19th September, 2015

“Reflections on Leadership Challenges in Irish Schools”- Address by Dr Harold Hislop, Chief Inspector, to the Annual Conference of European Network for Improving Research and Development in Education Leadership and Management

Opening

Chairman, I am most grateful to you for your welcome. In our first official language “is mór agam an cuireadh a fuair mé uait agus ó Choiste na Comhadhála seo labhairt ag an ócáid tábhachtach seo” – I really appreciate the opportunity to be with you today to recognise the importance of the work that you do.

Within your theme of “Leading future-focussed learning”, your organisers asked me to examine what might be some of the challenges facing school leaders in the years ahead, particularly those in the Irish education system, and to comment on how Ireland is seeking to address those challenges.

I have chosen to frame my comments around what I see as three significant areas of challenge:

- The learning and assessment challenge
- The evaluation and accountability challenge
- The sustainability and growth challenge

I am going to talk about these themes very much from an Irish perspective but I hope that at least some of the challenges that I share with you will resonate with some of the issues that you may be facing in your own countries. And of course the value of a conference such as this is that we in Ireland can hear the comments, questions and observations of our visitors about these issues in ways that I am sure will help us to reflect on the steps that we should consider and act upon.

Can I also make clear two constraints that I have adopted?

Firstly, because of the focus of this conference, most of my comments about leadership will refer to the leadership of the school principal or the senior leadership team in the school. I am conscious of the leadership roles played by many people within schools and their governance, and indeed the importance of leadership beyond the school. But for convenience, most of my comments will be referring to the leadership role demanded of the school leader.

Secondly, my comments are not going to focus on defining what the nature of leadership is or exploring the different strategic and operational aspects of the role. I will focus instead on the nature of the challenges that the school leader faces.

The learning and assessment challenge

Much of the literature on school leadership emphasises the importance that school leaders place on leading learning. But it seems to me that one of the most fundamental questions and challenges that we face concerns two issues: the what and how of learning.
The “what” of learning

We have to be very clear on what we want young people to learn. You will be familiar with the criticisms that have been voiced about the traditional 19th-century structure, pattern and “content” of education. You will be familiar, too, with the criticism that many of our traditional curricula have emphasised the acquisition of knowledge at the cost of developing the sort of skills that have become known as “21st century skills”.

So what than has been the Irish approach regarding what we want young Irish people to learn? It’s probably fair to say our approach has been and is evolutionary rather than radical. We continue to structure learning in schools, though we are more conscious than ever of the importance of the continuum of learning from early childhood through to adulthood. We continue to see value in a nationally articulated curriculum for schools. We have a formal, statutory National Curriculum and Assessment Council that ensures very real debate on the nature of curriculum and assessment. The Council is a genuinely representative body and has generated an impressive degree of national consensus about what we value and want young people to learn.

Most recently our concern has been to recognise and tackle the narrowing of the curricular experience, especially at secondary level, that is being caused by an over-emphasis on State examinations. Already well established for many years, one of the most beneficial aspects of the Irish second-level school experience is the opportunity provided by Transition Year – a year between lower and upper secondary level where schools have a wide degree of autonomy over the curriculum and provide students with a wide range of learning opportunities away from examination-focussed classrooms. Students engage in community work, in entrepreneurial, environmental and artistic projects, in work experience, as well as some learning in cross-curricular subject disciplines. We have clear evidence of the benefits that this wider learning has for students’ lives and long-term success.

We have also embarked on significant change at lower secondary level. Within the proposed curricular framework at this level, we have retained the value of subject disciplines but provided increased opportunities for curricular innovation at school level. This will mean that second-level curricula will continue to be substantially defined in traditional subject areas, but we have attempted to ensure a broad and balanced learning experience through articulating a comprehensive set of statements of learning that schools must aim for and must assess. We have included the possibility of school-designed units of learning and short courses that straddle traditional disciplines. We have committed ourselves to embedding 21st century skills strongly in the teaching and learning of subjects. We want to provide and reward learning experiences that promote not only critical thinking, but also collaboration, creativity, innovation and inventiveness – attributes that will be absolutely necessary if we are to equip young people to tackle the challenges of changing economies and the moral, societal and environmental challenges that arise in a globalised world.

We have emphasised, too, what I prefer to call “gateway skills” (rather than core skills) at both primary and secondary levels – the skills of literacy (understood in its widest sense of the ability to use and understand language) and numeracy – simply because of the key role that these skills play in enabling young people to access and express knowledge, thinking, opinions and imagination.

And increasingly, we are acknowledging and articulating the key role that schools play in fostering the well-being and social responsibility of young people through formal learning, through engagement with social action and political awareness, through pastoral care, and through physical activity and responsible, healthy decision-making. For example, all of these
skills will be an integral part of an area called “Well-Being” which will be a mandatory part of the curricular experience at lower secondary level.

The “how” of learning

I said that there are two issues concerning the learning challenge: the second is the how of learning – in other words the nature of the learning experience that we need to see in schools.

John Hattie’s work on Visible Learning has been widely acknowledged as making a major contribution to our understanding of what effective learning looks like. He writes of an approach that focusses on creating high expectations for learners, that provides meaningful and challenging experiences for the student in some sort of progressive development, that enables the student to engage in a range of learning strategies, and that maximises the power of feedback to the student and from the student to the teacher. This iterative learning approach is much less concerned with a student’s achievement in relation to some national or international standard, and much more concerned with recognising the progress that the student has made to date, the next suitable learning step for the student and the student’s progression over time.

This sort of learning demands highly skilled teachers, and in that regard, Ireland has some advantages. Teaching is well regarded as a profession in Ireland and is regulated by a statutory Teaching Council. Significant changes have been introduced into our teacher education programmes to ensure a greater emphasis on the continuum of learning from ITE to induction to CPD and on reflective practice.

However, considerable challenges remain for us if we are to achieve universal application of the sort of learning that Hattie describes. We know that Irish teachers’ ability to use the information they gain from assessment to inform students’ learning is less well developed than it should be. In the past, our teacher education programmes paid less attention to developing teachers’ assessment skills. To date, official government policy, backed up by legislation, has been resolutely against the publication of comparative school league tables based on test or examination data. However, an over-reliance on externally set state examinations at second level has limited both the learning that schools and teachers assessed and the value that was placed on non-examined skills by parents, students and schools.

We are beginning to tackle these lacuna in a number of ways.

In designing our new languages curriculum at primary level, for example, the NCCA is expressing the skills to be acquired in learning outcomes but it is also providing teachers with detailed progression continua across all aspects of language learning. These will help teachers to identify in considerable detail the aspects of children’s learning that have been mastered and also the next incremental steps in the child’s learning journey. Rather than simply judging a child’s achievement on a standardised test or against a notional national standard, the curriculum and its learning continua have the potential to provide a much more nuanced understanding of the child’s learning progression. As curricula are written for lower secondary level, similar supports are envisaged and under development.

Learning how to recognise and discuss students’ progress will be at the core of much of the continuing professional development programmes that are being designed and rolled out to support junior cycle and primary curriculum reforms.

A further development to support the sort of learning that we want to see in schools is the formal introduction of classroom-based assessments at second level. The proposed arrangements for assessment at lower secondary level envisage a dual approach to assessment – the use of externally set and marked examinations complemented by school-based assessments on which
teachers will provide feedback to students and parents as part of the overall monitoring and reporting on students’ progress.

These school-based assessments are important because they enable teachers and schools to assess and report on a broader range of learning. But of greater importance is the opportunity that they present for collaborative learning among teachers. Hattie’s work emphasises the absolute need for a strong collaborative culture among teachers – one in which students’ learning, the progression that students are making, and the practices that foster that learning are at the heart of searching professional conversations. Ireland’s Junior Cycle Framework will provide time for formal structured meetings, at which teachers will discuss students’ work and review teachers’ judgements of students’ progress as part of the assessment process. Like teachers in other counties that use this approach, Irish teachers, who have been trialling such assessment moderation, find this the most professionally enriching element of the curricular change.

So what are the leadership challenges inherent in this learning and assessment challenge?

I have talked at some length about the learning and assessment challenges that we face, simply because I believe that unless we understand these challenges, we cannot define or address the leadership challenges that arise from it.

So what are the implications for leadership that our learning and assessment challenges pose?

One aspect of the role of the school leader is to articulate and demonstrate for the whole school community: students, parents, teachers and managers, the value placed on learning: the importance of the broad and balanced curriculum that I have spoken about, the balance between knowledge and skills, the importance of learning skills and attitudes for social as well as economic participation, and the moral purpose that will guide them. This is not easy in Ireland, where the influence of end-of-school state examinations and competition for university places is so strong. School leadership in this context involves a whole range of decision making: the way that the school leader celebrates success, the emphasis that is given to certain learning activities over others, the deployment of the best staff resources to the students of greatest learning need, and countless other decisions. All of these speak to the creation of the school culture and climate, and a deep appreciation on the part of the principal of his or her impact upon that culture.

A further challenge for the school leader is the task (the “moral imperative” to use Fullan’s phrase) of building a collaborative culture among teachers. If we want to implement the approach to teaching and learning that Hattie demonstrates to be most effective, we must accept, as James Spillane puts it, that “teaching is socially defined more as a complex social craft” as distinct from “a well-defined, relatively invariable, technical endeavour”. This means that leadership in schools must support networks and collaboration in the school that promote professional control and collegiality among teachers. Of course, that is easier to say than to achieve.

At its simplest level, enabling a collaborative culture that is focussed on learning, means ensuring that the time available for collaborative dialogue is used for purposeful discussion of the progress that students are making and why differences are occurring. But it also means that teachers have to be open to reviewing their own practice and changing it for the sake of students, rather than persisting with less than optimal practice. In some cases, too, sharing expertise may not come easily, especially if one’s teaching reputation and status is linked to the fact that “my students” do best in high-stakes examinations. Creating the climate of trust and
professional respect in which collaborative learning can occur among all of the staff is an ongoing and deep challenge for any school leader.

Thirdly, leading learning in 2015 brings with it the need to lead innovation including, but not limited to, the issues that surround the introduction of ICT into more ‘traditional’ schooling models. While there are risks in over-emphasising the role of ICT, we have to accept that its pervasiveness in everyday life and work means that ICT skills will be essential for students. Alas, many school leaders will tell you of the inadequate level of investment in ICT Irish schools, and we hope that the Minister’s Digital Strategy to be launched soon will address the investment gap. But I am concerned here with the way the technology is used. Irish schools, like many others, have focused on investment in presentation technologies. We need to see more evidence in Irish schools of a serious engagement by school leadership in leading ICT policy and practice that underpins and supports student learning. This is a real challenge for our school leaders and one where they will need considerable support and resources.

The evaluation and accountability challenge

This brings me to the second challenge that I want to discuss: that of evaluation and accountability. School leaders live with the reality of internal and external accountability every day.

Evaluating the quality of learning and how well the work of the school supports that learning are at the heart of the work of the school leader. And of course, the school leader faces considerable external accountability demands – from parents and the community served by the school, from external examination systems, from school owners or patrons, from employers, from government departments and from the inspectorate.

What I want to concentrate on here, however, is the question of the quality of learning that is occurring for students, and how evaluation and accountability support that learning.

In Ireland, we have been convinced by research, including the OECD’s Synergies for Better Learning Project, that shows significant benefits for learners when effective self-evaluation in schools is complemented by external inspection.

The Department of Education and Skills introduced a requirement that schools would engage in school-self-evaluation from the 2012/13 school year. For many years prior to that, schools had been supported to engage in a school development planning process, but the outcomes of that work were mixed. There were misgivings that the process had become too concerned with written documentation rather than real improvement, and that the process sometimes failed to ask searching questions about the quality of practice in schools.

The Inspectorate led a wide consultation process with the education partners and supported pilot work in schools that culminated in the development of national guidelines and the introduction of mandatory SSE. While making SSE mandatory had its risks, a very deliberate decision was taken to emphasise that the primary purpose of SSE was to encourage improvement (rather than accountability) and that SSE had to focus on the core activity of the school – learning and teaching.

Rather than ask schools to review the full range of their work, we chose instead to ask schools to focus solely on the practice of teaching and learning. The tools that were developed and the criteria that supported schools’ judgement-making were restricted to Learning Outcomes, Learning and Teaching. Schools were encouraged to take discrete and limited aspects of their practice for review – literacy, numeracy and one other theme over a four-year initial period. Specialised professional development sessions were provided for school leaders and all
teachers to introduce and support the initiative. In the Inspectorate we also committed not to engage in the inspection of schools’ SSE until the process was well embedded in schools.

We have a long way to go to perfect self-evaluation in Irish schools, but I think the evidence suggests that a reasonably successful start has been made. High percentages of schools self-report that they have engaged in SSE and that they have drawn up improvement plans to address shortcomings. Many have managed to involve teachers, students and parents and other stakeholders. They report that they have used a good range of evidence in forming judgements about their practice. Weaknesses have been identified. The Guidelines need revision. Not surprisingly, schools admit to us that they may have made unwise decisions in choosing the focus for review or in the collection of evidence. Indeed, handling and understanding data – and the increasing amounts of it that ICT makes possible – are universal problems for school leaders. Not unexpectedly, schools have struggled with sharing the results of their reviews with parents and the wider community.

Nevertheless, the informal evidence available to us from inspection visits in schools suggests that principals have welcomed the opportunity SSE has given them to focus the conversations of teachers on the quality of students’ learning and its relationship with teachers’ practice. If this is the case, it will justify the limitations that we adopted for the SSE process. We will be consulting widely about the next steps in SSE in the current school year. If we succeed in embedding the progress to date and building upon it, then I believe we will have given school leaders a significant tool with which to fulfil their role to lead improvement in the everyday practice of teaching.

Ireland’s Inspectorate has also adopted a particular approach to the evaluation of schools. Like almost all inspectorates, it fulfils an accountability function, inspecting and reporting on the work of schools and the effectiveness of school leaders. However, we have made a strong public commitment that our focus is inspection for improvement and we have an equally strong commitment to co-professional working with teachers, parents and the education partners. We have done so, because of what experience and evidence tell us. Adopting an approach to inspection that is developed in close consultation with the education sector, which commits to judging the work of the school within an understanding of its context, and that sets out to affirm strengths and provide constructive suggestions for improvement, seems to be more effective than one devoted to accountability alone. At the moment, for example, we are engaged in an extensive consultation with the early years’ sector about how we will begin to conduct education-focussed inspections in pre-schools. As in the school sector, it is clear that practitioners and leaders in the early years’ sector value the external perspective that inspection can bring to the evaluation of teaching and learning. Even when the Inspectorate identifies seriously underperforming schools and reports publicly on their weaknesses, we don’t label them as “failing schools”; rather we engage with the administrative sections of the Department and school support services to ensure that tailored support and monitoring is put in place so as to encourage change and improvement.

So what is the leadership challenge inherent in this evaluation and accountability challenge?

So what then are the specific leadership implications and challenges arising out of these developments in evaluation?

Firstly, both inspection and self-evaluation are clearly focussed on the quality of learning that is taking place in classrooms. This has its advantages as it is consistent with what we know about the importance of this focus in the work of leading learning and improvement in the school. This should mean that principals feel supported in initiating and persisting with conversations about
the progress that students are making, how this is being monitored, and how the implications of students’ progress are actually reflected upon and acted upon.

I have spoken earlier about the collegial culture that the principal must foster to enable these discussions to take place. An even greater challenge, however, is to address the reality of what we know about teachers’ effectiveness. We know that the degree of variation in students’ learning between schools can be significantly smaller than the degree of variation in students’ learning between classrooms and teachers within individual schools. Hattie in a recent paper has pointed to the implication that this has for evaluation and school improvement; for the absolute need for improvement to focus on fostering the most effective practice and reducing less effective approaches at the level of the individual teacher.

If we are determined to change teachers’ practice within classrooms in this way, then a critical first step is to develop a culture where teachers critically and constructively observe each other’s practice. This is not always easy to get off the ground, particularly where tradition has favoured the autonomy of the individual teacher in his or her classroom. That is certainly the tradition in Ireland and I know in several systems. However, effective school leaders can help peer review to grow organically from the sort of discussions that arise in school self-evaluation or those that will arise as teachers meet to moderate their judgements about students’ learning. Learning to intervene at the right time to encourage this practice, enabling team teaching or observation periods to take place, agreeing secure protocols around peer-to-peer observation and feedback, and concentrating on a developmental rather than an accountability purpose, are among the challenging steps that effective leaders need to take to foster this development in their schools. A small but growing number of Irish school leaders are adopting these practices.

School leaders also need to have the confidence, skills, time and determination to create and use regular opportunities to observe teachers’ practice themselves and to have one-to-one conversations with those teachers. Like the peer-to-peer conversations, the evidence would suggest that framing the discussion as one for professional development rather than high-stakes accountability is likely to create a more positive disposition on the part of teachers and exert a more powerful influence on learning practice. Implementing such an approach will be a real challenge in the Irish education system, but there are developments that can support this move. One is our efforts to improve the professional development of school leaders, which I will talk about shortly. Changes to our initial teacher education could also help: experienced teachers now form part of the team of professionals that supports and supervises student teachers during their placement in schools. Similar ideas are being trialled in revised Teaching Council arrangements for teachers’ early professional practice and induction. All of this can help to embed the practice of observing and being observed, and of engaging in collaborative and challenging conversations about learning and teaching.

There are challenges in all of this for inspection, too. Like other inspectorates, we evaluate the quality of school leadership and we are conscious that our inspection models reflect adequately the importance of creating collaborative cultures in schools, focussed on teaching and learning. That is one of the reasons that we have embarked on revising significantly the framework that we will use in evaluating leadership in schools. We will be sharing the draft framework with the education partners in a consultative process later this term. It will include domains encompassing the role of school leaders in:

- Leading school development
- Leading learning and teaching
- Building culture, capacity and teams
- Professional growth and development
- Organisational management

Within each of the domains, we will delineate a number of standards and articulate at least two points on a continuum of practice for each standard, so that the document can support school leaders in identifying the next steps on their own learning journeys. The Framework will, I hope, provide a set of national standards to inform not only inspection but also principals’ self-reflection and self-evaluation, the initial and continuing professional development of school leaders, and indeed the recruitment process in schools.

A number of jurisdictions have also sought to involve school leaders more directly in the inspection process – in some cases as part-time members of inspection teams or by inviting principals to join the inspection team in their own school while inspectors engage in the analysis of evidence that occurs at the end of inspections. Both approaches have their strengths and their drawbacks but I know that all of these and other approaches are worthy of consideration.

The sustainability and growth challenge

Finally, I want to turn to the issues of sustainability and growth. By this challenge, I am referring to tasks such as:

- the need to identify, grow and develop school leaders
- the need to ensure that school leaders have sustainable roles that allow them to focus on the key work of improvement
- the need for adequate management structures to support school leaders
- the need to encourage collaborative practices between school leaders.

Those who lead learning have to be learners too! Here, we have to admit that the Irish education system has one of its greatest challenges.

While we have invested well in teacher education in Ireland, we have not invested significantly in the professional development and growth of our principals and school leaders in the past. We have not required any particular post-graduate qualification as a condition of appointment to school leadership positions, although many aspiring and serving principals have taken such qualifications at universities on their own initiative. A small professional development service for school leaders fell victim to spending restrictions in the economic crisis.

There are, however, hopeful signs that this is changing. Earlier this year, the Minister for Education and Skills announced the establishment of a dedicated Centre for School Leadership to provide continuing professional development opportunities for school leaders and deputy leaders. The Centre will also coordinate a mentoring and support service for serving principals – a service that has the potential to assist and enrich the practice of all principals (and not only those who might appear to be under-performing). The Department is also exploring ways in which it can support the provision of high quality post-graduate programmes in school leadership – programmes that can address the needs of school leaders and develop the domains of practice that will be outlined in the standards that I spoke of.

We also have to admit that considerable practical barriers exist that prevent school leaders from engaging in leadership for learning. One of these is management capacity within Irish schools and within the boards of management of these schools. In the past, middle management posts in schools did not support effective distributed leadership and accountability to best effect in all schools. During our economic recession, middle management posts in schools were cut severely. This meant that leadership and management tasks that could be delegated to senior
teachers remained undone, or reverted to the principal, or to those teachers who could be persuaded to assist him or her.

An equally pressing gap in the Irish system – more at primary level than at second level – is the reliance that we place on voluntary boards of management. All schools, irrespective of their ownership or patronage, are run by boards made up of volunteers including representatives of the owner/founders, teachers, parents and community members. These volunteers do heroic work in attempting to manage schools. Legally they are responsible for all employment matters, human resources and financial management, and often capital expenditure, too. They are required to hold the school leader to account and they should play a key role in determining the direction and purpose of the school. It is not realistic, in my view, to expect that volunteers can be found to adequately carry out these complex tasks in all 4000 plus schools in Ireland, many of them small schools employing fewer than four teachers.

Given the limitations on capacity for management within the school staff and within boards of management, the tendency is that more and more management tasks revert to the school leader. Inevitably, the capacity of school leaders to engage in the more valuable task of leading learning is eroded, even where they have the determination and bravery to engage in it.

We have to face up to the need to create greater and more flexible middle-management capacity in Irish schools, and management bodies have been pressing this case with Department officials and ministers. But in the longer term, we also have to look at the complex tasks that are required of boards, especially if Irish schools are to enjoy the levels of autonomy common in many other education systems. We have to consider how some of these management tasks could be done in alternative ways. This need not imply an erosion of the autonomy of schools but rather more effective and professionalised ways of working. The new governance manual for primary schools published yesterday by the Minister, for example, provides for the possibility of a single board for more than one school. This is a modest change but certainly presents one possible way forward.

Lastly, can I end on a positive note regarding sustainability and growth? In several education systems, policies on leadership development seek to encourage the sharing of expertise between schools and thereby enable school leaders to contribute to system-wide improvement. A well-known saying in the Irish language puts it well: “Ní neart go cur le chéile” – or strength comes through working together. A good example of that and a particular success story in the Irish context are the two professional associations of school leaders – the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) and the National Association of Principals and Deputy-Principals (NAPD). Both emerged from and are sustained largely by voluntary effort among school leaders. They receive modest public funding, but they have enabled extensive sharing of good practice and the provision of co-professional support and they have made significant contributions to national educational policy.

Conclusion

I readily admit that none of the leadership challenges that I have spoken about is easily addressed and few of the practical tasks arising from them are readily solved. In a way, that is as it should be, because leading learning, leading the development of young people is at its heart a task with a deep, moral purpose.

That is why a conference such as yours is so important. The rich discussions that you have had here over the last three days have considered many of these complexities and I am sure presented promising possibilities and solutions. As they enable all of us to lead learning more effectively in the months and years ahead, you will indeed have served young people well.
Go raibh maith agaibh!