

The Review of the Primary Curriculum

Consultative Conference on Education 2019

Athbhreithniú ar an gCuraclam Bunscoile

Comhdháil Chomairleach ar Oideachas 2019

Speech by John Boyle, INTO General Secretary





A Uachtarán, A Chathaoirleach Siobhan

A chairde

How often have you heard the phrase ‘that’s something that should be taught in schools’? It’s a testament to the great work that you do on a daily basis that you are seen as the solution to all of society’s problems – Childhood obesity, Internet safety, traffic congestion, the list goes on. But there are a limited number of hours in the day. If, every time a new concern caught the public’s interest, we tacked a little bit extra on to the current curriculum, we might as well rebuild teacher residences next to our schools since there would be no chance of anyone getting home in the evening.

Yet there’s no doubt that the world has changed dramatically and at a rapid pace in the last twenty years. When the 1999 curriculum was launched, there was no Whatsapp, no Instagram, no Snapchat. Phones were just for phone calls and tablets were something that you took if you had a headache. We know that our children live in a very different world than children 20 years ago did. We know better than anyone, because we know our own pupils. We meet them at the school gate or the classroom door every day and they tell us about the games that they play, the friends that they pal about with or the pals they have all over the world, the things that they worry about and the things that make them tick. We know better than anyone the world that they are living in and the guidance they need to navigate it.

And we know that any curriculum for their learning should be carefully planned out and considered, not a knee-jerk reaction to a dramatic newspaper headline.

We saw that knee-jerk in action with the literacy and numeracy strategy – A half-baked ministerial decree coming hot on the heels of PISA results and some newspaper reports. And of course, like any rush job, it was destined to fail. A curriculum cannot be written on a whim and proper training cannot be passed on from person to person like a game of Chinese whispers.

You told us that you weren’t happy with the way that the language curriculum was rolled out, with good reason. It wasn’t acceptable to drip feed bits of a curriculum and expect principals and teachers to deliver in-service training themselves. And we made sure that the Department heard that as is evident from the recent revisions to that curriculum and from the suite of supports that have now been provided for its roll out. We insisted that they slow things down with the maths curriculum and learn from their mistakes. As a result, they have pushed the implementation of the maths curriculum out a few more years, until the language curriculum is embedded and the maths curriculum is ready, fully ready, to go. The Department are consulting on the full maths curriculum and listening to the people that know best – the teachers that will implement it and they will soon begin consultations on the whole curriculum – please make sure that every teacher you know engages with that consultation process directly with NCCA and through INTO.

I want to thank you for your feedback. We rely on you to share your opinions with us so that we can represent your views as loudly and as clearly as we possibly can. And I hope that, over the course of this conference, and after it, you will

continue to steer us so that we, as a union, can be certain that we are representing the views and interests of our members. You work at the coal face, you teach the curriculum every day. Your feedback is crucial for us.

One thing is certain, we will insist that any new curriculum coming down the tracks must be properly resourced and come with proper training for each and every teacher.

Society puts its hopes and ambitions on the shoulders of teachers because it knows the critical and fundamental role that teachers play. It is important that we remember that. The quality of teaching in Ireland North and South is consistently one of the highest in the world. We should and do trust our teachers. We allow, and must preserve, space for the creativity and personal teaching style of the individual teacher, in stark contrast to some other countries where teaching materials come with a rigid script that anyone who can read could deliver. We as teachers should, and do, have professional confidence around the work we do, and we trust in ourselves.

There will always be new trends, new fashionable ideas and bandwagons that somebody thinks we should be jumping on, while we, as educators are used to adapting to meet new challenges, change must be managed and INTO will be to the forefront in managing that change through our work at the primary education forum. We must take care not to be overly swayed by external forces, whether those forces come in the form of the Inspectorate or our view of what the school down the road is doing.

We know what a successful day in our classroom looks like. It might be the excitement in a child’s face when they get that ‘Aha’ moment with something they previously struggled with. It might be kindness that your pupils show to a new child in the class, because they know, from your example, that ‘that’s how we treat people in our class’. For some, the very fact that a certain child is at school on a particular day, might make that day a success.

You know your own yardstick. While you might choose to take on things that are right for your school or your class, the value of the work you do isn’t measured in awards, WSE reports or flags.

I know that above everything else Irish teachers genuinely care about the wellbeing of their pupils. When it comes to understanding the pupils in your care, you know best and we must continue to have confidence in that.

We have an objective shared with the Department, for the best primary education system in Europe by 2026 and looking after vulnerable children in our DEIS schools and children with special educational needs are key to the success of our mission in the next six years.

Rather than sniping on us and our schools in the press, our Minister and Department officials would be much better served if they set out in writing what plans the Department is going to put in place for the necessary resources, administration and training for schools opening special classes.

I hope that, over the course of the next day, you will share that professional insight with your colleagues and with us to make the 2019 education conference another great success.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.