

'Teachers against learning' sounds very like a new form of professional self-harm.

In my opinion by Gerry Jeffers and Majella Dempsey

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It's hard to fathom the decision by the teacher unions to boycott and picket in-service education for teachers. 'Teachers against learning' sounds very like a new form of professional self-harm.

Both the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI) and the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) have honourable histories and it is difficult to find previous examples of censoring members' access to professional development, as has happened in relation to training for the proposed new junior cycle.

From the outset of the disagreement, the unions have expressed concern about schools' capacity to deal with the junior cycle reform proposals. One powerful way of increasing that capacity is through teacher professional development.

As the debate has twisted and turned, teachers' limited confidence in their own assessment skills has emerged as a more serious problem than initially imagined.

Thus, it seems reasonable to have expected the unions to support opportunities for their members to deepen their learning about assessment, including modes and techniques, cross moderation, external authentication and other details of assessment of and for learning.

Preventing teachers from upskilling themselves also smacks of anti-intellectualism. Is there fear that teachers may be 'turned' by engagement with ideas on assessment? Fear that engaging in open and robust discussion with fellow professionals might lead to new insights?

It is worth recalling that this debate started with how poorly served many young people are by the present system at junior cycle. That has to remain as a central focus. Reform is urgently needed. Further procrastination does young people no service.

The overwhelming evidence that teachers tend to 'teach to the test' has to be recognised. How learning is assessed has to change radically.

Understandable fears, risks and uncertainties can be reduced by enabling the teaching profession to become more assessment literate. That requires extensive in-service education, at national, local, school and individual level.

In hindsight, perhaps the decision by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to proceed on a subject-by-subject basis was not such a good idea; a more whole-school approach might have been wiser, starting by building on what teachers already do to a point where they, as professionals, would be comfortable to defend their assessment decisions.

Issues of standards, equity and fairness could have been explored in a less-pressurised atmosphere.

Critically, issues of trust - including teachers trusting their assessment abilities, parents trusting teachers' assessment judgments, students trusting teachers to be impartial, society at large trusting teachers as professionals - might have been addressed.

At the heart of such discussions has to be the principle that assessment is an integral component of the teaching and learning experience.

Furthermore, principals, as leaders of learning in schools, have to be central to in-school understanding of assessment issues. Equally, there is a need to engage with parents and - students on what the changes will mean to them in real terms.

The attempted reform has also exposed the weaknesses of a random and poorly structured approach to teachers' continuing professional development generally.

While occasional workshops inside and outside school can be beneficial, major reform requires major professional learning.

The teacher unions' disappointing responses -without consulting their members - to both Education Minister Jan O'Sullivan's compromise and Dr Pauric Travers' proposals has led to an impasse. More meaningful schooling for 12-15 year olds is at risk.

As the summer break looms, some imaginative initiative is urgently needed.

If the DES could offer - and the unions accept - an intense, accredited course in the principles and practice of assessment in the service of teaching and learning for, say, three people from every school (two teachers and a principal), more informed conversations would ensue. Crucially, such a move would significantly build capacity at school level.

These 2,000-plus teachers would then be a major asset for implementing the reforms which the unions' leaders claim to favour.

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