

# The importance of consultation partnerships education essay

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The paper will first look at the inclusion of values in curriculum and how consultation and partnership can help develop a curriculum that includes the values of all included parties. The second part of the paper will discuss the proposed changes to the Junior Certificate, a topic at the centre of attention within the education sector. The third section of the paper will look closely at deep curriculum reform and the different effects it can have. The paper will discuss the factors that will determine these effects while focusing on school culture as a central theme.

### **The importance of consultation/partnerships in terms of values underpinning the curriculum selection**

This section of the paper will discuss the importance of consultation and partnership in relation to the values that underpin the selection of curriculum. First of all, it is important to get a full understanding of what it is meant by curriculum and values, and how they interlink. Thaman (1993) defines curriculum as "a selection from the culture of society, of aspects which are regarded as so valuable that their survival is not left to chance, but is entrusted to teachers for expert transmission to the young." This semester, we were introduced to a curriculum that includes content, pedagogies, culture, assessment, set of collective experiences and underpinning values, which are concerns about what ought to be. "A value is a belief which need not rely upon facts or evidence, although a value position can be supported or challenged by knowledge propositions" (Le Metais 1997). Values are those beliefs that coincide with the aims of the curriculum and can often include values on culture, utility, information, preparation for social capability and well-being. Gilles (2004) makes a further

link by stating " Curriculum reflects what we value as a nation and what we seek for our young people. It is designed to convey knowledge which is considered to be important and to promote the development of values, understanding and capabilities." Three questions that need to be addressed: Are government declarations of values and aims common amongst people? Are explicit values and aims carried through into practice? Are values and aims unchanging over time?" The belief is that a curriculum can only be owned in partnership - a partnership that aims to incorporate the rights, duties and values of the various included parties" (Trant 1998). McCormack (2013) included various parties that should form the partnership; they " represent a coalition of interests and projects brought together under a common name at a particular point in time" Goodson (2001 p. 45). Gillies (2004) points out ' values will inevitably figure in any attempt to outline a curriculum and in any attempt to outline a resulting educational programme.' The problem remains in identity; whose values should be included? Values can be reliant on the ideologies of those who implement the curriculum or who are involved in selection. The aim is to form a consensus in decision making, a process that seeks the consent of all participants. With this in mind consultation and partnership is the most democratic and professional way to select an educational programme. Many agree with the idea of partnership but disagree that it is in place. Trant (1998) describes some of the problems that exist with value selection. Trant's paper is titled ' giving back the curriculum to teachers'; yet Trant believes that teachers lack ownership. Each party has a need to push forward their values, therefore, the need for consultation and partnership

grows constantly. A further problem with curriculum decision making in Ireland is that some teachers are passive; they just follow the curriculum guidelines passed down from the higher parties therefore ignoring the personal values they place on education. Whitehead (1988) states " Values are the ideals that give significance to our lives that are reflected through the priorities we choose, and that we act on consistently and repeatedly." However, teachers may sometimes become ' living contradictions' to themselves, in that they may have to put the values of the school, the NCCA and the DES before their own. As a future educator, it is my responsibility to question what I value, and I must question the relevance and purpose of what I am teaching. Gleeson (2010) argues that the curriculum values cannot be devised by one group and implemented by another; cross analysis and consultation must apply. Many feel that the struggle with the current dominant mode of operating is not simply because values are set in place without involving all the stakeholders, but that, even when there has been wide consultation to develop policy, people in receivership do not evaluate the curriculum from the point of view of how they help them work towards their values and beliefs. What is required is an altered mind set, a different approach and realistic expectations. The challenge for policy makers is to frame and form ideas and then invite, and expect school communities to make informed decisions about new policy based on the values and beliefs of the their particular communities. This approach requires that the policy makers be influenced in the first place by those school communities, through consultation and representation. It also depends on the willingness by the NCCA and the DES to allow their values to be actively owned and shaped by

different school communities. The challenge is for the central authority is to change the focus from dictating from the top down to co-ordinating and supporting from the centre (Atkin 1996). As we prepare for the Ireland of the future, it will be important for us to find a basis for co-operation rather than confrontation. Irish education has been damaged by struggles over management and control, and all the while the people whom the system is supposed to serve are becoming increasingly alienated from it. We need to move the values we have from the current classical humanist, teacher led approach to a more liberal progressive mind set; we must place value on innovation, creativity and critical thinking (McCormack 2013). It is not the ownership that matters but what is taught and valued. It is the curriculum that counts, and the way forward here is to look for a partnership - in defining, planning, implementing and assessing the curriculum in terms of content, pedagogy and overall, values. (Trant 1998 Pg. 7). Values " guide decision making on the curriculum and, when reflected in the educational experience of students, should have an impact on the formation of their values" therefore an agreement between parties should be met before any decisions are made on the curriculum, thereby leading to a notion on values that is shared by the wider community.

### **The approach to curriculum development by the NCCA in particular in relation to the proposed changes for Junior Cert**

The current project to reinvent the Junior Cycle within Irish post primary schools is a project that has been at the forefront of the media in recent years." The curriculum and the code of style of discipline in most of Ireland's

secondary schools signify a resolute censorship of the imagination by the educational authorities, arguing that Irish secondary education is effected by averageness, and to let slip away the potential for self-understanding which is singularity one's own potential"(Gleeson 2003, P. 16)In reference to Gleeson's quote, the NCCA is aiming to create an innovative curriculum designed to address the concerns and interests of the students. " The terminal Junior Cert exam will be replaced with a school-based model of assessment with an emphasis on the quality of students' learning experience" (DES 2012). The changes being implemented need to be meaningful and lasting; changes need to redirect the focus away from a top down approach to a more centred collaborative approach incorporating all interested parties. While the consultation process adopted by the NCCA has to be applauded; upon further examination of the consultation findings one stark fact emerges. As per the NCCA " the principal forum for the consultation was the website where a questionnaire based on the themes of the paper could be accessed." (NCCA, 2011) In total 445 online questionnaire responses were received. 40% of these responses were from post primary teachers. (NCCA, 2011) In 2010 the Department employed 26, 185 second level teachers. (DES, 2010) Therefore less than 1% of second level teachers took the opportunity to voice their own views. Eisner provides a possible reason for such reluctance on the part of teachers to engage in the consultation process, " many teachers gain their deepest satisfaction in their own classroom. The classroom is their professional home and they are not particularly interested in collaboration or in doing educational research". (Eisner, 1992). Eisner also points to teachers' reluctance to embrace change

pointing out that " it is much easier to change educational policy than to change the way in which schools function" (Eisner, 1992). However, the response overall was seen as positive and the reform was taken as broadly accepted. The NCCA devised four stages in order to achieve a successful implementation of the new Junior Cycle. The NCCA recognises that in placing emphasis on communication, consultation and partnership, stages may overlap. Stage one was completed early 2010 with the production of the ideas paper. Stage two involved the drafting of the Framework for Junior Cycle - Innovation and Identity report, one of the most significant reports on the change to date. Stages three which is currently being run involves the planning of how such reform will be implemented. Eisner states " Many veteran teachers are sceptical about new reforms and respond with passive resistance" (Eisner 1992, p. 5). The reality is that many experienced teachers will have to rely on new teachers in order for the implementation to be successful. Stage four is the implementation of the new cycle and this will commence in 2014. Continuous consultation throughout will allow for equal involvement and more practical opinions being shared. There is a feeling that every effort has been made by the NCCA and policy makers to consult the ideas of all the stakeholders. Goodson states that " new models of educational change need to reinstate the balance between the internal affairs, the external relations and the personal perspectives of change (Goodson 2001, p. 10). The NCCA needs to ensure a balance is met between the external/top down approach that has dominated curriculum making and the internal/bottom up approach that aims to include the individual teachers and school's initiatives. The emphasis needs to be taken off how the

curriculum is owned and controlled and placed on how it is implemented. Trant (1998) states that the " Major issue facing us is to find ways of bringing these partners together not to contest the control of the curriculum, but to discover the means to understand it better and realise its potential." The aim is promote a curriculum that has been developed through a representational partnership, through which membership is determined by the Minister. There are both benefits and difficulties with representational partnership. " If you consult people their criticism can't be as strong;" the current view is as that a sense of accountability will lead to a decrease in resistance from the various stakeholders (Gleeson 2010). The difficulty is that the Minister remains in power and has choice to who is represented, and who represents. The NCCA states that " professional development also enables teachers to engage with new ideas and thinking in teaching, learning and assessment" (NCCA 2011, p. 17). This immediately highlights the redirected focus. The NCCA have recognised the need for partnership and the need for individual teachers and schools to place their own stamp on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Speaking in October, 2012, Mr. Ruairi Quinn said " The new ' lower stakes' Junior Cert will deliver a programme which will allow students to develop a wide range of skills, including critical thinking skills and basic skills such as numeracy and literacy" (DES 2012). The focus will be placed on student learning and the quality of learning provided by the individual teachers. Whether or not the new Junior Cycle will be effective or not remains to be seen, however the feeling is that through consultation and partnership, the NCCA and the DES have given the reform every chance of succeeding. The challenge for teachers will be to better facilitate the process



of learning for the students rather than remain a giver of information. Teachers need to alter the focus from a teacher led environment to a student led one, thereby creating a positive and safe place for learning to take place. The NCCA are very clear about this " The course is no longer an entity to be covered, rather it becomes the focus and resource for learning," Students will be required to become aware of the process of learning. In this, they will build key personal capacities around ' Learning to Learn.'

### **The importance of consultation/partnerships in terms of the successful implementation of deep curriculum reform into post-primary schools**

For successful implementation of deep curriculum reform in Irish post primary schools a number of factors will need to be taken into account. (Malcolm Skilbeck (1984) cited in Trant 1998, Pg. 7) maintains that there are three models of curriculum. The centralist model (curriculum prescribed by the government), the school-based model (schools determine their own curriculum), and the partnership model, where the curriculum in broad outline is common to all schools and where it is defined in partnership by both central and local bodies and interpreted by the schools; this is where we need to be at. However, when looking at a deep reform, school culture is one of the most significant factors that will determine the success of a new reform. Three overarching questions appeared in many of the consultation submissions and discussions led by the NCCA: How can we ensure that reform leads to greater equity and inclusion? What is the best balance between locally and centrally devised curricula? How can reforms at junior cycle be connected to reforms in senior cycle and in primary education?

Fullan (1991) discusses the difference between deep change and surface change. Deep change goes further than what is seen on the outside; deep change looks deeper than the physical change in curriculum and focusses on change in content pedagogy, belief and values. Understanding the difference between subjective and objective change is important; the objective meaning of change incurs that the change is implemented by policy makers alone, and includes only what the policy maker's value, however many see these policy makers as detached contributors. The subjective meaning of change differs in that it looks at interpreting the change from a teacher's perspective, those involved closely with the implementation of the change, Hollins (1996) supports Fullan and relates to school culture as a factor; "schools are shaped by cultural practices and values and reflect the norms of the society for which they have been developed". A change in content, beliefs and values are heavily interlinked with the culture of the school; therefore reform is likely to impact different schools in diverse ways. There is a great tension in education organisations about reform and initiatives that set out with the best intentions but are not successfully integrated or applied (Fullan 1991). Consultation is vital; the reformers are always convinced what they are recommending is right as they have been through an active process of learning about the subject of the reform, but when this initiative is passed on to others, they are not afforded the same time and journey, and often they do not accept it. 'Restructuring occurs time and time again, whereas reculturing (how teachers come to question and change their beliefs and habits) is what is needed' (Fullan 1991, P. 34). Much of the tension and cynicism that has been witnessed between schools and 'the system' and

between teachers and 'the management' is to do with how decisions about professional practice are made. Those who direct act as if they value top-down decision making and hierarchical leadership, whereas the teachers and school communities, on the receiving end of these decisions, value the right to participate in making decisions which affect them directly. Very often teachers or schools go through the motions of responding to directives and pay lip service to changes because they feel powerless to question them. Schein (quoted in Stoll 2000) considers the basic essence of a school's culture to be, "The deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic 'taken-for-granted' fashion an organisation's view of itself and its environment". Dalin constructed a framework including three different school culture types; fragmented, project and organic that examines factors such as structure, relationships, beliefs and values and the overall environment (McCormack 2013). The view is that fragmented and project schools need to incorporate the approach taken by organic schools in order for the implementation to be successful. For fragmented schools to change their approach, a change in school culture will need to occur; this can only happen through the support from the NCCA and the DES. The current view of the curriculum makers needs to be altered. "Those who introduce educational reforms or restructure educational systems pay scant attention to the social organisation and contexts in which these changes are introduced" Stoll and Fink (1995, Quoted in Hinde 2004) School culture can be affected in many ways. Parents and students will have their own conceptions on what school is and how it works; however, political and

economic forces are likely to have an external influence on a schools culture; again a partnership between these parties can help outline the culture of the school that is understood by all. Reform that is not implemented through consultation and partnership can quite easily lead to the dilution of standards within schools. (Nowlan 2012) describes how " The aims and ambitions of the current Junior Certificate when it was introduced in 1989, were a far cry from the 13 subject content-coverage marathon students and teachers now experience" Curriculum makers must not rush to adopt new structures and strategies without considering the deeper implications. Too often people jump on the bandwagon and the change may occur without really thinking about the process of change and how do we make that happen, thus, further exaggerating the need for consultation and partnership. In conclusion the openness to cultural impacts seems to be in place; when dealing with the pathways to change The NCCA (2012) stated " from curriculum conformity to schools having freedom to be different" thereby giving schools the independence to create a curriculum based on their own culture.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has looked at the factors that play a part in reforming curriculum, while placing consultation and partnership at the centre of attention. In order for deep reform to occur in a smooth and successful way, it is clear that policy makers must take school culture into serious consideration. This paper has looked at the effectiveness of consultation in the passing on of values; again values may be embedded in the school culture however, through a

partnership these values can be altered to meet the needs of the students. Thaman (1993) states that culture is " the way of life of a discrete group of people, including its body of accumulated knowledge and understanding, skills, beliefs and values." Although some schools may have to adjust their culture in order to accept reform, the fact that a culture exists must not be ignored. the NCCA needs to apply the new framework in such a way that allows all schools to place their own stamp on the curriculum thereby witnessing a sense of individuality and accountability and overall, a successful reform. There has been significant strides taken in recent years to correct an educational system that has come under serious scrutiny and criticism. The aim to include all stakeholders is a major step for education in Ireland; a shared decision making on curriculum will help the education system meet the needs all of the stakeholders and more importantly the students.