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## Reforming Curriculum: Policy Optimism Meets Practice

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### 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 resisters 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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