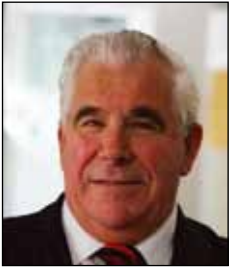


# Pádraig Pearse the Educationalist

Context and continuing relevance of Pearse's thought and practice for education in Ireland today



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In this immensely rich exposé of Pearse's engagement with education and with Irish language and culture, Prof John Coolahan portrays the young man's passionate commitment to his ideals; his intensity of thought, action and advocacy in support of his convictions and his energetic vision for education and for national identity. The author also discusses the continuing relevance of Pearse's thinking and practice for education today.

During this year's impressive Easter Rising Centenary commemoration, it is understandable that attention focussed on the physical force nationalist dimension of Pádraig Pearse's life. However, from the time of his youth up to three years before he died, it was education and cultural renewal that dominated his work. As Joe Lee remarked in his biographical note, "Education remained his [Pearse's] abiding passion".<sup>1</sup> He only became active in the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) from May 1914, having joined a short time previously. Even as late as April 1913, Pearse stated: "Take up the Irish problem at any point you may and you will inevitably find yourself, in the end, back at the education question."<sup>2</sup>

Before contextualising and examining his ideas on education, it may be helpful to provide a summary of his own education and his engagement with the practice of education as well as with the debates on education and cultural revival.

## Pearse's own education

Benefiting from an educationally favourable home environment, he attended a private school from 1886 to 1891, rather than a national school. From 1891 to 1896 he attended the Christian Brothers Secondary School in Westland Row. While he was very successful in the then four competitive examinations set by the Commissioners for Intermediate Education, he also became an enthusiastic pupil of Irish, influenced by Brother Maunsell from County Kerry. He left school in 1896 at the age of sixteen and joined the Gaelic League, which had been founded in 1893. In 1898, he took the Matriculation Exam of the Royal University and proceeded to the award of B.A. and B.L. degrees by 1901. His BA subjects were Irish, English and French.

## The practice of education

The extent of Pearse's engagement with the practice of teaching is sometimes under-estimated. Between 1896 and 1898 he was employed by the Christian Brothers as a tutor teacher in the CBS. As well as attending lectures in UCD from 1898, he also gave part-time lectures there on Irish from 1899 to 1902. In 1904-05, he taught Irish in Alexandra College Dublin.

From 1906, he gave more formal lectures in Irish in UCD, paralleling Eoin Mac Neill's lectures on Irish history there. He also taught in the Gaelic League's Leinster College. In 1908, he founded and was Headmaster in St Enda's school in Ranelagh, and in 1910 founded St Ita's girls' school, where he also gave sessions. There is a favourable report on his teaching in St. Enda's by a senior inspector JJ O'Neill, who later became first Secretary of the Department of Education under the name Seosamh O'Neill. From 1912, Pearse continued as Headmaster in St. Enda's as it transferred to the Hermitage in Rathfarnham. Thus, it can be noted that Pearse had quite a deal of first-hand experience of teaching and lecturing.

### Irish language and culture

Parallel to this, during these years, was his very close engagement with the cultural revival movement, particularly in its focus on the revival of the Irish language. From 1898, he was an active member of Coiste Gnótha of the Gaelic League. In 1899, he represented the League at the Welsh Eisteddfod, during which he visited schools to observe bilingual teaching. In 1900, he became Secretary of the League's Publication Committee. In 1902, he visited Glasgow and set up links with the language revival movement in Scotland. From 1903 to 1908 he was Editor of *Claidheamh Solais*. He proved to be a very strong editor and wrote a very extensive and influential range of articles. In 1905, he went on a visit to Belgian schools an event which had a major influence on him. Arising from this, he wrote extensive articles on bilingual teaching and prepared and published lesson plans on Direct Method Teaching. He also taught in other Gaelic League Colleges and he was sought after as a speaker at Gaelic League Branch meetings. The Gaelic League Branches had mushroomed to over 500 by 1905, one of the major adult education movements in Irish education. In 1907, he built his cottage in Rosmuc in the heart of the Connemara Gaeltacht, to which he brought some students to experience the richness of the folk and linguistic life of the area.

### Writings on education

As further evidence of his close engagement with educational issues, there are his specific writings on education. A large number of his articles in *An Claidheamh Solais* are focussed on the educational debates of the day. His extensive Prospectus for St. Enda's reflects his vision for the type of exemplar school he hoped for Ireland. His newsletter, *An Macaomh*, is a valuable on-going reflection on the activities of the school and of the educational context of the time from 1909 to 1913.

Pearse had been in favour of Home Rule until the British reneged on it, under pressure from Unionists in Northern Ireland. Between 1912 and 1914, he issued a number of articles on *Education under Home Rule*. He also wrote a series of letters to the press on *Education in the Gaeltacht*. Probably the publication for which Pearse is best known is *The Murder Machine*, published in 1912 and re-published in January 2016.

This summary of Pearse's active engagement on educational and language issues is evidence of how serious Pearse was in seeking reform for these interests. As a committee member, editor, investigator, pamphleteer, public speaker, lecturer and teacher, Pearse was untiring in his efforts both in bringing about change in the character of Irish education and in

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*Herder*

promoting the language revival and cultural renewal movement. As he walked to his execution at dawn on 3 May 1916, at the early age of 36, he could have looked back at a lifetime of significant endeavour to promote the education and language system which he considered integral to a distinct Irish nationhood.

### Advocate for Reform

When evaluating Pearse’s educational ideas it is desirable to try and relate to the mind-set of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rather than viewing them from a contemporary perspective. All three forms of the Irish school system – national, secondary and technical – emerged during the time that Ireland formed part of the British Empire. To some extent, the school system was designed as a political socialisation process which prohibited or under-emphasised the Irish language, history and culture/heritage. This gave rise to the cultural revival movement of that period. Many of the revivalists considered that the Irish language and distinctive culture was in great decline and perhaps on the road to extinction. In 1892, Douglas Hyde gave expression to the mood in his address, *The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland*. He and Eoin MacNeill were key founders of the Gaelic League in 1893.

In the early nineteenth century, cultural nationalist theorists such as Fichte, Herder and Von Humboldt had identified language as the key criterion for nationhood. The possession of a distinct language gave a moral right to independent statehood. Fichte for instance wrote: “Wherever a separate language is found there a separate nation exists which has the right to take independent charge of its own affairs.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise Herder stated: “Herder stated, “A people ... has nothing dearer than the language of its fathers. Its whole spiritual wealth of tradition, history, religion and all the fullness of its life, and all its heart and soul lives in it.”<sup>4</sup> He went on to write, “If language is the organ of our social forces, the medium of our innermost education, then we cannot be educated otherwise than in the language of our people and of our country.”<sup>5</sup>

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In the mid-nineteenth century the Young Ireland Movement very much embraced such sentiments and through the organ of “The Nation”, and a host of new publications, highlighted the importance of the Irish language and provided a strongly nationalist interpretation of Irish history. Thomas Davis wrote: “A people without a language is only half a nation. A nation should ever guard its language more than its territories... ‘tis a surer barrier, and more frontier than fortress or river.”<sup>6</sup> The motto of the Gaelic League, “Tír gan Teanga, Tír gan anam” was taken from the Young Irelanders.

At the turn of the 20th century, Pearse was one of those who were very influenced by such views and adopted a strong revivalist stance towards the Irish language. Pearse remarked, “Were the Irish language to disappear, then the people which we should have in Ireland, whatever else they might be, would not be the Irish nation.”<sup>7</sup> Many of his sayings echo the cultural nationalist theorists as when he wrote, “Language and literature must always remain the most important channels for national self expression... In it Ireland’s temperament is expressed, its point of

view is Ireland's. Moreover, it imposes the Irish point of view and Irish modes of thought on these who use it."<sup>8</sup>

It is against such a framework of reference and conviction, in a political context in which the Gaelic culture was considered to be gravely imperilled, that one needs to understand the intensity of Pearse's drive for language and cultural renewal. He saw the education system as a crucial agency in this life or death struggle. Pearse's priority, for most of his life, was to secure reforms in the education system through which he and future generations of Irish people could turn the tide of Anglicisation and, as he saw it, re-establish links with the older Gaelic culture before the conquest.

As it happens, the decade 1898 to 1908 was an era of major effort at educational reform in Ireland, even though one would not think it from Pearse's writings. However, he took a very active role in advocating and influencing many of the reform initiatives. He was an untiring advocate of reform, particularly elements relating to his areas of concern – the Irish language and education. Through a vast range of articles in *An Claidheamh Solais*, through a range of pamphlets and by many public speeches, he fought for change. He criticised the system for being anti-national, for its rigidity and for its alleged lack of freedom for teachers, reserving his most harsh criticism for secondary education, carrying scars from his own experience of its four-tier competitive exam system. There is a difference in tone in his critique in the pre-1912 period, which is more focussed and constructive, whereas his later reflections on education are more sweeping, rhetorical and less based on evidence.

Pearse was a committed advocate of the value of bilingualism in education. He partnered Archbishop Walsh in a pamphlet on Bilingual Education, published by the Gaelic League in 1900. His sustained advocacy of the cause was a factor in the Commissioners of National Education authorising and supporting Bilingualism in 1904. It was also agreed to allow Irish as an ordinary school subject and as an "Extra Subject" for fees, as well as in the bilingual format. In 1904, following representations, a corps of Irish language inspectors were appointed. Due to further advocacy by Pearse and others, in 1907 organisers for Irish instruction were recognised. There had been an impressive increase in the provision of Gaelic League Colleges and, in 1906 following advocacy, they were granted state aid. What was striking about Pearse's engagement was that he acknowledged when progress was made, and pointed out that all the fault could not be levelled at the Education Commissioners. In January 1908, he acknowledged, "*Irish can be taught under the existing code, and well taught, to every child in Ireland. If it is not taught in a given school the blame is with the teacher and the manager – one or both. On that point let there be no doubt.*"<sup>9</sup> (original underlining). Also, to Pearse's satisfaction, Irish history became an approved subject in the primary curriculum in 1908.

Indicative of Pearse's concern with educational administration was his support, in contrast to most of his colleagues, for the Devolution Bill of 1907. The key advantage of the Bill, in Pearse's eyes, was that it would place education policy under Irish control. In support of the Bill he stated, "That Bill if placed on the Statute Book, will call into being an Irish Council... which will have virtual control of Irish education... we shall be

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on the eve of the greatest and most beneficent revolution in the modern history of Ireland. The schools will be ours.”<sup>13</sup>

Pearse was one of many who pushed for a solution to the contemporary university question. Again, his response to Augustine Birrell’s 1908 University Bill was gracious – “This really seems to be an honest Englishman’s honest attempt to settle the Irish university question, in the best interests of Ireland as he sees them.”<sup>11</sup> However, he took a leading role in the advocacy of Irish as a compulsory matriculation subject for the new National University, achieving success in 1913.

### Practice

As well as his sustained comment and advocacy on educational issues, Pearse also wanted to demonstrate by practical action how a school oriented to Irish culture could operate. With this in mind in 1908, he took the significant initiative of founding a lay secondary school, St. Enda’s, in Cullenswood House in Ranelagh. In 1910, he added St. Ita’s as a school for girls. Then, in 1912, he rented the Hermitage, a magnificent site in the hills above Rathfarnham, as a home and boarding establishment for St. Enda’s. Pearse wanted St. Enda’s to be an exemplar school, in strong contrast to the boarding schools of the day, which he viewed as being modelled on English patterns.

The school was animated by a patriotic ethos. It implemented a comprehensive style curriculum with four modern languages as well as Latin, Mathematics, Science, History, Geography, Nature Study, Drawing, Manual Instruction, Physical Education, Vocal and Instrumental Music. The extracurricular programme was remarkably rich – sport featured prominently, particularly Gaelic hurling and football. Pearse established a school museum, particularly rich in natural exhibits. There was a school library with 2,000 books. Drama and pageants featured prominently, not alone in the grounds but, on occasion, in venues such as the Abbey Theatre and Croke Park. School debating was encouraged. The Hermitage included an impressive school garden in which students worked. A very enriching dimension of school life were visits and contributions from some of the writers and artistic luminaries of the day such as Eoin MacNeill, WB Yeats, Standish O’Grady, Sarah Purser, Douglas Hyde, AE, Padraic Colum.

In cultivating a Gaelic spirit in the school, Pearse drew on his romantic view of ancient Irish history and projected characters such as Cuchulainn, of pagan Ireland, and St. Colmcille, of early Christian Ireland, as role models. Unlike the prevailing tradition in other schools of the time, Pearse eschewed corporal punishment. He established a students’ council and laid great stress on an honour code for students. In the style of pedagogy, Pearse put into practice his child-centred educational philosophy. He very much favoured the Direct Method of language teaching and he was skilled in the use of what was known as the magic lantern for projecting visual aids material. While Pearse was an enthusiastic, gifted educator who attracted a staff that shared his ideals, he was not a good financial manager. In 1914 he undertook a fund-raising tour in America, and in the period prior to his execution he was at pains to make ends meet for St. Enda’s.

## Enduring Relevance of Pearse's Ideas

Viewed from the perspective of schooling in Ireland in 2016, there is much of relevance in Pearse's educational writings and practice, and one considers that there is much in contemporary school provision and practice with which he would be happy. Obviously, the cause he fought for – that Ireland would have control of its own education policy – has come to pass. The Irish language, Irish history, Irish culture and games now have a core role in the school system.

Pearse, in line with the cultural nationalist agenda, was committed to restoring “the national factor” as a central focus of the curriculum. He wrote: “The school system which neglects it, commits, even from the purely pedagogic point of view, a primary blunder. It neglects one of the most powerful of educational resources.”<sup>12</sup> The comprehensive type curriculum in contemporary Irish schools is reflective of Pearse's practice and perspective – “In a true education system religion, patriotism, literature, art and science would be brought in such a way into the lives of boys and girls as to affect their character and conduct.”<sup>13</sup>

The child-centred approach, which now permeates the early childhood and primary curricula, and to some extent the junior cycle, is very much in line with his aspirations. Pearse repeatedly stressed that the nurturing of the child's nature was the central concern in education – “The main object in education is to help the child to be his own true self.”<sup>14</sup> The aim is “to foster the elements of character native to the soul, to help bring these to their full perfection, rather than to implement exotic excellences.”<sup>15</sup> He expresses the process as follows, “It comes to this, then, that the education of a child is greatly a matter, in the first place, of congenial environment and, next to this, of a wise and loving watchfulness whose chief appeal will be the finest instincts of the child itself.”<sup>16</sup> Part of this congenial environment would be the absence of corporal punishment, which has been outlawed in Irish schools since 1982.

A further core dimension of Pearse's educational thought, which has continuing relevance, is his exalted view of the teacher's role. In contradistinction to his view of the contemporary situation of Irish teachers, he stated, “I would make the teachers, both primary and secondary, a national service, guaranteeing an adequate salary, adequate security of tenure, adequate promotion, and adequate pension ...”<sup>17</sup> Ireland, in 2016, is blessed to have a very high calibre teaching force, very well educated, and which under the Teaching Council is now undergoing a major era of reform and development. Interestingly, in the light of recent developments, Pearse urged that the teacher training colleges “would work in close touch with the universities.”<sup>18</sup> Pearse placed a high value on teachers' inspiration and enthusiasm – “What the teacher should bring to his pupil is not a set of readymade opinions, or a stock of cut-and-dry information, but an inspiration and an example... so infectious an enthusiasm as shall kindle new enthusiasm.”<sup>19</sup>

Pearse viewed the educational system of his day as very much a “top down”, rigid and highly regulated system. Against that framework, he repeatedly called for greater freedom for schools and teachers. He called for “Freedom for each school to shape its own programme in conformity

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with the circumstances of the school as to place, size, personnel, and so on; freedom again for the individual teacher to impart something of his own personality to his work, to bring his own peculiar gifts to the service of his pupils...”<sup>20</sup> He would also extend this idea of freedom to the pupils, in the form of pupil councils.

Contemporary Irish educational policy, through curricular policies, school planning processes and school self-evaluation processes has been encouraging schools and staffs to work collaboratively and to put their own stamp on their school communities. At primary and junior cycle levels, teachers are encouraged to adapt the general curricula and to design new elements such as “Short Courses” in junior cycle for their pupils.

A major bugbear of Pearse concerning the secondary school system of his day was the highly competitive externally set and corrected examination system. He himself suffered from the four-tier process of his school days, which continued in a three-tier format of Junior, Middle and Senior Grades up to political independence. It was to this system that he mainly applied the impactful epithet “the murder machine.” He regarded the exam system as fostering major defects in the teaching-learning process. Contemporary Ireland’s two-tier, set and externally corrected public examination system continues to cause controversy. Despite attempts to reform it over four decades, the progress towards its reform has been slow.

In Pearse’s day, the education system was run by three separate agencies, which operated independently of each other. Not surprisingly, Pearse advocated that they be brought together under one Minister and operate in a co-operative way working from a single building. In his view, the task of such a Minister would be demanding – “In a literal sense the work of the first Minister of Education in a free Ireland will be a work of creation; for out of chaos he will have to evolve order and into a dead mass he will have to breathe the breath of life.”<sup>21</sup> In 1924, the various branches were, indeed, brought under the Minister for Education as the Education Department. Nowadays, the various branches work more cohesively than in the earlier decades. Pondering on “when we are free,” Pearse projected his attractive image of the future, “Well-trained and well-paid teachers, well-equipped and beautiful schools, and a fund at the disposal of each school to award prizes on its own, tests based on its own programme.”<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that Pearse was very actively involved in the language and education question in the early twentieth century. It was an era of great political, cultural, social and economic debate and action. During his short lifetime Pearse made significant contributions to public awareness of issues facing the education system, through advocacy he influenced several significant education policy changes and through his educational practice he imaged forth what an Irish culturally focussed school could be. Pearse informed himself on new thinking on educational thought and practice.<sup>23</sup> He visited schools in three other countries where language and culture issues had some parallels to Ireland. In his educational writings he set forth a range of educational perspectives many of which are of enduring relevance for contemporary schooling.

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