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EDUCATIONAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF SIXTH-CLASS TEACHERS IN IRISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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This study set out to investigate the educational beliefs and teaching practices of a sample of sixth-class teachers in Irish primary schools in the wake of a major change in the school curriculum and to identify differences in those beliefs and practices associated with location of school and sex of pupils served. A questionnaire was administered to teachers of classes consisting of only sixth-standard pupils in a representative sample of schools (N=88) stratified by location (city or town) and sex (male only or female only). On the whole, life in sixth-standard classes in Irish primary schools emerged as quite highly structured, teacher-controlled, and oriented toward the attainment of traditional goals. The number of practices and attitudes for which significant location and gender differences were found was small. In general, boys' schools tended to have a somewhat more traditional academic orientation than girls' schools and were also more likely to use direct disciplinary measures to ensure pupil cooperation.

In its essential features, Irish primary education underwent no radical changes from the early 1930s to the late 1960s. The abolition of the primary-school terminal examination, the Primary Certificate Examination (PCE), in 1967 and the formal introduction of the new primary-school curriculum (16) in 1971 were the first signs of major change. The new curriculum followed on and was influenced by the deliberations of the Plowden Committee in England (11) and was accompanied by rapid expansion and greatly increased expenditure at all levels of Irish education (20).

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There is little doubt that the PCE was a major factor determining curricular emphases and teaching methods in Irish primary schools Teachers tended to adopt an examination-oriented approach to the very narrow range of examined subjects (i e , Irish, English and arithmetic), often to the detriment of other curricular areas and to the neglect of the all round education of pupils (6, 10, 17)

The new approach incorporated in the 1971 curriculum had as a major aim the freeing of the teacher from the obligation of having all pupils follow a rigid compulsory programme of instruction (15, 16) Teachers were encouraged to give more time and attention to areas such as environmental studies, art and craft, drama, movement education, and music The integration of subjects was encouraged Children were seen as complex beings, as active constructors of knowledge and not simply as 'imbibers of information' The need for more freedom and activity in the class room was stressed and the use of 'discovery methods' in teaching encouraged The recognition of individual differences and of the need for flexibility on the part of the teacher to cater for such differences was central There was also an awareness of childhood as a unique cultural entity deserving attention in its own right (2) In this view, primary educators should not feel constantly constrained to justify curriculum content and teaching methods by reference to criteria culled from an examination of the needs of adulthood Whatever word or phrase is used to describe the orientation of the new curriculum – 'child-centred', 'informal', 'progressive' – there is little doubt that in its general emphases the approach it recommended was very different from what obtained prior to 1971 in Irish primary schools

Following the introduction of the new curriculum, three major studies were carried out to gauge its implementation and perceived effects In 1974 and 1975 respectively, the Conference of Convent Primary Schools in Ireland (CCPSI) (5) and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) (18) surveyed their members In 1976, the Department of Education sought the reactions and opinions of primary school principals (9) All three surveys were conducted by questionnaire and were aimed mainly at determining the extent of agreement with the rationale of the new approach, the extent of implementation of the new programme, the perceived academic progress of pupils since its introduction, and respondents' general satisfaction with it A considerable degree of agree ment emerged from these surveys In general, the attitude to the new curriculum was found to be favourable and agreement with statements

about its underlying rationale was high. Implementation levels were reported to be moderate to high; class size was seen as the major obstacle to implementation.

The CCPSI (5) respondents were religious teachers, mainly in girls' schools. Opinions were reported separately for schools of four sizes. It was found that the attitude towards the new curriculum was most favourable in schools of 17 or more teachers, nearly all of which were located in cities or towns.

Some of the responses in the INTO survey (18) were reported separately for male and female teachers and for teachers in urban and rural schools, while others were not. Higher proportions of female teachers than of male teachers in schools in both locations said that the new curriculum had affected their job satisfaction favourably. With regard to ten educational issues, which are also included in the present study, opinions sometimes differed among the categories of respondents. Women teachers had slightly more positive opinions than men teachers about the meaningfulness of an integrated curriculum and about child-centredness. A much higher proportion of men than of women agreed that schools were neglecting the three Rs. Rural teachers were more likely than urban teachers to agree that education should emphasize competition; this difference was especially marked between rural and urban female teachers. Urban teachers were slightly more inclined to the view that children need more supervision and discipline than were rural teachers. Rural male teachers were distinguished by having the lowest rate of agreement with the view that learning by discovery was superior to other modes of learning and with the notion that the child was the most active agent in education. They also had the lowest rate of disagreement with the idea that scholastic attainment is more important than social and emotional development.

The report of the Department of Education survey (9) categorized responses according to school size and school location. The principals' own degree of agreement with the rationale underlying the new curriculum varied with school size, being greater in larger schools, but did not vary with school location. The degree of implementation of basic practices of the new curriculum by teachers was reported by principals to be higher among junior than among senior teachers; its relationship to school size varied for different practices and by level of teacher.

In a more recent study, Egan (8) surveyed a national sample of teachers

at all grade levels in Irish primary schools He found a widespread acceptance of the principles of the new curriculum He classified teachers into two categories ('formal' and 'informal') and found that a more informal approach was adopted by two thirds of the teachers in the lower grades and a more formal approach by the remaining one third In the higher grades, the opposite was the case Informality was greater in girls' schools and among women teachers than among men teachers in comparable classes Pupil freedom to move around the classroom and to talk with other pupils was more common in small schools, as was the use of multiple text books In the teaching of Irish, greater use was made in small schools of mass media materials Teachers in these schools also tended to be more opposed to streaming In larger schools, discovery methods in art, drama, and physical education were more prevalent than in smaller ones

Concentrating their survey of teaching practices on the lower grades of Irish primary schools, in which Egan (8) had detected a higher incidence of informal approach, Archer and O'Rourke (1) found that their respondents displayed a marked attitudinal preference for informality in their expressed views on both the content and aims of education at that level This, however, went hand in hand with the adoption of rather formal practices in the teaching of reading and a relatively large amount of whole-class teaching on the part of those same teachers

In a separate study of educational provision in small schools (19), the INTO sought the opinions of its representatives in schools of different sizes on a number of issues related to implementation of the new curriculum The size classifications used permitted comparisons between schools with 1-2 teachers, 3-4 teachers, and 5 7 teachers (the majority of which were in rural areas) and schools with 8+ teachers (the majority of which were in cities and towns) About 70-75% of respondents thought that having multiple standards in a class inhibited the implementation of the new curriculum This opinion did not vary much across school sizes In the present study, only single standard classes were included so this source of possible difference in implementation is not present

The focussing of this study on single-standard classes also effectively eliminated rural schools, which tend to have mixed grade classes, and allowed a more precise examination of differences between city and town schools The latter difference had been obscured or ignored in previous studies where the larger school size groups inevitably included

both city and town schools (5, 9, 19) or where the location variable was defined only in terms of urban/rural (18) or urban/mixed/rural (9) categories. The gender distinction which has proven to be of consequence in previous studies is preserved and sharpened in the present study by the inclusion of single-sex schools only.

The present paper presents the results of analyses of self-reported data relating to the educational beliefs and practices of a national sample of sixth-class teachers in Irish primary schools. These are teachers at the extreme upper end of the primary school, at which level previous studies have indicated that either implementation itself (9) or at least adoption of the informal approach associated with the new curriculum (8) is lowest. The analyses of data focussed on the responses of four groups of teachers: teachers in city boys' schools, teachers in city girls' schools, teachers in town boys' schools, and teachers in town girls' schools. These four groups were compared on ten different categories of beliefs and practices. Where no differences emerged, the commonalities are made the basis for a general description of beliefs and practices in the population of schools represented. Where differences did emerge, they are used to provide differentiated descriptions of schools in the four categories.

METHOD

Sample

In the autumn of 1973, a stratified sample of Irish national schools (excluding private, Protestant, special and one-teacher schools) was selected as part of a longitudinal study (21). The stratifying characteristics were location (city, town, rural) and sex composition (boys, girls, mixed). Schools from the city boys', city girls', town boys', and town girls' strata of that sample which had at least one class containing only sixth-standard pupils were included in this study; there were 88 such schools still participating in the original study in the spring of 1977 when the present investigation began. Completed questionnaires were returned by all sixth-class-only teachers in 76 of these schools. Nine schools made partial returns and three made no returns. Completed questionnaires were received from 164 teachers. The details of returns by type of school are contained in Table 1.

Instrument

A questionnaire, modelled on and drawing many items from Bennett's (3) study of primary teachers in England, was constructed to examine the

TABLE 1

NUMBERS OF PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS, BY SCHOOL TYPE

School type	Eligible schools	Schools with full participation	Schools with partial participation	Total teacher returns
City boys	21	18	1	51
City girls	22	19	2	44
Town boys	23	20	3	33
Town girls	22	19	3	36
Totals	88	76	9	164

educational beliefs and practices of teachers It sought information on ten topics

(i) School, class, and teacher characteristics (teacher gender, lay/religious status, length of teaching experience, number of years with present sixth class, number of pupils in the class, and number of sixth classes in the school),

(ii) Pupil characteristics (each teacher was asked to estimate the proportion of pupils in his/her class who were of varying degrees of ability),

(iii) Classroom organization (students' freedom to choose their own seats, move around or leave the classroom),

(iv) Discipline (use of various disciplinary measures),

(v) Curriculum organization (time tabling, use of textbooks, use of individual and group work),

(vi) Parent opinion (influence on teachers' implementation of the new curriculum and emphasis on basic skills),

(vii) Time spent teaching curricular areas,

(viii) Opinions about teaching aims (e g , acquisition of basic skills, encouraging self expression, developing pupils' creative abilities),

(ix) Opinions on educational issues (e g , relative importance of scholastic attainment, emotional and social development, use of traditional teaching methods),

(x) Opinions on the effects of teaching methods (formal and informal)

Procedure

The questionnaire was given to each teacher of a sixth-standard-only class in the participating schools by a field worker responsible for that school. With the exception of a very small number of questionnaires left at the school for later completion, each questionnaire was completed by the teacher and collected by the field worker in the course of a one-day visit to the school.

Analysis

Teacher responses to the 111 questions in the questionnaire were divided into ten categories for analysis. The responses in each category were entered as the variables in a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to test the hypothesis of overall differences between the four groups of teachers (those in city boys' schools, city girls' schools, town boys' schools, and town girls' schools). For each analysis, Table 2 details the number of cases and the number of variables employed and gives a brief description of the variables. The number of cases varied from analysis to analysis because only those teachers from whom responses to all the questions within a category were obtained could be included in the analyses for that category. When a MANOVA yielded a significant lambda value, indicating that there were overall significant differences between groups, univariate analyses of variance were carried out for each variable. If these analyses yielded significant F-values, Scheffé post-hoc analyses were carried out to examine the significance of differences between pairs of groups. In these cases, means and standard deviations are reported separately for each group of teachers.

RESULTS

In five of ten categories of variable, the MANOVA test indicated that there were significant overall differences between the teachers in the four types of schools (Table 2).

School, class and teacher descriptors. Gender of teacher was so closely associated with school type that no variability was found to exist in two of the four groups of schools. All sixth-class teachers in the city boys' schools were male, while all in the city girls' schools were female. Only one of the 33 teachers in town boys' schools was female and only two of the 36 teachers in town girls' schools were male. Because the standard deviation of gender was zero in at least one group, the gender variable was not included in the multivariate analysis.

TABLE 2

SUMMARY OF RESULTS OF MULTIVARIATE ANALYSES OF VARIANCE

Description of variables	Number of cases	Number of variables	Wilks lambda	χ^2	df	p
School class and teacher descriptors	162	5	620	74 81	15	< 001
Pupil descriptors	152	6	864	21 43	18	NS
Classroom organization	161	5	867	22 25	15	NS
Discipline	152	9	514	96 17	27	< 001
Curriculum organization	150	9	812	29 70	27	NS
Impact of parent opinion on curriculum	163	2	919	13 36	6	< 05
Time spent teaching in curricular areas	156	14	593	77 72	27	< 001
Opinions about teaching aims	162	9	785	37 39	27	NS
Opinions about education	153	25	445	111 26	75	< 01
Opinions about teaching methods	152	20	692	51 16	60	NS

Of the remaining five variables, two had significant univariate F ratios These were the lay/religious status of the teacher and the number of sixth classes in the school (Table 3) Town girls' schools had a significantly higher percentage of religious teachers (58%) than did city boys' schools (18%), city girls' schools (17%) or town boys' schools (24%) The number of sixth classes was significantly higher in city schools, where the average was about three classes, than in town schools, where the average was about two Across the four types of school, the mean number of years of teaching experience was 18 0 (SD = 11 92), the mean class size was 36 5 (SD = 5 63), and the average number of years for which teachers had been teaching the same class of pupils was 1 78 (SD = 1 11)

TABLE 3

MEANS AND CONFIDENCE INTERVALS OF SCHOOL, CLASS, AND TEACHER DESCRIPTOR VARIABLES WITH SIGNIFICANT INTER–GROUP DIFFERENCES

Variable	City boys (CB) (N=51)		City girls (CG) (N=42)		Town boys (TB) (N=33)		Town girls (TG) (N=36)				Group differences
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p	p<.05
Status of teacher (lay = 1; religious = 2)	1.18	.38	1.17	.38	1.24	.44	1.58	.45	8.34	<.001	CB,CG,TB ≠ TG
Number of sixth classes in school	3.04	1.09	2.86	1.12	1.88	.60	2.03	.70	15.40	<.001	CB,CG ≠ TB,TG

Pupil descriptors No significant differences appeared between teachers in the four types of schools in the proportion of their pupils whom they described as being 'very bright' (M = 14 7%), 'bright' (M = 22 9%), 'average' (M = 35 4%), 'below average' (M = 18 0%) or 'dull' (M = 9 2%) or as causing discipline problems (M = 7 6%)

Classroom organization Among the seven original variables in this category, there were two which did not demonstrate variability within at least one group of schools No teacher in the city boys', city girls', or town boys' schools allowed pupils to choose their own seats each day, and only one teacher out of 35 in the town girls' schools did so All teachers in the town boys' schools required pupils to ask permission before leaving the room and over 94% of teachers in the remaining three groups of schools also had this requirement The means and standard deviations of the five variables which were included in the MANOVA, and for which no significant group differences were found, are presented in Table 4 These means show that most teachers do not allow their pupils to choose their own seats at the beginning of the year, to move freely about the classroom, or to talk freely to one another in class High percentages expect their pupils to be quiet most of the time (86%) and appoint class leaders and other pupils with responsibilities for certain jobs (84%)

TABLE 4

MEANS AND CONFIDENCE INTERVALS OF CLASSROOM ORGANIZATION VARIABLES

VARIABLE	M	SD
Seats chosen by pupils or assigned by teachers[1]	1 66	42
Pupils allowed to move freely about classroom[2]	1 61	35
Pupils allowed to talk freely to each other in class[2]	1 69	30
Pupils expected to be quiet most of the time[3]	1 14	35
Appoint class leaders and pupils responsible for job[3]	1 16	36

[1]Chosen by pupil = 1 some chosen some assigned = 1 5 assigned by teacher = 2

[2]Yes = 1, only during certain classes = 1 5, no = 2

[3]Yes = 1, no = 2

Discipline. Highly significant inter-group differences emerged in the MANOVA of the variables in this category. Three of the nine variables had significant univariate F-ratios (Table 5). (One variable, use of 'sending pupil home', was not included in the MANOVA because no teacher in city girls' or town girls' schools reported the use of this technique; only about 10% of teachers in the boys' schools reported its use.) Corporal punishment was used significantly more often in boys' schools (by 52% of city and 77% of town teachers) than in girls' schools (by only 9% of city and 16% of town teachers). Extra work, as a disciplinary measure, was found to be significantly more common in city boys' schools, where 78% of the teachers reported its use, than in girls' schools, where 49% of city teachers and 25% of town teachers used it. Sending a letter home was used with significantly greater frequency by teachers in city boys' schools (67%) than in town boys' schools (32%).

The disciplinary measures for which no significant inter-group differences in frequency of use were found were informing parent(s) at a parent/teacher meeting (67%), withdrawal of privileges (62%), 'sending to the head teacher' (42%), 'sending out of room' (25%), and referral to a psychologist or doctor (18%). It should be noted, however, that about 87% of the teachers reported that they normally found verbal reasoning or reproof to be sufficient in maintaining discipline and that they used the other measures only for persistent disruptive behaviour, where verbal reproof failed to gain the pupils' cooperation.

Curriculum organization. No significant inter-group differences were found among the nine variables in this category (Table 6). (The question 'Do you regularly give your pupils homework?' was excluded from the MANOVA because all teachers in every group of schools answered in the affirmative.) Only about 29% of the teachers reported that they take pupils out of school regularly as part of teaching activities. High percentages of teachers reported that they use a time-table for organizing the week's work (91%) and that they require pupils to learn tables off by heart (88%). The average extent to which the teaching of basic skills was done by using textbooks was 66½% (the remaining 33½% was done by the use of specially prepared materials). In a typical school day, the average percentage of class time spent by the teacher teaching the class as a whole was reported as about 61 percent. Pupils spent about 18% of the day working individually and at their own pace and about 15% of the day working together in groups, in both cases on work prescribed by the teacher. The remainder of the time (about 7%) was split nearly evenly

TABLE 5

MEANS AND CONFIDENCE INTERVALS OF DISCIPLINE VARIABLES[1] WITH SIGNIFICANT INTER-GROUP DIFFERENCES

Variable	City boys (CB) (N=46)		City girls (CG) (N=43)		Town boys (TB) (N=31)		Town girls (TG) (N=32)				Group differences
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p	p< 05
Use of corporal punishment	1 48	51	1 91	29	1 23	43	1 84	37	21 69	< 001	CB,TB ≠ CG TG
Use of extra work	1 22	42	1 51	51	1 42	50	1 75	44	8 538	< 001	CB ≠ CG TG
Use of 'sending letter home'	1 33	47	1 40	49	68	48	1 53	51	3 697	< 02	CB ≠ TB

[1] Yes = 1 No = 2

TABLE 6

MEANS AND CONFIDENCE INTERVALS
OF CURRICULUM ORGANIZATION VARIABLES

Variable	M	SD
Take pupils out of school regularly as part of teaching activities[1]	1.71	.45
Use a timetable for organizing the week's work[1]	1.09	.28
Require pupils to learn tables off by heart[1]	1.12	.33
Percent of basic skills teaching by textbook	66.57	17.70
Percent of class time spent with		
teacher teaching class as whole	60.82	16.90
pupils working together in groups on teacher-prescribed work	14.28	11.60
pupils working together in groups on self-chosen work	3.57	4.38
pupils working individually (self-paced) on teacher-prescribed work	17.73	12.43
Extent of implementation of new curriculum[2]	2.58	.74

[1] Yes = 1; No = 2

[2] Very great = 1; great = 2; moderate = 3; slight = 4; not at all = 5

between individual and group work by pupils on work of their own choice. The teachers' self-rating of the extent to which they had implemented the new curriculum in their classes was midway between 'moderate' and 'great'.

Parent opinion. Only two questions were asked about the influence of parents on the teacher's work; possible responses were 'very great' (=1), 'great (=2), 'moderate' (=3), 'slight' (=4), and 'not at all' (=5). A significant Wilks' lambda was found in the MANOVA, and a significant univariate F-ratio was obtained for the question about the extent to which parents'

views influenced the teachers' implementation of the new curriculum (Table 7) The means for boys' schools (2 88 for city and 2 79 for town schools) appeared to indicate greater parental influence than those for girls' schools (3 43 for city and 3 39 for town schools), but the differences were not sufficiently large for a significant Scheffe contrast to be found An ANOVA of the means of the boys' schools combined (M = 2 84) and girls' schools combined (M = 3 41) showed that this overall difference was significant ($p < 001$) Overall, the sample of teachers agreed that parents are more concerned that their children acquire basic skills than that they experience other aspects of the new curriculum (M = 1 81, SD = 82)

Time spent teaching curricular areas The MANOVA demonstrated the existence of significant inter-group differences in this category of variables Time allotments to two areas (mathematics, and art and craft) had significant F-ratios (Table 8) In the case of mathematics, differences between boys' schools (M = 5 20 hours for city and 5 27 hours for town schools) and girls' schools (M = 4 74 hours for city and 4 84 hours for town schools) were not large enough to render individual Scheffe contrasts significant However, an ANOVA for combined boys' schools (M = 5 23) and combined girls' schools (M = 4 79) showed this mean difference to be significant ($p < 01$) There were significant Scheffe contrasts between girls' and boys' schools in the time devoted to art and craft City and town girls' schools spent 2 05 and 1 86 hours, respectively, on arts and crafts compared to 1 10 and 86 hours for city and town boys' schools The remaining average time allotments to curricular areas across groups were 5 42 hours for Irish (SD = 1 27), 3 02 hours for English (not including reading) (SD = 1 12), 2 06 hours for reading (SD = 82), 1 12 hours for history (SD = 67), 1 11 hours for geography (SD = 68), 0 48 hours for science (SD = 63), 0 64 hours for social and environmental studies (SD = 1 22), 2 53 hours for religion (SD = 41), 0 71 hours for physical education (SD = 47), 0 17 hours for speech and drama (SD = 32), 0 09 hours for movement education (SD = 31), and 0 99 hours for music (SD = 40)

Opinions about teaching aims Teachers rated each of nine educational aims as 'essential' (=5), 'very important' (=4), 'important' (=3), 'fairly important' (=2), or 'not important' (=1) No significant inter group differences were found in the ratings of the importance of the aims The highest importance (M = 4 57, SD = 59) was assigned by teachers to the acquisition of basic skills in reading, writing, and number work High

TABLE 7

MEANS AND CONFIDENCE INTERVALS OF THE PARENT-OPINION VARIABLE WITH SIGNIFICANT INTER-GROUP DIFFERENCES

Variable	City boys (CB) (N=50)		City girls (CG) (N=44)		Town boys (TB) (N=33)		Town girls (TG) (N=36)				Group differences
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p	p<.05
Parent views influence implementation of new curriculum	2.88	1.19	3.43	1.02	2.79	.99	3.39	1.10	3.775	<.02	–

TABLE 8

MEANS AND CONFIDENCE INTERVALS OF HOURS SPENT TEACHING IN CURRICULAR AREAS WITH SIGNIFICANT INTER-GROUP DIFFERENCES

Variable	City boys (CB) (N=46)		City girls (CG) (N=42)		Town boys (TB) (N=33)		Town girls (TG) (N=35)				Group differences
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p	p< 05
Mathematics	5 20	1 08	4 74	65	5 27	1 11	4 84	99	2 830	< 05	–
Art and Craft	1 10	83	2 05	77	86	63	1 86	64	23 44	< 001	CB,TB ≠ CG TG

ratings were also given to the importance of the acceptance as goals of 'normal' standards of behaviour (M = 4.10; SD = .89), an understanding of the world in which pupils live (M = 3.86; SD = .79), the encouragement of self-expression (M = 3.86; SD = .73), helping pupils to cooperate with one another (M = 3.81; SD = .76), the development of pupils' creative abilities (M = 3.68; SD = .75), and the enjoyment of school (M = 3.64; SD = .93). Only moderate importance was ascribed to preparation for academic work in secondary school (M = 3.43; SD = 1.02) and the lowest rating was assigned to the promotion of a high level of academic attainment (M = 2.60; SD = .95).

Opinions on educational issues. Analysis revealed significant differences between the educational opinions of teachers in the four types of schools. Four statements were found to have significant univariate F-ratios (Table 9). Teachers in city girls' schools (M = 1.73) were more inclined than were teachers in boys' schools, whether in cities (M = 2.35) or in towns (M = 2.56), to disagree with the idea that, from the teachers' point of view, scholastic attainment is more important than social and emotional development. Teachers in town boys' schools (M = 3.53) were more likely to agree that schools today are neglecting the three Rs than were teachers in city girls' (M = 2.78) or town girls' (M = 2.75) schools. Again, the teachers in town boys' schools (M = 3.97) differed significantly from those in town girls' schools (M = 3.31) by agreeing more strongly that pupils learn the basic skills better through traditional teaching methods. Teachers in city boys' schools (M = 3.83) agreed more than those in city girls' schools (M = 3.27) with the idea that sufficient use is not made of psychological tests in identifying pupils' problems and needs.

The overall means and standard deviations for the remaining 21 statements, for which significant inter-group differences were not found, are given in Table 10. The highest degree of agreement was registered for the statements that teachers need to know the home backgrounds and personal circumstances of their pupils, that the primary end of education is to prepare the child for adult life, that teaching is more efficient when there is a definite syllabus to follow, that education should be child-centred, that most fifth and sixth standard pupils feel more secure if told what to do and how to do it, that the progressive approach in teaching can be successful if the teacher is prepared to put enough preparation into it, and that education should teach children to be good and fair competitors. The strongest disagreement was expressed with the statements that most fifth and sixth standard pupils have sufficient maturity

TABLE 9

MEANS AND CONFIDENCE INTERVALS OF EDUCATIONAL-OPINION VARIABLES[1] WITH SIGNIFICANT INTER-GROUP DIFFERENCES

Variable	City boys (CB) (N=48)		City girls (CG) (N=41)		Town boys (TB) (N=32)		Town girls (TG) (N=32)				Group differences
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p	p< 05
From the teacher s point of view scholastic attainment is more important than social and emotional development	2 35	76	1 73	59	2 56	98	2 19	64	8 501	< 001	CB TB ≠ CG
Pupils learn the basic skills better through traditional teaching methods	3 79	94	3 76	80	3 97	78	3 31	90	3 388	< 02	CG ≠ TG
Schools today are neglecting the 3 Rs	3 08	1 11	2 78	94	3 53	1 24	2 75	1 05	3 764	< 02	TB ≠ CG TG
Sufficient use is not made of psychological tests in identifying pupils problems and needs	3 83	88	3 27	92	3 47	95	3 53	80	3 064	< 05	CB ≠ CG

1 Strongly agree = 5 agree = 4 uncertain = 3 disagree = 2, strongly disagree = 1

TABLE 10

MEANS AND CONFIDENCE INTERVALS OF EDUCATIONAL-OPINION VARIABLES[1] WHERE NO SIGNIFICANT INTER-GROUP DIFFERENCES EXIST

Variable	M	SD
An integrated curriculum is more meaningful to children than teaching subjects separately.	3.66	.88
Education should be child-centred, not teacher-centred, since the most active agent in the child's education is the child himself.	3.98	.94
Children learn best by discovery.	3.59	.91
Children develop better both socially and emotionally in an open classroom.	3.11	.82
Children working in groups waste a lot of time talking and 'messing about'.	3.42	1.04
Most pupils experience anxiety in trying to cope with the freedom and lack of formal structure in the open classroom.	3.13	.82
Pupils work better when rewarded by marks and stars.	3.72	.82
The progressive approach in teaching can be successful provided the teacher in question is prepared to put the requisite amount of preparation into it.	3.94	.63
The school curriculum should have a strong local flavour.	3.80	.74
Most pupils in 5th and 6th standards have sufficient maturity to choose a topic of study and carry it through.	2.37	.85
Most pupils in 5th and 6th standards would feel more secure if told what to do and how to do it.	3.97	.66
Teaching is more efficient when there is a definite syllabus to follow.	4.07	.71
The primary end of education is to prepare the child for adult life.	4.14	.72
Since adult life is very competitive, education should teach the child to be a good and fair competitor.	3.89	.71
'Creativity' is an educational fad which will soon pass.	2.47	.91

TABLE 10 – Contd

VARIABLE	M	SD
Streaming by ability is undesirable in the lower grades of primary school	3 59	96
In the upper grades of primary school, the bright children should be streamed off from the rest of their age group	2 73	1 06
The slow child is neglected in the non-streamed class	2 82	1 05
If a child is doing poorly he/she should be kept back	3 03	92
More use should be made of standardized ability and attainment tests in the assessment of pupils	3 71	77
Teachers need to know the home backgrounds and personal circumstances of their pupils	4 59	56

[1] Strongly agree = 5, agree = 4, uncertain = 3, disagree = 2 strongly disagree = 1

to choose a topic of study and carry it through, that 'creativity' is a passing educational fad, that bright children should be separately streamed in upper grades of primary school, and that the slow child is neglected m non streamed classes

Opinions on the effects of teaching methods Since no significant differences were found in the MANOVA on the teaching-method variables, only the overall means and confidence intervals are reported in Table 11 In these questions, teachers had been asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed that certain outcomes result from the use of formal and of informal methods in the classroom There were nearly equal degrees of agreement that neither type of method brings out the best in bright students and that both types fail to encourage responsibility and self-discipline and provide the right balance between teaching and individual work There was a much higher degree of agreement that informal teaching methods make heavy demands on the teacher and could create disciplinary problems than that formal methods do There was also a somewhat greater degree of agreement that informal methods are likely to leave many pupils unsure of what to do and to encourage time-wasting or day dreaming than that formal methods have these results Formal

TABLE 11

MEANS AND CONFIDENCE INTERVALS
OF TEACHING-METHOD VARIABLES[1]

Variable	M	SD
(a) Formal methods (traditional)		
could create discipline problems	2.30	.96
fail to bring the best out of bright pupils	2.85	1.07
make heavy demands on the teacher	2.74	.99
encourage responsibility and self-discipline	3.06	1.00
teach basic skills and concepts effectively	4.00	.70
encourage time wasting or day-dreaming	2.27	.89
leave many pupils unsure of what to do	2.34	.98
provide the right balance between teaching and individual work	3.28	.89
allow each child to develop his full potential	2.78	.94
teach pupils to think for themselves	2.86	.97
(b) Informal methods (progressive)		
could create discipline problems	3.95	.54
fail to bring the best out of bright pupils	2.59	.84
make heavy demands on the teacher	4.01	.74
encourage responsibility and self-discipline	3.46	.84
teach basic skills and concepts effectively	2.74	.93
encourage time wasting or day-dreaming	3.45	.97
leave many pupils unsure of what to do	3.52	.97
provide the right balance between teaching and individual work	3.23	.86
allow each child to develop his full potential	3.32	.89
teach pupils to think for themselves	3.74	.70

[1] Strongly agree = 5; agree = 4; uncertain = 3; disagree = 2; strongly disagree = 1

teaching methods, on the other hand, were much more commonly believed to be effective in the teaching of basic skills and concepts than were informal methods

DISCUSSION

This study set out to investigate the educational beliefs and teaching practices of a sample of sixth class teachers in Irish primary schools in the wake of a major change in the school curriculum and to identify differences in those beliefs and practices associated with location of school and sex of pupils served

On the whole, life in sixth-standard classes emerged as quite highly structured, teacher controlled, and oriented toward the attainment of traditional goals Nearly all teachers used a timetable to organize the week's work About 18 out of 25 hours a week were devoted to the teaching of Irish, mathematics, English (including reading), and religion, three hours were devoted to history, geography, and music The vast majority of teachers required their pupils to learn their tables off by heart, to ask permission to leave the room, and to be quiet most of the time The teachers considered that their pupils' most essential tasks in this final year of primary school were to acquire basic skills in reading, writing, and number work and to learn to accept 'normal' standards of behaviour In their efforts to foster the acquisition of basic skills, teachers used published textbooks about two thirds of the time and spent about 60% of instructional time in teaching the class as a whole Ninety-three percent of all class activity was teacher directed A very high proportion of teachers found that verbal reasoning and reproof sufficed for maintaining classroom discipline

There were only two practices with regard to which teachers in both city boys' and town boys' schools differed significantly from those in both city girls' and town girls' schools These were the use of corporal punishment in cases where verbal reproof failed and the amount of time devoted in a typical week to art and craft activities Preparedness to use corporal punishment as a last resort was found to be more common among teachers in both city and town boys' schools than among teachers in either city or town girls' schools Teachers in girls' schools in each location devoted about two hours per week to art and craft as against one hour given to such activities in boys' schools in each location

Gender differences were also found in the case of two other variables when location was ignored and all schools of a single sex were considered together. The time devoted to mathematics in boys' schools exceeded that in girls' schools by some 27 minutes per week. Teachers in boys' schools also ascribed a somewhat higher influence (between 'moderate' and 'great') to the impact of parental opinion on the degree to which they had implemented the new curriculum than did teachers in girls' schools who, on the average, rated this influence about halfway between 'moderate' and 'slight'.

Apart from these differences, the extent to which the educational beliefs and practices associated with the new curricular approach were reported was fairly constant across the teachers in the four types of schools. The differences in time allocation to art and craft and mathematics can be explained, in part at least, by a tradition in curricular planning in Ireland which, until recent decades, excused girls and even female teachers from algebra and geometry and which prescribed needlework for girls as part of their 'training in all domestic subjects necessary for their future vocation' (14, p. 202; cf. also 13, 12). In terms of their prospects for further education and for employment, the smaller amount of mathematics instruction for girls would seem to have the more serious potential consequences although, in the wider context of self-development education, boys' lesser access to art and craft experience may be equally damaging.

Some of the aspects of informality measured by Egan (8) are closely related to the 'beliefs' and 'practices' measures used in the present study, e.g., freedom of movement, integration of subject areas, use of discovery methods, attitudes towards the new curriculum. However, whereas Egan found significant gender differences on many of his measures of informality, few such differences emerged in the present study. Neither did we find gender differences in the self-reported degree of implementation of the new curriculum. Perhaps the 'backwash effect' of second-level education and/or entrance examinations may account for the similar approach adopted by male and female teachers in the final year of primary school as it emerged in the present study. Furthermore, while our study was confined to teachers of single sixth classes, Egan sampled a wide range of teachers across grades. Finally, Egan's variables are complex ones, based on the factor analysis and weighting of a number of items, while ours were treated as separate single-index variables, treated jointly but not additively, by the MANOVA.

Some variables were found to differ between specific pairings of school types When these are considered, the following description seems to emerge A boy in a single sex city or town school when compared to a girl in a comparable school, was likely to receive more instruction in mathematics and less in art and craft, was more likely to receive corporal punishment, and was more likely to be taught by a teacher who acknowledges being influenced by a belief that his parents were more concerned that he acquire basic skills than that he have a wide experience of the new curriculum Such a boy was also likely to have a teacher who disagreed less strenuously than his counterpart in a girls' city school that scholastic attainment was more important than social and emotional development If he was a boy in a city school, he was more likely to be given extra work as a disciplinary measure than was a girl in either city or town If in a town school, he was more likely than a girl in either city or town to have a teacher who believed that 'schools today are neglecting the three Rs' In town schools only, teachers of boys agreed more strongly than did teachers of girls that 'pupils learn the basic skills better through traditional teaching methods'

All in all, although the number of variables which differed across boys' and girls' schools were small, we are left with the general impression that boys' schools, especially in towns, had a somewhat more traditional academic orientation than girls' schools and also made more use of direct disciplinary measures to ensure cooperation in working toward those traditional academic goals Because in this study the sex of the teachers coincided almost exactly with the sex of the pupils served by the school, it is impossible to determine which of these two factors is responsible for the differences described above

Considering that our city and town sixth-class teachers were only a small subset of the full range of teachers across grades surveyed by the INTO (18) we find it noteworthy that there were such small differences of opinion on three statements presented identically to both groups That 'teaching is more efficient when there is a definite syllabus to follow' was agreed by 90% of our teachers and by 84% of the INTO respondents, that 'schools today are neglecting the 3 Rs' by 46% of the present and 39% of the INTO respondents, and that 'children learn best by discovery', was agreed by 60% of the present and by 70% of the INTO respondents

In the case of five other statements, it is impossible to ascertain whether observed differences or similarities of response may be related to

slightly different wordings or to the fact that the INTO study surveyed a range of primary teachers at all grade levels. While 83% of our teachers agreed that education should foster/emphasize competition, only 42% of the INTO respondents were of like mind. Seventy percent of our respondents compared to 86% of INTO respondents, agreed that 'an integrated curriculum is more meaningful than teaching subjects separately'. Eighty-seven percent of INTO respondents agreed that 'education should be child-centred rather than curriculum-centred', and 67% agreed that 'the most active agent in a child's education is the child himself'. Eighty-five percent of our respondents agreed with a statement that combined both of these ideas. Only 6% of INTO respondents, and a similarly low 12% of ours, agreed that scholastic attainment is more important than social and emotional development. There was virtually unanimous agreement by our respondents with the idea that 'teachers need to know the home backgrounds and personal circumstances of their pupils'. A very large proportion (98%) of INTO respondents agreed with the related idea that 'a child's progress in school in strongly influenced by his social and cultural background'.

Where the discrepancies in the opinions of these two groups of teachers are relatively large – in judgments about the integrated curriculum, the discovery method, and the role of competition – our sixth-class teachers appear more traditional. This interpretation is consistent with Egan's (8) finding that teachers in the higher grades tended to be more formal/traditional in their approach and curricular emphases than those in the lower grades of primary school. Here again, it is to be expected that the proximity of second-level education and the pressure of upcoming secondary-school entrance examinations would affect sixth-class teachers in this way.

In our study, there seems to be some inconsistency between what sixth-class teachers report as their educational beliefs and what they say that they actually do in their daily practice. Furthermore, the dominant educational beliefs which emerged were not always consistent with each other. While respondents expressed a firm belief in the value of an integrated curriculum, a child-centred approach, and a discovery mode of teaching, at the same time they were strongly convinced of the value of a definite syllabus, teacher-centred teaching, competition, and of the effectiveness of extrinsic rewards for work. They rated formal (traditional) methods highly for the teaching of basic skills while regarding the informal (progressive) approach as very conducive to the development of pupils'

ability to think for themselves This conflict of beliefs takes on special significance when we consider that the teachers assigned the highest importance to the acquisition of basic skills and to the inculcation of normal standards of behaviour while also rating highly the development of creativity and the encouragement of self-expression

These inconsistencies probably reflect fundamental conflicts in the minds of the teachers, most of whom had been trained prior to the introduction of the new curriculum The inconsistencies are also, perhaps, a true reflection of the difficulties which must inevitably arise at the point of transition from one system and philosophy of education at first level to a very different system and philosophy at second level (4) A teacher who tries to straddle this gap will find it very difficult to be consistent and, in the final analysis, may be forced to be pragmatic and to resort to a traditional approach in preparing final year pupils for a traditional style of second level education and, in some cases, for second-level entry examinations

Although our sample of teachers emerged as fairly traditional in their beliefs and practices, the average teacher self-rating on implementation of the new curricular approach fell between 'moderate' and 'great' This raises some questions about what, in the minds of teachers, would constitute 'complete' implementation, whether objective criteria can be established for it, or whether each of our respondent's answers simply reflected what he/she considered to be a certain level of implementation relative to his/her own circumstances

The Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board has committed itself to 'a review of the curriculum at primary level, particularly with regard to its implementation' (7, p 27) The present study is of particular relevance in the context of this proposal On the basis of our findings we would argue that curriculum development should at all stages entail a concerted effort to define specifically what a proposed curriculum, when implemented, would look like, not inside the heads of planners but in the classrooms of teachers and pupils Implementation might then be more effective and studies of the degree to which implementation has taken place might yield a clearer picture

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