
That was the Crisis: what is to be done to fix Irish education now?

FINTAN O'MAHONY

ABSTRACT In 2008 Ireland found itself in the forefront of the Eurozone crisis. The impact on education has been profound. In this article it is suggested that Ireland's education problems long pre-date the economic crisis and current 'reforms' are about long-term neoliberal restructuring, not short-term solutions to immediate economic problems. Rather than treat teachers as the problem, there is a need to work with the profession and to reclaim the value of education for its own sake. Teacher unions are central to mobilising around this much more optimistic vision of education.

The economic crisis in Ireland was not the cause of the introduction of education reforms, but the experience of the 2008 crash has provided the occasion and opportunity for dusting down previously shelved attempts at educational change and given new impetus to their implementation under the cloak of 'necessary austerity'.

When the term 'austerity' is applied to any reform, of course it becomes easy to dismiss it, but it doesn't make it easier to challenge it. In 2008, when cuts were first being applied to public services, the issue for Irish teachers was to place education at the heart of a plan of recovery, and to make the case to ring-fence education from the cutbacks. Despite demonstrations, delegations, debates and even a day on the picket line, they failed. Ireland's experience of the 2008 financial crisis has had a major impact on the country's schools and those who study and work in them.

The long-term damage resulting from the crisis has been substantial. To choose just two examples from many that hurt education and teachers deeply: first, guidance counsellors, who were an *ex quota* entitlement for schools, were diluted back to the general allocation of teaching jobs; and second, and to all Irish teachers' discredit, the pay of new entrants to the profession was uncoupled from the pay of their more established colleagues, creating a two-tier workforce in which new teachers were badly disadvantaged. The correct

response, in education and across society, teachers were told, was to *muddle through*. *Things will improve, education will recover, a rising tide lifts all boats*. Restoring education to its rightful place at the heart of a functioning society is still the goal, but we have to have a functioning society first.

Most commentary in Ireland neglects to mention the way education in particular has been a victim of the mutton dressed as lamb that is austerity pretending to be reform, but such reforms are evident in England, in the USA, in Denmark, in Brazil, in Argentina, where, as here, teachers who stand up for themselves are portrayed as dangerous outsiders. In Ireland the experience has perhaps been more benign. Despite horrendous attacks on teachers' pay and pensions, schools have, for the most part, continued on as normal, with teachers teaching, students learning and a renewed focus on education to the exclusion of distracting administrative tasks. It is the case that Ireland has not experienced the overt privatisation that is a feature of many other jurisdictions. The question remains though, what of the future?

Although privatisation looks less conspicuous, there has, however, been a very obvious rise of managerialism in Irish education. The arrival of the business model with market principles is the most insidious shadow of the global education reform movement (GERM) in Ireland. The drive is on to turn students and their parents into consumers, and teachers into box-ticking bureaucrats. The effect of this trend is to make school more about process than about knowledge, more about measuring and learning outcomes than about relationships. This neoliberal agenda is most obvious in 'pay deals' (rather, exercises in how deep cuts will be), which introduced longer hours for less pay for teachers; within education the discussion has shifted to how to limit this influence, not how to reverse it. But when education becomes wrapped up in managerialism we make the mistake of making economics the reason for doing or not doing anything. Instead we should focus on critiquing the policy decisions which alienate us. There's nothing wrong with having an education 'system', but developing a bureaucracy where data is prioritised over student or teacher well-being commodifies education. Our professional lives become stuff that can be bought and sold when education policy transforms parents and students into consumers.

Until recently we teachers felt that the public perception of teachers in Ireland was poor, with countless media stories decrying the attitudes and actions of teachers as unworthy of respect. A particular feature of austerity is the way it has been used to set up divisions between different sections of society, for example between private and public sector employees. Teachers have often been presented in the media as privileged and only representing vested interests. One particular feature of these developments has been a marginalising of professional opinion and an advocacy for reforms across education that have little connection with professional opinion. The favoured approach has been to develop education policy outside of any meaningful engagement with teachers and the teaching profession. The real experts are not asked.

This has been most evident in relation to the reform of Junior Cycle, the exams taken by students after three years in secondary education. The reform

itself is the latest version of an item on the Department of Education's agenda for forty years and, to be brief about it, entails a mixture of state exams and school-based assessment. It is the latter that Irish teachers have a particular problem with, and though internationally the push is on to give schools the responsibility for assessment, the argument against the idea in Ireland, beyond just a desire to engage in a form of 'educational tourism', has been well articulated – so well articulated, in fact, that it has won the support of almost all teachers, a majority of parents, and even students and the media have begun to accept the idea that teachers may in fact know best when it comes to reform. It is now plain that the plans for Junior Cycle have major implications for teachers but there is wholly inadequate provision for teachers' professional development and no proper resources for schools.

Such has been the opposition to the reforms that both unions representing second-level teachers in Ireland (the Association of School Teachers of Ireland [ASTI] and the Teachers' Union of Ireland [TUI]) have been involved in strike action on the issue – the first time the two unions have taken such action on a purely educational/professional issue. This campaign, not over as I write, has taught us one important thing: taking principled action is a unifying force for teachers and their unions. It is action that has won a series of concessions from the Minister for Education and put teachers back at the table shaping the reform. A further positive development is that public opinion of teachers seems to have shifted somewhat on the basis that teachers have emerged as the defenders of educational standards.

It is, of course, hard to remain optimistic when teaching in Ireland is increasingly a casualised profession, where new entrants to the classroom face unsettled, nomadic and stuttering careers without stability or a clear path into the profession. The lives of our newest professional colleagues are unrecognisable from the start to a career that I had. They experience a different pay scale to teachers qualified before them, they have had allowances for further study capped or wiped away and they often 'double job' because they are unable to get a full week's work. Despite these experiences, the myth that teaching is a permanent, pensionable job for life lives on in much of the public commentary on Irish teaching and education.

The link between all these trends in education is that in Ireland education is being separated from teaching. The control a teacher might expect in the classroom is not mirrored by a control over the education system itself. Faced with marginalisation in the reform process, in decisions about pay and conditions and in the way our most vulnerable colleagues are treated, the only answer is action. Irish education has been paralysed by fear for the last seven years, fear of where the next cut will come from. However, as we approach an election in early 2016, and note the positive reception of the arguments on reform our recent strike has received, there is a developing opportunity in Ireland to change the direction of reform.

Public service as a need, a right, and not a luxury, is the wider context in which GERM has arrived in Ireland. Although Ireland prides itself on its

commitment to education (the land of saints and scholars), the reality is that public service and public education are honoured more in word than in any investment. It appears that powerful voices want to sacrifice public services in order to maintain a system that was indifferent to those public services in the first place. These voices regard teachers as an obstacle to their agenda: low tax, low headcounts, minimal investment. It is Thatcherism, lauding the disappearing state and despising those who work for the benefit of society. The talk now is of 'pay restoration', investment and reversing emergency measures on teachers' employment conditions; Irish teachers would be forgiven for declaring all this talk as cheap.

What is clear is that whatever the local talk, the imperatives that drive education policy in Ireland are those that come from outside the country. The most obvious way Irish education has crossed paths with GERM is in the international rush to measure educational achievement with Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 'scores'. The Irish scores haven't changed in over a decade and yet the figures in 2009 were used to usher in a wave of change in a panic in schools. The reality is that it does not make sense to compare different groups of students from different backgrounds, doing a test that varies from place to place, and expect to achieve uniform data. Nonetheless, the 'poor' results in 2009 were taken as a crisis in Irish education that could only be fixed with a concentration on the things PISA tests: numeracy and literacy became the new buzzwords. What the government really wanted was to do better in the tests of course. When the 2012 figures showed a marked 'improvement' in Irish students' results, we were told the reforms were a sign of how much could be achieved in a short space of time; no time was given to examine the flawed methodology of PISA which would probably allow any country to rise or fall randomly over any given period. What is of more concern is how any improvement is attributed to the reform rather than those who implement it, or indeed those who sit the standardised test.

No policy maker or reform zealot in Ireland talks about what education is really for. Beyond being 'jobs ready' or 'uniquely employable' they have no clue about how education is supposed to set one free; it is not about standardisation and compliance. Education is for growth, for questions and answers, not for pat solutions or the easy way out. Irish teachers have felt that this reforming zeal goes back further than the crisis, that they are the victims of forces beyond their control: economic forces, political and social forces, the force of a negative public discourse that is being driven by those with an alternative agenda. Irish teachers have felt for a generation that they have no real say in shaping their work lives or determining how best to use education as anything more now than a clinical data-gathering exercise. This alienation expresses itself in the shortness of many teaching careers, the 'muddling through' mentioned earlier. Somewhere someone made the decision that education is measurable, that you either measure up or you are nothing; that's what alienates teachers: they refuse to write people off. To measure educational attainment in terms of money spent denies us the opportunity to enrich the lives of all our citizens; we need to place

education at the centre of our society, not marginalise it. Give teachers credit: they equip people for life, not to be economic units, but to be social contributors.

Education issues in Ireland, such as Junior Cycle reform, or the plight of many newer teachers, or the effects of austerity on education, are often presented to us as necessary because of, or unfortunate by-products of, economic forces nobody really has control over. We are all victims of this sorcery: like the audience at a magic show we know we've been tricked; we don't know how, but we all go along for the ride. This makes it all right that we don't consult professionals on reform, or allow hundreds of teachers to leave the country or leave children without the mental health supports they need; it's not how the trick is performed, it's the end result that is magical and diverting, briefly anyway.

That is why we now need to strengthen our resolve through our teachers' unions. Battered, derided and ignored by many teachers without doubt, the teachers' unions remain the only leaders that will listen when we shout, that will act on our behalf, nationally, internationally.

That is why the ASTI has filled the gap by asking teachers to strike in opposition to Junior Cycle reform. Only through concerted and united action were we able to say we stood up for education, that we were leaders, proving that the time has come for educators to take back education and place it at the heart of teachers' unions' work and to restore it to its rightful place at the heart of a functioning society. In that respect the action has served a purpose beyond the aims of the ASTI. It has placed discussion of education centre stage, beyond the media frenzy around exam results and the focus of the Easter union conventions.

The biggest problem our unions face is our lack of ideas – ideas about where we want to go rather than the warmth of where we are, about how we are perceived by others and how to confirm or change the views they have about us; we should be talking about the way a teacher trade union should operate in the future, talking about the managerialism at work in education, about how economics dominates every discussion on teaching and learning. The prevailing view of trade unions is that they are about money; what the reality is doesn't matter, that's the perception.

But in order to deal with these economic or political sleights of hand teachers should re-engage and reclaim their unions. Our unions could become places where we could talk about the transformation of education, about setting the agenda, instead of waiting for the latest initiative to reject; where we critically reflect on the place of education and educators in our society; where we draw on the skills and expertise of our members to inform reasoned change and training.

Acknowledging that ideas and research, knowledge and experience are central to a trade union's reason to be should drive us on. Taking every opportunity to talk to teachers in their schools should be a prerequisite for elected representatives; this would greatly benefit policy decision making.

Teachers talk all the time; they have a voice. If they were invited to express themselves on the future of education or the future of their unions and if we, the leaders of our unions, are willing to listen to them, we can create and propagate an agenda which, if not listened to by outside bodies, will incur our wrath. Only when we have a counter-argument to remove every boulder they throw in the road will we know our own strength. Of course, without developing a means of dialogue with those who oppose our view, we cannot get to a position where our might can be exercised, for as long as we refuse to understand them, or refuse to allow them to understand us, we cannot be confident that our ideas are worth standing up for. There are meaningful ways of not merely 'communicating education', but of communicating as educators.

When education is reduced to economic arguments for making profit it is reduced to insignificance. There is no price too high for the emancipation an individual can achieve through education. When educators, and those to be educated, are excluded from decision making, democracy is replaced by profit and loss and we create a society where success is judged purely by economic success. Without the work teachers do, everyone would be less well off; how many economists can say that? Appreciating education is central to any recovery of a nation's self-respect, and that trumps economic indicators every time.

FINTAN O'MAHONY is a member of the Standing Committee of the ASTI, Ireland's largest secondary teachers' union. He was an unsuccessful candidate for the Vice Presidency of the ASTI in April. He teaches English and History at Scoil Mhuire, Carrick-on-Suir, tweets [@levdavidovic](#) and blogs at [levdavidovic.wordpress.com](#) *Correspondence:* natnif2@yahoo.ie