



An Lárionad um Fhorbairt
agus Oideachais na Luath-Óige

A Historical Overview Of Our Conceptualisation Of Childhood In Ireland In The Twentieth Century

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Introduction

This paper offers an historical overview of the conceptualisation of childhood in Ireland as expressed in the programme/curriculum in operation in the primary schools between 1900 and 1999. Firstly, I examine the conceptualisation of childhood and the various influences on it. Secondly, I take a brief look at the various sources of data that enable us to trace and analyse the conceptualisation of childhood in Ireland. I then outline the main source of data that will be used for today's presentation, namely, the three successive primary school curricula in the twentieth century in Ireland. Finally, I offer some broad conclusions arising from my consideration of the data.

Conceptualisation of Childhood

Hayes (2002:21) gives us a succinct description of childhood, highlighting the complexity of the term and outlining the multiple factors that are involved in its definition.

Childhood is both a biological reality and a social construct. It is defined not only by biology, but also by a particular society at a particular time in a particular way which represents the view that society has of childhood.

As Hayes outlines, our conceptualisation of childhood is both context-linked and time-specific. This means that a particular society will have a different image of children than another and this changes with societal developments (Smyth, 2003:161). For example, in Ireland, we have a much-altered conceptualisation of childhood in 2004 as opposed to 1904 or even more recently. In addition, our conceptualisation of childhood is different to that of society in other countries and cultures across the world. Therefore, there is no one static universal conceptualisation of childhood.

There are a number of influences that impact upon our conceptualisation of childhood; some of the major influences are outlined. The State impacts on our image of childhood by the provision it makes for children and families, through legislation and through the provisions it makes for education, care and welfare. The Churches also play a role in the doctrines they espouse and the role children play within these institutions. The media are playing an increasing role in shaping society's image of childhood. Finally, and increasingly, children are

starting to influence their own role and position in society, through increasing consultation and prominence (Cleary, *et al.*, 2001:XV).

The conceptualisation of childhood never remains static in society. It is transient and evolutionary, tempered by the influences mentioned above. However, there are also wider influences in society that impact upon the conceptualisation of childhood, including the political, economic, social, religious and cultural influences. These are becoming increasingly international and globalised in modern society (Cleary, *et al.*, 2001:XV).

Sources of Data

There are a number of sources from which the conceptualisation of childhood in Ireland can be traced in historical terms. These include the memoirs and biographies of individuals reflecting on their childhood. In addition, there are a number of anthropological studies that were conducted in Ireland throughout the twentieth century that illuminate the role and position of children in Irish society. It is also revealing to analyse policies and legislation relating to children throughout the century. However, there is a dearth of documentation in this regard in the Irish context, as has been noted by a number of commentators (Hannan and Katsiaouni, 1977; Fahey and McLaughlin, 1999). A valuable source of information is available in the form of school curricula, which are generally premised upon a particular conceptualisation of childhood, among other issues. During the twentieth century, three curricula operated in Ireland, namely:

1. The curriculum from 1900-1922 pre-independence;
2. The curriculum in operation from 1922-1971 following independence;
3. The implementation of the child-centred curriculum 1971-1999.

The Primary School Programme 1900-1922

The first curriculum in the twentieth century was implemented from 1900-1922, commonly known as the 'Revised Programme.' Just to briefly contextualise the period; at that time, Irish affairs were determined at Westminster, London. The Irish population was in continuous decline since the Great Famine (1845-1849), there were poor social and health services and infant mortality was high. There had been considerable agitation in Ireland at the close of the

nineteenth century in relation to the agrarian situation, political independence, educational reform and cultural revival (Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, 1990).

The Revised Programme was introduced following a comprehensive review of national and international best policy and practice conducted between 1896 and 1898 by the Commission on Manual and Practical Instruction (Commission on Manual and Practical Instruction, 1898). The Revised Programme of 1900 was a fundamental change from its predecessor. It abolished the system of Payment by Results previously in operation. It introduced a wide curriculum, including subjects such as Kindergarten, Manual Instruction, Drawing, Elementary Science, Singing, Cookery, Laundry and Physical Drill. These subjects were in addition to English and Arithmetic already in existence. In addition to a radical change in content, the methodology was also transformed from that of a didactic and subject-driven style to a heuristic and child-centred method. This meant that the content of education was to relate to the reality and interests of the child. Subjects were no longer to be compartmentalised but to be taught seamlessly in an integrated manner (Commissioners of National Education, 1901).

The Revised Programme was implemented 1900-1922, with some revisions, most notably in 1904. The Notes for Teachers issued in 1904 endorsed the Kindergarten approach in the infant classes, the use of the environment of the child to stimulate learning, proposed frequent changes in lessons and the allocation of ten minutes in every hour for rest and play (O'Connor, 1984). In addition, Junior Assistant Mistresses were granted in schools with large enrolments, their role being largely to cater for the needs of the younger children. There was some element of gender segregation within some subjects such as Needlework, Laundry and Cookery for girls and Manual Instruction for boys.

Overall, there is little evidence in a radical change in the conceptualisation of childhood in wider society in this period. However, there was somewhat of a revolution in the instruction of young children in the infant classes (O'Connor, 1987a). The education of young children was certainly enhanced, availing of a wide and varied curriculum, taught in a heuristic and discovery-like method. In addition, there was a focus on the social health context of children and there were advancements in relation to healthcare and dental care for pupils. A very

different concept of the child as an individual and as a learner was conceived (Coolahan, 1973).

National School Programme 1922-1971

The second curriculum to be examined relates to the programme introduced in primary schools after the advent of independence in 1922. The political and societal context was very altered from the situation in 1900. Ireland determined its own affairs politically, but was recovering from the War of Independence and the Civil War. The economy of the Irish Free State was largely agrarian based and was stagnant for decades after independence, leading to high unemployment and emigration. There was little emphasis placed on social provisions for children and families. The cultural movement, which was intricately linked to the military movement for independence, was particularly prominent at all levels of Irish society and played an important role in shaping the Free State (Lyons, 1971).

The First National Programme Conference was convened by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation in 1921. It was attended by a number of organisations but was not representative of the educational stakeholders (O'Connell, 1968). Its report was issued and accepted in 1922. It introduced a much narrower curriculum than was previously in operation. The main thrust of the programme was in placing an emphasis on the Irish language, history and culture, in an attempt to transmit the cultural inheritance successive generations had been denied. The curriculum was pruned to ensure that adequate emphasis was placed on these elements. Thus, subjects such as drawing, physical drill, manual instruction, cookery and laundry and elementary science were omitted as compulsory subjects from the programme (National Programme Conference, 1922).

Within the overall programme, a special emphasis was placed on the infant classes. This was primarily based on the advice of Rev. Timothy Corcoran, Professor of Education at UCD, that the early years were the language years:

The vital years for vernacular usage are those from three onwards...(Corcoran, 1924:213)

Thus, while throughout the rest of the primary school Irish became compulsory for one-hour per day, Irish became the medium of instruction in the infant classes. Irish was to be imparted

using the direct method of instruction. This affected all pupils in infant classes, 90% of whom spoke no Irish in the home (O’Cuiv, 1966:162).

Owing to difficulties with the implementation of the 1922 Programme, a Second National Programme Conference was convened in 1925. This was more representative of the educational stakeholders and in general, it endorsed the 1922 Programme. However, it allowed a concession in the infant classes owing to difficulties using Irish as the medium of instruction, of insisting on Irish between 10.30 and 2pm daily. It also illuminated the conditions for the use of Irish in the infant classes; that the teacher must be competent to impart education through Irish and the pupils must be competent to assimilate such instruction. Rural Science or Nature Study was also added to the list of obligatory subjects (National Programme Conference, 1926).

Owing to disappointment with the implementation of the programme, the curriculum was further pruned in 1934 to allow a greater emphasis on the Irish language. This reduced the requirements in Arithmetic, made English an optional subject in the infant classes, removed Nature Study again and reduced the number of schools in which geometry and algebra were taught (Department of Education, 1934).

There was much controversy and debate surrounding the use of Irish as a teaching medium in educational journals and Dáil debates, citing the dangers to education and harm to children this was causing (See Ó hAodha, 1982). This led to the introduction of a revised programme for infants in 1948. Once again, the child-centred language of the 1900 programme is evident, placing the child at the centre of the learning process. The language in 1948 resonates with the ideology and philosophy of the aforementioned 1900 curriculum. Again, a concession of allowing 30 minutes of English teaching per day was introduced in the infant classes (Department of Education, 1948).

The emphasis in the curriculum in this period was on a linguistic and cultural revival and on a moralistic and literary content, leading to a narrowing of the wide curriculum that had been in use from 1900-1922. To accommodate this, children in schools came to the fore in the cultural revival and it can be argued that their education in this period may have suffered, as it was not premised on the needs of the child (O’Connor, 1987b). A child-centred curriculum was of little

importance in comparison to the restoration of the Irish language, for which the schools were the prime agent of reform. Little regard was given to the needs, interests or abilities of the individual child in the curriculum, while there was a strong emphasis on didactic teaching and punishment emanating from the belief in the doctrine of original sin (Corcoran, 1930). It is also unusual in international terms that both boys and girls received the same education, as education was perceived to be for moral as opposed to economic or vocational reasons.

The New Curriculum 1971-1999

There was a shift in emphasis in the 1960s from education as being a social expenditure to one of investment in the individual and society as a whole. There was an economic boom, which facilitated increased investment and interest in education. Increased contact with organisations such as the UN, UNESCO and the OECD removed the insularity that had characterised Irish educational policy since the 1920s. There was a growing realisation of the need to invest in education for Ireland to compete on an increasingly international stage. Education was perceived as a ladder for social mobility and there were increased aims to attain equality of educational opportunity (Coolahan, 1981).

From the late 1960s, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education came together and drafted a curriculum for primary schools. Following a pilot implementation and revisions, the curriculum was introduced in 1971. This curriculum acknowledged that previously:

Education was 'curriculum-centred' rather than 'child-centred', and the teacher's function in many cases, was that of a medium through whom knowledge was merely transferred to his pupils. (Department of Education, 1971:15)

This curriculum returned once again to child-centred principles. Education was designed to facilitate the full and harmonious development of the child, with inherent flexibility to adapt to the needs and abilities of the individual child. Subjects were to be taught in a seamless and integrated manner as opposed to the previous tradition of compartmentalisation. A focus was placed on making the school an enjoyable place for children to be and to make learning relevant to the interests of the child. An emphasis was also placed on the learning environment of the child and on small-group and individual learning. The creation of a disposition for learning was considered of paramount importance in the learning process.

Within this context, childhood was recognised as a distinct period of human development (Department of Education, 1971).

A process began in 1990 to revise the working of the primary school curriculum. This was conducted through a process of consultation and partnership, culminating close to a decade later in the Primary School Curriculum (Department of Education and Science, 1999). For the first time in the history of the curriculum in Ireland in the twentieth century, the previous curriculum was used as the base from which to develop and thus ensured educational continuity for pupils. This curriculum is five years into implementation at this point and the NCCA are currently reviewing progress to date.

Within the education system, this era heralded the introduction of a child-centred curriculum in 1971, placing a special emphasis on the child as an individual. Methodologies were improved and greater use was made of the environment and previous experiences of the child. Advancements include a special focus on children affected by disadvantage and those with special needs.

Conclusions

Horgan and Douglas (2001:139) aptly summarise curricular provision in Ireland since the inception of the national system in 1831:

In the State sector, in this country, the curricular pendulum since 1831 has oscillated back and forth from the traditional, didactic approach to child-centredness.

The curriculum in Ireland has been influenced, by varying degrees at different times, by national and international developments. The 1900 programme was greatly influenced by international theorists, by the New Education Movement and the system in England (Selleck, 1968). In 1922, the system was national in nature and outlook and chose to ignore international models. This insularity continued until the 1960s when Ireland once again opened up to international models of policy and practice and adapted them to the needs of the Irish system.

We can see that the way in which the curriculum was developed and modified involved various ranges of stakeholders at different times. In 1898, the Commission on Manual and

Practical Instruction collected volumes of evidence from a host of witnesses at home and abroad, commissioned reports on various systems and distilled this to produce the 1900 curriculum. The range of players in 1922 was greatly reduced, with policy decided by the dominant forces in Irish education. This was to continue in Irish education until the 1990s, when the process of devising the 1999 curriculum adopted a partnership approach.

Profiling the conceptualisation of childhood is an ongoing and dynamic process. The Revised Programme of 1900 was child-centred in theory, offering a wide curriculum with heuristic methodologies, based on the needs and interests of the child. Following independence, the needs and interests of the child were relegated within the curriculum to accommodate the language revival movement, schools being used as the primary site of intervention for the revival. From the 1960s, and formalised in the curriculum introduced in 1971, a gradual journey towards child-centredness was undertaken within the curriculum in Irish schools. It is heartening that in recent years, curriculum development has become more democratic and participatory, rightly placing the needs and interests of the child at the core of the learning process.

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