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Longitudinal study of levels of moral reasoning of undergraduate students in an Irish university: the influence of contextual factors

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This paper reports a longitudinal study of levels of moral reasoning in a convenience sample of Irish undergraduate university students, using the Defining Issues Test 2 (DIT2). The study was timely, as higher education institutions are becoming increasingly interested in the promotion of social capital and the development of the whole person. A total of 259 students completed the DIT2 at the beginning, mid-point and conclusion of their degree course. As with similar international studies, increases in levels of moral reasoning over time were statistically significant. However, Irish students' DIT2 scores were markedly lower than their international peers with 62% of graduating students at the pre-conventional and conventional stages. The paper suggests some context-related explanations for the under-performance of Irish students including the instrumentalist nature of Irish post-primary education, the prevailing culture of consensualism, authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism, the conflation of religious and moral education and the emphasis on economic outputs and contractual accountability.

Keywords: moral reasoning; Defining Issues Test 2; academic discipline; contextual influences; accountability; higher education policy and practice

Introduction

The important role of education in developing morally sensitive individuals who use principled moral reasoning when facing dilemmas has been widely acknowledged (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005, 1991; Rest et al. 1999a). The recent global economic crisis has highlighted the significance of moral judgement and development amidst a growing sense of declining ethical standards. As Sennett (1998, 27) persuasively argues, today's capitalist society presents a major challenge to character development, one where 'short-term capitalism threatens to corrode those qualities of character which bind human beings to one another and furnishes each with a sense of sustainable self'.

Research to date has shown that Irish post-primary (Breslin 1982; Gleeson 1979) and third-level students (D'Arcy-Garvey 1988; Doyle and O'Flaherty 2013) have significantly lower levels of moral reasoning than their US and international peers. Drawing on the largest longitudinal study of its kind (O'Flaherty and Gleeson 2009) outside of mandatory tests of military personnel in the USA, the current paper compares the findings of a longitudinal study of levels of moral reasoning in a convenience sample of Irish university students, using the Defining Issues Test 2 (DIT2), with those of their international peers.

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The significance of the study

Recent abuses of power on the part of members of well-respected professions in Ireland underline the importance of high ethical standards. Kirby (2002, 174) mourns the 'erosion of a strong ethic of public service' (Kirby 2002, 174) and highlights the 'increased levels of corruption in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger era'. According to the International Corruption Rating of Transparency International, Ireland's rating between 1997 and 2000 has declined more than any of the other 18 countries surveyed ... [ranking] second last on a long list of countries behind Singapore, Hong Kong and Chile' (Kirby 2002, 173).

While there has been no official enquiry to date into the Irish 'bank crisis' there has been an abundance of critical comment (see Cooper 2011; Ross and Webb 2010; O'Toole 2009) as well as official reports compiled by senior International Monetary Fund (IMF) figures, itself a flawed financial entity. Such commentary has identified low ethical and moral standards as one of the main reasons for the present disastrous state of Ireland's economy and the ensuing misery for so many ordinary, law-abiding people. O'Toole (2009, 46), for example, notes the inability of the Central Bank to even spell 'ethical' correctly: 'for more than thirty years before the Irish banking system collapsed, it had been colluding, on a massive scale, with fraud, tax evasion and routine breaches of exchange control laws'. He highlights the underdeveloped system of public morality where 'in business and especially in banking there remained an anarchic attitude to law and morality, rooted both in a colonial habit of playing games with authority and in a religious culture that saw sex, rather than money, as the currency of sin' (O'Toole 2009, 215).

Drawing on the Regling and Watson report, Cooper (2011) argues that responsibility for the demise of the Celtic Tiger can be laid firmly at the door of the banks, with politicians also culpable because of their role in creating a climate of 'light touch' regulation. The title of Ross and Webb's (2010) book – *Wasters* – makes the complicity of the political class in this financial catastrophe abundantly clear and tells the story of how insiders profited at the expense of ordinary people without batting a moral eyelid! All this provides incontrovertible evidence for what Dunne (2002, 83) calls the 'subversion of the proper goods of education'.

On the international front, Sennett (2006) identifies the virtues of loyalty and trust as critical dimensions of social capital seen in terms of people's involvement in family, education and labour networks. Pope Benedict XVI (2009, 22) asserts that 'corruption and illegality are unfortunately evident in the conduct of the economic and political class in rich countries, both old and new, as well as in poor ones' while Schweizer (2011) exposes the machinations of crony capitalism in the USA. Many reasons are advanced for such moral crises including the declining rates of religious worship in western societies, the increasing reach and influence of global media and changes to societal and family structures where individualism has replaced the cooperative ethos of previous generations (Dunning 2004). Evidence of such change is found in reduced levels of volunteerism and civic engagement, reduced levels of engagement in democratic processes and the emphasis on human as opposed to social capital, driven by economic concerns and neo-liberal ideology (Putnam 2000).

The sociocultural context

The general sociocultural context of Irish education sets the scene for Ireland's lower scores in moral reasoning. Ireland has traditionally been a strongly Catholic country (O'Donoghue 1999; Lee 1989) where religious and moral education (Coolahan, Hussey,

and Kilfeather 2012; Fuller 2002) have been conflated, and moral education has been subsumed into religious education. Coolahan (2006, 98) remarks that many authors have seen fit to 'raise questions about the nature and value of the educational control exercised by Catholic Church agencies' over its education system, and its role as a key 'agent of socialisation' during the first 50 years of Irish independence. As the influence of the Church began to wane in the changed social and cultural circumstances of the 1980s and 1990s many of these Catholic agencies began to question the nature of their involvement in education and/or adopt a paradigm of transformation (Coolahan 2006; Norman 2003). However, the institutional culture of schools takes a long time to change, and according to Tuohy (2006, 39), trustees of Catholic schools have remained 'more concerned with the maintenance function of schooling [rather] than in taking a leadership role in education'.

Meanwhile, levels of Irish religious worship (O'Mahoney 2010) have dropped in the context of far-reaching changes to societal and family structures (Lunn and Fahey 2011) and a range of other factors including clerical abuse scandals. The Celtic Tiger led to 'a major shift in cultural values [so that] Ireland is well on the way to being a post-Christian society with an increase in secularism and materialism' (Tuohy 2006, 27). Some half of our post-primary students now attend state rather than private Church-owned schools (DES 2012a) while Irish Church-State relationships entered a new phase with the Education Act of 1998 (Government of Ireland 1998a). Section 9(d) of that act states that a recognised school shall 'promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students ... in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school'. At a more general level, Irish social commentators have noted the rise of individualism (Baker et al. 2004) and a decline in moral values (Fitzgerald 2007; Fuller 2005).

While education has always been highly valued on the island of saints and scholars, the context of Irish education is characterised, *inter alia*, by a prevailing anti-intellectualism, the pre-eminence of the Department of Finance with its technical mindset and our colonial past (Kane 1996; Lee 1989). According to Lee's (1989) seminal history of modern Ireland the Irish education system has not been noted for its 'intellectual independence [or] intellectual originality' (Lee 1989, 583), while Kane (1996) highlights a 'poverty of thought' and the neglect of critical theory. This 'intellectual retardation' should be seen in terms of the 'self-interest of the dominant power groups rather than clerical hostility to independent thought' (Lee 1989, 610), along with the influence of post-colonialism, whereby the Irish mind was 'enveloped in and suffocated by the "dependency syndrome" that had wormed its way into the Irish psyche during the long centuries of foreign dominance' (Lee 1989, 627).

The social sciences that developed most successfully in Ireland after independence were history and economics (Garvin 1985), whereas northern European states were considerably more active in fields like social psychology and education. Consequently, even in the 1980s, 'Ireland still lagged well behind the average level of European social thought' (Lee 1989, 609), meaning that morality was based on how people felt about certain ethical issues rather than a moral imperative derived from ontological and epistemological principles.

The preoccupation of Irish economists with the production of human capital has been very influential in Irish policy-making (Lee 1989) and educational thought (O'Sullivan 2005). The economic climate of the 1980s provided an ideal environment for the full flowering of technological functionalism (Gleeson 2010) where the educational ideal of

the 'cultivated man' was replaced by the ideal of the technical expert or the 'specialist', such a dominant feature of higher education as noted further. Against this background, mainstream curriculum does little to promote critical thinking in an instrumentalist environment dominated by examination performance (Hyland 2011; Smyth, Banks, and Calvert 2011).

Moral reasoning and the DIT

Moral reasoning is concerned with making decisions regarding the best course of action in particular situations. Piagetian theory, particularly Piaget's (1968) treatment of morality, provided the basis for Kohlberg's contention that cognitive development is necessary but not sufficient for moral development. Kohlberg's (1958, cited in Kohlberg 1984) stage theory sets down three developmental levels of moral reasoning: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional. Each level is more cognitively and morally advanced than the previous one and the associated six stages represent the levels of moral reasoning used by individuals in deciding on the appropriate action in particular circumstances.

Kohlberg's theory has been criticised because of a perceived gender bias (Gilligan 1982) and its postulation of universal stages (Liebert 1984). Gilligan (1982) argued that the focus of women's moral development is on the 'moral self' and suggested that Kohlberg's morality of justice and rights be replaced by a morality of care and nurturing. However, her theory attracted criticism because of the lack of supporting empirical data and the fact that only females were used in the development of her care-orientated model. In any event, gender accounts for only a small percentage of variance in moral reasoning scores (e.g. Rest et al. 1999a) while cross-cultural studies have provided evidence of the universality of Kohlberg's theory (Rest et al. 1999b). Haidt (2001, 814ff) is also critical of the domination of 'rationalist' models and the 'worship of reason', suggesting that moral reasoning is predicated on 'interpersonal processes' that reflect social and cultural influences.

Whereas Kohlberg used interview data to identify respondents' stages of moral reasoning, his disciple Rest developed a cognitive developmental model that 'minimized the practical and empirical concerns associated with Kohlberg's system' (Thoma 2002, 227). Factor analysis of a mega-sample of over 44,000 subjects (Rest, Thoma, and Edwards 1997) indicated that DIT items cluster around three general moral schemas – personal interest (PI), maintaining norms (MN) and post-conventional. The main focus of the PI schema is on what is of direct advantage to the individual; the fairness of simple exchanges of favour for favour; the intentions of the parties involved and maintaining friendships, good relationships and finding approval. From a cognitive development perspective both the MN and the post-conventional schemas are more advanced in attaining a socio-centric perspective than the egocentric perspective of the PI schema. 'MN' represents a focus on maintaining the legal system, existing roles and formal organisational structures. Those who fit the post-conventional schema arrive at moral decisions on the basis of shared ideals that are fully reciprocal and open to scrutiny (Rest et al. 1999a, 1999b). Such individuals begin to question and suggest changes to the status quo for moral reasons (Narvaez and Bock 2002).

P score standing for principled score is regarded as the most consistent index for the DIT and as a direct indicator of the development of moral reasoning from adolescence to adulthood (Thoma 2002). The N2 score, developed during the late 1990s, represents a

modified version of the P score adjusted by the degree to which an individual respondent discriminates clearly between lower and higher staged DIT items (Bebeau and Thoma 2003).

Moral reasoning, education and academic discipline

Existing research indicates that DIT P scores increase with education, reaching a plateau as the individual exits formal education (Doyle and O’Flaherty 2013; Rose 2012; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Rest et al. (1999b) contend that ethical reasoning develops with education while Bebeau and Thoma (2003) report that education accounts for 30–50% of the variance in DIT scores. The evidence indicates that the higher education experience itself has a uniquely positive influence on increases in levels of post-conventional moral reasoning, over and above maturation (Myry, Juujärvi, and Pessa 2013; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005, 1991). Rest et al. (1999b, 73) concluded that higher education seems to ‘prod(s) students to re-examine their thoughts about the moral basis of society and to value post-conventional reasoning more and more’ while Mayhew, Seifert, and Pascarella (2010, 358) highlight the role of higher education in helping students become ‘responsible and ethical participants in a tolerant and diverse democracy’.

The evidence regarding the relationship between academic discipline and levels of moral reasoning is inconsistent. McNeel (1994) found that effect sizes (a measure of the strength of the relationship between two variables) were especially large for psychology (1.48), nursing (1.47), English (1.26) and social work (1.01) students, while education and business had only moderate effect sizes. Derryberry et al. (2007) and O’Flaherty and Gleeson (forthcoming) found no significant differences in the moral reasoning scores of education and liberal arts students. Elm, Kennedy, and Lawton (2001) found that the sample mean score for moral reasoning among business majors was lower than that of non-business majors while Sweeney and Fisher (1998), Armstrong (1993) and St. Pierre, Nelson, and Gabbin (1990) reported lower levels of moral reasoning for accountancy students. The limited evidence available indicates that student teachers’ levels of moral reasoning (e.g. Cummings, Maddux, and Cladianis 2010; Cummings, Harlow, and Maddux 2007; Chang 1994) are significantly lower than other students.

Methodology

Longitudinal studies consider changes in the relationships between variables over time (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011). A sample of newly enrolled entrants to one Irish university was tracked from the first (Autumn 2002) to the fourth year of their undergraduate programme, taking the DIT2 test at the beginning, middle and end of their programme.

The research instrument

Participants were presented with the five DIT2 ethical dilemmas where a third party is faced with making a decision on how to act in the circumstances outlined. Using a five-point scale, they were asked to rate the importance of 12 considerations relating to the particular dilemma indicating the importance of each item in deciding on the appropriate course of action. In the scoring process weighted points are allocated to the four considerations identified as most important and the points corresponding to the highest

modes of moral reasoning (Stages 5 and 6) provide the P (principled moral thinking) score for each participant (Rest 1994). P score is the weighted average across the five storeys of the ranked Stage 5 and 6 items. Since the Rest (1979) model is developmental and sequential, a higher P score means a lower percentage of reasoning at lower levels. While researchers have typically reported moral reasoning scores in terms of P score, the more recently developed N2 index, basically a modified P score, offers a better estimate of a respondent's location on the developmental continuum (Bebeau and Thoma 2003).

Study cohort

The DIT2 was administered to a convenience sample of first-year students early in their first semester (Phase 1), when 689 students across the full range of academic disciplines in the participating university returned completed tests. It was subsequently administered to as many of these students as could be accessed at the mid-point of their four-year programme (Phase 2) and during their final semester in 2006 (Phase 3). The 259 students who completed the DIT2 on all three occasions constituted the longitudinal study group – 157 males (61%) and 102 females (39%). Forty-two per cent of respondents hailed from farming and professional backgrounds, and this is largely reflective of the socio-economic status of Irish university students of the period (Clancy 2001). Access became more difficult as students progressed through university although the researchers employed a range of strategies including an electronic version of the test, postal communication and in-house contact.

As may be seen from Table 1, respondents were broadly representative of the intake to the participating university for the relevant academic year (2002–2003) in terms of gender. The sample included 102 teacher education students, 39 business students, 36 humanities students, 25 engineering students, 32 science students and 25 computer science students.

When participants' socio-economic status is compared to that of all Irish 1998 higher education entrants (Clancy 2001, 68) by fathers' occupation the study cohort appears to be generally representative of the national profile (see Table 2).

Some 15% of respondents' fathers' formal education ended after primary school with 40% ending after lower secondary. This is generally consistent with relevant national data as reported by O'Connell, Clancy, and McCoy (2006) and the 2002 Population Census data (CSO 2002; see Table 2).

Table 1. Study cohort and university population by gender and academic discipline in 2002.

College of study	Student sample gender		Total	University population student gender		
	Male (%)	Female (%)		Male (%)	Female (%)	Total
Education	68 (68%)	33 (32%)	102	132 (63%)	77 (37%)	209
Business	21 (54%)	18 (46%)	39	198 (46%)	237 (54%)	435
Humanities	19 (53%)	17 (47%)	36	164 (38%)	265 (62%)	429
Engineering	18 (72%)	7 (28%)	25	174 (86%)	29 (14%)	203
Science	11 (34%)	21 (66%)	32	73 (29%)	175 (71%)	248
Computer Science	19 (76%)	6 (24%)	25	177 (84%)	33 (16%)	210
Total	157 (61%)	102 (39%)	259	918 (53%)	816 (47%)	1734

Note: Figures available from the HEA, end-of-year numbers for 2002–2003.

Research findings

All of the findings presented here were arrived at using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Both P and N2 developmental indices are used to report the research findings. Changes in levels of moral reasoning longitudinally will be outlined in this section. The relationship between levels of moral reasoning and a number of independent variables, including gender, academic achievement and course of study, will be presented and results from the study cohort will be compared with international norms.

Levels of moral reasoning and gender

Whilst mean P scores of female students were consistently higher than those of male students across all three phases of data collection, no significant differences emerged across the three phases.

Levels of moral reasoning and academic achievement

A significant relationship between DIT2 scores (both P and N2) and academic achievement as measured by Quality Credit Average (QCA) emerged across all three phases ($p < 0.05$). A significant relationship was also noted between first years' P and N2 score averages and academic achievement as measured by points achieved in the Leaving Certificate ($p < 0.05$).

Changes in levels of moral reasoning by P score and N2 score

Table 3 outlines the mean P score values attained by the study cohort across all three phases of data collection.

The mean P score value for the study cohort increased from 25.91 (Phase 1) to 30.63 (Phase 2), an increase of 4.72 points (almost 18%). The mean Phase 3 P score of 32.87 represents an increase of 6.96 points (26%) from Phase 1. A meagre 3% ($n = 8$) of the Phase 1 study cohort achieved a P score greater than 50 (from a possible maximum score of 90). This increased to 12% ($n = 30$) by Phase 2 and 14% ($n = 35$) in Phase 3. When paired sample *t*-tests were used to compare the P score means for each phase, statistically significant differences were found between Phase 1 and Phase 2 and Phase 1 and Phase 3 (both $p < 0.001$) and between Phase 2 and Phase 3 $p < 0.005$.

The mean N2 scores for Phases 1 and 2 respondents (20.42 and 27.02, respectively) reveal an increase of 6.6 points or 32%. The mean N2 score for Phase 3 was 29.78, a

Table 2. Study cohort fathers' levels of educational attainment compared with O'Connell et al. (2006) and Census (2002).

Level of formal education completed	Study cohort	Fathers of new entrants in 2004	Male population aged 35–49 Census 2002
No formal education/Primary only	15%	18.8%	11.8%
Lower secondary level	40%	26.6%	28.3%
Leaving Certificate/upper secondary	19%	23.1%	28.1%
Third level	23%	29.3	24.9%
Other	3%	2.2%	6.9%
Total	100%	100%	100%
(N)	259	14,244	404,812

Table 3. Mean P score for Phases 1, 2 and 3.

Phase of study	(n)	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
<i>Phase 1</i>					
Post-conventional (P) score	259	.00	58	25.91	11.07
<i>Phase 2</i>					
Post-conventional (P) score	259	.00	68	30.63	14.66
<i>Phase 3</i>					
Post-conventional (P) score	259	.00	74	32.87	14.61

mean increase of 9.36 points (45%) from Phase 1. Paired sample *t*-tests reveal significant differences between N2 scores Phase 1 and Phase 2, Phase 2 and Phase 3 and Phase 1 and Phase 3 ($p < 0.001$).

PI and MN scores

PI schema score represents the proportion of items selected that indicate preference for Stage 2 and Stage 3 considerations. While the changes in mean PI score are quite small, they are in the expected direction with the mean score dropping from 36.41 (Phase 1) to 32.61 (Phase 3), a statistically significant decrease ($p < 0.001$).

The MN schema score represents the proportion of items selected that indicate preference for Stage 4 considerations. The mean MN score for Phase 1 is 30.21. While this drops to 29.79 for Phase 2 it increases to 30.15 by Phase 3.

P score and academic discipline

Mean P score values across Phases 1, 2 and 3 by academic discipline are presented in Table 4.

Phase 1 humanities students displayed the highest mean P score at 29.42 followed by science students, 26.58, with business students displaying the lowest mean P score of 24.51. Humanities students again have the highest mean P score average (34.01) in Phase 2 closely followed by education (31.56) students with business students again displaying the lowest mean P score of 28.02. While humanities students continue to display the highest mean P score of 37.75 in Phase 3 it is engineering students who now display the lowest mean P score (28.48).

Table 4. Longitudinal mean P score by academic discipline.

College of study	(n)	Mean P score Phase 1	Mean P score Phase 2	Mean P score Phase 3
Business	39	24.51	28.02	30.14
Education	102	25.37	31.56	33.16
Engineering	25	24.96	28.00	28.48
Humanities	36	29.42	34.01	37.75
Computer science	25	25.36	29.92	36.20
Science	32	26.58	29.68	30.64
Total	259	25.91	30.63	32.87

Students from all disciplines display growth in mean P score from Phase 1 to Phase 3. Education students show the highest mean P score gains between Phase 1 and 2. Engineering students display the lowest mean P score gains both between Phases 1 and 2 and between Phases 2 and 3. Across all three phases humanities students display the greatest mean P scores gains (8.33 points). Using analysis of variance (ANOVA) to estimate between-group and within-group variance, no statistically significant relationships emerged between P score and academic discipline.

International comparisons

One of the most striking and interesting findings from the present study is that Irish university students do not perform as well as their international peers (Bebeau and Thoma 2003; Rest 1987) on the basis of the norms compiled by the Centre for the Study of Ethical Development (CSED) at the University of Alabama. Compared with these norms, the scores of the Irish study cohort resemble those of senior high school students and are lower than the levels of adults in general and university students in particular (Bebeau and Thoma 2003). As can be seen from Table 5, the average DIT2 score for Irish first-year students was 25.9 as against an international average of 32.3. International N2 scores were also higher.

It should also be noted that Irish first years displayed lower P scores than their international peers on the DIT1 (28.89 as against 42.3).

Summary of main findings

- The average P and N2 scores of the study cohort increased over the course of their university programmes and the differences between each of the three phases were statistically significant. Mean PI scores decreased across three phases.
- The mean P scores of female students were consistently higher than those of male students across all three phases of data collection.
- There was a significant relationship between P score and academic achievement across all three phases.
- Humanities students consistently scored higher than students from other disciplines while engineering students consistently scored low with student teachers' scores in between.
- Irish students' P and N2 scores were considerably lower than their international peers.

Table 5. Comparisons of P and N2 score averages of freshmen in Ireland and the USA.

	Mean P score	Mean N2 score	(<i>n</i>)
Irish freshmen DIT1 (O'Flaherty and Gleeson 2009)	28.89	30.15	110
International college students DIT1 CSED norms (Rest 1987)	42.3	N/A	2,479
Irish freshmen DIT2 (O'Flaherty and Gleeson 2009)	25.91	20.42	259
International freshmen DIT2 CSED norms (Bebeau and Thoma 2003)	32.32	31.05	2,096
Irish seniors DIT2 (O'Flaherty and Gleeson 2009)	32.87	29.78	259
International seniors DIT2 CSED norms (Bebeau and Thoma 2003)	37.84	36.85	2,441

Discussion

As noted earlier most comparable studies have found significant increases from freshman to senior year while findings around the relationship between academic discipline and levels of moral reasoning are inconsistent. The current findings are consistent with these patterns. This study found that mean P and N2 scores, while increasing from Phase 1 to Phase 3, do not differ significantly by academic discipline. Humanities students displayed the highest mean P score gains across the three phases, consistent with Rest's (1979) findings.

Since the first three of the earlier findings are consistent with the international literature and since international findings regarding moral reasoning scores by academic discipline are inconclusive, this discussion will focus on the differences in DIT scores between Irish university students and their international peers. While DIT scores for the research cohort are considerably lower at point of entry (freshman year), their mean P and N2 score gains from Phase 1 to Phase 3 are the same as those of their international peers. This suggests that their comparatively low P and N2 scores can be explained by their lower scores on entry to university. While acknowledging that US university students normally enter university a year later than their Irish counterparts, this section focuses on the influence of the pre-university school experiences identified earlier, with particular reference to moral and civic education and the prevailing model of contractual accountability.

The influence of their pre-university school experience

The prevailing anti-intellectualism and the preoccupation with human capital have exercised huge influence on Irish post-primary schooling. The associated emphasis on consensualism (Lee 1997; Lynch 1987) militates against critical thinking while the pervasive ideology of essentialism (Lynch 1987) is at odds with the developmental theories of Kohlberg, Piaget and others. The official subject-based curriculum emphasises knowledge transmission, book learning (OECD 1991, 68) while 'doing the Leaving' (NCCA 2003, 23) rewards rote-learning at the expense of problem-solving, critical thinking and self-directed learning (Hyland 2011; Government of Ireland 1998b). Smyth, Banks, and Calvert (2011, 225) concluded from their longitudinal study that:

Many middle-class and high-aspiring (senior cycle) students expressed impatience with, and were critical of, teachers who did not focus on 'what would come up in the exam'. For them, good teaching constituted practising exam papers and focusing precisely on the kinds of knowledge and skills needed to do well in the exam. In this context, an emphasis on broader educational development or life skills was seen as irrelevant.

Lynch (1989, 101) identified three universalistic orientations within the post-primary education system in Ireland that also militate against the promotion of moral reasoning: 'the bias towards the technical development of the individual ... competitive individualism ... and the lack of individual autonomy permitted to pupils'. She contends that the entire process 'rewards egocentrism highly and sanctions altruism severely [by] impos[ing] penalties on cooperative effort at times of evaluation [and encouraging work] for extrinsic gain rather than for intrinsic value' (Lynch 1989, 43ff). Boldt (2000) found that both teachers and students in Irish primary and post-primary schools valued 'academic

achievement' and 'work ethic' above all else. In this context many students make the transition to higher education without the generic skills needed to cope successfully at that level (Hyland 2011).

The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) study found that Irish post-primary teachers were less supportive of constructivist beliefs and more supportive of direct transmission beliefs than teachers in comparison countries (Shiel, Perkins, and Gillece 2009). TALIS also found that Irish teachers showed the strongest preference for transmission-based structuring practices across all TALIS countries. Gillece et al. (2009) identified a predictably positive relationship between these direct transmission beliefs and structuring pedagogical practices, particularly in mathematics and science. Such orientations, along with the profoundly hierarchical nature of Irish post-primary schools (Lynch and Lodge 1999; OECD 1991), clearly militate against students' levels of moral reasoning and development. The instrumental attitude of Irish parents towards education (Byrne and Smyth 2010) reflects the characteristics identified by the Commission on the Points System (Government of Ireland 1998b, 48):

the negative impact on students' personal development; choice of subjects to attain the highest points for entry to third-level education; a narrowing of the curriculum arising from the tendency to teach to the examination rather than to the aims of the curriculum; and an undue focus on examination results.

This powerful contextual influence is now being questioned by the higher education sector in a context where 'non-examination subjects get little or no attention and in many cases, broader co-curricular activities are ignored or minimised' (Hyland 2011, 4). The same culture explains the difficulties encountered by programmes like Social, Personal and Health Education (Mannix McNamara and Geary 2003), the Relationships and Sexuality Programme (Mayock, Kitching, and Morgan 2007) and 'Exploring Masculinities' (McCormack and Gleeson 2012).

Moral and civic education in Irish post-primary schools

The Irish tendency to conflate moral and religious education is coming unstuck in a more secular Ireland (Fuller 2005) characterised by growing disillusionment with the Catholic Church. The Forum on Patronage of Primary Schools Advisory Group has proposed that 'provision [be] made for denominational religious education/faith formation to be taught as a discrete subject' (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012, 111) and that 'all children have the right to receive education in ... Ethics and the State has the responsibility to ensure that this is provided' (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012).

Similar issues need to be addressed at post-primary level where moral decision-making has optional status in the Leaving Certificate Religious Education programme. Byrne and Smyth (2010) found that, in so far as parents have concerns about their children's schooling, these are utilitarian in nature having to do with academic/career guidance and preparation for the world of work. At the same time, Kellaghan and McGee (2005) found that a significant proportion of the Irish general public were unhappy with the attention to moral development in primary (40%) and post-primary (42.5%) schools.

Not enough time is given in schools to students' non-cognitive development. A range of non-cognitive dispositions that were adverted to were considered important, not just for the

acquisition of cognitive competencies, but also in the context of learners' social and moral behaviour [including] a system of values, and a sense of identity and inclusion. (Kellaghan and McGee 2005, 22)

The status of civic, social and personal education is quite low (Gleeson 2008). Dunne (2002, 86) remarked that we 'can be under no illusion about the scale of the challenge we now face' while Prendergast (2003, 11) concluded that the 'society that Catholic schools worked so hard to build now appears to be neither civic or moral'. The Irish findings from the International Study of Civic Competence (Cosgrove, Gilleece, and Shiel 2010) are inconclusive. Irish 14-year-olds had comparatively lower scores on trust in civic institutions, citizenship, self-efficacy and civic participation. Their mean scores on the importance of conventional citizenship, perceptions of social-movement citizenship and civic participation in school were average. They scored higher than the international average on equal rights for all racial/ethnic groups, support for democratic values, participation in illegal protest and openness in classroom discussions.

Prevailing models of education accountability

The Education White Paper (DES 1995, 5) and successive Department of Education and Science (DES) statements of strategy recognise the importance of 'the holistic development of the individual and promote the social and economic welfare of society'. However, the model of accountability enshrined in DES strategy statements is contractual rather than responsive and predicated on performance rather than process indicators (Gleeson and Ó Donnabháin 2009). These strategy statements have been heavily influenced by the neo-liberal Lisbon Agenda, which aimed to make the European Union the most successful and competitive economy in the world by 2010. Indeed, O'Sullivan (2005) notes the emergence of a powerful 'mercantile paradigm' long before Lisbon, while Prendergast (2003, 11) characterises Irish education as 'market-driven, smart-targeted and commodified ... where a secular piper increasingly calls the tune'. In such an environment there is the real and present danger that while 'an economy can be doing very well yet the people living in that economy don't feel very well' (Healy and Reynolds 1996, 45) with little attention to holistic and moral development. The Pillar of Social Partnership successfully challenged the Gross Domestic Product/Gross National Product (GDP/GNP) model of measuring progress so that the Central Statistics Office (CSO) now employs broader, more comprehensive progress indicators (Healy and Reynolds 2007). The net result is that, more than half of the 109 indicators in the CSO (2011) annual report, *Measuring Ireland's Progress*, are principally of a social nature with important moral dimensions e.g. risk of poverty, official development assistance and greenhouse gases.

Challenges for the future

Higher education has a major contribution to make to the moral fabric of society and the moral and ethical standards of future professionals. Regardless of subsequent career paths, graduates will have to resolve moral dilemmas in both their personal and their professional lives. The recent economic crisis in Ireland has highlighted the importance of the moral reasoning levels of politicians, developers and financiers. In that context, the DIT scores of Irish graduates are a cause of serious concern. Responses are required at both post-primary and higher education levels.

As noted earlier, Irish students enter university with lower levels of moral reasoning than their international peers. This highlights the need for a critical review and reform of post-primary curriculum. And the current education minister is committed to tackling the over-emphasis on rote learning and the influence of the ‘points race’ on the student learning experience. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA 2008) has been working on the integration of key skills such as critical thinking and ‘an awareness of personal values and an understanding of the process of moral decision making’ is one of the 24 learning statements in the revised junior cycle (DES 2012b, 6) where the key skills of ‘managing myself’ and ‘staying well’ are also relevant to moral development. However, the associated cultural change will require professional, public and political support.

The Irish Universities Act (1997) identifies the promotion of the cultural and social life of society and the capacity for independent critical thinking amongst its students as important goals, alongside supporting and contributing to the realisation of national economic and social development. There is a real tension between the goals of economic development and the development of civil society (Breathnach 2004), one where ‘cultural criticism, intellectual and moral leadership tend to run counter to the predominance of economic concerns’ (Skilbeck 2001, 37). Meeting the skills needs of the knowledge economy is a top priority for the Higher Education Authority (HEA) while the current National Development Plan (Government of Ireland 2007) sees investment in higher education and research as the key driver of Ireland’s competitive advantage. Ireland’s commitment to neo-liberal ideology has been ‘impressive’ and we are ‘the leading country (of 48 higher education systems) in terms of implementation of the Bologna goals and objectives’ (O’Brien and Brancaleone 2011). Irish higher education has also been very much to the fore in drawing up outcomes-based education (OBE)-type learning outcomes in the context of such frameworks and the European Credit Transfer System (Gleeson 2013).

Reflecting international trends (Hazelkorn 2013), Irish higher education has been characterised by increasing specialisation. The overall number of courses in the sector has trebled over the past 20 years with some 880 degree courses now offered across some 45 higher education institutions (Hyland 2011). Some institutions offer up to 20 different specialised courses within their arts or business or engineering faculty (Hyland 2011, 3). In his discussion of a world dominated by specialists and reductionism, Abbott and MacTaggart (2010, 188) concludes that ‘people able to see the big picture, those who can synthesise, are in very short supply – which is largely why we’re in such a muddle’. Antidotes to specialisation include critical reflection regarding limitations of the neo-liberal agenda (Lingard 2010; Ball 2003) and the development of cross-disciplinary interventions that will challenge students to consider the relevance of social justice, equality and respect to addressing the common good in the context of their future professional lives. This demands a broadening of the curriculum (see O’Flaherty and Doyle 2012) in keeping with the HEA (undated) assertion that ‘the enhancement of economic opportunity without due regard for social innovation and civic society is short-sighted and ultimately self-defeating’. Universities must pay greater attention to the development of social capital, community engagement and the promotion of teaching and learning strategies that require active participation, real-world experience and opportunities to collaboratively address social problems (see O’Flaherty and McGarr 2013). Hopeful signs include the growing popularity of service learning (McIlrath and Mac Labhairn 2007) and participative and critical pedagogies (HEA 2011).

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