Investment in Education and the intractability of inequality

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EDITORIAL

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Investment in Education, initiated in 1962 and published in 1965, has been described as ‘probably the foundation document’ of modern Irish education (Clancy 1996) and a ‘landmark both in the national and international memory’ [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 1991]. Dr. Patrick Hillery, the Minister for Education, who commissioned the report, recalled 30 years later that ‘there were no real ideas before the OECD project’ – a harsh but largely justifiable commentary on the entrenched conservatism of political and educational elites for the previous generation.

Investment was the product of a pilot study initiated by the OECD. The OECD proposal for an international Education Investment and Planning Programme (EIPP), which involved the establishment of pilot studies on long-term educational needs in developed countries, was immediately accepted by Irish politicians and officials: indeed, Ireland was the first member state to accept participation in the new programme. Seán O’Connor (a former Secretary of the Department of Education) argued that it was ‘one of the most important policy decisions and, in my opinion, one of the most courageous ever made about Irish education’ (O’Connor 1986, 63), not least because it exposed the Irish educational sector to unprecedented international scrutiny. The government led by Seán Lemass showed political courage in authorising a comprehensive evaluation of the Irish educational system by an independent survey team, but it was a calculated gamble on their part rather than a leap into the unknown, as a critical analysis of the Irish educational system would prove a potent asset for reforming ministers and officials. International pressures dovetailed with changing attitudes and priorities among the Irish political elite to offer a favourable context for the study.

The survey team presented a wide-ranging and highly critical analysis of the educational sector, based on the accumulation for the first time of comprehensive statistical data about education in the Irish state. O’Connor later argued that the publication of an independent report of such range and quality left policy-makers with a stark choice: ‘to devise policies consistent with the facts produced by the report or to do nothing at all. It was reasonable to presume that the Minister would not adopt the second option’ (O’Connor 1986, 110). Investment illustrated the traditional shortcomings of the educational system – from curriculum limitations to ineffective use of resources to severe disparities in participation linked to class and region – in such a definitive fashion that political and administrative elites were obliged to confront them effectively for the first time since the foundation of the state. The report not only legitimated major educational reform but also provided the statistical data and the policy analysis to underpin state action: Investment offered the essential rationale and blueprint for the transformation of the Irish educational system, particularly at primary and post-primary level. Clearly Investment in Education represented a significant paradigmatic shift in educational thinking in Ireland, marking a key turning point. As Murray (2012) noted, the report

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provided the bridge between a general commitment to planning and a concrete programme of action to expand and reorient the Irish education system.

This special issue charts both the significance of the seminal work and its impact on Irish education over the subsequent 50 years. The issue consists of two witness papers and four academic papers, offering a broadly based analysis of the legacy of the report and of its place in Irish educational policy-making: the papers were written and compiled following a one-day conference on the theme of Investment in Education: Fifty Years On, in the Trinity Long Room Hub research institute, Trinity College Dublin, in November 2012. The witness papers set out the personal reflections of two key players, Áine Hyland, who worked as a research assistant to the Investment in Education team and Seán O’Connor, former Secretary of the Department of Education and the first head of the Development Branch, perhaps the most prominent official advocate of state activism in education.

Reflections on the era
As research assistant to the Investment in Education team throughout the period of the study, Hyland provides valuable insights into the conditions under which the team operated, the influences that shaped that work and the key issues that emerged over the period. The historical context for the Investment report emphasised the shift in thinking reflecting T.K. Whitaker’s Programme for Economic Expansion (1958) and the increasing recognition that education was an investment that would contribute to economic expansion. As the first country participating in the OECD’s pilot programme on investment in education, the Irish Investment team was to prove pioneering, particularly in the development of the methodology for many subsequent national surveys. Hyland writes with refreshing candour about the working conditions of the Investment team, their interactions among themselves and with the steering committee and how they were regarded by colleagues, particularly in the Department. She recalls the painstaking task of collecting much-needed data on schools, collating that data (illicitly on a comptometer machine) and analysing the results with an incredible level of statistical rigour, providing a fascinating insight into the work of the team.

In another witness account of the Investment ‘moment’ in Irish education, Mulcahy and O’Sullivan interviewed Sean O’Connor in 1986, reflecting on the years immediately preceding and following the publication of the Investment report. The backdrop of the introduction of free second-level education, discussions around comprehensive schools and certification within the vocational school sector and competing demands regarding technical and academic subjects, all provide key insights into educational debates and decisions of the time.

Understanding inequality
Ferriter (2006) in his book What If? Alternative Views of Twentieth-Century Ireland. Poses the question, ‘What if Donogh O’Malley had not introduced free secondary education’, noting that ‘the Investment in Education report provided the backdrop for O’Malley’s speech, as did UNESCO figures which revealed that, in the Republic, only 36% of children aged 14-19 were at secondary or technical schools’ (133). While the issue of social inequality was central to the Investment report, Frawley assesses the conceptualisation of inequality in the work. In particular she argues that much of the
focus in *Investment* centred on social inequalities in post-primary, and to a lesser extent higher, education. In the intervening years both official and academic focus has broadened considerably, with much attention now placed on early years education. She tracks the proliferation of research evidence internationally, highlighting the significant human capital and societal gains of early years investment and the growing policy recognition of the value of such investment. She also cites the growing attention being placed on understanding the processes underpinning social inequality in educational outcomes, building on the work of *Investment* which placed addressing inequality at the centre of educational debate and policy.

Loxley, Seery and Walsh provide a valuable reflection on the influences, domestic and international, shaping *Investment*, and in particular the emergence of human capital theory as part of Ireland’s ‘economic thinking’. In analysing key trends in educational participation and attainment, drawing on Central Statistics Office (CSO) data, the authors chart the dramatic changes in educational attainment across a range of indicators in the 50 years post-*Investment*. Considerable expansion in Irish education was crucially underpinned by significant increases in the public resources devoted to education in the intervening years. These developments are linked by the authors to the transformative impact of key policy decisions in the late 1960s and to the seminal influence of the OECD with its own key influences and agenda.

O’Connor also acknowledges the transformative impact of *Investment*, particularly in terms of the scale of public investment in education. Assessing developments since the establishment of the Irish Free State (1922), O’Connor highlights the historical backdrop of the *Investment* work, in particular describing glaring failures in education policy – in terms of both resources and ambition – in the first half-century of independence. He notes the conceptualisation of expenditure on education as an investment was revolutionary for the Ireland of the 1960s. Developments in second- and third-level education in the subsequent 50 years were, as a result, ‘remarkable’, but a persistence of social disadvantage and a lag in progress on lifelong learning are also noted. Further, key advice from *Investment* in relation to the nature of investment and the optimal configuration of resources have, according to O’Connor been largely ignored.

Barry highlights the central proposition in *Investment* that a non-meritocratic education system serves society poorly. He charts the impact of *Investment*, particularly in terms of educational reforms paving the way for ‘free’ second-level education and access to school transport networks. However, he notes that many of the reforms, particularly in relation to the abolition of the primary-school certificate and increases in the statutory school leaving age, still came a decade or more after other Northern European countries. Developments leading to a binary-type higher education system are noted, while increased emphasis on research and development and the fourth-level sector are also highlighted. However, Barry cautions, persistent social inequality in second-level completion rates and, not unrelated, inequality in access to higher education remain as challenges for Irish education.

In 2008, the journal’s Editorial Board decided that one issue per year would be dedicated to a special issue. Since then special issues, pertinent to educational studies in Ireland and elsewhere, have been published on such diverse themes as the law and education, globalisation and multiculturalism, physical education, and accountability among others. The publication of this *Irish Educational Studies* special issue on the *Investment in Education* report is particularly significant in that it provides a forum for the Educational Studies Association of Ireland, through its journal, to promote reflection and debate on one of the most significant documents in Irish education in the last 50 years.
References


