

Speaking Notes

Reform of the senior cycle is a wider project than the reform of the Leaving Certificate exam.

But the task of reform begins with decisions with regard to assessment -it is the tail which wags the curricular dog.

The assessment debate might begin with the question of what it is hoped to achieve in the senior cycle; what needs to be given currency in the assessment process and what can be ignored for the purposes of assessment. But it should be borne in mind that what is ignored in assessment in upper second level comes also to be ignored as a serious curricular endeavour .

The assessment debate therefore ,begins with questions concerning what the student needs to know on completion of upper second level; what the student should be able to do and how the student should 'be' in terms of sense of self and as a member of the wider society. The learning agenda ,therefore, might be summarised as one concerned with knowing; doing and being.

It is probably true to say that the traditional upper second level focus has greatly emphasised knowing; placed much less emphasis on doing and has offered little on the issue of being.

This was reflected in -and reinforced by -the assessment approach which relied largely on a written , terminal and summative exam which rewarded rote learning, cognitive intelligence, application and compliance.

Equally it ignored the usually formative dimensions of the extracurricular -whether in sport, artistic pursuits such as drama and music or other social activism by the student- all of which provide immensely formative opportunities for those students who participate .

The fact that this activity is outside of the scope of assessment has meant that its potential contribution to realising the wider goals of the upper second level experience has been greatly diminished.

But there are other problems with this approach to assessment. The odds are stacked against poorer students and less well-resourced schools in this -ostensibly fair -process. The appearance of fairness legitimates the outcomes -the winners feel they deserve their results; the losers likewise feel they got their just desserts. So, those who come out on top are under no obligation to reflect on the starting out advantages which they had in the academic race and those who come out on the bottom are unaware that they were hamstrung from the outset. An intergenerational stasis emerges here , where , even in a context of all boats rising the small boats are likely to remain small!

This becomes all the more problematic when Leaving results are used as the basis for progression to higher education. It is this role which now underpins the 'high-stakes 'nature of the Leaving cert -a characteristic it once had by virtue of the fact that most people finished their formal education at this point.

But most people now progress to higher or further education which means that the programme of study and outcomes there now become much more important in allocating employment and career opportunities - displacing the Leaving Cert role in this regard.

The Points system, therefore ,has a number of important implications for upper second level.

Firstly, it means that the programme is conducted with one eye on third level -such that the developmental needs of the child at this stage in their education are sub-ordinated to the requirements of third level entry.

Secondly, it crystallises the inequities which underpin second level outcomes in third level opportunities. In this way it reproduces existing categories of winners and losers in the parental generation and transforms inherited status into achieved status.

Finally, the better off who fail to hit their desired points level are increasingly able to circumvent this hurdle by study abroad or by repeating the exam in fee paying grind schools.

So, it is difficult to conclude other than reform of second level becomes possible only if the connection between second level outcomes and third level entry, mediated through the points system, is severed.

This would mean that the high stakes pressure of the examination would be reduced if not eliminated; it would allow for multiple modes of assessment emphasising formative as well as summative assessment; it would validate different ways of being in the world of the second level school and it would be fairer.

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