

Finding the Treasure Within – NEU Proposals for a post-pandemic education system for all.

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented disruption to schools and pupils in Northern Ireland. There has been significant focus and no little political pressure to recovering the existing system, a focus on “lost learning” and “catching up” work, a “business as usual” imperative – but with little focus on the opportunity to “build back better” or to reimagine a better future for our young people, or their teachers.

This short NEU paper seeks to change that imperative and our starting point is a recognition that our education system has had some long-standing weaknesses that pre-date the pandemic. The pandemic offers us the opportunity to stand-back and reflect and to ask the question “What should the new normal look like?”

We know that:

- Too many of our young people leave school without the skills they need or a calculated direction.
- The pressure on teaching and learning for exams dominates secondary school education
- Our system is the most socially segregated system in the developed world, 34th of 34 OECD countries (OECD, 2012).
- Progress in narrowing the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has stalled.
- We are outperformed by many of our international competitors. Our primary schools are high achievers (based on narrow metrics within TIMSS and PIRLS research) but our secondary schools are ‘bang average’ and – even within a selective system - our “high-flyers” under-achieve (PISA).
- Our children, on ‘well-being’ metrics, are less satisfied or healthy than in other OECD countries.

The opportunity presented by the pandemic is that we should

- Prepare children for life, not just for exams (Parentkind).
- Reflect on where and how and when learning takes place.
- Tackle inequalities within and beyond the classroom.

This paper will consider the first of these three imperatives and borrows heavily on the recent Institute for Public Policy Research paper “The New Normal – The Future of Education after Covid-19” (Quilter Pinner, Ambrose, 2020) and from the recent lecture by Professor Neil Selwyn (Monash University, Australia) at the SCOTENS (Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South) seminar of 21st October 2020.

From our own, internal, NEU survey and focus groups and with the benefit of external research, we know that:

- Northern Ireland, despite its rich and broad modern curriculum, has experienced a narrowing of focus, with increased attention on core subjects (English, Maths, ICT, ‘STEM’). Evidence suggests skills crucial in future job markets will be interpersonal skills, like collaboration, co-ordination, higher-order cognitive skills, judgement, decision-making (Bakhshi, 217) with a wage premium on skills of communication and persuasion (SKOPE).

- The pandemic has temporarily dismantled much of the current system – in respect of external examinations, suspension of inspection, suspension of PRSD (appraisal) as well as many hours of teaching and learning.
- The dominant feature of the accountability system has focussed schools on high-stakes examinations and on meeting performance targets to the exclusion of a broad and balanced curriculum and life experience. Unintended consequences include “teaching to the test”, gaming the system like “off-rolling”, a focus on learning-by-rote, and by memorising.(and private tutoring) There is growing public-sector evidence of ‘command/control’ accountability regimes relying on compliance can raise performance of sub-standard service but cannot drive excellence, which requires empowerment and commitment to innovation and excellence.
- You-Gov polling found teachers and parents want the pandemic to lead to *“a much broader and more rounded education”* (Edge Foundation, 2020: 25)
- The pandemic will create a jobs crisis, and be reinforced by trends such as automation, artificial intelligence, and climate/environmental break-down. Broader skills are necessary.
- Northern Ireland (and the UK systems) are “outliers” in relying on ‘hard levers’ of accountability, whereas *“jurisdictions such as Ontario, Canada, Finland, Japan and New Zealand that place greater emphasis on the more professional forms of work organisation tend to pursue more collegial forms of teacher and school leader accountability”* (OECD, Schleicher, 2018b).

During the Covid period and beyond, the mental health of children is another consideration. The National Children’s bureau reports that whilst a certain level of pressure at exam time is both normal and helpful an increasing number of young people are experiencing extreme pressure to achieve academically. The NSPCC have recorded an increase in young people seeking counselling for exam stress since 2015 showing that numbers tripled for those receiving counselling for GCSE exam stress specifically. The BBC reported on the 19TH Feb 2020 that 800 post primary young people are on waiting lists to seek support through the schools counselling service. The recent executive summary of the Youth Prevalence Survey outlines how the jump in data continues to show the worryingly high numbers across NI and that the evidence is clear and we are accessing young people too early and that it is ongoing and at a consent level from Primary 6-A level.

Through the Covid emergency, we now have a period of reflection on school curriculum, accountability, and assessment. The teachers’ pay agreement of April 2020 (TNC 2020-1) raise the prospect of formal reviews into Accountability, Assessment, Workload and Well-Being, as well as developing collegial forms of school-engagement such as Joint Consultative Committees in large schools. That these reviews are being instituted at present provides a broad marker from the education system and from teachers themselves, that change is required.

This time of reflection must put young people at its heart, with a recognition of the need to balance high academic standards with wider skills that young people need to thrive in life. The post pandemic education landscape must focus schools on finding “the treasure within” each and every child¹.

Within this new, post-pandemic, ‘landscape’, NEU proposes two measures that may help in achieving this better balance. These are:

¹ The “Learning: The Treasure Within”, report to UNESCO of the International Commission, was chaired by Jacques Delors and was the outcome of a three-year work by a commission chaired by Jacques Delors, this report considers the requirements for an education for the twenty-first century capable of tapping and nurturing the rich potential for learning inherent in every individual.

- Proposal for a two-year pilot to dispense with GCSE examinations – to be replaced by a school-generated Certificate of Achievement, and
- The introduction of a Transition Year pilot after Year 12 of post-primary education, similar to that successfully introduced in the Republic of Ireland.

NEU Proposal 1: Letting GCSEs go.

This academic year sets teachers and pupils an impossible task. To undertake public examinations based on a full (or largely full) curriculum without ample time to teach the course. This “back to business” policy of the Minister is widely thought to be unrealistic.

NEU prefers to use the Covid emergency to re-examine the wisdom of our exam-laden educational offer to young people. We believe that exams are not necessarily the most accurate way to determine the achievement of a student in a given discipline, and particularly terminal exams being used to determine a student’s grade entirely.

This is one of the reasons the NEU believes exams more of a snapshot of performance on one day at one time, and a test of memory recall under pressure, than an overall measurement of ability in the given subject. Properly moderated teacher judgements are more holistic and will be made with an overview of performance over a longer period of time, hence diminishing the effects of any one particularly “off” day for a student.

NEU would suggest a proper, open, debate for changes to the ways that schools are assessed, and for reforms of the exam system – particularly GCSEs.

As its name suggests, the General Certificate of Secondary Education, first introduced in 1988 to replace “O” Levels, has outgrown its original role. A certificate designed to serve as a final record of achievement for those who once left school at 16 now has little or no meaning when all pupils stay on until 18.

Calls for reform of GCSEs (and A-levels) have a long history. In 2004, the former chief inspector of schools, Mike Tomlinson, led a Review that proposed an overarching diploma to replace GCSEs, A-levels, and vocational qualifications². Failure to heed these proposals, in NEU’s view, was one of the great missed opportunities of the New Labour era that opened the door to coalition reforms in England. Northern Ireland did not follow but cannot either wholly divorce itself from the English reforms, notably in view of the high numbers of pupils seeking university places in Great Britain. The more recent Conservative idea of educational reform was simply to make all exams much harder, in line with a private education system based on tough discipline and top marks (and far superior resources, of course).

Ironically, one of the proponents of the change NEU seeks is Lord Kenneth Baker who, as Education Minister, introduced GCSEs in 1988. Baker notes:

“When I took the equivalent in 1952, it was before “O” Levels. Ninety-three percent got a job at 16 when I took the exam. And so, they had to clutch in their hands a certificate showing they’d achieved and that was very important. But the school leaving age is now 18, in effect. Education goes on from aged four to eighteen. So, what are we testing young people at 16 for?”³

Koulla Yiasouma, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, has indicated severe concerns on conducting examinations during the pandemic, noting “I can see no alternative to cancelling summer 2020-21 exams.” Speaking following a meeting with members of her Youth Panel noted on 10th November that *“Too many of our young people and our schools are stressed beyond measure and action must be taken immediately to alleviate this. I was*

² See at <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2004/oct/18/1419education.furthereducation1>

³ Quoted in an article by Sally Weale, 23 August 2018 “Stress and anxiety: how the new GCSE is affecting mental health?”

frankly shocked to find that so many of the Panel in exam years were in a state of stress and extreme anxiety about their experiences at school”⁴.

“I am absolutely clear the current situation is untenable, and the Minister must move to protect the health and wellbeing of our young people. My suggestion would be to cancel exams, however if the Minister can come up with an alternative that will dramatically alleviate the stress that young people are under as a result of continuous assessments, then I am very willing to listen. In normal times it is important that GCSE and A Levels go ahead, but we are not in normal times. Consequently, we have found that both schools and young people are working to make sure every assignment and class test is perfect. Young people have reported being continuously assessed and indeed Principals and teachers have confirmed they are continuously assessing. This means young people are in constant ‘exam stress’ mode, they are suffering mentally, and it cannot continue for the rest of the school year. A decision must be made before Christmas. It is time to make a definite plan for the indefinite situation of 2021, it is time to take our foot off the accelerator, to give our young people and teachers some breathing space and to prioritise our children’s mental health, because nothing is more important.”

NEU therefore proposes immediate debate to “let go” GCSE’s for the period of Covid, assumed at minimum to cover academic years 2020-21 and 2021-22. This period should be used to allow for a broader-based educational offer with progression based on school-based achievement reports. Within this period, there could be a properly funded and evaluated pilot cohort to undertake a ‘Transition Year’ similar in nature to that successfully embedded in the Republic of Ireland’s education system. The Transition Year is NEU’s second proposal.

NEU Proposal 2: Transition Year

In addition to letting GCSE’s go, the education system’s obsession with cliff-edge testing and rankings could be tempered by the introduction of something akin to the Republic of Ireland’s transition year. The Transition Year (TY) is a one-year programme that forms the first year of a three-year senior cycle in many schools. It is designed to act as a bridge between the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate programmes. It is available to all second level schools and currently approximately 75% of schools offer the programme. Transition Year is optional for students in most schools.

The concept and practice of a ‘Transition Year’ in the Republic of Ireland has been in place since the mid 1990’s. According to the ‘Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools, Department of Education and Science, Ireland, 2004’ the Transition Year aims “To promote the personal, social, educational and vocational development of pupils and to prepare them for their role as autonomous, participate and responsible members of society.”

Transition Year is not universally available in ROI and is dependent on resourcing and funding, however, about 75% of schools offer the year to students. Uptake by pupils is in and around the 63% mark

The year focusses on non-academic subjects, life skills, work placements, exchange visits and other trips. Transition Year offers learners an opportunity to mature and develop without the pressure of an examination. It also provides an opportunity for learners to reflect on, and develop an appreciation of, the value of learning in preparing them for the ever-changing demands of the adult world of work, further and higher education and relationships⁵.

⁴ Statement of the Northern Ireland Children’s Commissioner of 10th November 2020 at <https://www.niccy.org/about-us/news/latest-news/2020/november/10/i-can-see-no-alternative-to-cancelling-summer-2021-exams-says-children-s-commissioner/>

⁵ See at <https://ncca.ie/media/3758/scr-erc-ty-research.pdf>

The success of the Republic of Ireland's Transition Year was thoroughly evaluated by the Republic's Educational Research Centre⁶, with the main findings and key points being:

1. Most students who do Transition Year (TY) report enjoying the year and describe it as a beneficial experience. This is supported by many teachers and parents.
2. A substantial minority of students – perhaps one-quarter – report disappointing or underwhelming TY experiences.
3. School-level provision of TY has increased consistently over time, from 60% of schools in 1994/95 to 89% in 2014/15.
4. Student-level uptake of TY (where available) has also increased consistently, from 31% of the eligible cohort in 1994/95 to 65% in 2014/15. Since 2008/09, a majority of students have taken part in TY each year.
5. In general, students report more negative views of TY when participation is compulsory rather than optional.
6. In 2013, South Korea introduced a programme that is partially modelled on Transition Year to Korean middle schools, aimed at 13-year-old students. Korean educators, policymakers, and researchers are drawing on Ireland's experience with TY to inform the ongoing development of this initiative. Transition programmes at the beginning of senior cycle are also receiving renewed interest in Finland and England.

Among the reported benefits of TY participation are: Making new friends and mixing with other groups; Forming better relationships with teachers; Having a break from high-stakes examination stress before entering senior cycle; More varied teaching and assessment methods, such as portfolios and project work; Going on trips in Ireland or abroad; Getting to sample a range of subjects; Doing work experience and having opportunities to engage in the 'adult world'; Thinking about and learning about possible future careers or areas of study; Making stronger subject choices for senior cycle (after subject sampling and insights achieved from work experience); Taking part in musicals, mini-companies, and other medium- or long-term projects; Developing self-regulatory and organisational skills (e.g., time management); Feeling more mature and independent; Finding new interests and developing new skills (personal, social, practical, and artistic); and Developing stronger social skills and confidence.

These outcomes are reported by a majority of students (and supported by teachers and parents) each year – sometimes accompanied by strong endorsements of "life-changing experiences"

Where disbenefits occur, the development of a Northern Ireland pilot should be cognisant of some areas where reported feedback was not positive. Clear and targeted co-design of a TY in Northern Ireland can successfully design-out negative feedback. For instance:

- Students report negative views of TY when it is experienced as a 'doss year'. This tends to be the case when students feel that they have little to do in their TY classes, or that their TY classes are too similar in format or content to more conventional classes at more junior or senior grade levels. In such cases, students become bored or disengaged. These dis-benefits can be easily avoided, when contrasted with the idea of TY as 'a break' between junior and senior cycle, which many students do appreciate. In these cases, students report active engagement in challenging, relevant activities and novel experiences both in and out of the classroom.

⁶ See at <https://ncca.ie/media/3758/scr-erc-ty-research.pdf>

- Concerns over losing study skills over the course of the year, and the substantial additional expense associated with TY, are also common. These reservations can contribute to Third Year students who are interested in some of the other experiences of TY deciding not to enrol in the first place or to TY students experiencing regret at the perceived loss of academic momentum in cases where they also feel that they gained relatively little from the extra year. However, there is little evidence that Fifth Year or Sixth Year students who took part in TY experience any subsequent disadvantage.
- Recent figures indicate that TY is not available at all to students in about one-in-ten schools around Ireland (11% of schools in 2014/15). This tends to be more common in small schools, schools with more socio-economically-disadvantaged student intakes, and ETB schools. The decision not to offer TY can be related to lack of student interest in TY within the school, resourcing constraints, or small cohort sizes. Although a lack of widespread student interest can contribute to a school's decision not to offer TY, this also means that any students within the school who might have an interest in (aspects of) the extra year are not able to access it.

A further, lengthy and detailed examination of Transition Years by the Economic and Social Research Institute can be found at: <https://www.esri.ie/publications/student-teacher-and-parent-perspectives-on-senior-cycle-education>

'Now' strikes as an appropriate time to consider a similar scheme for students in the north given the COVID-19 crisis and the resulting reduction in teaching time. Such a year offers the possibility of time and space to allow for necessary adjustments to the system of assessment with concomitant benefits to learners, teachers, school leaderships and awarding bodies.

NEU is not alone in this matter. Kevin Daly of the Irish National Teachers Organisation has argued for the benefits of Transition Year: *"Longer term, the potential advantages of such a year for pupils, schools include:*

- *A year free from high stakes assessment that could offer some freedom to teachers in terms of pedagogical practice and would necessitate professional development opportunities.*
- *Better subject and career choices based on broader experience of the workplace and greater maturity.*
- *Enhancement of CV's, personal statements, and the development of 'soft skills' crucial to career progression and human growth while still developing general academic and technical skills.*
- *Possible benefits to mental and physical health given additional opportunities for sports, outdoor pursuits, a break from preparing for high stakes examinations and continuous, non-exam assessment, high stakes applications to FE and HE, vocational training and a break from subject choices in year 12 in advance of starting the transition year.*
- *There is some evidence in the Republic that students who take the transition year achieve higher results in their 'Leaving Cert' and experience lower 'drop out' rates in third level education.*
- *Potential additional jobs for teachers.*
- *Expanded career opportunities for teachers.*

In the context of forthcoming reviews of assessment and the very real possibility of lasting change brought about by the COVID-19 Pandemic, an attempt to introduce the option of such a year could contribute to some of the more strategic and 'philosophical' changes to education that the Northern

Ireland Teachers Organisation and wider Trade Union movement may wish to pursue, for instance a permanent move away from pressurised high stakes assessment models.”

The NEU proposal would be for a small, pilot scheme of 100 pupils from a limited number of “opt-in” schools to take part in testing the efficacy of the TY in Northern Ireland. The pilot participation would be voluntary, as a means of avoiding some of the deficits within the Republic of Ireland scheme.

This idea is not without its challenges. Additional funding would be required, including for active research. Ensuring parental buy in and engagement from other stakeholders is essential – while it may not be a ‘high stakes’ year it must have value for those who engage in it, including teachers.

There is some evidence in the south that additional cost to parents may result in this opportunity being denied to some pupils from lower income families. The cost of trips, equipment and so on could be a barrier to some young people and their families and again, funding, and careful planning is required to ensure that opportunities are available to all regardless of background.

Every crisis presents an opportunity, and this is perhaps one area where something positive could emerge from the difficulties created by the lockdown and the interruption of ‘normal’ schooling of late.

Mark Langhammer

NEU Regional Secretary, 10th November 2020