

# **Teaching in a Climate of Change: Developments Affecting the Lives of Teachers in Northern Ireland**

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# Teaching in a Climate of Change: Developments Affecting the Lives of Teachers in Northern Ireland

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## Abstract

This paper outlines the change context in which teachers are working in Northern Ireland. These changes are summarized under the headings: System Review, Curriculum Review, Teacher Competences, Managed Learning Environment, Teachers' Health and Well-being and General Teaching Council. The backgrounds and implications of the changes are identified and the responses to them are discussed in relation to teachers' needs.

## Introduction

Northern Ireland is the smallest of the four countries making up the United Kingdom with 24,000 teachers teaching 348,000 pupils. Some 899 primary schools enrol pupils from 5 to 11 years of age and 235 post-primary schools take pupils from 11-16. A proportion of the post-primary schools, mainly 'grammar' schools, take pupils at 11 years through to 18. The teaching population is 74% female, 26% male and some 48% of all teachers are over 45 years of age. Given its small size, the Northern Ireland system is often considered to have the potential to allow experimentation and change across a whole structure (something very difficult for a country the size of England with 56 million people) but it has maintained a remarkable stability and conservatism of purpose over many decades - until recent years that is! Change is now confronting all aspects of education in Northern Ireland, changes that are being brought about by external pressures (e.g. relating to information technology in education or to public accountability of education) and to internal pressures (e.g. relating to a review of school curricula). Arguably the changes and developments in the system are considerable each in their own right, but put together they represent a formidable challenge to the professional lives and work of teachers. A selection of these change contexts is described below under the headings:

System Review

Teacher Competences

Teachers' Health and Well-being

Curriculum Review

Managed Learning Environment

General Teaching Council

## System Review

Of the two main types of post-primary education in the UK, Northern Ireland alone maintains the older 'selective' system in which pupils are selected for grammar schools on the basis of their performance in externally set tests at the end of their primary schooling. Non-selective schools (sometimes called 'secondary modern' schools) take all-comers. Both types of schools are fully state-funded. Since the 1960s/1970s the English, Welsh and Scottish alternative is based almost completely (~95%) on comprehensive schooling in which schools take all pupils. The tests for selection are taken by 11 years olds wishing to gain entry to grammar schools and are called the Transfer Procedure Tests though more often they are known simply by their old name of '11 plus' tests, owing to the age of the test-taking pupils. The selective system began in Northern Ireland in 1948 and since then has periodically experienced criticism, some of it very intense. Northern Ireland is in the midst of one these periods at the moment and since 2000 two major consultative reviews have been undertaken (Burns, 2001 and Costello, 2003). That the review has taken so long is indicative of the polarized views that exist in relation to selective education and the reasons for this are outlined briefly next.

At present, the grammar schools take in almost 40% of the annual cohort of 11 year old pupils leaving primary schools. Such is the perception of the quality of education in such schools, an education that is 'academic', oriented to university entry and onwards to the professions and highly paid employment, that it is the case every year that 60% of the cohort applies for entry. The debate in Northern Ireland society centres on whether there should be selection or not. Those against selection cite opposition to a variety of aspects of the system ranging from the use of tax-payers' money to fund 'elitist' education

to the social divisions created by the perceived 'failure' of some 60% of the population to make the grade for grammar school education. The disappointment shared by the unsuccessful 20% has been thoroughly researched (e.g. Save the Children, 2001; Sutherland, 2000) and is the subject of much concern in relation to the trauma and frustration occasioned on the pupils and their families. Those for selection claim that it has helped Northern Ireland consistently to produce the best national examination results in the UK by enabling the most academically-oriented pupils to be given top-flight academic teaching.

What is perhaps more pertinent in relation to the tests themselves, however, is that research by the first author (Gardner and Cowan, 2000) has shown that the tests have the potential to mis-classify as many as two thirds of the test-taking cohort (approx. 12,000 pupils) by as many as three grades. The government has now accepted that the tests are fundamentally flawed and in a speech to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the then Minister of Education asserted that: "Throughout its history, the 11 plus branded most of our children failures when in fact the real failure was, not the children, but the 11 plus itself. ... I want to make it clear to this Assembly, and to the people, that the Tests have no place in the future of education here." (McGuinness, 2002). It was not until most recently, however, that the government actually announced that the tests and indeed the selective system would end in 2008 (Kennedy, 2004).

It seems then that the momentum for change is unstoppable and, if so, the implications are that teachers in Northern Ireland schools will experience a radical change in their working context. Perhaps the most impact will be felt by the teachers in grammar schools whose only experience has been with relatively highly motivated pupils. These teachers may soon have to deal with pupils displaying a much wider variety of academic ability, behaviour, special needs and motivation to learn, than that to which they are accustomed in the more sedate environments of their grammar schools. But it is likely that teachers in all schools may have to adapt to new structures. For example, some proposals before the government could mean the merging of upper primary and lower post-primary years of schooling if a delay of selection until '14 plus' is the preferred option to compromise between selection at 11 plus and no selection at all. Although teachers and their representative bodies were consulted on the issue of selection in the recent reviews, it is likely that any decision that is made will invariably be accompanied by government requirements for changes in practice and perhaps working conditions from the profession. The extent to which there is any consultation as to how the changes might be accomplished is likely to be limited.

### **Curriculum Review**

The Northern Ireland curriculum came into being in 1989 and is structured along the same lines as the England and Wales National Curriculum, which was introduced the previous year. Since then Northern Ireland has followed the London lead with programmes of study for each of the four 'key stages'. Key Stage 1 covers the age range - 5-8 year olds, Key Stage 2 - 8-11 year olds, Key Stage 3 - 11-14 year olds and Key Stage 4 - 14-16 year olds. Several differences are of particular note, though. Unlike England and Wales, there is no external testing of pupils at the end of Key Stage 2 (11 year olds), largely because so many pupils also have to study for the 11 plus mentioned above. Teacher assessments over time are consolidated and reported instead. School 'league tables' have also been abandoned. These tables, in England and Wales, enable schools to be compared publicly on the basis of their pupils' performance in the external tests. These league tables have attracted considerable criticism from teachers and other educationalists as they do not take into account the background, educational and asocial, of the pupils concerned.

Although the Northern Ireland version of the National Curriculum has been localized for the country's schools, several major concerns about its design have persisted. Notable among these were problems associated with an over-prescribed curriculum for pupils entering primary schooling for the first time. At a period in their lives (from as young as 4 years and 2 months in Northern Ireland) in which the crucial learning objectives may be argued to be socialization and expressiveness, the UK's early years curriculum is oriented to a formal design, with limited opportunities for the widely preferred play-based learning for children of this age. Another major issue is the slump in pupils' motivation to learn that is evident in the first couple of years after leaving primary school. In a major study of almost 2,700 pupils in 51 schools, Harland et al identified a variety of problems in key stages 2 and 3 (1999a and 1999b respectively). In a later in-depth study of Key Stage 3 with the same schools (Harland et al, 2002) found serious problems with the curriculum's breadth, balance and coherence and reported a serious decline in pupils' enjoyment and perception of the relevance of their learning.

Since the Harland studies, the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has consulted upon and implemented comprehensive revisions for key stages 1, 2 and 4 but it is at Key Stage 3 that perhaps the most radical proposals have been aimed. Much of the proposed curriculum change has been research informed e.g. by research on thinking skills, multiple intelligences (including emotional intelligence), assessment for learning and employers' views on the skills set needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century world of work. This latter analysis has revealed that the skills and dispositions considered most important by employers include: "... reading, writing, listening, speaking, basic computation, information management, creative thinking, decision making, responsibility, adaptability and team work skills, including collaboration and negotiation" (CCEA, 2003, p21). Adopting the view that learning needs to be "... emotionally engaging to the learner, particularly during the 11-14 age range when so much is going on with adolescents to distract them from school" (p 22), the Council has concluded that the learning challenge facing the education system and its curriculum design implies that:

... in order to be motivated to learn, young people need opportunities to explore real problems and to think through their own responses, making meaningful connections and, ideally, creating their own meaning rather than being "taught" solutions or having meaning created for them. The challenge therefore is to make learning developmentally appropriate to the age and maturity of the learner; socially relevant, emotionally engaging, motivational, in the sense of being explicitly relevant to real-life contexts; cognitively challenging; and connected (CCEA, 2003, p 22).

Such rhetoric presents huge challenges for teachers, many of whom teach traditionally and somewhat didactically, and ultimately there is the possibility that the proposals are too radical to survive the consultation. The next section considers the training environment in which teachers in Northern Ireland are required to develop their skills.

### **Teacher Competences**

Teacher training in the UK is 'standards of competence'-based. By this we mean that prospective teachers are required to reach specified standards in a defined set of skills (England and Wales, specified by the Teacher Training Agency, [www.tta.gov.uk](http://www.tta.gov.uk)) or to achieve a specified set of competences (Northern Ireland, Department of Education, [www.deni.gov.uk/teachers/](http://www.deni.gov.uk/teachers/)). Whether described as standards or competences the training areas cover variations of professional values, practices, knowledge and understanding. In Northern Ireland, 92 discrete competences have been identified by the government and are detailed under the five areas:

- understanding of the curriculum, and professional knowledge;
- subject knowledge and subject application;
- teaching strategies and techniques, and classroom management;
- assessment and recording of pupils progress,
- foundation for further professional development. (DENI, 1998, p 11-16)

Examples of these competences include: "Demonstrates breadth of knowledge in all of the subjects forming the content of his or her teaching" and "Demonstrates an awareness of children's extra-curricular achievements". First introduced in 1996, the competences have attracted considerable debate. Some teacher educators consider that they reduce the art of teaching to a set of technical skills, while others counter with the view that they provide a helpful framework for a new teacher's development and create a common language for reflection and discussion on the complexity of teaching. It is difficult to escape the former perception in the face of the skills onslaught and for many people the words of Hamon and Rotman ring true:

"They do their job, nothing more, nothing less, aided in this by codified rules, timetables and lesson plans. The restrictiveness of their official texts and regulations serves them to adhere strictly to their minimalist assiduity ... The sacred fire which once lit their work gradually dies to a smoulder ... into unthinking cynicism." Hamon and Rotman (1984)

Whichever side the argument falls, there is a growing realization that any finite list of standards or competences, however long, is not in itself capable of adapting to new circumstances nor will the

achievement of such standards and competences necessarily impart the adaptability that teachers need in the rapidly changing arena of education. The whole basis of knowledge is being extended and radically changed by the Internet and its related technologies in the media, while the pupils' world itself is expanding far beyond their neighbourhoods to the 'global village' in which we all now live. Teaching now, and for the foreseeable future, will require a new type of professional, one who embraces change, adapts his or her teaching style to the learning style of their pupils, engages with a rapidly changing notion of knowledge and its construction, and who wholeheartedly espouses the view that the role of a teacher is in the facilitation of learning and not the transmission of knowledge.

### **Managed Learning Environment**

This last issue is echoed in the overview statement of the Curriculum Council in its curriculum review proposals: "The impact of the information revolution should be acknowledged by a changing emphasis in schools from the transmission of knowledge to the development of skills and capabilities" (CCEA, 2003, p 7). For those teachers who already act as 'learning facilitators' there is much less problem with this aspiration than say for those who have long established, traditional modes of 'transmission' teaching. The temptation is to predict that these teachers might be found in the ranks of the older generations but teacher training in Northern Ireland, especially at primary level, has not freed itself of the 'transmission' mode of developing new teachers and it is likely that didactic teaching will be a feature of a fairly wide range of teaching ages. In order to break through the various degrees of inertia, reluctance and even resistance, the challenge is to enable all teachers to experience the worth of the most up-to-date applications of new technology in education - and then to enable them to have convenient access to the relevant high quality resources. This is a tall order for any nation but it is arguably easier, once the funding has been acquired, for a small nation of only 24,000 teachers to take forward radical and far-sighted development plans. This is exactly what the 'emPowering Schools Strategy' is doing.

emPowering Schools is the second of two major strategic development programmes conceived by the Education Technology Strategy Group for Northern Ireland, the first having been launched in 1998 (ETS, 1998) to:

- facilitate a differentiated pace and level of learning that takes account of individual pupil abilities, including those who are more able;
- help provide appropriate support - and scope for greater independence - for those children with special education needs;
- facilitate access to sources of information well beyond the normal capacity of the school or college;
- foster the development of information skills that teach pupils to be discriminating in their use of information and to be able to shape and present it in ways appropriate to the context; and
- increase motivation to learn, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In order to advance this agenda, the Classroom2000 project ([www.c2kni.or.uk](http://www.c2kni.or.uk)) was created to develop and install the necessary infrastructure, including broadband Internet connections for all secondary-level schools, a website for supporting teachers ([www.NINE.org.uk](http://www.NINE.org.uk)), laptop computers for over half of all of the teachers and network installations with curriculum-based software packages in all schools except the very smallest. The competence of teachers was addressed in a number of initiatives, the most important of which was the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) Information and Communications Technology (ICT) training. This programme cost £10.8 million but was provided free of charge to the 21,000 teachers who completed it. This training focused on the teacher's use of new technology directly in his or her teaching and somewhat conflicting views of its efficacy are presented in the official evaluation (ETSMG, 2003) and a major independent study (Galanouli, Murphy and Gardner, 2004). The new emPowering Schools strategy (detailed in NIEL, 2003) will see a shift of focus from the infrastructure to the promotion and use of e-learning, organized and delivered through a nationwide 'managed learning environment', MLE.

The Northern Ireland managed learning environment, though serving a small country, is set to be one of the largest such initiatives anywhere in the world. The implementation schedule is designed to connect most classrooms in all 1,100+ schools to the Internet with fast broadband connections, through a single data centre which will provide "... protected access to a wide range of services, including e-learning, digital video, conferencing, remote diagnosis and record-keeping" (NIEL, 2003, p

12). At a cost of around £300 million, everyone engaged in education, i.e. some 400,000 people comprising ~350,000 pupils, ~24,000 teachers and all teacher educators etc., will have their own password and mailbox on the system that also manages all assessment records and teaching resources. Most important of all, however, will be the provision of Hyperwave ([www.hyperwave.com](http://www.hyperwave.com))-based virtual learning environments (VLEs) for supporting all areas of the curriculum and which will also enable schools, teachers and pupils to create their own VLEs. Considerable work has already gone into pump-priming the VLE potential and the evaluations of a variety of ongoing and completed VLE projects is available at [www.elearningfutures.com](http://www.elearningfutures.com). The challenges for teachers in working with VLEs have been examined by Gardner, Mallon, Cowan and McArdle (2003) and the consequent training needs may be summarized in one quotation from their report of developing a VLE for citizenship teaching in three secondary-level schools:

“There needs to be a substantial training programme for teachers that covers:

- the technical aspects of VLE usage and develops the skills and judgements needed to blend good traditional pedagogic practice with the integration of innovative learning contexts;
- the skills of assessing and recognizing pupils’ progress and performance in increasingly complex learning contexts ranging from wholly individualized to wholly collaborative; and
- the skills needed in engaging with pupils in on-line feedback and support and learning outside the classroom (in existing or developed collaborative communities).” (p 10)

Teaching in these new VLE contexts is perhaps one of the most innovative yet challenging developments that teachers must face in the next few years as VLE technology takes root and the opportunities and potential are increasingly recognized.

### Teachers’ Health and Well-Being

It is probably not surprising, given the catalogue of major changes outlined above, which are impacting on teachers’ lives, that the government has commissioned a teachers’ health and well-being survey (PWC, 2002). This survey canvassed all teachers and managed a 50% response rate of 11, 787 completed questionnaires. The following table lists the main stress factors in teachers working lives:

Stress Factor	% Respondents	Stress Factor	% Respondents
Too much work	74	Long working hours	48
Too much admin	73	Poorly motivated pupils	46
Lack of time	62	Pupils’ non-acceptance of teacher authority	40
School demands on after-school time	58	Lack of parental support on discipline	36
Changes in curriculum	51	Marking coursework	35
School inspections	51	Maintaining class discipline	35
Interruptions to teaching	49	Feeling unvalued	33
Implementing technology	48		

The table suggests that the main stresses in teachers’ lives in Northern Ireland are perceived to be over-working (74%) and over-burdening with administrative tasks (73%). Some way below these, but still high, we find a perceived lack of time to get all the tasks they need to do, done (62%) and the

perceived encroachment on personal time - an unacceptable work-life balance (58%). Note that 'implementing technology' features quite highly at 48%, prompting the authors to observe that : "increased use of technology will itself be a cause of teacher stress, at least in the short term", and recommend:

"... provision of extra support for IT implementation in schools. The use of managed services rather than in-house support will reduce the burden on teaching staff. It is essential however, that there is adequate training provided and a range of support mechanisms including on-side support, help desk, conferencing facilities and self-help user groups established." (PWC, 2002, p 17)

The various sections above have detailed major, systematic and system-wide changes that are affecting teachers lives in Northern Ireland. A variety of formal arrangements have been and are being made to ease the burdens, smooth the challenges and energize the teaching community. These come in the form of major training programmes, significantly enhanced resources (especially ICT resources) and the development of tailored resources fro different aspects of the curriculum. What has been missing, though, has been the teachers' voice. This is not to ignore the continuing representation of teachers in matters of pay and conditions of work, undertaken by the teaching units, rather it is to point out that the teachers' professional voice on whether any initiative is of academic or pedagogic worth, or enhances pupils learning, has been missing. Moreover, teachers' inputs into the initiatives have been somewhat token with membership on steering groups, project teams etc. What has changed most recently in the context is the inception of the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland.

### **General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland**

The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland was the last of the UK nations' teaching councils to be formed when it was launched in 2002<sup>1</sup> and quickly established its agenda as being to :

- build a broad "professional community" and enhance the status of teaching as a profession;
- provide an independent and authoritative voice for the profession on matters pertaining to teaching;
- promote and maintain the highest standards of professional conduct and practice in collaboration with key partners. ([www.gtcni.org.uk](http://www.gtcni.org.uk))

It is in the second of these points that much hope is invested i.e. that the Council will be able to inject a strong teacher perspective into policy formulation and implementation in the future. One of its first actions has been to identify professional development as a key priority and to construct 'guiding principles' for its delivery. The Council considers that professional development programmes:

- should address individual, institutional and regional priorities;
- should reflect the varying professional/work and home circumstances experienced by teachers;
- should address the issues of classroom practice and should allow teachers to reflect on the broader issues of philosophy and purpose in education;
- must be resourced to ensure cohesion, accessibility, quality and relevance;
- should respond to technological change e.g. managed and virtual learning environments;
- should take cognizance of new knowledge of learning styles. ([www.gtcni.org.uk](http://www.gtcni.org.uk))

It will be clear to the reader that almost all of the major developments in the previous sections are in some manner recognized and encapsulated in these principles. If the Council can manage to harness the training and support resources in Northern Ireland sufficiently to deliver on these principles, then perhaps teachers lives, and the climate of change that is so pressing on them, will experience more stability and positive development in the years to come.

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<sup>1</sup> GTC (Scotland) has been in existence since 1966, legislation to create GTC (England ) and GTC (Wales)was enacted in 1998. GTC (Northern Ireland) was also enacted by legislation in 1998 but was not launched until 2002.

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