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"Teacher Education for a Changing World – the Case of Ireland

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Abstract:

This paper was written in response to a request from a Network of Teacher Educators, funded by the European Commission to submit a paper describing the challenges facing teacher education in Ireland. The paper provides an overview of Ireland's system of teacher, it documents innovations that were recently introduced and discusses some current issues.

Teacher Education for a Changing World - the Case of Ireland

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1. Introduction

It is generally agreed that pre-service education provision in Ireland is reasonably effective. A recent OECD review of Irish education policy stated as follows:

Despite the pressures, initial teacher education is already of a good and appropriate standard and happily the means very largely exist at present for the further development that should and will undoubtedly occur. Most important, the quality of the teacher educators is high. The reforms of the 70s and the injection of resources for capital works, equipment and staffing, have provided a foundation upon which to continue to build. Thus, a well organised, effective and professionally and academically sound structure for initial teacher education already exists.¹

However, that is not to say that no further improvements are necessary. The changing context of Irish education presents new demands and new challenges which must be met if our young people are to be prepared for the world of the twenty-first century. Unlike initial teacher training which has undergone reform, the areas of induction and in-service have received less attention in Ireland than in many other countries in recent years. Their significance in the development of an effective teaching force has been emphasised in many recent international studies on education,² yet these two areas have been relatively neglected. In this regard, the OECD report stated:

The challenge that now faces the authorities and indeed the whole teaching profession is how to address in a comprehensive way the needs and aspirations of talented and well-educated young teachers as they make their first full-time professional encounters with the school (induction) and as they progress through their careers (continuing in-service education and training). We believe that the best returns from further investment in teacher education will come from the careful planning and construction of a nation-wide induction and in-service system using the concept of the teacher career as the foundation.³

The Irish education system faces many new challenges as it prepares for the twenty-first century. Some of these challenges are not unique to Ireland - others are specific to the Irish context. The first of these is the demographic situation. Unlike many European countries which experienced dramatic reductions in the child population in the past twenty years and are now witnessing an upward trend in births, Ireland's child population continued to increase from the 1960s to the mid 1980s. However, the number of births fell from 75,000 in 1980 to 52,000 in 1990 and the child population is now falling. This has already affected enrolments in primary schools and is beginning to affect enrolments in second-level schools. It is clear that there will be relatively little recruitment of young teachers into the profession during the next decade. This has significant implications for teacher education, both pre-service and in-service.

Another relevant factor is the dramatic fall in the numbers of men and women entering religious orders and congregations. In the past, many teachers at both primary and secondary level were members of religious orders, i.e. priests, nuns or religious brothers. In the case of secondary schools, almost half of the teachers were members of religious orders thirty years ago. Today this proportion has fallen to 10% and is likely to fall below 5% by the end of the decade. In primary schools only 5% of teachers are members of religious orders to-day - a fall from 25% thirty years ago.⁴ Religious orders traditionally appointed one of their own members to act as Head or Principal of their school particularly at secondary level and there were relatively few promotion outlets for lay teachers. This situation has changed since the mid 1980s and increasingly lay teachers are being appointed as Principals of schools owned by religious orders.

Other new demands arise from the increase in the numbers of pupils staying on in full-time education after the age of fifteen. This has led to the need to re-appraise the curriculum of post-primary schools, particularly at Senior Cycle level. New subjects are being added and the content of existing subjects is being revised. The didactic pedagogical approach of earlier decades is being questioned and a more experiential and activity based approach is recommended. The new information technologies have significant potential for education and there is much debate about how this potential can best be realised. The increased emphasis on Europeanisation is also seen to have implications for Irish education.

These and other issues have been addressed in a recently published Green Paper on Education - *Education for a Changing World*.⁵ As in many other EC countries, the Irish government is in the process of re-assessing its educational policies and it plans to introduce wide-ranging legislative reform within the next year. The Green Paper has provoked considerable debate and discussion since its publication in June, 1992. Hundreds of meetings have been held all over the country and over 800 written responses have been submitted. A major National Convention on Education, lasting ten days, was hosted by the Minister for Education in October, 1993 and a White Paper will be issued early in 1994.

The Green Paper identified a number of challenges facing Irish education, many of them challenges faced by educational systems throughout Europe. The challenges posed by an "enterprise culture" were particularly emphasised, and the need "to equip students with the ability to think and to solve problems - rather than just with an accumulation of knowledge" was highlighted. The importance of preparing students for the world of work was also high on the agenda although many respondents reacted to this item with some cynicism, pointing out that in a country with almost 20% of its workforce unemployed, there seemed little point in preparing young people for a world which many of them would never experience. The Green Paper also highlighted the problems faced by the education system in coping with disadvantaged children, and pointed out the need to ensure that "the handicap of social and economic disadvantage is alleviated rather than aggravated by the education system". A number of policies and strategies were suggested to enable the education system to meet this aspiration. The current coalition government is committed to focusing more resources towards disadvantaged areas and groups and the current Minister, a former teacher, who is the first Labour Party Minister for Education appointed in Ireland since the foundation of the State in 1922, has made it clear that support for the disadvantaged is a priority for her.⁶

Teacher education was also discussed in the Green Paper, which referred to "the need to respond to the increasing demands of teachers, who must adapt to radically changing circumstances during their careers".⁷ This is the topic to which we will now turn.

2. Innovation in Teacher Education

2.1 Initial Training

Teacher education and training in Ireland has traditionally distinguished between primary, secondary and vocational teachers. As in many other countries, primary teachers have traditionally been trained in teacher training institutions (the equivalent of the continental *écoles normales*) and second-level teachers have been trained in universities. Teachers of practical subjects in vocational schools were trained in colleges designated for this purpose. The history and traditions of the various training institutions continue to influence the structure of teacher education in Ireland although there have been significant developments since the 1960s.

During the past five years further changes have occurred in teacher education. In the late 1980s, reduced school enrolments led to a fall in the demand for new teachers at primary level. The state reduced the annual student intake to colleges of education from over 2,500 in the early 1980s to less than 500 in the early 1990s.⁸ State grants were withdrawn from one of the largest Colleges of Education and it was forced to close in 1988.⁹

The OECD report of 1991 advised against any further closures but suggested instead that a policy of "merger and consolidation" be adopted.¹⁰ It was suggested that this collaboration could be formalised by merging each of the Colleges with a University Department of Education so as to constitute a School or Faculty of Education. This has now happened and the two main Colleges of Education will offer courses from now on leading to Arts degrees as well as to a B.Ed.¹¹ Also within the past few years, Thomond College of Education, which provided a four year concurrent training course for teachers of P.E., Wood and Metal Technology and some areas of applied science, has been subsumed into the University of Limerick.¹² Thus, the majority of students following three and four year concurrent teacher education courses are now attending institutions which are no longer monotchnic.

2.2 Induction

In the past, those involved in initial teacher education have played no role in teacher induction. While newly appointed teachers at primary and second level undergo a one-year probationary or induction period, this is monitored by the school authorities and the state inspectorate, sometimes inadequately. It is generally considered that the induction process requires strengthening and reform. The Green Paper proposed that teacher training institutions should be involved in the induction year and it will be interesting to see whether this proposal will come into effect.

Commenting on the need for a more formal induction programme, the Chief Inspector recently stated as follows:

The induction year would be considered a most important part of initial teacher education. Each new teacher would be placed in an appropriate school environment, under the pastoral care of a designated member of staff. The training institution would continue to have a role in the supervision of the teacher and would continue to provide a range of training modules during the year. Training would continue, therefore, through two further years following completion of a degree.¹³

This ideal is far from the reality currently experienced by many new teachers who find themselves in the particularly difficult situation of acting as supply teachers during the first few years of their career. Unlike many other countries, Ireland has no mechanism for providing a pool of supply teachers. It is a matter for each school to find teachers who will substitute for permanent staff who are absent due to illness, maternity leave or any other reason. From the

young teacher's point of view, however, the situation is unsatisfactory. A supply teacher might have only a few hours notice of a post which might only last for a few days. Some young teachers find themselves teaching in up to twenty different schools in their first year, teaching children from different backgrounds and different levels. They feel quite unprepared for this type of "fire-brigade" activity and apart from the informal support of their colleagues, often have nowhere to turn for advice and support. This is but one example of an area where induction support is particularly needed.

2.3 In-Service

There is no overall co-ordinating agency for INSET in Ireland at present, although many commentators have urged that such a body be established.¹⁴ A great variety of types of INSET exist and much of it is undertaken by teachers in their own time and at their own expense. Colleges of Education and University Education Departments offer post-graduate degree and diploma courses. Teachers' Centres (there are 26 around the country managed by committees of teachers) provide an impressive range of courses on a very limited budget. The Ministry for Education, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, school management bodies and teacher unions also provide in-service education. Almost ten years ago, a committee which was set up by the then Minister for Education emphasised the need for nation-wide in-service policy and for a structure to implement such a policy¹⁵ but in spite of renewed calls for such an approach, this has not yet happened.

The importance of in-service education has been highlighted in many recent studies on education. An OECD conference in 1986 maintained that:

... at a time of declining pupil numbers and declining recruitment through initial training, the investment in in-service training is the most effective way of improving the quality of the teaching service generally.¹⁶

The Green Paper recognises the need for coherence and systematic in-service provision for teachers in Ireland. It states that:

Teachers need to keep themselves abreast of new developments in their professional field of responsibility. They should also be facilitated in participating in and benefiting from structured opportunities for in-career training.¹⁷

The role of INSET in helping teachers to develop their professional competence and to update their knowledge and skills to keep abreast of changing educational requirements is recognised. The Green Paper further states:

The issue of personal and professional development is also decisively important in sustaining and enhancing teachers' motivation and in helping teachers to respond positively to the changing role of the school.

The importance of school-based and school-focused in-service is recognised in the Green Paper. To date, the bulk of in-service in Ireland has been provided outside the environment of the school and it is rare for a whole school staff to engage in school-based in-service related to the needs of their school. The importance of each school working with its staff to identify their development needs is emphasised in the Green Paper. It is anticipated that this approach will be complemented by training for particular policy and curricular initiatives which will form part of the 1994 INSET programme for which support under EC Structural funds has been obtained.

3. Some Current Issues in Teacher Education

In spite of recent changes in the structure and content of initial teacher education, there is still some way to go in developing approaches which will encourage young teachers to be adaptive,

creative and reflective during their careers as teachers. The challenge to teacher trainers is to provide a solid base of educational theory and practice from which the young teacher can develop, while at the same time encouraging him/her to be imaginative and creative and to adapt to different situations. There are obvious limits to the extent to which new and inexperienced teachers can be reflective practitioners but even in initial training, this concept should be introduced. This will require teacher trainers themselves to move from an authoritative mode to a more open-ended approach, a switch which some experienced trainers find difficult.

Another area which needs to be addressed more fully in initial training is the role of new technology and its application in the classroom. Again, some teacher trainers are themselves either unfamiliar with or overawed by the rapidly changing facilities afforded by new technologies and it is not unusual to find that student teachers are more familiar with developments in this area than their tutors. (It must also be said that not infrequently pupils in the classroom may in turn be more skilled in this area than their teachers - young or old).

A number of issues also arise in the context of in-service education. Firstly, teachers want to be involved in deciding on the form and content of INSET. They argue that such decisions should not be taken by the state without an active involvement by teachers themselves. Such involvement could range from undertaking a needs assessment to delivery of INSET, whether school-based or school-focused or provided by external bodies such as Teachers' Centres, Colleges of Education, or Education Departments of Universities. The need to evaluate the effectiveness of INSET programmes has also been recognised. The recent OECD review commented that:

A weak element in current INSET policy in Ireland, as in nearly all OECD countries, is the lack of serious evaluation of its impact in view of its relatively high cost. It is indispensable that any national or local institutional agency made responsible for INSET should commission a systematic evaluation programme.¹⁸

Another issue relates to whether teachers should be facilitated to attend INSET courses during the school day. Different points of view have been expressed in this regard. Teacher Unions have argued that INSET courses should take place within school hours and that arrangements should be made to release teachers from their teaching duties to attend such courses. On the other hand, it has been argued that a professional approach to this problem would be that teachers should be willing to attend INSET courses outside the time-tabled school day.

And finally, what about training the trainers to ensure that they remain in touch with what is happening at the chalkface and with current relevant research both nationally and internationally? In this regard, the OECD *Schools and Quality* states as follows:

It will be necessary for their professional development (for teacher trainers) to be related not only to recent experience of teaching in schools but with ways of combining educational research, practical work in schools involving students and the recording of such experience which will be of enduring professional interest as well as personally beneficial in terms of "keeping in touch with the classroom".¹⁹

Unlike the U.K., where teacher trainers are required to spend some time in the classroom at regular intervals, teacher trainers in Ireland rarely return to the classroom (if indeed they were ever classroom teachers) once they are appointed to either Colleges of Education or Education Departments of Universities. Indeed it would be difficult for them to do this, even if they so wished. Currently, there are administrative obstacles to taking a year off from third level teaching and spending it as a classroom teacher at either primary or post-primary level.

As regards research, many individual members of staff from Colleges of Education and University Education Departments are actively involved in educational research at both national and international level. The Educational Studies Association of Ireland is a vibrant active vol-

untary organisation run by staff of third level education institutions. It has a membership of almost 400 - a very significant number in a country with considerably less than that employed in a full-time capacity in third level Education Departments. Moreover, almost all third level education institutions are involved to some degree with the Association of Teacher Education in Europe - and many of the RIF networks have an Irish involvement, with interchange of staff between Irish institutions and teacher education institutions in other countries of the EC.²⁰

In conclusion, while teacher training in Ireland has come a long way in the past twenty-five years, it would be a mistake for us to be complacent. Ongoing changes will be necessary to ensure that the quality of the teaching force in Ireland remains high. Such changes will be necessary in all aspects of teacher education - initial, induction and in-service. However, in the process, it is important that we do not throw out the baby with the bathwater but that we recognise the elements that have proven to be effective while identifying and discarding elements which are not longer relevant or desirable as we move into the twenty-first century.

Footnotes

1. OECD *Review of National Policies for Education - Ireland* (Paris: OECD, 1991) p. 97.
2. For example J. Coolahan (ed.) *Teacher Education in the Nineties: towards a new coherence* (Limerick: Association for Teacher Education in Europe, 1990) and H. Vonk et al (eds.) *New Prospects for Teacher Education in Europe* (Amsterdam/Brussels: ATEE, 1992).
3. OECD review, op. cit.
4. Statistical reports of the Department of Education and *Investment in Ed. Report, 1965*, Annexes and Appendices p. 181 (Dublin: Stationery Office).
5. *Education for a Changing World - A Green Paper* (Dublin Stationery Office, 1992).
6. *Programme for Government*, January, 1993.
7. *Education for a Changing World*, op. cit.
8. A. Burke "Teaching - Retrospect and Prospect" in *Oideas*, 39 (Dublin: Department of Education, Autumn, 1992).
9. The College in question was Carysfort College, run by the Sisters of Mercy for over 100 years, and with facilities for almost 1,000 students.
10. OECD review, op. cit.
11. A. Hyland and K. Milne (eds.) *Irish Educational Documents, Vol. 2* (Dublin: Church of Ireland College, 1992) p. 388.
12. Hyland and Milne, op. cit. p. 381.
13. S. MacGleannain "Teacher Education and Quality Assurance" in D. Swan (ed.) *The Moment of Truth in Irish Education* (Dublin: University College, 1992).
14. J. Coolahan "Teacher Education in Ireland" in ATEE - *AGITE: Guide to Institutions of Teacher Education in Europe* (Brussels: ATEE, 1992).
15. Report of the *Committee on In-service Education*, 1984.
16. OECD, Summary report of the International Conference on "Quality in Education; the Vital Role of Teachers". May, 1986, p. 4.
17. *Education for A Changing World*, op. cit.
18. OECD review, op. cit. p. 107.
19. OECD *Schools and Quality - an International Report* (Paris: OECD, 1989) p. 72.
20. ATEE News Spring 1993 gives details of these networks (Brussels: ATEE, 1993)