



BEACONS

Bringing Education Alive for our
Communities On a National Scale

Shared Learning Day: 13 December 2019

at

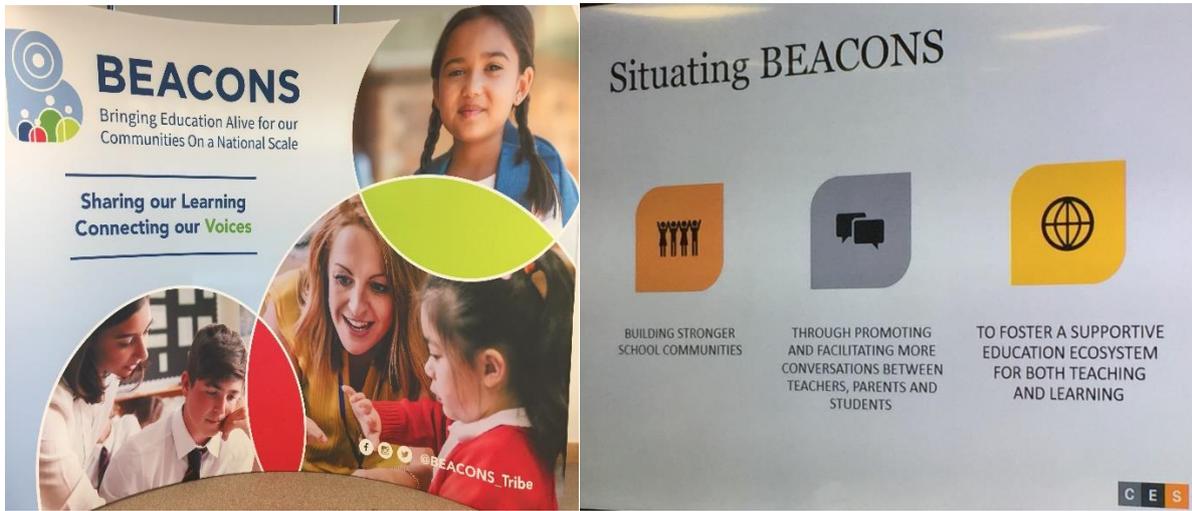
The Offices of the Teaching Council



Introduction & Summary of main Themes

- **Purpose:** The purpose of the day was to share learnings from the four BEACONS events held during 2019 - bringing together primary, secondary, and resource schools in Ennistymon, Baltinglass and North East Inner City Dublin - as a basis for considering the future development of the process.
- **BEACONS:** The process reflects the unfolding vision of the Director of the Teaching Council to catalyse a conversation process among parents, teachers and students in their local areas to allow them say what's important about the future of education in a safe, inclusive, inspirational way. The hoped-for fruits include tapping the insights, hopes and aspiration of diverse participants to help shape education at a local level while feeding insights into a national conversation.
- **Nature of the Process:** Feedback to date points to **inclusion** as a defining characteristic of the process in the eyes of participants. The challenge is to make it more inclusive still. Participants felt that **starting a fire** or **growing seeds** were the metaphors that best reflected the nature of the process.
- **Student Perspective:** Being heard is the predominant sense of the process from students, the ability to secure change, the opening of their eyes to the realities of teachers and principals and impacting the school climate positively; a small minority of students asserted that, for them, change was not experienced as a reality.
- **Adult Perspective:** it was important to recognize the need for greater creativity, for greater equality of voice and to be able to hold uncomfortable conversations; learning walls were collapsing; adults were becoming comfortable with the unfamiliar; change was happening; magic was being enacted; it was important to address the reality of those students who challenged the narrative of change;
- **Formal Evaluation:** the primary finding of the formal evaluation carried out by the Centres for Effective Services (CES) was that the process was succeeding in its stated ambition. The challenges were how to enhance communication about the process, how to learn and share learnings.
- **Participant Feedback:** the overwhelming sense was the power of deep listening and hearing the voice and honesty of what students had to say; there was a commitment to action - spreading the word among colleagues; hosting BEACONS in one's own area or in a subject-specific way such as initial teacher education or bullying; spreading the word of the process in the public service.
- **A Taste of the Process:** To capture a flavour of a typical BEACONS session participants were invited to host conversations on education subjects of interest/concern to them. Thirteen conversations were volunteered from the Leaving Cert and home-work to bullying and wellbeing. Some looked for more experiential learning, life without homework in its current form, questioned the need for transitions, envisioned how the BEACONS could feed into a Citizens Assembly for Education and how to embed it as part of school process.
- **Looking to the Future:** The dominant themes arising from participants concerned scaling the process, having national impact, developing hosting capacity and embedding it in school process. The quality and equality of relationships was key.

Images from the BEACONS Shared Learning Day



Students and Adults in conversation



Building the Brand

Sending birthday greetings

Welcome to Shared Learning Day



Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director of the Teaching Council, extended a warm welcome to the representative of the three communities who had been the first to host the BEACONS process – Ennistymon, Baltinglass and North East Inner City – together with representative of the DES, the NCCA, the JCT and many others interested in the future of education who had come to learn of the BEACONS initiative. This was an exciting event which allowed the sharing of learning and represented an excellent example of innovation to be shared with the wider public sector.

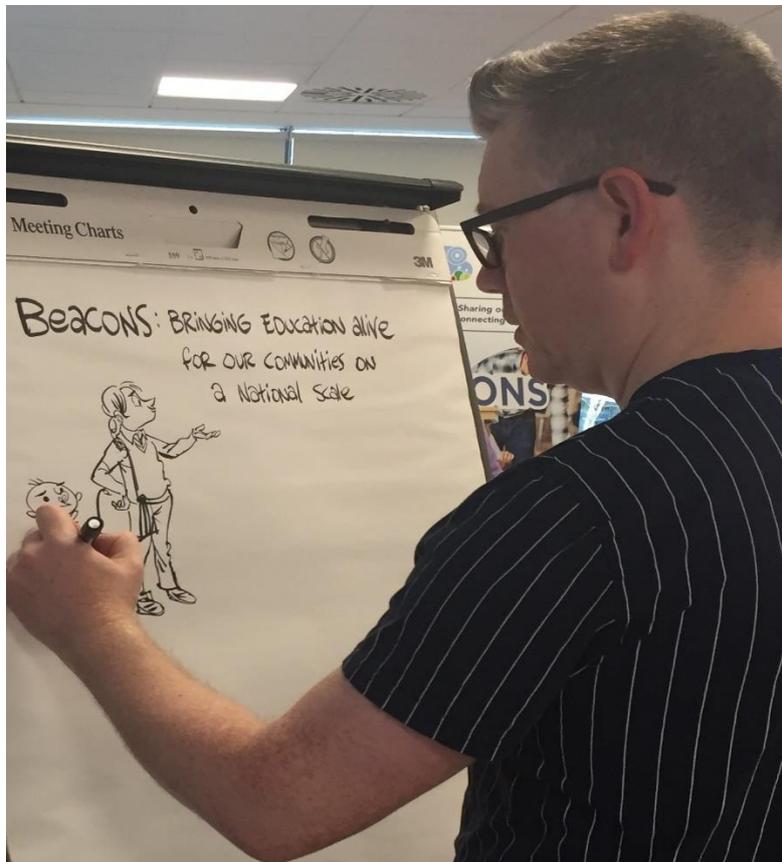
He recalled the genesis of the idea which was nourished at the 2018 Burren College of Art conference exploring a more creative education system. He was inspired by the notion of breaking open a conker shell to reveal a shiny conker – it was possible to crack open the education system without breaking those within it. A ‘tribe’ had been assembled to promote the BEACONS process and the rate of progress had far exceeded initial ambitions.

Mary Hawkes Green from the Burren College of Art recited a poem ‘*For a New Beginning*’ by John O’ Donohue to set the tone of possibility for the day’s sharing’s – concluding with an invocation to adventure:

*Though your destination is not clear
You can trust the promise of this opening;
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
That is one with your life’s desire.*

*Awaken your spirit to adventure
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk,
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.*

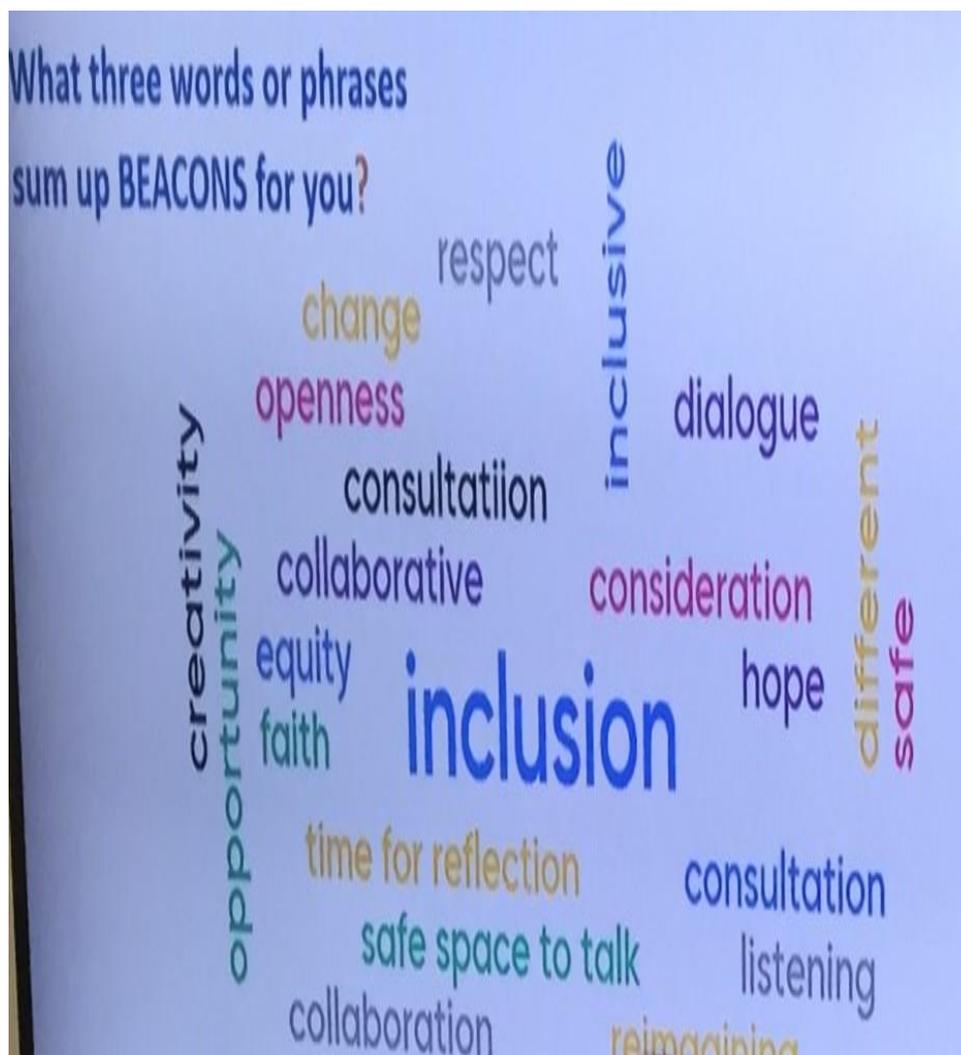
Capturing the moment graphically



Graphic recorder, Fintan, at work.

Bringing Education Alive

Words reflecting BEACONS: Chris Chapman, facilitator with the Burren College of Art, shared a word cloud of what resonated most with participants about the process to date, highlighting the central importance of **Inclusion** as well as respect, collaboration, creativity and safety.



What best represent what BEACONS is about?

Metaphors for BEACONS: Asked what metaphors for BEACONS they found most attractive participants in the room voted for:

- ✚ Starting a Fire - 29%;
- ✚ Growing seeds in a garden - 24%;
- ✚ Raising a child - 10%;
- ✚ Other - 21%

Overview of BEACONS to date

The overview came to life with a video record of participants followed by the voices of students and a review of learnings to date:

Video: In a [video](#) overview of the BEACONS events to date participants spoke of the process effecting a change of mentality, shifts in awareness, breaking down barriers within and between schools, the importance that commitments made were reflected in actual change, the valuing of all voices, the speed at which safety and trust were established, the open/nurturing nature of the process etc. It was asserted that the BEACONS represented the future and it was happening now.

The Student Perspective - voices in the room: Ali Warner, co-facilitating, sought out the views of students who had participated in BEACONS: it makes students feel good about themselves and feel heard by people who see the importance of education; we understand teachers more now, it has changed how we relate to school and it's easier to go there; it resulted in a reduction in homework; before BEACONS I loved to hate school – BEACONS opened my mind to the fact that teachers really care; a space has opened for voices other than prefects; teachers listen more now and actually change how they teach and how they treat students – more as equals and not condescending; I hadn't realized that teachers, parents and students shared the same issue; teachers are more positive and happy – I like when teachers are happier – it makes school a better place. One student took the view that her school hadn't changed and that it hadn't listened.



Student Perspectives

BEACONS Process: Chris reviewed how BEACON events are structure with participants meeting as constituent groups (parents/teachers/students) initially with ice-breakers about what they would like others to understand about their perspective and experience of education. Common themes were emerging such as recognizing that others care, the levels of stress, particularly at 2nd level – CBA’s were causing more stress. Small gestures – a smile in the corridor – had power to make a big difference. It provided openings at many levels – personal, school, locality and seeing the bigger systemic patterns at a national level. The BEACONS process was seeking to inject space to clarify what’s going on and what might help. Participants included all primary and secondary schools in an area plus resource and adult education centres. Perhaps the net might be thrown wider?

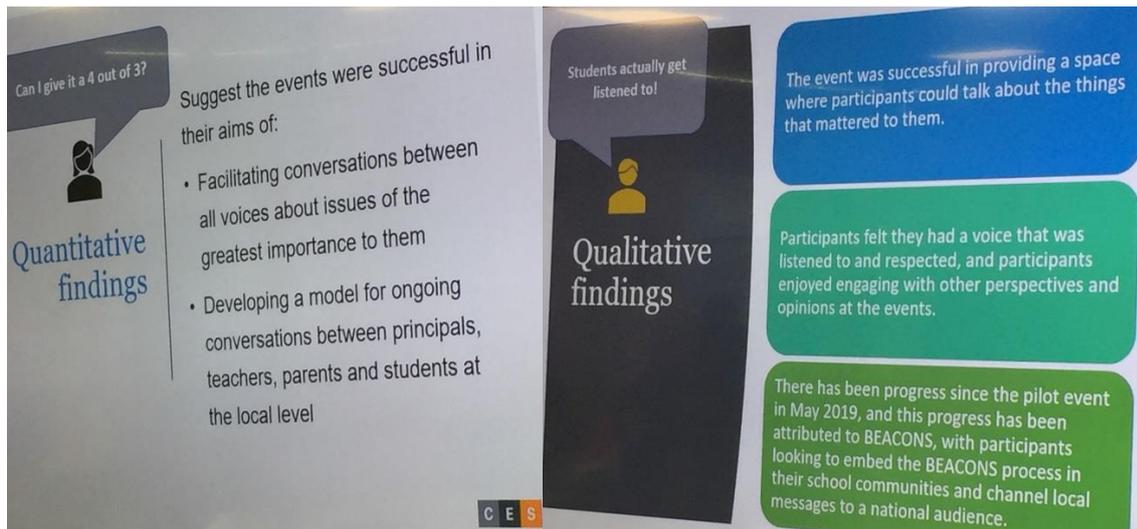
Adults Voices—feeling comfortable being Weird!



Adult participants in the BEACONS process felt it was important to respect the authenticity of the student who said nothing had changed for her. More genuine dialogue was necessary and more creativity – being creative is what defines our being human. Recognizing equality of voice was an important shift in thinking and sharing with other schools in a locality allows powerful things to happen – each locality is unique. A creative initiative catalysed the process and we have learned from students and vice-versa; we all need to take time and space in our over-busy lives. Real walls are falling with boundaries between parents, teachers and students being crossed – excellent facilitation allowed a radical shift. The

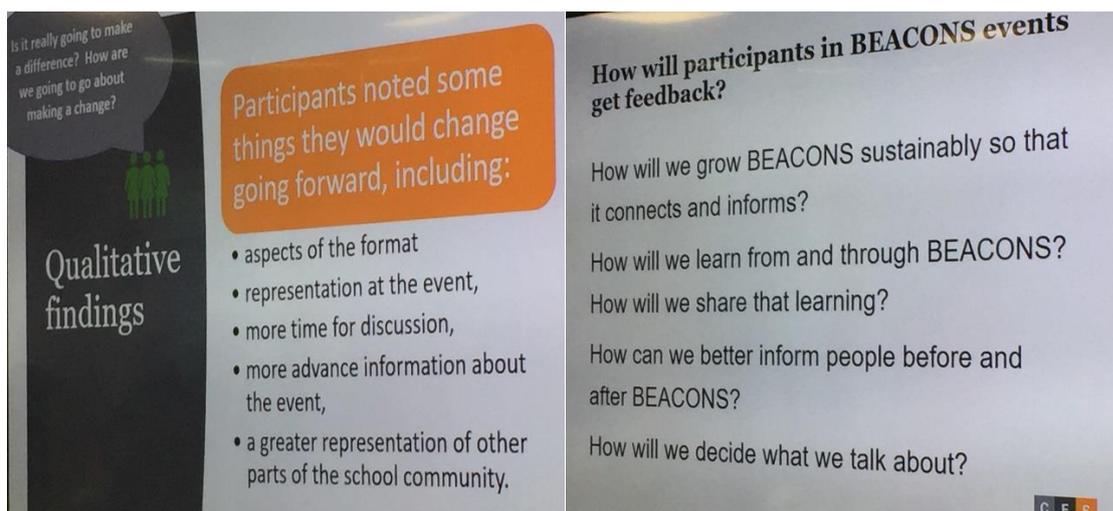
injunction was to just ‘do it’ and we did and we went back to Ennistymon in response to the challenge as to whether anything would change; occasionally something magical happens in education, something ‘draíochtúil’ – a sense that you can make a difference – ‘Tá BEACONS ‘draíochtúil’.

The formal Evaluation: Tomás introduced an evaluation done by the Centre for Effective Learning (CES) on the BEACONS process which pointed to the success of the initial prototypes in realizing the objectives which had been set:



Can I give it 4 out of 3?

There were also pointers and questions for the future – will it really make a difference?



The challenge now was to connect and include as many school communities as possible and learn how to learn. Tomás’ challenge to those present was to commit to taking one action that would further the ambition of the BEACONS process.

Participant Feedback

What's exciting your interest most?

Asked to respond through phone-based 'mentimetre' to what was exciting their interest most from what they had heard so far, participants volunteered that hearing the voice and honesty of students and the power of listening were very impressive: having children at the table – too often as adults we exclude them; the willingness to have difficult conversations; the power and honesty and clarity of young people; the sheer magic of it all; we have common wishes and hopes; a new model of collaboration; the challenge to keep BEACONS-style conversation going in my school; how can we elevate to national level to really make impact; the voice of the child is not only heard but acted upon; I always thought a project like this would work and I never tried it – I'm thrilled that you have started it; excited at the opportunity to make a difference; the inclusivity, the passion in the room, the authenticity; the obvious potential, the time is now, this is the real thing. And there were sceptical voices to say very little or nothing excited them.

One thing you will do as a result of today's event: many participants were motivated to commit to action - hosting an event, spreading the word, deepening the process, learning more about the process: I'm definitely hosting an event in 2020; work with at least 4/5 local champions to host further events; implement BEACONS-style event in school; could the approach be used in sectors other than education? Listen more to my child; tell my friends about it; take action in my school and go on strike; share BEACONS on social media; I'd like to attend a BEACONS event; inform staff of the event; try to improve wellbeing in school; I want to influence change in the wellbeing class in my school; I will investigate further re ETB parents forum; I will follow-up on issues brought up today and bring more students into this in school; organise a BEACONS event on initial teacher education; set up a BEACONS conversation to allow students to have a voice; explore place-based learning as a short JC course; hold a meeting with those involved with BEACONS in my school to move the process forward to access student voice in a meaningful way; read the report, consider the implications and uses in my organisation; try to make my school a happier place and take what I have learned from today; assist in any way I can in developing this project throughout the public service; talk to McGill Summer school about doing a session on BEACONS and also talk to Ireland's Edge; bring it to higher up in education. A few felt unable to contribute – nothing; nothing, sorry.

When we speak of BEACONS what needs to be at the Centre and in the wider Context?

Invited to have table conversations about what needed to be central to all BEACONS conversations and what needed to be part of the context, participants named the following:

- **Central to all BEACONS:** relationships; students; listening, speaking and acknowledging without fear; safety and respect; conversations starting; equality; openness; engagement; openness; trust; ways of learning; happy teachers and

happy students; community; follow-through to all schools; education works find for most – but not for all; primary more open to this than post-primary;

- **Also in the wider Context:** voices being heard; understanding; awareness; feeling comfortable talking; empowerment for all; action; making a change in the system; equality, inclusion; community; sense of possibility that things can change; try to make sure that participants understand the link to how systemic change occurs – citizenship/rights holders; stress; life skills; soft skills; student voice; coming together is essential to wellbeing; power – who decides who is in and who is out of the conversations; what works and doesn't work; networks in parish, region – commonalities; school community – coming together of parents-teachers- students community; parity of voice; opt-in; school priorities; what do we want for our students from education; structure of 2nd level school; what type of assessment at second level; conversation between primary, secondary and tertiary; the follow-through of the of the event; breaking the mould; keeping meaningful and relevant; smaller issues first; harnessing the student voice; be realistic – prioritise issues/changes; plan for action; equality = equal voice; leadership? Key is challenging culture; DES need to be at the table; how do you scaffold against the innocence of youth? Managing expectations vs realistic options; is it about voice only? As in 'Voice' = answer to everything; need for role recognition; equality isn't the same as equal voice; young people get respected – you get listened to more; having a voice; social media; more friendly relationships with teachers and students; BEACONS needs to be funded; drugs; health; addiction; friendship; teachers understanding students understand teachers too (empathy); anxiety; homework (and corrections); making meaningful change; climate change; diversity; easier learning; eco-friendly; what has happened and what has still to happen; small changes make a big difference – heightened awareness, everything matters; this is different/new; realistic view of the whole system; support to allow process; impact; citizens assembly for education; change takes time, needs time; celebrate; reflection; potential to influence nationally.



Comments from the floor: A representative of DEPER said they were delighted to have contributed to funding the process – there would be a new fund open in 2020. The NPCPP

saw great possibilities in the process. A school teacher suggested the need to interrogate what we want from education – why is there so much stress in the middle band? Another, originally from Ennistymon, quoted Mandela on the power of education to change the world and what a pity the BEACONS process wasn't available when he was in school in the 1970's. Joan from the ETBI felt inspired by the potential of the process to allow meaningful change from the bottom-up – it needed to be context based; the ETBI was available to help the process.

What's inspiring us now?



Lunch Time, when the good conversations happen!



Meanwhile, behind the scenes, the facilitators take stock

Open Space – a flavour of a BEACONS event

Open space, a practice at the heart of the BEACONS process, allows participants to host conversation on issues they want to explore more deeply – thirteen volunteers stepped forward to host a range of subjects supported by others in the room with an interest in their topic:

Table	Topic
1	Leaving Cert
2	Setting up BEACONS in school
3	Bullying
4	Junior Cycle
6	Diversity and Inclusion
10	Primary – Secondary transitions
11	Initial Teacher Education
12	No homework but what else?
13	Engaging parents
14	Wellbeing
15	Citizens' Assembly at BEACONS
16	How to bring this back to school?
17	Change

And the action needed:

1. **Leaving Cert:** the whole school experience was reduced to one week; change was needed to make it more practical with an assessment system capturing prior work and 'practicals'.
2. **Setting up BEACONS conversation in school:** address a current issue in a new and meaningful way to hear all voices i.e. a BEACONS-style conversation with a facilitator; invite teachers, parents and students; be open to change; have home-work as first topic – positives and negatives, what will we change and get perceptions of different people.
3. **Bullying:** it needs awareness building – not banning; it's up to parents to check phones; teachers need to be more observant of signs of physical bullying.

4. **Junior Cycle:** schools are focused on grades and defeat the spirit of a love of learning; why don't CBA's have percentages? CBA's keep you in the learning loop in 2nd year; why two CBA's in Gaeilge in 3rd year and not in modern foreign languages?

5. **Diversity and Inclusion:** there is diversity in the student body but not in the staff; diversity feeds into inclusion – it takes work; identify realities – barriers and opportunities; BEACONS needs to include all and to foster inclusion of those with special needs – not to be treated separately; create safe space with facilitation that can handle sensitive topics such as racism.

6. **Transitions from Primary to Secondary:** why is transition needed? Should children be expected to transition or should schools 'transition' to accommodate students? After second year disengagement starts; there needs to be consistency in language and processes from one system to the next and children's expectations need to be managed. Look at good practice in other jurisdictions and apply contextually.

7. **Initial Teacher Education:** Importance of teaching student teachers about equality of 'voice'; there are more ways than P/T meeting for dealing with parent and student 'voice'; transition mentoring and buddy system; who are the members of the community we are trying to reach? **Next steps?** A BEACONS event in a College of Education or among colleges of education to see what being a student teacher means.

8. **No Homework but what else?** It doesn't inspire children to learn; it's something to be against and causes stress; it has parents spending time checking and it extends the school day; there is a perception that more homework implies a better teacher; the bike rack is unused because of weight of school bags; replace with project-based and experiential learning. **Action:** Enquire what 'no homework' looks like – is it something else or nothing at all; ask the children/students what they need/want; have a BEACONS on the 'homework' topic.

9. **Engaging Parents:** what contribution can parents make to a school? Engaging parents to offer support and resources in socio-economically disadvantaged groups; Cobh community college was painted by parents and students; Australian model BEE – involvement is part of contract as a parent; parents and teachers don't incentivise parental involvement – ask them; institutionalised school model doesn't incentivise parental involvement and there is a fear on the part of teachers of engaging with parents. **Action points:** schools develop tangible reasons why parents should get involved – start small with low-hanging fruit; develop a framework/road-map for schools to help parents engage in school life.

10. **Wellbeing:** Create a safe place to learn – everyone together, normalising mental health; your friend isn't the only person you can talk to; have outside speakers talk about practical aspects of wellbeing; make wellbeing a subject – discussing topics in class, walks, yoga etc. wellbeing for all students, especially the more stressed senior cycle students.

11. **Citizens Assembly for Education (Café):** This initiative proposes that a citizens' assembly is convened to discuss the big question of the purpose of education in a way that is safe while giving a central role for students. Instead of getting side-tracked on the myriad issues

in education the proposed frame aims to be a broad one - how students can survive and thrive in a time of unprecedented change. It was suggested to enlist the support of potential allies such as IBEC.

12. How to bring BEACONS back to schools: If school were any other service we could report on the performance of the service – why should school be different? Change is a slow process – allow that it may take time; how to sell it – how will it be perceived? Grow the dialogue café - invite parents? Students need to see change - don't promise change if it can't be delivered.

13. Changes needed in Education: respect and equality of voice vs talking down – teachers need to respect as they want to be respected; less pressure; more practical stuff and more substantial change in TY with life skills; have continuous assessment for JC and SC in place of terminal exams.



Calling the Conversations



Real Conversations

Looking to the Future

Having experienced a flavour of the BEACONS process, participants were asked to commit to action to further the process. Phone-based 'mentimetre' was again pressed into service to allow all present to share their action pledges.

What would you love to build on as BEACONS develops? The dominant themes were scaling the process, having national impact and recognition while developing hosting capacity and getting the process imbedded in schools: how to make national; more regular events – actually do it, not talk about it; involve more communities; document, evaluate and inform the national questions around education; expand reach; develop teachers to host the conversations; check up on schools and ask what has changed; model should have schools focus on a few things that arise from the process and report back at next event; organise more vents, make more visible in the system – spread the word; trust in local knowledge; address educational disadvantage; address homework; empathy-centric workshops; have information to send to all parents/staff advising what BEACONS is about in advance – and follow-up communication; be more practical and less theoretical; ensure the education community, not just schools, are involved; structures for use in school; tool kit to encourage schools and parents to buy into it; have a guide for facilitators of events; recognition from Government bodies – link with ETB parents forum; start with BEACONS facilitators in school – it can be student/teacher led after that; timing of events to facilitate parents, under-represented today; getting all schools involved with conversations in wellbeing classes – opening space for students to just talk to each other; how to apply for BEACONS; relationships; safety; reach; maintain voluntary nature.

Questions/Comments to improve BEACONS: this question evoked lots of suggestions for developing tools to facilitate the spread and implementation of BEACONS as well as encouragement to continue to grow the process, paying attention to inclusivity: keep on developing; include college students; develop facilitator support material; how to do process inclusively; a BEACONS toolkit; develop a programme for teachers, parents and students; a brochure for schools; develop a toolkit and guidelines for others to follow; how can more communities find out about the model? How to embed in school process; help define how it can fit with a national scale; develop facilitators for BEACONS across local communities; have input from children with special needs and physical and intellectual disabilities and some representatives from Youth-reach; who's not here and why? interactive online hub; roll out more events on a regular basis; how to create BEACONS events in your own school; practicality; need to focus on what you want to achieve if many generations present; clarify the aims of BEACONS for those who haven't experienced the magic; keep on keeping on; make contact with parents forums; join the dots with Croke Park hours, SSE and Féilte Scoile – this would be an amazing use of time; recognize BEACONS might create unintended tensions in certain school communities; have regular in-school and inter-school meetings; have step-by-step plan for follow-up for schools.

Closing Remarks

Tomás extended warm thanks and appreciation to all who managed to participate at what was a very busy time of year, to the facilitators Chris and Ali and to his colleagues in the Teaching Council. He reflected that Inclusion was found to be a defining characteristic of BEACONS. Three questions, posed to him by a participant, were: (i) how to make the process work for me (Moslem Board of Education); (ii) how to connect together and (iii) how to support this at a national level. There was also the question of bringing the process back to school level.

For himself the journey had entailed being open to invitation, engaging in a fun process in the Burren, seeking help with launching something whose feasibility was unknown, taking a chance and creating diversity in a steering group. Having local champions was important. Together with DWEC four new possible BEACON's were already in prospect in 2020 both generic and subject-specific. Funding was being sought from a variety of sources.

The immediate next step was a Webinar on 22nd January to share knowledge about how the BEACONS process works.

MH

26.12.19

Closing Reflection

John O'Donohue was once asked about the hallmarks of a great conversation, and he described them as follows:

- *You overheard yourself saying things that you never knew you knew.*
- *That you heard yourself receiving from somebody words that absolutely found places within you that you thought you had lost.*
- *A sense of an event of a conversation that brought the two of you onto a different plane.*
- *A conversation that continued to sing in your mind for weeks afterwards.*

I think that it is fair to say that the BEACONS Sharing Learning Day on 13 December 2019 in the Teaching Council offices fulfilled all of these hallmarks with aplomb. Over a month later, the conversations which I heard, witnessed and participated in continue to sing in my mind. And I certainly found myself saying things that I never knew I knew!

Máirín Ní Chéileachair of Dublin West Education Centre described BEACONS as something containing a bit of *draíocht* (magic). And this for me was the magic of BEACONS – a community of people in a particular place and time drawing things from each other that they never knew they had or were possible.

I want to thank all participants – the communities of Ennistymon, Baltinglass and North-East Inner City Dublin, the Department of Education and Skills, all State agencies, and stakeholder bodies – for participating in the conversation on BEACONS. We look forward to more of the same with you during 2020!

Acknowledgements

Host: Teaching Council

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Administration (and much else): Máirín Ní Chéilleachair (DWEC)



Máirín & Chris ready to welcome

Ali engaging the students

Participants

