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**Time, Vocabulary,
and
Art's Thoughtful Uses of Feeling?**

A reflection on forty years of
arts and education in Ireland

Ciarán Benson

with
Martin Drury
Michael D. Higgins, President of Ireland
Aine Hyland
Seóna Ní Bhriain
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Mary Shine Thompson, editor

**Encountering the Arts Ireland
Arts Council
2019**

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The Place of the Arts in Irish Education

Áine Hyland

The publication of the *Benson Report* in 1979 followed a decade of change and upheaval in Irish Education. A report on *Investment in Education* had been commissioned by the Irish government following Ireland's participation in the Washington Policy Conference on Economic Growth in 1961 and the report was published in January 1966. The *Investment in Education*⁷⁵ report was supported financially by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), then a relatively new international organisation of which Ireland was a member. The publication of the report triggered a tsunami of change in Irish education – not least of which was the announcement by Minister for Education Donogh O'Malley that free second-level education for all, with free transport where required, would be introduced in September 1967. John Coolahan subsequently described the report as one of the foundation documents of modern Irish education.⁷⁶

The first of the comprehensive and community schools were built in the following decade and capital grants were made available for building, extending and improving voluntary secondary schools. Vocational school students were now allowed to sit the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate and the second-level school curriculum was revised. The first of the Regional Technical Colleges had been built and means-tested grants were available for university attendance. A new and exciting curriculum had been introduced for primary schools in 1971 and for the first time since the foundations of the State, the arts were highlighted as central to children's learning. It was an exciting decade in Irish education and the publication of the Benson Report was timely.

From a personal point of view, I was very engaged with all the changes that were taking place in education. When I sat the Leaving Certificate in 1959, I had intended to become a primary school teacher and I spent a few months in Carysfort Training College for primary teachers between September and December 1959. However, my experience there was disappointing and when I was offered a post as an Executive Officer in December 1959, I left Carysfort and became a civil servant in the Department of Education in Marlborough Street. In 1962, I was seconded to work with the *Investment in Education* team, where I met my future husband Bill Hyland, who was the statistician on the research team. I was immersed in all kinds of facts and figures about Irish education during the two years I spent with the *Investment in Education* team and I developed a fascination with the education system. While the

⁷⁵ Ireland. Department of Education. (1965). *Investment in Education: Report of the Survey Team Appointed by the Minister for Education in October 1962*, Dublin, Stationery Office

⁷⁶ J. Coolahan. (1980). *Irish Education: History and Structure*, Dublin, Institute of Public Administration, 165.

Investment in Education report did not go into detail about school curriculum it nevertheless noted the neglect of the Arts in Irish education stating: ‘The curriculum in a great many schools is limited and is of a classical grammar school type. Small schools in particular appear to have difficulty in providing a varied course.’⁷⁷

During my time in the Department I had acted as a rapporteur for some of the meetings of the Council of Design, one of whose members was Louis le Brocquy. In its report published in 1965 the Council of Design⁷⁸ stated that ‘Indifference to the importance of good design in every aspect of the school ... has been part of an educational tradition in which art as a whole has been gravely undervalued.’ An earlier report in 1961, *Report by the Scandinavian Group on Design in Ireland*,⁷⁹ was also critical of the extent to which the arts were undervalued in Irish education. That report was scathing in its comment that ‘the Irish schoolchild is visually and artistically among the most under-educated in Europe’.

However, not all aspects of the arts were neglected in Irish schools. In the 1950s. I had been fortunate to attend a girls’ secondary school where music was central to the life of the school. Although it was a small boarding school with fewer than one hundred students, we had an excellent choir which won awards almost every year for both secular and church music. Every girl in the school was taught to play a musical instrument and virtually everyone was in the school orchestra at some stage of their schooling. We also staged an operetta or a musical every year in which all students were involved. However, the visual arts did not play a significant part in my education and while I studied drawing at secondary school, the subject was taught by the mathematics teacher whose focus was largely on geometric patterns and shapes – the syllabus was more closely allied to today’s technical drawing than to art. When I got married in the mid-1960s, I had to resign from my post in the Department of Education, as the marriage ban, which forbade married women from working in the civil service, was still in operation. (The marriage ban was not lifted until 1973, following Ireland’s accession to the European Economic Community – now the European Union). During the subsequent years I gave birth to three daughters, was awarded a Licentiate of the Royal College of Music which qualified me as a piano teacher, and completed a BA in Irish and French in University College Dublin (UCD), and the Higher Diploma in Education and a Master’s degree in Education in Trinity College. For most of the 1970s, I was a part-time secondary teacher with music as one of my teaching subjects. Therefore, I had a special interest in the place of arts in Irish education and in the Benson Report when it was published in 1979.

At primary school level, the new curriculum in 1971 had introduced a very welcome focus on the Arts. As the Benson Report noted: ‘The inclusion of imaginative programmes in music, art and craft, drama and mime activities, physical education and dance, as integral parts of the curriculum, heralded a new era in Irish national

⁷⁷ *Investment in Education: Report*, p. 280, par. 10.26).

⁷⁸ Ireland. Council of Design (1965) *Report of the Council of Design*, Dublin, Stationery Office.

⁷⁹ K. Franck, E. Herlow, A. Huldt, G. Biilmann Petersen, E.C. Sorensen. (1961). *Design in Ireland: Report of the Scandinavian Design Group in Ireland, April 1961*, Dublin, Córas Tráchtála / The Irish Export Board, 1961-04, 49.

education.’⁸⁰ The primary school attended by my young daughters throughout the 1970s had been a pilot school for the Arts in the new curriculum and the Arts played an important role in their schooling. When the Benson Report was published in 1979, I was a part-time lecturer in Carysfort College of Education, now totally transformed from the Carysfort Training College I had briefly attended in 1959 – and the Arts were a central lynchpin in the education of future student-teachers. I remember some wonderful artistic renderings of children’s literature in the College Library annexe – a stunning visual representation of Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, made by students, stands out particularly in my mind. Music was also an important subject in the training of teachers – both academic music and what was referred to as professional music, that is, music as taught in the primary school. The college itself had acquired some impressive art works. We had art works by le Brocqy, Patrick Scott, etc on the corridor walls. And of course Seamus Heaney, afterwards awarded a Nobel prize for literature, was Head of English in Carysfort College at that time. It was an exciting and arts-rich environment for the training of primary teachers.

In addition to the place of the arts within formal schooling, there were many opportunities in the 1970s to experience the arts outside school, although in less advantaged communities, these opportunities were scarce. The Benson report referred to ‘the often heroic and inspirational work of many individuals within the system’. It also pointed out that ‘by means of various extra-curricular activities some pupils were encouraged to participate in the arts’.⁸¹ However, Benson pointed out that some of the stereotypes associated with the Arts were unhelpful: ‘the arts are seen as more suitable for girls than for boys and for the less intelligent rather than for the more intelligent pupils.’ ‘They are often judged to be more interesting than useful ... it is no accident that Friday afternoon is such a popular time for art and craft in primary school.’⁸²

While the 1980s witnessed a period of economic recession with cutbacks in many areas of the arts and education, the setting up of the Curriculum and Examinations Board by Fine Gael Minister Gemma Hussey in 1984 held out some promise for a renewed emphasis on arts education within the formal school system. A consultative document, *Issues and Structures in Education*,⁸³ set out a proposed framework for a Junior Cycle second-level curriculum which consisted of a core which would be obligatory for all students, and a series of options described as Additional Contributions. The framework included Creative and Aesthetic Studies, and the obligatory subjects would be Art, Design and Craft, Music, and Drama. Literature in both English and Irish would be obligatory and creative dance and mime would be optional subjects. However, when the coalition government fell in 1987, the Curriculum and Examinations Board was disbanded and its recommendations were ignored by the subsequent National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (although the current revised junior cycle curriculum has borrowed somewhat from the proposed framework of 1984).

⁸⁰ Benson Report, 1979, 1.13.

⁸¹ Benson Report, 1979, 1.18.

⁸² Benson Report, 1979, 1.21.

⁸³ Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB). (1984). *Issues and structures in education*. Dublin: CEB.

Carysfort College was one of the victims of the economic recession of the 1980s and when it closed in 1988, I went to UCD as a lecturer in the Education Department. Having been involved in the preparation of primary teachers in Carysfort, where the arts were highlighted and formed part of every student's repertoire, I was struck by the aridity of the training programme for secondary teachers. There was little or no reference to the arts – apart from the literature element of the language subjects. The separateness of the training of teachers of the visual arts (which happened in the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) which had no relationship at that time with the Education Departments in either UCD or Trinity College) was noticeable. The physical surroundings of many of the teaching spaces in Belfield at that time were less than aesthetically pleasing and I don't think I ever saw a painting or even a print on a wall there during the seven years I spent as a member of the staff of the Education Department.

My appointment as Professor of Education and Head of the Education Department in University College Cork in 1993 happened to coincide with the appointment of Michael D. Higgins as Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht. His appointment was enthusiastically welcomed by the arts community nationwide but especially in his native city of Galway. Media coverage of his welcome in Galway was enthusiastic: 'As a poet-politician returned to his native city last night, the country's first ever Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht found himself engulfed in celebrations and the adulation of almost all of Galway's arts community.' Speaking to RTÉ reporter Jim Fahy, Higgins outlined the aim of his portfolio: 'My major function is to put culture, the arts, and the Irish language at the centre of Irish life.' Referring to his appointment, Adrian Munnelly from the Arts Council emphasised the need for the arts to be funded properly and the need to 'secure funds from Europe in order to be able to complete the arts infrastructure to create arts centres and artists' studios and theatres around the country'. Professor Alan Titley stressed the urgency of getting the much-discussed Irish language television service on air and film-maker Louis Marcus also wanted to see 'the re-establishment of the film agency for Ireland, which was axed in 1987'.⁸⁴ In retrospect we can see that the new Minister did indeed deliver on many of these visions – although of course there remains still a lot to be done.

The relatively high profile given to the Arts by the appointment of Michael D. as Minister provided an impetus for me in my role as Head of the Education Department to engage more actively with the arts in education. I invited the students of the Crawford Institute in Cork who were enrolled on the Diploma course for teachers of Art and Design to attend some of the education lectures in University College Cork (UCC). I also invited a number of schools in less advantaged areas to collaborate with the Education Department in enriching their school programme by enhancing their arts education curriculum. We were fortunate to source funding for this initiative, initially from The Atlantic Philanthropies and later from a local philanthropist, Tomar Trust. This enabled us to provide financial support to the schools, initially through a

⁸⁴ Author. 'Galway celebrates Michael D. 1993', <https://www.rte.ie/archives/2018/0108/931702-first-minister-for-the-arts/>.

research project on Multiple Intelligences, Teaching and Assessment,⁸⁵ and later by a project called Bridging the Gap⁸⁶.

During my period as Head of the Education Department in UCC, my educational philosophy was strongly influenced by the research and writings of Howard Gardner in the Harvard Graduate School of Education. His seminal book, *Frames of Mind*, first published in the 1980s, posited the theory of Multiple Intelligences and I became an advocate of this theory and its significance for teaching and learning. Some colleagues and myself, and in later years the principals of some schools in disadvantaged areas of Cork city, attended summer schools annually between 1996 and 2004 run by Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Project Zero (PZ) had been set up in the late 1960s by Nelson Goodman who was concerned that virtually nothing (ZERO) was known about how effective learning occurred. Howard Gardner had been involved in PZ from the beginning and led many research projects on teaching and learning. Initially the focus of PZ was on learning in and through the arts as well as on the importance of the arts in their own right, and those of us who attended the summer schools learned many strategies about enhancing learning through and with the arts.

In a recent publication, Ellen Winner (wife of Howard Gardner) who has undertaken significant research of the role of the arts in education, wrote:

The arts have been in existence since the earliest humans, are parts of all cultures, and are a major domain of human experience, just like science, technology, mathematics and humanities. In that respect, they are important in their own rights for education. Students who gain mastery in an art form may discover their life's work or their life's passion. But for all children, the arts allow a different way of understanding than the sciences and other academic subjects. Because they are an arena without right and wrong answers, they free students to explore and experiment. They are also a place to introspect and find personal meaning.

She further stated:

We do not believe that the existence of arts education should be justified in terms of skills in other, traditional academic subjects: if one seeks first and foremost to develop skills in geometry, studying geometry – rather than music and dance – is always likely to be more effective. Indeed, as mentioned above, one can raise the question of why training in the arts *should* improve skills in reading or mathematics or science. What is the underlying mechanism? Even if one could show that arts training has some effect on reading, writing and arithmetic (the so-called 3 Rs) it should be obvious that improvement in these

⁸⁵ Hyland, A. (2000). *The Multiple Intelligences Curriculum Project Final Report*, Cork, Multiple Intelligences Curriculum and Assessment Project, Education Department, UCC.

⁸⁶ T. Connolly, C. Deane and Á. Hyland. (2004) *Bridging the Gap Evaluation Report*, Education Department, University College Cork.

basic subjects is more likely to come about if they are the direct focus of the curriculum.⁸⁷

Around the same time, back in Ireland, the Department of Education had funded a national programme for schools in disadvantaged urban areas called Breaking the Cycle. Maura Grant⁸⁸ was co-ordinator of this project and she believed and indeed demonstrated that involvement in the arts could be a powerful factor for success in and out of school. The project culminated in a visit to each individual school by the President of Ireland at the time, Mary McAleese and by a major showcasing event in Dublin's National Concert Hall in the millennium year, 2000. A report on the project noted that:

When young people engage in the arts process, they are likely to experience joy, appreciation, engagement and flow. When learning through the arts, children learn new ways of self-expression and communication. Through the arts, children master complex symbol systems and develop thinking skills which are positive experiences that enrich their lives.... the arts can play a vital role in learning how to learn, as essential ability for fostering achievement and growth through their lives.

In University College Cork, the Multiple Intelligences Curriculum and Assessment project (1996 to 2000) and the Bridging the Gap project which got under way in 2001 highlighted the arts in education. While Bridging the Gap did not initially focus solely the arts, it became clear that exposure to and an opportunity to engage in the arts would be a very significant way of bridging the gap between pupils from less advantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers. The annual report of the project in 2004 noted that the arts and other curriculum enrichment activities had been successfully promoted as a way of improving the pupils' learning experiences. A large number of school-based projects which were supported financially by Bridging the Gap provided access to music, drama and visual arts activities for children who would not otherwise have these opportunities. The schools reported that involvement in these activities had a positive impact on the pupils' learning dispositions and that this in turn produced gains in achievement.

Notwithstanding claims made by some teachers that the arts had contributed to an overall improvement in pupil attainment, the report made it clear that there was no empirical evidence that any of the interventions targeted at addressing educational disadvantage, either in Cork or anywhere else, had produced measurable gains in the achievement of pupils on standardised tests e.g. of literacy and numeracy. We shared the view articulated by Ellen Winner that 'the primary justification of arts education should remain the intrinsic importance of the arts and the related skills that they develop'.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Winner, E., T.R. Goldstein, V.-L. Stéphan, *Educational Research and Innovation Art for Art's Sake? The Impact of Arts*, OECD Publishing, 249-265, 265 and 262.

⁸⁸ Grant, M. (2000). *Breaking the Cycle of Education Disadvantage: A Celebration of Learning Through the Arts*. Dublin: Department of Education and Science.

⁸⁹ Winner, E. and S. Vincent-Lancrin. (2013). 'The Impact of Arts Education', in eds E. Liebau, E. Wagner, M. Wyman, *International Yearbook for Research in Arts Education* 1/2013, 71-78, 78.

The schools involved in Bridging the Gap collected data to show how involvement in the arts had an impact on a range of factors that affected learning. One school showed significant improvement in reading test results following an arts programme. Several schools described the impact of the arts on learning in other curricular areas, and on the development of generic transferable learning skills. Many of the projects reported visible improvements in pupils' self-esteem, which was seen as contributing to more positive learning dispositions. Some schools described improvements in attendance and in the involvement and support of parents - an important factor in the achievement of children. In several of the projects it was clear that a major outcome of engagement in the arts was the raising of expectations of parents and teachers. (There is an extensive literature documenting the relationship between teacher expectations and learner outcomes). A number of the schools reported that teachers developed their own skills through working alongside arts specialists as part of a school-based project. This enhanced their professional practice and broadened the range of teaching and learning resources available in the school. It inspired teachers to adopt new routes to learning in their classrooms.

One school which had not previously emphasised music in the curriculum reported that 'each child in the school now plays a musical instrument and can read music. Parents are also involved. They met with the music teacher to learn basic music theory and to discover how to make the practice of music enjoyable for their children.' One of the parents told us that:

Giving my child music lessons was something that financially I would never be able to do. So when the programme started in our school, I must say both my daughter and I were excited. With great patience and dedication from her music teacher, she now has a great love for music.

Another school principal reported that the most important learning point was an ability to ply a musical instrument in a large group setting and the discipline involved. By extension it became a community project with parental participation an important aspect.

In one boys' primary school, Bridging the Gap provided funding to buy musical instruments for a marching band. The school principal reported:

As well as pride in their sons, the project undoubtedly reached out to parents who otherwise had little to do with the school. Barriers came down, ghosts from their own past seem to have been banished, as their feelings towards the school and towards the school's efforts became more warm and positive. ... what no evaluation can measure is that look of fierce pride manifest in a parent's face as they look into the school yard and see their son, lost in concentration, as he and one or two others play the pieces which they have practised for so long.

Bridging the Gap also subsidised some visual arts projects. One such project - a print-making project in collaboration with Fota Wildlife Park - was called 'Tyger, Tyger Burning Bright'. Pupils from a number of schools visited Fota Park to see the tigers there and subsequently made prints of the tigers which they framed and sold for a profit. This was an example of an inter-disciplinary project which combined reading,

geography, environmental studies, and art and the children learned some new and valuable transversal skills in the process. And of course, the schools had access to the wonderful resources of the then newly-opened Glucksman Gallery in University College Cork where pupils and their teachers were introduced to the rich collection of art owned by the university. The project also collaborated with Cork Opera House to provide subsidised access for children and young people from less advantaged backgrounds who would never otherwise visit the Opera House to attend performances there. Throughout the five-year life of Bridging the Gap, the university hosted a major showcase of the artistic work of the primary and secondary school pupils every year – their artwork, poetry, choirs, orchestras, rap groups – a rich demonstration of what had been achieved.

Like so many initiatives in the arts which depend on the leadership of committed individuals and on once-off project grants, Bridging the Gap ended when I retired from University College Cork in 2006. However, its legacy still remains in a number of schools which have continued with their choirs and orchestras and with a greater than usual emphasis on the arts.

At a national level, the launch of the *Arts in Education Charter*, jointly published in 2012 by the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht gave a new and welcome impetus to the arts in education and seems to augur well for the future. The charter was largely the dreamchild and work of the late Professor John Coolahan who had been a champion of the Arts and an inspirational leader throughout his life. The *Arts in Education Charter* includes a commitment by government to set up a High-Level Implementation Group and to introduce a number of initiatives including the Arts Rich Schools initiative and the development of a portal site for arts-in-education. The on-line portal showcases a rich collection of arts activities throughout the country and encourages the sharing of ideas among practitioners in the arts and education communities. When I accessed the arts-in-education portal recently, I was very pleased to see that the Glucksman Gallery in UCC continues to support arts experiences for schools and pupils. The Gallery's recent exhibition, 'The Classroom Museum' (January 2020), enables schoolchildren in rural Ireland to participate in an imaginative programme of creative learning around contemporary artworks from the UCC art collection. The initiative facilitates the loan of artworks into the classroom space and includes a visit by the artist to the school, a collaborative art project by the children and an exhibition of this work in the Glucksman Gallery.

In summary then, in addition to the 1979 Benson Report, other developments and initiatives which influenced me and convinced me of the importance of the arts in education included firstly the *Investment in Education Report* in the 1960s which uncovered the shortcomings in Irish education and pointed the way to educational reform. The new Primary School Curriculum of 1971 was hugely significant and introduced the arts as an integral part of children's schooling. I saw this in the education of my own three daughters who were fortunate to attend primary schools where the arts were central to the curriculum. My seven years as a staff member in Carysfort College in the 1980s also convinced me that the arts could indeed contribute significantly to teaching and learning and this conviction was strengthened when I got to know the work of Howard Gardner and his colleagues in Project Zero in the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The educational projects which I led in

University College Cork – the Multiple Intelligences, Curriculum and Assessment project and the Bridging the Gap project provided myself and my colleagues with an opportunity to share and learn from exciting initiatives in the arts with teachers, pupils and parents in schools in the less advantaged areas of Cork City.

As we look to the future, we hope that the *Arts in Education Charter* and its Implementation Group will ensure that there will be ongoing political and financial commitment to the arts in education. The death of John Coolahan in 2018 was a sore loss to the implementation of the charter and the recent move by Orlaith McBride from her post as director of the Arts Council to her new position as director of the National Archives will also be a loss. However, we must remain optimistic. Much has been achieved since the publication of the Benson report forty years ago – but much still remains to be done.

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