

Troubling some generalisations on teacher education in the English-speaking world: the case of the Republic of Ireland

Tom O'Donoghue and Judith Harford

judith.harford@ucd.ie

There is a great deal of talk about a crisis in teaching across the English-speaking world, about the quality of teachers leaving much to be desired, and about the quality of student outcomes dropping. This, in turn, has resulted in various aspects of teacher preparation coming under severe scrutiny. In general, disquiet has been voiced about the quality of those admitted to teacher preparation programmes, about the quality of the programmes themselves, and about the quality of those responsible for delivering them. Much of the literature in this regard emanates primarily from the US, and England and Wales, and to a lesser extent from Australia and New Zealand. While the criticisms voiced may well be valid for these contexts, one would still not be justified in uncritically generalising from them to the rest of the English-speaking world. We adopt such a 'troubling' perspective by focusing on the situation regarding secondary school teacher preparation in the Republic of Ireland. Along with being offered as a work of interest in its own right, a number of areas for consideration regarding the situation in South Africa are also outlined.

Keywords: English-speaking world; Republic of Ireland; teacher preparation; teacher professional development

Introduction

There is a great deal of talk about a crisis in teaching across the English-speaking world, about the quality of teachers leaving much to be desired, and about the quality of student outcomes dropping. This, in turn, has resulted in various aspects of teacher preparation coming under severe scrutiny. In general, disquiet has been voiced about the quality of those admitted to teacher preparation programmes, about the quality of the programmes themselves, and about the quality of those responsible for delivering them. Much of the literature in this regard emanates primarily from the US, and England and Wales, and to a lesser extent from Australia and New Zealand (O'Donoghue & Whitehead, 2008). While the criticisms voiced may well be valid for these contexts, one would still not be justified in uncritically generalising from them to the rest of the English-speaking world. Equally, one would not be justified in uncritically transferring the proposed policy solutions to other countries. It is particularly important that cognisance be taken of this latter point in countries like South Africa, which have undergone major reforms in teacher education in recent years (Wolhuter, 2006:124-139). In this paper we adopt such a 'troubling' perspective by focusing on the situation regarding secondary school teacher preparation in the Republic of Ireland (Ireland).

The Irish education system has a well-established tradition in teacher preparation that is highly regarded nationally (Advisory Group on Post-

Primary Teacher Education, 2002) and the quality of Ireland's teaching force is considered to be high by international standards (Coolahan, 2003). Consequently, it is not surprising that teaching is widely viewed as an attractive career option (Heinz, 2008), that entry to teacher preparation programmes is extremely competitive, and that applicants come from the top echelon of school leavers (Harford, 2008). These observations provided the stimulus for this paper on secondary school teacher preparation in Ireland.

The usual practice in Ireland when referring to 'secondary schools' is to speak of 'post-primary schools'. This is because 'secondary schools' historically has a restricted usage in Ireland, referring specifically to those schools which belong to a tradition of classical grammar schools, which are nearly all run by the various Christian Churches (primarily Catholic) in the State and which have steadily broadened and modernised their curricula in recent years. Alongside these are four other types ('vocational schools', 'comprehensive schools', 'community schools' and 'community colleges'), each of which also offers a wide range of school subjects. Collectively, however, all five types are referred to throughout the remainder of this paper as 'secondary schools'.

The paper is in three main parts. First, a general historical background is provided. A particular way of depicting the current situation regarding secondary school teacher preparation in Ireland is then addressed. Finally, a number of areas for consideration regarding the situation in South Africa are outlined.

The historical background

The formal professional preparation of secondary school teachers in Ireland dates from 1897, when Trinity College Dublin, the oldest university in the country, established examinations for graduates in the 'theory, history and practice of education'. Two years later the Royal University of Ireland introduced a diploma in education. These programmes were for those working in what was popularly known at the time as intermediate education and later became known as secondary education.

In 1905, a report on intermediate education recommended the establishment of a formal system of training for all secondary school teachers (Dale & Stephens, 1905). It was to include a study in the 'mental and moral sciences bearing on education', and in the 'theory and history of education.' There was also to be practical training, including classroom observation, formal examination and a probationary period in a recognised school. These recommendations informed the blueprint for programme requirements laid down by the Registration Council for Secondary Teachers which came into effect on 31 July 1918, with a brief to register and regulate the qualifications of secondary school teachers.

The first chair of Education in Ireland was established at Trinity College Dublin, in May 1905, while the constituent colleges of the newly established National University of Ireland (1908) had all established chairs of Education by 1915. Thus, in comparison to other counties where the universitisation of

teacher preparation has emerged relatively recently (Galton & Moon, 1994), secondary school teacher preparation in Ireland has strong roots within the university. The pattern which emerged was one whereby students graduated in the first instance with a university primary degree and then enrolled in the Higher Diploma in Education (H.Dip.Ed.)

Following Independence in 1922, education policy focused on overturning what was widely promoted as having been a policy of cultural assimilation and political socialisation promulgated under British rule (Coolahan, 1981; O'Donoghue, 2006). The associated ideology of cultural nationalism drove initiatives until the 1960s. The Catholic Church also played a key role in shaping educational policy (O'Donoghue, 1999). This meant that schools, teacher training colleges and university Education departments were widely organised along denominational lines.

Concerns about the social and economic context of education gathered pace during the 1960s. The OECD *Investment in Education* report of 1966 is widely credited with "rescuing Irish education from its concern with character development and religious formation" (O'Sullivan, 2005:129) and 'normalising' the link between education and the economy. It provided a projection of current trends in Irish education under existing government policies, an examination of the extent to which the educational system was meeting basic social and economic objectives, and a discussion on the efficiency of the system in its use of resources.

Amongst developments which followed were the introduction of 'free education' for secondary school attendance in 1967, capital grants for expansion of the classical grammar style secondary schools and the secondary-level vocational schools, and the introduction of state-funded secondary-level comprehensive and community schools. Soon the *Report of the Commission on Higher Education* (1967) drew attention to the fact that the number of staff in Education departments was not large enough to meet the associated demands in teacher preparation (Commission on Higher Education, 1967: 238). Three years later a *Report on Teacher Education* (Higher Education Authority, 1970) argued for the need to expand and develop both teaching and research facilities within university Education departments. Gradually, staff numbers were expanded to include full-time specialists in psychology, sociology, curriculum studies and research design. Premises and facilities were also improved and lectures were supplemented by seminars, tutorials and workshops (Coolahan, 1985:10-11). It was at this point that the H.Dip.Ed., the principal route through which graduates prepared for a career in post-primary teaching, was restructured from being a part-time programme to being a one-year full-time course, allowing for a greater sense of balance between university and school-based experience. Also a number of specialised post-graduate programmes in education were introduced, aimed at helping teachers to cope with the diversity and complexity of the classroom.

The 1990s was both a period of unprecedented economic growth and rapid social change in Ireland. Teacher preparation providers were urged to

equip teachers with the necessary skills to cope with a more diverse student population, the result principally of changing demographics and broader provision for special educational needs. The traditional power base in Irish education was also at this time being re-negotiated. The Catholic Church witnessed a radical diminution of its power, largely due to the growing secularisation of Irish society and the sexual abuse scandals which dogged the Church throughout the 80s and 90s. Conversely, the teacher unions gained considerable ground and by the 90s was one of the most effective lobbying groups nationally. Their strength at the negotiating table ensured that teachers' salaries remained relatively high by international standards. This, in turn, contributed to the steady supply of high calibre entrants to the profession (Walshe, 1999).

The changing complexion of Irish education as well as the structural complexity of the system was not lost on the principal stakeholders who began to cooperate in an unprecedented manner to modify existing structures to fit the demands of a more pluralist society. A series of highly significant policy documents, most notably *Education for a Changing World* (Government of Ireland, 1992), the *Report of the National Education Convention* (Coolahan, 1994) and the white paper, *Charting our Education Future* (Government of Ireland, 1995) followed. Also the Education Act (1998) and the Teaching Council Act (2001) were passed. The former represented a significant step in the framing of a wider legislative base for primary and secondary school education (Glendenning, 1999), while the latter gives a clear commitment to the continuous education and professional development of teachers.

The current situation

This section depicts the current situation regarding the preparation of secondary school teachers in Ireland. The organisational framework is that provided by O'Donoghue and Whitehead (2008:193-197) which is deduced from the views of contemporary senior teacher education scholars across a wide range of English-speaking countries and is based on the central Weberian notion of an 'ideal type' (Shils & Finch, 1949:90). It proposes that for comparative purposes it is helpful to consider the situation regarding teacher preparation in any country by asking how the following fundamental matters are addressed:

- The matter of who should be selected for teacher preparation;
- The matter of where teacher preparation should take place;
- The matter of what should be the curriculum of the teacher preparation programme;
- The matter of who the teacher educators should be;
- The matter of the attitude of the wider societal culture to beginning graduate teachers.

Each of these will now be addressed in relation to the current situation regarding secondary school teacher preparation in Ireland.

The matter of who should be selected for teacher preparation

Teaching in Ireland is an all-graduate profession, with the number of places

on courses limited by the State Higher Education Authority, in collaboration with the State Department of Education and Science. As in countries such as Austria, Australia, the Czech Republic, England, Finland, Israel, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Scotland, the Slovak Republic, Sweden and Wales, both consecutive and concurrent models in secondary teacher preparation operate (OECD, 2005). The consecutive model comprises a programme of professional training in pedagogy and teaching, usually taken after having first completed a primary degree in a discipline related to the subjects which will subsequently be taught in schools. The majority of those studying to be secondary school teachers in Ireland are enrolled in courses based on this model. However, the concurrent model, one in which academic subjects are studied alongside educational and professional studies, is the basis of the courses in which students in areas such as physical education, home economics, art and construction studies are enrolled; they follow a four-year joint academic-subject and education degree. A recent review of post-primary teacher preparation endorsed the continuation of both models, noting that each has “numerous merits and benefits” (Advisory Group on Post-Primary Teacher Education, 2002:13).

Candidates for secondary school teacher preparation courses are selected predominantly on their academic performance, with over 90% of entrants to the various postgraduate teacher preparation programmes holding honours degrees. High performance levels are also the norm at Leaving Certificate Examination (the final secondary school examination) for those students intending to follow concurrent courses (Coolahan, 2003; Heinz, 2008). Furthermore, in Ireland, as in Finland and Korea, where teaching has high social status, competition for places is high (OECD, 2005). In 2008, for example, there were 2,455 applicants for 800 places on the various postgraduate teacher preparation courses in the four National University of Ireland Education departments, where approximately 70% of secondary school teachers pursue their teaching qualification (figures from the Post-Graduate Application Centre). This ranks Ireland among the most competitive teacher preparation selection systems in Europe. Also, the demand for places remains high despite the unlikely prospect of candidates securing a permanent post once qualified. In 2006, for example, of the 1,249 students who graduated from H.Dip.Ed. and other postgraduate teacher preparation courses nationally, only 4.9% secured permanent teaching posts in Ireland (Higher Education Authority, 2008:62); the vast majority (62.7%) were employed in temporary whole-time and part-time substitute teaching positions. These students were predominantly graduates of Arts, Humanities and Social Science faculties. The majority were women, reflecting the fact that the teaching profession in Ireland, in line with international trends, is highly feminised (Drudy *et al.*, 2005) (at secondary school level, 54% of the teaching force in Ireland is female, placing the nation as one of the highest proportion of women teachers at second level among OECD countries).

The student-teacher body remains largely homogenous with regard to nationality, with 98% of entrants to the various postgraduate teacher prepara-

ration courses in the four constituent colleges of the National University of Ireland (University College Dublin, University College Cork, National University of Ireland, Galway and National University of Ireland, Maynooth) between 1999 and 2005 claiming Irish nationality (Heinz, 2008). Increasingly, however, more mature students, often with more diverse working experience, are enrolling in courses to become secondary school teachers (Coolahan, 2003). Also, there is a greater awareness at policy level of the need to diversify the teaching body in order to meet the needs of a more diverse cohort of pupils. This has become more pressing in recent years in light of a significant increase in the proportion of ethnic minorities in schools. Although traditionally a homogenous society characterised by mass emigration at various intervals, Irish society has witnessed significant inward migration over the last fifteen years, the result of a growing demand for labour in an expanding economy.

Recognising the need to attract a more diverse student intake into teacher preparation courses, the recent Review of Post-Primary Education (2002) argued that it is highly desirable to ensure greater participation in teacher education by students from diverse backgrounds. This approach dovetails with OECD policy generally in relation to the need for more flexible entry routes to the teaching profession (OECD, 2005).

The matter of where teacher preparation should take place

The matter of where teacher preparation should take place has been one of the “most vigorously debated” issues throughout the history of formal teacher education (Zeichner, 2008:263). As Robinson (2008:385) notes, “the history of teacher preparation provides ample evidence of tensions between the liberal arts and professional conceptions, between theoretical and clinical preparation, between university-based and school-based approaches”. Over recent decades, however, the universitisation of teacher education has emerged as a dominant trend internationally, with teacher preparation programmes also being increasingly available at Masters and Doctorate degree level. This development is indicative both of the drive for quality and the perceived need to promote the professionalisation of teaching.

At the European level, the latter development has become more pronounced since 1999, with what has become known as the Bologna process seeing the brokering of an agreement to make higher education qualifications across European countries more comparable. This process, which aims to create a European Higher Education Area by 2010, has led to significant restructuring of higher education degree programmes, aimed at ensuring that all teacher preparation be provided in university-level institutions. Among the arguments advanced for quite some time to support university-led teacher preparation, and which are still drawn upon, are that in democratic societies, universities are centres for the “free, open and independent pursuit of knowledge” and that therefore education and teacher preparation should be subject to such free and independent enquiry (Kelly, 1993:125). A related argument which also still has currency is that positioning teacher education within the

university fosters “a theoretical mission” within a more field-based terrain (Goodson, 1997:18) which helps to retain teachers’ professional knowledge in the face of movements which would lead to a more practice-based, technicist and ultimately reductive enterprise.

These developments provide no great challenge in Ireland. As noted earlier, secondary school preparation in the nation has strong roots within the university sector historically, which means that the academic knowledge base of initial teacher education is strong. The available teacher preparation courses are provided by thirteen separate institutions nationally. The main providers of consecutive courses are the four constituent colleges of the National University of Ireland, along with Trinity College Dublin. A mix of both concurrent and consecutive programmes are offered by the remaining institutions. Although each enjoys considerable autonomy, all are subject to regulation by the Teaching Council, which, under the Teaching Council Act (2001) is empowered to review and accredit programmes of teacher education and training for the purpose of registration. With field-based experience a core feature of consecutive teacher education programmes, providers typically work closely with partner schools on the professional formation of student teachers. Also, while not suggesting a reduction in the emphasis on the theoretical components of courses, a recent review of post-primary teacher education has recommended even closer links between universities and schools via the establishment of partnership boards, comprising the representatives of placement sites and teacher educators (Advisory Group on Post-Primary Teacher Education, 2002:13).

The matter of what should be the curriculum of the teacher preparation programme There is considerable commonality in the curriculum of initial teacher preparation programmes in most developed countries (Buchberger, Campos, Kallos & Stephenson, 2000). In the main, the structural framework comprises the following four areas: academic subjects, educational sciences (foundation disciplines), the pedagogy of school subjects, and teaching practice. In the Irish context, courses broadly follow this pattern in accordance with the requirements laid down by the national Teaching Council, although there is a certain amount of institutional autonomy regarding the interpretation of guidelines. The foundation disciplines, professional studies and practice teaching form the backbone of the principal teacher preparation programmes which prepare students to become secondary school teachers.

Regarding the foundation disciplines, it is noteworthy that while there has, since the 1990s, been a move away in some countries from areas such as the history, psychology, philosophy and sociology of education in favour of a more practice-oriented focus (Simon, 1994), they remain central to pre-service programmes in Ireland. Also, as with courses in curriculum and assessment, inclusion and ICT, the expectation is that they be enquiry based and provide the foundation for reflective practice.

Professional studies in the pedagogy of the student teacher’s specialist subjects also form a core part of courses. These are directed towards the age

range 12–18 and there is the expectation that the principles of lifelong learning will be emphasised. Those students pursuing a post-graduate diploma in education study the pedagogical aspects of two school subjects on the curriculum of secondary schools, while the teacher preparation in such specialist areas as physical education, home economics, art and construction studies are constructed so that student teachers follow more specialist tracks in concurrent degree courses. These students are expected to teach their main subject and, if possible, a subsidiary subject, to complete their contractual teaching load.

Courses also include practice in teaching under supervision which is typically undertaken in a recognised secondary school. A minimum number of direct teaching hours is required in one or more approved subjects and this must be under the direct supervision of personnel from the university or college concerned. In contrast to the experience in some other countries where the contact between the university supervisor and the student teacher is minimal and the supervisor is often viewed as a “disenfranchised outsider” (Slick, 1998), supervisors on pre-service teacher preparation programmes are typically viewed as central to the development of the student teacher. Supervisors are usually experienced teachers of long standing, with the majority being still practising in the classroom. They are selected on the basis of their pedagogical expertise and guide the student teacher in the development of core pedagogical skills. Education departments in the universities typically work closely with a cluster of partner schools to ensure that teaching internships can be facilitated and experienced practising teachers play a key role in mentoring student teachers.

The matter of who the teacher educators should be

As with teachers in Ireland generally, as we argue in the next section of this paper, secondary school teacher educators have had high status in Irish society since the first Education departments were established. This can be attributed partly to the fact that, from the outset, they and their departments were located within the university sector, one of the most prestigious institutions in Irish society. Such prestige, in turn, can be ascribed at least to some extent to the strong interest taken in the universities by the Churches, with Trinity College Dublin for long being associated with the Anglican Church, and the National University of Ireland and its constituent colleges being strongly under Catholic influence until recent decades. Also, there was no ambiguity about the purpose of Education departments from their inception; they were, first and foremost, concerned with teacher preparation. Thus, they were spared many of the tensions with manifested themselves, particularly in universities in the US, around debates as to whether university Education departments should be concerned primarily with research, or with the preparation of personnel for the profession.

Teacher educators — a group termed second-order practitioners by Murray (2002) — have typically arrived at an academic career in Ireland, as in various other countries, in a less structured or conventional way than other

academics. The majority have tended to be former teachers, confirming the widely-held view that field experience is important. This state of affairs also has the advantage of ensuring that classroom teachers and student teachers are confident that their work is being overseen by personnel whose 'currency' within the classroom is strong.

The situation as outlined so far has also benefited from the fact that while a considerable proportion of staff have tended to be part-time, they have typically been educated to at least Master's level and have worked predominantly in the areas of supervision and subject methodologies. At the same time, it is recently coming to be recognised that in the area of individual school-subject pedagogy in particular, it would be desirable to have permanent staff members who could integrate issues around subject methodology more closely with the broader theoretical components of courses. A recent review of secondary school education commented on this, stating that new posts should be created to allow for the recruitment of "teacher education professionals with specialisms in curricular areas who could be appointed as Course Leaders in the area of teaching methodology" (Advisory Group on Post-primary Teacher Education, 2002:13).

There are other long-ingrained practices which have also served to maintain the high status of teacher educators, especially amongst the teaching profession and student teachers. Regarding teaching placement supervision, for example, while the bulk of the work is typically carried out by part-time staff, university personnel are usually also involved in school visits in order to promote coherence and quality assurance, and to build greater university-school partnerships. Further, in the majority of cases, university Education departments offer professional development support for their part-time staff members.

Over recent years also, there has been a push in all Education departments in Ireland, in line with a major push across the Irish university sector as a whole, for staff to be more research active. One consequence is that the entry criteria for permanent posts as teacher educators has been raised. In particular, the general requirement is that applicants for full-time positions will have a PhD degree. The expectation is that as well as conducting and publishing research, teacher educators will also develop curricula, teach courses and work with schools. It may well be that this 'double bind of teacher education', as Gitlin (2000) refers to it, will lead to tensions in the near future. On the other hand, the remit of the recently established Teaching Council to promote research on teaching and teacher education may result in an approach to research which will bridge the theory-practice divide and thus further enhance, rather than detract from, the status of teacher educators.

The matter of the attitude of the wider societal culture to beginning graduate teachers As noted earlier, teaching in Ireland carries a high social status and teachers typically enjoy good levels of public support. To date, there has been no research which has traced the nature and extent of the situation historically,

such as that conducted by DePaepe and Simon on Belgium (1997). At the same time, various attitudinal surveys have indicated that teaching is one of the most highly regarded professions by the public (Coolahan, 2003). The significant involvement of religious personnel historically has no doubt helped to foster this situation and, in turn, make teacher education attractive for high-quality graduates.

Acknowledging the central role of the teacher historically in Irish society, the OECD in its *Reviews of National Policies for Education: Ireland* (OECD, 1991:77) noted that “the local teacher was a person of consequence in local society, acting as teacher, but also as counselor and peacemaker when necessary”. The high regard in which teachers were held in their communities can also be attributed to “a distinguished tradition of professional dedication and service” (Coolahan, 1981:231), with the general pattern amongst the great majority being that they made teaching their sole career. The control of the majority of the schools by the Catholic Church and the great attachment of the Irish to their religion also meant that teaching was associated with spiritual matters as much as secular ones.

The long-standing regard for teaching and teachers lived on well after Ireland’s position as a predominantly rural society had changed. In 1991, in a time of economic recession, it was noted that morale amongst the teaching force was high. This was considered not surprising since, as it was put, everyone “speaks of the excellent quality of the teaching force and the respected status of teachers in society” (OECD, 1991:78). It was further added:

Most practising teachers have few reservations about their own professional competence and their good standing in society. Moreover, they enjoy certain satisfactory conditions of service. Their salaries are relatively high *vis-à-vis* other professions and compared with the low remuneration of teachers in certain other OECD countries.

The OECD added to this that the autonomy of Irish teachers in the classroom “is legendary” and that “their relations with their employing authorities are generally cordial”. Things have not changed much since then. Although a highly unionized profession, the teaching profession’s status remains high in the public eye and the teacher unions have effectively represented the interests of the profession in a sequence of national partnership agreements brokered since 1987.

Some areas for consideration regarding the situation in South Africa

Because Ireland is different in so many ways, one might be excused for thinking that the exposition outlined so far offers little that might be instructive for South Africa. Such a view, however, overlooks an argument which has a long tradition in comparative education, namely, that only by understanding the workings of other education systems is it possible to fully comprehend and appreciate one’s own (Noah, 1986). Recent work by O’Sullivan, Maarman and Wolhuter (2008) comparing certain aspects of the teacher education curriculum in both South Africa and Ireland, serves to illustrate this point. In similar

vein, the present paper is valuable in illustrating for teacher educationalists in South Africa that at a time when there is a great deal of talk about a crisis in teaching across much of the English-speaking world, about the quality of teachers leaving much to be desired, and about the quality of student outcomes dropping, Ireland stands out as one of a number of countries in which this is not the situation. To put it another way, Ireland is a country that can provide inspiration to nations such as South Africa which are seeking to raise the quality of their teachers and their teacher education, and indicate what is possible once the culture is predisposed towards bringing about such a situation.

It would be a major paper in itself to detail all of the more specific implications that can be drawn for the South African situation from this Ireland case study. However, detailing a number of them serves to illustrate the possibilities. At the broad level, it is useful to be reminded that Ireland is a state which successfully managed to form a new identity after years of political struggle and to then successfully plough its own furrow in education, including teacher education. More specifically, it is instructive that it managed in more recent times to move all of its teacher education programmes from colleges to universities, with excellent results. Thus, it is suggested that there is no reason why the same development in South Africa in more recent times should not have similar outcomes. Equally, the Irish experience indicates that, with appropriate capacity-building, there is nothing to fear from the current emphasis being placed on the importance of teacher educators in South Africa engaging in research and reporting their results in the academic literature.

Two other recent developments in teacher education in South Africa are also evident in Ireland, where they cause no concern whatsoever, even though they go against movements elsewhere. The first of these is that there has been no movement towards a more extensive component of school-based teacher education (Department of Education, 2007). Secondly, the downgrading of teacher education qualifications has not taken root (Robinson & Christie, 2008:153). In making these observations, of course, the current authors are not so naïve as to overlook the enormity of the issues which face both the educational system generally, and teacher education in particular, in South Africa. Rather, the point that is being made is that in a world of general gloom about teacher education, Ireland is one country which not only shares with South Africa, but also values, developments which go against international trends.

Those charged with educational policy-making in South Africa might also benefit from being cognisant of problems currently being highlighted in teacher education in Ireland so that they might be pre-empted and be addressed, when and if necessary, through a sustained focus. Principal amongst these is the failure to equip teachers as career-long learners in an environment where there should be a strong linkage between initial teacher education, induction and continuing professional development (Coolahan, 2003). In line with current OECD (2005; 2008) trends, a National Pilot Project on Teacher

Induction was established in response to a clearly articulated need to support newly qualified teachers. However, while welcomed by all stakeholders, the programme remains operational only on a pilot basis.

Another problem being highlighted centres on the importance of facilitating a more research-based approach to teaching in line with government policy which has given much higher priority to investment in research more generally. While such an approach was recommended in two recent reviews of teacher preparation at both primary and secondary school level, it has led to no significant initiatives being taken. Equally, while the importance of providing greater opportunities for reflective practice and for teacher research have been widely endorsed, the nature of the already overloaded teacher preparation courses is such that the operationalisation of such objectives has proved problematic (Harford & MacRuairc, 2008).

Finally, a growing culture of evaluation, in line with international trends, has become an integral part of educational policy in Ireland and resulted in a fundamental shift for the majority of teachers. The introduction of whole-school evaluation and school development planning during the 1990s has proved difficult for many, particularly those at secondary level who historically have not engaged in collaborative planning or evaluation processes. While the need for some model of evaluation and for accountability is widely acknowledged in the education community, this remains a contested area. Although a culture of performativity is not embedded in current practices, it is nonetheless becoming more visible in relation to discussions around school improvement and target setting (MacRuairc & Harford, 2008). Of particular concern is the recent associated move towards recognising distance teacher education agencies. Reductionist models of distance learning, it is feared, could narrow the knowledge base of teacher preparation and jeopardise the status of teacher preparation programmes. This should provide the most salutary lesson of all; at a time when so-called market forces are driving government economic management, there is a possibility that policy makers will sacrifice a system of teacher education based on deep-seated moral and liberal educational objectives built up over many years for predominantly fiscal and short-term objectives. One would hope that in South Africa, policy makers would not even contemplate such a possibility.

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Authors

Tom O'Donoghue is Professor of Education in the Graduate School of Education, The University of Western Australia. His research interests are history of education, international education and qualitative research methods.

Judith Harford is Director of Teaching and Learning at the School of Education, University College Dublin. Her research interests are gender and education, history of education and teacher education policy.