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The process of curriculum change in the Irish national school system, 1868 to 1986.

(A paper presented by Aine Hyland to the Conference of the Educational Association of Ireland in Galway, 22 March 1986).

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This paper will present an overview of curriculum change in the Irish national school system in the period from 1868 to 1986. It will highlight the process whereby the national school curriculum was reviewed and implemented at the following key points:

I 1868 - 1872: The report of the Powis Commission followed by the introduction of the Results Programme

II 1898 - 1900 The report of the Belmore Commission followed by the introduction of the Revised Programme of 1900.

III 1922 - 1934 The reports of the 1922 and 1926 National Programme Conferences and the Revised Programme of Primary Instruction, 1934.

IV 1947 - 1971 The INTO Plan for Education (1947) and the report of the Council of Education on the function and curriculum of the primary school (1954) followed eventually by the introduction of the Primary School Curriculum (1971).

V 1984 - 1986 The work of the Curriculum and Examinations Board in relation to the primary curriculum will be briefly summarised.

The paper will raise the following questions in relation to each of these key periods:

1. **Why** was a review thought necessary?

2. **How** was the review carried out?

3. **Who** was involved in the review?

4. **What** was the outcome of the review?

5. What arrangements were made for **implementation**?

1. **Why?** The impetus for an overall review of the national school system in the 1860's came both from within the country and from the rest of the U.K. A system of payment by results had been introduced in elementary schools in England in 1864. This new system, which had considerable curricular implications, had resulted in significant savings in public expenditure on education in England and the Treasury wanted to see it extended to Ireland.[1] Within Ireland there were pressures from the Catholic hierarchy to reform the national school system both in terms of the curriculum (as set out in the Board school-books) and in terms of denominational recognition.[2]

2. **How?** A Royal Commission was set up by the government in 1868 to carry out a full review of the system. Evidence, both written and oral, was given by organisations and individuals within the country and from overseas. All submissions and evidence were published and the reports and evidence covered nine volumes. The final report of the commission was published in 1870.[3]

3. **Who?** The commission, under the chairmanship of Lord Powis, consisted of 14 men - 7 Protestants and 7 Catholics. They included members of the aristocracy, of the judiciary and of the churches. The commission also included two school inspectors.

4. **What was the outcome?** One of the most significant outcomes of the report was the introduction of a system of payment by results in Irish national schools which in turn resulted in a radical reform of the curriculum. Under the new system, teachers would be paid an annual salary and results fees which would be based on the results of their pupils at an annual examination. The new system and the related curriculum was

drawn up by the Chief of Inspection, Patrick Keenan, who afterwards became Resident Commissioner of National Education.[4] The system of payment by results resulted in an exam-dominated curriculum which was narrow, inflexible and centrally imposed.

5. Implementation. The Commissioners of National Education refused to introduce curriculum change until a commitment was made by the government to provide additional financing for Irish National Education.[5] Prime Minister Gladstone, who as Chancellor of the Exchequer in the 1860's had introduced economy measures in the public service generally, was not initially sympathetic to demands for an increase in the vote for Irish national education. However, in 1872, Resident Commissioner Keenan went to London[6] and following meetings with the Prime Minister, the Cabinet and the Treasury he eventually secured an increase of over 25% in the annual vote for Irish national education.[7] This increase was used to pay the new results fees to schools. The teachers and inspectors co-operated fully with the Board in the implementaion of the Results Programme and for over a quarter of a century the programme remained unchanged.

1898 - 1900.

1. Why? During the 1890's, payment by results had been phased out in elementary schools in England and Scotland.[8] By the end of the nineteenth century, educational developments were taking place on two fronts in a number of countries of Western Europe, (1) the introduction of a more "child-centred" approach to education and (2) the inclusion of manual and practical instruction in the curriculum of elementary schools.[9] In Ireland, attention had been drawn to the need for curricular reform at national school level on a number of occasions during the 1890's.[10]

2. How? In January 1897, the Lord Lieutenant set up a Vice-Regal Commission to inquire and report "on how far and in what form manual and practical instruction might be introduced into the national school curriculum."[11] Like the Powis Commission of 1870, the Belmore Commission invited the views of individual and organisations both in Ireland and overseas and all evidence, both oral and written was published.

3. Who? The Commission, under the chairmanship of Lord Belmore, had 14 members, ten of whom were also members of the National Board. These members included the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Walsh (who was also a member of the Intermediate Board) and Professor Fitzgerald of Trinity College who was particularly interested in science in the curriculum. Due to the illness of the Earl of Belmore, Dr. Walsh played a leading role in the work of the commission and in drafting the final report. Dr. Walsh also played a very significant part in the work of the Palles Commission which reviewed the system and the curriculum of intermediate education two years later.[12]

4. What was the outcome?

A major revision of the national school curriculum took place as a result of the report of the Belmore Commission and the new curriculum, known as the Revised Programme of 1900 came into effect in all national schools in September 1900. With the introduction of the Revised Programme, payment by results was abolished. Philosophically and educationally, the Revised Programme was fundamentally different from the programme which it replaced. It was a "child-centred" curriculum and it encouraged learning based on activity and observation. The curriculum itself was drawn up almost exclusively by W.J.M. Starkie, who was appointed Resident Comissioner of National Education in February 1899 and who had no practical knowledge or

experience of the national school system prior to his appointment. He refused help from the inspectorate in finalising the curriculum and there is no evidence that he took account of the reservations of teachers, particularly those of the INTO, as expressed in their evidence to the Belmore Commission. No effort was made to "pilot" the programme before it was implemented in all national schools in the school year 1900/1901.[13]

5. Implementation.

When the approval of the government was being sought for the new programme in 1899, it was estimated that the cost of introducing the new scheme would be at least £60,000 per annum. This represented about 4% of the annual budget of about £1,400,000 on national education.[14] The Treasury made it clear from the start that they would not provide extra funds for Irish education and insisted that any additional costs would have to be offset by savings in other sub-heads of the national education vote.[15] This caused difficulties in the early years of the new century but as a result of some juggling within the vote (which caused some serious problems between the Board and the INTO) the Board "found" the funds to provide well-organised and well-staffed inservice courses for teachers and inspectors.[16] Over 20 new full time organising inspectors and assistants were recruited on a five year contract basis to give courses in "new " subjects such as manual instruction, drawing, elementary science, singing and cookery. The Board also provided equipment grants averaging about £10,000 per annum during the first five years of the Revised Programme. By 1904, expenditure which could be directly attributed to the Revised Programme, accounted to about 4% of the annual budget.[17]

Overall, the success of the Revised Programme of 1900 was limited. It was a theoretically impressive curriculum but among its weaknesses were lack

of consultation with teachers and inspectors at the drafting stage and failure to take account of the constraints, both physical and human, within the national school system of the period. There is evidence that many teacher and inspectors, possibly a majority, never fully understood the philosophy underlying the Revised Programme. In spite of wide-ranging in-service provision and equipment grants, the attitudes of many teachers and inspectors to the Revised Programme were ambivalent and it would appear that the Revised Programme was not implemented to the extent originally envisaged.[18]

1922 The First National Programme

Why? During the second decade of the 20th century, cultural nationalism reached a peak of fervour in many European countries. In Ireland cultural and political developments in that decade resulted in questions being asked in nationalist circles about the relevance of the official curriculum of Irish national schools.[19] In 1918, the Gaelic League produced an Education Programme for all levels of education, in which considerable emphasis was given to Irish language and literature, history, music and culture generally.[20] At the annual congress of the INTO in 1920 criticisms were levelled against the official National School Programme on two grounds (1) that it was overloaded and (2) that the Irish language was placed in a subordinate position and was not classed as an obligatory subject. Congress directed that a conference be set up "to frame a programme or series of programmes in accordance with Irish ideals and conditions - due regard being given to local needs and views".[21]

Who? The conference, chaired by Maire Ni Chinneide was composed of 11 representatives from the following bodies: Aireacht an Oideachais, the General Council of Co. Councils, the National Labour Executive, the Gaelic League, the INTO and the ASTI.

How? There was no open invitation to members of the public to give evidence to the conference but the help and advice of some individuals were acknowledged. In particular, the conference acknowledged the help and support given by the Professor of Education in U.C.D., Rev. T. Corcoran, S.J., but his evidence was not published. Before issuing its programme, the conference submitted a draft copy to the Executive of the INTO, which in turn sent a deputation to the Minister for Education of the Provisional Dail pointing out "the apprehensions felt by the teachers as to the difficulties and hardships which the ideal character of the Programme might entail". The deputation was assured that the Minister believed "in fully consulting the teachers on all matters relative to educational administration.....and he is prepared to go as far to meet their representations and their views as is consistent with the interests and welfare of the nation as a whole". [22]

What was the outcome? The report of the First National Programme Conference was signed on 28 January 1922. In the following April the programme was provisionally adopted by the government and issued to the schools and it came into effect in all national schools from September of that year.

Implementation. The First National Programme of 1922 was radically different to the curriculum which it replaced. A number of subjects which had been compulsory since 1900, such as elementary science and drawing, were either removed from the curriculum or became optional. The Irish language was introduced as a compulsory subject to be taught in all classes for at least one hour per day, and in addition all the work in the Infant classes was to be through the medium of Irish. Schools were also exhorted to carry out as much as possible of the work of the senior classes through Irish.

The First National Programme presented a major challenge for teachers. Out of a lay teaching force of 12,000 less than one-third were competent to teach Irish.[23] A major in-service programme was launched by the government during the summers of 1922 and 1923 and by 1924 this proportion had also doubled. The in-service programme cost £77,000 in 1922 and £65,000 in 1923.[24] This represented about 2% of the annual budget for national education.

1926 Second National Programme

Why? Shortly after its introduction, teachers began to express unease about the 1922 programme. There was a general belief (confirmed by T.J. O'Connell of the INTO who had been secretary to the First National Programme Conference) that the 1922 Programme had been "framed rather to mark an ideal attainable only after lengthened and strenuous efforts on the part of educational authorities and educational bodies than to prescribe a scheme of work immediately applicable over the whole country".[25] Following their Easter Congress of 1924, the INTO wrote to the Minister for Education, indicating that they (the INTO) proposed to set up a conference to review the curriculum and asking him to suggest names for this conference.[26] The Minister's response was to take the initiative in setting up this conference which became known as the Second National Programme Conference.

Who? The Second National Programme Conference chaired by Rev. L. McKenna, S.J., had 24 members - 3 representatives of school managers, 5 representatives of the INTO -the President, the General Secretary and 3 members of the Central Executive Committee; 2 representatives of the General Council of Co. Councils, 2 representatives of the Gaelic League and 11 nominees of the Minister for Education. The A.S.T.I. wrote to the Minister asking for representation but this request was refused.[26]

How? The conference invited submissions by placing an advertisement in the public press. Replies were received from 54 public bodies and 150 individuals. In addition, oral evidence was given by 19 individuals.[27] None of the evidence was published, thereby bringing to an end a practice which had been well established during British administration. It was not until very recently, when the written evidence and some of the oral evidence has come to light, that it has been possible to compare the recommendations of the Conference with the views of those who submitted evidence. Such a comparison shows, for example, that the vast majority of those who gave evidence, including the INTO, expressed reservations about the feasibility or indeed the desirability of teaching infants entirely through the medium of Irish. Nevertheless, the conference unreservedly recommended that this requirement be continued, stating that "the members of the Conference agreed on the supreme importance of giving effect as far as possible to this principle; and in confirmation of their belief they received authoritative evidence".

What was the outcome? As a result of the conference, the programme was modified to take account of the difficulties which had been encountered by teachers in implementing the First National Programme. It was recognised that a more gradual approach both to the teaching of Irish and to teaching through the medium of Irish would have to be adopted. The requirements in other subjects were reduced to make more time available for Irish.

Implementation. The modifications were a "scaling down" of the requirements of the First National Programme and as such did not have either in-service or resource implications.

1934 Revised National Programme

Why? The new Fianna Fail government under DeValera, which had come to power in 1932, was anxious to press ahead with a policy of Gaelicisation. It was felt that the concessions which had been made in the national schools programme in 1926 should be withdrawn and that the more ideal approach contained in the 1922 programme should be re-introduced.

Who and How? The decision to revise the curriculum was taken unilaterally by the Minister without consultation outside his Department.[29]

Implementation Notes for Teachers were issued in the different subjects of the programme.[30] The Primary Certificate examination which had been introduced on an optional basis in 1929 became compulsory for all pupils in sixth class in 1943 and remained compulsory until 1967.[31] De Valera was unapologetic about the return to an exam oriented curriculum. In 1941 he stated: "I am less interested in the teacher's method of teaching than I am in the results he achieves, and the test I would apply would be the test of an examination".[32]

1971 The "New" Curriculum

Why? The 1934 Programme remained the official curriculum of the national school system until 1971. However, dissatisfaction with the programme had been expressed by the teachers from the early 1940's onwards. In 1947, the INTO published a Plan for Education which proposed a more child-centred approach to education and the inclusion of a wider range of subjects in the curriculum of the national school.[33] The same year, a departmental committee within the Dept. of Education also suggested that the curriculum be broadened.[34] In 1954, the Council of Education produced a report on the curriculum of the national school and this report also pointed out that the existing curriculum was too narrow.[35]

Who? In one sense, it can be suggested that those who initiated the review which culminated in the new curriculum of 1971 were the INTO (through the 1947 Plan of Education) and the Council of Education which published its review of the primary curriculum in 1954. It was not, however, until the mid-1960's that the Dept. of Education took steps to revise the curriculum. In Dec. 1966 a Steering Committee was set up within the Dept. to advise on the primary education aspects of a proposed White Paper on Education. In Autumn 1967, the annual conference of primary inspectors debated the need for a new curriculum and before the end of the year a New Curriculum sub-committee had been appointed. The members of this sub-committee were all members of the primary education inspectorate.

How? In Spring 1968, some 200 schools (out of a total of 4,300) were chosen as pilot schools to pilot aspects of a revised curriculum and in October of that year a draft of a new curriculum[36] was submitted to a number of educational organisations (the INTO, managerial organisations at primary level and all colleges of education for primary teachers) which were invited in to the Dept. of Education to be briefed on developments. No post-primary interests were invited to this meeting nor were they subsequently given an opportunity to comment on the draft curriculum. There is no evidence that the ASTI requested an opportunity to make their views known - as they had had done for instance at the setting up of the Second National Programme Conference in 1925.

The Working Document was published by the INTO in its journal, An Muinteoir Naisiunta, in February 1969.[37] However, there was no open invitation from the Dept. of Education to the public at large to respond to the Working Document. The Teachers' Study Group seems to have been

the only group other than officially recognised bodies, which made a direct and detailed response to the Department. The responses to the Working Document were not published, thus continuing a trend which had started in 1922. Available responses would indicate that the overall thrust of the new curriculum was welcomed by the organisations consulted by the Department.[38]

Throughout 1970, work continued on the preparation of a Handbook for Teachers and in September 1971, this Handbook (in two volumes) was formally introduced into all national schools.[39] The Primary School Curriculum (1971) became the official curriculum of all national schools in September 1971.

Implementation A total of about 400 schools had been involved in piloting the curriculum in the period 1968 to 1971. During the summers of 1969 - 1972 residential courses of a week's duration were organised for over 4,000 principals to familiarise them with the principles underlying the new curriculum and with the strategies for implementing it. Non-residential summer courses and week-end courses were organised for teachers at national, regional and local level and these courses continued until about 1974. The annual costs of these "special courses for teachers" grew from £30,000 in 1969 to over £80,000 in 1974.[40] The "Free Grant for School Requisites", i.e. a grant for school equipment, also increased significantly during this period from less than £55,000 to almost £425,000 per annum.[41] The combined additional expenditure on in-service and equipment which was directly related to the introduction of the "new" curriculum accounted for about 1% of the annual budget for national education in 1974.

There is no doubt that impressive work was carried out by the primary inspectorate of the Dept. of Education in the years 1968 to 1972 in preparing the Working Document and the Guidelines for Teachers and in arranging for the piloting of courses and for in-service provision. This was done in a very short time and on a relatively limited budget .

Subsequent criticism focussed on some weaknesses in the procedures adopted. Some critics argued that the fact that different sub-committees of inspectors were responsible for different aspects of the curriculum resulted in a certain lack of cohesion in the Handbook. The failure to involve post-primary interests, either teachers, inspectors or management at any stage in the drafting or piloting of the curriculum resulted in a failure by many post-primary teachers to appreciate the extent of the intended reform. By the mid-1970's, many post-primary teachers were expressing concern at what they perceived as a falling in standards in primary schools.[42] The lack of consultation with post-primary inspectors was surprising, as many secondary school syllabuses had undergone significant reform during the 1960's and the authors of such reform might well have had something to contribute to the reform of the primary curriculum. The failure to involve, or at least engage in dialogue with, post-primary interests would have seem to have been particularly desirable as for the first time in the history of Irish education, elementary schools would no longer be required to provide terminal education for children. The Government had announced in 1966 that (1) free post-primary education would be available for all children (2) the primary certificate examination would be abolished (3) children should in general transfer from primary to post-primary school at the age of 12+ and (4) the compulsory period of education would be extended from 6-14 to 6-15 by the year 1972.[43] Consequently the need to ensure curriculum continuity betwen primary and post-primary education might have been regarded as particularly acute.

Although it was stated in the introduction to the 1971 Teachers' Handbook that the curriculum should be subject to ongoing review, this did not in fact happen. Evaluations of the different aspects of the curriculum were carried out by the Curriculum Unit of the Dept. of Education but until recently, the results of these evaluations were not publicly available. The dissemination in September 1985, of the reports on Irish and English were welcomed and it is hoped that reports on the other aspects will also be published.

There has been no nationwide empirical research since 1971 to determine the extent to which the new curriculum has been implemented in practice in the schools. A review of large scale and smaller scale empirical research on aspects of the curriculum was carried out for the Curriculum and Examinations Board in 1985 and a summary of this research is contained in the Board's Discussion Paper on Primary Education.[44]

1984 - Curriculum and Examinations Board

Why? The Curriculum and Examinations Board which was set up in January 1984 was asked to "report to the Minister on the desirable aims, structure and content of curriculum at first and second levels".[45] As the specific terms of reference of the Interim Board concentrated on curriculum and asessment at post-primary level, most of the attention of the Interim Board was directed at this level. From the outset, however, the Board believed that the curriculum should be designed as a continuum, particularly during the period of compulsory schooling, and the structures which were set up reflected this approach.

Who? The Interim Board, chaired by Dr. E. Walsh, is composed of 20 individuals, nominated by the Minister for Education, from a wide range of educational and other interests.

How? The Board adopted a system of setting up sub-committtees to advise on various aspects of its brief and of publishing short Consultative Documents and Discussion Papers for wide dissemination. The committee which advised on a curricular framework for junior cycle post-primary included teachers and management personnel from the primary sector. Similarly, the Primary Review Committee included teachers and others from the post-primary sector. As well as inviting written responses to these documents, the Board accepted oral evidence from major organisations (the Designated Bodies) and organised public meetings at venues throughout the country where wide-ranging discussion on the Board's documents took place. The Board proposes to publish a number of these responses within the coming months. These responses will be taken into account by the Board before making any firm recommendations to the Mnister on curriculum and assessment.

Outcome The interim Board is coming to the end of its term of office. It is expected that legislation to set up a Statutory Board will be put before the Houses of the Oireachtais shortly. The interim Board plans to report to the Minister for Education next week and the report will be published simultaneously with its presentation to the Minister. As regards primary education, the Board has recommended that an overall review of the primary curriculum be undertaken and the Primary Committee which is sitting at present has been asked to advise the Board as to the form such a review might take.

Summary and Conclusions

A number of tentative conclusions might be drawn from the above overview of curriculum review and change during the past 120 years.

The reasons for carrying out a review of the primary curriculum varied at different periods but in all cases in which a review was followed by reform, the formal decision to carry out a review was taken at government level.

The composition of the review bodies varied at different periods. Some of the bodies were composed of individuals directly nominated by the Crown such as in the case of the Powis or Belmore Commissions or the Council of Education which was set up in 1950. Others contained a balance of representatives of various interest groups and individual Ministerial nominees as in the case of the Second National Programme Conference. Under British administration, teachers were not represented per se on review bodies although their views on the curriculum were sought and published. Review bodies set up from 1922 onwards, invariably included teachers among their membership, either in a formal capacity representing the INTO or as individuals who were closely involved with and would know the views of the INTO.

All the reviews involved an element of consultation with interest groups but the extent of such consultation varied considerably. The open and frank approach which characterised curricular review in the days of British administration had much to commend it from the point of view of an educational historian. This approach was unfortunately discontinued under the Free State government. There is evidence that the Second National Programme Conference had intended to publish the submissions it received but this intention was frustrated by the refusal of the Dept. of Finance to provide the necessary funds for such publication.[46] Subsequent review bodies seem to have made no attempt to publish submissions - consequently it is difficult to determine what individuals or organisations were most influential in determining the outcome. The intention of the Curriculum and Examinations Board to reverse this trend and to publish submissions from Designated Bodies is a welcome one.

The drafting of the new programmes was carried out in most cases by individuals or committees within the National Board of within the Dept. of Education. Both the Results Programme of the 1870's and the Revised Programme of 1900 were drafted by the then Resident Comissioners, Keenan and Starkie respectively. The National Programmes of 1922 and 1926 were drafted by the First and Second National Programme Conferences and were taken on board and promulgated by the Dept. of Education. The 1934 programmes and the 1971 curriculum were both drafted within the Dept. of Education. There is no evidence to suggest one way or the other as to which approach led to more successful implementation.

Implementation: An analysis of curriculum review and renewal over the past 120 years indicates that curriculum reform costs money. On each of the four occasions when major curricular change occurred, there was government commitment to additional financing for this purpose. The most outstanding example was in 1872 when the government allocated an extra 25% to the national education budget to enable payment by results to be introduced. In later reforms, additional funds were allocated to two areas - in-service and equipment. In 1900 and 1922, the additional funding was in the region of 4% and 2% respectively of the overall national education budget. In 1971, additional funding was about 1% of the budget. In any future reform, money would have to be found for in-service, and where appropriate, for materials and equipment.

While additional funds would appear to be a necessary condition for curricular renewal, it is not a sufficient condition. The above analysis would suggest that the goodwill and support of teachers and inspectors is also essential if curricular reform is to succeed. Communication and consultation contribute significantly to the development of such goodwill and support and the evidence would indicate that time and effort spent on communication and consultation is time well spent.

Finally, a quotation from Dr. Coolahan's recent book, "The ASTI and Post-primary education, 1909 - 1984, supports the conclusions arrived at in this paper. Having analysed in considerable detail, events related to post-primary curricular reform in the period from 1970 to 1985, Dr. Coolahan concluded:

> "The lessons of the last 15 years indicate that unless the support and co-operation of the teacher unions are obtained there is little prospect of significant curricular or examination reform. Such reforms require significant expenditure. The teacher unions will be involved in balancing professional concern about the educational acceptability of the proposed changes with what they regard as appropriate reward for their members."[47]

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