

Reconceptualizing evaluation and assessment from a culturally responsive standpoint – An Irish perspective

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Abstract

This article explores the impact that Professor Stafford Hood had on the development of culturally responsive evaluation and assessment (CRE/A) in Ireland. Starting with a brief outline of the demographic and cultural changes that have happened in Ireland since the mid-1990s, the article discusses the initial encounters with Professor Hood and his introduction of the theories, practice and praxis of CRE/A to a group of Irish scholars. This engagement was formalized by the establishment of the CREA-Dublin, hosted in Dublin City University. The article examines how CREA-Dublin has used the culturally responsive lens to critique evaluation, assessment, and quality assurance practices within Ireland and across the European Union (EU). Outlining the impact of several major EU funded projects as well as locally initiated research, the article concludes by highlighting the centrality of Professor Hood as a scholar and an individual to the transformation of research and practice in the fields of evaluation and assessment on the island of Ireland and beyond.

“What’s Next?” (Hood, 2018a)

INTRODUCTION

Ireland, in common with many other European countries, has undergone a period of significant economic, social, and demographic transformation in the past 25 years. It is

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within this context that the authors of this article undertook their work in educational evaluation in general and culturally responsive evaluation (CRE) in particular. Part of a wider European group of researchers working in the field, the authors were directly influenced by their collaboration and friendship with Professor Stafford Hood who was intimately involved with their 20 year journey to integrate the ideas and concepts of CRE into Irish educational provision. In this article, we will seek to tell some of that story, exploring how we collectively assessed the relevance of CRE to an Irish context, used these insights to explore and innovate at the practice level, and moved beyond the particularities of the Irish education to examine how a CRE approach to educational evaluation might fit within the diverse cultures of education within Europe.

A changing Ireland in a changing Europe

One of the most striking global phenomena of recent decades has been the movement of populations between and within continents. In Europe, 2021 saw 2.26 million people move to the European Union (EU), many coming from areas of conflict, deprivation, and dysfunction. A significant subset of migrants to the EU are under 18 and in the period 2012–2022, over 2 million under 18 years old lodged asylum applications with the EU (Eurostat, 2023).

Although it is important to acknowledge that all migrants are not refugees or asylum seekers, the significant number of those seeking refuge in the EU who need to be integrated into compulsory education structures is striking (Brown et al., 2019). In Ireland, a similar dynamic can be seen. The period 2021–2022 saw an 85% increase in the number of immigrants arriving in Ireland—from 65,200 to 120,700—with an impact on the school-going population (Central Statistics Office, 2022). Indeed the most recent analysis of the Irish student population indicates that 12% of school going children at the age of 15 are from a migration background (EU, 2021) a figure in line with the overall migrant representation in the national population of 11.6% (Central Statistics Office, 2017).

These numbers are particularly striking in the context of Ireland which, while never as demographically homogenous as popular lore suggested (Bryan, 2010), was traditionally a country marked by relative insularity, cultural commonality, and emigration. In parallel to, and perhaps influenced by these demographic changes, was the notable social liberalization experienced by Ireland in this period. While the rapid diversification of the student population resulted in quite obvious changes across the continuum of education, the legal and ethical transformation also had a significant impact in an education system that was marked by its largely religious nature. A system that saw 93% of all primary schools and approximately 50% of secondary schools owned and controlled by the Catholic Church clearly faced challenges when seeking to accommodate a transitioning and more liberal legal and cultural milieu.

From evaluation to culturally responsive evaluation in Ireland

During this period of significant social and systemic change, the authors began their work on evaluation in general and educational evaluation in particular. Evaluation theory and practice in Ireland has largely been piecemeal in its development, drawing on a somewhat incoherent local professional base and being heavily influenced by the reporting requirements of the European Union (Boyle et al., 2020). One of the areas that contradicts this broad trend is education, which saw the emergence of a strong evaluative structure—the Inspectorate—in the mid-19th century. Based on a system of formal classroom

observations linked to public statements of quality for most of its existence, the late 1990s saw a transformation in how the Inspectorate was organized and operationalized. In its most recent iteration, the emphasis in compulsory school evaluation has been on the development of internal or self-evaluation capacity to act as an addition, or at times a counter-balance, to external quality judgments (Gardezi et al., 2023; McNamara et al., 2022). This approach is perhaps summarized by McNamara and O'Hara (2005, p. 271), which stated that the purpose of the school inspectorate in Ireland was to provide “an external validation of an internal evaluation.” Since the mid-2010s, there has also been a parallel focus on the inclusion of stakeholder voice—in this case parents, students, teachers, and community bodies—in the creation and interpretation of relevant data (Skerritt et al., 2023).

It is against this background that Professor Stafford Hood's long and fruitful relationship with the authors began. Our first meeting was a result of formal institutional ties between Dublin City University (DCU) and Professor Hood's then employer, Arizona State University (ASU). Following some very positive initial encounters in the early 2000s, the authors and Professor Hood initiated a series of increasingly formal engagements that ultimately resulted in the creation of the Centre for Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment—Dublin in 2010 (CREA-Dublin). This research center, hosted by the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection (EQI) at DCU has developed a unique profile as a European center exploring the impact of culture and cultural responsiveness on the way in which we think about and operationalize systems of quality assurance and development in Irish and European educational provision. In the course of nearly 2 decades of dynamic and developmental dialogue, Professor Hood challenged the authors to constantly interrogate how we understood the concept of culture and how we integrated this into evaluation structures in school and wider systemic levels in a way that enhanced the educational opportunities for all stakeholders (Frierson, Hood and Hughes, 2002; Hood, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2014, 2018b; Hood et al., 2015).

On culture and cultures

One of the more interesting challenges faced by the CREA-Dublin group when attempting to explore the relevance of CRE to an Irish context was to come to a working, and contextually relevant definition of culture (O'Hara et al., 2014). As experienced evaluation theorists, we were collectively familiar with Stake's (1976) concept of Responsive Evaluation, and in dialogue with Professor Hood, we became comfortable with his development of CRE from a US perspective. What was more challenging for us was the attempt to define “culture” in a manner that made sense contextually and historically. Our initial engagement, influenced by writers such as Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gorski (2009), among others, is perhaps best summarized by Spencer-Oatley (2008, p. 3), who argued that

Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people.

Within this broad definition, we were able to position Irish educational structures, designed in a colonial period, developed during a post-colonial state building phase and transitioning now in a period of rapid social transformation. The inclusion of beliefs—interpreted here as those relating to religious communities and practices—is also important in a system that is heavily influenced by confessional stances and structures (O'Brien et al., 2023). Interestingly, this dialogue has continued in partnership with a broad

community of European researchers who have become our partners across a number of EU funded Erasmus+ projects exploring the impact of cultural responsiveness (CR) in areas such as evaluation, planning, leadership, and assessment (Brown, McNamara, O'Hara, & Shevlin, 2020; McNamara et al., 2022). In the most recent iteration of these engagements, the Inter-cultural Community Evaluation and Planning (ICCEP) project, Altrichter (2023) expanded on the nature of culture from a European perspective, suggesting that it had performative, transformative, heterogenous, and identarian elements that are rooted in, at times overlapping, competences, power structures, and historical contexts (Barrett et al., 2014). Interestingly, from the perspective of an approach to evaluation that emphasizes stakeholder involvement at all levels, authors such as Altrichter (2023) and Tovey and Skolits (2022) suggest that a key element to any and all engagement rooted in cultural responsivity is one that exhibits the characteristics associated with “reflective-practice” as defined by Schön (2017). From this strong conceptual foundation, colleagues in CREA-Dublin, with the support of Professor Hood, sought to develop a series of practice-focused interventions in the field of CRE and it is to these that we now turn.

From evaluation to CRE—An Irish narrative

As has been mentioned earlier, the school evaluation system developed in Ireland is one that sees a structured dialogue between internal and external stakeholders based around publicly agreed standards. This process entitled *Looking at our Schools* is managed by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and is regularly revised in light of the changing educational and social contexts (DES, 2022). The perennial challenge has been to work out how new or under-represented groups can meaningfully be included in this process of dialogue and decision-making. This is particularly important in a process of evaluation that is characterized by what Boyle et al. (2020) define as one based on “reciprocity.”

Perhaps the first attempt to do this was developed with the cooperation of Professor Hood in the mid-2010s (Harrison et al., 2020). Working with the parent and student groups in a rural Irish school, the research sought to find ways of giving voice to the traditionally marginalized Gypsy-Roma-Traveler (GRT) community by involving them in the design and implementation of peer assessment and evaluation structures. Ultimately, this process was seen as giving greater ownership to these groups and finding a way of involving them in processes that were “more in line with requirements for active citizenship in a diverse society” (O'Brien et al., 2015, p. 225).

Useful though this process was, it did demonstrate certain gaps. One of the most important was how to overcome barriers of language, access, and cultural norms. Adebayo and Heinz (2023) highlight that while the intention for inclusion is there, quite often the mechanisms are absent. To address this, CREA-Dublin colleagues have been working in a formal way with others to build opportunities for engagement into existing structures. Work by O'Brien (2015, 2017, 2023) with school management bodies saw both teachers and students involved in the design of evaluation standards that could be used to assess the ethos and culture of their organizations. Both the outcome of this engagement and the development of agreed measures of quality and the highlighting of stakeholder voice was viewed as being particularly important and successful. This latter issue of voice and its prioritization was also central to a wide range of interventions developed as part of the Distributed Evaluation and Planning in Schools (DEAPS) process (Brown, McNamara, O'Brien, Skerritt, et al., 2020).

This latter point also underpins the work done with school leaders to prepare them to involve the voices and judgments of a wide variety of groups in their mode of decision

making. In a project organized in a rural Irish primary school, and led internationally by Professor Hood, a mode of leadership identified as “Distributed Culturally Responsive Leadership” was developed (Brown et al., 2019, 2022). This drew on many of the insights of CRE to find a way of generating culturally relevant evidence, which was used to inform leadership practice with a view to creating an integrative and integrated cultural context.

Perhaps the final, and in some ways most significant, recent development in CRE in Ireland has been the creation of the DCU Shaped Professional Learning Network. Comprising 152 schools, it is based in Northern Ireland, a society that is emerging from an extended period of civic strife where culture and cultural identity has been used as a way of demarcating difference and ensuring continuing division (O’Hara et al., 2021). Drawing on ideas of networking and what was termed “polycentric evaluation” (Brown et al., 2020), this network pioneered a mode of evaluation that drew on the entire resources of a designated community area, making quality judgments that were rooted in a collective rather than an individual approach. A key part of this was the involvement, in a structured and meaningful way, of community stakeholders from a variety of cultural, economic, and civic backgrounds (Altrichter, 2023).

CONCLUSION

In some ways, writing this article has been an impossible task. It is simply not feasible to encapsulate a 20-year personal and professional engagement with a scholar of the status of Professor Hood, given word limits. It is sufficient to say that he was an inspiration, a regular voice of encouragement and challenge, and ultimately, a companion on the road to a better society. We collectively and individually remember him with gratitude and affection and are determined to keep asking ourselves “what’s next” as he did.

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