Equality and Curriculum in Education

A Collection Of Invited Essays

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Chapter 7

Junctions and Disjunction in the Aims of Irish Education Policy

Tom Collins

This paper aims to isolate and interrogate the main aims that underpin the direction of Irish education policy. In particular, the paper will look at the question as to whether the diverse aims of the different sectors of the system as a whole are aligned and mutually reinforcing or if there are places where there is a disjunction between aims, or even where diverse aims may be at cross purposes with one another.

It is certainly the case that any overarching, system-wide framework of aims is rarely explicitly articulated in official policy statements or initiatives. This, however, is not surprising and should not lead to the conclusion that no such framework exists. Few policy statements have a system-wide focus. On the contrary, they are usually focused on a sectoral or issue basis, according them a narrower remit and more tightly defined purpose.

In the absence of explicitly stated system-wide aims, however, there is always the possibility that sub-system initiatives may not neatly dovetail with one another; some aims may be inadvertently ignored or different parts of policy provision may even be at odds with one another. Indeed this latter possibility is explicitly raised by the inter-agency group exploring transitions from second level to third which refers to a shared concern that, "the very mechanism by which students make the transition from one sector to the other may be working against the kinds of learning valued by both." (p7, 2013)

It is important to establish, therefore, if there is a generally shared – even if not explicitly articulated - framework of aims underpinning the totality of Irish education policy. If indeed there is such a framework, what are its main elements? What is the relative priority of each component of the framework and is there a consonance and synergy between these components? And are the aims of the system consistent with the aims for it? Based on a desk review of the many policy initiatives and pronouncements over recent years, this paper will attempt to address these questions. It will do so by looking at

1. Early Life Education - Early Childhood to end of Second level
2. Lifelong Learning and Further Education and Training
3. Higher Education

EARLY LIFE EDUCATION - EARLY CHILDHOOD TO END OF SECOND LEVEL

Early Childhood

Throughout the documents and initiatives reviewed here, there is a gradually crystallising view of the young child as an active learner with life-cycle specific learning and developmental needs. The White Paper on early childhood education, Ready to Learn (1999b), referred to the "need to provide a range of experiences and learning opportunities to enhance all aspects of a child's development - cognitive, emotional, linguistic, moral, physical, sensory and social." (p56, 1999) This theme is developed by the NCCA in the Final Consultation Report: Towards a Framework for Early Learning (2005) where the child is presented "as an active learner, interacting and engaging with people, objects and events. Most children display a tremendous drive and capacity to learn from birth. This is evident in their desire to become aware of and to understand the world, and everything in it. Playful interactions with appropriate involvement from others can support much learning which is self initiated, fun, positive and motivating." (p21, citing Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl, 1999)

This view of the child and the role and nature of early childhood education becomes codified in Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, published by the NCCA in 2009. The Framework is structured around four themes:

*   Well-being
*   Identity and Belonging,
*   Communicating
*   Exploring and Thinking.

The Primary School Curriculum pre-dated the above early childhood framework by six years. There is nonetheless significant commonality in the guiding themes between the two. The

opening paragraph of the curriculum asserts that it, "celebrates the uniqueness of the child, as it is expressed in each child's personality, intelligence and potential for development. It is designed to nurture the child in all dimensions of his or her life - spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical." (p6, 1999a)

The aims of primary education, as expressed in the curriculum are

- To enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual
- To enable the child to develop as a social being through living and cooperating with others and so contribute to the good of society
- To prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning. (p7)

The need for a holistic view of the child is repeatedly emphasised in this curriculum - stressing as it does the child's innate sense of "wonder at the complexity of the world", the desire to understand it and the spontaneous impetus to explore it through play." (p14)

Some tension as between a holistic, developmental focus on the one hand and a more skill specific focus on the other becomes evident as the child progresses through the school system. Literacy and numeracy skills begin to assume a particular precedence where, as stated in the Literacy and Numeracy For Learning and Life (2011a), "both primary and post primary schools have key roles in teaching essential literacy and numeracy skills." (p10) The Strategy noted that one in ten children in Irish schools has serious difficulty with reading and writing with the proportion in some disadvantaged schools being as high as one in three. There is also some evidence in NCCA evaluations of the Primary Curriculum of the emergence of a stronger instrumentalist approach in the content of 5th and 6th class as the transition to second level comes into focus.

Second Level

The transition from primary to second level is one of the key transitions in the educational life cycle. As the child enters the new world of adolescence, s/he also moves from the familiar, primary school environment to the more daunting, challenging and possibly more exciting environment of the second level school. Second level education consists of a three-year junior cycle followed by a two- or three-year senior cycle.

Currently two major curriculum and assessment change programmes are under way in second level, with sector-wide significance. These are a changed Mathematics programme - Project Maths - and a proposed new Junior Cycle.

Project Maths arose from a concern that Mathematics study had become too narrowly focused on learning rules rather than reasons. Project Maths "focuses on developing students' understanding of mathematical concepts, the development of mathematical skills, and the

application of knowledge and skills to solving both familiar and unfamiliar problems using examples from everyday life…" (NCCA, in Cosgrove et al p7, 2012).

The proposed new Junior Cycle emerges from a range of long running concerns, including

- continuity between primary and second level
- disengagement in second year and its long term implications for the student
- the disproportionate influence of the Junior Certificate examination on the teaching and learning culture of the first three years in second level.

Junior Cycle

The stated aims of the Junior Cycle are to

- reinforce and further develop in the young person the knowledge, understanding, attitudes, skills and competencies acquired at primary level.
- extend and deepen the range and quality of the young person's educational experience in terms of knowledge understanding, skills and competencies.
- develop the young person's personal and social confidence, initiative and competence through a broad, well-balanced, general education.
- prepare the young person for the requirements of further programmes of study, of employment or of life outside full time education.
- contribute to the moral and spiritual development of the young person and develop a tolerance and respect for the values and beliefs of others.
- prepare the young person for the responsibilities of citizenship in the national context and in the context of the wider European and global communities.

Whatever about the stated aims, the work of Smyth et al in the ESRI /NCCA longitudinal study, as reported in the ESRI Research Bulletin (2009), drew attention, amongst other things, to a widening disjunction between a holistic view of the child's learning and a more instrumental view as the child moves into and begins to navigate second level. The study, which began in 2002, was conducted in twelve second level schools involving 900 students as they progressed through the second level system.

The study shows that in second year in particular a significant minority of students - in the region of 25% - become disenchanted by school and disengage from an active and positive participation. This second year experience can have a major, negative long-term impact on the child's educational attainment in the Leaving Certificate and beyond. Some students, "especially working class(background) get caught up in a cycle of 'acting up' and…from second year onwards appear to become disaffected if they feel that the rules of the school are arbitrary or unfair. Even more academically engaged students feel little sense of ownership over the school rules as currently formulated." (p4, 2009)

With regard to the Junior Certificate examination, the study states that, "the exam influences the nature of teaching and learning especially in third year with the focus narrowing to one of preparation for the exam. This finding is very much in keeping with research in high stakes testing internationally, since both students and teachers will respond to the presence of such tests." (p5)

The challenge of securing the active engagement of students in Junior Cycle is uppermost in the deliberations of the NCCA in regard to Junior Cycle reform. In Innovation and Identity (2010) it is proposed that, "the purpose of any change at Junior Cycle should be to ensure that all learners at this stage of their lives sustain and further develop a strong relationship with learning…" (p15) It defines such a relationship as a 'strong disposition towards and enjoyment of learning.' Research on student well-being undertaken by a consortium in St Patrick's College is referred to with approval - "The balance between the academic achievements of students and their other strengths and capacities needs urgent attention in a performance driven system where talent and achievement are so narrowly defined. Students need to have the skills and cultural tools to participate in society, but the current drive for higher standards of achievement and performance without genuine commitment to holistic development and equality of condition for all, is seriously problematic for the well-being of many young people and for society more generally." (p7)

Senior Cycle

The aims of the Senior Cycle include

- providing continuity with the Junior Cycle and providing a gateway to further or higher education or work.
- providing a curriculum "characterised by breadth and balance while allowing for some degree of specialisation".
- contributing to equality of opportunity.
- supporting the development of each individual's "moral, social, cultural and economic life" and enhance his/her quality of life.
- educating for citizenship.
- ensuring that "the highest standards of achievement are obtained by every person, appropriate to his/her ability. (NCCA, p12, 2002)

The Senior Cycle can be of two years or, if it includes Transition Year, three years duration.

The focus on holistic development, somewhat submerged in the demands of the Junior Certificate examination, re-emerges in Transition Year - an optional programme offered in a minority of second level schools.

The stated aims of Transition Year (TY) are:

- education for maturity, with an emphasis on the personal development of the student
- the promotion of general academic and technical skills with an emphasis on self-directed learning
- education through experience of adult and working life as a basis for personal development and maturity. (DES, p3, 2004)

According to Jeffers, in an evaluation conducted in 2007, there is a "consensus that TY promotes young people's confidence, improves bonds between classmates and facilitates better relationships between students and teachers. Opportunities to explore adult and working life, particularly through work experience placements, are seen as distinct benefits of TY." (p7) He also notes that fifth and sixth year students "sometimes indicate a tension between the emphasis on a broad education for maturity (in TY) and the demands of the LC and the associated points system." (pviii)

With regard to participation in TY, he notes previous research (Smyth, 2004) that found higher levels of uptake among girls in schools that charge fees and in schools in the east of the country. There is a corresponding under-representation of boys, (especially those from family backgrounds with low levels of formal schooling) and of small and rural VEC schools. (pxxiii) This leads to a concern that, notwithstanding the inherent benefits of TY, the class-based nature of its take-up may lend it the character of a quality programme that accentuates inequality.

With regard to sixth year in second level, Smyth, Banks and Calvert, (2011), show that

- students are broadly satisfied with the Leaving Certificate programmed they take, but satisfaction was linked to "how well students were doing academically, with many students critical of the increased workload during sixth year and the almost complete reliance on a terminal examination."
- while students generally preferred active learning approaches, what is distinctive about the Leaving Certificate year is that some students, "particularly those from middle class and academically oriented schools, become highly instrumental in how they approached the impending examination, focusing only on what was required to do well."
- half of the sixth year students took "grinds" outside school.
- second year experiences "are key influences on later outcomes." (pxvi)

They further conclude that, "as currently structured, the Leaving Certificate tends to narrow the range of student learning experiences and to focus both teachers and students on 'covering the course'."

Amongst its many insights the longitudinal study shows how examination classes, whether junior or senior cycle, depart from learning for its own sake to an instrumental orientation, where children are taught to the test and become increasingly "other directed " in their

learning. The higher the stakes the more restricted the focus and the more restricted the focus, the greater the emphasis on examination performance as a singular aim.

It is perhaps somewhat ironic, therefore, that the child's first encounter with the formal system - in pre-school - is marked by a greater readiness on the part of the system to accord autonomy and self-direction to the learner than will be encountered at any other stage in the child's career through school, other than in somewhat stand alone programmes such as Transition Year. And in TY there is, as shown, an underlying tension regarding its potential to distract the student from the Leaving Certificate. By the end of second level it can be reasonably asserted that the initial pre-and early–school focus on well-being and self-direction has largely given way to an instrumentalist focus on examination achievement and performance standards.

The pivotal role of the Leaving Certificate in allocating places in higher education is central to the high stakes character of this examination and to the narrow focus of the test. The Commission on the Points System (1999) expressed concern on this in its report of 1999 when noting that, the Commission agreed "that the Leaving Certificate should begin to recognise a wider range of skills, intelligences and achievements than is currently the case. These would include…taking initiative in and responsibility for learning…the ability to work co-operatively, a sense of social solidarity and a variety of other aspects of social and personal development which the NCCA refers to as the 'qualities of the student as a human being'." (4.4,1999)

Of particular significance to this paper, the Commission also noted that many of the submissions it received adverted to the lack "of congruence between the aims and goals of the second level curriculum and the modes and techniques of assessment used for the established Leaving Certificate…" The point was made that Ireland is unique in the extent to which the Leaving Certificate relies on a single, final examination. It went on to recommend that "while a broad senior cycle education should be provided, and the student's attainment in that senior cycle assessed and certificated, in some instances the certification might be of the nature of a record of participation and involvement rather than a grading of achievement. Some element of the certification might not count for points purposes, but would be a pre-requisite for entry into third level." (4.6, 1999)

LIFELONG LEARNING AND FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Arising from a concern for the continuum of learning from the cradle to the grave, policies around lifelong learning are inevitably more systemic than sectoral - concerned much more with inter-sectoral articulation than intra-sectoral reform. As such, clearly articulated system-wide goals are more likely to be expressed and elaborated in this context than perhaps in any other.

The White Paper on Adult Education – Learning for Life (2000), identified the following six "priority areas" for adult education:

- Consciousness raising
- Citizenship
- Cohesion
- Competitiveness
- Cultural Development
- Community Building. (p12)

Though specifically concerned with adult education the paper argued for a lifelong learning motif as the guiding principle of all education policy. It proposed therefore a "systemic approach" recognising that the "interfaces between the different levels of educational provision, and the quality of the early school experience have a critical influence on learners' motivation and ability to access and progress in adult education…" (p12) Developing this theme the paper goes on to observe that failure in the early school experience in terms of acquiring "a positive disposition to learning, in acquiring the fundamental learning tools of literacy and numeracy, in developing a positive sense of personal well-being and the requisite interpersonal and social skills needed to participate in the everyday life of the community, can very seriously limit the life chances of children. While adult and general out of school education interventions have shown that such negative early school experiences can be redressed, it is clearly far better that these needs are met in the early school life of the person, with the emphasis on prevention." (p30)

Similarly generic systemic goals emerge in the deliberations of the National Guidance Forum Report, Guidance for Life (2007). This report also takes a lifelong perspective, developing a framework consisting of four integrated 'groups of outcomes' as follows:

- Emotional Development
- Social Development
- Learning Development
- Career Development. (p15)

Though the focus of the report is lifelong, its conception of the goals of guidance is somewhat more limited than those found in Learning for Life. The guidance pre-occupation is mainly, if not exclusively, concerned with interventions that enhance personal – as opposed to social-development. The social development agenda is largely limited to the development of self-awareness and interpersonal skills.

With regard to further education and training (FET), Dr John Sweeney introduces a somewhat different distinction, that between "social" objectives and "workforce" objectives. He voices concerns that the recently established Education and Training Boards (ETBs) with their origins in the VECs have a more established background in the social arena but have relatively little background in specific workforce initiatives. He refers to the fact that "many

employers believe that the ETBs come to this task (workforce development) poorly equipped by virtue of their wide spread of functions, composition and starting capacity to discharge it. (p61) With regard to youth unemployment he captures the stark seriousness of the interrelatedness between the personal, social and economic imperatives of education success when he observes that, "it is fair to deduce that most of the young with alternatives to being on the Live Register (LR) typically avail of them within a year and that those who remain on it longer than twelve months are at an exceptional risk of facing forty years or more of low grade employment interrupted by spells of unemployment." (p64)

Workforce development

In a similar vein and tone, the IBEC Education and Skills Survey (2010) observed that, while education and training were "at the heart of Ireland's social and economic progress over the last number of decades," current economic conditions affecting Ireland have required a "reassessment and reforms by all stakeholders concerning education and training which has led to decisions being made about expenditure methods and priorities for investment." (p3) For its part the OECD, in Learning for Jobs, notes that, "the current economic crisis is making intense demands on the system to provide education and training for a sharply increasing number of people and poses serious challenges in particular to the apprenticeship system" (p6, 2010). Amongst other things this report talked about the need to "systematically identify the literacy and numeracy problems of those who come into contact with training services and provide basic skills support to those in need." (p7)

In the period since the financial and ensuing economic crisis hit, there is an urgency in the tone and a recognition of the more constrained parameters in many of the pronouncements and policy provisions, not particularly apparent before the crisis. In this regard, the concern with unemployment and with appropriate further education and training provision (FET) has emerged as a priority goal in recent years. As observed by the Minister for Training and Skills in the Action Plan for SOLAS (2010), "Ireland's further education training system faces major challenges at a time of severe economic crisis. The unprecedented level of unemployment – 14.8 % of our labour force is unemployed - has resulted in significant increased demand for education and training…the need to upskill those who have lost their jobs has become obvious to us all." (p1)

More recently, Sweeney calls attention to the differential impact of unemployment during the recession while noting that the incidence of unemployment "varies significantly with characteristics such as educational attainment, gender, nationality and place, duration is the most significant crosscutting problem with 60% of the live register unemployed for more than a year. " The FET sector, he says, "will have a crucial role in ramping up the government effort to reduce LTU in the coming years." (p6, 2013) He observed that the recession with its "destruction of jobs, large drop in employer recruitment and escalation in unemployment has sharply increased the numbers of people wanting an appropriate FET course to re-skill or up-

skill as their best strategy for surviving the recession and participating in the incipient economic recovery". He expressed particular concern with regards to Ireland's "dual economy" and specifically the degree of polarisation in the labour market, i.e. the wide gaps in earning potential and labour market capability between the educationally disadvantaged in the labour force as opposed to the educationally advantaged.

Despite, or possibly because of, the urgency for action and the "destruction" of jobs, while state spending on labour market programmes has more than doubled, it has been principally absorbed by "passive measures" and spending on training and job creation programmes between 2007 and 2010 per unemployed person has dropped dramatically. (p15)

In a general sense there is a diffuseness to the world of adult education, further education and training and out of school provision that resists encapsulation. Within this world there are some very different emphases and preoccupations giving rise perhaps to Sweeney's concern about the fitness for purpose of the ETB's when it comes to workforce training.

It could be suggested that Sweeney's concerns revolve around a more fundamental issue than mere functionality capability. This is the ideological schism within the lifelong learning field regarding its social purpose, specifically as to its 'remediation' role or its emancipatory role.

Those who critique its remediation role see lifelong learning at the service of economic interests, working to outfit individuals already poorly served by schooling, for an uncertain economic labour market. They argue, rather, for an education for emancipatory citizenship, portraying the citizen in Habermas' image as a self-directed, active, competent, ethical participant in reasoned conversations about issues of common concern. Citizenship education, therefore, should rely on participatory pedagogies, including a "focus on the quality of dialogue, student voice, contextual knowledge, and relevance to students' lives and narratives." (Joldersma and Crick, p142, 2010) Within this worldview if students are not learning, something is getting in the way.

In many significant ways, therefore, this position is different to – and skeptical of - schooling. In the Irish context, in programmes such as Youthreach and the Back to Education Initiative, the sector is dealing primarily with those who, for one reason or another, have either fared poorly or been poorly served by the world of schooling. Against this background it is one of the few ideologically discordant voices in Irish education, drawing on educational influences such as Freire, Illich and Habermas. What is common to much of it though is its second chance emphasis; its counter school leanings; its real life focus; its tendency to eschew summative assessment and evaluation and a difficulty in measuring its outcomes and cost benefit. The sector tends to be wary of formalisation and of the "disfigurement" which might arise in the teacher student relationship when, as Pádraig Hogan puts it, the question of quality in education is redefined as one of "indexed quality and by an associated machinery of inspection" (p1, 2010) that may be perceived to sideline purely educational purposes.

The sector, therefore , attempts to provide an alternative pathway to educational attainment and accreditation and also an alternative pedagogical experience for many for whom the mainstream system has failed. It suffers, however, from low status. The largely undifferentiated nature of higher education in Ireland and the high national targets for participation in higher education lend a "there by default" character to some aspects of further education and training. This can obscure the impact and value of the sector in its work with those who are most educationally and socially disadvantaged and in the way in which it provides a platform from which its students can re-engage with the world of work and/or the world of education, as well as in the wider democratic discourse.

Higher Education

There is a broad level of agreement in all the documents reviewed on the centrality of a high quality education system in driving economic growth. The needs of the economy, therefore, are central in establishing the overall direction of the system of both further and higher education in the country, with a broad level of agreement on the centrality of both sectors in tackling unemployment and driving economic growth and innovation.

With regard to higher education there is a broad level of agreement on its critical contribution to economic development. Where some contestation arises here it is frequently expressed in the discourse of "education for life" as opposed to, or in conjunction with, "education for work." While this debate is, as shown above, also to be found in the further education and training area, in higher education it is rarely represented as an irreconcilable duality. Indeed, it is more commonly proposed as a unitary goal consisting of a two-pronged approach. IBEC, for instance, refers to the strong relationship between business and higher education. It insists, however, that this relationship should not be viewed "in simple terms, of developing graduates with the skills and knowledge needed to drive business forward…the belief is that building the relationship between business and higher education should have at its core the principle of equipping people with the skills that industry requires which will maximise their prospects of having rewarding fulfilling and careers, and that this will be a major determinant of their quality of life". (p2, 2009)

In the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (Hunt Report, 2011b), the chairman refers to a "deep concern to ensure that higher education can continue to deliver the personal, social and economic capital that has enriched this country." (p3) He goes on to say that the report has been "framed in the context of the objective in the government framework for the Smart Economy" and the report will "complement and support the recommendations of the Innovation Task Force…" (p3) The report itself states that, "higher education is central to the economic renewal we need to support individual well-being and social development." (p9)

It would appear therefore that IBEC and Hunt would both downplay any tension between the economic goals of higher education and its wider social and personal ones. Similarly, the HEA, while acknowledging the "growing importance of the role of higher education institutions in driving economic and social development" also are at pains to point out that this role "stands as a complement to the historical and equally important significance of higher education institutions as the repositories of cultural and intellectual wealth, as places where the pursuit of knowledge is its own reward, and where the emphasis is on the holistic development of the individual." (p6, 2013)

Almost all policy documents reviewed in the area of higher education point to the increasing participation levels in the sector. Most welcome it. Hunt (2011) says it is "essential to create an enhanced human capital by expanding participation in higher education." (p10) Later, the report notes that, "if Ireland is to achieve its ambitions for recovery and development within an innovation driven economy, it is essential to create and enhance human capital by expanding participation in higher education." (p10)

While Ireland has been remarkably successful in increasing its participation in higher education - 45% of young adults (25-34) have acquired a higher education qualification and nearly two thirds of eighteen year olds enter higher education - Hunt points out that inequalities persist. The report shows that in 2004, with a total participation rate of 55%, higher professionals had 100% representation. The representation of the semi- and unskilled manual groups, however, was only 33% and the non-manual (lower middle income) group had just 20% representation. (p34)

Most official pronouncements, both national and international, welcome Ireland's high participation rates in higher education. IBEC, however, raises a concern that quality is being diluted by quantity as HEIs leverage the funding model by increasing student numbers. The perception of business, it says, is "that inflating student numbers within the HEIs has taken precedence over striving for excellence. This may have eroded quality within the sector over recent years." (p3)

It is difficult to establish the validity or otherwise of this hypothesis. What is clear is that the social inequalities in participation rates are also reflected in progression rates with essentially those least likely to gain access also the least likely to progress. According to *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education* (2010), the "lowest levels of progression are found among the traditional working classes, with non–presence rates between 17% and 19% among the Skilled, Semi-skilled and Unskilled socio-economic groups." (p38, 2010) The study shows, furthermore, that prior educational attainment is "a very strong factor in whether or not a new entrant progresses past the first year of their course of study." (p5)

Examinations : Social Class

This overview calls attention to a number of persistent themes in the narrative of education policy in Ireland over recent decades. The paper has shown that two factors in particular remain at the core of Irish education, notwithstanding many apparent attempts to ameliorate their impact. These are the centrality of the two State examinations in the child's school experience and the overwhelming influence of socioeconomic background in educational attainment.

The paper has attempted to identify the processes whereby these factors have prevailed with such tenacity in the education arena. With regard to assessment, it has shown that as the child progresses through the school system, from early childhood through to the end of second level, the focus of the experience and the purpose of the project - notwithstanding the stated aims - become ever narrower. The mode of assessment and the assessment content in the two State examinations and the role of the Leaving Certificate in mediating entry and in allocating places in third level are crucial elements in this ongoing process. In concert, these militate against many of the stated aims particularly of early life education, concerning the holistic development of the child and the development of engaged, active, lifelong learners. On the contrary the paper has shown that over time in the schooling lifespan the education compass becomes firmly fixed on the demands of the two State examinations. The Junior Certificate in particular acquires a meaning which greatly outweighs its purpose in this process of educational and developmental reductionism. Against this background, the current discussions concerning changes to higher education entry, together with major change initiatives currently under way in second level such as Project Maths and Junior Cycle reform, assume an even greater significance.

The importance of a successful encounter with early life education attaches profound significance to issues concerning educational opportunity, access and participation. In particular it points to the imperative of enabling children to overcome disadvantages of background, both in accessing education and in their attainments within the education system. The Education Act (1998) defines educational disadvantage as "…the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools."

The longitudinal study by the ESRI referred to earlier is one of many which show that the school system works best for those already advantaged, while the disadvantaged, especially disadvantaged boys, perform least well and are most prone to disaffection and alienation. This is not confined to second level. It is also true of the primary sector, as shown with regard to literacy and numeracy and is, and, as also shown carries forward into both further education and higher education.

In a study for Barnardo's in 2009, Investing in Education: Combating Educational Disadvantage, which dealt with the issue of social differentiation in educational outcomes, Smyth and McCoyfound "marked differences" across social class groups on all indicators looked at. They show, for instance, that while over 90% of young people from professional backgrounds complete the Leaving Certificate, just two thirds of their counterparts from unskilled manual backgrounds do so. (p8) With regard to performance in the Leaving Certificate they found that 58% of students from higher professional backgrounds achieve four or more honours grades in the Leaving Certificate; this is the case for just 16% of those from semi-and unskilled manual backgrounds. (p9)

This over-riding influence of social class background on educational outcomes persists despite the prominence in many policy statements and initiatives of aims concerning social inclusion and integration. Why is the system failing to achieve its aims in this most important social project?

In addressing disadvantage, considerable confidence is invested in the potential of early intervention in overcoming barriers of background or special need. The DEIS action plan (2005), for instance, was grounded in the belief that:

• Every child and young person deserves an equal chance to access, participate in and benefit from education.
• Each person should have the opportunity to reach her/his full potential for personal, social and economic reasons.
• Education is a critical factor in promoting social inclusion and economic development. (p19)

The goals of integration and inclusiveness recur persistently in almost all official pronouncements on Irish education. This is true of all sectors of education but is very pronounced with regard to early life education. As expressed in the OECD Project Overcoming School Failure, "the priorities for primary and post-primary education over the coming years will be to promote quality, relevance and inclusiveness by supporting schools in developing an inclusive environment for all learners, targeting interventions to address educational disadvantage, raising educational attainment, meeting the needs of pupils with special education needs, providing support for immigrant children, enhancing teacher education and professional development, promoting ongoing curriculum development, school evaluation and quality improvement and providing high quality school accommodation together with administrative and financial supports." (p6, 2011c)

The past two decades are noteworthy for the range of system-wide initiatives undertaken towards tackling educational disadvantage and early school underachievement.

Such key system-wide initiatives have included inter alia:

- DEIS (Delivering Equality in Schools Programme-comprehending both primary and second level)
- EPSEN Act (2004) (Education for People with Special Needs)
- Education Welfare Act (2000), which established the National Education Welfare Board (2000)

While initiatives such as the Free Preschool Year were not primarily about tackling disadvantage, it was a major consideration in its launch.

While these initiatives were mostly built on earlier provisions (e.g. National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS), School Completion Programme and Early Start), they were distinctive in that they frequently embodied a legislative "rights based" dimension; a focus on disadvantaged schools; a focus on additional supports to particularly marginalised groups such as traveller children and on children for whom English or Gaeilge was not their first language; an ongoing focus on curricular reform and quality improvement, especially with the establishment of a national framework of qualifications and a focus on intervention at the earliest ages possible, recognising that the most efficient educational strategies for government in tackling educational disadvantage involves such early life interventions.

More recently (2012) the OECD reasserted the value of early intervention arguing that, "to be effective in the long run, improvements in education needed to enable all students to have access to quality education early, to stay in the system until at least the end of upper secondary education and to obtain the skills and knowledge they will need for effective social and labour market integration." (p2) Its Spotlight Report on Ireland notes that while the country has made "a significant effort to build a high quality and equitable education system…there is still room for improvement." (p6) Citing the PISA returns for 2009, this report notes that, "students from low socio-economic backgrounds are 2.40 times more likely to be low performers than their peers with high socioeconomic status..(and those) whose parents have low educational attainment have twice a higher risk of low performance…" (p6)

As has been shown earlier with reference to the Barnardo's study, this link between socioeconomic background and school achievement carries forward to the Leaving Certificate. Bearing this in mind, In its report concerning school failure (2011), the OECD suggests that the priorities for primary and post primary education over the coming years will be to promote quality, relevance and inclusiveness by supporting schools in developing an inclusive environment for all learners, targeting interventions to address educational disadvantage, raising educational attainment, meeting the needs of pupils with special education needs, providing support for immigrant children, enhancing teacher education and professional development, promoting ongoing curriculum development, school evaluation and quality improvement and providing high quality school accommodation together with administrative or financial supports." (p6)

Mainstreaming of programmes concerning inclusion and integration in schools has been a prominent policy priority in Irish education over the past decade. This is enshrined in legislation concerning the education of children with special needs. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) lists six principles informing its advice to the Minister, the first of which is that, "all children, irrespective of special educational need, are welcome and able to enrol in their local schools." (p3, 2013) With regard to Traveller children, the Traveller Education Strategy, while noting that, "many of the views expressed in this report could be directly related to other minority groups, such as people with disabilities" (p6, 2006), endorses "the inclusion of Travellers in the mainstream education system, in a way that respects Travellers cultural identity including nomadism." (p9) The report goes on to state that, "inclusion is a core principle and a central theme of this report. It is recommended that all educational provision for travellers be integrated, in a phased manner, in an enhanced mainstream provision that will result in an inclusive model of educational provision." (p10)

Notwithstanding such a generalised preoccupation with integration and inclusiveness, it could be suggested, however, that other philosophical and policy priorities work to frustrate the integration goal. Of particular significance here is the pre-eminence of parental choice in school selection and the associated commitment to diversity in school patronage.

School patronage and frustrating Integration

The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Report of the Forum's Advisory Group (2012) shows how the ambitions of Stanley in establishing a state-supported primary school system, uniting the children of different denominations, were bitterly resisted by the churches. It states that while the system remained *de jure a mixed system*, it became *de facto* a denominational one.

The report draws attention to the significance of the Papal Encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri* (On the Christian Education of Youth) published in 1929, which "clearly sets out the subsidiary nature of the State's role in education vis a vis the family and the church." (p12) It notes how this subsidiary role became institutionalised in the Irish Constitution of 1937, where the State "acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide according to their means the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children." (Article 42.1)

So, laudable aspirations for an integrated school system in the early 1830's were truly frustrated by the main churches on the island such that by the mid-1960's in the Preface of The Rules for National Schools it was stated that, the "State provides for free primary education for children in national schools and gives explicit recognition to the denominational character of these schools." As the Forum report points out, this was the first time in the 134 years of the national school system that the schools were formally recognised as denominational. (p14)

This subversion of the State's aims for integration was made possible by the primacy accorded the parental position in the education of children and by the State's readiness to fund patron groups that had evolved along sectarian lines. Any attempt by the State to leverage an integrated solution was either too weak or simply never arose in the first place.

Currently about 96% of the State's primary schools maintain a denominational ethos and patronage structure. Two other patronage groups have emerged in recent decades - An Foras Patrunach for Irish medium Gaelscoileanna and Educate Together. With regard to Gaelscoileanna, the issue has a further significance considering that Irish is the first official language of the State. As noted in the Forum's report, "it is State policy to promote bilingualism across Irish society and the State is committed to supporting the rights of parents who seek an Irish medium education for their children. Strong parental demand has been expressed for all Irish medium schools and the patronage groups representing such parents are pressing for greater provision of such schools." (p2)

It is arguable, however, that the State's commitment to diversity in patronage, the cultural centrality of parental choice and the ongoing subsidiary nature of the State's relationship to patron bodies together replicate the structural and cultural conditions which historically allowed for the evolution of a school system segregated on denominational lines.

In a more abstract sense the issue calls attention to the difference between an emphasis on inclusion and integration on the one hand and one on equity on the other. There is a clear policy commitment in Ireland on integration and inclusiveness but this tends to gain expression in remedial or compensatory programmes targeted on those in need. However, while the rising tide may lift all boats, the bigger boats do not become any smaller!

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to identify the various aims that underpin Irish education policy; to show where there is synergy and alignment in these aims and to establish what, if any, tensions or disjunctions are to be found between these aims. It has demonstrated that the field of educational policy in Ireland is a very active one where the last two decades have witnessed major developments throughout the entirety of the education system. It is certainly timely that the collective impact of these initiatives is reviewed, and the degree of consistency between them is established.

And so to return to the questions posed at the outset of the paper, namely, is there a generally shared, even if not explicitly articulated, framework of aims underpinning the totality of Irish education policy? If there is such a framework, what are its main elements? What is the relative priority of each component of the framework and is there a consonance and synergy between these components?

The review has highlighted a number of broad strategic national priorities, both within the field of education and outside of it, which recur frequently in policy statements- and which together approximate to such a framework. In terms of aims for the education system as well as aims of the system these include a

- commitment to lifelong learning - both for its intrinsic and instrumental value
- wide level of agreement that investment in education both supports and is essential to personal growth and agency, to social cohesion, cultural enrichment and economic development
- national drive to widen access and participation, especially in higher education
- concern to enhance the quality and currency of Irish education
- conviction on the need for an integrative, inclusive schooling experience
- recognition of the role of the parent as the 'primary educator.'

The paper has shown that there is a wide degree of commonality in the stated aims between the different programmes and policy initiatives.

While most programmes are silent on the relative priority of their respective aims, in practice some key priorities emerge, suggesting that real aims may sometimes be unstated and unstated aims may sometimes be real. Notwithstanding the silence on priorities the paper has identified a number of key dilemmas and areas of disjunction that arise, both within and between programmes in the pursuit of diverse aims. These include, in particular, the challenge of

- maintaining a coherence and synergy within and between the different education stages as the learner progresses through the system
- redressing the increasingly restrictive focus of the schooling experience, mediated primarily through the two State examinations in second level
- managing multiple and diverse aims of the system as these relate to personal growth, social and cultural enrichment and economic development
- maintaining the quality and currency of Irish educational qualifications while increasing participation and widening access, especially in higher education
- driving for integration and inclusiveness in education while allowing for diversity in school patronage and according pre-eminence to parental choice in school selection.

It would of course be unrealistic to expect a perfectly aligned set of aims and objectives for a sector as complex and as diverse as that of education. Public policy in a democracy will always be marked by tensions between objectives, by contestation on aims and by imperfect implementation.

Against this background, the paper has called attention to the facilitative - as opposed to prescriptive - role of the State in its relationship to education providers and the cultural and institutional centrality of parental choice. Together these factors combine to offset the many other attempts by the State to address educational disadvantage and to reduce the impact of social background on educational attainment.

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