Symposium on Education: Student Perspectives on Junior Cycle Reform

23 May 2014

Junior Cycle reform was explored by students and education stakeholders at a symposium entitled *Education in the 21st Century: Student Perspectives on Junior Cycle Reform* which took place on Wednesday May 21st, 2014, in Trinity College Dublin.

Organised by the Research in School Education (RISE) Group in the School of Education, Trinity College, the symposium focused on student perspectives of the rationale, aims and possible outcomes of proposed Junior Cycle Reform. Over 30 students took part, ranging from 11-17 years of age and representing 6th class at primary level through to 5th year at post primary level. The outcomes of the symposium will be compared with those from a similar event run by the RISE group last year for adult stakeholders in the education sector. School of Education Director of Research Dr Colette Murphy said: "This symposium couldn't have come at a better time. Adults may have the responsibility of making the decisions, but it is the students who live with the consequences.”

The symposium was designed with the involvement of students themselves in collaboration with researchers from the RISE group. Student advisors will also help with analysing and interpreting the findings from the symposium, helping the researchers get to grips with the issues surrounding this subject from the student’s perspective. Barry O’Callaghan, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) opened proceedings with a short introductory piece which presented an overview of Junior Cycle Reform.
Research by RISE members Dr Colette Murphy and Dr Paula Flynn on student voice informed this symposium. Dr Murphy’s research used a children’s rights-based research methodology to compare the views of young students in Wales, where standard attainment tests (SATs) were abolished in 2004, with those of a group of students in England who were part of the last cohort to take SATs in science at the end of their primary education.

“The clearest message to emerge from this study is the enormous contribution students can make to debates on their own education. Young people often have a much more sophisticated understanding of the issues than they are given credit for and raise issues which might otherwise be overlooked,” Dr Colette Murphy commented.

Dr Flynn’s research in the Republic of Ireland has demonstrated the potential for improved attachment to school as well as positive teacher-student and peer relationships when students experience ‘authentic’ rather than tokenistic student voice opportunities for consultative purpose. She adds “Young people want and need to be heard on issues that impact on their experience of education. Their insights are essential to inform an understanding of obstacles and supports to learning as experienced from their expert perspective in the learning relationship”.