Making Education Policy Work

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There is a widespread perception amongst ASTI members that they were marginalised in the process that led to the Framework for Junior Cycle. The ASTI believes that teachers must be at the heart of curriculum policy processes. Research demonstrates that top-down education policy measures which do not take proper account of the expertise and knowledge of the teachers who are expected to implement those measures, are unlikely to succeed.

In the context of the ongoing review of the Senior Cycle, the ASTI commissioned independent research by Dr Brian Fleming * on the consultative process to date.

The following are the key findings from this research:

1. Transformative change in teaching and learning takes time and is dependent on a number of factors.
2. Crucial factors are:
    (i) principles of change must be clearly articulated, shared and understood by all involved;
    (ii) 'buy-in' by the teaching profession, as a central stakeholder, to the rationale and vision for change;
    (iii) need for capacity building in schools prior to implementation of change;
    (iv) an acknowledgement that the meaning of change needs to be regularly revised;
    (v) an acknowledgement that change processes in education must be incremental rather than radical.
3. Consideration of implementation issues, including professional resources, has been absent in education policy, most notably in introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle. Implementation must not be conceived as a process which takes place after the design of policy.
4. Curriculum policy and implementation policy must reflect, rather than marginalise or reduce, the primary role of teacher agency in implementing change in the classroom.
5. Teachers' work is becoming increasingly intensified, with teachers expected to respond to greater pressures and comply with multiplying innovations in conditions that are at best stable and at worst deteriorating.
6. In Ireland, deteriorating conditions for teachers have included unequal pay structures, casualization/non-permanent contracts, limited restoration of promotional opportunities, the teacher supply problem, the inadequate capacity and resource levels in schools and, more generally, the underfunding of education at all levels.

7. Top-down approaches, without due regard for the expertise of those who will implement them and their knowledge of the reality at school level, will limit the chances of success of policy initiatives.
8. There is a need to evaluate the impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle on the learning that is taking place in classrooms. There is also a need to examine implementation issues which are problematic. There are, for example, logistical issues in relation to Subject Learning and Assessment Review meetings which have not yet been fully addressed.
9. There is a need to consider an appropriate time frame for introducing change at Senior Cycle. It is unlikely that circumstances for major change will be suitable in the near future due to: uncertainty of the outcomes of the Framework for Junior Cycle; the need to overcome the legacy of disharmony which surrounded the Framework for Junior Cycle; the pay and casualization issues; the teacher supply issues; and lack of capacity in terms of middle-management in schools.

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Senior Cycle Reform

Paper by
Dr Brian Fleming

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Policy Theory

Until the 1960s, policy formation was presumed to be a fairly straightforward exercise in decision-making. Those in authority debated and determined what needed to be done and handed the results of these deliberations down to be carried out by others. This approach suited the hierarchical nature of most societies. Policymaking was an event rather than a process. During the 1960s, rioting occurred frequently in many of the major cities in the United States. The policymakers at national level devised a response which involved providing significant financial support to city administrations to address the issues in their localities. In the Californian city of Oakland, tackling unemployment, particularly among members of minority groups, by instituting public works programmes was seen as the best way forward. As a result, the city was assigned a specific budget of $23 million in 1966 to implement a plan to tackle unemployment and what became known as the Oakland Project was born. Unfortunately it was more or less a total failure which resulted in a lot of soul-searching among policymakers. It also prompted quite an amount of research by academics most notably that by two political scientists, Jeffrey L Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky. In 1973, they produced a book entitled Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland: Or, Why It's Amazing That Federal Programs Work at All. In their view, too much focus and effort were given to the design of the programme, including calculating and securing the necessary funding, while the implementation phase was viewed as routine, consisting of technical issues to be easily worked out as the project took shape. In relation to the Oakland Project, they observed that 'those seemingly routine questions of implementation were the rocks on which the programme eventually floundered' (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973, p.143). Their essential point was the need to take into account the issue of implementation in any policymaking process. Their study quickly attained iconic status as it opened up a new field of research for scholars. Prior to that, the process was seen totally as top-down in the sense that the policymakers decide at a sort of theoretical level and implementation follows. So, they identified implementation as an integral part of the process which needs be considered from the outset. While implementation studies have advanced considerably since then, their message remains pertinent, 'implementation must not be conceived as a process that takes place after, and independent of, the design of policy' (ibid).

Discovery of the implementation problem came as 'something of a surprise to planners and analysts' according to McLaughlin (2008). She cites as significant variables the question of capacity-building prior to implementation, and negotiation that may occur when theory meets practice. Appreciation grew that policymaking is a process and a great deal more complex than was traditionally understood. The top-down approach was inadequate. Charles Lindblom describes policymaking as a perpetual interaction of ideas and participants. It is far from a deliberate rational linear model of decision-making: 'Policymaking is, instead, a complex interactive process without beginning or end'

(Lindblom and Woodhouse 1980, p. 11). Writing about the process as he observed it in the US, he describes it as a policymaking ladder. At the top of this ladder are those whom he labels as the 'proximate policy-makers'. These are 'those who share immediate legal authority to decide on specific policy, together with other immediate participants in policy decisions' (ibid).

Inevitably, the work of Pressman and Wildavsky prompted a focus on those who implement policy. Michael Lipsky had begun, in the late 1960s, to study the role, function and importance of what he called the street-level bureaucrats, that is, those whose role it is to implement policy on a day-to-day basis. They are, as he sees it, 'constantly torn by the demands of service recipients to improve effectiveness and responsiveness and by the demands of citizen groups to improve the efficacy and efficiency of government services'. Given the conflicting pressures placed on them, they 'create capacities to act with discretion and hang on to discretionary capacities that they have enjoyed in the past' (1980, p.19). Following Lipsky's initial seminal work, Maynard-Moody and Musheno focused on street-level actors also, and found that people who hold positions of this nature were not overly-concerned with policy directives or rules; 'Street-level decisions and actions are guided less by rules, training or procedures and more by beliefs and norms, especially beliefs and norms about what is fair' (2003, p. 6). Catherine Durose (2001) undertook equivalent research in the United Kingdom and reached similar conclusions.

All of this resulted in debates in the latter part of the twentieth century as to how best to develop and deliver policy. Scholars generated a wide range of variables in their studies of the policymaking process, some or all of which might be applied in particular cases of perceived failures similar to that which befell the Oakland Project. Those belonging to the top-down school took the view that in a functioning democracy, choices made by political leaders should be implemented and that was the over-riding priority (Linder and Peters, 1987). On the other hand, those of the bottom-up persuasion argued in favour of the professional judgement of actors at the coal face responding to complex situations (Hjern and Hull, 1982).

In face of these conflicting schools of thought, and a lack of a clear consensus, it is hardly surprising that governmental authorities, notably those of a right-wing disposition, harkened back to simpler times. Implementation studies became unfashionable for a period towards the end of the last century. As governments, notably those of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in Britain, moved towards less government intervention in economic and social affairs, compliance, performance indicators and market forces became more significant according to scholars such as O'Toole (2004), Saetren (2005), and Bourgon (2009). Susan M. Barrett (2004, pp. 256-259) summarises this perspective:

In this new policy construction there was perhaps less perceived need for studies of implementation since there was a belief that the "reforms" in the public services associated with new public management had addressed key problems of 'implementation failure', which include a lack of clear unambiguous policy objectives, resource availability and control over implementing agencies.

The neo-liberal approach promotes a reliance on the market to address economic and social problems. New Public Management is a feature of this approach. It depends on the inculcation of an audit culture (Apple, 2005). Those at the coal face are required to prove that they are performing efficiently, thus giving rise to the term 'performativity' to describe such regimes:

It requires individual practitioners to organise themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluators; to set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation (Ball, 2003, p. 215).

Judgement as to whether they are or not performing effectively is in the hands of those who may have a limited or no understanding of the context in which the 'street-level bureaucrat' is operating. Compliance is the over-riding objective.

This approach re-opens the divide between policy formation and implementation. In reality, it is the reincarnation of the top-down approach with a layer of surveillance added. While initially an approach favoured by governments of a particular disposition, it has gradually moved into the mainstream. A proponent of this approach in the world of education, Michael Barber, an advisor to the Blair government in the UK, suggested that to ensure that policy objectives, once determined by those in authority, are implemented in full, it is necessary to apply management procedures common in the private sector. What he describes as 'deliverology' requires that policy arrangements are fully understood all the way 'down' the line to the teacher in the classroom. Those in management in particular sites, principals in the case of schools, should have a clear picture to evaluate inputs, outputs and outcomes and evaluate the performance of all the street-level bureaucrats. Change management and key performance indicators are central themes.

The greatest change in recent years that has implications for education generally is in the external context at national and indeed international level. Sahlberg summarises the agenda of what he entitles as the Global Education Reform Movement as 'competition, parental choice, standardisation, accountability and privatization' (Sahlberg, 2018, p. 77). International trends are increasingly impacting on national policies and indeed on the nature of teaching and its practitioners. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was introduced in 2000 by the OECD following years of pressure by the US authorities for such a step to be implemented. It takes place every three years and the topics being considered are mathematics, reading and scientific literacy with one being assessed in each of the three year cycles. Tests in the chosen domain are administered to a random sample of fifteen-year-old pupils in attendance in each of the participating countries.

Questionnaires are administered to the pupils after the test to gather further information on them and their attitudes, to the school principal and an optional one is available to families. Of course, any assessment process should be designed with the needs of the participants borne in mind as an absolute priority. The strong possibility that for some young people it proves at minimum dispiriting and perhaps worse (MacRuairc, 2011) is something that needs more attention. While there has been criticism of the process on methodological grounds (e.g. Gorur and Wu, 2015) the real problem arises because of the misuse of the data that emerges. A large quantity of nuanced information is presented in the popular media in simplistic terms. Like any assessment process, PISA can only measure that which it is designed to do. A nation's vision for its education system is most probably far wider than the particular topic being assessed in any one three-year exercise. It presents a picture of what the OECD thinks a fifteen-year-old should know about the specific domain and not, as is sometimes implied, what has been taught and learned in school. As it is not offering a verdict on the latter, it should only form part of any policymaking consideration. However, there is plenty of international evidence that it occupies a more influential role in policymaking than that and has resulted in the adoption of some strategies over others (Grek, 2009, Sellar and Lingard, 2013, Sahlberg, 2015. The importance of an education system in securing a nation's economic prosperity is long since recognised, so governments are constantly looking for best practice (Stewart, 2012, Harris and Jones, 2015) and the availability of a readymade policy initiative can prove seductive (Luke, 2011).

PISA facilitates such a process in that policymakers look to its 'highest' performers internationally. Yes, of course it is important to learn from others but the translation of policy from one context to another can be problematic (Alexander, 2012). Unfortunately there is evidence of policy 'borrowing' (as distinct from 'policy learning') whereby ideas from one country which is seen to perform 'successfully' on PISA are applied in another without any regard for contextual difference at national level (Auld and Morris, 2014,

Harris and Jones, 2017). In taking this course, less attention is focused on implementation than policy choice. Yet as Fullan points out, careful implementation is the key to sustained improvement in education provision (2018). We know that context and cultural factors vary from one nation to another, from one education system to another, and even from school to school within the same national system, in such a way to impact significantly on policy implementation (Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000). Yet in the wake of a PISA report, particularly one that highlights supposed 'deficiencies' in a nation's provision, and a drop in the international league table, these tend to be minimised, if not totally overlooked, by policymakers (Harris and Jones, 2015, Zhao, 2016).

For members of the teaching profession the implications of the performativity and accountability agenda are arguably more serious than for most public servants. This has two dimensions. For three decades now, teachers across the world have been dealing with a seemingly never-ending series of initiatives, a veritable 'policy epidemic' (Levin, 1998). For some considerable time, Andy Hargreaves has been drawing attention to a growing problem as teachers' work is 'becoming increasingly intensified, with teachers expected to respond to greater pressures and comply with multiplying innovations in conditions that are at best stable and at worst deteriorating' (1995, p.84). Many of these policy measures are either described as, or presumed to be evidence-based, as a result of what seems to be successful implementation elsewhere, so consultation with the 'street-level bureaucrats' is either avoided or deemed to be unnecessary. Top-down initiatives without due regard for the expertise of those who will implement them and their knowledge of the reality at school level, will limit the chances of success (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009).

The second dimension is the greatly increased accountability pressure being placed on teachers without, in many cases, the provision of the necessary support (Whitty, 2016; Ravitch, 2016). The statement that 'the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers' (Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010, p. 16) is commonly cited. Unfortunately, it has been appropriated by some commentators and policymakers to equate what are deemed to be 'failings' as measured under the PISA process with underperformance in the teaching profession (Tucker, 2011; Rafee, 2011). Yes of course teachers can get better. Even outstanding ones may suffer a performance dip from time to time. The issue is how improvement is to be achieved (Ravitch, 2013, Shirley, 2017). The side-lining of teachers from the policymaking process while at the same time making them responsible for its successful implementation, is likely to cause problems. In some jurisdictions, the accountability measures are quite extreme for individuals or indeed particular schools.

In the mid-1990s, Andy Hargreaves conducted a detailed study of thirty-two teachers in Ontario with a view to portraying the emotional aspect of their work. In discussion with him, the importance of having available a wide range of teaching strategies was emphasised by many of them:

The methods they used were determined, in many ways, by what they felt the students needed emotionally as well as intellectually … The teaching strategies that teachers used were shaped by their own emotional needs, as well as those of their students. Excitement and enjoyment figured strongly among those needs, emotions that were often tied to senses of creativity, breakthrough and achievement in teaching students and in themselves as teachers. (Hargreaves, 1998, pp. 847–8)

The teachers in this sample were operating at elementary level but similar factors apply with other age groups (e.g. Schutz and Zembylas, 2009). Irrespective of the age of the

pupils, the 'psychic rewards' for teachers lie in the relationship with pupils (Lortie, 1975). Hargreaves concludes that teaching cannot 'be reduced to technical competence or clinical standards. It involves significant emotion understanding and emotional labour. It is an emotional practice'. (ibid, p. 850).

Those who enter the teaching profession usually do so with a sense of vocation and an emotional commitment to the care and welfare of children and young people. The context in which they work, both locally and nationally, inevitably impacts on their sense of self. The English education system is one where the neo-liberal approach has been developing vigorously. Stephen Ball has written extensively on the topic in a number of aspects, and traces the likely impact of the performativity regime on teachers and how they fulfil their roles and see themselves. Tensions are inevitable, between a teacher's judgement of good practice and emotional commitment to care for and meet the needs of students on the one hand, and the requirements of the performativity agenda on the other:

The teacher ... is subject to a myriad of judgements, measures, comparisons and targets. Information is collected continuously, recorded and published . . . and performance is monitored by peer review, site visits and inspections . . . A sense of being constantly judged in different ways and by different agents and agencies...A kind of values schizophrenia is experienced by individual teachers where commitment, judgement and authenticity are sacrificed for impression and performance. (Ball, 2003).

His fundamental concern is the structure in place will not only change what teachers do but also who they are. Evidence from the US supports his concerns in this regard (Holloway and Brass, 2017). Of course, teachers will endeavour to mediate the effects of this restructuring of their role in order to respond to pupils needs as Troman (2008) outlines in his study but this requires additional effort and commitment on their part. A lot of the research on the situation in England, and indeed in the US, tends towards the pessimistic. The evidence from the UK is that this approach, when applied fully as is the case there, leads to a de-professionalisation of the teacher in the classroom (Ball, 2003, Gewirtz et al. 2009). This can lead to 'disaffected consent' (Gilbert, 2015) among teachers which is most certainly not in the interest of pupils.

Whilst it can be argued that the educational authorities in Ireland haven't adopted this agenda to its full extent, certainly that is the clear trend in that direction (MacRuairc & Harford, 2008; Sugrue, 2009 & 2011; Mooney Simmie, 2012; Mooney Simmie et al., 2019, Gleeson & Ó Donnabháin; 2009, Skerritt, 2019). Those occupying management roles in schools are now deemed responsible for meeting targets, often expressed in simplistic mathematical terms, and held responsible in the form of public evaluations if they are not met. It may be that the traditional and long-standing independent nature of Irish schools in the patronage structure and the strength of the unions can mitigate, to some extent, the damage the performative agenda is likely to cause in schools in Ireland and to the teaching profession generally. However, there is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that damage is already being done.

From the foundation of the State, curriculum policy has remained within the remit of the government. Indeed, the sad case of the restoration the Irish language is a classic illustration of how the top-down approach to policymaking, whilst ignoring implementation issues, leads to relative failure more or less inevitably. Nowadays, a statutory body, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) advises the Minister for Education in relation to such matters. It clearly has no role in implementation arrangements and probably has limited experience in that regard in any event. While it obviously works closely with the Department of Education and Skills (DES), this structure is hardly an ideal way of ensuring that implementation is a central part of policymaking.

In 2009, the NCCA published a discussion paper entitled Leading and Supporting Change in Schools. It was prompted by a number of developments including various pieces of research carried out by the ESRI tracing students' experiences in second-level education (Smyth et al., 2004, Smyth, 2006, Smyth, 2007). The approach of the NCCA is clearly illustrated in this document in the form of a number of basic principles including the following: the rationale for any proposed change and the principles associated with it must be 'clearly articulated, shared and understood by all involved' and 'the meaning of the change needs to be regularly revised' as the process unfolds. Clearly implied in the document was the NCCA's view that something far greater than incremental and limited change was what was needed:

But, achieving real change, educational change that is deep and lasting, takes time. This is because most real change involves changing the way teaching and learning happens or changing the culture of schools as places of learning and organisations — changing the way things are done. Realising this kind of profound change involves professionals grappling with fundamental beliefs, dispositions and habits, and altering practice on the basis of experience. There is probably inadequate appreciation of the time involved (NCCA, 2009, p.14).

'Access to appropriate levels of funding and resources' were identified as basic necessities. The primary role of teacher agency in the change process and the importance of the leadership function were also stressed (NCCA, 2009, pp. 13–18.) The debate and discussion which followed was reflected in another publication from the NCCA in 2011, Innovation and Identity: Ideas for a new Junior Cycle. The organisation was careful to stress that it was an ideas document rather than a set of proposals. It continued a summary of discussions and consultations on the issue over the previous decade and was quite explicit as regards the central message; 'unless the examination at the end of junior cycle changes, what happens in the three years before it will simply stay the same . . . A new Framework for Junior Cycle must include curriculum and assessment change' (NCCA, 2011, p. 5, original highlight). Again, the centrality of teacher agency was stressed:

Ultimately, deep and lasting change can only be achieved through, and find expression in, the experience of learners, the work of teachers and the life of schools … It follows that schools, teachers and students must be directly involved from the start in thinking not only about why change should take place and what will change but how change can and will happen. (NCCA, 2010, pp. 15–16).

A new framework was envisaged which included both curriculum and assessment change. What students would learn was incorporated in twenty-four statements of learning and eight key skills. While traditional subjects would still be available, schools would be encouraged to develop short courses including ones specific to their own context.

The DES in 2012, having considered the recommendations of the NCCA, released its Framework for the Junior Cycle. A number of reasons were provided as justifying the need. Significant numbers of first year students were not making progress particularly in English and maths and many pupils were becoming disengaged in second year; choices students were making early in Junior Cycle closed off options later on in the pupil's education. In the document the criticism that was voiced most frequently over the years was re-iterated namely that the dominance of the terminal examination induced a strong over-reliance on rote learning. This approach, it was argued, did not prepare pupils well for the fast changing world of work that awaited them in adulthood. Furthermore, it was stated that reliance on a terminal examination at the end of Junior Cycle was not in line with best practice in other countries, that the dominance of the examination determined the approach taken by both teachers and pupils and that many successful education systems relied on school-based assessment at that stage of the education cycle. In the framework, arguably the most significant element related to assessment procedures. It foresaw the majority in the form of school-based assessment though in the case of English, Gaeilge and maths the State Examinations Commission would set and correct a terminal examination which would account for 60% of the total marks. The document listed the key skills pupils would acquire during the Junior Cycle as, literacy, numeracy, managing myself, staying well, communicating, being creative, working with others and, finally, managing information and thinking.

The proposals were to be implemented on a phased basis staring in 2014. It contained many elements of the thinking outlined in the NCCA publications but most attention immediately focused on the section detailing assessment arrangements:

The most significant change in introducing the Framework for Junior Cycle is in the area of assessment. The current Junior Certificate examination will be phased out and replaced by a school-based approach to assessment … Final assessment at the end of a period of study has a role to play, but it will be just one element of a broader school-based approach to assessment. [Arrangements included] on-going classroom assessment for learning where feedback will be provided to students … standardised testing in English and Maths … a final assessment component for all subjects at the end of the three years initially set by the State Examinations Commission but administered and marked by schools … the final assessment will generally be worth 60% of the overall marks … be marked by teachers in the school … except for English, Irish and Mathematics that will, in the initial years, continue to be marked by the SEC until the standardised tests in reading and Mathematics become established in post-primary education. (DES, 2012, pp. 20–22.)

Proximate Policymakers

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For many decades the DES was, in effect, an organisation with a very limited role in policy formation (Fleming, 2016). From a position of subservience to the Church, the Department emerged briefly in the 1960s as a policymaking body but subsequently reverted somewhat into the role of ringmaster between various groups. The proximate policy-makers in Irish education, nowadays, are the State and the teaching unions. There are a whole range of other organisations, usually referred to as the education partners, who seek to influence policy. These include management bodies, parents groups, the churches, patronage organisations and student representatives. In addition to these, there are other bodies that contribute to discourse on matters in relation to education. In relation to thinking within the DES far and away the most influential of these is the OECD. Through international assessments such as the PISA it produces a sort of league table covering many nations across the world. Here and elsewhere a negative movement in the league table position has been seen to prompt an immediate political response. PISA is now a main source of contributor to policy selection (Sahlberg, 2015) and countries are looking to borrow policies from the 'best performers (Auld and Morris, 2014; Harris and Jones, 2017) with little or no regard to contextual factors. The OECD promotes the view that the absolute priority of an education system is economic, often described as meeting the needs of the 'knowledge economy'. Worldwide the trend is to shape education provision in general and the curriculum in particular as a driver of economic development and national competitiveness (Yates and Young, 2010). Ireland is not immune from this movement and indeed seems to be embracing it enthusiastically. At local level it is promoted actively by the Irish Business and Employers Confederation. In the political sphere education policy is rarely treated as a high priority. In general, politicians tend to tread carefully leaving the issue to the various groupings and there are historical explanations for that state of affairs.

In any debate regarding proposed changes between the DES and all these bodies, the teaching unions are, in reality, the only ones with negotiating cards to play. Other groups can advance particular views and indeed influence public opinion as well as the thoughts of those involved in the negotiating process. However, it is the acceptance or rejection of any particular proposal by the teaching unions which is likely to prove the most significant factor.

To describe the decisions announced by the DES in its Framework for the Junior Cycle in 2012 as controversial would be a gross understatement. Both teaching unions at post-primary level were known to be very strongly opposed to school based assessment such as the DES envisaged. Inevitably what followed amounted to a trial of strength followed during which many factors with no direct relationship to curriculum matters came into play. Controversy, dissension and industrial action followed for the next five years. The Junior Cycle programme as we now know it emerged as quite different from that envisaged in earlier documents, most particularly in the area of assessment. The

terminal examination, set and marked externally by the State Examinations Commission, at the end of third year continues as the dominant form of assessment. Classroom Based Assessments in second and third year, set externally by the NCCA and assessed by classroom teachers in line with national descriptors and standards, are reported on the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement, which is distributed in the autumn following the terminal examination. Within the subject descriptor, the terminal examination accounts for 90% of the total marks, and a subject-specific Assessment Task accounts for the remaining 10%. This Assessment Task is set externally and administered within classrooms by subject teachers. There is good reason to believe that Coolahan et al. (2017, p.81) are correct in observing that this is 'unlikely to capture the serious engagement of many of the students, particularly those less motivated, who may deem it a minor contribution to the overall grade in a subject.'

Eventually, a policy initiative reaches school level. Annette Braun and her colleagues in the UK have been looking at how schools 'do' policy:

It is important to consider, firstly, that policies are processes, even when mandated, and policy texts can be differently worked on and with. Secondly, policy practices are specific and contextualised. They are framed by the history and ethos of each school and by the positioning and personalities of the key policy actors involved. And thirdly, and related to the contextualised aspect of practice, policies are mediated by positioned relationships (2010, p. 249).

The following year they published another paper in which they delved further into the context issue (Braun et al., 2011). They categorised context under four headings, situated (such as locale, history, intake and settings) professional (values, teacher commitments and experiences and policy management within the school, material (budgets and infrastructure) and external (pressures and expectations, Ofsted ratings, league tables and legal requirements and responsibilities). As well as being variables in their own right, factors such as these can interact with each other in diverse ways reflecting different contexts. They found marked differences between four case study schools:

Context is of course always specific. It is also dynamic and shifting, both within and outside schools ... whilst we have tried to capture a full range of contextual factors, such a list can never be exhaustive... Schools enact policy in circumstances not always of their own choosing... Policymaking and policy makers tend to assume 'best possible' environments for 'implementation': ideal buildings, students and teachers and even resources ... we have attempted to disrupt this idealism by introducing the 'reality' of our case study schools, with their situated and material contexts, their specific professional resources and challenges, and their different external pressures and supports (Braun et al., 2011, p. 595).

Context matters at both national and local level when change of a significant nature is envisaged. McLaughlin and other scholars have pointed out the absolute necessity to build capacity prior to rolling out a policy innovation. In the case of Junior Cycle reform, the DES addressed this issue but only partially. A support service for teachers (JCT) to assist with the implementation of the new arrangements was established. By and large, the view seems to be that this has been a very positive development. Unfortunately at the same time, capacity in schools themselves was being reduced by the DES, whilst demands were increasing. There were also serious questions surrounding morale issues in staff rooms generally. In 2010, measures were taken to save money in education and elsewhere as a result of the collapse in the economy. The Common Basic Scale which had existed for about forty years was broken with the effect that young teachers joining the profession were paid less than their counterparts who had started a short time previously. One result was that many emigrated to teach abroad or opted for alternative

employment. Also, teaching became a less attractive proposition for young graduates to pursue. This was exacerbated by increased casualisation in the profession whereby new recruits tended to be offered contracts on quite limited hours. A pattern had begun to develop whereby schools were finding difficulty filling positions with suitably qualified applicants. For those already in schools, promotional opportunities virtually dried up when a moratorium was placed on filling posts of responsibility. This meant that school principals and their deputies had fewer resources available to assist them in leading and managing their schools. Meanwhile, the DES inspectorate was pursuing the performativity agenda and, as a result, placing an increasing workload in schools just when their ability to cope was being reduced. It would be difficult to identify a more unsuitable time in the last couple of decades for attempting to introduce a wide-ranging reform agenda. The reaction of the teachers' unions to the proposals from the DES in 2012 were entirely predictable. In any event, securing agreement of teacher unions is a necessary but not sufficient condition to ensure that reform is implemented.

Not all street-level bureaucrats are the same. Some will make serious efforts to comply with whatever mandates appear from those in authority. However, it's in the nature of the teaching profession that many of its members, probably a large majority, will have strongly held values and beliefs. Their response at classroom level is not merely a question of compliance or not. Similarly it's not a case of resistance to new ideas and excessive loyalty to the status quo. Automatically, they will try to make sense of what is proposed in the light of their beliefs, professional judgement and commitment to the children and young people in their care. Lipsky's insights are particularly relevant in the case of education. Although they may baulk at his terminology, teachers, as the street-level bureaucrats, are more vital to implementing change in education than their peers in other branches of the public service. They are sole performers in the sense that they undertake their duties usually in isolation without any oversight from any of their peers. So, in the matter of educational change, securing the agreement of their representatives in the form of the teaching unions is a necessary but insufficient strategy. As McLaughlin (1987, p. 174) puts it 'change ultimately is a problem of the smallest unit.' Teachers generally must be persuaded that the proposed changes are in the best interests of their pupils if they are to impact on individual classrooms throughout the country. It's a matter of speculation whether that happened or not.

Evaluation

As the Junior Cycle reform package has not been rolled out over all subject areas, it is too soon for an evaluation of the project to be undertaken. There is an implementation committee consisting of representatives of the various parties. It has arranged for each subject to be reviewed after the first three-year implementation cycle. This is to be followed by a comprehensive review of the implementation experience in 2022. While reviews are fine, it is very regrettable that there is no indication as yet that the DES and/or the NCCA are committed to commissioning a robust independent evaluation.

It is beyond debate, however, that the reform programme as enacted was significantly different from that envisaged in the NCCA documents or indeed the DES Framework publication of 2012. So, a question will have to be addressed as to whether it is possible to realise the original vision in the light of these changes. We have been down this road before following the decision to replace the Intermediate and Group Certificate examinations about thirty years ago. The policy proposals as detailed in the early part of this decade echo much of what was said then. The historical precedent gives little grounds for optimism. In 2000, an official report summarised the experience: 'Students, it is argued, have never experienced the Junior Certificate Programme as it was intended' (DES, 2000, p. 26).

At this early stage and in the absence of basic information, a verdict on the experience at school and classroom level must be tentative. The question arises as to whether 'educational change that is deep and lasting' has occurred or is on the horizon. The chances are that the answer is in the negative for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the project as adopted nationally was so far removed from what was deemed necessary at the outset that the likelihood is that the objective was unrealisable in any event. Secondly, given the capacity, resource and staffing deficits in schools at the time, and bearing in mind how schools 'do' policy, it is absolutely certain that huge variations occurred across the school system in how the initiative was enacted. However, it is likely to have been incremental rather than transformative and as such the benefits will have been limited.

In any reform package questions of scalability, sustainability and ownership have to be addressed. Rather than looking to see how many schools have been impacted by the reform we need to focus on the extent to which deep and lasting changes have occurred in classroom practice. Reforms can be introduced without being implemented to any significant extent and will wither as our own previous experience on Junior Cycle has previously illustrated. Scalability requires a shift in ownership from 'an externally understood and supported theory to an internally understood and supported theory-based practice' (Stokes, et all, 1997, p. 11). It is not obvious to me that we can confidently predict positive outcomes under any or all of these headings.

Prior to writing this piece, I spoke to some school leaders and teachers. The number involved was relatively small so these observations must be read in that context. Some teachers of the subjects which have been rolled out have introduced new and imaginative methodologies which will no doubt greatly add to the student experience. There is a warm welcome for the Classroom Based Assessment model although it adds to the workload of teachers. Some students perceive a limited value relative to the work involved. Perhaps the change which has the greatest potential benefit in the long-term is the introduction of the Subject Learning Assessment and Review (SLAR) meetings. Professional conversations are seen as a fundamentally 'good thing' even though there are costs in the form of reduction of teaching time available to schools and withdrawal of qualified teachers from classrooms at a time of scarcity. In moving towards the development of what Fullan and Hargreaves describe as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), creating space and time is an important first step. It's a question of what use is made of that opportunity. Collaborative working, if done well, can empower teachers and increase their collective self-efficacy (Donohoo, Hattie and Eells, 2018). Doing it well requires skilful leadership, focus and sensitivity. At a practical level, also, there are logistical issues in facilitating this process that may have not been fully appreciated. In Professional Capital, Fullan and Hargreaves pose a fundamental question which seems appropriate to recent developments in Irish education. 'What messages are you getting about the importance of your own professional development when the only professional learning time is low cost meetings to implement laid-on agendas?' (2012, p. 11). In an address to the American Education Research Association annual meeting thirty years ago, Andy Hargreaves shared a very important insight on the different types of staff collegiality. Nothing in his experiences in the interim have altered his views and in a very important article, hugely relevant to our situation, he repeated them:

Collaborative cultures comprise evolutionary relationships of openness, trust and support among teachers where they define and develop their own purposes as a community. Contrived collegiality consists of administratively contrived interactions among teachers where they meet and work to implement the curricula and instructional strategies devised by others (Hargreaves, 2019).

Clearly, the SLAR initiative, as currently devised, falls within the contrived collegiality approach. That is not to say that good will not come from it. However, it will be very limited and the PLCs will not emerge, in my view. The potential benefits for students of the development of PLCs, based on trust and mutual support, within which staff address issues that they have identified as priorities in the context of their own school, will not be realised.

Senior Cycle

Without waiting to see how reform of the working out, albeit in its early stages, the NCCA, in 2016, initiated a review of the Senior Cycle. This seems an extraordinary way to proceed and underscores the danger of having an organisation with a narrow brief. The initial step was to commission a study of Senior Cycle provision in nine jurisdictions and this formed the basis for a conference held in 2018. A consultative process on Senior Cycle was undertaken with schools by the ESRI on behalf of the NCCA later in 2018. Schools were invited to participate. Of those volunteering, forty-one were chosen. These were selected to 'capture diversity in terms of DEIS status, gender mix, school type, size, language medium and geographical spread.' (Banks et al., 2018, p. 5).

In Cycle 1 of this process, the views of teachers, parents and young people were sought under the general heading 'what is the purpose of senior cycle education in Ireland?' A series of questions was devised as a prompt for the discussions in the case of teachers and parents but how the process was carried out was left to the schools themselves. Focus group or brainstorming was the approach generally taken. In the case of the young people, NCCA staff conducted focus group discussions with one group of Junior Cycle students and two of seniors in each school. The findings from these discussions were summarised by NCCA staff.

Positive aspects of the current arrangements, the value of what's deemed to be a fair and transparent examination, the workload for both students and teachers, stress among senior students, and discontinuity between Junior and Senior Cycle were all issues that attracted commentary. All groups desired 'to see a greater variety of assessment methods' but the views of parents were mixed 'with some highlighting the workload involved in multiple assessment tasks and many pointing to the need to retain external assessment.' The need for additional resources including CPD were considered crucial and 'many teachers and parents also felt that any change to senior cycle should be informed by the experiences of junior cycle reform' (Banks et al, 2018, p. 60).

Following that, Cycle 2 took place. The focus on this occasion was Pathways and Flexibility. Regional seminars were organised at which the format was roundtable discussions. Again, questions to prompt discussion were devised. Essentially, these sought views on strengths and weakness in current arrangements and suggestions for change in terms of cycle length, flexibility and subjects or modules. A lot of the discussion in this cycle also was focused on assessment. Among all groups, students, parents and teachers, concern was expressed regarding the reliance on the terminal examination in a concentrated period at the end of the final year and a consensus emerged that a greater variety of assessment methods for final certification were needed:

Teachers placed a very strong emphasis on external assessment as a positive feature of the current senior cycle and very much wanted any new assessment components to

be marked externally. Many parents valued the role of external assessment but did not emphasise its importance to the same degree as teachers (Smyth, 2019, p. 89).

Of course, consultation is usually beneficial. In an education system, it allows individuals and groups operating at different levels and fulfilling diverse functions to share information and ideas. The question is how useful has the process been to date. Responses to a survey organised by the ASTI would suggest that in most cases, at school level, it proved to be of doubtful value. The fact that in most schools not all teachers were involved drew much criticism. A lack of adequate communication beforehand, as to what was involved, was cited by almost two-thirds of respondents as a major weakness. Of those who responded to the question whether the process was worthwhile, over 60% responded in the negative. Responses in the space for additional comments indicate concerns as to the Junior Cycle change process as it unfolds and a need for a full review before any further innovations are introduced. Over and over again respondents asked for teachers' views to be sought and taken into account. Unless and until that happens it seems unlikely from reading responses to this survey that teachers will willingly and enthusiastically embrace and implement change at Senior Cycle. The respondents to the survey were even more critical of the Cycle 2 process. It seemed to them that a particular agenda was being pushed and the teacher voice was largely ignored. Others I spoke to suggested that the structure of the session resulted in little real exchange of views.

Aside from the comments of individual participants, there were more basic weaknesses in the approach taken. Firstly, as we have seen, forty-one schools were chosen to participate reflecting six different contextual factors, namely DEIS status, gender mix, school type, size, language medium and geographical spread. In the matter of how schools 'do' policy there are others. Resource availability, leadership, local education 'market', ethos, staff profile, trajectory, history and culture are a few that spring to mind. The list, as Braun and her colleagues point out, is extensive. So, engagement with some people in less than 6% of post-primary schools is highly unlikely to capture the contextual differences across the system to any significant extent. Also, we would need to know more about teachers in the participating schools who chose not to participate. Is it the case that some of those, perhaps a majority, are suffering from innovation overload and just opted out? If so, is that not a factor that needs to be taken into account before any decisions are taken? All that the report can claim to represent is the views expressed by the individuals who participated. Secondly, of the eleven questions posed as prompts, only one made a passing reference to the Junior Cycle reform experience. For teachers, it was 'how should senior cycle build on the student experience of the new junior cycle. Are there any challenges in building on the new Junior Cycle experience from your school's perspective', with a similar but shorter one for parents (Banks et al., p. 6). Yes there was in each case a 'what have we missed' catchall question at the end but inevitably the construction of the questions impacted on the subsequent discussions. As a result, there was very limited focus on the recent experience of curriculum reform. Finally, the most striking and fundamental feature of the list of questions was that total absence of any reference to implementation issues. In this regard, it is important to note that while staff of the ESRI compiled the subsequent report, 'the themes for discussion were outlined by the NCCA with input from the research team on the wording of questions' (Banks et al., p. 5). Leaving aside for the moment the question as to whether promoting Senior Cycle reform just at the present time is a good idea, the approach taken by the NCCA, presumably in consultation with the DES, clearly was very restrictive.

Obviously, a decision was taken to exclude all discussion of implementation issues. Not only does it ignore the advice of Pressman and Wildavsky, and countless public policy scholars since, 'implementation must not be conceived as a process that takes place after, and independent of, the design of policy', it ignores obvious lessons which should have been learned in recent years from the Junior Cycle reform process. At the time of writing, the third phase of the consultation, that with the wider public, is taking place. It remains to be seen what will emerge. However, if the process follows the restricted model of consultation followed to date and, most particularly, if it ignores implementation issues, I believe it will be seen as tokenistic.

The Right Time?

Some time, probably in 2020, the NCCA will submit proposals to the Minister for Education reflecting the work undertaken since 2016 on the issue. In my opinion it is unlikely that, in the next few years, circumstances will be suitable for seeking to introduce 'deep and lasting' change at Senior Cycle for a number of reasons.

1. The outcome from the Junior Cycle reform will still be very uncertain. We will not even have a comprehensive review much less an evaluation by then.
2. The legacy in terms of disharmony and conflict caused by that experience at system level and in some, if not all, schools is still an issue and only time will resolve it.
3. The salary and casualisation issues which have given rise to so many problems may not have been resolved fully.
4. Having ignored the issue of inadequate supply of qualified personnel for some years, the Minister finally admitted to the problem by setting up the Teacher Supply Steering Group in March of 2018. So far, there is little sign of any action being taken to address the issue in a sufficiently effective manner. Schools are having continuing difficulties in recruiting suitable fully qualified teachers to fill vacancies across a range of subjects.
5. Some steps have been taken to address the lack of capacity at school level by allowing for a limited restoration of posts of responsibility to be implemented. Also, the DES allocated a second, and in a few cases a third, deputy principal to some schools. In an age when the distributed model of leadership is widely commended and the potential of the middle leader is increasingly recognised this seems a strange way to expand capacity at school level. A more particular problem arises from the fact that only about a quarter of schools benefitted, namely the larger ones. The thinking seems to be that size is the only variable that determines the leadership and management needs of a school which reveals a limited understanding on the part of the authorities. In any event, and in all schools, the workload is increasing, the most recent example being the requirements of GDPR, with the result that they are not in a significantly better position to take a new initiative on board than they were in 2012.
6. The Leaving Certificate is a very high stakes examination. It is widely viewed, rightly or wrongly, as a fair and transparent process. Any suggestion of tampering with current assessment arrangements will attract far more trenchant opposition from both teachers and parents than was the case with the Junior Certificate.

Whilst reform is required, it is absolutely clear to me that schools are in need of a 'breather' from the current pattern of ongoing innovation and additional workload. A break of three years would allow schools to focus on how the Junior Cycle reform is unfolding and for a rigorous independent evaluation to be initiated. During that period, the DES could take significant steps to resolve a number of outstanding issues which would have the result of creating an environment more conducive to the introduction of substantial change. These include the pay and casualisation issues, the teacher supply problem, the inadequate capacity levels in schools and, more generally, the underfunding of education at all levels. It would also create a space for the DES, the teacher unions and others in the education arena to devise a better model of policymaking. A tension between the DES and the teacher unions in the matter of salaries and conditions of service is inevitable. However, surely it is possible for them to collaborate in a more open and constructive manner on other issues in the interest of our children and young people. We must move away from taking our advice solely from international organisations, or borrowing ideas from abroad, without due regard for the contextual situation in Irish education generally and more especially at classroom level. Polite comments about the importance of teacher agency are fine but we need to create a framework that ensures that those involved directly with our young people are centrally involved in policy formation so that they become 'the instigators, creators and implementers of educational change' (Harris and Jones, 2019, p. 123). Also, in the context of encouraging the development of Professional Learning Communities, we need to develop a system of 'lateral' accountability (Fullan, 2011, p.11) to replace the current bureaucratic, performative model. The observation of Hargreaves and Fullan (2012, p. 45), applies equally to the Irish education scene as elsewhere:

> *When the classroom door is closed, the teacher will always remain in charge. Where students are concerned, the teacher will always be more powerful than the principal, the president, or the prime minister. Successful and sustainable improvement can never be done to or even for teachers. It can only be done by and with them.*

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