ADVANCING LEARNING, ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION IN IRISH SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOLS

Address to
Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
Annual Convention 2015

Galway Bay Hotel, Galway

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RÉAMHRÁ

A Dhaoine uaisle,
Is móir agam an cuireadh a fuair mé ó bhur gCoiste labhairt anseo anocht, agus an fháilte a chur sibh romham. Sula dtosnaím ar ábhar mo léachta, ba mhaith liom an deis seo a thapú chun mo bhfuilchas pearsanta a ghabháil do Mhalachay Ó Maolbhuaídigh as ucht na hoibre go léir a rinne sé as son ACCS agus ar son na scoláirí uile i scoileanna na tíre seo. D’obraigh sé go dílis mar uachtarán ar ACCS agus is minic a bhí mé féin an-bhuíoch dó as ucht an chomhoibrithe a spreag sé idir an Chigireacht agus lucht ACCS. Éacht ata déanta agat, Malachy, agus cinnte dearfa táimid go léir go mór faoi chomoin agatsa.

BACKGROUND

In a paper that I gave at the JMB conference last September,¹ I described how I thought Irish education might experience changes in a number of areas over the next five years or so. I located all of this potential for change as needing to be informed by core values that included:

- We must recognise and celebrate good teachers and good teaching
- Learning is about developing young people and setting them on the road of learning for life
- Equity is not the enemy of excellence, equity is at the core of the educational endeavour
- A confident and well-informed Irish educational system for a confident Ireland

I am delighted that ACCS has picked up that final principle “A confident educational system for a confident Ireland” as the overall theme of your 2015 annual conference.

The paper that I gave in September last and from which that quotation comes provides the backdrop to what I will have to say tonight. This evening, I want to focus in on just a small number – two or three in particular - of the themes that I outlined in that paper, and for the sake of time, I want to explore them mainly in the context of lower secondary education in our own education system. In doing so, I want to share with you some of the learning journey that we are on in the Inspectorate. I hope that this talk will connect your own

learning journey as an organisation and as individuals working to provide young people with the education that they deserve.

**What we do and what we expect**

If you are involved in any way in teaching or in the running of schools or in the evaluation of schools, a great deal of your time and focus is probably placed on the *quality of the service* that is provided to young people. We are constantly working or thinking about how well we run schools, how broad a curriculum we provide, how good is the teaching that we see, how attractive and suitable are the learning environments that we provide. All of us, I think, – and I’d admit that inspectors are no different – focus naturally on the inputs that are made to the current educational system: the quality of teaching, the quality of management, the quality of resources.

I believe that we are less inclined to think regularly about the *outcomes* that our work and efforts are intended to achieve. I know that the *quality of the learning* that students engage in, the richness and appropriateness of what young people learn has always had a place in our thinking – but it’s also true, I think, that we can find ourselves focusing more on the quality of *how* we provide for this learning than on the quality and nature of the learning itself. So, one theme that I think is worth considering regularly and deeply is *Learning*.

**LEARNING**

There are many possible reasons why it is easier to discuss, describe and evaluate the factors that support and facilitate learning than to discuss learning itself. One reason has to do with defining good learning and recognising definitively when it happens. Factors that facilitate learning, like good teaching or effective school leadership or adequate resources are much easier to describe and recognise, than learning itself.

**Defining the learning we want to foster**

So what learning *do* we want to see for young people? When speaking last autumn, I said that learning is about developing young people and setting them on the road of learning for life; that our aim should be to achieve the rounded development of young people – in all
aspects of the physical, mental, emotional, aesthetic, social, intellectual and spiritual
dimensions of their lives.\textsuperscript{2} That definition seemed to be one that resonated with many in the
audience last September and I think it is one to which many in the Irish education system
genuinely aspire.

Of course, there are alternative definitions.

The first chapter of the PISA 2012 report, the very influential OECD survey of the
achievement of 15-year olds, opens with this statement:

“What is important for citizens to know and be able to do?” ……PISA assesses the
extent to which students near the end of compulsory education have acquired key
knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in modern societies. The
assessment which focusses on reading mathematics, science and problem-solving
does not just ascertain whether students can reproduce knowledge; it also examines
how well students can extrapolate from what they have learned and apply that
knowledge in unfamiliar settings, both in and outside of the school. This approach
reflects the fact that modern economies reward individuals not for what they know,
but for what they can do with what they know.\textsuperscript{3}

Within the very focussed lens of the PISA study, this narrower of definition of learning is
understandable. We should however, be alert to other ground-breaking studies that the
OECD has sponsored. One of the most potentially significant books to emerge from the
OECD’s Centre Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) in recent years – and one that I
don’t see discussed or considered sufficiently in my view – is a work written and edited by
three world-class researchers: Hanna Dumont, David Instance and Francisco Benavides. It’s
called The Nature of Learning. As its subtitle makes clear, it contains a comprehensive and
insightful analysis of research conducted by hundreds of eminent educationalists and
researchers across many different disciplines and it seeks to use this research to inspire
educational practice. It adopts a refreshingly broad definition of learning; it examines what
we know about how learning takes place; and it challenges us to ask to what extent our
schools actually foster the learning to which we aspire for young people.

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{3} OECD, PISA 2012 Results: What Students Know and Can Do: Student Performance in Mathematics, Reading
I’m not fond of the term “21st century competences” because I think most of the skills involved are certainly not new inventions or discoveries of the 21st century, and it’s worth noting that in their introductory chapter to the book, David Instance and Hanna Dumont are also ambivalent about the term. But what they do point out is that

Our societies and economies have experienced a profound transformation from reliance on an industrial to a knowledge base. Global drivers increasingly bring to the fore what some call “21st century competences” – including deep understanding, flexibility and the capacity to make creative connections, a range of so-called “soft skills” including good team working. The quantity and quality of learning has become central with the accompanying concern that traditional educational approaches are insufficient.4

Drawing from the work of a wide range of researchers, Dumont and Instance suggest that learning in schools should enable students to

- To [develop the] higher order thinking skills [that] are increasingly integral to the workplace of today and tomorrow
- To generate, process and sort complex information
- To think systematically and critically
- To take decisions weighing different forms of evidence
- To ask meaningful questions about different subjects
- To be adaptable and flexible to new information
- To be creative
- To be able to identify and solve real world problems

They do not suggest that these skills are in some way developed at a remove from knowledge:

- Young people [they write] should ideally acquire a deep understanding of complex concepts

And they argue cogently that young people must be given opportunities to acquire much more than the skills and knowledge they need for economic prosperity:

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• Teamwork, social and communication skills are integral to work and social life in the knowledge society
• Students should develop into self-directed, life-long learners

And they make clear their belief that

• To draw attention to the skills used in contemporary and future workplaces is not to privilege only economic demands over the competences called for to be effective in communities, social and personal life.\textsuperscript{5}

I think my only criticisms of their definition of what learning should be are that it lacks specific references to the development of values and ethical understanding, and to the cultural dimensions of life and learning (though Instance and Dumont would argue, I think, that these are implicit in their references to “social and personal life”), and I see no emphasis on instilling a joy or intrinsic pleasure in learning – though I think the authors would say that that “self-directed, life-long learners” must be enjoying their learning experiences.

**How does learning in Irish schools measure up?**

I think it’s a fair question to ask ourselves if the learning that we are encouraging in schools meets the standard set by Dumont and Instance.

I am sure that the school mission statements that you genuinely strive to realise every day encapsulate at least some of the aspirations that Instance and Dumont describe. The curricular statements and specifications that set out for us what young people are to learn in our schools, emphasise the ways in which each particular subject can contribute to the rounded development of young people and our future citizens.

There is much evidence, too, some of it in inspection reports, of good practice among teachers in Irish schools, many of whom are highly skilled and dedicated to the role that they play in fostering not only knowledge of the subject that they teach, but also the broader development of their students’ values, attitudes and aspirations. The commitment

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., pp.23-24.
that teachers make to the rounded and ethical development of their students is well encapsulated in Section 4 the Teaching Council’s Codes of Practice.⁶

But are we certain that the experience of second-level education in Ireland really fosters the sort of learning that we have pictured above? In a presentation made to a recent conference of the Inspectorate, Professor Gordon Stobart, Emeritus Professor of Education at the Institute of Education at the University of London, cited an extract from an article published in *The Irish Times* in 2005. The article was written by a first-year university student, who had been a high performer in the Leaving Certificate examination and was now advising a further generation of students about successful learning in secondary school:

Learning the formula for each exam and practising it endlessly. I got an A1 in English because I knew exactly what was required in each question. I learned off the sample answers provided by the examiners and I knew how much information was required and in what format in every section of the paper. That’s how you do well in these examinations....
There’s no point in knowing about stuff that’s not going to come up in the exams. I was always frustrated by teachers who would say “You don’t need to know this for the exams but I’ll tell you anyway”. I wanted my A1 – what’s the point of learning material that won’t come up in the exams?⁷

One has to admire the determination and no doubt sheer hard work that the writer brought to her learning, and acknowledge a considerable degree of sophisticated knowledge management in her thinking. I have no criticism of this student – she simply responded intelligently within the constraints of the system that we designed. Clearly, *The Irish Times* believed that her advice would be valued by future cohorts of Leaving Certificate students. Nor would I suggest that the example of one student’s experience is representative of all the learning that takes place in Irish second-level schools. In fact, I know that in very many of the thousands of lessons that took place in Irish schools today, students and their teachers really engaged in meaningful and deep learning.

But, don’t we have to ask whether the sort of learning that that student writer and perhaps others like her experienced in school – a learning experience that we provided and rewarded – is really likely to equip her and the vast majority of her colleagues with the skills,

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knowledge and attitudes that would equip them to be global citizens of the 21st century? Of course, her writing is only one example of the effect that the current second-level system may have had, but does it resonate with you? Shouldn’t we ask whether the emphasis in our practice is tilted towards a learning dominated by exam success or towards the development of deeper learning? Have you heard your sons or daughters or other young relatives describe their learning in junior cycle or in senior cycle? Are their experiences and those of the young *The Irish Times* writer in line with the criticisms that we have heard – from some student bodies? from academic researchers? from third-level institutions in Ireland?

**SOME IMPLICATIONS OF SEEKING TO ENCOURAGE 21ST CENTURY LEARNING**

If we know that the learning that we offer to young people is not a good as it should be, and if we know that young people will require a very different learning capability in the future, then we have a duty to change the current system. This brings with it a number of implications.

**A changed curriculum**

The curriculum is one starting point. While a curriculum statement is no guarantee that learning will occur as we would wish, a clear statement of intent that points the teacher, learner and system in the right direction is absolutely necessary. In fact, there is a growing realisation across many countries that school curricula need to change significantly. As recently as last month, Professor Graham Donaldson, when reviewing evidence from across many high performing countries for his *Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales* noted that

> There is a discernible shift from curriculum specifications based on traditional subject disciplines towards the framing of purposes in terms of key competences, key skills, life skills, capabilities or capacities...  

Time does not permit a line-by-line analysis of each aspect of Ireland’s *Junior Cycle Framework*, but it is undoubtedly true that the key features of the *Framework* are certainly in line with the sort of thinking about learning for the 21st century that Dumont and Instance

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(and the hundreds of researchers on whom their work relies) have outlined and with the international trends that the Donaldson review has identified in countries such as Australia, Scotland and New Zealand.

The Framework provides for a broad and balanced development of the student, emphasising through its 24 statements of learning and its key skills, the need for a different understanding of learning. It seeks to strike a much better balance between the development of students’ skills and their acquisition of knowledge; between the acquisition of concepts and developing the students’ ability to use procedures, and it asserts the important inter-relationship of both.¹⁹

Of course, the Framework document is only the beginning: what will be really important is that each of the subject specifications will have to fully embrace this approach, and include detailed examples of how students can demonstrate these skills in the context of each subject. I welcome very much the fact that the Travers II Document which emerged from the recent talks on junior cycle reform between the Department of Education and Skills and the teacher unions¹⁰ re-emphasised the importance of ensuring that the curricular specifications bring this level of clarity for teachers, parents and students, and I know that the NCCA are fully committed to improved presentations of forthcoming specifications to achieve this end. A longer-term challenge for individual schools will be to ensure that despite using the structure of distinct subjects, the learning experience for students in junior cycle will be a well-planned and integrated one, that adequately addresses the students’ learning across all of the skills and statements of learning.

The Framework also offers a way in which one of the key risks to superficial learning can be avoided. As long ago as 1993, Howard Gardiner said:

The greatest enemy of understanding is coverage. As long as you are determined to cover everything, you actually ensure that most kids are not going to understand.

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¹⁰ The Travers II Document: A Way Forward, March 2015, is a proposed agreement on how junior cycle reform could be advanced and implemented in Irish second-level schools. The agreement was drafted by Dr Pauric Travers, former president of St Patrick’s College of Education, who acted as independent chairperson of talks between representatives of the second-level teacher unions (the ASTI and the TUI) and officials representing the Minister for Education and Skills. The full document is available on the DES website at www.education.gov.ie. At the time of writing, the proposals have been accepted by the Minister but have not been accepted fully by the teacher unions.
You’ve got to take enough time to get kids deeply involved in something so that they can think about it in lots of different ways and apply it - not just at school but at home and on the streets and so on.

Now, this is the most revolutionary idea in American education – because most people can’t abide the notion that we might leave out one decade of American history or one formula in math or one biological system. But that’s crazy, because we now know that kids don’t understand these things anyway. They forget them as soon as the test is over – because it hasn’t been built into their brain, engraved in it. So since we know unambiguously that the way we do it now isn’t working, we have to try something else.\(^\text{11}\)

The clear implication is that we must give teachers and learners more time to explore a less wide range of subjects but to do so in much greater depth. This is exactly why the Framework suggests (and the Travers II Document re-asserts) that junior cycle students should study fewer subjects than many do at present, but insists that they explore the concepts and skills of these subjects and their application in unfamiliar contexts much more thoroughly. We have evidence from Ireland that this can and does work: the protests that were heard in the early days of Project Maths when some elements of the traditional mathematics programme were jettisoned echo the initial reaction that Gardiner describes, but the evidence of better achievement in maths that emerged from the Project Maths Pilot schools in PISA 2012 seems to demonstrate the validity of the approach.\(^\text{12}\)

I very much welcome one important adjustment to the Framework that Minister O’Sullivan chose to make last November and which was re-affirmed by the Travers II proposals. The original Framework document had emphasised the development of the students’ physical and mental health as well as their personal, emotional and social skills and their sense of social responsibility. However, there were understandable fears that in the current Irish second-level context this importance needed to be underscored by requiring provision for these areas of the student’s development. Making Well-Being (delivered through the short courses of SPHE/RSE, PE and CSPE) a mandatory part of the curriculum and providing that 400 hours of learning be made available for learning in this area is, I believe, a pragmatic


and wise refinement to the original proposals. It is certainly in line with the growing recognition internationally of the need for schools to foster students’ social and emotional skills,¹³ and one that will make decision-making at school level more straightforward.

A final feature of the Junior Cycle Framework that is worthy of mention is the emphasis that it places on developing the students’ awareness of what they are learning, of how they learn best, and of the next possible steps that they can take in their own learning journeys. Instance and Dumont describe this as “self-regulation of learning”, and citing work by De Corte they assert that this self-regulation of learning is not a set of learning skills that is separate from knowledge acquisition, “but an integral part of it.”¹⁴ It’s hugely important that we encourage this in students if they are really to become life-long learners, able to adapt in their economic, personal and social lives.

**A fundamental change in teaching**

To achieve the learning that is described in The Nature of Learning, we need a significant change in teachers’ practice. In an article that appeared earlier this week in The Irish Times, I thought that Anne Heelan of AHEAD expressed in a very striking way the dilemma facing teachers at every level:

> When I started teaching, I thought my task was to hammer my knowledge into the heads of students. I realised in time that this was not what the job was about. The real purpose of teaching is learning, and if students are not learning then teaching is not working.¹⁵

The research that Dumont, Instance and others such as John Hattie have amassed outlines the sort of challenges that teachers will face if they are to ensure that students engage in the sort of deep learning that we want. Can I mention just two of these?

A key finding from research is that learning occurs when our brains are not passive recipients of stimuli and information, but *when they actively construct and interpret*. This

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¹⁵ Heelan, A. (2015), “There’s no ‘average learner’ but we still teach as if there were”, in *The Irish Times*, 17 March 2015.
means that it is crucial that we actively engage the individual in learning and that we make learning a more active process.

Frequently, I think, we say those words – more active learning – yet we have little idea about what this means in practice. It certainly does not mean that every lesson has to involve games or elaborate physical activities. Nor does it mean that student learning can only take place when the student discovers everything for him or herself. It does mean, however, that engagement with materials, experimentation and discovery learning have their value, provided the purpose and likely path of the learning are carefully thought through in advance by a highly skilled teacher.

Engaging learners also requires, as Instance and Dumont describe, that teachers are highly attuned to the learners’ motivations and how to use these to encourage learning.\textsuperscript{16} If we want to engage these learners, we have to recognise that different learners come to the classroom with very different learning styles and that therefore, we need teachers who are skilled at using a wide range of teaching strategies, including those that promote problem solving as well as creative and critical thinking.

That is no small ask: most of us who have become teachers have experienced success within a reasonably restricted set of conventional approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. We can sometimes fail to appreciate the challenges for learners for whom these conventional approaches are unsuited. And in a situation where we are changing what we want young people to learn, we face the further challenge of extending our repertoire of teaching strategies to enable us to foster new forms of learning, skills and abilities in students.

A second implication for teaching and teachers comes from the research finding that learning is much more a social activity than a solo occupation. While autonomous work and study are important, most learning occurs in the process of interaction, negotiation and cooperation – between students, between students and teachers, and in later life between individuals and teams in most workplaces of the 21st century. That is why, according to empirical research, cooperative group work, appropriately organised and structured, can be enormously beneficial for achievement as well as for the development of valuable,

behavioural skills. Of course, the most significant words in that sentence are “appropriately organised and structured”, because group work and collaborative learning do not just happen when we pair students or sit them in small groups. If such an approach is to work, we have to deliberately recognise and teach the skills of interaction, of sharing ideas, of listening and questioning, and of collaborative learning. These techniques have not traditionally formed a significant element of our teacher education programmes and must become an important focus for teachers’ continuing professional development.

The promotion of active learning and recognising the importance of the social and interactive dimension of learning do not imply a diminution in the importance of the teacher – rather the opposite. Professor Dylan Wiliam has warned against any assumption that the role of the teacher can be eroded:

.....teachers do not create learning; only leaners can do this and so many have called for a shift in the role of the teacher from the “sage on the stage” to the “guide on the side”. The danger with such a characterisation is that it is often interpreted as relieving the teacher of the responsibility of ensuring that learning takes place. What I propose here is that the teacher be regarded as responsible for “engineering” a learning environment, both in its design and its operation.

As I mentioned last September, I think that that sort of learning environment is probably best summarised in Hattie’s description of effective teaching for effective learning – or what he calls Visible Learning. He identifies and describes a highly skilled and informed type of teacher-directed instruction. He makes clear that this is not simply a teacher chalk-and-talk approach or one dominated by the acquisition of undigested knowledge. Rather, he describes how “teaching requires deliberate interventions to ensure that there is cognitive change in the student”, and that the key ingredients in this process involve

- An awareness of the learning intentions
- Knowing when a student is successful in attaining those intentions
- Having sufficient understanding of the student when he/she comes to the task
- Knowing enough about the content to provide meaningful and challenging experiences for the student in some sort of progressive development

17 Ibid.
• Knowing a range of learning strategies to provide to the student when they seem not to understand
• Providing direction and re-direction in terms of the content being understood
• Maximising the power of feedback to the student and from the student to the teacher.19

It is also self-evident that this sort of environment and teaching requires adequate teaching resources in each school, but also investment in the quality and ongoing professional development of teachers. The Chief Inspector’s Report of 2010-12 described how cutbacks in funding at second-level during the financial crisis impacted negatively on student/teacher ratios and the range of subject options available to students.20 I certainly hope that this can be prioritised and redressed as financial resources improve, so that the ongoing improvement in teaching and learning that we need at second level can take place.

Changes to assessment

If we are really serious about promoting the learning to which we aspire for young people, we have to recognise that young people are likely to value the behaviours and learning that we choose to recognise and reward. That is why a consideration of approaches to learning cannot be separated from a consideration of assessment – it is absolutely necessary to align assessment with the purposes and nature of the learning we want to encourage.

For historical reasons, stretching back to the use of examinations as a mechanism for allocating funding to second-level schools and indeed to universities in Ireland in the 19th century, state-organised examinations have acquired an enormous cultural regard in the Irish psyche.

Well-constructed examinations have their role, of course. They can measure the achievement of some students relatively well against nationally defined criteria and standards. They can be adjusted in style and content to test a somewhat broader range of skills and abilities and lessen problematic predictability. They can claim to provide a reassurance to parents that students’ progress will be measured in a detached and objective way. Understandably, teachers who have been successful themselves in state and other

20 Inspectorate (2013), Chief Inspector’s Report 2010-12, Department of Education and Skills, Dublin, see especially Chapter 1.
examinations, and who are highly effective educators within the current system are attracted by the certainty and, in their view, the objectivity of the examinations.

Given this attachment to State examinations, among society generally and among teachers, Minister O’Sullivan’s decision to retain a state examination to assess a substantial part of students’ learning at the end of junior cycle is understandable, despite the fact that it represented a considerable shift from the policy of her predecessor. It was a decision that was welcomed by parents and teachers alike, and one that has been re-affirmed by the Travers II proposals.

What State examinations cannot do, however, is to provide information about a considerable range of the skills and abilities that we want to encourage in young people who will be citizens of the 21st century. Our current system, relying solely as it does on State examinations for 16 year-olds is completely out of alignment with the sort of learning that these students need to engage in. And what is even more serious, is that we know that as long as we leave this examination-based assessment system in place, schools, teachers and our young people will remain focused on the sort of learning that has naturally dominated our educational system for over a century-and-a-half, and which will not serve our young people well in the future.

The obvious answer is to carry out some elements of assessment at school level and using tasks, projects and techniques that allow students to demonstrate their understanding of concepts and skills and their ability to apply them in ways that would never be possible in an examination. But broadening the range of concepts, skills and abilities that we assess is only one purpose of carrying out assessment in the classroom. Research shows that the greatest benefits for students’ learning occur when teachers and learners provide really effective feedback to each other. Giving students meaningful feedback about their learning is essential if learning is to be effective. Instance and Dumont point out that the research shows that feedback must not be just feedback about current achievements – in fact such feedback produces relatively little benefit, but where feedback engages students in mindful activity, the effects on learning can be profound. For example, helping the student to understand the elements of his learning that have been achieved is useful; but far more beneficial is enabling him or her is to understand how their abilities and skills can be improved and how their learning can progress. That is why, for the sake of the student,

school-based assessment must happen between the student and his or her own teacher, and of course, the parents of the learner.

It is reasonable to argue, as Dr Travers did in his proposal for junior cycle reform, that such school-based assessment should be separated from any form of state examination or certification, as teachers desired (and as the original Framework proposed). It is also true that without this form of school-based assessment, a complete picture of a student’s achievement is simply not possible, and the virtuous circle of learning-teaching-assessment/feedback-learning for the 21st century cannot exist. So Travers proposes that no more than two examples of such assessments would be recorded formally and reported upon to parents and students in each subject, but not in a manner that is State certified or combined with State examination results.

Travers was absolutely clear that in order to craft a solution, he had accepted the teachers’ rather than the Minister’s desired position, and he placed school-based assessment very firmly in the relationship between the teacher, student and parent. There are risks in this Travers approach – will school-based assessments be valued as much as State-certified examination results, for example? I am confident that they will over time – indeed I believe that when teachers and parents experience school-based assessment and feedback, they will come to regard them as much superior to exams, but this will take time.

Of course, school-based assessment need not be associated with only two recorded assessment events – this sort of assessment should be happening regularly. I see huge potential for good in developing standard national student report formats, similar to those introduced at primary level, on which teachers could document for parents and student at regular intervals across the three years of junior cycle, the student’s progress in acquiring the skills and competences underpinning learning at junior cycle.

The challenge of school-based assessment and the support of moderation

Yet implementing such assessment in the Irish context will be challenging. We are enormously fortunate that we have a highly skilled teaching force, who understand their subject knowledge and who are more than capable of facilitating deep learning among students. We need to build on these strengths.

Teachers will of course need to become familiar with the detail of new subject specifications. Teachers engage in assessment of their students at present, but much of that
assessment is within the current paradigm of teaching, learning and examination-dominated assessment. Teachers will certainly require professional development and ongoing support to enable them to assess the work of students against the broader set of skills, success criteria and standards that can be expected of learners.

One of the most effective ways to build on the strengths of teachers is to capitalise on that attribute of learning that I spoke of earlier – that learning is primarily a social activity that occurs best in the process of interaction, negotiation and cooperation between peers. That is why other educational systems provide sufficient time and support for teachers to engage in school-based moderation of students’ work at fixed points, and why Travers II proposes Subject Assessment Review meetings as part of the new arrangements. These occasions provide teachers with invaluable opportunities to learn from each other, to learn about the expectations that fellow teachers have of students, to review their own teaching and their students’ learning, and to be reassured that their assessment and feedback to students is fair and well-judged. Teachers who participate in such meetings frequently describe them as the best professional learning experiences that they engage in.

An external support to teachers from beyond the school can also play a further role in ensuring that teachers are fully equipped to use assessment and feedback in an effective, well-judged and fair way. Travers proposes that an assessment support service would help teachers and provide an assurance to them and to parents that judgements are formed according to common principles and standards. The need for such a service is likely to be higher in the initial stage of implementation for each subject, but a continuing external support will be required for all subjects in the long-term.

All of this needs a well-informed teaching cohort, that is open to professional learning and new knowledge, and it requires a commitment from government that those professional learning opportunities will be provided. Teachers in Ireland have long argued for investment in their professional development. They know its value and over the years, many of them have invested heavily in their own professional development for the benefit of their students. It would be a great tragedy if they did not avail of the rich learning experiences and dedicated time for learning that Junior Cycle for Teachers is now offering. Even if currently unconvinced by some elements of the junior cycle arrangements, teachers can through JCT acquire a deeper knowledge of their subject and the pedagogical skills associated with it, they can help JCT to be more responsive to their needs, and they can only enhance their professional standing. I truly hope that this opportunity will not be lost.
It’s also self-evident that other resources, including leadership capacity, will be needed to implement the sort of learning and assessment that students need and which the junior cycle framework offers. That is why I am glad to see that the management authorities, including the ACCS, will be engaging with the Department on this issue.

**The implications for internal and external evaluation**

Finally, in all this discussion of the nature of learning, I believe there are lessons and synergies for the evaluation of schools.

The research that points to the social nature of highly effective learning described by Dumont and Instance, and Hattie’s emphasis on iterative feedback as a key process in learning has implications for both self-evaluation and external inspections. School self-evaluation seeks to capitalise on both. Just as students can learn from good teacher feedback, feedback from students can be an invaluable learning source for teachers. Listening to students can be an eye-opening experience for schools.

Similarly, collaborative, peer review, where teachers regularly observe and discuss each other’s practice, creates and capitalises upon the learning that can occur between teachers and between school leaders and teachers, when they engage in a learning process of interaction, negotiation and cooperation, and when feedback supports improvement and development. That’s why self-evaluation can be a really effective support to improve teachers’ practice and students’ learning, and why it is such a valuable tool in the hands of effective leaders and school management. It’s also why, in the current school year, we have surveyed schools to establish the extent of their engagement with SSE and offered them advisory visits from the Inspectorate to support the process.

Similarly, I accept fully that the inspection of schools can really benefit from engagement with students. As part of our own learning about learning, we have videoed focus group discussions with students in several schools about their perceptions of learning and effective teaching. You will be able to access these shortly on our SSE website and I hope you will find them as revealing and thought provoking as we did, as we seek to encourage and evaluate 21st century learning in schools.
Inspection must also involve a meaningful dialogue with school communities when inspection happens, and challenging and meaningful engagements with school leaders and managers when we are designing and improving how we conduct inspections. ACCS has been extremely helpful to us in this regard; not only facilitating the trialling of new inspection models in ACCS schools, but also acting as a critical but constructive friend in formal consultations. I hope that you’ll be glad to note that this commitment to a professional collaborative approach and strong reciprocal relationships between the Inspectorate and schools is re- emphasised and restated in our newly revised Code of Practice.\textsuperscript{22}

It is my sincere hope that our work will continue to complement fully your efforts and the efforts of all teachers in your schools to provide even better 21st century learning for all the young people that we serve.

Go raibh maith agaibh!

\textsuperscript{22} Inspectorate (forthcoming), \textit{Code of Practice for the Inspectorate}, Department of Education and Skills, Dublin.