

## Telling Tales – Cruelty and abuse in schooling in Ireland

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The report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (Government of Ireland, 2009) - the Ryan Report - shocked Ireland and the wider world with its chilling descriptions of abuse that was systemic, pervasive, chronic, excessive, arbitrary and endemic. Subsequent debate has, rightly, centred on the 'religious' arena, highlighting the appalling breach of trust in institutions that were church-run and staffed by members of religious orders. Discussion of broader educational values and perspectives has been limited. Exploring the perspectives of writers on schooling, in autobiography, memoir or through their fiction, can contribute to the educational debates that should arise from the Ryan Report. This article considers the insights of selected writers. A strong authoritarianism tradition within Irish schooling is identified as contributing to cultures of docility and compliance. The relevance of such issues for current practitioners is also discussed.

### Introduction

'How children are treated is one of the key elements which defines any society', began Taoiseach Bertie Ahern's statement on institutional child abuse in 1999. He continued with an unequivocal apology:

On behalf of the State and of all citizens of the State, the Government wishes to make a sincere and long overdue apology to the victims of childhood abuse for our collective

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failure to intervene, to detect their pain, to come to their rescue. (Ahern, 1999)

Subsequently, the 2009 final report of the *Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* (Government of Ireland, 1999) shocked a nation with its chilling descriptions of abuse that was systemic, pervasive, chronic, excessive, arbitrary and endemic.

The Ahern statement also implied that we had known about the neglect of children for a long time when he referred to the Kennedy Report of almost thirty years earlier.

The short preface to the 1970 Report on Industrial Schools put it very simply: "All children need love, care and security". Too many of our children were denied this love, care and security. Abuse ruined their childhoods and has been an ever present part of their adult lives, reminding them of a time when they were helpless. I want to say to them that we believe that they were gravely wronged, and that we must do all we can now to overcome the lasting effects of their ordeals. A new, comprehensive approach is required to deal with the effects of previous abuse, to detect the children caught in frightful isolation, and to put proper structures in place (Ahern, 1999).

The Ryan Report recommends that '*The lessons of the past should be learned*'<sup>4</sup> (Government of Ireland, 2009, Vol VI p.461).

## **Overview**

This article locates the Ryan Report (Government of Ireland, 1999) in the wider national and international contexts of revelations about child abuse. Some of the key findings and recommendations of the report are explored. Among the questions arising from the revelations is what was known, when and by whom. Furthermore, while abuse went fundamentally against the perpetrators' espoused

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religious beliefs, it also contradicted values at the heart of teaching: respect, trust, care and integrity (Teaching Council, 2016). The body of the article concentrates on extracts related to schooling from the memoirs, autobiographies and fiction of a cross-section of Irish 20<sup>th</sup> century writers. In the absence of formal educational research into schooling generally and child care institutions specifically, the assertion is made that writers' recollections, while not totally reliable, can illuminate practices, policies and attitudes. Thus, the article suggests that the ongoing discussion needs to be widened, specifically to focus more on mainstream schooling as well as traditions of authoritarianism within teaching. Discussion of contexts and issues follows and some conclusions are offered.

### **Irish and international contexts**

Public discourse has tended, almost inevitably, to link the Ryan Report with the horrific disclosures about the abuse of children by priests in the Ferns Diocese<sup>5</sup> (Murphy, F et al 2005), in the Dublin Diocese (Murphy, Y et al, 2009) and in the Diocese of Cloyne (Murphy, Y et al, 2010). There is a wider international context of revelations about physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many, though not all, in Catholic Church related institutions. A wide range of reports, radio and TV programmes, films and newspaper articles paint disturbing pictures with recurrent patterns whether from Canada<sup>1</sup>, the US<sup>2</sup>, Mexico<sup>3</sup>, Netherlands<sup>4</sup>, Australia<sup>5</sup> or Tanzania<sup>6</sup>. According to Keenan (2014,

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the drama-documentary film *The Boys of St Vincents*, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, revelations in the Boston Archdiocese that led to the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law in 2002 at <http://www.boston.com/globe/spotlight/abuse/>

<sup>3</sup> For example *Would You Believe: The Legion*, RTE television Dublin, first broadcast, 9 March 2014.

<sup>4</sup> See The Deetman Commission, 2011, English summary at [http://www.onderzoekrk.nl/fileadmin/commissiedeetman/data/downloads/eindrapport/20111216/Samenvatting\\_eindrapport\\_Engelstalig.pdf](http://www.onderzoekrk.nl/fileadmin/commissiedeetman/data/downloads/eindrapport/20111216/Samenvatting_eindrapport_Engelstalig.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the research by Barry Coldrey

<sup>6</sup> For example, '[Why didn't the Rosminian order tell us the truth about Fr Kit?](#)'. [Catholicherald.co.uk](http://Catholicherald.co.uk). 20<sup>th</sup> June 2011

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p 8) reports of abuse of minors by Catholic clergy have also been made in Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Chile, China, Columbia, England, France, Germany, Italy, Jamaica, Malawi, Malta, New Zealand, Nigeria, the Phillipines, Poland, Scotland, South Africa, Spain, and Switzerland. Increasingly, public apologies follow revelations<sup>7</sup>.

The focus on abuse by Church personnel can, at times, deflect attention from its pervasiveness throughout society. In their overview study of the nature and extent of child sexual abuse in Europe, Lalor and McElvaney (2010) point out that the sexual abuse and exploitation of children takes place in all Council of Europe member states, that the perpetrator is commonly a relative or acquaintance, that females report more abusive experiences than males. They also highlight the lack of reliable empirical data. Within Ireland, the 2002 SAVI (McGee et al, 2002, p. xxxiii) report found that ‘Overall, almost one-third of women and a quarter of men reported some level of sexual abuse in childhood’.

### **Widening the discussion**

Perhaps because revelations about the abuse of children shock most people’s sense of decency, immediate reactions are often characterised by revulsion and condemnation. To move beyond the horror towards some understanding is challenging. Obviously, psychology, psychiatry, sociology and medicine can contribute valuable perspectives towards increased understanding. The suggestion here is that the memoirs of writers and others also has a distinct contribution to make.

Undoubtedly, an explosive combination of inequalities of power between so called ‘carers’ and the children in their charge and the

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example *The Tablet*, 11 April, 2014  
(<http://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/666/0/francis-apologises-for-sexual-abuse-of-children-by-priests-and-vows-tough-sanctions-for-perpetrators> )

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sexual inclinations of particular professed religious Brothers, Sisters and priests was a contributory factor to what took place. Subsequent local debate has, rightly, centred on the 'religious' arena, highlighting the appalling breach of trust in institutions that were church-run and staffed by members of religious orders, people who presented themselves as caring and virtuous. Discussion of broader educational values and perspectives has been limited. Much of the national conversation has corralled the issue into a 'religious' arena. Critically, the 'educational' aspects of the scandal deserve exploration. The reformatories and industrial schools that were primary sites of abuse were 'educational' institutions. Many of the people mentioned in the Ryan Report, and convicted in courts, were 'teachers'. Some of those who taught in Letterfrack, Goldenbridge and elsewhere were moved to and from 'mainstream' schools. The regimes that operated in the schools reported on in the Ryan Report can be positioned at one end of a spectrum or hierarchy. Concern about children's welfare leads us to recognise that casual cruelties and oppressive authoritarian regimes were not restricted to industrial schools. Many questions arise. For example, what was distinctive about the cultures that enabled systemic abuse of children? What are the implications for those learning to be teachers or child-care workers today?

### **The Ryan Report**

It is still painful for many to re-read some of the conclusions of the Ryan Report (op cit). For the purposes of this article it is worth recalling a selected few:

Physical and emotional abuse and neglect were features of the institutions. Sexual abuse occurred in many of them. Schools were run in a severe, regimented manner that imposed unreasonable and oppressive discipline on children and even on staff. (6.01)

A climate of fear, created by pervasive, excessive and arbitrary punishment, permeated most of the institutions

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and all those run for boys. Children lived with the daily terror of not knowing where the next beating was coming from.(6.11)

The schools investigated revealed a substantial level of sexual abuse of boys in care that extended over a range from improper touching and fondling to rape with violence. Perpetrators of abuse were able to operate undetected for long periods at the core of institutions. (6.19)

Academic education was not seen as a priority for industrial school children.(6.37)

A disturbing element of the evidence before the Commission was the level of emotional abuse that disadvantaged, neglected and abandoned children were subjected to generally by religious and lay staff in institutions. (6.39)

The Confidential Committee heard evidence in relation to 161 settings other than Industrial and Reformatory Schools, including primary and second-level schools, Children's Homes, foster care, hospitals and services for children with special needs, hostels, and other residential settings. The majority of witnesses reported abuse and neglect, in some cases up to the year 2000. Many common features emerged about failures of care and protection of children in all of these institutions and services (6.43)

Each conclusion points to seriously flawed educational practices. Collectively, the conclusions suggest toxic cultures in many industrial schools. We don't know how pervasive such cultures were. The absence of a strong educational research tradition means there is little empirical evidence about how children experienced 20<sup>th</sup> century schooling.

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The Ryan Report (Vol V) includes additional material to provide greater context. The Ferriter Report in particular (Vol V, 0 353 sqq) provides an historical perspective on issues of class, gender and sexuality. In official reports and memoirs it is clear that for some poor children ‘childhood was synonymous with abuse, physical and sexual’ (ibid). Institutions like orphanages, reformatories and industrial schools were regarded by many as positive alternatives to chaotic and dysfunctional families. Ferriter references a number of autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works, suggesting that they provide a sort of parallel narrative that complements and at times is at odds with official accounts. He cites the observation of archivist and critic Catriona Crowe: ‘The official record can tell us what happened, but rarely what it felt like’ (ibid).

Ferriter references, in particular, *The God Squad* by Paddy Doyle (1988), Mannix Flynn’s 1983 novel *Nothing to Say*, Bernadette Fahy’s (1999) *Freedom of Angels, Surviving Goldenbridge Orphanage* and *Fear of the Collar* (1991) by Patrick Touher. Each of these accounts offer telling insights and are valuable complementary texts to the Ryan Report. As Ferriter remarks about them, ‘The recurring word is fear’.

How do reports of cruelty experienced in industrial schools compare with accounts of contemporaneous life in more conventional schools and classrooms? Might memoirs, as well as fictionalised versions of schooling, offer some pointers, especially how schooling was experienced at an emotional level? Much of the remainder of this article explores a selection of extracts from a range of writers.

### **Early indications**

In his autobiography *Vive Moi!*<sup>19</sup>, Seán O Faoláin (1963, 1993) declares: ‘*The first school I was sent to was as cracked as blazes*’ (ibid, p. 20.) He was writing about Cork City at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Following a rich, engaging commentary on the physical layout of the school building and asides about ‘*the good monks who*

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*taught us*’ who were *‘mentally and emotionally like children themselves*’ he recalls an incident involving two boys, Feeney and Corrigan, who had been caught mitching, *‘on the lang*’.

To set the scene, O Faoláin, the arch storyteller, paints a picture of the headmaster, *‘a brother whom we called Sloppy Dan*’.

Sloppy Dan himself was smallish but burly, with a round porcine face, always brick-red, big round glasses, a rounded powerful back. His devouring pedagogic obsession was English grammar. He would wander from class to class to teach it, invariably carrying in his fist a punishment strap cut from a black leather harness trace, about one-foot-six long, two inches wide and a half-inch thick, and when, as he constantly did, he became excited over his parsings and analyses he had the odd habit of swishing his strap behind his back like a tail and roaring at the top of his voice like a bull. If we failed to give the right answer he would make us hold out our hands and give us one-two of the hardest he could draw. It was not the pain I minded so much as the sight of his round, empurpled face leaning over me with bulging eyes and bellowing mouth around which there would sometimes gather a pale-grey scum of frothy spittle. (ibid, p.37)

Later, the young O Faoláin observed the headmaster *‘holding Feeney by the left arm and lashing with his leather strap at his naked thighs and bottom*’. Shocked at what he saw, O Faoláin *‘turned and fled out to the evil-smelling jakes and hid there, shivering, until the school closed*’ (ibid, p.38).

*Vive Moi!* was published in 1963 when corporal punishment was regarded as ‘normal’. O Faoláin comments:

It is possible that certain manly readers of these lines will laugh at me and say that it probably was no more than Feeney deserved, or say that they themselves often got



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leathered and add (the usual phrase) that it didn't do them a bit of harm – as if they could possibly be sure of this<sup>23</sup>.

In fairness, he also acknowledges that Sloppy Dan was exceptional, though an exceptionally violent man in such a position suggests a peculiar view of school leadership. O Faoláin goes on to make comparisons with Lowood School in *Jane Eyre* and remarks that '*...in spite of the cold, the dirt, the smells, the poverty and the vermin, we managed to create inside this crumbling old building a lovely, happy, faery world.*' This observation captures a strong, apparently contradictory, strand in many accounts of schooling: the curious juxtaposition of accounts of harsh, seemingly oppressive conditions with assertions of joy and happiness. It is as if the oppression has been internalised, with a consequent lowering of self-esteem and expectations. This echoes a point made by Ferriter in the background context paper for the Ryan Report (Vol V, p 353 sqq) , when he notes that side by side with fear, children in institutions often found comfort in religion and institutional practices.

Like so many Irish writers, O Faoláin would have been acutely conscious of the legacy of James Joyce. Joyce, born in 1882, had attended the Jesuit-run Clongowes Wood College in Co Kildare and, later, Belvedere College in Dublin. Joyce incorporates vibrant schoolboy into *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (1916, 1965). He describes one teacher, Mr Hartford, as exceptional because he was '*decent and never got into a wax. All the other masters got into dreadful waxes*' (ibid, p.50). In one classroom scene, Father Arnall excuses Stephen Dedalus from writing because his glasses have been smashed. But Father Dolan insists that Stephen is pretending that the glasses are broken in order to avoid writing and so inflicts corporal punishment with the pandybat. Joyce describes it thus:

Stephen's heart leapt up in fear:

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- Any boys want flogging here, Father Arnall? cried the prefect of studies. Any lazy idle loafers that want flogging in this class?(ibid, p.53)

For poor performance in Latin, Stephen's classmate, Fleming, gets six '*loud quick smacks*' of the pandybat on both hands. Next, Father Dolan singles out Stephen '*lazy little loafer!*'.

A hot burning stinging tingling blow like the loud crack of a broken stick made his trembling hand crumple together like a leaf in the fire: and at the sound and the pain scalding tears were driven into his eyes. His whole body was shaking with fright, his arm was shaking and his crumpled burning livid hand shook like a loose leaf in the air. (ibid, p.53)

Young Dedalus rails against the punishment as '*unjust and cruel and unfair*' at regular intervals. We glimpse the hierarchical nature of relationships among teachers as Stephen realises that Father Arnall is not going to stand up to Father Dolan, even though he had excused him. The authoritarian theme is developed further when Stephen, buoyed up by his classmates' encouragement, decides to complain to Father Conmee, the rector. The incident resonates with the Ryan Report conclusion, almost a hundred years later: '*Authoritarian management in all schools meant that staff members were afraid to question the practices of managers and disciplinarians*' (Ryan Report, Vol IV, p.458). A perennial problem?

More than two decades younger than O Faolain, Máire Cruise O'Brien in *The Same Age as the State* (2003) offers us insights of life in a two-teacher (111 pupils) primary school, Scoil Ghobnait in Dunquin in the Kerry Gaeltacht, in the 1920s. Pervasive physical punishment is evident:

'. . . everyone, sooner or later, except for a very few quiet and good girls, of whom I was one, got hit in Dunquin. Further, I must say that I never saw anyone hit for anything

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other than failure at lessons. We were all too docile and/or cowed for actual misbehaviour' (ibid, p.87)

Again, despite the casual violence, she proceeds to speak of the generosity of one of her teachers, Muiris Ó Dálaigh, reinforcing the notion that children's engagement with school can involve curious combinations of revulsion and affection.

### **Peter Tyrrell's story**

A compelling account of school life from the early part of the last century comes from Peter Tyrrell. Tyrrell, born into a poor family near Ahascaragh, Co Galway, was put '*into care*' at the age of eight and sent to the industrial school run by the Christian Brothers in Letterfrack<sup>8</sup> in 1924. The book disturbs at many levels. The author's voice of innocence and trauma has a great ring of simplicity and authenticity. Peter Tyrrell struggled to have his story heard. He wrote much of *Founded on Fear* (2006) in the 1950s and was in contact with Senator Owen Sheehy Skeffington, a campaigner for the abolition of corporal punishment in schools. Sadly, Peter's tragic life ended when his charred corpse was found in Hampstead Heath in 1967. The manuscript remained in Skeffington's private papers until historian Diarmuid Whelan discovered it in 2004 and arranged for its publication

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<sup>8</sup> Letterfrack Industrial School from 1885 to 1974 is the subject of Chapter 8, Vol 1 of the Ryan Report pps 285-394. Among the conclusions are 'There was a climate of fear in Letterfrack. Corporal punishment was severe, excessive and pervasive....A timeline of documented and admitted cases of sexual abuse shows that for approximately two-thirds of the period 1936-1974 there was at least one Brother in Letterfrack who sexually abused boys at some time and for almost one third of the period there were at least two such brothers there. One Brother worked for 14 years before being detected. ...Children left Letterfrack with little education and no adequate training. (p.394)

Tyrell describes the leader of the school thus:

Brother Keegan .... is very religious, .. fond of a drink but never to excess. A strict disciplinarian, he is very hard and can be a very cruel man. ..., it was Keegan's practice to come to the square always carrying a stick. He often took several boys away, and flogged them severely with their pants off. The reason for this flogging was because of improper actions, which are said to have taken place in the dormitories and lavatories. Keegan .... is just as severe on the other Christian Brothers and masters as on the children (ibid, p.58) .

Tyrell recalls Brother Walsh as '*cruel and cunning*' (ibid, p.59) and tells how he beat a lay teacher, McAntaggart '*.... across the face with the strap until the teacher cried like a child.*' Brother Dooley '*.... nearly always carried a heavy cane or walking stick, which he used fairly often to beat the older lads on the back and the legs, for mistakes in drill and exercises*'. Again, in Tyrell's efforts to be fair, he adds, '*I don't remember seeing him beat very young boys*'. Brother Fahy was '*a conceited, self-centred, arrogant bully. He bullied not only children, but other Brothers, and masters as well*' (ibid, p.60). Mr Hickey, the bandmaster, is '*An ex-Artane boy, he is a cruel bully. He spends half the time teaching the band and the other half beating them*'<sup>9</sup>.

Tyrell's pen pictures are by no means universally negative. Brother Scully '*had a kind word for everyone and was most liberal with his*

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid* p.61. Artane refers to St Joseph's Industrial School, Artane, Dublin, like Letterfrack, run by the Christian Brothers from 1870-1969 and the subject of Ch 7 of the Ryan Report (Vol 1, pps 105- 235). Among the conclusions are: 'Artane used frequent and severe punishment to impose and enforce a regime of militaristic discipline...Sexual abuse of boys was a chronic problem in Artane....Artane failed generally to provide for the emotional needs of the boys. The Department of Education and the Christian Brothers management did not improve or change a system that was failing.' (p 234-235)

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*snuff* (ibid, p 58). Tommy Mannion a man on the farm said, ‘*Brother Scully got more work out of the boys by singing a song than all the other brothers had with their sticks and straps*’ (ibid, p 58). Brother Murphy was ‘*brilliant and highly educated*’ and ‘*broadminded*’ (ibid, p 60). Another Brother Murphy, the cook, is noteworthy ‘*because I have never seen him beating the children*’ (ibid, p 61). Brother Conway is ‘*a good teacher*’ who, ‘*when his class are not working well.....reads them a story, or changes the subject*’ (ibid, p 60). Tyrrell’s account of his teacher in third class, Mr Griffin, is warm and affectionate.

Tyrell’s recollections are powerful reminders of how perceptive children are when observing teacher behaviour.

### **Other glimpses - the 1930s and beyond**

Former Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald attended Belvedere College in Dublin during the 1930s. He reports being happy and well adjusted at school. He did not ‘*as some children do, feel the need to overidentify with my school*’ (FitzGerald, 2010). He remembers being particularly exercised by religion and politics and writes very positively about the school. Almost unintentionally, he reveals how difficult it can be to build fairness and justice into the system:

Tolerance, indeed, was a feature of the school. While discipline could frequently be painful, and inevitably from time to time unfair, it was not intrusive. On the whole, and within the reasonable limits required by the running of an institution containing six hundred boys, we were allowed to follow our own inclinations. The boys too were tolerant of one another: there was no bullying. And no furtive sexuality that I ever came across. (ibid, p.29)

Jack Keyes, who wrote as Hugh Leonard, was born in the same year as FitzGerald, 1926. In *Home Before Night* (1981) he illustrates classroom practice, especially if you missed school:

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.... for the first two years your master was Alfie O'Hagan, who was an old fellow of maybe fifty, with a calm, wide face. He moved slowly. When you got an answer right, he shook your hand and tightened his grip until the bones bent and you came twisting up from your desk and under his arm like a tango dancer. If you refused his hand, he was offended. 'Are you making strange with me?' he would ask, his eyes dreaming at the ceiling while he twisted the lobe of your ear like an orange peel, and 'No, sir!' you screamed. Squeezing hands and ears was a sign that he liked you: with the dodgers and mitchers he used the cane and his fist. (ibid, p 91)

Elaine Crowley (1986), also growing up in Dublin in the 1930s, provides evidence of how young people can learn to live with contrasting experiences of different subjects or teachers. Her recollection of the needlework teacher is of someone who said:

'You lazy, worthless girl,' and a bang of the ruler across the knuckles was all the attention I was worth or she had time for.

This is followed immediately by:

But there were other days when I came into my own-English composition, Religious Knowledge or any subject where my jackdaw memory could shine: (ibid, p 86)

Children learn quickly that school is a complex, layered place where expectations of teacher behaviour need to operate on a broad spectrum.

Patrick Galvin, born in Cork in 1927, spent time in Daingain Reformatory, Co Offaly. His memoir (Galvin 1990), with graphic accounts of abuse, formed the basis of the 2003 film *Song for a Raggy Boy*. For anyone coming fresh to the topic of school-based abuse, this film offers a very raw and challenging introduction.

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### **The 1950s**

Rulers, leathers and canes were not the only weapons in a teacher's arsenal. There's a vivid classroom scene in *Reading in the Dark* (Deane, 1996), an auto-biographical novel by Seamus Deane. The Maths teacher, Father Gildea, intimidates with threats and a sneering sarcasm, evident as he enunciates 'rules', clearly enjoying his powerful authoritarian position:

We have here, in this venerable textbook, forty simple sums in algebraic form, to each of which there is only one correct answer. There are, in this room, forty boys. One sum for each. The coincidence is pleasing. We begin with Johnson, the strange-looking creature in the left-hand corner of the front row. He gives the answer to number one in no more than two seconds. If he takes longer, he will be deemed to have given a wrong answer. McDaid, the object next to Johnson, takes number two, and so on throughout the whole zoo-like assemblage we, in our politeness, call a class. However, if Johnson is, in McDaid's considered opinion, wrong in number one, he, McDaid, does number one over again and gives the correct answer. If the person next to McDaid happens to believe that Johnson was right in number one, and McDaid wrong to correct him, he skips number two and does number three; whereupon McDaid must, if he agrees with the verdict, re-do number two. Equally, the person next to McDaid also has the choice to believe that both Johnson and McDaid were wrong in number one; if he takes this choice, he does number one over again. And so on: (ibid, p 91)

We can deduct that this hair-raising Maths class took place in St Columb's in Derry, a school with a most distinguished list of past students. Deane's contemporaries there included playwright Brian Friel, Nobel Laureates John Hume and Seamus Heaney, political activist and journalist Eamonn McCann and musician Phil Coulter.

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A school's reputation and achievements are no guarantee against classroom cruelty.

Brian Cosgrove, former Professor of English at NUI Maynooth and a year younger than Seamus Deane, grew up in Newry. He attended the Christian Brothers school there and in *The Yew-Tree at the Head of the Strand* (Cosgrove, 2001) recounts a telling incident from a trigonometry class. He introduces the item by referring to recent apologies by the head of the Irish Christian Brothers to all who had been physically or sexually abused. He notes that

I had absolutely no experience of sexual abuse, and have little or no reason to believe that any of us (in Newry) were subjected to such treatment. (ibid, p 125)

He proceeds to bring alive a Saturday morning Maths class of thirteen and fourteen year-olds. Cosgrove's focus of attention is the plight of one of his classmates. Again, the 'normality' of corporal punishment is evident.

The victim was Niall Kelly, a most likeable youth, without malice, but utterly devoid, also, of anything, approaching academic ability. Niall was usually astute enough to keep out of big trouble; but if he did get into hot water, he usually took his punishment (perhaps a few 'biffs' from the leather strap on the open palms) with an amiable stoicism, remaining unruffled by what was a recurrent event. Perhaps it was this very imperviousness that drew down on his head the full wrath of our frustrated trigonometry teacher, himself the victim of his painful sinuses and resolved to create a fellow-victim (ibid, p 126).

Like Deane, Cosgrove highlights the power differential. He monitors the rising anxiety of his classmates as they witness the obsessive Brother relentlessly hunting down his prey. Cosgrove confesses that, writing half a century after the incident, he still finds



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it painful to remember the systematic interrogation and beating of the child that went on for an hour or more. He remembers:

This was no longer Niall, but an unrecognisably pathetic and broken creature, reduced to snivelling inarticulacy. And there followed on from this a sense of guilt, tinged by frustrated rage, that not one of us had the authority to intervene and end the display of savagery that had unfolded before us. (ibid, p 128)

In *Another Country – Growing Up in '50s Ireland*, journalist and author Gene Kerrigan (1998) also confirms the pervasiveness of school-based corporal punishment. At his primary school in Finglas, Dublin, the cane was a strong weapon and he introduces the reader carefully into the classroom with the reminder that '*a kind, gentle man*' was very capable of inflicting pain as he performed '*his duty*'.

Mr McAuliffe, kind man, gentle man, hefted the bamboo cane and brought it slashing down on my outstretched palm. The pain shot through my right hand, stinging, eye-watering. I held my arm outstretched, waiting, trying to keep my face expressionless. Mr McAuliffe slowly raised the cane again, lowered it gently to my palm. Touched the palm, once, twice, like a golfer teeing up a ball. Then he raised the cane again. My hand reddened and burning, my arm involuntarily shied away from the bamboo (ibid, p 31)

Kerrigan, clear, focused and still angry, challenges the inclination to minimise what was going on.

.... It was called 'slapping', a trivialising euphemism for violence. Our own trivialising name for it was biffing. When you got biffed it was never a token slap. The master prepared each slashing assault with all the concentration that a Croke Park hurler applied to belting what was likely

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to be the last free in an All-Ireland final, ten seconds left in the match, score even. (bid, p 32)

He recalls that children were beaten *'for giving cheek, for disobeying orders and on occasion for getting answers wrong, for showing you were not paying attention'*, and, he adds, *'doing badly in our Irish language lessons'*.

Kerrigan's description and analysis deserves careful attention as he also touches on Irish identity, English soccer, differences between rural and urban perspectives, educational policy, censorship and Church influence on schooling. He then recalls moving on from Primary School to the Vocational or Technical School.

At Tech, they didn't hit us. Violence was reserved for national school. And one day I did something or didn't do something and it was time to show me who was boss and the teacher told me to stand up. He was a confident type, a seasoned pro, none of the let's-be-friends crack about him. He began to needle me, to mock me. With his adult skills, his facility with words, his ability to wield sarcasm, he could twist me and turn me on the spot, and he did (ibid, p 58)

Kerrigan reminds us of the destructive power that teachers with such verbal skills can wield, how we often remember the feeling rather than the specifics of incidents.

I remember nothing of the detail of that incident except one aching wish that filled my mind. I was humiliated, red-faced, willing him to end it, please let me sit down, pick on someone else. I hadn't the necessary verbal skills to protect myself, my ego, my pride, from the relentless, contemptuous assault. And I remember wishing with all my heart that it was like it used to be in national school. Then I could just hold out my hand and take the pain and let it be

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over. When you're determined to hurt a kid, you don't have to have a cane to do it (ibid, p 58)

Mary Becket, born in Belfast in 1936, recalls the day her daughter arrived home from school:

She was ten years of age and didn't often cry. She showed me the mark on her legs where the head-teacher had hit her with the cane. A big red mark it was right across the back of her legs. And she had lovely skin on her legs, lovely creamy skin. When I think of it I can still see that mark (Becket, 1990, p 90)

Mary rushed to the school to confront the head-teacher. The latter took to her heels and, when chasing after her Mary, put her hand through glass a big suffered a '... *deep cut from my wrist to my elbow* (ibid, p 60).

Politician Gerry Adams began his schooling, in 1956, in St Finian's De La Salle School in Belfast. Again, mixed memories about the experience and the juxtaposition of positive and negative recollections are evident. He writes: *St. Finian's was a good school. The discipline was quite severe, but the only occasion on which I remember a teacher being particularly cruel to me was when I was slapped on my first day in school – I thought very unfairly* (Adams, 1996, p 20).

### **How representative?**

While we might admire writers for whistleblowing or truth-telling, there's always the niggling doubt about how representative such extracts are. Might it be that only particularly sensitive people carry such painful memories into adult life while the majority of former students 'get on with it'? Might some be tempted to exaggerate, perhaps prompted by the commercial success of what might be

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regarded as ‘misery literature’ such as *Angela’s Ashes* (McCourt, 1996). Furthermore, not all writers focus on classroom cruelty.

John McGahern, a writer finely tuned to overt and covert cruelty, recalls a range of school experiences. By the time he was 13 years old he had already attended seven schools. In *Memoir*<sup>62</sup>, he recalls one teacher, Kelly, as particularly authoritarian. McGahern describes him as ‘...tall, good-looking in a dark way, nationalistic, a Fianna Fail member of the County Council, intellectually conceited and brutal.’ McGahern packs numerous relevant school-related themes into a few pages: the position of the Irish language; the county scholarship system; favouritism; the teaching of history; non-attendance; minority denominations; single sex and co-education; cycling eight miles to school; the Marist Brothers. He recounts an incident when the principal, Brother Placid, ‘*an exceptional teacher*’ (McGahern), 1996, p 170), cycled out to where the young McGahern was picking potatoes when he should have been at school. Brother Placid convinced the future writer’s father that he should send his son back to school and so changed the nation’s literary history. McGahern talks of those years as ‘*the beginning of an adventure that has never stopped*’. In the light of the complex unraveling of the Ryan Report and the role of religion in Irish schooling, it is worth noting that McGahern remarks:

The fear and drudgery of school disappeared. Without realizing it, through the pleasures of the mind, I was beginning to know and love the world. The Brothers took me in, sat me down, and gave me tools. I look back on my time there with nothing but gratitude, as years of luck and privilege – and of grace, actual grace (ibid, p.171)

Fergal Keane writes warmly and incisively about his schooling at Presentation College Cork in the late 1960s, in particular about Brother Jerome Kelly recently returned from the West Indies. Keane remarks : *The ignorant chatter among schoolboys was that the brothers were free to beat as much as they wanted on the missions, so that when they came back home they were half savage*

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(Keane, 2005 p 80). He mentions the radicalising effect teaching abroad had on some and how they '*often found themselves at odds with the stifling conservatism of Ireland*' (ibid, p 81). Jerome Kelly stood out in a number of ways and Keane's admiration for him is strong. The writer declares: *Jerome did not approve of corporal punishment*. Keane explains how, as punishment for repeatedly talking in class, he and another student were sent by Brother Jerome to clean up a section of the Mardyke Walk. Again, his comment reveals dominant thinking of the time when he says: *The clean-up operation was tedious and exhausting but it did not seek to humiliate. And to anybody who'd been on the receiving end of a cane or a leather strap that was a revolutionary concept* (ibid, p 83).

Footballer Paul McGrath, paints some graphic images of the wider social context he encountered while growing up in Sallynoggin, Dublin in the 1970s. He was no stranger to exclusion, intimidation and bullying. In school, his reaction to casual cruelty is to resist, and his account gives some flavour of shifting attitudes:

..... this teacher walked up behind me and smacked me across the back of the head. I was absolutely furious. He had hit me for no reason, so I just jumped straight up and went for him, hell for leather. A few of the lads, rushing to my support, jumped on top of him too. There was absolute pandemonium and I think a few of us came close to being expelled (McGrath, 2006, p 69).

### **Convent cultures**

Women writers who recall their school memories - fewer in number - tend to be more positive. There are not as many reference to the casual brutality often found in the writings of their male contemporaries, though the examples cited earlier by Maire Cruise O'Brien, Elaine Crowley and Mary Beckett should not be ignored.

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Author Edna O'Brien, born in 1930, describes the world of her Loughrea convent boarding school with great attention to detail – three hundred women; the prevailing smells of wax floor polish; ewers of freezing water and cabbage; dour years in which I came to love Latin; profane temptations; falling in love; rules, friendship, penances and hilarities; the school play; constant study – without any reference to corporal or sexual abuse (O'Brien, 2012).

Molly Keane, who attended the French School, in Bray, Co Wicklow, around 1918 describes it as having 'a very strict régime', where 'even the smallest doing was supposed to be dreadfully naughty' (Quinn, 1986, p 69). The focus was on speaking French and being punctual so 'if you were honest enough to admit that (not speaking French and being late) some ghastly punishment would follow'. Mary Lavin, who moved to Ireland from the USA in 1921, aged nine, loved school, Loreto St Stephen's Green, Dublin, especially its social aspect, the intellectual challenge and the athletics. (ibid, p. 89). Joan Lingard, one of whose books *Across the Barricades* has been a popular choice by teachers and students in Junior Cycle English, grew up in Belfast. She was a Christian Scientist, as she says 'perhaps a very odd thing to be in Belfast'. She attended Bloomfield Collegiate and, again reminds us the prevalence of ambiguous attitudes to schools which appear dysfunctional but are remembered fondly. She describes the school as:

'...a very small school in an old building and it was run on fairly antideluvian lines. The classes were small, and it didn't have a great academic record, but I enjoyed it. Its eccentricity appealed to me much more than a large well-run school would have done and I made a lot of good friends there' (ibid, p 103)

Dervla Murphy, born in 1931, clashed with a teacher in the national school in Lismore Co Waterford. She also demonstrates how complex, ambiguous attitudes can emerge from such encounters. *'Ignoring everything except English and history naturally landed*

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*me in trouble with my teachers – none more so than Sister Andrew, with whom I had a running battle, if not a running war! I joined her class when I was eight and it was a real battle of wills. She was trying to prove she could control a nasty little terror like me, and in the process she walloped me – physically and verbally. I was trying to prove that I could take on the adult world. We were bitter enemies for years, but in a curious way we were very fond of each other beneath all the hostility; and we have remained the best of friends throughout my adult life’* (ibid, p 121).

Nuala O Faolain, author of one of the most-read Irish memoirs of recent decades *Are You Somebody?* (O Faolain, 1996), was born in 1940. She conveys her boarding school’s atmosphere as a concentrated cocktail of striving for academic excellence against a backdrop of religious intensity and burgeoning adolescent sexuality. However, she also states ‘*I have no doubt that being sent to this school was the biggest single stroke of luck in my life’* (ibid, p 42)

Alice Taylor warmly recalls going to school through the fields in the 1940s (Taylor, 1988). Maeve Binchy remembers her schooldays at the Holy Child convent school in Killiney in the 1950s with obvious affection<sup>10</sup>. She describes the nuns as ‘terribly nice and very innocent’. Clare Boylan, born in 1948, also enjoyed school, though she describes lessons as ‘frightfully dull’ and textbooks as ‘monstrously dull’ (Quinn, 1986, p 22).

In 1954, future president Mary Robinson was sent from Ballina Co Mayo to boarding school in Dublin at ten years of age. While experiencing some loneliness, she declares ‘*I enjoyed my years at Mount Anville. Doing well in exams and playing in the school*

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<sup>10</sup> In *Maeve Binchy, The Biography* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books), 2013, Piers Dudgeon contends that not only was she happy at school but that her experience of the convent school was very influential in her fiction.

*hockey and tennis teams*' (Robinson, 2012, p 20). There are no references to brutality, casual or otherwise.

### **Fictional exposures**

Roddy Doyle, like McGahern another teacher turned writer, includes some telling classroom scenes in his fiction. For example, by the third part of the Doyle's Henry Smart trilogy, *The Dead Republic* (Doyle, 2011), the central character, now in his sixties and back in Ireland, lands a job as caretaker in the boys' school in Ratheen, a Dublin suburb. Initially positive impressions of the school: '*everything was new. The teachers were young. The headmaster was a gentleman*', (ibid, p 139) gives way to disillusionment. First there is the pervasive poverty: '*It took me a while to calm down, to notice the shivers and malnourishment, the ringworm, the bruises. It took me a while to accept that poverty could also be suburban*', (ibid, p 142). Then there is the corporal punishment. The caretaker listens outside classroom doors and hears the slaps.

'I counted them. Four, five, the sixth. Six was as many as I'd tolerate. Six of the famous best. Three whacks on each open hand with the leather strap. The limit: I'd allow no more. Then I heard the seventh, and the eighth. The ninth, the tenth. I heard the objections, killed in the throats of fifty-four witnesses, the silent outrage. And the terror. I was outside. The boys were inside, watching a brute lose control of himself. Living it, and being destroyed by it' (ibid, p 145).

In the novel, Smart confronts and threatens the teacher, Mulhare from Kilkenny, still in his twenties. The caretaker effects a cultural change. Henry Smart declares. '*No child was slapped, except on the days when I stayed at home. I'd made my own republic, inside the railing of the school*'.



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MJ Hyland, born in 1968, grew up in Ireland and includes some powerful school-based scenes in her novel *Carry Me Down* (Hyland, 2006, p. 147 sqq). In one memorable scene, the narrator's account of the humiliation of pupil Kate Breslin by the teacher, Mr Roche, is a telling tale of the abuse of power.

### Changing perspectives

Maguire and Ó Cinnéide (2005) point out that for much of the last century throughout Irish society, including in schools and family homes, 'a certain level of violence against children was accepted as both normal and necessary' (ibid, p 649). They recall a 1955 letter-writing campaign to the *Evening Mail*, a Dublin newspaper, seeking the abolition of corporal punishment in national schools. The response of the Fine Gael Minister for Education, Richard Mulcahy, in parliament is telling, not least in its dismissive tone, He described the campaign as '*an attack by people reared in an alien and in a completely un-Irish atmosphere and it is carried on here with the help of the pages of our Irish newspapers. It is an attack on the whole spirit of our educational system and it is an endeavour to attack our educational roots*<sup>11</sup>'. The advent of a national television station, the conversations relating to the Second Vatican Council and other changing perspectives led to an increased questioning of traditions particularly during the 1960s. Towards the end of that decade, a Dublin-based medical doctor, Cyril Daly, began campaigning for the abolition of corporal punishment in schools. In 2009, recalling his struggle, he wrote:

It was not possible for a Catholic parent to find a Catholic boys' school, either primary or secondary, where corporal punishment was not part of the essential matrix of Catholic education. Corporal punishment and sexual abuse are not

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<sup>11</sup> Dáil Eireann, Debates, 8 July 1955, p.470  
<http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates>

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discrete entities. They are a morbid and ineluctable continuum (Daly, 2009).

Daly presented 8,000 signatures of people opposed to beatings in schools to the Education Minister, Brian Lenihan, in 1969. However, Lenihan maintained the *status quo* and the nation had to wait for over a decade for abolition.

The Kennedy Report on industrial schools (Government of Ireland, 1970), as referenced by Taoiseach Ahern in 1999, highlighted the neglect of children and heralded shifts in policy and practices regarding children in residential care. Coolahan describing primary schools just before the outlawing of corporal punishment, notes that ‘the resort to forms of punishment such as corporal punishment has declined considerably’ (Coolahan, 1981, p 180) while at second-level ‘corporal punishment is forbidden in vocational, comprehensive and community schools and is now rarely exercised in secondary schools’ (ibid, p 202). Corporal punishment in schools was officially outlawed on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1982 when John Boland was Minister for Education and Garret FitzGerald Taoiseach<sup>12</sup>.

### **Other commentaries**

Commentaries on Irish schooling throughout the last century indicate that authoritarianism bubbles away, sometimes slightly below the surface, as a persistent feature. Authoritarianism in schools needs, of course, to be appreciated within particular contexts - historical, cultural, political and religious – and dominant views on schooling at particular times. A self-congratulatory view of the schooling system tended to discourage critique. However, some incisive observations by various commentators highlighted particular weaknesses. For example ‘a tradition of bad school

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<sup>12</sup> See Department of Education, *Circular Letter 9/82*, (Dublin: Department of Education, 1982)

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buildings, underpaid teachers and rigid bureaucratic control<sup>13</sup>, fragmented policy development (O Buachalla, 1988, p 391) and power imbalances (Ferriter, 2012, p 5) can be seen as contributing to authoritarianism. Deference by State officials towards church-run schools is often cited as an indicator of a specific Irish strain of authoritarianism. For example, in what is regarded as a significant contribution to the educational debate of the time, an assistant secretary in the Department of Education, writing in the late 1960s, stated: ‘no one wants to push the religious out of education, that would be disastrous in my opinion. But I want them in it as partners, not always as masters’ (O’Connor, 1968, p.249).

In his critique of the education system, Akenson (1975, p156.) captures some of the strengths, weaknesses, tensions and contradictions associated with schooling. He summed up Ireland in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as ‘a parochial and culturally self-contained agricultural nation in which the church, state and social practices all worked in smooth cooperation’ which was also ‘sometimes callous, miserly, superstitious and authoritarian’ as well as ‘proud, independent and upright’.

In looking at the broader canvas of politics and society in 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland, Lee (1989) is often scathing in his critique of the Department of Education, the teacher training colleges and university education departments, especially for their collective neglect of educational research or analysis. At one stage, in discussing the central role of emigration in ‘traditional’ Ireland, Lee paints a picture of ‘... a society that devoted much of its energy to skilfully socialising the emigrants into mute resignation of their fate’ (ibid, p 644). He also comments: ‘Collective self deception by a society over several generations is a singularly elusive historical topic to pursue. But it may be central to understanding the Irish mind and the Irish character in the past century’ (ibid, 652). Authoritarian traditions within Irish Catholicism are also identified

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<sup>13</sup> *Irish School Weekly*, 6 May, 1944 cited in Diarmuid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000*, (London: Profile Books) 2004, p.531

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as important cultural shapers by others, for example Whyte (1971) and Inglis (1998). Ferriter (2004) draws attention to outsider views of corporal punishment in Irish schools during the 1960s. He quotes a journalist from the *Daily Telegraph Magazine* who expressed astonishment at the toleration of public beatings in schools, asserting that in Irish church schools in particular ‘*every day many endure thrashings which, In England, would be enough to close the school and start and enquiry*’ (ibid, p 588). Ferriter also notes how the 1967-70 Kennedy Committee, referenced above by Taoiseach Ahern in his 1999 apology, did not uncover the full extent of abuse in industrial schools, partly because ‘*The Department of Education did not co-operate fully with the committee by refusing to give it a list of all the complaints received*’ (ibid, p 589). In his review of the Ireland in the 1970s, Ferriter (2012) sees education, religion and the status of women as a constellation of related issues where there was, *inter alia*, ‘*frank rejections of the authoritarian approach to education in the past...*’ (ibid, p 618)

O’Donoghue, an Irish academic currently based in Australia, who has written insightfully, sympathetically and critically about Catholic education, contends that the authoritarian internal government of religious orders led to the development of teachers who valued order. He cites a number of Irish writers and artists who found this claustrophobic, including Thomas Kilroy, Eithne Strong, Brian Moore, Tom Murphy, Robert Ballagh, Charles Harper and Brendan Kennelly. For example, Thomas Kilroy links the casual cruelty with ‘*rigid codes of behaviour coupled with a moral code which operated on a level of guilt and fear rather than reason and love*’ (O’Donoghue, 1999, p 54)

In his study of Christian Brother orphanages and industrial schools in Australia between 1940 and 1960, Coldrey (2000) highlights not only a range of contextual issues but the fact that in such institutions very different outcomes can occur for different children. As he puts it:

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The institution was to be a refuge from the sordid environment of the festering urban slums from which the children had been rescued. For some, refuge and a second chance were the realities; for others, the asylum from neglect, abuse and chaotic living was itself a place of terror and degradation (ibid, p 354).

### **Beyond schools**

Revelations in recent years also suggest toxic strands of authoritarianism deeply embedded in the cultures of other Irish institutions. When Bishop Jim Moriarty resigned in 2010, following criticism of how the Dublin Archdiocese dealt with cases of clerical sex abuse, he stated ‘I should have challenged the prevailing culture’.<sup>14</sup> An inquiry into Irish banking failure noted, ‘...the Commission frequently found behaviour exhibiting bandwagon effects both between institutions (“herding”) and within them (“groupthink”)<sup>15</sup>. ‘Groupthink mentality’ is also central to Carragher’s<sup>16</sup> finding that RTE seriously defamed Fr Kevin Reynolds in its *Prime Time Investigates – Mission to Prey* programme. Cultural issues within the Gardaí in Co Donegal are central to the findings of the Morris Report<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Statement from Kildare and Leighlin Diocese, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Banking Inquiry: *Misjudging Risk: Causes of the Systemic Banking Crisis in Ireland*, (Nyberg Report), 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2011, available at <http://www.bankinginquiry.gov.ie/Documents/Misjudging%20Risk%20-%20Causes%20of%20the%20Systemic%20Banking%20Crisis%20in%20Ireland.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Anna Carragher, *Investigation Pursuant to section 53 of the Broadcasting Act 2009 in respect of the programme ‘Prime Time Investigates – Mission to Prey,’ broadcast on 23 May 2011*. 2012. Broadcasting Authority of Ireland at [http://www.bai.ie/?page\\_id=2660](http://www.bai.ie/?page_id=2660)

<sup>17</sup> Report into Certain Gardaí in the Donegal Division (The Morris Report), Government of Ireland, 2008. [http://www.morristribunal.ie/SITECONTENT\\_404.pdf](http://www.morristribunal.ie/SITECONTENT_404.pdf)

## **Discussion**

The evidence presented here from a broad selection of 20<sup>th</sup> century writers points to casual classroom cruelty as a persistent strand in Irish schooling. Boys appear to have been subjected to harsher physical punishment from teachers than girls. Authoritarian regimes predominated within schools. A majority learned to live with the harshness and were cowed into a compliance and submissiveness that many growing up in post Ryan Report Ireland find incredible. At the same time, accounts of brutality are frequently juxtaposed with warm positive memories of schooling.

Among the questions that arise from this partial survey are: has the abolition of corporal punishment, the disclosures of the Ryan Report, increased public appreciation of the vulnerability of children and greater respect for children's rights rendered concern about authoritarianism redundant? Within the inherited tradition of Irish schooling do some authoritarian practices persist? Does teaching attract a disproportionate number of people with authoritarian inclinations? Is there an instinctive authoritarianism associated with a teacher's identity? Can authoritarian practices in schools be isolated from authoritarianism in the wider society? How differently do we understand childhood today?

Teachers and child-care workers should be keenly aware that the exercise of authority can be oppressive and destructive, that in school contexts service is more appropriate than domination. Indicators of inclinations towards authoritarianism can include an excessive issuing of orders without explanations, threats of punishments for non-compliance with orders, heavy emphasis on status and regular reminders, subtle and otherwise, of power differentials, discouraging questioning, emphasising memorisation rather than analysis and generally treating students as passive spectators rather than as active learners. While power is not inherently oppressive, all teachers can benefit from reflecting on the concepts of between power-over, power-with, and power-to.

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Many Irish schools arose from clear visions of serving poor, marginalised people at a time when the State did not prioritise such responsibilities. This religious and humanitarian commitment also led some to establish residential institutions for orphaned, neglected and rejected children. The journey from original aspiration to the mire of abuse is laden with valuable lessons about motivation, vision, routines, monitoring, educational change, Church-State partnership, leadership and faithfulness to vision.

Today we have a more developed view of children's needs and rights. This heightens public revulsion at the Ryan Report and other revelations. The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989) which Ireland ratified in 1992, draws attention to issues of children's survival, protection, development and participation within society. Significant milestones in embedding a more positive view of children can be seen, for example, in the National Children's Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2000), legislation setting up the Office of the Ombudsman for Children (Government of Ireland, 2002) and the establishment, in 2011, of a distinct Department of Children and Youth Affairs headed by a cabinet minister. A more child-focused discourse is also evident in public policy statements. Indeed, schools and teachers can usefully evaluate their practices against the UNCRC (see, for example, Jeffers, 2014)

## **Conclusion**

The Ryan Report shocked. The selected autobiographies and memoirs of writers throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century offer testimony of many schools and classrooms as sites of casual cruelty. This appears to have been more widespread in boys' schools rather than in girls' schools. A persistent strand of authoritarianism emerges from the portrait as a strong feature of Irish schooling. Compliance and conformity appear as accompanying bedfellows to authoritarianism. Sometimes, in a counter intuitive observation, those who witnessed abusive behaviour sometimes juxtapose their accounts with warmer recollections of their schooldays,

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highlighting a complex interplay between memory, schooling and authoritarianism. This toxic combination of authoritarianism and conformity laced with a curious sense of institutional belonging appears to enable severe abuse of power including physical and sexual abuse.

The subsequent national conversation after the Ryan Report, while painful, also serves to illuminate aspects of a shared past, an inherited tradition. Whether we are learning from these insights or are constructing new mythologies remains unclear.

A final observation may be instructive. As the country struggled to come to terms with the Ryan Report's devastating revelations, further evidence tumbled into the national conversation with the publication of findings into Magdalen laundries in 2013. The echoes with Ryan are disturbing. For example, the Taoiseach's response to the McAleese Report<sup>18</sup> included the following:

...for generations Ireland had created a particular portrait of itself as a good living and God fearing nation. Through this and other reports we know this flattering self-portrait is fictitious. It would be easy to explain away all that happened and all we did with those great moral and social salves of "the culture back then", "the order of the day" and "the terrible times that were in it". By any standards it was a cruel, pitiless Ireland distinctly lacking in a quality of mercy<sup>19</sup>.

The Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Eamon Gilmore, likened the Ireland of the Magdalen

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<sup>18</sup> Martin McAleese, 'Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries' <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/MagdalenRpt2013>

<sup>19</sup> Enda Kenny, Dáil Eireann, 19<sup>th</sup> February 2013.



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Laundries to ‘a foreign country’ which he sees as ‘now a historical curiosity for a new generation of our citizens...’. He continued:

However, it is one thing to learn the bitter lessons of history; it is another to apply those lessons to Irish society today. What are those lessons? How it upholds human rights, and not any one version of morality, is a core barometer by which we should judge our State, its services and our society.<sup>20</sup>

Such lessons are especially relevant to those working in education.

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