allow up to ten subjects for assessment meant that many

schools continued with the status quo and the opportunity for a more radical change to school timetables was lost. The decision to phase in subjects, starting with English in September 2014 rather than introduce several subjects simultaneously was a lost opportunity. Teachers of English felt exposed in that theirs was the only subject to be introduced and many were precluded by their union from taking part in CPD and preparation. Had three or four subjects been introduced at the same time, teachers of one subject area would not have felt as exposed as teachers of English did, and an important opportunity to encourage collaboration and professional dialogue between colleagues could have been secured.

Ministers changed, time moved on, other subjects were launched, and the union embargo was lifted. This meant that the tone of the conversation changed and the potential benefits of new teaching and learning opportunities came more to the fore. To help embed different modes of assessment classroom-based assessments (CBAs) were introduced, accompanied by Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings. The DES granted 22 hours professional time to teachers annually in the hope that local contexts and good relations would enable the successful transition to CBA and SLAR meetings becoming the norm. Unfortunately, some industrial relations issues again arose with the result that this is not the case in all schools. Whereas the Assessment Task associated with the second CBA is only worth 10% of total marks, some school leaders report that CBAs have taken on a disproportionate weight and a status of their own. Amongst students and their parents, anxiety levels are raised to those typically experienced by students taking the Leaving Certificate. This is an unintended negative consequence that seems to be more of an issue in schools that have retained Christmas and summer exams when the intention was that classroom-based assessments would replace these in-house tests. In time the advantages of the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) which will include all subjects examined by the SEC, learning from short courses and CBAs as well other areas of student involvement will be recognised.

## Lessons for Senior Cycle Reform

Participation in PISA generates an enormous amount of data that can inform policy and educational priorities for policy makers and other educational leaders. However, the rich data contained in the PISA studies are often reduced to crude league tables about how well or how poorly individual countries have performed. School leaders, such as the NAPD and other management associations, must lobby politicians to see education as an investment, not as a cost. Education needs careful nurturing, adequate resourcing and trust in our teachers for our investment in the next generation to pay off.

As reform of the junior cycle takes hold, the time is right to consider how best to reform senior cycle (upper secondary education). To avoid the disharmony generated by the introduction of the junior cycle reforms, the NCCA is undertaking a rigorous consultation to review the senior cycle. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) undertook extensive research to analyse the opinions of teachers, parents and students in 41 representative schools selected to be involved (Smyth et al. 2018). Preliminary findings suggested that:

- students were not taking ownership of their learning;
- the current exam is weighted towards the academically minded;
- broader skills are neglected; there is a need to prepare students for the digital age;
- handwritten exams are incongruous with the digital agenda in society;
- there is a perceived gap between junior and senior cycle;
- issues of validity, reliability and anonymity are not the same as fairness.

There is a significant challenge in pursuing the wider purposes of the Leaving Certificate given the widespread use of student results as a selection mechanism for third level. There is also a desire to reduce the emphasis on assessment during the final three weeks of senior cycle. It was clear from the ESRI findings that future developments at senior cycle need to ensure continuity with the junior cycle and with developments in further education, apprenticeships and traineeships. Given the challenges in

encouraging schools to take greater responsibility for curricula at junior cycle, it is interesting that the question of compulsory subjects, subject choice and pathways using the Leaving Certificate Applied and Vocational emerged as areas to be considered in the senior cycle review.

What should a well-educated 18-year old look like was a question posed at a recent NAPD symposium as Ireland continues a national debate about how well the education system caters for all students. Ireland has changed over the last decade. Recent census statistics indicate that 12% of the population comes from a non-Irish background (CSO Online_b). Students in Irish schools are drawn from 200 countries reflecting tremendous linguistic diversity. Thirteen per cent of the students have some form of disability and 20% experience deprivation. The education system should cater for all and provide happy, fulfilled and challenged students who can think for themselves. There must be equality of opportunity and equity in the system. Educators need to make the senior cycle more suitable to meet the needs of a significant cohort of students not suited to the type of academic curriculum on offer in the current Leaving Certificate. At the NAPD Symposium 2018, the National Parents' Council (Primary) reported on a survey issued to over 4000 parents. The questionnaire related to the aspirations the parents had for their children into the future. Over 66% of parents remarked that they would like to see changes to the type of senior cycle on offer in Irish schools. They want their children to get good results but most of all they wanted their children to be happy, to develop good social skills and know about the world they live in. When asked what they believed were the qualities needed to be a well-educated 18-year-old, parents listed independence, confidence, creativity, ambition, leadership, curiosity, courage, compassion, honesty, justice, empathy, tolerance, respect for themselves and respect for others. Among the skills parents believe are needed for their primary children are strong computer and digital skills, a high level of literacy and numeracy, to be a critical and creative thinker, to have practical skills, to have good knowledge about their personal wellbeing and to have good social skills. The responses of the primary parents surveyed show that change is needed to what transacts in the classroom at second level.

While the senior cycle review consultation is in progress, the NCCA has been moving to make the senior cycle more relevant over the last number of years with updated syllabi in subjects like Agricultural Science, Applied Mathematics and Art and Economics. The recent introduction of Politics and Society, Computer Science and Physical Education shows that the Leaving Certificate programme is trying to change with the times. The revision of subjects involved will benefit students but will also require extensive professional development for the teachers involved.

## Summary

The proposal to phase out the current Junior Certificate started a debate on the vision Irish society has for its education system and the values that should be promoted. Ireland values education. The passionate involvement of six Ministers for Education from three different political parties and all stakeholders, but particularly the parents and the students, influenced policy makers and caused deep reflection on the best way forward. State exams were regarded as 'hard but fair' and a rite of passage to be experienced but there is now a realisation that performance in a single terminal exam may not be the best way to promote and assess learning.

This chapter has detailed the pressures and influences which were catalysts for junior cycle reforms including the role played by PISA rankings, various Ministers of Education and the NCCA. It has detailed how key stakeholders such as school leaders, the NAPD, teachers and parents were involved in the context of a fragmented system in which the reform agenda was the subject of contestation involving the main teacher union (the ASTI) primarily due to disagreements regarding the role of the teacher in the assessment of students' work for state certification. Over time, the tenor of these discussions has changed and there has been a more general acceptance of the benefits of the proposed reforms although these have not been implemented to the extent envisaged initially. The implementation of CBAs is one concrete example of the enactment of the reforms and approaches such as interviews, continuous assessment, presentations and projects will generate a portfolio of achievement to better reflect the student's potential over the course of the junior cycle.

With junior cycle reforms now at the end stage of initial implementation, thoughts have turned to reform at senior cycle with some general acceptance that using the Leaving Certificate as a filter for university entry is not serving the educational interests of young people in a vibrant and developing Ireland. The experience at junior cycle has demonstrated that reform is not easy and at the heart of any curriculum reform must be a belief that learning is fun and that effort leads to success. Schools should be facilitated to develop their own programmes and make best use of the passion and creativity of staff to suit each school's context. We are lucky to live in a society which values education. As Professor Philip Nolan, President of Maynooth University said at the NCCA senior cycle seminar in November 2018 in Dublin, 'we should look on education with an openness to wonder and joy'. In all this, we must ensure that the integrity of the system is upheld, and standards are maintained. The reform boat has sailed far enough from the shore so that changes brought about to date cannot be undone. Ireland can aspire to a second level system that is responsive to societal needs and stands on its own educational merits.

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# The Junior Cycle Reform from a Comparative Perspective: Assessment as Curriculum Practice According to Irish, Finnish and Swedish Teachers

**Maija Salokangas, Wieland Wermke, and Gerry Harvey**

## Introduction

The debates and controversies concerning continuous assessment brought in by the Junior Cycle reform in Ireland show that assessment can reveal much about the teaching profession's relationship with the state

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governance and the civil society. Previous chapters have discussed in detail how the new assessment practices introduced by the reform were received in Ireland and what effects they had on teachers' professional identity and their day-to-day work. The purpose of this chapter is to reflect these Irish developments to developments elsewhere; countries that have taken very different approaches in curriculum reforms, and in student assessment in particular. This chapter reports how teachers perceive assessment practices in Ireland, Finland and Sweden.

Assessment of student learning is an important educational activity, as it defines what counts as valid knowledge and how it should be measured and therefore offers a useful angle to examine curriculum more broadly. Furthermore, assessment defines how state governance relates to the teaching profession in a context-related way. This is why, we argue that assessment is a fundamental aspect of not only curriculum, but also teaching, as it specifies the constraints and possibilities of teachers' practice in their classrooms (Forsberg and Wermke 2012).

## Recent Curriculum Reforms in Ireland, Finland and Sweden

Traditionally, Irish second-level students study a wide range of subjects via content rich syllabi which rewards students who have strong rote learning abilities and perform well in high-stakes terminal examinations. The Junior Cycle reform reduced the significance of a national exam at lower secondary level, by introducing continuous assessment conducted by teachers. Increasing teachers' role in student assessment was controversial and sparked a national debate concerning the extent to which teachers should be involved in the assessment process. It is worthwhile to note that as previous chapters have shown, in justifying the Junior Cycle reform, the Finnish education system was referred to as an example of international best practice (e.g. Humphreys 2014), despite the obvious fundamental differences between the two systems. In Finland in the 1990s, decentralisation reforms increased local autonomy and municipal responsibility for financial resources (Simola 2005). As a result of these

reforms, the system of governance shifted towards a model of managing by objectives and controlling results instead of the process (Carlgren and Klette 2008). Goal-orientation was already present in Finnish curricula prior to the 1990s decentralisation reforms, but the framework curriculum from 1994 onwards put goals and assessment at the centre to a greater extent, encouraging student self-evaluation and providing schools with freedom to create their own local curricula (Simola 2014). The economic downturn of the 1990s played a significant part in the radical decentralisation and delegation of education-related decisions to the municipal (local) level.

Finnish schools follow a national core curriculum, and teachers play an important part in localising it. The most recent national core curriculum was published in 2014 and set in motion a school- and municipality-level curricular localisation process (Soini et al. 2018). The local curricula, developed by teachers in a collaborative process, was approved in 2016 and applied in schools from August 2016 onwards. Although Finnish teachers play an important part in developing the local curriculum, due to the nature of the new curriculum, curricular analysis points to the diminishing role of the teacher in the learning process as the facilitator of learning, and the potential effects these changes have on Finnish teachers' work (Erss 2018). Unlike in Ireland and Sweden, the recent reforms have not brought significant changes on Finnish teachers' role in student assessment. Traditionally Finnish teachers conduct student assessment at lower secondary level and there are no published exam results or school inspections. However, quality assurance and school evaluation (QAE) has been an important feature of the Finnish education since the 1990s. Despite international trends, this has been a local concern and evaluations have generated data for schools rather than for public consumption. The only national evaluation at the lower secondary level is sample-based exams implemented by the National Board of Education (NBE) (Simola 2005). Although these exams are administered by the state, the primary purpose of these evaluations is school development rather than school control. Overall, it has been argued that there is a great belief in local decision-making and a general antipathy towards ranking lists (Simola et al. 2013).

Sweden offers another illuminating case for comparison. Between 1990 and 2000, a series of reforms decentralised the education system radically. Since the Millennium, a wave of recentralisation reforms have also brought increased state evaluation. For example, responsibility for teacher employment and salaries was transferred from the central state government to municipalities. The decentralisation shift was accompanied by a strong marketisation of the school system. Due to freedom-of-choice reforms, parents and pupils were entitled to choose between schools and were not required to simply enrol at the nearest school within the municipality. Technically, every pupil was given a voucher for his or her education, which financed schools. This implies that school resources were dependent on the number of pupils enrolled and that they therefore competed in a school marketplace. These market reforms led to an increasing number of independent schools, some of them run for profit (Salokangas and Ainscow 2017). Such forms of governance transform the identities of all stakeholders including teachers and principals. Parents and students became customers with increased rights, and the reform wave during 1990–2000 rendered teachers merely to a group of knowledge providers, with no particular state-secured status (Wermke and Forsberg 2017). Moreover, since the pupils' vouchers are valid for independent as well as public schools, and since there are also opportunities to run profit-oriented schools, competition has increased, particularly in urban areas. Competition means that the schools with the best arguments attract the most pupils and thereby meet the challenges of the school marketplace. The strongest arguments are associated with adequate pupil results, displayed in both National Curriculum Tests (NCTs) and the average level of pupil grades. Since teachers now negotiate their salaries individually with the principal and are dependent on the individual school's market-related situation, marketisation restricts the autonomy of the teaching profession. Rather than teachers' pedagogical judgement, competition in the marketplace becomes increasingly relevant (Wermke and Forsberg 2017).

New measures were needed to address the increasing complexity in the education system, leading to introduction of new forms of evaluation. These characterised the period of recentralisation. Since the first half of the 2010s, international large-scale comparisons of pupil achievement,

such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), have become increasingly important to Swedish policy making (Wermke and Forsberg 2017). This was one way to deal with complexity. These tests displayed a fall in performance among Swedish pupils, a PISA shock. Furthermore, the increasing diversity of schooling, resulting from the decentralisation reforms of the 1990s, threatened equity and equality in schooling. Since 2008, complexity has been dealt with by evaluating teacher education and certifying teachers (Frostenson 2014). Furthermore, the government has increased the evaluation of schools through an extended system of school inspectorates and national curriculum testing by including more subjects and more age cohorts in the testing procedure, and now by using the results much more extensively in assessment (Wermke and Forsberg 2017).

To summarise, Ireland, Finland and Sweden offer contrasting cases for comparison because the recent reforms in the three countries have taken different approaches to teachers' role in student assessment. In Ireland, Junior Cycle reforms shifted away from national exams and increased teacher involvement in student assessment by bringing in continuous assessment. In Sweden, the pendulum swung the other way—shifting away from local and in particular teacher responsibility for assessment and placing heavier emphasis on the state-administered standardised national curriculum tests. These recent developments have increased the pressure on teachers significantly. Meanwhile in Finland, the latest reforms have not considerably altered teachers' role in student assessment and Finnish teachers remain central in the assessment process. This provides a fertile ground for comparison, particularly because existing research has demonstrated that teachers in these countries perceive the effects of restructuring on their professional autonomy and control differently (Houtsonen et al. 2010).

# Differing Governance Traditions as a Basis for Curriculum Reforms and Frames for the Teaching Profession

The reforms in the three countries discussed in the previous section can be related to varied governance regimes that frame teachers' professional practice. Education governance structures also differ greatly between the countries involved. Where Finnish teachers operate in a system overseen by municipality governance, the Swedish school system is much more of a hybrid with various education providers involved in public school governance. On the other end of the continuum is the Irish system that lacks a system-wide middle tier and in which schools operate under a complex system of patronage involving religious and non-religious bodies (Skerrit and Salokangas 2020).

Drawing on the idea of input-outcome governance regimes helped us to distinguish how the countries involved relate to each other in terms of how they are governed. Numerous comparative studies emphasise the differences between input-governance and outcome-governance regimes of education in western Europe (Hopmann 2003). In input-governed regimes, teachers are considered as civil servants equipped with considerable shared and individual decision-making capacity. Teachers working in such input-governed regimes are subject to little if any formal forms of external control imposed upon them from outside of the teaching profession. Control is exercised within the profession, and the route to the profession is difficult, as standards of teacher education are high and entrance tightly controlled. The Finnish trust-based teaching profession, and shared teacher-based school-level decision-making, fits into such description. Traditionally, Finnish teachers behave rather uniformly and conservatively, which is also considered to contribute to their trustworthiness (Simola 2005). In comparison, regimes which impose control upon teachers from the outside through, for example, district-level administration, state agencies or exam boards, have been identified as outcome-governance regimes. High-stakes national exams and other forms of accountability paired with a prescriptive curriculum and intense culture of external inspections are examples of an outcome-governance

regime. Certain features of the Irish education system (high-stakes national exams and intensified school inspection) indicate that it follows the logic of an outcome-governance regime. The continuum of input-outcome governance is illustrated in Fig. 11.1 in relation to the three countries under discussion. In the input-outcome continuum, Sweden falls somewhere in the middle. Having been through an intensive reform period, in the 1990s and since the 2000s, Sweden is on a recentralisation track (Wermke and Forsberg 2017). According to Swedish scholars the Swedish teaching profession is constructed as the opposite of a trust-based autonomous profession (see the Finnish case) (Lundtsröm 2015). Wermke and Paulsrud (2019) argue, however, that Swedish teachers still have much autonomy, particularly in relation to assessment. What has changed is that control has intensified massively also. So, the Swedish teachers bear considerable responsibility in a high-risk profession due to rigid control.



**Extended decision-making**

| | |
|---|---|
| *I*<br>*Higher complexity, lower risk* | *II*<br>*Higher complexity, higher risk* |

FINLAND      SWEDEN

**Limited control** ← → **Extended control**

IRELAND

| | |
|---|---|
| *IV*<br>*Lower complexity, lower risk* | *III*<br>*Lower complexity, higher risk* |

**Limited decision-making**

**Fig. 11.1** Ireland, Sweden and Finland on an input-outcome governance regime continuum

## Complexity and Risk in Curriculum-Related Decision-Making

In this chapter, teachers' decision-making and how that decision-making is controlled are closely connected to the concepts of complexity and risk. To begin with, it is important to note that when we talk about decision-making capacity, we do not refer to freedom in its broadest sense, but rather to self-governance (Ingersoll 2003). With self-governance and capacity to make decisions comes responsibility for potential wrong decisions. How the profession, the state and the surrounding civil society handle the complexity and associated risks associated with the profession's decision-making capacity becomes a central issue. Considering the complimentary existence of mass education and the teaching profession within the wider education system and in the organisation of schools, we argue that the more an organisation or the wider education system *decides* by rules, regulations and routines on behalf of teachers, the less complex teachers' work becomes. The converse is also true, increased decision-making capacity increases complexity and risk. Following this logic and drawing on professionalisation theory (in particular, Vanderstraeten 2007) we argue that professions' first and foremost task is to handle risks, which, due to the complex nature of professional work, cannot be dealt in a technological manner. Therefore, risk-taking is at the core of the nature of a profession.

Complexity is an inescapable feature of teachers' work. Educational decision-making and the relationship between teachers' decisions and the outcomes that follow are not predictable. Put simply, teachers' decisions are not the sole factor leading to desired outcomes in education. For example, teachers and students (and their families) must work together in order to generate educational success. This diminishes teachers' risk to be solely responsible if something goes wrong (e.g. poor student performance). Furthermore, drawing from the premise that teachers are an ascribed profession (Vanderstraeten 2007), that is, ascribed to the organisation of schools, also gives the teachers an opportunity to blame less favourable outcomes on circumstances. They cannot choose their

students, the sizes of classes, the number of lessons delivered in a particular subject per week or school year and so forth.

Assessment as curriculum practice is a good example of a complex and risky area of educational decision-making. The outcomes of children's education are communicated in the language of grades and they determine to a great extent the students' future educational and career paths and therefore life chances. Such influence makes grading a source of contention for the education system and the teaching profession.

## Investigating Teachers' Perceptions of Assessment as Curriculum Practice from a Comparative Perspective

The findings reported here draw from a qualitative study involving interviews with Irish, Finnish and Swedish teachers conducted during the academic year 2016–2017. Participants in all countries were demographically diverse in terms of age and gender, and they taught a wide range of subjects and had different levels of management duties in their schools. The 14 Finnish participants teach lower secondary students aged 13–16 years in public schools in Helsinki. The two schools involved are comprehensive schools with primary and second-level students studying in the same campus, as is increasingly common in Finland. They are both local schools, and the student population reflected the demographically mixed neighbourhoods. In Ireland, 17 teacher interviews were conducted in three second-level schools in the greater Dublin region. The sample of schools selected was chosen to reflect the diversity of patronage. Seven of the interviews were conducted in a co-educational school run by an Education and Training Board (ETB). The other two schools are voluntary single-sex boys' schools and operate under religious patronage. The ten Swedish teacher interviews were held at a municipal school and at a school run by a religious charity. They are both located in the city centres of mid-sized to large Swedish towns.

The Finnish and Swedish data were translated into English. In data analysis, *decision-making* and *control* became central themes, and different dimensions of teachers' work (educational, social, administrative and developmental) and layers (individual, school and profession) were

significant subthemes (Salokangas & Wermke, 2020). The data and analysis presented in this chapter relate to the educational subtheme, with a specific focus on curriculum and assessment. The conceptual tools utilised in data analysis as well as more detailed descriptions of methods used are presented in detail in earlier publications (Wermke et al. 2018; Salokangas et al. 2019).

## Teachers' Responses to Their Role in Student Assessment

There were considerable differences in how Irish, Finnish and Swedish teachers perceived and understood teachers' role in student assessment. Somewhat surprisingly, the determining factor for teachers' views on student assessment was the country they taught in, not the subject they taught, the type of school they worked in, nor their work experience. The general teacher response in Ireland could be categorised as moving from active to passive resistance to a state now of superficial compliance and this only after a protracted period of resistance which involved industrial action. The controversies that the Junior Cycle reform brought to Ireland featured strongly in our Irish data (collected in the academic year 2016–2017). Teachers expressed in a rather explicit manner their reluctance to assess their own students' work and put forward passionate pleas for independent assessment conducted by the State Examinations commission:

> *I don't think it's a good idea and I think the whole idea of an exam is that it's looked at anonymously, it's looked at by somebody who has no like day-on-day interaction, no social connection, no known connection to a child and I think regardless of professionalism, when you work with the same kids day in, day out for years, it makes it, very difficult to, I think, independently assess those children.* (Irish teacher)

> *I think it* (teacher assessing the learning of their students) *is a terrible idea. It doesn't in any sense make any sense. I mean, for me to grade my own students is giving an autonomy that is impractical, unrealistic.* (Irish teacher)

In comparison, Finnish teachers were well used to assessing their students' learning and considered it a fundamental part of their work.

I: *In your career of 20 years, has your job description changed or boundaries of your agency changed?*

R: *I don't think so … Of course student assessment, for example, is based on instructions from the municipality office so that everybody would do it more or less the same way. And you have to follow the guidelines, and that's OK.* (Finnish teacher)

Finnish teachers considered assessment as one of the hardest tasks in their work, and they reported on the stress and challenges that came with assessment. Teachers highlighted some changes in municipality and school-level assessment guidelines over their careers; however, in comparison to the experiences of their Irish and Swedish colleagues, the changes introduced were not as fundamentally transforming. Despite the challenges that assessment brought to their work, Finnish teachers were unanimous about it being a core function of teachers' work.

*For me, not assessing my students work would be strange, and not right somehow. Assessment is what we do, like planning and teaching. It would be difficult to even imagine what the job would be like without it.* (Finnish teacher)

In Sweden again, the latest reforms have brought in new national exams in an increased number of subjects and more nuanced assessment criteria. This is how one of our Swedish participants described it:

*Yes, I think that the most striking difference is the new curriculum, that it limits teachers' autonomy. The last curriculum was based on teacher's autonomy, meaning the teachers themselves were supposed to make these curriculums and knowledge criteria and so on, meanwhile this new one has removed the decision-making from the teacher since the national testing has increased and includes more subjects, you can see them as guidelines but it's also a form of control.* (Swedish teacher)

In a heavily marketised education system such as Sweden, grades are one of the most important competitive advantages for the schools to attract students. The recent expansion of standardised testing, a new and more specified curriculum and a new grading system were perceived by teachers as largely resulting from students' poorer performance in PISA results.

*If you look at PISA results they have more impact on the societal debate than before, when there was sort of a focus on creating a democratic citizen.* (Swedish teacher)

Several of the participants think that the recent curriculum has limited teachers' autonomy and is a form of soft governance from the state. However, some teachers consider this as positive development since it has made it easier to plan teaching and overall has simplified and clarified their work by reducing complexity. A consequence of such governance strategy is that teachers' administrative work increases. One of the Swedish teacher's commented:

*There's too little teaching, it's more about collecting assessment bases, that's what I feel sometimes.* (Swedish teacher)

This is quite representative, as teachers reported that they need to document and justify all grading carefully, since there is always a risk that parents, school management, or even administration, may question grades. In addition to increased control from the state, these administrative duties also give the school administration the possibility to indirectly control teacher's performance (Ingersoll 2003). A unifying development in all three countries was the increase of parental involvement. As we have seen in previous chapters of this book, Irish teachers also felt the parental pressures increasing with the new curriculum. In Sweden, teachers made obvious links with the recent assessment reforms and parental involvement.

*You have to be on your toes due to the fact that students and parent that can contest grades … so you need to know what you're doing and that's a change I think compared to when I started.* (Swedish teacher)

In Finland, on the other hand, teachers did not make as explicit links to curriculum, but unanimously reported increasing parental pressures and involvement in assessment and in their work more broadly:

*Parents nowadays are so much more aware and the parents that really care about their child's life, they can meddle. That's why you have to keep the assessment books for ten years. I actually have every book from 25 years, I haven't gotten rid of any of them. You might have to justify your grading even after five years.* (Finnish teacher)

## Recent Curriculum Reforms Revealing Nation-Specific Teacher Autonomy Mindsets

This chapter has examined changes in Junior Cycle assessment through the lens of the increased decision-making capacity it gave to teachers in relation to student assessment. We contrasted these developments in Ireland to developments in Finland and Sweden, where reforms have had varied effects on teachers' assessment-related decision-making; extending it in Ireland, restricting it in Sweden, and maintaining it in Finland. We have also argued that increased decision-making capacity increases complexity and risks in teachers' work while conversely, extended control has a diminishing effect on risk and complexity. In order to draw conclusions we present a model which helps us to explain how different ways to govern through curriculum leads to different types of teaching professions in different countries. Due to the focus of this chapter, the analysis here focuses solely on assessment. However, the model can be applied when examining curriculum or teachers' practice more broadly (Salokangas & Wermke 2020). Figure 11.2 pulls this categorisation together. Within this model, our three countries represent examples of what we call teachers' autonomy mindsets. Drawing on literature concerning decision-making and general systems theory, we define a mindset as a set of assumptions, methods or notations held by one or groups of people (Hopmann 2008). With autonomy mindsets, we refer to teachers' perceptions of their own decision-making capacity.

Outcome governance                                                          Input governance

| Ireland: | Sweden: | Finland: |
|----------|---------|----------|
| - Traditionally high variance in local governance (patronage), | - Transformed system of high variance in local governance (marketisation), | - Tradition of uniform local governance (municipality) |
| - High-stakes national exams | - High-stakes national exams | - Low-stakes national exams, |
| - Active and influential school inspectorate | - Active and influential Inspectorate system | - No inspectorate |

**Fig. 11.2** Decision-making, complexity and risk in curriculum assessment

*The first type (I)* applies to teachers who have a very complex task and who are assigned considerable decision-making capacity. Of our cases, the Finnish teaching profession represents this type. In particular, data show that teachers in this national context make considerable assessment-related decisions, as they conduct continuous and final assessment of their students. The decisions teachers make have significant consequences for students, as the final grades determine their educational options in future. On the other hand, the Finnish teachers' work is not heavily controlled. There are no published exam results or school inspection practices that would work as a control mechanism. The state exams that exist are used for school evaluation purposes at the local level only. Furthermore, if a teacher's decision is contested, and assessment is revisited (in a possible case of appeal from a parent), this may or may not result in a grade change but there are no direct consequences or sanctions for the teacher. How collegially assessment is conducted varies between schools, as some schools have adopted more collegial practices than others. Collegial decision-making strategies absorb the risks that come with important decisions, such as students' final grades. In order to ensure that a decision is right, especially in relation to very unfavourable grades (that, for instance, might force a student to repeat a class), the collegially made decision diminishes the risk for the individual teacher.

*The second type (II)* refers to teachers who have a very complex task including a plethora of decision-making responsibilities. In this type,

teachers' work is also controlled in an extensive manner. In our data, the Swedish teaching profession represents this type. They hold considerable decision-making capacity in their work, as they conduct continuous assessment, as well as the assessment of NCTs. However, the dominating view that the Swedish teaching profession is constrained might relate to the intense formal control they are subject to. As indicated earlier, the number of NCTs has increased steadily with evidence of intensified exam pressures and intense school inspections since 2008.

This current situation can be seen as a reaction to the extensive decentralisation and marketisation reform efforts of the Swedish school system in the 1990s, which introduced different types of schools and changed the teaching profession. Indeed the transformational reforms of the past decades have shaped the teaching profession in varied ways as, for example, it became possible for teachers to negotiate their salary and the teacher unions lost impact as the collective voice of the profession. Increased autonomy at the local level increased the complexity of decision-making, which again jeopardised equity and equality in the school system. What we see currently is the state's reaction to this, an extensive increase of external control (Wermke and Forsberg 2017).

Swedish teachers' salaries, opportunities for career progression and working conditions have improved, but with this individualisation a Pandora's Box of possible consequences may have been opened up for them. Many risks must be handled individually by teachers. At the same time, the complexity of practice leads to solutions of different qualities, frequently reported in media and social media, which has a negative impact on the status of teachers. We argue that this is framed within a 'neurotic' autonomy mindset that makes teachers self-restricting in order to cope with high complexity and risks. Examples include exhaustive documentation of grades (which takes away time from teaching) and teaching to the test (where teachers' planning focuses on and prioritises standardised grading criteria rather than central aims of the syllabi) (Wermke and Forsberg 2017; Novak 2018).

*The third type (III)* as displayed in Fig. 11.2 is described with lower complexity in its tasks. We mean here lower complexity in relation to type I and II and not a lower complexity work per se. In such a work culture, control of the teaching profession is of higher intensity. In our

study, Ireland represents this type. Irish teachers report that they concentrate (traditionally) on a restricted core of teacher work that is planning and delivering subject content. The assessment aspect is conducted externally, by the State Examination Commission (SEC), and teachers are satisfied with this arrangement, which is steeped in historical legacy, and see no reason to change it. In comparison to Finnish and Swedish schools, Irish schools are complex hierarchical organisations with numerous leadership and management positions that absorb risks and complexity from the individual teacher. This agency is framed by an extended system of control, by frequent and high-stake central examination, and school inspection.

> *Your teaching is very much monitored … it's judged off your results, if we are being honest … if my students get 5 A's out of a class of 20 people say he must be a very good teacher!* (Irish teacher)

The Irish teachers' initial rejection of continuous assessment resonates with this type, which is why we argue that the Irish teachers' reaction to revised Junior Cycle assessment resonates with type III *down-scaled autonomy mindset*. Teachers' work is heavily controlled externally, and that is why there is a considerable risk related to their work. However, in relation to assessment, Irish teachers' work is not as complex as their colleagues in Finland and Sweden. Fewer decisions mean less risks.

Finally, *type IV* in our model is not represented by any of the countries involved. Teachers in this type are not heavily controlled; however, the decisions they make are also rather limited in comparison to type I and II teaching professions. Systems in which standardised testing is not used, or in particular, the results are not aimed for public consumption and where other control mechanisms such as inspections are limited, would fall in to this category. However, teachers of this type also hold limited decision-making capacity over central educational matters such as assessment.

## Summary

This chapter relates the Junior Cycle reform to curriculum developments in Finland and Sweden. Comparing these countries contributes to a further understanding of the Irish case. Education governance structures differ greatly between the countries involved, which arguably has an effect on how teachers' perceive their role in curriculum assessment. This chapter draws from professionalisation theory by Vanderstraeten (2007), including conceptualisations on *complexity* and *risk*. The chapter explores why similar quality and quantity of decision-making capacity in curriculum assessment can be perceived differently by teachers working in different contexts, how and by whom decisions related to curriculum assessment are controlled, and what are the associated complexity and risks. This chapter presents a model which helps to explain how different ways to govern through curriculum leads to different constitutional mindsets of teaching professionals in different national contexts.

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# 12

# Leading Organisational Change to Support Junior Cycle Reform

**Eileen O'Connor and Damian Murchan**

## Introduction

Publication in 2010 of *Innovation and Identity: Ideas for a New Junior Cycle* by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) highlighted the need for the Irish education system to adapt to a new mind-set in relation to teaching, learning, assessment and reporting for the first three years of second level education. This, it was argued, would require a significant shift in teacher instructional practice and student classroom experience with a move from an emphasis on examination grades as evidence of learning towards the importance of generating ongoing evidence of students' progress. In October 2012, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) published its blueprint for a radical reform of the Junior Certificate, involving the introduction of a new junior cycle programme. The policy (DES 2012) prompted debate that is outlined in

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detail elsewhere in this volume, for example, in Chaps. 9 and 10 and in Murchan (2018). Throughout the period of that debate, movement towards implementation proceeded at varying speeds, guided in part by DES Circular 0020/2014 (DES 2014) setting out revised arrangements for the junior cycle for the years 2014/2015 with the initial introduction of a new subject specification (curriculum) for English for students from September 2014. In response to concerns expressed by education partners about the proposed overall pace of reforms, the DES (2015) agreed some modifications to the proposals along with agreement to phase the changes in over a period of five years.

Underpinning junior cycle reforms is the revised policy document, *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* (DES 2015), which expresses a desire by policymakers to provide a more student-centred learning experience appropriate to the twenty-first century, building on the positive features of current education practice. This is intended as a system-led reform that would be actively embraced and enacted at school level. The proposal envisages:

- a broader and more flexible curriculum giving greater autonomy to schools to design programmes to suit students' needs
- a junior cycle pathway is offered to *all* students, including those with particular learning needs, through the Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes (L1LPs/L2LPs)
- a phased introduction of revised subjects
- revised assessment arrangements incorporating both formative and summative approaches
- an increased prominence given to classroom assessment and feedback to students on how to take their learning forward
- greater professional collaboration between teachers
- a more holistic reporting of students' learning, progress and achievements across the three years of lower secondary education
- provision of continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers and school leaders.

Embedding the curriculum reform, with parallel changes in teaching, learning and assessment would, it is argued, have far-reaching effects for second level education as a whole in Ireland and for individual students, teachers and parents. However, transitioning from aspiration to implementation is another matter and involves a myriad of factors that can impact the success of the plan. Fullan (2016) outlines the general phases of a reform process to include:

- *Initiation*—the process leading up to and including the decision to proceed with a change
- *Implementation*—putting into practice activities and structures new to the people attempting or expected to change and
- *Continuation*—whether the change becomes embedded as an ongoing part of the system or disappears either by a decision to discard or through attrition.

Implicit in this Irish reform, particularly in the CPD elements, are concepts related to Cohen and Hill's (2001) *teacher practice-based enquiry* and *teaching for understanding*, where teachers engage in classroom practices that support and demonstrate ongoing evidence of connecting assessment and teaching (cited in Fullan 2016). It signals the need for active teacher engagement in developing and applying new knowledge, skills, practices and understandings so that the reform overall can succeed. However, successful teacher engagement in reforms is not guaranteed, thus highlighting the need for careful attention to issues of organisational planning, school leadership, school culture and capacity building. In analysing change drivers associated with educational reform, this chapter examines the opportunities and challenges associated with the implementation stage of junior cycle reform and how the changes are being embedded in the Irish education system. The chapter also addresses specific tensions and issues associated with the reform and draws lessons which may be beneficial for other systems engaging in similar large-scale change.

# Understanding Change Processes in Education Reform

The change process and the complexity of successful innovation implementation are challenging and difficult to understand. Early concepts of educational change (e.g. Tyler 1949) assumed announcing change at system level and expecting schools to get on with it. Evans (1996) argues that while reforms may begin with policy and content, their success depends heavily on a complex range of issues which include the readiness of people, the organisational capacity of schools and the kind of leadership that is exerted throughout the process, an analysis consistent with Fullan's (2001) characterisation of change as a complex, messy and snarled process. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) argue that schools and educational organisations today need a form of change more suited to the *fast, flexible and vulnerable New World of the 21st century* (p. x) and they offer a vision for transforming public education for the variety of challenges encountered in this new world. Their vision for successful change involves building on the best of what we already know and do well while advancing our education system to espouse and encourage a sense of shared meaning and purpose, interdependence, collective courage and professionalism. This echoes Senge's (1990) notion of the learning organisation which he sees as a way of developing a habitual acceptance of change in organisations and an avoidance of what he terms organisational ossification. He outlines several organisational features which are essential for continued improvement and a way of managing ongoing organisational change, including:

- questioning of current ideas and practices
- openness to new ideas and thinking
- ongoing professional learning by individuals
- a team approach involving professional dialogue and shared meaning
- systems thinking (taking cognisance of the 'bigger picture' and seeing the organisation as a dynamic process).

Fullan (2016) sees innovation as multidimensional, arguing that any new reform involves at least three components: new materials, a change in practice and an alteration of beliefs. Together, these are essential for continued improvement and a way of managing ongoing organisational change. A shallow form of change is reflected in the introduction of new materials which in itself may or may not have any lasting impact on improving teaching and learning. A deeper level of change occurs when such new materials are accompanied with modifications to and improvement in teacher classroom practice. However, to achieve profound change (a total break with the old ways of thinking and acting), there is a need to focus on teachers' shared beliefs and understandings. This helps engender school *re-culturing* (Fullan 2001, p. 44) where teachers challenge their own beliefs and practices thereby modifying the culture—the way we do things around here—in classrooms and schools. Furthermore, a successful system reform requires a combination of high challenge, ambitious targets (pressure) and strong levels of support (capacity building) (Fullan et al. 2005). Heifetz and Linsky (2002) identify adaptive challenges as complex change issues for which current knowledge and experience are not sufficient to address and solve. Adaptive work is difficult, requires time and entails new learning, taking individuals outside their comfort zone and beyond what they know. Consequently, complex adaptive educational change, such as the junior cycle reform, may cause disequilibrium in the system and avoidance or resistance among some stakeholders.

## The Junior Cycle Reform Initiative in Ireland

The junior cycle reform is underpinned by the policy document, *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* (DES 2015), and by a number of DES circular letters which outline the required arrangements for schools regarding the reform's gradual and evolving implementation. The circulars (Table 12.1) mandate a system-wide whole-school approach to successfully embedding and sustaining the reform in all second level schools.

The pressures include a broader curriculum, new subject specifications, changes in classroom practices and revised approaches to assessment. The latter include external examinations, Classroom-Based Assessments

**Table 12.1** Key DES documents and circular letters supporting the implementation of the junior cycle

| Source | Brief title | Focus |
|---|---|---|
| DES (2012) and DES (2015) | Junior cycle framework documents | Communicate policy and implementation details for junior cycle reform |
| DES (2014) | Revised arrangements for the implementation of the junior cycle student award | Sets out detailed changes to junior cycle from September 2014, including a slower pace of change, over six years |
| DES, TUI, ASTI (2015) | Appendix to joint statement on principles *and* implementation | Professional time (for teachers) to support implementation |
| DES (2016a) | Continuing implementation of school self-evaluation 2016–2020 | A school self-evaluation process, *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools,* to support the implementation of junior cycle |
| DES (2017a) | Arrangements for implementing junior cycle in 2017–2019 | Arrangements for the implementation of the framework for junior cycle with particular reference to school years 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 |
| DES (2017b) | Professional time and administration grant | Grants 22 hours professional time to teachers annually, within normal timetabled hours. |
| DES (2018) | Arrangements for implementing junior cycle in 2018–2019 | Update on curriculum elements and assessment components for implementation in 2018–2019, including CBAs[a] and ATs[b]. |
| DES (2019a) | Arrangements for implementing junior cycle in 2019–2020 | Update on curriculum elements and assessment components for implementation in 2019–2020, including the Wellbeing programme, Short Courses and the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA). |
| SEC (2019) | Junior Cycle Assessment Task Booklets 2020 | Correspondence from the SEC advising schools on the process for completion of the ATs and arrangements for the secure custody of the completed AT booklets. |

[a]CBA Classroom-based assessment
[b]AT Assessment task

(CBA), Assessment Tasks (AT), and Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) department meetings. A further pressure point for the adoption of the reform is the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) process (DES 2016b) which facilitates an ongoing process of school review and evaluation. The SSE process is seen as vital to quality assurance and school improvement. It is described as *a collaborative, inclusive, reflective process of internal school review* where the whole-school community and its key stakeholders *engage in reflective enquiry on the work of the school* (DES 2016c, p. 10). The DES Circular 0079/2018 requires that schools engage in self-evaluation of teaching and learning and strongly advises that schools should use their school self-evaluation process to support implementation of the junior cycle. As mandated by the DES circulars, a range of system and school led pressures and supports are evident (Fig. 12.1).

Consequently, the challenge for the junior cycle reform is not just to implement a change to teaching and learning in classrooms but rather to engender a culture for continuous improvement within and across schools

| Pressures | Supports |
|---|---|
| • A broader curriculum incorporating Principles, Key Skills, Statements of Learning and Wellbeing | • Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for school leaders and staff. |
| • Subject specifications and associated assessment guidelines | • Resources on Junior Cycle for Teachers website (www.jct.ie) and on the NCCA website (www.curriculum online.ie) |
| • A change in classroom practice | • A range of published documents |
| • Assessment components (Classroom Based Assessments, Assessment Tasks, External examinations) | • Recent Inspectorate reports on schools |
| | • Initial Teacher Education |
| • Subject Learning and Assessment Review [SLAR] meetings | |
| • School self-evaluation | |

**Fig. 12.1**  Pressures and supports associated with junior cycle reforms

and the system. Research (Senge 1990; Fullan 2016) suggests that any large-scale system reform requires a number of drivers to ensure that the reform has a strong chance of being successfully embedded in the system and sustained over time. This chapter now examines the recent reforms in Ireland in the light of a number of significant change drivers to include published policy and resources, building capacity, fostering collaborative cultures, applying systems thinking and underpinning change with strong leadership.

# Key Drivers Impacting the Junior Cycle Reform Process and Its Sustainability

## Policy and Resources

As indicated previously, three main phases of curriculum reform can be identified: planning, implementing and embedding. From the outset of the junior cycle reform in Ireland and through its implementation stages, a range of resources for schools and other stakeholders have been made available by the DES and NCCA and the most significant of these are highlighted in Table 12.2. The implementation is underpinned by the DES policy documents: *The Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES 2012, 2015). The revised 2015 framework provides the policy foundation upon

**Table 12.2** Key policy and curriculum resources and supports

| DES | NCCA | JCT |
|---|---|---|
| • The framework documents, 2012 and 2015<br>• Circulars 20/2014, 40/2016, 15/2017, 29/2017, 79/2018, 0055/2019.<br>• *Looking at Our School (2016)*.<br>• Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018–2023) | • Subject specifications and associated assessment guidelines.<br>• Guidelines for subject CBAs and assessment tasks.<br>• *Wellbeing Guidelines* (2017)<br>• Assessment Toolkit (2015)<br>• Learning Outcomes Booklet (NCCA 2019) | • Whole-school and leadership CPD workshops<br>• Annual CPD schedule for schools<br>• Online webinars; subject resource booklets<br>• Parents information leaflets<br>• JCToday newsletter<br>• Junior Cycle posters |

which the reform is built and outlines the vision for the phased implementation of the reform in relation to classroom teaching, learning, assessment and reporting practices. The document highlights 8 principles, 24 statements of learning and 8 key skills which, together with the revised subject content, make up the new curriculum. Circulars from the DES (see Table 12.1) clarify the arrangements and supports for in-school implementation of the reform and affirm the commitment of the DES to the continued review of the implementation in partnership with school leaders, teachers and other education partners. Much of the content of the circulars is binding on schools. Other relevant resources for schools include the online Assessment and Reporting Toolkit (NCCA n.d, online), *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools* (DES 2016b), *Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines* (NCCA 2017), Reporting Guidelines (NCCA 2018a), *Ongoing reporting for effective teaching and learning* (NCCA 2018b) and *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES 2019b). Of these, *Looking at Our School 2016* and *Circular 40/2016* are noteworthy in supporting implementation of the junior cycle reforms in schools. They provide an operational framework and guidelines for school self-evaluation to enable schools to recognise and affirm aspects of good practice as well as to identify and discuss areas for improvement. Taken together, the combination of policy, resources and supports evident in Table 12.2 suggests a vision for a unified systemic approach to curriculum reform distributed across the main agencies involved in promoting and facilitating the change process.

## Building Capacity Through Teacher Learning

A successful reform requires appropriate implementation and embedding of policy and practices in schools. Teacher effectiveness is central to this process and requires capacity building for staff, frequently in the form of CPD in the short term along with adjustments to initial teacher education (ITE), though the latter is outside the scope of this chapter. Such capacity building is another driver that can be harnessed by policymakers in promoting educational change, involving the collective development of new knowledge, skills and competences, drawing on appropriate

resources, ideas, materials and time. For successful change implementation and adjustment to teacher practice and student learning, change needs to be evident in classrooms and schools and more importantly, structures need to be established to support it during the implementation and embedding phases of the reform. It is therefore important, but not sufficient, to engage teachers in front-end pre-implementation professional development. Fullan (2016) contends that teacher and system capacity building require broad-based, varied and ongoing professional development in order for it to transfer into improvements in the daily cultures of how people work together in new ways. Similarly, in its national framework for teachers' learning, the Irish Teaching Council (2016) argues that effective CPD should involve a blend of individual and collaborative reflection that can be supported by personal or externally mediated professional learning. This reflects a previous view (Teaching Council 2011, p. 20) that CPD should be *constructivist in nature … where emphasis is placed on reflection, joint problem solving, networking and systemic sharing of expertise and experience* and corresponds with Murchan et al.'s (2009, p. 468) call to avoid a *dependency culture* whereby teachers' own capacity to understand and respond to their learning needs may not be best served by a one-size-fits-all approach to CPD.

## Continuing Professional Development for Junior Cycle Reform

Garet et al. (2001) note that the success of ambitious reform initiatives hinges in large part on the qualifications and effectiveness of teachers. Consequently, CPD is a major focus of systemic reform in most education systems. As part of the Irish reform the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), a dedicated teacher support service, was established by the DES in September 2013. Charged with the provision of a comprehensive and sustained national programme of capacity building for school leaders and teachers and the development of suitable resources, the JCT aims to help schools plan and implement sustainable changes to their curriculum provision (Flood 2014) through a range of face-to-face and online initiatives, as outlined in Fig. 12.2.

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**CPD support for schools**

- One school-based Whole School Planning and School Self-Evaluation day each year

- One school-based 'subject cluster'day for groups of (4-8) schools each year

- One-day 2nd subject off-site seminars (each year over 4 years)

- Two days CPD for school leaders each year

- Seminars and school support for new elements of the curriculum: Short Courses, Level 1 and Level 2 Programmes, Wellbeing.

- A variety of online webinars for all subjects

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**Fig. 12.2** Supports provided by JCT

Staffed by practising teachers and school leaders, seconded from their schools for a maximum period of five years, the service ensures that support is provided for teachers by their professional colleagues. The service comprises a number of teams who design, promote and support specific aspects of the curriculum and CPD provision. These include specialist subject teams (one for each subject specification), an L1LP/L2LPs team, a school leaders' support team and a whole-school team. There are also teams providing support in relation to new aspects of the revised junior cycle curriculum: Short Courses, the *Wellbeing* content of the curriculum and teachers serving students with special educational needs. Table 12.3 highlights the phased implementation of subjects in schools, along with the year in which associated CPD was first provided to teachers.

All schools are offered a whole-school planning day each year of the implementation phase. Furthermore, subject-based CPD for teachers commences one year in advance of the implementation of the subject in schools. It is offered to subject teachers both in school and in off-site seminars for a minimum of four days on a rolling basis as the various subject specifications are being phased in. In order to avoid excessive disruption for schools, subject teachers are also offered an annual 'cluster' subject day which involves working with other colleagues/schools in their

**Table 12.3** Phased introduction of subjects with corresponding CPD

| Phase | Subject / Area | First enrol[a] | First certify[b] | Start of CPD[c] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | English | 2014 | 2017 | 2013 |
| 2 | Science; business studies | 2016 | 2019 | 2015 |
| 3 | Irish; modern languages; art, craft & design; wellbeing | 2017 | 2020 | 2016 |
| 4 | Mathematics; home economics; history; music; geography | 2018 | 2021 | 2017 |
| 5 | Technology (materials technology/wood, technical graphics, metalwork, technology); religious education; Jewish studies; classics | 2019 | 2022 | 2018 |

[a]first enrolment of students in new subject
[b]year first cohort of students certified in the subject (after the three-year junior cycle programme)
[c]year CPD first offered for subject(s); this support continues over several years

region. Two days CPD is offered to school leaders per year over the course of the phased implementation and support is provided in a range of other areas of the new curriculum, as outlined above, such as Short Courses, Level 1 and 2 Learning Programmes, and Wellbeing. In addition, a range of elective CPD opportunities are available to teachers outside of school time (after school, weekend, etc.) through an elective partnership between the JCT and education outreach partners from the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and The Arts. A central feature of support overall has been the development of the JCT website (www.jct.ie) which contains a significant amount of information and resources, including access to the JCT Newsletter, other JCT publications, the annual schedule for all CPD and a provision for schools to register and enrol in CPD events. It also provides teachers and school leaders with ongoing access to all CPD events and material after they have been rolled out. Whereas a formal evaluation of the JCT has not been undertaken to date, teacher feedback is captured at all events and the website and twitter facility also offer the opportunity for CPD recipients to comment and raise issues as required. Feedback from school leaders and teachers is a vital element in informing and shaping the content and structure of future CPD planning and events.

As yet, it is not possible to quantify the financial investment by the system in professional support to teachers. However, the scale of the JCT, including personnel and resource development, suggests significant commitment to capacity building. The support service has facilitated opportunities for skills development, shared experiences, and collective and collaborative thinking both in school and between groups of teachers across schools. Furthermore, the freedom and flexibility afforded to teachers' learning via webinar discussions, outside the rigidity and time pressures of the school day, is a significant development. One important feature of CPD in the junior cycle reform, in keeping with research findings as stated earlier, is the emphasis on promoting collaborative learning and development amongst teachers within schools and across schools, through the school 'cluster' model of CPD. Developing such collaborative cultures within and across schools is the focus of the next section.

## Promoting Collaborative Cultures of Teaching, Learning and Evaluation

Another essential driver for and goal of educational reform is the creation of more collaborative practices both for teachers and learners. Traditionally in Ireland, the second level teacher was recognised as a subject specialist and in many instances worked independently of other staff members and department colleagues. Therefore, developing an organisational climate where people actively learn from each other within and across schools in Ireland is challenging. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) and Spillane et al. (2015, 2018) argue that collaborative cultures within and across schools, which involve professional learning communities, promote more effective teaching and greater levels of student achievement. Building such learning cultures involves minimising professional barriers both within and between schools and addressing the traditional isolationism of teaching in the classroom and the lack of communication and connection between schools. If successful, such a culture would enable teachers to work naturally together through joint approaches to planning, observing and discussing each other's practice and reviewing and revising teaching strategies on a continuing basis.

Specific elements of the junior cycle reform aim to engender greater levels of collaboration amongst teachers as they are obliged to plan collaboratively within subject departments in relation to teaching, learning and assessment. Through the SSE whole-school process and subject department SLAR meetings, teachers are required to share, plan and evaluate together both at staff level and within their subject departments. Furthermore, the JCT's school cluster model of CPD brings teachers from different schools together to share and learn. It is intended that these developments will lead to more professional openness and transparency and positive learning relationships in schools and across the system. This collegial aspect of continuing professional development—working collaboratively off-site, meeting peers from other schools, networking and sharing experiences—are important (O'Connor 2008). Such collaborative cultures also foster certain levels of peer pressure which have been shown to be positively associated with adoption of the change process (Fullan 2016). This thinking concurs with Harris et al.'s (2001) idea of the importance of *external agency* (p. 92)—the existence of external pressure and support as an important contributory factor in changing teachers' practices and behaviours—and their assertion that changes in behaviour are not achievable in isolation (cited in O'Connor 2008).

In tandem with developing a learning culture amongst teachers, successful schools build internal accountability mechanisms where they draw on evidence to establish school-based processes of ongoing inquiry, action and improvement (Elmore 2004). The existing SSE process in Irish second level schools, while described as a pressure point above, also supports schools in recognising and affirming aspects of good practice and in identifying and discussing areas for improvement. It involves developing a collaborative learning process that combines individual responsibility, collective expectations and corrective action. As outlined earlier, arising from Circular 0040/2016, SSE is now a mandatory element of junior cycle implementation process in schools in order to assist all stakeholders in coming to terms with and embracing the concept of the 'bigger picture' in relation to school improvement.

## Systems Thinking and Coherence-Making

Senge (1990) identified systems thinking (seeing the bigger picture) together with shared understanding and coherence-making as key ingredients for achieving an organisational learning culture. This involves creating opportunities whereby teachers across a system are given opportunities to reflect together, to develop a greater clarity about and commitment to the reform and also come to understand how the different elements of the reform connect together. It involves ensuring that a systems approach is applied at each of the various organisational levels: system, whole-school, team (such as all teachers of a subject, all teachers involved in the Wellbeing programme) and classroom, as illustrated in Fig. 12.3.

### System Level

Several agencies within the Irish education system are involved in planning and supporting junior cycle reform. These include the DES, State Inspectorate, NCCA, JCT, Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), State Examinations Commission and the school
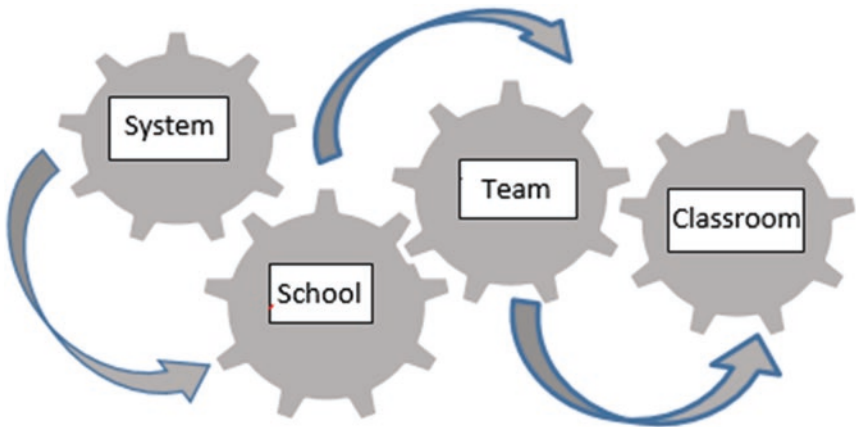


**Fig. 12.3**   Interconnectedness between system and school levels

Management Bodies. Consultation between such agencies is required so that there is a clarity, coherence and a consistency of message regarding the purpose of the reform and this consistency needs to be reflected in a shared *language of learning*. In addition, a responsibility falls on the main Government agencies (DES, NCCA) to ensure that there is coherence across the broad suite of policy initiatives designed to improve functioning of the education system.

One key issue to be addressed at national level involves the availability and use of time for planning, teaching, learning, assessment and reporting. Time issues become more critical in a period of change where teacher workload inevitably increases, particularly in the initial implementation stage, and when more is expected of all members of the school community. The availability of time is, therefore, seen as a key resource and a motivator in any change process. CPD requires time and this was allocated to schools as indicated earlier. In addition and reflecting consultations by the Teaching Council (2016), the DES acknowledges that teachers need professional time to engage in a range of professional collaborative activities, in particular with their teaching colleagues. Consequently, since Circular 0029/2017, all full-time teachers are entitled to 22 hours of professional time, with a pro-rata provision for part-time teachers (DES 2017b), per year within their working timetable. The time is to be used flexibly to facilitate professional collaboration and also for individual planning, feedback or reporting activities relating to junior cycle. Other time supports include two hours to be allocated by school management to a subject teacher, on a rotational basis, for the preparation, co-ordination and reporting to management of each individual subject or Short Courses/subject SLAR meetings. Furthermore, in recognition of the extra workload for school leaders, with effect from 2016, extra hours have been allocated to schools on an interim basis, pending the restoration of leadership posts in schools to help with the facilitation of this additional work (DES, 2018). Notwithstanding such time allocations, increased workloads and the pressures and anxieties of new learning inevitably give rise to tensions and dissatisfaction with regard to time availability in schools and also to the perception that there is never enough time. It is imperative that the DES and all stakeholders are cognisant of these issues and the risk of innovation overload.

Another challenge for the system will be to ensure that capacity building and essential teacher and school leader support is maintained as the reform is being embedded. Support is therefore needed after 2022 when the final subjects will be introduced into schools. Change theorists (Kotter 1995; Fullan 2016) comment that many change projects fail because victory is declared too early and that resources, particularly time, CPD and other supports, are withdrawn too quickly. The initial positive steps, as described above, are only the beginning of what needs to be done to achieve long-term sustainability of this reform initiative.

## School Level

Within individual schools, there is a need to focus the connections and inter-relationships between the different levels of the organisation, thus giving teachers a sense of coherence with regard to the whole-school implementation of the reform and also an awareness of its impact across the entire school community. Each individual school needs to adopt a systemic or *bigger picture* approach to planning and decision-making and to develop an understanding of the significance of the three distinct yet interconnected organisational levels within the school—whole-school, subject/team and classroom (see Fig. 12.3). Awareness of such interconnectedness is essential to effecting the changes to teaching, learning, assessment and reporting at junior cycle. Priorities identified and agreed at whole-school level need to be adopted and enacted at the other two levels. This requires a shared understanding and an informed professional dialogue among all stakeholders in relation to the different aspects of the change process. Furthermore, changes in classroom practice cannot be sustained and embedded as the 'living practice' in the school unless they are supported both at subject department and at whole-school levels.

## Subject Department and Team Level

The junior cycle reform envisages greater subject department and teacher autonomy in relation to subject content, teaching, assessment and reporting. This necessitates detailed planning by subject departments with

teachers engaging in frequent and continuous discussions about their practice, where they plan, design and evaluate together. The mandatory classroom formative assessment, which culminates, for most subjects, in two CBAs (one in year two and one in year three, except for Gaeilge, where both occur in year three), requires attendance at SLAR meetings, indicating the need for a deep level of collaboration and a sharing of expertise between the individual staff members in each department. The obligatory SLAR meetings also play a key role in developing a collegial professional culture and capacity building among teachers in relation to the judgements they make about student achievement. This systematic breaking down of isolation and individualism in the teaching, learning, assessment and reporting processes, and the necessary building of mutual trust and a collegial approach, requires time and ongoing pressure and support.

## Classroom Level

At classroom level, the impact of the reform is reflected in the changing teaching/learning culture and teacher-student relationships in schools. The centrality of a student-centred approach and the consequent recognition of the importance of student voice and choice is significant in the changing classroom dynamic. It is evidenced in changed classroom layouts which allow for student interaction and group work, active teaching methodologies, a flexible curriculum, more use of ICT and an increased emphasis on formative assessment and ongoing reporting and feedback which allows for greater student engagement and reflection on their learning. The teacher is more the facilitator of a student-centred education process as opposed to the subject content specialist. This changing role of the teacher has implications for individual teacher confidence and classroom practice and signals the need for continuing CPD and support.

## School Leadership

An essential driver associated with educational change is school leadership and in particular the role of the principal in developing and sustaining a collaborative learning culture. While Ball (1987) identifies the school leader as the 'critical reality definer' (p. 81) in the school community, Barth (1996) views the principal as the 'lead learner', with the potential to act as 'a catalyst assisting teacher growth' (p. 50). Similarly, The Teaching Council's 'Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education' (June 2011) enunciates an unambiguous policy direction for school leadership in Ireland, emphasising the role of the principal as the 'lead learner' within a distributive leadership culture, operating in the school as a learning community (p. 20). Therefore, leadership for sustainable reforms involves understanding the change process, leading it and also developing capacity within others in the school community so that there is a critical mass of people working together to establish new ways of thinking and working. As Stoll et al. (2003) argue: 'it is the leader's role as capacity builder that is fundamental to learning in a complex, changing world' (p. 112). A fundamental tenet of leading change is to understand that the reform is not fixed in stone and that, for it to be successful, it needs to respond to each individual school context and essentially become an ongoing organisational 'learning' process. Essentially, an effective change process continually shapes and reshapes good ideas and actions as they build capacity and ownership across the organisation. This requires an inbuilt process of feedback and review which can be difficult for schools where traditionally teachers initially like to know what has been decided and then get on with it and are therefore fearful of fluidity and lack of certainty.

Furthermore, school leaders need to know and accept that despite preparation, and particularly in the early stages, things will not progress smoothly or to the planned timeframe and that any deep or adaptive change worth working towards will involve what the literature describes as an *implementation dip*. This difficult learning period, where the way ahead is not clear and where there is a decrease in motivation and trust in the reform process, needs to be recognised as a normal part of any change

journey. Leaders need to acknowledge this to staff and discuss it openly so that teachers and the broader school community understand that it is a common experience and don't lose heart and give up without giving the reform a chance. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) argue that the change process requires pushing ahead without being rigid, regrouping despite setbacks and not being discouraged when progress is slow. Leading change therefore necessitates resilience, courage and commitment on the part of school leaders who need to be focussed but flexible and who stay true to the vision despite the problems and setbacks. Staff members depend on school leadership to ensure that motivation is maintained. Leaders also need to manage fear of change among staff members. Accepting new ways of working requires time. Feelings of fear, anxiety, loss and being deskilled are associated with letting go of well-established and successful practices and taking on new, as yet untested, ways of working. Many people might prefer to be competent at the 'old' wrong way than to appear incompetent at the 'new' right thing (Black and Gregersen 2002). This emphasises, as discussed earlier, the importance of ongoing pressure and support to keep the reform on track.

Organisational change cannot be achieved by leaders working in isolation and leadership needs to be distributed throughout the organisation. A desired outcome for the reform in Ireland is to create a system with the internal capacity to carry out its efforts at change so that when key players leave a school the reform does not stop or stagnate. Consequently, school leaders need to use the strengths of the whole school and work to develop the leadership (both formal and informal) of others in the organisation. A key requisite for sustainability of organisational reform is the capacity to develop leadership in others on an ongoing basis. Collins (2001, p. 36) characterises this as 'enduring greatness' across the organisation, building a critical mass of people within the school and system who work together to establish and sustain the new way and who can lead the organisation to higher levels of achievement in the next generation. This is particularly important in the interests of continuity where the school leaders or other key reform players in the school may move to another position or retire. However, a study by Lárusdóttir and O'Connor (2017) on distributed leadership in schools in Ireland and Iceland revealed a perception among

middle leaders and school staff that existing leadership structures and cultures in schools are not designed to create leaders.

The role of the school leader in fostering change is therefore multifaceted and challenging. They are charged with planning, resourcing and providing support for the reform. They need to gain the confidence of staff, ensure good communication processes, involve staff in decisions relevant to effective implementation and deal with instances of resistance and negative perceptions of the process within the school community. It requires a leader who is optimistic, respects others, trusts others and who acts with intentionality to build a collegial and collaborative school culture focused on learning. The current support offered to school leaders by the JCT is essential as they implement the junior cycle in their schools and must continue in the post-implementation phase when the reform becomes the norm in all classrooms and schools across the country.

## Summary

This chapter situated junior cycle reform within an organisational change theory framework and examined how change theory informs and underpins a radical policy shift in Irish lower secondary education. The reform reflects global trends towards providing a more student-centred learning experience appropriate for the twenty-first century, building on the positive features of current education practice. Although education systems around the world face similar issues, there is no universal approach to supporting teachers and school leaders charged with leading change. Whereas it is important to know what change is happening and how issues are being dealt with *globally*, it is crucial to *act locally* and adopt policy suited to the specific culture and context. Strategic policy change should involve all stakeholders from the beginning and acknowledge and connect with the prevailing reality experienced in schools. This chapter characterised junior cycle reform as both a top-down and bottom-up approach, where key policymaking agencies work closely with school management authorities, teacher unions, schools and teachers who are actively engaged in adapting and refining the programme as it is being phased in. Introduced in 2013, the reform is still in its infancy and reflects

some of the drivers associated with successful change. A vision for radical change in relation to teaching, learning, assessment and reporting in schools has been outlined and the importance of social context, school leadership and school culture to learning have been highlighted. The collegial aspect of CPD for teachers is incorporated into the reform process. There is evidence of the development of whole-school practices reflecting teacher dialogue, collaborative cultures of teaching, learning and decision-making, in-school review, accountability and an openness to improvement together with the development of a supportive and knowledgeable school leadership.

Several tensions and issues that need to be resolved have been identified. One key challenge will be relinquishing the deeply embedded practice in schools of regular summative testing which continues to be highly valued by many parents and teachers. Schools will need to discontinue mid-term and end-of-year summative exams to avoid over assessment for students. DES Circular 0079/2018 frames the problem succinctly:

> ….*there is a need to avoid over assessment and to minimise the cumulative burden on students and teachers of multiple assessments across the full range of subjects. ….therefore, schools should plan for the replacement of in-house examinations with Classroom Based Assessments for 2nd and 3rd year, where relevant.* (p. 16)

The SLAR meetings associated with CBAs are key to promoting a deeper professional culture of collaboration in schools, so it is imperative that sufficient space is created for such dialogue. Another significant challenge is how to accommodate 400 hours for the new mandatory Wellbeing programme into the current school timetable. In implementing junior cycle, schools are expected to mediate 8 principles, 24 statements of learning and 8 key skills through a variety of curriculum modes: subject specifications, Short Courses, Wellbeing and other areas of learning. This poses challenges for teachers and schools in shifting their thinking from a long-established subject/content-based curricular approach. The Wellbeing programme will require whole-school consultation and review of each school's current curricular provision with a possible reduction of time allocation to certain subjects and perhaps the loss of certain subjects

from the curriculum in some schools. This may introduce uncertainty about the future status of some subjects within schools, both at junior and senior cycles.

Careful management of such tensions is required both at system and school levels to avoid negative impact on the new reform process thereby detracting from its core purpose of enhancing the student learning and classroom experience in schools. Review of the senior cycle programme is already underway and it is essential that students can transition seamlessly from junior cycle to a revised senior cycle programme that is aligned coherently with students' prior experiences in second level education. Considerable planning, energy and resources have already been committed to junior cycle reform. Therefore, it is imperative to maintain continued focus and accountability at school level, alongside sustained system-level support particularly in terms of time and CPD. The reform will require ongoing review, feedback and revision over many years to ensure that victory is not declared too early and that its sustainability into the future can be guaranteed.

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# Junior Cycle Reform: Looking Forward

## Keith Johnston and Damian Murchan

## Introduction

This chapter reflects on the key messages and themes emerging across the preceding chapters and takes a future-orientated perspective by identifying the key lessons in respect of policy and practice emergent from this analysis. It reflects the globalised nature of educational discourses and related reform endeavours and situates these in the contexts of the key actors and players who mediate these reforms and their respective agendas. A number of overarching themes connect chapters in the book and are drawn together in this concluding chapter. These include (1) the influence of history, existing practice, and systemic context; (2) the influence of global trends and discourses external to the national system of education; (3) the challenge of reforms in respect of both policy development and implementation; (4) the influences of key actors particularly teachers and school leaders; and (5) challenges in negotiating contested perspectives, for example, in relation to assessment, to enable meaningful enactment of reforms. Reflective of these themes, the key messages from

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the book are summarised and implications and recommendations for policy and practice are identified.

# Lessons from the Reform

As detailed over the course of this volume, the junior cycle reforms represented a major revision of curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy in the lower secondary stage of Irish education. Commencing in 2014, the reforms have been introduced to schools on a phased basis with the final phase of subjects introduced in 2019. Although the overall achievements and outcomes from the reform process are yet to be established, there are a number of significant lessons which can be learned from the process to-date. These lessons reflect the stages in the reform process, from policy development, through implementation and embedding of reform phases. Lessons also reflect the change process: how it plays out not only at the level of the system but with respect to individual schools and the key actors within them. The lessons are firstly unpacked with reference to a number of key themes identified within the work and are then summarised within the final concluding section to the chapter which identifies some attributes of a potentially successful systemic approach to curriculum reforms.

## The Influence of History, Existing Practice, and Systemic Context

The perspectives and analyses offered across the chapters indicate that the context in which the intended reforms are to take place is of particular significance and that curriculum change does not take place in a neutral vacuum. Instead, the influence of existing customs and practice shapes the manner in which the reform is understood, interpreted, and adopted by key actors within a national education system. In the case of Ireland the planned reforms were developed and implemented against a backdrop of a somewhat fragmented system characterised by a multitude of agencies each with their own remit and responsibilities, a variety of school

types operating within differing management structures, a relatively rigid subject-based approach, and the prevalence of high stakes assessment that fostered a relatively didactic approach to teaching. One overarching cultural effect of such characteristics is that cumulatively they cultivate a system which is reflective of 'silos' and is individually orientated rather than a system underpinned by more co-operative and collaborative approaches and values, which are advantageous to enacting reforms. This tendency appears to operate at all levels within the system: at the agency level where each has its own agenda and priorities, at the school level where competition rather than collaboration between schools has been the 'norm', and at the level of the individual teacher where the teaching of the assigned subject and 'student success' as reflected in the examination grades achieved are the key concerns. Whilst evident across the volume, the significance of such key characteristics of systemic context is most strongly reflected in Chaps. 10, 11, and 12. These chapters are orientated towards the implementation of the reforms, thus reflecting the particular interplay of context and implementation—intended change is subject to reinterpretation in light of existing norms, culture, and practice. This may have implications for the type of changes which are likely to be either accepted or rejected by the system and draws attention to the optimum scope for reform endeavours. As reflected in Chap. 7 regarding mathematics reforms, changes which are small scale may be repackaged within existing practice with the net effect of no change, whilst changes which are seen as extensive or indeed revolutionary may cause anxiety and stress in the short-term but may achieve more fundamental alterations to practice in the longer term. This poses an evident dilemma for policy makers tasked with balancing the 'pain' and 'gain' dimensions of curriculum reforms.

## The Influence of Global Trends and Discourses External to the National System of Education

Whilst systems context is of particular significance as detailed previously, there is an interesting contrast evident in the analyses offered across chapters between influences which are internal to the national system of

education and those which are reflective of global trends and discourses and which are thus external to the national system of education. It is possible to distil two main points in relation to this: firstly that international 'super-agencies' and projects such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) exert a significant influence on global educational reforms. This influence is reflected in the 'dominant discourses' which permeate such reform agendas and efforts and which ultimately leads to the adoption of a local version of a global trend, evident, for example, in the junior cycle with respect to the 'key skills' dimension of the reforms (Chap. 5). Secondly it is evident that the influence of such external agencies is significant in 'fast tracking' reforms compared to internal influences such as national reports which tend to have either no effect, that is, lead to inertia, or which may contribute to some change but within a much longer timeframe—the pace of such reforms is thus much slower. A clear example of this can be drawn from the many chapters which detail the influence of PISA (and particularly 'PISA shock' in 2009) on instigating junior cycle reform efforts in spite of the fact that many national reports had advocated for such reforms, particularly with regard to the assessment dimension, over an extended time period (as detailed in Chap. 9). Thus, external influences can be adjudged to be significant in influencing not only the nature of the reforms pursued and enacted at the national level, but also the pace of such reform endeavours. External influences lead to greater legitimation of reforms, and thus action, compared with internal influences. This can be further understood in light of the influence of systemic context as described previously. Such systemic context is a conserving force less malleable to influence by internal national level reports than by international agency-led reform agendas. Whilst there may be considered benefits to this reality (in driving the adoption of highly valued/desirable reforms) it also suggests the need for a clearly understood and developed philosophy of education at the national level, so that such externally led reform agendas can be mediated appropriately in light of established national priorities and values. However, the prevalence of structural fragmentation at a national level may be seen to militate against the capacity to devise and document such priorities in a unilateral manner.

## Challenges with Policy Development and Implementation

A central theme across the volume is the challenge of reforms in respect of both policy development and implementation. Put simply, curriculum change is difficult and complex, particularly when set against the backdrop of global and national agendas, and a fragmented national system populated with a multitude of significant actors. The complexity of change is recognised in a number of chapters within the volume, and these chapters identify two key overarching stages in the reform process: the development stage and the subsequent or follow-up implementation stage.

With regard to the development stage, a number of approaches or strategies are documented across the volume. For example, in Chap. 7, there is an interesting evolution detailed, ranging from a development process based on negotiation with key stakeholders to a more research-informed and expert-led process. The nature of the development process is recognised as significant in ensuring 'buy-in' when development gives way to implementation: having all key stakeholders 'on board' is important, as is having clearly established and utilised communication channels which include all relevant personnel, as emphasised in Chap. 10. The significance of an inclusive development process is evident from Chaps. 2 and 3 which address the role and input of parents and students respectively. The perspectives set out in these chapters underline the challenge of ensuring a truly inclusive and effective development process: Chap. 2 identifies how parental representation can be limited by perceptions of their own 'standing' or cultural capital, whilst Chap. 3 draws attention to the particular challenge of incorporating 'student voice' in a manner which is truly valued and authentic and which does not amount to mere tokenism on the part of the 'adult' actors. These, and the other related perspectives set out across the volume, suggest the need for careful consideration of the optimum approach to development for curriculum change/reform and for related consideration of both the voices to be represented and the means to enable such representation. Chapter 2 suggests there may be limitations to the partnership approach characterised by

representation through agencies—all teachers and parents may not feel represented via such a mechanism. In any reforms being considered there are also subject-specific considerations which need to be factored in as evident from the analyses of languages and music. Given the already stated complexity of reform endeavours, the development stage is key to building clarity and shared understandings amongst the stakeholders involved, which may in turn underpin the likelihood of 'success' for the subsequent implementation stage.

This is particularly the case given that, as evidenced from a number of the chapters, the 'devil is in the detail' of implementation, and that whilst there may be agreement in principle around a proposed change or reform, the exact nature of implementation can be contested and hence difficult. This is particularly evident with regard to contestation of proposed reforms with respect to assessment (Chap. 9). Whilst there was widespread agreement on the desirability of assessment reform, there was significant disagreement about how this should be enacted in practice with particular disagreement regarding the role of teachers. It is also evident that disagreements are not always just about the actual reforms, they can become 'political' and utilised by teachers and their unions as a vehicle for raising more general concerns regarding teacher pay and conditions. The role of the media in reporting contested and 'political' reforms is highlighted in Chap. 4. The analysis presented identifies how the media can indeed play a key role in communicating the reforms to the general public but that in the absence of careful nurturing, reporting may become selective and not necessarily focus on or communicate about the key issues such as the rationale for the reforms or how changes to assessment may promote enhanced student learning. This suggests that it may be advantageous for policy makers to engage proactively with the media so as to encourage a focus on the rationale and detail of any planned reforms, and not just on implementation-related events such as industrial relations disputes or teacher strikes. Such proactive engagement may facilitate the media in playing a more constructive or enabling role in reforms, as distinct from the possibility of media playing a more divisive role by focusing extensively on contested aspects.

The complexity of implementation is addressed across a number of chapters in the volume. In general, these chapters identify and address

the complexity of curriculum reform implementation and identify the need for certain provisions or supports to enable the implementation process to happen. These analyses suggest that there are both practical and 'mindset' dimensions to reform implementation, the practical relating to the materials, supports and resources needed and the mindset dimension relating to the openness to change necessary at the individual teacher and school levels for reform implementation to occur. Existing practice and system context all impact on change capacity. In exploring implementation through the lens of organisational change, Chap. 12 suggests that change is complex and requires systems thinking, careful leadership and management of change and that the school needs to function as a learning organisation that is open to ongoing change and improvement. As highlighted in Chaps. 10 and 12, there are both top-down and bottom-up dimensions or drivers to the change process and there are both pressures (such as targets to be achieved) and supports necessary to underpin change (such as documentation, resources, individual and whole school CPD, and the fostering of a collaborative mindset). Time is a key and precious resource. Reform requires ongoing review, feedback, and revision over many years to help ensure that it is successful. Chapter 5 in addressing reform implementation in the context of key skills suggests that there is a need for realignment of educational systems so that pedagogy and assessment are aligned with key skills and for schools to be reconceptualised as learning organisations which afford greater agency to both the learner and the teacher. These perspectives suggest a significant conceptual shift and thus underline the complexity and challenge of reform implementation and the related change process.

The pace, scope, and sequencing of reform implementation is an important consideration as raised within Chaps. 7 and 10. Within Chap. 10 the decision to phase junior cycle subjects in over several years is presented as a 'lost opportunity' as teachers of subjects in the initial phase 'felt exposed' and perhaps more significantly such an approach was considered as curtailing the possibility of collaboration and professional dialogue amongst teachers of different subject areas from the outset of the implementation phase. Drawbacks associated with a phased approach to implementation are also detailed within Chap. 7 in the context of Project Maths. In this case, the phased introduction is described as prolonging

and complicating the change process, creating heightened uncertainty and stress for teachers and students. Phased approaches also have implications for curriculum alignment, for example, with regard to consistency and congruence between junior and senior cycle and with regard to the philosophies and practices at play within the different levels of a system at certain points in time when 'old' and 'new' approaches overlap. Whilst a phased introduction may appear initially attractive in reducing the burden on a system and the actors within it, experience suggests that this is not exclusively the case, further illustrating the complexity and challenge associated with effective curriculum implementation. There are, however, differing views about the best way to introduce reforms, with many advocating a phased approach, notwithstanding some potential limitations highlighted here.

## Role and Influence of Key Actors

The influences of key actors particularly teachers and school leaders are evident throughout the volume: the teacher role is identified as particularly prominent in the analyses presented within the individual chapters. There is an interesting juxtaposition between the dual roles of teachers as potential agents and facilitators of change on one hand and as resistors of change on the other. Teachers are central actors in the success of any reforms but such change can bring pressure and workload on teachers leading to resistance and/or to reforms becoming 'political' from the teacher perspective. As detailed in a number of chapters (particularly Chaps. 2, 5, and 8) curriculum reforms can lead to an altered role for the teacher which can challenge both their self-confidence and their own perceptions of their professional competence. In light of this, and as argued across many of the chapters within the volume, there is a need for professional supports and CPD to enable meaningful enactment of the intended changes and to support teachers in becoming comfortable with any potentially altered role. Given the nature of the changes proposed in many contemporary reforms internationally, such supports/CPD are most usefully underpinned by a constructivist pedagogical orientation, as suggested in Chaps. 5 and 12, and can enable teacher networking and

collaboration via mechanisms such as communities of practice. Teacher resistance to involvement in the assessment of their own students is one of the 'headline stories' of junior cycle reforms as detailed in Chaps. 9 and 10. Against this backdrop, Chap. 11 details how Irish teachers operate in a highly externally controlled system where their main role is as 'curriculum deliverer' and posits that they are satisfied with this as external control limits the risk associated with their work. It furthermore suggests that the context needs to promote/nurture a changed mindset if Irish teachers are to have greater involvement in assessment. The experience of Sweden indicates that this is a difficult balancing act whereas in Finland teachers' role is assessment is long established and accepted. Such a perspective reinforces the significance of context (and in this case its interaction with teacher mindset) as detailed previously in this chapter. Some fostering (by the 'system') of 'positive' experiences with respect to assessment of their own students, such as in the context of classroom-based assessments (CBAs), may facilitate such incremental change in the mindsets of Irish teachers.

The volume also highlights the central role of school leaders in supporting and enabling curriculum reforms, a theme particularly prominent in Chaps. 10 and 12. Chapter 10 positions school leaders as 'learning leaders'. It identifies the role of leaders in initiating and sustaining a dialogue about learning in their schools and in convincing teachers and parents of the merits of proposed reforms and specifically how they will improve the nature and quality of learning. Leaders are also identified as having a role in supporting reforms by providing the enabling conditions for teachers to innovate, experiment and collaborate with other teachers and schools. Chapter 12 unpacks leadership with respect to 'capacity building' and in detailing the multifaceted and challenging role of the school leader it outlines how change cannot be achieved by leaders operating in isolation. Instead leadership needs to be distributed and fostered throughout the school so as to develop a critical mass of personnel who can work together to sustain change, in what essentially is an ongoing learning process, subject to inevitable setbacks along the way. These perspectives reinforce the well-established significance of school leaders in mediating reform agendas and highlight how school leaders need to understand and be convinced of the merits of proposed reforms if they

are to create the conditions necessary for the intended changes to be enacted at the teacher and school levels. This is of particular relevance where reforms are intended to facilitate schools in developing their own programmes and to engage teachers in designing aspects of curriculum which align with the needs and interests of the learners in their own particular school context.

## Challenges in Negotiating Contested Perspectives

There are a number of contested areas referenced over the course of the volume, including the raising of some fundamental questions of what constitutes worthwhile education in the twenty-first century and the potential to broaden the understanding of what constitutes 'good' education or teaching. The latter is premised mainly on a shift in what is most valued from the achievement of high grades to a broader consideration of worthwhile outcomes. Some of these worthwhile outcomes may not be reflected in terminal examination grades. As suggested in Chap. 10 parents as one significant stakeholder seem to be in favour of broadening the educational base, which may be achieved by incorporating a key skills dimension and aligning the education system in response to this, but parents also value the 'reassurance' provided by well-established terminal assessments. As illustrated in Chap. 3 there is potential for a student voice dimension to inform decision making in relation to this in any future reform programmes. There is a related consideration of whether upper secondary education in Ireland is overly academic and exam orientated and whether it is appropriate as a means of selection for university entry and the related influences that this brings to bear on the system as a whole. There is recognition of what may be regarded as the contested role of the teacher not only in respect of any potential role in assessment but also with regard to a more fundamental reorientation from subject or content specialist to more designer and facilitator of learning. Some subject related contestation is evident in the chapters regarding languages, mathematics, and music—typically this is reflective of debates regarding underpinning philosophy, overarching approach, and prioritisation of content as relevant to the given subject.

Notwithstanding these areas, contestation in relation to assessment was most prominent in junior cycle reform endeavours as reflected in a number of chapters in the volume and particularly within Chap. 9. The experience with respect to assessment highlights again the complexity and difficulty of curriculum reforms, the prominence of teacher unions in all aspects of educational reform in the Irish context, and the prevalence of a particular mindset amongst Irish teachers with respect to their own role in student assessment. As detailed in Chap. 11, this view is at odds with that of many of their peers internationally. Overall the experience with respect to the assessment issue illustrates how certain key issues have the potential to disrupt overarching reforms even in contexts where there is broad agreement regarding the necessity of the particular reform agenda. It also illustrates how the process of negotiation and compromise, whilst instrumental in producing the agreement needed to enable reforms to proceed, has the potential to produce a much altered version of change than that initially envisaged. In the context of junior cycle, for some this amounted to a significant watering down of the reforms intended in the initial review framework. In the longer term the experience with respect to assessment at junior cycle may, barring a significant change in the position of teachers and their unions, lead to more modest future proposals in the area of assessment, with policy makers likely to be mindful of what may or may not be considered workable or desirable by teachers and their unions. The complex issues encountered in providing alternatives to the 2020 Junior and Leaving Certificate exams as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic may well result in reconsideration of stakeholders' views about what is or is not workable in the future. The need for review of junior cycle is also evident in relation to the assessment issue as there is both the desirability to establish if the mechanisms put in place (such as the CBAs) are working in practice, with the potential that evidence which suggests that CBAs are indeed effective may engender more positive teacher attitudes to future reforms of a similar ilk.

# Attributes of an Effective Systemic Approach to Curriculum Reform

A number of overarching key themes have been identified based on the analyses offered within the volume. Informed by these themes, this final section aims to identify some broad 'lessons' which are framed as attributes of a potentially successful systemic approach to curriculum reform. It is proposed that attention to these attributes would aid curriculum reform at the senior cycle in Ireland and similar reforms in any education system engaging in fundamental realignment of curriculum policy and practice.

First, it is noteworthy that existing customs and practice shape the manner in which any reform is understood, interpreted, and adopted by key actors within an education system. This has implications for the type of changes which are likely to be either accepted or rejected by the system. Recognising the significance of context is a precursor to appropriately planning reforms especially with regard to the levels of support and 'change management' associated with any proposed change: what may be considered as more radical reforms require different levels of nurturing and supporting than more 'straightforward' reforms deemed to be more compatible with existing practices.

Secondly, it has been established that there are both internal and external factors which can influence and drive reforms. External influences can be adjudged to be more significant in influencing not only the nature of the reforms pursued, but also the pace of such reform endeavours. Education systems can benefit from having a clearly established underpinning philosophy of education so that external pressures can be mediated in light of clearly established national priorities. Otherwise, systems are susceptible to being dominated by externally lead international trends or fashions.

Thirdly, it is recognised that curriculum reform is difficult and complex with respect to both development and implementation stages. In light of this, there is a need for careful consideration of the optimum approach to development for curriculum change/reform and for related consideration of both the voices to be represented and the means to

enable such representation. Established mechanisms may not facilitate all voices in a truly inclusive manner. The nature of the development process is recognised as significant in ensuring 'buy-in' when development gives way to implementation. Having all key stakeholders 'on board' is recognised as highly important, as is having clearly established communication channels which include all relevant personnel and which are utilised over the course of any development process. This is as distinct from communicating 'agreed' reforms on the conclusion to such a process.

Fourthly, there are both practical and 'mindset' dimensions to reform implementation, the practical relating to the materials, supports, and resources needed and the mindset dimension relating to the openness to change necessary at the individual teacher and school levels for reform implementation to occur. Both need to be factored into any planned implementation strategy. Teachers and school leaders play a particularly prominent role in curriculum reform implementation. Capacity building is needed so that leadership can to be distributed and fostered throughout the school so as to develop a critical mass of personnel who can work together to sustain change. School leaders need to understand the rationale and intent behind any proposed change if they are to facilitate the conditions for change implementation to occur at the school and teacher levels.

Finally, the analysis presented in this volume indicates that certain key issues have the potential to disrupt overarching reforms even in contexts where there is broad agreement regarding the necessity of a given reform agenda. This highlights the significance of the 'detail' of planned reforms and of how reforms are negotiated and communicated. Any related process of negotiation and compromise, which may produce the agreement needed to enable the reforms to proceed, has the potential to produce a much altered version of change than that initially envisaged. This is an evident reality of any curriculum reform process. This analysis also draws attention to the significance of 'mindsets' which may be encountered during the reform process. In the context of negotiation and compromise, enabling positive experiences of contested aspects may be one way of facilitating changed mindsets on an incremental basis in the longer term.

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