



Report on the Seventh Annual Conference of IASSEE

The Annual Conference of the Irish Association for Social, Scientific and Environmental Education (IASSEE) was held on the 19th and 20th June, 2008, in Queen's University Belfast (QUB). It was the seventh annual conference organized by the association and it built on the success of previous conferences. IASSEE is an all-Ireland association, which focuses on the teaching and learning of history, geography and science at primary level and on the pedagogy underlying that teaching and learning in initial teacher education. The 7th IASSEE annual conference focused on educational research, particularly in the areas of images, perceptions and teaching. Members were updated on the IASSEE all-Ireland longitudinal study on **Student Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences of History, Geography and Science: An All-Ireland Survey** which has been generously funded by SCoTENS since 2004.

This year's conference was attended by thirty delegates. This attendance included members of IASSEE, invited participants, delegates from the NCCA, members of the Northern Ireland Inspectorate, education and library boards as well as interested educationalists and academics drawn from the three disciplines. The conference was opened by a welcome from the conference organisers, Karen Kerr (QUB) and Karen Carlisle (QUB). The first keynote address, 'Educating for what? 'soft' versus 'critical' approaches to values-based educational initiatives in Ireland' was delivered by Lesley McEvoy (QUB). Lesley introduced 'soft' and 'critical' global citizenship education. This paper examined citizenship education in Northern Ireland in terms of potential tensions and 'policy approximation', human rights education, approaches to teaching controversial issues and teaching 'political generosity'. Lesley concluded by looking at 'adjectival educations' in terms of science, history and geography and discussed 'going towards a more critical approach'. A lively and interesting debate ensued, chaired by Karen Kerr (QUB).

The IASSEE dissemination presentations followed and members were updated on phase 3 of the longitudinal study on Student Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences of History, Geography and Science: An All-Ireland Survey which has been generously funded by SCoTENS since 2004. A paper by Karen Kerr and Colette Murphy updated members on the findings related to science. The second presentation, by Fionnuala Waldron, Geraldine O'Connor, Eileen O'Sullivan and Paddy Madden examined the findings for history. This was followed by an update on the geography findings by Susan Pike, Richard Greenwood and Laura Walsh. The dissemination session was concluded with a discussion, involving all the members present, on the overall findings from phase 3. The first day of the conference concluded with a second keynote address, given by Prof Janette Elwood (QUB). It was entitled 'Stepping outside one's comfort zone in educational research – shifting perspectives and influences on what we know and how we come to know it'. This sparked a very

interesting and insightful debate on what it is for us to research outside our 'usual' areas.

The first session on the second day of the conference included two papers and was chaired by Karen Kerr. Brian Ruane (St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra) in his paper 'Citizen Teacher- Perceptions of initial teachers regarding development, human rights and diversity in education', gave an account of the development and delivery of a new course for first year B Ed students in St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra which aims to help these aspiring teachers become confident practitioners addressing the challenges and opportunities of diversity and change in an interdependent world. The course employed participative methodologies to enable students to explore their own knowledge, attitudes, values and perceptions. This paper analysed the response of 300 students to a questionnaire completed at the end of the six week course. The qualitative and quantitative data therein offered insights into the students' readiness to implement development and intercultural education, their perceptions on the interconnections between their personal and professional development and the extent to which their personal convictions and perceptions regarding global justice issues determine how they engage in such courses and integrate such learning into their professional practice and lives. Conor McCrory (Queen's University, Belfast) gave the second paper in this session, entitled 'Evolution, Creationism, and Intelligent Design in Northern Ireland: the attitudes of pre-service science teachers'. This paper presented an outline of the evolution-creationism struggle and issues of relevance for science education. Recent developments in Northern Ireland were summarized and situated in a national and international context. Data was presented from research being undertaken pre-service science teachers in Northern Ireland which looks at the opinions of future teachers to the related issues. Some questions for further consideration were raised: What factors affect teacher-attitudes to the relevant issues? How should teachers and science educators respond to the issue of creationism vs evolution? Who should decide what is taught in the science classroom (courts, lobby-groups, politicians, subject-specialists, educators)?

Chaired by Karen Carlisle (QUB), the second session included three papers. The first paper was given by John McCullagh (Stranmillis University College Belfast) and involved preparation from James Stewart (W5,Belfast). It was entitled 'Learning beyond the classroom and the lecture theatre: The important role of external education agencies within an ITE programme'. This presentation was based on the format and evaluation of the module "Primary Science Beyond the Classroom," within the BEd (Primary) pathway. This module examined the role of trips to external science agencies, including the W5 Discovery Centre in Belfast and examined the role of the classroom teacher, before, during and after a school visit, in maximising children's learning experiences. During the course students, specialising in different areas of the curriculum, were placed in local schools and required to collaboratively plan cross-curricular lessons to support and consolidate learning, before and after the trip to the centre. The evaluation (using questionnaires and interviews) indicated that the students, (and their host schools), find this an extremely worthwhile experience which contributes greatly to their development in planning, classroom teaching and critical reflection. Although the context was science, the principles and skills developed are transferable across all areas of the curriculum. This paper promoted practices and approaches that are of use to colleagues in ITE and encourage links with local educational agencies. The second paper was given by Órlaith Veale, Clíona Murphy, Janet Varley (St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra) and was entitled 'Implementation of the Primary Science Curriculum in Ireland: The children's view'. This paper

considered International and national concerns have regarding the decline in pupils' interest in the sciences, which has been suggested to begin even at primary school level. This paper also examined the curricula in the Republic of Ireland, which has been subject to considerable change. It represents a significant alteration of both emphasis and content, when compared with the equivalent sections of its predecessor, the 1971 *Curaclam na Bunscoile*. This paper reported on a large-scale study, which aimed to discover pupils' experiences and perceptions of science within the new curriculum. Findings were based on data gathered from a nationwide survey of primary school children and detailed case studies of children in eleven primary schools. This paper highlighted some of the successes and concerns surrounding the children's view of the science they are encountering at primary school. This research was funded by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

The final paper of the conference was given by Cliona O'Keeffe and Arlene Forster (NCCA). The paper was called 'Primary Curriculum Review, Phase 2 – Teachers' experience with the Science Curriculum'. A brief history of The Primary School Curriculum in the Republic of Ireland was given. One year after science was implemented the NCCA initiated phase one of a curriculum review—an ongoing process to continually improve the quality and effectiveness of the curriculum. This paper presented on the second phase of review which focused on three subjects—Gaeilge, Science, and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). This paper focused on the Science Curriculum as enacted and experienced in schools. It outlined the successes and impacts of the curriculum as reported by teachers, it drew attention to children's interest in and enjoyment of the subject, their development of skills such as working scientifically and their increased awareness and understanding of and curiosity about the world around them. The presentation also highlighted particular challenges as experienced by teachers. These included a lack of resources and equipment, a limited amount of teaching time allocated to Science and difficulties in undertaking investigative work with large class sizes. When asked to state their priorities for furthering their implementation of the Science Curriculum, teachers focused on resources (accessing and making more effective use of them), increased participation in hands-on investigative work by children, and supporting children's conceptual understanding across all four strands of the curriculum.

The IASSEE general meeting took place on Friday afternoon. At this meeting, members discussed the next steps in the longitudinal study on Student Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences of History, Geography and Science: An All-Ireland Survey. The conference ended with a short address by Karen Kerr in which speakers, participants and organizers were thanked and the gratitude and appreciation of IASSEE for the support provided by SCoTENS and Queen's University Belfast, in jointly funding the conference was expressed.