



BEACONS Portlaoise: Building a Community of Belonging



BEACONS

Bringing Education Alive for our
Communities On a National Scale

Reflections from November 2020



*Video reflections from Catherine Doolan, Director of Laois Education Support Centre,
Liam O' Neill, Vice Chairperson of Laois Education Support Centre and
Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director of the Teaching Council.*

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This report was authored by Mary Yarr.

Foreword

This report describes the context of the BEACONS event, held by Laois Education Support Centre in conjunction with the Teaching Council on November 26, 2020. It describes the event itself and its outcomes. It identifies key areas for exploration and development.

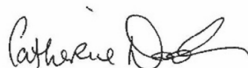
The idea for this project came about as a result of a conversation between the two of us about the wider remit of Laois Education Support Centre in the education community. We discussed our responsibility to look beyond our current model of serving the needs of schools around professional development and to seek new ways in which we could explore and possibly enhance the educational experience of all the stakeholders in our community.

We noted in particular the changes in the demographic makeup of our catchment area. In our discussions with stakeholders (See full report for list) we became aware that Laois, and Portlaoise in particular, has become a very multicultural community. We note that Laois has new residents from over 90 different countries. 50 different languages are spoken here and at least 22 different religions practised. Significantly more than 10,000 people speak a language other than English in their homes. We concluded that this means we have been given a gift of diversity that we could never have imagined in our wildest dreams. We are excited by the possibilities that this provides. We are, however, also acutely aware of the challenges that diversity may pose for all those involved.

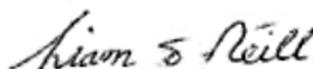
We knew that we had choices – either to become involved or not. Through our wider remit as an Education Support Centre, we made a firm decision to engage with our school communities with a view to exploring openly how Laois Education Support Centre could possibly support schools in addressing interculturalism in their own contexts. It was here that it became apparent to us that the Teaching Council's BEACONS model would provide a very appropriate framework for our engagement with the education community of Portlaoise. We are very grateful to the Teaching Council for their commitment, engagement, and professionalism in collaborating with us to make this engagement a possibility.

We invited schools and key stakeholders to come together through BEACONS to start a conversation around interculturalism. Our intention was that this conversation would be open, honest, and safe and that it would also be the first tentative step in a longer engagement with school communities in this area. We were genuinely heartened by the response from principals, teachers, students, parents, and the wider community on the day. The enthusiasm, honesty, and willingness to share their perspectives and experience was wonderful. We look forward to ongoing engagement with schools to build on the success of this event.

Finally, our hope is that through seeking to explore our diversity, we will strengthen and enhance our existing community of education and help build a '*Community of Belonging*' where we might all embrace and celebrate our interculturalism. Through recognising and respecting the cultural diversity we have been gifted we know we will only enhance our own cultural experience.



Catherine Doolan
Director



Liam Ó Néill
Vice Chairperson

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Teaching Council and, in particular, to Tomás Ó Ruairc for providing us with the BEACONS model, facilitating a platform of educational engagement for the community of Portlaoise.

Particular thanks are due to Chris Chapman and Ali Warner who facilitated this online BEACONS event.

We thank all the following schools and organisations who participated in the event with such energy and enthusiasm, ensuring the day was both successful and enjoyable:

- Dublin West Education Support Centre
- Dunamase College
- GAA
- Gaelscoil Phortlaoise
- Holy Family Senior School
- Kolbe Special School
- Laois Education Support Centre
- Laois Integration Project
- LOETB
- Maryborough NS
- Migrant Teacher Project
- Muslim Primary Education Board
- NASC Refugee and Migrant Centre
- Portlaoise College
- Portlaoise Educate Together PS.
- Scoil Chríost Rí
- St. Mary's CBS, Portlaoise
- The Teaching Council



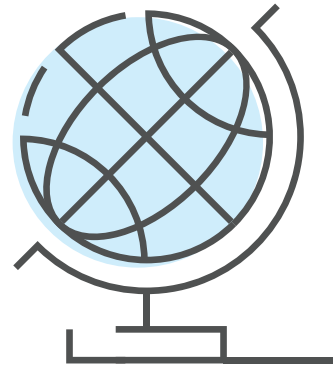
Context

Laois Education Support Centre serves the education communities of Laois, parts of Offaly, and North Tipperary. Its mission is to deliver the highest quality of support for its school communities in order to foster continued development and improvement.

Laois Education Support Centre is a key partner in the local education community, enabling it to meet its current and future educational needs.

In the last two decades, Portlaoise has experienced a rapid increase in immigration. It is necessary to acknowledge the linguistic and cultural enrichment of Portlaoise which represents a wonderful linguistic repertoire and a rich diversity of nationalities, religious faiths, and ethnic backgrounds.

This process is underpinned by the notion of '*Belonging*'. In this context, this is understood as something we experience when we feel safe, accepted, and valued for who we are, when we form connections and a sense of community with the various groups that make up our identity and feel supported by them. It is framed as a process of looking at possibilities rather than problems, at working together and accepting each other in the hope of transforming how we interact both individually and as a community. In light of this, focus is now directed on exploring the possibilities around creating a '*Community of Belonging*' in the context of the education community of Portlaoise.



A rich diversity of nationalities, religious faiths, and ethnic backgrounds.



Aims

The following aims were identified as central to both the BEACONS event and the longer-term intent of Laois Education Support Centre emanating from the day.

To enable positive engagement with the education community of Portlaoise, with Laois Education Support Centre fulfilling the role of a hub of learning, beginning with the BEACONS event.

To provide a safe, respectful, multicultural space where the diversity of voices belonging to Portlaoise can be heard in the hope that all these voices will inform and challenge those involved in the education community of Portlaoise.

To create a space where the educational potential of diversity can be unlocked.

To promote a sense of '*Belonging*' which ensures that linguistic and cultural diversity is of benefit to all, with a view to establishing Portlaoise as a '*Community of Belonging*', promoting all voices equally.

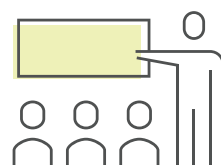
To create opportunities to extend the relationship between education communities across sectors in relation to diversity and explore how other partners could work collaboratively to support them in the area of interculturalism.

To enable a conduit of local influence to reach national level in policy formation, contributing to building a broader sense of '*Belonging*' at national level.

Values core to Portlaoise



Respect



Equality



Diversity

Research and Planning

In consideration of potential areas for discussion, Laois Education Support Centre facilitated a Zoom session on *The Language of Interculturalism*, led by Dr Rory Mc Daid, Marino Institute of Education, on 16th November 2020. This provided a useful contextual basis and increased understanding of intercultural awareness for the organisers.

It is evident that the language of interculturalism is evolving, particularly with regard to descriptors of students whose first language is neither Irish nor English, and that there is no agreed descriptor.

Descriptors include:

- BME (Black, Minority, Ethnic) students
- BAME (Black, African, Minority, Ethnic students minority ethnic learners
- EAL (English as an Additional Language) pupils
- International students
- Newcomers
- New Irish
- Foreign nationals
- Students from a migrant background

However, it became clear that some terminology is not conducive to fostering a culture of true inclusion, for example the use of negative prefixes such as ‘non-national’.

Dr McDaid emphasised the importance of the first or home languages of students and raised the question as to how these languages are respected. It was evident from the discussion that the link between language and identity is important. It is also important to realise the significant role of the first language in the acquisition of a second language.

Liam O Neill, Vice Chairperson of Laois Education Support Centre, outlined the evolving linguistic landscape of Portlaoise and recognised that this linguistic and cultural capital is integral to a sense of ‘*Belonging*’. He noted that the visibility of diverse languages is not always apparent and such linguistic and cultural enrichment should be explored and valued.

Catherine Doolan, Director of Laois Education Support Centre, emphasised that optimism and goodwill were vital in the initial stage of the process and thus, Laois Education Support Centre engaged with the Teaching Council and its facilitators in planning and preparation for the BEACONS event in that spirit of positivity which was reciprocated fully.

Relevant Department of Education documents such as the Intercultural Education Strategy (2010) and Languages Connect, Ireland’s Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026 were researched.

Goal 2 of the Languages Connect Strategy, contained in its Implementation Plan 2017-2022, is to “diversify and increase the uptake of languages learned and cultivate the languages of the New Irish.”



It was evident from the discussion that the link between language and identity is important.

BEACONS Event

The Director of Laois Education Support Centre chose to engage with the Teaching Council, in the hope of using their BEACONS model, in order to examine and respond to the changing demographics of Portlaoise and to initiate the process of building a ‘Community of Belonging’ in Portlaoise.

The BEACONS model, Bringing Education Alive for our Communities On a National Scale, is an innovative approach to building stronger school communities through facilitating better conversations between parents, teachers, and young people at local community level, allowing diverse groups to engage in a safe and welcoming space. It seeks to foster a virtuous feedback loop between local community conversations and national consultation processes. It reflects Laois Education Support Centre’s commitment to innovative practice and its commitment to enhancing connections between policy makers, school leaders, teachers, parents, and young people.

BEACONS afforded Laois Education Support Centre the opportunity to recognise and understand the emergent needs of its local education community and to respond to these needs. Its values are convergent with those of Laois Education Support Centre in its attempt to create a ‘Community of Belonging’: respect, trust, inclusiveness in a spirit of hospitality and welcome.

In light of the changing demographic and a growing diversity in the educational context, Laois Education Support Centre chose to frame the BEACONS event through the lens of Intercultural Awareness, valuing and respecting the diversity of voices in Portlaoise. Its aim was to explore the landscape of learning in Portlaoise from the perspective of its participants. It wished to facilitate sharing good ideas and to capture good practice in a safe space. It also wanted to identify emerging themes of pertinent interest to the education community of Portlaoise.

The values which underpinned the process of engagement throughout the day included: to listen, enjoy, encourage, support, celebrate and help create a sense of ‘Belonging’.

The BEACONS event was held on Thursday 26th November 2020 and this is the 7th such event using the BEACONS model of conversation. The purpose of the day was to welcome the educational community of Portlaoise and to hear how the educational experience might be explored for all. The event took place online because of COVID-19 and managed to create a relaxed atmosphere of welcome in a virtual context.

The format involved a series of conversations in small groups held in online breakout rooms, firstly grouped according to category, for example teachers’ groups, parents’ groups, pupils’ groups, and then randomly. These groups were facilitated by Chris Chapman and Ali Warner. Techniques included word capture, storytelling and Mentimeter, in order to make connections, listen, and share stories and allow meaningful and honest discussion to take place. In the afternoon, groups were asked to consider and share their perceptions of good practice in their educational experience and explore challenges they might have experienced.



Words present in conversations on the day.

Emergent Themes

To inform the planning for the way ahead and to inform future engagement processes, key recurring themes emanating from the conversations have been identified.

Transitions: early years, primary, post-primary, third-level

Preparing pupils for transitions and preparing parents for transitions need to be addressed.

'It's hard to jump from 6th class to 1st year'

'How can primary engage with post-primary better?'

'Like home/school communication - we need to do a lot more to support teachers, parents and students in this space.'

'I think they are teaching the right stuff each year so I think the schools are fine to be honest'

'Meitheal do a super job of helping the induction to post-primary'

'Virtual open days to reduce anxiety'

'We need a unified approach - developing a program to improve the transition from primary to secondary in terms of cultural interaction'

'Need a consistent approach to support transitions and ensure we take an inclusive approach to ensure everyone is informed and supported'

'When I was in primary school I was always nervous of going into secondary school and now I'm in secondary school it's not scary at all'

'Designated support and resource to support transitions across all schools. Really important work and should have dedicated resourcing.'

'We would love to meet with, and work with, a group of our colleagues from post-primary. In particular to improve understanding of how support is provided to pupils in the mainstream at second level.'

'Can post-primary students help primary before they ever leave primary?'

Pupils shared the feeling of being alone, having to make new friends, feeling *'outside'*, not belonging. Some participants suggested that reassurance for pupils about to move to the next level from pupils already in that level would be beneficial. It was noted how important it is to consult with pupils on how best to enhance transitions between and within schools.

The event highlighted the clear potential of primary and post primary engagement among teachers and the dynamic between both sectors was evident, both exchanging the benefits of learning from each other.

'How can primary engage with post primary better?'

Teachers acknowledged that work on transitions is really important and that there should be dedicated support and resources to develop this.

Home school communication and parental engagement.

'How can we be more inclusive in our broader school communities and ensure diversity of representation on school boards?'

'Having options for parents to be able to learn English in a school environment'

'It's a two way process'

'Everyone doesn't have wifi connection'

'Diversity in parents council'

'Online platforms for communication can help break down language barriers as students don't rely on spoken instruction and teaching'

'Ensure communication is accessible in all languages'

'Schools should improve their communications with the teachers by having more parent teacher meetings (even over phone)'

'Don't assume parents can engage with apps for communication - over reliance on this format since Covid'

'Maybe the support is in communities already?'

'The difficulties when English is not the first language'

Discussion of this theme was wide-ranging: how to help parents support their child's learning; how to address language barriers and avoid miscommunication; how to involve parents in the school community, *'supporting parents to support schools.'* Most participants found this a great challenge and as one teacher said *'communication home can be misinterpreted - that can be difficult.'* Some interesting solutions, including note banks and phone interpreting for critical incidents, were shared. One participant commented that we cannot assume that parents can engage with apps for communication. It is clear that the question of *'how parents can be made feel part of the story'*, as one participant asked, needs to be explored. Another participant suggested more diversity on Parents' Councils. The difficulties when English is not the first language were acknowledged and that all parties need to engage in order to improve home-school communication.

Languages, identity and linguistic heritage.

The importance of the Gaelic language; pupils expressed appreciation of their own language and culture as the foundation for appreciating the linguistic and cultural diversity of Laois.

The variety of languages in our schools was described, but are they visible, are they recognised, are they valued as a rich resource? Does the educational system value the evolving linguistic repertoire of the country? Does it reflect the linguistic/cultural capital of Portlaoise?

Teachers showed concern for the ‘*language barrier*’ and were keen to explore possible solutions. They discussed interpreting and the dangers of unprofessional advocacy, the dangers of using pupils as interpreters and the challenges of translation provision.

Some primary pupils were strong in advocating learning languages, particularly those languages not dominant in the Irish curriculum for example ‘*I want to learn Japanese*,’ ‘*I want to learn sign language*’ and they demonstrated a sense of empathy in wanting ‘*to learn some words of another language*,’ to demonstrate a desire to build friendships and show understanding in their school environment. The importance of body language and its potential for misunderstandings across cultures was also discussed.

Maintaining home languages as an expression of identity and as another way of seeing the world was emphasised. Are home languages heard or seen in the classroom? How can schools recognise the value of home languages and how can they encourage their use both informally and formally? Does the education system promote the linguistic repertoire of students from a migrant background or is there a hierarchy of languages, with English being the dominant language?

Conversations described an evolving linguistic and cultural landscape in Portlaoise and the desire to see teacher role models from a diversity of cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

The role of languages in social cohesion and the link between language and identity, ‘*how we describe people*,’ particularly those from a migrant background, was discussed. It is clear, for example, from these discussions that pronouns used to make comparison and marking difference are not acceptable for example ‘*we do this... but you/they do...*’ The discussion of identity and ‘*what does it mean to be Irish in 2020 in Portlaoise?*’ indicates the depth of challenging conversations at the event and the potential for further exploration.

Participants discussed and asked questions that go to the heart of the matter:

‘How can we ensure we best hear others and they us?’

‘How can we be equipped with the appropriate language to speak about interculturalism?’

‘What is the most inclusive language we can use to connect to each other?’

‘Language is dynamite. We can exclude by words we unintentionally use.’

‘I think we should have more days to celebrate the different cultures in our community. We have European languages day but I feel this isn’t enough’

‘I believe Polish should be an optional subject learnt in secondary school because a lot of people are polish and it would be good to be able to communicate with them in their own language’

‘Welcome/fáilte signs to be translated to other languages’

‘Educated on how to speak about different cultures respectfully’

‘Should have multi-lingual signs’

‘More diversity in teachers would help in language barriers’

‘More events to celebrate and become more aware of the different cultures in our community’

‘To belong you have to hear and be heard’

'Reflecting diversity of languages in our schools and value them daily'

'I sometimes don't know what word to use. If I say a particular word it might hurt someone, or maybe that's just me overthinking it.'

'A brilliant idea suggested was phrase books provided in schools so everyone can do their best to communicate through language barriers'

Sharing best practice and continuous professional development.

Teachers showed an appetite for reflective practice, for professional engagement and a desire to learn together across primary and post-primary contexts. They appreciated the *'time to pause and reflect'*.

They acknowledged gaps in their professional learning in the context of intercultural awareness, a wish to go beyond the tokenism of intercultural days and a willingness to explore this together. Teachers asked:

'How can we move to a more integrated approach to interculturalism in schools?'

'How can we effectively implement ideas and improvements?'

'What are the creative ways to promote inclusion?'

'Find new ways to encourage interaction'

'A space to chat with others in education is very useful'

'We need to look at a broader definition of what a teacher is and look at the potential for all adults in a school to be educators'

'Look within and change from ground up'

'Value inclusion locally and change things step by step'



Mental health and wellbeing, coping with the challenges of distancing in the context of COVID-19 featured in many student conversations.

Students spoke openly about supporting each other, trying to maintain friendships, participating in physical activities, and keeping safe in lockdown. It was clear that without a sense of wellbeing and a sense of belonging, it is difficult to learn. One participant acknowledged ***'how much learning we can share when we quickly establish trust.'***

'Having a class where you just talk about things and it would be really good for your wellbeing'

'Acceptance'

'Inclusion'

'Have someone to talk too'

'People giving permission to each other to have more conversations like these.'

'Time to pause and reflect'

'Doing small things that can make a big difference'

'Success isn't measured by results but by how hard you try'

'Diversity among the adults as well as the children in schools'

'Don't be afraid to make new friends'

'Give students the chance to socialise (e.g. with mask/over zoom)'

'Communication, listening as well as talking'

'More extra-curricular activities and events within the school.'

'With happiness comes learning'

'Find new ways to encourage interaction'

'Having kindness at the centre of everything you do'

'A feeling of community'

'Looking at the whole picture - to have a greater understanding of where people are coming from -to look at both sides of the situation'

'Support and tolerance for each other'

Recommendations

Based on the data gathered at the BEACONS event, potential areas for consideration by Laois Education Support Centre as a hub of learning for the school community in the area of diversity/interculturalism emerged. These are:

- 1 developing further the potential to **establish Portlaoise as a ‘Community of Belonging’**, considering how Laois Education Support Centre can be a conduit, a provider of a community network of interactions: intra-school spaces, inter-school spaces, school and extended community spaces.

- 2 **facilitating engagement with schools across educational sectors** such as special education, early years, primary, post-primary, and Gaelscoileanna in order to support intercultural education.

- 3 exploring, researching, and disseminating **best practice in intercultural education** nationally and internationally.

- 4 facilitating engagement to **examine the challenges of ‘transitions’** and offer guidance on the preparation of pupils and parents for transition between schools.

- 5 facilitating schools to produce guidance on **home school communication and parental engagement**.

- 6 **promoting the rich and evolving linguistic repertoire of Portlaoise** and its environs through building on the current expertise of Laois Education Support Centre and its promotion of literacy, biliteracy, and creativity in the classroom.

- 7 promoting innovative and collaborative practice in **intercultural education between different school and community settings**, using online technologies.

- 8 creating an opportunity for **continued participation between different school and community sectors and education providers**, exploring intercultural education and prioritising the thematic areas identified at the BEACONS event.

- 9 developing an **Intercultural Awareness training module** tailored to Portlaoise schools’ needs and responding to the challenges such as home-school communication, parental engagement, and language support.

Summary

Through the BEACONS model, Laois Education Support Centre and the Teaching Council embarked on a process of exploration, to see how the local could unlock its full potential in education, and how that could in turn better connect with the national in a virtuous feedback loop. This provided a hub of learning where participants felt at ease in giving voice to their views on education in Portlaoise.

This was a ground-breaking event where teachers, pupils, parents, and other members of Portlaoise community were welcomed and supported. Both pupils and teachers expressed gratitude for the opportunity to participate, with pupils also expressing a spontaneous gratitude to their teachers for their education, saying how lucky they felt for the opportunities afforded them. *‘How lucky we are, all the stuff we have,’* said one young boy.

It was acknowledged that the BEACONS philosophy of *‘the local leading the national’* was fulfilled at the event. *‘It was a great example of the local leading the national, demonstrating the value and importance of local leadership,’* affirmed Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director of the Teaching Council. The event provided a real inter-school space, and the potential of the link between school and community was recognised.

It must also be acknowledged that a clearly articulated vision from Laois Education Support Centre contributed to the event’s success. The tone set was both informal and positive: *‘there was a good feeling,’ ‘buzz,’ ‘feeling of inclusiveness,’* according to participants. Online worked well, as acknowledged by several pupils and the technical back up, particularly for online break out rooms, was superb.

Pupil interaction was strong and honest and one pupil, during the event, summarised his feelings thus, *‘not alone anymore,’* affirming that sense of *‘Belonging’* explicated during the event and showing that the event had achieved its purpose.

Teachers valued the opportunity to reflect, to engage with other educators and primary/post primary teacher engagement proved particularly valuable. This event is an important and brave first step in genuine engagement, an event filled with energy and empathy.

An acknowledgement of the richness of Laois, a place of culture and learning was expressed by participants and their desire to share, welcome, and develop new understandings was clear.

Laois Education Support Centre is guided by its commitment to the values of promoting respect, equality, and diversity. Those same values and attitudes underpinning the planning of the process were expressed and elaborated by the participants at the online workshops, for example welcoming diversity, building respect and a *‘Community of Belonging’*.

In a spirit of positivity, Laois Education Support Centre has begun a process of unlocking the educational potential of Portlaoise, building social cohesion and a sense of *‘Belonging’*.

Laois Education Support Centre has established a hub of learning through the BEACONS event, providing opportunities for connection and for learning and creating a synergy of linguistic, cultural, and educational potential. It has successfully created a sustainable and stable context for continuing the process of learning together. Its Director has committed *“to listen and act on the outcomes of the BEACONS event.”*

Laois Education Support Centre will now continue the process through developing collaboratively a support network for intercultural learning, giving opportunities to connect and to explore and solve educational challenges. It will disseminate information and good practice to inform the learning process, shaping inclusive education, and scaffolding the development of a 'Community of Belonging'. It will raise awareness, particularly among educational leaders and decision makers, of the voices of Portlaoise with regard to educational provision.

The energy, enthusiasm and hope infusing the vision of Laois Education Support Centre was shared and expressed in large measure by all the participants on the day giving a sense of optimism for the future of education in Portlaoise. This was facilitated in no small part by the flexibility and inclusive nature of the BEACONS model which meant that participants felt respected, heard, empowered, and engaged. This allowed them the safety to reflect on their own experiences and engage with the perspectives of others in a space that facilitated trust and openness.

References

[Department of Education Intercultural Education Strategy \(2010\)](#)

[Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026. Implementation plan 2017-2022.](#)

[Laois Integration Strategy: Key Facts \(2018\)](#)

Glossary

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| BAME | Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic |
| BEACONS | Bringing Education Alive for our Communities On a National Scale |
| BME | Black, Minority Ethnic |
| COVID | Corona Virus Disease |
| EAL | English as an Additional Language |
| GAA | Gaelic Athletic Association |
| LOETB | Laois & Offaly Education and Training Board |



Notes





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