

# CURRICULUM CHANGE WILL BE CONSTANT AND CONTESTED, ASTI CONFERENCE HEARS

The first ASTI Education Conference since the pandemic heard that curriculum development is necessary, but must involve teachers.



*Pictured at the recent ASTI Education Conference were (from left): Cathal Mac Coille, Prof. Damian Murchan (Trinity College Dublin School of Education), Miriam Duggan (ASTI President), Dr Majella Dempsey (NUI Maynooth), and Kieran Christie (ASTI General Secretary).*

Curriculum development is now a constant feature of education, involves predicting future challenges and opportunities and, therefore, will always be a contested space. Moreover, education is a deeply valued social good and every member of society has strong associations and views on education and the work of schools.

These were some of the key messages from the ASTI's 2023 Education Conference 'Curriculum for the Future: Getting Policy and Practice Right'. Keynote Speaker Prof. Damian Murchan from Trinity College Dublin School of Education told the conference that curriculum development needs to start with considering the world our students are going to be living in. He said curriculum development must contemplate issues such as climate change, technological advancements including artificial intelligence (AI), rising violence in society, declining levels of well-being including challenges such as drug and alcohol addictions among young people, and growing cultural diversity.

"What are the skills that students need, such as critical problem solving, critical thinking, collaboration, digital literacy skills? What about technology: what technological skills are needed within the curriculum? How can we integrate technology more meaningfully in the curriculum rather than just using it as a teaching aid? What about interdisciplinary skills? Do we pollinate ideas across our subjects in schools, or do we just teach our subject? What about a culturally responsive curriculum?"

"That the world changes is assumed; that the curriculum needs to evolve is recognised, but the nature of the changes are often contested. This

should neither surprise nor deter us," said Prof. Murchan, who emphasised the need for teachers' voice to be heard, respected and brought into the discussion at an early stage. He also elaborated on the modalities wherein teachers' voice can be influential, and noted the importance of engaging with multiple social actors around curriculum policy and wider education policy.

## **The importance of teacher agency**

Dr Majella Dempsey from NUI Maynooth spoke about the importance of teacher agency in every area of education – not just in the classroom – but particularly in the curriculum development space. Referencing Stenhouse, Dr Dempsey said: "There can be no change without teacher change".

She said that teachers can only have agency when the context supports agency. While individual teachers may perceive themselves as having different degrees of agency, at a collective level, teacher agency is largely determined by specific conditions: working conditions and the degree of autonomy teachers have, curriculum, the availability of resources, the regulatory environment for schools, and the wider policy and legislative frameworks. Therefore, structures and environments that support teachers, which ensure that their work environment is well resourced, and that their work is valued, are crucial.

Other conducive conditions include facilitating professional conversations between teachers, teachers having appropriate physical environments at

school, and achieving a balance between quality curriculum materials and allowing teacher creativity and power.

Echoing Prof. Murchan, Dr Dempsey said that resistance to change is a key part of curriculum development in society. She noted that Biesta (2022) talks about the need to protect education from the needs of society: “The teacher as a professional acting in agentic ways is important in keeping the balance in the ecology of schools”.

### The Scottish experience

Andrea Bradley, General Secretary of the Education Institute of Scotland (EIS), explained her union’s experience of Curriculum for Excellence, introduced in 2010 following an eight-year development period. The EIS supported the initiative, as announced in 2002, due to its “ambitions of a seamless educational journey for learners, featuring breadth, depth and creativity in learning; an emphasis on learners’ health and well-being; the promise of less high-stakes assessment and the centrality of teacher professional judgment; and, crucially, greater equity for students,” explained Ms Bradley.


However, implementation has been challenging. Curriculum for Excellence was introduced in schools during a period of recession and cutbacks. There was a sharp focus on learning and assessment, with other aspects of the initiative being overlooked. Internal assessment increased, leading to students being over-assessed and teachers being overworked.

“Teachers in Scotland have one of the highest class contact hours in the OECD. A continuation of large class sizes and overcrowded classes, and the layout of classrooms and schools, militate against teachers employing the kind of creative pedagogies – those which emphasise personalisation and choice – for the benefit of learners who increasingly present with complex additional support needs. Such constraints within the pressures of daily professional practice damage teacher well-being and morale which, coupled with lack of resources, impacts negatively on the learning experiences of children and young people.”

### Focus on the strengths

The afternoon session was a panel discussion on the contested space of curriculum development comprising: Dr Melanie Ni Dhuinn, Senior Lecturer in Education, Marino Institute of Education; Dalton Tatton, Assistant Secretary General, Department of Education; and, Kieran Christie, General Secretary, ASTI.

Panel speakers emphasised that education is highly valued in Ireland and that the current system has many strengths. Curriculum development should focus on addressing shortcomings rather than ripping up all that’s currently there. Curricula will continue to change and change proposals will continue to be contested. Lessons can be learned from the Framework for Junior Cycle.



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