Developing the characteristic spirit of publicly managed schools in a more secular and pluralist Ireland

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Abstract

This discussion paper considers the identification and definition of the 'characteristic spirit' of publicly managed schools in the Republic of Ireland. Some international approaches to values in publicly funded schools are introduced along with relevant contextual aspects of Irish education including the cultural diversity and secularization of modern Irish society. The Irish Education Act (1998) gives ultimate responsibility for school values and 'characteristic spirit' to the school 'patron', a role legally separate from that of school ownership and school management. The underlying values of privately managed faith-based schools are well established. However, the 'characteristic spirit' of publicly managed Education and Training Board schools remains largely undeveloped. Appropriate responses to this challenge are identified and discussed.

Keywords: characteristic spirit; patronage; publicly managed schools; values in education; pluralism; school-based action research.

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Introduction

The totality of underlying values operative in a particular school or group of schools is variously referred to in terms of 'ideology', 'school culture', 'school ethos' (cf. Lawton, 1975; Giroux, 1981; Husu and Tirri, 2007; Green, 2014). Both 'school culture' and 'school ethos' are commonplace terms in Irish academic discourse on faith-based schools (Furlong and Monahan, 2000; O'Higgins-Norman, 2003). The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) created, for the first time, a legal governance entity for all schools, where the guardian of the 'characteristic spirit' of a school is a person or entity known as the 'patron'. The patron has legal authority to appoint and dismiss the school board of management, which is 'responsible for the management of the school on behalf of the patron' (Government of Ireland, 1998, S.15(1) and is required to 'uphold and be accountable to the patron for … upholding the characteristic spirit of the school, determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school' (Government of Ireland, 1998, S.15.(2) (b)).

Most Irish secondary schools were originally established by Catholic religious authorities with their values or 'characteristic spirit' identified by the religious affiliation of the school founders. When trust bodies were established at national level in 1998, they assumed the role of patrons, defining 'characteristic spirit' in terms of Church teaching (Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA), 2012; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977; 1998; 2014) and the founding charism[2] of the school owners.

The focus of the current paper is on the implications of this recent legislation for schools managed by Education and Training Boards (ETBs)[3], the largest publicly managed sector of Irish education

[2] The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994, p. 799) defines a charism as a spiritual gift to a person or group for particular work in the world, where, for example, 'Catholic schools sponsored by the Franciscans distinguish themselves by living out the charisms of Saint Francis' (Cook and Simmonds, 2011, p. 320).

[3] ETB publicly managed schools are of two kinds - 'partnership schools' and schools under the sole aegis of the ETB. 'Partnership schools', for which the ETB is patron, are formally referred to as 'Designated Community Colleges' whose co-trustees are historically nominated by a religious denomination. The representative body for ETBs, Education and Training boards Ireland (ETBI) identifies 56 of the 265 ETB schools as having 'Designated' status (Personal communication, May 2016). While the current paper is concerned with the 209 majority of ETB schools, the authors are fully cognisant of the implications of the distinction outlined here for the debate on characteristic spirit in Irish publicly managed schools.

(ESRI, 2013). These schools are a distinctive segment of the Irish schooling system, catering for 31% of all secondary schools and 27% of secondary students in 2015-16 (DES, 2016).

Under the provisions of the 1998 Education Act and the 2013 Education and Training Board Act, which restructured 38 Vocational Education Committees into 16 ETBs, the ETB is the patron of its schools and has responsibility for their 'characteristic spirit'. Each ETB is a representative statutory public body that operates as the representative legal entity, employs staff, provides funding and appoints school boards of management.

The underlying values and characteristic spirit of ETB schools have yet to be clearly defined and articulated and their national body, Education and Training Board Ireland (ETBI), is cognisant of this lacuna (JMOS, 2011). The current discussion paper has two main purposes:

a) To set out relevant aspects of the historical, social, legal and policy background in a context where little relevant empirical evidence has been harvested to date.

b) Drawing on international literature and practice, to chart a way forward through school-based action research and inclusive, consensus-seeking, consultative and deliberative processes at school and other levels within the ETB structure.

The paper aspires to contribute to the national and international discourse on values in schooling, while drawing on that discourse to address policy challenges of an increasingly diverse school population in Irish publicly-managed schools. Some international perspectives on the underlying values of publicly managed schools are considered and relevant aspects of the Irish context are introduced, with particular reference to the ETB sector. A considered response to the current challenge is then outlined and justified.

The underlying values of publicly managed schools – two international perspectives

Values have been an on-going subject of educational discourse, research and contestation for decades. Until recently these debates were conducted within the general rubrics of Foundation Studies, such as the philosophy, history and sociology of education and, more recently, curriculum studies and education policy studies. In these settings the values of schooling were examined and

debated in terms of the aims of education, control of education, institutional governance, management and leadership, curriculum selection and pedagogical practices. For example, more than a century ago, Durkheim (1885, p. 445) declared that the aim of public education is not a matter of training individuals for employment but rather to develop citizens who can contribute to a society. From a US perspective, Feinberg (2006, p.xi) draws attention to the 'shared moral understandings required to sustain and reproduce liberal, pluralist democracies'. Noddings (1997, p. 27) proposes that a 'morally defensible aim for education' should focus on the development of caring, loving and lovable individuals. This is further supported by the work of Cochran-Smith (1999, p. 116), who stresses the importance of social justice, social change and social responsibility as a core aim of education. As well as having responsibility for academic outcomes, schools have an onus to empower students, and staff members, 'to negotiate the diverse values and social norms of their communities…. in order to support students' social and academic success' (Husu and Tirri, 2007, p. 390ff). It is the responsibility of the whole school community to promote student welfare and active citizenship in a context where 'teachers are not free to choose whatever they personally regard as valuable' (ibid, p. 392).

Arriving at common values in schools, particularly in schools that serve multi-ethnic societies, is a complex undertaking and its success relies to a large extent on strong and effective leadership. Starratt (1991, p. 187) argues that school administrators have 'a moral responsibility to be proactive about creating an ethical environment for the conduct of education… [and] to serve moral purposes (the nurturing of the human, social, and intellectual growth of the youngsters) for the greater good of society'. The three 'ethics' used by Starratt to develop his argument provide a valuable framework for the creation of an ethical educational environment. His ethic of critique addresses social justice and human dignity questions such as racial prejudice and hegemonic relationships. The ethic of justice requires educational administrators to 'encourage discussion of individual choices [and] school community choices [so that] the institution serves both the common good and the rights of the individual' (ibid, p. 193). Examples of such decisions include the nature of multicultural education, grading and testing. The ethic of caring demands that 'the integrity of human relationships be held sacred and that the school as an organisation should hold the good of human beings within it as sacred… [including] the right [of persons] to be who they are, an openness to encountering them in their authentic individuality' (ibid, p. 195).

In more recent decades, as exemplified by a special issue of this journal in 1994, 'values' were identified as an organisational concept with the potential to critically inform the transformation agenda then current in UK schools following the 1988 Education Act. This shift was echoed on a global scale. In 1996 the UNICEF Living Values Education Programme was established by educationalists from five continents as a way of 'conceptualizing education that promotes the development of values-based learning communities and places the search for meaning and purpose at the heart of education' (http://www.livingvalues.net). This new focus on values continues to engage educationalists, driven by the multiplicity of pressures for change arising from the 'global education reform agenda' (Sahlberg, 2016) and the phenomena of globalization, international migration, secularization and changes in the public role of religion (Berry, 2016; Rizvi and Lingard, 2010).

Education policymakers, focused on legitimation, favour normative over descriptive approaches to values education. The paper now considers values education from the perspective of two countries where conservative, government-led approaches were adopted – the 1998 Education Act in the UK and Australia's National Framework for Values Education (NFVEAS). Australia's National Framework for Values Education (NFVEAS) (Australian Government, 2005, p. 1) drew heavily on their Ministerial Council on Education, Training, Employment and Training which saw education as being as much about 'building character as it is about equipping students with specific skills'. NFVEAS proposes that schools should *explicitly* teach nine given values along with character building, social responsibility and ethical judgement. Its introduction led to the Australian Values Education Programme (Lovat and Clement, 2008; Lovat, Dally, Clement, and Toomey, 2011) and the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEECDYA, 2009) whose fundamental principles included the capacity to exercise judgement and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics and social justice, the pursuit and protection of the common good, the just society, human rights, honesty and trustworthiness and caring for the environment.

Concerns have been expressed regarding the role of the government in the development of NFVEAS. For example, it is suggested by Cranston, Kimber, Mulford, Reid, and Keating (2010, p. 189) that:

> While these values appear to express many of the values that might be considered typically Australian (yet none are exclusively Australian) and be consistent with democratic equality notions, it is when a

> government attempts to overlay or impose its own ideological understanding of these values onto schools that they become problematic.

Dyrenfurth (2007, p. 211) argues that Prime Minister Howard's support for NFVEAS was politically motivated and that he 'appropriated terms from the political left and infused them with the individualist ideology of his conservative Coalition government'. Jones (2009, p. 37) regards the lack of sufficient analysis of values education policies as a weakness of NFVEAS in a context where the focus of the Framework is on a 'common values approach' (ibid, p. 38). She found a 'conservative orientation, particularly values inculcation discourse, in both the document and its implementation … the product of a conservative government which had engaged in a culture war with the intellectual left, and chosen education, particularly state secular education, as its battleground' (ibid, p. 52) and encourages educators to avoid alienating participants by placing greater focus on educational rather than political goals. Now that the Australian Curriculum has been developed and disseminated, the status of NFVEAS is somewhat unclear although all students are expected to develop the general capability of 'ethical understanding'.

Over twenty years ago McLaughlin (1994, p. 454) remarked that the inclusion of the 'spiritual, moral, social and cultural development' of pupils among the formal inspection criteria for British schools is 'making it impossible to avoid explicit and sharply focused attention to the value questions involved'. Wood (2016) notes the current 'fascination with British values' with Prime Minister Cameron calling for their active promotion in schools in response to what Clarke (2014) and others call the alleged 'anti-British anti-Western agenda'. The British Education Secretary announced in August 2014 that the promotion of 'British values' would be added to the early years curriculum (Wood, 2016), while the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011) stipulate that teachers should not undermine 'fundamental British values'. The DfE (2015) has recently identified a need to 'enforce a clear and rigorous expectation on all schools to promote fundamental British values' in a context where, as critics point out, marginal groups are expected to 'mix, assimilate… blend in and stop being different' (Crozier and Davies, 2008, p. 229).

Maylor and Read (2007) acknowledge the difficulty of achieving balance between distinct community identities and an inclusive national narrative of collective identity. The Parekh report (The Runnymede Trust, 2000) was grounded on the equal worth of all people, on Britain as both a community of citizens and a community of communities and on the principles of difference,

cohesion, respect for moral difference and the divisiveness of racism. Drawing on Parekh, Olssen (2004, p. 184) critiques the concept of 'Britishness as encapsulating a form of consensus that did not accurately capture, or assist, ethnic relations, and in a way that had definite implications for citizenship education' and calls for the reform of curriculum practices and school organisational structures that 'have a tendency to take the majority culture as the "norm"' (ibid, p. 188). This would enable 'all groups and people [to adopt] … mechanisms or techniques that enable or persist with the continuance of open dialogue [and] promotes… the conditions for an effective multiculturalism'. It would also address the concerns of Abbas (2004) regarding Islamophobia as well as fears that over-emphasis on Britishness might negate the multiple realities that exist in children's lives (Cooper, 2005; Wood, 2016; Wood and Warin, 2014). Ipgrave's (2011) important distinction between identity-based and epistemology-based forms of inclusion provides a helpful point of reference.

The authors believe that there are valuable lessons to be learned from these international approaches when considering the definition of the characteristic spirit of the Irish ETB sector. It is however, necessary to set the scene by outlining some relevant aspects of school governance architecture, which the Irish education system has developed over almost two centuries, as well as outlining recent changes in Irish society.

Irish education context

As noted by the OECD (1991, p. 11), 'in order to understand contemporary Ireland, it is necessary to recognise how much of its remote as well as more recent history still affects public values and attitudes and offers a key to understanding its institutions, not least its system of education'. This observation certainly applies to the unresolved question of the 'characteristic spirit' of publicly managed schools. This issue is considered here from the perspectives of Ireland's colonial past, anti-intellectual bias and associated neglect of philosophy of education, church control and ideological considerations of human capital and economics.

Lee (1989, p. 627) concludes that a 'dependency syndrome wormed its way into the Irish psyche during the long centuries of foreign dominance'. Closely associated with this colonised past (Howe, 2013) is Garvin's (2004, p. 145) portrayal of an 'atmosphere [in Ireland] of intellectual

and material bankruptcy [where] education had been classical and grammar school in type'. The dominant role of the Catholic Church in Irish society was a conservative, anti-intellectual influence for much of the twentieth century (Inglis, 1998). Lee (1989) argues that various Irish Ministers for Education became infected with this anti-intellectualism as reflected in their protestations that the proposed introduction of comprehensive schooling was not ideologically driven (Faulkner, 2005; O'Sullivan, 1989). Coolahan (1984, p. 1) identifies 'the neglect of education studies [as] a weakness in the intellectual and cultural life of Irish society' where the philosophy and sociology of education were overshadowed by the heavy emphasis on psychology with its focus on the individual as an abstract entity (Benson, Garvin, Lynch, and Roche 1985). Under-resourced university education departments, where the Foundation Disciplines, including philosophy of education, were often under clerical control, and whose perceived status in the universities was low, were ill-equipped to participate in education debates (Coolahan, 1984, p. 4), with Economists being only too willing to step into the breach (Matthews, 1985).

Based on his detailed and rigorous analysis of the Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools (Department of Education, published annually), Mulcahy (1981) concluded that Irish post-primary education lacked a coherent, philosophical basis and a 'clear goal of enabling pupils to develop a philosophy of life, a world view or a well-grounded set of values'. Lane (1991) lamented the failure of curriculum bodies and assessment bodies to develop a philosophy of education and McCormack (1992, p. 27) remarked that the Education Green Paper (DES, 1992) was totally bereft of 'any explication of the vision of society and model of development'. The ensuing National Education Convention (NEC) which was driven by the imperative of consensus, was dominated by the voices of the teacher unions, school management bodies and patrons, industry and employment representatives and parents (Gleeson, 2004). It eschewed philosophical considerations and focused on issues of power and control, which were of greater concern to the Catholic Church (Gleeson, 2010). Ever since the publication of *Investment in Education* (OECD/DES, 1966) the role of education in the production of human capital (Lee, 1989; Ó Buachalla, 1988; O'Sullivan, 1991) has played a very influential role in Irish education policy with education discourse becoming increasingly 'coterminous with the theme of education and the economy' to the exclusion of 'cultural identity, language, civic competence and moral development' (O'Sullivan, 1992, p. 449ff, see also Corcoran and O'Flaherty, 2016; 2017; O'Flaherty and Gleeson, 2014a, 2014b; O'Flaherty and Gleeson, 2017). During Ireland's economic boom, politicians and economists, were wont to

explain the Celtic Tiger phenomenon by reference to its policy of investment in education (e.g. Fitzgerald, 1998). This is indicative of the prevailing emphasis on human capital in the absence of a philosophical underpinning as already discussed. As Lynch (1989, p. 139) concludes, the 'two most prominent features of Irish second-level education [were] its technical orientation and the competitive individualism evident in the daily organisation of school life'. Hardly a conducive environment for consideration of the 'characteristic spirit' of publicly managed schools!

The prominent role of the Catholic Church in Irish affairs and Irish education during most of the twentieth century has been well documented (OECD, 1991; Ó Buachalla, 1988; Walsh, 2008; Williams, 1999). That influence is frequently advanced as an explanation for our failure to develop a philosophy of education (O'Donoghue, 1999). Hannan and Boyle (1987, p. 60) suggest that, under Church and colonial influences, Ireland's educational values have become 'so highly legitimised… that they appear to require no rationalisation'. Private school ownership was perpetuated (Coolahan, 2014, 1981;), resulting in a system that is 'inherently denominational in character' (Colton, 2009, p. 253). As noted by Daly (2012, p. 201), in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, a key principle of Catholic social teaching, the state relied on 'private intermediary bodies…. to supply and operate the schools in which public education is provided'. To this day the majority of primary schools continue to be controlled and run by religious, mainly Catholic, bodies (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather, 2012).

It wasn't until the passing of the Vocational Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1930) and the subsequent introduction of Vocational Education Committee (VEC) schools, now Education and Training Board schools that the state began to play a more direct role in the provision of education. The regulatory provisions (O'Reilly, 2002) issued for these publicly managed VEC schools however 'endorse a view of religion as an integral part of the cultural identity to be promoted in these schools' (Williams, 1999, p. 322). Ward (1999, pp.204-234) tellingly entitled her chapter on Vocational Education Committees, '*Clergy, Politicians and Mutual Friends*'. During the formative early decades of the system, the legislation providing for the appointment of non-local authority members to Vocational Education Committees facilitated the appointment of two or three Catholic clergymen, and frequently a Protestant clergyman. In addition, the assertiveness of Catholic bishops and clergy ensured a theocentric approach whereby 'a neophyte member of a community of believers [was] being inducted into the totality of its understanding of life by those knowledgeable and positioned to conduct this process of induction' (O'Sullivan, 2005 p. 118). In

effect, Catholic values 'permeated this state system of education' resulting in schools with 'a distinctly Catholic stamp' (Hogan, 1983, p. 45) accompanied by 'much discussion' (Williams, 1999, p.322) between the Minister of the day and the Catholic Church regarding the character and curriculum of VEC schools (O'Reilly, 2002; Walshe, 1999).

Against this background it is hardly surprising that the 'characteristic spirit' of publicly managed schools has received scant consideration in a context where education has been characterised by anti-intellectual bias, an over-emphasis on the production of human capital and Church control. Irish society has, however, been changing significantly over recent years.

Globalisation, secularisation and a pluralistic Ireland

In this increasingly 'borderless world' (Ohmae, 1995) the flow of people and cultures across countries is growing exponentially with the international migration population of the world growing from 77 million in 1960 to 233 million in 2013 (MPI, 2015). While religious and ethnic diversity have always existed in Ireland (Bryan, 2008), the annual number of immigrants quadrupled between 1991 and 2006 (from 56,323 to 206,258), with the proportion arriving from the European Union (excluding the UK) rising dramatically from 41 in 1976 to 61,165 in 2006. Some 10% of Irish primary students and about 8% of post-primary students have immigrant backgrounds (Lyons and Little, 2009, p. 9) with the majority (70%) of 'recently-arrived' students (ibid) attending publicly managed schools. Whereas the immigrant share of the Irish population was well below the OECD median a decade ago (OECD, 2009), it is projected that:

> [a]llowing for continuing immigration, the large foreign-born population and their immediate descendants are likely to expand more rapidly in Ireland than in most other EU states, to comprise 25-30% of the population by 2021, 33-38% by 2041 and 36-45% of the population by 2061, depending on the model used as a basis for the projection (Coakley, 2013 p. 241).

Fischer (2010; 2016) highlights the challenges experienced by Irish schools against a backdrop of increasingly diverse school populations, cultural evolutions, incoming migration and increased secularisation. This increasing cultural diversity has inevitably impacted on religious diversity with increases of 117% in those belonging to Orthodox religions, 51% in those belonging to the Islamic faith and 45% in the 'no religion' category (CSO, 2011). Inglis (2007, p. 206) remarks that, while 'the era of the simple faith that characterised Catholic Ireland up to the 1960s is rapidly

disappearing', as reflected in the 5% decline in those identifying as Catholic between 2002 and 2011 (CSO, 2011). Tuohy's (2008, p. 27) concluded that Ireland is 'well on the way to being a post-Christian society with an increase in secularism and materialism' while Ó Tuathaigh (2005, p. 57) remarked that 'Ireland had increasingly become a pluralist, secularist and cosmopolitan society that exhibited many of the values of Western consumerism'.

This shift from 'an essentially normative value system to the more challenging and less easy to govern world of pluralism' (Tomlinson, 1998, p. 323) creates difficulties for the development of an understanding of the 'common good' (Sachs, 1990), an essential ingredient of a healthy community (Haidt, Osenberga and Hom, 2003). The effect is felt in schools, as they move 'from being an important cog in the mechanism by which norms and codes were transmitted' to the 'cockpit in which the conflicts are first encountered by the young' (Tomlinson, 1998, p. 323).

Irish legislative framework

The Irish Constitution (Government of Ireland, 1937, Article 42.1) guarantees to support parents in 'the religious, moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children' and Article 42.4. commits the State to providing 'for free primary education [and] to give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative, and, when the public good requires it, provide *other educational facilities or institutions* with due regard, however, for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation'. The italics have been added by the authors to indicate that ETB schools are legitimised in the Constitution.

While the concept of school patronage is not mentioned in the Constitution (1937), it has been used in the primary ('National') school system since 1831 (Akenson, 1970). The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) recalibrates the concept and role of patron and, in a governance architecture which may well be unique to Ireland (Coolahan et al., 2017), links it to the newly introduced concept of characteristic spirit of all primary and secondary schools including ETB schools (Tuohy, 2008; 2006), requiring boards of management to

> … uphold, and be accountable to the patron for so upholding, the characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school (Government of Ireland, 1998 Section 15b).

O'Reilly (2002) draws attention to the apparently deliberate avoidance of the word 'ethos' within the Education Act and, given the language employed by O'Sullivan (2005), O'Higgins-Norman (2003) and Williams (1992), it seems reasonable to suggest that 'characteristic spirit' is used in order to avoid the faith-based connotations of 'ethos'.

Reactions to the notion of patronage are varied. Colton (2009, p. 258) defines the role of the patron as 'one of oversight, delegation and support, carrying considerable responsibilities and considerable authority' while Fischer (2010, p. 2) calls for a review of a system that gives school patrons the right 'to impose or develop their specific "characteristic spirit" or "ethos" in their schools'. Parker-Jenkins and Masterson (2013) identity a disparity between Ireland's largely denominational system of patronage and the fundamental demographic changes that have occurred in Irish society and Colton (2009) identifies dissonance between the constitutional right of parental choice and the educational options available to parents.

The increasing diversity of patronage models is exemplified by the relatively recent establishment of Educate Together[4] schools which are

> … seeking to ensure that parents have the choice of an education based on the inclusive intercultural values of respect for difference and justice and equality for all….in an inclusive, democratic, co-educational setting that is committed to enabling and supporting each child to achieve their full potential while at the same time preparing them to become caring and active members of a culturally diverse society (Educate Together, 2015, p. 1).

Growing public pressure led to the establishment of *The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism* in the primary school sector in 2011 with the purpose of receiving and assessing the various views and perspectives of interested stakeholders. Reflecting on the Forum's processes and report, O'Toole (2015, p. 4) argues that the patronage system is facilitating educational domination by Catholic clerics in a pluralist society while impeding the creation of 'non-denominational "common" schools for all children across the state'.

The governance, functions and geographical remit of VECs were radically amended in the Education and Training Board Act (2013) which established regional ETBs and their umbrella

[4] Established as an educational corporate body in 1984, Educate Together has a network of 77 primary schools. Four second-level schools with Educate Together involved as patron, co-patron or as partner have opened since 2014. http://www.educatetogether.ie/our-schools/second-level

national body (ETBI). However the school governance architecture set out in the 1998 Education Act remains unchanged, with the role of patron assigned to the statutory ETB bodies.

The characteristic spirit of ETBs: a way ahead?

While it is the responsibility of ETBs to uphold the characteristic spirit of their schools, the concept itself has been subject to little analysis or debate. Meanwhile it is left to individual schools, largely unsupported by ETBs, the DES or the academic community to identify and articulate their own particular characteristic spirit for inclusion in school mission statements and public relations material (O'Reilly, 2015; 2002).

This is a challenging task. Instancing long-running debates about religious worship and sex education in non-voluntary schools, McLaughlin (1994, p. 454) concludes that 'controversy is inevitable [given] the inseparability of educational values from wider questions of a cultural, political, economic and religious kind'. We have already seen that both the Australian and UK approaches to core values are being critiqued on the grounds that they are government-led and conservative. Alternative, more collaborative 'bottom-up approaches' are required where domination is contested and autonomy is promoted through a 'negotiated curriculum' (Hopkins 2015), 'dialogic teaching' (English, 2016) and 'transformative communication in intercultural education' (Langmann, 2016). A significant background theoretical frame is provided by the civic republican political theory of Pettit (2012) and others (Hinchcliffe, 2015; Hopkins, 2015).

It is appropriate to recall the distinction between the descriptive and the normative approaches to school values and characteristic spirit. The authors are in the process of undertaking descriptive research to establish the prevailing values of a sample of ETB schools as a prelude to the development of normative guidelines for the articulation of the characteristic spirit of schools in the sector. It is important to learn from the Australian and British experiences. This will require us to abandon the tendency to conceptualise school culture in monocultural terms and, to acknowledge that schools are sites of polycultural contestation. This will involve recognising the importance of 'ideological settlement' and favouring 'critical realism [over] naive reformism' (Daly, 2008 p. 5ff).

The US Centre for Public Education (CPE) proposes that, in order to serve the maintenance and evolution of democratic society, public education depends on three core conditions: public support, public participation, and mutual accountability between schools and the public (CPE, 2015). Reid (1984, p. 109) develops Schwab's notion of polity where 'power is collaboratively shared among groups or categories of citizen' and all members of the community become engaged in deliberative discussion. Goodson (2001) identifies the limited impact of externally mandated reform and Fullan, (2007) sees negotiation with key stakeholders at school and community level as critical aspects of deep educational change. As Hoggett (2006, p. 179) suggests, without a collective understanding of the values that underpin publicly managed schools, 'it is often at the level of "operations" that unresolved value conflicts are most sharply enacted, with the result that public officials and local representatives find themselves "living out" rather than "acting upon" the contradictions of the complex and diverse society in which they live'.

Much of the available evidence then is pointing towards the importance of school-based inquiry and research. A bottom-up approach requires sector-wide consultation (Halpin, 1999) where invested bodies, communities and personnel have the opportunity to articulate their ideologies, viewpoints and vision. Such an approach must 'recognize the rights and responsibility of the various partners – teachers, students, parents, and local communities' (Trant, 1998, p. 7) and allow for consideration of local factors (Elliot, 1998) and the idiosyncrasies of individual school cultures. From an Irish perspective, one notes, for example, how failure of the Exploring Masculinities (EM) writing group to 'consult far and wide' (McCormack, and Gleeson, 2012) in the development of the programme contributed to its demise, notwithstanding the support of the Department of Education and Skills and the main post-primary Teacher Union (Gleeson, 2010).

Consultation across all levels, including the national Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), regional Boards and schools, will take place against the background of the historical legacy of the VEC/ETB sector, characterised by Hannan and Boyle (1987, pp. 60ff) in terms of 'pragmatic goals and explicit curricular provision [with] highly instrumental and pragmatic goals and curricular planning'.

In view of the historical anti-intellectualism and general paucity of education debate there are grounds (in preliminary work undertaken for the project prefigured in this paper) to suggest that the characteristic spirit of the ETB sector may not have been given, to date, the sort of deep critical

discussion it deserves. Against that background the authors are proposing a school-based action research approach. This form of inquiry aims 'paradoxically both to improve practice and to continually reconstruct what counts as improvement [where] value commitments are not only defined and clarified but reconstructed' (Elliott, 1994, p. 418). Drawing on the aforementioned descriptive research reports, volunteer ETB schools will undertake a collaborative, school-based initiative, aimed at developing their current understanding of characteristic spirit and facilitated by critical friends with experience of action research. Such an initiative might focus, for example, on aspects of the formal and/or informal curriculum, school culture, organisational factors. The deliberations implicit in the design, implementation and evaluation of such initiatives will facilitate the development of the normative dimensions of characteristic spirit in participating schools although the amount of consensus remains to be seen.

A similar process of consultation and deliberation can subsequently be employed at regional ETB and national levels, building on collation and analysis of the school-based research. The projected outcome will be to provide ETBs, individually and collectively with initial articulations of principles and guidelines with which to i) support schools in subsequent iterations of characteristic spirit, and ii) form the bases according to which ETBs can individually meet their statutory obligations as patrons of publicly-managed schools, according to Government of Ireland, 1998 Section 15b).

The approach outlined above mirrors Elliott's (1994, p. 418) suggestion that schools should 'become reflexive organisations engaged in a process of cyclically re-evaluating their activities in the light of their values, and re-evaluating the values themselves'. By critically engaging in self-evaluation, schools, regional ETBs and ETBI can begin to define and realise their values in reflexive processes around their respective roles. Being more than an armchair exercise, this involves 'a form of practical inquiry which involves jointly reflecting about our practices [where] the outcome should be both the development of our understanding of how to achieve our ends-in-view (values) and of what it is we want to achieve' (ibid, p. 419). Such an approach respects Fullan's (2007, p. 460) recommendation that 'plausible visions… should be formed in the light of reflective experience, and must therefore be derived from action, not imposed upon it' (2007, p. 460).

The emerging characteristic spirit of the ETB sector will need to be revisited and revised on an on-going basis and appropriate structures will also be needed to facilitate the associated 'dialogue and deliberation' (Williams and Shearer, 2011). This is particularly important within a pluralist society since 'reconciliation of rival claims and conflicting interests can only be partial and provisional' (Hogget, 2006, p. 178) as societal change continues to impact on values and norms.

Given the societal, cultural and demographical changes experienced in Ireland in recent decades (Darmody, Tyrrell, and Song, 2011), the process of communally exploring and articulating an agreed statement of values to inform the 'characteristic spirit' of publicly managed schools is likely to be inherently controversial (Mclaughlin, 1994; Weiler, 1990). As noted by Hoggett (2006, p. 176), the public sphere 'is the necessary embodiment of such conflictual purposes' and publicly managed organisations must cope with inherent, irresolvable, value conflicts, which are a 'vital dimension of public life'. In a pluralist society, the challenges of agreeing values and principles in (and for) schools which are publicly managed, are the challenges of democracy. These challenges are handed to schools and ETBs by the governance framework of patronage and characteristic spirit.

Conclusion

It is, however, well to remember that such consultation and debate will take place in an environment that is growing less hospitable towards critical debate of this nature. The current global shift away from democratic public values towards a market-driven model of education (Ball, 1999; Lingard, 2010) means that public education as a common good is increasingly under siege from corporate interests and a new form of global educational governance is emerging, based on the influence of international agencies – 'globalization from above' (Giroux, 2011). On the other hand, there is renewed interest in the common good of Irish society and in participative political debate (Healy, Sheehan and Whelan, 2015; Fitzgerald, 2007).

The Education Act, itself the outcome of considerable consultation and consensus-seeking, licenses and challenges the ETB sector to define and articulate its own characteristic spirit. Issues around the development of appropriate strategies and processes for defining the characteristic spirit of publicly managed schools are best understood in the cultural, political and historical contexts

of Irish education and with reference to the increasingly pluralist and secular nature of Irish society. This process can certainly benefit from international thought including Starrat's (1991) ethics of critique, justice and caring and from the experiences of the UK and Australia. It should be informed by wide consultation and debate and by school-based action research and inquiry. Appropriate support and decision-making structures that are deliberative, participative, and inclusive are essential in order to enable and facilitate these developments. It is hoped that the proposed action research and ensuing development will inform the international discourse around school values.

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