

Education Policy in Ireland since the 1940s

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Abstract: This paper maps education policy in the Republic of Ireland from 1947 to 1973, 1973 to 1980, and 1980 to date and examines how and why these policies were or were not actualised. The paper reveals policy processes have swung from being determined by single 'heroic' government leaders to more participatory processes including the production of papers, acts and consultation. In this analysis the participation of key groups such as the Catholic Church, Committees, governing bodies, Unions, teachers and parents are identified. The paper also illuminates continuities and changes in a move for comprehensive education that meets the spiritual and cultural needs of students and education to produce human capital and meet economic growth. Here the links between the expansion of education provision to equalise educational opportunities for all to reach their potential are revealed as central to educational policy, but the implementation of such reforms has been sluggish.

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Introduction

This paper will review education policy in the Republic of Ireland during the period 1950 to date and is presented in four eras. The first era moves from 1947 to 1973 and is presented as a first phase of education reform for the educational structures established by the new state in the 1920's and 1930's. The period 1973 to 1980 is taken as a discrete period of elaboration and development of the reform ideas presented in the previous phase. Finally I examine the era 1980 to date, when consensus building and consultation and the vagaries of parliamentary competition, culminate in a range of legislative outcomes centred on the 1998 Education Act.

While the research available suggests that education policy may not be a prominent policy area influencing voting behaviour in Irish elections (Marsh, 2010), it will be clear from the paper that the personal priorities of the holder of the office of Minister for Education, (MfE) has been a critical influence on the shifting fortunes of particular policies over time. The level of detail is designed to contain sufficient narrative to provide a basis for analysis in this paper. The references, as well as providing sources for assertions and data, are meant to guide those who may have an interest in following Irish education policy in more detail. Five key themes emerge in the paper. First, the role of religion and churches in the Irish education state. Second, the relationship between the cultural, and spiritual aspects of education and the emerging centrality of the economic functions of education related to human capital. Third, the policy agenda setting process. Fourth, the shifting distribution of power within the system. Finally, the continuous expansion of the education system in terms of participation at lower secondary, upper secondary and at tertiary levels in a search for equalising opportunities and enabling community members to reach their potential.

Part 1

In 1950, the Irish state was coming to the end of a thirty-year state formation process. In 1949, it had declared itself a republic². In 1937 it had ratified a new constitution. Article 42 of this new constitution established the basic principles of education policy to guide the new state. The article remains un-amended as the basic law in Irish education, and includes the following:

42.4. The State shall *provide for* free primary education and shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative, and, when the public good requires it, provide other educational facilities or institutions with due regard, however, for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation³. (Emphasis added).

‘Private and corporate initiative’ as the primary or default mode for the provision of education, and the ancillary or supplementary nature of the role of the state are the constitutional directions provided to government and judiciary to guide policy formation. The Constitution, and indeed, the declaration of the Republic by the twenty-six county Free State, reflect the outcome of cycles of social and political contestation and settlement of the previous hundred and fifty years⁴. In 1950, the Irish educational system consisted of a set of five institutional sub-systems⁵.

² The Republic of Ireland Act 1948, (NO.22 of 1948) was passed on 21st December, 1948. On the 4th February, 1949, the statutory instrument S.I. No.27/1949 was signed appointing 18th April, 1949, as the date on which the Act would come into operation.

³ The constitutional provision in Article 42 on Education requires to be read in conjunction with Article 40, Personal Rights, Article 41, The Family and Article 44, Religion.

⁴ For the history of Ireland in the period, see Ferriter, D.(2005) *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900 - 2000*, Keogh, D (1994) *Twentieth Century Ireland: Nation and State* Lee, J.J. (1989) *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society*.

⁵ A general overview of the development of Irish education structures and policy in the nineteenth and early twentieth century is to be found in Coolahan, J. (1981). *Irish Education: history and structure*. See also O’Buachalla, S. (1988). *Education Policy in Twentieth Century Ireland*, and Titley E.B. 1983. *Church, State, and the Control of*

At the base of the pyramid was a national primary school system throughout the country, owned and managed, in the great majority of cases, by the local clergy, mostly Catholic clergy given the predominance of the adherents of Catholicism among the population⁶. The managers operated under a system of 'patrons', usually the bishops of the diocese in which the school was located or another religious authority. The appointment and dismissal of teachers was, primarily a matter for the manager and patron. The training of teachers for national schools took place in colleges paid for by the state but managed on a denominational basis by church authorities. The National Schools were free to all children without differentiation. Instruction was segmented in terms of 'secular instruction' and 'religious instruction', with a parental option to withdraw children from religious instruction should the denominational nature of the instruction offend their beliefs or their wishes for the education of their children. The capital and maintenance costs of this system was shared by the state and the local church communities. The salaries of teachers was paid by the state which controlled the operation of the schools through a set of 'Rules for National Schools' which had their origins in the nineteenth century foundations of the system. The state operated an inspection system focused primarily on compliance with the Rules and the quality of teaching (Coolahan & O'Donovan, 2009). Provision was made for infant classes for children aged four to six and there were seven standards. The curriculum of the national primary school was decided by the state and promulgated through the Rules. The schools were a major instrument for the national policy of reviving the Irish language as the language of the people which was reflected in the emphasis on the language in the curriculum. A Primary Certificate examination in Irish, English, and Arithmetic had become compulsory for all children in 1947 and was taken usually at Standard 6, aged 12-14. The legal school leaving age was set at fourteen. In 1950, it is estimated that approximately 56% of children completed primary schooling

Schooling in Ireland 1900-1944. The section that follows draws heavily on Coolahan (1981) and O'Buachalla (1988).

⁶ Of the 2.9 million people in Ireland in 1946, 93.5% were returned as Roman Catholic in the Census of that year. The population of persons of other religions had declined by 13% in the 1936-1946 inter-censal period (Central Statistics Office (Ireland), 1947).

to Standard 6 and 7, the remainder having completed their schooling prior to reaching those standards (Ó'Buachalla, 1988, p. 336).

At post-primary or secondary level there were two forms of provision in 1950 - a private, church affiliated, fee-paying system of boarding and day schools, and a statutory system of publically managed, 'vocational schools' providing pre-vocational or 'continuation courses' for two years to prepare young people aged 14 to 16 for work or for further technical studies and training - a poor man's and poor woman's secondary schooling⁷. The secondary schools were recognised by the state in accordance with a set of *Rules for Secondary Schools*, which prescribed the core curriculum with a particular emphasis on the compulsory inclusion of the Irish language and literature. For the rest, the curriculum was 'firmly within the humanist grammar-school tradition' of classical languages and literature, with relatively little emphasis on the sciences (Coolahan, 1981, p. 53).

For both sets of second-level school, the curriculum was further influenced by the state through the process of publishing the syllabi and the format for examinations set and administered by the state. The secondary schools offered a three year course in preparation for the Intermediate Certificate and a subsequent two year Leaving Certificate course. In 1947, a state examination known as the 'Group Certificate', became available at the end of the two-year programme of continuation education in the vocational schools. Students were presented for one examination in a range of both general and specifically vocational or 'practical' subjects⁸. The vocational schools offered part-time courses for adults with a focus on local economic and social development. In the larger towns and cities these institutions also offered technical and higher technical courses on both a part-time and a full time basis.

The training of teachers for secondary schools took place in the universities, based on a primary degree and a one-year post-graduate

⁷ The Vocational Education Act, 1930, established this system following a review of an earlier local authority based system of technical education.

⁸ There were five Group Certificates: General Certificate in Commerce; Secretarial Certificate in Commerce; A Certificate in Domestic Science, A Certificate in Manual Training, and a Certificate in Rural Science. On oral Irish language examination was compulsory as was English. A choice among a further six subjects was available to students.

'Higher Diploma in Education', which, with a year of satisfactory probation teaching, entitled one to be registered as a state recognised teacher. Payment of recognised teachers was made by the state and supplemented by the school owners. Graduates, without post-graduate education qualification, were recognised as qualified teachers for the vocational schools in their degree disciplines. For subjects of a practical nature in which degree qualifications were not then available, the state organised teacher training programmes, operated in conjunction with the local public Vocational Education Committees (VECs). There were thirty-eight of these committees throughout the Republic.

A Central element in the architecture of the Irish education system in 1950, was the Department of Education and its Minister. With a headquarters in Tyrone House, Marlborough St., Dublin, formerly the offices of the pre-Independence Board of Commissioners for National Education, the Minister and Department managed the state's interest in the national system of education and its subsets. They were the channel for the state funds provided to institutions and to teachers, they planned the future of the system and promulgated national policy for it. In doing so, it was the focal point of the pressures and the demands, the expectations and the ideals articulated by the various organisations and individuals that made up the system. It was also the sole agency of the state in respect of education. The minister acted as a member of the cabinet and the government and was subject to the interactions, pressures, power-plays and ideological positions that accompany the operation of a national political system. Unlike many other European states the government faced the challenges of the late twentieth century whilst having to deal with the competing legitimacy claims from religious bodies who were also trying to determine the purposes and control the governance of educational institutions in a modern state (Ó'Buachalla, 1988; O'Reilly, 1989).

Part 2. Post-War Ireland to 1957

The aspirations for Ireland that might be achieved in part through the education system may be caught by reflecting on one of the major

statements by the most influential political leader in Ireland of the 1940's and 1950's, Eamonn de Valera:

The ideal Ireland that we would have, the Ireland that we dreamed about, would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as the basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit - a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, while fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose fields would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. It would, in a word, be the home of a people living the life that God desires that men should live (Lee, 1989, p. 334)⁹.

The speech was delivered at the height of World War II from which the Irish state remained neutral. Ireland was isolating itself in pursuit of its ideals and in defence of its independence. A range of initiatives were introduced to stimulate indigenous manufacture. Yet the dominant image of Ireland in the 1940's and 1950's is one of stagnation and failure (Goldthorpe & Whelan, 1992; O'Brien, 1953).

This was the general backdrop to a letter written by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister (PM)) de Valera to his MfE, Thomas Derrig in December 1944 indicating that it was appropriate to examine the total education system, primary, secondary, vocational and university. De Valera suggested that the plans published by the governments of Great Britain and of the 'Six Counties' (the preferred term of southern politicians for the Northern Ireland state) would be worthy of examination. The minister responded two

⁹This statement contrasts significantly with the vision expressed in the Programme for Government of the coalition administration which took office in March 2011: "The Government for National Recovery will strive to ensure that every one of our citizens has an effective right, free from discrimination, to contribute to the economic, social and cultural life of the nation. Our aim, when our legislative and constitutional changes are implemented, is that Ireland will be a transformed country. By the end of our term in government, Ireland will be recognised as a modern, fair, socially inclusive and equal society supported by a productive and prosperous economy" (Programme for Government, 6th March, 2011, p. 3).

days later to say the matter was under consideration and in March 1945, nine officials were set the task to ‘...examine the existing education system...to make recommendations as to what changes or reforms, if any, are necessary in order to raise the standard of education generally and to provide greater educational facilities for our people’ (Ó’Buachalla, 1988, p. 264). The completed report made two potentially radical proposals: ‘to raise the school leaving from 14 to 16, and secondly, to replace the continuation or vocational schools with new senior primary schools which would be organised on a denominational basis’ (Hyland & Milne, 1992, pp. 18-23). There is no evidence that the departmental officials engaged in consultation on the matter of the proposed standing down of the VEC structure but the argumentation presented by officials makes it clear that “...because the educational process is essentially religious... the new system, however organised, should be subject to ecclesiastical sanction”. The objection to vocational education committees was that “...they are in fact un-denominational education committees...it seems well to accept the fact that children of different religions require different kinds of education and to build from the beginning on denominational lines”. It was envisaged that four central controlling bodies would be established - Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Jewish. On December 1st 1947, the report was forwarded to the Taoiseach. In February 1948, there was a general election, and a change of government (O'Reilly, 1998, pp. 272-277).

Earlier that year the union representing Irish primary teachers, the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) published a major discussion document, ‘*A Plan for Education*’ (Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), 1947). This publication occasioned a major debate in the upper chamber of the Irish parliament, the Senate, on June 18th 1947. The policy areas under discussion included: the inspection of teachers, the condition and quality of school buildings and facilities, the teaching of Irish and its effectiveness, and the Primary Certificate Examination¹⁰ which had recently been made compulsory. The examination, it was being argued, had

¹⁰The Primary Certificate was a written test in English, Irish and Arithmetic taken on completion of the Sixth Standard. For a note on the Primary Certificate examination, see Coolahan, 1981, pp. 43-44.

the effect of narrowing the scope of the primary curriculum, an idea that received support from all speakers except the minister. The report also contained a proposal for a Council of Education to advise the minister that was representative of the education interests of the churches, teachers, and parents. While the growing professionalisation of the Irish National Teachers Organisation was ensuring a public voice for organised teachers, the idea that parents might be consulted apart from their religious leaders and authorities was a new and potentially revolutionary idea, despite the centrality of parents as educators of their children in Article 42 of the 1937 Constitution¹¹. Catholic parents were deemed to be represented by Catholic bishops (O'Sullivan, 2005)¹². One speaker in the Senate debate presented an extended encomium on the Vocational Education Committees and the Continuation of Vocational schools. The question of religion in education received but tangential reference with Senator O'hAodha (Hayes) stating : "We have un-denominational schools which are really denominational and we have the question of religion and religious teaching in our schools settled to the satisfaction of the Churches. We have nobody arguing that it should be changed.", - from which there was no demur (Oireachtas na hÉireann (Parliament of Ireland), 1947, p. 1920).

Only one of the ideas presented in texts referenced above became translated into educational policy - the INTO recommendation to establish a national Council of Education to advise the minister on an on-going basis in respect of education policy on which the minister of the day expressed decidedly little enthusiasm. The election of February, 1948, returned a new government. After sixteen years in office, The Taoiseach (PM) de Valera

¹¹ Article 42 includes the following: Article 42 1. 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, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children. 2. Parents shall be free to provide this education in their homes or in private schools or in schools recognised or established by the State. 3. 1° The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State. 2° The State shall, however, as guardian of the common good, require in view of actual conditions that the children receive a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual and social.

¹² O'Sullivan offers an analysis of this position in O'Sullivan, 2005, pp. 117-127.

and Thomas Derrig, his Fianna Fáil¹³ MfE for most of that period, all lost office (Lee, 1989). They were replaced by a new coalition administration with a range of disparate parties led by the main civil war rival, now called Fine Gael, leading the government. Richard Mulcahy, the leader of the Fine Gael party, not being acceptable as a leader of the coalition, became the MfE. The Education Council was established in April 1950, with all its members appointed by the Minister and was chaired by a Catholic clergyman assigned in the first instance to advise the Minister on the functions and role of the Primary school. The Education Council reported on this task in 1954. The report was, in the words of Hyland and Milne “...essentially conservative but as regards the curriculum there was general agreement that the existing curriculum was too narrow and should be broadened to include Physical Education, Nature Study and Drawing” (Hyland & Milne, 1992, p. 119). The recommendations of the Council were referred by the MfE to a departmental committee and the Council was asked to report on the secondary school system (Hyland & Milne, 1992). A response to the Primary Report recommendations was issued two years later in December 1956, indicating that “Before the recommendations can be carried into effect, it will be necessary for them to be discussed with the various interested bodies including ecclesiastical authorities, school

¹³ Fianna Fáil (Gaelic for 'Warriors for Ireland'; full name 'Fianna Fáil, the Republican Party') have been the dominant party in terms of electoral support in the Irish state from 1931 to 2007.

It achieved on average 43% of the popular vote at general elections in the period 1931 to 2007. The second largest party, Fine Gael (in English 'The Gaelic Party'), has achieved an average of 31 per cent of the vote over the same period. Both parties have their origins in the civil war which followed the 1921 British-Irish treaty which established the Irish Free State. Both parties were formed from break-always from the nationalist Sinn Fein (Ourselves Alone) party. Both parties are centralist with the capacity to move both left and right for electoral advantage. Fianna Fáil is historically slightly more aligned with small farmers, and trade unionists, while Fine Gael associated more with big business, the professions and larger farmers. An Irish Labour Party was established in 1912 and has achieved between 10% and 18% average support at elections over the 1921-2007 period. A number of smaller parties have emerged, and most have faded within a decade. In the period under review, there have been 31 Ministers for Education. All but six, were members of Fianna Fáil; five were members of Fine Gael, and one was a member of the Irish Labour Party (Weeks, 2010; Walshe, 1999).

managers, and teachers with a view to making the necessary arrangements and adjustments...” and that “It would not be possible to carry out all these recommendations in full immediately” (Hyland & Milne, 1992, p. 129). A general election and a change of government took place in March, 1957¹⁴. The new, Fianna Fáil MfE Jack Lynch was in no rush to adopt the agenda of his predecessor. When in 1962 the Council report on the secondary school system was presented, things had begun to change in Ireland.

Examining the Council of Education and its reports as education policy text and discourse, the following themes which persist to contemporary times are identifiable:

- the role of government ministers and indeed the Taoiseach (PM) in setting the agenda
- the controlling role of public servants in the generation of policy documents and guiding decisions, and the import of their own personal dispositions and priorities in the processes
- the absence of clear consultation processes and the existence of privileged access for some (religious)
- the role of teacher unions in agenda setting and discourse
- the role of parliament and the significance of general political change on the fate of specific policy proposals.

The working of the Council of Education also provides a clear illustration of the extent to which the religious influences permeated official thought. Official educational discourse was dominated by the perspective of Catholic teaching being in effect, paradigmatic.

Finally, this failed attempt to effect significant change can be interpreted as a very weak and tardy set of responses to the social stagnation of post-war Irish society.

¹⁴ General elections also took place in 1951 and 1954 while the Council was preparing its Primary Report. Minister Mulcahy who established the Council was returned as Minister in 1954 in time to receive the Primary Report. He did not survive to manage an implementation process. Lynch, his replacement was the first of a new generation of Fianna Fáil ministers to replace the revolutionaries in office. For an examination of the import of the generation change on Irish politics and policy see Garvin 2004, *Preventing the Future; Why was Ireland so poor for so long?*

These are all aspects of the policy process that continue and that also mutate in the later decades.

In summary in terms of education policy or themes in 1950, it is possible to identify a number of discrete but inter-related elements in educational discourse that may be presented as follows:

- the expansion of enrolments and provision,
- the resourcing of educational expenditure and seeking an appropriate balance between private and public or state funding,
- the role and effectiveness of the schooling system in the revival of the Irish language and the Gaelicisation of the culture of the new state,
- the role of state and the role of religious organisations or churches in the governance of education,
- a private, church affiliated, fee-paying system of boarding and day schools, and a statutory system of publically managed, 'vocational schools' providing pre-vocational or 'continuation courses' for two years to prepare 'the poor young people' aged 14 to 16 for work or for further technical studies and training
- the availability of public examinations at junior secondary, upper secondary and in the two year vocational school programmes¹⁵ - the contribution of the education system to economic and social development.

The remainder of the paper will focus on a number of policy processes in the decades since 1950 and on events relating to the primary and post-primary school developments, in the late twentieth century. These are presented so as to illustrate the continuities and the mutations that occurred and to provide a basis for the comparative analysis of policy processes across a number of states and their varied interplay of structure and agency, ideology and politics.

¹⁵ Presentation for state examination was not universal and was influenced by retention levels which were sometimes low. Local newspaper reportage of schools' examination performance also provided an incentive to teachers and schools to withhold some students for examination on the basis of their weak academic performance.

Part 3: Irish educational policy from 1958 to 1980

Between 1951 and 1958, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the Irish Republic rose by less than 1% per year. Employment fell by 12 percent and the unemployment rate rose. Irish GDP per capita fell from 75% to 60% of the European country average. Half a million people emigrated (Haughton, 2000). The continuation of emigration after Irish independence, and particularly the exodus of the 1950's when emigration reached its highest peak since the 1880's, induced a demoralising sense of failure in Irish society (O'Brien, 1953). From 1956 there began a number of critical personnel changes at the heart of the Irish state. In 1956, Kenneth Whitaker was appointed Secretary in the Department of Finance. Lynch, as the first new generation Fianna Fáil MfE to take over from the men who had been revolutionary founding fathers, can be seen as a transition figure. In 1958, Whitaker presented the government with the state's first cohesive economic strategy document which proposed a reversal of the protectionist, isolationist economic policy. Whitaker's document was subsequently the basis of a government White Paper as the *'First Programme for Economic Expansion'*. It struck an optimistic note at a pessimistic time (Haughton, 2000, p. 35). The resignation of de Valera as Taoiseach (PM) and as leader of the Fianna Fáil party in 1959, and the appointment of a moderniser, Sean Lemass, in his place, meant that outmoded and unsuccessful protectionist policies could be abandoned gradually and Ireland could begin a process of adaptation in a free-trade world. The liberalisation of trade and the ending of a commitment to isolationism was clearly signalled by the repeal of protectionist legislation and the establishment of an Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement in 1965. Preparations for joining the 'European Common Market' were put in place which did not come to fruition until 1973 (Haughton, 2000).

The *First Programme for Economic Expansion* (1958) was followed by a second programme in 1963, for which Whitaker was again the principal architect. The second programme was ground breaking in having a full chapter on education and states:

A society which rates highly spiritual and moral values and seeks to develop the physical and mental well-being of its people, will devote a substantial part of its resources to education. There are, in addition, social and economic considerations which reinforce the claim of education to an increasing share of expanding national resources. Improved and extended educational facilities help to equalise opportunities by enabling an increasing proportion of the community to develop their potentialities and to raise their personal standards of living. Expenditure on education is an investment in the fullest use of the country's primary resource - its people - which can be expected to yield increasing returns in terms of economic progress (Second Programme for Economic Expansion, 1963. Ch 8) (Hyland & Milne, 1992, p. 36).

The role of the high spiritual and moral ideals, and the significance of the religious interest in the matter of educational change were clear. However the economic role of education and education as investment were positioned as the central themes that dominated Irish education policy as text and as discourse into the 21st century. A new language emerged: 'education as investment for economic progress', and as 'human capital development' and a new theme was foregrounded; 'equality - as equality of educational opportunity' (O'Sullivan, 2005, p. 239). These themes now joined those of religion in education and the Irish language in Irish educational policy discourse. The state in education is about to take on a new assertiveness.

From 1959, a generation of young, energetic and assertive Fianna Fáil Ministers for Education; Hillery (1959-65), Colley (1965-1966), O'Malley (1966-68), Lenihan (1968-69) and Faulkner (1969-73) set about modernising the Irish education system¹⁶. The operation of the Department of Education was changed. The establishment of a Development Unit within the Department of Education was headed by Sean O'Connor, an energetic and courageous senior official who subsequently became Secretary (Head) of the Department. The Development Unit which also

¹⁶ For a comprehensive and informative study of this period of Irish education policy making see Walsh, 2009.

included a statistician and a number of inspectors, is generally recognised as an internal structural move which strengthened the capacity of the Department and the ministers of the next twenty years to effectively drive the modernisation agenda (Ó'Buachalla, 1988). The role of the then newly formed Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) was a major source of new ideas for Irish officials in relation to the economics of education. Officials from the Departments of Education and of Finance attended the major conference organised by OECD in Washington in 1961. There they encountered the ideas regarding 'human capital' as developed by Becker and others at Chicago University and returned to champion the participation of Ireland in an international study then underway in the Mediterranean basin countries under the auspices of OECD (Walsh, 2009; Ó'Buachalla, 1988). In 1962, the Fianna Fáil MfE, Patrick Hillery, appointed a survey team of public servants and academics to assemble statistical and economic data on the operation of the Irish education system as part of the OECD study.

The report, *Investment in Education*, was published in 1965. It started from a set of manpower projections for the economy and estimated a serious shortfall in the numbers of school graduates with second-level and technical qualifications. Data in respect of participation rates, retention and certification rates were presented comprehensively for the first time. Disturbing statistics in respect of differential participation on the basis of geography and social class were presented. The widespread presence of very small (one to two teacher) primary schools, and the extent of very small secondary and vocational school provision around the country, drew attention to the poor facilities and the sub-optimal use of resources in the system. The report addressed matters of curriculum, quantifying the time allocated to the teaching of Irish and the relatively poor outcomes in terms of language competence achieved. The secondary school curriculum as was the case in 1950 was still seen to be very limited and confined to the traditional grammar school format, emphasising classical languages, particularly Latin, with relatively little attention to modern languages, the sciences, arts or technologies. The dual system of publically managed vocational schools with a two year programme providing an emphasis on technical or 'practical' subjects serving one quarter of the school

population, and private and mostly religiously managed, secondary grammar schools, confined to traditional nineteenth century grammar school subjects, serving the remainder was still operating. The dual system was seen to be inefficient and not serving current needs.

A series of national policy decisions were taken between 1963 and 1980 which were guided by the Programmes for Economic Expansion, and by the international developments in educational thought being encountered by Irish education officials to a greatly enhanced extent through their engagement with bodies such as the OECD. The policy decisions were also informed by the related work the Irish education officials were themselves undertaking in relation to this report (Walsh, 2009). Government expenditure on education began to grow. Current (non-capital expenditure) increased from £8.5 million in 1950/51 to almost double that by 1960; by 1970 it had increased by 500% to almost £78 million. Public education expenditures grew from 3.05% of Gross National Product (GNP) in 1961-2 to 5.53% in 1966, and 6.29% in 1973-4. Education's share of Public Capital Expenditure rose from 4.2% in 1961 to 7.5% ten years later. The *Second Programme of Economic Expansion* set a target of 100 new schools and 50 school extensions to be carried out each year, a target that was reached in the early years of the 1960's (Walsh, 2009; Sheehan, 1975). From 1950 to 1960 second-level enrolments grew from 66,601 to 102,933, an increase of 54%. From 1960 to 1967 enrolment increased by 89% to 195,421 and in the following decade to 291,064, a further increase of 49%¹⁷.

Retention levels to Standard 6 (age 12-14) in the primary, national schools was approximately 55% in 1950, despite a legislative compulsion on attendance to age 14. By 1960 retention levels in primary schools had risen to almost 70%; by 1970 they had reached 90%. In 1972, the school-leaving age was raised to 15 by which time transfer to second-level

¹⁷ Data from Dept of Education Reports, various years, assembled by the author.

schooling had become close to universal. By 1980 universal completion of primary school to Standard 6 was achieved¹⁸.

The enrolment increases in 1967 and 1968 were 14% and 12% respectively. The increases can be explained by the abolition of fees for entry to secondary and vocational schools, and the provision of a school transport service at both primary and secondary level which was introduced by flamboyant MfE O'Malley, in 1967. These policy initiatives made schools available in rural areas which were hitherto inaccessible because of cost and of distance. The abolition of fees was substituted with state payments to all schools on a per capita basis. This epoch making set of decisions, collectively known as '*the free education*', paved the way for universal post-primary participation. The reforms were introduced by ministerial announcement, unaccompanied by preparatory green or white papers, and apparently without cabinet approval. There is some lack of clarity as to the level of prior knowledge and approval received by the Minister O'Malley from the Taoiseach (PM), Sean Lemass. Further research is required here. The decisions enraged senior Dept. of Finance officials and some cabinet colleagues (O'Connor, 1986; Walsh, 2009). The popular support they generated in effect bounced the government of the day and the public service into their acceptance. The events were the most dramatic illustration of the impact of the individual holder of the office of MfE. O'Malley's early death in office in 1968 made him the "...folk hero of Irish education" (O'Connor, 1986, p. 192)¹⁹.

At primary level, the rationalisation through the closure and amalgamation of small schools was the structural change which caused most negative reaction. Between 1962 and 1979 the number of one and two-teacher schools had been reduced by 63% through a process of amalgamation with other local schools. The objective of the amalgamation process was to provide for better facilities, make better use of teacher

¹⁸Legislation in 1926 set a legal requirement that all children attend school to age 14 and established an enforcement service. The age was varied from 14 to 15 by Ministerial order in 1972 (Coolahan, 1981). Data derived from Ó'Buachalla (1988, pp. 340, Fig.11.6).

¹⁹Sean O'Connor was the senior Dept. of Education official who worked most closely with O'Malley during the period. His book is the exception as an 'insider's account' of Irish education policy processes.

resources, and assist in the implementation of a new child-centred primary curriculum introduced in 1971²⁰.

A distinctive feature of the Irish education system in the midst of deep-seated processes of change was the weakness of the formal basis for decision making. Apart from the vocational education system and its legislation, no legislation had been introduced since 1926. The primary and secondary education system relied on nineteenth century and early twentieth century legislative provisions and adjustments to existing provision which were communicated by way of departmental circular letter. Major new initiatives were consulted on with the key stakeholders who were the church authorities and to a lesser extent the teachers' unions, and the resulting compromises were promulgated by way of circulars issued by the Department. This is well illustrated by reference to the establishment of boards of management to national schools (Coolahan, 1981; Ó'Buachalla, 1988).

Since the setting up of the national school system in Ireland in 1831, each individual school was run by a manager who was nominated by the school's patron. By the mid twentieth century, virtually all schools were under denominational patronage that is, under the patronage of the bishop of the diocese in which the school was located. Early in the twentieth century the Catholic hierarchy strenuously resisted state efforts to have greater lay involvement in the management of national schools. Only after the 'Second Vatican Council' in the 1960's did the Catholic Church become more responsive to this suggestion (Hyland & Milne, 1992, pp. 150-154). In 1975, boards of management for national schools were introduced which had the effect of modifying but not substantially altering the clerical and religious dominance of national school governance established in the previous century. This was done by the issue of a document, "*Boards of Management of National Schools - Constitution of Boards and Rules of Procedure*". Church authorities, principally the Catholic bishops, insisted on majority representation on the boards to

²⁰ See Walsh (2009, p.119-136) for a detailed treatment of the difficulties in implementation experienced in this policy process and the resistance of local communities to the amalgamation of their local schools.

ensure their rights as owners of the school properties and their historically acquired prerogatives as patrons to control the religious character of the schools. Initially the patron appointed four representatives, including the chair, out of seven members to the board of small schools and six members of ten to the boards of larger schools. The remaining numbers were made of two parents, one of whom to be a mother, and two teacher representatives, one of whom to be the school principal. Following objections by the teacher union (the INTO), a resolution was found with the patron bodies agreeing to nominate fifty percent of the membership including the chair. What might appear in retrospect as a relatively straightforward matter in a modern democracy; the provision for parent, teacher and community representation on school boards of management in Ireland over the period 1974 to 1986, was very problematic (Walshe, 1999)²¹. In effect, this episode was a case of a state assertion and a minor reversal for the dominance of religious influence in Irish education. From another perspective it represented a social awakening of the potential power of parents liberated by the proceeding of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and Church talk of the role of lay people.

The most significant structural changes of the 1960's and 1970's took place in the second level school provision, with the introduction of new types of secondary comprehensive schools. In 1963, MfE Patrick Hillery, under some pressure from the policies developed by other political parties, announced his intention to commence the provision of new comprehensive schools in areas where no provision had been made to date, and to unify secondary schooling by allowing the vocational schools to extend their programme and to prepare students for Department's Intermediate Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations (Coolahan, 1981). Again, this decision did not involve legislation and was carried out over a twenty year period (Ó'Buachalla, 1988). Within the broader objective of expanding access to secondary level provision, these initiatives had a range of policy objectives: to provide secondary level education in remote areas and areas which had been educationally underdeveloped, to model a new form of

²¹ Changes to reduce the number of patron representatives on the boards were negotiated and a revised document was issued in 1986 (Hyland & Milne, 1992, p. 151).

secondary provision which was unselective and open to all young people in a community and, to implement a secondary curriculum with an integration of the humanities tradition of school curriculum and the technical or practical tradition of the vocational school sector (Gleeson, 2010). In the 1970's, a variation on the comprehensive schools called 'community schools', with modified governance arrangements was developed by the Department of Education to carry the same objectives. In response to these developments, the Vocational Education Committees (VEC's) which were the local authority-based providers of continuation or vocational schools devised a further model of secondary school to be utilised in the context of 'green-field schools' or amalgamations with governance arrangements which provided for the new schools to be operated with the network of existing local authority based schools. These structural changes at secondary level were the subject of considerable contention involving state, the Vocational Education Committees and local communities where the new model of schools was under consideration.²² The church authorities attempted to minimise and control the developments as they impacted on their prerogatives and interests. Behind closed doors, the Catholic bishops secured the Catholic nature of these new schools by being made trustees and patrons of the comprehensive schools under a deed of trust for a period of 999 years (Walsh, 2009). The subsequent, slightly more inclusive, and significantly more acrimonious negotiations in respect of governance for community schools, ended with a patronage arrangement to last for 99 years. Parents, teachers and the local Vocational Education Committees would now share in the governance of these new schools at board of management levels (Walsh, 2009).

The abolition of the Primary Certificate examination for national primary schools and the introduction of free post-primary education, provided a context for major changes in primary curriculum and pedagogy (Coolahan, 1981). This was formalised without an act but with the introduction of a new programme for primary school, *The primary school curriculum, issued in 1971* which mandated a new child-centred approach,

²² For an account of these tensions, the emergence of these arrangements, and the settlements, see Walsh (2009, pp. 258-276; O'Flaherty, 1992).

significantly influenced by the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget. The aim of the curriculum was 'to enable the child to live a full life of a child and to equip him or her to avail of further education and go on to live a full and useful life as an adult in society' (Hyland & Milne, 1992, p. 143). The new primary curriculum broke from the 'subject-based' organisation and advocated an integrated curriculum based on seven broad 'curriculum areas': religion, language, mathematics, social and environmental studies, art and craft, music and physical education (Dept. of Education (Ireland), 1971). The new curriculum mandated the implementation which reflected Irish educational discourse since the INTO (1947) and which featured in the Council of Education Report in 1956 (Hyland & Milne, 1992). The evidence reveals a sluggishness and aversion to change within the education system. In the following decades a slow transformation of Irish primary schooling was effected, facilitated by the establishment in 1985 of a structure to oversee curriculum and assessment in the system. However, old pedagogic styles change slowly. The primary curriculum returned to the agenda a decade later. As late as 1991, the OECD was reporting on the "...disappointment by the Department and others at the limited impact of the 1971 Curaclam (the Irish term for 'Curriculum')..."(OECD, 1991, p. 66). At post-primary level, curriculum changes followed the structural changes. The comprehensive ideal required the unification of the system in terms of curriculum and examinations which meant the unification of the dual systems of academic secondary schools and the vocational schools. Thus in 1967, the subjects of the two year programme in vocational schools were modified and supplemented to become part of the lower-secondary Intermediate Certificate Examination conducted in year three of the secondary school programme (Coolahan, 1981). All schools thus had the option of presenting students for two state-run examinations; the 'Group Certificate' examination previously exclusive to the vocational schools, and the Intermediate Certificate, previously exclusive to academic secondary schools.

By 1969, the vocational schools, as well as the new comprehensive schools, were offering the upper-secondary Leaving Certificate programme which now included engineering, construction studies, technical drawing and home economics as subjects. These subjects brought with them the

inclusion of additional modes of assessment appropriate to the 'practical subjects' which was a significant addition to the terminal written examination as an exclusive mode of assessment thus far. The need to extend the restructuring of the examination system operated by the Department of Education was highlighted by a report on the Leaving Certificate in 1968 which drew attention into issues of the reliability of the examination and the reliance on a single assessment event in the assessment of student learning in most subject areas (Madaus & McNamara, 1968). The introduction in 1968 of a selection system for university-level entrance based on points to be calculated on grade performance in the Leaving Certificate examination introduced a competitiveness in the system which made the Leaving Certificate a very high-stakes and pressurised event in the lives of young people (Coolahan, 1981). A report on the Intermediate Certificate Examinations pointed to the need to expand the repertoire of assessment modes available in the system (Department of Education (Ireland), 1975).

In the period from 1963 to 1980 all the secondary school subjects were reviewed, updated and re-stated in the language of curriculum studies, a discipline beginning to receive growing attention in the education and professional development of teachers in colleges of education, and in university departments of education. Curriculum development activity and curriculum development units appeared, particularly in the 1970's, which was evidence of engagement with curriculum and pedagogic issues throughout the system (Crooks & McKernan, 1984). Syllabus committees consisting of subject teachers, university personnel and members of the Dept. of Education inspectorate, were established by the Department of Education to undertake this work. New syllabuses were published by the Department as the basis for the examinations at the Intermediate Certificate and the Leaving Certificate level. The piecemeal nature of the process, the lack of focus on the whole curriculum and the manner in which "...the inspectorate all stayed in their subject boxes..." was a criticism articulated by those becoming conversant with the emerging discipline of Curriculum Studies (Gleeson J. , 2010, p. 94). 55% of all 'second-level schools' (secondary, vocational, comprehensive and community schools) presented students for the Group Certification examinations after two years of junior

secondary school "...as a 'trial run' of the Intermediate Certificate after three years" (Crooks & McKernan, 1984, p. 99). Such action further exacerbated the fragmentation and lack of coherence in the curriculum and assessment dimensions of the system which the structures of the Dept of Education and the education state were unable to address (Gleeson, 2010).

It was not until 1989 that the Intermediate Certificate and the Group Certificate were discontinued and a single lower secondary examination, the Junior Certificate examination, to be taken at the end of three years junior secondary schooling, was established (Dept. of Education Ireland, 1989; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1989).

Part 4. Irish educational policy from the 1980 to date

The 1980's were difficult for the Irish Republic. The growth, which had been buoyed up by the educational progress of the 1960's and 1970's, had halted. What had been an annual growth rate of 3.75% had reduced to a negative -0.1% for the 1980-1985 period (Doyle, 1987). Since the 1970's, the worsening politics of Northern Ireland loomed ever larger on the political agenda in the Republic and absorbed considerable government attention. Emigration which had been reversed in the 1970's resumed very serious proportions again in the 1980's as in the 1950's. The drift of population from rural areas to large towns and cities continued and accelerated (Central Statistics Office (Ireland), 1998, p. 7). It is worthy of note that the numbers leaving Ireland in 1988 were approximately 45,000 which came close to the annual number being born (Walshe, 1999, p. 1). A *White Paper on Educational Development* in 1980 was more of a periodic review, than a set of vigorous decisions for the future. Political turbulence was in the air. But as a government white paper, *Education Development* signalled an intention, however weak, to proceed to legislation. Producing a white paper was rare for Irish education²³. In the course of 1981-82 there

²³ British parliamentary procedure, which is followed by the Irish parliament provides for government publication of a discussion/consultation paper as a 'Green Paper', followed by a White Paper, which presents government decisions on the basis of which 'Bills' are

were three governments and four Ministers for Education. In 1982, The Fianna Fáil lost office after a period of seventeen almost continuous years of government. The (MfE) in the second coalition government led by Garrett Fitzgerald, was Gemma Hussey, a woman who had been opposition spokesperson on Women's Affairs. Both the Taoiseach Fitzgerald and MfE Hussey were deeply committed to education reform and keen to progress the expansion and modernisation agenda, despite the financial constraints²⁴.

Two policy initiatives from the term of office of this minister created policy agenda items which continued, and indeed still continue to loom large on the education policy landscape of the Irish Republic. These two structural policy initiatives will be briefly outlined to illustrate how issues of fragmentation and the need for co-ordination loomed large during the period since 1980. After decades of development and expansion the need for new structures in relation to curriculum and to sub national co-ordination and support emerged. Both themes had long histories in the earlier decades of educational developments and in each case required the championing of reforming ministers to be brought to fruition. Each faced the opposition of interests vested in the status quo and arising from the vagaries of inter-party political rivalry and the results of general elections (Ó'Buachalla, 1988).

Curriculum and Examinations - the search for a new structure

Hussey's Fine Gael predecessor as minister (John Boland, July, 1981-March 1982), had articulated the need for a national curriculum body to achieve three policy objectives:

- to enable a re-evaluation of the role of schools, the courses on offer and the system of assessment,
- to widen participation in the decision-making process, and

prepared for enactment as 'Acts of Parliament'. It was clear that this white paper did not comply with the standard conventions of representing definitive government decisions on specific policy items (Hyland & Milne, 1992, p. 51).

²⁴ Both have also written on their period in office (Fitzgerald, 1991; Hussey, 1990).

- to allow for a review of the role of the Department's inspectorate²⁵.

On taking up office in December, 1982, Hussey established a departmental working group to plan the details. In January 1984, an 'Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board' was established. In the composition of the Board, the Minister was keen to establish a wider consultative process for education decision-making, referring in her inaugural speech as Minister to the need for 'partnership' in building a consensus on education policy. The Board consisting of twenty voting members and two advisors from the Department of Education, represents, according to Gleeson, '...one of the earliest Irish examples of the partnership approach in action' (Gleeson J. , 2010, pp. 239-240). As well as teacher and school management representatives and representatives of the broader society, board membership included nominees of the National Parents Council for Primary and Post Primary schools which had been established with funding from the Minister, as part of her development of a 'partnership approach' in Irish education policy. Like the establishment of the Development Unit in the Department in the 1960's, the structure of the Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board, provided a new energy and a developmental focus for the area of curriculum reform and reform of the examinations and assessments system.

Proposals for curriculum reform at primary, junior secondary and upper secondary were developed and wide ranging consultations took place around the country and preparations for establishing the 1984 Interim Board on a statutory basis were in place. The *National Board for Curriculum and Assessment Bill, 1986*, was published in November, 1986. In March 1987, following a general election and change of government there was a significant modification of the proposal. The Fianna Fáil MfE who took office, Mary O'Rourke, did not wish to proceed with a statutory board which might compromise her freedom of action in relation to curriculum (Gleeson J. , 2010, p. 244). She proposed a non-statutory, advisory council which would advise in general on assessment but would not have responsibility for the state examination system. The new body, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) commenced the

²⁵ For details of the establishment process see Gleeson (2010, pp. 236-250).

process of on-going review of syllabi and programmes, and of advising the Minister. When, in the late 1990's, it came to drafting a comprehensive education bill, teacher and parent representatives lobbied for the inclusion of sections to put the NCCA on a statutory basis, which was absent from the first published draft of the bill²⁶. The Education Act 1998 passed, guided by MfE, Micheál Martin, who included statutory provision for the NCCA (Government of Ireland, 1998). Gleeson (2010) critiqued the policy process around the establishment of the NCCA on a statutory and argued: i) the new body was presented as autonomous from the Department of Education for the 'partners' in the general education system, and ii) the process was influenced by the agendas and priorities of individual politicians and the vagaries of the operation of the political system (Gleeson J. , 2010, pp. 247,249).

The Search for Intermediate Bodies and the Education Legislation

A second major education policy initiative focused on by Gemma Hussey as Minister was the issue of local education authorities or 'an intermediate tier' between the Department of Education and individual schools and education service providers²⁷. The idea had been nurtured within the Department of Education for some time, particularly by Sean O'Connor, the civil servant appointed to head up the Development Unit in the 1960's. He broached the issue in public when talking to Catholic Primary School Managers in 1973 (Walshe, 1999). For O'Connor, an intermediate tier was an institutional and structural development which would remove much of the managerial and administrative workload which was located within the central government Department of Education. The de-centralisation would thus free the department to perform the key functions of reviewing the system, formulating policy and advising the minister. In the autumn of 1973, when Richard Burke was MfE in a new coalition government, and when the enterprising O'Connor was Secretary

²⁷ Walshe (1999, Ch. 3, p.45-96) presents an extended account of the process up to 1999.

in the Department of Education, a series of discussions between officials of the Department, representatives of the church managements and representatives of the Vocational Education Committee sector were convened as a 'Committee on Regionalisation'. By January 1974, it was clear that there was an unwillingness on the part of the church related representatives to agree participation in a system that would in any way dilute their existing levels of managerial autonomy. The talks were discontinued and there the matter rested till Gemma Hussey became minister.

The debate and the public policy process recommenced with the launch of Minister Hussey's Green Paper, *Partners in Education* in November, 1985, and continued without determination till the resolutions provided in the *Education Act, 1998* and the *Vocational Education (Amendment) Act, 2001*, a full seventeen years later. The process was conducted over the period of office of ten different Ministers for Education, all except three of whom were members of Fianna Fáil.

The period saw a considerable widening of the consultation process around this and other education issues in Irish education in the period 1985 - 2011. The British governmental process of state deliberation was implemented in Ireland in full, starting with a consultative Green Paper, leading to government decisions presented in a White Paper, and followed by draft legislation presented as a Bill, to be debated on in parliament.

In her 1985 document, Gemma Hussey proposed thirteen Local Education Councils with a key function to co-ordinate post-primary provision in their areas. The idea found little explicit early support. The submissions by the major parties, presented in the public domain and debated at length in the media, were largely hostile, with all parties seeing losses to their existing institutional prerogatives, and few espousing the benefits of improved co-ordination. Before the consultation process had completed, Hussey was transferred to another ministry to facilitate the resolution of a teachers' pay dispute which was causing great grief to the Fitzgerald led government (Fitzgerald, 1991). Hussey's Fine Gael replacement showed no will to progress the matter and in 1987 the government was replaced and Mary O'Rourke of Fianna Fáil, who had opposed Hussey's plans as Opposition spokesperson, became MfE.

But the period of public debate in the media did constitute a widening of the participation in educational discourse, and a number of opportunities for inter-sectoral discussion were facilitated around the 1985 Green Paper. These had the effect of opening dialogue between interested parties who previously had not had the opportunity to engage in an exploratory way with one another's perspectives and interests²⁸.

While O'Rourke had rejected the Local Education Council proposal, she and the Taoiseach of the day, Charles J. Haughey, were clearly committed to move towards comprehensive educational reform and to proceed by means of the Green Paper, White Paper and Education Act route (Coolahan, 1994a). In this context, it was timely that the OECD were then in the process of preparing a country review of national education policies for education in Ireland, their first since the 1960's. This report was published in 1991 as the Minister was engaged in her first draft of the Green Paper. The OECD report referred directly to the extent to which "...the department is concerned with minor matters because there is no administrative layer interposed between it and individual institutions", and suggested that "The question arises, therefore, would it not be desirable to devolve some of the Department's routine functions to regionally based administrative units"(OECD, 1991, p. 41). By October, 1991 when O'Rourke was almost ready to publish her Green Paper, she had changed her mind. The unpublished, draft text as drafted during her ministry, included a proposal for County Committees of Education, which would replace the thirty-eight Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and would be responsible for support services to all second level schools initially, and later to all primary schools. Walshe presented evidence that O'Rourke became convinced of the potential of 'County Committees of Education' to co-ordinate local post-primary provision and to eliminate the distinctions between secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools in a form of "commonality of school types" (Walshe, 1999, pp. 66-67). However, in late 1991, O'Rourke was replaced as MfE, first by Noel

²⁸ For an example of one such event addressed by the Minister, see O'Reilly, B. (ed. 1986). *Administrative Reform in Irish Education. Proceedings of the Fourth John Marcus O'Sullivan Lecture and Symposium*. Tralee: Tralee Vocational Education Committee.

Davern of Fianna Fáil, who held the post till February 1992, and then by Seamus Brennan, also of Fianna Fáil, who held the post till the fall of the Haughey's Fianna Fáil administration in January 1993. Seamus Brennan published the Green Paper in Education in June 1992, and the proposal in respect of County Committees of Education and a local intermediate tier was not included. Instead, the devolution of powers to school boards of management and to national executive agencies such as a payroll agency, an educational property management agency and a school psychological agency were proposed (Government of Ireland, 1995).

The Green Paper prompted over a thousand written submissions to the Department of Education and a large number of meetings, this time organised by the Minister and his Department. The absence of the intermediate tier drew the supporters of such an initiative into public expression that was exemplified by former Taoiseach Fitzgerald in a journal which provided a platform for such views. He said:

Any proposal for a local or regional co-ordination mechanism is, of course, bound to evoke howls from a whole range of vested interests. I don't need to name them! But any talk of devolution of power from the Department of Education is quite meaningless when there is apparently to be no regional or local body with a co-ordinating function...One can only hope that a recovery of nerve takes place before this Green paper turns white" (Fitzgerald, 1992, p. 8).

At the end of 1992, the government again fell and Niamh Bhreathnach became the first Irish Labour Party MfE, serving from January 1993 until June 1997 with a short break in November-December, 1994²⁹.

²⁹ The 27th Dáil (Parliament) was elected at the 1992 general election on 25 November 1992 but did not meet until 4 January 1993, however the 23rd Government of Ireland was not appointed until the 12 January. The 27th Dáil lasted a total of 1,654 days. The 23rd Government of Ireland (12 January 1993 – 15 December 1994) was formed by the Fianna Fáil and the Labour Party. It was the first time that these two parties were in government together, as traditionally Fine Gael was the coalition partner of the Labour Party. The 24th Government of Ireland (15 December 1994 – 26 June 1997) was formed by Fine Gael, the Labour Party and Democratic Left. Following a number of scandals in 1994, particularly over the beef industry and the alleged mishandling of the prosecution of a clerical

Some shifts in the alignment of groups around this issue of an intermediate tier became evident when, in 1993, the Conference of Major Religious Superiors (CMRS) expressed support for local education committees. Members of the VEC sector arranged publication of a document which outlined options for the overhaul of VECs to fulfil such a role (CMRS Education Committee, 1993; Brown & Fairley, 1993). Towards the end of 1993, two reports issued by the National Economic and Social Council on which employers and trade unions and other social partners were represented, contained endorsements for a redistribution of power and greater efficiency in Irish education through intermediate structures operating to cover both primary and post-primary provision (Walshe, 1999). Subsequently, in a major development of consultation mechanisms, Minister Bhreathnach convened a National Education Convention which ran from October 11th to 21st, 1993, and was held, prestigiously, in Dublin Castle. The Convention aimed to promote communication and to clarify view-points, to foster dialogue and to analyse proposals and reactions to them, and to explore consensus and a coherent overview of viewpoints, in preparation for the forthcoming White Paper, across the full range of educational issues (Coolahan, 1994a; Coolahan, 1994b).

Following the Convention, the Minister published a *Position Paper on Regional Education Councils* which proposed eight regional councils, with statutory planning, co-ordinating, and support service roles in March 1994. At further consultative meetings chaired by the convention secretariat, it became apparent that some of the details of the proposal would be strenuously contested by the stakeholders namely the church management groups and the VECs (Coolahan & McGuinness, 1994). In April 1995, an Education White Paper, *Charting our Education Future* was published which proposed ten Education Boards (Government of Ireland, 1997). VECs would be retained within the Education Board structure with

paedophile, the Labour Party left the 23rd government and, after negotiations, formed the 24th government with Fine Gael and the Democratic Left. This was the first time in Irish political history that a party had left a governing coalition and gone into government with opposition parties without first holding a general election.

amended legislation and rationalisation to reduce the numbers. The new Boards would channel exchequer funding to all schools.

In preparing legislation arising from the Convention Report and the White Paper, priority was given to a Universities Bill, which was time-consuming and politically difficult. The lack of a government majority in the Seanad, the upper house of the Irish parliament, resulted in government being forced to amend the Universities Bill considerably, which consumed extended parliamentary ministerial time. The consequence of the amendments was that the Education bill was delayed.

Education Bill No.1, 1997 was published on January 3rd, 1997. Inter alia, it was 'to make provision for the establishment and maintenance of education boards'. The bill was debated in parliament in March of that year, and fell with the government in June 1997.

Education Bill No. 2, 1997, was published by Minister Micheál Martin on December, 10th, 1997, and enacted on 23 December, 1998. The provision in respect of education boards had been dropped and was not replaced during its passage through parliament. The new bill did provide in Part IX, Section 54, for the Establishment of bodies to provide services related to education.

The Education Act, 1998, ended that rather hectic phase of policy processes around the issue of an intermediate tier. The intervening period saw the development of a range of national agencies³⁰ and a major legislative overhaul of the VEC system which had the effect of modernising the governance and broadening its remit³¹. While it could be argued that VECs could, under 2001 legislation be assigned the type of

³⁰ <http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?pcategory=17216&ecategory=36795&language=EN> for a list of agencies associated with the current operations of the Department of Education and Skills. Not all arise from the 1998 legislation and some like the Teaching Council have had separate legislation to establish them.

³¹ The Vocational Education (Amendment) Act, 2001 (No. 23 of 2001) introduces the administrative distinction between 'executive' and 'reserved' functions common in contemporary local authority governance (Sections 11 & 12). It also broadens the function from a narrow 'vocational education' remit, to a more comprehensive remit in respect of 'education and services ancillary thereto' (Section 9). It further allows the Minister to confer additional functions (Section 10).

functions envisaged for Education Boards since 2001, there is no indication of a willingness on the part of ministers to do so. A wide range of state agencies have been established but structural changes that would encroach on the levels of church control of Irish education have not been implemented. The current international and national financial crisis and the change of administration in March 2011 may lead to a re-opening of the general issue. The *Programme for Government 2011* speaks of “devolving more responsibility locally” and that “Administrative functions, relating to maintenance, school building projects and co-ordination of support services...will be devolved locally” (Government of Ireland, 2011, p. 39).

Conclusion

The performance of the Irish education system in the last fifty years is in many ways impressive. Recent statistics show the extent to which the expansion agenda, the central persistent if unwritten policy, has been effected over the ten years from 2000 to 2010. Enrolment of 16 year-olds in Full-time Education as a percentage of the Estimated Population has gone from 91% to 99.8%; for 17 year-olds, from 81.2% to 93.5%; for 18 year olds from 61.6 to 80.5% and for 21 year olds, from 29.7% to 53.9%. This basic data displays an education system growing in the broadest terms. Evidence reveals however, that success in terms of policy processes and educational decision-making is decidedly less impressive. It is said that the structure of the education system in the Republic of Ireland is unique among countries of the European Union because private institutions have been publically funded, where “...control of education has been ceded away from the public and given to an authority that does not seek its mandate from the public will” (O'Sullivan, 2005, p. 212). The nineteenth century legacies entailed in the church ownership of primary and secondary schools and the concept of school patron, have dominated the policy landscape throughout the period of review and into the present. Nonetheless, the policy processes of the period have shown the extent to which the power of policy initiative resides firmly with the person of the Minister for Education. It is clear that the state has been persistent, if cautious, in

asserting its interest in the economic functions of the education system, primarily by its expansion of the system but also through control of the curriculum in the interests of economic objectives. However, the state has been unsuccessful in significantly extending the democratic participation of parents and the public in the governance systems, despite the broadening of participation in educational discourse and consultation on educational policy matters. The account presented in this paper illustrates the highly centralised nature of policy making in Irish education resulting in the striking extent to which policy initiative is concentrated on the holder of office of the Minister for Education. When this aspect of the Irish system is combined with the extent to which primary and secondary education facilities are in the ownership of religious authorities, the great difficulty reported here in moving from policy discourse to policy enactment and implementation, become more intelligible. The policy initiative to address the highly centralised nature of the system, and to counter the dominance of church authorities at local and state level, along with the proposals in respect of an intermediate tier or sub-national structures, have been unable to challenge the status quo that derives from the present concentrations of power in both church and state.

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