

Secondary School Education in Ireland

History, Memories and Life Stories,
1922–1967

Tom O'Donoghue
Judith Harford



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Historical Studies in Education

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1

Introduction to Secondary School Education in Ireland: History, Memories and Life Stories, 1922–1962

The year 1967 is very significant in the history of education in Ireland, marking the introduction of what became known as ‘the free education scheme’¹ that led to a great increase in attendance at post-primary schools across the country. Up until then, only a small number of those who left primary school continued their schooling. For the vast majority of this minority, what this meant was attendance at one of two types of schools, namely, vocational schools and secondary schools. The smaller proportion of the group attended vocational schools, which were run by local vocational education committees and offered a two-year course which was essentially practical and oriented towards the world of work. The larger proportion, albeit still very small in number relative to those who left primary school, attended secondary schools.

The general pattern of post-primary school attendance in the early 1960s had been established in the days of the British administration of the country and was maintained during the first four decades following Independence in 1922. In 1924, the number of students in secondary schools was a mere 5 per cent of those enrolled in primary schools in the State, and by 1960, the figure had increased only to 16 per cent.² The majority of those in secondary schools attended Catholic schools; there was a small number of Protestant schools, and a Jewish school was established in the 1950s. In contrast to the situation in many other countries,³ there were no State-established secondary schools in Ireland until 1966, when the first of a very small number of comprehensive schools was opened.

Secondary school education prior to 1967 was, then, very much for a minority. While the reasons for this are considered in the next chapter,

there are also many related areas of research deserving of attention. In particular, there is a great lack of exposition on the experience of schooling by those in attendance at secondary schools in the decades immediately prior to the introduction of free secondary schooling. This book, focusing on memories of that experience over 50 years later, is offered as one attempt to address the deficit. It is recognized that there is also a great need for a similar book on those who attended vocational schools. Hopefully the present work will stimulate others to engage in a project to that end.

In conducting the associated research and in writing this book, we were motivated by our view that it was essential to commence the documentation of memories of students' experiences lest, after a few more decades, these might be forgotten. On this, we were, in turn, influenced also by the small number of accounts available on the period between the early 1920s and the mid-1960s, which indicate that the experience of secondary schooling by students,⁴ as well as by teachers and parents, was far from homogeneous. This, of course, should hardly surprise us, since a range of categories of secondary schools existed in the country at the time, albeit with much in common in terms of management structures, the curriculum offered and the pedagogical practices employed. Also, while it is true that in the secondary schools the children of professionals, managers and employers heavily outnumbered the children of those from lower status occupations,⁵ many of their families were far from wealthy. Furthermore, even though the children of semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers were in the group to benefit least from secondary school education, not all were deprived of the experience. In some cases, this was due to Catholic religious orders of nuns, brothers and priests providing tuition free of charge. In other cases, it was due to parents making great financial sacrifices to pay the necessary fees. In other cases, yet again, it was thanks to scholarships provided by county and urban councils for a tiny cohort of students across the country.

A realization of all of the foregoing brought home to us the need to try to capture the range of experiences across the overall secondary school student cohort. On this, we could have commenced with an exploration of the field by seeking out such sources as students' diaries, accounts in school magazines, and letters to parents and friends. However, we concluded that the most immediate task should be to capture the memories of a cohort of those who commenced Irish secondary schooling at various times during the two decades prior to 1967. As a result, we undertook a series of interviews with a wide range of people for whom

this was the case. The remainder of this chapter locates the resulting accounts within the broader corpus of work on the history of education in Ireland and provides an overview on the nature of the research approach adopted.

* * *

The history of education in Ireland is a well-researched field. Much of it relates to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but previous centuries have also received a reasonable amount of attention. The greatest emphasis in the existing corpus of work is on what might be termed 'the high politics' of schooling, dealing with such matters as who provided education during different time periods, for whom and to what ends.⁶ Central to this corpus of work are analyses of Church-State relations before and after Irish Independence in 1922, the churches in question being the Roman Catholic (RC) Church and the Protestant Churches, especially the (Anglican) Church of Ireland and the Presbyterian Church.⁷ Attention has also been given to analysing the nature of school attendance patterns over the years and the administrative structures in the various categories of schools established. Furthermore, a small but important body of work has been generated on the history of access to education,⁸ on the prescribed curriculum⁹ and on official positions on pedagogy at all levels of the educational system, as well as on teacher preparation,¹⁰ on school inspectors¹¹ and on the State-run national examinations, namely the Intermediate Certificate examination and the Leaving Certificate examination. We know much less, however, about some of the individuals and groups central to the system, including school managers, parents, teachers¹² and students.

The latter point is especially striking when considered in relation to former students' memories of schooling. This is not to say that no works whatsoever exist. There are, for example, a number of autobiographical accounts which portray memories of primary schooling in rather romantic terms.¹³ At the other extreme, and also especially in relation to primary schooling, is a host of works which recall experiences of abuse, both physical and sexual, particularly in orphanages and industrial schools,¹⁴ as well as in more regular school settings. Some of this work is autobiographical,¹⁵ some is in the form of academic expositions¹⁶ and some yet again is in the form of testimony given to government commissions. Little, however, is available in relation to the large territory that lies between the romantic accounts and those of horrendous abuse, particularly in relation to secondary schooling. Furthermore, what does exist is usually not in the form of lengthy solicited narratives. Rather, it

consists of various sections in works of reminiscences that, in most cases, span the broad range of human life experience.¹⁷ As already indicated, this book constitutes a first attempt to begin to address the deficit by outlining accounts of individuals who attended Irish secondary schools in the decades prior to 1967, the year in which free secondary school education was introduced.

* * *

The accounts presented in later chapters were deliberately solicited from individuals whose memories were not dominated by a view that the experience of secondary schooling was totally idyllic. Also, there was no deliberate seeking out of participants whose recall of being brutalized overshadows all else. Furthermore, the selection of individuals was undertaken to capture a wide range of categories of schools, including schools catering for both Catholics and Protestants, and schools that differed in terms of their cultural ethos.

As this was the first attempt we know of to engage in such a project, we also deliberately sought to have amongst our participants individuals we considered would be likely to have reflected on their schooling. Thus, quite a number of our accounts are based on the memories of former teachers and of academics in the field of education studies. These are complemented by accounts from individuals who responded to a number of advertisements which explained the nature of the project and which requested people to volunteer to be interviewed. This purposive sampling approach allowed us to spread the range of participants widely.

We tried our best to have a gender balance and to have the memories of those who were boarding school students recorded alongside the memories of those who were day students. Also, all of the accounts are based on interviews with those currently in the 'middle classes'. It is difficult to see how this situation could have been otherwise since a main function of secondary school education was to provide the credentials necessary either to maintain the middle-class position into which one was born, or allow one to move into this position. In saying this, we recognize that we could, in a larger project, explore the memories of those who did not succeed in moving up the social ladder as a result of their attendance at a secondary school, those who dropped out after attending for a year or two and those who remained in school for five or six years, but ended up failing the Leaving Certificate examination.

Rather than being oral history, where the aim is to gain information about the past, the research which eventuated in the solicited accounts

presented in this book can be seen as being in the life history tradition. A life history is 'the history of an individual's life given by the person living it and solicited by the researcher'.¹⁸ It makes extensive use of the in-depth interview in order to encourage participants to reveal, in their own words, their perspectives on their lives, experiences and situations. Accounts that emerge from the adoption of this approach are mediated by the researcher's interaction with the person during the telling of the story. Thus, one overcomes, to some extent, the problem in the traditional autobiography that what we read is what the author wishes us to know.¹⁹

Life history research in relation to education has become very popular over the last four decades. A relatively recent overview on scholarly contributions in this tradition has been provided by Rolls *et al.*²⁰ Teachers' careers constitute one area of focus, with early comprehensive studies having been conducted by Lortie,²¹ Sikes *et al.*,²² Huberman²³ and Fessler and Christensen.²⁴ There is a related tradition of recording individuals' memories of schooling which has a much longer history. An example recounted by O'Donoghue²⁵ concerns Count Giovanni of Porcia who, in the early 1720s, invited a number of Italian intellectuals to tell the story of their lives. They were asked to describe the methods by which they were taught grammar and other subjects at school and university. The project led to the writing of *The Life of Giambattista Vico Written by Himself* and was published in a Venetian journal in 1728.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Abbs²⁶ also demonstrated the potential of another related approach in his work *Autobiography in Education*. He focused on the manner in which education affected individuals by asking the fundamental question: where is it that education takes place? Education, he argued, cannot take place without reference to the individual; it is essentially an enterprise concerned with interior states and conditions. He then went on to use exemplary autobiographies from such notable figures in history as Augustine, Rousseau, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Gorky, for the purpose of studying the processes of childhood, education and growth.

Other significant studies making use of autobiography as a method in educational research were carried out by Goertzel and Goertzel,²⁷ who utilized published autobiographies of various eminent twentieth-century personalities to identify psycho-social factors influencing childhood formation. Similar work was carried out by Benjamin Bloom at the University of Chicago and was published under the title *Developing Talent in Young People*.²⁸ Here Bloom relates the results of his attempt to examine the processes by which highly talented individuals in the

arts, business, sport, mathematics and science reached the highest levels of accomplishment in their chosen fields. In his studies, he placed great emphasis on investigating participants' recollections of their educational experiences, with tape-recorded data forming the main source material for the research.

In the last two decades, accounts of research on other groups have also been written. These include those of adult dyslexics recalling their experiences of schooling,²⁹ as well as of those who attended segregated schools³⁰ and schools for students with moderate learning disabilities.³¹ At this point, however, it is important to recall that the investigation that led to the production of this book, while influenced by the research methods underpinning such studies and those of the other studies mentioned above, had, as its primary focus, highlighting various individuals' memories of secondary schooling in Ireland, rather than seeking acontextual generalizations in relation to the educational process. To this end, guidance was also provided by a number of significant oral history projects, including those undertaken by Gardner and Cunningham,³² Leight and Rinehart³³ and Punch.³⁴

And yet, as has been mentioned already, the book is not the product of an oral history study. Rather, it is based on 'topical life stories' located within the life history research tradition. On this, it is apposite to recall the distinction drawn by Allport,³⁵ and reiterated by Denzin,³⁶ between the complete, or comprehensive, life story, and the topical life story. The complete or comprehensive life story is concerned with all aspects of the individual's life from birth and is usually a long and complex account of the overall flow of life of an individual. In contrast, the topical life story focuses on only one phase, aspect or issue in the individual's life. It involves, as Goodson³⁷ sees it, the soliciting of a person's life story in relation to that one phase, aspect or issue. Drawing on these distinctions, the accounts presented in this book are offered as topical life stories, where the focus is on the participants' memories of their secondary schooling.

Recognizing a compelling view that gender is a significant variable in the conduct and outcome of interviews,³⁸ we ensured that, where at all possible, the interviews with the female participants were conducted by the female author of this work and those with male participants were conducted by the male author. We also recognized that the selection of memories told to an interviewer and the ways in which they are narrated can be influenced by the intersubjective relations between the interviewer and the participant.³⁹ This prompts us to suggest that the memory stories that each of us solicited from each participant might

vary somewhat if conducted by different interviewers. We went some way towards addressing this by ensuring that not only are the accounts that we present topical life stories, they are also edited topical life stories. The decision that they should be edited was made in the light of Allport's⁴⁰ advice that while unique styles of expression, including argot and colloquial phrasing, should remain unedited, editing for the sake of clarity or to remove repetitious material, is justified. The editing was conducted in conjunction with the participants. Each interview was reconstructed into a first-person essay by the authors and then returned to the participants for reading and responses. This co-construction process continued until each participant arrived at an account which he or she felt could be made public.

Finally, there is no suggestion that one can generalize with regard to all who attended secondary school in Ireland for the period reported in the individual accounts of participants here. Also, as has been made clear already, those interviewed constituted a convenience, or purposive, sample. Thus, not all readers may agree with the trends and directions indicated. Indeed, we can hear many a reader legitimately saying: 'I had a totally different experience and I went to a similar type of school.' Far from being a weakness of the book, we see this as a strength; disagreement is to be encouraged to stimulate cogitation of alternatives and contribute to debate on them. The outcome, we hold, could be the sowing of the seed for engagement in a much wider project, where the aim would be not only to capture the full range of experiences, but also to try to calibrate within it what was general, what was specific and what was idiosyncratic.

* * *

The next chapter sketches out the broad background to secondary school education in Ireland from 1922 to 1967. The expositions on the memories of a cohort of those who commenced Irish secondary schooling prior to 1967 are then presented in the seven chapters which follow. Six of these chapters relate to particular categories of schools: Catholic diocesan colleges; schools run by the Irish Christian Brothers; schools run by other Catholic male religious orders; schools run by the Presentation Sisters and the Sisters of Mercy; schools run by other Catholic orders of female religious sisters; and schools run by the Protestant Churches. Chapter 9 relates the memories of those who received their secondary schooling in a variety of schools that do not fit neatly into the categories dealt with in the previous chapters. Chapter 10 brings the book to a close with a general conclusion.

2

The Broad Background to Secondary School Education in Ireland, 1922–1962

Introduction

This chapter sketches out the broad background to secondary school education in Ireland from 1922 to 1967, so that the expositions in the remaining chapters on the memories of a cohort of those who commenced Irish secondary schooling prior to the introduction of free secondary school education in 1967 can be understood in context. Five aspects of the background are outlined. First, the extent of the provision of secondary schooling in Ireland over the period is described. The categories of secondary schools which existed are then detailed. This is followed by an outline of the nature of the State-prescribed secondary school curriculum. An overview on the nature of the secondary school teaching force is then presented. Finally, some perspectives on the ‘general’ approaches used in teaching are considered.

Provision of secondary schooling in Ireland up to 1967

A variety of educational traditions developed in Ireland throughout the course of history.¹ During Europe’s ‘dark ages’, the bardic schools were aimed at preserving and transmitting the country’s rich Gaelic tradition.² Alongside them were the monastic schools which were focused on biblical scholarship, conversion to Christianity and the spread of the Christian message beyond Ireland.³ This pattern changed when schooling in the country became an instrument of the Tudor conquest and of the associated process of colonization.⁴ It is also during this period that the first major decline in the Irish language as the language both of the majority and of the politically powerful set in, as it came to be associated with poverty, ignorance and lack of opportunity.⁵

Catholicism, on the other hand, continued to be the Church of the great majority of the population, notwithstanding the growth of a significant Protestant minority. Indeed, loyalty to Catholicism strengthened in the country over the centuries in response to being subjected to constant threat from outside forces. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a series of draconian 'Penal Laws' was passed aimed at depriving the 'native' Irish of all rights to property, religion and education.⁶ The response of many of the 'native' Catholic gentry was to go into exile, and those who remained often sent their children to Catholic schools in Europe. Some elementary education was made available by itinerant teachers for those of the poorer Catholic class who could afford it, in what came to be known as 'hedge schools', and which were usually private houses or barns.⁷ Protestant schools of various categories were also established by a number of voluntary groups, primarily to educate Protestant children,⁸ but a number of them had as their objective the conversion of children from Catholicism.⁹

By the latter half of the eighteenth century, the pattern of schooling was to change again, primarily due to the relaxation of the Penal Laws. A variety of Catholic schools provided by individuals and religious orders were now established, initially to offer primary school education.¹⁰ Some of these schools expanded to also offer secondary school education to a small number of the children of the Catholic middle classes. This became possible because, by the early 1800s, the political situation was no longer hostile to the Catholic Church (the Church), which was rapidly replacing a chaotic structure of ecclesiastical administration with a high degree of organization.¹¹ As a new and powerful interest group, the Church cooperated with the British government in trying to realize a mutual interest of pacifying the majority of the population so that they would give allegiance to both Church and State. The conduct of education was a notable example of the mutual dependence which developed in this regard.¹²

In 1831, a State-sponsored primary (national) school system, overseen by a board of commissioners, was established. Initially intended to be multi-denominational, with strict delimitation between religious and non-religious education, it had developed into an almost totally religious-managed system by the late 1870s.¹³ This was due to the sustained agitation undertaken by the Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland and the Presbyterian Church. The outcome was that while the State paid the bulk of the capital costs of running the primary schools, the vast majority of them were run by parish clergy, both Catholic and Protestant, and the buildings were the property of the Church bodies.

Protestant children, in the main, attended schools under the ownership and management of their respective Protestant denominations. However, because the majority of the population was Catholic, the bulk of the primary schools throughout the country became, *de facto*, Catholic schools. A small number of these, especially in the larger towns and the cities, were managed and staffed by religious orders. In the case of most of them, however, ownership was vested in trustees who included the local bishop. The parish clergy also controlled appointments to teaching positions, as well as promotion to school principal. With the education of primary schoolteachers being almost entirely a Church-run affair and with intake to the primary school teacher-training colleges being on a denominational basis, the clergy rarely had to worry about the religious conviction of those they employed. Furthermore, all primary schools, regardless of denominational affiliation, operated a State-prescribed timetable and curriculum, and religious instruction was permitted as a school subject.

There was a move on the part of the State at the beginning of the twentieth century aimed at introducing a system of local education committees with local rating and using as a model the system adopted in England under the 1902 Balfour Education Act.¹⁴ The Protestant Churches indicated that they favoured the move. Opposition, however, was mounted by the Catholic Church. The origin of this, as Coolahan has put it, was a realization that the replacement of the boards, which had evolved as vested interests over time, spelt overt danger for the Catholic Church, while the functions of the local committees were 'an infringement by the State through a democratic structure on the monopoly of power held at local level by the school patron and individual manager'.¹⁵ The outcome of the Church's vigorous campaign was the defeat of two major reform bills, The Irish Councils Bill (1907) and the McPherson Education Bill (1919). The Church also managed to preserve the status quo in the case of secondary or intermediate schools, which meant that from the passing of the Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act of 1878, through to Independence in 1922, direct government influence in the sector was kept to a minimum. Education at this level, in the case of both Catholics and Protestants, was very much a middle-class preserve.

The Irish Free State was established in 1922. Two years later, in 1924, the government's responsibility for almost all kinds of education apart from that offered by the universities was vested in a Minister for Education who headed up a newly created Department of Education.¹⁶ No changes were introduced to the existing system of ownership and

management of primary schools. With the great majority of the Protestant population on the island of Ireland being located in the new Northern Ireland State, the vast majority of primary schools in the newly independent southern State were Catholic schools. For the same reason, the vast majority of secondary schools in the south were also Catholic schools. Furthermore, all secondary schools continued to receive government financial assistance and to remain firmly in private hands. In the case of Catholic schools, this meant that the vast majority of them were run by diocesan priests and members of religious orders, while the headmasters of most boys' Protestant schools were clergymen and the headmistresses were devoted members of their respective churches.

Both the Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches were happy with the arrangement regarding secondary schools since they were provided with State subventions while preserving their managerial control. The State, for its part, wanted no controversy with the churches; the Department of Education stated in its first annual report that the State had assumed no responsibilities for the appointment of principals, teachers or managers.¹⁷ While the department inspected schools and exercised a certain degree of supervision through its powers to make grants to secondary schools as a result of inspection, it was not concerned with founding secondary schools, or financing the building of them. Also, because of the State's reluctance to take a leadership role in education up until the 1960s, it was almost impossible to engage in national planning to address social and geographical disparities in the provision of secondary schools.

In 1924, while there were 493,382 students in primary schools in the State, the secondary school system catered for only 22,897 students.¹⁸ The number of secondary school students increased gradually over the next four decades, until by 1955–1956 it had reached 59,306.¹⁹ Overall, however, a great imbalance still existed between the number of students attending primary schools and those attending secondary schools. Also, apart from a small minority of students (as considered in the previous chapter), secondary schooling was closed to those in the poorer sectors of Irish society; as late as 1961, the children of professionals, managers and employers heavily outnumbered those from lower status occupations in the secondary schools, yet their parents constituted only 13 per cent of the workforce.²⁰ Children of the unskilled or semi-skilled manual workers benefited least from secondary education.²¹ Students from the lower classes also were the least likely to obtain a university education and the most likely to drop out of secondary school at an early age.²²

The level of provision of local authority scholarships was totally inadequate as an aid and as an incentive for those in the lower social groups to pursue a secondary school education. In 1950, the number of scholarships awarded expressed as a percentage of the number of students in the sixth class of primary school was only 1.54 per cent. Also, scholarships were not distributed equitably on a regional basis.²³ For example, in the school year 1950–1951, Dublin County Borough offered one scholarship for every ten students in sixth class of primary school, Offaly County Council offered one scholarship for every 28 students and Laois County Council offered one scholarship for every 30 students. At the other end of the spectrum were Counties Dublin, Galway and Cork, whose county councils offered only one scholarship for every 202, 227 and 281 students, respectively, in sixth class in primary school. Furthermore, the value of these scholarships was only barely sufficient to pay the annual school fees. All other expenses had to be paid by parents, or were made available through the benevolence of those who managed the schools.

In many cases attendance at secondary school was prohibitive, not just because of the fees that had to be paid, but because potential students were needed at home to work on farms, or had to seek employment in Ireland or overseas. This situation persisted throughout the 1920s, '30s, '40s and '50s. The author, Frank Delaney, born in 1952, summed up the situation as he saw it in County Tipperary in his youth:

The poverty of our parish was such that keeping the bodies and souls of many of the schoolchildren together was often as much as many parents could do. Where my four brothers and sisters were concerned, we received a secondary school education, perhaps the first entire family in our locality to do so.²⁴

Also, availability of secondary schooling was not evenly provided throughout the State, with some areas being particularly disadvantaged. The north-west and south-west of the country, with their large stretches of poor land and very heavy emigration, stood out in this regard.²⁵ A small number of students in these areas were amongst those in the 30 per cent of the student population throughout the State who were boarders, but the parents of the majority of those of secondary school-going age were unable to afford to pay boarding school fees.

Consideration of the numbers attending the 12 secondary schools in Counties Donegal, Leitrim, Cavan and Longford in 1940 gives an

indication of the extent of regional under-provision in secondary school education.²⁶ In only one of these, St Patrick's Diocesan College, Cavan, did the number of students exceed 200, while in three of the schools, namely, Ballybofey, Lifford Prior and Raphoe Royal, the number in attendance in each case was less than 50. Ballymahon Girls' School and Cavan Royal School had only slightly larger numbers.²⁷ The remaining schools, namely, Loreto Girls' School, Letterkenny, Coláiste Admhnáin, Letterkenny, St Mary's Convent, Carrick-on-Shannon, St Mel's College, Longford and Loreto Convent, Cavan, each had less than 150 students in attendance. This meant that, in all, there were only 1,200 students in attendance at secondary schools in these four counties.

The areas that stand out in terms of having very few secondary schools were, in general, also the areas with the lowest provision of vocational schools in the country. Officially termed 'continuation schools' and 'technical schools', the vocational schools had been established under the Vocational Education Act of 1930.²⁸ Over the years, they took on a definite character. They offered courses which were essentially practical in focus, oriented towards the world of work and geared towards early school leavers. Their full-time continuation course was one of only two years' duration and was not designed to allow for transfer to secondary schools. Other problems included the Church not being as closely associated with vocational school education as it was with secondary school education, the core practical subjects (manual instruction and drawing) not being promoted as compulsory subjects at primary school level and the lack of standardization with regard to teacher training for vocational education. These matters, along with the fact that many of the schools were unable to employ a range of specialized staff since they catered for only a small number of students, did little to enhance the public perception of vocational education. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the overall student population of these schools was at all times less than that at secondary schools.

Many of those who attended both secondary and vocational schools were also faced with other difficulties. In particular, quite often a lot of time and effort were required to reach a school on a bicycle or on foot, as most parents did not have motor cars. The experience of one student who attended Roscommon Christian Brothers Secondary School in the 1950s has been described as follows:

While attending CBS in the 1950s, for a period he cycled daily the 40 miles round-trip from his native Kenagh. Mid-way through his career at CBS, a special school bus provided by the Past Pupils' Union

eased his burden, but he still cycled the nine miles to Lanesboro to make the connection to Roscommon.²⁹

As late as 1962, 26 per cent of the day students at secondary school had a daily round trip of between 10 and 20 miles.³⁰ The bicycle was the mode of transport used by 40 per cent of day students in getting to secondary school, while 27 per cent travelled by foot, 21 per cent by public bus or train and 8 per cent by private car or other means.³¹ As already indicated, it is true that problems like these were overcome by some through attendance at secondary school as boarders; in 1955–1956, 31 per cent of secondary school boys and the same percentage of secondary school girls were boarders.³² However, this solution proved to be a practical one only in the case of those children whose parents could afford to pay boarding school fees.

Finally, a pattern was established throughout all of the period under consideration of a certain proportion of those attending secondary schools commencing for a year or two and then dropping out. In fact, as the number of boys attending secondary school increased over the years, so also did the rate at which they dropped out after a short period of attendance. For example, of the 4,527 boys who entered the first year of secondary school in 1932–1933, 21 per cent had dropped out by 1934–1935. This rate of dropout increased in the 1940s and 1950s; of the 5,244 boys who entered the first year of secondary school in 1943–1944, 25 per cent had dropped out by 1945–1946, and of the 6,971 boys who entered first year in 1953–1954, 27 per cent had dropped out by 1955–1956.³³ On the other hand, while approximately two girls entered the first year of secondary school for every three boys throughout all of the period under consideration in this book, most of them were still in secondary school three years later.

Categories of schools

Within the secondary school sector overall, which consisted almost totally of Catholic schools and Protestant schools, a variety of categories existed. One type of school within the Catholic sector was the diocesan college. All 28 of these schools, which offered the standard secondary school curriculum, had been established by the Catholic bishops during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to encourage students to consider becoming priests for the respective dioceses in which they were located. They were all large purpose-built boarding schools located in fine parkland settings. The chapel and the study hall were their central

features while, in general, each also had a library, a ball-alley and playing fields. On average, by 1940, each college catered for about 170 boys, who were generally the sons of shopkeepers, business people, those in the lower level professions and those farming medium-sized farms.

The children of the wealthier class who were not enrolled in diocesan colleges attended a small number of fairly exclusive schools run by religious orders. These included the Dominican Fathers' Newbridge College, County Kildare, the Benedictine boys' school at Glenstal Abbey, County Limerick, St Vincent's Vincentian College, County Dublin, Clongowes Wood Jesuit College, County Kildare and the Benedictine girls' school at Kylemore Abbey, County Galway. Middle-class girls also attended schools run by such religious orders as the Loreto Sisters, the Dominican Sisters and the Presentation Sisters.

The majority of secondary schools were managed by the Irish Christian Brothers and the Sisters of Mercy. Most of the schools of these religious orders were small, with an average enrolment of only 150–200 students.³⁴ Also, they had only very basic facilities. A small number of schools run by Catholic lay men and women also existed (although not all of them defined themselves specifically as Catholic schools) and were conducted in equally challenging circumstances.

As with Catholic schools, the small number of Protestant schools in the country also varied in terms of size and facilities. Of the 42 Protestant schools in 1962, 22 were in the Dublin area. The remainder were scattered unevenly across the Republic, with the exception of a group clustered along the boundary with Northern Ireland. The one Jewish school in the country, established in the 1950s, was also in Dublin.

In 1958–1959, the Department of Education's annual report noted that some of the secondary schools around the country were getting very old. Also, they did not contain enough space for the number of students in attendance.³⁵ Five years later it was reported that 21 per cent of all secondary school classrooms in the State were 100 years or over in age and a further 18 per cent were 80 to 99 years old.³⁶

Before leaving the matter of school provision, the tendency which existed for a certain percentage of students to remain on at primary school needs to be noted. Collectively, the classes in which they were located were officially termed 'secondary tops'. Here, students usually studied a maximum of six core secondary school subjects for a year or two before leaving, although some did proceed to sit for the Intermediate Certificate examination. The number of 'secondary tops' increased throughout most of the period under consideration and were attended much more by girls than by boys. For example, in 1939–1940, the

number of secondary tops in the State was 61, with 3,627 girls and 259 boys in attendance. By 1956–1957, there were 87 secondary tops with 5,570 girls and 511 boys in attendance.³⁷ This development was encouraged by the State as it provided a relatively cheap way of extending the provision of secondary school education without the State becoming directly involved in the building of new secondary schools and having to meet the associated capital expense. By 1961–1962, there were 6,641 students in secondary tops, of which 94 per cent were girls. However, while this represented an increase in actual numbers yet again since 1956–1957, it was also the first time an overall decrease took place in the number of students in ‘secondary tops’ as a percentage of the total number of students in attendance at secondary schools.

More extensive change was also underway. In October 1959, Sean Lemass, then Taoiseach (prime minister), announced that the government was going to finance an increase in facilities for second-level education.³⁸ This resulted in an extensive scholarship scheme being introduced in 1961 to facilitate attendance by the less well off at second-level schools. By now, there was also a significant expansion taking place in the number of students enrolling in secondary schools. Between 1956–1957 and 1961–1962, the number of secondary school students increased from 62,429 to 80,000. This 28 per cent increase over five years was accompanied by a 14 per cent increase in the number of secondary schools, from 474 to 542.³⁹ The bulk of the increase in student numbers, however, was absorbed in existing school buildings by using all available space and converting other buildings on school grounds into classrooms.

In 1964, the State undertook, for the first time since Independence, to give building grants to the secondary school authorities for the expansion of secondary schools. Then, in 1966, it was announced that the State was going to provide free secondary school education, commencing the following year. Changes that were eventually to have an influence on the Catholic Church’s control of much of secondary schooling followed. Between 1970 and 1981, there was a dramatic drop in individuals joining the religious life in Ireland. This was particularly marked in the case of teaching orders, with the number of nuns involved in primary school teaching declining by one-third and in secondary school teaching by one quarter. Teaching brothers declined by a few percentage points more.

The long-term outcome of the developments initiated in Ireland in the 1960s was reflected in the pattern of school attendance in the country in 2008.⁴⁰ The great majority of students in the primary schools were

now proceeding to a second-level school, where they remained for five or six years. Of these students, 55 per cent were attending secondary schools, belonging to the tradition of classical grammar schools that have been the main focus of concern in this chapter so far, but they had broadened and modernized their curricula, while an additional 30 per cent proceeded to vocational schools, which by now were offering the complete range of secondary school subjects and entering their students for the same State examinations as the secondary schools. 'Community schools' and 'comprehensive schools' had also been established, with the same broad curriculum as the secondary and vocational schools, and the designation 'community colleges' had come to be used to describe many recently established, or expanded, vocational schools with new management structures.⁴¹

The secondary school curriculum 1924–1967

Shortly after Irish Independence, it was declared officially that educational policy in the new Ireland would be strongly influenced by a determination to revive Irish as the national language and to promote Irish history, music and other traditions from the Gaelic culture. In accord with this position, primary schools sought to develop basic skills of literacy and numeracy in Irish and English, and to teach religion. Much the same emphasis was evident in the curriculum for secondary schools, where the focus was on a general academic education in the grammar school tradition. Generally, students studied Irish, English, another language, history and geography, mathematics and at least one other subject from an approved list.⁴² These formed the core of the curriculum which prepared students for two new secondary school examinations, namely, the Intermediate Certificate examination, usually taken after three years of study, and the Leaving Certificate examination, usually taken after another two years.

The State gave additional financial support to schools that used the Irish language as the medium of instruction.⁴³ This led to a growth in the number of schools where Irish was the medium of instruction in all subjects, in the number of schools in which it was the medium of instruction in a variety of subjects and in the number of schools in which it was the medium of instruction in a select few subjects. Together, these three categories of schools never came close to being in the majority. Nevertheless, by 1960, 16 per cent of secondary school students were in all-Irish-speaking schools, 14 per cent were in schools where as much Irish as English was being taught and 19 per cent

were in schools where at least one subject apart from Irish was taught through Irish.⁴⁴

Not only was it compulsory under the new regime for schools to teach the Irish language, the curriculum for the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations also emphasized what was seen as being important for the Gaelic development of students, in contrast to the indifference to this tradition in schools in pre-Independence days. In particular, it was now compulsory to teach history and geography, and to do so with an Irish orientation. This use of schools to reshape national consciousness through a linguistic and cultural revival arose from a desire to give the children of the nation possession of what was seen as their national heritage.

The teaching of Irish history in particular was seen as crucial in the State's gaelicization policy. While the history of Western Europe was well covered in Intermediate Certificate history and was included under 'special topics' in Leaving Certificate history, Irish history received high priority, especially since the balance of the examination questions strongly favoured it. The approach reflected the concurrence of dominant ideologies of Catholicism and conservative nationalism. On this, the novelist John Broderick has commented as follows:

The idea of history that we got was that we had been oppressed by our neighbours, the British, for seven hundred years; that the Catholic religion in particular had been suppressed and was persecuted; that there had been a great revival in the nineteenth century with Catholic Emancipation through Daniel O'Connell, and that Catholicism thrived under that, but that coming into the twentieth century we were being Englified and we were becoming more and more part of the United Kingdom and that was why 1916 came about; this had to be broken, the Irish people had to be shown what their heritage was. In a capsule this was the history of Ireland.⁴⁵

Educators encouraged the teaching of this perspective on Irish history through narrating accounts of the lives of those deemed to have been outstanding individuals in Irish nationalist history and through studying perceived significant incidents. Teachers were informed that the desire was 'to establish a legitimate continuity for Irish separatism'⁴⁶ and that students should be imbued with the ideals and aspirations of Irish revolutionaries of the past.

The other side of this emphasis on Irish language and culture was a bias against Protestant Anglo-Irish culture. This exclusion was blatant

with respect to the teaching of English. Certainly, there was an emphasis on 'Shakespeare's Historical Dramas and other suitable plays of the same period', and on the poems of Scott, Byron, Longfellow, Milton, Wordsworth and Tennyson, but no recognition was given to contemporary Anglo-Irish dramatists, poets, essayists or novelists.⁴⁷ Professor T. J. Corcoran, SJ, the main architect of the secondary school programme, defended this lack of attention on the grounds that it protected students from exposure to a body of literature which was 'rarely good in structure' and was 'strongly influenced by a Protestant ethos and materialist values'.⁴⁸ This rejection of works such as those of Berkeley, Goldsmith, Swift, Shaw and Wilde was part of a process of strengthening the connection between Catholicism and the nation-building enterprise. The fact that it might also contribute to feelings of rejection on the part of the minority Protestant population was of little concern to either the Catholic Church or the State.

The Protestant Churches did raise objections in the early years of the State to what they saw as the compulsory promotion of the Irish language and of Gaelic traditions that were not part of their cultural inheritance.⁴⁹ The objections became public when it was announced that a pass in Irish would be necessary from 1928 onwards in order to pass the Intermediate Certificate examination overall and from 1934 in order to pass the Leaving Certificate examination overall. The Church of Ireland Bishop of Cashel, for example, expressed his belief that this was not only unjust in relation to his flock, but was also ill-advised from a material point of view since continental languages would be of more benefit in the promotion of the nation's economic development.⁵⁰ Such objections, however, were to no avail and also faded away in later decades.

The Catholic Church was well satisfied from the early years of Independence that its educational interests were safeguarded by the administrative and curricular structures of the State. In turn, it cooperated with the State in its gaelicization project. It soon became clear, however, that it was not prepared to accept the process beyond a certain level, with fear being expressed in the 1920s that too much emphasis on teaching the Irish language might threaten the place of the classical languages in the curriculum. The Church also argued that it needed to be always kept in mind that it was English that had helped to make Ireland 'an apostolic nation'.⁵¹ Concern increased in 1934, the year in which a pass in Irish became essential for passing the Leaving Certificate examination overall.⁵² The argument was that any further increase in emphasis on the language could push Latin out of the curriculum of boys' secondary

schools. When this became a possibility in 1936, the Catholic Headmasters Association objected in a lengthy public statement in which it was argued that the secondary school programmes in Latin provided the necessary groundwork in an essential subject for seminarians. The matter arose again in 1937, following speculation about the reconfiguration of the compulsory subjects in the secondary school curriculum in the interest of promoting further gaelicization. Catholic and Protestant headmasters were at one in expressing opposition to any such move.

The severity of the Church's opposition was such that curriculum changes over the next 30 years upheld the pre-eminence of Latin and English. This, however, was only one of the ways in which the Catholic Church safeguarded its interests in the secondary school curriculum. It also played a part in marginalizing, if not completely neutralizing, other educational interest groups, most notably parents, from contributing to the development of curriculum policy and practice. It also cooperated with successive governments to stifle attempts to establish a national forum where curricular and managerial proposals could be discussed by members of various interest groups.⁵³

All secondary schools, both Catholic and Protestant, were free to teach religion in the schools and to permeate school life with their particular religious ideas and practices, and this they did to great effect. Within Catholic schools, there was a significant degree of uniformity in the nature of the religious climate that prevailed because of the domination of the teaching force by the religious. Priests, brothers and nuns taught religion daily in classes lasting about 45 minutes. They imparted dogma, morals and Church history in all grades, with Catholic doctrine being viewed as received truth handed down unchanged. Senior students were also taught apologetics to help them defend their faith through systematic argumentation.

The role of the teaching of religion in Catholic girls' schools deserves special mention. Women, while excluded from decision-making in the Church, were viewed as central in perpetuating allegiance to the institution. As mothers, the argument went, they had a major responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the members of their families and for encouraging their children to enter religious life. To safeguard their children against the temptations of modern life, girls were told that when they became mothers they should bless their homes, dedicate them to the Sacred Heart and pray for the protection of the Virgin Mary. Also, domestic science, a school subject taken by most girls, was afforded a special place in their education. This, as the annual Conferences of the Convent Secondary Schools stressed throughout the 1940s and 1950s, was because a woman's role in life was to be a good wife and mother.⁵⁴

Turning to consideration of extra-curricular activities in schools for boys and girls, both Catholic and Protestant, this was an area in which there was some variation from school to school both in the nature and extent of what was provided. The most expensive schools, such as Newbridge College, were able to advertise that they could provide 'ample facilities for all outdoor games'.⁵⁵ Choral singing and piano lessons were extras in a number of schools of this nature, both for boys and girls. Clongowes Wood College advertised that it had 'a flourishing Dramatic Society and orchestra' and a 'Debating Society founded by Thomas Francis Meagher',⁵⁶ while the Society of Friends co-educational Newtown School in Waterford prepared students for 'awards in music and life-saving'.⁵⁷ The latter school also offered a great variety of practical subjects, including domestic science, dressmaking, art, physical training and handicrafts, Belvedere College offered games, public speaking, art, music and photography,⁵⁸ and Alexandra College had a geography club and a Gaelic Society to foster a love of the Irish language and Irish drama and music.⁵⁹

When it came to extra-curricular activities of a non-religious nature, most of the schools outside of the cities, with a few exceptions, concentrated only on sport. In boarding schools, games were generally played in after-school hours. Day schools also promoted games, usually during one afternoon a week, sometimes renting a field to provide the necessary facility. The results of hurling, Gaelic football, soccer, camogie, rugby and hockey school-championship games were reported in the local and provincial press, often at the request of the winning school, which saw the publication of success as a way of enhancing its public image and wooing extra students. Also, from the 1930s, army and ex-army gymnastics' instructors taught Swedish drill in some schools around the country and put on drill displays for the public at annual school sports' days.

Some schools also organized an annual concert or opera, and entered students for inter-school debating competitions. However, such activity was confined largely to students in boarding schools and to day students who lived near their schools. For those day-school students who did not live near the school, the priority once the hours of formal schooling came to an end was to dash on foot, or bicycle, often in bad weather and over rough roads, in order to get home before the onset of darkness.

Teachers

In the middle of the 1960s, 55 per cent of all secondary schoolteachers in Ireland were Catholic nuns, brothers and priests.⁶⁰ The majority of the remainder were Catholic lay people teaching in the schools of the