CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Visions of the future - education
Authors	Hyland, Áine
Publication date	1987;1987
Original Citation	Hyland, Á. (1987) 'Visions of the future - education', Journal of the Annual Conference of the Teachers' Union of Ireland, Bundoran, 1987.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Rights	© 1987, Áine Hyland.
Download date	2026-11-08 10:23:37
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/18061



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Áine Hyland

"Visions of the Future – Education"

published in

Journal of the Annual Conference of the Teachers' Union of Ireland
(Bundoran, 1987).

Abstract:

This article, written in 1987, attempts to provide a vision for the future of education. While recognising that technological advances will contribute to educational change and development, the article rejects suggestions that the classrooms of the future will be "equipped with robots programmed to act as teachers". It points out that educational change has always been evolutionary rather than revolutionary and emphasises the central role of teachers in the system. It states that "in the final analysis, it is the teachers and only the teachers who can implement change within the classroom".

Visions of the Future - Education

The title of this paper might well produce expectations in the reader of a futuristic scenario of education - of schools with high-tech classrooms equipped with robots programmed to act as teachers, blackboards replaced by press-button computers and a considerably depleted human teaching force. Or one might envisage a scenario where education no longer took place in institutions called schools and where distance learning was the norm - where all homes were linked into an educational network, with videos, televisions and computers providing a barrage of information on a wide range of topics for all ages and levels of children and adults.

But such scenarios represent an oversimplistic interpretation of education. Education includes considerably more than information and skills - and "high-tech" methods are limited in the extent to which they can offer much more than information and skills. Moreover, there is a considerable weight of evidence to show that change in education is slow. In the 1960's, an American researcher analysed more than 150 studies of educational innovation.[1] He found that on average, it took 50 years for a new idea or a new trend or a new discovery, after its acceptance in society, to be translated into a proposal for specific change in education. It took 15 more years for the innovation to gain acceptance in 3% of the nation's schools, and another 5 years to become fashionable, making a total time-lag of 70 years! There is also evidence in the history of our own education system, both in this century and previous centuries, to indicate that educational change tends to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary. One finding that is universal both in time and place is that teachers play a crucial role in educational innovation - for change to be successful, teachers must be convinced of the need for change and they must be committed to the proposed change. Educational innovation is very much in the hands of teachers:- educational philosophers and theorists can write about change, educational administrators can facilitate a climate conducive to change, educational "financiers" can provide the resources which are a prerequisite for change - but in the final analysis, it is the teachers and only the teachers who can implement change within the classroom.

In any analysis of education, either past, present or future, a convenient starting-point may well be the following question: "To whom and under what conditions is the opportunity for learning (with teachers) made available? " The answer to this question might include an analysis of what is taught, how teaching is organised, where teaching takes place and who are the decision-makers and organisers of education. Such an analysis should also include a look at the demographic and the economic situation. In this "crystal-gazing" exercise, which will be confined to a period of about twenty years, these are the kind of issues that will be briefly addressed.

Demographic situation

Unless there is a reversal in the present downward trend in fertility and birth rates, the numbers of pupils in primary schools will have fallen significantly by the year 2,000. At present, there are about 575,000 pupils at primary level. On present trends, this figure could fall to about 450,000 by the turn of the century.

The decline in the number of births will have affected the post-primary sector also by the year 2,000. However, the effects of the government decision of May 1985 on "Ages for Learning" - in particular the decision to allow schools to provide a three year senior cycle - may well offset the population reduction.[2] On this basis, it may be reasonable to assume that the present post-primary population of 350,000 will remain relatively unchanged. However, it is likely that a higher proportion of these pupils will be in senior cycle than at present.

The most difficult area to project is the third-level sector. Issues such as employment rates, emigration, government and E.E.C. policies on the financing of education and training are some of the imponderables which will have a considerable effect on the level of participation in third level education in future decades. On the basis of existing trends, one might very roughly estimate an increase of about 50% in the number of students in third-level colleges, i.e. from 54,000 at present to about 80,000 at the end of the century.

It is likely that within the next two or three decades, employment patterns will change. This will result in an increase in the numbers of people in "second chance" education, and in courses which would provide further professional education and career development opportunities. More people may also find that they have more enforced leisure-time and in this event, educational courses may well become an increasingly popular activity for a growing proportion of the population.

One way or the other, formal education is likely to remain a major industry in Ireland for many years to come.

What will be taught and how will the teaching be organised?

Within education, there is a broader consensus than may be generally realised in the answer to this question. By and large, teachers, parents, and school managements agree with the proposition that education during the years of compulsory schooling should be concerned with the full development of the child. Different groups may express this in different

ways, but the general message emerging is that schools should provide "for the full and harmonious development of the child".[3] It is likely that during the coming decades, children at junior cycle post-primary level as well as children in primary schools will be involved in the following areas of experience: Arts education; Guidance and Counselling; Language and Literature - both vernacular and non-vernacular; Mathematical studies; Physical Education; Religious Education; Science and Technology; Social, political and environmental studies. There may be more emphasis on concept-development and on skills-training within many subjects, although it is likely that the knowledge component will continue to be a significant part of school programmes.[4]

At senior cycle, the picture is more complex. Within the past two or three years, the pattern of educational provision within senior cycle has changed. It is estimated that at present, over 25,000 pupils in senior cycle are participating in Vocational Preparation and Training courses, Many of the developments in this area have taken place in vocational schools but an increasing number of secondary schools - which traditionally provided an academic programme - are recognising the value of these programmes. If there is no change in government or E.E.C. policy in regard to these courses, it is likely that a growing proportion of pupils will participate in such courses in the coming decades. Another recent development at senior cycle has been the Transition Year. A very small number of schools (less than 20) were involved in piloting Transition Year programmes during the past ten years of so. In the current school year, 100 schools have been allowed by the Department of Education to offer a Transition Year and it is expected that next year, this number will double. In the coming decades, it is likely that there will be further development of this pattern. It is, however, to be hoped that the present policy, whereby students embarking on Vocational Preparation courses are specifically precluded from following a Transition Year course, will be discontinued. This policy seems to run counter to one of the main purposes of the Transition Year programme - that pupils should use this year to clarify their aspirations for the future. What if during the Transition Year, a pupil finds that his/her aspiration for the future would be best served by following a Vocational Preparation course rather than a more academic Leaving Certificate course? Under present regulations, such a pupil would appear to have no option but to follow the Leaving Certificate Programme. This policy seems irrational and discriminatory and will hopefully be reviewed and changed in the near future.

It is difficult to predict the pattern on the so-called "academic" side of senior cycle. Much will depend on whether additional places will be provided at third level and if so, in what areas or faculties these places are provided. As the population "bulge" passes throught the second-level sector during the next ten years or so, it is likely that there will be a

growth in the demand for third-level places, particularly in the more popular "professional" faculties, with considerable pressure on students to obtain higher and higher Leaving Certificate points to gain entry to such faculties. On the other hand, the recent decision by the E.E.C. whereby member countries are required to impose the same fees conditions on all students within the E.E.C. may well mean that more Irish students will seek third level places in countries where university fees are considerably lower than our own - countries like the U.K. and France, for example.

At all levels of education, we can expect that schools will pay increasing attention to programmes which encourage "creativity, enterprise and innovation rather than conformity and passive learning". The traditional concept of "failure" will hopefully change. The schools of the future are already being exhorted to encourage children "to think in terms of identifying problems and considering solutions rather than always seeking absolute right or wrong answers to problems" and to bear in mind that "an imaginative failure can be more educationally worthwhile than a correct, but poorly understood response".[5] The implications of adopting this type of a philosophy are profound in terms of what will be taught in our schools and how it will be taught.

As regards the "how", there can be little doubt but that teachers will continue to be the central mediators of learning. We are likely to see an increase in technological equipment within the classroom but such equipment will enhance the teaching rather than replace the teacher. Computers will be increasingly used in a wide range of subject areas - not only in areas such as mathematics, and business studies, but also in areas such as music, art and creative writing - areas which are not usually associated with computer technology. The gap between school and community will gradually be bridged; pupils and teachers will see the wider environment - whether social, economic or business/industrial - as a resource rather than as a threat. Education will be a more active and outward looking activity, rather than the passive, bookish and somewhat introspective activity to which many of us have been accustomed.

Where will the teaching take place and who will be the decision-makers and organisers of education?

A study of the history of Irish education shows that control and ownership of schools has been a highly contentious issue in this country on many occasions during the past 150 years. The efforts by the then Minister for Education, Ms. Gemma Hussey, in 1985, to introduce a degree of "rationalisation" into the educational system,[6] particularly at second level, were not welcomed by vested interest groups in education. The objections voiced by these groups echoed some of the objections raised by their

predecessors in the early 19th century when not unsimiliar proposals were put forward by the then government. It is difficult to imagine that there will be any significant change in the control and ownership of schools, either at primary or at post-primary level in the foreseeable future.

There are, nevertheless, some issues which will have to be addressed in this area by future governments. At primary level, a growing number of parents in recent years have expressed their wish to have their children educated outside the denominational framework which has characterised the national school system for the past hundred years. Within the past decade, parents in three areas of Dublin and Wicklow have successfully overcome the formidable financial and other constraints which they confronted in their efforts to set up multi-denominational schools within the national school system. Parents in at least five other parts of the country are actively pursuing the same goal but the task is an extremely difficult one. The fee for membership of the "club" of owners of national schools (in the form of site costs and local contribution towards capital costs) is well in excess of £100,000 in respect of an 8 classroom school. There are almost 2,000 children in the country who belong to churches other than the four main Christian churches; a further 8,000 or so were returned in the last census as having no religion and 14,000 chose not to respond to the question on religion.[7] The findings of various surveys have shown that many members of the main churches, including interchurch families, would prefer to send their children to multi-denominational schools if they were available.[8] It seems likely that during the coming decades, many parents will question whether their constitutional rights to education are being met by a government which allocates virtually all of the primary school vote to denominational schools.

At post-primary level, the suggestions put forward in "Partners in Education" may well be raised again in the coming decades, although it is unlikely that any major changes in ownership or control will take place. Some smaller single-sex secondary schools will probably be amalgamated or replaced by co-educational schools and it is likely that many secondary schools which at present have as principal a member of a religious order, will have lay principals. There may be a greater degree of co-ordination and co-operation in relation to the provision of courses, particularly at senior cycle level, in smaller centres of population, but this is unlikely to affect the fundamental issue of ownership. Within the secondary sector, there is likely to be a consolidation of parent representation on management boards, but again this will not affect the question of ultimate control.

There is not likely to be any great change in the number of teachers employed at either primary or post-primary level. At primary level, if the total number of teachers remains more or less unchanged, the average

pupil-teacher ratio will begin to fall, gradually bringing Ireland closer to European levels in this regard. But on this basis, even with the projected decline of pupil numbers by over 100,000 by the turn of the century, Ireland's average pupil-teacher ratio at primary school level will not have reached average E.E.C. levels by the year 2,000.

The assumption that the total number of teachers at post-primary level will remain relatively unchanged will bring its own problems. Pupil numbers at post-primary level almost trebled in the past twenty years and most of our second-level teachers were recruited during that period. The numbers of teachers retiring on age grounds during the coming twenty years will be relatively low, and the level of recruitment of new teachers will be consequently low. With little new blood entering the teaching profession, further professional training of existing teachers in the form of in-service courses will take on an added urgency. The demand for a coherent and consistent in-service policy may well be one of the most pressing issues of the next two decades. In-service education needs to be closely linked with curriculum review and reform and the question of how this link will be forged has yet to be addressed.

It is likely that before making major changes in education in the years to come, future Ministers for Education will continue the trend towards greater and more open consultation with educational interest groups and with the public at large. It is hoped that the pattern of consultation set by the interim Curriculum and Examinations Board during the past three years will be continued by the statutory Board. It is important that teachers take full advantage of the consultative process to make their views known and it is equally important that decisions taken by the Board and by other advisory and decision-making groups in education take full cognisance of the views of teachers. The crucial role of teachers in curriculum development and reform will have to be fully recognised and supported at all levels. As regards parents, it is likely that the National Parents' Council, which was set up last year, will play an increasingly supportive role in educational development in the decades ahead.

Expenditure on education.

One would require to be a clairvoyant to predict the economic situation in the year 2,000 or to make any estimates of expenditure, either by the state or otherwise, on education at that time. However, a few basic facts on recent expenditure by the state on different levels of education will provide some food for thought in regard to the relative allocation of state money on the different levels of education and by implication on the different social sectors of our population. The state spends a total of about £1,000,000,000 each year on education.[9] This represents roughly the following per capita expenditure at the different levels (primary, post-primary and third level):

£600 per pupil at primary level; £1,300 per pupil at post-primary level; £4,000 per student at third-level.[10]

How much state money is spent on any one person's education during one's lifetime? Obviously that depends on the number of years one spends in the education system. The state spends a total of £4,800 (£600 x 8 years) on a young person who drops out of school at the end of primary education. It spends roughly £8,700 [(£600 x 8) + (£1,300 x 3)] on someone who completes his/her schooling at the end of junior cycle and £12,600 on a person who remains in school until the end of a three year senior cycle. Three years at a third level institution costs the state approximately £12,000 in addition to this so that anyone fortunate enough to spend three years at such an institution will have cost the state a total of almost £25,000 for their schooling.

In 1983, 2% of the population received only primary education; 23% received primary and junior cycle education; 45% received primary and full post-primary education and about 30% received primary, post-primary and third level education.[11] On average then, the state spent about **£15,000** on a young person's full-time schooling.

Consider then the inequality of treatment received by a young person who drops out of school at the end of primary education - almost certainly someone from a lower socio-economic group. S/he could be deemed to be "owed" at least £10,000 by the State for his/her education. At the other end of the scale, a young person who has had the benefit of a three year degree course - probably someone from a relatively advantaged background - has been "overpaid" by the State to the tune of almost £10,000.

Is there any prospect that by the year 2,000, society might accept the concept of equality of educational expenditure for all? Would such a proposal have much support within the electorate? Probably not. And yet can we continue to live complacently with the knowledge that state expenditure on education is so inequitably allocated? Like so many uncomfortable questions, this is one which will probably be left to another time and possibly to another generation to grapple with.

References:

1. Reference in a paper read by Goble, Norman M. entitled *Innovation - What and Why?* at the European Seminar of the World Confederation of Organisations of the Teaching Profession on *The Role of Teachers and Their Organisations in Educational Innovation,* Athens, May, 1984.

2. *Ages for Learning - Decisions of Government, May 1984*. (Dublin, Stationery Office, 1984).

3. Department of Education, *Primary School Curriculum - Teachers Handbook.* (Dublin, 1971).

4. Curriculum and Examinations Board, *In Our Schools, a framework for curriculum and assessment.* (Dublin, 1986).

5. Ibid.

6. *Partners in Education - a green paper.* (Dublin, Stationery Office, 1985).

7. *Census of Population of Ireland 1981, Vol.5, Religion* (Dublin: Central Statistics Office, 1985).

8. M. MacGreil, *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ireland* (Dublin: College of Industrial Relations, 1977). See also Dalkey School Project, *Survey of Attitudes and Preferences towards multi-denominational, co-educational, democratically managed schools* (June, 1986).

9. *Government Estimates for 1986* (Dublin, Stationery Office 1985).

10. Derived from financial statistics in Dept. of Education, *Statistical Report, 1983/4* (Dublin, Stationery Office, 1985).

11. Dept. of Education, *Statistical Report, 1983/4* (Dublin, Stationery Office, 1985).