

# Literacy in the Irish Reformatory School

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**Summary:** Literacy and education have long been acknowledged as key factors underpinning essential competencies and influencing lifestyle, social achievement and career choices in Ireland. The impact and effect of institutions and institutionalisation over the last century in Ireland on the children and young adult residents has, over recent years, raised serious concerns as a result of allegations of institutionalised abuse and neglect over many years involving many thousands of children in the care of the State and its agents. The author considers the history of literacy assessment and education in the Reformatory and Industrial Schools. The lack of detailed oversight in institutions formally designated as schools is explored. The author describes the educational opportunities provided by the schools and discusses their links with employment on discharge and the consequences of limited education and poor literacy for the former residents.

**Keywords:** Ireland, nineteenth century, twentieth century, reformatory schools, industrial schools, children, crime, juvenile justice, courts, literacy, education, Residential Institutions Redress Board, Magdalen Asylums, Department of Education, employment.

## Introduction

The term ‘literacy’ encompasses the ability to read and write, skills that humans have used for over five thousand years (Scribner and Cole, 1981, p. 3). During most of that time, until relatively recently, it was possible to negotiate everyday life with little or no literacy. The introduction of compulsory State schooling in the nineteenth century generated an expectation that all adults should be able to read and write. This expectation, accompanied by the wider use of printed documents to organise daily life, stigmatised those who were illiterate (Howard, 2012, p. 5). The twentieth century became increasingly print-mediated, where

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documents such as instruction manuals and application forms required increased levels of reading and writing ability. Literacy skills are a vital prerequisite in the technology-rich environment of the twenty-first century. They underpin competencies such as computer literacy, financial literacy, health literacy and information literacy. In our digitally-mediated social world, those with insufficient literacy to meet the basic requirements of daily life risk being marginalised and excluded.

Literacy levels generally increase in relation to years spent in schooling (e.g. Denny, Harmon, McMahon and Redmond, 1999, p. 223), but this was not the case in the Irish Reformatory and Industrial Schools. The Residential Institutions Redress Board acknowledge that many former residents emerged with low levels of literacy (2005, Section 12). Although very little information about the Reformatory and Industrial Schools entered the public domain, the Annual Reports of the Department of Education included a general overview and some statistical information about them every year. They particularly noted the literacy level of children on admission, and the presence of annual literacy statistics provided the initial impetus for this article. Why were these literacy assessments made, and what were the consequences?

This article considers the historical antecedents of the literacy assessments in the Reformatory and Industrial Schools, discusses their links with employment on discharge, and describes the educational opportunities provided by the schools. Historical documents from the Department of Education are used to extrapolate from the literacy statistics provided in the Annual Reports. The literacy assessments ultimately provide a lens through which to view the educational provisions within the Schools, focusing particular attention on the Reformatory Schools.

## **Historical background**

Reformatories were originally established in Britain by charitable societies such as the London-based Reformatory and Refuge Union. They accommodated children convicted of crimes who would otherwise have been sent to prison, the age of criminal responsibility at that time being seven years. Juvenile offenders formed up to one-third of the Irish prison population in the years prior to the introduction of the Reformatory Schools Act in 1858 (Reformatory and Refuge Journal

XXVII, 1865, p. 38). The Act provided State funding, certification and inspection for schools that accepted convicted children. The first Irish Reformatory School to be certified was for girls at High Park, Drumcondra in December 1858, run by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge. By 1862, there were nine certified schools in Ireland, with separate Reformatories for Protestant and Catholic children (HMSO, 1862, p. 3).

Reformatory Schools accepted children convicted of crimes, while Industrial Schools catered for neglected, orphaned and abandoned children. Suitable provisions for education and training were to be provided in both types of school.

Reformatory Schools were for children aged between twelve and sixteen years, convicted of an offence that would have resulted in imprisonment or penal servitude in an adult. They could be detained up to the age of nineteen years. Following release, they remained under the supervision of the Reformatory School manager until their nineteenth birthday. Table 1 below shows the admission rates to the Irish Reformatory Schools for selected years in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Committal to Reformatory School was often imposed on first conviction throughout both centuries, with no consistency in sentencing. The most common offences were Larceny and Housebreaking. Other convictions recorded for these years include Unlawful Possession (thirty admissions), Wilful Damage (twenty-four admissions), Receiving (thirteen admissions), and Vagrancy (thirteen admissions). The Commission of Investigation into Child Abuse remarks that these were generally offences of poverty rather than of criminality (Volume 1, 2009, p. 620). Children originally admitted to Industrial Schools could be committed to a Reformatory School for absconding (eleven admissions), and for 'Refusing to Conform to Rules of Industrial School' (four admissions). In 1959, two girls were committed to Reformatory School for 'Having a Parent who does not Exercise Proper Guardianship'.

A variety of residential provisions for poor children existed in Ireland by the mid-nineteenth century, funded by charitable organisations such as the London-based Reformatory and Refuge Union. This organisation funded Industrial Ragged Schools in Cork and Limerick, accommodating destitute children (Reformatory and Refuge Journal XXXIV, 1867). Industrial Schools were given a legal basis in Ireland from 1869, and by 1899, there were seventy-one Industrial Schools with

8,422 residents (Coolahan, 1981, p. 191). Industrial Schools were used to accommodate neglected children under fourteen years found wandering or begging. They also accommodated children with a criminal conviction if they were younger than twelve years, and sometimes up to fourteen years. The children could be detained until sixteen years old, and remained under the supervision of the school manager until their eighteenth birthday (Department of Education, 1926, p. 84). The Children Act 1941 allowed the periods of post-release supervision for both types of school to be extended up to twenty-one years of age.

**Table 1:** Admissions to Reformatory Schools for Selected Years

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Larceny</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>House Breaking</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
<b>1863</b>	<b>153</b>	113	40	<b>118</b>	90	28	<b>4</b>	3	1
<b>1864</b>	<b>184</b>	148	36	<b>116</b>	88	28	<b>2</b>	2	0
<b>1865</b>	<b>160</b>	118	42	<b>115</b>	80	35	<b>4</b>	4	0
<b>1926</b>	<b>26</b>	22	4	<b>17</b>	14	3	<b>7</b>	7	0
<b>1929</b>	<b>39</b>	32	7	<b>16</b>	12	4	<b>12</b>	12	0
<b>1932</b>	<b>32</b>	25	7	<b>14</b>	9	5	<b>8</b>	8	0
<b>1935</b>	<b>44</b>			<b>23</b>	19	4	<b>16</b>	16	0
<b>1938</b>	<b>71</b>	61	10	<b>35</b>	28	7	<b>23</b>	23	0
<b>1941</b>	<b>100</b>	91	9	<b>66</b>	59	7	<b>20</b>	19	1
<b>1944</b>	<b>121</b>	101	20	<b>54</b>	39	15	<b>48</b>	47	1
<b>1947</b>	<b>88</b>	78	10	<b>38</b>	30	8	<b>38</b>	37	1
<b>1950</b>	<b>97</b>	86	11	<b>48</b>	40	8	<b>40</b>	40	0
<b>1953</b>	<b>82</b>	70	12	<b>37</b>	27	10	<b>38</b>	36	2
<b>1956</b>	<b>93</b>	87	6	<b>34</b>	28	6	<b>49</b>	49	0
<b>1959</b>	<b>125</b>	112	13	<b>41</b>	32	9	<b>61</b>	61	0

Sources: Third, Fourth and Fifth Reports of Inspector of Irish Reformatory Schools, HMSO 1863–1865; Department of Education Annual Reports 1928–1960

Following the Ministers and Secretaries Act 1924, the Irish Department of Education took over formal responsibility for the remaining four Reformatory Schools and fifty-two Industrial Schools. The Department of Education's function was to inspect and certify that the schools were fit for receiving the children committed to them. On certification, the

State contributed Capitation Grants. Local Authorities paid towards the maintenance of children from their areas, and judges could make orders compelling parents to pay a contribution towards their children's upkeep on committal (Department of Education, 1926, p. 84).

From 1927 until 1944, there were two Reformatory Schools, one for boys managed by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (the Oblates) and one for girls managed by the Good Shepherd Sisters in Limerick. The Oblates established St Kevin's Reformatory for Boys in Glencree, Co Wicklow in 1857 and St Conleth's Reformatory School in Daingean, Co Offaly in 1870. Both were housed in former army barracks. Glencree closed in 1927 and the only remaining Reformatory School for Boys was at Daingean, with 250 places. Due to the poor state of repair in Daingean, the boys from Daingean were transferred to Glencree in 1934, but they were transferred back to Daingean again in 1940 when Glencree was deemed unfit by the Department of Education (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Volume 1, 2009, pp. 609–614). Despite the poor state of conditions in Daingean, this remained the sole Reformatory School for Boys until it closed in 1973, as recommended in the Kennedy Report. The Oblates continued to manage Scoil Árd Mhuire in Oberstown, Lusk, Co. Dublin from 1972 until 1984.

St Joseph's Reformatory School for Girls in Limerick, managed by the Good Shepherd Sisters, was certified in 1859. By 1927, it was the sole Reformatory School for girls. A second Reformatory School for girls was opened in 1944 by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge, who had opened the first Reformatory in High Park and also ran several Magdalen Laundries (also known as Magdalen asylums). St Ann's Reformatory School Kilmacud provided eighty places for girls convicted of sexual offences until it closed in 1984. In 1989, the two female religious orders became trustees of the Ruhama organisation (McGarry, 2011).

The Department of Education Annual Report in 1926 states that the Reformatory and Industrial Schools are conducted by voluntary managers, responsible for the upkeep of buildings, appointment of staff, expenditure of funds and all details of the school management (1926, p. 85). In practice, the existing schools were all managed by Catholic religious orders and the staff were generally members of those orders. While many were described as teachers, not all were trained. By agreement with the Department of Education, young men and women entering religious orders were sent to teach and supervise children in the

Reformatory and Industrial Schools, with limited teacher training and negligible childcare training (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Volume 1, 2009, p. 78). As the religious orders demanded vows of obedience, personal preferences regarding work placements were not considered. Thus, many of the staff allocated to work with children in Reformatory and Industrial Schools were untrained, unskilled and likely to be unsuited to the role. The limited training provisions are evident in the description of a childcare course provided for the managers and sisters in charge of 'Children's Homes' in 1953. The Sisters of Mercy provided the course at Carysfort Training College from 19th to 28th August 1953, arranged with the advice and approval of Archbishop McQuaid of Dublin:

At least one Sister and, in some cases, two or three, from each Girls' and Junior Boys' Industrial School attended the Course. The Course was very successful and the many aspects of Child Care dealt with by the lecturers were listened to with the greatest enthusiasm and interest. There is every reason to believe that among the benefits of this Course will be further improvements in school standards, the increased welfare and happiness of the children in the schools and a better preparation of them for life. (Department of Education, 1954, p. 37)

### **Annual reports**

The First Report of the Inspector of Irish Reformatory Schools was published in 1862. Subsequently, an annual Report on the Reformatory and Industrial Schools was presented to the British Parliament. In 1922, the Report was addressed to the Irish Minister of Local Government. The 1923 and 1924 Reports were presented to the Minister for Education. From then on, the Department of Education incorporated a short review of the Reformatories and Industrial Schools into their Annual Reports.

In the 1928 Annual Report and in succeeding years, the first chapter discusses Primary Schools and the second chapter deals with Secondary Schools. Chapters dealing with the National Library, the National Museum and other responsibilities of the Department of Education come before the chapter on the Industrial and Reformatory Schools. The reports physically reflect a distinction between Reformatory and Industrial Schools and the other schools, regarding the systems as

separate entities, just as the children in the Reformatory and Industrial Schools were regarded as a separate and distinct group.

The 1928 Annual Report provides a fuller account of the Reformatory and Industrial Schools, reflecting a closer familiarity with the schools due to the new regulatory role undertaken since 1924. The Report outlines the provisions for children in both types of school, and it displays the underlying belief that such schools were of a high standard in terms of personnel and intention.

In addition to receiving instruction in the usual subjects of the Primary Schools' Programme, the pupils of these schools are trained in certain trades. The training for boys includes carpentry, tailoring, shoemaking and farm and garden work – and where numbers and other facilities exist there is some additional choice of occupation. For girls, training in practical domestic economy subjects is the invariable rule. Besides the ordinary physical requirements of feeding, clothing, housing etc., each school has to provide medical attention necessary in individual cases. Last, but certainly not least, is the moral training and character formation, by instruction, conduct and the personal influence of responsible members of the staffs. In no other schools do the personal qualities of the teachers and assistants have such vital or far-reaching effect. The upbringing of children in good homes is not always a simple problem. When children have to depend entirely on a school for what their homes should give them, much more than efficient instruction and material comfort is of importance, and it will be obvious that, apart from arrangements for education and physical wants, there is good reason to avoid any exaction of a hard and fast uniformity in other phases of school activity and to encourage whatever may relieve the institutional features of such schools. (Department of Education, 1928, p. 83)

Daily Religious Instruction was made obligatory when the schools were established, and the high place given to Industrial Schools in the Annual Reports of the Diocesan Inspectors [Religious] shows that the intelligence of the pupils compares favourably with that of the other schools when there is opportunity for comparison. (Department of Education, 1928, p. 89)

Despite the commitment to education and religious instruction outlined in these introductory remarks, the educational provisions are a cause for

concern to the Department of Education. The reports discuss particular reservations in relation to what is termed 'literary attainment'. The 1928 Report, referring to previous decades, asserts that '... there is evidence that education in most of the Irish schools was better than it was in general elsewhere' (p. 87), but goes on to state that, despite these past achievements, the situation has changed in recent years. It refers to a Department of Education Circular sent to all Industrial School managers in 1922 that had required them to adopt the entire National School Curriculum. The 1928 Report found:

For many years, however, the literary side of the work was very backward. The fourth class of the National School programme was considered sufficient for the needs of Industrial School pupils, and Irish history and language were not considered suitable for them. In addition to this, there was no definite literary instruction exacted for pupils who had completed their 13th year and entered industrial schools at 10, 11 or 12 years of age, and had little or no education when committed. (Department of Education, 1928, p. 88)

The Report states that '... a successful attempt is being made now in all the schools to combine a full Primary Education with sound practical training' (p. 88). However, the outcome of this attempt is less successful than anticipated. The Reports for 1930 and 1931 identify a continuing imbalance between industrial training and literary instruction in both the Industrial and Reformatory Schools:

The industrial training of the boys in the majority of the [Industrial] schools may be said to have yielded good results, but the literary standard attained in some cases might be higher. In this connection it is just possible that the balance between the two classes of instruction needs to be adjusted, and attention is being given to this matter. (Department of Education, 1930, p. 126)

In some of the schools perhaps, these claims [industrial training] receive too generous recognition, which might be curtailed in the interests of other phases of the school life, including the literary instruction. (Department of Education, 1931, p. 105)



Reports in succeeding years contain similar statements indicating criticism of the educational provisions. Forty years later, the Committee on Reformatory and Industrial Schools (the Kennedy Report) found that educational facilities in the schools did not take the educational needs of the children into account (1970, Section 7.2).

The Annual Reports demonstrate a tension between the Department of Education's concern with poor educational standards and the lack of a mechanism to address this concern. The Reformatory and Industrial Schools pre-existed the foundation of the Irish State, and their practices were already long established by the time the Department of Education came into being in 1924. The Annual Reports indicate that the School managers implemented the Department's instructions and official circulars as they saw fit, acting with a large degree of autonomy. The 1922 Circular instituting a full National School Curriculum was not implemented in some schools, and the Department seemed unable to compel compliance or to impose any sanctions.

This tension between funding and control can be seen in other interactions between the Catholic teaching orders and the State. The negotiations between the Christian Brothers and the Department of Education in 1924–25 is one example. The Christian Brothers chose to operate their network of primary and secondary schools independently of British State funding, but in 1924 they sought funding from the new Irish Department of Education. The Department voiced concern regarding the number of untrained teachers within the Christian Brothers' schools, among other things, but the Catholic hierarchy disregarded these concerns. The eventual agreement saw the Christian Brothers schools taken under nominal State control, which provided funding but allowed all other control to reside with the religious order (Hyland 1980). The Catholic hierarchy retained final authority, casting the Department as a source of funding rather than governance. The Christian Brothers deducted stipends from the Department's capitation grants for all Brothers resident in the monasteries attached to the Industrial Schools run by the order, whether they held a post within the school or not (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Volume 1, 2009, p. 74). In a similar fashion, the Oblates in Daingean Reformatory School supported all their priests and brothers resident there from the Department's capitation grant, although few of them worked in the school (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Volume 1, 2009, p. 684).

### **Literacy assessment on admission – historical antecedents**

From 1863 to 1959, the British Inspectorate and later the Irish Department of Education published annual statistical tables relating to literacy levels on admission to Reformatory and Industrial Schools. The rationale for assessing literacy on admission is not explained anywhere in the reports. However, literacy assessments were a particular feature of earlier reports on Reformatory Schools. In 1862, the Third Annual Report for St Kevin's Reformatory School in Glencree lists the literacy of the thirty-nine boys admitted during 1861:

The educational condition of these boys on admission was as follows:–

8 could read moderately well

11 very imperfectly

20 not at all

3 could write moderately well

10 very imperfectly

26 not at all

(Third Report of St Kevin's Reformatory School Glencree 1862, p. 9)

A similar list of the literacy abilities of the 236 boys already resident there in 1861 is given on page 10 of the Report, with a matching list regarding their improvement in literacy during the year.

The First Report of the Inspector of Reformatory Schools in Ireland in 1862 contains narrative accounts of the nine certified schools visited and an overall assessment of the conditions in the schools. Inspector Walter Crofton finds that:

The educational and industrial progress in the different schools appears to me to be good, and that considerable attention is directed by the Managers and Committees to this very important point. (HMSO, 1862, p. 4)

In 1863, the Third Report by Inspector Patrick Murray presents detailed tables of the age, gender, social conditions and previous committals of the children resident in all the Reformatory Schools in 1863 and 1864 (HMSO, 1865). The tables include a section headed 'State of Instruction on Admission', and the categories are: Neither Read nor Write, Read or Read and Write Imperfectly, Read and Write Well, Superior Instruction,

and Instruction not Ascertained. These terms are not defined. The Inspector's Reports in subsequent years continue this format. The Industrial Schools also use this format, reproduced in Barnes (1989, p. 144). The Irish Department of Education publish tables on literacy in the Annual Reports from 1926 until 1959. As in previous years, these tables are entitled 'State of Instruction on Admission', presenting literacy level as an indicator of educational attainment.

The 1862 report on St Kevin's Reformatory School provides information about literacy at both admission and on discharge, demonstrating the overall improvement achieved. The Inspector's Reports record literacy level on admission only, without any corresponding indication of change over time. The Department of Education similarly provides details of literacy on admission. There is no indication of improvement during the time spent in the Schools, which was usually a committal period of two years in Reformatory Schools. Children committed to the Industrial Schools could spend many years there.

There are no statistical tables on the literacy of children attending National, Secondary or Vocational Schools in that era. This suggests that the practice of assessing literacy on admission was an integral part of the management of the Reformatory and Industrial Schools rather than a requirement of the Department of Education.

Table 2 shows the relevant figures for literacy on admission to the Reformatory Schools for every third year from 1926 until 1959. Table 3 shows figures in relation to selected years for the Industrial Schools, although note that the age range is different, reflecting the younger age groups admitted to these schools.

The figures, although incomplete, indicate that many of the children admitted to the Reformatory and Industrial Schools were deemed 'illiterate'. In both tables, only 18 per cent of the overall assessments indicated an ability to read and write well, with the majority assessed as having only imperfect or moderate literacy.

The literacy assessments in the Reformatory and Industrial Schools were probably much more arbitrary than is suggested by these tables. The Reports do not define the terms used, making it difficult to understand the differences between categories such as 'Imperfect literacy' and 'Moderate Literacy'. There is no information on the literacy test used or how it was applied. The Reports make no reference to literacy tests in use by National Schools in those years. Research studies of Irish pupils' literacy undertaken in the 1960s and early 1970s used British assessment tests (e.g.

Macnamara, 1966; Swan, 1978). The UCD Department of Psychology used their own tests to assess the literacy of children in the Reformatory and Industrial Schools in 1970 (Committee on Reformatory and Industrial Schools 1970, p. 113). The first Irish standardised literacy tests were not developed until the mid-1970s (Greaney, 1977). In 1926, there were two Reformatories and fifty-two Industrial Schools in the State, with three and forty-eight respectively by 1959 when the last table was published, so variation in assessment and categorisation has to be taken into account. Successive educational enquiries such as the Investment in Education survey (Department of Education, 1965), and the more recent McAleese Committee (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2013, p. 333) experienced difficulties in matching officially published statistics with physical documentation. It is entirely possible that that these literacy assessments have no extant supporting documentary evidence. Howsoever they were collated, returns on literacy assessments were forwarded to the Department of Education every year and duly published in the Annual Reports. This confers on them the appearance of being objective, reliable and relevant statistical information.

**Table 2:** Level of Literacy on Admission to Reformatory School for Selected Years  
Age Range: 12–16 years

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Illiterate</i>	<i>Imperfect Literacy</i>	<i>Moderate Literacy</i>	<i>Read &amp; Write Well</i>	<i>Superior Literacy</i>
<b>1926</b>	13	10	0	3	0	0
<b>1929</b>	39	15	13	11	0	0
<b>1932</b>	27	1	11	7	8	0
<b>1935</b>	44	1	10	33	0	0
<b>1938</b>	71	0	59	7	5	0
<b>1941</b>	100	2	28	43	27	0
<b>1944</b>	121	9	44	47	21	0
<b>1947</b>	88	15	28	28	17	0
<b>1950</b>	97	10	37	30	20	0
<b>1953</b>	82	13	*28	26	15	0
<b>1956</b>	93	8	28	31	26	0
<b>1959</b>	125	8	49	41	27	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>900</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>307</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>0</b>

\* Includes one girl aged under 12 years. Source: Department of Education Annual Reports 1928–1960

**Table 3:** Level of Literacy on Admission to Industrial School for Selected Years  
Age Range: 10–14 Years

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Illiterate</i>	<i>Imperfect Literacy</i>	<i>Moderate Literacy</i>	<i>Read &amp; Write Well</i>	<i>Superior Literacy</i>
<b>1926</b>	384	97	128	129	30	0
<b>1932</b>	314	38	113	119	43	1
<b>1938</b>	377	59	109	132	76	1
<b>1944</b>	412	62	109	143	92	6
<b>1950</b>	277	18	95	103	58	3
<b>1956</b>	226	18	61	76	71	0
<b>1959</b>	267	35	68	127	37	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>2,257</b>	<b>327</b>	<b>683</b>	<b>829</b>	<b>407</b>	<b>11</b>

Source: Department of Education Annual Reports 1928–1960

### Literacy levels in the wider society

In the absence of any comparative data on the literacy levels of National School pupils in this era, data on attendance rates, early school leaving rates and failure rates in the Primary Certificate examinations from the Department of the Education Annual Reports are used to indicate literacy rates.

Akenson remarks that the Irish school attendance rate in the period 1920–1951 never reached the 85 per cent level seen as the minimum acceptable even in remote areas in Britain (1975, p. 68). In 1926, there was an average attendance rate of 77.6 per cent, indicating that 118,000 of those registered on the school rolls were not attending school (Department of Education, 1929). A gradual improvement over the intervening years saw a school attendance rate of 86.2 per cent by 1959, with 67,721 non-attenders in that year (Department of Education, 1960).

In 1929, 9,328 children sat the first Primary Certificate examinations, with a failure rate of 20 per cent. Increasingly larger numbers of children sat the examination and obtained the Primary Certificate. By 1959, there were 38,914 candidates, and while 16 per cent failed, the numbers passing indicated an improvement in overall educational attainment.

Despite depicting the gradual improvement, these statistics also suggest that literacy difficulties existed among those absent from school and those failing basic primary-level examinations.

Education journals and education conference reports during the 1930s and 1940s contained regular complaints of poor reading and writing among second-level pupils. One teacher newsletter in 1939 remarked that it was 'dishonest' and 'damaging educationally' to ignore the poor standard of English reading and writing of many fourteen year olds arriving to the Day Vocational Schools (Vocational Education Bulletin, November 1939, p. 327). Similar remarks appeared in other issues of the newsletter. In 1940, the President of the Irish Technical Education Association referred to young men attending committee meetings of the GAA, the Gaelic League, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael who were unable to write resolutions or simple letters (Irish Technical Education Association 1940, p. 30).

Difficulties with literacy were evident among National School pupils, among pupils whose families supported them in second-level schools and among young men who were sufficiently integrated into their communities to be involved in cultural and political organisations. The sole group whose literacy was measured were the children in the Reformatory and Industrial Schools. This provided a way to set them apart from the other children in Irish society, who were deemed to be fully literate despite the rates of non-school attendance, early school leaving, and Primary Certificate failure.

### **Employment on discharge**

Literacy was of little consequence for the future employment for those leaving the Reformatory and Industrial Schools. In the nineteenth century, progression to farm work and domestic service was actively encouraged (Barnes, 1989, p. 131). The first reports describe boys clearing and tilling the land around recently established reformatory schools.

The laborious work of clearing and reclaiming the waste land has been continued whenever the weather permitted us to engage in out-door employment.

Fifteen acres are this year sown with potatoes, turnips, oats, &c. The kitchen garden has been much improved, and the immediate neighbourhood of the Institution is beginning to attest, by its verdant and cultivated appearance, the amount of toil expended upon it. (Third Report of St Kevin's Reformatory School Glencree, 1862, p. 11)

In the nineteenth century, some of the girls' schools developed good reputations as sources of well-trained domestic staff. These practices continued into the twentieth century. While many boys and girls were discharged to 'family and friends', others were placed in employment by the schools. A third of the boys discharged from Industrial Schools in 1926 were employed as 'Farm Boys', while two thirds of the girls were employed as 'General Servants' and 'Maids'.

A decade later, the report for 1938 remarks that constant enquiries are made to the schools for farm workers and domestic servants (Department of Education, 1939, p. 114). Tables 4 and 5 show details for those discharged to employment from the Industrial Schools in selected years between 1926 and 1959. Farm work accounted for up to 40 per cent of the boys annually, while between 60 per cent and 80 per cent of the girls were placed as domestic servants, maids and cooks every year.

A similar pattern is evident in the discharges to employment from Reformatory Schools depicted in Table 6 for selected years. The Annual Reports provide more detail regarding the smaller numbers leaving the Reformatory Schools. Discharge to farm work, manual labour and domestic service remained at a constant level for those years. Two relevant factors that had a bearing on these employment pathways were, first, the need to secure board and lodgings for young people who had no families to provide for them and, second, the impact of trade union restrictions in relation to apprenticeships (Department of Education, 1929, p. 88). Farm work, manual work and domestic service continued to be the main employment categories until the 1950s, when categories of 'Hotel Worker' and 'Factory Worker' began to appear, reflecting changes in the wider society.

**Table 4:** Boys – Employment Following Discharge from Industrial School: Percentages in Selected Years

<i>YEAR</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>% Defence Forces</i>	<i>% Farm Work</i>	<i>% Tailors</i>	<i>% Shoe-makers</i>	<i>% Other</i>
<b>1926</b>	<b>308</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>1932</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>1938</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>41.7</b>
<b>1944</b>	<b>425</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>1950</b>	<b>365</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>1956</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>1959</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>44</b>

Source: Department of Education Annual Reports 1928–1960

**Table 5:** Girls – Employment Following Discharge from Industrial School: Percentages in Selected Years

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>% Domestic Service</i>	<i>% Maids</i>	<i>% Cooks</i>	<i>% Laundry Maids</i>	<i>% Other</i>
<b>1926</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>1932</b>	<b>263</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>1938</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>1944</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>19.5</b>
<b>1950</b>	<b>266</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>1956</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>1959</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>12</b>

Source: Department of Education Annual Reports 1928–1960



**Table 6: Boys – Employment Following Discharge from Reformatory School: Numbers in Selected Years**

Year	No	Defence Forces	Farm Work	Gardener	General Labourer	Baker	Carpentry	Carter	Messenger	House Boy	Shop Assistant	Shoe Maker	Hotel Work	Factory	Other
1926	20	0	4		2		1		8	1	2				2
1929	*17														
1932	25	2	10	1	4			4	1						3
1935	19	0	5			2	2		1		4	4			1
1938	25	2	5			2	3	1	3		2	5			2
1941	29	10	3		4				3		4	4			1
1944	59	7	13	6	5	5	2	3	4		6	7			1
1947	52	7	10	5	5	2	1	2	6	2	1	4	3		4
1950	66	4	8	4	9	3	6	4	9	7	5	3	2		2
1953	47	6	9	2	8		2		4	5	6	1		3	1
1956	40	4	4		7		4	2	2	3	8	2		3	1
1959	30	8	4		6								5	6	1

\*No further details given. **Other:** Includes Van Boy, Printer, Blacksmith, Tailor, Clerk, Motor Engineer, Fishing, British Navy, Turf Worker, Marine. Source: Department of Education Annual Reports 1928–1960

**Table 7:** Girls – Employment Following Discharge from Reformatory School: Numbers in Selected Years

<i>Year</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>General Servant</i>	<i>Machinist/ Factory Work</i>	<i>Religious Community</i>
1926	2	1		1
1929	4	No Details		
1932	3	3		
1935	2	1	1	
1938	0			
1941	0			
1944	3	3		
1947	14	14		
1950	5	3	2	
1953	8	*7	1	
1956	5	5		
1959	5	5		

\* Including 1 Laundry Maid. Source: Department of Education Annual Reports 1928–1960

The category of Laundry Maid appears in both of the tables relating to girls. Chapter Ten of the McAleese Report (Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform, 2013, pp. 325–433) describes the legal provisions allowing transfer between the Reformatory and Industrial Schools and the Magdalen Laundries. The report acknowledges that the Schools generally placed girls in more conventional convent laundries, school laundries and ‘other laundries’ (p. 334). However, the Limerick Girls’ Reformatory School and five of the Industrial Schools were co-located with Magdalen Laundries, and many admissions to the Laundries came from these as well as from other Industrial Schools. At least 622 documented instances of girls being placed in the Magdalen Laundries from the Reformatory and Industrial Schools were identified by the Commission. Some girls were released on licence at sixteen years and placed directly in the Laundries, and some were placed there on discharge aged sixteen or seventeen years. The provisions for post-release supervision up to the age of twenty-one allowed school managers to recall girls formerly resident in the schools and place them in Magdalen Laundries.

Placements from the Industrial and Reformatory Schools accounted for 7.8 per cent of known residents in the laundries. This group of entrants had the lowest mean age (17.8 years) and median age (seventeen years) of all the entry categories (Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform, 2013, p. 328). The youngest known resident in a Magdalen Laundry was placed there from an Industrial School at nine years old in the late 1930s. In the 1960s, a thirteen year old girl was discharged from an Industrial School to a Magdalen Laundry, where she remained for two years (Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform, 2013, pp. 325–433). The Magdalen Laundries were work-orientated institutions, and any girl placed there was unlikely to improve her educational attainment.

### **Educational opportunities**

The Reformatory and Industrial Schools provided a service for children deemed to be criminally deviant, destitute or neglected. Once legal provision was made for admission to the Schools, the quality and standard of the care and education provided was not questioned to any extent. In the absence of any explicit explanation for the literacy assessments, it is useful to look at statements in the Annual Reports, which suggest that poor literacy offered a justification for providing limited educational resources:

The educational possibilities of these [Reformatory] schools have hitherto been much restricted because a large percentage of their pupils were almost entirely illiterate when committed. Of those (26) admitted during the year 1925–26, 8 boys and 2 girls were illiterate, and only 1 boy and 2 girls could be said to have reached even a moderate proficiency in reading and writing. In addition to this, many of these pupils have a peculiar instability frequently associated with delinquents. These conditions control to some extent the occupational training of the pupils. The trades of shoemaking and tailoring with farm work are the chief employments at present in the boys' school, and domestic training in the girls' school. (Department of Education 1928, p. 86)

The statistics in the Report show that of the 71 young persons admitted to the Reformatory Schools, 59, of whom 51 were over 14

years of age, could read and write, but imperfectly. This condition which is not peculiar to the year under review has been noted on previous occasions; in view of the age of the pupils and the generally low standard of their education it is necessary to concentrate on a course of instruction that would be helpful to them when they take up employment. (Department of Education, 1939, p. 114)

In the nineteenth century reports, great attention was paid to the food provided for the children, to ensure that the nutrition would sustain health without supplying any excess energy for troublemaking. In the First Report on Reformatory Schools, the Inspector remarked that it was important to ensure that the food provided was the minimum quantity required to preserve health and perform the work required. He stressed the importance of guarding against anything which could operate ‘as a premium to the commission of crime’ (HMSO, 1862, p. 7). Severe malnutrition was recognised as grounds for redress under the Residential Institutions Redress Scheme, identifying it as an acknowledged feature of the Irish Reformatory and Industrial Schools. A research study conducted by Feeley (2014) among former residents of Industrial Schools presents first-hand accounts of the limited resources provided for them. Many of the research respondents, as well as recalling a constant lack of food, recall a similar dearth of reading material in the residential environment.

Many respondents cited little or no access to literacy resources, toys, games or other material stimulus to develop either written or spoken language. (Feeley, 2014, p. 95)

One woman recalled that the library books in her classroom were only available twice a year when the state inspector was present and then many of those who were given momentary possession of them were unable to read them. (Feeley, 2014, p. 96)

Former residents also remark upon the presence of untrained teachers.

Even pupils who were literate before moving into care regressed in the uncaring environment of the ‘inside’ school and classroom. Those pupils with any form of learning difficulty were given no specialised

support and individual learning needs were ignored. (Feeley, 2014, p. 101)

The capacity of parents or family members to provide material resources for their children had an impact on literacy skills, for example in the provision of books and the exchange of letters (Feeley, 2014, p. 104). Some schools had a benign approach to literacy, allowing books and comics and encouraging learning, but others focused on physical work rather than on education. Many children in these latter schools did not learn even the basics of literacy (Feeley, 2014, p. 107). Although these statements refer to Industrial Schools, they are equally relevant to the Reformatory Schools. The Residential Institutions Redress Scheme recognised that the failure to provide minimum levels of schooling and literacy constituted serious neglect, psychological injury and loss of opportunity eligible for redress payments (Residential Institutions Redress Board 2005, Section 12).

The Oblates informed the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse that the boys in Daingean Reformatory School were taught Primary programme subjects and given vocational training (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Volume 1, 2009, p. 683). However, the Commission found that generally only one or two lay teachers were employed to teach a population of up to 200 boys, despite a recognition that all residents would benefit from primary level education. The teachers came directly from training college, and often took some time to adjust to a difficult environment. The lack of experienced teaching staff meant that the level of education provided was very low. A 1966 report cited by the Commission documented that up to half of the boys in Daingean were not receiving any formal education. Of 112 boys then in the school, twenty-five attended educational classes, thirty attended metalwork or woodwork instruction, and the remainder were working on the attached farm and bog. The Oblates did not provide any vocational or occupational training. Many former residents claimed to have received no education there (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Volume 1, p. 683). This mirrored similar provisions in Glencree Reformatory School, run by the Oblates from 1857 to 1940.

In 1967, a Department of Education report promises improvements in Daingean:

... the educational aspects of this reformatory school for boys in Daingean, Co Offaly has [sic] been shamefully neglected over many years. The boys were illiterate on entering the school and were given very little education during their two years of normal time in the institute. As a result of financial restrictions, the directors had to make use of them as labourers. It is proposed now to put an end this neglect. (Department of Education 1967, quoted in Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Volume 1, 2009, p. 683)

Although funding was provided for improved schooling in 1970, Daingean was closed in 1973 following the recommendations of the Kennedy Report.

Little information is available in relation to the Girls' Reformatory Schools, but the progression to domestic service suggests that there was similarly little attention paid to educational attainment for the girls.

### **Diversions from education**

The limited educational provisions and employment options after discharge for those sent to the Reformatory and Industrial Schools have already been outlined. Daily activities within the school were similarly limited. From their establishment in the nineteenth century, the residents provided the labour for the cleaning, cooking and laundry needs of these large institutions. Barnes describes a never-ending cycle of work for the residents. They kept the premises clean and tidy, attended school classes and performed the demanding work of industrial training (Barnes, 1989, p. 134). Several of Feeley's research respondents described how children in the late twentieth century were diverted from schooling to provide the manual labour needed within the institutions (Feeley, 2014, p. 143). They also worked on attached farms, and other labour-intensive commercial contract work designed to supplement the incomes of the institutions (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Volume 3, 2009, p. 45).

The extract from the 1928 Report already given above outlines how educational instruction in the Schools was limited to younger children. It was not routinely provided for new committals aged over ten years old with poor previous education. It was acceptable to allocate a nine year old girl to a Magdalen Laundry, and to allocate ten year olds to full-time 'training'. The legal requirement to provide schooling up to the age of fourteen years was of little concern in a system that operated according to its own mandate.

In an era that linked literacy with intelligence, literacy ability was commonly used as evidence of intelligence. Thus, the literacy assessments could demonstrate not only the educational attainment of the children on admission, but also their educational potential. Literacy assessments provided one way to ensure that those who were regarded as unlikely to benefit from schooling could be identified at an early stage and allocated accordingly. The constant demands within these institutions required a steady supply of labour. It is clear from the official reports that those who struggled with schooling were allocated to work rather than accommodated in the schoolroom. Seen in this light, the Schools did not measure literacy in order to gauge the amount of educational instruction needed for improvement. Instead, the assessments justified the withholding of such instruction.

## **Conclusion**

The presence of literacy assessments in the annual reports of the Department of Education provided an opportunity to explore the provision of literacy within the Reformatory and Industrial Schools. The religious orders who managed these Schools provided highly regarded social services to Irish society. It was generally assumed that the children committed to their care would benefit from the orders' cumulative educational expertise. A literacy assessment underpinned by such expertise would have been accepted as objective, valid and credible. The publication of these assessments by the Department of Education further strengthened their position as reliable reports of attainment. However, any impression that the assessments reflected a high degree of attention to literacy within the institutions was dispelled on examining the reports in more detail.

The literacy assessments published by the Department of Education from 1926 to 1959 match similar assessments dating from the 1860s, a series of statistical tabulations spanning almost a full century. The nineteenth century reports on the Reformatory and Industrial Schools describe a work-orientated system that prepared children to become farm workers and domestic servants. Within the prevailing utilitarian approach, the educational provision for such children was related to their future employment needs. This practice of educating poor children to the bare minimum continued into the following century, where the main employment options continued to be farm work, manual labour and domestic service. The Reformatory and Industrial School system in the twentieth

century retained many other features from the previous century. These included a shorter training course for teachers in the Schools, the employment of many untrained teachers, and an emphasis on industry rather than on education.

In 1862, the literacy assessments in St Kevin's Reformatory acted as a baseline to measure improvement between admission and discharge. The poor standard of education recorded by the Kennedy Report in 1970 suggests that later literacy assessments no longer served as baselines for measuring improvement, but instead served other functions. As well as offering a mechanism to justify diversion from schooling, these assessments also justified the provision of lower standards of teaching for the children allocated to the schoolroom. Children destined for employment as manual workers and domestic servants were not expected to have a high standard of literacy, and therefore did not need highly trained teachers.

There was no evidence of literacy assessments in any other type of school. This reinforced the distinction made between children in the general population and children committed to the Reformatory and Industrial Schools. The literacy assessments seem to have been used as measures of educational achievement on admission. It was accepted by the Department of Education that children as young as ten years could be diverted from schooling to 'training' if their educational attainment was poor. These children, already differentiated from literate Irish children, were further differentiated by being no longer subject to the School Attendance Act that required schooling until age fourteen years.

There are still significant numbers of Irish adults with first-hand experience of the Industrial and Reformatory Schools. The schools were not an aberration in Irish society. They were part of the institutional childcare provisions, and provided a resource to the courts and local authorities. They offered placements for children deemed to need residential intervention. Although hidden from the scrutiny of the general public, their activities were regulated by legislation and inspection. State inspectors and other professionals visited them, and in some cases, the residents attended local national schools. A lack of detailed oversight contributed to a regime of secrecy and silence in the Reformatory and Industrial Schools, allowing institutionalised abuse and neglect to flourish.

The present-day acknowledgement of appalling levels of physical and sexual abuse within them tends to overshadow the neglect of literacy



within institutions formally designated as schools. The Department of Education remarked upon their poor literacy standards in successive reports from 1928, without effecting improvement. While rates of educational attainment increased within the general population throughout the twentieth century, the children sent to Reformatory and Industrial Schools emerged with a very limited level of education. Longer schooling is generally associated with higher literacy levels, but the long committals to these schools did not result in improved literacy. Instead of providing educational support to disadvantaged children, the Reformatory and Industrial schools produced poorly literate adults, destined to remain educationally disadvantaged into the future.

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