



# *Enabling the Voice of the Young in the Citizens Assembly on the Future of Education*

**21<sup>st</sup> March 2023**



*Gathering Hosted by Larkın College*



**Facilitation:** Chris Chapman



## *Enabling the Voice of the Young in the Citizens Assembly on the Future of Education (CAFÉ)*

### **Purpose & Acknowledgements**

**Purpose:** A creative gathering, organised by the Burren College of Art and hosted by Larkin College, was convened on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2023 in anticipation of the Citizens Assembly on the Future of Education (CAFÉ). The purpose of the gathering was to explore how the commitment in the Programme for Government (PfG) to giving a central role in the assembly to the voice of the young might be implemented in practice. Like the [Burren Symposium](#) from May 2022 which also addressed issues surrounding CAFÉ, the purpose of the gathering was to be as helpful as possible to those charged with preparing the assembly by providing perspectives from a range of actors within the education system including, in particular, students.

**Acknowledgements:** Thanks are due to Thomas Usher, principal of Larkin College, who welcomed the participants, Máire O'Higgins the chaplain of Larkin who orchestrated attendance by students from the Larkin and Belvedere colleges and Jean, the librarian of Larkin who hosted participants in the library space. Our thanks also to Nell Smyth who brought students from Raheen Woods Steiner School, Niamh Murray who brought students from Rutland Street, National School and Chris Chapman from ReSource at Burren College of Art who provided the artful facilitation of the event. Finally, thanks are due to all those (Annex IV) who made the time to contribute to this short but intense burst of creative conversation in service of making the Citizens Assembly on the Future of Education as effective as it can be.

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### **Background**

The Programme for Government (PfG) provides as follows:

**'Striving for Excellence in Education:** We are committed to supporting the development of a shared understanding of the value of education which addresses how education can prepare people of all ages to meet new societal, environmental, technological and economic challenges which face us all.

*'We will establish a Citizens Assembly on the Future of Education ensuring that the voices of the young people and those being educated are central.'*

Government has recently indicated that CAFÉ is likely to get underway towards the end of 2023 or early 2024. The terms of reference are likely to be presented to Government for approval not long before the commencement of the assembly. Decisions will also be required on how the assembly will be structured to give effect to the above mandate.

The significant innovation in CAFÉ is the explicit commitment, for the first time in a citizens' assembly, to ensuring that the voices of the young and those being educated are central. The **central question** for the gathering in Larkin College was to explore how this might be honoured in practice, mindful that past citizens assemblies have been confined to those over the age of eighteen. A **second question** was to explore how this commitment might be supported by engagement with the young in advance of the holding of the assembly. This latter could help elucidate current reality, ensure that less heard voices get heard, identify seeds of a better future and generate public engagement with the potential of the CAFÉ.

### **Additional Context – OECD & UNCRC**

As potentially useful reference points for the conversation we were reminded of key concepts from the **OECD's 'Future of Education & Skills'**:

- ❖ Student agency;
- ❖ Co-agency (with peers, teachers, parents and communities);
- ❖ Societal wellbeing;
- ❖ Recognizing different needs for different students;
- ❖ Transformative competencies: creating new value; reconciling tensions and dilemmas and taking responsibility.

Given the focus on the voice of the child in the wording in the PfG it was worth referring to the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** (UNCRC) in particular:

- ❖ **Article 12:** Children have the right to give their opinions freely on issues that affect them. Adults should listen and take children seriously – and
  - ❖ **Article 29:** Children's education should help them fully develop their personalities, talents and abilities. It should teach them to understand their own rights, and to respect other people's rights, cultures and differences. It should help them to live peacefully and protect the environment.
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## *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

Although only three hours in duration, the gathering in Larkin yielded a rich harvest of insights around the key themes of how student voice could best be honoured and how the period leading up to the CAFÉ could be used to advantage to tap into a much wider range of voices than can be captured in the CAFÉ process proper.

The following provides a summary of the discussion that took place in response to the key questions that were posed for discussion. A faithful record of what was harvested from the discussions is to be found in Annex I – III.

### *A Word that's important to be in the Conversation* – Annex I

Invited to suggest a word that was important to include in the conversation, participants responses revolved around: **inclusion** - voice/inclusion/collaboration/community; **values** of respect/equality/faith; **feelings** of joy and celebration - and **process** – listening/connection/reflection/imagination.

### *Enabling the Voice of Young People in the CAFÉ* – Annex II

While CAFÉ is the first assembly with an explicit commitment to making the voice of the young a central focus, previous assemblies have sought input from children and young people. The citizens assembly on biodiversity loss heard the views of a [youth assembly](#) of thirty five young people who had met over two week-ends and were given a half-hour slot to present to the adult assembly. In Scotland the [Children's Parliament](#) was invited to make a submission to the Scottish Climate Assembly and the latter decided to include the children's entire report in their official submission to Government.

Questions for consideration in the CAFÉ context include whether the commitment to the centrality of the voice of the young in the programme for government can best be honoured by including children and young people as part of a single assembly with adults or whether to have two distinct assemblies with inter-connecting features. A single assembly would entail a break with practice up to now that only those of voting age - eighteen and above - are included and would need to address child-protection issues, how to facilitate different age groups and what proportion of adults and children should be included. The challenge posed by dual assemblies was how they would relate to each other in such a way that the voice of the young was accorded the weight in the assembly process and in the recommendation to Government which the programme for Government promises.

While a variety of other options for engaging the voice of the young could be envisaged, the focus of the conversation was confined to the two central propositions above to facilitate coherence. Participants were divided into two youth groups and three adult groups yielding a diversity of perspectives with common themes:

- **A Single Assembly:** Two tables (one adult and one youth) came down strongly in favour of a single assembly. This was the only way to honour the commitment in the PfG, to ensure that the voice of the young was not filtered, diluted or overlooked in transmission and provide a coherent set of recommendations. Youth should be represented on a 50/50 basis with adults. Advance preparation and support of young people was essential together with facilitation appropriate to different age groups.
- **Dual Inter-linked Assemblies:** Two tables (adults) opted, with some reservations, for two parallel assemblies with effective linkage structures. This would ensure that youth (and adult) voices would be more fully heard within their own groups. Attention would need to be given to facilitating under-seven voices. What process would be used to select the youth participants and how to ensure special needs children and early-years were in the mix?

The deficiency in the dual model would be the absence of inter-generational dialogue. How the two assemblies came together was therefore important - there would need to be trust and openness in the relationship. One possible structure for the groups' meetings would be the 'goldfish bowl' model (where the adults could listen in on the youth conversation). The idea of the 'fifth province' was evoked - how to optimise the sum of the parts with scaffolding, support and balance. It was also important that the findings of the youth assembly be accorded equal weight with those of the adult assembly and that creative modes of mediating messages be facilitated.

- **Advantages & Disadvantages:** One (youth) table analysed the pros and cons of separate youth and adult assemblies and a joint assembly. The main advantage of separate assemblies was more attention to the individual voices of both groups without the danger of the youth voice being drowned out by adult voices. The corresponding weakness was the lack of the greater understanding and creativity of having complementary inter-generational voices.

**In summary** there was a disposition, on balance, to favour a single assembly. However, there were common concerns underlying the deliberations of all groups:

- ❖ **Support:** to ensure that children and young people (including under-seven's) were properly represented, they should be prepared and assisted to have their voices fully heard in the assembly process;
- ❖ **Facilitation:** to provide skilful facilitation of multiple age-groups, whether in a single or dual assemblies, to ensure that all were heard equally;
- ❖ **Inter-generational dialogue** :to provide space for the creativity and richness of inter-generational dialogue – whether through a single assembly or joint structures that allowed for meaningful engagement of two separate assemblies and
- ❖ **Unfiltered youth Voice:** that the voice of children and young people was not filtered or diluted by traditional deference to the adult voice when it comes to the making of recommendations to Government.

Anticipating the later conversation other suggestions referenced pre-assembly surveys; drawing on the output of engagement work of [BEACONS](#) and the [creative education](#) work of the Burren College of Art; addressing assessment as the tail that wags the dog in education as well as PE and mental health. There should be a national conversation with submissions from schools and organisations feeding into the process. Every school could have its own model of assembly.

### *Pre-Assembly Engagement* - Annex III

It was suggested that the period between now and the launch of the assembly was an opportunity to harvest information for presenting to the assembly on: (i) current reality in education; (ii) gathering perspectives of lesser-heard voices; (iii) identifying seeds of a better future; (iv) supporting other organisations and groups who are seeking to engage their constituencies to input to CAFÉ and (v) working with media on creating a national conversation.

Invited to name topics for discussion the following six themes were surfaced and groups assembled around these:

- **Why** a citizens' assembly on education now?
- Generating a **national conversation**;
- Engaging **minority voices**;
- Creating a **student-centred system**;
- Identifying the **seeds of a better future** and
- Addressing **mental health**.

**Conversations in a nutshell:** The conversations surfaced the urgent need for CAFÉ to address how education could resource young people to respond resiliently in a world traumatised by change. Education was an experience to which we've all been privy – there was an opportunity to engage a creative national conversation by asking good questions and listening attentively. There are many unheard voices from travellers and migrants to young offenders and those with special needs – we need to provide safe spaces where their voices can be heard and advocated authentically to the CAFÉ. Seeds of a better future can be accessed by gathering data across the system from students and parents and through action research – there are also alternative systems such as Steiner which enact a different philosophy to the mainstream from which we can learn. We need to advocate for a student-centred system which will challenge conventional wisdom about education priorities – changing mind-sets will be evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Finally mental health pressures on the young are omni-present both from within and without the education system – addressing this reality needs to be a conscious focus of policy.

These themes are elaborated below (and set out in full detail in Annex III):

- ❖ **Why CAFÉ now?** The world is traumatised by global changes - the results of covid, war, climate change and the digital revolution resulting in adverse childhood experiences ([ACEs](#)). We need to resource young people to respond to a new world as resilient, creative, independent people. Education isn't broken but it shouldn't contribute to ill health and it can definitely do better in responding to current reality. There is need for hope.
- ❖ **Generating a National Conversation:** People's engagement has been central to citizens assemblies that have had impact. CAFÉ provides an opportunity to stimulate the imagination of the nation around the future of education, a subject we've all experienced over many years. Creative responses could be sought from every school (4,000 schools) - and the public could be invited to contribute – 'make a mark'. We need to listen, to tap into new conversations with new voices, beyond the usual actors. Asking good questions is crucial: why go to school? What does a flourishing student or 'a school of the heart' look like? How might the learning of Irish be engaging? Why can CBA's and informal education be so much more satisfying in nurturing student agency? How to facilitate a latent consensus on the future needs of education to be nurtured into life? Finally, how to engage the media with CAFÉ?
- ❖ **Tapping into Minority Voices:** There are many minority groups with limited voice who need to be reached: travellers; young offenders; the disadvantaged; Ukrainian children and those in direct provision; those in special education without strong advocates; home schools and special schools; early childhood with trauma needs. To reach these groups and bring their voice to the assembly requires 'capturing mechanisms': safe spaces creating trusting and respectful relationships in which they can speak for themselves with processes using simple language; have advocates to speak on behalf of these groups; the transmission of knowledge to the CAFÉ needs to be authentic.
- ❖ **A Student-centred System:** This requires a democratic revolution in which, for example, students would have greater discretion in subject choice. A student-centred system would challenge the centrality of the Leaving Cert and points system and accord greater value to other skills and the arts. It would recognize different learning styles and diversity with multiple options. Moving towards a student-centred system would be an evolutionary process and would require changing mindsets by embracing ideas such as introducing wellness coordinators.
- ❖ **Seeds of a Better Future:** It was suggested that the seeds could be identified through gathering data from student councils, parent bodies, advocacy agencies, state bodies and BEACONS as well as action research generating empowerment in a cyclical process. Another group addressing the same theme suggested the need for



passionate educators meeting students where they are passionate; the importance of learning experientially and in interdisciplinary ways that explore the 'why' of subjects; applied project-based learning; whole-person learning; dialogic approaches to learning; learning beyond the confines of the curriculum as in responding to the needs of the community.

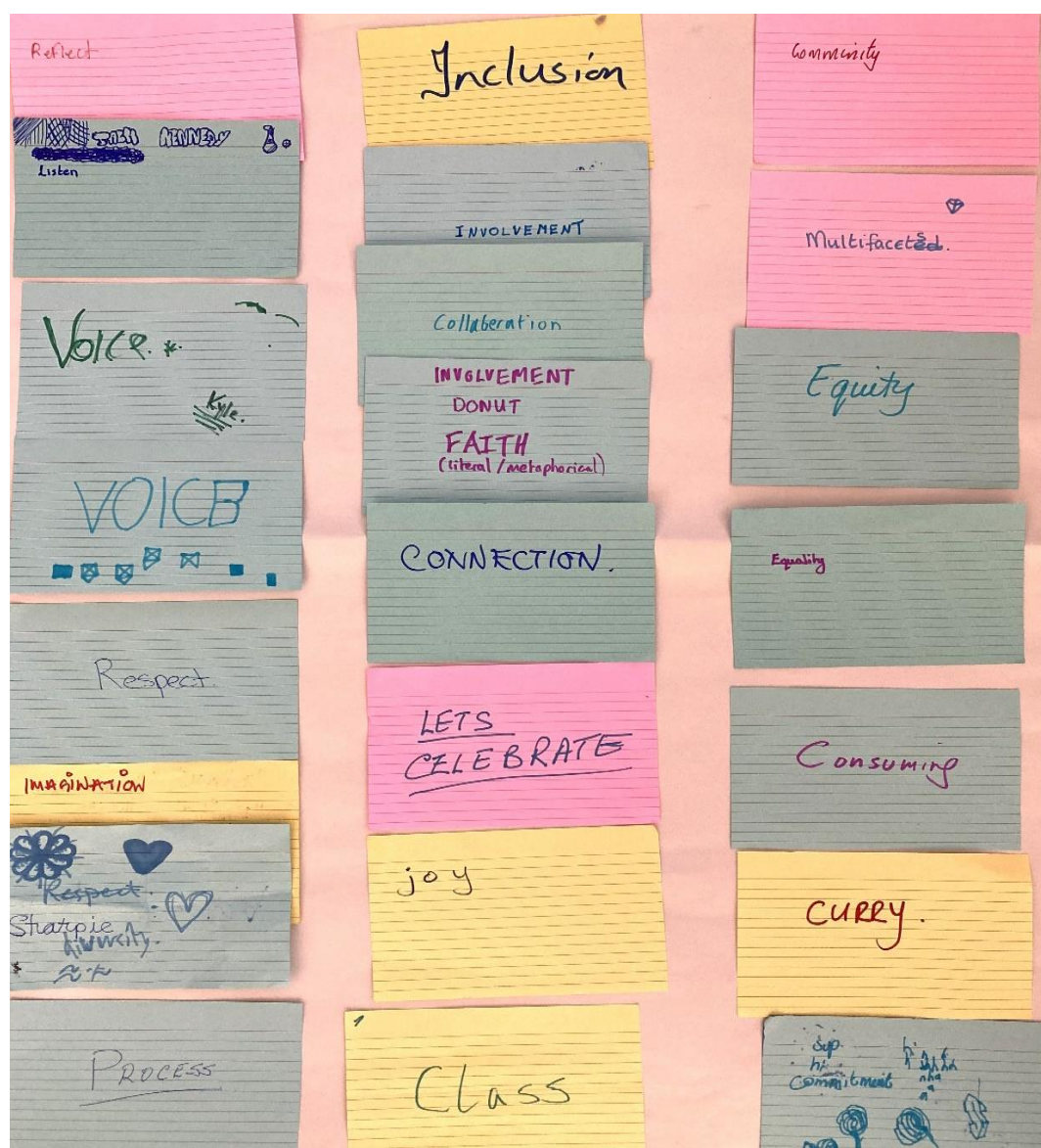
- ❖ **Mental Health Problems & Approaches:** Among the mental health challenges cited were ADHD, parental expectations, peer comparison, out-of-control classes, insufficient physical activity; depression and suicide; sleep issues; life online; bullying and exam pressure. Among the solutions proposed were more exercise to let off steam; having open conversations with parents; supporting teachers' classroom practice; regular check-in's with someone around mental health; minimising scope for comparing exam results; reduced screen time; meditation practice; continuous assessment and study workshops; coming down hard on bullying; the stigma around mental health needs to be a thing of the past – it needs to be a normalised discourse so that those with problems don't fall through the cracks.
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## A word that's important to be in the Conversation

- **Inclusion:** voice (x2); involment; collaboration; involvement; inclusion; community;
- **Values:** faith – literal/metaphorical; equality; equity; respect (x2); commitment;
- **Feelings:** joy; let's celebrate;
- **Process:** listen; reflect; imagination; connection; multifaceted;
- **Other:** consuming; curry; class.





## *Preferred Option – One or Two Assemblies*

### *& other helpful Suggestions*

#### **One Assembly**

**Table 1 (Adults)**

- To give effect to the commitment in the programme for government, adults and youth need to be in the same room so that youth are given agency and empowerment in the collective with their voices being unfiltered and contributing to a balance of diverse experiences.
- Even though youth make up less than 50% of the population they represent the bulk of those in education and they should have 50% representation with adults;
- Given the diversity of age groups the quality of facilitation is particularly important with diverse media to allow younger cohorts contribute; there should be listening and empowerment ahead of time through special training; contemporary children have real impact when they speak which needs to be experienced;
- Participants need to know that their contribution will make a difference.

**Table 2 (Youth group)**

- We want one big assembly including everyone because everyone should be heard.
- Young people can't be helped if they are not listened to. In two different assemblies young people can be overlooked;
- One assembly creates greater diversity;
- The assembly needs to look at continuous assessments, libraries, PE hall, mental health.

#### **Two Interpenetrating Assemblies**

**Tabel 3 (Adults)**

- Equity of views with voices in split groups and richer conversation in own age groups – while managing ages/profile of children and students? However, two separate rooms miss the potential richness of joint conversations?

- Age profile of youth assembly 7 – 17 years with explicit reference to under-sevens'
- How to blend the two groups: create a listening space where the adults listen to youth in a 'gold-fish' bowl discussion?
- Good facilitation is needed to ensure voices are heard and to guide participation;
- Equal weighting needs to be accorded to outcomes between the two assemblies;
- Trust and openness need to characterise the relationships within and between the two groups;
- There should be a national conversation with submissions from schools and organisations feeding into the process.

#### **Table 4 (Adults)**

- How can students be selected to assure equity across social classes – can the adult model of demographic representation be used?
- How can SEN voices be heard? Barriers to entry/attendance at the assembly can impact socio-economic equity;
- Perhaps develop surveys with help of Ombudsman - models exist;
- Include conversations from BEACONS and Burren College of Art events;
- Include early childhood education as equal player;
- Include assessment as a topic – 'the tail that wags the dog';
- Young people have to have agency and need to be protected;
- What is an acceptable channel where all feel included and validated? This needs to be realistic and respect common humanity. What intermediate structure can be created where adults and youth from their respective assemblies meet on common ground (5<sup>th</sup> Province) – this needs scaffolding and support and balance.

### **Pros and Cons of Single vs Two Assemblies**

#### **Table 5 (Youth group)**

- A youth assembly would allow youth freedom to speak with more individual attention to the student voice with more creativity and individual involvement.
- For an adult assembly there would likewise be more scope for individual voice.
- As against this individual assemblies would lack the fuller understanding and creativity of having complementary trans-generational voices.
- A mixed assembly would enjoy the best of both worlds with equality and equity though there would be a diminution of individual voices and the danger of the adult voice predominating and the youth voice not being taken seriously.
- What if young people go first and are joined later by adults?



## *Pre-Assembly Preparation*

### **Why have a Citizens Assembly on the Future of Education Now?**

- **The world is traumatised** – global changes with adverse childhood experiences (ACES) as a result of Covid, war, climate change;
- The **digital revolution**: positive but .....
- We need to **prepare for the future**, to respond to our new world;
- A future is up to young people but they need more resources; how to understand and how does education respond/update to change?
- We need to create **resilient fully independent people** rather than workers (industrial model);
- The world is a more global entity and education needs to respond;
- Education shouldn't lead to **ill-health**;
- Primary education is very positive. **The education system is not broken but it can definitely be better** – resources, arts, creativity;
- **Hope** is necessary.

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### **Generating a National Conversation in Preparation for CAFE**

- **Host conversations**: let CAFÉ be a catalyst for well-led (not boring) school level conversations; seek creative response from every school; professional conversations generating HOPE; public conversations 'leave a mark'; people's voice have registered on the assemblies that work;
  - **Stimulate** the imagination to bring out people's ideas – we're all invested;
  - **Talk** – have 'hushed conversations' – get people talking; short-form content; diverse; widespread and entertaining;
  - **Listen**: beyond the obvious conversations with the main actors – tap into new voices;
  - **Ask good questions**: 'If I had a magic wand?' Why do we go to school? What does it look like when a student is flourishing? How would we love to learn Irish – and everything else? Where is good teaching to be found (not solely in school)? What would 'school as heart' look like? Why is it that CBA's and informal education can be so much more satisfying in nurturing student agency?
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## **How to represent Minority Groups**

### **Minorities:**

- Traveller groups;
- Young offenders;
- Disadvantaged;
- Ukrainian children and direct provision parents;
- Special education – deprived who haven't got great advocates generally;
- Home schools and special schools;
- Disability – SEN – meaningful representation;
- Early childhood – trauma needs;

### **Mechanisms to reach Minorities:**

- What capturing mechanisms for 7 to 16 year olds? Have students a safe space in which to speak;
  - How will assembly consult?
  - Appoint advocate people for all of the above to bridge the information deficit – citizens advice bureau. The process needs simple language, trust, respect, relationships. Talking to and with children;
  - Inform the assembly – knowledge from where?
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## **Creating a Student-centred System**

- A massive democracy revolution is necessary if system is to become student-centred;
- Students having power to choose (subjects) e.g. film-making (steiner system);
- Is the Leaving Cert necessary? The points system defines much of education; Development of other skills; Education through arts;
- Movement towards student-centrism; it's necessary to recognize different learning styles and diversity;
- There is need for multiple options with 'main thread' as part of a tapestry of possibilities;
- Evolution is more probable than revolution;
- Extra-curricular activities are very important.
- Change of mindset e.g. wellness co-ordinators.

## **Identifying Seeds of a Better Future**

A process of data gathering and listening through:

- Child voice in schools heard through **student council**;
- Parental perspectives;
- Advocacy agencies + State bodies + BEACONS;
- Interpretations by educators/teachers;
- **Action research** – empowerment in the process – cyclical;
- Knock-on effect on children/educators/families.
- Working with the flow to see and meet people at their passion;
- Finding passionate people who can transmit or pass on their skill;
- Learning through experience – play other ways;
- Interdisciplinarity vs subjects: choices broad or deep vs binaries; understanding the why in real life terms and connecting the dots;
- John Dewey – do/learn; applied learning/project-based learning e.g. mini company vs rote learning; reflection- connection;
- Experiences beyond the normal day-to-day; the western world's view; how travel contributes; Amazon tribe – guiding and discovering, recognising the needs of the community and responding to those needs; what do we need to survive and thrive?
- Whole-person education – heart, hands and head;
- Protect/Integrating/Learning – dialogue-based education; co-creation.

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## **Mental Health – Problems & Approaches**

- ADHD – let off steam by exercising;
- High expectations from parents: talk to your parents about it;
- Teachers controlling class: teachers get workshops in how to control a class;
- Comparing yourself to others: keep results confidential;
- Lack of physical activity: more PE – get out and exercise;
- Depression and suicide: talk to someone – regular check-ins;
- Sleep issues: less homework, reduce screen time and go to bed early;
- Pressure from teachers: teachers can provide more support;
- Social life: block/remove the online;
- Home issues: talk to someone;
- Pressure: meditate – don't be hard on yourself;
- Teachers picking on students: report them;
- Bullying: serious punishment;
- Exam pressure: continuous assessment;
- Studying: studying workshops;
- Disruptive students: punish bad behaviour.

## **Other Comments on mental health**

- Parental hierarchy and pressure parents;

- The way others make you feel;
- Feeling like you can't talk to people – experience solution later on;
- Is there someone/something there?
- Need ways to cope – options;
- There is a growing trend in mental health problems – it's now normalised;
- There is a stigma around mental health – an outside/inside perspective.

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Margaret Gallagher: Childrens Rights Alliance

Michelle Keane: Chair, Teaching Council

Deirdre Duffy: Community Foundation Ireland

Dr Marie Griffin: School Principal

Dr Rose Dolan: MU Department of Education

Tom Boland: BH Associates

Diarmuid Creedon: INTO

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