

EDUCATE TOGETHER SCHOOLS – CORE VALUES AND ETHOS

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Introduction

I would like to present to you some of the experience of the Educate Together movement in handling the atmosphere and culture within which our schools operate. But firstly by introduction, let me briefly explain what Educate Together is and how it operates.

Educate Together is the national representative organization of patron bodies and Boards of Management of schools that subscribe to the Educate Together Charter. There are currently 18 such schools in the Republic of Ireland. They are all national (primary) schools.

These schools are recognised and funded by the Irish Department of Education and Science, they are non fee-paying and operate under the same set of regulations and law as do all state funded primary schools in the Republic.

The impetus to establish schools of this type in Ireland grew out of the general trend towards educational reform of the 1970s, and

resulted in the establishment in 1977 of the Dalkey School Project. Despite the enormous obstacles that had to be overcome, other schools followed so that there are now 10 schools in the greater Dublin area, 2 in Cork (one of which is a Gealscoil) and others in Kilkenny, Limerick, Galway, Sligo, Ennis and Celbridge. In practice this is a very diverse family. Some of the schools are inner city schools, one with disadvantaged status, others are in affluent suburbs. Some are in areas of enormous and growing social diversity

The structure of an Educate Together school differs in only one respect from the structure of other national schools. The role of the patron (which is carried out by the bishop in the traditional model) is occupied by a company limited by guarantee whose members comprise the supporters of the school in the local area. This membership generally consists of the parents, ex-parents and prospective parents of children in the school itself but would also include supporters from the general community. This company has charitable status and is governed by the Companies Acts which ensure that it is run in a fully accountable and democratic manner.

Educate Together schools are set up by small groups of committed parents, teachers, educationalists and other interested parties. They have to struggle against formidable difficulties in order to establish schools that are run according to their ethical and educational

principles. The scale of these obstacles and the fact that have been overcome clearly indicates the commitment of these individuals to establish schools that are decisively different in ethos from those in existing schools.

It is as a result of this that questions of “Ethos” assume a central importance in the life of an Educate Together school.

This paper attempts to describe these questions and to reflect the continuous self analytical passionate debate that is at the core of the development of Educate Together as a distinct educational philosophy in modern Ireland.

What is Meant by “Ethos” in and Educate Together environment?

I refer first to the definitions of ethos already mentioned at this conference

“The character, sentiment, or disposition of a community or people, considered as a natural endowment; the spirit which actuates manners and customs; also, the characteristic tone or genius of an institution or social organisation.

“The disposition, character, or fundamental values peculiar to a specific person, people, culture, or movement

“...the dominant pervading spirit or character of a place or institution”

Whilst these seem appropriate in many social situations and organisations, they would appear too general and perhaps almost ethereal for many in an Educate Together school.

A definition which would be more understandable would be:-

“The ethical principles and educational policies upon which the school strives to base all its activities.”

Not only this, a parent or teacher in an Educate Together school would expect that this ethos would be expressed in a written form. They would look for it in the mission statement of the Board of Management and centrally in the memo and articles of the limited company that carries out the responsibility of the patron.

The written statement of ethos of an Educate Together school would be expected to be used as the litmus test of the appropriateness or validity of a wide range of school practices or activities. These would include the way that the patron company conducts its business, the way that elections are conducted for members of the Board of management, the discussions of the Board itself, as well as the day to day activity of the school both in and outside of the classroom. In

contentious policy debates, it is the “constitution” which is appealed to settle disputes(usually by both sides with equal passion) and most importantly it provides the common ground around which parents, teachers and supporters of very varying opinions can agree and work together.

Educate Together would contend that it is a fundamental obligation of any school to define its ethos in written form. We think that it is essential that this should be in the form of a single stand alone document that is automatically available to anyone working in , attending or supporting the school.

We would also suggest that to be real, this statement must have a legally enforceable character and should be written sufficiently precisely so as to give positive security to all those involved in school affairs.

Whilst defining an ethos in this way could appear to an outside observer to leave the stage wide open to doctrinaire and dogmatic school policies and possibly the emergence of special kind of ‘political correctness’, our experience has been to the contrary. By clearly defining a set of unifying principles and attitudes, it creates a zone of security within which can flourish vigorous debate on interpretation and implementation. It allows all concerned to know

exactly where they stand and as a result, it spurs creativity, initiative and innovation. We have found that it has attracted many dedicated and talented teachers , built very high levels of positive parental participation in educational life, and created highly supportive atmospheres in which children have flourished.

To take this discussion further, it will be best to examine the definition of the Educate Together ethos in some detail.

The Ethos of Educate Together

The ethos statements of all Educate Together schools originated in the formation of the Dalkey School Project whose Memo and Articles have been copied with very minor changes in the legal documents of the 16 other limited companies that today operate as patrons of Educate Together schools.

In this document, the aims and objectives, powers and limits to the powers of the patron body of the school are clearly defined. Much of this is in legally detailed language, and as a result I will extract only the key features effecting the ethical values that the patron seeks to promote;-

The objects for which the Association is established are as follows:

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

- (1) Run by Boards of Management which are predominantly democratic in character.
- (2) 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.
- (3) Child-centred in their approach to education.
- (4) Co-educational and committed to encouraging all children to explore their full range of interests and opportunities without distinction by sex.”¹

Later, in 1990, the member companies of Educate Together met and drew up the Educate Together Charter, which is now the basis of unity of the Educate Together movement.

Again extracting only the main features, this documents commits the members of Educate Together to:-

“3.1 Support the establishment of schools which are:-

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, whilst positively affirming the professional role of the teachers.”²

From these extracts it can be seen that the fundamental driving concept in these definitions is that of inclusion - that is - that children should be educated together in an atmosphere in which difference is specifically recognised, endorsed and welcomed. That this difference covers ethical background and preference, religious views, social and cultural roots, gender and physical and mental advantage and

disadvantage. The other major foundation idea is that the structures in which this ethos is delivered should be democratic, respectful and representative.

The beauty of this formulation is in the fact that it includes a fundamental commitment to respect the rights of minorities both in society and within the school and couples it with a commitment to deliver this in a form that is democratically accountable and subject to majority votes. It is important to note at this point, that although the ethos is legally enforceable, it is subject to a legally enforceable method whereby it may be changed. To some this may appear at first sight to be a weakness. Some may seek a legal definition of ethos that once established becomes unassailable and set in stone. Educate Together's experience suggests that this weakness is in fact a strength. If the promoters of a school are aware that the ethical values which they uphold are liable to democratic change, then it clearly requires them to ensure that these values are constantly elaborated in the daily life of the school. An ethos clearly cannot be maintained purely by an external legal hand, it has to be a living, constantly regenerating feature of the discussions in the playground, staff room management meeting and general meeting of parents. If the promoters of the school fail in maintaining it in these places it will certainly wither.

How is this Ethos applied?

The democratic structures of an Educate Together patron are straightforwardly protected by the law. AGMs must be held each year, proper notice and notification of EGMs must be given, Directors must declare their interests and be accountable to the AGM and no action of the company can be outside its Memo and Articles. Even changes to these documents cannot be made without recourse to the Companies Office.

Further safeguards to the definitions of ethos lie in the fact that a school must operate under the regulations of the Department and now, for the new schools owned by the Department, they must conform to the conditions of the new leases currently being developed by the partners in Irish primary education.

To successfully apply this ethos to a school and ensure that the daily evolving culture of a school is educated by it, we would highlight some factors listed below.

It goes without saying that the selection of a teaching staff and in particular a principal teacher who is committed to the implementation of the ethos in the whole life of the school is of

paramount importance. We would highlight further that it is essential that this process does not stop at selection but continues with active support of the role of the principal who we see as the leader of the pedagogic team and not as a bureaucrat and who should be provided with all the necessary supports to carry out the demands of modern school administration.

Secondly that the delivery of ethos and building of school culture is “an ideas and discussion driven process”. It has to be an ongoing, integrated, cyclical process of self analysis – of doubt and questioning. It has to permeate all areas of school activity from the big areas of the delivery of the religious education core curriculum, through the way the school celebrates festivals all the way down to the manner in which the PTA organizes Science Week. This discussion should start before the school opens, be part of the consultation phase with the local community and continue until such a time when the school changes or is no longer needed. It is the responsibility of the patron body or trustee to ensure that this happens, that the issues of are brought up at the meetings of the board and parent body, that the school’s response to gender equity, the policy on peer pressure and bullying , the response to the recognition of multiple intelligences, the response to provision of facilities for religious instruction for those parents who wish to avail

it, to the response to children whose native language is neither Irish nor English, I mention these few in no particular order of merit – that these considerations are carried out with full reference to the defined statement of ethos.

Thirdly, that the consideration of these questions must take place in a situation where the participants have real power. The process of review of ethos must be a process that has teeth. All participants in this review must really know that they have a legally enforceable right to participate and make a difference. If they do not and are merely consulted, then they will not become the active deliverers of this programme. It is our experience that any attempt to impose an ethos in a hierarchical model is ineffective in today's world.

Furthermore we think that it completely misses the huge opportunities for creative involvement that the democratic model offers.

There are indeed dangers in this process. Democracy means that there is no certainty that the voters will make the right decision. Rights mean in essence the absence of control. In our schools there is sometimes a danger that the local democratically formed patron can become embroiled in the detail of school life and lack sufficient detachment to carry out its supervisory role.

To the first concern our experience would suggest that the benefits far outweigh the possible dangers. In fact over 25 years despite many – usually positive but sometimes highly controversial disputes over the implementation of the ethos our core values have never been threatened. At the same time we have had to stand back in awe at the confidence with which our ‘stakeholders’ - children, teachers and parents have developed it in practice.

To the second, we feel that this is a management and training issue that national bodies like ourselves must address in order to make the system work.

The key issue here is one of trust. That is, trusting that the ethos upheld genuinely corresponds to the best interests of the educational community and that this community has been empowered with the structures, practices and information necessary to protect it.

Conclusion

It is our contention that the best way to support and protect a school ethos is to define it in a legally enforceable form which is also legally bound to democratic evolution. The pressure of the obligation to be held to account at regular intervals by one’s constituency erodes dogmatic formulation. It constantly forces a patron or promoter of a school to consciously explain and justify the policies implemented. It

openly encourages critical and constructive comment and alternative suggestions. It provides a mechanism whereby such suggestions can be evaluated by the community in whose interests they are being advocated.

We would also contend that the Educate Together model suits well the emerging atmosphere in society in which parents, teachers and children expect to have ownership of their institutions and that policy decisions are taken with conscious justification and openness.

References

¹ Memo and Articles of Dalkey School Project Limited

² The Educate Together Charter 1990, as amended by the AGM of Educate Together April 17th 1999

Appendix

EDUCATE TOGETHER CHARTER

RECALLING Article 26.3 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights:

“Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children”

and Article 42.4 of the Constitution of Ireland:

“The state shall provide for free primary education and shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate education initiative, and, when the public good requires it, provide other

educational facilities or institutions with due regard, however, for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation”,

and RECOGNISING:

- 1.1. That many parents have a valid preference for schools in which boys and girls of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds can be educated together in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect,
- 1.2 That the multi-denominational schools established under the banner of EDUCATE TOGETHER are a distinctive response to the growing demand for such an option within the Irish educational system,

EDUCATE TOGETHER AFFIRMS THAT:

- 2.1 Children of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds have a right to an education that respects their individual identity whilst exploring the different values and traditions of the world in which they live,
- 2.2 Parents are entitled to participate actively in decisions that affect the education of their children. In particular, they have the right to decide what kind of school reflects their conscience and lawful preference,
- 2.3 Multi-denominational schools have the right to be treated no less favourably than other schools within the Irish educational system, in accordance with their needs and their identity,
- 2.4 The state has a duty to take identity of the multi-denominational sector fully into account when deciding on policy that affects the establishment and development of schools,

and COMMITS ITSELF TO:

- 3.1 Support the establishment of schools which are,
- 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, whilst positively affirming the professional role of the teachers
- in areas where the demand for such a school exists,
- 3.2 Promote fuller awareness and recognition of the identity of the multi-denominational sector at all levels in Irish society and abroad,
- 3.3 Participate in appropriate structures and activities concerned with the future development of education in Ireland and abroad,
- 3.4 Promote a future where multi-denominational education will be as freely available to parents as any other educational option they may choose.

*Formally launched on 12th May 1990 at the Aula Maxima, University College Galway
amended at AGM 17th April 1999*