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Title	Response to the “Leader Profile” interview by John Walshe with Andreas Schleicher in Leader Quarterly, Winter 2022
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Publication date	2023;2023
Original Citation	Hyland, Á. (2023) 'Response to the “Leader Profile” interview by John Walshe with Andreas Schleicher in Leader Quarterly, Winter 2022', Leader Quarterly, Autumn 2023, pp. 34-35.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Rights	© 2023, the Author. Published by the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals.
Download date	2026-09-05 09:14:54
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17636

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Response to the "*Leader Profile*" interview by John Walshe with Andreas Schleicher in *Leader Quarterly*, Winter 2022

by Áine Hyland

"The Irish school system has helped most people to succeed and has created a high level of equity with very strong outcomes". These are the words of Andreas Schleicher in his interview with John Walshe in the Winter 2022 edition of *Leader Quarterly*.

Andreas Schleicher is probably one of the most influential educators in the world. Whether one agrees or disagrees with him, one must recognize that his influence with policy makers throughout the OECD is unrivalled. A German born mathematician and statistician, he is an expert on global education systems and is head of the OECD's Directorate of Education and Skills. He was the mastermind behind Pisa and other assessment tools for comparing education systems across the world.

He is the author of a number of books and reports on education, most notably *World Class: How to Build a 21st Century School* System (2018) – a book which has been praised by educationists and economists as diverse as Howard Gardner (of *Multiple Intelligences* fame), Michael Fullan (guru of *Educational Change*), Klaus Schwab (founder of the World Economic Forum) and Ulli-Pekka Heinonen (former Minister for Education in Finland).

Schleicher's interview in *Leader* is particularly relevant at the current time when Senior Cycle reform is one of the top items on Minister Foley's agenda – a reform agenda about which students and teachers have expressed serious misgivings. Schleicher provides a strong endorsement of the Irish school system and its curriculum. He praises the current Leaving Certificate and urges caution when it comes to reforming it.

Recognising that the Leaving Certificate is a high stakes exam he states *"that it (i.e. the Leaving Cert) is part of the secret of the success of Ireland. By setting a very high bar you get people to think that hard work is valued in education".* He is cautious about complementing the current examination by some element of teacher judgement, reminding the reader of what happened during the pandemic with grade inflation. He states that *"the more judgment you bring in to this the more you will end up with social regression".* And he concludes that *"the strongest performing and most equitable education systems do have something like Ireland which has a clear set-up and goal posts".*

Schleicher favours an externally assessed Leaving Cert, stating that

"having something from outside the system that is accepted by society is really important", adding: "*We see this across the world ... If you do not have a trustworthy currency your education system will unravel very quickly. Look to the places like the US where employers don't give a damn about what High School certificate you have and where universities set their own entrance tests"*.

He supports the current Points System for selection for Higher Education. In this regard, he states that "*meritocracy and fairness are really important"*, adding: *"as long as there is a need for selection the points system is probably the most meritocratic way of making sure the best places go to the most talented people, not to the wealthiest, which is often the case in other countries"*.

Even Irish commentators such as Tom Collins who believes that the points race is "*far from being a level playing field"* (Irish Times 31/01/2023) have not suggested that the points system be abolished. Collins has called for "*a ring-fencing of places for underrepresented groups in high-points disciplines"* – a recommendations which was made as far back as 1999 in the *Report of the Commission on the Points System.*

There is however, a jarring note in Schleicher's *Leader* interview. Those of us who are familiar with Irish schools will baulk at his suggestion that Irish teachers are less supportive of their students than teachers in some Asian countries. In response to the claims that the Leaving Cert in Ireland causes too much stress for students, Schleicher replied: "*If you get rid of the test you won't necessarily see lower anxiety. If you want to lower anxiety you need to strengthen the student teacher relationship"*.

He refers to countries "*where life is tough and school is tough"* but where there is strong resilience among students because of strong relationships with teachers. He suggests that relationships between teachers and students in countries such as China or Japan or Korea are better than those in Ireland because *"teachers (in those countries) spend a lot more time with students outside the classroom"*.

I am astounded by this assertion. From my knowledge of education in China, I am bewildered as to how Schleicher comes to this conclusion. Of course it is well known that those who can afford to pay for extra tuition in China after school (and significant numbers of them do) spend more time studying (often with their own classroom teachers) than students in Western countries.

But where is his evidence that this leads to "better relationships" between students and teachers? And what about those students whose families can't afford to pay for extra tuition? And what does Schleicher know about the relationship between Irish students and their teachers? Available evidence indicates that relationships that exist between teachers and their students in Ireland are generally positive. In his recently published report the Chief Inspector states that "*Good or very good levels of students enjoyment and motivation were evident to inspectors in 80% of the lessons observed during announced inspections in post-primary schools"*
(Chief Inspector's report 2016-2020, 2022, p. 139).

And evidence from the ESRI's *Growing up in Ireland* research confirms the good relationships that generally exist between students and their teachers, especially in schools in less advantaged areas (Emer Smyth, *Growing up in Ireland, Report 5,* 2017).

Schleicher argues strongly for better integration between the world of work and higher education, stating that *"in the future, great places of work are going to be great places of learning, and great places at anticipating changing labour demands"*. He *"notes a lack of willingness by Irish universities to engage with the future of work"*. While this may have been true in the past, there is considerable evidence nowadays of closer co-operation between Higher Education and the world of work.

For example, under Pillar 3 of the HEA's Human Capital Initiative which specifically targets future skills needs, programmes are jointly provided by Higher Education providers and employers. As well as providing state-of-the art courses for the workforce of the future, they provide upskilling for existing workers. Many of these courses are flexibly delivered, so that learners can continue in employment while adding to their skills and qualifications.

Having said that, Schleicher's interview in *Leader* and his many publications and podcasts, are a wake-up call for educationists at this significant juncture in the world of teaching, learning and assessment. Easy access to information and data via the internet has been with us for some time and has created a challenge to teachers and students alike.

The more recent development and availability of AI-led programmes such as ChatGPT (November 2022) are more dramatic, disruptive and challenging, and require us to re-think what and how we teach, and how we assess our students' learning, especially in Senior Cycle and in Further and Higher Education. ChatGPT can write an essay that is almost impossible to distinguish from an essay written by a human, on almost any topic, in a matter of minutes.

As Schleicher wrote more than a decade ago: "*The dilemma for educators is that routine cognitive skills, the skills that are easiest to teach and easiest to test, are also the skills that are easiest to digitize, automate or outsource. There is no question that state-of-the-art skills in particular disciplines will always remain important. However, educational success is no longer about reproducing content knowledge, but about extrapolating from what we know and applying that knowledge to novel situations.* (Schleicher, *The Case for 21st Century Learning, 2011).*

That is the challenge that those charged with advising and deciding on curriculum and assessment at all levels of the education system need to address. The future is now – let's embrace it with determination and confidence.

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