

Chapter 6

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS - A LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH TO EDUCATION

6.1 The expression of a Vision and Principles in Chapter 5 leads naturally to consideration of the educational needs and aspirations of learners. It is the extent to which post-primary education can identify and meet the educational needs and aspirations of all pupils that will define its quality and effectiveness. We take the view that it would not be enough to change the post-primary education system simply to remove its most widely criticised aspects and to maintain existing standards: such an outcome would be little more than change for the sake of change. Rather the new system must be capable of achieving higher standards for all, responding to each individual's range of abilities, interests and aspirations and relating the needs of the economy and society to the knowledge, skills and understanding which schools will aim to develop in their pupils.

6.2 Any proposals for change to the post-primary system also need to take account of the continuously developing social, technological and work environments in which the education service is set. The dramatic adjustments in values, human relationships, jobs, work patterns, communication systems, legislation for the human rights of the child, and the rising expectations for an ever higher standard of living, are forcing schools to review and develop their provision. Those schools which are focused on the needs and aspirations of their pupils and committed to working with parents have recognised the need for self-assessment and working with others in the community and world of work: they are having most success in meeting the pressures for change. The alternative presents the danger of becoming evermore introverted, marginalized and ineffective in meeting the needs of pupils: in such circumstances, self-preservation can supplant pupils' entitlement to the best possible education, almost as the driving force of the school. All schools, and those who work with them, need to keep reminding themselves that we have moved from a world where possibilities were limited to a world where much more is accessible and

the range of possible achievement is limitless. In such a world, schools need to be focused firmly on the centrality of the learner in the education process, and be open to new ways of learning and teaching. The extent to which an innovation helps to meet the educational needs of the child should be an important criterion in determining whether and when it should be introduced.

Modern Research into Intelligence

6.3 Advocacy of a more learner-centred approach to education was a recurring theme in our public meetings and in written submissions to the Review Body: it was a theme common to all shades of opinion on the post-primary education system. Another matter, also raised frequently in consultation and which is directly related to the development and practice of a learner-centred approach, is the need for schools to take account of modern research into the nature of intelligence, specifically the concept of multiple intelligences. Older notions of intelligence saw it as a single dimension that was fixed at an early age and predictable. Modern understanding views intelligence as multi-faceted and suggests that everyone has the potential to develop expertise and competence in a range of abilities and aptitudes. There are a number of approaches to the idea of multiple intelligences, but all describe a range of intelligences including linguistic, artistic, logical-mathematical, musical and spatial intelligence. The older concept of intelligence sets limits on what it was believed young people were capable of achieving, whereas the modern idea of multiple intelligences presents a richer and wider view of human potential.

6.4 This and other research is supporting what perceptive teachers have always recognised, namely that each child has a range of abilities: a child is not usually narrowly endowed in terms of ability and if she or he is to develop competence and confidence as a learner, the learning and curriculum experienced needs to reach out to the whole range of the child's abilities. The essence of modern ideas on multiple intelligences is that not only should education be as broad and stimulating in scope as possible, but so should be the range of learning and teaching methods in order to relate to and engage each child. Recognition of the value of a wider range of types of intelligence than has traditionally been acknowledged in our education system requires change in school structures, in classroom organisation and in the curriculum.

6.5 Research findings on multiple intelligences support the case for a broad curriculum for all children and that, given the opportunity to learn across the whole curriculum, the learner's prospects for achievement are greater, and motivation can be strengthened. This view is also endorsed in "Unlocking Creativity" (see Chapter 2). The Review Body strongly endorses the views in the following extracts from the "Unlocking Creativity" documents -

"All people have creative abilities and we all have them differently. Many people do not discover their creative abilities because of lack of opportunity, encouragement and skill. When individuals do find their creative strengths, it can have an enormous impact on self-esteem and on overall achievement. Creativity relates to the capacity of all people to combine skills, knowledge and resources to solve problems, in new ways, in any context, and within any group." (1)

"Issues of creativity and of cultural development concern the whole of education, including the shape of the curriculum, methods of teaching, ethos, and the relationships between teachers and learners." (2)

"A balance must be found between the need to assess and measure progress and the desire to provide flexible routes to accreditation and to reward creative endeavour. Creativity must be recognised and valued as a core element in the processes of learning and assessment." (3)

The Curriculum and Assessment Continuum

6.6 A learner-centred approach to education has implications for learning and teaching in early years centres and primary and post-primary schools, and for the framework of the curriculum, assessment, and reporting arrangements.

(1)&(2) Department of Culture, Arts and Libraries (DCAL), Department of Education (DE), Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (DHFETE). (2001) **Unlocking Creativity: A Strategy for Development** Pages 15 and 16 Belfast. DCAL, DE, DETI and DHFETE

(3) DCAL, DE, DETI and DHFETE. (2001) **Unlocking Creativity: Making it Happen** Page 28 Belfast. DCAL, DE, DETI and DHFETE

The process of education from age four to nineteen needs to be designed, planned and implemented as a continuum. When children move from pre-school centres to primary school and then to post-primary school there should be continuity in their learning and experience of the curriculum. The learning and teaching provided should be informed by an assessment system that is both diagnostic and formative and enables children, teachers and parents to be well-informed about achievement across the curriculum and about progress in response to any interventions to meet special needs or circumstances. Learning and teaching should be geared towards opening up options and possibilities, not closing them down.

6.7 Focusing on the child as the learner at the centre of all that a school provides also obliges the school to develop its curriculum and deploy its staff, both professional and support staff, in ways that guarantee, for the child, flexibility, choice and opportunity, coupled with objective guidance on courses, options and career pathways. Again feedback from the public consultation process supported greater freedom for post-primary schools to develop their provision to meet both their pupils' and local needs, and to build on areas in which they have particular expertise.

6.8 In our view, flexibility and choice in curriculum provision necessitate new ways of organising, managing and delivering learning and teaching. Many post-primary schools in Northern Ireland are too small to be able to offer a sufficiently wide range of courses to fourteen to sixteen year-olds to ensure that there is real choice and flexibility related to career aspirations: they will need to co-operate with other schools and other providers of education and training and to develop distance learning if their pupils are to have the range of opportunities to which they are entitled. These developments will require resourcing, piloting and evaluation and the sharing of good practice, staff and facilities, if the interests of the pupils are to be accommodated properly and the prospect of raising standards for all is to be realised.

6.9 We believe that flexibility and choice must increase progressively in curricular provision across ages eleven to nineteen. In the main, the curriculum followed from age eleven to fourteen should be common in scope in all schools, but even at this stage, pupils should be introduced to the wider choice of courses available from age fourteen and to the broad career paths from which

they can select as they move through the age fourteen to nineteen phase of full-time education and training.

Guidance for Careers

6.10 We also believe that the careers education programme, which should include informed, objective guidance from professionally qualified staff within the school and elsewhere, should begin at KS3 and develop in both scope and significance throughout KS4 and beyond.

6.11 In our view, schools, in partnership with external agencies, including specialists in careers guidance in the further and higher education sectors, need to re-examine current provision to determine how best to improve all aspects of careers education, and to ensure that careers guidance is fully integrated into the curriculum and given high status. Every pupil in post-primary education needs to be guaranteed easy and responsive access to expert advice either in person or through tele- or video-conference link.

6.12 Our emphasis on careers guidance is deliberate: if pupils are to make better choices of courses and careers they need expert support and guidance, including good quality information. The availability of reliable guidance is not only important at the stages when choice of courses related to career pathway takes place, ie, in Years 10 and 12, but is also important year on year if pupils are to be assisted in circumstances where they have yet to clarify their choices and pathways and, albeit in a minority of cases, where they want to change their minds after choices have been made. These issues are discussed in more detail in Chapter 11.

Parity of Esteem for Schools and Curricular Pathways

6.13 In our Vision of post-primary education, we anticipate that schools will wish to develop distinctive specialisms or emphases in provision, for example in science and technology, the performing arts, languages, multi-media, the environmental sciences, and sport. Such specialism, coupled with the distinctive ethos of a school, will define the institution clearly and this will be of value to pupils and parents when they are considering their choice of

post-primary school. We also anticipate that in making provision for fourteen to eighteen year-olds there will be growing co-operation between schools and institutions of further and higher education. This may entail pupils moving from one campus to another for particular courses or staff working on more than one campus. These arrangements could be complemented and facilitated by information and communication technology, specifically learning on-line.

6.14 An important issue for pupils and parents, as well as for schools and institutions of further and higher education, is the development of the status and esteem of different curricular choices and career pathways through further and higher education and training. We are convinced that access to a wider range of subjects for pupils in the fourteen to eighteen age range, and more openness to different combinations of courses and units of courses, will help to erode the current harmful stereotyping of the academic, vocational and occupational pathways. Whilst the academic pathway and its associated qualifications will continue to attract young people and to be of value to the economy and to society, we are convinced that, taken together, economic imperatives and the need to provide all young people with opportunities to exploit their talents to the full, underline the need for a significant work-related component in education. The value of vocational education that informs young people about broad areas of employment, and occupational training that provides them with the knowledge and skills for specific jobs, must be reflected in increased esteem for such learning. We feel that employers and further and higher education providers have particularly important roles in raising that esteem; employers will have to demonstrate their recognition of the value of such learning, and universities will have to provide progression routes, or stepping stones, to higher education for all young people, regardless of the nature of their post-16 learning.

6.15 It is important, if we are to provide for parity of esteem, that education in Northern Ireland should move away from the sterile and misleading labelling of some courses as academic (and, by inference, as high value) and others as vocational (and by inference, of lower value). Many of the successful economies across the world are seeking convergence of previously separate academic and technical/vocational routes in their education systems. Their judgement is that as knowledge-based industries become ever more important to their competitiveness in world markets, they need employees who have had a broad general education in which there is a blend of theoretical and applied

learning. Without the foundations of a broad set of transferable skills, employees will be unable to manage successfully in an environment where jobs and ways of working change continuously.

Learning and Teaching in the 21st Century

6.16 Learning and teaching in our schools have been undergoing change prompted by curriculum requirements, research in multiple intelligences, developments in assessment and examinations, the increasing availability and use of computers in classrooms and by the recent re-emphasis on improving learning and teaching as a key to raising standards. Developments external to schools also have implications for learning and teaching in that the rapid expansion of access to computers in homes, youth clubs, and public buildings has allowed many children to advance the development of their computer skills ahead of those of their teachers, and has raised their expectations of what should be available in schools to support their learning. The current investment by Government to develop teachers' computer skills is intended to meet these pedagogic needs and raise awareness of the potential of the computer as an environment as well as an aid for learning.

6.17 For the future, teachers need to be supported in developing further their skills and given the resources to do the job we all expect of them. Society in Northern Ireland has a high level of esteem for teachers and education in general, compared with other countries. Our teachers are well-qualified, professional in their approach, and hard working. If we are to respond to the needs and demands of education in the 21st Century, a priority must be to effect continuous improvement in teacher education at the initial, induction and in-service stages. In order to feel confident in their planning, management and evaluation of children's learning, teachers need access to ongoing professional development of the highest quality. Continuing professional development must provide opportunities for teachers of the same subject, topic or theme to work collaboratively, to engage in peer learning and to share good practice and resources. Opportunities must also be available for schools to work co-operatively with external agencies such as CCEA, the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS) and the Universities in research in curriculum, assessment and examining.

6.18 In broad terms, the strategy for learning and teaching for the 21st Century must focus on the empowerment of the learner, on the role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning, and on the interdependence of learners and teachers in the achievement of high standards.

Key Issues for Post-Primary Education

6.19 In developing the post-primary school system to meet the educational needs and aspirations of pupils and their parents, other important matters have to be addressed. These include respect for the human rights of the child, the implications of social disadvantage for the delivery of education, special educational needs, the recognition of equality of opportunity, a commitment to social inclusion, and the role of education in promoting a culture of tolerance.

The Human Rights of the Child

6.20 It is our firm belief that only a system of post-primary education which provides schools with the responsibility, freedom and resources to tailor provision to meet individual needs, can properly meet and respond to basic human rights principles. We believe strongly that learner-centred education will not only honour the dignity of the individual but ensure that decisions are taken in young people's best interests, and in keeping with the requirements of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The views of the young people whom we met during the Review and other young people's views expressed to the Review Body, including those in a research⁽⁴⁾ report commissioned by Save the Children, had a particular influence on our analysis of the type of post-primary system which we believe will reduce educational inequalities, improve access and opportunity for all, and lead to higher achievement.

(4) Leonard, M., and Davey, C. (2001), *Thoughts on the 11-Plus, Belfast: Save the Children*

Social Disadvantage

6.21 Research⁽⁵⁾ has demonstrated that living in socially disadvantaged circumstances affects educational attainment in both material and other ways. In terms of material circumstances, children from disadvantaged backgrounds may not have sufficient space at home to undertake homework, and their dietary intake may be inadequate in ways which adversely affect brain growth and development. About one-third of our children are socially disadvantaged, ie, are poor or deprived (using receipt of means-tested benefits as an indicator). These children may not be able to participate in some school activities, particularly where travel and overnight costs are incurred or specialist equipment is needed.

6.22 Their families are also more likely than others to be composed of adults who themselves have comparatively low levels of educational attainment and the effects of this on their parenting practices and on their own children's development may be both attitudinal and practical. For example, the parents may hold negative attitudes towards the value of educational qualifications and attainment; they may be pessimistic, sceptical or cynical about the possibility of equality of opportunity and the value of educational attainment; they may be less able to help their children with school work. All of these factors may contribute to under-performance by their children, relative to their peers.

6.23 Schools need to ensure that their policies and provision to promote positive attitudes to learning are informed by the best evidence on school strategies which have been shown to be effective in motivating, engaging and empowering children from disadvantaged circumstances to succeed.⁽⁶⁾ There is exemplary practice in this area in some schools in Northern Ireland which should be shared across the whole post-primary sector. Schools with strength in this work should be supported in providing guidance and practical help to other schools in the development of policy, staff, resources and accommodation.

⁽⁵⁾ Cox, T. (ed.), (2000) *Combating Educational Disadvantage: Meeting the Needs of Vulnerable Children*. London: Falmer Press.

⁽⁶⁾ Gallagher, T., Shuttleworth, I., and Gray, C. (1998), *Improving Schools in Northern Ireland*. Research Monograph 7 Belfast: Northern Ireland Economic Council

Special Needs

6.24 There is also a wide variety of specialised educational needs which children may have either permanently or from time to time and which are relevant to their education and the work of educationalists. They represent barriers to the pupil's learning which expert educators and other professionals seek to help them overcome. We have found it helpful to consider several different categories of special educational needs:

- children who experience disrupted education perhaps because of difficult social circumstances such as being 'looked after' or because they are themselves school age parents;
- children with additional needs arising from emotional and behavioural problems;
- children with additional needs arising from sensory and physical disabilities;
- children with special needs arising from severe learning difficulties;
- children with special needs arising from moderate learning difficulties;
- the additional needs of gifted and creative children;
- the special needs of delicate children (those with substantial long-standing chronic illnesses requiring frequent medical interventions).

6.25 Children with such needs or these kind of circumstances may constitute at any one time as much as 20% of the school age population, and consideration of appropriate provision for their educational needs has formed an important part of our Review.

6.26 Children's social, medical and other needs are usually inextricably linked with their educational performance. While there are many excellent examples of good practice, there is no doubt that catering for the range of special needs outlined above requires extra resources and high levels of staff skill and expertise. While it is sometimes difficult for individual schools to be able to deal

effectively and comprehensively with the full range of needs children may have, they can often make progress in partnership with expertise in special schools and elsewhere. While schools do not operate in isolation from other agencies, each has different priorities and these are not always complementary. There is scope for improvement in both the quality and range of education provision available for the groups of children in the kinds of circumstances mentioned above, and the way in which that provision is organised both within the education service and in conjunction with other public services.

6.27 The overall objective of provision in this area should be the holistic development of every young person and the achievement of equality of opportunity for them through mainstreamed educational provision enhanced where appropriate by -

- access to specialist outreach support (this is discussed further in Chapter 12.5);
- improved communication and co-operation between all partners involved in their education and welfare. This includes parents, teachers and schools, the education and library boards, the public health and social services, the probation and youth services and the criminal justice service.

6.28 The special needs a child may have cannot be addressed properly by public service departments working separately. Rather, all the public services must come together in a co-ordinated way to support the pupil's social and personal development and educational attainment. Thus we believe that the development of learning support arrangements, in which specialists from health care, social services and education work collaboratively and in partnership with schools, should be a high priority in any future arrangements (as proposed in Chapter 12.)

Equality and Inclusion

6.29 Throughout all stages of this Review we have been mindful of the views expressed by parents, young people, teachers and representatives of a wide cross-section of schools, about the causes and effects of inequality of opportunity within the present post-primary arrangements. We readily

acknowledge that much effort has been made by teachers and considerable resources have been directed through a range of special initiatives to help counter the influence of social disadvantage, to promote social inclusion and to address underachievement. To an extent, these initiatives are aimed at the symptoms rather than the underlying causes of inequality in our education system. We accept that schools alone cannot be expected to remedy the effects of social disadvantage in education. Accordingly, an important focus of our work has been to develop procedures, systems and structures which will empower and assist all schools to provide equality of opportunity and promote social inclusion.

A Culture of Tolerance and Respect

6.30 A strategic approach to the promotion of a culture of tolerance within the education system should embrace all schools. We would endorse the sentiment in "Towards a Culture of Tolerance: Education for Diversity",⁽⁷⁾ that it is not enough for children to be educated simply to tolerate one another, rather education should aim to provide young people with an active and informed respect for and appreciation of the rich diversity of our cultures. We believe that schools should be able to explore, encourage and facilitate activities which contribute to this objective, and which promote attitudinal change in society. Such approaches might include measures to make schools more open and attractive through their values and curricular experiences, or through active partnerships and sharing of facilities and good practice. For example, within the curriculum, music, creative and expressive studies and sport offer excellent opportunities for co-operation, partnerships and the development of mutual understanding and respect across school sectors.

6.31 In recognising that teachers and others in schools have a pivotal role in promoting understanding and respect for diversity, we consider that for meaningful progress to be made, these values must be promoted at all levels within the education service and in the wider community. We are confident that our recommendations, if implemented, will provide the foundation for real progress in this area.

(7) *The Working Group on the Strategic Promotion of Education for Mutual Understanding (1999) Towards a Culture of Tolerance: Education for Diversity, Bangor: Department of Education*

Summary

6.32 This chapter has highlighted a number of key issues and problems which all education systems for the 21st Century will need to address. These include the implications of modern conceptualisations of intelligence, developing ideas on curriculum and assessment, the need to improve careers guidance, the need to promote greater parity of esteem across all types of qualifications and the implications of modern ideas on teaching and learning. In addition, we have highlighted a number of broader concerns which modern education systems will need to take into account. These include the implications of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the importance of tackling social deprivation and promoting social inclusion, the continuing need to provide for special educational needs, to promote equality and inclusion and to promote a culture of tolerance and respect. All of these issues will need to be addressed, but arguably the ability of post-primary education in Northern Ireland to do so is constrained by the limited resources available to individual schools and the restricted extent of co-operation between them.