

## **'Current directions in teacher education and curriculum reform in Ireland'.**

*This is the text of a paper presented by Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director of the Teaching Council, at a symposium on the above title in UCC on Friday, 22 February 2013. Dr. Anne Looney, CEO of the NCCA, and Dr. Harold Hislop, Chief Inspector, also spoke at the symposium.*

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank Paul Conway, and all the staff of the Education Department here in UCC, for the invitation to speak to you tonight.

It is an honour and a pleasure to share a platform, for the first time, with Anne Looney and Harold Hislop, and I think that the fact that UCC has brought us together on this topic, provides more than a strong hint to at least one answer to the question implicit in the title of tonight's discussion.

Current **directions** in teacher education and curriculum reform. In terms of "directions", I would like to talk to you this evening about explosion and convergence. I would like to talk to you about how these concepts interact as dynamics, with teacher education and curriculum reform. And I would like to explore how we might reimagine the relationship between teacher education and curriculum reform into the future.

Our country has the proud record of having one of the longest, unbroken periods of democracy in Europe. This is something to be celebrated. The downside of that, though, is that historically, and certainly up until the late 80's, there have been few examples of a radical rethink. Yes, there have been game changers such as the introduction of free post-primary education. But by and large the broader structures and the way in which those structures operated remained largely unchanged. This certainly seems to have been the case in initial teacher education.

James Deegan has talked about how the broad shape of teacher education was more or less established by 1933, comprising a three-part programme of studies, including a professional course in educational studies, a general education in academic subjects, and an optional course (Waldron, Smith et al, 2012). We had the awarding of degree status in 1974 to primary teaching, and then had to wait another 40 years for a significant change to that mode of entry into the profession. Even allowing for the change in title from teacher training colleges to colleges of education, there was little else by way of significant change until the 1990s, which saw an explosion of work in both the statutory and policy areas. While our universe is expanding at an accelerating rate, the big bang in education over the last 20 years or so now seems to be leading to convergence in a number of areas.

This is understandably causing a lot of shock, and fear perhaps, in the system. Up until this big bang, teacher education seemed to have been operating in cycles of change of approximately 40 years. It's noteworthy that the dates in question – 1933, 1974, 2012 – all coincide with a change in government, or at the very least a significant upheaval in our political culture, following a period where the incumbent party had enjoyed a long, unbroken period of power – 10 years, 16 years, and in the latter case, at least 15 years. No surprise there, in terms of broader political shifts impacting on public policy, but worth noting all the same.

So if the concept of such a cycle of change holds, then what is different about the current period of change? Is it not just more of the same?

### **Convergence and acceleration**

I don't believe that it is more of the same. The reason I say that is that the key difference between now and those other occasions can be summed up in two words – convergence and acceleration. The dynamics of change in both teacher education and curriculum reform are clearly converging. The pace of that convergence is accelerating.

### **Roles in teacher education**

Even within teacher education, roles and identities appear to be “exploding”, or emerging, and converging. Roles are being made explicit and fusing with others in new identities.

What do I mean by that?

#### *Making explicit what has been implicit*

Well, take the concept of the teacher educator. I have just come from an EU Presidency Conference on the teacher educator, which has been described as the “hidden profession”. What comes to mind when you hear the word “teacher educator”? Do you think of mentor teachers? What about co-operating teachers – those who host student teachers on school placement or teaching practice? Whether or not you regard them as “teacher educators”, the use of these terms indicates that certain roles in teaching are becoming more explicit, and are being more explicitly acknowledged, especially by the teachers themselves.

#### *Teachers from the past, teachers of the present, teachers for the future*

So these are examples of roles and identities which have been implicit becoming explicit. What about this fusion of identity that I am talking about? James Deegan has recently written about the concepts of “being” and “becoming” in the context of teacher education. In particular, he talks about how those who are becoming teachers and teacher educators have a lot in common, in the context of the significant changes that are ongoing in initial teacher education. He states that (Waldron, Smith et al, 2012 P180):

“**Together** they meet the challenges of 'imposing gateways', cross 'conceptual thresholds' and move into 'different kinds of spaces.’”

**Together**, the teacher educators and student teachers are exploring what it means to become a teacher now. Teachers who become mentors, teachers who are co-operating teachers – it does not matter when they first did their B. Ed. or H. Dip., they are **now** exploring anew, in tandem with student teachers and newly qualified teachers, what it means to become a teacher.

If we accept this idea – that teachers **from** the “past” and teachers **of** the “present” are working together to become teachers **for** the “future”, then I think that it is perfectly valid to talk about a convergence of space and time, or perhaps of “spaces” and “times”, in both teacher education, **and** curriculum reform. I will return to this point on curriculum reform later. But for now, we can say that our understanding of teacher education, of where and when it takes place and can take place, is shifting.

#### *Space and time to reflect*

These are very interesting developments from a Teaching Council point of view. At the core of our work as a Council is the image of the reflective practitioner. It encapsulates the idea that when our powers as a Council are fully realised, we will be able to say and verify that at the heart of an excellent teacher will be the heart of an excellent learner. Yet if this is so important, how can a teacher reflect, and act on that reflection, if they do not have the space and time to do so? Of course, this need for space and time cannot be solely geared towards individual needs. Quite the opposite. The more recent literature on whole system reform in education, e.g. “Professional Capital”, highlights the importance of space and time for teachers to lead each other authentically in order to effect whole system reform.

### *Accountability and space and time*

Why the emphasis on authenticity? It stems from how the concept of accountability is impacting on change in teacher education. Space and time can be “mandated”, but there are doubts as to effectiveness of such an approach. What is the alternative? That teachers be left alone to reflect as they see fit? I do not think that that is a feasible option in the world that we live in today. True, teachers still enjoy a high level of trust from the public. However, as a regulatory body that is much younger than the profession which it regulates, we endeavour to explain to teachers that in the Ireland of today, it is not sufficient to exhort people to trust you – *You must trust me! I know what I am doing! I am a professional!* In the Ireland of today, we know how fragile a concept trust is. In the Ireland of today, it is all about trust and verify. In this context, accountability is a fixed element of the education firmament.

But I don’t think that even its most ardent advocates would want it to have free rein, especially in the profession of teaching. Take, for example, this quote from a teacher in the US from “Professional Capital” giving their feedback on using “mandated” planning time (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2011 P120):

- Teacher 4: You have common planning time, you have cluster time, and there’s no real sacredness to it. So everything comes before it, and you’re flying by the seat of your pants. And, you sit down for a couple of minutes and you want to participate and you find yourself, like everybody else, waiting for the kids to be coming back from gym. So you can never really be relaxed.

“You can never be really relaxed.” Ironically, as this example shows, strictly mandated time to reflect and plan can become fragmented and undermine the very purpose which it sets out to achieve. It shows that such an approach can work against the importance of integrating the reflective act into daily practice. That is not in anybody’s interest. It means ultimately that within a broad policy framework, there should be appropriate flexibility for the autonomy of the professional so that they can lead themselves and their colleagues in an authentic way that has impact for the greater good.

### **Teaching Council – A roadmap for teacher education into the future**

So – convergence, acceleration, space and time, and accountability. If these are the words on which we hang a description of what is going on at the moment, at least in teacher education, you might well ask, what is the Teaching Council doing about it? In essence, we have developed, and are continuing to develop, a framework that paradoxically will ensure policy consistency as a framework for change – a

policy framework that will enable teachers to adapt and change as practitioners throughout their lives with courage and confidence.

### *Policy consistency as a framework for change*

In short, we are putting in place a values framework that sets out key principles that should inform and underpin good teaching for the foreseeable future. One of the benefits which we feel accrues from a Council for the profession is to address the issue of policy consistency that Prof. John Coolahan has alluded to in the past. Within the broader policy framework, we are seeking to establish and articulate a clear sense of what constitutes good teaching, to support the profession and to enhance the trust of the public in the profession. We do not seek to do so in an immutable way, but in a way like a tall skyscraper which from a distance looks tall and unmoving, but up close you realise that the only way it stays standing is to be flexible.

And that is the essential dynamic flowing through our policy documents such as the Continuum of Teacher Education and through the Code of Professional Conduct for teachers. Neither of these documents is a detailed prescription of what should constitute every phase of a teacher's lifelong journey of learning, nor everything that a teacher should do every day. But they do seek to put in place the scaffolding around which each teacher can build and develop their professional practice. And like any good building, they can extend, modify, demolish and rebuild their "building" at any stage during their career, but always with the same "scaffolding", i.e. supported by the values inherent in these documents, and more importantly, by their colleagues.

### *Policy on the continuum*

So what do we mean when we refer to the continuum? To quote from the document (Teaching Council, 2011 – P8):

- The continuum of teacher education describes the formal and informal educational and developmental activities in which teachers engage, as life-long learners, during their teaching career. It encompasses initial teacher education, induction, early and continuing professional development and, indeed, late career support, with each stage merging seamlessly into the next and interconnecting in a dynamic way with each of the others.

### *Continuum and curriculum*

So where does this all link up with curriculum? It is interesting to note that the word "curriculum" appears 13 times in the continuum policy. On average, that's one reference for almost every 2 pages. One reference caught my eye recently, where referring to professional studies and curriculum studies we say (Teaching Council, 2011 – P13):

- **In such studies, teaching itself is understood and practised as a form of self-critical learning by student teachers**, with ample opportunities for teamwork and enquiry-based initiatives with colleagues.

This is the idea that the study of curriculum would not be a process of acquiring and regurgitating knowledge about strands and themes, but would be a truly dynamic process that would inform the

“re-forming” of teachers from the very beginning of their career of lifelong learning. When you consider the significant changes to curriculum and syllabus over the last 25 years, and the ongoing changes now, then the fact that the curriculum that is being studied is changing as it is being studied shows how truly and how deeply teaching and teacher education is linked with transformation and change.

### *Story and storyteller*

One of my favourite quotes of Anne Looney is the one that says that curriculum can be described as the set of stories that one generation chooses to tell the next. If we are talking about convergence between teacher education and curriculum reform, we could ask the question - what should the relationship be between how we frame the story (i.e. curriculum), and how we prepare those who we trust to tell the story to our children and young people (i.e. teacher education)?

But perhaps that last question could be in danger of misdirecting us – should it not be:

How do we prepare those who we trust to tell the story, to help our children and young people write their own story? This question would enable us to read the title of tonight’s symposium in a whole new way – that teacher education will ultimately be a catalyst for future curriculum reform. This reminds me of a key moment in Anne’s presentation to the PDA last November, where she was talking about JC 2.0, and how a seminal Rubicon was crossed when a teacher posted a clip of their own teaching on the forum and invited feedback. The overall impression which I got from her talk was that JC 2.0 was a space in which, at any time, teachers could support and inform curricular reform at Junior Cycle.

### *Blurring boundaries*

I also remember Harold Hislop’s presentation to the Instructional Leadership conference last October, where he quoted liberally from “Professional Capital” – about teachers teaching each other to invest in their own professional capital, and thus support each other in how they tell the stories to the next generation. The point about the blurring boundaries between teacher education and curriculum reform is emphasised by the authors of that book (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012 P117):

- *“Second, in places such as Finland, Alberta, and Ontario, educators understand teacher development is inseparable from curriculum development. It’s not the job of bureaucrats or a few elite teacher representatives to develop curriculum while classroom teachers deliver it. Instead, within clear common guidelines, teachers and schools create, think about, and inquire into curriculum and pedagogy together. Otherwise, how can we expect children to develop 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills of innovation and creativity if their teachers don’t enjoy the same opportunity?”*

This convergence of teacher education and curriculum reform is therefore not an esoteric discussion. In fact, it is happening as we speak. And I think that this development is something which both ourselves in the Teaching Council and in the NCCA are clearly aware of. At the very least, we are asking the same questions, and this should lead to some rich dialogue between us that will support and enhance the quality of teaching and learning in our schools.

If education is about anything, it is about people helping people. Teachers have known that instinctively for years. The irony seems to be that they have not realised the full potential of that statement for themselves. Now there are clear hints that they are, through projects such as JC 2.0.

### *The Scotty dilemma*

I am not sure if there are any fans of Star Trek in the audience, but I am sure that most people are aware of Scotty's catchphrase – *She cannee take anee more, cap'in!* The classic image of the great leader at the helm of the ship driving the crew forward to new achievements, new frontiers, and the professional in the bowels of the ship, ready to collapse with exhaustion. While humorous, it does speak to a very difficult truth for many teachers and principals around the country. So all this warp speed of change may be amazing and wonderful, but can it work?

There are those who would say that it must, that there is a national imperative at stake. But also, as a Teaching Council, we would say to the profession that they can be trusted to pilot the ship of learning in teaching themselves, in the interests of the public – they will be lifelong learners, but they will drive their own learning. They will be inducted and probated, but they will be the gatekeepers. They will undergo a high quality period of initial education, but the standards and expected outcomes will be set by them in tandem with other stakeholders. This change can happen as long as they feel they are in the driving seat. That is what Fullan is talking about in his paper on the drivers for system reform. And through initiatives such as Junior Cycle reform, and the Council's work in induction and probation, I believe that we are facilitating the profession in taking that step.

### **Conclusion**

A couple of points to conclude:

- Teacher education, in the broadest sense of the term, has had the potential to reform itself, and reform curriculum, all the time. All we are doing now is making explicit what has been implicit, and trying to cascade it outwards in a three-dimensional view of the space and time in which learning and teaching occur.
- It has been said before that we are preparing our young people for a world that we will not be around to see, a world that we cannot know. In the face of such uncertainty, anxiety and fear amongst teachers are understandable. But it has been clear for some time that curriculum reform is leading teachers out of the classroom, and leading teachers out of themselves to shape the reform process. That of course is in keeping with the root of the word "educate" - to lead forth.
- And teachers have nothing to worry about in being led out of themselves. Teachers have been shaping how the story of curriculum is told for years. Take a practical example - when my English teacher in second year made a wonderful link between Portia's line in *The Merchant of Venice* - "the quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven" - and the Lake Isle of Innisfree "And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow". In that moment, which I can still remember so clearly, she drew an imaginative link between two lines of creativity hundreds of years apart, and affected how I and my classmates interpreted literature henceforth - a moment of suspended humility, which served as a point of resonance for all occasions since when a line of poetry or prose has struck me, sparked a memory or sparked my imagination.

- And as I relate that memory to you now, and hope that you will take it with you and reflect on what we all have said here this evening, so I hope that you will have some sense of how the convergence of past, present and future, of curriculum and teacher education, in this moment here tonight, is anything but a pipedream.

Tomás Ó Ruairc

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## References

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