

State, Family and Compulsory Schooling in Ireland

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Abstract: Legal sanctions to compel parents into sending their children more regularly to school were widely applied in Ireland from the 1920s to the 1950s, following which the practice declined substantially and changed in nature in the 1960s and 1970s. This paper documents the history of these sanctions and draws attention to their application as an extensive and intrusive form of state intervention in the family prior to the 1960s. It argues that the prevalence of the coercive measures they deployed contradicts the idea that state approaches to the family in this period were dominated by an anti-interventionist ideology. It suggests instead that compulsory schooling advanced a new form of normative regulation of certain aspects of child-rearing and so provided an important historical development of state action on the family in Ireland.

I INTRODUCTION

During the latter decades of the nineteenth century, legislation designed to force reluctant parents to send their children to school became a universal feature of the expansion of schooling in western countries. It provided an important new extra-familial dimension to child-rearing and became a central feature of the increasingly wide-ranging encounter between families and the state. Analyses of state-family relations in Ireland have paid little attention to this development. Kennedy's (1989) examination of the links between government and family makes no mention of compulsory schooling. Breen *et al.* (1990) likewise overlook this dimension of state-family relations

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and as a result can assert that until the 1960s, the family "was largely outside the sphere of state intervention" (p. 108). McCullagh's (1991) analysis of the family as an ideological symbol shows how it was used to combat state interventionism in the 1940s and 1950s, but he does not attempt to reconcile the apparent strength of this anti-statist family ideology with the substantial and widely-used powers of intervention in the family provided for by compulsory school attendance legislation.

The concern of this paper is to consider the extent and nature of compulsory schooling as a form of state intervention in the family. It pursues this concern in the following sections. Section II reviews a number of general approaches to schooling as a dimension of state-family relations. Section III provides a brief chronology of compulsory school attendance measures in Ireland, identifying three roughly defined periods in that chronology: a long emergent period running from about the 1870s to the 1920s, a period of overt legal compulsion from the 1920s to the 1960s, and a period of moderated compulsion, incorporated within welfarist measures, from the 1960s to the present. Section IV turns to an assessment of compulsory schooling in Ireland as a form of state action on the family, looking especially at the new authority relationship between the state and the family.

II GENERAL APPROACHES

The element of compulsion in the distribution of educational services which school attendance legislation represents gave this particular social service an unusual and paradoxical character: the "good" being distributed had to be forced upon some of its beneficiaries. Liberal educational thought has usually resolved this paradox by interpreting compulsion as a regrettable necessity caused by the moral or social defects of parents who are unwilling or unable to recognise and follow their children's educational interests. The greed and selfishness of parents who want to put their children to work, and the ignorance or social incapacity of those who fail to take advantage of schooling, are the most common themes in this way of handling the paradox.

An alternative approach is to view schooling as more complex than the image of a straightforward "good" for individuals suggests. Many critical strands of social analysis regard schooling as an imposition rather than a good, an expression of the interests of dominant groups who promote it as much as of subordinate groups who receive it (for a review of these interpretations as applied to compulsory school attendance measures, see Tyack, 1976). Neo-Marxists, for example, point to the rôle of schools in maintaining and reproducing class structure, feminists to their rôle in sustaining women's subordinate position, and national or ethnic minorities to their rôle in propa-

gating the culture of the majority. Each of these approaches suggests an image of schooling as a contested field with a complex and shifting interplay of costs and benefits for all those involved, but with the balance of advantage generally tipped in favour of dominant groups.

Of particular interest to us here are the variants of this critical tradition which have been concerned with the impositions *on the family* which schooling can represent and thus with compulsory attendance as a form of state action on the family. These have focused on schooling as a mechanism which provides outside agencies — particularly the state — with direct access to the child-rearing process, thus enabling those agencies not only to mould the minds of children but also to influence the behaviour and attitudes of parents. Lasch (1977) uses the image of the “family besieged” to sum up what he sees as the ever-growing penetration of the family not only by the school but also by the welfare officer, the health inspector and the many other agencies of intrusive government. David (1980) sees neither the family on its own nor the school on its own, but rather the interlinkage of the two in the “family-education couple”, as the key mechanism for the maintenance of economic and gender relationships in capitalism. Caldwell (1980) views schooling in a more global context and in terms of its effects on quantifiable aspects of family demography. He argues that a particular model of family organisation is implicit in the modern organisation of schooling and is ultimately one of its major reasons for existence. He proposes that the emergence of schooling, both in the western world of the nineteenth century and in the developing world today, entails the weakening of traditional family-centred morality which binds the individual to the family as his or her main membership group and which places family interests first. It overlays this traditional morality with a school-based morality which emphasises wider horizons and an allegiance to larger agencies such as the nation and the state. Caldwell’s particular concern is with the effect this development has in reducing the number of children parents want to have and thus on the birth-rate. But his arguments assert more generally that a central function of schooling is to edge the child’s subordination and loyalty away from parents and kin towards the wider community and thus to weaken the tight personal and hierarchical unity of family organisation in favour of the large, impersonal but equally hierarchical organisation of modern society.

Donzelot (1979) offers an interpretation which is similar to Caldwell’s in some respect but is less generalised and examines more closely the mechanisms by which compulsory schooling intervenes in the family. He views compulsory schooling as one of the many techniques used by modern society to “police” families, with policing understood “not in the limiting, repressive sense we give the term today, but according to a much broader meaning that

encompassed all the methods for developing the quality of the population and the strength of the nation" (p. 6). Like Caldwell, Donzelot sees policing through the school as having its most immediate effect on reproduction: it imposes a constraint and a need for planning on parents' reproductive behaviour by making it impossible for them to count so much on their children's labour and by inculcating new standards of child protection and welfare (pp. 75-76). Unlike Caldwell, Donzelot is concerned with class differences in this policing regime, particularly with reference to the bourgeoisie and working classes in France. For both classes, the state's objective as it developed in the nineteenth century was the same — to enhance population quality and national strength by "preserving children from the old customs, which were deadly" (p. xx). For the bourgeoisie, this objective merged harmoniously with their ambitions for advancement and they readily seized on new medical, educational and relational norms to enhance their children's lives. For the working class, the new constraints and standards had a more ambiguous significance, having overtones of supervision as much as of liberation. This was so especially in the case of those who combined a difficulty in supplying their own needs with resistances to the new medical and educative norms. For them, schooling became but one element in the emergence of a larger "tutelary complex", eventually composed of the courts, social workers, the medical and "psy" professions (psychiatry, psychology and psychoanalysis) as well as "educative authority", which strove to mould their behaviour regarding child-rearing to the new standards deemed necessary to promote the social good. The element of tutelage for these families meant that they were "in essence ... stripped of all effective rights and brought into a relation of dependence *vis-à-vis* welfare and educative agents" (p. xxi).

Donzelot's concept of the "tutelary complex" brings together a number of themes prevalent among other writers in the critical tradition. It points to the formidable array of forces which compulsory schooling brought to bear on those lower class families which were its target. They comprised, in the first instance, agencies from the fields of education and the law, but also, in later developments, medicine, psychiatry and social work became involved. The technical and scientific or quasi-scientific authority of these forces drowned out any dissent emerging from targeted groups and gave legitimacy to the coercive measures they deployed. The rhetoric they used obscured the insidiously authoritarian element in compulsion by defining it as benignly intended, rationally guided and self-evidently necessary to improve the condition of the poor. In reality, its ameliorative effect was dubious. It reduced the autonomy and legal rights of those subjected to it and introduced new mechanisms of surveillance and direction into their lives. In short, the significance of compulsion lay not so much in the content of the educational

material, good or bad, which certain classes of families were exposed to. It lay rather in the new authority relationship thereby created between those families and the state and the institutional mechanisms it set up to give effect to that relationship.

This view of compulsory schooling thus invites us to go beyond an educational framework in assessing the authority relationships and the public administration of certain aspects of family life entailed in compulsion. Before looking at the Irish case in these terms, we need to get some sense of the shape and development of compulsory schooling in Ireland. This is the concern of the next section.

III DEVELOPMENT OF COMPULSORY SCHOOLING IN IRELAND

General Background

In the early stages of the emergence of mass elementary school systems, most political debate and conflict concerning schooling was pre-occupied with questions of *supply* — in what form and to what extent schooling should be provided, how it should be financed, who should control it, what the rôle of the churches should be, what the curriculum should contain, and so on. Questions about the extent or nature of popular *demand* for mass schooling scarcely arose, and where they did, they were more often concerned with what was seen as the vigour of such demand and the danger that it would be met by uncontrolled and potentially disruptive local effort, rather than with the possibility that the masses might not want the kind of schooling the authorities wished to see provided (de Swaan, 1988).

As supply problems in schooling were surmounted and as school provision became widespread, demand problems became more obvious and it became clear that while demand for schooling did exist that demand was by no means universal. In the United States, Tyack (1976) concludes from the available school attendance statistics that, because of the combined effects of non-enrolment and day-to-day absenteeism among pupils, average daily attendance rates barely exceeded 50 per cent of the relevant child population by the end of the nineteenth century and did not exceed 60 per cent until the 1930s. For Europe, no comprehensive statistical picture is available (partly because of the difficulty of interpreting and comparing data on school attendance). But Caldwell (1980) cites evidence for some countries to suggest that the supply of school places exceeded actual demand by a considerable stretch until early in the present century at least.

The failure of demand to keep up with the supply of school places could have been taken to reflect on the models of schooling on offer and their relevance to the segments of the population where they had limited accep-

tance. In fact, the dominant response to the persistence of low and erratic school attendance was to look for an explanation outside of schools in the client population. This led to the characteristic official interpretation of chronic non-attendance at school which emerged in western countries in the second half of the nineteenth century. It came to be seen as a dereliction of duty on the part of families, resulting either from the selfishness of parents who kept their children from school for the sake of the income they could earn or from a broad inclination towards shiftlessness and indiscipline among both children and parents in the poorer classes. As a logical outgrowth of this view, in the latter half of the nineteenth century most school systems in western Europe and the United States witnessed the introduction of compulsory school attendance legislation, in most cases beginning with limited and only partially effective provisions but everywhere culminating in comprehensive systems of enforcement by the 1930s at the latest.

In the United States, Massachusetts in 1852 was the first state to introduce compulsory school attendance legislation and Mississippi was the last in 1918 (Landes and Solomon, 1972). In western Europe, some countries (Austria, Denmark and Prussia) attempted to introduce compulsory school attendance in the eighteenth century. But these early efforts were largely ineffective. It was not until the 1870s and 1880s that the movement towards effective and comprehensive compulsory attendance laws got under way (Flora, 1983, Chapter 10, includes details on the main legislative developments in thirteen western European countries up to the 1970s). In most countries, the initial compulsory requirement was for six to eight years of schooling, with the starting age usually between 5 and 7 and the minimum leaving age between 13 and 15. In recent decades, the leaving age has typically been raised to 15 or 16, so that the compulsory period extends to nine or ten years and, exceptionally since 1972, to eleven years in Britain. It is worth noting that in both the United States and in most western European countries, compulsory school attendance measures not only contained positive injunctions designed to force reluctant children to attend school: they also incorporated or were accompanied by negative injunctions designed to reduce or eliminate child labour, which was the most easily identifiable competitor to schooling as an activity for children from as early as 8 or 9 years or age upwards (Landes and Solomon, 1972; Caldwell, 1980).

Emergence in Ireland

The Irish experience was generally in line with these patterns as far as the timing and nature of compulsory school attendance laws are concerned. The Powis Commission of 1868-70, which carried out the most comprehensive of the many nineteenth-century official examinations of the Irish education

system, recognised a serious problem in the demand for schooling in the form of low and irregular take-up of the school places which had been provided by the 1860s. The Commission felt that school statistics showing daily attendance rates in the 1860s of over 60 per cent were grossly inflated, partly because those statistics took no account of children who were not on any school rolls and partly because teachers frequently overstated attendance in order to enhance their own and their schools' standing. The Commission judged that the real average attendance rate was as low as one third, with many children scarcely going to school at all. It also judged that this pattern of low and irregular attendance at school was a major cause of the persistence of poor educational standards among children. However, the Powis Commission, in keeping with the official preoccupation of the time with problems of school supply rather than of demand, tended to interpret low attendance as a symptom of supply problems (such as inadequate schools and problems of church-state conflict over schooling) rather than as a demand-side problem. When considering how to improve enrolments and attendance, therefore, the Commission was hesitant about legal compulsion of parents and children, giving as reasons that it would be impractical and perhaps contrary to the principle of parental rights over children. It felt able to make only the rather limp recommendation that, in towns, "provision be made for all children who are out of school and not at work", while in rural areas "it would be inexpedient to introduce compulsory attendance" (Powis Commission, 1870, Vol. 1, pp. 324-325 and *passim*).

By the early 1890s, school attendance rates had advanced somewhat in Ireland. But as in other countries, these advances were accompanied by increases in school provision so that concern for the gap between actual and potential attendance was intensified rather than reduced. In addition, the introduction of compulsory attendance laws in England in 1880 had a demonstration effect in Ireland in that the Irish authorities regularly pointed to the way school attendance rates in England had begun to pull ahead of those of Ireland since 1880. Arising from this increased awareness of the school attendance problem, the Education (Ireland) Act of 1892 included a number of measures which made attendance at school for 6 to 14 year-olds a compulsory legal obligation on their parents. However, these measures, like the confidence in compulsion underlying them, were half-hearted. They required attendance only for a minimum of 75 school days per year and allowed for many excuses and exemptions for parents. Furthermore, the act did not apply to rural areas until a rural local government structure was established in 1898, and even then many local authorities chose not to enforce minimum school attendance requirements in their areas.

Weak though they were, the compulsory attendance provisions in the 1892

Act received no great welcome from leading Irish opinion, particularly on the Catholic side. They were judged by some Irish Catholic MPs as unwarranted and extreme. The Irish Catholic bishops passed a resolution which condemned them as unnecessary and as a breach of the Thomist principle of absolute parental authority over children's education as a right based on natural law (Irish Hierarchy, 1892). The provisions, in consequence, had limited practical effect. They resulted eventually in the introduction of compulsory school attendance in a number of urban boroughs and in about 40 rural districts (Akenson, 1970, pp. 344-349) but even in those areas the measures had too many loopholes to allow for effective enforcement. The compulsory attendance measures of 1892 were significant mainly as a sign that the idea of compulsion, if not the reality, was gaining ground in official circles in Ireland.

In the early years of the present century, as further advances in school provision were made, the way was opened for a clearer view of demand-side problems and a more assertive approach by school authorities to those problems, leading to a marked shift in favour of compulsory attendance. The Killanin Committee which reported on primary education in Ireland in 1918 highlighted, among other things, the erratic nature of popular demand for schooling. It delivered a sharp attack on the "regrettable indifference and apathy" towards educational matters in Ireland and lamented that "even to parents, the school life of their children is too often a matter of very casual concern". It commented in particular that "[the] lack of interest in schools is shown ... by the bad or irregular attendance at them", with average attendance in many cases at "not more than 60 per cent of those on the rolls" and with some children "leaving school at ten years of age, or even younger ... and many children who never go to school" (Killanin Committee, 1981, Vol. 1, p. 5). Unlike the Powis Commission of fifty years previously, the Killanin Committee was in no doubt about the solution to this problem: a rigorously enforced system of compulsory attendance, combined with a blanket prohibition of paid child labour up to the age of 14. The Committee recognised the background factors which fostered poor attendance, such as poverty and bad weather, but denied that these were sufficient to account fully for the problem or to rule out the usefulness and rightness of a scheme of compulsory attendance.

Nationalist opinion was moving in the same direction, with the keen support of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). The INTO took the initiative in 1920 of convening a national conference to frame a new programme for primary education to reflect nationalist aspirations. As did the Killanin Committee, the conference deplored the low rates of school attendance in Ireland, asserting that the average school leaving age in Ireland was

eleven. It strongly endorsed compulsory attendance, particularly as a prerequisite for the effective use of primary education as a means to revive the Irish language and promote national culture (Akenson, 1975, p. 66; Coolahan, 1981, p. 40). The deliberations of the conference thus presaged the interest of the government of the Irish Free State in primary education as a tool of national cultural revival and its willingness to use compulsion as a sanction in using that tool. The rôle of the INTO in this instance is also significant as an indicator of the importance of educational interest groups such as teacher unions and school system administrators in promoting the idea of compulsory attendance. They had a strong interest in maximising school numbers and at the same time in deflecting the blame for low attendance from the school systems onto their client populations.¹ Their influence in turn reminds us that compulsory attendance laws were less a cause than a consequence of the growth of school systems: they generally emerged when school provision had become widespread and when school-linked pressure groups such as teacher organisations had become large and well organised (Landes and Solomon, 1972, use econometric methods to demonstrate this point in a comparative analysis of compulsory school attendance laws across the states of the United States up to around 1930).

The Era of Coercion

The report of the Killanin Committee was the first unqualified, authoritative endorsement of the idea of thoroughly-enforced compulsory school attendance in Ireland. Its recommendations on compulsory attendance met no organised opposition and those recommendations were included in the MacPherson Education Bill of 1919-20. This bill never became law, largely because of Catholic opposition to the radical administrative overhaul of the whole primary education system which it proposed (Ó Buachalla, 1988, pp. 53-55). However, in 1922 the government of the new Irish Free State adopted as national policy the recommendations of the INTO's national programme conference of 1920-21 which echoed the Killanin Committee in its enthusiasm for compulsion. Progress by the Free State government in drafting new legislation on compulsion was initially hampered by difficulties in deciding on an enforcement apparatus (Akenson, 1975, p. 66), but new provisions were eventually enacted in the School Attendance Act of 1926.

This Act required attendance at school for 6 to 14 year-olds for every day of the school year. For the most part, it placed responsibility for enforcing this obligation in the hands of the Garda Síochána (the national police force). In

1. On the importance of this interest as a force behind compulsory attendance in other countries, see Tyack, 1976; on the INTO as a force in Irish educational policy formation, see Ó Buachalla, 1988, pp. 85-107.

the case of the county boroughs of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Waterford and Dun Laoghaire, where school attendance committees had been set up under the 1892 Education Act with power to appoint full-time school attendance inspectors, these committees and their inspectors continued to act as the school attendance authorities.

The Dáil debates on the School Attendance Bill suggested that opposition among influential opinion to the idea of compulsion, which had been strongly voiced in the 1890s on both pragmatic and principled grounds, had largely disappeared. Some resistance was expressed by farming interests (Lee, 1989, p. 131) and by rate-payers (Akenson, 1975, p. 66) but the main point of contention in the Dáil was whether the minimum school leaving age should be 16 rather than 14 (see especially the debate on the second reading of the bill on 3 December 1925, *Dáil Debates*, Vol. 13, cols. 1206 ff). The Act made a concession to the need of poor farm families for their children's labour by allowing absences from school for farm children for up to 15 days in both the spring and autumn. The concession, however, was a reluctant one and the Act specified that it should be allowed only for the first ten years of its operation, that is, up to 1936. The annual reports of the Department of Education showed some awareness that problems such as poor schools and the remoteness of many families from schools in rural areas still played a rôle in poor attendance, but generally these problems were now relegated to second place behind problems seen to originate in the attitudes and practices of recalcitrant children and their parents.

The problem which the 1926 Act was designed to confront was not so much a complete disregard among sections of the population for the benefits of schooling as a gap between what educational officialdom defined as an acceptable minimum and what popular voluntary practice yielded by way of school attendance. This gap assumed two main forms and so gave the Act two principal objectives. The first was to keep children in the 10-14 age-group at school. This was the group identified as having the highest non-enrolment rates and therefore as the main target of the legislation (*Dáil Debates*, 1925, Vol. 13, col. 1206). The second was to produce better daily attendance rates across all age-groups. School statistics at the time showed average daily attendance at 73 per cent of those enrolled. But these statistics took no account of unenrolled children and other distorting factors, and the government minister introducing the school attendance bill in the Dáil claimed that the real attendance rate among all 6 to 14 year-olds was as low as 60 per cent (*Dáil Debates*, *loc. cit.*)

School enrolment and attendance statistics suggest that the 1926 Act produced quick initial results in the required directions but fell short of achieving full attendance. The number of older children on the rolls soon rose

substantially. Between 1926 and 1936, enrolments in Fifth and Sixth Standard (mainly children aged 11-13) increased from 70,000 to over 92,000, a rise of 32 per cent. These increases occurred against a background of falling overall enrolments in national schools as a result of population decline, so that enrolments in Fifth and Sixth Standard together rose from 13 per cent of total enrolments in 1926 to 19 per cent in 1936. At the same time, average daily attendance rates also surged ahead. At the end of the 1925-26 school year, the last before the School Attendance Act became effective, the Department of Education estimated average daily attendance among those aged 6 to 13 inclusive at 317,000, which was 68 per cent of the total population in that age group as measured by the 1926 Census of Population. Two years later, average attendance for the same age group had risen to 355,600, an increase of one-eighth. By 1936, the next census year, average attendance had fallen back slightly to 345,500. But the total school-age population had also fallen by 4 per cent since 1926, so that average daily attendance in national schools amounted to 78 per cent of the relevant population.² Thus the combination of higher enrolments and more regular attendance produced a marked advance in the overall school attendance picture (*Annual Reports of the Department of Education, 1926-36*).

From the early 1930s onwards, the 1926 School Attendance Act may have served to maintain attendance rates at the levels achieved by that time, but it did not succeed in pushing them any higher. Despite intensive enforcement of the Act, attendance rates remained in the range 83-85 per cent from the early 1930s through to the mid-1950s. In the second half of the 1950s it began to edge towards 87-88 per cent and it was only in the mid-1960s that it broke the 90 per cent barrier.

After the first ten years, the most striking thing about the Act, in fact, was not so much any further success in getting children to go to school as the degree of enforcement which was brought to bear on parents and children in the attempt to achieve that effect. The enforcement procedures prescribed in the 1926 Act required school principles to furnish school attendance reports weekly to school attendance officers (i.e., Gardaí or school attendance inspectors) and it empowered those officers to check school rolls themselves. On the basis of information supplied from the school rolls, school attendance officers were required to identify truant children, to visit their parents and to serve formal warnings on them. If visits and formal warnings failed to improve attendance, parents could be summonsed to court by school

2. Given that the numbers of 12 and 13 year-olds in second level schools had risen over the same period and that additional small numbers attended private primary schools (neither of these groups was included in the Department's statistics), the average daily attendance rate taking all schools into account probably exceeded 80 per cent.

attendance officers where they faced possible fines of up to 20 shillings for a first offence and up to 40 shillings for a second offence. Following fines on parents, the ultimate penalty consisted of committal "to industrial schools, to relatives or to other fit persons" of children whose parents were unwilling or unable to compel them to attend school. This latter penalty gave the courts power to remove children from their homes and have them detained in industrial schools up to the age of 16.³ Although industrial schools had an educational function, they were also carceral institutions with a bleak internal regime, so that the punitive element in the ultimate sanction against truancy was very much to the fore. Indeed, a feature of the overall enforcement system is that it was conceived of entirely as *law enforcement* — coercion and punishment were its key features and school attendance officers were not in any way charged with enquiring into or acting upon the welfare of families in enforcing the law.

While data on how this enforcement process worked in practice are not plentiful, the available information suggests that it was widely applied from 1927 onwards, that this application intensified in the 1940s and continued at a fairly high level until well into the 1950s. It also suggests that the initial stages of the process — visits to parents and the issuing of formal warnings by school attendance officers — reached very large numbers of children and parents. The numbers experiencing the intermediate stages — court summonses and fines — were much smaller as these stages were applied only to a small fraction of those who experienced the initial stages, while the third and final stage — committal to industrial school — was applied to an even smaller fraction of those who appeared in court. The most comprehensive data on this pattern are those available for Dublin in the annual reports of the Dublin city school attendance committees (see Table 1). These data suggest that the reach if not the depth of the policing involved was remarkable. In 1930, for example, school attendance officers in Dublin reported 50,083 visits to parents out of which 904 court summonses resulted. Since total enrolment in national schools in the city in 1930 numbered 53,626 children, there were nearly as many visits to homes by school attendance officers as there were children on the rolls (in some years the number of home visits actually exceeded the number of 6-14 year-olds on the rolls). Obviously, many of the visits were repeat calls to the same families and there are no statistics to distinguish the number of families involved. But it is clear that the numbers

3. Periods of detention were not prescribed in the School Attendance Act; they were governed rather by the 1908 Children's Act. No systematic information is available on the length of detentions normally ordered by the courts. The Kennedy Report (1970) was uncertain on this question, though it suggested that, although the courts had the power to detain school attendance offenders up to the age of 16, such detentions normally did not go beyond the school leaving age (which was then 14).

Table 1: *School Attendance Enforcement in Dublin City, 1927-1980*

	<i>No. of School Attendance Officers</i>	<i>No. of Visits to Parents</i>	<i>No. of Formal Warnings Issued</i>	<i>No. of Court Summonses</i>	<i>No. of Children on Rolls</i>
1927	18	49,429	1,592	241	52,967
1930	18	50,083	940	337	53,626
1935	24	68,699	669	198	81,120 ¹
1940	26	73,835	879	336	63,169 ²
1945	26	74,298	2,524	1,056	66,295 ³
1950	27	63,322	3,059	1,203	68,135 ³
1956	27	64,343	4,086	1,320	73,277 ⁴
1960	29	55,324	3,165	1,509	74,956 ⁴
1965	29	49,720	1,691	755	80,637 ⁴
1971	28	38,417	1,754	978	n.a.
1975	28	32,890	1,029	377	95,212 ⁵
1980	29	31,221	1,102	354	n.a.

Notes: n.a. — not available.

¹City boundaries were expanded in 1931, giving rise to a sharp rise in the school population between 1930 and 1931.

²Relates to 6-14 year-olds on the rolls of national schools only. In 1940, a further 10,062 under-14 year-olds were on the rolls of private primary schools, with a grand total, all ages, all primary schools, of 85,081 pupils.

³Relates to 6-14 year-olds on the rolls of national schools only.

⁴Relates to 6-14 year-olds in national and private schools.

⁵Relates to all ages in all primary schools.

Source: *Annual Reports*, Dublin City School Attendance Committees.

affected by at least the initial stages of school attendance enforcement represented a substantial proportion of families with school-age children.

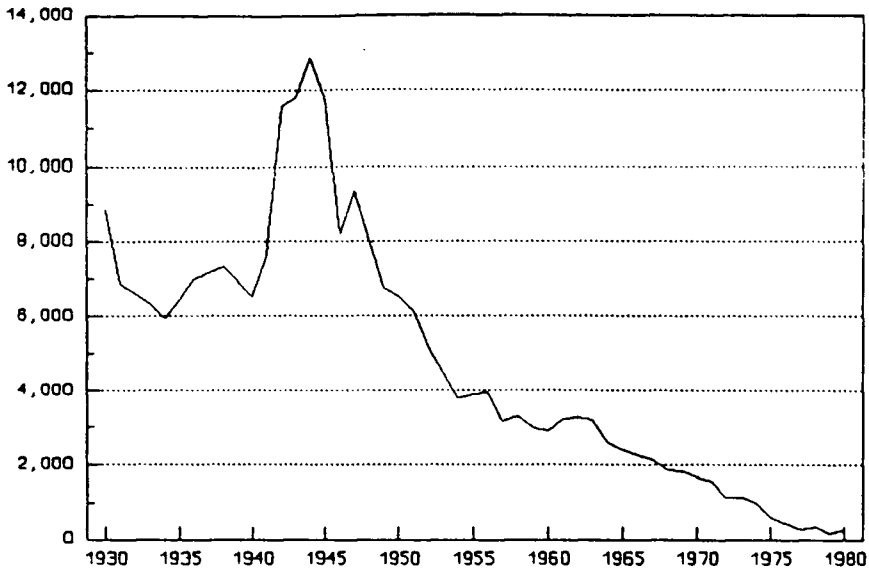
For the country as a whole, the available data relate to the intermediate and final stages of enforcement — court prosecutions and committals to industrial schools. Figure 1 shows the trend in court prosecutions nationally under the School Attendance Act from 1930 to 1980. The annual number of prosecutions ranged between 6,000 and 7,000 for most of the 1930s before shooting up in the early 1940s to peak just below 13,000 in 1944. Subsequently, the numbers fell back to the level of the 1930s before beginning a steep drop in the early 1950s.⁴ Recourse to the most severe penalty, com-

4. Up to the 1950s, court prosecutions were more common outside of Dublin than in Dublin. Thus in the mid-1940s, for example, when Dublin schools accounted for about one-sixth of 6 to 14 year-olds on the rolls nationally, court summonses for school attendance offences in Dublin were less than one-tenth of the national total. Subsequently, however, the balance became reversed. During the 1950s, the Gardaí began to develop a resistance to school attendance work, leading to a sharp decline in court prosecutions in their areas of responsibility compared to a rise in Dublin. By the 1970s, the great majority of school attendance cases in court were prosecuted by the school attendance committees in Dublin (and the other boroughs with such committees), rather than by Gardaí in the rest of the country.

mittal of children to industrial school, was relatively rare but was still significant and followed the same trend as overall prosecutions. In 1928-29, 68 children were committed to industrial schools for non-attendance at school. Such committals tended to be fewer during the 1930s but they surged again in the 1940s, reaching 129 in the year 1943-44 before falling back again in the late 1940s and 1950s (*Annual Reports of the Department of Education*).

On the basis of the data just reviewed, it would appear that on its introduction, compulsory school attendance legislation had direct consequences for about one-third of families with school-age children. This is the proportion suggested by the daily absence rate of almost one-third in 1926. It is also suggested by the increase of 32 per cent in enrolments in the Fifth and Sixth Standard cohorts between 1927 and 1936, especially since the proportion of those cohorts directly affected includes not only the 32 per cent who had been unenrolled but also those already on the rolls who would come under pressure regarding regular attendance. For many families, the threat rather than the exercise of sanctions may have been the effective influence. However, it appears from the data that at least the initial exercises in enforcement — visits to the home by school attendance enforcers — reached very large numbers. In the country as a whole, if five families were visited for every court prosecution (which would appear to be a minimum ratio by the standards revealed in the data available for Dublin), the proportion of families affected would have been of the order of 15 to 20 per cent in the mid-

Figure 1: *Annual Numbers of Court Prosecutions for School Attendance Offences, 1930-80*



Source: *Statistical Abstracts, 1930-1980*.

1940s. If more than five families were visited for every court prosecution, as is possible, then the proportion of families so affected would have been correspondingly higher. Thus, even on the basis of these rough indications, it is possible to see that school attendance enforcement introduced a regulation on families that was unprecedented both in its scale of application and in the intrusive, coercive manner in which it affected families.⁵

The Welfare Period

From the 1960s onwards, in Ireland as in other countries, schooling became a more central element in the social structure: links between schooling and occupational placement became stronger and the school became more important as a mediating institution between children's social origins and their occupational destinations (Breen, *et al.* 1990, pp. 123-142). Primary schooling ceased to be seen as the terminal education for the majority and was increasingly viewed as a preparation for entry into post-primary education. Non-attendance and early dropping out of school acquired a new importance as a form of self-exclusion from the social-occupational placement function of the school. As a result, pressure to attend school emerged increasingly from social sanctions which punished those who did not comply with social and economic marginalisation, and legal sanctions steadily lost their importance.

As these developments took effect, the school attendance problem changed both in scale and in nature. Persistently truant children became fewer in number and so in simple quantitative terms, while they continued to be an identifiable sub-group, they became more marginal in the school-going population. By the 1960s, according to school attendance statistics, non-enrolment in schools among children in the compulsory ages had become exceptional and average daily attendance rates had generally risen above 90 per cent of enrolments.⁶

5. An additional important feature of the enforcement of compulsory attendance which we do not have the space to explore here is its gender bias: prosecutions for school attendance offences involving boys usually outnumbered those for girls by a factor of at least three or four to one. Whether this reflects a higher incidence of truancy among boys or simply a more tolerant approach among school attendance officers to school absenteeism among girls is not possible to say with the present state of knowledge (Finch, 1984, p. 169, sees the latter explanation as the important one in accounting for similar gender bias in compulsory school attendance enforcement in England).

6. The decline in the scale of the school attendance problem was reflected in a relative lack of interest in it among educational policy-makers in the 1960s. The 1966 OECD report, *Investment in Education*, the most comprehensive investigation of the Irish education system since the foundation of the state, made no reference to the traditional school attendance problem (that is, truancy among compulsory age-groups in primary schools) but was concerned instead with the parallel "new" problem, low participation in education among post-compulsory age-groups. Subsequently, school attendance problems were dealt with as an aspect of child-care policy (i.e., policy geared to deprived children or "children at risk") rather than as an aspect of education policy, and so tended to drift out of the view of educational policy-makers.

Equally importantly, in so far as persistent truancy continued to be seen as a problem, its nature was re-defined in terms of the new perspective on school attendance which the enlarged rôle of schooling in social structuration provided. This perspective shifted attention away from simple attendance — the physical presence of children in the classroom — to more complex ideas of educational participation and performance. Those ideas placed the question of the social and cultural integration of children into the values and practices of the school at the centre of concern. Educational debate and reform in much of the western world — Ireland included — in the 1960s and 1970s were pre-occupied with such integration as a determinant of educational outcomes and thus of educational inequality. Such inequality in turn was seen as a key factor in the persistence of social inequality, poverty, unemployment and other social problems in advanced industrial democracies. Burgeoning research into patterns of educational attainment demonstrated the strong influence of children's socio-economic background, and in particular the importance of motivation and values derived from the home, in determining their participation and performance in school. However, improvements in home values and motivation could not be compelled. The contradiction between genuine commitment to the value of schooling and forced attendance at school quickly gave the coercive aspects of compulsory school attendance laws the appearance of an anachronism, a hangover from the days when participation was something to be inflicted upon rather than encouraged in children.

Persistent truancy in primary school was the most extreme manifestation of low participation and was largely attributed to extreme forms of family or personal deprivation (Hart, 1970; O'Sullivan, 1977, 1979). It came to be seen as a symptom of familial or personal distress (such as unemployment, alcoholism, violence or abuse among parents, learning difficulties or personality problems among children) rather than as a more diffuse form of deviance or indiscipline among broad social strata. These changes in the definition of the problem led to a shift, in principle at least, in the official response to it. It was no longer seen primarily as a form of delinquency on the part of parents and/or children which required a penal and coercive response from state authorities, to be delivered if necessary through policing and the courts. It came to be seen rather as a sign of personal or social pathology which required a social-therapeutic response, to be delivered mainly through the educational, medical and social welfare agencies. The Kennedy Report of 1970 on child welfare services presented a typical statement of this new approach in its comments on the compulsory attendance system. It recommended that school attendance officers be re-designated as school welfare officers and that they be required to have a training in social work. More generally, it stated:

Persistent absence from school may be one of the early warning signs of the existence of families and children in distress. Such difficulties may be physical, psychiatric or psychological... Such cases must be identified at the earliest stage and referred to the appropriate agencies for assistance whether by way of family support or medical or psychiatric treatment of the child. (Kennedy Report, 1970, p. 82).

This new definition of the truancy problem in principle transferred it from the arena of pure law enforcement to the arena of therapeutic welfare work, with social workers, psychologists and medical doctors coming to the fore. Some manifestations of this principle became evident in practice. Already by the 1960s, the courts had begun to request background reports from school attendance officers on the home circumstances of persistently truant children and, to some degree at least, to replace punishment with social, psychological and medical assessment as a prelude to ameliorative treatment. In the boroughs of Dublin, Cork, Waterford and Dun Laoghaire, a university training in education or social science began to replace the traditional "good general education" required as a qualification for the post of school attendance officer, reflecting the new quasi-professional welfare work which school attendance enforcement was beginning to involve (Working Party on School Attendance Officers, 1980).

However, the new approach was deployed in patchy fashion, as a succession of official reports indicated, and the main consequence of the new thinking was that the old coercive remedies fell out of favour without being replaced by anything as comprehensive in coverage.⁷ School Attendance Officers in the five urban boroughs with School Attendance Committees were able to adopt at least some of the new practices, though they were hampered by lack of adequate resources and the limitations of their remit (see especially *Annual Report 1971*, Dublin City School Attendance Committees). In the rest of the country, however, where the Gardaí were responsible for school

7. A number of official reports recommended basic changes in the approach to school attendance problems (see especially Kennedy Committee, *Report on the Reformatory and Industrial Schools System* (1970); *Task Force on Child Care Services, Final Report* (1980); and Costello Committee, *Report on National Youth Policy* (1986). However, these recommendations generally were not passed into legislation. The 1926 School Attendance Act was amended slightly in 1967 to smooth out certain aspects of enforcement procedures, and in 1972 the minimum school leaving age was raised from 14 to 15 by ministerial order, as provided for by Section 24 of the 1926 Act. Otherwise, however, the 1926 School Attendance Act remains unchanged as the statutory basis for the compulsory school attendance system in Ireland to the present time. [Since these words were written, the 1926 School Attendance Act has been amended by Section 75 of the Child Care Act, 1991. This amendment enables the courts to subsume school attendance cases into the procedures which allow Health Boards to take children in need into care. It thus provides a statutory basis for the already existing tendency (as described above) to treat school attendance problems as an aspect of the more general problem of deprivation and need among children.]

attendance enforcement, the new thinking tended to remove school attendance work outside the normal scope of police duties. As a result, the number of prosecutions for school attendance offences declined steadily and the School Attendance Act fell into disuse over much of the country. In so far as it continued to be applied it was used more often as a device to facilitate intervention in problem families (especially in cases where it enabled the courts to remove children from problem homes) than as a simple policing mechanism designed to force children to attend school.

In general, therefore, as the old coercive regime in compulsory school attendance came to an end, the shrinkage in the scale of the truancy problem, combined with the inadequate application of the new therapeutic approach, meant that it tended to drift into the backwaters of administrative action. Consequently, compulsion, in its earlier blunt and widespread form, ceased to be a significant feature of the school system.

IV COMPULSION, THE STATE AND THE FAMILY

In 1927-28, the first year the 1926 School Attendance Act took effect, primary education was one of the largest areas of government activity in Ireland. Expenditure on primary education was the biggest single element of current government spending, amounting to 16 per cent of expenditure on government services. Some 15,000 teachers were paid out of state funds to teach a centrally-designed curriculum to a population of about half a million children on the school rolls. The government and ruling élites of the newly independent Free State were eager to use primary schooling as a major instrument in the political consolidation and cultural rejuvenation of independent Ireland. Thus while it may be generally correct to characterise the rôle of the Irish State in the aftermath of 1922 as minimalist, conservative and auxiliary (Breen, *et al.* 1990, pp. 22-25), primary education provides one instance where, despite its sharing of power with the Catholic church, its influence was central, extensive and ambitious in at least some of its objectives.

Primary schooling by its nature can be regarded as an extension of the family's child-rearing function, as reflected in the traditional conception of the teacher as being *in loco parentis*. Schooling thus gives a rôle to external agencies in a central family process. However, compulsion inserts schooling into the family arena in a more direct and intrusive way than does any other aspect of the school system. In the Irish case, the sanctions used to enforce compulsory attendance brought the school attendance officer to the door of the family home. His or her visits and the threats backing them up were directed in the first instance at parents and at the way they dealt with their children. They were directed in the second instance, where pressure on

parents failed, at the family unit itself, in the sense that it could be broken up by the forcible removal of children to industrial schools. While education policy as a whole might have implications for family behaviour without actually making the family an explicit focus of concern, in the case of compulsory school attendance legislation the relationship between parents and children becomes the immediate target and so brings schooling into the field of direct and intentional management of the family.

Parents' Rights

In Ireland, during the era of coercion when compulsory schooling operated in its most vigorous and widespread form, the apparatus it deployed in dealing with those families who were its target was extensive. The school was joined by the police, school attendance inspectors, the courts and that peculiar quasi-carceral institution, the industrial school, in enforcing attendance. As we have seen above, something of the order of one-third of families with school-age children experienced either the threat or the exercise of the sanctions involved.

The most immediate and obvious effect of this intervention was to assert state authority in this area of childrearing and so to diminish parents' traditional rights over their children. In the 1830s in England, the great social reformer Lord Shaftesbury had opposed the principle of compulsory schooling on the grounds that "it would infringe the right of a parent to bring up his child as he saw fit" (Pinchbeck and Hewitt, 1973, p. 357). This view was in keeping with the traditional position of both the common law and Christian teaching which regarded the father's rights over his children as paramount and as properly exempt from legal restriction. In Ireland, as we saw above, the Powis Commission of 1868-70 held to this principle in hesitating to recommend compulsory attendance and it was also invoked by the Catholic hierarchy in condemning the compulsory attendance provisions in the Education Act of 1892. Yet the strengthening of compulsory school attendance laws marked a radical departure from traditional legal principles of family autonomy and of parental control in childrearing: they restricted parental discretion in regard to children by imposing an obligation on parents to send their children to school and by empowering the state to police that obligation in a thorough and intrusive fashion.

One important parental right at issue centred on the costs of schooling and thus on parents' freedom to organise their children's lives to fit in with the economic survival strategies of the household. Economic costs of schooling for parents lay in the opportunity cost of children's labour and the direct costs of school clothes, books and materials, though these are difficult to estimate. In Ireland, labour market surpluses (as reflected in high unemployment and

emigration rates) were more common than shortages at the aggregate level, suggesting a weak demand for children's labour in general. Seasonal factors, local conditions and the economic circumstances of particular families may have regularly provided a niche rôle for children either in family enterprises (especially farming) or in paid labour. However, these factors cannot be measured adequately so that the significance of children's labour as a source of parental resistance to schooling cannot be quantified. Similar measurement problems arise in the case of direct family expenditures required by schooling, so that the significance of that factor cannot be quantified either.

However, economic reasoning would not necessarily make parents hostile to schooling, since some economic return might be forthcoming from their children's education. In addition, parents' decisions may not have been dominated by narrow economic considerations and may not have hampered their children's educational welfare as much as the education authorities seemed to suggest. By the late nineteenth century, literacy levels in Ireland were already high despite what the authorities defined as low school attendance rates. Voluntary attendance patterns, for all their irregularity, thus seemed to produce some useful educational outcomes. Additional or more continuous schooling may have been considered self-evidently good by the educational authorities but it may have been unnecessary to acquire basic literacy for most children and so may have been objectively superfluous to the needs of large sections of the population. Indeed a child who by the age of 10 or so had not acquired the rudiments of literacy necessary to function in a semi-subsistence society, even given frequent absences from school up to that age, was as likely to be suffering from learning difficulties or from the destructive effects of bad teaching as from a lack of schooling. In these circumstances, parents (and indeed children) may have reasonably questioned what educational or other benefits could be expected from further schooling.

Compulsory school attendance had the effect of denying parents the right to judge these issues and act accordingly and transferred that right to the state. It was thus significant as a transfer of authority from parents to the state. This diminution in parents' rights co-existed with continuing legal support, in principle at least, for family and parental rights in education and it is surprising how little friction this co-existence gave rise to. The paradoxes involved became particularly notable in Ireland following the adoption of the 1937 Constitution which gave parental rights in education prominent recognition. Article 42 of that Constitution refers to the family as the "natural and primary" educator of the child and explicitly limits the powers of the state to intervene in the rôle of the family in education: "the State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of

school designated by the State". On the other hand, the Constitution also asserts that it is the duty of the state to ensure that children receive a "certain minimum of education" and allows the state, in exceptional cases where parents fail in their duty regarding education, to "supply the place of the parents, but always with due regard for the natural and the imprescriptible rights of the child".

These constitutional provisions possess considerable potential for contradictory interpretation since they assert a strong rôle for both the state and the family in education without defining the balance between the two. In practice, education is generally equated with formal schooling, and unless families are willing and able to provide a close parallel to schooling from their own resources, regular absence from school for anything other than involuntary reasons is taken to represent a failure of duty on the part of parents. This means that state powers in elementary schooling are quite considerable: the state determines the basic model of elementary schooling (especially in regard to the curriculum), it usually involves itself very heavily in the public provision of that form of education (especially in connection with funding), and for those who reject the publicly provided model, only those who can provide their children with a close replica from private resources escape punitive sanctions or other therapeutic forms of control. In Ireland, legal challenges to the powers assumed by the state in these areas have been rare and have had little impact on the question of parents' rights⁸ and the pattern seems to be the same in most other western jurisdictions.⁹ Thus, the contribution of compulsory school attendance laws towards a new legal framework which shifted the state towards the apex of the state-parent-child legal triangle as far as education is concerned has gone virtually unchallenged in the legal arena and, in Ireland as elsewhere, has become a taken for granted part of the modern legal order.

8. An isolated challenge occurred in 1942 when President Douglas Hyde referred an amendment to the School Attendance Act to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court subsequently declared this amendment unconstitutional. The amendment purported to extend the powers of the Minister of Education over the curriculum in non-national primary schools. The government seemed to intend to use this power to ensure that Irish would occupy a sufficiently important place in those schools, a degree of governmental control over private education which the Supreme Court found unacceptable (Osborough, 1978).

9. Osborough (1978) suggests that in Europe as a whole, constitutional guarantees of parental rights in education have not proved a very effective basis for legal challenges by citizens against the powers assumed by governments in education. In the United States, the Supreme Court's landmark judgement in the case of *Pierce v the Sisters of Charity* in 1923 extended constitutional protection to the principal of private elementary schooling and was subsequently hailed as a "charter of parents' rights in education". But in fact, it was largely concerned with protecting parents' religious rights in regard to education, rather than with parental rights in any more general sense, and it did not address wider issues of the balance between state and parental rights in education (Arons, 1976).

Children's Rights

For children, the counterpart of the parental obligation concerning schooling could be construed as a newly strengthened childhood right to schooling and as signifying a shift in the balance of rights within the family away from parents towards children. In that sense, school attendance laws could be interpreted as a defence of children's rights in the face of the hitherto unrestricted dominance of parents over children. It is notable, however, that compulsory attendance legislation was introduced in Ireland without any systematic debate or investigation of the degree to which schooling was attuned to children's interests, an absence which was particularly noticeable in connection with habitual truants. Even more recently, research on schooling in Ireland has tended to presume that schooling is a "good thing". As a result, little systematic attention has been given to the negative effects of schooling on children, particularly as a cause of school truancy and thus ultimately as a reason for the emergence of compulsory school attendance legislation. D.H. Akenson, one of the few educational historians to consider compulsory attendance, assumes not only that schooling, despite its defects, was beneficial but that compulsion was a desirable and effective way of promoting it. He castigates the Irish education authorities from the 1930s to the 1960s for what he sees as Ireland's low participation rates in schooling and suggests that their failure to implement compulsion more vigorously and to raise the minimum school leaving age beyond 14 was a culpable contributor to these low rates (Akenson, 1975, pp. 65-71). Akenson's argument is weak on a number of factual points,¹⁰ but more importantly, like most of those who accept progressivist assumptions about schooling, he does not explore why it was so widely resisted and what this resistance says about the assumed benefits of schooling.

In the absence of systematic investigation of the effects of schooling on children it is hard to adjudicate on the degree to which it served children's interests. However, some doubt on this question must be generated by the very nature of the "right" embodied in compulsory schooling: it was as much a

10. It is not at all obvious that school participation rates in Ireland up to 1960 were low by European standards. Akenson uses a fleeting comparison with British school attendance data to suggest that they were but since his data relate only to Britain and even then are not explored in any detail, they are too narrow to support his point. Though comparative data on school attendance rates need to be treated with caution, the comparative statistical evidence assembled by Flora (1983; see Vol. 1, Chapter 10) would seem to indicate that Irish primary school attendance rates for most of the present century have been as high as, if not higher than, the European norm. As for compulsory attendance measures, Akenson rejects an official claim made in 1936 (in the report of a government-appointed committee which investigated the need to raise the school leaving age to 16) that existing Irish provisions on compulsory attendance were as comprehensive as those of other European nations (*ibid.*, p. 66). Again, the information assembled by Flora (*op. cit.*), as briefly discussed earlier in this paper, would suggest in fact that the committee's claim was probably reasonably accurate.

duty or obligation enforced on children and their parents by the state as an entitlement which children were free to claim or have claimed on their behalf. The idea of children's right to schooling empowered the state not only to penalise parents who were negligent in regard to their children's schooling but also to incarcerate children who persistently resisted the exercise of that right on their own behalf. In legal terms, intractable truancy thus carried more of the connotations of criminal deviance than of personal loss or incapacity as far as both children and parents were concerned, since punishment rather than support or assistance was the key feature of the legal response.

In addition, there were at least some obvious negative elements in the cost-benefit equation as far as children's interests were concerned, independently, that is, of the interests of their parents. The simple matter of getting to and from school imposed a general and widely acknowledged hardship on children, especially in rural areas and more especially in bad weather. Even in Dublin city, where travelling distances to school were generally short, heavy rain could reduce school attendance by half (Annual Report of Dublin City School Attendance Committees, 1927). There were other difficulties for children which the education authorities were less willing to acknowledge. One of these was the doubtful educational value of what went on in school. In many areas of the curriculum, "shockingly low standards of instruction and class boredom" meant that children learned little from school teaching (Fitzpatrick, 1991, p. 183). An occasional school inspector was willing to blame poor attendance on bad teachers rather than on uninterested pupils (*Annual Report of the Department of Education, 1924-25*, p. 44).

The deterrent effect of poor teaching on children was exacerbated by what was referred to in the Senate in 1955 as the "prevalent and widespread use of the rod, the cane and the strap for all sorts of school misdemeanours, large and small" (*Seanad Debates*, Vol. 45, col. 100). Corporal punishment was widely used in schools as a teaching instrument, as well as a tool of discipline, even though the regulations of the Department of Education forbade its use "for mere failure at lessons". In the mid-1950s, a public campaign to tighten the regulations and reduce the use of corporal punishment, which was championed in the Senate by Owen Sheehy Skeffington, generated considerable public controversy but won little official sympathy (Sheehy Skeffington, 1991, pp. 169-172). Sheehy Skeffington's motion in the Senate that corporal punishment be prohibited for girls won the support of only one other Senator. The Minister of Education, General Richard Mulcahy, in denouncing the campaign, did not deny that corporal punishment was widely used but was concerned rather to suggest that instances of "objectionable and excessive punishment" documented by the campaigners were a slur on the school sys-

tem and were motivated by un-Irish feeling (*Seanad Debates*, Vol. 45, col. 1939). Thus, in effect, the recourse to corporal punishment by teachers was at best only weakly controlled. The result was undoubtedly to turn many schools into violent places, with what one psychologist in the 1950s felt were destructive consequences for 25 per cent of children (Sheehy Skeffington, 1991, p. 170).

There must, therefore, be real scope for questioning the benefit to children in Ireland represented by the compulsion to attend school. Again, however, as with the question of parents' interests in this area, the central significance of compulsory attendance legislation was that it shifted the power of judgement about the issue from the arena of the family to the realm of public authorities. In other words, it is not so much the content of the new norms as their origin in state legislation which is their most striking feature. Thus, while it is unclear if compulsion in schooling represented a victory of the powers of light over the powers of darkness, it is quite clear that it represented a victory for the authority of the state over the authority of the family. The reference to children's rights as a justification for this conquest should be considered less a factual reflection of the realities of the situation than an ideological device with an ambiguous significance for parents and children. The image of the negligent or greedy parent and of the exploitative employer keeping the helpless child out of school because of the labour he or she could supply was often used as a propaganda device by those promoting compulsory attendance. But the image of the school as a self-justifying institution which used the rhetoric of children's needs as a "legitimation of some feature of education which is imposed in the interests of the school, of the teacher, or of society, but certainly not at the behest of recipients" (Finch, 1984, p. 102) must also be considered.

V CONCLUSION

As an instrument of social change, therefore, compulsory schooling can be interpreted not so much as a straightforward force for progress and enlightenment as a complex movement which sometimes pitted the state against patterns of family survival and autonomy. At its most benign, it could be seen as creating new rights for children *vis-à-vis* their parents, so altering the nature of the parent-child relationship in a manner which was positive for children. However, it could equally be seen as geared primarily to the benefit of neither children nor parents but as effecting a new subordination of the family as a whole to state direction by transferring a segment of familial rights away from parents to the state. It thus created a new authority relationship between the family and the state as far as children were concerned and forcibly imposed that relationship on that quite substantial pro-

portion of families who showed indifference or hostility towards it.

The consequence was to help transform popular notions of what childhood and parenthood meant and to create (by force if necessary) new popular practices based on these notions. Teachers, school officials and other educational experts were strengthened in a degree of access to children that had no historical precedent and that was largely outside of parental supervision or control. The economy of the household was affected as the child's income earning rôle was limited to out-of-school hours or deferred to post-schooling years and as the expenses of schooling became a part of family budgets. The child as juvenile labourer was supplanted in popular thinking by the child as school pupil, and child labour — traditionally an accepted part of childhood — became identified with child exploitation and deprivation. The combination of lost earnings and new expenditures thus converted children into consumers rather than producers of household income, and thus may have contributed to the slow but steady decline in marital fertility which occurred in Ireland in the first half of the present century (Coale and Watkins, 1986). These developments tended to promote new ideas of parental obligations towards children at the expense of traditional ideas of children's obligations towards their parents.

However, our concern here is not to explore these outcomes in any detail. It is rather to point to the rôle of mass schooling in enabling public authorities to lay down new rules of child-rearing and to subject both children and parents to new forms of external surveillance and direction in imposing those rules. The recourse to compulsion and the scale on which that compulsion was exercised indicate the social importance of the integrative mechanisms schooling helped deploy and the degree of resistance to those mechanisms among those not already committed to the new emerging order. The institution in Ireland in 1926 of an effective coercive mechanism designed to expand the reach of the elementary school system to the entire child population thus can be viewed as an important milestone in the evolution of state-family relations, even though it is rarely adverted to as such and we have had little analysis of its effects in these areas.

Some commentators have suggested that in Ireland in the decades following independence, legislation in the field of family policy was geared mainly towards objectives set by Catholic social teaching (see, e.g., Breen, *et al.* 1990). From the standpoint of the present paper, it could be added that the drive to universalise primary schooling, and the reliance on compulsion as a means to achieve that goal, were equally important but little noted elements of state action on the family, elements which were not particularly Catholic and which linked relationships between the state and the family in Ireland with broad trends in western countries at the time.

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