

Educate Together Keynote, Ethos Conference, CityWest Hotel, Dublin
March 1st 2003.

THE ORIGIN, DEVELOPMENT AND POTENTIAL OF THE EDUCATE
TOGETHER ETHOS

by Paul Rowe

INTRODUCTION

The Educate Together model of education is a unique product of the Irish National School system. It has its origins in 1975, the year of the foundation of the Dalkey School Project. Now at a time when it is fast becoming an option of choice for many new parents in Ireland, the movement is making itself open to evaluation and research on an unprecedented scale and needs to define its central characteristics with greater clarity and to a larger audience.

This paper is being presented in an attempt to present the dynamic experience of the movement in such a way as to clearly identify the fundamental values and objectives at its heart and to prevent misunderstanding or dogmatic interpretations. In the words of one of its founding personalities, Bill Hyland, such documents are always a draft, always work-in-progress and the discussion always continues. The emphasis has been in creating processes around values rather than a set of rules, static formulae or regulations and it is very important to all of us that we adhere to this focus. Identifying

fundamental values, creating organisational forms that allow these values to evolve in changing circumstances and creating definitions that are inclusive and that embrace diversity in interpretation have emerged as one of the fundamental strengths of the Educate Together model.

In many ways this is an extraordinary story. The personal and organisational history is one of the great examples of cooperative Irish enterprise in the last quarter of the 20th century, one that spans people of widely varying backgrounds from many differing parts of the country. All the thirty-one Educate Together schools have their own marvellous story of achievement against formidable difficulties. It remarkable that from the original document at the founding meeting of the Dalkey School Project 28 years ago to the current definition in the Educate Together Charter there has been only minor textual changes. This is a testament to the accuracy with which these principles and aims were defined at that time. Now that many aspects of this definition are now being looked at as fundamental features of a state funded, inclusive, national school system for the future means that it is timely to assess it from today's perspective.

THE NATIONAL SCHOOL SYSTEM

The Dalkey School Project was an initiative that right from the start considered itself to be part of the national school system. In many

ways, the objectives of the Dalkey School Project were an attempt to reclaim some of the original aims of the national school system that had been diluted and undermined in the century and a half since its foundation. At the same time as attempting this reclamation, the Dalkey School Project sought to address some of the main modernising features in contemporary educational thinking both at home and abroad.

I do not intend to review here the origin of state funded education in Ireland. This task has been ably undertaken by Professor Áine Hyland in her article “Educate Together Schools in the Republic of Ireland The First Stage 1975 – 1994” which is published on the Educate Together website. However, the national school system as set up by the Stanley Letter of 1831, saw as one of its objectives to unite in one system children of different creeds, while taking the most scrupulous care not to interfere with the religious beliefs of any of them. Even the name of the system was significant. Not used for any other education system funded by the British empire, the word “National” was specifically chosen to emphasise the objective of promoting a harmonious relationship between families of differing faiths. The concept was one of providing "combined moral and literary and separate religious instruction". The rules of the system emphasised this. Even today, if you visit the restored national school

in Bunratty Folk Park, you can see the sign that the schoolmaster had to display to show the community when religious instruction took place. This facilitated parents removing their children from any inappropriate religious instruction. The state refused to grant aid any school that did not adhere to these regulations or refused entry to those of faiths differing from the patron.

Although the main churches quickly moved to ensure exclusive control of individual schools, this underlying structure remained an essential part of the regulatory framework of the system and continued after the formation of the state in 1922. The rules state that "no pupil shall receive or be present at any religious instruction of which his parents or guardians do not approve" and also "that the periods of formal religious instruction shall be fixed so as to facilitate the withdrawal of pupils" (whose families do not hold the religious views being taught). However, during the whole of the 20th century and right up today, the denominational nature of the system was paramount. Despite the liberalising ideas prevailing in many churches during the latter part of the 20th century, the Irish government took measures to reinforce the denominational nature of education and to render meaningless the guarantees made to minorities that existed in the established rules. In 1965 the Rules for National Schools were revised to specifically recognise the

“denominational nature” of primary education. In 1971, the introduction of the New Curriculum - often called the “integrated” or “child- centred” curriculum – decisively broke down the separation between secular and moral education on one hand and religious instruction on the other. It made it effectively impossible for a parent to remove a child from the inculcation of the religious beliefs of the school’s patron. In the last few years, the Education Act 1998 firmly copper fastened the legal power of patrons to define the ethos, select key staff and decide key policy in schools. It has provided a legal form of control in a situation in which hitherto for the weight of property and personnel had sufficed.

It is important to note that much of the thinking behind the invention of the Dalkey School Project in 1975 was rooted in a wish to restore - in a modern context – the inclusive intent and minority safeguards inherent in the national school system.

ST PATRICKS NATIONAL SCHOOL AND MARLEY GRANGE

The 1970s were years of great debate in education in Ireland and throughout the world. Quite apart from this debate, this was a period in which citizens were asserting their rights in many areas of society that had previously been closed to their influence. In Dalkey and in other suburbs of Dublin –notably Highfield and Marley Grange in Rathfarnham – parents were seeking a more respectful and inclusive

form of education for their children. The particular dangers of segregated education were highlighted by the eruption of sectarian tensions in the north. Parents were seeking rights that had been present on paper in the constitution and other laws but had never been acted upon. In St. Patrick's National School, Dalkey, a rapidly growing school under the patronage of the Church of Ireland, parents formed a Parent Teacher's Association and voted one of their number as secretary of the Board of Management. Supported by a progressive rector and an inspirational principal teacher, the school community created what was in effect a multi-denominational school. At roughly the same time, the residents of Marley Grange conducted a survey in their new housing estate that showed a strong preference among the new residents for a school that would operate with patronage shared between Catholic and Church of Ireland. In both cases, the educational establishment, notably the churches, and the Department of Education moved to oppose these developments. In Marley Grange a new Catholic school was established with unusual speed and later a very small Church of Ireland school was set up. In Dalkey, the expansion plans of the school were rejected and the Board was instructed by the Minister to restrict its intake according to religious criteria. In fact all new entrants to the school in 1974 were cancelled. These events were mirrored in other areas. A similar survey – with similar results was also organised in the Firhouse district of Tallaght

and around this time the organisation that created the integrated schools in Northern Ireland – “All Children Together” was formed.

With the institutional frustration of the attempts to create a multi-denominational school with either democratic model of management or one of shared management between differing denominations, parents were left with few options and no support from the educational establishment. Shared management could only exist with willing partners. Those who had preferred the democratic approach in Dalkey had however had a glimpse of how such a model of education could work and had been left with no possibility for their younger children to attend. Unless they provided an alternative they would be compelled to send their children to schools that conflicted their conscience and lawful preference or embark on the difficult task of home education. It is a testament to this group of parents, to their courage, foresight and the particular cooperative dynamic that bound them together that they decided to reject their rejection and seek an alternative.

DALKEY SCHOOL PROJECT

The Dalkey School Project emerged from a period of intense discussion and debate in the area between Summer 1974 and Spring 1975. The constitution of the project was formally adopted in February 1975, and by the end of this year the words “Educate

Together” appeared at the top of all correspondence. At a public meeting that year, the group had considered and rejected a narrow definition of multi-denominationalism and had stated their aims was a school in which “No Child was an Outsider” and that the definition they endorsed was one of “All Faiths and None”.

The Constitution states:-

“To develop and support in Ireland the establishment of schools which are multi-denominational (i.e. with equal right of access for the children of Catholic, Protestant and other parents, and with the cultural and social background of each child held in equal respect), co-educational and managed under a system which is predominantly democratic in character, wherever and whenever there is viable local support for such a school.”

To provide a framework by which a National School under the Department of Education’s Rules for National Schools may be established in the area which will meet the following five principles:-

A child-centred approach to education

Co-education

Multi-denominational – Catholic, Protestant and other children must have equal right of access to the school, and the social and religious background of each child shall be equally respected.

The school shall be a National School, run by a management Committee which shall be predominantly democratic in character.

The school should be planned as a pilot project....”

By the time that the DSP became an incorporated body, these principles were expressed in the following terms:-

“To advance education in Ireland, to develop and support the establishment of a multi-denominational school or schools which are:-

Run by Boards of Management, which are predominantly democratic in character.

Multi-denominational and multi-cultural, having an ethos where every child is equally respected and has equal rights of access to the school regardless of social, cultural or religious background or personal creed, and where all children are educated together in an atmosphere of respect.

Child-centred in their approach to education.

Co-educational and committed to encouraging all children to explore their full range of interests and opportunities without distinction by sex."

The incredible difficulties that were overcome by this group of people to win recognition for a voluntary committee of parents and supporters to become a patron recognised by the state, to win recognition for the school itself and finally after no less than four sets of temporary accommodation build and establish the permanent building and vibrant institution that is today the Dalkey School Project National School have been well documented elsewhere and should properly be the subject of a detailed book and documentary.

However it is important to identify some central characteristics:-

The people who established the Educate Together model in Dalkey were very little different from the parents who are forming new associations and new Educate Together schools today. They sought the best for their children. They sought a modern educational environment that recognised the benefit of cherishing social and religious diversity. They saw the huge educational potential of parental involvement in schools. They wanted a school environment that was organised from first principle for the educational benefit of children. Sometimes at an unspoken level and sometimes not, they

deeply resented the hostility of the establishment to an educational initiative that was a serious attempt to address the human rights of citizens and to enhance the system as a whole and one which was not hostile to any religious faith.

The Dalkey School Project was a parent-initiated school. It arose as a result of the democratic expression of parents whose needs could not be met by the existing denominational provision.

It was a genuine cooperative enterprise, in which parents teachers and supporters came together in an atmosphere in which private agendas and politics were left outside the door and people united for the best interests of children and society.

It was well led and professionally organised. It set out to build a cross-party consensus to support the right of parents to choose a form of education for their children that reflects their conscience. At the same time it supported the rights of those who wished for denominational education and worked to build good relations with local religious and educational interests. It conducted surveys and was well informed of all aspects of the system and engaged in practical negotiations to bring success.

At the same time as becoming a leading advocate for educational reform. It carried through all these aims in the process of actually building and managing a school.

The Development

The Dalkey School Project opened its doors in 1978 after the direct intervention of the Jack Lynch and three years' intense lobbying, fundraising, research and discussion. Six years later it moved into its permanent premises in Glenageary. Even while in temporary accommodation it proved an inspiration to visitors who subsequently decided to adopt the model. In 1981, the Bray School Project National School was opened and in 1984 the North Dublin National School Project National School opened in Glasnevin. In 1987 three more schools opened in Sligo, Cork and Kilkenny. In 1988, the first in service course to develop a Religious Education Core Curriculum was held. In 1989, St Columba's CoI National School(Ranelagh)became the first denominational school to transform into an Educate Together school.

In the years since communities all over the country have 'bought into' this set of concepts, formulations, organisational and teaching practices. In fact the way in which different communities have interpreted the original model have widely varied. This variation in interpretation was actually implicitly acknowledged in the names of

the first 11 Educate Together schools. All included the name “Project” in their names and the sector was for many years referred to as “The Project Schools”. There was certainly no attempt to enforce any uniformity in interpretation. For many, the definition was clearly seen as a loosely defined quartet of principles around which ethos was an inclusive process of discussion of policy and curricular development.

The first three schools formed a national umbrella organisation in 1984, this was a collaborative organisation in which three school communities pooled experience, and set about representing their common objectives to government. All decisions had to be unanimous. New schools were established, each were compelled by government to establish their own patron bodies, and each used the original formulations of the Dalkey School Project as the basis for their Memo and Articles. Once opened, they joined Educate Together as full members (start-up associations were afforded associate membership) and contributed to the consensus driven decision making of the organisation. Later an annual event, the Educate Together Day was organised as a forum for ideas exchange and networking.

Six years into the existence of Educate Together as an organisation, an attempt was made to translate the principles of the Dalkey School

Project Memo and Articles into a concise statement of values and objectives. This resulted in the formulation of the Educate Together Charter (1990) that was unanimously agreed by all member schools at that time. The Educate Together Charter remains the fundamental statement of aims that is endorsed by all members of the movement. 15 years after the original formulation of the Dalkey School Project, the wording had only slightly changed.

“Multi-denominational i.e. all children having equal rights of access to the school, and children of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds being equally respected,

Co-educational and committed to encouraging all children to explore their full range of abilities and opportunities,

Child centred in their approach to education,

Democratically run with active participation by parents in the daily life of the school, with due regard however for the professional role of the teachers”

However, society and education in Ireland were in a period of rapid change during this period. The intensification of the political crisis in the North, the growing significance of the European Union, the rapid shift of the basis of economy from agriculture to industry especially

that driven by foreign multi-nationals, the rapid increase in accessibility of travel, media, and later of the internet and cheap global communications all stimulated huge developments in society and education. In the last decade of the century, the impact of European standards stimulated a whole raft of legislation, including equality, health and safety, employment rights, freedom of information. The historically un-legislated area of education became a focus of first the Forum on Education and various White Papers. By 1995, the incremental growth of the Educate Together sector had brought the recognition of the necessity to establish a permanent national office with paid staff. This in itself brought forward the necessity for the adoption of quicker decision making systems and legal protection. As a result, decision-making by majority vote was adopted in 1995 and then the incorporation of the national body into a company limited by guarantee was completed in 1998.

A critical moment was in January 1999 with the abolition of the requirement by the state that all Educate Together schools had to provide their own sites and pay 15% of the building costs of a permanent building. This wiped up to €1m off the fundraising targets of local school communities and removed what had been the greatest restraint on the progress of the movement. By 1998, the state had acknowledged that an Educate Together patron had the right to

operate more than one school and the incorporation of the national body allowed the development of centralised patronage functions for schools. This had been one of the original intentions of the founders of the Dalkey School Project.

By 2000, there were three forms of patronage for Educate Together schools, those schools with individual patrons (considered by many to be the classic model), schools with the national patron and the first signs of the growth of individual patrons into regional patrons as the Dalkey School Project opened a second school under its patronage in Monkstown.

The Educate Together idea was comprehensively tested in this period. 16 differing communities had taken a set of principles, a shell ethical education curriculum and a set of company documents and had applied them to the practical process of building schools. Each was independent and there were only informal ties with others. For most of the period the financial pressures on these communities were intense. Major disputes and difficulties arose from time to time, either fuelled by controversies over enrolment policy as schools became drastically over subscribed or the treatment of religious instruction facilities or over the real meaning of democracy in a school that is also the employer of professional staff. All the schools weathered

these difficulties and the experience was fed back strengthening the collective consciousness of the movement.

The place of denominational or doctrinal instruction with the schools was an area of constant discussion. The first three schools offered time for this instruction within school hours as instructed by the Department. Subsequent schools were able to use the time allocated to the delivery of an inclusive ethical education programme and to offer the facilities of the school outside school hours to any group of parents who wished to organise doctrinal instruction. The difficulties were exacerbated by the fact that only the majority religious community lacked established means of conducting doctrinal instruction outside the school system. All the minority faiths had well established Bible Classes, Sunday schools etc. The provision of doctrinal instruction within school hours meant that the school was placed in the unenviable position of deciding how to treat those who did not attend doctrinal instruction. Did the teacher make the time interesting and fun and leave themselves open to accusations of inducing children not to attend the classes run by the Catechist? Or did they make them boring and lead themselves open to the opposite charge? Was it fair that the school then had to cram its own ethical programme into the rest of the school hours as the only way it could ensure that this programme was being taught to all children?

In practice, by the year 2000, it was clear that the way forward was for schools to offer facilities outside school hours, and even the first three schools have either moved or are in the process of moving this provision outside the main school programme.

Enrolment policy has been an ongoing area of contention. From the start, it was felt that the only way in which the schools could carry through their legal obligations that no family was disadvantaged in anyway was to operate a “First Come First Served” policy. There were many discussions over this and Educate Together schools were often pressed to adopt policies to prefer certain categories of children such as siblings, refugees, travellers, those of no faith or those already in the Educate Together sector whose families had moved for work or other reasons. This debate is ongoing today, however, the majority of schools that experimented with special categories have reverted to the “First Come First Served” policy. There is now a growing recognition that enrolment policies only come into play when the demand for places exceeds the supply and that if we are to be bound by our legal charter, we must work to increase the supply of places rather than restrict access. It remains the aim of the movement that a parent who has a child ready to start school in September should have a realistic chance of placing that child in an Educate Together school when applying in April of that year and that no family should

have to travel more than 30 minutes in time to access a school that respects its conscience. Unfortunately, we are still a long way from achieving these objectives.

The precise meaning of the term “democratically run with due regard however for the professional role of the teacher” has been discussed in every school in the sector. Many times: In great detail: Then in greater detail! It has been natural in a sector in which all schools have been initiated by voluntary groups of parents that the exact balance between this intense personal involvement of parents with their child’s education and the objective, professional role of the teacher responsible for the education of all children in a class has had to be worked out.

As in all schools, the most delicate and potentially difficult area is that which bounds the conditions and human relationships of those employed in the school. The huge benefits to be gained from the involvement of the parent body and parents in the educational programmes of the school had to be worked out in detail. Mistakes had to be made, policies developed, boundaries and roles defined. One of the greatest difficulties was that teachers had no training in operating in a school legally bound to democratic methods. Even

today, no teacher training college in the state offers even a voluntary module that prepares young teachers for this environment.

The upshot of these discussions led to the only amendment of the Educate Together Charter to-date. In the place of the form of words taken from the constitution “with due regard however” in 1999, the sector unanimously decided to adopt the following formulation:-

“Democratically run with active participation by parents in the daily life of the school, whilst positively affirming the professional role of the teachers.”

Exactly how to exert the powers of patronage that were now taken up by a limited company whose members were chiefly parents within the school has been an area of constant debate in each Educate Together community. This debate has carried on alongside the national negotiations on the Education Acts that have legally defined the role of the patron in the Irish school system and also in the context of the removal of the requirement by the state for Educate Together schools to provide their own sites. Great care has been required to ensure that the role of the patron to oversee ethos and fundamental policies and procedures has been carried out without becoming embroiled in the details of school administration and human relations at local level. In practice there has been considerable

change in the form that this patronage has taken within the Educate Together movement since 1998. There is no longer the insistence of the state that each school must establish its own patron. Dalkey School Project was able to open a second school under its patronage in that year and from 2000 to 2003, all new Educate Together schools have opened with the patronage of the national body.

By 2004, these developments have been fully absorbed by the national movement and have withstood all the tests of time. Now we can start to describe a clearly defined Educate Together model. The fact that this model is increasingly representative of the needs of the times can be seen in the accelerated growth of the movement in the past five years.

Year	Closures	New Schools			
		Catholic	Gaelscoileanna	Educate Together	Others
1998	12		6	1	1
1999	14		4	1	1
2000	17		2	1	1
2001	11	2	2	2	
2002	9		3	7	
2003	N/a	2	2	3	
Total	63	4	18	15	3

SO WHAT TODAY IS THE EDUCATE TOGETHER MODEL?

The ethos of a school is defined by the patron in the Irish system. So the Educate Together model is in essence a form of patronage, which defines ethos, and promotes best practice and quality control of management.

An Educate Together school operates with a transparent, legally defined ethos. The role of the patron in an Educate Together is carried out by a legal entity that is bound by its Memo and Articles. The fundamental element of this document is the formulation of the four principles of the Educate Together Charter. These can be expressed in a simple, stand-alone document that is easy to publish and display to all those participating in the school.

Because this legal form defines the policy of the patron and the Education Act empowers the patron to lay this as a legal charge on the Board of Management of a school, it defines the fundamental approach and policy of all the activity of the Board of Management of that school. As a result, children, teachers, parents – all the people participating in the school - can have great comfort and certainty about the legal framework in which the school operates.

The Multi-denominational or inclusive principle obliges the Board to ensure that in all the activities of the school, the identity of the children is respected and actively supported and cherished irrespective of religious, cultural or social background. This has wide and very important consequences. The board may not promote or encourage any particular religious viewpoint. The school does not require the parents of children to identify their faith. All aspects of the school life must cherish and actively support the identity of all children and this support must take place as of right without application or request. This is a central feature that distinguishes a school that tolerates or makes accommodations for those who have differing views from a school that is built on the human right of all children to respect of their identity.

The operation of this principle has major ramifications for the teaching of ethics and religion in the school. The Board, in consultation with the parents and teachers delivers a comprehensive programme of comparative religious education – education about religious faiths – in an age appropriate manner and related to the specific dynamics of the community. This also encompasses programmes of ethics and civics, anti-racism, anti-harassment, anti-bullying, relationships and sexuality. The work of our school communities in developing this “Religious Education Core

Curriculum” (now increasingly referred to as an Ethical Education Core Curriculum in Educate Together circles) has produced a unique body of work, grown in Irish conditions that is one of the most impressive contributions made by the movement. It is this core curriculum that is the main subject of this conference.

This principle also bars a school from any policy that would favour any particular social background, economic or cultural, in access or treatment in the school. This has wide implications for enrolment policy and even fundraising. The “First Come First Served” policy, whilst still under discussion and review is seen as the most appropriate implementation of this legal requirement for enrolment policy. Fundraising must be collective and any individual contributions must be anonymous and voluntary. No family can be placed in the position in which they feel that their contribution or participation is limited by their means.

The **Co-educational** principle commits the board to ensuring that children are encouraged to develop their abilities and opportunities irrespective of gender. When first penned, there were few co-educational primary schools in the Irish system. Nowadays co-educational schools are the norm for all new schools although there are still very significant areas in the country where only single gender

provision is available. There have also been major advances in the national curriculum which address gender stereotyping.

However, co-educationalism is much more than having girls and boys in the same room and teaching them the same curriculum. This principle requires a board to ensure that in all aspects of the school's work – including behaviour, sports and extra-mural activities for instance – there is no gender preferential decisions taken. It also places a heavy onus on the board to ensure that there is a comprehensive programme of education that permeates all aspects of school life to address not only the historical discrimination against women but also the redefinition of the male role in society. It does not require me to draw attention to the importance of this legal obligation of a board when we are faced with the harrowing increase in alienation of young people especially young men from the education system.

The **Child centred** principle is often the one most misunderstood by those outside the Educate Together sector. The national school system has been formally child-centred since 1971 with the introduction of the New Curriculum. The founders of the Dalkey School Project were indeed firm supporters of the educational aims of this curriculum and wanted to see its fullest implementation in the schools that they

operated. However, the curriculum is defined by the Department, delivered by the teaching staff and quality assured by the inspectorate. What Educate Together means by retaining this principle in its definition of ethos, is that in addition to this general philosophical objective, this principle is established as a legal obligation on a board i.e. that all its decisions must be made according to the developmental needs of the children in its school. Wherever choices have to be made, the board must place these needs as its first priority.

Democratically run with active participation by parents in the daily life of the school, whilst positively affirming the professional role of the teachers.

We have come a long way since the origins of Educate Together, when the original documentation of the Dalkey School Project was being drawn up. Then there was only a pilot scheme in operation in the Dublin Catholic Diocese for Boards of Management. Originally only seven schools were part of this scheme. Nowadays, Boards of Management are ubiquitous. In effect, with the gradual withdrawal of the religious from the management of schools, primary education is being managed by volunteers and teachers. The administrative load is also drastically increasing. Volunteers now have to shoulder

the responsibilities of school management with little or no training and with even less administrative support from the State.

The Educate Together charge on a board to operate democracy within the school and combine this with an obligation to positively support and affirm the professional role of the teacher is the expression in legal terms of an obligation to build a genuine partnership between the teacher and parent in the operation of the school. In effect, this obligates the board to build an educational community in which the full resources of both roles are brought into play for the benefit of the children and society.

The role of parents as partners in the process of education is now recognised by the state both nationally in the statutory role of the National Parents Council and also at policy level. However, for parents to be partners they must have real power and ownership of the process of involvement in the school. They have to move beyond a role as fundraisers and tea providers at school meetings and they have to be given more direct input in decision making than is afforded by a parents association that can only operate as a pressure group articulating the views of parents.

By obligating a board to operate in a democratic fashion by proactively involving parents in the discussion of school policy and

ensuring that this involvement is real and respected, the Educate Together ethos is addressing one of the central themes that will dominate education in the future. The fact that this obligation is balanced in the same sentence with an obligation to affirm the role of teachers directly prevents destructive implementations of the parental role or the concept of a 'parent-run' school. In practice, where this partnership is consciously nurtured, where all the professional training of the teacher is combined with the wide resources of a committed and supportive parent body, a school can lever into educational resources that would be simply unavailable if they had to be accessed as paid services.

The obligation to democratic management also ensures that board - as much as possible and in an age appropriate fashion - include the pupils in the decision-making processes of the school. Many Educate Together schools successfully run students councils with direct participation down to first class level.

There is a wider significance here as well. Modern society is increasingly looking to schools to address major social issues. In one regard, this is correct. By engendering positive social attitudes in primary education we should be able to hope that this will improve society in the future, however many of the social attitudes that we are

asking teachers to improve are already prevalent in society as a whole and it is completely unfair to expect teachers alone to solve them. For example, we talk about gender stereotyping and expect our schools to address this issue. However, most of us still colour code children at birth and adopt a whole raft of gender specific attitudes in the home. The same applies to issues such as racism, xenophobia against travellers, the abuse of alcohol and other substances and the environment.

The Educate Together model of parental involvement, genuine partnership with teachers in curricular policy and the building of a school as an educational community we feel is a constructive way that such issues can seriously be addressed and a way to prevent the situation where young children are constantly receiving contradictory messages from home and school.

There is an issue here that strikes to the core of the educational process. The fact that the Educate Together ethos is built, ab initio, from the assumption that people think differently on major issues and that this difference is normal, positive and a vital resource for the future offers significant educational benefits. These far outweigh a discussion on purely religious or social grounds. A child entering a school at the age of 4 with the assumption that he or she is sitting

next to someone who may well think differently on major matters rather than coming to a school which promotes the illusion of a unified ethical view offers additional richness to the school experience. The habits and assumptions built up that this difference is something natural and interesting and something to be comfortable with is not just central to bringing up children to be conscious and adept in a diverse society and world. It has deep educational resonances. The teacher moves from a figure who defines right and wrong or who instructs by asserting the 'right answer'. There is no assumption that everyone thinks the same. The educational process is shifted to a facilitatory framework in which the student learns by evaluating information given and has a protected right to come to his or her conclusions. By protecting these rights on ethical and religious questions, a method of operation is established which inevitably percolates into other areas and re-enforces the learning method as exploratory, analytical and questioning. This has wide significance in the learning of other subjects especially in social matters, civics, environment, history, art and music and the natural sciences. It also opens exciting vistas when we look to apply the Educate Together philosophy to second level education which we do not have time to explore here.

THE FUTURE

Over the years, there have been many discussions on the relative merits of these four principles. Some people have suggested that they be reordered or some left out. In practice, they all compliment each other and together form an integrated definition of fundamental school policy. The fact there has been no change in the elements is certainly not because they have been protected from challenge or critical review. They are as relevant today as 25 years ago, because they address objective requirements of parents seeking an appropriate form of education that respects their rights and hopes for their children's future.

The challenge of diversity, of a rapidly growing economy of a people now moving with confidence on the global stage will remain one of the central pre-occupation of educators in Ireland for many years. The fact that we have an overwhelming monopoly of privately owned, state-funded religious schools in which those who are different can only gain recognition if they raise their hands and ask for special treatment absenting themselves from a central part of the school day is quite unsustainable for the future. It is an affront to their human dignity, their rights and a clear violation of the safeguards expressed in our constitution.

The Educate Together model provides a school ethos that embraces the rights and identity of all. Difference of view is welcomed as an educational resource rather than an additional demand that has to be accommodated in an already stressed system. The model provides a comprehensive programme of religious and ethical education which incorporates all the headings of Civic, Social, Political, Personal and Health Education and ensures that the environment in which religious, social and cultural difference is discussed is positive and supportive.

By also facilitating parents to operate separate doctrinal instruction classes outside school hours, we feel the school addresses not only the rights of all children and their families but also the moral rights of teachers who are never placed in a situation where they are required to teach as religious truth a viewpoint that they may themselves hold. We feel that there is in fact no other way in which we can ensure that no child or family will feel themselves an outsider in our state funded schools.

Indeed this may offer an optimum environment for the religious formation of children. We certainly have anecdotal evidence from the numbers of committed religious families – from many different persuasions including Catholics and Anglicans - who choose our

model of education. However, we claim no expertise in this field and we would appeal to the professional religious educators, members of the teaching orders or diocesan officials to undertake research and evaluation of this trend. We call on them to report to their superiors on whether or not the provision of a national network of schools operating on this model will enhance or not the provision of denominational education into the future. We would feel that such a network would bring the system into balance with the wishes of the society, prevent a significant minority being compelled to attend denominational schools against their preference, allow the denominational sector to remain true to its ethos and provide genuine choice.

To the representatives of the Department of Education, politicians and society in general we would pose the question “What is the way forward?” Our Constitution, Education Acts and other laws copperfasten the rights of patrons of schools. 99% of the schools available to citizens are religious schools. At least 96% of them are privately owned. All social trends and successive census show a radical change in the religious allegiance of citizens. Can we seriously sustain a state supported monopoly provision in which the only school available to the vast majority of citizens is one that is legally obliged to inculcate and prefer one particular religious persuasion?

The alternatives facing the government seem stark. One option would be to seek the dismantling of the legal support for denominational patrons and enforce policies of religious equality onto schools - effectively transforming them into state institutions in which the state would define ethos. We would suggest that such a path could not succeed without a drastic overhaul of the constitution and the removal of the protection of religious bodies and their ownership rights. It would be unlikely to succeed and without a doubt it would diminish our society and education system.

Another option would be to do nothing and allow the pressure of social resentment and difficulty coupled with the decline in religious personnel achieve what the state is unwilling to undertake itself.

The option we would propose is the active support of the building of a national network of schools operated under the same principles as encapsulated by the Educate Together charter and that this network would be incorporated in the National Development Plan. Our figures would suggest that the system could be brought into balance with approximately 10% of the schools operating on this basis. We would hope that this network would be created with the support of all denominational providers, all political parties and educational bodies. We would hope that this would be seen as the only

appropriate way in which the system can address changing social needs allow its health into the future.

What is unacceptable in a modern European state is that each September, all over the country, thousands of parents, even tens of thousands of parents if current census returns are accurate, debate whether or not to declare that they wish that their children should be absented from doctrinal instruction that is integrated into the compulsory school day. They are forced to consider the consequences that may fall on their children if they do.

The fact that we as a society place so many of our own citizens in the position where they have to decide whether it is right for them to make such an issue of their own identity that they may create difficulties for their children simply cannot be sustained into the future.

Parents have the fundamental right to expect a legal assurance that they can access a state funded school in which the identity of their children will be respected - without application or question - whatever that identity may be. If they wish a religious ethos they should be able to access it but if not, - on grounds of human rights - they must have the choice.

Our system at present provides them no choice and continues to place enormous difficulties in the path of those who work to provide it. It is only the proliferation of schools operating the same fundamental policies as are encapsulated by the Educate Together model that the state can be sure that it has vindicated its responsibilities.

ENDS.