

# Education in Northern Ireland: a view from the sidelines

**Les Caul** gives us a trenchant overview of the complexities of the primary and secondary education sector in Northern Ireland, which points up issues of relevance to the whole of the UK and has obvious implications for the strategic development of Higher Education both there and in the rest of the UK.

In earlier work (Caul 1990) I have illustrated how education in Northern Ireland, prior to the political reforms of the early 1980s, was simultaneously similar to, and different from, that evident in England and Wales. A reluctant state, required to address universal secondary education, was influenced by major education reports, but their actual impact was minimal. They singularly failed to effect major change in an education system that remained selective, segregated by religion and dominated by a large number of small schools. This was compounded by the influence of the main religious denominations and their ownership of schools, as each of the two major religious denominations insisted that their management of schools remained sacrosanct.

The beginning of a new millennium heralded the end of almost forty years of violence in

Northern Ireland. This led to a debate among academics about the impact of the 'troubles' on children in the province. This debate swung from a minimalist stance to one where estimates of the impact of the 'troubles' were significant. Nevertheless, much has been learned about children and the 'troubles' and how schools successfully managed high levels of stress and trauma.

The emergence of this 'new beginning' began with a period of optimism that rapidly coincided with massive curriculum reform and a renewed need to combat a deep economic recession. Northern Ireland's levels of underachievement in schools were highlighted as government sought to improve literacy standards. New imperatives demanded a renewed rigour in education.

Contemporary research into social mobility in the United Kingdom has reintroduced the role of grammar schools into debates

about pupil achievement. The 'soft right' in the British press has been quick to cite Northern Ireland as an example of the positive impact of grammar schools on the academic achievement of a large number of working class children. However, critics often fail to identify the long tail of underachievement in Northern Ireland. Underachievement and indiscipline in some schools, unacceptable social behaviour and political unrest remain powerful factors in the system.

Schools in Northern Ireland polarise into two groups: a small number of very high achieving schools, working normally with middle class pupils and achieving high standards; and a larger group accommodating under-achieving pupils, normally from working class backgrounds and centring in the inner city areas of Londonderry and Belfast. It is in these areas that the prevalence of violence was greatest. Schools in these areas have been significantly affected by the 'troubles'

and while they remain stable, educational outcomes have consistently remained low. Northern Ireland suffers, then, from underachievement and associated behavioural problems, children being difficult to work with in school.

In a system of 1,264 schools, approximately half are Controlled Schools while 43% are managed by the Catholic Church. There is also a small, but growing, integrated sector. The existence of separate school sectors, a selective system of education, a large proportion of single sex schools and a substantially rural dimension within the province explains the relatively large number of schools and the sizeable proportion of small schools. More than one third of primary schools have enrolments of less than 90 pupils. One sixth of post-primary schools have an enrolment of less than 300 pupils and nearly two fifths have an enrolment of less than 500 pupils. This large number of small schools comes at a significant educational cost to some pupils in terms a reduced level of opportunity.

Central to the impact of local democracy is the debate about academic selection which is to end in 2012. The Minister of Education wants to introduce a non-selective school system or at least defer school choice until 14 years of age. Nonetheless, the grammar school sector is surviving and is to introduce its own non-regulated academic selection tests in 2010. Given the sectional nature of the school system, this will mean that at least three different tests will be ►



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► offered to parents who want to send their children to grammar schools. Primary schools could in theory be asked to prepare children for all three tests. However, it is more likely that those aspirant parents who seek grammar school entry will enter their children into two different tests. The tests will focus on literacy and numeracy, whilst the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum is a skills-based approach, thus re-enforcing an existing tendency to see one approach as 'superior' to the other.

2010 will see the introduction of the revised curriculum finally established across the system. A Foundation Stage attempts to slow the introduction of formal approaches until Year 3, while a computer-based parent reporting initiative has been dropped. Minimum entitlement refines the concept of a Northern Ireland Curriculum, while access to 24 GCSE subjects and 15 A levels are essential criteria for sustainable secondary schools which will go some way to addressing the issue of small schools unable to deliver the full breadth of the

curriculum. Sustainable education has emerged as the most significant factor in education. Minimum primary school enrolments have also been published.

While Northern Ireland is a small relatively compact province, it has a relatively large number of schools divided among the Controlled, Maintained and Voluntary sectors. Resources in education are, therefore, still divided very thinly across the sector. In what is, in some ways, a highly centralised system, the situation is nonetheless open to unregulated ad hoc 'solutions' offered in a world of management by initiatives. Central control manifests itself in a new Education and Skills Authority and *Every School a Good School* approach to pupil failure, but it is not clear how this approach will in fact be translated into practice in a system whose schools are still immensely diverse in structure, style and educational philosophy. As O'Casey wrote, *'the world is in a state of chaos'*.