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To cite this article: Thomas Walsh (2016): 100 years of primary curriculum development and implementation in Ireland: a tale of a swinging pendulum, Irish Educational Studies, DOI: 10.1080/03323315.2016.1147975

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2016.1147975>



Published online: 25 Feb 2016.



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100 years of primary curriculum development and implementation in Ireland: a tale of a swinging pendulum

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(Received 22 January 2015; accepted 22 January 2016)

There are ongoing initiatives in curriculum development and implementation in Ireland and internationally in order to enhance the educational experiences and outcomes of learners. This article is the first historical longitudinal analysis of primary school curriculum development and implementation in Ireland from the 1890s to the 1990s. The purpose of the paper is to distil key lessons from the history of curriculum development and implementation to inform contemporary policy and practice. The paper begins by situating current curriculum discourse and developments in both a national and international context. It then delineates the three main curriculum reforms undertaken in Ireland in the period under review. The section relating to each period includes an overview of the societal context in which the curriculum was developed, the process of development, the content of each curriculum and its implementation. Three key themes emerge from the analysis – the impact of wider societal factors on curriculum, the impact of the radical nature of curriculum change attempted and a lack of focus on planning for implementation.

Keywords: primary education; curriculum development; curriculum implementation; curriculum reform; curriculum history

Introduction

The ongoing review, reform and development of curricula are necessary to enable reflection on their content and methods and to ensure they keep pace with wider societal developments. In effect, every curriculum is a continuum and is in a state of continuous adaptation at both a policy and practice level. The formal reform and development of curricula has become a priority at all levels of the education system in Ireland and internationally in recent times. This has been catalysed by a focus on the competences required for individuals and economies to prepare for and prosper in the knowledge society.

Although always evident, policy borrowing between jurisdictions has become increasingly prevalent in an era of globalisation, and organisations such as the European Union and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) promote the development of trans-national or supranational regulatory frameworks. There has also been an effort since the Lisbon Strategy (European Council 2000) to promote a competence-based curriculum and learning outcomes model within Europe, which integrates knowledge, skills and attitudes and attempts to

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transcend subject learning. Voogt and Roblin (2012) report that there is a high level of consistency among international frameworks that document desirable twenty-first century competences. However, adoption by member states of such a competence-based framework has been variable as it represents a paradigm shift from conventional understandings of curricula, pedagogies and assessment modes (Leat, Thomas, and Reid 2012; Méhaut and Winch 2012). Indeed, many countries that adopted competence-based and outcomes-focused curricula have since modified their approaches, including England, Scotland and New Zealand.

In addition, international comparative studies, such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), are highly influential in flavouring national education policies. Ireland had its own 'PISA shock' (Baird et al. 2011) following the publication of the 2009 results and a suite of policy measures was introduced to respond to perceived deficiencies highlighted by the results, most notably through the national literacy and numeracy strategy in 2011 (Department of Education and Skills [DES] 2011).

In tandem with these trends, it is also evident that curricula are influenced by economic arguments and there is a strong emphasis on accountability (Priestley and Biesta 2013). Antunes (2012) notes the emerging emphasis on 'governance' in the lexicon of education policy, locating it within an economic discourse, focused on effectiveness and efficiency, as opposed to a social or human rights issue. This tension is evident as subject-oriented systems with a focus on assessment attempt to graft a process-based curriculum emphasising a holistic focus on the child and the development of a broad range of human competences. However, caution is required as transplanted elements often get lost in translation or do not function in new environments, contexts or macro systems (Sahlberg 2011).

Priestley and Biesta (2013) note three trends in modern day curriculum development: a return to constructivist and child-centred approaches, an emphasis on the teacher as a central agent in curriculum development, and the formulation of curricula in terms of competences and capacities. However, teachers in many jurisdictions do not have the professional capacity or confidence to develop curricula owing to an historical culture of top-down reform (Gleeson 2010, 2012). In Ireland, a technical, reductionist view of education and the role of the teacher (Tyler 1949) was evident in much of the last century and the curriculum was largely understood to be something developed elsewhere for implementation in schools. There is now a greater acceptance of curriculum as a social construction that is continuously negotiated and re-negotiated at a policy and practice level by a range of partners (Elliott 1998; Goodson 1998).

In Ireland, a major reform of the current primary school curriculum, introduced in 1999, is underway and elements of the revised curriculum are to be introduced between 2015 and 2018. At post-primary level, a radical restructuring of curriculum and assessment at junior cycle has been undertaken and will be implemented on a phased basis between 2015 and 2022 (DES 2014). Programmes and curricula in a number of subjects have also been recently reviewed or are being currently revised at senior cycle level, including Mathematics, Biology, Physics and Chemistry. Among the aspects evident across many of these reforms are the development of more flexible programmes of learning, the provision of outcomes-based curricula, a greater focus on skills development and an enhanced emphasis on assessment as an integral feature of teaching and learning. The contemporary design and development of curricula, co-ordinated by the

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, includes efforts to involve teachers as innovators rather than implementers of curriculum (Looney 2014).

In this context of national and international curriculum development and reform, an awareness of earlier traditions and practice has much to offer regarding curriculum planning and implementation in the present. This paper focuses on extracting key lessons and insights from an analysis of 100 years of curriculum development and implementation in Ireland with a view to informing successful approaches for policy developers in the contemporary context. During this period, influences on the curriculum evolved from a colonial, to a nationalist to a child-centred perspective and each had a particular impact on the design, content and delivery of the curriculum in schools. These evolving influences also affected the role of the teacher, the concept of the learner and the nature of how learning transacted in schools. The next section of the paper delineates the three main curriculum reforms undertaken in Ireland between the 1890s and the 1990s, focusing on the wider societal context for reform, the development and content of each curriculum and the successes and shortcomings of implementation.

An overview of curriculum development and implementation in Ireland, 1890s–1990s

The revised programme of instruction 1897–1922

Context

A national system of education was established in Ireland in 1831 with the aims of socialising the Irish population into certain norms and of providing for basic literacy and numeracy. The 1890s became a period of curriculum reform for a number of domestic and international reasons. There was consensus that a system of ‘payment by results’ introduced in 1872, with a focus on a narrow range of literary subjects, had outlived its purpose. While effective in the reduction of illiteracy, it had resulted in the didactic teaching of a narrow range of subjects. Influences from international jurisdictions were prevalent due to Ireland’s colonial relationship with England and there was an awareness of an international trend to place a greater focus on the holistic development of the child by incorporating manual and practical subjects in school curricula. By the 1890s, the physical growth of the system was nearing its end and issues such as teacher training and pupil attendance legislation had been resolved to some degree. Finally, there was practically universal agreement among the key stakeholders that a revision of the programme was necessary.

Development and content

In 1897, the Board of National Education established the Commission on Manual and Practical Instruction (CMPI), to determine ‘... how far, and in what form, manual and practical instruction should be included in the Educational System of the Primary Schools’ (1898, V). The comprehensive report of the CMPI concluded that a radical revision of the primary school programme was both necessary and desirable. The Commission’s report was used as the basis for drafting the *Revised Programme*. In its development, there was little effort to involve or inform the key stakeholders that would be involved in its implementation, namely teachers, managers, inspectors and parents (Walsh 2007).

In addition to existing subjects, the *Revised Programme* (1900) introduced Kindergarten, manual instruction, drawing, singing, object lessons, elementary science, physical education, cookery and laundry as obligatory subjects (Commissioners of National Education in Ireland [CNEI] 1902). It placed a special emphasis on the education of young children, advocating the basing of education on the local environment and proposing that schools should be interesting and humane places. The *Revised Programme* was innovative in that it allowed flexibility to managers and teachers to align the programme to the needs of individual schools and localities. The child-centred philosophy of the *Revised Programme* was at variance with conceptualisations of children in earlier programmes, seeking to implement a broad and balanced curriculum using heuristic methodologies.

Implementation

The majority of teachers provided a better quality of education following 1900 and although there was some loss in children's ability to recall and regurgitate information, it was compensated for by a broader programme, greater enjoyment of schooling and improved methodologies (Walsh 2012, 66–70). In the early years, subjects such as drawing and object lessons were taught widely as they did not require high levels of additional resources. Vocal music and needlework were introduced as subjects in approximately three-quarters of all schools (CNEI 1914, Appendix, Section 1). The introduction of Kindergarten, elementary science and cookery languished behind, arguably due to the necessity of specialist equipment, facilities and training for their implementation (CNEI 1905).

An evaluation of the Irish school system in 1903 by an inspector from England, Mr F.H. Dale, found that the methods of instruction in schools had altered little from those utilised prior to 1900, with a focus remaining on mechanical accuracy as opposed to practical instruction (Dale 1904). He regarded the greatest innovation to have occurred in the new subjects introduced, while the subjects with the strongest tradition and most familiarity were the slowest to change. Inspectors' reports during the era often lamented the didactic methods of teaching still observed and a circular was issued in 1907 stating '... it would appear that the intentions of the Commissioners as regards the methods of teaching the courses of instruction in National schools are not yet fully comprehended' (Vice-Regal Committee of Inquiry into Primary Education (Ireland) 1913, 146). By 1912, 35 'organisers' had been appointed nationwide to support teachers in the introduction and implementation of new subjects.

Overall, the *Revised Programme* fell short of the educational revolution it had aspired to invoke. It was heavily influenced by international jurisdictions and was not sufficiently contextualised for implementation in the Irish context. The supports put in place lacked sufficient cohesion and intensity to instigate change. Moreover, issues around teacher training, insufficient funding, the physical condition of schools, poor attendance rates and the lack of popular support for the reforms also hindered implementation. Key stakeholders were not kept informed or instilled with a sense of ownership of the revisions, an omission considering they were the means to translate the theory of the programme into a practical reality. While conceptually well devised, the *Revised Programme* lacked a strategic implementation policy and failed to provide an appropriate support infrastructure to ensure successful implementation.

Curriculum reforms in the 1920s

Context

The opening decades of the twentieth century witnessed much political, social and cultural activity and agitation in Ireland and internationally. There were attempts at both Home Rule and for separation from Britain using military means, resulting in the achievement of political independence for a 26-county Free State in the 1920s. The cultural nationalist revival, involving organisations such as the Gaelic Literary Society, the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Gaelic League, sought to promote and celebrate distinct aspects of Irish culture and it reached its zenith around 1920. Owing to the circumstances in which political freedom was achieved, political and cultural organisations were united on the importance of emphasising the uniqueness and distinct character of Ireland as an independent nation. As stated by the newly formed Department of Education, the aim of the government regarding education was ‘... to work with all its might for the strengthening of the national fibre by giving the language, history, music and tradition of Ireland their natural place in the life of Irish schools’ (Department of Education 1925, 6).

The complex and often acrimonious relationship between the British authorities and the Catholic Church that characterised much of the previous century was replaced by a symbiotic and pragmatic church-state union in independent Ireland (Whyte 1990). The state accepted the pivotal position of the Catholic Church and facilitated it to provide a service that the state alone could not afford (Drudy and Lynch 1993).

Development and content

In the 1920s, the Irish people had their first opportunity to design their own programme of education. In this post-colonial context and amid patriotic fervour, the overriding aim was to accentuate the differences between the pre- and post-independence educational policies, focusing on the Irish language and Catholic religion as the main characteristics of this distinct identity. The first National Programme Conference was initiated by the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) in the lead up to independence to frame a new programme for primary schools. Ireland was in a state of flux with the War of Independence and there was a view that the INTO was not the proper body to convene such a conference. In this context, there was an imbalance in representation as some organisations were not invited to attend and others chose not to participate. Overall, 55% of the conference members emanated from the teacher unions.

This first conference developed a minimum programme to be delivered in national schools, including the obligatory subjects, the additional subjects and the conditions necessary for its implementation (National Programme Conference 1922). However, it offered no rationale or curriculum philosophy for the inclusion or exclusion of subjects, documented no research considered in the process and did not provide any methodological guidance. The programme introduced in 1922 was a radical departure from its predecessor, primarily framed along nationalist lines and taking less cognisance of the child’s interests and abilities. Not only did the range of subjects become more restricted (Irish, English, mathematics, history, geography, singing, needlework and drill) but the content and focus of many became decidedly Irish in orientation. While the Irish language was to be taught to all pupils for one hour per day, the

‘shocker’ was the insistence that Irish be used as the medium of instruction in infant classes (Akenson 1975, 44). There was little debate or analysis on the effects of using the language as a medium of instruction on the child. It was largely viewed in nationalist terms as being vital for the good of the nation and therefore a requirement for the child.

In 1924, a Second National Programme Conference was convened and while more balanced in representation, there was an inbuilt majority of ministerial nominees (National Programme Conference 1926). Its report endorsed the philosophy and content of the 1922 curriculum. The main changes introduced in 1926 included a higher and lower course in the Irish and English languages, to be taught depending on the linguistic ability of teachers and pupils, and a concession allowing some teaching of English in infant classes.

There were two other minor curriculum modifications in 1934 and 1948. From 1934, the higher course in Irish was to be adopted in all schools and the lower course in English was to be studied by all pupils outside infant classes. In addition, English was no longer to be taught in infant classes where there was a teacher competent to teach through Irish and English became optional in first class (Department of Education 1934). The *Revised Programme for Infants* introduced in 1948, and the accompanying *Notes for Teachers* in 1951, were flavoured by the underlying principles and philosophies of the 1900 curriculum (Department of Education 1948, 1951). These broke from the prevalent concept of the young child within curricula from the 1920s and returned, in theory at least, to a more child-centred and activity-based ideology and approach.

The curriculum framed in 1922 was to prove the bedrock of curriculum provision for the next 50 years and the few modifications introduced did not interfere with its underlying ideology or philosophy. The curricula as laid out during this period were succinct and contained little of an accompanying rationale or theoretical framework to underpin their contents. The concept of the child as portrayed within the curriculum documentation remained consistent throughout the 1920s and 1930s: a child who needed to be filled with knowledge, to be moulded into perfection by strict discipline and the amassing of vast quantities of factual data. During this period, the curriculum was devised from a political and nationalistic frame of reference as opposed to a pedagogical or educational approach. It prioritised national as opposed to individual interests, and consequently, the content was not based directly on the needs, interests or abilities of the child.

Implementation

The information conveyed within inspectors’ reports (which were partially published between 1925 and 1930) and in the short accounts of the work in the schools published by the Department until 1964 indicates that the totality of the programmes was not implemented as envisaged (Walsh 2012, 176–183). The general weight of evidence points to poor progress in the Irish language within the school system, particularly its use as a teaching medium, as the linguistic expertise required to implement the programme in both languages proved overly challenging for most teachers. For example, less than 20% of teachers had a Bilingual Certificate or higher in 1924, the qualification considered necessary to use Irish as a medium of instruction (Dáil Debates 1925). At its zenith in the 1940s, only 12% of schools used Irish as a medium of instruction

and this had declined significantly by the 1960s (Department of Education 1947, 104, 1967a, 16). The national aim to produce Irish speakers was never realised to any degree and most pupils left national schools with a rudimentary grasp of the spoken language (Kelly 2002). This basic competence in the Irish language came at a high price when one examines the time allocated to Irish within schools during the period, reducing the amount of time available for the study of other subjects (including English) and the narrow range of subjects studied.

Evaluations on the implementation of mathematics reported a continued focus on the mechanics of the subject rather than the development of concepts or mathematical thinking. While singing and needlework remained compulsory subjects, they were rarely commented on and it is arguable that they were not afforded a high status within the programme. Once rural science and nature study became optional subjects in 1934, they were not commonly taught. These were subjects that could have gone some way in preparing pupils for their future lives and occupations in a predominantly agrarian society. Subjects such as physical drill, cookery and laundry were rarely taught during the period (Walsh 2012, 176–183). While a number of studies and organisations called for reform of the curriculum (INTO 1941, 1947; Church of Ireland 1950), the Report of the Council of Education (Department of Education 1954) generally supported the status quo and consolidated the stagnation in Irish education that had become prevalent by this time.

The primary school curriculum (1971)

Context

A number of factors coalesced in the 1960s to catalyse reform of the primary school curriculum. These included contact with international jurisdictions, the aspiration to join the European Economic Community, the advent of free post-primary education, the abolition of the Primary Certificate Examination, developments in communication and technology, increased economic prosperity, the presence of a young cohort of motivated politicians and the increasing aspiration of the attainment of equality of educational opportunity (Fleming and Harford 2014). One of the main influences was the theory of human capital formation advanced by the *Investment in Education* report (Department of Education 1965), a theory that subsequently influenced increased investment in education as an essential ingredient of economic development (Loxley, Seery, and Walsh 2014). The deference and sensitivity towards the central role of the Catholic Church in education had begun to wane and politicians began to assert their role in education policy (O'Donoghue and Harford 2011).

Development and content

The curriculum development process in the 1960s was led by the Inspectorate which undertook research and examined recent international developments to inform curriculum policy development. In 1967, *Towards a White Paper on Education*, was prepared (but never published) and this seminal document set the tone and foundation for the future development of the curriculum. It encapsulated aspects of national and international thinking from a number of fields of expertise, including psychology and curriculum development (Department of Education 1967b). This was followed by the publication of the *Working Document* in 1968, a first version of the curriculum

(Department of Education 1968). Consultation on the *Working Document* was facilitated by the Inspectorate and feedback from key stakeholders was sought. This improved teacher familiarity with the nature and content of the curriculum introduced in 1971 and allowed a period of gradual engagement with the ideals underpinning the curriculum. While much of the feedback was positive in nature, many concerns were raised in relation to the practicality of implementation (INTO 1969; Teachers' Study Group 1969). However, it is evident that the observations put forward by the various interested parties did not impact significantly on the final draft.

Between 1968 and 1971, approximately 20% of primary schools participated in a pilot project to implement the new curriculum in a range of subjects. This enhanced teacher familiarity with the subjects not only within the schools, but also for teachers in neighbouring schools who visited and observed implementation in practice. No official review of the pilot project was undertaken and the experiences of implementing the various subjects in the pilot schools did not impact on the revision of the curriculum, which emerged largely unchanged from the earlier *Working Document*.

The *Primary School Curriculum* published in 1971 proved to be a radical departure in ideological position, content and methodology to its predecessor (Department of Education 1971a, 1971b). It represented a seismic shift in state policy and attitude towards the education of children and set the tone for subsequent provision along the lines still delivered in the first decades of the twenty-first century. It was underpinned by the ideology of child-centred education, offering a wide range of subjects and encouraging discovery learning methods. While the core subjects of English, Irish, mathematics and religion remained, the relative focus on these subjects altered, with a greater emphasis placed on the English language. The inclusion of additional subjects such as music, art and craft, social and environmental studies and physical education allowed a greater focus on the aesthetic, physical, creative and emotional aspects of development. The curriculum allowed for greater flexibility in relation to the selection of content and methodologies, empowering decisions to be made at a school level taking into account the school environment, facilities and the interests and stage of development of the pupils. There was also a greater focus on individual and group learning and use of the environment as a source of learning.

However, the curriculum's theoretical framework was weakly articulated and its principles were not clearly delineated. There were many contradictions inherent as attempts were made to align aspects of the traditional approach with more progressive thinking. Another oversight was the lack of alignment between primary and post-primary curricula, bearing in mind the same department devised both programmes within a similar time period. These ultimately impacted negatively on the implementation of the curriculum.

Implementation

The level of curriculum implementation varied from school to school (Walsh 2012, 283–332). While the principles of the curriculum were widely endorsed by teachers throughout this period, including a focus on the individual, use of the local environment, integration of subjects and discovery-based learning, there was a dichotomy between their endorsement in theory and their implementation in practice (Fontes and Kellaghan 1977; Walsh 1980; INTO 1988). As Sugrue (1997, 25) stated, while teachers endorsed progressive ideology, '... when data on actual practice are isolated

from these studies teachers seem to endorse a child-centred rhetoric while practising a more formal pedagogical style'.

Evaluations of the implementation of English were practically unanimous in agreeing that the standard in English improved from 1971 (Fontes and Kellaghan 1977; Department of Education Curriculum Unit 1982). Research continued to evidence improved reading standards in comparative tests throughout the 1970s, reducing previously wide gaps between Irish pupils' reading ability and that of their British counterparts (Travers 1976; Ward 1982).

A converse picture is evident for the progress of Irish language achievements in the same period. Evaluations overwhelmingly pointed to a disimprovement in many elements of language learning, especially written work and particularly in senior classes (Comhairle na Gaeilge 1974; Greaney 1978). Commentators questioned the suitability of the standards expected from the study of Irish in primary schools, the effectiveness of the methodologies in use, the appropriateness of the language-centred Buntús programme introduced and the usefulness of many of the resources available for teaching Irish (Ó Domhnalláin and Gliasáin 1976; INTO 1978; Harris 1984).

There was some consensus that pupils' understanding of mathematical concepts improved during the period, yet this was accompanied by a disimprovement in aspects such as computation and memorisation (Conference of Convent Primary Schools in Ireland 1975; INTO 1976). Despite these findings, there was still concern in the 1980s at an overemphasis on the routine aspects of mathematics learning such as computation and mechanical operations, with a consequent neglect of elements such as problem solving, interpretation and abstraction emphasised in the curriculum (An Roinn Oideachais 1988a). There were numerous calls in the period for more emphasis to be placed on the use of concrete materials, activity methods and interactive oral work in teaching mathematics (Curriculum and Examinations Board [CEB] 1986).

There was an improved emphasis on social and environmental studies (history, geography and civics) following 1971. While there was an enhanced focus on social history and human geography, many evaluations lamented the chronological approach to history still pursued and the excessive reliance placed on textbooks (Bennett 1993, 1994). Another concern with both history and geography was the neglect of the local environment of the pupil and school (An Roinn Oideachais – An tAonad Curaclaim 1983a).

Studies confirmed some degree of success in relation to the implementation of the music curriculum following 1971, especially in aspects such as song singing and pitch (An Roinn Oideachais – An tAonad Curaclaim 1983b). However, evaluations noted teachers' perceptions that the syllabus was designed for music specialists as opposed to ordinary teachers, causing a lack of competence and confidence in implementation (Conference of Convent Primary Schools in Ireland 1975; INTO 1976; Herron 1985; CEB 1985b; INTO 1988). While teachers generally welcomed the inclusion of art and craft activities, many lacked the confidence and felt unprepared for their implementation (INTO 1976; Department of Education Curriculum Unit 1984; CEB 1985b). This led to a preponderance of activities in routine aspects such as painting, with few instances of implementing aspects such as construction and appreciation. Similar to the experience in music, evaluations signalled a focus on the expressive as opposed to appreciative elements of the subject.

Studies almost unanimously evidenced poor levels of implementation of physical education in primary schools. The principal explanation for this situation was the unrealistic nature of the physical education programme relative to the available facilities and equipment in schools and teacher expertise in the area (INTO 1976, 1988; An Roinn Oideachais – An tAonad Curaclaim 1988b).

It is noteworthy that so many aspects of the new curriculum's principles and content did not become common practice in classrooms following 1971. Many constraints on implementation were in evidence prior to the introduction of the curriculum and communicated in submissions by multiple organisations to the Department. Such constraints included the large classes in which many pupils were taught, the material condition of schools in terms of facilities and resources, a mismatch between curriculum provisions and parental expectations, the predominance of small schools, the dearth of suitable resources and educational materials, poor provision for teacher in-service training, the weak link between primary and post-primary curricula and the lack of alignment between school design and proposed methodologies. The interplay of these factors in constraining the achievement of curriculum change during the era is considered in the next section.

Discussion – key considerations and implications

This section focuses on three key themes that have emerged from the comprehensive analysis of a century of primary curriculum development and implementation in Ireland. The first theme relates to the impact of wider societal factors on the development and implementation of curricula. Second, the radical nature of curriculum change attempted at each juncture is analysed. The final theme relates to a lack of focus on planning for implementation during the development phase and the lack of provision for the systematic and continuous evaluation of implementation.

Impact of wider societal factors

Schools exist within a wider societal context and their operation is tempered by political, social, economic, cultural and religious influences. Curriculum development and implementation at each juncture during the period under review was affected by this wider milieu, with certain aspects playing a more considerable role at various times. For example, the cultural and political context of the 1920s impacted considerably on the programme devised while in the 1960s, the impact of economic thinking and social developments occupied a more prominent position. Throughout the period, the Catholic Church positioned itself as one of the key stakeholders in the arena of education and exercised power at proprietorial, managerial and consultative levels. In many ways, the deference shown by the state to the Catholic Church following independence and the reluctance of both church and state to upset the status quo impeded reform and contributed to stagnation in educational development for long periods in the twentieth century (O'Donoghue and Harford 2012). Economic conditions were unpropitious at each juncture of curriculum change and the aspirations of curriculum developers in relation to the resources available to introduce change did not materialise. International influences have played varying roles throughout the period under review but one thing is clear – local and national contexts trump

international influences. As a result, policy borrowing must be judicious and elements adopted must be tempered and adapted to domestic sensibilities.

As there is generally government involvement in the development of curricula, the influences on policy-makers change over time and this leaves education policy susceptible to political influences. It is interesting to note the critical influence that vested interests (individuals, organisations and movements) can have on the development of curricula at various junctures and their long-term impact on policy. Currently, an economic emphasis is prevalent as many curricula focus on skills and competences required for a skilled and flexible workforce. These are often foregrounded in curricula to the neglect of a concern for educating children in democracy, social justice and peaceful co-existence.

Radical nature of reforms

While curriculum planning must be aspirational in tone and content, it should not neglect the societal and educational context in which it will be implemented. Between the 1890s and 1990s, educational change occurred on a sporadic basis, following long periods of neglect or apathy and the reforms introduced were often multifaceted in nature. The assertion of Fullan (1993, 42) that schools are faced by ‘... irregular waves of change, episodic projects, fragmentation of effort, and grinding overload ...’ holds true in this period. Each major curriculum reform between 1897 and 1990 represented a dramatic change from its predecessor in terms of its philosophy, methodologies and content. Cuban (1990) uses the image of a dramatic swing of a pendulum in such a scenario – but while there is motion, there is often little change and the pendulum returns to its resting place. Change in revolutionary format does not work well within a conservative and complex education system – implementation proves more steadfast when there is gradual change, adaptation and evolution (Sugrue 1997). For the most part, the curriculum revisions did not represent an organic development of the curriculum and were often motivated by non-educational reasons and driven by political or wider societal interest groups. Revised curricula were often delivered to teachers for implementation with little consultation or preparation in terms of pedagogical training and resources. For example, the 1934 modification began:

The Minister of Education has decided on certain modifications in the programme of instruction for Primary schools. They come into operation immediately. (Department of Education 1934, 3)

Traditionally, teachers are conservative and Simola (2005) refers to this ‘pedagogic conservatism’ as a factor impacting on the tension between progressivism and conservatism. Similar to the findings of Lortie (1975), many teachers during the era, when faced with uncertainty, continued to practice in a way that was familiar and safe to them with the result that many positive aspects of reform were not implemented. Moreover, teachers often lacked the professional capacity and confidence to be curriculum innovators owing to the predominant technical reductionist model of curriculum development. The scenario outlined by Cuban (1998) proves true in the Irish context during this era – while some reforms effect change in schools, in other instances, schools modify change initiatives to make them manageable for

implementation in their own context. Sahlberg (2011, 143) urges a process of renewal as opposed to reform, involving ‘... a continuous systemic transformation of teaching and learning ...’.

Lack of focus on implementation

A significant oversight with each revision of the curriculum was the lack of a strategic focus on implementation aligned to the societal and educational context of the time. In general, policies were overly ambitious and designed by policy-makers with particular expertise in a curriculum area, setting out high expectations for the generalist teacher. When curricula were devised and disseminated, usually for immediate implementation, the work of the central authority and the ‘event’ of curriculum change was seen to be largely complete. In reality, policy development represented the first, and arguably the least complex, step in effecting change in practice (Sarason 1990; Fullan 1993; Evans 1996). What was absent in much of the policy development was the roadmap required to move from the contemporary practice to the policy aspiration.

Change challenges individuals and institutions to do things in a different way. In the implementation of curriculum change, principals and teachers are the key agents in the translation of the policy vision into reality in schools. There is growing consensus that teachers as individuals and schools as institutions occupy the pivotal role in the implementation of change, acting as the conduit between aspiration and reality, between policy and practice (Sarason 1990; Callan 2006; Sahlberg 2011). Effecting curriculum change relates not only to changing the content but more importantly to winning over the hearts and minds of teachers – and some of the most difficult challenges relate to the change of attitudes, motivation, philosophies, beliefs and practices of teachers (Evans 1996; Hargreaves and Fullan 2012). In the three curricula reviewed, a technical rational model of curriculum implementation is prevalent, placing the teacher in the role of a ‘curriculum implementer’ as opposed to a ‘curriculum maker’ (Clandinin and Connelly 1992; Callan 1995). When change is introduced, even if teachers are broadly supportive of its thrust in theory, it is considerably more difficult to effect a change in their practice. In the absence of ownership of change, teachers will portray an image of reform or compliance to satisfy policy-makers and external educationalists, while in reality, practice changes little (Sarason 1990; Fullan 1993). Successful change only becomes a reality when new practices are internalised and integrated with teachers’ existing attitudes and practices.

In the period prior to independence, a significant focus was placed on evaluating, reviewing and documenting curriculum implementation. However, from the 1920s, there was a lack of focus on evaluating implementation and a reluctance to publish findings of such research when available. Even when research was undertaken that pointed to the need for a new direction or modification of policy, little timely and concerted action was undertaken to improve curriculum implementation in practice. In this way, the curriculum failed to respond to the need for ongoing change and to evolve in line with societal needs in a systematic way.

Conclusion

An understanding of the curriculum journey travelled to date has much to offer current efforts to effect curriculum change and educational renewal. This review of

the experience of devising and implementing successive curricula over a century provides a useful case study of how aspirations for curriculum change can fall well short of realisation when insufficient attention is paid to the range of inter-locking factors that affects the successful implementation of policy. The history of education teaches us that at particular stages in the development of the education system, only certain things are possible and these are delimited by a multiplicity of factors within the social and educational milieu. While the multiple factors impacting on implementation has been elucidated, the nature of achieving curriculum change is infinitely more complex than ensuring a checklist of ingredients is provided for. It is the interplay of these factors at a particular point in time that impacts on translating curriculum policy into a practical reality in schools. In an era where curriculum is viewed as a social construction and where there is greater representative engagement in its development and review, further trust should be placed in the professionalism of teachers to use their judgement to construct and deliver relevant high quality educational experiences and outcomes for students.

Notes on contributor

Thomas Walsh is a lecturer in the Maynooth University Department of Education. His main teaching and research interests include history of education, early childhood education, school-university partnership, school inspection and evaluation and curriculum development and implementation. Prior to joining Maynooth University, he worked as a primary school teacher, as a researcher in the field of early childhood education and as an inspector with the Department of Education and Skills.

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