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## Teaching the Media In Ireland

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**Teaching the Media in Ireland**

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## **Introduction**

This chapter presents an outline of the context, provision and future prospects for Media Education in Ireland with particular reference to the junior secondary cycle. The research, carried out by as part of the Euromedia Project, was co-ordinated by the School of Media, Dublin Institute of Technology and was carried out between January and June 2001. To date, little if any formal research has been carried on provisions for media education in Ireland. O'Halloran (1992) and Lynskey (1990) both identified the need and proposed methodologies for media education in Irish primary and secondary curricula respectively and O'Neill (2000) describes the historical context for media education in Ireland. However, no formal evaluation has yet been made of media education developments that followed during the 1990s and this chapter, it is hoped, will contribute to the long-awaited assessment of the place of media education in Irish schools.

The study involved a general analysis of the development and current situation of Media Education in Ireland. It examined the specific national context as well as empirical research in secondary schools with teachers of fourteen to sixteen year old students. While it was originally envisaged that about twelve schools would be involved in the survey, a national teachers' strike during the period of the research resulted in the project being limited to just three participating schools. Therefore, the findings reported here are preliminary and can only be considered as a pilot study for future research into this area.

## **National social, political and economic context**

The development of Media Education in Ireland is a relatively recent phenomenon. Despite the fact that the Irish educational system is a widely celebrated one, both at home and internationally, it is also a notoriously centralised one and it is only in the last decade that the reform necessary to facilitate the growth of new curricular areas such as Media Studies has been instituted - an area in which Ireland lags substantially behind our European counterparts.

The post-primary sector within the Irish educational system is for historical reasons complicated in structure. It comprises secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. Secondary schools, educating sixty-one per cent of second-level students, are privately owned and managed, largely by religious communities, but are predominantly funded by the state. Ninety-five per cent of such schools participate in the 'free education scheme' and receive capitation grants and allowances. The remaining five per cent are fee-paying schools. In addition to the historically dominant secondary school system, twenty-six per cent of secondary level students attend vocational schools and the remaining thirteen per cent attend community and comprehensive schools, all of which are publicly funded.

Much of the impetus for curriculum innovation in Irish education stems from the landmark 1992 publication of the government discussion paper *Education for a Changing World* (1992). The Green Paper articulated what had long been expressed by all partners in education. The educational experience, which had remained largely unchanged for many years, was an examination-intensive system, unsuited to many, and biased towards a fact-acquisition academic approach to the neglect of the

development of critical thinking, The education system as a whole was over-centralised making curriculum innovation enormously difficult. A wide-ranging debate on the future of education, its content and structures, developed and culminated in such events as the National Education Convention held in 1993, a government White Paper *Charting Our Education Future* (1995), and *The Education Act* of 1998. The direction of educational development was clearly charted and a number of key targets identified. The key target for secondary level education was to attain a completion rate of ninety per cent by the year 2000 from the seventy-seven per cent in 1995. Reforms of the junior- and senior-cycle curricula were to be continued, catering for the wide range of ability levels now participating in secondary level education and preparing students fully for effective participation in a rapidly changing society. The work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCAA) was also to be underpinned by law thus ensuring a greater responsiveness to curricular change and innovation. How Media Studies has fared and what its future prospects may be within this general environment of change is considered in the remainder of this chapter.

## **Media Education context**

### ***Development***

The entry of Media Education into the mainstream curriculum in Ireland has been a late, cautious and piecemeal one, much to the disappointment of the pioneering teachers of Media Studies who with their counterparts in the United Kingdom, have campaigned for a critical and empowering educational response to contemporary media culture. The most progressive forms of Media Education have been developed for more marginalised areas of the curriculum, such as vocational programmes, where

teachers have traditionally been given a large degree of flexibility to develop new approaches. For the core secondary curriculum, however, Media Studies has been introduced as a segment of the junior English curriculum and as a Film Studies option on the senior cycle English syllabus.

Historically, the response of Irish education to the media has been an ‘inoculatory’ one. O’Halloran (1992) notes how the original Primary Curriculum handbook (1971) pointed disapprovingly to the ‘parallel education’ which children received through:

the flood of information stimuli and exhortations conveyed by sound and image by which the pupil is assailed outside the school through posters, cinema, television, strip cartoons, radio and popular songs (1971: 20).

Mc Loone (1983) linked this tendency in Irish educational thinking with the neglect more generally of the arts and creative expression. The relatively late arrival of television in 1961 was symptomatic of a more general fear of technology in general and the potential of film as an expression of culture, for example, was not recognised until the mid 1970s. Equally, a xenophobic nationalism combined with the cultural conservatism of Irish Catholicism exerted strong influence on Irish education at least until the 1960s. Ironically, however, some of the earliest initiatives in Irish Media Education were promoted by the Catholic Communications Centre, founded in 1968, which in addition to publications such as *Introduction to the Mass Media* (Hunt, 1985) also ran training programmes in well equipped studios for teachers and students in media production techniques.

The origins of Media Education in Ireland can be traced to the late 1970s and early 1980s when the education system was recognised to be under severe pressure and in need of reform. At that time, Ireland had one of the youngest populations in Europe, with over fifty per cent of the population under twenty-five. The demographic pressures on an ancient system, coupled with cut-backs in public spending and poor job prospects for many school leavers, placed the entire system in crisis. At the same time, cultural change, the opening of Irish society, as well as the obvious centrality of popular culture in young people's lives, made the contrast between in-school and out-of-school life all the more apparent. Isolated efforts by teachers to develop Media Studies were galvanised and co-ordinated to some extent by the Education Department of the Irish Film Institute (IFI) which, in the absence of any other body, assumed responsibility for the development among teachers of a culture of media education. In addition to offering seminars and courses in Film and Media Studies, the IFI acted as a catalyst for the promotion of media awareness not just in schools but amongst the Irish public generally. A number of high-profile joint conferences and summer schools between the IFI and Radio Telefis Eireann (RTE), the state broadcaster, created an environment in which the media's contribution to and representation of Irish life was critically debated. A well attended National Media Education Conference held in Dublin in 1985 and addressed by leading UK Media educationalists such as Len Masterman, David Lusted and Eddie Dick created the impetus for the setting up of the first Teachers' Association for Media Education (TAME). The purpose of TAME was 'to support and encourage teachers of media education in both primary and post-primary schools' and to act as a lobbying group for curriculum provision, in-service training and the development of teaching resources for Media Studies. It was partially successful in each of these aims, though

once the modest provisions for Media Education in the Junior Certificate English syllabus were instituted (see below), the activities of the organisation fell into abeyance. A contributory factor was also the financial crisis experienced by the IFI and the winding down of its Education Department between 1986 and 1990.

As noted above, it was in the vocational area that Media Education made its first formal entry into an Irish curriculum in 1978. The Vocational Preparation and Training Programme (VPTP), designed for early school leavers, included in its Communications syllabus a requirement to study 'media among other elements of communications' (1978:145). An expanded version of this programme in 1984 listed among its aims for Communication Studies 'to develop an awareness of the nature and function of communications in contemporary society' and to enable students to 'acquire greater social competence' (1984:78). The objectives of this programme indicated that 'in addition to competence in the basic communication skills, an ability to cope with the various systems of communication, including mass media, would be required'. Students should know, furthermore, about the different kinds of mass media, processes of production, decision making, truthfulness, objectivity and bias. Students would also be encouraged to engage in practical production of news sheets, radio programmes, video magazines programmes etc. to give them an insight into media processes as well as developing their communicative abilities.

This admirable and well-balanced syllabus was a successful element of the programme as a whole and gave many teachers a long awaited opportunity to introduce a more relevant engagement with contemporary culture into the curriculum. The difficulty from the point of view of those who had campaigned for the



recognition of Media Studies in the school curriculum was that it had been restricted to the vocational area and not seen as something that was fundamental to all education. This distinction between the traditional curriculum in the secondary school and the vocational sector was perpetuated throughout the rest of the 1980s as the system itself expanded in an unplanned way to cater for the needs of industry and a bulging youth population with too few places in higher education. A range of vocational programmes was developed sometimes locally and with uncertain certification as post-Intermediate Certificate and post-Leaving Certificate courses, nearly all of which incorporated some elements of applied Communication Studies but for which skills acquisition was the primary emphasis. These efforts culminated eventually in the development of a new senior cycle programme, the Leaving Certificate Applied, whose integrated, modular and cross-disciplinary approach gave considerable emphasis to communications studies as a core element of personal development.

The campaign to incorporate media studies within the mainstream of the academic curriculum was led by the various interests of the IFI, TAME, and the Association of Teachers of English. In the context of an overall review of the curriculum at primary and second level, some measure of success has been achieved, with a media component being incorporated into the English syllabus in the first instance, and in varying lesser degrees in the Visual Arts and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE). The transition year programme which allowed schools to develop their own curricula also received a boost with the setting up a Transition Year Curriculum Support Service and many schools have offered media studies as an integral element of such a programme. Such curriculum reforms see elements of Media Education at

strategic points throughout the educational system: from junior cycle to transition year to senior cycle. While notable inclusions have been achieved, the result is also a disjointed one and the failure to establish Media Studies as a curricular unit in its own right at any level must remain a disappointment.

### *Curriculum spaces*

The principal curriculum space provided for Media Education within the Irish secondary system lies within the revised English syllabus at both junior and senior level. The secondary level curriculum consists of a three-year junior cycle followed by a two or three year senior cycle. The Junior Certificate programme, introduced in 1989, provides a single unified programme for students aged between twelve and fifteen years, emphasising knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies. It also emphasises qualities of ‘responsible citizenship in a national, European and global context’. It is in this context that the majority of students encounter Media Studies as a formal element of the curriculum.

The traditionally academic senior cycle programme which prepared students for higher education has also undergone restructuring, in part due to increased participation rates, and in response to its outmoded university-oriented approach. An optional Transition Year programme has now been introduced offering students opportunities for personal and social development. Its interdisciplinary and student-centred nature has provided interested teachers with extensive opportunities for the development of Media Education modules. The established Leaving Certificate examination is the terminal examination for the majority of students in the fifteen to eighteen age groups. Students take at least five subjects, though in practice seven to

eight is the norm. Significantly, the revised Leaving Certificate English syllabus now includes the study of film.

A vocational orientation to the senior cycle programme was introduced with the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), first introduced in 1989 and expanded in 1994 to include link modules for preparation for work. The Leaving Certificate Applied is a new self-contained two-year programme involving a cross-curricular approach rather than a subject-based one with a strong vocational and personal development emphasis. It incorporates modules in Communication Studies with Media Studies elements.

### ***Provision and formal curriculum frameworks***

The major responsibility for Media Education in the secondary level curriculum falls on English language teachers. The first step towards a universal provision for media studies was made in the revision of the Junior Certificate English programme in 1989 when it was suggested that English, while ‘retaining the best elements of English teaching would allow teachers to introduce new elements such as adolescent literature, classroom drama and media studies’ (1989: 1). The Junior Certificate, representing the final phase of compulsory schooling, aims at breadth and balance in its curricular approach and aims at relevance to the cultural, economic and social environment of the individual in its curriculum provision. The teaching of English at Junior Cycle aims to develop the personal proficiency of the student in the arts and skills of language defined as ‘personal literacy, social literacy and cultural literacy’ (1989: 1). While Media Literacy has become one of the defining principles of Media Education, the elaboration of the principles of literacy in social and cultural

dimensions in the syllabus are clearly more functionally oriented and mass media literacy is defined in this context. The syllabus refers to reading newspapers, having a critical consciousness with respect to language use and writing within the discipline of media forms such as radio and television and does create a specific curriculum space for the study of media. Teachers are given a high degree of freedom to develop syllabus units within the overall programme combining literary and media genre in a variety of ways, choosing their own texts and materials to achieve the objectives of the programme. Units can focus on a central text (e.g. novel or Shakespeare play) or group of texts. Alternatively, a Unit can be structured around a theme or cultural topic (Heroes and Heroines, Conflicts and Contrasts, Advertising) (1989: 6).

*The Teachers' Guides* elaborate on how a Media Studies unit can be incorporated into the programme. *Introduction to Media Studies*, for example, is an introductory unit for 1<sup>st</sup> year students (age 12-13), and encourages them to think and talk about the media as products/processes. Through linguistic exercises, students can begin to approach such media-specific concepts as visual communication, selection, construction and develop an awareness of their own interaction with the media. The context for such this introduction is articulated in a 'protectionist paradigm'. Features highlighted include the persuasiveness of the media, the power of the image and the significance of selection/construction in media news making. Students, it is suggested, "could take a 'nasty' character from a novel or story and write a sympathetic description of him/her. Construct a sensational news item from a selected poem" (*Junior Certificate English – Draft Guidelines for Teachers*, nd: 85).

A unit on *Advertising* follows the *Introduction to Media Studies Unit* and introduces basic visual literacy/semiotic concepts of denotation, connotation, anchorage, preferred reading, target audience and representation. Less 'protectionist' in description, it enables a wide discussion of knowledge and interaction with advertising in the media and encourages an awareness of the 'range of media products in society, media as a source of pleasure and personal consumption of media products' (*Junior Certificate English, Draft Guidelines for Teachers*, nd: 86). It also opens possibilities for creative, practical work in advertising construction in order to illustrate principles of audiences and targets and extends its analysis to television programme opening sequences analyses of the moving image and film. More negatively, a section on representation in advertising images looks at how stereotypes represent and attract audiences and has been a frequently repeated theme in the examination of the course.

While the openness of the new English syllabus has been widely welcomed and its inclusion of Media Education an important, if limited one, a major drawback to the entire approach, as acknowledged by teachers, is its mode of assessment. As Coy (1997) notes, 'The biggest obstacle to teaching the Junior Cert. course is the Junior Cert. exam. It has reduced English, once again, to a written subject despite the promise of the syllabus' (1997: 96). In one of two examination papers, Media Studies is now formally examined but in a textual way in the form of written responses and analysis of visual elements. Thus, the exam paper of 1998 used a newspaper Kellogg's advertisement depicting a teenager's bedroom and asked questions such as: (1) What image does this advertisement portray of the lifestyle and values of teenagers? (2) Do you feel teenagers are being exploited in this advertisement? And

(3) Do you think it is an effective way of promoting the product? (1998)

In 1999's examination paper, following a transcribed segment of *The Simpsons*, students were asked, "From what you observe in your own home and elsewhere list the bad and good effects of television on family life in general and discuss whether its use should be regulated by parents" (1999). This is not representative of all the opportunities that Media study at the junior cycle allows, but much of it in this vein is unnecessarily restrictive and limiting.

The transition year programme (TYP) is a unique phenomenon in Europe with a year-long programme allocated to personal and social development and maturity, structured between the junior and senior elements of the second level system. Seventy-five per cent of schools now offer a TYP and thirty per cent of those schools have now made it a compulsory element for their students. A unique feature of the TYP is that schools are free to develop their own local approaches and with the support of a Transition Year Curriculum Support Service can integrate a variety of cross-curricular modules on offer around a core of General Education units. The emphasis of the programme is on education for maturity, for developing skills of self-directed learning as well a general process of personal and social development. A work placement is an integral part of the TYP. Media Studies has been a popular element chosen by many schools for inclusion with transition year (Kelly, 1998). The freedom that the TYP offers represents a significant opportunity for teachers to develop ambitious projects, new forms teaching and learning and modes of assessment without the constraints of a formal examination syllabus. Studies of media representation, of visual awareness and education, film analysis and processes

of media production have been typical elements used by teachers in such programmes. Teachers of English often develop the introduction to media offered in the junior cycle and introduce in the transition year the type of social and cultural analysis required of the new Leaving Certificate Programme. Experiential learning through the production of magazines, videos and films, as well as work placements in media and cultural industries have been valuable experiences for many students. Despite the proven contribution of a transition year to the enhancement of overall student performance, the weakness of the TYP remains its optional nature. The programme has suffered by reputation of being ‘a year out’ in the context of an otherwise competitive academic environment and some schools have marginalised the programme by aiming it towards weaker students.

At the senior level, the most significant innovation has been the introduction of film as a prescribed element alongside the traditional literary genres of poetry, drama and fiction. The syllabus develops the Junior Certificate emphasis on literacy and oral skills in personal, social and cultural domains (*Leaving Certificate English Syllabus*, 1995: 2). The term “language” is acknowledged to include visual forms of communication and the role of media, film and theatrical experience are seen as significant (1995: 2). The programme also introduces a more sophisticated approach to the analysis of all texts which looks to their ‘embedded nature in history, culture, society and ultimately personal subjectivity’ (1995: 3). The designated areas of language use are now defined across ‘lines of information, argument, persuasion, narration and aesthetic uses of language’. Areas of development to encourage media analysis are clearly outlined so that students should study documentary films and media accounts for the language of information, political speeches and advertising for

the language of persuasion and films for the language of narration. Similarly, in the traditionally privileged literary section of the aesthetic use of language, teachers and students are also encouraged to 'view films as complex amalgams of images and words' (1995: 13). Students must still study one literary text in detail but at higher level are now also required to study texts in a comparative way, taking into account historical and cultural contexts. Film as text is included as part of this comparative study, which must also include other literary genres.

The Leaving Certificate Applied is the latest curricular innovation in Media Studies at second level. It marks a new departure for senior cycle education and offers an alternative to the traditional subject-based approach of the dominant examination programme. It results from what is now viewed as a major achievement in Irish education that virtually all the seventeen to eighteen cohort now remain in full time education. The programme is now offered in approximately 200 schools and is aimed at those whose needs are not met by the academic Leaving Certificate programme. Thirty per cent of the programme consists of General Education, thirty per cent Vocational Education and twenty-five per cent for Vocational Preparation.

Communication Media represents one module in a broad-based and cross-curricular approach to communications which emphasises social and cultural skills of literacy, discrimination and awareness. Units on Newspapers, Radio, Television, Film and Advertising aim to give students an understanding of the different media, develop critical thinking and communicative skills and to enable them to learn media techniques and technologies. Much of the emphasis is on engagement with a range of media content – newspaper coverage, radio and television programmes, advertising – learning the critical terminology to describe and analyse it, and to examine some of



the underlying conditions of its production. Other modules in the Social Education curriculum likewise draw on media as a learning resource and a tool in the study of the social context of contemporary issues, the social and political process and the centrality of the media to active citizenship. A process of Media Education permeates the programme and seeks in an integrated way to stimulate critical thinking and active participation by using the readily available resources of media.

## **Study procedures**

### ***Research Design and sample selection***

The purpose of this study was to examine approaches to the teaching of media within the English curriculum for 14-16 year olds in Irish secondary schools, i.e. within the curriculum space of Junior Certificate English, the only compulsory formal curriculum framework for Media Education in Ireland. The research design followed closely the framework outlined by Hart and Hicks (1999).

A sample of twelve schools in the Dublin area was initially selected, comprising a mix of single sex and mixed secondary schools, both public and private, reflecting the principal types of school within the Irish system. Unfortunately, a period of intense industrial action in Irish schools during the period of the research frustrated this plan and to date only three schools have agreed to participate (see p. 1). These cases are discussed here.

The research involved both classroom observation of media teaching and structured interviews with teachers. Classroom observation focussed on the aims of the media lesson in question, its content and methodology, and the resources utilised. Sessions

were not recorded but detailed field notes were kept. Teachers were also interviewed in relation to their involvement in media education and asked a range of structured questions concerning their background and approach to the teaching of media, the context and available support for media teaching as well as their personal aims and objectives. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and subsequently analysed using NUD.IST qualitative data analysis software.

The three schools included in the survey were as follows:

School 1: Girls' Convent School, a public secondary school serving the south inner city region of Dublin. A wide mix of students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Classroom observation of a Junior Certificate examination class – 3<sup>rd</sup> year, student ages 15-16.

Teacher A: Male, English teacher, 5 years experience of teaching media.

School 2: Boys' Catholic Secondary School, a public secondary school with a wide catchment area covering north and south Dublin and a mixed student body.

Teacher B: Female, English teacher, 10 years experience of teaching media.

School 3: Boys' Catholic Secondary School, a public secondary school serving the south inner city. Socially mixed student population though predominantly from lower socio-economic groupings.

Teacher C: Male, English teacher, 30 years teaching experience and 15 years experience of teaching media.

## **Findings**

### ***Background***

The teachers interviewed were experienced and enthusiastic teachers of media and were passionate about the need for Media Education. None had received formal training or qualifications in Media Studies. Teacher C had first become involved teaching Media while teaching General Studies in England and Teacher B had been teaching the Junior Certificate English media component since its inception. Their personal interests in media favoured film, music and radio listening over television and they recognised that their tastes were different to their students. None professed any expertise or particular interest in computers or new media.

Each teacher felt that Media Education was very necessary given the pervasive presence of media in young people's lives and expressed concern at what they perceived to be their manipulative influence. Teachers felt that the everyday traits of contemporary youth culture, such as the wearing of designer labels and use of mobile phones, were largely due to media influence. There was a clear suggestion in teachers' concerns that the purpose of Media Education was in part protectionist and stemmed from a distaste for the commercial intentions of many media messages. The focus on advertising and persuasive communication within the curriculum also appears to reflect such a concern. However, teachers also recognised that pupils were experienced users of media and very comfortable with media language and as such generally responded positively to media in the classroom

### *Aims, Objectives and Key Concepts*

Favoured concepts and topics in the classes observed dealt with agency (the people behind the media message, point of view in journalism), the power of media institutions, representation and target audience. As such, the aims of the media lessons observed were framed as attempting to engender a critical awareness of the constructed nature of media messages. Popular topics for Media teaching included analysis of advertising images with a particular focus on stereotyping and how ideological meanings could be encoded in media texts. Similarly, teenage magazines and popular television programmes were used to illustrate notions of audience targeting and representation of particular issues. Teachers tended to deny that their approach was 'protectionist' in nature but were clear that pupils were generally unaware of the processes involved in the media or the agendas that may lie behind particular media messages.

There was also a strong discriminatory aspect present in approaches to Media teaching. In addition to wanting their students to be critically aware of the power of the media, teachers also hoped that they would be able to evaluate media content critically. As one teacher argued:

I want the students to be able to evaluate a media text so that they can appreciate the values of say a film or a piece of journalism. I want them to be able to see value in a film, to be more discriminatory, instead of looking at something purely for entertainment value.

(Teacher C)

The same teacher subsequently described evaluation and discrimination as the key concepts of Media Education. The discriminatory paradigm, a distinctive feature of the senior cycle where Film Studies is provided as an option alongside works of literature, features less prominently in the junior cycle curriculum but nonetheless remains a key aim of Media Education as articulated by media teachers. The sense of developing a critical awareness of media was likewise couched in the language of the protectionist paradigm. Teacher A, for instance, when asked to outline his long term aims for his pupils said:

To be able to approach the media with a healthy degree of cynicism and to arm them with the ways or approach that would help them to understand the various agendas that are going on. To give them the critical capability to be able to fully understand the media and how it works (sic). (Teacher A).

Teachers want to encourage this questioning approach to the media and to give their students confidence in being critical, independent consumers less amenable to either peer or media pressure:

I think it is important to equip students with enough knowledge so that are aware of the language of persuasion as found in the advertising message. I think it is important that students have the ability and confidence to evaluate a media text. The crucial phrase is 'to evaluate'. If students can critically evaluate a film or media text, this will increase their ability to make informed choices about the media.

(Teacher C)

### ***Teaching Approaches and Resources***

In contrast perhaps to other sections of the English curriculum, Media teaching has the potential to be a genuinely learner-centred activity. In the lessons observed for this study, there were many examples of classroom discussion, debate and student-led activities. However, in the main, hierarchical approaches to teaching dominated. Classroom discussion tended to be led by the teacher and while students had opportunities to contribute to class debate, their input was restricted by a teacher-centred pedagogy. Teachers did try to open a space within the classroom framework for students' interests and concerns to emerge and, indeed, students frequently displayed their expertise in discussion of media through their familiarity and knowledge. Classroom assignments and group projects also appeared to allow for more independent learning though limitations of time and the demands of the curriculum repeatedly acted as a constraint on such activity.

Another constraint on student initiative in their exploration of media was the over-reliance by teachers on the prescribed English textbook which provided the structure and content for discussion. Teachers explained by referring to the pressure of time and the lack of availability of other resources for teaching about the media. Students were encouraged over the course of their studies to collect and introduce their own materials for classroom discussion, though again the constraints of the syllabus being followed did not allow sufficient time for independent project work.

The lack of resources is frequently cited by teachers as adding to their frustrations in developing more interesting and exciting approaches for teaching about the media. The schools concerned, all publicly funded, supported media activities as much as they could within limited budgets. It was felt that private schools enjoyed an advantage in being able to afford better facilities and specialist teachers. Against this, the work of the IFI was singled out for special praise both for the study materials they had produced as well the special student screenings they regularly organised. Teachers felt the lack of other relevant support networks whether in the form of teachers' associations or in-service training.

There is no provision for practical Media work within the English syllabus and this was acknowledged by teachers as a shortcoming. Where practical Media work did take place, it was an extra curricular activity such as a photography club within the school or a special video project supported by interested teachers.

### ***Curriculum***

One of the features that has an overbearing influence on how the media are taught is undoubtedly its mode of assessment by written examination. The exam consists of two papers, the first of which has four sections. Media studies are examined in the fourth section, with a total of thirty out of the available one hundred and seventy marks apportioned to paper one. As such, teachers reckon that they spend no more than ten per cent of their teaching time on media. In an examination year particularly, teachers are forced to concentrate on approaches that will maximise students' performance in these sections. The teachers agreed that such an approach was very

narrow and went totally against the spirit of media education. They felt, however, that they had little choice:

We are dictated to by the exam, we're given very little scope or freedom. The fact that you can break down topics into the ones that you saw me do on the board - see handout - shows that it is a very narrow focus.

(Teacher A)

The teachers interviewed recognised that the way Media Education had been incorporated into the Junior Certificate English syllabus was limited and neither interesting nor sufficiently challenging for students. They were more positive about the film studies option in the Leaving Certificate, which they felt offered greater scope for analysis and for engaging students' interest. Transition Year programmes also afforded more opportunities for more ambitious Media Education programmes though not all schools had the resources to offer Media as part of their Transition Year.

Teachers supported the idea that Media Studies should be a far more significant part of the secondary level curriculum. They were in favour of the curriculum as a whole opening to diverse new developments and that media should have a strong cross curricular influence. At present, they felt that the burden of Media Education fell squarely on their shoulders and that the only interaction with media that other subject teachers would have is through the showing of videos. They also strongly supported the idea of Media having a distinct and separate place in the curriculum. Its peripheral location within the Junior Certificate English syllabus did not do any favours for the



cause of Media Education and in fact might succeed in turning students away from the subject. Teachers realised how popular Media courses were at third level and for this reason felt that a separate subject at Leaving Certificate level would be a very positive development. With regard to the close relationship between English as a subject and the teaching of Media, they agreed that in principle this was a worthwhile development for the subject and provided a more relevant curriculum. However, as English teachers, they also recognised the shortcomings of adopting a wholly literary based approach to the study of media. While film study was increasingly a popular option at Leaving Certificate, this allowed only for the application of literary methods of textual analysis and left out whole areas of media studies to do with context, agency and institutional analysis.

## **Conclusions**

The main conclusion to be derived from this research is that the formal introduction of Media Studies as part of the Junior Certificate English syllabus has to date only been a partial and qualified success. It has introduced concepts of media analysis to wide school going population but in a limited way that restricts students' exposure to textual analysis with an overemphasis on concepts of persuasion and advertising. There is insufficient time or space within the current curriculum to explore other aspects of media or to engage in a more fundamental way with processes and content of contemporary media and popular culture. The development of more sustained forms of analysis at Leaving Certificate level offers greater opportunities for such an exploration but in this instance are confined to the relatively 'aesthetic' area of film studies.

The approaches to Media teaching shown by our teachers displayed strong influences of both protectionist and discriminatory paradigms. Couched in the language of engendering a critical awareness of media processes and products, in fact much of the approach to Media Teaching could be said to derive from a quite negative view of contemporary media culture and its supposed influence on young people. The curriculum as outlined by the Department of Education reinforces this approach and it is perhaps unsurprising that asking teachers of English to take on the burden of Media Education with little formal training in the academic discipline of media studies results in a defensive and very cautious approach to youth culture.

Another consequence of the examination-dominated and restricted Media syllabus allowed within the Junior Certificate is that there is no opportunity for any exploration of changing media forms of communication, and in particular no consideration given to the textual, technical or cultural impact of new media. This can be seen to be a major omission, given the interest of young people in computers and screen-based new media culture. It also stands in contradiction to government policy to prepare pupils for the Information Society and with the extensive programme to provide computers and fast internet connections for all schools.

Further research is required to see if the above issues are representative of experience across the school system, for instance in the better resourced private sector or in the public comprehensive and community schools. It would also be useful to study Media Education at Transition Year and Leaving Certificate levels to examine how different and less restricted curriculum frameworks impact on teaching approaches to the media. At the same time, a crucial area for future research in Media Education

provision is some study of pupils' own responses to Media Studies classes and of how Media Education has affected their approach to media consumption.

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