Conversation with Students in Initial Teacher Education and Early Years Education

about

Citizens Assembly for Education (CAFÉ)

25 March 2021

Highest Aspiration for Education

Conversation with Students in Initial Teacher Education and Early Years Education

About

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Purpose: A group of some 32 students from initial teacher education and early years education convened online on 25 March 2021 for a conversation lasting 90 minutes where they explored what they wanted to see discussed at the Citizens Assembly for Education (CAFÉ) and how such an assembly could help bring the education system into alignment with the demands of a rapidly changing world (Invitation at Annex 1). Invitations were issued to students from a cross-section of colleges - DCU, Marino Institute of Education, NUI Maynooth, NUI Dublin, NUI Galway, UL, Mary Immaculate College and St Patrick's College Thurles.

This prototype event is the first in a series of conversations that is planned with students, teachers, parents, academics and others.

Structure/Approach

The format was a simple one. Apart from a welcome and scene-setting about CAFE by the hosts in plenary format, the participants were organised in break-out groups to discuss:

- ➢ How they were feeling at the start of the process;
- ➢ Their highest aspirations for the education system and the personal challenges for themselves in bringing this about;
- ➢ The greatest challenges for the education system in bringing about the desired future;
- ➢ The most helpful contribution the CAFÉ could make and
- ➢ Concluding comments.

Views in response to questions were harvested in plenary sessions through the Zoom chat function and the use of 'Mentimeter'.

Summary of Views

The following is a summary of the detailed views which are elaborated under thematic headings in the following pages.

Students' Feelings & Aspirations

Feelings: Perhaps unsurprisingly at a time of Covid-19 lockdown and fresh from online classes, when asked how they were feeling, the prevailing sense was one of stress, busy, overwhelm and seeking to cope.

Highest Aspirations: The highest aspirations for education which are echoed throughout the report were headed up by inclusion, child-centred differentiation, ambition and communication.

Personal Challenges in realizing desired Future

- Stress, having enough time, over-crowded curriculum, planning;
- Resources vs fear of burn-out;
- How to provide differentiated support;
- Insufficient knowledge or emotional capacity;
- Working within constraints/rigidities of the system;
- For Early Years students the over-arching challenge was of recognition.

Challenges for the Education System in realizing desired Future

- Changing mind-sets, addressing vested interests;
- Implementing change – curriculum and assessment;
- Resourcing post-Covid, particularly for most needy;
- Addressing assessment and the leaving certificate;
- Revaluing teachers, SNA's and student teachers.

Most helpful Contributions CAFÉ could make

- Explore the nature and purpose of education;
- Give voice and a platform to diverse groups in society;
- Explore how to improve the teaching of Irish*;
- Change assessment and create new metrics of value;
- Create greater appreciation and respect for the profession of teaching – and early years and SNA's;
- Greater teacher autonomy and the curriculum and
- Provide more resources for education.

*The importance of Irish and how it is taught and resourced generated very considerable comment in both 'Mentimeter' and zoom chat.

Check-in - How are you feeling?

Stressed!

Busy but grand :)

Lack of motivation

Frustrating

Busy

Overwhelmed

Challenging

Busy

Trying to adapt

Draining

Busy

Coping

Students are beyond stressed.

Finding new ways

What key words should be included in any conversation regarding 'Highest Aspirations'?

- INCLUSION
- SMALL CLASSES
- DIFFERENTIATION
- CHILD CENTRED
- CONTINUITY
- COMMUNICATION
- SMALLER CLASSES
- AMBITION
- PLAY
- HELPING AND SUPPORTING

What will be the most difficult personal challenges, if you are going to play your full part in the aspired for future?

Stress/Time/Planning

- Having time
- Managing levels of stress after a school day from putting 100% in school;
- Planning and stress
- Planning
- Managing stress
- Wanting to help as much as you can, but knowing you can only do so much
- Balancing the paperwork, planning, etc. with high quality practical input without experiencing burn out.
- Lack of support
- Over packed curriculum
- Having the time to help everyone
- Managing levels of stress after a school day from putting 100% in
- Having time
- Using time wisely
- Social Life as a teacher

Resources/Supports
- Resources
- Lack of support
- More classrooms and teachers
- Support from at a school and government level - will I be able to thrive in this career? Or will I burn out and become frustrated?
- Resources and knowledge available
- Not having the facilities and resources to help the children that really need it
- Lack of supports for teachers and schools
- Technology
- Parents support

Self-Confidence/Competence
- That I wouldn't be able to be that 1 good adult or that I wouldn't be able to have that positive impact on the child.
- Motivation

- Becoming informed on learners' experiences
- Lack of knowledge in certain areas
- Lack of knowledge
- That my own personal experiences with life would lead me to respond emotionally to situations which sometimes isn't the best response
- Lack of knowledge around mental health in classroom and how to support it.
- That I would be overly emotionally involved

Individual vs System
- Bringing change forward when dealing with established educators
- Integrating with others to ensure an integrated curriculum
- Changing the dichotomy of private and public education
- Accepting changes and implementing changes (those who are not straight out of college)
- Making a difference as an individual in a large-scale system
- Working within the confines of a strict curriculum
- The assessment modes laid out by the department don't suit all students so we have to try and help them adapt to be able meet the requirements
- Providing continuity from each level of the education system
- Represent student educator's views
- Funding and investment by the government
- Increased investment co-ordination of qualification requirements across gov. department

Differentiated Needs
- Finding somewhere to fully educate ourselves on how to include different needs in our classes
- Differentiating for all learners
- Wanting to give each child an individualised experience that will help them to achieve their potential in a world changing faster than my skillset, and meeting the curricular / DES requirements at the same time.
- Becoming informed on learners' experiences

Early Years
- Being recognised as professional as early years educator
- Recognition of early years
- Issues in relation to ECEC recognised
- Professional recognition; Society recognition; Pay and conditions for ECEC student voice represented

What do you think will be the most difficult challenges for the education system as a whole, if the aspired for future is going to become a reality?

Status Quo & Privilege vs Changing Mind-sets

- ❖ Those for whom the current system benefits not willing to accept change that may challenge their success
- ❖ Our constitution (and therefore state) does not take responsibility to ensure that the educational experience of all children is consistent and fair.
- ❖ Broadening the mind-sets of teachers and planners
- ❖ Agreement and compromise between various authoritative bodies regarding new policy
- ❖ Fear of change for those who have
- ❖ Why we learn, what it's for.
- ❖ Empathising with the learners' experience
- ❖ Changing certain attitudes
- ❖ Political ideologies
- ❖ Rise of consumerism and devaluation of education
- ❖ Shift in language and thinking. Avoiding terms like "weaker students". They may be weaker in rote learning but stronger in learning by doing
- ❖ Focusing on the learners rather than exams
- ❖ If a student fails an exam... Have they failed the exam or has the system failed them?
- ❖ Embracing new attitudes
- ❖ Reactionary thinking.
- ❖ Evolving with technology
- ❖ Social media influences and its affect

Implementing Systemic Change - Curriculum/Assessment

- ❖ Designing a continuous approach from Early Education all the way to third level. One that allows for the needs and abilities of such a diverse society.
- ❖ Being able to change the system and allowing it
- ❖ Evolving with the times
- ❖ It has to be end-to-end integrated.

- ❖ Have continuity of learning from early years up to secondary
- ❖ Implementing changes that will help the future
- ❖ Creating a form of assessment to match the changes
- ❖ Standardised testing in deis schools doesn't always show the correct level of intelligence of student who are bright but not in the academic sense
- ❖ Getting rid of standardised testing that does not suit all Students
- ❖ Assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning the standardised tests only suit 1 type of learner not fair on other types of learner
- ❖ Creativity at the heart
- ❖ Accepting change and implementing change
- ❖ Implementation of changes
- ❖ New curriculum
- ❖ Moving away from the old curriculum to the new one
- ❖ revised curriculum
- ❖ Integration and planning - the talk being walked

Resources and their Allocation

- ❖ After COVID, will anyone be willing to invest in education if they've been speaking poorly of teachers
- ❖ Recession in the wake of covid and lack of investment in education
- ❖ More classrooms and teachers
- ❖ Government funding
- ❖ Funding and resources available
- ❖ Government funding and investment
- ❖ Funding
- ❖ It doesn't cater for the weaker students and that financially the resources aren't always there for the children that need it most

Miscellaneous
- ❖ More emphasis on mental health support
- ❖ Adding modules in ITE courses to cover these changes
- ❖ Recognition of Early Years

What are the most helpful contributions a Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Education could make?

The Nature and Purpose of Education
- What is the purpose of Education in Ireland
- Revise the expectation that people need to know what they want to do "for the rest of their lives" at the end of 6th year.
- To reach agreement on the purpose of education in Ireland
- To hear the common misconceptions that the general public have about education
- Bringing exposure to the issues being brought forward by educators
- To hear the common misconceptions that the general public have about education
- What is the purpose of education
- Less business/economic emphasis
- Agreement on a common ethos for education to ensure continuity and efficiency
- Redefine the classroom
- What do we really want to achieve through education?
- Taking learning outside the classroom
- Identifying the aims and goals of education
- Think about the end product. What sort of society do we want? How can schools contribute to this society?
- Identifying what the public want from their education system
- Continuity of education
- Co-ordination between early years (play-based) to primary school (wrote-learning)
- Reconnecting to nature and our natural learning genius that aligns and has the same principles as nature

Voice & Platform
- Giving a voice to educators - other than the route of unions
- Some members of the citizens assembly may be parents who have the best interests of children at heart and have great insights
- Give a voice to children
- Reflect the diversity of people in society and their needs
- The role of teacher voice and student voice when policies are being developed

- Involving children in decision making and creating an awareness of their ability to enact change (in many areas)
- Giving people in education a voice
- Gives a voice to the whole of society in terms of education in an organised way
- Represent student educators views
- Putting education to the forefront of public attention e.g. media attention
- Time to allow teachers to listen to children

Assessment

- Changing assessment methods
- New metric of value sounds good as explained
- That standardised testing needs to be changed
- Looking at standardised testing and changing it as it does Not suit every type of learners
- Standardised testing needs to be revised
- Implement different types of assessment
- Less emphasis on leaving cert attainment
- Get rid of the idea of "wasting points".

Value & Respect in Teaching
- To break the stigma that teachers are glorified babysitters
- Appreciating and respecting the profession of teaching as a 'real' career- not just easy finishing at 2:30 etc.
- Value SEN, SNAs, classroom assistants, and acknowledge that more than one adult is required to give students a valuable, meaningful classroom experience.
- More respect for teachers and student teachers
- Break the stigma that teaching is an "easy" career which is incredibly frustrating to hear
- Respect for student teachers as we study sociology, philosophy and all these abstract subjects to help us teach - the ordinary people don't realise this

Curriculum

- More flexible curriculum
- Teacher Autonomy on Curriculum Content
- Why the curriculum and standardised testing needs to be changed

Resources
- Realise more funding is needed e.g. SNAs and Learning support and the impact they can have on a child's development and learning
- Smaller class sizes (x 4)
- Need for better funding
- What supports and resources are needed within education?

Early Years
- Professional recognition for early years
- Value early years professional
- The emphasis on third-level as a marker of success

Miscellaneous
- To Support children more
- Ties with the department will help the group's voice be heard
- How we "rate" schools
- Recognition of the lack of opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively
- Emphasis on wellbeing
- Diversity
- We need to have a more diverse teaching staff - gender, social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation

Gaeilge
- Looking at the stigma around Gaeilge
- Recognition of the lack of opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively
- Gaeilge, Gaeilge, Gaeilge ....
- Look at Gaeilge and how it's not working and how to break that stigma
- Gaeilge is so so so important needs to be used and
- Irish language is key to our education system but limits the potential of diversity among teachers
- More emphasis and proper planning for Gaeilge.
- Look at Irish and put more funding into it.
- In order to teach Irish we do need a high standard of geailge because in order to teach it you need a strong level of Irish as the classes need good Irish teachers
- Gaeilge needs to have an emphasis and it needs a positive outlook in order to make children excited about it
- LOOK AT IRISH AND PUT MORE FUNDING INTO IT

- Gaeilge needs to be reformed at second level
- Gaeilge needs to have an importance put on speaking
- Gaeilge needs to have an emphasis placed on speaking and comprehension speaking Irish is so so so important and it sadly often depends on the teacher that you have

Comments from Chat re Gaeilge

- ❖ I agree about specialist Gaeilge teachers.
- ❖ I agree, fostering a more positive view towards Gaeilge by removing the view that it is a 'burden' on teachers by implementing team teaching could be the first step to promoting an over-all more positive view.
- ❖ I think it's important to have a basic understanding of the language but there should be better supports to enable people to speak Gaeilge, if it's to be the management language of the Primary classroom, it needs to be something that all team members in the classroom have a knowledge of to ensure it's supporting long-term attainment (including for less confident educators).
- ❖ The foundation of Gaeilge is not taught in first year and therefore too hard to catch up in later years.
- ❖ I agree with the point about Irish being a requirement for primary teaching, I don't think a lack of one subject should mean that someone should miss out on the opportunity to educate students

Concluding Comments/Thanks

➢ There is such collective wisdom in this group - imagine if teachers were provided with more opportunities to discuss the big ideas! Yes!

➢ Thank you! This has been such an insightful discussion and I look forward to hearing more about the journey of the CAFÉ

➢ There needs to be more Think-Pair-Share opportunities for educators incorporating all levels, early years to 3rd level / apprenticeship providers, so we can be on a fundamentally linked timeline for education for all that is meaningful.

➢ Yes, excellent point! In my 2 years in ITE, I have not had conversations of this depth about education.

➢ Thank you!

➢ Also, I'm not sure if they were included, but a huge number of Early Years, Primary and Post-Primary teachers are coming through Hibernia, they should be linked in too. :)

➢ Thank you! Thanks you; thank you! Thank you so much Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

➢ Go raibh mile maith agaibh, having an opportunity like this to share ideas and views has been extremely beneficial!

➢ Thank you all, this was fantastic.

➢ Wonderful session

➢ I agree with ( ) in relation to team teaching, I spent one placement team teaching in 2nd year and it was a fantastic experience. It brought an opportunity for various strengths to be employed and the students to have more focused attention when needed.

➢ Thank you, great discussion

➢ Thanks very much, this was an excellent opportunity!

Invitation to an online Conversation - Thursday 25th March 4 -5.30pm

Citizens Assembly for Education: Initial Teacher Education & Early Years Education

Zoom Link: CAFE: 25March: 4pm

The Programme for Government commits to a Citizens Assembly for Education (CAFÉ). As the post-Covid moment comes into sight this is an exciting opportunity to look afresh at what education needs to be in the 21st century to meet the needs of students and citizens as life-long learners.

"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 young people and those being educated are central."   (Programme for Government)

Arising from the 2018 symposium at the Burren College of Art 'Towards a More Creative Education System' a Citizens Assembly for Education (CAFÉ) Group was formed to progress a Citizens Assembly for Education in which the voice of those being educated would be central. This ambition was realized with the above commitment given in the programme for government. We are now interested in preparing the soil of public opinion to ensure that the deliberations of the assembly – when it happens in the lifetime of the government - are as rich and productive as they can be. With this in mind we are hosting a series of conversations with interested parties across the field of education.

In this conversation, we want to focus on the voice of student teachers who will be at the coalface of education as we face into an uncertain future post. What do prospective teachers, including those in early years, want to see discussed in a citizens assembly and how can such an assembly help to set the scene for the changes that need to happen to bring the education systems into alignment with the demands of a rapidly changing world?

The format will be participatory with small-group discussions and feedback. We hope you can join us.

To join just click on this Link: CAFE: 25 March: 4pm