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Authors	Hyland, Áine
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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

100 Years of Junior Cycle Curriculum – 1914 to 2014[1]

(article submitted to NAPD's *Le Chéile* by Áine Hyland, August 2014)

One hundred years ago, Pádraig Pearse wrote scathingly about the stranglehold of the examination system on the secondary school curriculum in an Ireland still under British rule. In 1914 he wrote a critical article in *The Irish* Review which he subsequently published in 1916 as his well-known pamphlet - *The Murder Machine*. In this pamphlet he stated:

> The idea of a compulsory programme imposed by an external authority upon every child in every school in a country is the direct contrary of the root idea involved in education ….. The first thing I plead for is freedom; freedom for each school to shape its own programme in conformity with the circumstances of the school…. Freedom for the individual teacher to impart something of his own personality to his work ….

To-day, one hundred years later, in an independent Ireland, an examination-dominated curriculum persists in our second level school system. Since 1922, there have been various attempts to loosen or remove the chains of centralised examinations from our second level curriculum, especially at junior cycle, but all such attempts have failed to date.

From 1878 until 1924, the Intermediate Board's examination system dominated teaching and learning in Irish secondary schools. Under a system of payment by results, there was a strong incentive for secondary schools to adopt the Board's examination syllabi. Following the setting up the Free State, payment by results was abolished and in 1924 new Intermediate and Leaving Certificate programmes and examinations were introduced. These programmes initially rejected prescribed texts and open courses were introduced in language and literature subjects. Examinations were no longer predictable, and rote-learning of set texts was no longer rewarded. Fr. Timothy Corcoran, S.J., professor of education in University College Dublin, was a strong proponent of open courses and he was supported by Eamonn deValera, one-time Minister for Education, Taoiseach and subsequently President of Ireland.

[1] For a detailed analysis of efforts to reform junior cycle education over the past 44 years, see Bill Coolahan *The Reform of Junior Cycle Education as an Issue in Irish Education 1970 – 2014,* Dublin: Parkmore Press, 2014.

However, as a result of pressure from the teaching profession, set texts were re - introduced in 1942 and by the mid-1960s, the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations had a strong grip on the junior and senior cycle syllabi in secondary schools. Undoubtedly, "the examination was the tail that wagged the curriculum dog" throughout most of the 20th century.

The exception was the vocational sector, where during the 1930s and 1940s the curriculum varied from school to school, and each school was free to develop courses which were suitable for its pupils and responsive to local labour market needs. The Day Vocational (Group) Certificate examination which was introduced in the late 1940s reduced somewhat the autonomy of vocational teachers, but in comparison with the (voluntary) secondary sector, vocational schools still retained a great degree of freedom to develop distinctive curricula. The Group Cert examinations were discontinued when the Junior Certificate exam was introduced in 1989 but by that stage most vocational schools had introduced the Intermediate Certificate programmes, sometimes in addition to the Group Cert.

The Council of Education which reported on the curriculum of the secondary school in 1962 "approved generally of the existing regulations which provide the framework for the junior and senior cycle curricula". The report stated that the "ultimate purpose of secondary schools in Ireland is to prepare their pupils to be God-fearing and responsible citizens" and that "liberal or general education (i.e. an all-round formation of the faculties) is the immediate object of the secondary school". The Council considered that "a well-balanced course of general education is one having humanist and other subjects as its basic core, the balance being in favour of the humanist group". In general, the tone of the report of the Council of Education was smug and self-satisfied and suggested that there was no great need to reform the curriculum at either junior or senior cycle of secondary schools.

Within a very short period, however, the findings of the report of the Council of Education were challenged by the Investment in Education report. In 1966, that report provided evidence of a second level system that was arguably dysfunctional, with 56% of pupils dropping out of full-time education without either the Intermediate

or Group certificates, and less than 10% of the cohort completing the Leaving Certicate. The report highlighted the limited nature of the curriculum of Irish secondary schools and pointed out that the emphasis was on education of a "classical grammar-school type". It showed the relatively low numbers of students (especially girls) taking science subjects and the low number of boys taking modern languages. In the context of a country which was hoping to develop its international industrial and business focus, it was clear that curriculum reform at second level would have to be a priority.

In 1968, the then assistant secretary of the Department of Education, Seán O'Connor wrote:

> Public examinations are the bogeymen of the second-level system ….. they are achievement tests or more accurately, memory tests, and their form is totally unrealistic …..We have gone to absurd extremes in memory testing; it would be a good thing now to give priority to comprehension and the intelligent use of information.

The numbers of pupils in second level education increased significantly following the introduction of free second level education in 1967 – within less than ten years second level enrolment in Ireland had increased from 148,000 in 1966/7 to 239,000 in 1974. In 1970, a committee was set up by the Minister for Education to advise on the reform of the Intermediate Certificate examination (ICE). The committee published an interim report three years later and a final report the following year, 1974.

The ICE report recommended that the centralised examination of pupils at the end of junior cycle should be discontinued and that a system of school-based assessment should be introduced. It envisaged a comprehensive system of moderation of school-based assessment by a "moderation and educational assessment service (MEAS)", organised through groupings or consortia of schools. In addition, it recommended that support should be made available to teachers to ensure that they had the necessary skills to engage in a range of modes of assessment such as essay-type questions, objective tests, oral and practical tests and project and coursework assessment.

There were five representatives of the Department of Education on the team which drew up the ICE report. My late husband Bill Hyland, who was senior statistician in

the Department at the time, was one of the members of the team. In a minority report, he dissented from the recommendation that "external examinations should give way to an ongoing service of school-based assessment (SBA). He saw the introduction of SBA "as a necessary and desirable innovation" but he regarded it "(1) as an addition to external examination, and (2) as an alternative mode which those pupils who do not wish to use external examinations or for whom external examinations are unsuitable, can use instead". He also felt that the estimated costs of SBA set down in the report were too low and that the MEAS scheme would prove to be more expensive than indicated in the report. He was aware that in 1973, one-quarter of 15 year olds had already left full-time education and that by the age of 16, the proportion had increased to over 40%. He felt that it was too soon to discontinue a nationally certified award at the end of junior cycle.

In the event, no action was taken by the then Minister for Education, Richard Burke, on the ICE report although a small number of schools, supported by the Public Examinations Evaluation Project (PEEP) decided not to enter their pupils for the intermediate certificate examination and to provide their own school certificate based on school-based assessment. My two older daughters, who attended Newpark Comprehensive School in the 1970s, were both awarded the Newpark Certificate at the end of junior cycle and did not sit the intermediate certificate examinations. Dr. John Harris, afterwards to become an adviser to Minister for Education, Gemma Hussey, was principal of Newpark School at that time and he was active in curriculum reform circles and president of the Irish Association for Curriculum Development.

A decade later, the issue of curriculum reform again became a major national educational policy issue. In January 1984, the (interim) Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) was established by the newly appointed Minister for Education, Gemma Hussey, in January 1984. Her intention was to set up the board as soon as possible on a statutory basis. The CEB, which was chaired by Ed Walsh, President of the then NIHE Limerick, was asked to make recommendations on a new unified system of assessment for junior cycle second level as well as to undertake a review of the Leaving Certificate. I was a member of that board and I chaired the joint committee which reviewed and reported on the reform of the junior cycle curriculum.

The first CEB consultative document, *Issues and Structures in Education*, published in July 1984, was outspoken and radical. The board proposed a reformed system of assessment for junior cycle, a system "which should permit the involvement of teachers as part of their professional work. It should be sufficiently flexible to allow for the development of alternative programmes … The scope and range of skills and qualities assessed should be broadened considerably". The report added: "If one is to provide an assessment of a comprehensive range of content and skills, if one is to achieve congruence between course objectives and examination procedures, and if the increased autonomy of schools and teachers is to be promoted, then it seems inevitable that at least part of the examination procedure will be school-based". It pointed out that change from external to internal assessment, especially at the end of the compulsory school period, had taken place in many countries, including Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Sweden and New Zealand and it was time for Ireland to follow suit.

A framework for curriculum and assessment - *In Our Schools* - was issued by the CEB in March 1986. In contextualising its recommendations for reform, it recognised the need for Ireland to re-assess its educational goals in the context of the late twentieth century. School programmes "should be framed within a cultural context which emphasises creativity, enterprise and innovation more than conformity and passive learning". Students must be encouraged "to think in terms of identifying problems and considering solutions rather than always seeking absolute right or wrong answers to problems". In order to achieve this, reform of the assessment system was vital. According to the board, the role of assessment in promoting student learning should take precedence over its role for the purpose of certification, and information about the progress of pupils should be "an integral and recurring part of teaching and learning". External examinations at the end of junior cycle should be phased out and replaced by school-based assessment.

The Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) supported those recommendations – their members were willing to assess their own pupils for certification – they had done this since the 1930s for the Group Cert and TS exams. The Association of Secondary Teachers (ASTI) had reservations – but more particularly in relation to high-stakes examinations like the Leaving Certificate.

The reforms proposed by the Curriculum and Examinations Board were not however, implemented. In early 1986, in a cabinet re-shuffle, Gemma Hussey was removed as Minister for Education. Her successor, Patrick Cooney, was cautious. Advised by officials in the Department of Education, he distanced himself from the recommendations of the CEB. He referred the report back to the board, suggesting that "alternatives" to some of the recommendations be considered. Shortly afterwards, the coalition government fell and Fianna Fail came back into power. The Curriculum and Examinations Board was disbanded and was replaced by a new board – the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Unlike the proposed statutory CEB, the NCCA would not have responsibility for examinations – its role would be an advisory, not an executive one.

Within a short period of taking office, the new Minister for Education, Mary O'Rourke, announced that the intermediate and group certificate examinations would be abolished and that a new unified certificate, the Junior Certificate, would replace them. It was envisaged that the new Junior Cert would encompass the best aspects of assessment of both the group and the intermediate certificates. However, this did not happen and the junior certificate which was introduced in 1989, was modelled more on the intermediate cert than the group cert. School-based and continuous assessment, which had been a key feature of the group cert, was largely discontinued except for a small number of subjects.

A review of the junior certificate, undertaken ten years later by the NCCA, was critical of the influence of terminal examinations on pupil learning. It stated:

> It was intended that the Junior Certificate would be awarded on the basis of a wide range of modes and techniques of assessment. …. In contrast to what was originally envisaged, the assessment of the junior cycle programme is dominated by terminal written examinations.

The review stated that "there is an ongoing mismatch between the aims and principles of the Junior Certificate programme and the modes and techniques currently in use for the formal assessment of that programme". It emphasised that the need for change was urgent and called on all the education partners "to engage fully as a matter of urgency and agree a way forward".

In spite of the exhortations of the NCCA, successive Ministers in the first decade of the twenty first century took no action in relation to junior cycle reform and it was not until October 2012 that a new framework for junior cycle was launched by Minister for Education Ruairi Quinn. When launching the new framework he stated: "the Junior Certificate is no longer a high-stakes exam, yet we continue to treat it as if it were a dry run for the Leaving Certificate." He proposed a framework which appeared to address the concerns which had been articulated by teachers over previous decades. The Junior Certificate, as currently structured, was to be phased out and a new award to be known as the Junior Cycle Student Award (JCSA) would be introduced. The new framework would be introduced gradually and would be fully in place by 2022.

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Under the proposed junior cycle framework, 40% of the marks for each subject are to be awarded for school-based components such as oral examinations, lab work, essays, or e-portfolios. Schools will be encouraged to develop short courses according to local needs and interests. The State Examinations Commission (SEC) will initially retain responsibility for setting and marking the final assessment for English, Mathematics and Irish which will count for 60% of the marks. For all other subjects the SEC will provide assessment papers (accounting for 60% of marks) to be supervised and marked by teachers. The NCCA will provide support to schools in the form of assessment and moderation toolkits, syllabus specifications and exemplars of the standards expected.

In the words of Gráinne Faller in an article in the Irish Times in January 2014,

> The (current junior certificate) model is outdated and well out of step with international best practice. … The JCSA aims to change all that…..The idea is that if we shift focus from what students are taught to how and what they learn, and encourage independent thinking, learning and real engagement with education, we will end up with students who are more flexible and capable of adapting to ever-changing learning environments.

The ongoing reluctance of some members of the teaching profession to engage with the proposed new junior cycle framework is disappointing. As can be seen from the above summary of previous efforts at junior cycle reform, the model now being proposed is more balanced than any previous proposal, with 40% of the marks coming

from continuous assessment and 60% from terminal examinations. The new award will be phased in over an eight year period and support on assessment will be provided by the NCCA. Earlier proposals, especially those of the ICE report, emphasised continuous assessment. The recommendations of the CEB in 1986, while radical in respect of curriculum reform, were more modest in terms of the reform of assessment, recommending that "***at least part*** of the examination procedure will be school-based." The CEB had undertaken considerable public consultation and had set up a range of committees and boards of studies which involved school management, teachers and parents. The introduction of the Junior Certificate in 1989 was a lost opportunity. The climate was right for reform. As the Junior Cert became embedded in the system in the 1990s and 2000s, it became more difficult to change it, even though the ESRI confirmed in its Post-Primary Longitudinal Study in 2013 that students would "prefer more autonomy in the learning process … and a learning environment that more closely mirrors what they will face in the future workplace".

Today, it is more than timely that the stranglehold of a centralised national examination at the end of junior cycle be brought to an end. Only a very small number of pupils now leave school at the end of junior cycle – so why have a national examination for all pupils at that stage? Accountability will be provided by whole-school and subject evaluations (WSE) carried out by the inspectorate and by standardised tests in literacy and numeracy (to be introduced in 2017) and in science (from 2018). Teachers who have graduated in recent years are much better prepared to engage in curriculum design and school-based assessment than their counterparts of thirty or forty years ago. With the co-operation of teachers, the freedom and flexibility for schools, teachers and pupils envisaged by Padraig Pearse a century ago can finally be realised and junior cycle education in Ireland can be a world-leader.