

The foundation of the Preparatory Colleges in the Irish Free State, 1922-37

The Department of Education of the newly independent Irish Free State asserted in 1928 that the official initiative for the creation of preparatory colleges was designed to offer ‘...a sound secondary education on Irish lines...with the advantages of a collective school life lived in an atmosphere of Gaelic tradition’ (Report of the Department of Education for the school years 1924-25-26 and the financial and administrative year 1926-27, pg.21). The pre-service training of primary teachers emerged as a crucial arena of government intervention in the newly independent Irish Free State, not least due to the emergence of Gaelicisation as a key policy imperative and the enduring influence of cultural nationalism on the ministers who led the new government and the senior officials who were prominent in its public administration. The activism of the new Free State government in primary teacher training conformed to a wider pattern of development in Western European states, where state intervention was more significant and more intrusive in non-university institutions with a vocational or professional training mission (Neave, 1982). The policy activism of the newly formed Department of Education was all the more notable as it contrasted with a cautious and minimalist approach by the Irish state to policy and structural reform in primary and post-primary education. The most ambitious and radical departure by the Free State government in teacher education was the initiative for the establishment of the preparatory colleges.¹

Following the transfer of power to the Irish Free State in 1922, the system of primary education maintained a high level of continuity with the pre-independence administration in terms of ownership and control. The Department of Education, which

was formed in 1924 to coordinate the previously disparate branches of primary, secondary and technical education, accepted the decentralised managerial model of governance established under the commissioners of national education, in which the vast majority of national schools were privately owned and controlled by clerical or religious managers operating under the authority of ecclesiastical superiors. Successive ministers and senior officials deferred extensively to the Catholic bishops and the Catholic church occupied the predominant position within a denominational educational sector for a generation after the achievement of national statehood (Walsh, 2009). Most politicians, administrators and educational authorities subscribed to a shared conservative world view in which the Irish state took only a limited and subordinate role in providing education and was expected to assist the work of the private, mainly ecclesiastical organisations which controlled and managed the schools (Ibid.).²

Deference to the power of the institutional churches also influenced the distinctive evolution of primary teacher training in Ireland. Although the commissioners established a public, non-denominational teacher training college in Marlborough St. in 1837, which was originally intended to support an ambitious plan for model schools as centres of teacher training, the Irish administration abandoned the embryonic public system for training teachers in the late 1800s, instead offering state aid to denominational teacher training colleges from 1883-4 (Parkes, 2011). The public training college at Marlborough St, identified by Parkes as 'the sole survivor of the National Board's grand plan for a nondenominational system of teacher education,' continued to operate, but mainly served Presbyterian students up to 1922 (Parkes, 2011, pg.74). As Tom Walsh outlines, teacher training for elementary schools was largely provided from the late 1800s by state-aided, denominational institutions under

the auspices of the Catholic bishops or the authorities of the Church of Ireland, as the state's previous role in providing teacher education was diluted and ultimately abandoned, in 'a major strategic victory for the Catholic church' (Walsh, 2016, pg.19). While the training colleges were privately administered and denominational, they were also subject to official oversight by the commissioners, who determined their admission procedures, level of enrolment, curriculum and financing (King, 2006; Parkes, 2011). This state-aided, church-provided model established an enduring precedent for pre-service teacher education in the twentieth century. Any institutional changes following independence and partition reinforced the denominational, state-aided character of the system. The Marlborough St. college was closed in September 1922 by the new Free State government and its buildings would later be used to accommodate preparatory college students (Jones, 2000).

The most radical policy departures in the first decade of the Irish Free State were inspired by Gaelicisation, which impinged dramatically on primary teacher training in a way that was not true of any other strand of higher education or professional training. A departmental memorandum at the end of the decade noted that the department undertook 'a complete reform of the Training College curriculum' (Department of Education, not dated, pg.4).³ Irish became a compulsory subject for entry to the training colleges and an essential qualification for national schoolteachers. A new programme in 1923 made Irish a compulsory subject in the training programme, while the colleges were expected not only to adapt rapidly to teaching Irish but to produce a bilingual teaching profession (Ferriter, 2006; Parkes, 2011). A revised programme of studies was introduced by the department in 1932-33, which gave greater emphasis to professional components of the course, moving away from a dual focus on general academic studies and professional practice (Report of the

Department of Education, 1931-32). The revised programme also required colleges to give students experience of teaching practice in a number of national schools rather than the previous approach of using a single 'practising school' linked to a particular college (Ibid.).

The process of recruitment to teacher training inherited by the Irish Free State was 'a gradual growth from the early days of the National Board...', which was shaped by competing pressures from the commissioners, the major churches and the British administration (Report of the Department of Education for the school years 1924-25-26 and the financial and administrative year 1926-27, pg.32). Candidates for the publicly funded colleges were generally required from 1910 to pass the King's Scholarship examinations overseen by the national board at Easter following completion of a two-year course, except for university graduates who could secure full or partial exemption from the examination (Ibid., pg.35). The examination candidates were traditionally drawn from monitors (students at senior level in national schools who assisted with teaching younger pupils); pupil teachers recruited from the secondary schools; untrained teachers and private students recommended by the authorities of a training college (Ibid., pg.35).

The new Department of Education noted in its report for 1924-27, however, that 'since the beginning of the present century the monitorial system has been on the decline', not least due to the increasing failure of monitors to secure entry in the competitive examinations for the training colleges – this was attributed by the department both to a failure 'to provide adequately for their general education' and the reality that they spent 'too much of their time in teaching' (Ibid., pg.37). The pupil-teacher scheme was also increasingly ineffective in providing candidates for training, as less than half of pupil teachers secured places through the King's Scholarship

examination (Ibid.). Senior departmental officials concluded bluntly that 'the existing method of recruiting teachers for the Training Colleges from monitors and pupil-teachers has failed' (Ibid., pg.41), as it supplied almost no male teachers and only a minority of female entrants for teacher training. There was a severe shortfall of male students qualifying for the colleges in 1924, with only 101 candidates securing entry in 1924 of 205 places allocated to men: among the issues which preoccupied the department in the mid-1920s were an overall shortage of student teachers and particularly the 'same story of shortage and inefficiency among the men candidates for the Colleges...' (Ibid., pg.41).

The senior officials of the department identified an urgent need for reform, due to the introduction of the School Attendance Act, 1926, which imposed compulsory attendance requirements between the ages of 6 and 14 and particularly the pervasive influence of the new policy for language revival. The departmental report indicated that '...it will be necessary (1) to open up new sources for the supply of candidates and (2) to provide the pupils with much better education and training (Ibid., pg.42).' Moreover, the overarching government objective of Gaelicisation was crucial to official deliberations, as the department emphasised the need not only for a higher standard on the part of the entrants but a fundamental change in the composition of the student body in the training colleges:

It will also be necessary, in view of the Irish work in the schools, to draw as large a supply of teachers as possible from the Irish-speaking families of the Western counties, which, owing to their poverty, have not in many cases hitherto been able to give their children a sufficient education to fit them to be teachers (Ibid., pg.42).

This official logic provided the rationale for the establishment of preparatory colleges as the key element of the wider reconfiguration of pre-service teacher training.

A far-reaching transformation of the system for recruiting national schoolteachers was undertaken in the first decade of the Free State. Entry to the colleges by monitors was terminated in 1925 and the training college scholarship examinations were replaced from 1931 (O'Connor, 1998). An 'open competition' was introduced based on assessment of Leaving Certificate results, combined with the outcomes of preliminary tests at Easter in oral Irish, music and needlework (for girls) as a prerequisite for admission (Report of the Department of Education, 1931-32). These reforms established a selection process for the 'open competition' which was maintained until 1959. This element of the selection process for the training colleges saw a high level of competition for entry, mainly drawing upon secondary school students who performed well in the examinations (O'Donoghue, Harford and O'Doherty, 2017).

But the most ambitious and radical initiative launched by the newly dominant nationalist governing elite to reform pre-service teacher training was the establishment of the preparatory colleges. Their mission was to transform the training colleges to give primacy to Irish, guarantee a secondary school education for entrants and produce a reliable supply of Irish-speaking teachers who were competent to teach through the medium of Irish. An internal committee on recruitment within the Department of Education recommended the establishment of preparatory colleges in an interim report in March 1925, drawing on the example of earlier initiatives to recruit Irish speakers to the teaching profession promoted by the Dáil government's Ministry of Irish (Jones, 2000). The committee was influenced by the trenchant views of Prof. T.J. Corcoran S.J, professor of education in UCD, who was the intellectual architect

of the Free State's policy of language revival through the schools (Walsh, 2018). Corcoran was a zealous advocate both of teaching through the medium of Irish and securing preferential access to the teaching profession for native Irish speakers (Jones, 2000). The preparatory colleges would be positioned as integral to the achievement of both objectives.

The creation of the preparatory colleges was championed within the administrative elite by Pádraig Ó Brolcháin, the chief executive officer in charge of the primary branch from 1922 to 1934, who advocated the establishment of 'intensive centres to train our future teachers on an Irish basis...' and supported by Seosamh Ó Néill, the long serving secretary of the Department of Education (Jones 2000, pg.86). Although senior officials of the Department of Finance were sceptical of the concept (and would later show marked hostility to the system itself), the Minister, Ernest Blythe, strongly favoured both the creation of specialised centres accommodating student teachers and the location of the colleges in Gaeltacht areas (Ibid., pg.85). Jones points out that the first Free State Minister for Education, Eoin MacNéill (1922-25), favoured a more flexible approach involving co-educational colleges across the country which would not be restricted to student teachers, but Blythe's views, which were shared by senior officials within the Department of Education, proved more influential in formulating the proposals presented to the government (Ibid, pgpg.86-89). Blythe was an uncompromising cultural nationalist who regarded the Gaeltacht as an essential battleground in restoring the Irish language (Ó Buachalla, 1988). Blythe's advocacy proved crucial not only in securing the assent of the Department of the Finance for the scheme but in determining the key characteristics of the preparatory colleges system.

The Department of Education's scheme proposed seven residential colleges conducted through Irish, providing free secondary education for students aged 13 and

over for four years leading up to entry to the training colleges (Department of Education, 22 February 1926).⁴ The department cited a range of justifications for the new scheme, almost all related either to the anticipated increased supply of Irish-speaking teachers or the favourable impact on the training colleges both in terms of achieving a minimum post-primary standard among candidates and facilitating the progress of Gaelicisation. A subsequent departmental report from the end of the decade asserted that the preparatory colleges would 'reform the Training Colleges at the foundation by ensuring that the candidates for these Colleges shall have received a thoroughly sound secondary education (Department of Education, not dated, pg.4).' The new scheme set out to replace the discredited monitorial system with a new system of entry to the training colleges to establish secondary education as a baseline for entry.

The official memorandum prepared by the Department of Education emphasised that the initiative would open secondary education and the primary teaching profession to low-income families from Irish-speaking areas, as it would 'tap a source of supply hitherto largely neglected, viz. the children of the primary schools in the Gaeltacht, whose people have not sufficient means to enable them to pay for their children's education beyond the National School course' (Department of Education, 22 February 1926). Yet despite the department's occasional resort to egalitarian rhetoric, the benefits offered to poor families in the Gaeltacht were incidental to the essential purpose of the scheme, which was to provide a reliable supply of candidates for teacher training who were fluent in Irish and whose educational formation occurred in an Irish-speaking and unashamedly nationalist cultural setting (Walsh, 2018). The national objective of language revival was crucial to the official rationale for the new institutions, as the department's report for 1924-27

acknowledged: ‘...it was decided to set up a number of Preparatory Colleges which would provide for clever boys and girls desirous of becoming teachers and other clever boys and girls with a good knowledge of Irish, a sound secondary education on Irish lines..., with the advantages of a collective school life lived in an atmosphere of Gaelic tradition’ (Report of the Department of Education for the school years 1924-25-26 and the financial and administrative year 1926-27, pg.21). The colleges would not only offer secondary education through Irish to national school pupils, mainly drawn from the Gaeltacht but would prepare them for teaching in an atmosphere conducive to Gaelicisation.

The department attributed a high value to the benefits of ‘collective school life’ within Irish-speaking residential, secondary schools. The official memorandum issued on 22 February 1926, on which government approval of the initiative was based, asserted that the colleges would not only remedy a shortage of male teachers but provide an ideal institutional setting to prepare candidates for teacher training:

These Colleges will provide a school...sufficiently large to permit the advantages of a collective life and the influence of the formative elements with youthful companionship in work, a school in which the young candidates for the profession will be assembled in distinct homogeneous groups so that their teaching and training may be constantly inspired by the special purpose in view (Department of Education, 22 February 1926, pg.1).

This memo underlined the determination of senior departmental officials to exert a high level of control over the formation of candidates entering the teaching profession. The memo was ambitious and even messianic in tone and content, informed by the fervent idealism of the cultural nationalist movement and the urgent policy imperative to secure a sufficient supply of teachers competent in Irish. The preparatory colleges

were intended to play an indispensable part in achieving the government's objectives of transforming the training colleges and overcoming the shortage of primary teachers fluent in Irish. Moreover, the department positioned training within the preparatory colleges as an ideological vocation, not unlike the religious life, albeit informed by the cultural nationalist imperative to restore the Irish language. The new residential colleges were designed to secure the Gaelicisation of the training colleges and underpin the government's policy of reviving the national language through the schools.

The Executive Council approved on 11 February 1926 the proposal from MacNeill's successor as Minister for Education, Prof. John Marcus O'Sullivan (1926-32), to establish 'two residential preparatory training colleges in Dublin, two in Munster and three between Connacht and Donegal' (Minutes of Executive Council, 11 February 1926). The department acted swiftly to establish six preparatory colleges for Catholic candidates between 1927 and 1929, envisaging five in Gaeltacht areas and one in Dublin: all would be single-sex institutions, with three colleges serving boys and three for girls. The colleges for boys included Coláiste na Mumhan, which was to serve the Munster Gaeltacht in Ballyvourney, west Cork; Coláiste Éinne for the Connacht Gaeltacht in Galway and Coláiste Chaoimhin in Glasnevin, the sole college in Dublin, while the all-female colleges were Coláiste Íde, in Dingle, Co. Kerry; Coláiste Muire, in Tourmakeady, Co. Mayo and Coláiste Bhríde in Falcarragh, Co. Donegal (Jones 2000).

While the rapid approval of the preparatory colleges testified to the powerful support which the initiative enjoyed from senior public officials, the process of founding the colleges was protracted and often tortuous. The haste with which key political and official supporters drove forward their cherished project increased the logistical

difficulties in securing appropriate sites and buildings for the new institutions and created hardship for students. All but two of the colleges, Coláiste Íde and Coláiste Chaoimhin opened in temporary accommodation, often at a considerable distance from their eventual location and frequently in buildings in Dublin far removed from the Gaeltacht; as Jones points out, the department was willing to move students from one campus to another from year to year, while officials 'made ad hoc decisions as problems occurred, and completely disregarded the effects on the students, who were moved around the country, in a complicated series of manoeuvres as accommodation became available.' (Jones, 2000, pg.182). The three colleges for Catholic girls were operational by August 1930, with each accommodating the planned quota of 100 students (Report of the Department of Education, 1929-30). But the department struggled to secure permanent accommodation for two of the three male colleges: by 1930 only Coláiste Chaoimhin was operational in its permanent building and the two other colleges, destined for the Gaeltacht in Cork and Galway, were housed in temporary accommodation. The department admitted in 1930 that 'considerable difficulty has been experienced in the acquisition of suitable sites...' (Ibid., 13). Coláiste na Mumhan opened in temporary accommodation in Mallow with 69 students, while Coláiste Éinne was initially based in Furbough, Co. Galway, but soon moved to Talbot House, Dublin, which could provide for a complement of only 30 (Ibid.). Each college remained in temporary accommodation for most of the following decade, with Coláiste Éinne being relocated to Salthill in 1937 and Coláiste na Mumhan (later renamed Coláiste Iosagáin) moving to its permanent building in Ballyvourney only in 1940 (Jones, 2000). It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the welfare of students or quality of their educational journey was distinctly secondary to the core policy imperative of securing Irish-speaking teachers as quickly as possible.

Five of the six Catholic colleges were delegated to the management of religious orders, while Coláiste Éinne was entrusted to the diocesan clergy in Galway following its move to Salthill (Walsh, 2009; Jones, 2000). The senior officials had prudently consulted with the Catholic bishops from 1925, agreeing that the bishop of each diocese in which the college was located would become the manager and could select a religious order of his choice to administer the college (Jones, 2000, 88-9). This decision implemented a similar state-aided, church-provided model of governance to the Catholic training colleges and frequently involved the same religious orders, including the Sisters of Mercy, De La Salle order and the Christian Brothers. This testified to the department's caution in managing the sensitive interface of church-state relations in education and underlined the reality that any significant initiative in teacher preparation had to take account of ecclesiastical power.

Although the government initially considered establishing a single college in Dublin, providing for Protestant and Catholic girls in different buildings previously occupied by the Marlborough St training college, this proposal was dropped in 1926 due to opposition from the Church of Ireland authorities, led by John Gregg, archbishop of Dublin (Jones, 2000). Instead the department quickly agreed to establish a co-educational preparatory college under the control of the Church of Ireland (Parkes, 2011). Although Gregg was critical of the government's policy for compulsory Irish, he collaborated with the department in establishing the new college to secure the prospects of Protestant teachers and safeguard the Church of Ireland Training College (CITC), which struggled to attract candidates with a sufficient knowledge of Irish (Relihan, 2014). Coláiste Moibhi was founded in 1927 under the patronage of the Church of Ireland archbishop of Dublin, initially on Moibhi Road, Glasnevin (Jones, 1996). Coláiste Moibhi was effectively a gateway to CITC and as

Relihan (2014, 156) comments, served for the following sixty years as 'a mainstay for CITC in the provision of candidates suitably qualified in the Irish language'. The establishment of Coláiste Moibhi was an olive branch by the Free State government to the Church of Ireland, whose authorities were deeply sceptical of the policy of Gaelicisation and particularly the demands placed by 'compulsory Irish' on Protestant schools.

Successive governments led by W.T. Cosgrave and Eamon de Valera worked diligently to co-opt the Church of Ireland authorities to the cause of language revival and secure their collaboration with the preparatory colleges. The Department of Education made generous concessions to Coláiste Moibhi to facilitate its establishment and successful operation. The normally strict entry requirements in Irish were diluted for Coláiste Moibhi and it was the only college where entrance examination papers were presented in English (Relihan, 2014). When the Protestant preparatory college transferred from Glasnevin to new premises at the former Royal Hibernian Military School in the Phoenix Park in 1934, the acquisition of the property was facilitated by the department and its new building was financed by the state (Department of the Taoiseach, 8 May 1934, ppg.1-3). De Valera, now the President of Executive Council, attended the formal opening of Coláiste Moibhi on 8 May 1934, highlighting the pragmatic accommodation between the government and Church of Ireland. Gregg paid tribute to the 'courtesy and goodwill' displayed by the government in establishing Coláiste Moibhi: '...the Education Department had agreed to its foundation with the greatest readiness and goodwill...' (Department of the Taoiseach 8 May 1934, pg.1). De Valera declared that his presence at the ceremony was 'proof that the Government regarded the work of that College as of special importance' (Ibid., pg.3). If this display of harmony obscured genuine differences between government

ministers and Church of Ireland over the Irish language policy, nevertheless the outcome served the interests of both parties. Coláiste Moibhi proved the most enduring of the preparatory colleges, surviving far-reaching policy changes until the 1990s and ironically outlasting the high tide of the Irish language crusade.

Despite the familiar involvement of religious orders (or the Church of Ireland authorities) the preparatory colleges constituted an exceptional case of interventionism by the new Irish government in education during the first generation of the new state. The preparatory colleges were state-sponsored secondary schools which in turn were intended to redefine the composition, linguistic profile and cultural character of the training colleges. The Irish state did not establish or finance secondary schools in the first generation following the achievement of self-government and indeed did not even offer grants to school managers or ecclesiastical authorities to build schools until 1964 (Walsh, 2009). When the Department of Education moved to establish vocational schools under the auspices of the Vocational Education Act, 1930, Minister O'Sullivan offered assurances to the Catholic bishops that the schools would follow 'a strictly practical' curriculum and would not compete with academic secondary schools under church patronage (Walsh, 2011). The government changed direction to provide second-level schools with a broad curriculum only with the ground-breaking announcement of the first comprehensive schools by Dr Patrick Hillery in May 1963 (Walsh, 2009). The preparatory colleges conformed to a conventional denominational pattern in terms of management and administration but were otherwise a radical departure for a conservative Free State administration, involving an exceptional assertion of government activism within traditionalist educational structures.

The preparatory colleges were also distinctive in offering specialised instruction to prospective student teachers in a segregated institutional setting defined by the

national mission to revive the Irish language. The departmental report as early as 1928-29 boasted of the Irish speaking and explicitly Gaelic cultural ethos of the colleges:

The whole life of these institutions is organised on an Irish basis, Irish is the language of the classroom and the playground and of the domestic and social activities of the Colleges. The principal reason for choosing the Gaeltacht for the establishment of these Colleges was that opportunities would be afforded for bringing the pupils into touch with, and under the influence of the living Gaelic tradition in the areas chosen (Report of the Department of Education, 1928-29, pg.13).

The delegation of the college management to religious orders and location of the colleges in remote areas reinforced the 'collective school life' explicitly sought by influential advocates of the colleges. Yet the segregated institutional character of the colleges militated against another of the department's declared objectives – namely that 'It is also expected that the establishment of Colleges in these areas will react favourably as regards the preservation of the existing Gaeltacht' (Ibid.). The department was soon expressing concern at the level of interaction between students and native speakers and urging principals to arrange visits to each college by native Irish speakers (Jones, 2000). As Jones points out, the remote location of most colleges from local towns and villages and lack of forward planning by the department significantly constrained interaction between the students and inhabitants of the Gaeltacht (Ibid.) Official insistence on the preparation of student teachers in a dedicated institutional setting, underpinned by cultural nationalist ideology with strong messianic and religious overtones, proved counter-productive in developing

interaction with native Irish speakers or achieving practical results in terms of broader support for Gaelicisation.

Moreover, it was striking that the preparatory colleges initially did not attract a substantial cohort of applicants from the Gaeltacht. The departmental report for 1929-30 described the level of applications from Fíor-Ghaeltacht areas in Mayo and Galway as 'distinctly disappointing' (Report of the Department of Education 1929-30, pg.15).⁵ The department issued revised regulations from 1931-32 which applied only to 'children from intensely Irish-speaking districts, in whose homes Irish is the language of ordinary use...' and who received their primary education through Irish (Ibid., pg.15). The regulations made a series of concessions to promote applications from the Gaeltacht, including raising the age limit for entry for such candidates from 15.5 to 16.5 years; reserving a quota of places originally intended for fluent Irish speakers for applicants from Fíor-Ghaeltacht areas; and introducing grants for such applicants who secured places in the colleges as well as prizes for those who showed 'promise' in the examinations but did not secure a place (Ibid., ppg.15-16). Such students were also to receive advances for payment of their training college fees, although these were to be repaid over several years following appointment as a national teacher. Blythe approved these concessions, which contrasted with his usual devotion to fiscal stringency, to advance the progress of Gaelicisation and achieve his cherished objective of securing Irish-speaking students for the training colleges (Jones, 2000). The determined efforts to attract native Irish-speaking candidates drawn from the Gaeltacht to the colleges had the desired effect, with an increase from only 100 candidates from the Fíor-Gaeltacht taking the preparatory college examinations in 1931 to 357 in 1932 and 331 in 1933 (Report of the Department of Education, 1932-33). Moreover, from 1933-34 the department approved a definitive preferential scheme

for applicants from the Gaeltacht, reserving 40% of places in the preparatory colleges for candidates from 'Irish-speaking homes in the Fíor-Gaeltacht' and a further 40% for 'fluent speakers of Irish from all Gaeltacht and Breac-Ghaeltacht areas and the country in general...' (Department of Education 1932-33, ppg.11-12). The preferential treatment accorded to applicants from the Gaeltacht emerged as a defining characteristic of the colleges and consolidated their status as Irish-speaking institutions serving the political and cultural project of Gaelicisation.

Another crucial influence on the distinctive character of the colleges was the official determination, particularly by the Department of Finance, to enforce entry to the teaching profession by successful candidates. From 1930 the students and their parents or guardians were required before entering the colleges to sign an undertaking to complete their training and serve for five years as a national schoolteacher (Jones, 2000). This requirement attracted considerable criticism not only the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), but from the managers of the training colleges themselves. Fr Killian Kehoe (1956-57, pg.2), president of St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, informed the college's manager, Dr John Charles McQuaid, the influential archbishop of Dublin (1940-72), in 1957, that a minority of students were 'here more or less against their will', due to their background in the preparatory colleges. Kehoe underlined a frequent criticism of the system, asserting that the students were '...caught in a financial web spun by the Department of Finance...They are really victims of the system that sent them to us (Ibid.).'

The preparatory colleges became the centrepiece of the reformed system of pre-service teacher training in the Irish Free State. The department noted in its report for 1928-29 that with the exception of university graduates and untrained members of religious orders for whom a limited number of places were reserved, 'the order of

precedence in connection with the admission of students to Training Colleges will in future be as follows: (1) Preparatory College Students (2) Pupil Teachers (3) Training College Entrance Examination candidates' (Department of Education, 1928-29, pg.13). The reform of the process for admission to the training colleges from 1931 combined the open competition based on the Leaving Certificate (and Easter tests) with preferential access for preparatory college students, who were allowed entry without further competition provided they fulfilled minimum Leaving Certificate requirements (O'Connor, 1986). The department also established a revised pupil-teacher scheme for a ten year period between 1926 and 1936, which further reshaped the composition of the training colleges. Pupil-teachers were selected from students aged 15 to 17, who completed the Intermediate Certificate with honours in Irish and undertook a two-year course in 'specially selected secondary schools', preferably through the medium of Irish (Department of Education 1924-27, pg.22): they were admitted to the training colleges on passing the Leaving Certificate and a test in oral test conducted by the inspectorate (O'Connor, 1998). The authorities of the training colleges from the early 1930s to the late 1950s had virtually no influence over the selection and demographic composition of their students.

The preparatory colleges fulfilled the objectives of the Department of Education to provide a consistent supply of Irish-speaking candidates for the teaching profession and to transform the composition of the student body in the training colleges. The new colleges accelerated the progress of Gaelicisation in pre-service teacher training, although enthusiasm for the cause of language revival was sometimes more uneven than the department was willing to acknowledge. The preparatory colleges provided a steady stream of Irish-speaking students, many drawn from the Gaeltacht, which had a distinctive impact on the cultural character and demographic composition of the

training colleges. St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra was dominated from the early 1930s by students from the western seaboard, with a significant intake from the Gaeltacht (Walsh, 2006). The Department of Education expressed satisfaction in its report for 1931-32 that at least in the Catholic training colleges 'practically all the work is done through the medium of Irish', based on an analysis of examination papers which were almost all taken through Irish (Department of Education 1931-32, pg.15). While formal assessment was a central aspect of academic activity in the college, the evidence relating to the use of Irish as the 'everyday language' was more variable. As Ferriter (2006) points out, English continued to be used as a language of record in St. Patrick's College, including much of the college's correspondence and the teaching practice reports, while the college president from 1920 until 1937, Rev. E.J. Cullen, resisted official efforts to make Irish the normal language of instruction. Other colleges adapted more rapidly to Gaelicisation – all courses in Mary Immaculate College were taught through Irish from the early 1930s, while Irish was used as a medium of instruction in Carysfort College from the mid-1930s (O'Connor, 1998; Our Lady of Mercy College, 1977). While a range of pressures, particularly from the Department of Education, influenced the progress of Gaelicisation, the advent of the preparatory colleges reshaped the composition of the student body and culture of the training colleges in this period and helped to elevate the position of Irish.

Indeed the preparatory colleges succeeded in some respects beyond the expectations of departmental officials. The department envisaged that half of the intake to the training colleges would be drawn from the preparatory colleges from the early 1930s (Department of Education, 1928-29: O'Donoghue, O'Doherty and Harford, 2017) and this proportion was regularly exceeded over the following decade. Entrants from the preparatory colleges and the pupil-teacher scheme comprised 64% of all

entrants to the colleges as early as 1932 (with the largest cohort of 36% being drawn from the preparatory colleges), compared to 28.3% from the open competition (Report of the Department of Education, 1931-32). The dominance of preparatory college entrants within the training colleges became more pronounced due to severe restrictions on the supply of teachers imposed by the department during the world economic depression, in response to a decline in the primary school population and an unexpected surplus of trained teachers. The austerity policies adopted by the government included the abolition of the pupil-teacher scheme in 1936 and the suspension of the open competition in 1938, with admission being restricted to preparatory college students, members of religious orders and untrained temporary teachers including native Irish speakers (Report of the Department of Education, 1936-37). Although the examination for entry to the Catholic preparatory colleges was also suspended from 1939 to 1942, the preparatory college system was effectively the sole route of entry to the training colleges for lay students during the late 1930s and early 1940s: no less than 62% of entrants to teacher training in 1938 were drawn from the preparatory colleges, with 31% consisting of untrained assistants, mainly members of religious orders (Report of the Department of Education, 1937-38). Mary Immaculate College, Limerick admitted only 30 students in 1940, with 28 drawn from the preparatory colleges (O'Connor, 1998). The preparatory colleges became the principal avenue of recruitment to primary teaching within a decade of their introduction (Walsh, 2018).

Yet the preparatory colleges also attracted significant criticism from the outset. As Puirseil (2017, pg.74) notes, the INTO was 'utterly opposed' to the scheme from its inception and offered a vocal public critique of the colleges over the following generation. While the primary teachers' union officially opposed the plan on the basis

that it forced students to commit to the teaching profession and the collective institutional life of the preparatory colleges when they were simply too young to make long-term career decisions, INTO representatives were particularly exercised by the deliberate precedence given to the Gaeltacht in recruitment to the colleges (Puirseil, 2017). The government decision to reserve most college places for students from Gaeltacht areas from 1933 intensified the opposition of the INTO, which denounced the revised regulations as 'reactionary and unjust...' (Jones, pg.218). If the INTO's arguments that the preparatory colleges effectively excluded students outside the Gaeltacht from entering the teaching profession were overblown (Puirseil, 2017), the dominance of preparatory college students in entry to the training colleges during the 1930s and early 1940s offered ample evidence to support the INTO's concerns.

Moreover, despite Blythe's crucial role in the foundation of the system, the Department of Finance soon raised objections to the extensive cost of the colleges and most of its officials were persistently critical of the preparatory college model over the following decades (Jones, 2000; Dukes, 2003).⁶ Tomás Ó Deirg, who served as Minister for Education for most of de Valera's lengthy period in office between 1932 and 1948, was a 'staunch supporter' of the preparatory colleges and vigorously defended the system from its numerous critics, not least within the Department of Finance (Jones, 2000, ppg.278-9). Yet the colleges remained vulnerable to shifts in government policy, as they were established by a Cabinet decision and departmental initiative, but never enjoyed any statutory underpinning through legislation.

The colleges often drew criticism because of their success, at least in the short-term, in achieving departmental objectives. The Catholic bishops and religious orders who controlled the training colleges were often ambivalent at best about the central place of the preparatory colleges in the admission and selection of student teachers

and their impact on the demographic composition of the training institutions. Two-thirds of the students in St. Patrick's College up to the early 1960s were drawn from the counties of the western seaboard, of which Kerry, west Cork, Clare, Galway, Mayo and Donegal were strongly represented, with only a handful each year coming from Dublin. This was almost entirely attributable to the preferential entry for preparatory college students and aroused increasing criticism among leading Catholic prelates, not least Archbishop McQuaid, who was dissatisfied at the low intake of students from his diocese (Walsh, 2018; Cregan, 1972). Dr Donal Cregan (1957-76), the long serving president of St Patrick's College, was also sceptical of the preparatory colleges, arguing that a system which forced students from frequently remote areas on the western seaboard to work in urban schools with large classes created 'a cultural shock' for both teachers and pupils (Cregan, 1972, pg.3). The predominance of Irish-speaking students from counties on the western seaboard reflected deliberate policy decisions by the Department of Education during the 1920s in pursuit of a more rapid and far-reaching Gaelicisation of the training colleges.

Ultimately the preparatory colleges were most vulnerable to policy reversals by the state which had brought them into existence. While a detailed evaluation of the eventual closure of most preparatory colleges is beyond the scope of this paper, the power of the department over initial teacher education determined the fate of the colleges. The Department of Education decided to close Coláiste Caoimhin, the sole preparatory college for boys in Dublin, in 1939, ostensibly on the grounds that it was too distant from the Gaeltacht, but in reality as an austerity measure to impose tighter control on teacher supply (Report of the Department of Education, 1938-39).⁷ Moreover, as the fervent cultural nationalism of the early Free State faded and critiques of the suite of policies underpinning Gaelicisation mounted, a new generation

of politicians and officials cast a jaundiced eye on the preparatory colleges. Dr Patrick Hillery brought forward a proposal to the Cabinet in November 1959 for the closure of the five remaining Catholic preparatory colleges, signalling the most radical reform of recruitment and admission to pre-service teacher education since the 1920s (Walsh, 2009). Hillery's memo even echoed some criticisms of the preparatory colleges made by the INTO and other critics but long contested by the department, identifying 'fundamental objections' to the system, notably the segregation of future teachers from other sections of the population and the pressure placed on pupils as young as 13 to determine their future careers (Department of Education, 9 November 1959). This memo marked a fundamental change of direction by the senior departmental officials, who not merely dropped a foundational initiative of early twentieth century Gaelicisation but more or less explicitly disclaimed the arguments of their predecessors a generation earlier (Walsh, 2018). Hillery's memo was not controversial among ministers and the government quickly agreed to replace the preparatory colleges' scheme with a more politically palatable solution of an expanded system of secondary school scholarships for Gaeltacht students (Cabinet Minutes, 15 December 1959). The government gave a nod to revival of the national language and support for Irish speaking students, while effectively dismantling a key building block of the state's original policy for the Gaelicisation of initial teacher education (Walsh, 2018; O'Connor, 1986). All five Catholic preparatory colleges ceased to operate from 31 July 1961, with four of them becoming 'A' secondary schools conducted entirely through Irish (Public Accounts Committee 1961-62). Ironically in the context of the tensions between the government and Church of Ireland over 'compulsory Irish', Coláiste Moibhi was the sole survivor of the original colleges, as it was allowed to continue in operation due to

the department's scepticism about the ability of Protestant secondary schools to provide bilingual candidates for the teaching profession (Jones, 1996).

The political and cultural crusades of the early Irish state had a more dramatic, long-term impact on initial teacher preparation than on any other strand of higher education or professional training. The preparatory college system was the most far-reaching initiative taken by the Free State government to pursue Gaelicisation of primary education and exerted a decisive influence on pre-service teacher training over the following generation. The colleges were positioned as key agents of state policy to achieve Gaelicisation and served the wider post-independence project of nation-building (Walsh, 2018). The system became the centrepiece of recruitment to primary teacher education during the early decades of the independent state. Essential characteristics of the preparatory college scheme were determined by a small number of dedicated advocates, including senior officials of the Department of Education and the Free State Minister for Finance Ernest Blythe, who managed to impose their preferences in an era of fervent cultural nationalism. But their decisions, including the insistence on a 'collective school life' which involved segregation of future primary teachers (Department of Education, 1928-29, pg.13); preferential treatment of applicants from the Gaeltacht and official attempts to enforce a commitment to the teaching profession among students, proved highly controversial even at the high tide of Gaelicisation and generated significant opposition to the system itself (Jones, 2000). The initiative was consistently opposed by influential interest groups such as the INTO and drew increasing criticism from the Department of Finance and influential Catholic educators within a few years of its creation. The preparatory college system faced a range of critiques which ensured that while the colleges did not lack committed

advocates, they never commanded unequivocal support either among the teaching profession or within the public administration.

The administration of the Catholic colleges by religious orders and the bespoke arrangements approved by the government for the Church of Ireland reflected the conventional pattern of devolution of authority by the Irish state to religious organisations within a state-aided system during the early to mid-1900s. Yet despite such a conventional governance structure, the initiative was a radical departure for a Free State administration which was both fiscally conservative and committed to the existing educational order, involving a striking assertion of government activism to create state-sponsored secondary schools which offered a dedicated educational setting for future student teachers. This exceptional interventionism by the Department of Education was informed by an ambitious vision to 'reform the Training Colleges at the foundation' and achieve a rapid, far-reaching Gaelicisation of the primary schools. While the preparatory colleges achieved many of the priorities set by the Department of Education, their longer-term viability was precarious, not least because their fortunes depended on a distinctive cultural and political milieu which gave precedence to Gaelicisation over many other educational objectives. The preparatory colleges were the product of an uncompromising cultural nationalism, laced with a zealous and even messianic commitment by leading politicians and officials to teacher preparation in collective institutional settings, which positioned primary teaching as an ideological vocation with the primary objective of restoring the Irish language.

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Endnotes

¹ This chapter draws on departmental reports issued by the Department of Education from 1924 until 1938 and unpublished archival sources from the Department of the Taoiseach and Department of Foreign Affairs. A small number of these archival sources are referenced below for clarity as well as being cited in the text.

² The study draws on analysis from two monographs by the present author – *The Politics of Expansion* (2009) and *Higher Education in Ireland, 1922-2016* (2018) which are cited fully below. I also wish to acknowledge the important unpublished thesis and subsequent publications by Valerie Jones, which are invaluable works of reference on the preparatory colleges.

³ This source is undated but was produced by the department in 1929 or 1930 as an internal report. The full reference for this source is: Department of Education (not dated) Memorandum, 'Unification and Co-ordination'. NAI DFA/GR/623-8.

⁴ The full reference for this source is: Department of Education (22 February 1926) Memorandum, 'Scheme for Preparatory Colleges'. NAI TSCH/3/S.4828.

⁵ The Fíor-Ghaeltacht consisted of areas where Irish was the main language spoken and the Breac-Ghaeltacht were considered to be partly Irish speaking.

⁶ Interview with James Dukes, 28 April 2003. James Dukes was Private Secretary to three Ministers for Education and later the first secretary of the Higher Education Authority.

⁷ Blake, *St Mary's Marino*, 97-8; Report of the Department of Education 1938-39 (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1940), 10