

## OPINIONS OF THE IRISH PUBLIC ON INNOVATIONS IN EDUCATION\*

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In a survey of a representative sample of the Irish adult population (n:994), respondents were asked in interview their views on innovations in Irish education. A majority (55%) thought that there was 'about the right amount' of change in schools. Majorities also thought that six specific changes were for the better: the raising of the school-leaving age to 15 (93%); change in school management (76%); the provision of sex education in schools (76%); having boys and girls in the same class (68%); comprehensive schools (65%); and the abolition of corporal punishment (58%). The only change that a majority of respondents did not perceive as being for the better was the closing of small schools; while 39% thought this was a change for the better, 48% thought it was not.

After a long period in which there was relatively little change in the Irish educational system many innovations were discussed and several implemented in the 1960s and 1970s. While the objectives of the changes have not always been explicitly stated, one can see in many of them a reflection of a reshaping of notions of economic and social development which was taking place in the country at the time. These notions are to be found in government programmes for economic development (5, 6, 7) as well as in other government policy statements and actions (cf. 1, 2, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15).

In the field of education, an attempt was made to eradicate regional and socio-economic inequalities in participation in non-compulsory

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education, which had been documented in the *Investment in education* report (4), by raising the school leaving age from 14 to 15 years in 1972. An attempt to equalize educational opportunity can also be seen in the establishment of comprehensive schools in 1968, this latter move also had the objective of making education more responsive to the aptitudes and interests of individual students.

Economic and social objectives are exemplified in the amalgamation of small schools, which was intensified following the *Investment in education* report (4). It was believed that the consolidation of existing school facilities would introduce greater efficiency into the system while at the same time exposing pupils to a wider range of educational facilities than was thought possible in small schools. The consolidation policy in many cases involved the bringing together of boys and girls in a co-educational situation.

To promote the democratization of education, change in the management of primary schools was proposed in the 1970s. Most national schools were managed by a local clergyman, who was nominated by the patron of the school (usually the ordinary of the diocese), up to 1975. In that year, boards, comprised of representatives of the patron, parents, and teachers, were introduced to carry out the functions of management.

These changes do not exhaust all the innovations that were proposed for, or took place in, Irish education in the 1960s and 1970s. But they are fairly representative of the alterations that were taking place in the system at the time. Most of them, it will be noted, were organizational ones. Changes related to curricular and classroom practice were also matters of concern, among these were examination reforms, the provision of sex education, and the abolition of corporal punishment. In an earlier report, the response of the public to changes in examinations was reported (3).

In an earlier report also, responses of a sample of the general population to a request to compare schools today with schools in the past were described. A large majority (8 out of 10) thought that schools today were better than schools a few years ago, only 1 in 10 thought that schools had disimproved. Thus there was acceptance by an overwhelming majority of the public that schools were changing, further, the changes were seen by most people as being for the better (10).

In this paper, we describe the views, obtained in interview, of a sample of the general population of adults in the country of change in general in schools as well as of a number of specific changes. The specific changes

relate to school management, school organization, and curricular and classroom practices. Some of the changes had already taken place when interviews were carried out in 1974 (raising the school-leaving age and the introduction of comprehensive schools), some were in progress (amalgamation of small schools and co-education), while others were under discussion but had not been implemented (change in the management of primary schools, sex education, and abolition of corporal punishment).

#### METHOD

##### *Interview schedule*

A personal interview schedule was developed at the Educational Research Centre and administered by Irish Marketing Surveys Limited. The part of the interview for which results are reported in this paper was concerned with opinions about changes in Irish schools

*Innovation in general.* Respondents were told that some people say that schools have been too slow in trying new ways and methods, while others say they have been too fast in adopting new ideas. They were then asked: 'how do you feel about change in schools?' They could respond by agreeing that schools 'have changed too much,' 'have changed just about the right amount' or 'haven't changed enough'; there was also a 'don't know' option.

*Change in school management.* Respondents were asked if they thought 'having parents involved in school management' was a change 'for the better,' 'makes no difference' or 'for the worse'. There was also a 'don't know' option.

*Organizational changes.* Four organizational changes 'that people talk about' were presented to respondents: raising the school-leaving age to 15, having boys and girls in the same class, comprehensive schools, and closing of small schools. For each change, respondents were asked to indicate whether they thought it was a change 'for the better', 'makes no difference', or 'for the worse'. There was also a 'don't know' option.

*Curricular and classroom changes.* Two changes were presented to respondents: providing sex education in schools and the abolition of corporal punishment. Respondents were asked to indicate for each of these changes if they thought it was 'for the better', 'makes no difference' or 'for the worse'; they also had a 'don't know' alternative.

*Sample*

A sample of 1,000 adults aged between 16 and 69 years was selected on a quota sampling basis to represent the general public in the Republic of Ireland. A description of the procedure adopted in selecting and weighting the sample is provided elsewhere (10).

After coding and cleaning, it was found that six interviews could not be used. Thus analyses are based on 994 people. Information was not available on the socio-economic status of five urban respondents or on the educational level of one rural and 23 urban respondents. The numbers in the analyses by socio-economic and educational level are reduced accordingly.

*Analysis*

The responses of each of the following groups are presented in percentages:

- (i) Total sample (n 994)
- (ii) Parental status groups (a) Parents of children attending school beyond first class in primary school (n 200 urban, 72 rural), (b) Non-parents respondents who either had no children or whose children were not yet beyond first class in primary school or whose children had already left school (n 497 urban, 225 rural)
- (iii) Residence groups (a) Urban respondents living in towns or cities with populations of 1,500 or more inhabitants (n 697), (b) Rural respondents living in areas of population with less than 1,500 inhabitants (n 297)
- (iv) Socio-economic level determined on the basis of the occupation of the head of household, not that of the respondent (a) Professional/managerial (n 118 urban, 3 rural), (b) Middle class/white collar (n 149 urban, 10 rural), (c) Skilled worker (n 197, 39 rural), (d) Unskilled worker (n 226 urban, 72 rural), (e) Farmer with 50 or more acres (n 73 rural), (f) Farmer with less than 50 acres (n 2 urban, 100 rural) Categories (a) through (d) are conventionally regarded as constituting an ordinal scale of socio-economic level. While we feel there are differences between these categories and farmers, who are assigned to two separate categories (e and f), it is not clear how the farming categories relate to the scale
- (v) Level achieved at end of formal education (a) Primary school only (n 249 urban, 176 rural), (b) Post primary school but no public examination (n 112 urban, 47 rural), (c) Group Certificate (n 26 urban, 12 rural), (d) Intermediate Certificate (n 69 urban, 25 rural), (e) Leaving Certificate (n 125 urban, 25 rural), (f) Third level education (n 93 urban, 11 rural)

## RESULTS

*Innovation in general*

A majority (55%) of respondents thought that the amount of change in general in Irish schools was 'about right' (Table 1). There was a considerable minority (26%), however, who thought that schools had not changed enough. More rural than urban respondents expressed satisfaction with the changes in schools; while nearly two-thirds (64%) of rural respondents were satisfied, over a third (36%) of urban ones thought there was not enough change. The desire for more innovation was also related to the socio-economic status and educational level of respondents. Less than 20% of farmers, about 30% of white-collar, skilled, and unskilled workers, and 38% of professional/managerial respondents indicated that not enough change was taking place. Within the educational groupings, respondents with Group Certificate (42%) and those with third-level education (40%) were distinguished by particularly high rates of dissatisfaction with the rate of change, which they regarded as not enough.

*Change in school management*

Three-quarters (76%) of respondents thought that the involvement of parents in school management would be a change for the better (Table 2). Only 14% thought it would be a change for the worse. These percentages showed very little variation across parental, residential, socio-economic, and educational sub-groups.

*Organizational changes*

Nearly unanimous support was manifested for the raising of the school-leaving age to fifteen. The vast majority (93%) of respondents believed it would be a change for the better (Table 3). Only respondents with the Intermediate Certificate showed any degree of deviation from this overall view, though even in this group, 85% accepted the raised leaving age as a change for the better.

Just over two-thirds (68%) of respondents thought that having boys and girls in the same classes would be a change for the better (Table 4). The only major difference among either parental status or residence groups was found among the latter; 23% of rural respondents compared to only 10% of urban respondents thought such a change would make no difference. There were, however, major differences among socio-economic and educational-level groups in their reactions to co-education. Increasing support for having boys and girls in the same class is found as one moves from the lower to the higher socio-economic levels (from 60% of small farmers to 82% of professional/managerial respondents) and from respondents

TABLE 1

OPINIONS ON THE AMOUNT OF  
CHANGE IN IRISH SCHOOLS

	Too much	About the right amount	Not enough	Don't know
	%	%	%	%
National total	11	55	26	7
<i>Parental status</i>				
Parents	12	58	25	4
Non parents	11	54	27	8
<i>Residence</i>				
Urban	9	46	36	9
Rural	13	64	16	6
<i>Socio economic level</i>				
Professional/Managerial	7	42	38	12
White collar	14	47	30	9
Skilled	7	53	33	7
Unskilled	12	53	29	6
Farmer (50 acres +)	10	67	18	5
Farmer (50 acres -)	16	66	11	7
<i>Level of formal education</i>				
Primary education	13	59	21	7
Post primary (no exam)	11	60	21	7
Group Certificate	14	42	42	2
Intermediate Certificate	7	59	27	8
Leaving Certificate	5	53	33	9
Third level	15	37	40	8

TABLE 2

OPINIONS ON THE EFFECT OF  
HAVING PARENTS INVOLVED IN SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

	Change for for the better %	Makes no difference %	Change for the worse %	Don't know %
National total	76	7	14	3
<i>Parental status</i>				
Parents	75	7	14	3
Non-parents	76	7	14	3
<i>Residence</i>				
Urban	75	6	15	4
Rural	76	7	13	3
<i>Socio-economic level</i>				
Professional/Managerial	82	5	13	1
White collar	79	8	9	3
Skilled	79	5	11	5
Unskilled	70	7	18	4
Farmer (50 acres +)	75	5	16	3
Farmer (50 acres -)	73	9	15	3
<i>Level of formal education</i>				
Primary education	73	8	16	4
Post-primary (no exam)	70	7	17	6
Group Certificate	78	6	16	0
Intermediate Certificate	81	6	10	3
Leaving Certificate	84	5	11	1
Third level	81	4	12	2

TABLE 3

**OPINIONS ON THE EFFECT OF  
RAISING THE SCHOOL LEAVING AGE TO 15**

	Change for for the better %	Makes no difference %	Change for the worse %	Don't know %
National total	93	3	4	0
<i>Parental status</i>				
Parents	95	1	4	0
Non parents	92	4	4	0
<i>Residence</i>				
Urban	93	3	4	0
Rural	92	4	4	0
<i>Socio economic level</i>				
Professional/Managerial	93	3	3	1
White collar	94	2	4	0
Skilled	92	2	6	0
Unskilled	92	3	5	0
Farmer (50 acres +)	93	5	1	0
Farmer (50 acres -)	94	4	2	0
<i>Level of formal education</i>				
Primary education	94	3	2	0
Post primary (no exam)	94	3	3	0
Group Certificate	92	2	6	0
Intermediate Certificate	85	5	10	0
Leaving Certificate	92	2	5	0
Third level	97	1	1	1

TABLE 4

OPINIONS ON THE EFFECT OF CO-EDUCATION  
(HAVING BOYS AND GIRLS IN THE SAME CLASS)

	Change for for the better %	Makes no difference %	Change for the worse %	Don't know %
National total	68	16	14	1
<i>Parental status</i>				
Parents	65	16	17	2
Non-parents	69	16	13	1
<i>Residence</i>				
Urban	72	10	17	2
Rural	64	23	12	1
<i>Socio-economic level</i>				
Professional/Managerial	82	7	6	5
White collar	78	9	12	1
Skilled	69	16	13	1
Unskilled	67	13	20	0
Farmer (50 acres +)	59	33	7	1
Farmer (50 acres -)	60	21	17	2
<i>Level of formal education</i>				
Primary education	59	20	19	2
Post-primary (no exam)	64	20	14	1
Group Certificate	74	17	9	0
Intermediate Certificate	86	9	6	0
Leaving Certificate	78	8	10	4
Third level	85	11	4	0

with relatively low levels of formal education to those with at least some kind of post-primary examination certificate (from 59% of those with only primary education to 86% of those with the Intermediate Certificate)

Almost two thirds (65%) of respondents thought that the introduction of comprehensive schools would be a change for the better, but nearly a fifth (18%) said that they did not know (Table 5) Indeed this item attracted a very high number of 'don't know' responses, particularly from rural respondents (31% of small farmers and 23% of rural respondents chose this option) and from respondents with low levels of formal education (about 20% chose the option) The greatest support for comprehensive schools was found in urban areas (73%) and among respondents of high socio-economic level (over 70%) and of high levels of formal education (almost 80%) The relative lack of positive support for comprehensive schools among rural respondents (56% thought they would be a change for the better), unskilled workers (62% thought comprehensive schools a change for the better) and respondents with low levels of formal education (about 60% thought such schools a change for the better) indicates not so much a disagreement with the concept of comprehensive schools as a lack of knowledge about them

The closing of small schools was perceived as a change for the worse by nearly half (48%) of the respondents (Table 6) The percentage was similar in nearly all sub-groups However, almost 40% of all respondents, and a similar percentage of most sub-groups, thought that closing small schools would be a change for the better Among rural respondents, the two opposing opinions were held by nearly equal numbers (45 to 46%) and among small farmers a small plurality actually favoured the closing of small schools (45% thought it would be 'for the better', 41% 'for the worse')

#### *Curricular and instructional changes*

Just over three-quarters (76%) of respondents believed that the introduction of sex education to schools would be a change for the better (Table 7) There was remarkably little variation over the sub groups, however, large farmers and holders of the Group Certificate were least enthusiastic about the idea, the latter being notably inclined (21%) to judge that it would make no difference Respondents with at least the Intermediate Certificate were most inclined (over 80%) to judge that sex education would have beneficial effects

That the abolition of corporal punishment would be a change for the better was the opinion of 58% of respondents (Table 8), 27% held

TABLE 5

OPINIONS ON THE EFFECT OF  
INTRODUCING COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOLS

	Change for for the better	Makes no difference	Change for the worse	Don't know
	%	%	%	%
National total	65	10	8	18
<i>Parental status</i>				
Parents	61	8	10	21
Non-parents	66	10	8	17
<i>Residence</i>				
Urban	73	7	7	13
Rural	56	12	9	23
<i>Socio-economic level</i>				
Professional/Managerial	73	5	8	14
White collar	77	7	7	9
Skilled	75	7	5	14
Unskilled	62	11	9	18
Farmer (50 acres +)	62	11	11	15
Farmer (50 acres -)	44	14	11	31
<i>Level of formal education</i>				
Primary education	58	12	9	22
Post-primary (no exam)	61	8	10	20
Group Certificate	72	12	6	9
Intermediate Certificate	70	9	4	17
Leaving Certificate	79	6	8	8
Third level	77	8	7	8

TABLE 6

OPINIONS ON THE EFFECT OF  
CLOSING SMALL SCHOOLS

	Change for for the better %	Makes no difference %	Change for the worse %	Don't know %
National total	39	8	48	4
<i>Parental status</i>				
Parents	41	8	47	3
Non parents	39	8	48	4
<i>Residence</i>				
Urban	34	11	51	5
Rural	45	6	46	3
<i>Socio economic level</i>				
Professional/Managerial	35	10	51	5
White collar	34	8	53	5
Skilled	37	12	47	4
Unskilled	42	5	48	4
Farmer (50 acres +)	38	7	51	4
Farmer (50 acres -)	45	10	41	4
<i>Level of formal education</i>				
Primary education	39	8	49	4
Post primary (no exam)	37	9	50	5
Group Certificate	52	14	31	4
Intermediate Certificate	30	9	53	8
Leaving Certificate	45	9	43	2
Third level	39	6	52	3

TABLE 7

OPINIONS ON THE EFFECT OF  
PROVIDING SEX EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

	Change for for the better %	Makes no difference %	Change for the worse %	Don't know %
National total	76	8	10	7
<i>Parental status</i>				
Parents	78	7	9	5
Non-parents	75	8	10	7
<i>Residence</i>				
Urban	77	6	12	5
Rural	74	9	8	8
<i>Socio-economic level</i>				
Professional/Managerial	80	9	6	5
White collar	75	10	10	5
Skilled	80	5	8	7
Unskilled	76	7	13	5
Farmer (50 acres +)	68	10	10	12
Farmer (50 acres -)	73	10	8	9
<i>Level of formal education</i>				
Primary education	72	7	12	9
Post-primary (no exam)	73	8	11	8
Group Certificate	69	21	10	0
Intermediate Certificate	85	5	6	3
Leaving Certificate	83	9	5	3
Third level	84	7	5	4

TABLE 8

**OPINIONS ON THE EFFECT OF  
THE ABOLITION OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN SCHOOLS**

	Change for for the better %	Makes no difference %	Change for the worse %	Don't know %
<b>National total</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>Parental status</i>				
Parents	58	11	28	3
Non parents	58	12	27	3
<i>Residence</i>				
Urban	59	11	28	2
Rural	57	13	26	5
<i>Socio economic level</i>				
Professional/Managerial	64	11	23	2
White collar	62	12	23	2
Skilled	58	14	26	2
Unskilled	59	8	31	2
Farmer (50 acres +)	58	8	30	4
Farmer (50 acres -)	49	17	26	8
<i>Level of formal education</i>				
Primary education	55	10	32	4
Post primary (no exam)	49	14	31	5
Group Certificate	66	14	14	6
Intermediate Certificate	69	13	17	1
Leaving Certificate	63	16	19	2
Third level	65	8	25	2

that it would be a change for the worse. The only groups in which markedly fewer respondents held that the abolition of corporal punishment would be a change for the worse were the holders of the Group Certificate (14%), the Intermediate Certificate (17%), and the Leaving Certificate (19%). Differences of opinion among socio-economic groups were not great, except that only 49% of small farmers thought that eliminating corporal punishment would be a change for the better. There was slightly greater variation among educational-level groups, with the respondents with the lowest levels of formal education least inclined and those with the Group or Intermediate Certificate most inclined to approve of the abolition of corporal punishment.

#### DISCUSSION

It is clear from the findings of this survey that the long period in which there was little change in the Irish system of education did not give rise to feelings among the general public that a maintenance of the status quo was desirable. Change in the system in the 1960s and 1970s was on the whole well received. While a slight majority of respondents thought the amount of change was about right, a quarter thought that there had not been enough.

The specific change that was most acceptable was the raising of the school-leaving age from 14 to 15; more than 9 out of 10 respondents thought this was a change for the better. The almost total unanimity on this topic is in keeping with views of the general public reported elsewhere regarding the need for education and access to the system; large majorities were of the opinion that students today need a standard of education of at least the level of the Leaving Certificate and that everyone should have the chance to go to university (10). Taken together, these opinions suggest a strong belief on the part of the public in the benefits of education.

Just over three-quarters of respondents thought that the change in school management and the provision of sex education in schools would be a change for the better. Agreement with the provision of sex education can be seen as support for a majority view of the public described elsewhere that schools place too little emphasis on preparing students for married life (10).

About two-thirds of respondents favoured co-education and the introduction of comprehensive schools. A smaller majority supported the abolition of corporal punishment in schools, though there was a sizeable minority (over a quarter) who thought it would be a change for the

worse. It should be noted that the relative lack of support for comprehensive schools was not accompanied by a large number who thought that such schools would be a change for the worse. Almost one in five respondents was not prepared to express an opinion on the effect of introducing comprehensive schools. This is not surprising given the small number of such schools in the country.

Only one item – the closing of small schools – did not attract a majority of respondents who saw it as a change for the better. Almost half the respondents saw it as a change for the worse, while less than four out of ten saw it as a change for the better.

One interesting feature of the responses of the public to changes in the educational system is that relatively few perceived the changes as making no difference. For the total population, the percentage who saw changes as making no difference was never more than 16, this relatively high percentage applied in the case of co-education. Higher percentages than this were obtained for some sub-groups but the population in general consistently saw the changes as having an impact on the system, for good or for bad.

Only slight differences were found between parents and non parents across the country in their perceptions of the amount of change in general which had taken place in Irish schools or in their perceptions of the value of specific changes. There were, however, differences among the residential, socio-economic, and educational sub groups in their perceptions of change in general. Rural respondents showed the highest degree of 'conformity' or 'acceptance' insofar as almost two thirds agreed that there was 'about the right amount' of change, those with third level education showed the lowest degree of conformity (just over a third). Rural dwellers also, by comparison with other groups (though the differences were not great), showed a relatively high degree of 'conservatism' (16%), indicated by their assessment that there had been 'too much' change. It is of interest that respondents with third-level education, whom we say showed a relatively low degree of conformity, also showed a degree of conservatism that was high (15%) relative to respondents with lower levels of formal education. The largest percentage (40%) of those with third level education, however, may be regarded as 'progressive,' in that they did not think enough change had taken place in schools. Respondents with the Group Certificate (42%), professional/managerial workers (38%), and urban dwellers in general (36%) were also characterized by progressivism. The least progressive groups were farmers, small (11%) and large (18%), rural dwellers in general (16%), and respondents with the lowest levels of formal education (21%).

There was little variation among sub-groups in their perceptions of change in school management, the raising of the school-leaving age, the provision of sex education, or the abolition of corporal punishment. For example, both urban and rural respondents, as well as parents and non-parents, expressed similar views on these topics. Where differences in the views of different socio-economic and educational levels did exist on these topics, there was a slight tendency for those in the higher status categories to see changes as being for the better.

Greater differences between sub-groups were found on other items. Agreement with the provision of sex education and with the introduction of comprehensive schools was greater among respondents in the higher social-class categories and among those with higher levels of formal education. Trends in differences between respondents of different socio-economic and educational levels in their views of the amalgamation of small schools were not linearly related to status. Significantly, rural respondents, who would have had greater experience than urban ones of school amalgamation, were more likely to see this as a change for the better. However, it should be borne in mind that a majority of neither urban nor rural respondents saw school amalgamation as being a change for the better.

In conclusion, the findings of this survey indicate that change in the system of education is acceptable to the vast majority of the Irish public. Most of the specific changes which have been introduced have the approval of most people. While we know from evidence reported elsewhere that schools are perceived to be improving and are rated as being 'pretty good' or 'excellent' by a majority of the Irish public (10), there are still considerable minorities who rate schools as being 'only fair' (10), and who, as we saw in this report, are dissatisfied with the rate of change in the system. Given these views, combined with the belief of many of the public that equality of opportunity does not exist in the Irish educational system (10), we may conclude that the general climate of opinion in the country is conducive to further change in educational provision, particularly if that change is perceived as contributing to the evolution of a more equitable system.

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