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Primary Curriculum Policy Development in Ireland 1922–1999: From Partisanship to Partnership

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This chapter focuses on the primary school curriculum development processes from the advent of political independence in the 1920s until the end of the twentieth century. It specifically analyses the three main curriculum reforms of 1922/1926, the 'New Curriculum' of 1971 and the 'Revised Curriculum' of 1999, as well as smaller curricular reforms in the interim. The processes and strategies that underpinned the development of the curriculum in each era is delineated, drawing on a range of archival and unpublished documents. The key discourses that underpinned and the controversies that ensued in the framing of each curriculum are explored. A key focus will be placed on the various stakeholders that exercised power and agency in the curriculum development process, most particularly religious and political influences, and their relative impact on the philosophy and content of these curricula. Given the longitudinal nature of the analysis, the increasing complexity of curriculum development and the wider range of stakeholders involved in curriculum

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development in later eras is delineated and critiqued. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the salient points relevant for contemporary curriculum development work. Overall, the chapter delineates the change from a secretive and partisan approach to curriculum development in the 1920s to a more engaged, consultative and partnership approach by the 1990s.

Introduction

There has been an exponential growth in the complexity of developing national curricula owing to the increased understanding of curriculum theory, both in terms of development and enactment. Curriculum development is impacted by a multiplicity of factors, including historical, ideological, cultural, political, economic, theoretical and practical considerations (Livingston et al., 2015). The contested nature of the curriculum is understandable considering its embodiment of the most important values, purposes, priorities and content for inclusion from the culture of a society (Lawton, 1989; Vitikka et al., 2012). Kelly (2004, p. 163) asserts that education is essentially a political activity, with the curriculum viewed as "the battleground of many competing influences and ideologies", resulting in many internal tensions and contradictions. Increased globalisation and diversity of opinion among education stakeholders makes the identification of curriculum priorities and values more challenging and contentious, with many competing voices articulating a view on the purposes of education (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Sahlberg, 2011).

Flinders and Thornton (2013) trace the emergence of curriculum as an area of scholarship and practice in the early twentieth century and the ways in which curriculum understanding and conceptualisation have changed and evolved in the interim. While initially "curriculum decisions were largely left to that small, usually elite, portion of the public most directly concerned with the operation of schools" (Flinders & Thornton, 2013, p. 3), the advent of mass schooling widened interest in curriculum development and content. Ornstein and Hunkins (2018, p. 209) assert that there are different ways to define curriculum development processes, outlining their evolution from a technical-scientific model to a current postmodern, post constructivist perspective. The curriculum development process in Ireland did not align seamlessly with trends in the UK or in the USA where the objectives model was highly influential (Stenhouse, 1975).

While traditionally the main focus in curriculum development has been on the written text, there is now a growing understanding and acceptance that the curriculum is a social construction that is continuously negotiated and created at a policy and practice level by a range of partners, most particularly teachers (Elliott, 1998; Goodson, 1998). This historical understanding placed great value on the 'policy as text' (Ball, 2016) and the writing and framing of curriculum texts were hotly contested. The process was often a closed and secretive process with limited stakeholder involvement. The right to be involved in the curriculum development process, or to be consulted as part of the process, was highly prized and in much of the period under review, limited to a small number of powerful stakeholders.

This chapter now progresses to explore in turn the development process for each of the three main curricula in Ireland following the advent of political independence to the end of the twentieth century. First, the curriculum development processes for the curricula introduced in the 1920s (1922 and 1926) are delineated. A particular focus on the contribution of Rev. Professor Timothy Corcoran SJ is included in this section, as is a brief overview of some minor curriculum development in the 1930s and 1940s. Second, the process for developing the 'New Curriculum' of 1971 is presented and critiqued, with a particular emphasis on the piloting process between 1969 and 1971. Third, the role of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in the development of the 1999 curriculum is analysed, critiquing, in particular, the representational structures of the subject committees. While each of the three sections has a short conclusion, the final discussion and conclusion will be reserved to summarise and explore the key issues from the longitudinal analysis and the key implications for contemporary curriculum development.

Development of Curricula in the 1920s

Before moving to critique the process of primary school curriculum development in Ireland in the 1920s, a brief focus on the development process of the preceding curriculum is worthwhile. The *Revised Programme*[1] *of Instruction* 1900 (Commissioners of National Education, 1902) was drafted by the Commissioners of National Education but was informed by an extensive body of research, consultation and public debate. This evidence-base was generated through an independent and public Commission of Inquiry, the Commission on Manual and Practical Instruction (CMPI), which sat between 1897 and 1898. It was comprised of 14 members and included two external educational experts, one from England and one from Scotland. It held 93 public meetings, at which evidence was taken at 57 from 186 witnesses, such as teachers, managers, inspectors, industrialists and agriculturalists. Commission members also visited 119 schools in Ireland, England, Scotland, Germany, Holland, Switzerland and Denmark, and appointed Assistants to review and document curriculum practice in France, Germany, Belgium and Holland. Oral evidence was complemented by the analysis of in excess of 60 national and international reports relating to primary school curricula. The Commission published four voluminous interim reports with appendices prior to the publication of the final report in June 1898 (CMPI, 1898). The breadth, sophistication and transparency of this curriculum development process set a high standard for curriculum development in independent Ireland. It was not a model that was followed by the Irish Free State in the 1920s.

The First National Programme Conference (1922)

As political independence became an increasing reality, the Irish people had their first opportunity to frame a curriculum free from British influence and oversight. Given the political and societal turbulence of the 1919–1921 period,[2] it was a resolution at the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) annual conference which initiated the first National Programme Conference as opposed to a government or departmental authority. It called for the framing of "a programme, or series of programmes, in accordance with Irish ideals and conditions—due regard being given to local needs and views" (National Programme Conference, 1922, p. 3). The first National Programme Conference, instituted in January 1921, was the initial curriculum making body for primary education in Ireland. It operated and deliberated in the context of the War of Independence and its report, published in January 1922, captured the nationalist fervour and patriotic elation of the achievement of political independence.

As the organising body, the INTO issued invites to a number of educational stakeholders to attend and be represented at the conference. The political context, societal instability in the midst of a War of Independence and the view that the INTO was not the appropriate body to establish such a Conference resulted in a narrow engagement. For example, invited Protestant representatives did not view the Conference as a legitimate body and refused the invite to participate (Farren, 1995, p. 116). The Boards of Education from the previous British administration were not represented due to the political climate, school management associations did not attend, while the Inspectorate or representatives from the training colleges were not invited. The Professors of Education (with the exception of Rev. Timothy Corcoran SJ, who acted as an external advisor) did not participate. The Conference was chaired by Máire Ní Chinnéide, an Irish language activist within the Gaelic League, and T.J. O'Connell of the INTO acted as Secretary. The 11 members of the Conference were comprised as follows:

- Ministry of Education (1)
- General Council of County Councils (1)
- National Labour Executive (1)
- Gaelic League (2)
- INTO (5)
- Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (1)

This represented a narrow membership for the development of a national curriculum, with 55% emanating from teacher unions.

At its first meeting on 6 January 1921, the members agreed on the adoption of a ‘minimum’ programme for schools, to explore the inclusion of additional subjects and consider issues of school administration, teacher training and the provision of textbooks (National Programme Conference, 1922, p. 4). There is almost no surviving documentation from the work of the first National Programme Conference over the period from January 1921 to January 1922 so it is difficult to determine the exact process by which the programme was developed or the way in which the views of members were reflected within it. It is evident that the conference met on a number of occasions and a draft programme for national schools was issued in August 1921 for consultation with INTO members (INTO, 1921). Such a level of consultation with teachers was innovative and INTO members were urged to submit views on the draft programme. Overall responses from teachers at this time were positive—but it must be noted that certain provisions, including the use of Irish as the teaching medium in infant classes, were not included in the draft circulated in August 1921.

The final report was signed by all 11 members of the conference and its tone and content reflected its membership. It captured the nationalist fervour of the era, framed as it was within the period of the War of Independence, and the quest to build national identity through the Irish language revival (Walsh, 2021). The pervasive influence of Gaelic League ideology in terms of language and education is evident in the widespread support for Irish within the programme. It proposed a much narrower programme of study than its predecessor and placed a central focus on the use of Irish as a medium of instruction and on its teaching as a subject. This is surprising given the objections of many teachers to an over-emphasis on Irish owing to the poor levels of competency in the language among many teachers in the system. This concern was expressed by an INTO delegation to the Minister in November 1921, at which point ministerial assurances were given that there would be “no undue hardship or injustice inflicted” on teachers who were unable to meet the expectations of the programme in Irish (National Programme Conference, 1922, p. 30). Despite the inclusion of administrative structures in its terms of reference, this sensitive issue was not explored within the programme report. This may have been due to the absence of members with the authority to alter the administrative structures as well as the sensitivities to altering the existing system by the churches, perhaps as communicated by Rev. Corcoran. The provisions of the report were also reviewed prior to publication by a Coordination Committee to ensure alignment with curricula at second- and third-level education.

The Second National Programme Conference (1926)

Following two years of implementation, the INTO requested a review of the programme owing to challenges in its implementation in schools. The INTO initially initiated the review but the Minister for Education refused to send representatives to this forum. Ultimately, urged by the INTO, the Minister for Education Eoin MacNeill agreed to convene a conference to review the programme in May 1925 (INTO, 1925). However, he asserted it would be an Advisory Body and he would not be bound by its recommendations. The composition and *modus operandi* of the Second National Programme Conference reflected the increased political and social stability of Ireland. It was convened by the Minister and was more representative of the educational stakeholders. It was comprised of the following 21 representatives:

- Gaelic League [1]
- General Council of County Councils [1]
- School managers [3]
- INTO [5]
- Ministerial nominees [11]

Interestingly the Terms of Reference were much narrower than in 1921, focusing exclusively on the suitability of the national programme, with no focus on school facilities or administration. Rev. Lambert McKenna SJ was appointed to chair the conference, an astute choice by the Minister given his strong advocacy for the learning of Irish in schools (McKenna, 1912). Moreover, the Minister had an inbuilt majority of 11 representatives which afforded him particular control of deliberations and outcomes. Unlike the first Conference, there were three Protestant representatives at the Second National Programme Conference. However, there were no direct representatives of the training colleges, Professors of Education, secondary schools or wider educational interests.

Archival materials shed light on the impressive and comprehensive approach the Conference took to its work. A sub-committee of the Conference was elected at its first meeting on 9 June 1925 to support wide consultation. It resulted in an invitation in the national press requesting "reasoned statements" from interested and knowledgeable parties, the selection of witnesses to provide oral evidence and the issuing of specific questions to individuals and public bodies not represented at the conference but which the conference believed important to consult (National Archives Box 244: File 12842). The request for "reasoned statements" proved fruitful and the Conference received submissions from 54 bodies, 150 individuals and 1260 teachers on summer courses. The responses in relation to the questions issued were analysed and collated by the Conference (National Archives File 12850). A total of 19 witnesses were invited to give oral evidence, including Rev. Corcoran, three inspectors and a range of teachers from schools of varying sizes and contexts. These were interviewed by a second sub-committee of 12 members. In addition to the above, inspector reports, educational documents and reports, school statistics, draft syllabi and European school timetables were circulated among conference members to inform their deliberations (National Archives Box 250: File 12848). Once all the data had been collected, the conference spent 10 days in November 1925 deliberating the major aspects of the programme, reporting that "in nearly every instance, we had the great satisfaction of arriving at unanimous decisions" (National Programme Conference, 1926, p. 8). Two further sub-committees were then established: one to draft the report and the other to draft the programme for schools.

An examination of the evidence to the Second National Programme Conference reveals a polarity of views in terms of the suitability, structure and content of the 1922 programme (see Walsh, 2012, pp. 145–150). Many of the witnesses and submissions requested differentiated provisions for Irish- and English-speaking areas, a more detailed and definite outline of requirements within the programme and a broader range of subjects in the programme. The diversity of opinion must have challenged the Conference members to reach "unanimous decisions" and to frame a programme that took into account the views of all. This was an endeavour completed in early 1926 through conciliation, negotiation and compromise. One of the key influences and architects of the programme, as in 1922, was the external advisor Rev. Corcoran.

Rev. Professor Timothy Corcoran SJ

While a conference of people was responsible for the development of the curricula published in 1922 and 1926, the influence of their external advisor, Rev. Professor Timothy Corcoran SJ, Professor of Education in University College Dublin, cannot be underestimated. Rev. Corcoran had been previously involved in the development of the 1918 Gaelic League Education Programme and was influential in clerical, educational and revival discourses. Akenson (1975, p. 44) asserts that Corcoran's role as an external advisor rather than an individual member of the conferences was a strategy to augment his influence. Corcoran had published widely on educational and other matters in the 1920s, especially with a focus on using the schools as vehicles for Irish language revival (Corcoran, 1923, 1924a). He advocated that the "early age is the language age" (Corcoran, 1925, p. 380) and called for the initiation of Irish language preschools to support language revival. His writings also display his belief in the Doctrine of Original Sin and the need for strict control and punishment to manage the potential inherent weakness and corruption of the child (Corcoran, 1930, p. 204). Central to this control was didactic and rigorous teaching methods, placing an emphasis on memorisation and repetition, advocating that "large masses of facts must be known" (Corcoran, 1925, p. 286). He also castigated the progressive educationalists, particularly Maria Montessori, advocating a shift from the child-centred and progressive nature of the 1900 curriculum (Corcoran, 1924b, 1926).

Overall, Corcoran's assertions carried weight in the 1920s and the curricula developed incorporated much of his thinking and ideology. Corcoran's conceptualisation of the child as a passive recipient of information and in need of rigorous, didactic teaching permeates both programmes. His emphasis on immersion education and of the direct method of teaching underpinned Irish language provisions in the 1920s. J.J. O'Neill, first Secretary at the Department of Education and well positioned to assess his impact, evidences Corcoran's influence on the curriculum in the 1920s:

> In the reconstruction of the Irish State, he was, from the beginning, the master-builder in Education. The Commissions on Education, set up in 1921, were guided so largely by him that it may be said that the curricula, aims and methods in Primary and Secondary Education which emerged from them were, in the main, the work of his hands. (O'Neill, 1943, p. 158)

Revised Programme of Instruction (1934) and Revised Programme for Infants (1948)

Continued challenges with the enactment of the 1926 programme resulted in numerous requests by the INTO for a revision of its provisions (INTO, 1934). Following negotiations between Minister Derrig and the INTO, a *Revised Programme of Primary Instruction* was introduced into schools in October 1934. Interestingly there was no wider consultation with education stakeholders and the revised programme was not preceded by any rationale or discussion regarding the alterations. It simply stated:

> The Minister of Education has decided on certain modifications in the programme of instruction for Primary schools. They come into operation immediately. (Department of Education, 1934, p. 3)

One final alteration to the programme was introduced in 1948 with the *Revised Programme for Infants* (Department of Education, 1948). Preparatory work for the revised programme was undertaken by a group of inspectors, particularly the Organising Inspector, Eileen Irvine. This was followed in 1951 by *Notes for Teachers* (Department of Education, 1951). The centralised way in which the programme and notes were developed diminished their impact on practice and many teachers did not adopt the revised measures in their infant classes (O'Connor, 2010, pp. 227–250).

Summary of the 1922/1926 Curriculum Development Process

Curriculum development in the period from the advent of political independence to the 1970s was characterised by centralised and often secretive processes that excluded wide stakeholder participation. One of the main issues with the composition of the first and Second National Programme Conferences was the lack of diversity of opinion among constituents, with most highly sympathetic to the revival of the Irish language through the school system. The twin pillars of Catholicism and nationalism that underpinned Irish education in the era were the key influences on curriculum policy and these were the key discourses that impacted on policy development and redevelopment. It is evident that certain stakeholders wielded more power than others, such as the Gaelic League and Rev. Corcoran, and their evidence considered more authoritative than that of others. Dissenting and diverse voices were not present or welcomed and there was a sense that questioning the revival of Irish through the schools was akin to questioning the legitimacy of the new Free State (Walsh, 2021). Terms of reference for educational reform were generally narrow and ministerial power was exercised to ensure outcomes in line with government policy. There was a reluctance to formally review the curriculum in place or to establish more democratic structures to widen stakeholder participation throughout the era. Indeed, the *Report of the Council of Education* (Department of Education, 1954), comprised of a narrow range of stakeholders, reinforced rather than challenged the status quo. Wider societal changes in the 1960s catalysed the realisation that a substantive review of the primary school curriculum was necessary and overdue, a process that began in 1966.

Development of the 'New' Curriculum (1971)

The Minister for Education, George Colley, announced a formal review of the primary school curriculum in June 1965 (Colley, 1965). This announcement was advanced by his successor, Donagh O'Malley, who established an internal departmental Steering Committee to prepare the groundwork for a White Paper on Education in December 1966. This Steering Committee was directed by Deputy Chief Inspector, Mr. Ó Foghlú. Mr. Ó hUallacháin, Deputy Chief Inspector, had responsibility for the primary section of the White Paper and he was assisted by Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh (Secretary), Mr. Ó Suilleabháin (Divisional Inspector), Mr. Ó Cuilleanáin (Divisional Inspector), Mr. Ó Domhnalláin (District Inspector) and Mr. de Buitléar (District Inspector). The Committee's work was supported by a number of sub-committees, comprised of close to 30 inspectors, which advanced particular aspects of the work (de Buitléar, n.d.). These processed and analysed submissions invited from wider members of the Inspectorate and evidently were influenced by the preparation of the Plowden Report in England. It completed a draft 120-page report in Spring 1967, *Towards a White Paper on Education* (Department of Education, 1967).

Although the draft report remained unpublished, the seminal lines of thinking within it formed the basis of curriculum development over the following five years. However, the impressive timeframe for its development impacted negatively on its coherence and breadth, limiting its value as the basis for curriculum planning it subsequently became. These limitations included inadequate reference to the available curriculum research and a lack of wider stakeholder engagement in its preparation, resulting in a vision and content framed primarily by departmental inspectors. The lack of discussion and tempering are evident in its ambitious tone, reflecting an aspirational future rather than a considered and cautious White Paper. Seán O'Connor, Head of the Development Unit from 1965 and subsequently Secretary of the Department of Education, attributed the blame for not proceeding with the preparation of a White Paper to Minister O'Malley, who was interested in progressing curriculum development quickly. O'Malley feared that the consultative processes needed to develop a Green and then White Paper on Education would take up to five years and he wished to press ahead with curriculum reform (O'Connor, 1986, p. 191).

The next phase in the process was the development of a Working Document in 1968 which was the first draft of the curriculum. This work was undertaken by a New Curriculum Steering Committee established in December 1967, chaired by Deputy Chief Inspector Mr. Ó hUallacháin. Again a large number of sub-committees were formed in January 1968 to advance particular aspects of curriculum formation, including individual subject committees. The resultant *Primary Education—A Working Document* (Department of Education, 1968) was in effect a development of the earlier draft White Paper, with enhanced detail on subject content, principles and methodologies.

As promised by Minister O'Malley in February 1968 (O'Malley, 1968), a draft of the Working Document was shared with the INTO in September 1968, and with managerial bodies and the training colleges in October 1968. There is no evidence to suggest it was shared with any post-primary stakeholders or wider educational or public bodies at this time, or indeed ahead of its publication in 1971. The INTO welcomed the philosophy and direction of the new curriculum (INTO, 1969a) and individual members were asked to submit written feedback within two months. In December 1968, *Notes on the Draft Curriculum for Primary Schools* were added to the original draft *Working Document*. A *Plan for the New Curriculum* were shared in the *Irish Times* in December 1968 (*Irish Times*, 1968) and the *Irish Times* carried a three-part editorial on the New Curriculum in July 1969 entitled 'The End of the Murder Machine?" (*Irish Times*, 1969, p. 10). A full copy of the most up-to-date draft *Working Document* was published in the INTOs journal, *An Múinteoior Náisiúnta*, in February 1969 (INTO, 1969b).

In addition to direct consultation with teachers and management bodies, inspectors and departmental officials took the unprecedented move of presenting and publishing widely on plans for the New Curriculum between 1968 and 1971. This activity reveals much in terms of the thinking, *modus operandi*, rationale and principles underpinning the curriculum that was not explicitly captured in the final documents in 1971. One such publication was *All Our Children* in 1969 (Department of Education, 1969a), a booklet issued by Minister Brian Lenihan to parents on the rationale for educational and curriculum reform. Minister Lenihan also focused on the need for a comprehensive curriculum reform of the primary school curriculum at his INTO Congress address in 1969, asserting the need for "the structuring from basic principles of an organic curriculum to meet the challenge and needs of a new era" (Lenihan, 1969). Maitiú Mac Donnchadha wrote an article in *Oideas* in Spring 1969 regarding the rationale for change in Mathematics based on new psychological insights on pupil learning (Mac Donnchadha, 1969). Inspector Séamus de Buitléar, who was centrally involved in developing and authoring the New Curriculum, wrote an article in *Oideas* in 1969 sharing an insight into influences on curriculum development (de Buitléar, 1969). Assistant Secretary at the Department of Education, Tomás Ó Floinn, published a wide-ranging article in *An Múinteoir Náisiúnta* in December 1969 on primary curriculum reform (Ó Floinn, 1969). Minister Faulkner delivered an extensive exposition to the Dáil in April 1970 on the structure, content and wider reforms that would support the introduction of the New Curriculum, reassuring teachers that they would be supported in enacting the new curriculum provisions (Faulkner, 1970).

Such widespread sharing led to a number of responses and submissions to the Department of Education. The INTOs response was one of warm welcome, "whole-heartedly endors[ing] the aims and principles upon which the suggested new curriculum is structured" (INTO, 1970, p. 13). It noted the ambitious elements of the curriculum and urged the provision of the necessary resources to support their enactment. There was a similar positive response from the Teachers' Study Group (Teacher's Study Group, 1969), but it too alerted the Department to issues with enactment if the necessary supports were not put in place. The submissions and responses of wider organisations, mostly managerial bodies and training colleges, were considered and collated into an unpublished digest of responses (Department of Education, 1970). An analysis of these submissions reveals a generally very positive welcome for the philosophy and content of the New Curriculum, welcoming the freedom it represented for teachers and schools. Again, the Department was urged by the submissions to support curriculum enactment through the provision of in-service training for teachers, reducing class sizes, providing grants for equipment and resources and developing an information campaign aimed at parents. There were also calls for the redrafting of the section on Religion and a reduction in the requirements in some subjects such as Music, Art and Craft, and Physical Education. Copies of the Working Document were also disseminated to inspectors working in other jurisdictions and some submitted responses and observations (Walsh, 2012, pp. 248–251).

The information sharing activities were certainly effective in the years prior to 1971 to disseminate information and to prepare teachers, parents and the wider system for the curriculum changes ahead. Moreover, Coolahan (1989, p. 63) argues that these speeches and publications were used to test the waters in a process of pragmatic gradualism, "testing responses, slowing down or speeding up developments as circumstances permit."

Piloting the Working Document 1969–1971

Parallel to the information sharing outlined above, another key element of the curriculum development process was a pilot scheme which would precede universal introduction in a select number of schools. This initiative was shared with schools in a circular, which reassured teachers that the curriculum would undergo continuous review in light of the pilot. As it stated:

> the proposed curriculum is not to be regarded as being in any way final or definitive. Whatever shape the agreed curriculum takes, it should be subjected to a trial period of about five years… It should, therefore, be subjected to a continuous review so that it may benefit from educational research development. (Department of Education, 1969b)

The piloting process was undertaken in a representative cross-section of 600 schools (Department of Education, 1971a). It was structured across the forty-eight inspection divisions, with twelve schools piloting elements of the curriculum in each division (three schools piloting one of the four main subject areas: Language, Social and Environmental Studies and Music; Mathematics; Art and Craft and Physical Education). The purpose of the pilot schools was to trial the content and methodologies of the Working Document. Specialised grants were provided to schools to purchase suitable equipment for the subjects being piloted. Pilot schools were also expected to facilitate study visits by local teachers, who were released to visit such schools for one half day with the consent of the school manager and district inspector.

Unfortunately, there is very little surviving documentation (if indeed there ever was any) on the operation of the pilot schools. It is unclear how many teachers visited the pilot schools or how much of a resource they became in their district. There was no official evaluation of the pilot project undertaken by the Department of Education to inform subsequent curriculum development or enactment. Short articles from the time become inadvertent sources of insight in relation to its operation and success. Mr Gillespie from St Andrew's NS in Rialto Dublin, lauded the positive impact of piloting Art and Craft on the classroom environment and on the classroom atmosphere in his school. However, he warned that the changes resulted in an exponentially increased workload for teachers to plan for and to integrate the subject, as well as the increased costs not covered by the grant (Gillespie, 1971). The positive impact of using projects and themes chosen by the teachers and pupils in a pilot school in Raheny, Dublin, were also extolled (Whelan, 1970). The selection of pilot schools was criticised by O'Connell (1979), arguing that schools were selected for their specialist expertise in subject areas rather than being representative of schools more generally. Walsh (1980) lamented the lack of support for the pilot schools beyond the already over-stretched Inspectorate. Following the dissemination of the first handbook of the New Curriculum in May 1971 (Department of Education, 1971b), all national schools were granted a day of special closure on 5 November 1971 to discuss its contents and to plan for its enactment at a school level (Department of Education, 1971c). A second day for such activity was granted in December 1976.

Summary of the 1971 Curriculum Development Process

The Inspectorate was the key architect of the 1971 curriculum, drafting almost exclusively the background draft White paper and Working

Document that informed the 1971 curriculum. In this context, there was some consultation with teachers and other education stakeholders at various points in the development process. This was undertaken through the publication of elements of the curriculum, through public speeches on the development of the curriculum and through the piloting process. Despite these innovative consultation procedures, cognisance was not taken of many of the issues relayed by the various organisations that submitted feedback to the Department. Indeed, there was no systematic review or evaluation of the piloting process and this valuable innovative strategy ultimately did not impact systematically on the curriculum development process. While there were some minor amendments, the curriculum remained largely unaltered following the piloting and consultation process to the draft White Paper prepared in 1967. While commendable processes, the information sharing and piloting could only pay dividends if there was an openness and a structure to listen to and incorporate feedback systematically into the curriculum policy. Regrettably this was not a feature of the development process leading to the publication of the New Curriculum in 1971 (Department of Education, 1971b, 1971d). The subsequent issues with curriculum enactment (Walsh, 2012, pp. 283–342) could have been mitigated through a more systematic process of curriculum planning and design.

Development of the 'Revised' Curriculum (1999)

Organisational Structures

The establishment of the Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) in 1984 was a significant innovation in democratising the operation of Irish education, enabling wider stakeholders and outside interests to play a role in educational policy making. As Minister Hussey stated, the purpose of the CEB was "to give a voice on curriculum issues to all bodies who would have a legitimate interest in them" (Hussey, cited in Crooks, 1987, p. 9). The work of the CEB was characterised by consultation with interested parties, the use of experts in curriculum development and a focus on continuity between primary and post-primary curricula. While its work primarily focused on post-primary education, it published a number of reports on the primary school curriculum, focusing both on its structure (CEB, 1984) and content (CEB, 1985).

In 1987, instead of being established as a statutory agency as planned, the CEB was reconstituted as a non-statutory advisory body, the NCCA. Wider societal engagement in a process of social partnership from the mid-1980s resulted in efforts to democratise education policy development. As a result, the Council of the NCCA, appointed by the Minister for a 3-year term, "was constituted on the basis of representational partnership" (Gleeson, 2010, p. 245), directly and explicitly representational of the educational stakeholders and social partners (Granville, 1994, p. 38). The final authority for curriculum decisions still resided with the Minister, however. In addition to the chairperson, deputy chairperson and one member appointed by the Minister, the NCCA Council included nominees from 14 partner bodies as follows:

- Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) [1],
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) [1]
- National Parents' Council [1]
- Department of Education nominees [2]
- Teacher unions (including IFUT) [4]
- School management bodies (three post-primary and two primary) [5]

Following the Education Act 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998), the NCCA was established on a statutory basis from 2002.

The function of the NCCA was to "advise on all matters relating to curriculum and assessment at first and second-level education" (NCCA, 1988, p. 1). The NCCA operated based on part-time committee and council members who were in most instances nominated by the partner organisations. The composition of curriculum and course committees was also delineated so that they were representative of the partners, the majority comprised of practising teachers (Granville, 2004). The chairperson was elected by the membership of the committee and as well as chairing meetings, s/he liaised with the Education Officer, the NCCA

Executive and the NCCA Council. One of the key roles in leading the curriculum development process in each of these committees was the non-voting Education Officer (normally a seconded teacher) who led the professional work of the committee and liaised with the permanent executive staff.

Development Process for the 1999 Curriculum

Alongside the new structures for curriculum development, two further catalysts for reform of the primary school curriculum were published in 1990: the *Report of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum* (Review Body on the Primary Curriculum [RBPC], 1990) and the *Report of the Primary Education Review Body* (Department of Education, 1990). Both of these committees were representative of the education partners and worked independently, the former focusing specifically on the primary curriculum and the latter on wider issues related to primary education (excluding curriculum matters). The RBPC examined aspects of the implementation of the New Curriculum (1971), with a view to recommending amendments for the future implementation of the curriculum (RBPC, 1990, p. 5). The Committee received 85 written submissions and progressed its work through five sub-committees, each focusing on a particular aspect of the curriculum. This report was a major catalyst and springboard for the decade of curriculum reform that followed in the 1990s.

The report of the RBPC resulted in further consultation and a request by the Minister for Education to engage in a continuing review of the primary school curriculum. From an operational perspective, the NCCA established 12 primary curriculum committees (representative of the overall groups represented at the NCCA) to advance the work of curriculum revision. Two committees (Level 1 focusing on junior infants to second class and Level 2 focusing on third to sixth class) addressed each of the six broad subject areas (Gaeilge, English, Mathematics, Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), Arts Education and Physical Education). Each committee was supported by an

NCCA-employed Education Officer. Each 12-person committee comprised the following representatives:

- Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) [4]
- Minister for Education appointees [2]
- National Parents' Council [1]
- Colleges of Education [1]
- Irish Federation of University Teachers [1]
- Catholic Primary Schools' Managers Association [1]
- Church of Ireland Board of Education [1]
- Teaching Brothers' and Sisters' Association [1].

This representation was wide and inclusive of the existing educational partners but it is interesting to note the numerically influential position of the INTO, forming one-third of the membership of each committee. Moreover, teacher representatives occupied the role of chairperson and Education Officer in almost all instances (INTO, 2000, p. 21).

The process of development was a protracted one, lasting a number of years for many of the subject committees. An insight into the *modus operandi* of the curriculum committees was provided by a number of NCCA officials and committee members (INTO, 1997). This reveals the significance of the RBPC report in influencing the direction of the curriculum committees, as stated by Regina Murphy in the context of arts education:

> To a large extent however, the parameters were already clearly established for the committee by the Report of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum (Quinlan), 1990, which had accepted submissions from a wide range of organisations and individuals in the course of the review. (INTO, 1997, p. 27)

An analysis of research relating to the 1971 curriculum implementation and subject-specific research was also integral to the work of curriculum committees, as shared by Frank Bradley and Fiona Poole in relation to Irish and Maths respectively (INTO, 1997). In certain subjects like Physical and Health Education, Frances Murphy notes that the Level 1 and Level 2 committees merged after initial development work and formed Working Groups to advance the preparation of curriculum documentation (INTO, 1997, p. 55). Given the protracted nature of the development, a new Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum committee was established in 1996, building on the work of the earlier Physical and Health Education Committees and SESE committees. The work of each committee involved the preparation of the Curriculum Content document and the Teacher Guidelines, as well as publisher guidelines, papers for parents and an overview of resource implications (INTO, 1997).

As the work of the subject committees drew to a close, a number of additional committees were established to bring coherence to the documents they had prepared. This is understandable as there is little evidence of communication or cooperation among the subject committees. First of all, a Primary Co-ordinating Committee was established in 1993 to help ensure the various aspects of the curriculum dovetailed, that there was coherence in the methodologies, to discuss time allocations and to ensure it did not lead to curriculum overload. This Co-ordinating Committee also advised the NCCA Council on the structure and format of the curriculum as well as strategies to support its introduction and implementation. A common format for all subject handbooks was developed and the process of preparing the curriculum documents was supported by a team of seconded teachers. An Assessment Committee assisted in ensuring that the issues of assessment and evaluation became an integral feature of the curriculum reform. Most importantly, an Implementation Committee established by the Department of Education and Science (DES) planned the groundwork to ensure that the aims of the Revised Curriculum were converted into the reality of practice in schools, a feature that had been neglected in previous eras. This provided for a phased introduction of the subjects alongside a range of supports for schools through the establishment of the Primary Curriculum Support Programme. The preparation of the *Primary School Curriculum Introduction* handbook was one of the final tasks undertaken in the preparation of the curriculum materials. Ultimately all of the materials prepared by the committees under the auspices of the NCCA were subject to the approval of the Minister. As stated by the INTO (1997, p. 3):

> All documents must be approved by the Minister before publication and his/hers is the final decision on timing and method of introduction and implementation.

The publication of the revised *Primary School Curriculum* 1999 marked the culmination of a decade of curriculum development by a broad range of stakeholders, co-ordinated by the NCCA. The resulting curriculum was published in 1999 in an attractive format of 23 full-colour handbooks. This comprised two booklets for each of the 11 subjects (one documenting the curriculum content and the other providing teacher guidelines) and the Introduction. The 23 handbooks (DES, 1999), comprising 2842 pages of documentation, represent an extensive 'physical face' (Alexander & Flutter, 2009, p. 6) to the curriculum for teachers. The extensive documentation, arguably a result of design by committee approach, impacted negatively on the clarity and accessibility of the curriculum message (Walsh, 2018).

Summary of the 1999 Revised Curriculum Development Process

The 1990s were characterised by an appetite for educational development and reform in Ireland, central to which was a comprehensive review and revision of the primary school curriculum. The participatory and representative nature of the PCRB augured well for continued participation, partnership and cooperation among the education stakeholders, when the Department, teacher unions, parent bodies, school managerial bodies, teacher educators and industry representatives came together to formulate curriculum policy. The establishment of the CEB and most particularly its successor, the NCCA, represented a significant shift in power for curriculum development from the Inspectorate to a wider, more representative structure. This altered the relative power dynamics among the various stakeholders in setting the agenda for educational change than had previously existed throughout the twentieth century. Moreover, it transferred the responsibility for curriculum design from a centralised, and often mysterious practice, to a more open and participatory process (Granville, 2004). The bottom-up and democratic approach over close to a decade assisted the sense of ownership of the reforms being introduced by teachers and other educational partners. Despite these many positive features, the development process resulted in a number of challenges discussed below.

Conclusion

This chapter has delineated the key processes undertaken in the development of the primary school curriculum in Ireland from the advent of political independence in the 1920s to the end of the twentieth century. During this period, curriculum development moved from a highly centralised and often mysterious process directed primarily within the Department of Education (Coolahan, 2017) to a more participatory and open process (Granville, 2004). Overall, Ireland's predominant model of curriculum development has been a 'centre-periphery' model (Kelly, 2004, p. 122). Indeed, Ó Buachalla's (1988) analysis of the key stakeholders in Irish education reveals a small number of powerful brokers still charting the direction of Irish education towards the end of the twentieth century. However, societal changes, including the adoption of the social partnership model, was to institute some fundamental reforms in the management and administration of Irish education from the 1990s. This was particularly evident in the 1990s when the Department of Education loosened the reigns and involved wider stakeholders through the structures of the NCCA (Gleeson, 2010). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (1991) report was instrumental in this fundamental alteration of the traditional power structures when it recommended a decentralisation of the policy development process. Interestingly, the reverse of this direction policy was evident in the United Kingdom from the 1980s, with the curriculum development process becoming increasingly centralised, politicised and conceived in narrower terms (Kelly, 2004).

Despite the advances, the new democratic and representative structures for curriculum development in the 1990s were not to be without issue or controversy. While power was distributed across a range of partners from the 1990s, Sugrue (2004) argues that those afforded a seat at the NCCA table was limited in nature, creating a new "policy elite" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 8). Granville (2004, p. 68) asserts that the structures of the NCCA had paradoxical consequences, leading to "ostensible devolution, with an underpinning element of increased central control." This resulted in a limited devolution of power from one centralised department to another largely centralised entity. As Sugrue (2004, p. 202) states:

> It would appear, therefore, that that power continues to be concentrated at the centre. What has changed is that the locus of control has shifted from DES personnel in general and the inspectorate in particular, to a newly emerging policy elite or group of educational entrepreneurs.

Moreover, the numerical strength of certain organisations, particularly the INTO, resulted in a predominance of teachers chairing and directing curriculum development and a weaker voice for other constituencies. This has the potential to stifle dissent and to control contestation by privileging consensus over dissonance, with the effect of maintaining the *status quo* through agreement on the lowest common denominator (Sugrue & Gleeson, 2004). Burke (1994) asserts that the structure and composition of the NCCA gave teachers a "virtual veto" over curriculum development policy in Ireland. Consultation has its part to play but as Brennan (2011) warns, design by committee can also run the risk of watering down the key messages and the conceptual basis for these.

One of the key challenges for the new structures was to consult with and engender a sense of ownership of the revised curriculum across the wider membership of the teaching profession. In reality, the partnership structures have operated well among the national agencies at the macro level of the Irish education system but there has been less success in terms of connectivity and transfer from the macro to the micro level of schools. For example, there are forums and contexts for national agencies and partners to come together to develop and share policy but there is less connectivity between this macro level and the site of curriculum enactment in schools. Such a disconnect is problematic considering the research asserting that curriculum reform is a change management process that requires a process of support to ensure ownership, sense-making and integration at the school level (Fullan, 2018; Shirley, 2016). This has led to issues of symbolic ownership and adaptation and challenged real change in terms of pedagogical practices. Sugrue and Gleeson (2004, p. 269) also warn of the "systemic silences" deeply embedded in educational structures and processes. Over time, these structures affording power and influence over curriculum development, and wider education policy, have been enshrined in legislation with the Education Act 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998). This seminal Act, establishing the NCCA as a statutory body, named the key actors and power brokers in the curriculum development process and these representative structures have altered little over the past two decades. More importantly, it enshrined in legislation a provision that the DES and its agencies (including the NCCA) would consult the key educational partners on any policy developments.

As Ireland moves towards another curriculum development process with the publication of the draft Redeveloped Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020), issues of power, representation and ownership remain in current discourses. Representational structures, although slightly altered to include more voices, remain the core feature of the NCCA Council organisational framework. With representation comes the question of who is and is not represented. This *modus operandi* privileges certain voices within the national curriculum development process at this critical oversight level. While the NCCA is commendably inclusive in its consultative processes, affording a voice to all those with a legitimate interest in education, including children (NCCA, 2019a, 2019b), curriculum decisions are ultimately agreed upon by a 25-member Council representing a relatively small number of national educational organisations. Granville's (2004) call for an ongoing review and assessment of partnership structures remains current to ensure that curriculum development processes evolve in line with research, policy and practice.

Notes

1. 'Programme' was used as the term to denote what would be commonly understood as a curriculum nowadays. Both terms are used in this chapter as 'curriculum' became the more common term from the 1960s.
2. The War of Independence in Ireland was fought from 1919 and resulted in a ceasefire in July 1921. Following protracted negotiations, the Anglo Irish Treaty was signed in December 1921 bringing British rule to an end in the Irish Free State. This was followed by a bitter Civil War in 1922. For further information, see Collins (2019).

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