

Introduction

Context

The policy topic I have decided to review for this essay is intercultural education, I will focus on the policy document "*Intercultural Education in Post-Primary Schools: Guidelines for Schools*". The document was published by the NCCA IN 2006 and provides detailed set of guidelines to support intercultural education in post primary schools and classrooms.

The specific aims of the document are to identify and provide strategies for to integrate intercultural education into curriculum across post-primary schools, prescribing practical advice on whole school planning as well as individual subject areas. The overarching aim of the document can be as seen as an effort to achieve genuine integration through an 'intercultural' society.

'Interculturalism' expresses the belief that we can all become personally enriched through experiencing and being exposed to other cultures, and that ultimately people from different cultures should be able to respectfully engage and learn from each other.

I will review and analyse the document in light of what I have learnt about Irish policy making - through participating in the group collaborative peer-learning activities during this module for DEIS and the Junior Cycle Reform. By taking a look at: - evidence of research and consultation, stakeholders, international policy influence and the future implications of this topic in the context of policy making.

Research and Stakeholder Consultation

Evidence of background research for the document is presented largely through its rationale. Figures and statistics collected from Irish census results as well as EU figures demonstrate the rising levels of immigration in this country and solid evidence for the need to consider the implications for society and the education system.

“The growth of immigration into Ireland since the mid-1990s has brought the issue of ethnic and cultural diversity to the forefront and has encouraged discussion around diversity. However, it would not be accurate to suggest that Ireland has only recently experienced diversity.” (www.ncca.ie, 2006).

The value underpinning the document is integration and inclusive education. This topic stems from prior research into inclusive education that has been established by the traveller rights movement. With traveller rights recognised as cultural issue, this document can be seen as an extension to this research to include the immigrant concern. The *“Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy (2006)”* document provides a much more in depth scope of inclusive policy that could be recognised as a foundation for development of this document. While the research to validate the policy topic is strong, there is less research evident in the document into the effectiveness or resulting application of the methods and strategies outlined.

The document provides guidelines for intercultural education, and has a strong emphasis on theorising the needs and outcomes for such policies. As such the majority of the consultation for the document seems to have been with educational research bodies. This is evident in the bodies that are listed as ‘working and guiding the steering committee for Interculturalism and the curriculum in the preparation of these guidelines’. With bodies such as the Teachers’ Union of Ireland, Development Education Unit of Development Co-

operation Ireland and the State Examinations Commission mentioned. The stakeholder's voice I find missing in this document is that of the students and the parents. The document contains mostly theory about the issue and possible interventions, but it is lacking robust research into student's/families (both Irish and foreign) experience and opinions of the topic. I consider the need for student consultation in this process necessary for the future development of this policy topic, as was proven in areas of the DEIS development process. In summary I find the background of the issue to be well researched, the theory behind the guidelines and advice is also strengthened by research. Though I believe that moving forward, in order to develop, the policy needs more research in the form of more consultation with the stakeholders who actively involved with the issue, such as students, their families and the wider community.

International Influence

Influence from the EU and the OECD can be found throughout the document. There is a strong emphasis on EU collected data to support the rationale and the context of the topic, as well as Ireland's place within the EU as an influence on the issue.

"As EU citizens, Irish people enjoy the right to move to other EU states. Other EU citizens, including the 10 countries that joined the EU in May 2004, also enjoy the same right, and many have chosen to live and work in Ireland. From May 2004 to April 2005 85,114 people from the ten accession countries were allocated Personal Public Service Numbers (PPS No) in Ireland." (www.ncca.ie, 2006).

The document can also be seen as a response to policy documents by the OECD such as *"Preparing our youth for a better world The OECD PISA; global competence framework"*. In this policy document the OECD describes the international importance of 'global competence' in students.

“ global competence is vital for individuals to thrive in a rapidly changing world and for societies to progress without leaving anyone behind. Against a context in which we all have much to gain from growing openness and connectivity, and much to lose from rising inequalities and radicalism, citizens need not only the skills to be competitive and ready for a new world of work, but more importantly they also need to develop the capacity to analyse and understand global and intercultural issues”

Much like the development of the DEIS policies, it is evident that when Irish policy making is targeted towards social issues such as equality or discrimination, the DES has been influenced by external pressure to do so by the EU and the OECD. It remains to be seen if the speeds at which these policies are developed, depend on the pressure from these external European forces, or the active engagement of the Irish government.

Future Piloting and Feedback

The document is a soft policy, as it provides for now, just guidelines for teachers and school administrations to refer to if they find themselves in the position to need them. I would consider this document at the draft policy development stage of the Irish policy making cycle. If the issue of intercultural education is to be address fully, I feel that elements of this document need to roll out as requirements in the current Irish post primary curriculum. These then need to go through some piloting and receive feedback and reviews in order to be refined. The issue can be found referenced in the key skills of the new junior cycle framework under “Working with Others”. It mentions co-operating and respecting difference as aims of the new curriculum. Although it is referenced here, it does not point specifically to intercultural education aims. Practical initiatives that are being piloted, which echo the values underpinning this document, are the introduction of ‘Religious Beliefs and Ethics’ at primary level and the establishment of the Yellow Flag programme.

Education about Religious Beliefs and Ethics (ERB) is in initial introductory stages with the general aims outlined;

“The general aims of the proposed ERB and Ethics curriculum support those of the 1999 curriculum, Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) and the Intercultural Education in the Primary School Guidelines (NCCA, 2004) and can be expressed as supporting teachers to enable children to:-

Express comfort, empathy and joy with human diversity, use accurate language for human differences, and form deep, caring human connections”

(Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics in the Primary School: Consultation Paper (2015)

The aims outlined in that policy document, support the aims of intercultural education as described in the guidelines. From what I have observed of Irish educational policy making, is that policy tends to be piloted from the bottom up, for example the introduction of the junior cycle framework before dealing with the senior cycle. In this sense, I am interested to see how the piloting of ERB and the feedback from it will affect the development of the Intercultural education policy. Similarly the “*Yellow Flag Programme*” provides practical incentive for schools to aim for intercultural education. Based on the recognition that Irish society becomes more and more culturally diverse it ‘provides a practical series of 8 steps that brings issues of interculturalism, equality and diversity into the whole-school programme and allows schools to apply them to the day to day running of the school.’ (“*About Yellow Flag*”. *Yellowflag.ie*. N.p., 2017. Web) As mentioned before, this programme aimed at inclusion was born from the Irish Traveller Rights Movement, and expanding the scope of intercultural education to reflect today's Irish society

“Despite there being a commitment at policy level relating to these challenges, practical progress in the area of intercultural education has been slow. Many so-called initiatives remain simply statements of intent and put unrealistic expectations on schools and teachers to deliver interculturalism without the necessary supports.”

(“*About Yellow Flag*”. *Yellowflag.ie*. N.p., 2017. Web)

The 'so-called initiatives' and 'statements of intent' mentioned here is how the intercultural education guidelines could be perceived as without further development through proper consultation with the appropriate stakeholders. In summary the intercultural education guidelines require further development as specific policies which will need piloting, feedback and review if it is going to move beyond intent and bring the theory into effective realisation.

Conclusion

The document "*Intercultural Education in Post-Primary Schools: Guidelines for Schools*" provides a strong rationale of the need for intercultural education across the post primary curriculum in Ireland. The document outlines in detail, tangible advice for specific subjects, daily lesson planning an assessment to encourage open discussion, inclusion and to discourage racism and prejudice. The guidelines provide a theoretical solution to dealing with diversity in Irish schools, and this is reflected in the stakeholders that have been consulted. Educational research bodies are the main voice heard throughout the document. Much like the DEIS development, pressure from external influences like the EU and OECD can be felt as driving forces behind the development of these guidelines. Although for this document to be developed beyond theoretical guidelines and into robust policies that can achieve some practical progress, then more consultation will be needed; consultation with students, families and the wider communities of Ireland that are currently experiencing these issues as they are happening.

Informed Insights into the Irish policy making process

DEIS Review Report

As part of our collaborative peer learning activity, I was assigned the individual task to review the *'Report on the Interdepartmental Group'* as part of our presentation on the review of DEIS . The report focused on cross departmental and interagency collaboration that took place in the development of DEIS. I found that the 2005 Action Plan for Educational Inclusion noted:

"A wide range of issues such as poverty, family breakdown and health problems can adversely affect the learning capacity of pupils. The education system cannot resolve these issues single handedly, nor can it be expected to, but it must adopt a leading role in influencing interventions that directly impact on the ability of pupils to derive maximum benefit from educational provision" (Action Plan for Educational Inclusion 2005)

Reviewing this aspect report highlighted for me the multi layered and complex nature of the issues that the DEIS programme is trying to deal with. Through doing this collaborative activity, I gained some insights into the Irish policy making process. What stood out to me most was the slow moving nature of policy development. The DEIS programme was originally proposed in 2005 and it took 10 years for the policy development process to come around full circle. My understanding is that in that time, social and economic factors change quite a lot and initial research may not be relevant any longer, meaning the policy making cycle is constantly trying catch up with itself. But what does this mean for the students that the policies are trying to protect?

"Hundreds of deprived schools identified as qualifying for extra teachers and supports were not included in the State's official scheme to tackle educational disadvantage... The schools were identified using a new deprivation index which allows policy-makers to objectively identify the level of disadvantage among school pupils based on home addresses and census data. It replaced a survey completed by school principals which was widely regarded as vulnerable to "gaming"." (<https://www.irishtimes.com> 2017)

I consider the DEIS programme essential and successful in many aspects, the values that underpin it are important for society as a whole to address. My concern is with however the structure of the Irish making policy cycle. If the process moves at a rate that can't keep meeting the needs of issues it is trying to solve, how will genuine progress be made?

New Junior Cycle Framework

Teacher engagement

The new junior cycle framework is an ambitious reform and requires the wholehearted engagement of teachers - otherwise its chances of success are limited. This was one of the main points that I found highlighted through taking part in the collaborative peer learning activity

I have learnt that the response of teachers to the new reform has been influenced by a range of issues – some related to these new developments themselves, others with deeper roots.

"A decade of rapid social, demographic and educational change followed by salary cuts, deteriorating career structures and casualization have left many teachers alienated and distrustful, even of initiatives which may be to their professional benefit." ("A way forward' Pauric Travers Independent Chairperson 12 February 2015)

It seems to me that timing is an issue with in the Irish policy making process. The DES has decided to roll out these new reforms of which, teacher unions disagree with some elements, amidst a climate of unrest among teachers in relation to existing issues such as pay inequality. It seems to me to be risky venture while teachers seem to be already disheartened.

'Holistic' Approach

It is clear upon examining the reform policy that there is a great influence from curriculum developments abroad. Throughout Europe and the US a more liberal progressive ideology is being adopted with more emphasis on a curriculum that offers a holistic approach, one that tends to the 'whole student' and encourages more self-directed learning. These ideals are reflected in the key skills and the emphasis on wellbeing that underpins the reform.

We are committed to helping every learner develop as a whole person, fulfil his or her potential and help shape a shared future built on the well-being of individuals, communities and the planet - (OECD, 2018).

I found an area under question however is the treatment of 'wellbeing' as a definable and measurable quality that can be implement alongside the established curriculum principals. The reform policies give an impression that has not fully explored methods to assess these elements and the expertise to tackle such a subject might be lacking behind the curtain of policy making

I feel that the report successfully highlights the need for greater implementation, CPD and general awareness for the role holistic approaches in education, though if this is to be achieved at its greatest potential there are wider issues across the education systems that need to be addressed in tandem.