

Teacher Education in the Republic of Ireland

Introduction

This memorandum for the European Network on Teacher Education Policies provides:-

- A brief outline of the primary and second level educational systems
- Information regarding teacher pre-service education and recognition at the two levels
- An outline of the current examination of primary and second level teacher education
- A description of provision for the in-career development of teachers and
- A brief outline of current developments in early childhood education

1. The Formal School System

At present, compulsory education in the Republic of Ireland is from 6 to 15 years of age. However, under the terms of an Education Welfare Bill that is currently in the final stages of the Parliamentary process and is expected to be enacted before the Summer recess, it is proposed to extend the age of compulsory schooling to 16 years.

Children are eligible for enrolment in infant classes in primary schools when they reach their fourth birthday although enrolment in schools is more usually on the first of September after that event. On the first of January in any year, more than half of all four year olds and almost all five year olds are enrolled in primary schools. Primary schooling, therefore, consists for an eight-year cycle that consists of Junior Infants, Senior Infants and grades 1 to 6.

Pre-School Education has traditionally referred to the education of children who are younger than 4 years. The only State (Department of Education and Science) pre-school provision is through the Early Start Pre-school Project, which the Department of Education and Science has established in primary schools in 40 designated areas of disadvantage. Early Start is a one-year pre-school provision that targets the children in the school catchment areas who are most at risk of educational disadvantage. It is designed to support the transition of the children from the home to formal schooling and to offset the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage in the children's education. Teachers in Early Start are fully qualified primary teachers and there is a total of 1,680 places in the Early Start centres.

There are four types of second level school in the Republic of Ireland – Voluntary, Vocational, Community and Comprehensive. Post-primary schooling consists of a three-year Junior Cycle and a two-year Senior Cycle and young people attend second level schools between the ages of 12 and 18 years. Many schools also offer a one-year “Transition Year Option” immediately after the Junior Cycle.

2. Teacher Pre-Service Education

2.1 Primary Teaching

The great majority of teachers in primary (also called ‘national’) schools, including teachers in “Early Start”, receive their teacher education in one of five Colleges of Education in the State. The basic course in primary teacher education is a three-year full-time Bachelor in Education degree course. Application for admission to the Colleges of Education is through the Central Applications Office (CAO) system for third level education and places in the colleges are allocated in accordance with the CAO process that is based on the common points scale for results in the Leaving Certificate Examination. Primary teaching is held in very high esteem and is deemed to be a very desirable career option, particularly among women and standards in the Leaving

Certificate that are needed to gain access to Colleges of Education are very considerably higher than the stipulated minimum requirements.

A number of College of Education places are reserved each year for mature students i.e., applicants for primary teacher education who are 23 years of age or over on the 1st January on the year the applicant wishes to enter a College of Education. Eligibility is based on the applicants' Leaving Certificate results. The majority of colleges run a separate competition for mature students although, in the case of one college, application is through the CAO process.

An eighteen-month post-graduate course is held in the Colleges of Education from time to time to meet unforeseen teacher supply needs that may arise due to early retirements, increases in teacher numbers or demographic changes.

Finally, teachers who have qualified teacher status in other European Union jurisdictions may apply to the Department of Education and Science for recognition as primary teachers. Teachers from jurisdictions in which the first official language is not English must produce certified evidence or undergo an examination to establish that they have sufficient competence in oral and written English to teach English through the range of grade levels in the primary school and to teach the curriculum through the medium of English. Applicants for recognition, who meet the English language requirement are given restricted recognition which makes them eligible for appointment in special school and in special classes in main-stream schools in which the Irish language is not a curricular requirement. The applicants are also given provisional recognition to teach in main-stream classes for a period of five years. During this period they must complete successfully the Irish language requirement that establishes their competence to teach Irish through the range of grade levels in the primary school and to teach the primary school curriculum through the medium of Irish.

2.2 Second Level Teaching

The conditions relating to registration as a teacher in **voluntary secondary schools** are prescribed by the Registration Council. The Council is a statutorily constituted body that includes representatives of the Universities, of School Management, of Teacher Organisations and of the Minister for Education in its membership. The Council prescribes that each applicant for registration as a secondary teacher must, among other requirements, comply with the following conditions:-

- (a) hold a relevant third-level qualification/degree, which must, in the opinion of the Council, be adequate to enable the holder to teach at least one of the approved subjects or areas of study approved for the purposes of a course of instruction prescribed in the Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools.
- (b) hold a suitable training-in-teaching qualification acceptable to the Council which is directed towards the age range 12 – 18 years. This qualification is most commonly a Higher Diploma in Education.

A course of study leading to a third-level qualification is recognised if the Registration Council considers that the course is suitable for teaching one or more approved subjects. In the case of awarding authorities, the University/College may apply directly to the Council for recognition of that course. A detailed assessment of the qualification, including all possible course options, is carried out. If the Council decides to accept the qualification as being suitable for the purpose of teaching an approved subject(s), it means that any future applicant for registration with the same qualification will be automatically regarded as having an acceptable qualification. A similar process of general recognition applies in relation to third-level institutions that wish to seek approval of training in teaching courses.

Individual recognition applies in circumstances where any applicant, whose qualifications have not received general recognition from the Registration Council, must submit details

of the particular course or courses undertaken in order that the Council may determine their suitability through the same assessment process. Recognition in such cases may be granted to the individual in respect of the particular qualification(s) submitted.

In general, the qualifications required for appointment as a **vocational teacher** in the second-level area are a relevant primary degree ie. the subject(s) in the title of the post must be taken in the final degree examination of a recognised degree-awarding authority. The assessment procedure is carried out by the Vocational Teachers Administration section of the Department of Education and Science. However, the criteria for assessing qualifications are the same as those used by the Registration Council.

Teachers in **Community or Comprehensive** settings are required to have a relevant primary degree (i.e., the subject in the title of the post must be taken in the final degree examination of a recognised degree awarding authority). They must also have the Higher Diploma in Education of an Irish University or an approved equivalent qualification. In the case of recognition of qualifications for the purpose of appointment in these schools, the assessment procedure is carried out by the Community and Comprehensive Teachers Administration Section of the Department of Education and Science. The criteria for assessing qualifications are the same as those used by the Registration Council.

Competence in the Irish language now applies only to teachers of Irish and to teachers employed in Gaeltacht (Irish speaking areas) schools and in other schools where Irish is the medium of instruction.

3. Teacher Education Policy

Department of Education and Science policy in relation to teacher education is currently undergoing a comprehensive review. The Minister for Education and Science has established two expert working parties to examine the pre-service education programme for primary and for second level teachers in the Republic of Ireland. Membership of the committees include representatives of third level teacher education institutions

(Universities and Colleges of Education), teachers, school management, parents and the Department of Education and Science. The work of the committees is well under way and they will report to the Minister for Education and Science before the end of 2000.

The terms of reference of the committees are:-

A. "The Primary Teacher Education Working Group will carry out a review and make recommendations to the Minister for Education and Science within 6 months on the content (including teaching practice) of the pre-service teacher education for primary school teachers. The Group will have regard to the need to achieve breadth and balance in the programme content and to the following factors, *inter alia*, in carrying out its review:

- (a) The review of the primary curriculum and the changes arising from it.
- (b) Developments in relation to the teaching of a foreign language.
- (c) Developments in relation to early childhood education.
- (d) Developments in relation to catering for children with special needs.
- (e) Developments in relation to in-school management and school development planning.
- (f) Initiatives to address problems in relation to disadvantaged pupils at primary level.
- (g) The development of primary education through Irish.
- (h) Developments in communications and information technology in schools.
- (i) The relative contribution that might be made to teacher training by the concurrent and consecutive approaches to initial teacher training.
- (j) Developments in relation to assessment and evaluation.

The Group will also review and make recommendations on the duration of the pre-service education programme for primary school teachers having regard, *inter alia*, to the following:

- (a) The implications, if any, of the recommendations in relation to the content of the programme.
- (b) The scope for and desirability of addressing teacher training needs through subsequent provision in in-career development programmes and the desirability of teachers continuing to renew their skills throughout their careers.

The Group will prioritise and cost its recommendations.”

- B. “The Second Level Teacher Education Working Group will carry out a review and make recommendations to the Minister of Education and Science within 6 months on the content, organisation and structure (including teaching practice) of programmes in teacher education for second-level teachers. The Group will have regard to the need to achieve breadth and balance in the programme in addition to addressing current and future issues on pre-service education for second-level teachers and to the desirability of teachers continuing to renew their skill throughout their careers.

The Group will also have regard to the following factors, inter alia, in carrying out its review:

- (a) A comparative analysis will be made between the consecutive and concurrent models of pre-service education.
- (b) Curricular changes at junior and senior cycle involving in particular the development of new programmes and methodologies to respond more effectively to the different and varied needs of a diverse student cohort.
- (c) Developments in relation to catering for children with special needs.
- (d) Developments in relation to in-school management and school development planning.
- (e) Initiatives to address problems in relation to disadvantaged pupils.
- (f) Developments in communications and information technology in schools.

The Group will also have regard to the following important features, which should underpin the professional preparation of second-level teachers:

- the maintenance of balance between the personal and professional development of students, as well as between the theoretical and practical aspects of their professional preparation
- the development of a firm understanding of the foundation disciplines of modern educational theory and practice
- the development of a good understanding of the educational needs of Irish language schools in and outside the Gaeltacht and of schools teaching through a language other than the mother tongue (e.g. French)
- the acquisition of the knowledge, attitudes and skills to enable student teachers to develop appropriate programmes and methodologies to respond to student needs
- the development of a good understanding of adolescent development and behaviour and of issues in relation to gender equality, cultural and ethnic diversity
- the development of the teaching and classroom management skills of student teachers
- the use of experienced teachers to guide and assist student teachers and to facilitate their subsequent induction into teaching

The Group will also review and make recommendations on the duration of teacher education programmes for second-level teachers, having regard, inter alia, to the following:

- (a) The implications, if any, of the recommendations in relation to the content of the programme.
- (b) The scope for and desirability of addressing teacher training needs through Subsequent provision in in-career development programmes.

The Group will prioritise and cost its recommendations.”

4. In-Career Development for Teachers

4.1 Policy Outline

There is no specific legislation governing the provision of in-career development (ICD) but the Education Act (1998) provides, for the first time, a clear statutory framework within which the Irish education system will operate and develop. Specifically, the Act gives statutory recognition to Education Support Centres, formerly Education or Teachers' Centres, which form the infrastructure necessary to deliver programmes of in-career development in response to national priorities and locally identified needs. While a highly centralised approach to in-career development existed before 1994, current ICD policy aims to support an approach to in-career development activities that is decentralised, school-focused and conducive to high levels of teacher participation in all aspects of the process. It also aims to ensure that the systematically identified needs of participants – teachers, parents and boards of management and all of the groups that are recognised as 'the partners' in the education process – are the primary influence in determining the aims and content of in-career development programmes.

In-career development is both a right and an obligation. In practice, attendance at most courses is voluntary. However, attendance is obligatory in the case of certain courses, such as those that support curriculum reform at national level and particularly those that take place during the school day. Also, teachers' conditions of service enable them to take a career break without pay or study leave, during which they must pay a substitute, to pursue further study. In general, attendance at in-career development activities has no effect on teachers' salaries, but promotion within the institution might be influenced by attendance at courses. Teachers who acquire additional recognised qualifications are eligible to receive allowances in addition to their salary. Where qualifications do not attract such an allowance, a refund of fees scheme is in operation.

4.2 Purpose of Development

In general, many in-career development programmes are in aligned with and facilitate educational reform and development. The basic concept of in-career development is one of ongoing professional development that is continuous throughout the teacher's career. The importance of professional development in improving the quality of teaching is recognised and, consequently, the focus of professional development activities provides opportunities for the development of professional competence and up-dates teachers' knowledge and skills. The importance of personal and professional development is also recognised in sustaining and enhancing teachers' motivation, in helping them respond positively to curriculum development and the changing role of the school and in taking account of social changes and the new challenges that face young people.

4.3 Components of Development

The key priorities are:

- Updating knowledge arising from curricular and system change
- Upgrading pedagogic, assessment and management skills
- Promoting intervention programmes for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with disabilities and special educational needs
- The provision of guidance and counselling services and
- Develop the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in schools.

Courses are aimed at a range of target groups, including whole school staffs, teachers of specific subjects, principals and individual teachers.

4.4 Forms of Development

Courses are held throughout the school year and during the holiday period. They range from short one-day or evening seminars to a number of days in a block or in sequence. They also take the form of summer schools, in-school staff development days or block release courses of varying lengths that are staggered through the academic year. A limited number of courses lead to the award of diplomas and Master's degrees.

Developmental activities in ICD are integrated into international exchange programmes in relation to management and curricular subjects.

4.5 Providers of ICD

The In-Career Development Unit (ICDU) of the Department of Education and Science has the overall responsibility for policy formulation, co-ordination, general direction and management, quality control and financial control in relation to in-career development activities. One aim of the unit is to empower appropriate groups, bodies and institutions to design, develop and deliver in-career development programmes effectively and efficiently.

Significant providers of in-career development courses are:

- Specific Central Support Services. Support for the introduction of new curricula/programmes is generally devolved to specific Support Services. As well as running courses, these services, which operate on a national basis, organise seminars and workshops, issue newsletters and provide backup and support to schools.
- Education Support Centres (formerly known as Education or Teachers' Centres). Currently the network includes 20 full-time centres, 10 part-time centres and 3 study groups that provide a good geographical spread throughout the country. The objective is that each centre participates in the delivery of national programmes, as well as meeting local needs that are identified by teachers and schools. Education

Centres also develop expertise in a particular field and share that expertise throughout the system.

- The Education Partners. The ICDU provides funding for organisations that represent parents, teachers and school management to run in-career development programmes that comply with approved priorities.

In addition, a variety of other institutions and organisations are involved in the provision of in-career development programmes. These include the universities and colleges of education, curricular subject associations that run courses for secondary teachers, some regional health boards that offer life-skills programmes and the Department of Health and Children which is involved in the “Health Promoting Schools” project. Individual schools are also supported in organising appropriate professional development activities for their staffs. All of this activity is negotiated and agreed and on the basis that it complies with national priorities.

4.6 Funding ICD

Over the period 1994-1999 over IR£40m has been expended on in-career development programmes. Significant funding was provided from the European Union under the Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 1994-1999. The current level of spending is a considerable increase on the pre-1994 position and represented in the order of 1% of the budget for teachers’ pay in 1999.

There is no charge for attendance at courses associated with national programmes. Other courses may be subsidised and in a small number of cases, participants are charged fees.

5. Early Childhood Education outside the Formal Educational System

Fifty six pre-schools for the children of the travelling community are run by voluntary committees and 98% of their costs are met by the Department of Education and Science.

All other pre-school provision including creches, playgroups and pre-schools are in the private domain and are run on a commercial basis. However, a small number of these in areas of disadvantage receive grants or partial funding from local authorities or a range of State Departments to reduce or to eliminate the need for a family contribution in the case of families that would have difficulty in making any payment. A range of qualifications is accepted for the adults who run traveller and other pre-schools.

In December 1999, "Ready to Learn", a White Paper on Early Childhood Education was published by the Department of Education and Science. The White Paper focuses on children from birth to six years and its aim is to support the development and educational achievement of children through high quality early education, with particular focus on the disadvantaged and children with special needs. Its aim is to raise and maintain standards in professional competencies, curriculum and methodologies in existing pre-school services and State intervention in the provision of early education services will take place only where there are gaps in provision in the case of the two populations already specified. Planning for the implementation of the White Paper provisions is currently under way in the Department of Education and Science.