

**Developments in Irish education since 1995  
with particular reference to the evaluation  
of Teacher Education**

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Far reaching proposals for developments in Irish education many of which were heralded in „Charting Our Education Future“ (1995) and outlined in O’Brien’s (1995) study are currently being translated into practical measures within governmental policy initiatives and in new legislation. Most of these emerging policy initiatives are evolving from investigations of existing educational practices and provisions. Such investigations are usually undertaken by bodies of experts and representatives of relevant stakeholders. They are set up by Ministerial decree and the ensuing legislation derives to a considerable extent from the recommendations of the bodies in question.

To arrive at an understanding of teacher education in Ireland it is necessary to describe the society which the education system serves and to examine the context within which education, and more particularly teacher education, take place. The Republic of Ireland has a younger population than most other European states with half the population under twenty-five years of age (OECD, 1991). Because of poor employment prospects in Ireland during the 1980’s, emigration to the US, Britain, Australia and more recently to mainland Europe was a necessity for many Irish people. A growth in prosperity in more recent years (a phenomenon which has caused the Irish economy to be described as the Celtic Tiger) has meant that the rate of emigration decreased noticeably. In fact, in certain respects, this trend has reversed and numbers of people who had emigrated previously are now returning to Ireland to take up employment.

The Republic of Ireland, according to the OECD Report of 1991, is overwhelmingly a Roman Catholic country with 90% of the population belonging to the major religious denomination in the state. While Ireland is undergoing many cultural and social changes with the accompanying problems faced by most Western societies, the country has preserved many of the attributes of its distinctive national culture and identity such as the Irish language and a distinctive Celtic identity in literature and the arts. These aspects of Irish life are reflected in the Irish education system and are particularly noticeable in the culture of primary teaching. Nearly all state primary schools are denominational in their intake and management and their location and organisation is parish based. All primary teachers are expected to have achieved a high degree of proficiency in the Irish language which is taught to all children in primary schools.

## **1. Teacher Education in Ireland**

The professional education of teachers takes place, for the most part, in the universities and in the colleges of education. These institutions are State funded through the Higher Education Agency

(HEA). The majority of primary teachers follow a three-year concurrent BEd programme in one of the colleges of education. A small number of first level teachers, including those taking part in Montessori training, receive their education in institutions accredited by the National Council for Education Awards (NCCA). The professional training of most second level teachers follows the consecutive model and a primary degree is a prerequisite to gain admission to the one-year post-graduate course (the Higher Diploma in Education or HDipEd) which takes place in one of the universities. A minority of second level teachers in such areas as physical education, home economics, music education and technology follow a concurrent model of teacher education.

### **1.1 The education of primary teachers**

There are five colleges of education in Ireland each of which offers a BEd degree programme for prospective primary teachers. The professional training programme in these colleges, which usually extends for a three year period, follows the concurrent model of teacher education. Traditionally, all five of these colleges were monotechnic institutions, they were administered as private, denominationally controlled entities and their sole purpose was the education and professional training of primary teachers. Recently however, the role of the two major primary teacher training institutions in the State, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, was expanded and these institutions now offer the Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree as well as the BEd programme.

The BEd degree as the qualification for primary teachers in Ireland was inaugurated in 1974 (up to then the course of study for primary teachers had extended for a two year period). At this time the larger teacher education institutions became recognised colleges of the National University of Ireland (NUI), however, more recently the association of these colleges with the NUI colleges was discontinued and St Patrick's College, Dublin, and Mary Immaculate College Limerick, became linked with Dublin City University and the University of Limerick. During the 1970's the smaller colleges in the State became associated with Trinity College, Dublin University, from which their degrees continue to be granted. The BEd degree which emanates from 1973 involves the concurrent study of education in its theoretical, curricular and practical aspects in combination with the study of one academic subject to degree level and includes several teaching practice placement sessions. While this type of programme is the major route into the primary teaching profession in the State, an alternative one year's professional training course for graduates has been put into operation at various times when a shortage of primary teachers has occurred. Prospective primary teachers gain entry to the colleges based on their achievement in the Leaving Certificate examination and their performance at interview. In the past the entry requirements included an interview (to assess suitability for teaching), an oral Irish (Gaelic) examination and a test of musical ability were mandatory for students.

Any discussion of primary teacher education in Ireland must take account of two major cultural influences associated with primary teacher training institutions: the importance accorded to the Irish language and culture and the denominational nature and religious ethos of the colleges themselves. Traditionally, a high standard of achievement in the Irish language was demanded of students seeking to gain entry to teacher education. In former years this necessitated the achievement of honours Irish in the Leaving Certificate examination. In recent years students were required to attain at least a grade C in the higher level Irish course together with a high level of proficiency in oral Irish. The promotion of the Irish language and culture and the use of the Irish language as the spoken language within the institution was a particular feature of the educational experience of primary teachers. Students studying subjects other than Irish as the academic subjects for their BEd

degree were obliged to take supplementary courses each year in the Irish language. On graduating from these colleges students were expected to be sufficiently proficient in the language to teach all of the subjects on the primary school curriculum through the medium of the Irish language.

The religious ethos of the college stemmed from an era when most, if not all, members of the teaching staff in the major institution were members of a religious order (Killeavy, 1998). While this trend had diminished considerably since the 1960's, the religious ethos of the college is still an important factor of college life and the study of Religious Education in which all students are expected to attend a special diploma course is a routine requirement for a teaching position in the vast majority of primary schools, though such a course of study is not required by the universities or the State Department of Education.

## **1.2 Second level education in Ireland**

Second level or post-primary school in Ireland extends over a five or six year cycle and includes five types of school: secondary, vocational, comprehensive, community school and community college (Killeavy, 1998). Secondary schools which comprise about two thirds of all schools at second level are privately owned and managed, usually by religious orders (OECD, 1991). These schools, most of which provide free education, are in receipt of state funding and they belong to the classical grammar school tradition. Vocational schools were established originally to provide technical education but their role has been expanded to cover all areas of the second level curriculum. Comprehensive schools were set up to meet the needs of areas without second level education and they offer a broad curriculum including both academic and technical areas. Community schools which offer the same type of broad curriculum as comprehensive schools were designed to serve as cultural and educational centres in their neighbourhoods. Community colleges arose from the vocational tradition and are similar to community schools but the curriculum they offer is more extensive and they often cater for older students.

Teachers at second level in Ireland are subject specialists rather than class or form-based teachers as is the case at primary level. The majority of these teachers have a primary degree and their professional training most usually takes place in a one year post-graduate diploma course at university. Unlike schools at first level, not all schools at second level are denominationally based. The church's power to influence the curriculum at this level is not enshrined in any rule or regulation laid down by the state with the exception of the rule giving each denomination control of the teaching of its own religion in all schools. Drudy and Lynch (1993) suggest however, that the churches, particularly the Catholic Church because of their strong representation on policy making bodies, can have a considerable influence on curriculum development.

## **1.3 The third level education sector in Ireland**

This sector comprises universities, colleges of education, institutes of technology, regional technical colleges and some non State-aided private third level colleges. The Commission on the Points System reports that recent developments in this system have been based on the differential (or binary) system. The A number of important developments, most notably the Universities Act 1996 and other recent legislation relating to third level educational institutions, have had significant impact on the role and function of universities and other tertiary institutions. The Universities Act, in stressing the social responsibility and accountability of the institutions, stipulates that each college should put in place a quality assurance (QA) initiative. The details and procedures to be followed

are decided by the governing authority of the individual institutions who are charged with the operation of the scheme in conjunction with the Higher Education Authority (HEA). During recent years considerable concern has been expressed by university teachers concerning the nature of the quality assurance to be adopted. Currently, procedures are being developed on the basis of the experience gained from a number of pilot QA schemes.

## **2. Current developments in teacher education**

Perhaps the most significant development in teacher education in Ireland is the proposed review of the area which has recently been announced by the Minister for Education and Science (Government of Ireland, 1998). The terms of reference for the two review bodies for primary and for second level teacher education have been published but their deliberations have not yet begun.

### **2.1 The review of the BEd programme for primary teachers**

The terms of reference for the review of the content and duration of the Bachelor of Education programme for primary teachers require the working group to review and make recommendations on the content (including teaching practice) of the course. The review group are directed to have regard to the need to achieve breadth and balance in the programme content and to take into consideration many of the new developments in education such as early childhood education, pupils with special needs, the problems associated with disadvantage, in-career development for teachers and new developments in communications and information technology. It is of particular interest that the group were asked to consider the relative contribution that might be made to teacher education by the concurrent and consecutive approaches to initial teacher training.

### **2.2 The review of second level teacher education**

The terms of reference for the review of second level teacher education require the review body to examine and make recommendations on the content, organisation and structure and teaching practice element of these programmes. The review group are directed to achieve breadth and balance in their recommendations and to address current and future issues on pre-service education for second level teachers and the desirability of these teachers continuing to renew their skill throughout their careers.

The review group are directed to carry out a comparative analysis between the consecutive and concurrent models of pre-service teacher education and to take account of curricular changes and new programmes designed to respond to the different and varied needs of a diverse student cohort. The group are also asked to have regard to the particular requirements of children with special needs, the problems of disadvantaged pupils to take into account developments in communications and information technologies.

These factors which are highlighted in the terms of reference from the Minister for Education and Science are in fact the measures upon which existing practice in teacher education is to be judged and further they are indicative of areas of governmental concern in teacher preparation. The ministerial document is also explicit on matters relating to the content of teacher education programmes and while the new body is charged with a review of teacher education the document clearly advocates

what are considered to be essential elements of teacher education programmes. It is suggested that the following important features should underpin the professional preparation of teachers:

“- the maintenance of balance between the personal and professional development of students, as well as between the theoretical and practical aspects of their professional preparation;

- the development of a firm understanding of the foundation disciplines of modern educational theory and practice;

- the development of a good understanding of the educational needs of the Irish language schools in and outside of the Gaeltacht and of schools teaching through a language other than the mother tongue (eg French);

- the acquisition of the knowledge, attitudes and skills to enable student teachers to develop appropriate programmes and methodologies to respond to student needs;

- the development of a good understanding of adolescent development and behaviour and of issues in relation to gender equality, cultural and ethnic diversity;

- the development of the teaching and classroom management skills of student teachers;

- the use of experienced teachers to guide and assist student teachers and to facilitate their subsequent induction into teaching.”

### **2.3 In-service education for teachers**

The necessity for expanded in-service training for teachers in Ireland is highlighted by the recent OECD report „Staying Ahead“ which suggests that ‘In-service training is no longer seen as a luxury in Irish education or regarded as simply an opportunity to pursue a hobby ... Instead it is seen as essential for professional and school development.’ The report goes on to comment that while the voluntary commitment of Irish teachers to in-service training and professional development is very high there is a need to build on that commitment and co-ordinate resources to further both individual and system needs. These needs are the result of the major initiatives being undertaken by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). These developments have included the identification of new subject areas and the development of associated curricula and assessment procedures.

Among the most important curriculum changes proposed in terms of the willingness of the state to assume responsibility for an area heretofore regarded as falling solely within the remit of Religious Instruction is the introduction of the subject areas, ‘Social Personal and Health Education’ (SPHE) and ‘Social Environmental and Scientific Education’ (SESE). The first component of SPHE entitled Relationships and Sexuality Education which was developed by the NCCA has been introduced into all primary and secondary schools. This programme deals with questions of morality which heretofore were regarded as falling solely within the jurisdiction of the religious authorities in the state.

The general thrust of the proposals of the NCCA is similar to the new proposals for primary education. This is evident in such proposed new subjects as ‘Civic Social and Political Education’ which are to a considerable extent ‘values driven’ and the new programmes in the sciences which are being designed with an increased emphasis on critical thinking and inquiry. One of the most fundamental changes considered by the NCCA is the introduction of a subject area entitled Religious Education.

Religious Instruction in Irish schools up to the present has been based upon the study of the teachings of a particular denomination as opposed to a comparative study of different religions. These new subject area of Religious Education would conform to the general syllabus structures and which would be examinable in public state examinations for students at second level. It would constitute an attempt to give students a critical appreciation of religious views and beliefs and an understanding of the role of religion in society. Unlike Religious Instruction the emphasis would be on theology rather than the study of doctrine or catechism. It should be noted that these discussions concerning the development of Religious Education as a new subject at second level are at an early stage and definite policy decisions have yet to be taken in this matter. Special legislation will be required to allow for the incorporation of Religious Education as an examinable subject into the time-table of second level schools in Ireland This is currently prohibited by legislation dating from 1878.

## **2.4 The proposed Teaching Council**

During the past year the Steering Committee on a Teaching Council appointed by the Minister for Education and Science has deliberated on matters centring on the professional accreditation of teachers and the induction of beginning teachers into the profession. The Report of the committee was launched early in October 1998 and its recommendations have significant implications for the evaluation of teachers at first and second level and for teacher education particularly at in-service level. It is proposed that the Teaching Council will be an independent statutory body through which teachers can achieve a large degree of autonomy. This new body which will be concerned with teachers at both primary and second level and it will subsume the role of the Secondary Teachers' Registration Council. A major aspect of the role of the Teaching Council will be to protect standards of entry to the career, promote improved induction and probation procedures and to foster better practice in ongoing professional development (ASTIR, 1998, pp. 16-17). While the council will not be directly involved in the evaluation of teaching and teacher education, several of its proposed functions will have a bearing on the matter. This applies particularly to the role of the council in advising the Minister on the standards of attainment required for entry to the profession and the establishment of procedures and criteria for the probation and full professional recognition of beginning teachers. The establishment of the new council marks a significant development in the extent to which teachers will now become a self-regulating profession having a major input into aspects of the evaluation of their professional practice.

The developmental processes and initiatives in Irish education which are outlined are, for the most part, at an early stage. The Commission on the Points System is due to make its recommendations during the coming year, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the Teaching Council are due to become a statutory bodies shortly, major reviews of teacher education at first level and at second level have been initiated and education legislation is anticipated. When these various commissions and review bodies finalise their investigations and put forward recommendations, it seems likely that major improvements and innovations will be set in train in Irish education.

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