The right questions

Recently there have been a number of media articles and questions in the Dáil focusing on the ICT in Schools Initiative. 'Technology crisis in schools' was the article headline, which compared ICT in schools, North and South. The sub-heading in the *Irish Independent* Supplement (27-3-2003) told us: 'The Republic's education system has fallen 10 years behind the North in the IT stakes, undermining our children's education and threatening the future of Ireland Inc.' Ten years ago the Northern Ireland Education System was five years into its latest programme for ICT in its schools much like we are now.

In 1994 the Northern Ireland Department of Education produced these figures for the level of IT provision in their schools: 24,500 computers were shared by 350,000 pupils. They had one computer for every 22 pupils in age range 4-11, one computer for every 7 pupils in age range 11-18 (Secondary Schools) and one computer for every 13 pupils in age range 11-18 (Grammar Schools). The age distribution of these computers in this survey showed 47% had been purchased in the previous 3 years, 33% were between 3 and 6 years old and 20% were over 7 years old.

The figures for the Republic of Ireland, which had entered 10 years later into the national provision for ICT in its education system, compare well with 10 years ago in Northern Ireland. Jerome Morrissey of the NCTE gives the figures as one computer for every 16 pupils at primary level and one for every 11-12 pupils at post-primary level.

But what is the benefit in having this information? In the same article, John Anderson from the Northern Ireland ICT initiative is quoted: **'Number ratio is attractive as a relatively straightforward way of attracting funding but you get to a point where it turns into a trap. It focuses people's attention on getting more boxes and away from practice. You reach a point where you have enough technology and you have to change the focus on to practice in the classroom.'**

There are other issues. Why was the Republic later in providing ICT funding for its education system? For example, Sweden began the funding ICT in its schools in 1984/85, Australia also in 1984. The Republic's start was 1998 yet we are expected to have achieved what other countries have achieved but in a longer time-span. How does the Republic's investment per pupil in the ICT in Schools Initiative compare with that of Northern Ireland and of other countries, such as Israel and the applicant members to the EU? The writer does not ask that question!

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Another recent article drew attention to 'the poor take-up of ICT in schools'. The solution offered was to make ICT in schools an examination subject. 'Examination status' has not of itself improve the situation, for example, Science. A more incisive and rigorous approach to questions from the media would be helpful. Many confuse using the technology in learning and teaching with a study that might be deemed technology education. In the Republic of Ireland, as well as in many other countries, ICT in the school system is seen as an integrated learning and teaching tool. Should the school system be faulted for not achieving what it is not deemed the goal to achieve?

In another supplement, Working in Education, this time the *Irish Times*, (4- 4-03) Jamie Smyth tells us in an article entitled 'Keying into today's classroom revolution - Computers will continue to change the way we learn.' that 'almost 65,000 teachers have taken part in training projects involving information and communication technologies over the past four years.' That certainly appears to be a statistic that should be trumpeted. How many teachers are there in schools in the Republic of Ireland? The same *Irish Times* in Easter Week of the Teacher Congresses led us to believe that there are approximately 53,000 teachers in our primary and post primary systems. The Department of Education and Science's own figures are even less. 65,000 clearly refers to the number of attendances at training courses for teachers in ICT. How many 'repeaters' are included? On the other hand how many teachers have received no ICT training? What is the nature of the training programme? Answers to these questions might give a more realistic picture of achievement. In the same article Jerome Morrissey is quoted as saying that there are 16 computers for each primary school pupil! Whether he is quoted or misquoted this statement should have been challenged.

Is it known that this ICT training is of a voluntary nature? Teachers do it in their own time, with no other incentive than a reliance on the teachers' dedication. When other curriculum change was attempted recently teachers were trained in school time. Why not follow the same approach to preparing teachers to use ICT? Compare the training programmes for staff in the education sector with other sectors as they moved into ICT use. Compare the technical support provided in the different sectors. What technical support is available to an organisation with, for example, 50 computers? If the organisation is a school there is no technical support, no staffing provision for regular and basic maintenance and no funding for calling on outside maintenance support. Should these contexts for ICT use in schools be questioned also?

These other questions need answers. If they are not answered satisfactorily then the ICT in Irish Schools Initiative will be less successful, not only in the ratio stakes, but also in the quality of support for teaching and learning which is a more appropriate objective.