

Contexts and Constraints: An Analysis of the Evolution of Evaluation in Ireland with Particular Reference to the Education System

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This paper is a case study of the emergence of an evaluation culture in the public sector and particularly in education in Ireland over the past three decades. It suggests that the emergence of this culture was strongly influenced by external factors, particularly the European Union (EU), and to a lesser but significant degree, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Indeed, it can be argued that without these external influences no culture of evaluation would have emerged. Moreover it is further suggested that even after three decades the continuation of systematic evaluation is still probably dependent on external forces, since a belief in or commitment to evaluation as a tool of governance has not taken hold among key policy makers in Ireland. A second point made in the paper is that, while evaluation practice in Ireland was at first largely concentrated around EU funded projects and economic transfers, in more recent times evaluation has migrated to programmes and policies. In particular, it has become an element of the quality assurance processes institutionalised as part of the 'reform agenda' of the public service. Finally, the paper makes the point that an evaluation culture in a particular country—in this case, Ireland, but the same applies elsewhere—is hugely contextualised and influenced by the constraints of existing ideologies, traditions, practices and relationships between different interest groups. Thus, in Ireland, in line with the corporatist and

partnership-driven approaches to economic policy and industrial relations which have been dominant in the past two decades, the form of evaluation which has emerged is consensual, collaborative and negotiated.

The Age of Evaluation

In an article entitled 'I audit, therefore I am' in The Times Higher Education Supplement (THES, October 18, 1996, quoted in Simons 2002: 17) Michael Power, Professor of Accounting at the London School of Economics, defined our era as 'the age of inspection, the evaluative state and the audit society'. He went on, 'whatever term one prefers, there can be little doubt that something systematic has occurred since 1971. In every area of social and economic life, there is more formalised checking, assessment, scrutiny, verification and evaluation'. Thrupp and Willmott, (2003: 14), suggest that the 'something systematic' that happened was the perceived failure of Keynesian social democracy around the time of the first oil crisis in the nineteen seventies. This they argue has subsequently underpinned what they describe as 'the neo - liberal project whose aim is to inject the competitive nature of the market into what is perceived as a stifling, inefficient and expensive public sector'. Bottery (2004: 62) postulates that these policies are impacting on the provision of public services in several

contradictory ways, of which the following are the most relevant to this paper.

1. Satisfying the greater demands of clients will be hindered by the need to reduce expenditures and increase efficiency.
2. The pressure to use private sector concepts and practices such as efficiency and profit will conflict with traditional, contrasting private sector values such as care and equity.
3. There will be tension in terms of trust as governments see the need to allow enhanced autonomy and creativity but yet are unwilling to abandon low trust policies of targets, performativity and compliance.

Imposing these 'low trust policies' (O'Neill, 2002) has, in the view of Schwartz and Struhkamp (2004), brought evaluation to the centre of the stage. They suggest that in the current mode of transformed governance called 'new public management' evaluation often plays a crucial role as an instrument to maintain bureaucratic control.

Johannesson et al (2002: 335-337) agree that these developments represent 'the new liberal agenda and the new public management' both characterised by 'buzzwords' such as 'decentralisation, choice, goal setting, accountability, transparency, managerialism, evaluation, competition and privatisation'. They go on to argue that the 'marketisation' of every sphere of public life is an international trend that represents a radical move away from the concerns around equity and inclusion that dominated public policy discourse in the nineteen seventies and the nineteen eighties. In the new 'discourse of progress' or 'system of reasoning', as they define it, 'science' is relied upon to rationalise social systems, preferably 'packaged as easy to install techniques to secure and measure social and economic progress'. This process, they suggest, gradually norms both institutions and professionals to accept what Foucault describes as 'governmentality', by which he means, according to Johannesson et al., the acceptance and internalising of language and techniques (such as, for example, appraisal,

inspection and so on) which ultimately undermines their freedom and professional status.

Not all commentators take such a negative view of 'the new public management' or accept that the underpinning theory is neo-liberalism. For example, Dan O'Brien senior editor of the Economist Intelligence Unit suggests that it is the 'end of ideology' by which he means the left right divide that has brought 'the rise and rise of evidence – based policy making'. He goes on to argue that since policy is no longer driven by ideology it now responds to 'evidence about what works' and that this has also contributed to the 'internationalisation of thinking on policy' (O'Brien, 2006: 12). What is problematic about O'Brien's interpretation is the implicit view that relying principally on empirical evidence to drive certain areas of public policy such as for example education is somehow 'non-ideological'. In fact it involves an ideology of faith in positivist and technical rationalist approaches to social science research which is open to question. Moreover, as Chevalier et al (2004) point out, such an ideology tends to be strongly linked to theories of choice, competition and the role of the free and quasi-free market in driving efficiency. However whatever view one takes about the roots of our age of evaluation there are few if any countries which have avoided a significant impact.

'New public management' theory and practice of course has been applied in education as much or arguably more than in any other area. Anthony Giddins (2004: 510) remarks that 'the commercialisation and marketisation of education reflects the cost cutting pressures of globalisation as schools are being reengineered in much the same way as business corporations'. Guy Neave (1998: 265), speaking of the European Union as a whole, and specifically of schooling, also uses the term, 'the evaluative state' and remarks on the paradoxical blend of devolution and centralisation being experienced by schools in most European countries. Neave goes on to spell out this paradox: while it

appears that schools are being given more autonomy to manage their own affairs, they are at the same time being subjected to greater Government regulation and scrutiny, mostly by way of the setting and monitoring of performance targets and through increased inspection and evaluation. Meuret and Morlaix, (2003: 53) regard this process as 'a logical consequence' of what they perceive to be a genuine effort to decentralise power to schools and report that the OECD sees evaluation as 'a key way to enhance the responsiveness of schools to the needs of their intake as well as to allow them to improve'. Moos (2003) perceives a wide international movement to shift decision making down to school level while simultaneously increasing the pressure on schools to render a value for money account in both financial and achievement terms. In the US, work by Elmore and Fuhrman (2001:4-5) argues that 'the theory that measuring performance and coupling it to rewards and sanctions will cause schools and the individuals who work in them to perform at higher levels underpins performance based accountability systems operating in most states and thousands of districts'. These systems, Elmore and Fuhrman (2001:5-6) suggest, represent a significant change from traditional approaches to accountability in that the new approaches focus primarily on schools, while in the past school districts were held primarily responsible. The new approaches focus on performance and other outputs while in the past districts were held responsible for offering sufficient inputs and complying with regulations. Significant concessions such as bonuses are now offered as are threats of school closure.

As a result of these trends, teachers throughout Europe, North America, the Far East and in Australia and New Zealand are today working in conditions characterised by increased public scrutiny, more sophisticated techniques ensuring accountability and a myriad of strategies measuring student learning outcomes. Research by Hargreaves (reported in

Wolf and Craig, 2004) in New York State and Ontario, Canada reports that as a result of these developments many teachers feel 'demeaned and degraded', 'unfairly criticised' and 'sick and tired of being asked to justify their existence' and of 'constant government put downs'. De Lissovoy and McLaren (2003: 131) suggest that 'the growth of these policies, rules and regulations seem to be crowding out all else as they come to constitute a new industry, bureaucracy and language'.

This pressurised atmosphere is further heightened by a general distrust of teachers at political level and an instrumentalist attitude to education, or at least schooling in society at large (Thrupp and Wilmot, 2003). This is evidenced by the demand for the publication of league tables of results and the 'naming and shaming' of under-performing schools and teachers. As Whitty et al observe (1998: 5), whether or not what we are witnessing here is a struggle between a professionalising project and a deprofessionalising one, it is certainly a struggle among different stakeholders over the definition of teacher professionalism and professionalism for the twenty-first century.

The Evolution of Evaluation in the Irish Context

In the 1970s and into the 1980s evaluation in Ireland was limited in scope and largely peripheral to decision making. While Ireland had a reasonably well-developed system for the evaluation of individual projects, it did not have a strong tradition of evaluation of policies and programmes. Also in the 1980s, interest in evaluation as a tool of good governance took a backseat against the drive to control public expenditure, given an economic crisis with extremely high taxation, borrowing, inflation, and unemployment. Extremely poor economic conditions meant that the emphasis was put on cutting back on expenditure rather than examining its use in detail.

One extremely significant exception to this scenario of limited interest in evaluation in the

1980s is in relation to EU expenditure in Ireland. This is one area where demand for evaluation was consistent and systematic. Ireland has been a major beneficiary of funding support from the EU. Tied to this expenditure was a requirement to evaluate EU-funded programmes. In the 1980s, this had significant impact in two main policy areas: industrial training and employment creation schemes, and anti-poverty and other community development programmes. Interestingly, a distinctly different approach to evaluation was taken in each of these areas, with evaluation tending to focus on quantitative measurement of outcomes involving the use of complex statistical modelling techniques in the industrial policy arena and on qualitative methods concerned with process description in the community development arena.

Since 1989, evaluation of the EU Structural Funds has been a formal requirement of those receiving the assistance, and has led to further developments in evaluation practice in Ireland in the 1990s. The funds were applied through a number of operational programmes conducted under a joint Irish-EU agreed Community Support Framework (CSF) plan. Each operational programme was subject to ex ante, intermediate, and ex post evaluation, as was the CSF as a whole. Institutional structures to support evaluation, including an influential evaluation unit located in the Department of Finance, were established to overview progress and promote good practice.

Outside of EU expenditure, there has been a renewed interest in evaluation of public expenditure in Ireland in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As the economy has dramatically improved and economic growth pushed ahead, the interest has been in examining the value being obtained for the significant increases in public expenditure that have taken place. As part of a more wide-ranging programme of management reforms, there has been an emphasis on programme review and evaluation. To this end, in 1997, the government approved

a series of what are called 'value for money and policy' reviews to be carried out as part of a new system of comprehensive programme evaluation. The intention is to institutionalise evaluation of expenditure programmes as part of the wider agenda of public service reform. The success of this initiative has been patchy so far, with some organisations and programmes lending more support than others to the process (Boyle, 2002; 2005).

Interestingly, Boyle (1997:52-53), suggests that the rise of evaluation in the Irish context has rather different roots or at least is strongly influenced by factors other than neo-liberalism and the new public management. While Boyle acknowledges the influence of the OECD and the EU in the form of 'a more results orientated approach to public service management, performance indicators and evaluation', he nonetheless goes on to suggest that the new public management is not a monolith...and the Irish experience is very different from Britain or New Zealand. There is little or any evidence, for example, of any great theoretical underpinning to the Irish public service reform programme. It does not draw significantly from public choice or agency theories...neither is there any significant ideological drive to recast the public sector.

Therefore, it is arguable that it was not so much any domestic pressure or ideology that drove this process, but rather a migration of EU evaluation policy, together with a strong sense that, as these developments appeared to be happening everywhere else, it was potentially dangerous to lag behind. It is no coincidence that in other areas of education, particularly vocational, adult and higher education, in health and other social services, and indeed across the public sector as a whole, the late 1990s and early years of this century have witnessed similar developments to those described in the following sections.

Consensus Driven Evaluation: The Case of Education

For whatever combination of reasons, the evaluation and quality assurance culture now firmly embedded within the EU (Lion and Martini, 2006) has been gradually incorporated as a key element of the national social partnership agreements which have determined economic and social policy in Ireland for nearly two decades. For example, in national partnership programmes such as *Work and Competitiveness*, 1998, *Prosperity and Fairness*, 2001, *Sustaining Progress*, 2003-05 and the current national agreement, *Towards 2016*, the terms 'efficiency', 'effective', 'performance', 'quality', 'flexibility', 'rationalisation' and 'evaluation' are mentioned throughout. This represents at the highest political level what has been called the 'institutionalisation of evaluation' (McNamara and Kenny, 2006). In consequence, recent legislation, including the 1997 Universities Act, the Education Act, 1998 and the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, all have specific sections requiring evaluations of programmes and institutions. As a result, right across the education and training sector, new evaluation systems have been designed and rolled out in the past decade. An important point to note is that all these social partnership agreements and subsequent actions, including the setting up of evaluation structures, have been negotiated and agreed with the social partners, including trade unions, and have been effectively paid for in the form of higher salaries.

The present authors argue that the absence of a neo-liberal ideology coupled with the corporatist approach adopted in Ireland, in the form of 'partnership' between the state and the 'social partners' such as the trade unions, has undoubtedly limited in practice the extent to which managerialist notions such as performance related pay or stringent appraisal of work quality can be employed. Paradoxically, therefore, while many neo-liberal concepts, ideas and processes appear in the various

agreements mentioned above, their implementation on the ground is highly constrained by the partnership context and niceties. As Boyle (1997) argues, the Irish reform programme might better be conceptualised as more akin to that pursued in other small European countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark. As in these countries, a corporatist political tradition predominates and accommodation, compromise and consensus are key words in the political lexicon.

A good example of this culture of compromise with regard to evaluation is provided by the emerging Whole School Evaluation (WSE) process in Ireland. The Education Act (1998) describes the task of school inspection and whole school evaluation as being 'to monitor and assess the quality, economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the education system' (Section 7(2)(b)). This terminology is closely aligned with neo-liberalist philosophy and EU/OECD policy, but as we shall see what has emerged in practice is considerably diluted. Flynn (2006) captures this dichotomy well when describing WSE in Ireland as 'answering the challenges of accountability in an Irish way rather than a European way'.

However, it is important perhaps not to overstate the case. Even if the context and politics are different, nonetheless a good deal of the neo-liberal agenda has found an echo in Ireland. Across the public sector and very strongly in education, the language of the new public management is in vogue, as are its outward and visible signs in the form of targets, standards, benchmarks, accountability, evaluation and so on. For example, the website of the Department of Education and Science now refers to parents and pupils as 'clients' and 'consumers'. Now schools must engage in 'evidence-based quality assurance', 'school development planning' and 'whole school evaluation', and most educational programmes, projects and interventions are subject to regular

evaluation. In fact in educational circles where the talk used to be of 'change fatigue' we have now complaints of 'evaluation fatigue'. Yet it is important to note that on the whole, in the area of educational evaluation, emerging policies and practices are to employ the now clichéd term, 'closer to Berlin than to Boston' – that is to say more concerned with consensus than with accountability. It is hard to envisage the application of the type of 'robust' school evaluation system introduced in England (now considerably diluted) being a practical proposition in the Irish context, at least for the moment. In fact, supporters of a more robust evaluation culture implicitly agree with this view. For example, Lenihan *et. al.* (2005) argue that there 'continues to be a poor evaluation culture in Ireland' while Ruane (2004) agrees and suggests that this is so because of 'a weak history of planning, inclusive negotiated agreements which may lead to compromise solutions and a political tradition of client focus which may bias against economic rationality'.

The key point here however, is that commentators such as Boyle and Ruane see the current situation regarding evaluation as being in flux and highly contested. While there may be little ideological impetus driving low trust accountability policies in Ireland, nonetheless the influence of this agenda is steadily gaining ground under the impetus of EU and OECD pressure. How this contest will play out in the medium and longer term is at this stage unclear. For the moment at all events the case of school and teacher evaluation represents a good example of the consensus approach to evaluation which is currently predominant and we will examine this in a little more detail.

School and Teacher Evaluation Irish Style

Schools and teachers in Ireland have a long history of being evaluated by a centralised inspectorate, a division of the Department of Education and Science. However, by the early 1990s this system had broken down to a

significant degree. The inspection of primary schools had become sporadic and rather idiosyncratic but still existed. In secondary schools inspection had nearly ceased entirely and in fact the largest teacher union supported its members in refusing to teach in front of an inspector.

The reasons for this decline in inspection are varied and need not detain us here. What is interesting is that the impetus for a new approach to inspection and school evaluation in the mid 1990s came from external sources rather than from any pressing domestic demand. This is made clear in the evaluation report prepared by the Department of Education and Science (DES) after the first WSE pilot project from 1996 to 1999 (DES 1999). For example, the introduction justifies the development of the WSE pilot scheme by noting that 'across the European Union a wide range of approaches is evident to the assessment and evaluation of schools' (DES 1999 : 8). On page nine we read that 'there is now a growing tendency across Europe to see external and internal school evaluation processes as being inextricably linked'. Later on the same page it is suggested that 'there is an increasing effort to encourage schools to review their own progress in a formal way... to engage in their own development planning'. The external influences made explicit in the above quotes show clearly that, as we have argued, EU policy in the direction of new public management systems such as strategic planning and systematic evaluation have been a key driver of change in the Irish context.

In May 2003, the DES in Ireland published twin documents entitled *Looking At Our School, an aid to self evaluation in primary schools* and *Looking At Our School, an aid to self evaluation in post primary schools* (DES, 2003 a & b, hereafter referred to as LAOS). These publications contain a very detailed framework for the inspection and evaluation of schools and teachers, including one hundred and forty three 'themes for self-evaluation' which schools and

teachers are invited to consider in preparation for an external evaluation by the inspectorate.

The LAOS framework was designed with an emphasis on cooperation and partnership rather than monitoring and accountability. It was agreed that it was the work of schools as a whole that would be examined and that individual teachers would not be identified or punished for poor performance. The scheme of evaluation was agreed only after long and difficult negotiations with the stakeholders and the views of the teacher unions were highly influential. This softly, softly approach was probably necessary in the context of a system in which the experience of external inspection had been very limited in the previous three decades. This tradition of inspection, such as it was, left a legacy whereby most principals and teachers either had no experience at all of evaluation or perceived it to be something external, done to them, rather than something which is part of their professional responsibility. Moreover this lack of experience of inspection and evaluation had been compounded by other factors tending to increase unease and resistance. These included the substantial power exercised by teacher unions, negative reports of school evaluation in other systems, particularly OFSTED in England, and the partnership framework through which public sector change must be negotiated and paid for (McNamara and O'Hara, 2006).

In consequence the emerging evaluation system is characterised by an emphasis on co-operation and collaboration, and on school and teacher self-evaluation with light touch supportive external monitoring by the Inspectorate. Professional and organisational development is prioritised ahead of accountability and naming and shaming of teachers or schools, comparisons and league tables are strictly forbidden.

However due to over-riding concerns with negotiation and the avoidance of conflict it is also suggested that the model adopted displays serious weaknesses. In particular there is a

strong reluctance to engage in the systematic data collection and analysis necessary to underpin an improvement strategy. There is also a marked reluctance to develop a serious role for parents and pupils or to use the evaluation reporting system to tackle serious problems or reduce the culture of secrecy endemic in Irish education.

In short school and teacher evaluation in Ireland exemplifies vividly the strengths and weaknesses inherent in the very similar models of evaluation being applied across the entire education and training system and indeed in many other social and public service contexts. For example it is a compromise between self-evaluation and external inspection which has been developed through elaborate consultative processes designed to allay the fears of the various partners involved. In this it has proved remarkably successful in that it has raised little of the resistance which was widely assumed to be inevitable. Likewise research to date indicates positive if modest outcomes in terms of professional and organisational development. On the other hand because it is such a compromise it exemplifies serious flaws including a very underdeveloped focus on data and evidence, a very limited role for key stakeholders such as parents and pupils and an extremely cautious approach to the content and use of the final evaluation reports. In common with many similar systems a key failure is the unacknowledged but very clear lack of capacity in schools to collect evidence to support the evaluation of professional activities. For these reasons it can be argued that the capacity of this type of approach to meet accountability requirements is questionable at best. However given the emerging evidence in many countries that evaluation and quality assurance systems which seek to be both developmental and judgemental may be doomed to failure on both counts what is emerging in Ireland may well represent a workable, if flawed, compromise.

Conclusion

In the 'age of evaluation' Ireland has been encouraged or even compelled by the pressure of very influential external forces to adopt a culture of evaluation. However despite the fact that this culture dates back over some three decades it remains a somewhat uneasy and unconvincing addition to the tools of governance. At one level, that of the evaluation of individual projects, decision making based on evidence has gained a foothold although even here the quality of much evaluation is variable and the relationship of evaluation to policy development is deeply problematic. At other levels, those of programme, policy and institutional evaluation, the constraints imposed by the requirements of consensus and partnership have created hybrid forms of evaluation which emphasise collaboration, negotiation and professional development but avoid evidence informed accountability and transparency. Whole School Evaluation described above represents an excellent example of such a hybrid evaluation model displaying the strengths and weaknesses inherent in the compromises which produced it.

Looking to the future it is not at all clear how the evaluation culture which has emerged in Ireland will evolve. On the one hand the wide acceptance of current evaluation practices together with the fact that more accountability focussed approaches in other jurisdictions are increasingly seen as more trouble than they are worth may militate against significant change. On the other developing EU and OECD policy towards greater accountability and compatibility of systems together with similar demands from employer groups and sections of the media may increase pressure for more 'hard nosed' evaluation. One thing however seems clear and that is that policy development in the field of evaluation will continue to be largely driven by external pressures since there is very little evidence of an appetite for evidence driven policy among senior political or public sector leaders.

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