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Teachers' and Parents' Perspectives on Curriculum Reform

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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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