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Introduction

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This collection of essays on policy initiatives in Irish education since 1922 serves to present change, as far as possible, within its historical context. This is not, necessarily, in terms of wider socio-economic change, although, of course, where this is relevant it is included, but rather in terms of education policy where it existed. The reservation 'where it existed' is an important one because, as the attentive reader will realise, some policy initiatives, for example in the field of initial teacher education (ITE), appear to have little ancestry and to gradually emerge in the early 1990s. What is interesting, where a longer ancestry of policy change is, or appears to be, absent, is the extent to which the practice or feature concerned suffered by neglect, such as that highlighted by John Walsh in his chapter on university and college education. Such a consideration would form the basis of another volume perhaps but it is tempting to reflect on the extent to which, initial teacher education, to take one example, suffered—that is to say children learned less well—or

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'effectively' to employ the current jargon—due to an absence of fairly incessant policy review, initiative and change of the sort that has characterised ITE since the mid-1990s.

Not all the contributors to this volume are historians and few are engaged, primarily, in education policy research. Hence, the collection does not offer itself as a standard policy narrative or analysis along the lines, let us say, of Séamas Ó Buachalla's *Educational Policy in Twentieth Century Ireland* (Dublin 1988) or Denis O'Sullivan's *Cultural politics and Irish education since the 1950s: policy paradigms and power* (Dublin 2005) and I would suggest to those seeking a thorough narrative overview or an analytic and theoretically framed interrogation to seek out these excellent works. My task has been a humbler one in that, rather than attempt a comprehensive narrative of education policy since independence, I opted to concentrate on a number of areas that, frankly, I found personally interesting, are of interest to students and some of which were often absent in general narrative accounts. I had initially hoped to include a number of other topics including Sport, Information Technology, 'new' programmes such as Social Personal and Health Education and the increasingly diverse school-going cohort and what, if any, policy initiatives were required in terms of the quite rapidly changing makeup of schools in terms, for example, of pupils' background, religion, and heritage. It will come as no surprise that the advent and subsequent impact of the Covid-19 pandemic meant that many who wished to contribute to this volume found that they could not. I wish to record my gratitude to them for their initial offers and valiant struggle even if, finally, it had to be abandoned in the face of very much more pressing matters. The collection deals with primary, post-primary and third-level education. It may be faulted, amongst other things, for its over-emphasis upon post-primary education. This was not my intention and the fault, if it exists, belongs to the disarray wreaked on colleagues' lives during the recent lockdowns.

Thomas Walsh's chapter provides an overview of curricular developments at primary level and captures the rich and innovative change that has occurred in primary schools, particularly since the late 1970s. The embrace of child-centeredness by the primary school teaching community, in particular, is noteworthy. Readers unfamiliar with Irish education

may be surprised that our conversion came so late, especially given the prevalence of more progressive forms of schooling, in aspiration if not always in practice, in other parts of Europe in the twentieth-century. The practical challenges facing primary schoolchildren and their teachers in the immediate decades after independence are detailed in Antonia McManus' chapter on T.J. O'Connell, each chapter, it is hoped, providing further context for the other.

Jim Gleeson's chapter on curricular reform presents an analytic overview of curricular change including the contrasting directions taken at primary and post-primary levels, the latter finding itself rudderless in the 1980s and increasingly at the mercy of ideologies or theories such as utilitarian economic dogmatism, curriculum as cultural inheritance or a form of social change or activism. Gleeson reveals the increasingly 'open' field that post-primary curriculum thought became from the 1980s, particularly given the climate of very high youth unemployment, the evolving understandings in Europe of education as inextricably linked to the economic growth of individual states and the collective community and the increasing influence of performativity and competition. Curriculum studies, it may be ventured, when undertaken well, are essentially exercises in the analysis of competing philosophies, not just of education but of how it is that we should live well (presumably the proper end of all education). It is the competing tensions underlying the varying views and their articulation over recent decades that informs Gleeson's chapter.

Returning to the primary community, Akira Iwashita's chapter deals with the role of religion in Irish schooling. The theme is always contentious and debates about definitions of 'control' and 'influence' and the place of religious instruction in an all-inclusive democracy are constants. Iwashita assembles a history of the place of religious instruction and places it in the context of campaigns that sought, and seek, to exclude either instruction or religious ethos in schools. Some of the same landscape is traversed by Sandra Cullen in her chapter on religious education and instruction in post-primary schools. Iwashita's reflections on the meaning and implications of liberalism, secularism and pluralism are pertinent and thought provoking—and, again, essentially philosophical in nature. As mentioned, Cullen deals with similar themes in her chapter on post-primary Religious Education from 1998 to 2020. Cullen

investigates the differences between instruction and education, the State's understanding of instruction prior to the Education Act of 1998, how the Act delineated terms and the emergence of Religion as a subject for examination and evolving understandings of the benefits of the study of religion(s). Particularly striking is Cullen's discussion concerning the troublesome conflation of the terms 'religious education' and 'religious instruction' and how this has had the effect of 'hinder(ing) progress in developing a philosophical rationale for religious education in the public space' while the 1998 Act marked 'the beginning of a divergence in policy between the State and the churches, exemplified in the various ways that the terms religious education and religious instruction have been used'. One suspects, reflecting upon Cullen's essay, that the 'uses' of religion in schools may become a matter of heightened debate between the State, commentators and religious patrons as each refine and seek acceptance of their position as representing equal claim in democratic discourse.

Turning to professional development, Anthony Malone's chapter charts the rise of in-career development for post-primary teachers. Malone cites the baleful influence of the terminal examinations of the Intermediate Education System as restricting both the practice of teachers and wider understandings of the teaching endeavour—features repeatedly lamented by the Intermediate Inspectorate throughout the lifetime of that system. It should be noted, in passing, that the inspectors repeatedly pressed for the provision of formal training for secondary teachers. Malone's detailed analysis of the development of in-career support describes how concerned parties advocated for in-career development from the early 1970s, a time of seismic change in the Irish education system following the introduction of free education in the mid-60s. The momentum for reform was lost during a series of economic recessions between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s but resurfaced in the early 1990s leading to specific policy aspirations. The theme of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) emerged as a constant in education discourse in the following two decades and discussions about how to embed it within the teaching career, in particular the suggestion of linking engagement in CPD with renewal of teacher registration led to the more collaborative and consultative model being adopted. The journey charted by Malone reflects the changing understandings of the challenges

of teaching and demonstrates that initial teacher education, of whatever duration or merit, must be accompanied by sustained, resourced and targeted in-career support.

Shivaun O'Brien's chapter is also concerned with policies that concern the 'quality' of teaching and learning in schools. Largely influenced by developments abroad the concepts of school effectiveness and improvement have, over the last two decades, entered mainstream evaluation discourse. The gradual introduction of the vernacular of 'effectiveness' and measurement is inextricably linked with the application of these in the wider social and economic sphere. They are related to transparency, value for money and accountability in terms of public expenditure. School self-evaluation, in Ireland, has its origin in the advent of school development planning—an initiative, again, belonging to the 1990s. But, as O'Brien demonstrates, and not unlike the debates surrounding in-career professional development described by Malone, the emphasis has shifted in the last fifteen years or so causing the more nuanced approach of school self-evaluation (SSE) to emerge. A type of institutional reflective practice, SSE encourages schools to conduct a form of internal audit as a way of enhancing not only teaching practice but also wider school improvement. Advocates believe SSE to be empowering for teachers and their schools while enriching formal evaluation methods. The appearance of SSE throws up interesting questions. One is tempted to believe that, historically, schools used the results of terminal examinations as a yardstick of success but, as my own chapter suggests, schools were industrious and focused places long before the introduction of "points". Indeed, as O'Brien points out, old practices and methods are not infrequently rebranded as 'new bows' but a process of self-evaluation that leads to better learning for pupils, especially one that is supported rather than demanded, is surely a welcome development in any education system.

The role of vocational education in rural Ireland, the theme of Marie Clarke's chapter, provides a welcome exploration of a neglected topic in Irish education studies. Set within the context of Ireland's precarious economic climate in the 1940s and 50s, Clarke traces the evolution of this new, state, system of education highlighting the complexity of its initial evolution and intention to provide for local communities. The role that the new system was to place in 'socialising the nation state' is unpacked

by Clarke and, in a sense, returns us to those undercurrents in Gleeson's chapter, as we are reminded of broader questions concerning who and what schools are for and who gets to decide. Clarke's chapter reveals how, in a sense, the state's initial understanding of the purposes of vocational education were somewhat vague becoming clearer in the course of the 1940s and 50s. But the system faced innumerable challenges. Traditionally, the very children living in the rural areas it was designed to serve usually left school at aged 12 or thereabouts (a theme taken up by Mc Manus in her chapter on T.J. O'Connell) and, throughout, vocational schools were considered less prestigious than their secondary counterparts. But the extent of their reach and work in providing practical, work-orientated, training was crucial at a time of economic stagnation as was the commitment to adult education, themes Clarke explores in detail.

O'Sullivan and Rami traverse related ground identifying the key milestones in the evolution of skills policy in Ireland, with an emphasis on intermediate skills and Further Education and Training (FET) which began to emerge more formally in the years following the establishment of the Vocational Education System. Like that system, the development of FET faced competition from the standard, mainstream system and, until recently, lay on the periphery of the Department of Education's priorities. The neglect has left a capacity deficiency within the FET sector and its provision remains negligible within Irish higher education. Nonetheless, significant advances have taken place over the last decade and the launch of the second FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020), primarily focused on the local with the centrality of the 'FET College of the Future' concept, should see the "evolution of FET facilities and provision into a distinct integrated college of FET that can serve as a beacon of community-based learning excellence" (SOLAS, 2020: 38).

In treating of inclusive education Geraldine Scanlon reviews a theme which has gained considerable traction not only in education but in wider social justice discourse recently. Setting Special Education within the emerging framework of human rights, Scanlon traces the evolution of understandings of Special Education and its provision in Ireland before turning to a consideration of the subject as increasingly embedded within global human rights legislation. As so often in the evolution of policy considered in this volume, Scanlon notes that, in Ireland, formal policies

relating to providing services to people with disability did not begin to emerge until the 1980s while, in 1996, the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities *A Strategy for Equality* report noted that "public attitudes towards people with disabilities are still based on charity rather than on rights" (p. 5) adding that "a failure to provide comprehensive education for people with disabilities results in their being denied access to employment and training opportunities comparable to those available to people without disabilities" (p. 6). The early 2000s witnessed a number of key policy documents concerning a wider range of disabilities but, Scanlon notes, "uncertainty, indecision and lack of consensus has resulted in a continual back and forth between the philosophies of segregation, integration and inclusion…". Despite progress, under the heading 'Constitutional Right to Education for Children with Special Educational Needs' the Children's Rights Alliance (CRA) awarded the government a "D" grade in 2021. Genuine progress, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities requires, Scanlon concludes: appropriate budgetary provision; the development of infrastructure needed to facilitate inclusion of students with SEND and the provision of continuous personal development in the area of inclusion for teachers.

A topic that touches closely upon the rights of the child is unpacked in David Limond's chapter concerning corporal punishment in Irish schools. It seems, at this distance, quite remarkable that such practices as caning and slapping were part of everyday life certainly until the late 1970s. So often we are repelled by a practice common in former times but are equally struck by the indifference of the society in which it took place and Limond's chapter captures both the relaxed attitude of society toward corporal punishment which was accepted as inevitable and supposedly moderate. Limond traces the evolution of the debate highlighting the contribution of Owen Sheehy Skeffington, Noël Browne, the School-Children's Protection Organisation (whose 1955 *Punishment in Our Schools* is a salient reminder of everyday punishments) and its successor Reform. Limond's chapter is a reminder that we never reach the end of history. Practices considered necessary and formative by one generation are correctly abhorred by the next. G.K. White recorded, in his memoir of teaching (*The Last Word*, Dublin 1977), that a colleague mentioned in

passing how he managed an uncooperative pupil: "I just give him a punch in the belly when I meet him" (p. 94). The conversation occurred in the 1940s but when White published *The Last Word* in 1977, five years before corporal punishment was banned in schools, he mused "punishment is a matter which exercises the minds of people outside schools rather more than those of the pupils and teachers" (p. 127). Limond's examination demonstrates that such views, by the mid-1970s, were a minority and underestimated the indignation caused by corporal punishment.

The chapter on academic selection in Northern Ireland by Brown et al. demonstrates the divergent paths taken after independence. Northern Ireland's commitment to the 11+ and academic selection is a distinctive feature of schooling there and Brown et al. discuss the impact of a high-stake terminal examination on those of primary school age and note that commentators have repeatedly highlighted the 11+ as, in Murray's words "presenting a challenge to the provision of an effective education". The examination has been criticised by several bodies including the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission on the grounds of exclusion. The examination, Brown et al. argue, limits, in particular, the opportunities of socially and economically disadvantaged children.

Paul van Kampen's chapter on Science in Irish schools, like Cullen's, deals with a specific discipline. Certainly, prior to the advent of the Intermediate System, some schools, such as St Kieran's, Kilkenny and Clongowes Wood, Kildare, provided science lessons but the curriculum generally, and certainly after 1878, reflected the values of classical humanism. The new Intermediate Board allocated 500 marks to Science subjects [200 to botany and zoology] whereas, Greek, Latin and English were awarded 1000 marks. Hence, the development of Science in schools and therefore more generally was significantly handicapped from the outset. Science education, as van Kampen, notes "suffered from a late start" and its fortunes have waxed and waned over the last two centuries. In particular, van Kampen highlights the tension that exists between teacher-led and more holistic and inductive approaches toward developing scientific literacy. It is, perhaps, a tension that those engaged in teaching any discipline will recognise.

Antonia McManus' chapter on the life and work of T.J. O'Connell (1882–1969) is a reminder of the dearth of such biographical studies in

Irish education studies and McManus' *Irish Education: The Ministerial Legacy, 1919–1999* (Dublin, 2014) was a welcome contribution to the field. O'Connell's many achievements are detailed by McManus but may be said to rest upon two convictions—the centrality of the child in education and the professional dignity of the teacher. O'Connell's foresight is remarkable. He agitated for better school conditions to protect children's health; to prevent their use as casual labour and supported teachers who found the Irish teaching demands of the National Programme of Primary Instruction—a programme O'Connell was closely associated with—too difficult to meet. A progressive who believed in education as an inherently worthwhile endeavour he proposed a school-based assessment scheme for primary schools in 1943. He proposed that the Department of Education publish a journal of education research which finally appeared (*Oideas*) in 1968, a year before O'Connell's death. McManus' forthcoming biography of T.J. O'Connell will be a most welcome addition to the history of Irish education and politics.

The role of university and college education is considered by John Walsh who details the emergence of higher education in the decades following independence when the universities, in particular, were insular and disconnected from public and economic life. The preserve of those who could pay, they were somewhat removed from wider educational policy as they did not come within the remit of the Department of Education and operated as independent, self-governing, institutions. Funding lay with the Department of Finance and Walsh details the often torturous discussions between university presidents and department officials. The peripheral position of the universities in the two decades after independence reflects, according to Walsh, "the narrow conceptualisation of higher education prevalent among the political and official elite" further undermined by Ireland's economic weakness. Walsh's narrative concludes in the mid-1940s but his dissection of the first twenty years of third-level provision after independence reveal a lamentable cross-current of underfunding, indifference and limited appreciation of the potential cultural and economic contribution of higher education.

The final chapter in this collection employs the recollections of a number of retired teachers in an attempt to draw out to what extent, if any, policy initiatives impacted upon their working lives. As we suggest in the

chapter, it appears that, largely, the teachers interviewed remained unfamiliar with wider policy discourse, especially that of the 1990s. However, they vividly recalled the impact of key events such as the introduction of free education and campaigns for improved remuneration and security of tenure. They had little familiarity with, for example, the Green and White papers of the mid-1990s although those in management recalled the advent of the Education Act (1998). Change, emanating from policy initiatives, was incremental and almost imperceptible. On reflection, they identified key events such as the disappearance of corporal punishment, the introduction of points and posts of responsibility and changes in curricula. These impacted directly on their working lives but usually in a gradual manner as if policy was 'done' elsewhere before seeping into schools. Other 'outside' changes, such as those concerning initial teacher education were not apparent but, collectively, the interviewees welcomed a more engaged, less formal and pupil-focused cohort of younger teachers emerging from university and college. While this cohort of retired teachers cannot reflect the teaching body as a whole it is, nonetheless, reassuring that, despite the challenges that accompany any endeavour as complex as a national education system, they held that the changes initiated by policy over the last five decades were welcome.

Reference

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