

Teaching in different ethos of choice: a comparison of two countries

La enseñanza en diferentes tipos de instituciones: Comparación en dos países
L'enseignement dans différents types d'institutions: Comparaison entre deux pays
O ensino em diferentes tipos de instituições: Comparação em dois países

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Abstract

Current educational research often incorporates an unconscious cultural or national bias that starts from the questions which are asked and concludes with the implications which are drawn. We describe a three-month *in situ* study of ethos in Irish National Primary Schools and attempt to identify how US and Irish professional teaching practices reflect the political and educational ethoi (customs) of their respective homes. In this paper, we focus on what is revealed about teacher practices and professional life: teacher views of school choice, the teachers' role in the operation of schools, the national curriculum, and student assessment.

Key words author

School choice, teaching profession, educational reform.

Key words plus

School choice, educational reform, student teaching.

Transference to practice

It is said that fish are the last to perceive the water which forms the universe in which they swim. In the same sense, a simple recitation of professional teaching practices fails both those who engage in these practices and those who establish policy unless the practices are connected to their environment. This study demonstrates the kind of thinking which is useful both for policymakers contemplating educational reform and practitioners who seek greater insight into what motivates them and their colleagues. A simple conceptual extrapolation of the findings of this study can be applicable to scholars from any country.

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Palabras clave autor

Selección de instituciones educativas, formación de docentes y reforma educativa.

Palabras clave descriptor

Elección escolar, reforma educativa, prácticas de la enseñanza.

Resumen

La más reciente investigación educativa se asocia con una parcialidad nacional y cultural desconocida, la cual comienza con preguntas que son respondidas y termina con deducciones ya inducidas. Describimos un estudio de tres meses in situ en escuelas de primaria irlandesas que intentan identificar cómo unas prácticas de formación de docentes profesionales americanos e irlandeses se reflejan en las costumbres educativas y políticas de sus respectivos países. Aquí nos enfocamos en lo que se revela directamente en las prácticas de información de docentes y su vida profesional: visión del maestro sobre la selección de instituciones educativas, el rol del maestro en el funcionamiento de las escuelas, plan de estudios y las contribuciones del estudiante.

Transferencia a la práctica

Se dice que los peces son los últimos en enterarse de que su hábitat es el agua. De la misma manera, una simple clase de prácticas de formación de docentes profesionales, falla; tanto para los que están comprometidos en estas prácticas como para los que establecen las reglas, a menos que, las prácticas estén conectadas con su entorno. Este estudio demuestra el concepto útil, tanto para los que hacen las reglas que contemplan la reforma de educación como para los que hacen las prácticas; éstos buscan mayor compenetración en lo que los motive a ellos y a sus colegas. Una extrapolación simple conceptual del descubrimiento de este estudio se puede aplicar a estudiantes de cualquier país.

Mots clés auteur

Choix d'institutions, profession d'enseignant et réforme éducative.

Mots clés descripteur

Choix d'institutions, réforme éducative, formation d'étudiants.

Résumé

La recherche éducative la plus récente est associée à une partialité nationale et culturelle méconnue qui commence par des questions déjà répondues et qui finit par des déductions déjà induites. Nous décrivons une étude de trois mois in situ dans des écoles nationales primaires irlandaises qui essaient d'identifier la manière comment les pratiques d'enseignement professionnelles américaines et irlandaises reflètent les mœurs éducatives et politiques de leurs pays respectifs. Nous y faisons le point sur ce qui est directement révélé dans les pratiques des enseignants et leur vie professionnelle : la vision de l'enseignant sur le choix des institutions éducatives, le rôle de l'enseignant dans le fonctionnement des écoles, le plan d'études national et les contributions de l'étudiant.

Transfert à la pratique

Il est dit que les poissons sont les derniers à reconnaître l'eau comme leur habitat. Ainsi même, une simple classe de pratiques de formation d'enseignement professionnel est un échec pour ceux qui sont engagés dans ces pratiques et pour ceux qui établissent les règles tant qu'elle n'est pas connectée à son environnement. Cette étude démontre le concept utile pour ceux qui établissent les règles et qui abordent la réforme éducative ainsi que pour ceux qui font les pratiques ; ce sont eux qui cherchent une majeure compénétration les motivant. Une simple extrapolation conceptuelle de la découverte de cette étude peut être applicable à des étudiants de tous les pays.

Palavras-chave autor

Séleção das instituições educativas, formação dos professores e reforma educativa.

Palavras-chave descritor

Escolha escolar, reforma educacional, práticas de ensino.

Resumo

A mais recente pesquisa educativa associa-se com uma parcialidade nacional e cultural desconhecida, a qual começa com perguntas que são respondidas e termina com deduções já induzidas. Descrevemos um estudo de três meses in situ em escolas de primárias irlandesas que tentam identificar como as práticas de formação de docentes profissionais americanos e irlandeses se refletem nos costumes educativos e políticos de seus respectivos países. Aqui nos enfocamos no que se revela diretamente nas práticas de formação de docentes e sua vida profissional: visão do professor sobre a seleção de instituições educativas, o papel do professor no funcionamento das escolas, plano de estudos a nível nacional e as contribuições do estudante.

Transferência à prática

Diz-se que os peixes são os últimos em perceber que o seu hábitat é a água. Da mesma maneira, uma simples aula de práticas de formação de docentes profissionais, falha; tanto para os que estão comprometidos nestas práticas como para os que estabelecem as regras, a menos que, as práticas estejam conectadas com seu entorno. Este estudo demonstra o conceito útil, tanto para os que fazem as regras que contemplan a reforma da educação como para os que fazem as práticas; estes são quem procuram maior compenetrção no que os motiva e aos seus colegas. Uma extrapolção simples conceitual do descobrimento deste estudo se pode aplicar a estudantes de qualquer país.

Introduction

In recent years, a number of countries have experimented with school choice as a way to improve education (Coulson, 2008; Hirsch, 2002). However, the rhetoric of school choice has become increasingly polemical (Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel & Rothstein, 2005). The purpose of this study was to gain insight into education in the United States by viewing it through the experiences of the Republic of Ireland that separately places responsibility of *education* on the parents and *schooling* on the Department of Education and Science (DES). This two-country comparison may enable educators and policymakers in any country to understand the connection between professional practice and national environment. We focus on teaching practices in Irish national primary schools, an ethos of choice, and compare them to traditional practices in the US, an ethos of state controlled public education.

Background

Albert A/ Shanker, founder of the American Federation of Teachers, AFT, one of the two large teachers' labor unions in the US, was an early advocate of teacher-led charter schools, a form of public school choice in the US. He foresaw, "the end of public education... if we don't behave differently" (1993). School choice research has been dominated by interest groups that either passionately support school choice or oppose it. Teacher voices are often absent from the debate. According to Gerald Grant, Urmila Acharya, Sharon Franz, Richard Hawkins, Wendy Kohli and Madhu Suri Prakash (1983), "The withdrawal of talent from teaching is one of the most disturbing signs that we face a crisis in education" (p. 593). While US advocates of charter schools frequently point to Shanker's seminal 1988 speech on the subject at the National Press Club as an indication of his support, they fail to realize that his central point was that *teachers*, not administrators, should be running schools. So, from the very beginning, school choice and the profession of teaching have been inextricably connected in the US. Is the teaching profession fundamentally different in an environment where school choice is the norm and teachers play a key role in the governance of each public school? And, if different ethoi relating to choice are accompanied by different professional norms, which is the cause and which is the effect?

In America, teaching varies from state to state. Even a cursory study reveals the centrality of the word, '*different*.' *Different* teacher certification requirements make it difficult for teachers to teach in a state *different* from the one in which they were originally certified. Different curriculum standards at the state level generate different curricula designed by *different* districts to meet those *different* state standards. When the Federal government stepped in to 'save the schools,' the result was internationally excoriated No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB); arguably the most controlling education legislation ever passed. Title II of NCLB focuses on improving teacher quality by seeking to assure that all teachers are academically qualified and effective. This will arguably lead to more standardized teacher certification and curriculum standards. But, typical of US education, NCLB is heavily dependent on individual states to interpret curricular and teacher certification standards in their different ways. It might be helpful if educators look outside the US box and see how other countries maintain higher achievement and happy teachers.

Article description | Descripción del artículo | Description de l'article | Artigo Descrição

This article is product of a study done in Ireland during a sabbatical from the University of Hawaii, Hilo.

The system of education in the Republic of Ireland presents a rich ground for comparison with that of the United States and, by extension, with other countries. In its Constitution, the Republic of Ireland established in 1919 makes parents, not schools, responsible for the education of their children. They are free to send their children to any school, school them at home, or start their own school. All schools are state funded for major capital and operational costs (Embassy of Ireland, 2006; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD, 1991). Although Gaelic is the first language of Ireland, since 1922 a primary aim of education has been to promote bilingualism (OECD, 1991). According to Sheryl O'Sullivan (2001), "the entire school system of Ireland resembles the charter school system in the United States" (p. 106). Recent studies of academic achievement consistently rank Irish students in the top 10 of 27 OECD countries (see Oldham, 2002). FitzGerald (2003) has found that given the levels of funding, Irish education is highly productive. So Ireland has a highly rated educational system with universal choice on a scale unknown in America. Teachers in Ireland must meet high entrance standards into teacher education programs, teach for a year before they are fully certified and are virtually guaranteed a position once their probationary period ends. They may choose to teach at any recognized school and are paid directly from the government on a common pay scale. In contrast, except for a limited number of elite universities, teacher education programs in the US generally accept all applicants. US teachers can, in most instances, be certified immediately upon passing an examination and paying a fee, and must survive a probationary period before attaining job security. US teachers may only apply for jobs in the states or regions in which they are certified and are subject to a bewilderingly broad range of work rules and salary schedules.

Choice in Ireland is organic and dynamic. Between 1998 and 2005, 63 denominational schools have closed or consolidated while four Catholic, 18 Gaelic Immersion and 15 Educate Together (multi-denominational, co-educational, child-centered and democratically run) schools have opened (Rowe, 2005).

Procedures

Irish primary schools included in this study were identified using a national data bank of all 3,300 state-funded primary schools. Subject schools were chosen in three categories: 'traditional' public schools (more than 93% of which are Catholic), *gaelscoileanna* (Irish language immersion schools), and Educate Together (multi-denominational, child-centered, democratic curricula) schools in three areas of the country (Cork, Limerick, South Dublin) where the density of schools was sufficient to remove commuting distance as a criterion for parental selection. We also purposefully selected co-educational primary schools that were similar in size to charter schools in our home state of Hawaii which in 2006 was 135 elementary students per school (Hawaii Charter School Administrative Office, 2006).

Before our visits, we briefed the Principal Teachers about the goals of the study and enlisted them to recruit parents, teachers and members of their Board of Management to be interviewed (see Table 1). We also interviewed leaders in key organizations: the Department of Education and Science (DES); National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA); New Schools Advisory Council (NSAC); Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA); Irish National Teachers Organization (INTO) which is the primary teachers' union; *Gaelscoileanna*, an organization devoted to

the preservation of Irish as a language; An Foras Pátrúnachta na Scoileanna LánGhaeilge Teo (An Foras) which is a recognized 'patron' body legally entitled to sponsor the creation of Irish immersion schools; and Educate Together, the patron body for the new multi-denominational schools. In all cases, we were granted permission to record the conversations.

Table 1
Number of interview participants by type of primary school

Participants	Total	Gaelscoileanna	Traditional Catholic	Educate Together
Principals	16	5	5	6
Teachers	27	11	7	9
Parents	27	6	11	10
BOM	12	4	4	4
TOTAL	82	26	27	29

This paper is based on three general categories of data: (1) publicly accessible laws, regulations, procedures and curricula; (2) digital recordings during approximately 100 hours of interviews; and (3) personal observations collected during site visits. We first listened to the recordings to identify themes such as teacher experiences in the classroom and in their training, parental satisfaction, teacher decision-making, Board of Management decision-making and then listened again to code the data. Each researcher coded three groups related to their area of expertise. Quotations were transcribed during the coding process to use as examples within each theme. To check for reliability, the coded data were exchanged and each selected at least three interviews to check in each group. When there was disagreement compromises were reached.

Results

In this section we describe teacher entrance and preparation requirements, the impact of school choice, the role of teachers in primary school operations, and the impact of national curriculum and assessment. Quotations are used to illustrate the findings

Teacher entry requirements and preparation

Unlike the patchwork of teacher preparation requirements that vary from state to state in the US, Ireland has uniform entrance requirements for applicants to higher education who strive to become teachers. When secondary students apply for post-secondary education, they seek admission to specific degree courses (programs) based upon their Leaving Certificate Examination scores. Applicants must select specific courses of study and are listed in order of merit for those courses. Unlike the situation in the US, where university students change majors approximately 3 times during their college careers, Irish students are accepted into a particular major program and are not free to change without significant time penalty. In the case of teacher education, places are offered to a limited number of applicants at each institution. In order to enter a Primary Teaching Program an applicant must score a very high 465 points; and the institution must have available spaces. According to the Irish Central Applications Office (2007), Primary Teaching requires high scores in comparison to other professions such as the sample listed in Table 2.

Table 2
A comparison of required entrance scores for Primary Teaching and other courses of study

Profession	Score
Pharmacy	550
Dental Science	550
Education & Psychology, Primary Teaching	535
Law	500
Primary Teaching	465*
Theoretical Physics	460
Engineering	450
Mathematics	395
Classics	385
Social Sciences	365
Physics with Astronomy	360
General Nursing	345
Environmental Earth Science	305

* Because of space limitations, not all on this point score were offered places.

Teacher preparation programs are available at only eight institutions throughout the country (World of Education)¹. All offer Bachelor of Education Degrees and four offer postgraduate courses leading to a higher diploma in primary teaching. Three different courses of study are open to applicants pursuing Primary Teaching: three-year honors; regular three-year Bachelor of Education Degrees done in English or Gaeilge; and post-graduate diplomas. Approximately 1430 students graduate from approved programs per year (DES, 2006). DES determines enrolment limits for each post-graduate course (O'Duibhir, 2008).

A recent study of Irish teaching practice conducted by the DES Inspectorate assessed students in the final year of their teaching practice in four areas: planning, teaching, learning, and assessment. Overall, "the evaluation found that the majority of student teachers were excellent, very good or good in their general work in the classroom" (DES, 2006, p. 35).

There is a sense among teachers and student teachers of being 'called' to teach and becoming professionals from the time they commit to entering a course in teaching. In one of our talks in an Educate Together teacher's lounge we were told:

I do think teachers still regard themselves as professionals and protect their professionalism quite strongly and do always turn up for work. Not turning up is not on the radar. There is very much a feeling of collegiality between principals and staff members.

Definitely there is not a 'them' and 'us.' It starts in the teacher training colleges. Day one of the teacher preparation program we were told that we are professionals; you will conduct yourself in a professional manner. Even when you are student teachers and go out in the schools, you will act as a professional teacher. You are not late. You are in there 20 minutes before the children. You stay in there till everyone leaves. Taking sick days is not acceptable. That's the life of a teacher and that's the way you are going to behave in your career from day 1. You are to dress as if you were going to a professional environment.

School choice

As part of the school-based interviews, each teacher, parent, principal teacher and Board of Management member was asked to describe how they became involved with their school. All agreed that school size was an important consideration. As one teacher at a traditional school told us the ideal primary school would be "...one stream [one class at each grade level starting with junior infant and ending at class 6] all the way up with 20-25 per class. I wouldn't like a big school of four classes of each grade." Small school size facilitates school choice by allowing as many as three small schools each with different ethoi to be located within walking distance of children's homes.

While the American school choice debate largely focuses on parental choice, the existence in Ireland of three essentially parallel public school systems means that teachers, as well as parents, can choose the kind of school at which they work. Traditional national primary schools, gaelscoileanna and Educate Together schools each seem to attract their own teachers. Teachers explained that their first choice of school was influenced, and in some cases constrained, by available openings. The Irish Primary Principals Network maintains a free *educationposts.com* site where current vacancies are listed for primary, second level and third level and advertises seminars for job seekers (IPPN, 2008).

Each Irish National Primary School is governed by a Board of Management which is accountable to its patron². The Board is responsible for advertising positions, appointing a selection board and then appointing teachers and principals in accordance with the Rules for National Schools and national Employment Legislation, subject to the prior approval of the Patron, sanction of the DES and teacher qualification requirements. When vacancies occur, teaching staff at

¹ This is compared to fourteen teachers colleges in the state of Kentucky, alone. Kentucky is mentioned because its numbers most closely mirror those of the Republic of Ireland.

² In the Irish system, patron are similar to not-for profit organizations that represent a distinctive ethos, provide supplemental funding and with the advice of the principals select members of the Board of Management for the schools under their patronage.

all local schools must be notified. In addition advertisements must be placed in at least one daily newspaper and may be advertised on *educationposts.com*. Selection boards cannot discriminate by gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religious belief, age, disability, race, members of the traveling community³ in school employment decisions. Generally selection boards base their decisions on the candidate's professional qualifications, teaching experience, reports on competence and references. If there are vacancies in several schools in the same geographic area, teachers in our sample reported that the school ethos was the most important factor in their choice of school.

In the year 2000... I was looking for a job. Because I'm from West Kerry, a Gaeltacht area⁴, I wanted to get into an Irish speaking school. So I saw the job advertised. I went for it and got it. This is my first. I had applied for schools that weren't all Irish schools but deep down I wished that I got a Gaelscoil and I got it. I've been here every since.

A gaelscoil teacher

I worked back 22 years as a sub until I worked here and found the school suited me being not from a particularly religious background. I like the ethos of the school, the Educate Together ethos, so I decided to stay on and eventually was made permanent.

An educate together teacher

A young teacher who chose to send her own children to the school at which she taught explains her choice in the following:

I went to an ordinary primary school and Irish secondary school. For my Leaving Certificate did my exams through Irish. Then I ...subbed for a year where the 6th graders couldn't understand instructions in Irish. Then I got the job here. I see the difference between the two kinds of schools. The difference is in the quality of Irish. A lot is because the teachers themselves don't have the language themselves. I want my son to know his language. I didn't even consider MD [the traditional Catholic schools near the Gaelscoil]. A lot of parents might choose the school for other reasons but I did it for the Irish.

A catholic ethos gaelscoil

When asked about school choice, the interviewees couldn't understand how schools would work any other way. The teachers referred to the right of parents to choose a suitable school as one Gaelscoil teacher told us:

Everybody is different. Every school has its pros and cons. If you have a child that is good at sports, send [them] to a sporty school and that makes sense as opposed to saying that you have to go to a school that doesn't suit you or because it is the one up the road. The Educate Together is another example of it [choice]. Parents are given a choice, not pushed. There are 5 Irish schools in the city and many other English schools so I think it is important to have the option there. I wouldn't have any issues if an Educate Together school opened up down the road - not at all...The ethos is different.

³ An itinerate people of Irish origin called an Lucht siúil (literally the people of walking). Currently, 25,000 are estimated to live in Ireland. (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_Traveller for additional information).

⁴ The Gaeltacht areas are regions where Gaelic has remained the common language and has traditionally been the first language in the regional schools.

Irish teachers consistently talked about the attraction to schools with the ethos they believed to be best for them and in many cases for their own children. They can choose among different religious ethos (Catholic, Anglican, Muslim or Jewish), multi-denominational schools, English or Gaelic language or a combination language and religious affiliation. The choice is most often related to school size and ethos, a complex interaction of language and culture not just religion.

The role of teachers in school operations

In contrast to the US, which not only assigns multiple administrative positions (Principal, Vice Principal, Registrar, etc) to each school but, in many cases, recognizes separate *administrator labor unions*, there are no administrators in Irish primary schools. Instead, there is a head teacher referred to as principal teacher on the same pay scale as all teachers who receive stipends to take a leadership role. In our interviews we encountered two kinds of head teachers: teaching principals and walking principals. As their title implies, teaching principals are responsible for teaching part of the day. Typical of the arrangement, at one Gaelscoil which we visited the principal taught junior infants in the morning and did her principal duties in the afternoon. When a school population exceeds 182 students, the principal becomes a walking principal and no longer has regular teaching duties but continues to be thought of as a member of the faculty.

Teachers collaboratively make most of the major decisions at their school with the exception of the school budget and facility financing which is normally decided at the Board of Management level. Every school which we visited has formal, periodic staff meetings. The principal teacher solicits issues to be discussed at these regularly scheduled staff meetings and seldom overturns a decision made by the faculty. The typical situation in many schools is:

[We have] a staff meeting every month. M [Teaching Principal] is very open to suggestions. It is very democratic. Everything is discussed before a decision is reached... The principal is hugely important. Ours lets everyone have a say. If we want to put items on the agenda, we can. It is very participatory, open, democratic.

A gaelscoil teacher

I would refer to him [the principal teacher] if I had a problem or a concern. I would refer to him immediately, but he wouldn't come and tell you what to do. No, never. If I have a problem, I would go to him for advice and backing. Even with a simple thing.

A traditional teacher

You know that at the end of the day they [principal teachers] are answerable to the Board of Management. You know, you would be aware of that. R [the principal teacher] would be answerable to H [Board Chair]. You could go directly to H but on the day to day you go to R [the principal teacher]. I'd feel I was answerable to R. [the principal teacher].

A gaelscoil teacher

Additional school responsibilities do not result in an increase in administration. Instead, in addition to regular classroom teaching duties, teachers may also apply for areas of responsibility, called 'posts,' for which they receive a small stipend and take on different leadership roles such as serve on the Board of Management as a teacher representative. One veteran teacher explained:

Some of us have posts of responsibility. I keep the register so I register every child that comes [including] parent's occupation, address, contact information. I also record the number of days the child attended. This must be done in order when the inspector comes. I organize French classes for after school. I also open the door in the morning for children to come in. Oh yea, to keep an eye on the kitchen. Another teacher takes the notes of the meeting and she organizes dancing classes. Somebody else will be in charge of the library; someone else will take care of the PE equipment. We have a little meeting of our groups every so often as well.

A traditional school teacher

There are things like everybody has their own things. I'm on the Board of Management because I was the only one that would go. I volunteered because it was something I wanted to do. I had never experienced what a Board of Management [does]. I wasn't aware and just wanted to experience it... You do have a say and it is interesting to see how it works from that part of school.

A young gaelscoil teacher

Teachers very much think of themselves a part of the school in which they teach. Because firing an Irish primary teacher is nearly unheard of, we asked what would happen if a teacher at the school was not doing his or her share:

Luckily enough our teachers are very committed. Nobody would be late, "swinging the lettuce" means you are not doing very much.

An educate together teacher

I think it is very structured as well I mean you have to have a monthly account that has to be done. It is usually done in a very relaxed way but everybody conforms. It's expected... There are no personality clashes. Things need to be done. You just do them.

Two gaelscoil teachers

In Irish Primary schools, the teachers express a great deal of ownership in and responsibility for running their schools. The expectation is that every teacher will contribute expertise and if they don't, their colleagues will help them and entice them to do their part for the good of the students and the school.

The national curriculum

In the US, the multitude of educational authorities have been unable to agree on a National Curriculum. In Ireland, a National Curriculum is taken for granted and, in fact, is the underlying premise on which all existing and new public schools are based. The most recent "new" curriculum was implemented in 1999 (NCCA). Most teachers said that it was "fantastic." As one teacher in a traditional school informed us, "It is broader [than the old curriculum] and the teachers have more chances to pick and choose [topics of interest to them]." Notably, anyone can purchase the entire national curriculum on a single CD for five euros.

The new curriculum, the first revision since 1971, was the result of collaboration of the Church of Ireland General Synod Board of Education, DES, INTO, National Parents Council-Primary, Catholic Primary School Managers' Association and the Irish Federation of University Teachers with guidance from the NCCA. It consists of six areas: Language; Mathematics; Social environmental and scientific education (SESE); Arts education; Physical education; and Social, personal and health education (SPHE). The ability of such diverse groups to find common ground is in sharp contrast to the situation in the US. The aims and vision of the curriculum are intended to be child-centered and "celebrate the uniqueness of the child, as it is expressed in each child's personality, intelligence and potential for development... enriches the child's life and the foundations are laid for happiness and fulfillment in later education and in adult life." Overall, "the curriculum outlines a detailed and structured framework of content that is comprehensive and flexible. It promotes the active involvement of children in a learning process that is imaginative and stimulating" (p. 6).

The emphasis in the curriculum is on concepts and ideas, not facts or factoids. It provides teachers with broad guidance and allows them to choose con-

tent that is meaningful to them and their students. While it is a national curriculum, teachers expressed a sense of empowerment to use it as a guide and design instruction appropriate for their students.

School ethos

While religious instruction is a common feature in most schools and is widely attended, according to Rules for Primary Schools, chapters 68 and 69, "no pupil shall receive or be present at any religious instruction of which his parents or guardians do not approve" and also "that the periods of formal religious instruction shall be fixed so as to facilitate the withdrawal of [such] pupils."

Consequently the national curriculum asserts:

Education, generally, seeks to reflect and cater for a variety of religious conviction and acknowledges the right of parents to arrange for their children's education in a school whose religious ethos coincides with their own religious belief. It is the responsibility of the school to provide a religious education that is consonant with its ethos and at the same time to be flexible in making alternative organisational arrangements for those who do not wish to avail of the particular religious education it offers. It is equally important that the beliefs and sensibilities of every child are respected (p. 58).

Time is set aside during the school day for religion/moral instruction. Schools that prefer to avoid sectarian religious instruction do not reject the concept; rather they develop values-based analogs. Recently, Educate Together published "Learn Together: An ethical education curriculum for Educate Together schools." It is designed to provide moral instruction in a multi-denominational ethos. The curriculum includes: moral and spiritual development; equality and justice; belief systems; and ethics and the environment. This is consistent with the Educate Together ethos described in their literature as multi-denominational, co-educational, child centred in their approach, and democratically run with active participation by parents in the daily life of the school, whilst positively affirming the professional role of the teachers (Educate Together, 2007, p. 1).

America, given the founders' history of escape from religious persecution, has clearly separated religion and education. US education is only beginning to emerge from the landmark *Alton J. Lemon v. David H. Kurtzman* (1971) ruling on public funding of religious education. In the Republic of Ireland, the Catholic Church has been and is the dominant religion and operates about 94% of the primary schools. However, the role of the Church is rapidly changing. As one teacher explained:

Even if this school has a Catholic ethos, it doesn't control other aspects of the school. There is a little of emphasis on it [Catholic teaching] but is not controlled in the way they used to - by the clergy. The clergy have enough sense now to leave it to the teachers and the principal. It is hard to find a nun or priest who teach there. There are religious classes but they are to teach morality and also other religions. It's not like the past.

Catholic gaelscoil teacher

The Catholic Management Board Members' Handbook (2004) asserts that "A positive ethos, while intangible is nonetheless recognised and appreciated as supportive, enlivening to those who learn and those who work in the schools... religious instruction should be part of the fullness of the education given in schools to children who belong to the Church" (p. 6). This positive ethos consists of values that might appeal to any moral, ethical person.

Students in all the schools we visited and whom we observed out in the community were extremely well-behaved by American standards. Most of the students dressed in uniforms and were not rowdy or loud in public places.

Student assessment

Standardized testing and formal reports to parents are used in Ireland to a much smaller extent than in the US. When parent interviewees talked about how they knew students were learning and that their school was a 'good' school, the first response was that the kids were 'happy.' They qualified that by saying that they would know if something was wrong because there is daily information flow from teachers to parents. In the case of infants (4-6 year olds) and first class students (about equivalent to the 1st grade in the US), mothers generally walk the child into the classroom to their assigned spot and use the opportunity to check with the teacher who views this time as important to her/his understanding of the child. Each parent expects her child to do homework every school night and to be asked sign homework when it is complete. This is much more formalized and universal than it is the US.

Formal written feedback to parents occurs only once each year. Teachers defending the fact that there is only one formal written report to parents at the end of the school year told us:

Yes, but I would see parents every day. They come in. They bring their kids in here then they come in to collect their kids. Most of them would ask how was she. If I had something to say, I would say it. If not I would say he was good or she was good whatever.

A traditional teacher

As Ireland becomes a nation of immigrants, there is more discussion about disadvantaged students. The schools are providing more help with grants from the DES. However, teachers did not consider differences in

achievement as a reflection on the parents. Nor would the Gaelscoileana or Educate Together or traditional schools consider the students they attract as better than the students who attend other schools.

But I don't think that would necessarily mean that the kids are from a different background. I think maybe it means that we have a smaller school with the kids more supportive of each other. It's more like a family. The kids don't want to disappoint the teachers. It's not about us (teachers) and them (students). I think there is a good sense of discipline but not coming from rules and regulations.

A gaelscoil teacher

Currently, there are parent-teacher conferences in the first quarter and formal written reports at the end of the year. Because of the frequency of informal contact between parents and teachers before and after school and at school events, the teachers did not express a need for additional formal assessment. However, in February of 2006, the NCCA published a white paper, *Reporting children's progress in primary schools: Background paper for discussion at Council*. The document reviewed reporting practices in 10 other European and Scandinavian countries and concluded by introducing several templates for report cards. In collaboration with the INTO, the NCCA is in the process of piloting these new report cards and encouraging teachers and schools to choose an appropriate format and complete them quarterly. The proposed report cards, specifically designed for each level, have three components: students as learner of curriculum subject matter, social and personal development and next steps to assist the students which includes advice to parents about how best to support their child's growth and development (NCCA, n.d.).

When we asked about assessment, no one mentioned standardized tests as an indicator even though all of the schools in the sample give them at the end of each year. If parents want the scores, they can request them but almost all the interviewees, notably including parents, didn't think it was the most important indicator.

Instead an Educate Together teacher said:

Standardized tests that we would have once a year at the end of the year to keep an eye on the kids' progress and make sure that they are achieving in the average range on a national test. That would be the main thing that would keep us up to date in regards to their progress.

If their child got poor scores, parents would complain. Sometimes the tests are not a reflection of the teacher but of the test and how the child took it and what the teacher taught. It is more a reflection of the child's ability, not the teacher. Long ago we didn't report the scores to the parents because they would be interpreted incorrectly. Now parents can request the results but we don't give them out automatically.

A traditional teacher

There are no universally required standardized assessments in the Irish primary schools. As students leave 6th class they may apply to secondary schools that require tests as part of the admission process. Once students complete the first level of their secondary education they take Junior Leaving Certificate examines. In order to continue to third level (colleges and universities) students take Leaving Certificates.

Recently, there has been increasing pressure on the NCCA to re-examine the use of assessment in the Irish primary system. Officials mentioned the influence of the No Child Left Behind legislation in the US as one motivator. The NCCA was asked in 2005 to provide advice on standardized testing in compulsory schooling. The Council examined different purposes for standardized testing and outlined particular issues associated with standardized assessment and concluded by making recommendations for supporting and promoting good practice in assessment and the development of Report Card Templates for communicating children's progress to parents.

Summary

One of the reasons cited for the emergence of the 'Celtic Tiger' as the richest country in the European Union is that Ireland had the most well educated population in Europe. This study has examined the teaching profession through a new cultural and contextual lens. We report that:

- In contrast to the US, Irish teacher education programs are limited to a small number of government-approved universities. Entrance is highly competitive and more difficult than professions such as theoretical physics or nursing. Teachers regard themselves, and appeared to be regarded by the public, as members of a professional elite and describe themselves as being 'called' to the profession.
- School choice in Ireland, both for parents and for teachers, is universal. Subject to the vicissitudes of the job market, teachers are free to select from schools representing at least three fundamentally different ethoi.
- There is a tradition in Ireland of teacher involvement in school decisions. Periodic staff meetings are universal and teachers expect to participate in the creation of their agendas. The distance between principals and teachers appears to be much smaller in Ireland than it is in the US.
- Religion plays a central role in the Irish educational system, although that role is different from the one which would be familiar to US educators.
- Irish parents base their opinions about teacher and school effectiveness on substantially more subjective criteria than is the case in the US Report cards and formal parent conferences are infrequent. Both parents and teachers associate student 'happiness' with school effectiveness.

Conclusions

Educators and policy makers are in a better position to put aside assumptions about schooling and adopt what works in other countries such as Ireland if they view practices in national and cultural context. Some may say that this study is limited because of the small sample size, difference in population between the US and Ireland, the difference in political configuration (the US confederation and Ireland's unitary republic) and the homogenous culture of Ireland contrasted with the US melting pot or salad bowl. Others would assert that we, as outsiders, are viewing the system through rose-colored glasses. Nevertheless, there are several important findings that could be implemented either by educators and policymakers in any country to improve elementary education.

The first is to re examine teacher preparation. As Arthur Levine (2006) points out “Teacher education is the Dodge City of the education world. Like the fabled Wild West town, it is unruly and chaotic. Anything goes and the chaos is increasing... and teachers are alternatively educated for a profession and a craft” (p. 109). Each state sets standards for licensure which often include passing scores on a standardized test such as the PRAXIS exams (see the Educational Testing Service, <http://ets.org>) but leaves to the colleges and universities the entry requirements, program design and assessment of teacher candidates. Salaries vary from state to state and district to district.

In the US, under No Child Left Behind legislation, states are now being held accountable for assuring that there are “highly qualified teachers” but these requirements are defined by each state. It may be time for the US to follow those countries which have established national teacher entry requirements and allow the states to raise but not lower those requirements. It also may be time to create national teacher preparation standards (See Sykes & Burian-Fitzgerald, 2004, for an example of high state standards see the Hess, Rotherham & Walsh, 2004 review of research).

Teachers in Irish primary schools have a much more significant role in the operation of their school than most teachers in the US. Teachers in many countries over time have lost their voice in school operation and decision-making. The consolidation of schools into increasingly large numbers of students has moved decision-making from the teachers to the administrators who in turn have been silenced as education has become centralized and decision-making shifted from the school to the central office. In the US, educators have long considered the disadvantages of large schools. Scholars such as Deborah Meier (1995, 1996, 2002), Joe Nathan and Sheena Thao (2007) and Mary Anne Raywid (1996, 1997, December-1998, January) have provided compelling research and methods that can help educators restructure large schools into smaller learning communities where teachers feel ownership of the school and know their students well. Structural changes can result in smaller, safer and academically more productive schools that attract students and teachers like some chartered school in the US have already demonstrated. Many teachers in the US have lost the respect of society and have become perhaps overly protected by their unions. They don’t own the schools and continually fight with management (administrators and far removed school boards) to define their rights and responsibilities. Before America can hope to have high achieving schools and high quality teachers, teachers need to be reborn as professionals. We have already learned that higher salaries are not the only answer (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2004).

Small schools can be cost efficient like the primary schools we studied in Ireland. However, it may mean that we need to rethink the role of the schools. Does every elementary school have to have a cafeteria and a gymnasium/auditorium? Should elementary schools provide after school activities and babysitting or would it be better to shift some responsibilities back to parents and families? How can teacher entry requirements, preparation and entry into the field be changed to result in teacher professionalism and ownership of their schools?

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