

Deirdre Mac Donald Speech at NCCA Conference on Senior Cycle in Croke Park

Context

Teachers are the practicing professionals in the field of education, this gives us unique and valuable insights pertinent to educational change.

Our knowledge and collective experience, which is evidence based, must be recognised and embraced as the huge asset that it is to advancing intellectually sound and sustainable developments in education.

Despite huge under investment - Ireland having ranked last out of 35 countries in terms of investment in education as a percentage of GDP in the latest OECD research – we have demonstrated that we are a flexible, cogent, committed and resilient profession, which has maintained high standards despite many obstacles. Evidence of this is the PISA results of recent years.

I am commencing with this observation, as one of the resounding legacies of curriculum change at Junior Cycle is that the professional voice of teachers was marginalised.

This perception may not be shared by some here today. I am duty bound as ASTI President to inform that this is the view of the practitioners in the classrooms and staffrooms around our country. This must not happen again with the Senior Cycle Review.

Teachers in their many roles, are overloaded and under resourced.

Plato described education as the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel. This will not happen by spontaneous combustion – teachers are vital to this work.

Turning now to the ASTI's appraisal of the purpose of education.

Knowledge

Senior Cycle offers time for students to a more challenging, exciting and interesting examination and understanding of subject material.

Breadth and depth is necessary in the subjects that the students have chosen to apply themselves to. The integrity of subject matter is very important and a "one size fits all approach" will serve no one well, least of all students who chose different subjects for this very reason.

Purpose cannot be divorced from content and skills and competencies can only be developed in tandem with sufficiently challenging subject matter.

This approach does not exclude the transposition of material from one discipline to another – but only where and when appropriate.

Ireland has grown and flourished as a result of a robust and intellectually sound education system. Generations of students have shown that this approach to education has allowed for the extrapolation from material, and connecting of material, in many forms and forums.

As I look around me here today I see ample evidence of the value of a knowledge based Senior Cycle, people who are fit for purpose in many areas of life. Who have benefited from the Senior Cycle available to them and cascade effect this has had as a result of their involvement in many areas of life.

While I do not believe that we should see individuals as economic units, the fact is that our economy has prospered as a result of the primacy of knowledge in our education system.

We are known as a knowledge based economy. I rest my case for continuing to value knowledge in the wide variety of subject offered at senior cycle.

Equality of Opportunity

The philosophy of Thomas MacDonagh, ASTI founder and signature to the 1916 Proclamation, declares the right to equal opportunities to all citizens, which ASTI members hold very dearly.

Senior Cycle should provide an opportunity for all students irrespective of their socioeconomic or cultural background to fulfil their ambition to access a pathway to their chosen career.

We have an external, objective, transparent and robust assessment/ examination system that is trusted and held in high esteem by all concerned and is highly regarded internationally.

We are duty bound to have a system which is insulated from any possibility of outside intervention which would further advantage those who by accident of birth are already greatly advantaged.

The teacher student relationship is an essential component of any learning experience. This relationship must not be adulterated in the assessment for certification process.

There are undoubtedly short comings with respect to students' ability to choose, with full knowledge and full consent, a road to a rewarding career.

2 aspects to this problem.

- 1) A need to greatly improve our guidance and counselling provision and
- 2) A need to develop pathways to further education & training, away from the universities and third level colleges. We fully support such deliberations and we know the folly of trying to shoe horn students into academic institutions. It serves nobody well and must be changed.

Personal Growth and Development

Personal growth and development in all phases of life, is perhaps the most complex and important objective of the Senior Cycle.

It requires a supportive environment where a student has the opportunity to experience success and failure in a safe learning environment.

Success and failure are part and parcel of a full experience of learning. Resilience cannot be taught, it is like immunity, it has to be built, through experience and exposure.

A standalone Transition Year offers such a prospect without repercussions for life after TY both in and out of school.

Transition Year option gives an opportunity to transition from Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle with the unique prospect of being exposed to a variety of activities while also keeping the academic element of school life – this is for some, but not all students, what is needed and wanted. It should be available for all.

While the Junior Cycle has given 400 hrs allocated to Wellbeing, this allocation of school time is not necessary in Senior Cycle.

Everything that matters and adds to the growth of the person, does not need to be formally planned, timetabled, and reported on.

The ability to work with others, in pairs, or on teams, with staff members in a different dynamic, is affirmative for all concerned. Time spent on extra-curricular activities in the Senior Cycle affords the opportunity to learn and finesse skills of co-operation and team building. Transferable skills for active citizenship.

Whether it be the team spirit of the hurling or hockey team or learning off your lines for the school show or learning your score for the choral competition, it is real learning that goes with you into life.

You see before you a long time school debater – one of the best things, along with choral singing, that helped me come to the position I am in today. Activities to be reflected on and to be evaluated before embarking on the next challenge.

Speaking of reflection and evaluation, it is important that we practice what we preach.

We need an external, objective evaluation of the Junior Cycle – planning process, subject content, implementation and CPD by JCT. As our General Secretary says “you cannot built on wet cement” – indeed sound foundations are vital in any change process and education is no different.

These 3 fundamental components, if properly resourced, places a person in a position to flourish on whatever path one choses to follow.

We should proceed with caution and remember wise men and women have their afterthought before. Senior Cycle should offer the potential to move to places of one’s dreams, irrespective of our place in society.

Speaking on behalf of teachers and generations of students to come and indeed adding to Beatriz Pont’s (OECD) reference to dreams

**I have spread our dreams under your feet;
Tread softly, because you tread on our dreams.**