

# **CHANGE, CHALLENGE, RISK AND OPPORTUNITY**

**JOINT MANAGERIAL BODY (JMB)**

**EDUCATION CONFERENCE:**

**LEADING FOR NEW LEARNING**

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

**Dr Harold Hislop, Chief Inspector  
Department of Education and Skills**

**MONDAY, 15 SEPTEMBER 2014  
CROKE PARK CONFERENCE CENTRE  
DUBLIN**

## Opening

A Chairde, ba mhaith liom ar dtús mo bhuíochas a ghabháil do bhur Ard-Rúnaí, Ferdia agus do bhur Uachtarán, an tAthair Paul, as ucht an chuiridh labhairt ag an gComhdháil seo.

I want to thank your General Secretary, Ferdia [Kelly] and your President, Fr Paul, for their invitation to contribute to your Education Conference. Fr Paul [Connell] and his predecessor, Noel Merrick, both had occasion to speak about the Inspectorate in two of their Presidential addresses in recent years, for on both occasions, and entirely by co-incidence, their presidential addresses coincided with the arrival of a notice of inspection in their schools!!

A Athair Paul, beidh áthas ort le cloisteáil nach bhfuil an triú fógra agamsa inniu! [Fr Paul, you'll be glad to know that I don't come bearing a third notice! ]

Speaking more seriously, I was glad to accept this invitation to address this conference, not least because it gives me a public opportunity to thank Ferdia, Fr Paul and your Executive for the way in which they have worked with me and my colleagues in the Inspectorate. We are both interested in improving the life chances of young people: we can differ sometimes as to the means but I believe we work constructively together on goals that really matter. In consultations about inspections, I have benefited enormously from the views, wisdom and challenges that Ferdia, Fr Paul and your members have expressed openly and honestly to me. Long may that robust and respectful working relationship remain!

## What is this address about?

When your Education Officer, Michael Redmond, briefed me on what you wanted me to speak about today, he asked, in particular, that I look forward to the developments and changes that I see as particularly significant for the coming five years or so in Irish education. He also offered the prospect that I was free to express something of my own personal preferences and wish list. And, he quipped, that he hoped, that at the worst, I wouldn't depress everyone!

Niels Bohr, a Nobel Laureate in Physics and a founder of CERN<sup>1</sup>, is reported to have said once that "Prediction is very difficult, especially if it's about the future!" So I fear that Michael may well have set me up for a fall! But he is very persuasive, and I am going to risk sharing some personal views and thoughts with you about how our education system might or should develop in the next few years.

I have chosen a number of areas where I see possibilities and probabilities for change, and I'll outline those in a moment. Some of these, if they come to pass, I would heartily welcome; others I fear, may encounter blockages and regrettably might not come about; and yet others may appear to some in the room as unworkable or even undesirable. There are areas, too, that I am not going to discuss, such as the impact of ICT or Irish in the school system, mainly because of lack of time.

---

<sup>1</sup> Niels Bohr, 1885-1962, Danish physicist.

But before I look at these areas of change, I think it's worth starting with some *over-arching values* that I think are particularly relevant to the educational issues that I will be discussing. My list of values is by no means comprehensive, but I hope that by reflecting on these values, we can contemplate more fully the challenges of the changes that we face.

## Values

So, to values: none of the values that I will list will be very novel or surprising, and most of them, I think, you will share. But I think these values bear both repetition and our constant commitment:

- **We must recognise and celebrate good teachers and good teaching!** Perhaps no other people, other than our parents, have potentially as significant an impact on our lives as the good teachers that we encounter. Think of one or two of those people in your own life – the way they inspired you, challenged you, led you to new levels of experience, and enhanced your self-worth. A lot of good teaching goes on every day in Irish schools. We can be proud of teachers in Ireland, we should cherish the regard in which teachers have been held in Ireland, and anything we contemplate in the future should strive to acknowledge, support and improve the profession of teaching.
- **Learning is about developing young people and setting them on the road of learning for life!** Seems obvious, doesn't it? Most of us in this room have been or are teachers. But we need to remember that teaching is not only a deeply powerful human engagement in the moment, it is also a means to an end. That end is the rounded development of young people – in all aspects of the physical, mental, emotional, aesthetic, social, intellectual, spiritual dimensions of life. It's about enabling young people to lead lives as full and productive citizens – economic contributors, yes, but much more than that! This means that what we value in education - what we enshrine in our curricula both written and experienced – has to be carefully judged and balanced. And it also means that elements of the education system that can affect the *experienced curriculum* – such as the professional development of teachers and the assessment and evaluation approaches we use – have to be judged in the light of the way they impact upon the learning experience of students.
- **Equity is not the enemy of excellence: equity is at the core of the educational endeavour.** Ireland has benefited enormously from the commitment of those who saw education as a way in which poverty could be ended. The religious communities of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the political leaders who had the courage to extend access to secondary and higher education in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought about remarkable social and economic change in Ireland. But in any country, where the vast majority enjoy the privileges of education – or any other

social service for that matter – we can run the risk of a certain complacency. When those who do not benefit from the *status quo* are in a minority, it's possible to lose the focus on *equity of opportunity for all*. Perhaps, the system comes to be shaped to suit the comfortable many, not the few; or perhaps the focus on the aim of equity is eroded, because it can mean the transfer of resources from the many to the few.

- **A confident and well-informed Irish educational system for a confident Ireland!**

Anne Looney has described curriculum as “the story that one generation tells to the next.” I think that that is an insightful definition, and it also reminds us that it is OUR story to shape, tell and pass on. It's absolutely right that we should design our education system and the experiences that we offer to young people in the light of the values and historical experiences of our society. By and large, we have done this well: Irish people have an enormous degree of trust in the Irish school system and its teachers; so, too, have employers and multi-national businesses; many of our young people are among the most articulate you will find anywhere; their ability to work with others, to be creative makes them highly sought after; their sense of social justice is striking.

Yet, if we are confident in the distinctive features of our own system, we also have to be sufficiently open to examine how other systems work; how others have *really* improved their students' learning. We live in a global and competitive world and our young people will have to survive in a world that is likely to be even more inter-connected and inter-dependent. How our educational system compares to others is a valid question. We have to be open to holding a mirror to Kathleen's face and open to acknowledging that Kathleen's educational face is not perfect!

What we need to guard against, however, is being too quick to adopt ready-made and unadjusted solutions from elsewhere. Too often, education is plagued by easy solutions, the magic project or intervention that is the panacea for all ills in school systems. Too many of those solutions and suggestions for change are directed at the features of educational systems where research shows us that change has little impact on student learning. The management structures that we use in education systems, the use of charter or free schools *versus* state schools, the introduction of ICT as the defining characteristic of a school, changes in class sizes, even sometimes the level of resources that systems spend on education – almost all of these and many others have been shown to have, at best, only negligible effects on the quality of students' learning.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, we can learn lessons from others – indeed it would be remiss of us not to do so. That is one of the major benefits that we can extract from examining research and from our participation in international studies, but we must reject some ideas,

---

<sup>2</sup> See John Hattie, *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of over 800 Meta-Analyses relating to Achievement* (London, Routledge, 2009)

take others and make our own them (where they have the potential to make a *significant* impact on learning), and be confident enough to do things our own way!

## Areas of change

So let me turn to some of the areas where I think change is likely to happen.

### Curricular change

It will be no surprise to you when I say that significant change is inevitable in both the *planned* and the *experienced* curriculum. Curriculum change is frequently controversial and it often gives rise to passionate claims and counter claims. Actually this is as it should be – it is an important indicator of the value we place as a society and as a profession on shaping the story that we tell to future generations. In addition, implementing real curriculum change brings with it, not only changes in *what* we teach but *how* we teach and this is challenging, unsettling and indeed can be threatening to teachers.

While we will have to address both curriculum implementation and curriculum content challenges at pre-school and primary level, we face the greatest changes in curriculum at second level. Despite the controversies, there is universal agreement that the current curriculum experience at lower secondary level needs to change. And that has implications for both the stage before and after junior cycle: inevitably upper primary and upper secondary education will feel the effect of changes in junior cycle. In fact, the possibility of achieving a more coherent experience for the learner from pre-school to upper secondary level should be grasped with open arms!

I am confident that the elements of Junior Cycle reform will happen. Teachers, school managers, parents, employers have all recognised the need for change. Minister O’Sullivan has made clear her commitment to implementing change. Positive, real engagement between the teachers unions and the Minister has commenced. The phased introduction of the first subject has begun and an excellent team of teachers is in place in the JCT<sup>3</sup> to support the change. Of course, we face a slow, long and challenging journey of change. We will face difficulties, but these can and will be overcome.

I won’t get into the detail of the implementation agenda, here. Instead, I’d like to comment about one underpinning aspect of the curriculum change. Much of the criticism of the current educational experience at junior cycle concerns an apparent over-emphasis on rote learning, on a teaching-to-the-examination syndrome, and the consequent narrowing of the educational experience for young people. And indeed how the resulting experienced curriculum is unattractive and unsuitable for many students, particularly boys and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

---

<sup>3</sup> The Junior Cycle for Teachers support service established to provide in-service education to post-primary teachers to support the implementation of the new *Junior Cycle Framework* in schools.

A key concern of the new framework is to re-dress the balance in favour of the development of cross-curricular skills, a more balanced development of students' social, emotional and physical well-being, and a wider range of learning experiences. Some of this derives from the influence of the thinking concerning 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, popularised by the OECD and others.<sup>4</sup> Some of the change is seeking to address real issues concerning young people's well-being and health. Other elements of the change reflect the possibility of a more personalised learning offered by ICT. This new emphasis is challenging for students, teachers and parents. Understandably, it gives rise to concerns about the capacity of individual teachers, schools and the system as a whole to implement the curriculum.

One risk is that the change outlined in the *Framework for Junior Cycle*<sup>5</sup> could be read as pitching the teaching of skills as somehow *distinct from* the teaching of subject knowledge. It could be interpreted as valuing project work, group teaching, discovery methodologies and other approaches above teacher-directed instruction. Some of this concern can find echoes in the sort of criticism that Daisy Christodoulou has expressed recently in her book, *Seven Myths about Education*. She talks, somewhat unconvincingly in my view, about the lack of a knowledge-based curriculum in English schools. She argues that a dumbed-down but "generic-skills-focussed" curriculum, combined with an over-emphasis on project work and discovery learning, has worsened English educational outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

I think it's very important not to fall into those traps when attempting to explain and understand the sort of curricular changes that we want to see in Junior Cycle. There have been attempts in the past to separate the teaching of skills from the teaching of subjects. It's happened in the teaching of science and geography. In history teaching, for example, in the 1970s and 1980s, several textbooks and curricula suggested the inclusion of specific units to develop historical skills such as analysis and judgement making, handling evidence, recognising bias, and developing empathy.<sup>7</sup> Few if any of them worked. Why? Because these skills only make sense in the context of bodies of knowledge about specific periods and historical events. Historical skills can only be developed when students also acquire a good knowledge and understanding of key events, personalities and actions in the past. The same could be said of skills in science or arts. That's one of the reasons why I welcome the retention of subject disciplines in the junior cycle framework.<sup>8</sup>

What I would like to see, however, is that the teaching of these subjects and the short courses that schools will be able to design, will bring students far beyond the acquisition

---

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Brigid Barron and Linda Darling-Hammond, "Prospects and challenges for inquiry-based approaches to learning" in Hanna Dumont, David Instance and Francisco Benavides (eds.), *The Nature of Learning: Using Research to Inspire Practice*, (OECD, Paris, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Department of Education and Skills, *A Framework for Junior Cycle*, (Dublin, DES, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Daisy Christodoulou, *Seven Myths about Education* (The Curriculum Centre & Routledge, Oxford, 2014)

<sup>7</sup> See for example the *Jackdaw* history packs which were produced in the UK and in the US in the 1970s and 1980s and which provided sets of copies of original sources for use in classrooms. Their appearance stimulated the production of similar series from public record office depositories such as the then Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, the National Library of Ireland and the Public Record Office, Dublin.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, the 1999 *Primary School Curriculum* states that subject disciplines are "an important part of the child's cultural and intellectual inheritance." [Department of Education and Science, *Primary School Curriculum: History*, (Dublin, Stationery Office, 1999), p.4]

and repetition of banks of knowledge. Students will require a good knowledge of a range of subjects, but they should also have opportunities to delve deeply into that knowledge, to learn to question and evaluate it, to be able to re-assemble different pieces of knowledge in new contexts and to use their knowledge and skills with others to approach new situations with open, creative solutions. Far from a dumbing-down of the curriculum, a changed Junior Cycle should be much more challenging. So I think it will be essential for teachers and school leaders not to regard the development of skills or competences as an end in themselves, but to design a balanced programme of learning activities in which students' knowledge can grow, while at the same time deliberate and planned attention is paid to the development of students' abilities to understand, question, think, appreciate, analyse, express oneself, care for oneself, critique and acquire values, cooperate and create. What I am speaking about is a redressing of the imbalance that exists in the current dispensation.

Two further areas of change are linked directly to the *experienced* curriculum.

### **Assessment**

The first of these is assessment. Here I see both risks and opportunities.

It's not surprising that for many teachers, many students and many parents in Ireland, assessment is indelibly associated with a written test of some sort. Even in primary schools, teachers place a great deal of emphasis on the administration of tests, be they weekly spelling tests, end-of-unit tests, or standardised tests of literacy and numeracy. Examinations have dominated the lives of teachers and students at post-primary and indeed third-level education, and those of us who are products of the system tend to replicate it in our practice as teachers.

There is nothing wrong, *per se*, with tests and examinations. On the contrary, they are very useful and essential tools in helping us to chart and analyse students' learning, and some of the criticisms levelled at the State Examinations are not always well-founded or well-informed. And until recently, we have under-utilised standardised assessment tests in the Irish system. But the obvious problem is that conventional tests and examinations cannot measure the achievement of many of the deeper skills or indeed the deeper knowledge that we say we value. One consequent and serious risk is often spoken about – that assessment or examinations come to distort good teaching rather than support it.

A more serious risk, in my view, arises because most of us in the Irish educational system lack an appreciation of the different ways in which we can make judgements about the current state of a student's learning. Most of us have not had opportunities to learn extensively about the advantages, weaknesses and in-built assumptions of various assessment approaches. There are real dangers that with the best will in the world, we misinterpret the limited assessment data that we have.

How often do we discuss in an informed and dispassionate way the relative merits and disadvantages involved in our choice of assessments? We tend to accept the current examination system at second level because by using a limited set of questions and written tasks, it can be shown to measure, to a reasonable degree of consistency, some limited

aspects of students' learning. It's easy, on the face of it, to persuade others that this familiar system brings a "fairness," even a "brutal fairness" to the system.

But if we truly value teaching and students' learning, we need to have a much deeper, better informed, and more honest discussion about the advantages and disadvantages that this "brutal fairness" imposes.

Linda Darling Hammond has demonstrated that well-intentioned decisions taken in the United States as part of the *No Child Left Behind* policy to place greater emphasis on externally administered tests led to declines rather than gains in the achievement of students.<sup>9</sup> Introducing an element of teacher-administered, school-based assessment may not give us a neat, simple number, but it could give us a much richer set of information about the capabilities and learning successes of the student. Nor does this mean that the system becomes "unfair" or lacking in objectivity. Teachers in other countries have shown that properly supported and moderated teacher-assessment *can* identify levels of student performance just as effectively as externally administered pen-and-paper tests, and can help to build a reflective professional, culture for improvement as well.<sup>10</sup> That's why successful systems – as far apart physically and philosophically as Finland and Hong Kong have adopted teacher-based assessment as their main method of student assessment.

And even if we were worried that simple statistical reliability might be eroded, would it not be worth accepting *some* (and I stress *some*) minor lessening of comparability for the gain of ensuring that good teaching is liberated and students have real opportunities to learn the broad and balanced sets of knowledge and skills that we say we want them to learn? Could we discuss whether at various stages of the education system, a different mix of assessment approaches might be used? Could we have more teacher-based assessment at certain stages during the lower secondary years, for example, with a different balance of approaches more appropriate at a high-stakes Leaving Certificate level? If not, why not?

So on the wish list that Michael has given me, I would ask for a sustained investment in our system's knowledge, expertise and capacity about all aspects of student assessment; an investment that will enable us to have those professional discussions, that will support teaching and that will inform good assessment policy. It's great to see recently revised teacher education programmes place a much greater emphasis on assessment (and the impetus that the Teaching Council has given to this development). I welcome very much the decision of Government in July of this year to establish the Educational Research Centre as a statutory body. It's excellent that this conference will hear a keynote address from Norman Emerson recently appointed as Director of Assessment at the NCCA. And I believe that it is undeniably true that a considerable effort will be needed to improve teachers' assessment literacy and skills through a sustained programme of teacher professional development and teacher professional networks.

---

<sup>9</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond and Laura Closkey, *Assessment for Learning Around the World: What Would It Mean to be Internationally Competitive?* In Phi Delta Kappan, Vol.90, No.04, December 2008, pp.263-272.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Queensland Studies Authority, *School-Based Assessment: the Queensland System* (State of Queensland, 2010).



None of this can happen overnight, nor can it happen without sustained investment and resources. Teachers will need time and experience to develop their knowledge, skills and confidence in assessment. I am sure that we will not see the full effects of such changes for many years, but they could have a profound effect on the quality of learning in schools and on the depth of our education discourse. And if I was advising any young teacher contemplating a piece of post-graduate research, I'd be encouraging them to look at this area.

### **International assessments and the availability of assessment data**

The question of the level of assessment literacy in the Irish education system is also relevant when we consider our involvement in international assessments such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS,<sup>11</sup> and the question of the availability of school-level assessment data in the Irish context.

Acres of academic and popular print have been written about PISA in particular: about the potentially damaging effect it is alleged to have had on educational policy and practice in some countries, on the one hand, and on the other hand, about the value of international benchmarks and comparisons. All human endeavours have advantages and disadvantages. PISA has certainly helped to bring about changes in the way we teach mathematics and it has been a useful spur to advancing changes in teacher education, curriculum and assessment. I have also heard it postulated that the change to an ICT-administered PISA in 2015, and the attempts that the 2015 test will make to measure students' ability to solve dynamic problems, may well lead to changes in country rankings and spur educational systems to greater use of ICT in teaching and learning.

Of course, there are limitations and weaknesses in international comparative studies which may be stated in the footnotes of PISA and other reports but which are not widely understood or appreciated. The outcomes of such studies need to be treated with caution. They also need to be read as one source of information among many. To do this intelligently and to best effect, however, we need to be confident in our own assessment practice and rich in our own information about student learning. This is yet another reason for my earlier emphasis on assessment literacy. For me, some of the most useful lessons from PISA and other studies is not found in inter-country comparisons or headline-grabbing league tables, but in the sort of thorough analysis of our own data that the Educational Research Centre produces.<sup>12</sup> And some of that evidence is challenging and unflattering: national and international studies show that socio-economic status remains an important determinant of

---

<sup>11</sup> PISA, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment is an international study of the achievement of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science. PIRLS and TIMSS are operated under the auspices of the IEA. PIRLS is the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study and TIMSS is the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Rachel Perkins et al, *PISA 2009: Results for Ireland and Changes Since 2000*, (Dublin, ERC, 2012); Rachel Perkins et al, *The Achievement of 15-Year-Olds in Ireland on Mathematics, Reading Literacy and Science in PISA 2012* (Dublin, ERC, 2013); Rachel Perkins and Gerry Shiel, *Problem Solving in PISA: the Results of 15-Year-Olds on the Computer-Based Assessment of Problem Solving in PISA 2012* (Dublin, ERC, 2014).

a student's learning in Ireland, and to a much greater extent than in some countries.<sup>13</sup> This really points to the need to sustain and constantly re-examine the programmes and initiatives that address social inequality among the students within individual schools and clusters of schools, within the school system, and in Irish society beyond the education system.

I think that it is inevitable, too, that in an education system that is more attuned to a deeper understanding of assessment, and in a society where the long-term trend is towards greater access to all public data, the current arrangements that limit the publication of assessment data<sup>14</sup> may well be re-visited. In my experience, most parents' main interest is in *their own child's learning*, and parents now have rights to access much more information about the progress that their child is making than in the past. But it's not unreasonable for them to expect information about how well their child's *school* is operating.

There is a superficial attractiveness and simplicity in school league tables. I think it's fair to say that the available evidence would tend to show that public access, merely to school-level examination or test data, without considerable additional contextual information, has little effect on improving a broad range of learning outcomes in schools. Nor does it seem to improve equity in school systems, and it's worth noting that the cost of providing any sort of acceptable data is very high. But if we believe that parents deserve more and better information about schools, and if we also accept a legitimate public accountability obligation, then those of us within the educational system will be challenged to provide a better alternative; indeed, we may come to feel that we have a duty to provide a better alternative. An enhanced knowledge and understanding of assessment among teachers, educationalists and the Irish school system generally, would be essential in enabling us to do that. And this would also equip teachers to have much more meaningful engagements in those really important conversations – with individual students and parents about the student's progress.

---

<sup>13</sup> Encouraging data is emerging to suggest that the long-term efforts that have been made to improve the performance of disadvantaged students through the DEIS programme of the Department of Education and Skills are being successful in Ireland. (See for example, Susan Weir and Sylvia Denner, *The Evaluation of the School Support Programme under DEIS: Changes in Pupil Achievement in Urban Primary Schools between 2007 and 2013 – Bulletin Report* (Dublin, ERC, 2013). However, data from PISA 2012 has shown that the proportion of variation in mathematics performance among Irish 15-year-old students that can be explained by elements of socio-economic status is above the average for OECD countries. It also shows that the likelihood of an Irish student from the bottom quarter of the PISA index of socio-economic status performing in the top quarter of students among all countries (after accounting for socio-economic status) is about the OECD average. Taken together these PISA statistics would suggest that the impact of socio-economic status on student outcomes in Ireland is about the OECD average. Other western societies, such as Canada, Estonia, Finland (and Hong-Kong China and Macao-China) combine high student performance in mathematics, a weak relationship between performance and socio-economic status, and relatively narrow differences across socio-economic groups. (See OECD, *PISA 2012 Results Volume II: Excellence through Equity: Giving Every Student the Chance to Succeed* (Paris, OECD, 2013), especially chapter 2.

<sup>14</sup> See Education Act, 1998, section 53.

## Teaching

Of all the changes that I think are most likely, the one that has the most potential is the practice of teaching itself. This change is also linked to the curriculum that students *experience*.

Here, I think that the work that Prof John Hattie has done in examining what actually works in schools to improve learning is of the most profound importance. His meta-analysis of over 800 meta-analyses of research into what brings about significant improvements in students learning demonstrates that *the* most significant benefits occur when “teachers become learners of their own teaching and when students become their own teachers”.<sup>15</sup>

He identifies and describes a highly skilled and informed type of teacher-directed instruction. He makes clear that this is not simply a teacher chalk-and-talk approach or one dominated by the acquisition of undigested knowledge. Rather, he describes how “teaching requires deliberate interventions to ensure that there is cognitive change in the student”, and that the key ingredients in this process involve

- An awareness of the learning intentions
- Knowing when a student is successful in attaining those intentions
- Having sufficient understanding of the student when he/she comes to the task
- Knowing enough about the content to provide meaningful and challenging experiences for the student in some sort of progressive development
- Knowing a *range of learning strategies* to provide to the student when they seem not to understand
- Providing direction and re-direction in terms of the content being understood
- Maximising the power of feedback to the student *and from the student to the teacher*.

I bet each of you can recognise teachers in your own school who fit this description. Those teachers that influenced your life for the better were probably like this.

Hattie has spoken passionately about the necessity for education systems to focus on creating, supporting and rewarding highly skilled teachers like this. And doesn't this resonate with what we know about the success of educational systems such as that of Finland and New Zealand, that have forged distinctive paths to improvement, and where a great deal of emphasis has been placed on investment in highly skilled teachers who are required to engage in constant professional development?

We already have something of a head start in this approach in Ireland, given the high regard and trust that our culture places in teachers. The recent lengthening of our teacher education programmes in the most radical shake-up of teacher education in decades is a further welcome step, as is the introduction of systematic induction and probationary

---

<sup>15</sup> John Hattie, *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of over 800 Meta-Analyses relating to Achievement* (Routledge, London, 2009), p. 22.

processes that are led by the profession and the Teaching Council.<sup>16</sup> The commitment to tackle the over-casualization of the teaching profession – a commitment that has to be delivered under the Haddington Road agreement – could also certainly help to bolster the profession as we come out of the economic crisis.

### **Teaching as collaborative undertaking**

Hattie argues convincingly that the passion and skills of individual teachers are key – that often there are greater differences to be found between individual teachers in a single school than between different schools. But like Hargreaves and Fullan, Hattie has also identified a responsibility of teachers to be learners and especially *collaborative learners* with their fellow teachers. Hargreaves and Fullan have written about the need for teachers to “break down the walls of classroom isolation and convert teaching into a more collaborative and collegial profession.”<sup>17</sup> The practice of teachers observing each other teach and of discussing pedagogy with one another in honest, open and constructive detail, is still rare but growing in Irish schools. Creating the conditions for this is not easy - it requires trust and boundaries, it requires openness and collegiality, and it requires a willingness to discard ineffective practice and knowledge, or a willingness to admit that we don't know, and even a commitment to re-learn dimensions of the art of teaching. And sometimes, rarely, I would say, it may mean that those unsuited to the profession realise that teaching is not for them.

One of the most significant potential impacts of the Teaching Councils' new induction and probationary processes is that it can make this sort of teacher-teacher and teacher-principal interaction the norm from the teacher's first day in teaching. The *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines* that the Inspectorate published in 2012<sup>18</sup> focussed on teaching and learning – and not any other aspect of school activity – simply because the research shows the potential of professional and challenging collegial conversations to improve students' learning, when those conversations are based on the evidence of observation, as well as feedback from students and parents. Your own agenda of workshops today is evidence of your own far-sightedness in this regard.

Once individual classrooms are opened up, and regular, real conversations begin, teachers and schools will be on a secure path to improvement and development. That's what I would like to see emerging from the introduction of SSE. If we approach SSE in this spirit, prioritising professional growth, responsibility and accountability, and provided we

---

<sup>16</sup> The Teaching Council's new arrangements for induction and probationary processes are currently operating in pilot scheme termed *Droichead* [Bridge]. Full details available on the relevant section of the Teaching Council's website at <http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/teacher-education/new-proposal-on-induction-and-probation.1593.html>

<sup>17</sup> Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan, *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School* (Oxon, Routledge, 2012), p. xi.

<sup>18</sup> Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills, *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Post-primary Schools* (Dublin, DES, 2012) available at [http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/sse\\_guidelines\\_post\\_primary.pdf](http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/sse_guidelines_post_primary.pdf)

genuinely welcome the views of students and parents, I see no reason why we cannot garner significant improvements for young people in schools.

### **Inspection can help**

In the Inspectorate, it is because of our faith in the value and effect of respectful professional engagement, that

- We have unashamedly placed great store on acknowledging good practice in classrooms and on seeking to make constructive, well-informed suggestions for improvement.
- It's why we have re-committed ourselves to these principles in the new *Inspectorate Code of Practice* that we have published for consultation.
- It's why we think there is a value in incidental inspections (as part of a balanced programme of external inspections): incidental inspections, where inspectors can have feedback conversations with teachers and principals unencumbered by the need for detailed published reports.
- It's why we think some of those incidental inspections could become more subject-focussed from time to time.
- It's why we have written to schools this month, asking them if they would like us to visit to discuss with them how they are engaging in SSE and to explore how they might advance on the SSE journey.
- And to encourage schools to share good practice about their SSE journeys, we are organising the first national seminar about SSE next month.
- I know, too, that SSE needs time to embed in schools. The focus of the first four-year period of SSE is on teaching and learning, with self-evaluation of leadership and management to follow. Once we have completed the first four-year cycle, I would not be averse to reviewing whether, in some schools, the focus should remain on consolidating teaching and learning rather than moving on to other aspects of school life.
- Because of our commitment to respectful co-professional engagement, we are keeping under review our external inspections such as WSE, and how they can support teachers and you as principals and board members, as you create a culture of improvement teaching and learning.
- And it's why we have developed and are currently trialling post-evaluation questionnaires that ask principals and teachers searching questions about the quality of the engagement inspectors have with them in the course of inspections. Some the preliminary results are very positive but we are committed to learning lessons about how we might support good practice as effectively as possible in schools.

## **Leadership, management and autonomy**

My final area of change concerns you. The *Chief Inspector's Report 2010-12*<sup>19</sup> described, accurately, I believe, the unplanned and uncoordinated loss of middle management expertise and resources in schools during the economic crisis, and the impact that this was having on principals, many of whom are themselves recently appointed to leadership. Your own organisation, with the ACCS, has made constructive proposals about how this situation may be addressed, how the opportunity might be taken in the years ahead to re-design and re-establish middle management so that it facilitates the sort of learning that I have described. Certainly, proposals along these lines could go some of the way to address the needs of the system, and I know that the JMB plans to discuss its proposals further with other management bodies.

The type of collegial, safe, but challenging school environment that is necessary for the sort of school improvement that I have described cannot happen without principals who can create the right atmosphere, commitment and passion for learning. Getting the leadership of schools right is vital to this process. That is why it is so good to see that the Secretary General of the Department is overseeing work to get real initiatives going on the initial education of principals and deputies and on an effective support structure for school leaders. I'd anticipate, too, that with better middle-management and leadership provision, we would have the potential to give meaningful but usable autonomy to schools and principals, especially in areas such as curriculum development, staffing deployment and school development priorities.

The current demographic and financial situation is far from ideal and the demographic pressures, in particular, are enormous both now and for the next decade. But, given the needs we have and the potential that these school leadership initiatives offer, I'd certainly add the funding and establishment of these developments to my wish list and my priorities for the school system as we come out of the current difficulties.

Personally, I also think that there would be merit in re-visiting proposals made as long ago as the White Paper of the mid-1990s<sup>20</sup> to see if we could work out how principals could have access, not only to traditional employment contracts, but also to more flexible employment arrangements and greater mobility opportunities.

## **Living values through change**

So, I foresee significant change, challenge, risk and opportunity

- in the lived curriculum experienced by students,
- in the development of assessment practice and our understanding of assessment,

---

<sup>19</sup> Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills, *Chief Inspector's Report 2010-12* (Dublin, DES, 2013) available at <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/Chief-Inspector%E2%80%99s-Report-2010-2012-Main-Report.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Department of Education, *Charting Our Education Future: White Paper on Education* (Dublin, Stationery Office, 1995); see especially chapter 11.

- in ensuring that teaching remains a proud and valued calling, and becomes a truly collegial and critical profession,
- in the evaluation of schools, and
- in the leadership, management and autonomy of schools.

What I truly hope for is that some years ahead, we will be able to say that in the excitement, struggles, successes and setbacks that we will experience, we continued to live out our values:

- that we will have celebrated and enhanced teaching and the profession of teaching;
- that we will have truly developed young people in all aspects of their lives;
- that we will have a more equitable school system and society; and
- a distinctive and confident Irish education system that we can be truly proud of.

Go raibh maith agaibh!