Chapter X
Re–Schooling and Information Communication Technology:
A Case Study of Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the place of information communication technology (ICT) in re-schooling; the authors discuss what re-schooling means and use Northern Ireland as a case study to explore how an entire school system is starting to be transformed through a combination of political change, curriculum development, and the integration of a managed ICT service. They argue that where ICT is being used to build social cohesion and social capital in addition to developing pupils' employability and academic performance, it is helping schools to become learning organisations. The authors provide an analysis of the social, economic, and political context of Northern Ireland, but argue that the lessons that have been learned about the relationship between ICT and re-schooling have resonance on a global scale.

INTRODUCTION

The central focus of this chapter is an examination of what the term re-schooling means and what role information and communication technology (ICT) and digital literacy might play in this process. Northern Ireland is chosen as a case study in the analysis of the question: What is re-schooling?

The work of David Istance and his team (2004) in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has focussed attention on major challenges facing education and schooling systems across the world. In the

Schooling for Tomorrow Project, they have developed six scenarios based around three clusters of ideas; the first cluster is based around the notion of "attempting to maintain the status quo." This is characterised as teachers working as they do at the moment, largely in isolation and fearful of what change might mean for their status; a more extreme version of this outlook is the "meltdown scenario" caused primarily by an extreme shortage of teachers through loss of morale, coupled with an inability to recruit sufficient numbers of young graduates who would have a far wider range of career options open to them.

The second cluster of scenarios have been termed re-schooling; the first example of this is called "schools as core social centres," where the school becomes the key social and community institution, and school walls would come down so that substantial community activity took place within the school. The second instance of this model is the "school as a focused learning organisation," "revitalised around a strong knowledge agenda in a culture of high quality, innovation, experimentation, and diversity." Teachers would be part of a wider local, national, and global community, aided by the opportunities created from digital connectivity, and there would be extensive networks linking the school to further and higher education. There would be a high premium on teacher professional development within schools as organisations that justified the use of the term-focused learning organisations.

The third cluster of scenarios is based around ideas of 'de-schooling', with schools no longer central to the education of young people, and government playing a less important role compared to a range of religious and commercial providers. In effect market forces would drive the shape of educational provision, and schools as we know them would cease to exist.

Istance reports that at a recent conference 85% of participants thought that the "school as a focused learning organisation" was highly or rather desirable while 81% supported the "school as core social centre." However, at a second conference to ascertain where 20 countries thought they actually were on a matrix showing all six scenarios, it was clear that OECD countries are "pretty much stuck in the bureaucratic status quo." While it was acknowledged that reform was taking place on a piecemeal scale, there were substantial barriers to change, not least of which are the attitudes of middle class parents who are described as "risk averse" and "wanting their children to succeed in terms that they know and did reasonably well by themselves."

The term re-schooling shares common ground with the language of transforming learning, which has been used to talk about applications of ICT that go beyond automating learning and enhancing learning; in this chapter, an analysis is offered of the ways in which ICT has started to 'transform learning' in Northern Ireland and to suggest that this is an illuminative case study of one of the necessary but not sufficient conditions in re-schooling.

THE NORTHERN IRELAND SCHOOLING SYSTEM

Any discussion of what re-schooling might mean needs to take account of what is already in place; what are the most significant characteristics of the education system in Northern Ireland? First, the system is segregated to a high degree with 95% of children from a Protestant background attending controlled, state schools, while those with a Catholic upbringing generally attend maintained schools which subscribe to and often display a Catholic ethos. Only 5% of children attend integrated schools.

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