



Excavating the Foundations of a Homogenous Primary School Teaching Force in Ireland

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Contribution

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The school teaching workforce in Ireland has been characterised as White, Heterosexual, Irish-born, Settled and Catholic or WHISCS (Tracy, 2000 cited in Bryan, 2010. See also Clarke, 2009; Coolahan, 2003; Devine, 2005; Heinz, 2011; Hyland, 2012; Schmidt and Mc Daid, 2015). Data on those entering undergraduate and post-graduate initial teacher education programmes in Ireland (Keane & Heinz, 2015) and those seeking to enter the profession from abroad (Schmidt & Mc Daid, 2015; Mc Daid & Walsh, *forthcoming*) provide little evidence that this situation will change in the immediate future. This situation is not unique. Nevertheless, while it is accurate to claim that homogeneity is relatively consistent internationally (see Cochran-Smith, 2004), there exist a particular set of historical underpinnings to the development and maintenance of this phenomenon in the Irish context.

Commencing with a brief overview of emerging qualitative and quantitative data establishing a stubborn homogeneity within the primary teaching workforce in Ireland, and further work which situates the Irish context within the wider European experience, this paper moves quickly to explain how the two most entrenched controlling factors maintaining this situation, religion and language, have deep historical trajectories. Drawing on critical documentary analysis, situated within a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework, the authors argue that even since before the establishment of the national system of education in 1831, power brokers at various points in Irish history (e.g., British government, Irish government and various church authorities) have worked hard to control inclusion and exclusion from the primary teaching workforce. Through an in-depth interrogation of legislation, state policy documents and ecclesiastical publications, the paper excavates very clear

antecedents of, at various times, government and church authorities exercising strict regulatory authority over those to be imbued with the right to perform the highly moral act of reproduction of Irish society.

In the context of an international landscape within which calls for a more heterogeneous primary workforce gain traction (see, for example, Schmidt & Block, 2010), this work has particular importance. Certain analyses (see, for example, Santoro, 2015; Keane & Heinz, 2015) emphasise paying attention to the complexities of teacher identity within the context of this broader push for diversification. This paper seeks to add another layer of understanding to this debate through unearthing pertinent historical technologies which secure the *status quo*.

Method

The data upon which this paper is based were generated through critical documentary analysis undertaken on historical documents and sources relating to the topic of teacher selection and education. As defined by Bowen (2009:27):

"Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge."

Documentary analysis was used to frame the wider context in which changes to teacher education and selection occurred, to triangulate data from various sources and to trace the evolving nature of education policy in Ireland. This approach brought many advantages considering the historical nature of the research but the authors remain cognisant of the limitations of document analysis also (Bailey, 1994; Cohen et al., 2006; Bowen, 2009). A broad suite of documents as outlined by Denscombe (2005) was consulted. The primary documents analysed include government reports, publications, official parliament records and pieces of legislation. These are drawn both from periods of British government rule and Irish government rule. Running alongside these state documents, the authors have also analysed significant ecclesiastical documents from each of the three main churches in Ireland (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Catholic) for the period under review. Analyses were also performed on a number of secondary documents (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

Care was taken to ensure that distinction was made between deliberate and inadvertent sources (Duffy, 2005; Scott, 1990). Such documents were sourced in the National Library of Ireland and in the National Archives. Each document was examined for its authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning (Scott, 1990; Denscombe, 1998). Pattern recognition was employed in an inductive way to identify emerging themes from the document analysis (Bowen, 2009).

Expected Outcomes

This research is timely considering the increasing diversity in both Irish society and in the societies of many European countries, and a concomitant drive for escalation of teacher diversity to reflect learner diversity. In Ireland, the teaching workforce at primary level has not evolved to reflect the growing diversity of the pupil population and this paper will collate and highlight the historical underpinnings of some of the systemic structural barriers that are resulting in a homogeneous teaching workforce. In focusing, in the main, on two of these, the fields of religion and language, the paper will conclude by positing a number of creative solutions to diversifying the teaching workforce that will allow a broadening of the teaching workforce while still maintaining high quality provision, which has been the hallmark of the force in Ireland.

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