Learnings and Themes from BEACONS to Date

February 2020

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Bringing Education Alive for our
Communities On a National Scale

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Purpose of BEACONS Process

The BEACONS 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.

First Steps

Between May 2019 and February 2020 there were six BEACONS involving a process of learning by doing. The evolving/incremental learning process has encompassed:

o Three **open-agenda** events in Ennisytmon (May 2019), Baltinglass and North East Inner City Dublin (both November 2019) ;

o Two **review events:** one in Ennistymon in November '19 to evaluate progress since the first event in May 2019 and a general review event at the Teaching Council in December '19 and

o A **themed** BEACONS dealing with inclusive education in Ennis in February 2020.

In seeking to identify the principal themes emerging it is useful to distinguish between:

o **Process insights:** views about the BEACONS process itself are drawn principally but not solely from the two review events in Ennistymon and the Teaching Council and

o **System insights:** recurring themes identified by students, teachers and parents about the nature of the education process itself are drawn principally but not exclusively from the open-agenda and 'inclusive education' BEACONS recognising that these themes occurred with different degrees of emphases depending on location/context and the proportions of national, secondary and other schools involved.

To allow parents, teachers and students to say what's important about the future of education in a safe, inclusive, inspirational way.

BEACONS as a Process

Student Voice

The power of students to name what's real and important to them was a key take-away from the BEACONS process. They asserted that as the ones in the classroom their voice needed to be listened to – no one disagreed. There was need for a BEACONS process within schools. Being heard was the predominant sense that students derived from participation in the process itself together with the ability to secure change. It also opened their eyes to the realities of teachers and principals with a resultant positive impact on the school climate. For other actors there was a belief that enabling the system to hear student voice would enable the system to meet student needs;

Potential of Process

There was a sense that BEACONS could have a big impact over time as it spread around the country capturing a picture of the whole system - what people feel as well as think. It was also a process that could be applied in the individual school context. Any doubts about the ability of primary students to participate was dispelled by the articulacy and wisdom of those who participated on an equal footing with second-level students, parents and teachers once they sensed they could talk in a safe way about their experience of the positive and negative aspects of education. While inclusion was a defining characteristic of the process there was scope to be even more inclusive drawing in representatives of the pre-school sector and adult education as well as seeking out students who were disaffected with the system. Being a process rather than a project, there needed to be follow-on events.

Need for Agency & Action

There was initial student scepticism in many post-primary contexts that their voice would be heard and that change would happen as a result of the BEACONS process. The year-end review in Ennistymon revealed a strong feeling that the BEACONS process had had a significant positive impact both qualitative and practical. It had brought about a change in the dynamic of teacher/student relationships with the institution of a dialogue café in at least one school to facilitate freer communication. There was a perception of better mutual understanding between teachers and students – with students being surprised at how much teachers really cared. Teachers were providing feedback on staff notice-boards. One student changed his mind on moving schools as a result of his altered perception of his teachers. Barriers were breaking down. Culture was changing with less bullying and more-friendly encounters. There was greater awareness of the power of a smile from a TY buddy to transform the experience of a first year student. The concern with environmental issues that was evident in the first BEACONS had resulted in real changes with one school winning a green flag and water fountains being installed externally and internally to obviate the need for plastic water bottles. There was serious engagement with recycling. The rationale for subjects was being addressed. In a national school there was an increase in the range of activities and homework had decreased. A bullying issue in at least one school was resisting easy resolution. However honest conversations during the course of the day seemed destined to facilitate resolution. Already there were plans to engage a BEACONS-style conversational process with creative suggestions as to how one might use non-verbal communication to transcend barriers to mutual hearing. Education on social media safety awareness reflected concerns voiced in all BEACONS.

Institutionalising the Process

An interesting question was how to institutionalise the gains from the BEACONS process? The experience itself was hugely positive but then students and teachers returned to a school context where a majority had not had the benefit of the experience. How to rectify this by having a BEACONS process as part of the school culture - of SSE/SIP, of staff, student, parent and Board meetings? There was a need for champions among all the constituent elements of the school community – principals, teachers, students and parents. Could student agency be reflected in the composition of school boards? There was need to promote greater awareness that student voice and agency were now governing concepts at national policy level. For parents it was important to recognise 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 and magic was being enacted.

Creating Impact

An important challenge was how to scale the process to have impact at national and local levels - developing hosting capacity and embedding it in school process. All available channels – FÉILTE, Education Conferences, Wellbeing web-site etc. – should be used to share the story.

Themes emerging from BEACONS

Looking at the themes that recurred with the greatest frequency from the BEACONS process:

Desire for Change in Culture/ Relationships

Perhaps the most important theme throughout all the BEACONS was the desire for a shift in the historic relationships between the principal actors in the education system. At is broadest level it reflected a desire for a system that relaxed control and trusted schools to do what was right for their students in their contexts. Within the school community the emphasis was on the importance of the quality of relationships, in particular between teachers and students – kindness, friendship, respect, being called by one's name, being really listened to, fun, a more positive tone and balance in the relationship between students, teachers and parents. A desire for greater praise, trust, respect, equality and a sense of belonging was evident. The notion of teacher as coach as well as subject-specialist was evoked. Could all the parties bring more of their common humanity to the process of education - the power of a smile in the corridor could be immense for some students. It was Important to create a culture of space and time to enable change.

Stress & Resilience

While varying in emphasis with location and context, the theme of stress was a constant in BEACONS. Stressors originating within the school system included transitions, the exam system, bullying and a curriculum that was insufficiently attuned to education for life and the non-academic student. External stressors originated from social media, drugs, cyber bullying, climate change, environmental degradation and the uncertain future of work. There was a need to develop stronger coping mechanisms in students based on purpose/meaning, self-awareness, creativity and resilience.

For their part many teachers and principals felt overwhelmed by conflicting demands, multiplicity of roles, tick-the-box exercises and the pace of change. Some felt guilty that they couldn't adequately meet the demands of special needs students while attending simultaneously to the needs of other students. For both students and teachers alike the culture problem within the system was reflected in the wellbeing agenda in junior cycle having become a source of time-table stress for teachers and cynicism for some students – 'not that again'. Likewise, classroom-based assessments (CBAs) which might have been expected to reduce stress had the opposite impact. While more continuous assessment was required its importance and the commitment of effort involved needed to be reflected in the final grade.

Exams/Assessment in the Age of Digital Natives

For primary-school students the shadow of the second-level exam system begins to build anticipatory anxiety preventing a focus on being in the now. The gradual transition from a child-centred to a more rigid curriculum and exam-centred approach happened as students moved towards second level from third class onwards in primary school creating a vicious self-reinforcing cycle with some wanting more home-work to reflect this shift and others wanting a less pressured approach. For some second-level students the notion that fourteen years of education could be reduced to a fortnight of exams made no sense – continuous assessment was essential. We needed to get away from the culture of judgement that fails people. The leaving cert reflected an industrial age model at a time when we had the first generation of digital natives.

Parents, teachers and students needed to be educated on how to exploit the huge potential of technology and IT while avoiding being exploited by it - the word 'gaducation' was coined for the positive use of technological devices in education. Technology allowed learning outside curriculum and outside school. The leaving cert hindered a rounded education which needed to be more hands-on with more resources and understanding for the non-academic sector. Universities needed to take more responsibility for their selection process. A new currency of value and assessment was required with pathways other than through the leaving cert. A larger process was needed with interviews, portfolios and FETAC credits for 'young scientist' and other accomplishments more relevant to the emerging world of work. There needed to be portfolio approach to terminal exams with continuous creative assessment possibilities. There had to be space for risk-taking, innovation and making mistakes. The mainstream academic-focused system needed a major correction - 'de-snobbing' – with a revalorising of vocational and alternative education. The new junior cycle's acknowledgement of the non-academic was insufficient.

Transitions & Connections

For many participants in BEACONS this was the first time that schools had interacted collectively. There was felt to be a lack of understanding of transition stresses and lack of links between pre-school and primary school and primary school and secondary. Transition to big secondary schools could be fraught with anxiety compared with primary experience free from social media, peer and separation anxiety and agoraphobia. Some saw enhancing connections between the schools in their area as important for this reason with ideas such as ambassadors from the second level to the primary, familiarisation visits from national schools to secondary and using wellbeing hours in secondary to assist with buddy reading in pre-school. Managing transitions was facilitated by training in mindfulness and the building resilience. If primary school students visited secondary schools and experienced sample lessons there was less transition shock – likewise for transition from pre-school to primary. For transitions to second and third levels have guest speakers, open days and career fairs with local workers and employers. Given that going to college is not for everyone it was important to have more exposure to trades and have links to adult education centres.

Education/Action on the Environment

Concern with the state of the environment and a desire for action was a common theme among students. They wanted less talk and more action about litter and plastic, water-fountains in school and more litter bins, rewards for civic action, more beauty in their surroundings, secure storage for bicycles, reduced packaging in deli-food. There should be education from a young age about environment – at pre-school and school. By teaching the children, they would teach the adults and the community thereby creating more awareness of the earth. 'We want ACTION NOW' to reduce emissions rather than winning the 'Green Flag'; 'we want re-usable bottles, hard-plastic lunch boxes, no wrapping.' There was an appreciation of the great outdoors and the resources of the community as potential sources of wellbeing and learning. There were voices seeking more connection to nature, more mindfulness and yoga.

Creativity & Art

The importance of having more opportunities for art and creativity was a recurring theme. Art had the potential to open multiple perspectives, to express feelings, to relate to the environment, to open more flexible ways of thinking. Curiosity was central to learning. Creative approaches could work with those who had learning difficulties through the use of physical objects, project work, free writing, art, drama, group work etc. Creative homework allowed results to be presented in class in forms other than writing thereby generating increased confidence. Imagination was encouraged through free writing and art. Drama worked to builds esteem and confidence. Finding different fun ways to do things, especially if you had a disability, generated interest. Talking, singing and drama were more accessible and inclusive than writing for some. There could be a greater focus on creativity in how homework was approached with free writing, encouragement for the imagination, group work and fun ways to approach subjects.

Role of the Teacher

The challenges facing teachers in a time of rapid change were highlighted. The curriculum was packed and getting more so each year – it was hard to fit it all in. There was an expectation that school would sort out all society's problems from obesity to social media. Meanwhile there was a serious teacher recruitment issue, particularly in certain subjects that needed to be highlighted - might schools cooperate more by sharing teachers to help alleviate the problem? Given the growing cultural diversity of the country and the importance of inclusion there was need for much greater diversity in the pool from which teachers were drawn. It was time to reconceptualise the role of teachers as professionals working together; the teacher as coach as well as subject specialist; teachers instilling curiosity by being curious instead of report-writing. Finally, teachers like everyone else, needed to be acknowledged – a little appreciation goes a long way.

Making Inclusion the new 'Normal'

As with the education system in general the central axis of discussion on inclusion revolved around culture change. Inclusion needed to be the new 'normal', a world with no 'others'. Our cultural tradition was of exclusion – middle-class values informed by the church with teachers coming from and formed by this tradition. While inclusion was the subject of the first thematic BEACONS it was a recurring theme throughout all BEACONS – indeed the demand from some special needs schools was to be included in BEACONS as the norm rather than being singled out for special/different treatment. Feedback on BEACONS events generally points to inclusion as a defining characteristic of the process itself in the eyes of participants with encouragement to go further by including representatives of pre-school and adult education and reaching out to those who feel alienated from the system. For those with mental disability the call was for recognition that they wanted to learn like everyone else and the learning needed to be measured, repetitive, adapted to need, engaged with the outdoors, creative and life-long. Inclusion applied to everyone as everyone had different needs whether 'special needs' or 'specially gifted' - there was 'no one-size fits all'. School was a microcosm of society. Inclusion in school gave confidence that transferred to an adult in society – 'I can do it'. What was important was contentment, the ability to communicate and to have life skills.

Not everyone was academic – schools could provide a life-skills achievement cert. School needed resources to be truly inclusive – smaller classes and attention to the wellbeing of teachers as well as students; 'as a teacher have I enough time to cater to every child's needs?' School physical design needed to facilitate inclusion, not separation. There should be more connection between special and mainstream. Who are the gate-keepers who determine who gets into particular schools whether mainstream or special needs? We need greater transparency.

> Feedback on BEACONS events generally points to inclusion as a defining characteristic of the process itself.

Other themes

Other themes that were aired at one or more BEACONS were:

(i) Home-work

Many primary school students felt there was excessive importance accorded to homework and by the time of the review sessions some had negotiated a new balance with less homework and some homework at school. For second-level students the problem was that teachers didn't realise how much other homework was being prescribed by other teachers.

(ii) PE/Active Learning/ Health/Wellbeing

Among the many suggestions arising were the potential of learning outside using games as media for active learning; more outdoor trips to allow interacting with community – tidy-towns, sport, gardening; learning outdoor survival skills as well as sports and athletics; eco-friendly activities such as cultivating a bee-friendly garden; relaxation activities for wellbeing, calming and fun; cultivating healthy eating habits with more vegan options in the tuck shop; more PE/mindfulness for body and mind - breathing/meditation exercises; double PE at senior cycle; educate parents about active learning and the transfer of learning from games to work.

(iii) Bullying and Safe Spaces

For at least one school bullying was a difficult issue which had not been resolved by the time of the review events. A special BEACONS-type process might be devoted to addressing this seemingly intractable problem. Addressing bullying required a whole-school approach. A related theme was the need for safe spaces for overwhelmed students who couldn't cope – fidgeting and ADHD. Creating safe spaces in school was vital to making visible what was unseen – distress, bullying etc. We needed conversational processes such as BEACONS in schools.

(iv) The Purpose of Education

Questions such as inclusion and reform evoked more fundamental questions about the purpose of education. It was suggested that, at a time of climate crisis, it needs to be about making the world a better place, about building life skills, about building resilience, about cultivating creativity and imagination, about exploring subjects in greater depth.

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Notes

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