So what is really worth fighting for in our schools: the role of the teacher in challenging educational times?

Patricia Mannix McNamara, Dr., University of Limerick
Introduction
In 1998 Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan wrote a book called What’s Worth Fighting for Out There? In this book, which was part of a trilogy, they identify the dramatic and rapid change in the external context of the school. The impact of this has been that schools have become more permeable and more transparent. They also write that teachers in 1998 operate under a microscope in a way that they never had to do before. It is fair to say that the trend of rapid change of external school contexts and of increased pressure for transparency and accountability of teaching, has continued relentlessly, particularly in Ireland in the past decade, which can only be described as having experienced enormous societal and economic change. Hargreaves and Fullan described the school environment of the late nineties as complex, turbulent, contradictory, relentless, uncertain and unpredictable, with increased demands for better performance and accountability of schools. As a result, they used their trilogy of books to advocate for teacher agency, in order to encourage teachers to meet the challenges posed to education by the external environment, suggesting that teachers and principals must reframe their roles and orientations to the outside world. Today, fourteen years after this book was originally published, their description of schools rings true, particularly for Irish post-primary schooling which is indeed complex, turbulent, contradictory, relentless, uncertain and unpredictable, with significant pressure and demand for better performance and accountability especially in student performance in Leaving Certificate exam results.

The role of the Irish post primary teacher is complex and multi-dimensional. There is every growing pressure in terms of exam performance and accountability, coupled with societal expectations that schools will focus on personal development, and on health and well being. This expectation is articulated frequently by the media, and in government: indeed it is a widely held view. Clearly the school has a role in the care and welfare of students. Teachers are actively involved in the pastoral care of students. However, what is missing in public discourse is the problematic connection between the unrelenting expectation of exam performativity and the pastoral care agenda. In the current dominance of exam performativity in schools and the increased infiltration of the discourses of accountability in education, teachers are under considerable pressure in terms of being able to offer meaningful education to their students. Of deep concern is the malign impact of the pressures of exam performativity on teacher autonomy and expertise and resultanty on the types of pedagogy that teachers can adopt. There is also a pervasive consumerist and neo-liberalist agenda becoming more and more prevalent in education in Ireland generally and in schooling particularly. This also places significant challenges on teachers in terms of their own educational values. This article will explore the challenges to teacher autonomy, in particular the role that consumerist agendas and terminal examination models (in this case the Leaving Certificate) have had in constricting educational autonomy and in narrowing the potential of curriculum.

Leaving Certificate Looms Large
One might be tempted to question how the Leaving Certificate exam became such a dominant force in Irish post-primary schooling. After all, the aims of education and of the school curriculum are advocated as a broad, balanced education that contributes towards the development of all aspects of the individual. According to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment:

The lifelong journey of education is concerned with the development of each student in ways which acknowledge the complexity of their potential as human beings. Education of the ‘whole person’ includes opportunities for students to develop their aesthetic, creative, cultural, emotional, moral, physical, intellectual, political, religious, social and spiritual dimensions (NCCA 2005).

When one looks closely at course syllabi, very quickly the preparation of the student for work and further education enters the discourse. In the Leaving Certificate Design and Communication Graphics Syllabus, for example, we read that:

Leaving Certificate programmes are presented within the general aim of education, with a particular emphasis on the preparation of students for the requirements of further...
education or training, for employment and for their role as participative, enterprising citizens (NCCA 2006 author’s italics).

This is not to say that preparation for the world of work and/or further education is not important; on the contrary! However, for a broad balanced education, clearly there are also other educational aims that are equally as important, such as the personal development, health and well-being, innovation and creativity of young people. The NCCA is currently reviewing the post primary curriculum. One might consider the proposed curriculum a departure from what has been previously prioritised. The underpinning approach to learning in the new curriculum is advocated as the development of a broad range of key skills including information processing; being personally effective; communicating; critical and creative thinking; and working with others (NCCA 2009).

Current senior cycle syllabi identify that: “All Leaving Certificate programmes, in contributing to a high quality education, emphasise the importance of self-directed learning and independent thought. A spirit of inquiry, critical thinking; problem solving, self-reliance, initiative and enterprise. Preparation for further education, for adult and working life” (NCCA 2001, 2006).

These are key attributes for any young person to possess, but they sit somewhat at odds with the learning approach adopted by students in order to achieve exam success, which is more predominantly characterised by rote memorisation and recall (Hennessy et al. 2011). The curriculum per se is perhaps not the most challenging aspect, the problems lie inherently in the dominance of the terminal exam system, which is unduly focused on assessment of cognitive knowledge, and the use of a points system for college entry that is based on performance in one terminal examination.

In a recent interview on the Late Late show on RTE, (27th January 2012) three college students who had performed exceptionally well in the Leaving certificate exam (two had achieved the maximum 600 points and one 580) were interviewed about their experiences of learning and exam success. When asked what strategies were used for learning, the response by the first interviewee indicated some strategic planning on her part. She stated that she dropped Art and English as she would not be able to achieve an A in those subjects. She chose instead to concentrate on the sciences. She then had what she termed were her own ‘tricks’, such as flash cards and recording information so that she could play information back over and over again. Clearly rote memorization and recall were what each interviewee understood as important to their success. These are quite at odds with the attributes cited as important for senior cycle by the NCCA above.

As a teacher listening to the interview, it was with some alarm that one realises that neither the interviewees nor the interviewer made any reference to the influence of teachers in their success. There was no mention of teaching or classroom engagement at all. Success was, for them, predicated on individualistic and competitive study skills that were based on memorization with little meaningful engagement with content. The content was a means to an end, in that its reproduction in exam was the measure of success. Two of the students attended a private school, and when questioned as to whether this gave them unfair advantage their answers were definitively negative. Although they did concede that in their view the private school afforded them access to “the best teachers.”

The points...the points...

Not only is the content learned in schools becoming a means to an end, in terms of reproduction in exams, the exam itself is also a means to an end in terms of its currency for university placement. This is attributable to the system of college entry we employ in Ireland, namely the points system. The points system or scale is based on the results gained in six subjects of the Leaving Certificate examination (the maximum achievable being 600). The system is administered by the Central Applications Office (CAO), which is in effect a limited company set up by third-level institutions in the Republic of Ireland to manage applications and admissions (Hyland 2011). Points are assigned to each grade achieved in the Leaving Certificate (see table 1). Points per applicant to the CAO are calculated as the total of the points from the six highest grades achieved. So for example six A1’s on six Higher Level papers yields a maximum of 600 points.

Irish Leaving Certificate Examination Points Calculation Grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leaving Cert Grade</th>
<th>Higher Paper</th>
<th>Lower Paper</th>
<th>Maths Foundation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>80</td>
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<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>C3</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>D1</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>D2</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D3</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LCVP points awarded: Distinction - 70, Merit - 50, Pass - 30

* 25 bonus points will be added to the points score for Leaving Certificate Higher Level Mathematics.

# Points for Foundation Level Mathematics will be awarded by certain institutions. Applicants should refer to the HEI literature for full details.

The competition for university places means that the number of points one achieves in the leaving certificate becomes of enormous significance. Hyland (2011, p.4) identifies some of the problems associated with this model. She has pointed out that because the points system is based on the Leaving Certificate:
Students tend to conflate the Leaving Certificate with the points system. When students are asked about their Leaving Cert results, she states that instead of stating their results in terms of subjects and grade levels achieved, as their results are issued by the State Examination Commission, students will usually respond to the question of How did you get on in the Leaving Certificate with the reply, I got X number of points.

The negative impact of the points system on senior cycle schooling is well documented. Students are overly focused on achieving the best possible exam performance. Subjects are chosen for their grade potential rather than student interest or even liking. We have seen an exponential increase in the use of grind schools in order to optimise one’s chances in the exam. It is important to note that access to grinds is dependent on financial resources and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are significantly disadvantaged in this regard. Furthermore, in 2008 John Walsh published an article in the Irish Independent, which drew attention to the intense competition for college places as creating what he called a “brain drain” which is driving a high proportion of students abroad. It is doubtful that much has changed in this regard in the intervening four years.

Impact on teacher pedagogy

Given that in the terminal exam model such as the Leaving Certificate, what is valued is the capacity to reproduce content, it is deeply problematic and the language itself denotes a utilitarian approach. The excessive focus on points and examinations also has a negative impact on teaching and learning and on how curriculum in schools becomes appropriated at stake. The pressure to transmit content in order to meet the needs of the state exam while dominant at junior certificate is intensified to an inordinate degree at senior cycle. This has an enormous impact on the pedagogical models that teachers can adopt. Endemic in global education is the transmission model of teaching and learning, what Paulo Freire termed the ‘banking model’ in his seminal work Pedagogy of the Oppressed. In using the banking metaphor Freire was drawing attention to education as a set of content or knowledge that the teacher transmits to the student. It is predominantly didactic in nature and teacher-centric. Students are more passive; they absorb the required content through rote learning, and memorisation. This is very difficult to avoid in educational systems that measure recall and memorisation. This banking model is not just limited to schools; it is particularly dominant in higher education also, with content transmission in lectures being strongly teacher-centric.

The system also perpetuates inequality. In order to maximise exam performance many students are seeking additional tuition or grinds which are expensive. The extra tuition that students purchase outside of school has become commonly known as ‘grinds.’ Even the language of ‘a grind’ frequent now in common parlance is antithetical to the aims of broad and holistic based education. ‘Grinding’ knowledge into someone is deeply problematic and the language itself denotes a utilitarian education agenda. The excessive focus on points and examinations also has a negative impact on how curriculum is valued by the school community, especially at senior cycle. As Hyland (2011 p.4) points out, the examination becomes the determinant of what is studied and how; non-examination subjects get little or no attention and in many cases, broader co-curricular activities are ignored or minimised. This is at a time when students are experiencing most stress and anxiety (ibid). Access to supports and to health promoting curriculum such as Social Personal and Health Education is not available due to the disproportionate constraints on school timetabling in order to meet the pressures of the Leaving Certificate exam. While obvious but nonetheless worthy of mention, limiting access to guidance and counselling will serve only to exacerbate strain on an already pressurised education system. Limiting access to such an important aspect of school infrastructure speaks volumes about what types of learning is valued a policy level.

The student entrepreneur: Notes for Sale!
The proliferation of the ‘notes’ culture in schools, and the expectation of students to accrue such stocks of notes are evidence of the ‘banking model’ in action. Teachers are under pressure to provide substantial notes to students in addition to already existing text books. Recently in providing critique of the dominance of notes in post primary education Hennessy et al. (2011) write of the pressures that are placed upon teachers in this regard. The expectation and proliferation of ‘notes’ to be learned off for exam success has unfortunately facilitated the development of student educational utilitarianism. The recent trend of students selling their leaving certificate notes is cause for deep concern on a number of levels.

In September 2010, Fiona Ellis, writing for the Irish Independent warns “Entrepreneurs take note: student nets €1,000 in e-Bay auction.” We read of the straight A student’s “meticulously compiled” notes: French and Math’s notes came to over €1,000 each, Irish made €140, music €120, English almost topped €300 and a bidder paid €190 for history notes. The student who was interviewed for the article states “I was, honest to God, quite surprised with all the interest but hopefully it will encourage other students to do the same.” The article also informs us that since the unique idea became public, several other A1 students have put their notes up on e-Bay to earn money. The student is clearly encouraging others to also adopt this fiscal approach stating “I might have started a trend It’s a good idea. I hope that other students will continue to do this year on year to make money.” The article concludes with informing us that this student will be living in Dublin come September and hopes to make a “sustainable income” through giving Leaving Cert grinds that are also on auction on e-Bay.

What does this say about the nature of education in schools or indeed about the role of the teacher as educator? At worst, it suggests a relative redundancy for examination preparation, and suggests a growing tendency by successful students to de-professionalise the role of the teacher. What is promoted here as entrepreneurship, in reality is the result of the pervasive infiltration of exam performance as the benchmark by which the success of education now becomes measured. Here, success as a student becomes the capacity to market ones notes for learning, and clearly for quite substantial sums of money. The uncritical representation of these issues in the media is cause for some disquiet. Nowhere in the media coverage of this new phenomenon is there any discussion of the aims of education, the focus is on exam success only. The entrepreneurship is celebrated rather than taking the opportunity to advocate for
something far more important, namely meaningful education for all. Also absent is recognition of the increasingly elitist nature of this trend. If one were to subscribe to this consumerism, one needs access to money to be able to buy such notes, giving unfair advantage over those who do not have the necessary resources, further widening the social and economic divide. Particularly, as on average only one in six hundred students achieves the “perfect Leaving Certificate score.” Approximately 7,000 students achieve less than 200 points and the average is 305 points. Where is the public debate about this aspect of leaving certificate performance?

**Education for what: serving the needs of the economy?**

In recent decades there has been quite a change in terms of what is now valued in education. Given the growing influence of the economic agenda in this area such trends are to be expected. The language of the marketplace has in recent years permeated education discourse. Worryingly, it is not only the language that has seeped in, but the consumerist values also are gaining a foothold. In education rhetoric and national policy the importance of schooling and of higher education for the ‘knowledge economy’ is gaining increasing momentum. The suggestion being that students are educated in order to be more productive citizens, replete with the requisite skills to enhance this growing knowledge economy. The general thrust of the knowledge economy ideology is that once students join the labour market they do so with the skills of knowledge management to enhance economic profit. This is worrisome on a number of levels, not least of which is that such an approach serves only to widen the already deep seated inequality in society. Of concern also to educators is the reduction of education and indeed of knowledge itself to a business product that can be exploited for high economic return. Educated citizens are perceived in the knowledge economy as a productive asset to society; from a humanistic perspective alone it is deeply problematic.

The dominance of the exam as a measure of student success, in order to secure a better economic future, suggests how pervasive the economic agenda has become in Irish schooling. Even the hierarchy of subjects: what is valued and what is not is deeply influenced by the economic agenda. Subjects that are not examined do not have parity of esteem in comparison to other subjects, this we know. However, it is more complex, because, for example, Art is examined to leaving certificate, and yet the status of Art fares less well than the sciences. Subject status is influenced by the beliefs that teachers and students hold about what counts as legitimate knowledge. High status subjects are academic in nature and are primarily concerned with theoretical knowledge. Subjects that are considered practical and less theoretical are less valued (Morris 1996, Goodson 1993). The arts are struggling to hold their value in education. Space for broader and more liberal education that includes the arts and affective education has become more and more constrained. Indeed liberal education is struggling for its very survival in schools, in the face of relentless economic pressure (Hennessey et al 2010).

**Impact for teachers**

Teachers are placed under significant strain in this exam and points pressure system. They are actively disempowered in a system whose outcome is the measure of cognitive knowledge in a terminal exam. Teachers often bear the brunt of negative comments in the media. They are expected to meet the ever increasing demands of exam performativity. With each new crisis that may be topical such as youth substance use, youth risk etc., teachers are put under pressure to respond, with little or no recognition of their ever decreasing pedagogical autonomy in the face of looming examination performance. The school is regularly promoted as the panacea for childhood ills, clearly without taking into account the constriction of educational time and space to engage in broader learning activities.

**Schools in challenging times**

There is no doubt that post-primary education in Ireland is facing considerable challenges. Cuts to the provision of guidance and counselling were received with considerable shock by schools in Ireland. The Minister’s stance reported in the Irish Times (January 18th 2012) that there is to be no specific and separate allocation for guidance provision over and above the number of teachers a school is entitled to under the general teacher allocation of 19.1, and the position that guidance provision would instead be managed by school management from within their staffing schedule allocation, places significant pressure on schools. Decisions such as these do not take cognizance of the demands on already overloaded timetables that Principals already content with.

The reduction in capitation places undue pressure on already under funded schools. Those most hit by the increase in class sizes are students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties. The cut to special needs assistants in schools has been a devastating blow to parents of children with disabilities in those schools. Clearly, the most vulnerable in our education system are not immune from the impact of swingeing cuts. What is most unpalatable in this circumstance is that these cuts are being made in order to meet the deficit created by a fiscal system that was elitist and badly regulated. Those in education hit by these cuts had neither hand act nor part in bringing about our current fiscal recession. Never before has the need for teacher advocacy been greater and it already has evidenced some success. The pressure applied to the ministry by the outcry of protest to the DEIS cuts has resulted in the Minister having to rethink the cuts. What was admirable in the protests was the partnership of parents and teachers protesting in solidarity to object to cuts that would only serve to further disenfranchise children attending DEIS schools.

**So what is worth fighting for in our schools then?**

Teachers have articulated a growing sense of disempowerment in the current educational climate. They often highlight feeling pressured to raise school standards, to deal with time constraints and the decline in their pastoral role (Rothi et al 2008). The ever increasing expectation of exam performativity and the ever growing demands for education to meet the needs of the knowledge economy are presenting a huge challenge to teachers ever before the added pressure of fiscal cuts. Our schools are on the cusp of great change and while this is challenging for teachers, it also presents them with a unique opportunity to have a strong voice in terms of the function of schools and of their role as educators within these schools.
Often blithe quotes are trotted out about education. Churchill’s “The only time my education was interrupted was while I was at school” or Einstein’s “Education is what remains after one has forgotten everything that one learned at school” do not ring true. Those of us whose professional lives are dedicated to education know this. But in the societal backlash against public service workers, such meaningless idioms are more commonplace. In the face of such adversity teachers have an opportunity to reclaim schools and to advocate for an educational agenda that really is broad and holistic.

The purpose of education in the words of Claxton (2008) should be:

Helping young people to develop the capacities they will need to thrive. What they need, and want is the confidence to try things out, to handle tricky situations, to stand up for themselves, to ask for help, to think new thoughts.

In other words: to become confident young people capable of creative and innovative thinking. Because of the dominance of the exam and the points system we are often left questioning the content of curriculum, debating the dumbing down of examinations, and yet we potentially fail to prepare young people for complex and uncertain futures (ibid), and indeed these futures are deeply uncertain in these recessionary times.

While our students have become really skilful at passing exams, in perfecting those skills they lose their capacity for wonder and critical questioning (ibid). Ken Robinson (2011) in his book Out of Our Minds: learning to be creative goes so far as to suggest that, in the need to reproduce knowledge for the exam through rote learning and memorisation, students’ creative potential is lost. In the drive for exam performativity students, rather than becoming bolder and braver are becoming more docile and fragile in the face of difficulty. They learn to think narrowly rather than broadly, to compete rather than cooperate, to be frightened of uncertainty and the risk of error that accompanies it (Claxton 2008).

Teacher status and professional autonomy has been significantly eroded in recent decades. There is little doubt that in the middle of the last century teachers theoretical and practical expertise was well established (Carlisle and Jordan 2008). The bureaucratisation of teaching, the constraints of mandated curriculum and the rise in dominance of the terminal exam has limited teacher autonomy severely. Challenging times call for radical change and the need for greater advocacy for the teaching profession is pressing. There is urgent need for a more politicised agenda in teacher professionalism. Teachers are generally driven by the best interests of student learning. They are experts in their chosen discipline and one cannot doubt but that teachers are deeply concerned about improving the conditions of schools. Perhaps, in these challenging times for education, a new form of teacher advocacy, an activist advocacy may be required. Sachs (2000:77) advocates for teachers to bring together alliances and networks of various educational interest groups for collective action to improve all aspects of the education enterprise, student learning outcomes and teachers status in the eyes of the community. Teachers have already successfully used their professional voice collectively to ensure that educational issues were put on the national agenda, were openly debated in the public domain and in so doing protected their DEIS schools. But the challenge is far from over.

In another book of their trilogy What’s worth fighting for in Education Hargreaves and Fullan state that by moving one step at a time, each teacher can change public perceptions so that the community ‘engages with and supports the challenging work of teachers today’ (p. x). In turn, teachers will ‘discover more resources and better ways to meet the needs of today’s pupils in our highly complex world’ (p. x). Their challenge is that: teachers cannot wait for society to get it - they must take action. Schools are a vital hope in terms of reinventing society, a more democratic one, where integrity is centre stage. The manner in which political decisions have maintained status quo, and how recent political decisions are adversely affecting schools means that need for teacher activism has never been greater. While no doubt challenging, the current crisis facing education provides educators with a unique opportunity to promote a new way of conceptualizing post primary schooling. Who best to drive this forward but those who know and understand the lived experience of schooling in Ireland today? Teachers are equipped with a wealth of experience and knowledge, both theoretical and practical that will serve them well in the challenging times to come.

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Biographical Note:
Patricia Mannix McNamara is Co-Director of the Research Centre for Education and Professional Practice (RECEPP) at the University of Limerick. She is Visiting Professor in the Katholieke University Leuven (Belgium) and Visiting Professor in University of Blaise Pascal Clermont Ferrand, France. A graduate of Mater Dei Institute of Education Patricia began her teaching career as a teacher of English, Religion and SPHE in post-primary schools.

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