

Challenging, Confronting and Choosing "New Appraisal" in Initial Teacher Education in the Primary Sector in the Republic of Ireland

Jim Deegan

1975 was a good year for the quality and quantity of entrants to the five colleges of primary teacher education in Dublin and Limerick. I'm saying so somewhat immodestly of myself and what I reckon was approximately 1,000 other entrants to the colleges who were "called to teacher training" that year. This was a time when "the call" still had something of a divine ring to it. To paraphrase, Garrison Keeler of Lake Woebegone and National Public Radio (NPR) fame in the US—the girls were many, the boys were few, and all the entrants were above average intelligence. It was a time when "threshold competences" (those competences that you needed to get in) were rooted in heritage dimensions, with places on programme secured through a combination of Leaving Certificate examination results and interviews for general suitability, music, and oral Irish. What I would describe as "practice shock" hit hard and early within weeks of the first term and was referred to ironically as Christmas Teaching Practice. The ill fate of some was already sealed before the first frost. The modus operandi for appraisal on teaching practice was always clouded in mystery and surprise and a few truly memorable idiosyncratic moments.

—Reflections of the author as a student teacher "being appraised". in 1975

Introduction

The above reflection stems from my thinking about the kinds of appraisal—estimates of value, merit, amount, and quality—that are currently under consideration in initial teacher education in the primary sector (ITE/Primary) in the Republic of Ireland. The reader can decide how, and in what ways things have changed or remained as they were? One thing is certain—the future will not be as gradual or incremental as the past and the mysteries and surprises are more likely to come from Bologna, Prague or Berlin. This is why the title of the paper is predicated on action—challenging (the status quo), confronting (business-as-usual) and choosing (collaboratively with mutuality of purpose)—actions that have not generally featured as part of the discourse decorum on ITE/Primary.

In recent years there have been positive developments on teacher policies generally but comparatively little on teacher education policies in ITE/Primary. While Drudy (2004) states that "the initial impetus for this period of change and reform of the education system in the Republic of Ireland came from an external source—the 1991 OECD Review of Education—much of the subsequent reform proposals and changes have emanated from review bodies and policy documents generated within the system and the wider Irish society" (*ibid.* p 31), the author goes on to say that "we are only now beginning to

realise the impact of educational change initiated at a European level" (*ibid.* p 31). The task of comparing national and international policy agendas and frameworks is, nevertheless, one of key importance given the -rippling out" of the Bologna Declaration of 1999 to all countries working towards the creation of a European Higher Education Act (EHEA) in 2010.

In this paper, I briefly describe the content and form of the cultures of ITE/Primary. Next I describe findings from a small-scale study of how student teachers are currently appraised on teaching practice. Then I describe the competences/learning outcomes outlined in The TUNING Project of 2000 (Gonzalez and Wagenaar, 2003). Finally I describe what I believe to be the conversation that needs to take place in advance of official decisions on "new appraisal"—competences/learning outcomes—in ITE/Primary. I focus this section of the paper through the particular lens of how we need to get ready for the everyday realities of diversity in schools, classrooms, and colleges/universities.

The Content and Form of Cultures in ITE/Primary

The content and form of cultures of ITE/Primary has historically been characterized by individualism and balkanization. We know little about unique and contingent features within particular teacher education programmes and less about systemic features across programmes, notwithstanding the discourse on policy and planning generated at meetings and publications of the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS), the Colleges of Education Research Consortium (CERC), the Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) and the review body and policy reports of the last decade. The cumulative discourse, however, privileges the structural over the ideological and moral dimensions of ITE/Primary. These are the dimensions that challenge and confront teacher educators' own "substantive attitudes, values, beliefs, habits, assumptions, [and] ways of doing things" (Hargreaves, 1992, p. 219). These are the nodal points where I believe we need to start a fresh conversation on ITE/Primary. These are where choice lies. This absence of a substantive and relevant literature on the ideological and moral dimensions of ITE/Primary is compounded by paradigmatic, epistemological, political, cultural and economic variables.

The marking of turf boundaries and partisan agendas have until recently conspired to keep things the way they are in ITE/Primary and indeed the potential for synergies and collaborations across contexts and settings has yet to be fully realized. There have been no big bang theories about teacher education as a technical problem in the fifties, a problem-solving problem in the eighties or a policy problem in

the present millennium like those that have existed in the relevant international discourse. There have been no paradigm wars about reflectivity or constructivism, notwithstanding their integration in the Primary Curriculum of 1999, publications of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and programme overviews and course syllabi in teacher education colleges. Yet this has occurred with little critical and inquiring discourse in official publications. Where ITE/Primary has been conceptualised as a "problematic," it has been almost exclusively to redress capital funding on the physical side and teacher supply agendas. These foci have been necessary and few would argue that building state-of-the-art learning settings and focusing on attracting, developing and retaining quality teachers are not worthwhile and meaningful endeavours. The questions that arise however are: Who is setting the agenda for the moral and ideological bases in ITE/Primary? Who owns and holds the blueprint for reform, renewal and change in ITE/Primary? Who manages and who implements policy in

ITE/Primary? Who challenges? Who confronts? Who chooses?

One notable exception in the pattern of inconsistencies and uncertainties in ITE/Primary was the short-lived impetus generated at the turn-of-the-century with the publication of the report Preparing Teachers for the 21st Century: Report of the Working Group on Primary Preservice Teacher Education (Kelleghan, 2002). The seeds of this impetus on ITE/Primary have a long lineage going back as far, at least, a half-century to what Coolahan (2004) described as "the creditable work" from the mid-sixties to the mid-eighties, through "the slowdown" and "policy wobbles" of the late eighties, to the surge of statutory and policy frameworks in the nineties. This long overdue report raised some challenging issues and concerns regarding the role and relationship between education sciences and teacher education competences/learning outcomes and the relationship of Education to other subject areas. This is the stuff of contemporary international discourse in ITE all around the world. Five years later the report is yellowing with age, paradoxically suspended in a policy limbo. As Kelleghan (2004) noted, "the delay may in part be due to the extreme pressure to increase teacher supply in recent years, though that, while it might affect implication, should not necessarily have affected planning." (p. 25). Using Goffman's (1959) "stage metaphor," ITE/Primary has languished in the "back regions" as opposed to the "front regions" on the national higher educational stage, and has yet to achieve the profile and prominence of the humanities, business, engineering, and bio-medical sciences. Indeed, ITE/Primary remained virtually untouched by outside influences until the publication The Bologna Declaration of 1999 which is impelling unprecedented official interest and attention with its focus on coherence and consistency in all of higher education in the EU.

Appraisal Patterns and Variations in ITE/Primary

Using a 'mix' of informal and semi-structured interviews with faculty engaged in teaching practice, documentary data on teaching practice guidelines, and a form of speculative analysis, I identified a set of patterns and variations on how student teachers are currently being appraised on teaching practice. The following findings are indicative of the work that needs to be done within and across colleges in mapping appraisal in ITE/Primary and TUNING with its focus on competences/learning outcomes.

- Content, performance and professional competences on teaching practice were evident across settings, with variations regarding how professional competence is defined and measured.
- Grade descriptors are evident across settings and are used as an objective measure of the competency level of a student teacher during teaching practice, with variations in the role and status of grade descriptors, and the range of grading formats used.
- Openness, transparency and accountability are evident across settings, with variations in how, and in what ways a student teacher can appeal a teaching practice grade, and how a supervisor defends a grade and to whom and in what forum.
- Methods for calibrating grades received for teaching practice are evident across settings, with variations in the status of different teaching practice placements across the three years of programmes.
- Decisions regarding the calibration of teaching practice grades are systematically ordered and sequenced across settings, with variation in the moderation process, and the roles and responsibilities of college supervisors and external examiners.
- The status of teaching practice grades is evident across settings, with variations regarding the weighting given to different teaching practice placements in the overall degree award.
- Teaching practice is an established feature in academic calendars and prospectuses across settings, with variations in the duration and the allocation of timetable slots to teaching practice.

- The eligible pool of teaching practice supervisors is drawn mainly from college faculty across settings, with variations in the role played generally and specifically with regard to particular teaching practice placements by contract supervisors.

What this survey indicates is that there are significant commonalities in teaching practice appraisal, and variations are more a matter of degree than kind in ITE/Primary. These commonalities represent useful starting points for intra- and inter-college conversation- building on competences/learning outcomes. What remains tacit and taken-for-granted is where programme ideologies, positive dispositions and critical knowledge fit into what is tantamount to a "working consensus" on appraisal in teaching practice. Apple (2005) cautions against this kind of "new common sense" where deep-seated problems are framed in such a way "that only certain answers seem to make sense" (p. x). A greater focus on the ideological and moral dimensions of appraisal in ITE/Primary could potentially yield not only useful differences of degree but also liberating differences of kind. Indicative of a liberating difference would be the development of formal structures for involving supervising teachers in supervising schools as advocated by Cannon (2004) in his review of teaching practice in the teacher education colleges and the Kelleghan Report (2002).

TUNING Educational Structures in Europe

The TUNING Project is a project by and for universities and is the Universities' response to The Bologna Declaration. The name TUNING was chosen for the project to reflect the idea that universities are not looking for harmonization of their degree programmers or prescriptive or definitive European curricula but simply points of reference, convergences and common understanding. TUNING presents the following key operational definitions that are essential for a reading and understanding of how competences/learning outcomes will be conceptualized and developed in the future. Two of the animating definitions of the project follow.

1. Competences represent a dynamic combination of knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities. Fostering competences is the object of educational programmes. Competences will be formed in various course units and assessed at different stages.

- Learning Outcomes are statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of learning. They can refer to a single course unit or module or else to a period of studies, for example, first and second cycle programmes. Learning outcomes specify the requirements for award of credit.

TUNING with its goal of identifying points of reference for generic (or transferable skills) and subject-specific competences of first and second cycle graduates represents the most coherent and cogent expression of the Bologna action lines so far and potentially the strongest challenge to prevailing appraisal orthodoxies in ITE/Primary. Recent conceptual refinements include a shift in emphasis from a staff oriented approach to a student centred approach, less specialized academic education in the first and second cycles, and more flexibility in first and second cycle programmes. TUNING conceptually splits the kindred ideas of education sciences and teacher education competences. An overview of the twin and interrelated features of educational sciences and teacher education competences follows.

Educational Sciences

Ability to analyse educational, concepts, theories and issues of policy in a systematic way

Ability to identify potential connections between aspects of subject knowledge and their application in educational policies and contexts

Ability to reflect on one's own value system

Ability to question concepts and theories encountered in the Education Sciences

Ability to recognize diversity of learners and the complexities of the learning process

Awareness of the different contexts in which learning can take place

Awareness of the different roles of participants in the learning process

Understanding of the purposes and structures of the education systems

Ability to conduct educational research in different contexts

Counselling skills

Ability to manage projects for school improvement/development

Ability to manage educational programmes

Ability to evaluate educational/program materials

Ability to foresee educational needs and demands

Ability to lead or co-ordinate multidisciplinary teams

Teacher Education Competences

Commitment to learners' progress and achievement

Competence in a number of teaching and learning strategies

Competence in counselling learners and parents

Knowledge of the subject to be taught

Ability to communicate effectively with groups and individuals

It would be foolhardy to dismiss such aspirational and broad-based themes and the general principles underlying them. It is worth noting, however, the "red flags" that a number of leading teacher educators have raised about standards and competences and associated political agendas in the US and UK.

Furlong, Barton, Miles, Whiting, and Whitty warned against how standards and competences have been used in the UK to "invent content"—where the most important influence on the content of training was the 'market' to which students were increasingly exposed, that is, practice in schools" (2000, p.149). They also cautioned that issues and concerns related to values, attitudes, and personal qualities are extremely vulnerable in official discourses on standards and competences. There is a tendency to avoid discussions of these issues in ITE/Primary and we need to be extra vigilant in ensuring that the onset of competences/learning outcomes systems do not exacerbate this situation but rather become opportunities for redressing this neglect and omission in the relevant discourse.

In the US, Sergiovanni cautioned against a "standards stampede" which squeezes the "lifeblood" out of education through "an excessive preoccupation on the technical world of standards" (2000. p.75). He also argues that the standards and accountability systems in the US have disenfranchised teachers, parents and students by failing to recognize local passions, needs, values and beliefs. With an eye on a similar concern, Eisner (1995) wrote about how standards can induce a focus on aggregate analyses of behaviour and fail to recognize differences. Here again the vulnerability of the ideological and moral dimensions of ITE/Primary is a serious concern. It is especially acute given the current positive momentum for intercultural and special educational needs teaching and learning and the pedagogical focus on curriculum differentiation in teacher education colleges.

Apple, (2005), also writing about experiences in the US cautioned against neoliberal and neoconservative reforms which attempt to institute marketisation, privatization, and managerialism in teacher education and also their close and unwelcome affinities with "strict accountability and constant and often punitive forms of assessment of students, teachers and teacher education institutions". (p x). Apple makes the telling point that the debate and controversies surrounding standards are not always couched in empirical terms and that this results in an "artificially created consensus about how public

problems are to be "solved" (p. xi) In similar vein, Drudy (2004) with reference to work conducted in University College Dublin as part of TUNING suggests that "as the higher education system moves towards a competences model . . . it will be important to avoid the administrative seductions of systems which are overly prescriptive and reductionist" (2004, p. 32).

Perhaps, Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, and Manning (2001) offered the most immediate concern regarding standards and competences when they stated that "one of the greatest difficulties with standards and the associated assessment of them is that although they make sense subject by subject, collectively they can become overwhelming and confusing." (p. 21). The unpacking of education sciences and teacher education competences and generic and subject area competences/learning outcomes will be a messy business. With these cautions in mind, I now turn to an example of the kind of conversation-building that needs to take place in ITE/Primary in terms of programme ideology, positive dispositions and critical knowledge—what I believe are the vulnerable aspects of competences/learning outcomes systems. Mindful of these cautions, I suggest that there are a slew of issues and concerns that are anterior to a headlong rush into a laundry list of generic and subject area competencies/learning outcomes in ITE/Primary. There is a conversation that needs to take place now before "the competences/learning outcomes stampede."

The Conversation that Needs to Take Place in ITE/Primary

The choices that we make now and how, and in what ways we meet the future will be our legacy for rising generations of young children living in the Republic of Ireland. And while there has been a recent outgrowth of statutory and policy discourses on diversity and education which is resonant throughout TUNING, we know little about the tacit and taken-for-granted everyday realities of diversity—the interactive outcomes of race, ethnicity, gender, class, ability, community, among a range of other social variables—in teacher educators' lives across classrooms, schools, families and communities. The issues and concerns of diversity often lie concealed in the underbrush of the "hidden curriculum" in programmes and courses in teacher education colleges. This section of the paper sets out a context for the kind of conversation that needs to take place in ITE/Primary as a pre-requisite to decisions on competences/learning outcomes. Diversity is used here as a way of highlighting how conversation-building in ITE/Primary could be conceptualised and progressed. Put simply, competences/learning outcomes is the wrong starting place.

If we take the following four indices used internationally to establish the status of education and diversity—participation levels, programmatic provision, pedagogical processes, and human and material resources—we can readily see that we are only beginning to scratch the surface of the national educational landscape on this matter. Specifically we need to systematically take stock of existing participation, provision, processes and resource levels, and consider new ways of responding to diversity in culturally relevant and meaningful ways. Quite simply, we need to prepare tomorrow's teachers to meet the challenges of an increasingly culturally diverse society and help raise diversity to the top of the educational agenda. Herein lies the kernel of the challenge facing all those engaged in ITE/Primary—making connections between programme ideology, positive dispositions and critical knowledge in a deliberative and democratic context. The fundamental question is a pragmatic one: How, and in what ways can we respond to TUNING in ways that does not compromise the integrity of diversity in ITE/Primary?

Programme Ideology

A number of possible and potential resonances are sparked by a pragmatic analysis of TUNING. The first resonance is rooted in the conviction that teaching, learning, curriculum, and assessment for diversity are interrelated and irreducible aspects of any educational agenda. In order to accomplish this challenge, diversity needs to be interwoven throughout all components of teaching, learning curriculum, and teacher education in the educational enterprise. One of the potentially disastrous outcomes for diversity would be an approach that fails to link theories, principles and practices of teaching and learning. Such an approach would manifest itself as a "tack-on" or additive extra to an already over loaded and "choking" programme in ITE/Primary. This raises a caution regarding competences/learning outcomes: Will appraisal renewal and reform contribute to curriculum overload or help to judiciously redistribute priorities?

Diversity should not be treated as an isolated or fragmented phenomenon. One of the most insidious things that could befall diversity is that it would remain strewn in bits and pieces, lost as wishes/hopes in an aspirational curriculum. This approach has been described as the "inoculation approach.- It is tantamount to a situation where teachers and student teachers in initial, induction and in-career contexts receive a sharp jab of diversity at some juncture in their professional development which is intended to last them for all the seasons of their teaching lives. This raises another caution with regard to competences/learning outcomes: How does one account for a developmental trajectory over the

professional lifespan?

One of the ways of counteracting such practices is to conceptualise teaching and teacher education as an alternative way of "thinking and doing." This work will have to begin simultaneously on a number of fronts and with groups and agencies that heretofore have not experienced a strong sense of mutuality of purpose. Teacher educators should take the following steps:

Operationally define their programmatic ideology and orientation to diversity in The idea is not to retreat to essentialist or single-triggering explanations of diversity but to develop interrogative skills for separately and interactively "confronting the dilemmas of race, culture, and language diversity in teacher education- (Cochran- Smith, 1995).

Concluding Remarks

There needs to be many conversations like the one that I have sketched for diversity. The important point is that there needs to be a conversation. And this brings me to the next point that I would like to make in this paper—how, and in what ways we plan and prepare for competences/learning outcomes systems is a choice. To borrow Kelleghan's (2004) comments on good practice in systemic reform and change—planning precedes implementation (and not vice versa). A central question underpinning the choice facing all of us is how, and in what ways we challenge and confront engrained approaches for doing things—what I have described as the comfortable and safe practices of "business as-usual" that typically lie deep in institutional structures. There is always the latent threat of the overweening influence of "the silent negative" in traditionally conservative and hidebound institutional contexts. In this regard, supporting and resourcing university/college teachers, classroom teachers, and student teachers working collaboratively on a mutually agreed agenda for competences/learning outcomes across, school and university settings is an imperative in an open, transparent and accountable system of ITE/Primary in the Republic of Ireland.

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