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Junior Cycle Reform: Looking Forward

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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.