

Introduction to the Special Issue: Contemporary Irish Education

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This special issue is devoted to various aspects of education in the Republic of Ireland. We thank the general editors for the invitation to guest edit this special issue and for the opportunity to put this collection of papers together for the readership of IEJEE. All the papers assembled are based on very recently conducted research in Ireland and none have been published already. All the authors have tailored their papers for an international audience and throughout have sought to explain 'local' terms and contexts, a feature that was emphasised in the invitation to submit a paper for the special issue and a point that was noted by the peer reviewers in their feedback. As such we hope that the articles included here have relevance for the wider educational research community.

Ireland has featured prominently in global affairs over recent decades in relation to its economics – in the 1990s and early 2000s for its unprecedented economic growth captured in the phrase 'celtic tiger' and more recently because of the its banking crisis and the rapid and radical move to austerity policies. Although a pan European phenomenon, the impact on Ireland of the recession has been especially severe, touching all aspects of social policy and practice, including education. In addition, the historical context, the values underlying practices, and the pressures and influences from the wider social, cultural and economic international sphere all contribute to how practice is experienced by key players such as teachers and learners. Collectively, the papers in this volume offer a contemporary perspective on some key policies and practices in Irish education.

The first paper in the collection, jointly authored by T.J. O Ceallaigh and Aine Ni Dhonnabhain, is about the promotion of the Irish language in the school system. Starting from the premise that the language we choose to use on a daily basis conveys something of our identity as a nation and a people, and from the fact that Irish as a language is unique to Ireland, their paper critically analyses the complex and controversial relationship across the Irish language, the State, its people, and the education system itself. They explain how the education system came to be tasked with ensuring the revival and health of the language. The paper is detailed, constructive and optimistic about what can be done to ensure the health of Irish as a living language while recognising the very real barriers and challenges that have to be addressed. Though specifically about the Irish language, the paper can also be read as an historical and contemporary account of politics, policies and

practices that extend beyond the language itself to what it means to be educated as an Irish citizen. Thus, the paper offers insights into what constitutes appropriate curriculum and assessment in Irish schools along with the values underpinning these important dimensions of the education system.

The next paper analyses an aspect of secondary education in Ireland that is also unique internationally – the programme known as ‘Transition Year’ (TY). Described as a ‘bridge that connects young people in the classroom with adult life and the world of work’, the author, Joseph Moynihan, takes us through the origin of, rationale for, and experience of TY in the education system. His own empirical research and that of others endorses TY as hugely successful in its impact on young people’s overall development, and in particular, on their subject choices towards the end of their secondary schooling, what they study at third level, and their subsequent career choices. As he notes in the paper, it has even been recognised in the popular press (not typically prone to reporting ‘good news’ stories in education) as an outstanding feature of the Irish education system. Understandably the author expresses surprise that this practice has not been taken up by other countries, given its success in Ireland. It is likely that much of its success is down to its close fit with research about how people learn, especially its fit with sociocultural learning theory and activity theory, as reflected in the work of Engestrom at the University of Helsinki.

The next two papers are about ‘voice’ and its role in policy and research. The first, by Domhnall Fleming, theorises and problematises the notion of student voice in Irish education and in post-primary schooling in particular. He distinguishes between the emphasis on student voice in the interests of rights and democracy and the emphasis on student voice in the interests of accountability and school improvement. This is a crucial and helpful distinction as it enables the author get at the heart of how policies geared to the enhancement of student voice actually function in practice. In reviewing international literature, he, *inter alia*, makes links with national policy in Ireland. Of particular note in the paper is the author’s analysis of the origin and role of school councils which were designed to inject greater democracy into schools from the perspective of students and to prepare students for their roles as active, participatory citizens. The empirical case study of the functioning of three school councils highlights the limitations of that construct and initiative as a way of empowering students as citizens. In sum his paper calls for ‘a more person-centred dialogic interaction within an inclusive classroom’.

The next paper on voice takes a different angle. Here the context is the ‘researcher voice’. It is noteworthy that over the last decade in Ireland there has been strong growth in the study of educational research as a process. This has been at least partially facilitated by the movement to ‘cohort’ doctoral programmes in universities where groups of students come together to study and share research and perspectives on matters educational. Most of the papers in this special issue are the fruits of such research programmes. The author of this paper on researcher voice, Dan O’Sullivan, offers a very interesting ‘telling case’ for not only do we get some insights into the concerns of newly qualified teachers in their first year of teaching but we get a problematizing of the researcher as instrument in the research process seeking to understand the transformations in identity accompanying induction into the teaching profession. Beginning with a brief but revealing account of the author’s own induction into professional life, the paper explores the notion of researcher voice, unpacking its layers to reveal ‘authoritative’, ‘supportive’ and ‘interactive’ stances, and how they collide and overlap in the teasing out of the data collection and analysis process.

Over the last several decades research on leadership has directed us to its distributed nature and challenged us to question the more traditional notion of the ‘good’ leader as always some charismatic, powerful figure who leads by virtue of formal position or

personality or exclusive claim to power. An exploration of the 'why', 'what', and 'how' of leadership in Irish schools is offered by Margaret O'Donovan in the next paper. Recognising the changed economic reality where school leadership is characterized by increased workload and an ever-expanding role-definition, the paper describes and analyses how school leaders (re)construct a form of leadership in times of austerity along with the associated challenges. Interestingly, the author's evidence shows how the concept of distributed leadership does not explicitly form part of the discourse of practitioners, posing challenges for the development of teacher-leadership capacity. Like the first paper, it can also be read as illustrating the legacy of history on how Irish schools are governed and led, and more particularly how the notion of 'ethos' is a highly relevant theme in the discourse of school leaders in Ireland.

The place of the arts in Irish education has rarely been guaranteed or without controversy in the primary and post-primary curriculum. Its value remains contested in practice even if the rhetoric is positive. Despite the Irish Government's endorsement of the arts in and out of school, Siobhan Dowling Long's paper highlights the lack of investment in the arts and the inadequate recognition by policy makers in Ireland of the life-enhancing nature of the arts and their role in lifelong learning. The increasing emphasis on literacy and numeracy in both compulsory phases of education, along with the role of formal assessment, especially now in primary school, militate against the promotion of aesthetic experiences for learners. In post-primary school, the study of the arts is not obligatory and by the end of that phase only a minority of Irish students have studied the arts in any depth. In contrast to the situation in Finland where students get an in-depth understanding and appreciation of their Finnish culture and heritage, the author illustrates the paucity of the experience afforded the Irish primary and post-primary student. The author concludes that the lack of investment in the arts is an area of grave concern.

In recent years in Ireland early childhood care and education has risen to prominence in the media, among politicians and in the public domain generally, while concern about standards in some early years services is a particular focus. As Rosaleen Murphy in the next paper explains, services for the youngest children (i.e. before age 4) are largely the responsibility of the Department of Health while children in the formal school system are the responsibility of the Department of Education and Skills. Crucially, while pre-school care and education is seen as the responsibility of parents, and is among the most expensive in Europe, primary education is state-funded. The paper argues that this split is highly problematic for conditions of work of those who work with the youngest children, for investment in that sector, and for the quality of service in the very earliest years of a child's life when the foundations of learning are laid. The author calls for parity of esteem to be given to the pre-school years and challenges the current policy and practice context in Ireland where the divergence between both is untenable given the significance of the early years for the lifelong wellbeing of the individual and society more broadly.

The last two papers in this special issue offer detailed accounts of aspects of Irish education that to varying degrees point to a growing neoliberalisation in education policy and practice, thus illuminating the impact of global trends that privilege an economic imperative over other purposes of human development in our school system. Drawing on Stephen Ball's theorization of policy, Kevin Cahill's paper offers a critical policy analysis of intersections between social class inequality and education in twenty-first century Ireland. He takes several key Irish policy documents (including the important document, 'An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion') that inform the practice of education and he subjects them to critical interrogation and review. His argument is that the refusal in Irish

policy and legislative discourses to name social class as a significant issue in understanding and addressing educational opportunity, experience and outcomes is a fundamental absence that militates against equality. He argues too that social class inequality is not just an issue for education to address but is an equity and social justice issue especially in a country that so explicitly claims democracy and inclusion as fundamental tenets.

The final paper is a critical engagement with the discourse of reform in Ireland with particular reference to the subject, Mathematics. In this paper Liz Kirwan meticulously tracks the 'genetic imprint' of PISA and its instrumentalist view of mathematics on the development of a new mathematics syllabus for schools (Project Maths). She shows how the Irish government in reforming the mathematics education policy was strongly influenced by the conceptual framework of PISA and thus argues that Project Maths does indeed bear the genetic imprint of PISA. However, she goes on to show how Project Maths is not a mini-PISA since it still retains much of the more traditional content of abstract, symbolic mathematics. She argues that the twin emphases of realistic mathematics on the one hand and the more abstract, traditional emphasis on the other is problematic, all the more problematic as the emphasis on real life mathematics is abundantly evident in the high stakes assessment system. One might anticipate that the power of the assessment may well reign supreme over other official endorsements of particular content and particular pedagogies. Will teachers teach to the test? Further research will have to answer this question.

Overall, the papers assembled pinpoint some of the issues that are challenging the Irish education system. National issues, such as the Irish language, and international issues, such as the impact of PISA, combine to give some insights into globalization in action in Ireland. The search for a good fit across multiple local/national heritages and international pressures means that Irish education as a system is not fixed but is changing to try to keep pace with international developments and national values, especially as society changes and becomes more diverse. It is clear from this small sample of papers that gaps remain between policies and practices and that greater attention needs to focus on those gaps to ensure a fairer educational experience for all citizens of the state.



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Mary Horgan is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education University College Cork where she played an active role in developing the first Degree programme in Ireland in Early Childhood Studies in 1995. She is patron of OMEP Irl. and was vice chair of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's Early Years Technical Working group from which Aistear (2009) the Irish Early Years Curriculum Framework emerged. Her research interests lie in childhood education with particular reference to curriculum, voice, agency and identity.