

In my opinion: Senior cycle is about much more than the Leaving Certificate



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News of a review of senior cycle education is exciting and scary. Recent experiences with Junior Cycle (JC) change confirm how difficult school reform can be. Perhaps one lesson from the JC experience is that we didn't have the right conversations, especially at the outset. This time, arguably, the stakes are higher. The nation's love-hate relationship with the Leaving Certificate (LC) adds to the complexity. In my opinion, it's important that the conversations should not be reduced to considering technical tweakings of the familiar.

Firstly, senior cycle is much more than the LC. The mid-1990s restructuring, which included mainstreaming Transition Year (TY) as a stand-alone optional year, introducing Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) as a ring-fenced alternative programme and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) as a version of the established LC, has enriched many lives. But Ireland and the world has changed since 1994. A review is overdue.

Difficult conversations need to take place. A hard look at existing provision in schools is required. We have achieved high participation rates but how good is the system at meeting students' needs? Is it flexible enough? Inclusive? How willing are schools to confront the narrowing of curricular experiences that results from an overemphasis on State exams? How open are policymakers to encouraging learning that's important, even when difficult to measure? Why has there been such poor uptake of the genuinely creative and educationally imaginative LCA in many schools? How concerned are vested interests with enabling schooling to liberate from socio-economic disadvantage?

As with JC reform, major insights are available through the NCCA commissioned research. Following students from first year through the secondary cycle, this ESRI research points to many strengths and weaknesses in our system. One stark conclusion is that for too many young people, their schooldays disappoint. Instead of encountering programmes and people that interest, engage, stimulate, challenge and satisfy them, they meet a poverty of experience.

Much can also be learned from the successes and failures of TY. Some schools have moved the learning well beyond examination-focused classrooms. When researching my book *Transition Year in Action*, it was exciting to find students, teachers and parents enthusiastic about community service, environmental and artistic projects, work experience and other forms of learning. Improved relations between students themselves, with their teachers as well as enhanced well-being and greater maturity also impressed. TY also shows how short courses can work, how active learning can energise, and how ongoing assessment can operate. TY can illustrate how students can cultivate a love of learning. But there is also evidence that TY is uneven, that not all schools realise its potential, that some students feel short-changed. The reasons deserve exploration.

A key idea in TY was to build a bridge between Junior Cycle and an environment where young people "take greater responsibility for their own learning and decision-making". Now that the JC ground has shifted substantially, this bridge needs to be re-imagined and re-engineered. There is also an urgency to ensure coherence with what happens after TY, bearing in mind the rights and needs of students who decide not to follow a TY programme. Critically, the conversations should engage with the possibility that the established LC programme may not be fit for purpose in its design, subject range, course content or modes of assessment, that it may be damaging too many students and teachers.

We need pastorally inclusive schools, where students' and parents' voices are taken seriously and where young people's rights are realised, should abound. Programmes should nurture individual and group flourishing among students; they should also foster creativity, collegiality and professionalism among teachers. Other indicators might include an inspectorate and support services working collaboratively with schools, assessment systems that affirm and encourage as well as enable pathways to further possibilities. While idealistic and hard to measure, such indicators should be central to any conversations about senior cycle review.

Dr Gerry Jeffers teaches educational leadership at Maynooth University. Transition Year in Action is published by Liffey Press