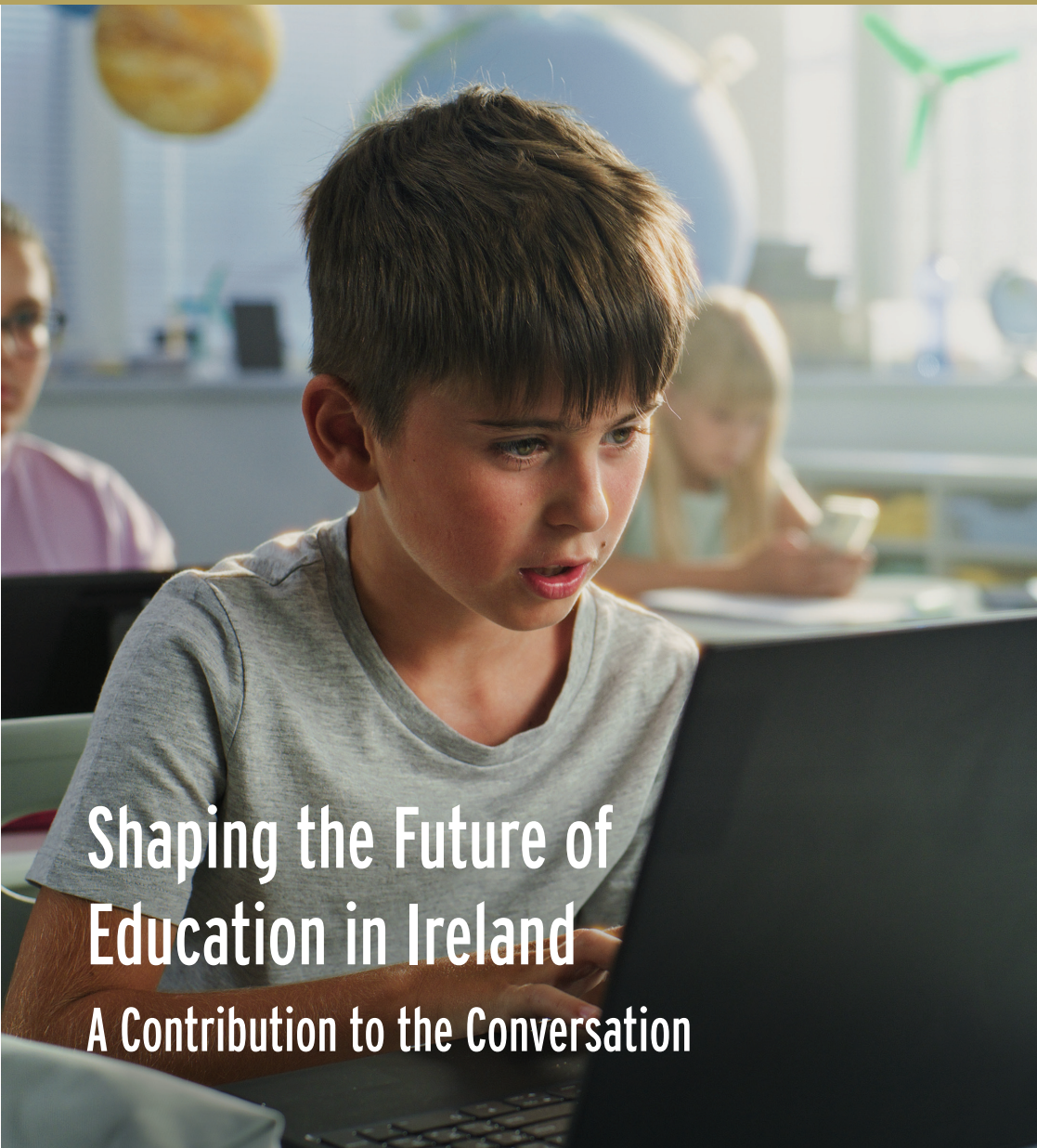


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Shaping the Future of
Education in Ireland
A Contribution to the Conversation

Special Issue on the National Convention on Education: Introduction

Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh

In July 2025, then minister for education and youth Helen McEntee announced the establishment of a National Convention on Education, a deliberative forum that, focusing mainly on primary and post-primary education, would make recommendations for the government's new long-term strategy, 'Our Schools, Our Future'. It was proposed that the Convention's agenda would be drawn from a prior 'National Conversation on Education', a process of consultation with all education stakeholders in the country – educators, parents, carers, young people, and advocacy groups, among others. Through surveys, written submissions, and community engagement events, it would seek to identify the principal concerns, aspirations, and priorities that should inform the convention's deliberations.

The period of conversation has already taken place, and the Convention on Education is now in process with the current minister, Hildegard Naughton, having secured government approval for its agenda in April of this year. It is described as 'a once in a generation opportunity for children, young people, parents, educators, and wider society to help shape Ireland's education system for decades to come'.

If this is so, it opens an opportunity for us and also rests a responsibility on us to shape not only Ireland's education system but our society. After all, this is the power and potential of education: it shapes and reflects the kind – and kindness – of society which we inhabit and to which we aspire.

This special issue of *Studies* hopes to constructively contribute to that debate. It offers both theoretical and practice-oriented papers, reflecting the experiences of academics, practitioners, parents, and students in the field, finding and preserving diverse voices.

Throughout, the papers seek to address 'the questions that the government has asked the Convention to discuss' and, recognising that agenda-setting is itself a judgement, in some cases, address absences in those questions. The discussion that follows places the special issue's papers alongside that agenda, including 'a shared vision', 'the values and aspirations that underpin that vision', 'reimagining curriculum', and 'strong links with communities'.

A shared vision

The current convention on education follows the first national education convention in 1993, which is explored in the first paper by John Walshe (with information not previously in the public domain). That convention led to substantive policy and legislative change, including two landmark pieces of legislation, i.e. the Universities Act (1997) and the Education Act (1998), as well as a succession of other bills covering *inter alia* the teaching council, education welfare, qualifications, and special needs. In tracing the origins and outcomes of the first convention, the paper concludes with Don Thornhill's suggestion that one of the strongest messages from the whole process was that good policy required three stages: listening through genuine consultation; thinking through careful policy development based on evidence; and implementing through legislation and sustained political commitment, including significant ministerial dedication and engagement as outlined in the paper.

In the following paper, Martin Hawkes sets out the context for the establishment of the current convention on education. He argues that the Convention faces a more fundamental question than is articulated in its agenda and which was 'left open' in the 1993 convention: what is education for? He continues 'at a deeper level, this involves revisiting a longstanding tension within the concept of education itself: between *educare*, the shaping or training of the individual, and *educere*, the drawing out of inherent potential.'

We are, after all, human beings, not human doings, and education should help us to be, not only to do. He concludes, 'the questions the convention engages are therefore both national and universal – how education can be a mechanism for both survival and wisdom in a chaotic world.'

This 'world of accelerations' is the context for the following wide-ranging paper by Andreas Schleicher, also adding an international dimension to the debate. The paper also addresses the implications of artificial intelligence, 'our focus must shift', a thematic thread that runs through several of the papers that follow. A need to engage meaningfully with students is a theme that emerges in this paper and throughout the special issue as well: drawing on the 'fact that over a third of 15-year-olds in OECD countries considered school a waste of time', he argues that 'if we were running a supermarket instead of a school, and more than a third of our customers walked out every single day without buying a thing, we wouldn't hold a committee meeting about customer resilience. We wouldn't blame the shoppers for lacking grit.

We would change the inventory. We would redesign the layout and customer experience. And we would adapt, fast. That needs to happen in education too.’ He continues by discussing:

The toughest challenge in modern education: how to incorporate values into education that provide orientation and foster identity in this fast changing world. Values have always been central to education, but it is time that they move from implicit aspirations to explicit education goals and practices in ways that help communities shift from situational values – meaning ‘I do whatever a situation allows me to do’ – to sustainable values that generate trust, social bonds, and hope and that help students learn to reconcile present with future needs.

This fundamental reimagining of what we value in and from education, the ‘toughest challenge’, that question ‘left open’ by the previous convention, is the subject of the set of papers that follow.

Values (or more fundamentally, the value of education)

Joe Dunne, in a profound philosophical paper drawing on his recent publication *What’s the Good of Education? A Philosophy of Persons in Practices*, sets out what he sees as the value of education. His opening remarks disclose the core of his argument:

Two questions arise at the heart of education: what is a good or flourishing life for a human being? And how can educators, and the institutions and policies that frame their practices, set young people on pathways to such flourishing? It’s only so long as these large questions are in play, and seen to be at stake in what transpires in schools, that we are on properly educational ground. Otherwise, our concern is with various processes that bear on schooling – e.g., socialisation, custodial care, training, credentialising, and social selection – but do not, in themselves, deservedly count as education.

From that beginning, he concludes *inter alia* that education is not a satellite of the economy ... It is not a productive enterprise, reducible to a logic of inputs and outputs or of efficient ‘delivery’. It does not construe knowledge as a commodity, students as customers or consumers (*and* raw material to be converted into ‘human capital’), nor teachers as functionaries

whose effectiveness is to be gauged by narrow measures of ‘accountability’.

This is also the basis of Kathleen Lynch’s paper. Her contribution is articulated in its title, ‘Going Beyond Human-Capital-Led Education: To Create a World without War, Violence and Deep Injustices, We Cannot Just Educate Young People to Compete and to Win’. She further elaborates in her conclusion:

In addressing the question of values, the relationships between participants and the development of ‘citizens of the future’, the Convention on Education should meaningfully consider that the capacity for education to enable humanity to move beyond fear and despair to become more caring, responsive, and responsible with other peoples, other species and the whole Earth in mind.

This challenge to consider the capacity for a ‘more caring’ humanity, having ‘the whole Earth in mind’, is covered by Pat Dolan, Joanne Parkes, Anne Dolan, and Finbarr Bradley respectively in papers that span values and curriculum, bringing one to life in the other.

Curriculum

Through education in empathy and through seeing education as a community resource beyond its formal constructs, Pat Dolan’s paper envisions ‘a new lens’ to develop ‘human flourishing’, echoing several other papers. Thinking beyond the confines of these constructs and recognising that ‘for many youth, mainstream schooling is a challenge,’ he explores the earlier conceptualisations of the value of education for a civic society and its implementation, and he outlines a resource to support educators now in developing capacities for empathy in formal and non-formal education settings.

The potential to develop empathy and an appreciation of the world we inhabit is continued in the next paper, where Joanne Parkes describes her experience of ‘the unique power of drama to engage, inspire, and motivate children through experiential and embodied learning’. She draws on three examples of practice in this space, which characterise this set of papers on curricular change: such changes are most potently not about topics or subjects, as conventionally constructed, but about experience and developing a sense of being in the world – as in Martin Hawkes’ emphasis on *educere*, ‘the drawing out of inherent potential’.

Kathleen Lynch’s call for education with ‘the whole Earth in mind’ is

also discussed by Anne Dolan in the following paper. She first describes the nature and extent of the climate emergency in Ireland and internationally and then outlines ‘a necessarily more radical, systemic framework’ for education in the face of this emergency. The paper again connects policy and practice, offering to the Convention a framework for educational reform based on sustainability principles.

Finbarr Bradley’s paper likewise connects principles and practice through a set of case studies ‘as an educator’ helping ‘students build a good life rather than just make a good living’. He argues for an authenticity, a truth to oneself based on a sense of deep-rootedness and connection to origins and place, and gives examples of approaches to education that pose the question ‘How will I create an authentic life for myself’ as the basis for ‘a good life’.

He also places this question in a broader setting where language, in this case Irish, is a consequential context. This is a topic taken up in Paul Gillespie’s paper, which begins by suggesting that ‘Ireland has a real opportunity over the next generation to create a society in which many languages, including Irish, flourish together in the much more complex multicultural society the country has become over the last three decades.’ The paper then explores the historical landscape of language education in Ireland and maps out a new horizon for a multilingual approach to education in a multicultural terrain.

What follows is a series of shorter papers representing diverse voices, including those of students, teachers, and the community more generally. This responds, perhaps indirectly, to the Convention’s consideration of ‘strong links with communities, to support the development of creative, critical, civic, and democratic participation and engagement in our learners’. These shorter papers begin with papers by people whose expertise derives from their experience, and the first of these is by a secondary school student, Jacob Roantree.

Following Paul Gillespie’s paper, Jacob discusses his own experience of language learning, critiquing the current approach. He concludes urging ‘teachers to work with their pupils and the language to find a way to provide those students with what really matters: accessing art, history, theatre, music, and so much more instead of ticking the most boxes in a test’. This is of a piece with themes that permeate other papers in this special issue: the need to engage with students as participants in learning and the sense that learning is a process, best achieved through experience, the journey as important as the destination.

While in many ways fundamental to its considerations, and to the need for belonging that pervades several of the papers in this special issue, language is a missing link in the Convention's agenda, at least as it is articulated. This point is made in the following paper *as Gaeilge le leagan Béarla* by Pádraig MacBrádaigh, a student leader originally from New York. Cuireann sé os ár gcomhair na dúshláin agus na féidireachtaí maidir leis an nGaeilge ach go háirithe agus muid ar thairseach 'saolré *An Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge, 2010-2030* ... go mbeidh 20% d'earcaithe na hearnála poiblí in ainm agus a bheith inniúil sa Ghaeilge chun seirbhísí a chur ar fáil don phobal ar ardchaighdeán.'

Community

Sai Gujulla, another student leader with a perspective from an international life lived, argues in the following paper for student engagement to 'provide confidence, opportunity, belonging, and the ability to participate meaningfully in society', again capturing the recurrent theme of the need for and potency of engaging with students.

Bernie O'Connell, a former school principal, also reflects this view. Recognising the challenges faced by educators today, he considers the importance of presence and engaging with students: 'maybe the greatest gift you can bestow in education is to spend time with people'. This finds echoes in the paper by another leader in education, David Leahy, also shaped by his experience as an educator. His paper's perspective is reflected in the profound but simple principle that 'access concerns entry into education; inclusion means belonging within it.' This demands a further evolution of our education system beyond investing 'heavily in educational opportunity' to a deeper, more rewarding systemic ethos of engagement with students.

The challenges of leadership development – and more importantly and more broadly, foundation – are considered by Jonathan Tiernan, director of Jesuit Education in Ireland, in the following paper. Similar to the questions facing education for being as well as – or more than – doing, 'Formation asks a different question to professional preparation. While professional preparation asks "What do I need to know in order to lead well?", formation asks "Who must I become if I am to exercise leadership wisely?"' Though originating in the context of Catholic education, the paper also provides a framework for school settings in general, seeing leadership as a privileged opportunity 'to shape a learning community'.

This symbiotic sense of schools as community and in communities is the context of Genevieve Wyeth's paper. From her experience as a parent, a school governor and as a non-executive director in childcare organisations, she gives a number of examples that 'should be routine and routinised as part of the normal fabric of education and our educational institutions, weaving 'strong links with communities' addressing the Convention on Education's agenda'.

Conclusion: It's personal

The special issue finishes purposely with an impactful paper by Katriona O'Sullivan, author of *Poor* and *Hungry*. The special issue having opened with a broader set of policy papers, this paper in concluding brings the personal to the page. It captures in one human story the value of education, the transformational power and potency of it in this 'age of accelerations', as it is previously posited by Andreas Schleicher.

In this personal journey that concludes the special issue, Glen Hansard comes to mind. His passing at the time of writing prompted a spontaneous public and popular grief, with thousands arriving at the Royal Hospital Kilmainham and St Patrick's Cathedral to pay their respects with dignity, showing an unusual solicitude and sorrow. The Oscar-winning singer-songwriter connected with many who felt disconnected. People he never knew felt they knew him.

He once told the *Irish Times* the story of his own education, how he got his education 'on the streets'. At school, his talent was 'bilateralism ... managing to appear like I was in the room, when in fact I was running over the hills with the wind in my hair.' He recounts how the school principal in Ballymun Comprehensive encouraged him to leave school for music, the music that turned his life around, where he flourished. His most inspirational teacher, he said, was 'Frankie Byrne, our head teacher, because he was a DJ and because I spent so much time with him for not paying attention, and we would get into the best conversations about Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen. He eventually advised me to pursue music as a career.'

His experience draws together some of the strands of this special issue: the importance of connection with students; the difference one teacher can make, 'the tap on the shoulder', as described by Andreas Schleicher; the presence for students called for by Bernie O'Connell; and the journeying with students suggested by, for example, Joe Dunne, Pat Dolan, Sai Gujulla,

and Joanne Parkes.

It also brings forth the importance of a sense of belonging – and non-belonging – in education, that rootedness advocated for by Finbarr Bradley, that conception of inclusion articulated by David Leahy, those one third of students in OECD countries who consider school ‘a waste of time’ or ‘a challenge’.

In his song ‘Don’t Settle’, Glen Hansard writes, ‘you’re not going back to where you don’t fit.’ For many students, the Convention on Education is an opportunity to make it different.

This is a conversation on education. In the tradition of *Studies* as described by Dermot Roantree in his editorial, we hope it makes a helpful contribution to shaping the future of education in Ireland.

Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh is a former President of University of Galway and former Dean of the Business Schools at UCD. He is Chair of the Council of the ESRI and a member of the Council of State. The opinions expressed are given in a personal capacity.

Note:

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