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## **Analysing the present<sup>i</sup>: drawing on the legacy of Vere Foster**

Article for *Policy Futures*

*This paper sets out a framing analysis for a public policy debate on the future of schools that resonates with practitioners in teaching and teacher education on the island of Ireland, north and south, but also in other countries. This is informed by a democratic impulse to facilitate public policy debates, particularly in the ways schools and higher education institutions are directed and constrained by budget cuts and the shrinking of public funding in this age of austerity and gross inequalities. This is also informed by a need for policy learning about global neoliberal agendas, free-market capitalism and its push towards profit-making schools in de-regulated systems but with tighter centralized control, which can result in the domination and control of teachers' work by politicians, corporate-funded think-tanks, entrepreneurs and business managers. Even though Ireland boasts checks and balances in the form of current structures and education legislation in both jurisdictions, the global financial crisis and the collapse of the Celtic Tiger along with the 'troika' bail-out and Ireland's exit in tandem with the unravelling of the common economic model built up over the last three decades have troubled the constituent social and political settlements around teaching and teacher education. The authors also take inspiration from Vere Foster (1819-1900), an Anglo-Irish gentleman, philanthropist, and 'social worker' with the poor in post-famine Ireland, as well as a significant social campaigner renowned for his contribution to emigration and education. His ideas, generated at a time of great social upheaval, can be reworked to be appropriate in Ireland of today to address the neoliberal agenda that has brought the economy to the brink of disaster. Imaginative responses about future possibilities for teaching and teacher education, their form, regulation and accountability are but a few of the terms needed for public policy debate that engages the profession on the type of schooling that would best meet the needs of Irish society now and into the future.*

### **Introduction**

Of concern in Ireland, north and south, is the major restructuring of the school systems but also teacher education. This is best exemplified in the policy agenda for teaching and teacher education as articulated by the Minister for Education and Skills Ruairi Quinn in this current Fine Gael-Labour Coalition in the Republic of Ireland, which has recently entered a new phase of economic and social development post Celtic Tiger-Global financial crash (GFC)-'troika' bailout<sup>ii</sup> and Ireland's exit (see Leahy, 2013; Hardiman, 2012; O'Toole 2010). Quinn (2012) published his reform agenda in an article<sup>iii</sup> titled 'The Future Development of Education in Ireland', which included calls to embed quality in schools at all levels, teacher education and higher education; to respond to changes in society in regards inclusivity/diversity; and to attend to structural/infrastructural changes given available resources. Quinn (2014) updated this agenda in a speech titled 'Reforming Education, Building a Better Future', which revised his calls now cast as personal priorities in education<sup>iv</sup>: improving quality and accountability in schools; supporting inclusion and diversity; and creating opportunities for Irish adults<sup>v</sup>.

Quinn's (2012, 2014) initial intentions for schools, teacher education and higher education institutions, later extended to embrace the further education and training sector, are apparently consistent. The focus remained on the future and modernisation, to do with consolidating the role of the Irish education system for economic growth and social reconstruction. However, the emphases have shifted. This policy agenda, as originally conceived then revised, requires public debate and professional engagement for many reasons. It is high stakes at this point in Ireland's C21st history, and it is imperative to give voice to different ideas about the contribution of teaching and teacher education to social and economic

development as part of Ireland's reconstruction. It is also important to air different conceptualisations of Ireland's economic, social and cultural modernisation and the concomitant modernisation of schools and teacher education, nationally and regionally. This is crucial given the sort of society that is being fashioned in the wake of a catastrophic period for Ireland, going from the banking crisis and credit crunch of 2007-2008 (see Hall, Massey and Rustin, 2012) to a period of major readjustment ostensibly to facilitate then consolidate national recovery. Another reason for public debate is to open up some major lines of communication between Irish governments north and south and the teaching profession in schools and teacher education institutions, but also between political parties, professional associations<sup>vi</sup> and teacher unions<sup>vii</sup>. This will ensure there is ample opportunity for policy-makers to seek grassroots professional advice on schools policy and practice from teachers and teacher educators, which is crucial to a serious consideration of a strategic – and democratic - way forward.

The authors of this paper cross national divides, with one located in Ireland<sup>viii</sup> and one in England<sup>ix</sup>, but we have forged a working relationship where we can learn from each other about what it takes to build a professional learning community of research-active practitioners across the island of Ireland, north and south, to engage with each other and with educational politics. Against this background, we are both keen to look back in history, not just to the earlier clerical, nationalist, and social democratic settlements (O'Sullivan, 2005; Lee, 1989; Ó Buachalla, 1988) that pre-date current neoliberal trends (O'Reilly, 2013; McGuinness, 2013; Mooney Simmie, 2012), but to elements of the complex history of schooling in Ireland, pre-dating partition and stretching back into the C19th (Lee, 1989; Ó Buachalla, 1988; Coolahan, 1981). We both share a concern to uncover the history and legacy of Vere Foster's life and work in post-famine Ireland (McVeigh, 2011; Colgan, 2001; McNeill 1971; McCune Reid, 1956)<sup>x</sup>, an era of great social upheaval, to inform our deliberations on the possibilities for schools policy advocacy today, another era of austerity and gross inequalities<sup>xi</sup>. At the same time, we both appreciate the need to draw on the theoretical capacities and research contributions<sup>xii</sup> of globally-located academics as well as Irish teachers and teacher educators to policy and practice development in the light of the goals they wish to accomplish in partnership with students, parents and other stakeholders.

### **The Vere Foster Trust**

To this end we established the Vere Foster Trust<sup>xiii</sup> as an entity that can operate, in part, as a policy think tank to facilitate the intellectual and political work of the teaching profession in Ireland. The questions that guide our joint work include: What are the policy-practice stories of teaching and teacher education in Ireland? Who writes the stories, and why? What are the ideological and political messages in Quinn's (2012, 2014) policy agenda on behalf of this Fine Gael-Labour Coalition government? Such questions are inspired by the ideological and political legacy of Vere Foster (1819-1901), who was actively engaged in school improvement to realise the ideals of a mixed system of Irish schooling combining secular and religious education, which was quite remarkable in C19th Ireland<sup>xiv</sup>, where Foster readily identified a link between schooling and the profound influence it had on girls' and boys' lives. He gave unqualified support to the mixed education system despite the lack of concern and antagonism that existed among the ranks of the rich, the level of apathy that was prevalent amongst the poor and the manipulation of the system by clerical interest for their own ends (McNeill, 1971). In his efforts to equip them with knowledge and skills for employability and emigration, the twin-strategy in post-famine Ireland, Foster recognized that the Irish national school system had both economic and social functions for generations of the poor of Ireland. His life story was 'a record of unselfish devotion to the cause of humanity' (Belfast Newsletter, December 22, 1900, quoted in Colgan 2001).

We want to acknowledge Foster's commitment to teachers and the efficiency of teaching, his contribution towards the formation of national policy on education (McNeill, 1971), his promotion of mixed schooling in line with the national school system established in 1831 in Ireland (Coolahan, 1981), and the INTO established in 1868 (McNeill, 1971; O'Connell, 1969). His motto that 'A Nation's Greatness Depends upon the Education of its People', printed as strap-lines on his copybooks, reflected the importance that he attached to the link between a developing nation and the education of its citizens, underlying his profound belief that 'Irish education must at least equal the best standards found elsewhere' (McNeill, 1971). In drawing on his legacy, we took inspiration from McLaren (1994):

*We need to develop a praxis that gives encouragement to those who, instead of being content with visiting history as curators or custodians of memory, choose to live in the furnace of history where memory is molten and can be bent into the contours of a dream and perhaps even acquire the immanent force of a vision* (McLaren, 1994, cited by Mooney Simmie, 2012).

This foreshadows our shared vision for the work of the Vere Foster Trust to activate public debates marked by professional engagement with policy-makers. We initiated a public lecture series to create a new kind of local/national policy space and bring new voices into Irish policy-practice conversations in order to engage with modernization and the future of Irish education in an age of austerity and gross inequalities<sup>xv</sup>. We supported the establishment of a cross-border educational research community network for research-active practitioners in schools and higher education, identified as the Institute of Educational Research in Ireland (IoERI), to draw on and support research in teaching and teacher education, particularly as it engages with developments in research in education<sup>xvi</sup>.

In turn, we hope these initiatives will encourage the flow of knowledge and discourses and ensure Ireland capitalises on policy learning but also feed into the collective professional analyses of political parties' policy intentions and/or social imaginaries (Lingard and Rizvi, 2010; Taylor, 2004). Our concern is that the teaching profession in Ireland becomes more centrally involved in moves to chart new lines of schools policy, including strategies for disadvantaged schools<sup>xvii</sup>. Obviously schools policy lines up with government budget battles (see Leahy, 2013), which is connected to deficit reduction and taxation decisions, but we argue these sorts of issues are of public interest and professional concern, and need a framing analysis. In this article, we endeavour to chart some terms to address the macro levels of policy-making in the Irish educational systems but also the micro levels of teaching and teacher education, given practitioners' lived experiences of time- and policy-pressures and the conditions that enable engagement with research, including practitioner research.

### **Policy reforms of teaching and teacher education**

In what follows, we engage firstly with elements of Quinn's (2012) policy agenda, which he categorised under three main headings: quality; inclusivity/diversity; structural/infrastructural changes, and the policy thinking behind it. We also engage, secondly, with corresponding elements of Quinn's (2014) revisions, which he cast as personal priorities: quality and accountability; inclusion and diversity; and opportunities for Irish adults. This facilitates a critical interrogation of the current ideological and political agendas for the modernization of teaching and teacher education, but also indicates some opportunities for grassroots policy advocacy informed by research, including investigations of different approaches to teaching and teacher education. This is imperative if the teaching profession together with policy-makers and stake-holders are to face the C21st future, consider different ways of working, and confront and counter challenges to research-informed modernising project/s in the interests of Ireland's economic and social reconstruction.

Quinn's (2012) rationale for his policy agenda was reform, in effect a major structural overhaul, in line with his view that 'Education is universally regarded as a key driver of social and economic progress', but also in response to international competitions like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)<sup>xviii</sup>, government ambitions to improve educational outcomes, and the economic constraints imposed by the bailout conditions<sup>xix</sup> (Quinn, 2012). More pertinently, these reforms were tied to social reconstruction. As he put it: 'The new society we will construct, as we regain our economic sovereignty, will be totally different to the Celtic Tiger model which failed us so dramatically' (Quinn, 2012). At the outset he acknowledged Ireland's place in the new 21st integrated, global economy. This was coupled with a prescient recognition that reform is not just about boosting economic growth, but the need to help students reach their potential and prepare for citizenship in a rapidly changing society, reflected in major positive developments like peace with Northern Ireland, changes in religious practice and belief, and immigration.

This original rationale suggested a twin focus on the Irish economy and society and portends some different tensions in this policy text. On the one hand, the Irish school system was being engineered to interface not just with Ireland's economic recovery as the country regained its economic sovereignty, but with globalised education policies that reflect global neoliberal economic policy rhetoric (see Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Olssen, 2004; Olssen, Codd and O'Neill, 2004). Quinn (2012) named both the OECD Education Directorate and the reports by McKinsey and Company as major influences, which is significant in terms of policy advice. He took the OECD directions on schools' preparation of students for the 21st, characterised by jobs not yet created, technologies not yet invented and problems not yet known, as the preface to his ideas for school reform. He also took McKinsey's (2012) reform elements that are deemed to be replicable for school systems in a number of selected countries (as their education systems move from poor to fair to good to great to excellent) particularly in relation to achieving improvements relatively quickly through unique state interventions, enhancing learning experiences of students in classrooms, and the emphasis that systems place on mandatory versus persuading stakeholders to comply with reforms. On the other hand, Quinn (2012) intimated the school system was to be developed responsively to changing social formations, which mirror emerging socio-cultural configurations marked by different class, race, ethnic, religious and gender relations in diverse urban and rural locations.

These different emphases highlight some conflicting policy tensions, given an airing in the Vere Foster public lectures. Ball (2013a) cited the OECD and agencies such as the WTO, IFC and EU as a set of very powerful and very persuasive agents and organisations that legitimate, disseminate and sometimes enforce neoliberal reform. Likewise, Lingard (2012) cited a predominant set of purposes embedded in globalised education policies: schooling for the knowledge economy, human capital, and productivity. It followed that what Quinn did not allude to in the McKinsey (2012) report was that good systems in order to get better involves 'increasing responsibilities and flexibilities of schools and teachers to shape instructional practice' with 'collaborative practices becoming the mechanisms both for improving teaching practice and making teachers more accountable' which flags our concerns about central policy control, and which hints at a managerial form of governance that contrasts markedly with local professional autonomy<sup>xx</sup>. In turn this speaks to another set of purposes for schooling in globalised education policies, cited by Lingard (2012): for opportunity, social justice, and citizenship, which echo Vere Foster's views on schooling and education, and which provoke debate about Chief Inspector Harold Hislop's challenge to schools to conduct their own evaluations transparently and accurately, and for the inspectorate to visit these schools to evaluate the school's own self evaluation<sup>xxi</sup>.

Two examples will do to glean the policy-practice stories of teaching and teacher education and tease out the ideological and political messages in Quinn's (2012) original policy reform agenda, both derived from his focus on quality. This was a main umbrella heading for the reform of schools at different levels, but also teacher education and higher education. In regards schools, quality was discussed in relation to the taught curriculum; professional education provided to all staff, including leaders and managers; the facilities and resources available; support for learners with special needs; the supports provided to school management; and the educational experiences for all learners. Clues to what such quality meant were encapsulated in his stated concern about what needed to be done to foster a reflective evaluative culture among school communities, the roll-out of school self-evaluation, effective external inspection, and improving standards. Here it is imperative for policy-makers and practitioners to interrogate the research evidence. As a case in point, high quality teaching is widely acknowledged to be the most important factor influencing student achievement, which has implications not only for teacher education but also the policy and professional knowledge bases that inform teacher preparation and professional development (see BERA-RSA, 2014; also Gleeson, 2012; Darling-Hammond and Lieberman, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2006).

Yet here Quinn (2012) indicated further policy tensions, for instance, in regards quality in Post-Primary Schools. His proposed reform of the Junior Certificate curriculum was intended to promote active learning, creativity and innovation, purportedly to address rote-learning and curriculum overload. The declared aim was to make the learning experiences more student-centred, but this was counter-balanced by the call for standardised tests in core areas of Literacy and Numeracy, state examinations and school assessment, admittedly alongside information on student participation in activities like debating and school sports. Space prohibits a thorough interrogation of the Junior Certificate curriculum reform but suffice it to say the focus on high quality teaching was implied at this point in his paper and its definition was in abeyance. While Quinn's (2012) focus on student-centred learning indicated a desire for meaningful learning experiences, there was a glaring policy contradiction because writ large was a concern for performance and accountability, which is a hallmark of neoliberalism (Ball, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; 2013b; Ball and Youdell, 2008), and which is inevitably steered by specifications of teaching (Hextall and Mahony, 2008; Ghale and Beckett, 2013).

Quinn's (2014) revised policy reform agenda clarified the matter of quality to the extent it was to be framed within the parameters of curriculum reform to the Junior Certificate, abolished by September 2014 and replaced with the Junior Cycle Student Awards (JCSA). Significantly, the proposed reform of the Junior Certificate curriculum has since sparked industrial action<sup>xxii</sup>, which seemingly fails to take advantage of a creative policy tension in the Minister's latest statement. The declared aim was to see less focus on exams and rote learning, and more on the provision of young people's skills for life and learning. These would include team-work, communication skills, creativity, and an ability to manage information. It was recognised that quality was not only confined to curriculum, and note was made of high quality teaching in all classrooms, which would give teachers an opportunity to embed research-informed practice. Quinn's (2014) only stipulation was that teachers must be qualified, and reference was made to the Teaching Council Act, which precipitated mention of criminal record checks and the Teaching Council's broader range of actions to prevent below-standard teaching. In turn, the Minister indicated that such actions were to supplement the improvements to initial teacher education, previously discussed in parliament.

### **Mandating quality**

These concerns with initial teacher education coincide with our second example to glean the policy-practice stories of teaching and teacher education and tease out the ideological and political

messages in the Minister's reform agenda. Quinn (2012) also elaborated a notion of quality under the sub-heading of Teacher Education, and here claimed studies show quality of teaching is more important than smaller class sizes in terms of shaping educational outcomes. He went on to indicate the need for a radically reformed teacher education programme, spanning the career continuum, marked by an early-years professional development plan to develop and extend teachers' skills. At the same time there was to be teacher education programme development, given the stated aim that courses for primary and second-level teachers would change radically to equip teachers with the necessary pedagogical skills for the C21st. Moreover, teachers' on-going registration would depend on regular involvement in professional development which featured lifelong learning, overseen by the Teaching Council. The Minister indicated these changes would be underpinned by a review of the structures for teacher education, as part of the National Strategy for Higher Education.

Space again prohibits a thorough interrogation of Quinn's (2012) concerns with quality in teacher education but even a cursory critical reading indicates the Minister did not cite the studies on quality of teaching, and implied a criticism of the profession's ongoing industrial concerns about class sizes<sup>xxiii</sup>. At the same time, Quinn did not articulate any meaning of quality other than to intimate that it is implicated in shaping educational outcomes. This was apparently to be the predominant feature of teachers' work, to be emphasised in his proposed skills-based reform of teacher education and presumably in any likely structural changes to provision. A reading of the research literature would have indicated teachers need skills but they also need to be intellectually engaged to ascertain different and diverse students' learning needs, among other things (see Beckett, 2013). While teachers' knowledge and the professional knowledge bases did not warrant a mention, his direction on teachers' on-going professional development hinted at neoliberal ideologies of power and control. Lynch (2013) pointed out in her Vere Foster public lecture these can masquerade as development, 'restructuring' 'innovation' and 'lifelong learning', but going further, these reforms would most likely be mandatory given the Teaching Council would be compelled to oversee the implementation of such initiatives<sup>xxiv</sup>. Significantly, Quinn (2012) struck another contradictory policy note with mention of teachers' pedagogical skills, yet another reading of the research literature would have shown the development of pre-service teachers' and practising teachers' pedagogical repertoire as crucial for working to more equitable outcomes from schooling (Mills and Mitchell, 2013). In fact, Mills and Mitchell (2013) argued that the focus on pedagogy in teacher education has to be grounded in notions of teaching as an intellectual activity, which was a point reiterated by Mills (2013) in his Vere Foster public lecture.

This concern for teacher education as a highly competitive and intellectually demanding career choice was the corollary to a well-performing public education system in the opening gambit in Sahlberg, Furlong and Munn's (2012) commissioned *Review of the Structure of Initial Teacher Education in Ireland* for the Department of Education and Skills. Education was identified as a national strategy in Ireland's economic and social structures, while teachers and how they are educated was at the core of the implementation of national programmes for sustainable economic growth and prosperity. Other components of teacher education were recognised, notably curricular, policy, funding and CPD, but the focus was on structural change to the provision of ITE, given the terms of reference. The springboard for their recommendations for the structural reconfigurations of institutional provision was a belief that Ireland needs to invest more in the continuous improvement of the quality of teaching, the role of research in teacher education, and international cooperation in all of its teacher education institutions. Crucially quality was articulated in the light of the European Commission's work on teacher education, with a focus on teachers' knowledge, attitudes and pedagogic skills; reflective practice and research among teachers; the status and recognition of the teaching profession and the professionalization of teaching.

A thorough interrogation of Quinn's call for the structural reform of teaching and teacher education, including Sahlberg et al's (2012) Report, has been undertaken by prominent Irish scholars. For example, Sugrue (2013) indicated grave concern about systems increasingly borrowing from one another as organisations such as the EU and the OECD join forces to determine performance indicators that are already being used to control and regulate the work of teachers and teacher educators. He took issue with the assumptions that teacher educators cannot be trusted to prepare the next generation of teachers; that by holding the profession to account by the imposition of specified criteria or learning outcomes student teachers will be better prepared; and that those who make these decisions and specify these criteria for the audit of teacher education seemingly know best or have a monopoly on what is 'best' for student teachers. Of significance to our argument in this article, Sugrue posited a definition of quality as 'not about high standards but those which are uniform, predictable and verifiable' (Power, 1999, cited by Sugrue, 2013), and went on to argue the case about the logics of accountability versus professional responsibility (also see Conway and Murphy, 2013; Conway, 2012). This distinction is crucial to the profession if in fact it is to take responsibility for its own research-informed practices and procedures in reply to the importation and enforcement of global neoliberal policies, including austerity measures. To this end, the profession needs to take advantage of the different tensions in Quinn's (2012) policy reforms and engage in professional policy advocacy on the strength of research evidence, but here we take heed of Sugrue's (2013) conclusion that without investment in building capacity any likely funding shortfalls and resultant rationalisation will be at the expense of strengthening research in teacher education.

### **Neoliberal dictates**

Any previous glaring policy contradictions in regards quality were seemingly eliminated in Quinn's (2014) revised agenda, because quality was conjoined with accountability and it was categorically stated that increasing the accountability of schools to their communities was to be the key mechanism for continuous school improvement. This was to build on previous announcements about parents' receipt of detailed end-of-year reports on their children's progress, including the results of standardised tests in Literacy and Numeracy at periodic intervals. The plan was now to extend this assessment and reporting into secondary schools to coincide with the introduction of the new curriculum reforms. This was to be accompanied by more frequent school inspections, albeit inclusive of parent and student voices, and the publication of national analyses of inspection findings by the Department of Education and Skills Chief Inspector. This was also to be informed by the apparatus of a School Self-Evaluation Report in tandem with a School Improvement Plan, with summaries to be provided to parents based on the argument that such initiatives would broadcast school improvement, empower parents, and consolidate school accountability.

In the terms of our framing analysis we are alarmed that, preceding any substantial public policy debates and professional engagement, Quinn's (2012, 2014) policy reform agenda is apparently intended to keep pace with the global neoliberal reform agenda (see Mooney Simmie, 2012; Lingard and Sellar, 2012; Limond, 2007). This is often devoid of research evidence and marked by governments' dictates of teachers' work and comes in the form of national curriculum, strategies for teaching and learning, and rigorous testing, all tied to behavioural outcomes, national benchmarks and school results (see Beckett, 2013). As another case in point, school improvement and school effectiveness is widely acknowledged as a contested field, but the weight of professional opinion comes down in favour of 'contextualised school improvement' that recognises the likely impact on school processes and student achievement of 'school mix', which is the social class composition of a school's student intake (see Thrupp, 1999, 2005; Lupton, 2004, 2006; Wrigley, Thomson and Lingard, 2012). Any School Improvement Plan must be informed by



teachers' action inquiries into factors that contribute to student achievement and showcase evidence-informed classroom practice (see Beckett and Tan, 2014).

Yet Quinn (2014) seems determined to follow directions on accountability, which is borne out in Chief Inspector Harold Hislop's (2013) paper, *Applying an Evaluation & Assessment Framework: An Irish Perspective*. It explored the usefulness of the OECD model of evaluation and assessment for improving school outcomes<sup>xxv</sup>, guided by the overarching themes of governance, design and procedures (the 'how' of assessment and evaluation, including tools and approaches), capacity (the ability of the systems, institutions and individuals to operate the arrangements), and the use of results. Hislop's stated task in the paper was to raise questions and matters for consideration in Ireland, given an acknowledgement that the OECD framework required a much broader conversation. This too is indicative of a creative tension in this policy text. In fact Hislop called for a national dialogue about the relevance of the OECD suggestions and policy recommendations, which needed to be considered by both the political and educational systems and wider Irish society.

In the first theme of governance, for instance, Hislop described the peculiarities of the Irish system in the form of Ministerial concentration of power over decision-making, which is tempered by a history of consultative practices, national consensus, degree of stakeholder buy-in and teacher professionalism. A critical reading suggests it is as though these were caveats to an exploration of a potential institutionalisation of stock-in-trade neoliberal approaches to teaching and learning. This was evident in Hislop's discussion of the weaknesses of a system of policy-making and governance that seeks to achieve consensus, notably in regards a concern about the responsiveness of the system. It was argued agreement to policy on setting curriculum standards, evaluation arrangements or student testing is slow, while Irish business interests registered their concerns about the preparation of Irish students for the knowledge society and the workplace. This is seemingly pandering to the populist position espoused by public commentators like Martin Murphy (2010), whose article 'What we must do to move education into the fast lane' appeared in the *Irish Times* and charted a reform agenda for schools in line with business needs<sup>xxvi</sup>. A further weakness was noted in the discussion about the concern with advice received from bodies influenced by sectoral interests [business interests notwithstanding] and cited the example of the advice received in regards proposals for a competency-based C21st style curriculum and the Minister's decision re radical change to curriculum and assessment arrangements. A notable absence in this discussion was the professional disquiet, which similarly precipitated industrial action<sup>xxvii</sup>. This seemingly did not dissuade Hislop from indicating that Departmental policy on evaluation and assessment would be forthcoming, guided by the Government's Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, marked by specific targets for improvement in students' learning and considerations of teacher appraisal, and in line with the OECD report.

Space yet again prohibits a thorough interrogation of Hislop's analysis of the application of the OECD framework in the Irish setting, but it is clear from his arguments there was another creative tension in his concluding discussion of the implications. On the one hand, there was support for what can be described as neoliberal dogma on evaluation and assessment. On the other hand, he gave voice to educationalists' concerns, for example, about measurement of educational outcomes, student testing, performance, accountability, standards, and international competitions like PISA. Most telling was his citation of Ball (2010), who expressed concerns about use of performance information, and his naming of PISA and accusations of 'a malign, "neo-liberal" and economically focussed effect on schooling' (Hislop, 2013). In his final comments Hislop unequivocally disagreed with the critics of neoliberalism and indicated his full support for the OECD framework, but he intimated this would be in terms that suggested further exploration of the challenges and questions for Ireland.

In her Vere Foster public lecture, Lynch (2013) tackled the issue of governance as a cornerstone of neoliberalism and framed it within a critical discussion of the Europe 2020 plan. This has salience for a critical reading of Hislop's paper, as Lynch maintains that in this plan education is defined as central to reviving the economy of the EU, given a key objective is to develop 'new skills and jobs'; to 'modernise' labour markets by facilitating labour mobility; to develop skills throughout the lifecycle and increase labour participation; and to have better matching labour supply and demand. Lynch described the OECD and EU as regulatory mechanisms that employ soft language, and noted the soft rhetoric conceals the controlling intent. She cited Nóvoa (2010), who claimed Europe is governing without seeming to govern, given an 'Open Method of Coordination' implies voluntary compliance in EU governance in education but there is growing pressure to make the curricula of all education markets relevant. Further, she argued the OECD and EU are governing by measurement, for example, PISA, League tables, Rankings, Key Performance indicators (KPIs) and Citation indices etc.

Lynch's (2013) concern that the regulation and control of public sector professionals are central to the neoliberal new managerial project lends weight to our concerns about the specifications of teaching often coupled with the government's dictates of teachers' work. These were shared by Leitch (2013), who in a response to Lynch, noted her presentation unpicked the lived experience of the education spaces inhabited by the profession in Ireland (and elsewhere). Pointedly, her analysis and critique of the neoliberal-inspired new managerialism articulated the profession's discomfiting felt-sense about many issues and changes represented by terms such as 'marketisation', 'accountability', improved educational standards, 'students as consumers', and global competition, which have reframed education (Leitch, 2013). Leitch drew parallels with Lynch's evidence of neoliberalism as the political ideology underpinning new managerialism in the south of Ireland, and showed evidence in Northern Ireland to illustrate an analogous political scenario. This comes as no surprise, given globalised education policies, which attract analyses and critique in different national settings. Writing in the USA, Cochran-Smith et al (2013) reported on their critical analysis of increased forms of accountability in a framework they call the 'politics of policy', which is a conceptual tool for making sense of ostensibly intractable public and political debates about teacher quality and teacher preparation.

Quinn's (2014) speech eliminated any real contrasting position to neoliberalism as he reiterated the Coalition Government's record in terms of its facilitation of the national recovery and regaining economic sovereignty and its record in education mostly through a legislative programme of reform. It followed that in his subsequent discussion of the Coalition Government's priorities for the coming year, the focus was seemingly on economic recovery, mostly through job creation, although note was made that not all the Fine Gael-Labour achievements have been economic. He cited examples of social reform: abortion reform, gender quotas and same-sex marriage, which are curious examples of human rights at issue in the EU.

### **Conclusion: future possibilities?**

Both the contradictory and the creative policy tensions in Quinn's (2012, 2014) policy texts discussed in this article must be resolved, and this must be done through dialogue between politicians, policy-makers and the professional workforce in teaching and teacher education. However, we take the twin points made by Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) about the dangers of seeing these texts as nationally driven prescriptions and insertions into practice, while marginalising or not recognising other moments in the processes of policy and policy enactments that go on in and around schools. We do not want to see the erasure of 'policy activity' of negotiations and coalition building that somehow links texts to practice (Colebatch, 2002, cited by Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012). We want to see the profession

actively engage with Quinn's (2012, 2014) policy agenda, which is underway to institutionalise the modernisation of teaching and teacher education, and which is vital if the present industrial disputes such as the conflict regarding assessment are to be settled.

While the work to realise this modernisation is only just beginning in the south of Ireland, the neoliberal ideological elements of Quinn's reforms are not new. These are replicated by governments committed to the profound re-shaping of schooling and social life modelled on Thatcher's ideological-political project and global neoliberalism (Hall, 1988, 2011, cited by Beckett, 2013). Without professional engagement in charting future possibilities, Quinn's (2012, 2014) reforms will provide mandated directions to embed a marketized and privatized system of schooling in Ireland (see Lynch, 2013; also Leitch, 2013). This paves the way for global private sector involvement, for example, by corporate elites like Murdoch and/or Pearson, coupled with the major loss of professional control in schools and universities, the result of the prescription and tight inspection of teachers' & academics' work (see Beckett, 2013). Alternative conceptualisations of teaching and teacher education were simultaneously refracted in Quinn's (2012) policy thinking about a new society different to the Celtic Tiger model, and in the appointment of Sahlberg, Munn and Furlong (2012) to review teacher education, which was significant given they cast ITE as the single most important factor in a strong public system and promoted the contribution of research to teaching and teacher education.

We are keen to reiterate Vere Foster's own ideological and political message that 'A Nation's Greatness depends on the education of its people' and revitalise his contribution to Irish educational politics. Rejecting the prevailing market-led economic notion 'that laissez-faire was the best cure for poverty in Ireland' (ÓGráda, 1988; Kelly, 2012), he singlehandedly set about transforming the National School system through the refurbishment of over two thousand dilapidated schools, and supported setting up the Teachers' Journal which he subsequently used to great effect to exhort teachers to come together in order to raise their status and improve the efficiency of teaching. He accepted the position of President of the newly formed Irish National Teachers Association (Colgan, 2001; O'Connell, 1969), forerunner to the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, which gave him a platform to become a 'medium of inquiry' for teachers to facilitate their contribution to national education policy formation (McNeill, 1971). He provided resource material to teachers through the 'Vere Foster National Copy Books' with the fourfold aim of teaching legible writing, spelling, thinking and character formation, and he demonstrated that education also happens despite the presence of dominant ideologies.

Like Vere Foster, we are equivocal in our support for teachers' professional learning and development so they can make a robust contribution to the local/national Irish society, culture and economy in the interests of the Irish people in our school communities, who are required to confront an immediate challenge. We posit the task is either to put back together again that which has failed the different and diverse school communities so drastically in the recent past, or to reset the economy for the benefit of the many instead of the few, the disadvantaged as well as the privileged, and to create a future that many of the present generation may not see but in which their children and grandchildren will live. This requires a self-conscious acceptance or rejection of the market led systems of the past, with all the inherent resource implications and what this means for the public provision of schooling. This task is imperative, especially in the run-up to the next elections: the general election in the Republic of Ireland must be held in or before 2016 with local and European elections in May 2015; and elections in Northern Ireland as part of the UK in May, 2015. The common issues – the current crisis of global neoliberal capitalism, the restructure of the Irish economy and society, the reform of the school systems – provides a platform for the Vere Foster public lecture series, a showcase of policy learning that encourages practitioners to build research-informed teaching and teacher education and their policy-

practice stories in local/national schools. These are the keys to the modernising work to be done in Ireland.

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<sup>i</sup>We are inspired by the late Stuart Hall who, with Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin in *After Neoliberalism: Analysing the Present*, challenged the economic model which has underpinned the political and social settlements of the last three decades but warned that the broader political and social consensus remains the same. We see this in Ireland. After the experience of a major economic crises there appears to be no crises of ideas as the very neo-liberal narrative that led the economy to implode is fast gaining ground again albeit cloaked in new policy texts. We are committed to shifting the parameters of the social-educational debate from one concerning small palliative and restorative measures to one that opens the way for moving forward towards a new educational-political era to bring about an approximation of the good society.

<sup>ii</sup>The term Troika, a Greek word for a 'group of three', was used in Ireland during the economic crises to describe the European Commission (EC), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Central Bank (ECB), the representatives who formed a group of lenders to bail out the Irish economy. At their behest, stringent austerity measures were enforced by the Irish Government resulting in major economic difficulties for the ordinary Irish people.

<sup>iii</sup>There are seemingly two Quinn (2012) articles with the same title, and although one has the stem 'A Century of Studies', they appear to be one and the same with identical bibliographic details: one online at a Century of Studies website and one in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, both published by Irish Jesuits. We would also refer readers to other essays in this issue of *Studies*, since they too provide policy analyses of Quinn's (2012) reform agenda.

<sup>iv</sup>This begs the question 'to what extent does Minister Quinn speak for the Department of Education and Skills and/or the Fine-Gael-Labour Coalition government?'

<sup>v</sup>The impetus for the inclusion of adults in this revised policy text may well be as a result of the establishment of a new Further Education and Training Authority in 2013 under the auspices of the Department of Education and Skills, tasked with ensuring the provision of further education programmes for jobseekers and learners.

<sup>vi</sup> These include the Irish Vocational Education Association, An Chomhairle Mhúinteoireachta: The Teaching Council, Education Studies Association of Ireland, Irish Primary Principals Network, Irish Association of Teachers in Special Schools, National Association of Boards of Management of Special Education, and Association of Teachers' Centres in Ireland.

<sup>vii</sup>These include the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), the union representing teachers at primary level in the south of Ireland and secondary teachers in Northern Ireland; the Association of Secondary Teachers' of Ireland (ASTI) and the Teachers' Union Ireland (TUI) both representing teachers at second level; and the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) whose members are currently engaged in a campaign entitled 'Defend the Irish University-Universities must work for the good of society not just business'. The National Parents Council also enjoys considerable influence particularly with the present Minister for Education and Skills. See Little (2013) Parties, causes and political power, in *Soundings*.

<sup>viii</sup>John Carr is a former General Secretary of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). Having taught as a primary teacher in a junior national school in Dublin, later becoming the Principal Teacher, he was appointed Education Officer of the INTO with responsibility for educational policy development. He was subsequently elected Deputy General Secretary and later General Secretary of the INTO and was a council member of Pan European Committee of Educational International and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. He specialised in the promotion of teacher professionalism, contributed to national curriculum development and the development of assessment and evaluation procedures and graduated with a MA in Education from the Open University. He is currently Chairperson of the Vere Foster Trust.

<sup>ix</sup>Lori Beckett is the Winifred Mercier Professor of Teacher Education in the Carnegie Faculty at Leeds Metropolitan University in England. Recruited from Australia in 2005 to build school-university partnerships in networks of

disadvantaged schools, she coordinates the 'Giving Teachers Voice' project; directs and teaches on the 'Leading Learning' CPD programme; and is Course Leader for the allied MA 'Achievement in City Schools'. Lori currently works as an academic partner to local teacher researchers, who are contributing to a city wide project on 'raising achievement' and writing for publication in a special edition of *Urban Review*. She was Convener 2007-2010 and Co-Convener 2011-2013 of the BERA Practitioner Research SIG, and is a founding member of the Vere Foster Trust, the result of her research into her Irish maternal family history.

<sup>x</sup> An hour long documentary, broadcast mid-2014 on RTE Lyric FM, recounts Vere Foster's extraordinary contribution to the development of assisted emigration schemes together with his outstanding involvement in the promotion of education in post famine Ireland.

<sup>xi</sup> For an instance of concern about austerity and inequalities in Ireland, see the Limerick Social Regeneration Plan: <http://www.ipa.ie/pdf/Oliver%20O'Loughlin%20Presentation.pdf>

<sup>xii</sup> For a useful discussion on the significance of research see the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2013) pamphlet, *Why Educational Research Matters. A briefing to inform future funding decisions*. London: author.

<sup>xiii</sup> The Vere Foster Trust was established with a twin mission to honour the memory of Vere Foster, who deserves never to be forgotten, and restore a working estate at Glyde Court, the ruined Irish ancestral home of the Foster Family, for professional and amateur researchers in educational, social and family history in Ireland and internationally. With public, private and philanthropic support, the aim is to convert Glyde Court into a World Heritage site, notably a working place of learning offering conference and residential-sabbatical opportunities for academic researchers, teachers, writers and artists of all ages and at different career stages, as well as a Diaspora Study Centre to coordinate the currently- fragmented resources on family and social history and emigration across the island of Ireland.

<sup>xiv</sup> Mixed schooling encountered intense opposition from the various church authorities (see O'Raifeartaigh, T. Mixed education and the synod of ULSTER 1831-40 in *Irish Historical Studies IX* ( March 1955) and Akenson, D. (2012) *The Irish Experiment: The National System of Education in the Nineteenth Century* Vol.1, London: Routledge & K. Paul

<sup>xv</sup> To date we have hosted four prominent academics (Lingard, Ball, Lynch, Mills) and booked Munn (see Sahlberg, Furlong and Munn, 2012), who are all critical scholars committed to research-informed policy and practice.

<sup>xvi</sup> The IoERI was established as a focal point for the meta-analysis of evidence-based educational research, and accordingly tapped two major initiatives to provide some directions: the Strategic Forum for Research in Education, 2008-2010 (see [www.sfre.ac.uk](http://www.sfre.ac.uk)), which mapped a typology of disciplinary, applied, developmental evaluative, and practitioner research in the field of education; and the BERA-RSA Inquiry into the Role of Research in Teacher Education: Reviewing the Evidence, 2013-2015 and the Role of Research in Teacher Education: Interim Report.

<sup>xvii</sup> See work in the south by the Department of Education and Skills, Ireland (2005) on the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: an Action Plan for Educational Inclusion); also the Department of Education and Skills, Ireland (2011a) on its evaluation of the planning processes in these schools.

<sup>xviii</sup> Ball (2013a), in his Vere Foster public lecture, noted PISA is a powerful lever for change, and poor comparative performance creates a 'policy window' through which ideas, which previously seemed extreme or outlandish, can enter policy discourses and attract attention and support.

<sup>xix</sup> Quinn states these conditions were contained in the memorandum of Understanding with the ECB, IMF and European Commission (the Troika).

<sup>xx</sup> McKinsey (2012) continued with 'collaborative practices becoming the mechanisms both for improving teaching practice and making teachers accountable'.

<sup>xxi</sup> Hislop's comments were made in an interview in SeomraRanga, an online resource website for teachers: see <http://www.seomraranga.com/>

<sup>xxii</sup> The Association of Secondary Teachers' of Ireland (ASTI) and the Teachers' Union Ireland (TUI), both representing teachers at second level, are currently about to participate in industrial action in relation to assessment aspects of curriculum reform.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Again, it may well be that Quinn is referring to the 2007 McKinsey report *How the world's best performing schools come out on top* in which they raised the issue that class size does not matter a statement which has been



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invoked by politicians in America leading to much public and professional debate and which has led to new reports challenging the argument that class size does not matter. In its stead, it is apparently teachers and parental involvement that matters most, a mantra that Quinn keeps repeating at every opportunity.

<sup>xxiv</sup>A similar situation arose with the announcement by the Inspectors that they were withdrawing from further involvement in the probation of teachers. It would now be the responsibility of the Principal. The INTO resisted this mandate and declared industrial action directing members not to participate in the probation process. An agreed settlement was, however, reached between the INTO and the Teaching Council in March 2014.

<sup>xxv</sup>Hislop cited relevant OECD references to inform his deliberations: Paulo Santiago (2012) OECD Review on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks for Improving School Outcomes – Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment (paper delivered at the EU Presidency Conference on “Better Assessment and Evaluation to Improve Teaching and Learning held in Dublin, Ireland on 19-20 March 2013). Hislop also directed readers to Department of Education and Skills, Ireland (2012), OECD Review on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks for Improving School Outcomes: Country Background Report for Ireland (Paris, OECD Publishing).

<sup>xxvi</sup>See Murphy, *Irish Times*, 5 October, 2010, who argued: (a) Reform of our education system is as important to the international community as the stabilisation of the banking system (b) education if it is prioritised, can provide us with the single most important route to job creation-white collar, blue collar, or any collar –full stop (c) my vision is of a curriculum that moves away from rote learning, one that focuses not on learning the answer but on fostering analytical skills. (d) ‘Our learning model for the future must equip students with problem-solving, design, innovation, communication to drive our economy forward’.

<sup>xxvii</sup>Teacher Unions in Ireland exercise considerable influence in respect of education policy issues although the current industrial unrest indicates a break down in terms of engagement with the new assessment reforms. All Teacher Unions have considerable access to the political and administrative system but their influence has seemingly waned since the demise of ‘Social Partnership’, a negotiating forum between Government and social partners, which gave the unions unlimited access to the centre of power in Ireland.