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Curriculum, culture, ideology and ownership: the case of the Exploring Masculinities programme

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This article considers curriculum ownership, contestation and the relationship between curriculum and culture through the lens of the Exploring Masculinities (EM) programme. The programme was developed in the late 1990s to meet the social and personal needs of young men. As its dissemination was being planned, it became the subject of critical attention from some high-profile journalists and certain parent bodies. This article reports on a follow-up study of a national sample of parents regarding the inclusion of EM issues on the school curriculum. It also draws on interviews with journalists who were at the centre of the related media debate. The macro curriculum issues are discussed in light of this data along with one key issue identified by parents, namely the professional competence of teachers around social and personal issues.

Keywords: curriculum ideology; culture; parents; media; teacher competence

Introduction

The authors revisited the Exploring Masculinities (EM) programme 10 years after its development in order to review the main factors behind its discontinuance in schools. This involved interviewing journalists who had opposed EM and surveying a national sample of parents and parent representatives to establish their views towards the inclusion of EM topics on the school curriculum. This article is framed by macro curriculum issues such as the relationship between curriculum and culture as well as curriculum contestation, ownership and partnership. These issues are introduced early on in this article and are then reconsidered through the lens of EM programme along with related professional competence of teachers.

The Exploring Masculinities programme

Gender issues have been attracting increasing levels of interest in Ireland since its accession to the EU (O'Sullivan 2005) and numerous school-based programmes and resources, focusing on gender issues, have been designed with the support of the Gender Equality Unit (GEU) of the Department of Education and Science, now renamed Department of Education and Skills (DES). Most of the early programmes were designed to address female inequality rather than issues of particular relevance to young men (Lynch and Morgan 1995).

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While the social and personal needs of boys in single sex schools were identified by Hannan et al. (1983), the holistic education of boys remained problematic as reflected in the ‘relatively low provision of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in [these] schools’ (Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin, and Conway 2004, 9). The specific social and personal needs of young men were identified by journalist Sheridan (1998, 11) who noted the increasing awareness of ‘male issues’ such as suicide and communication skills: ‘things do not look good for young men. They are three times more likely to kill themselves than young females; they commit up to 95% of all crime; they trail behind girls in academic performance’. Byrne and Smyth (2010, 195) reported that ‘boys may be more reluctant to discuss personal issues with their parents than girls [and] have a more contentious relationship with school because of misbehaviour and consequent negative interactions with teachers’.

The EM programme was developed with GEU support as an optional social and personal programme for young men at senior cycle. The EM Director, a Senior DES Inspector, worked with the assistance of a Project Coordinator and a writing group of seven experienced teachers in developing the programme materials. The aims of the programme included the exploration of different perceptions of masculinity and encouraging positive understandings of maleness through addressing issues such as sexual orientation, violence, depression and suicide.

The External Evaluation of EM (Gleeson, Conboy, and Walsh 2004) found a plurality of meanings for EM on the part of the dramatis personae (i.e. Project Director, teachers, principals) and identified key cultural factors that influenced the implementation of the programme during the pilot phase. EM teachers often worked in isolation and were reluctant to share the programme with others for fear that it would not be taken seriously. This meant that EM was rather invisible in schools with a number of school principals being unaware of its presence. The report also noted the failure to involve parents and the community at the development stage. However, teacher and student participants saw ‘the need for the programme and a value in what it was offering them’ (Gleeson, Conboy, and Walsh 2004, 131) and believed that EM was worthwhile and of relevance to young men.

Negative reactions to EM
Despite these positive reactions, the move to disseminate EM in 2000 resulted in an unprecedented amount of mostly negative attention from the Congress of Catholic Schools Parent Association (CSPA) and some high-profile journalists.

Reaction of CSPA
The Congress of Catholic Schools Parent Association (CSPA), which represents parents of children attending Catholic post-primary schools, were highly critical of EM. They argued that schools should be supporting the home in the social and personal development of children in accordance with the 1937 Constitution of Ireland and expressed alarm at the lack of consultation with parents during the development phase. The Association questioned the ‘moral principles and assumptions’ (CSPA n.d., 2) of the programme which were in their opinion at odds with the values of the home and argued that Catholic schools should not ‘be expected to neutralise their core principles in the delivery of programmes’ (CSPA n.d., 1). In their
support they cited the Education Act provision that a recognised school shall ‘promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school’ (Government of Ireland 1998a, Section 9d).

The Association argued that EM portrayed negative stereotypes of men in so far as some of the materials were based on an underlying assumption that men are ‘more insensitive and more violent than women [which was] totally unacceptable to the parents of teenage boys’ (CSPA n.d. 3). They also expressed concerns regarding the treatment of sensitive issues in the classroom and demanded the withdrawal of EM as it ‘undermined young boys by asking them to disclose their feelings about private and personal matters in the classroom and offered group therapy’ (Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin, and Conway 2004, 123).

**Media coverage**

The Exploring Masculinities (EM) came in for an unprecedented amount of attention in the broadsheet press. The National Coordinator of AMEN, Mary T. Cleary, argued that EM portrayed boys in a negative light and presented an unbalanced view of domestic violence, ‘falsely portraying men as violent and abusive and women as victims of an oppressive male patriarchy’ (Cleary 2000). Most of the negative media commentary came from a small number of high-profile journalists such as Breda O’Brien, David Quinn, Kevin Myers and John Waters. It should be noted, however, that only 12 newspaper articles dealt specifically with EM as an education programme while the remainder discussed gender or sexuality issues with ‘only passing reference to EM’ (Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin, and Conway 2004, 132).

In response to these criticisms, then Minister for Education and Science, Michael Woods, commissioned the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to conduct a review of the media debate and EM materials. This review (Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin, and Conway 2004) found that approximately two-thirds of the 96 media references to EM were negative in tone with particular reference to the alleged anti-male, feminist ideologies underpinning the programme:

EM’s explicitly feminist and left liberal agenda, its attempts to shape boys to suit a perception of the world which sees men as the problem and most particularly mainstream heterosexual men . . . its all prevailing message that power by definition is bad. (Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin, and Conway 2004, 115)

The reviewers found that the programme itself and the associated concerns had been debated insufficiently with ‘all the main criticisms introduced early on and repeated over time, [so that] the debate did not develop conceptually over the duration’ (Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin, and Conway 2004, 142).

The hiatus resulting from the Minister’s intervention meant the planned dissemination of the programme lost momentum, with the net result that EM was only being used to a limited extent in five schools by 2005 (Gleeson and McCormack 2006). There have been no subsequent attempts to reopen the debate on EM or re-examine the programme. As the Project Director stated in an email reply to the authors in 2009, ‘no subsequent Minister has made any statement on EM. Despite a
recommendation in the National Men’s Health Policy to update the programme in light of the NCCA report, nothing has happened’. The current study explores some of the factors that contributed to the demise of EM and locates EM in its broader curriculum context.

The broader curriculum context
Beginning from the premise of curriculum as contextualised social process (Cornbleth 2001), EM provides a valuable lens through which to view certain aspects of Irish policy and practice, namely the relationship between curriculum and culture and curriculum contestation, ownership and partnership.

Curriculum and culture
While curriculum ‘reflects the values of the society that has grown up around us’ (Abbott 2010, 193), there are always selections to be made regarding curriculum content and learning experiences, decisions that require critical debate. Such decisions are influenced, *inter alia*, by values, culture and curriculum ideology (Cairns, Gardner, and Lawton 2000) as well as considerations of gender (Pinar et al. 2004) and social class (Willis 1977; Lynch 1989; Gleeson 2010).5

Irish curriculum culture, heavily influenced by Catholic tradition (O’Donoghue 1999), is ‘a derivation from the Classical Humanist tradition with an overlay of technological subjects’ (OECD 1991, 68) with a strong emphasis on the transmission of subject knowledge and skills rather than student-centred holistic education. While the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) study found that ‘teachers in Ireland hold somewhat weaker constructivist beliefs than teachers in the comparison countries’ (Gilleece et al. 2009, 74), hardly a hospitable setting for programmes built on constructivist principles.

In response to Bruner’s (1971) fundamental curriculum question, how can we make humans more human, and based on the findings of anthropologists, eight cultural invariants were identified as the sub-systems of a curriculum framework (Lawton 1986). A ninth sub-system of particular relevance to EM, maturation, was subsequently added to address the increasing length of childhood in modern society, where schools ‘have taken over some of the functions of the family’ (Lawton 1996, 31).

However, when the Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board (Interim CEB 1984) proposed the adoption of an ‘Areas of Experience’ approach, the response of the education community was unenthusiastic. As Granville observed, ‘the gap between that model and the culture of schools was too great’ (Gleeson 2010, 160). OECD (1991, 68) would subsequently chide the CEB for ‘conced[ing] a great deal to subject-centred teaching by claiming that existing subjects should be the ‘starting point’. History is being repeated today in so far as the NCCA (2010) notion of an overarching Junior Cycle Curriculum Framework has been supplanted by the National Framework of Qualifications (DES 2011). When the Interim CEB (1984) attempted to initiate a broader debate on the relationship between education and culture,7 there was an impasse described by Granville in terms of ‘creative tension between two wings of the CEB, a “right-wing economic philosophy” and a “left wing
socio-educational orientation’” (Gleeson 2010, 159). That was before the arrival of the neo-liberal agenda and the Troika!

Curriculum contestation, ownership and partnership

While there is widespread acceptance of the notion of curriculum as a social construct (Apple 1999; Goodson 1997), curriculum policy and practice will always be subject to ‘an ideological battle’ (Carr 1998, 326) leading to curriculum contestation and debate:

Contestation in curriculum construction is unavoidable. (Mutch 2003, 6)

Curriculum selection is inherently controversial and subject to conflict and dispute. (Weiler 1990, 17–18)

Therefore, curriculum developers must remember that ‘change is a journey, not a blueprint’ (Fullan 1993, 24) and ‘leave room for further debate’ (Elliott 1998, 35).

The abortive debate regarding the relationship between curriculum and culture reflects the uncritical, technical nature of Irish education discourse (Gleeson 2010), due, inter alia, to the neo-liberal mood of the time, the prevailing anti-intellectual bias, the consensus-seeking model of partnership and the emphasis on contractual accountability (Gleeson and O’Donnabhain 2009). At a time when Irish post-primary curriculum is seriously overloaded and dominated by external examinations (Hyland 2011) there is an obvious need for critical and inclusive debate where it is recognised ‘explicitly that education is broader than schooling and that success in school is largely dependent on social and economic factors over which schools have no control’ (Noddings 2007, 81). While there has been a growing awareness of such matters, the historical focus of Irish curriculum debates (Gleeson 2004) has been on technical rather than critical issues and on conserving the status quo in three main areas:

1. Nationalistic – the question of ‘compulsory’ Irish.
2. Territorial – in defence of particular subjects, for example, History and Geography in the core curriculum; the craft subjects in the face of new technologies.
3. Sex-related – the inclusion of Relationships and Sexuality Education, suggesting that the controversy around EM was predictable.

The absence of critical contestation raises questions in relation to Ireland’s representational partnership model of curriculum decision-making which emphasises compromise, consensus-seeking and promotes sectoral interest at the expense of critical debate and innovative ideas (Gleeson 2010).

Noting that Irish teachers lack ownership of curriculum, Trant (1998, 33) bemoans the fact that, ‘nobody else has much ownership of curriculum either’ and suggests a partnership where the rights and responsibilities of the various partners including parents are recognised. The research evidence suggests that curriculum initiatives are more likely to succeed if they have been developed in partnership with teachers and other invested bodies, including parents (Fullan 1993; Watts 1977).
The Irish Constitution (Government of Ireland 1937) states that parents are ‘the primary and natural educators of the child’ and ‘guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual physical and social education of their children’ (Article 42, Section 1). The Education Act (Government of Ireland 1998a) provides for the recognition of the characteristic spirit of particular schools and for the inclusion of parental representation on the NCCA. The importance of close co-operation and partnership between schools and parents where teachers are ‘trained to inform and to consult with parents’ has also been highlighted by the OECD (2005), 88).

While parents are generally happy to allow the professionals take responsibility for the selection of curriculum content and pedagogies in the case of traditional academic subjects, they understandably have particular interests and concerns when it comes to social and personal education. It is hardly surprising that the most vociferous objections to EM came from parents in the Catholic school sector because of the expectation that such schools transmit Catholic values (O’Donoghue 1999). According to Byrne and Smyth (2010, 197), however, Irish parents are happy with their children’s schooling apart from concerns regarding academic/career guidance and preparation for the world of work.

Methodology
The authors investigated the views of a national cohort of parents and a sample of journalists towards the inclusion and treatment of social and personal issues central to EM in the school curriculum. This study, which consisted of four phases, had ethical clearance from the authors’ institution. Participation in the research was voluntary and participants, all of whom were adults, could withdraw at any stage. In phase one, a questionnaire was distributed to male Transition Year and fifth year students (aged from 15 to 17 approximately) during 2005–2006 in a representative national sample of 120 single sex and co-educational schools for delivery to their parents/guardians. Of the 9678 questionnaires distributed, 1915 were returned, giving a response rate of approximately 20%. The majority of respondents were female (77%), aged 40–49 (67%) and Roman Catholic (93%). Ninety-nine percent of respondents were parents while the remainder were guardians.8

The second phase, conducted in 2007, involved telephone interviews with a stratified sample of 24 questionnaire respondents. This sample was equally divided between those who had agreed/disagreed with the inclusion of EM topics on the school curriculum, mothers and fathers, parents from co-educational and single-sex schools with varying levels of experience of formal education.

The third phase involved the completion of the phase one questionnaire by members of the five national parent associations that constitute the National Parents Council post-primary (NPCpp).9 In 2008, the authors attended the relevant annual conferences. A total of 69 parents responded, of which the majority were female (63%), aged from 45–54 (61%) and Roman Catholic (87%). The highest number of responses came from Federation of Christian Brothers and other Catholic Schools parent council (FEDCBS) (21) while the lowest came from CSPa10 (6).

Based on the list of contributors to the EM media debate (Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin, and Conway 2004), four journalists – Breda O’Brien, David Quinn, Kevin Myers and John Waters – were selected for interview.11 These interviews, conducted
in 2009, explored their views of the programme then and now (McCormack 2010). The Project Coordinator of EM was invited to respond to the journalists comments.

The quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) with the approach of Miles and Huberman (1994) being used for qualitative data. As themes and sub-themes emerged great care was taken to revisit the qualitative data, find supporting evidence for themes and ensure thematic and data saturation. The construct validity of the questionnaires (Phases one and three) was established using correlation coefficients. Correlations of 0.757 and 0.852, respectively, for the questionnaires clearly indicate their validity (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000, 536). Cronbach’s Alpha was calculated at 0.903 and 0.986, respectively, indicating that both are highly reliable (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000).

Results
Parents’ views
Parents (Phases one, two and three) were largely in agreement with the inclusion of EM issues on the school curriculum (McCormack 2010). They did, however, identify some concerns and these are outlined in the following sections.

Parental views regarding the inclusion of EM issues on the school curriculum
Parents from the national sample were virtually unanimous (95%) in agreeing that the school should play a role in the social and personal development of young men at senior cycle and the parent association representatives indicated their agreement with the provision of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) at junior (81%) and senior cycle (78%). There was a high level of agreement from both parent groups regarding the inclusion of EM topics on the school curriculum (Table 1).

The survey of parent association representatives also found high levels of support for the inclusion of three further topics – gender stereotyping (93%), the role of society in constructing male identities (92%) and male–male relationships (86%).

Three main arguments emerged in favour of the inclusion of EM topics on the school curriculum. Firstly, parents saw issues such as homophobia and suicide as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>National sample (N = 1915)</th>
<th>Parent association respondents (N = 69)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>99% (n = 1909)</td>
<td>99% (n = 65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex education</td>
<td>97% (n = 1906)</td>
<td>98% (n = 65)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male/female relationships</td>
<td>94% (n = 1906)</td>
<td>97% (n = 63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>91% (n = 1908)</td>
<td>94% (n = 65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male depression</td>
<td>91% (n = 1903)</td>
<td>95% (n = 64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes towards gay people</td>
<td>90% (n = 1907)</td>
<td>94% (n = 62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation</td>
<td>82% (n = 1908)</td>
<td>89% (n = 62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic violence</td>
<td>81% (n = 1906)</td>
<td>95% (n = 63)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
relevant to young men’s lives, for example, ‘children as young as ten are calling each other such derogatory terms as gay . . . [this] appears to be the greatest insult’ (mother, questionnaire); ‘suicide is becoming very prevalent at [our son’s] age. If it is discussed it might help them’ (mother, questionnaire). Secondly, parents felt that post-primary schools were not doing enough on these issues:

My sons have been in post-primary school for five years and haven’t gotten any sex education. (mother, questionnaire)

Boys’ calling each other ‘gay’ was accepted in my son’s school. The school did very little to help and my second son is having to put up with the same all because they are involved in music, drama and can speak about feelings. (mother, interview)

Parents who did not feel comfortable discussing such issues with their sons welcomed support from the school. For example, one mother explained how it is ‘nearly impossible’ to address such issues as ‘we were never taught how to talk about these things or how to talk to them. We are awkward about these topics ourselves’ (interview).

**Teacher competence**

Parents, across all three phases, expressed concerns regarding levels of teacher competence to deal with EM issues in the classroom, with only 32% of association respondents believing that teachers were adequately prepared to deal with EM issues.

A few in-service days here and there does not equal training. (mother, questionnaire)

There is no real training in place; there is no real protocol on how to deal with these issues generally. (father, interview)

One mother feared that:

Teachers are merely filling in teaching hours [with] some guy who is normally a biology or woodwork teacher going in and teaching this subject and doesn’t know how to deal with these issues. They may not be comfortable doing this and may be passing on more error than fact. (interview)

One father suggested that, in the absence of proper development, it would be better to omit these issues as [it] might be worse than ‘school yard’ learning’ (questionnaire).

**Underpinning values**

The values underpinning such forms of education were a cause of concern for a vocal minority who believed that such lessons should be based on Catholic values. For example, a father who was a member of CSPA suggested that ‘within Catholic schools, Catholic views should have primacy’. This father wanted an emphasis placed on ‘loving God and your neighbour’ and such issues explored within ‘a good Christian framework’ (questionnaire). One mother suggested that:
These issues should be addressed within a moral framework that is unashamedly Christian. Not just about catching diseases or not dying because you took an overdose. Within a framework which helps the person decide themselves. (interview)

However, other parents expressed ‘serious reservations’ regarding Church involvement in teaching such matters. For example, ‘the Catholic Church should not be allowed to teach young boys about these issues’ (father, questionnaire) as they ‘will never speak openly and honestly’ (mother, questionnaire) and will ‘only fill boy’s minds with rubbish. They have no right to interfere or voice such an old-fashioned and wrong opinion’ (mother, questionnaire).

**Sensitivity of EM topics**

It was suggested that EM topics such as domestic violence, sexual orientation and suicide may be too sensitive to address in a school environment. It was feared that discussing suicide in class might be upsetting for some students, for example, ‘if a child was after going through suicide in the family and they were discussing it in school, it may bring back feelings and your child could come home upset and you wouldn’t know why’ (mother, interview). There was a fear that discussing suicide might ‘present an option to immature minds as they cannot assimilate topics like suicide at their age’ (mother, interview) and that discussing suicide might provide young men ‘with an option if things aren’t going well? There are a lot of insecure young men out there and if it is discussed they may see it as an option and the cool thing to do’ (father, interview). Some parents felt that students would be unlikely to share their experiences of domestic violence in a classroom setting:

- Domestic violence may be upsetting for some especially if there is domestic violence in their home. (father, interview)

- There could be boys in class that may have to deal with domestic violence. It may upset them. They would not come out and say they are having these problems. (mother, interview)

Some parents also felt that young men may not be mature enough to deal with issues around sexual orientation. For example:

- While some young men are ready for discussion on these issues based on maturity and experience others are not. (father, interview)

  [This immaturity may result] in a more jokey approach. (mother, questionnaire)

  It may be difficult to get beyond the silly responses. (mother, questionnaire)

**Journalists’ views**

Two main themes emerged from the interviews with journalists – the ideologies underpinning EM and the lack of consultation and debate at the development stage. The response to the Project Coordinator to the journalists’ comments are presented within this section.
EM and feminist ideology

All four journalists felt that EM was based on feminist ideology. David Quinn viewed the thinking behind the programme as a ‘pretty extreme version of feminism’. While Breda O’Brien saw the social and personal needs of young men as a priority, she was ultimately ‘disappointed by what emerged as it was definitely from a feminist ideological camp’. This view was shared by other journalists:

EM was an entirely feminist programme. The overall aim was to engineer men to make them agreeable to feminist demands. I don’t want maleness interfered with, doctored with, or changed by ideological driven zealots that are called feminists. (Myers)

EM represents a particular ideology of a faction . . . this programme came from a very narrow ideological perspective. (Waters)

The journalists regarded the ideological base of EM as anti-male and representing masculinity in a negative light – ‘as if they were inferior to girls’ (O’Brien) or ‘beyond redemption and toxic’ (Waters).

The Project Director’s statement that EM was devised ‘on the premise of gender as a social construct’ (Gleeson 1999, 1) was at the heart of the journalists’ concerns. While acknowledging the influence of societal factors on the formation of identities, they all regarded biological factors as more significant:

The behaviour and experiences of every society in the world tells us that men are different from women. The primary impetus for behaviour is genetic. You cannot programme one sex to do something that is apathetical to their nature . . . Child birth is not a social construct. (Myers)

Questioned about such criticisms, the Project Coordinator saw the critics of EM as ‘lay conservative right wing’ individuals who were merely interested in maintaining the status quo. He explained that the EM writing team were ‘largely a group of practitioners. . . . [who] did not sit around discussing theoretical issues’ and were more concerned with what they ‘needed to do’ and they ‘were going to do it rather than why [they] were doing it. . . . I don’t recall us having that conversation in any great depth. We may have skirted the issue’.

Lack of consultation and debate

The Coordinator believed that the writing group had not consulted adequately with external organisations and agencies during the development of EM and the journalists saw this lack of consultation as a major weakness.

[EM was devised] in a surreptitious manner, without any reference to parents or a democratic process . . . they did not consult far and wide. (Waters)

The Gender Equality Unit, which no one has ever heard of, came up with this programme and slipped it in to schools, without any debate and after consultation with a handful of people who were going to have the right views from the developer’s point of view anyway. (Quinn)
Waters in particular, felt that the EM messages were selective, being based on the views of the writing group and Project Coordinator. For example:

Waters: By the time EM was developed, I was writing about men’s issues for five or six years. I am not mentioned in the resource pack. Every kind of a male writer that they could find is in here. Many of whom have never written about men.

McCormack: Do you think that you were kept out intentionally?

W: Yes. There is no question that the idea was ‘that guy is not getting anywhere near this’. OK, put in an article by me and ask young men what they think of it? Is it bullshit or not? There is clearly tendentiousness and selectivity about this that is unhealthy. That alerted me to the problem.

McC: So they only wanted certain views portrayed within EM?

W: Yes, what was selected was from a particular perspective. Fundamentally, that was my problem in that I was aware of so much richness in a whole load of writers that could have really been brought to bear in introducing young men to manhood – but they were not included. There is so much wisdom about this, yet it was wilfully ignored.

Waters went on to say that the DES and Minister simply wished ‘to close down [the associated media debate] and didn’t allow any discussion to take place’. This is consistent with the Project Coordinator’s view that the Minister perceived EM as a ‘political “hot potato” that needed to be “kicked to touch”’.

Discussion
The positive reaction of most parents towards the inclusion of EM issues on the school curriculum raises important questions around the opposition of CSPA and some journalists and bodes well for the long-awaited introduction of SPHE at senior cycle. Parents did, however, identify a number of concerns regarding the introduction of EM topics while the journalists in question expressed strong reservations around the whole EM enterprise. This section revisits certain macro curriculum policy issues through the lens of the EM findings, as well as teacher competence.

The broader curriculum context revisited
Some of the above findings are now considered in the light of the broader curriculum context introduced earlier.

Curriculum and culture
While parents’ responses give cause to hope for some radical reappraisal of our education system, respondents in the Byrne and Smyth (2010) study did not express any concerns regarding the social and personal education needs of their children. This is redolent of the dichotomy identified by NCCA (2003, 11): while their consultations revealed little confidence in the potential of the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) ‘to deliver on any of the desired outcomes for senior cycle education’, that programme enjoys a ‘high level of public support’.
Some parents and the journalists questioned the curriculum selection process, the content of the programme and its underlying ideologies, for example, journalists felt the programme was extremely feminist while some parents feared it could be anti-Catholic in its orientation. Such concerns highlight the inherent difficulties around the commonly held understanding of curriculum as a selection from the culture (Lawton 1975). In terms of the curriculum/culture debate alluded to earlier the CSPA opposition might be characterised as a not-so-creative tension between a ‘right-wing ideology and religion’ and a ‘left wing socio-educational orientation’!

The combination of a subject-based Classical Humanist (CH) tradition, a vocational and examination-led curriculum culture, and the historically powerful role of the Churches did not provide a hospitable environment for EM. For example, the priority afforded the production of a body of classroom materials (Gleeson, Conboy, and Walsh 2004) reflects this prevailing CH culture with its subject-centred mentality. Indeed it has been common-place to evaluate the effectiveness of Irish curriculum development projects in terms of the body of materials produced (Gleeson forthcoming). There is a rich irony in the fact that it was the EM materials that drew the fire of both parents and the media, leading to the programme’s demise. Until curriculum reform moves beyond tinkering with the content and number of subjects to address the relationship between curriculum and culture and the recognition of maturation as a cultural sub-system, the social and personal needs of young people will remain secondary.

**Curriculum contestation, ownership and partnership**

The Exploring Masculinities (EM) became the subject of what was, in the case of curriculum, almost unprecedented levels of media attention (Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin, and Conway 2004) between 1999 and 2001. This provided a great opportunity for worthwhile curriculum contestation around curriculum and culture, the role of the school/home in social and personal education, the social construction of masculinity, the influence of feminist ideology and the role of democratic pedagogies. However, once Minister Woods sought refuge in a further review, the discussion broadened out in various directions with sustained media attention being wrongly portrayed as a debate (Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin, and Conway 2004, 132). The whole episode reinforces the view that ‘public acceptance’ of political decisions is often more important than ‘achieving educational ends’ (Gleeson 2010, 60).

While it will always be difficult to arrive at universally acceptable curriculum decision Fullan (2001) highlights the importance of consulting with key stakeholders when planning curriculum change. Some journalists understandably expressed serious concerns regarding the lack of consultation with relevant interest groups and partners prior to the development of EM. Since the content and pedagogy of EM challenged the deeply rooted beliefs and values of some parents, both consultation and constructive public debate were essential if these differing perspectives were to be accommodated. Such public debate would have been greatly enhanced by an informed media that was prepared to allow opposing views to be aired in a context where, as the evidence presented above shows, the vast majority of parents welcomed inclusion of EM issues on the school curriculum. Such issues are even more relevant today than they were 15 years ago!
As noted earlier, the National Parents’ Council post-primary (NPCpp) is a federation of parents from both private and public school sectors with their differing social and religious backgrounds and CSPA is one of its five constituent bodies. Had EM been developed under the aegis of the representational NCCA (Gleeson 2010) rather than the GEU, NPCpp would presumably have conducted its own internal debate with a view to achieving consensus and, given the above findings, decided to support the programme. CSPA’s singular unhappiness with EM provides an interesting example of what Lynch (1989, 118) called the particularistic features of the hidden curriculum of Irish post-primary education.

Clearly then, EM raises important issues regarding curriculum ownership and partnership in that a small vocal group of parents along with an even smaller group of elite journalists could exercise such power. Certain factors worked in their favour. Our current model of partnership prioritises sectoral interest over the common good (Gleeson 2004) and the political circumstances were right. They may not have been so successful had there been a different Minister in place, one who was prepared to show leadership by acknowledging the importance of an open debate on matters of deep significance to Irish society. Minister Dempsey appeared to have found a useful mechanism for more participative educational partnership when he established Your Education System (YES) to ‘provide all involved and interested in education with the opportunity to contribute to the development of a vision of education [and allow] the major values underlying our education system [be] articulated’ (Kellaghan and McGee 2005, 1). In practice, however, these meetings were dominated by the very specific concerns of well-meaning interest groups whose particular issues were not being adequately served by the main partnership players.

**Teacher competence**

The pedagogical challenges associated with EM included the handling of sensitive and controversial issues in the classroom, managing self-disclosure in the classroom, professional collaboration and interaction with parents. As noted already, the writing group prioritised the development of materials over providing the necessary support and development for teachers (Gleeson, Conboy, and Walsh 2004). Parents in the current study voiced concerns regarding the competence of post-primary teachers to address sensitive social and personal issues. Similar concerns had been raised by Gleeson, Conboy, and Walsh (2004). Such fears should be understood in the light of the TALIS findings that Irish teachers prefer transmission rather than constructive practices.

Noddings (2005) notes the polarised perceptions of the role of the modern school depending on whether one subscribes to the Western neo-liberal tradition or the community of care theorists. The former highlights individualism whereas the latter emphasises moral interdependence. It is her belief that in the context of modern society, ‘the school must do much of the work once charged to families. The best schools should resemble the best homes’ (Noddings 2003, 260). The adoption of a care theory position would pose a major challenge for Irish post-primary schools which are dominated by examination pressure (Government of Ireland 1998b; Hyland 2011) and whose hidden curriculum is characterised by competitive individualism (Lynch 1989). One notes, for example, how the NCCA (2005) proposal...
to afford increased levels of responsibility to senior cycle students has fallen on deaf ears.

The current study has identified parental concerns in relation to teacher competence. Such concerns should be viewed in the context of the TALIS findings already discussed, the ‘virtual absence’ of social and personal education from most Irish initial teacher education courses (Mayock, Kitching, and Morgan 2007, 136; Minton et al. 2008, 187) and the ‘one-off’ nature of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) provision with its emphasis on ‘knowledge-for-practice’ (Sugrue et al. 2001) and the latest subject reform (Granville 2005). For example, some 85% of funded ‘contact hours’ in 1998 were devoted to immediate systemic issues leaving the remaining budget for generic issues such as school development planning, leadership and so on (Gleeson 2010). Participants in the Sugrue et al. (2001, 96ff) study felt that ‘professional learning provision has been more successful in communicating cognitive knowledge than impacting positively on competencies and skills’ (Sugrue et al. 2001, 115). Similarly, Granville’s (2005, 46) evaluation of the Second-Level Support Services noted a heavy leaning towards the technical adjustment of practice . . . rather than a deeper change in professional mindset [in a context where] what works is what is important [with the result that there is] greater evidence of demonstrable achievement in respect of teaching practice than of mindset change.

Meanwhile, Irish post-primary teachers are becoming increasingly utilitarian in their focus insofar as they favour a ‘practical view of professionalism . . . grounded in the practical everyday realities of the job’ (Sexton 2007, 93). According to Sexton they eschew philosophical aspects of the profession including the moral role of the teacher while Kiely (2002, 217) found that post-primary teachers were unable to ‘give the moral aspect of their role the priority it deserved in this climate of immense social change’. While they are required under the Teaching Council Code of Professional Conduct to promote the holistic development of students, Irish post-primary teachers need ongoing professional development in order to fulfil this responsibility. If they are to reconcile societal expectations around coaching students for examinations while fulfilling the various roles of ‘counsellor, motivator, psychologist, coach, mentor, mediator, leader, administrator, manager, teacher’ (ASTI 2001) that leaves them with a difficult circle to square. If the Council is to afford official recognition to the plurality of the roles of the teacher it needs to review its current registration regulations in order to make a career in teaching more attractive to those who have not studied one or more Established Leaving Certificate subjects to degree level. To paraphrase T.S Elliott, students will have to live with the shortcomings of their affective education experiences long after they have forgotten the information that passed for knowledge and the knowledge that passed for wisdom.

Conclusion
The support of the great majority of parents for the inclusion of EM issues on the school curriculum raises important questions around the power of a small group of vocal and articulate parents and journalists (as well as AMEN) to collectively ‘scupper’ the programme at a time when there is a real need to address these issues. At a broader level, the whole EM episode shines a valuable light on the Irish post-primary curriculum policymaking process and highlights the importance of open and
critical debate around the ‘story we tell our children about the good life’. It also raises important questions in relation to the role of the Minister for Education and underlines the need to develop a wider range of teacher competences. Above all, it poses fundamental questions about our philosophy of education and the sort of society we want.

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**Notes**

1. For example, ‘Balance: Who cares?’ and ‘Exploring Sex Stereotyping’.
2. There is a strong tradition of single-sex schooling in Ireland. In 2000, some 38% of Irish post-primary students were attending single-sex schools and one-third of all post-primary schools were single sex (DES 2003). While single-sex schooling is on the decline, 16% of boys attended single-sex post-primary schools in 1999–2000 when EM was being developed.
3. This includes Transition Year (a one year optional programme between the junior and senior cycle which is taken by 40% of a year’s cohort) and senior cycle boys (DES 2000).
4. AMEN is a ‘voluntary group providing a confidential helpline, information and support service for male victims of domestic violence and their children’ (AMEN publicity information cited in Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin, and Conway 2004, 107).
6. Reflecting in particular the thinking of Lawton.
7. They identified four aspects of the relationship between education and culture – cultural heritage, socio-political culture, the developing culture and the unified culture including the artistic-literary and scientific-technological traditions.
8. Both categories are called parents in this article.
9. Congress of Catholic School Parents Association (CSPA); Parents Association for Vocational Schools and Community College (PAVSCC); Federation of Christian Brothers and other Catholic Schools Parents Council (FEDCBS); Parent Association for Community and Comprehensive Schools (PACCS); Co-operation of Minority Religion and Protestant Parents Association (COMPASS).
10. CSPA did not hold an annual conference in 2008. Members were invited to participate via email with the use of Survey Monkey.
11. O’Brien and Waters write opinion columns in The Irish Times for whom Myers also wrote before transferring to the Irish Independent while Quinn writes opinion columns for The Irish Independent and The Irish Catholic, amongst other papers.
12. As defined by TALIS in opposition to exchange-based.

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