

SHARED EDUCATION

I am making this submission in a private capacity. I have been a teacher since 1967, in both England and in Northern Ireland, in both faith and 'state' schools.

I was cautiously optimistic in 2010 when the First Minister of Northern Ireland, Peter Robinson, stated very strongly that he saw Integrated schooling as the way forward for our society. I hoped that the day when the present 93/7% State/Integrated breakdown might finally dawn, with goodwill from all interested parties.

Then, when the 'Shared' Education model began to be mooted, my concerns grew that powerful interest groups must be influencing policy. All leaders seem to pay lip-service to the desirability of Integration but not to the extent of significantly furthering it.

Baroness Blood has called for a root and branch Enquiry into Education in Northern Ireland. Perhaps with such a thoroughgoing survey as this informing policy, the fundamental question of parental choice can be adequately aired and addressed. Faith lobbies, in particular, can be relied on to continue to emphasise the sectarian argument of parental choice, and the preservation of what they call 'ethos', ignoring the wider ramifications of the costs to society of their 'rights' being met. ('Ethos', it should be remembered, is not the preserve of any one sector. On listening to some commentators, however, it is quite clear that some 'ethoses' are more desirable than others!). While such standpoints must be heard, so too must the concerns of those – the vast majority in my view - who believe society should be aiming in the much shorter term for the establishment of a school system which integrates children, of all abilities, backgrounds, ethnicities and religions.

I have no doubt but that submissions to this Enquiry will quote the compelling international evidence in favour of educating children under one roof. (And in talking about 'rooves' I am not referring to experiments like that in the Moy which has all the hallmarks of an educational oxymoron). My reason for offering my perspective is based on my personal experiences in over 40 years of teaching in a wide variety of schools, faith and state, in both England and Northern Ireland. I was educated in Tipperary by the Christian Brothers, and am a graduate of UCD.

I was involved in the seminal educational debate in England in the '60s and onwards, which witnessed the incorporation of pupils from a wide array of origins and backgrounds. Such transformations necessitated the re-examining of curricula, overt and covert, in ensuring that schools did much more than pay lip-service to multi-ethnicity, but actually fashioned-out an ethos in which all pupils could flourish. This necessitated us as teachers confronting our own deeply held beliefs and prejudices. We who hail from the indigenous cultures of these islands have absorbed attitudes which run deep, and only a certain kind of accommodating educational environment can address the types of questions and issues which true integration throws up.

Those who demand segregated schooling speak a lot about the need to respect 'difference'. But the 'difference' that they are overly and disproportionately preoccupied with, happens to be probably, ultimately the least important, but potentially the most incendiary, of all human differences, which is that of *religion*. This religious segregating of children may have had a certain contested causality in the past, but in this era of multi-culturalism, it's becoming a privilege which is unsustainable. I taught in multi-ethnic schools in England, integrated schools, (though not in name), but, because of the insistence of Catholics, Anglicans and Jews on having their 'own' schools, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and other religious minorities began to demand this selfsame privilege. And thus was precipitated the further disintegration of the education service, and the growth of arguments for religion to be taken out of schools.

A faith school is too two-dimensional – it operates in an intellectually 'safe' context, which is the antithesis of true learning. A mixture of backgrounds and cultures provides the missing dimensions. With Northern Ireland's fractious history, it is essential for schools to work towards that synthesis which is only possible with proper integration. 'Half-way houses' like those proposed by the Shared model, are exactly what Northern Ireland does not need. 'Shared Education' represents a failure to confront society's most glaring needs.

While faith/segregated/sectarian schools can and indeed do, emphasise certain desirable values, they cannot, by their very nature, draw from that nurturing well which is generated by a cross-community, ethnically-mixed, religiously-diverse catchment of children. There is little possibility of true, lasting friendships developing until children, working at the same tables, eating at the same tables, playing in the same teams, acting in the same plays, playing in the same orchestras, visiting each others' houses, (visiting each others' places of worship?), see each other as nothing other, than merely other young label-less people.

In all my years in schools, I never once came across a teacher who expressed a preference for teaching 'Catholic', or 'Protestant', or 'Muslim', or 'Jewish', black or white, etc. ... children. Teachers prefer to teach the child who is before them and not one of a particular racial, religious, sexual, or any other label. In fact, if a teacher were to have strong preferences for such a sectarian catchment of children, I believe they would in so doing, be disqualifying themselves from the noble profession of teaching. And yet, teachers in Northern Ireland are trained in segregated training institutions, a medieval practice which should have no place in a modern society. Those with the power to effect and perpetuate such ghettoisation should be challenged. If there were a proposal to train doctors, lawyers, etc., along sectarian lines, questions would rightly be asked.

In the days when schools were well-subscribed, there was no urgency to change structures, except among the high-minded pioneers of the

Integrated Education movement. Now that numbers are dwindling, it would take a very uncynical person not to wonder if perhaps current preparedness to share resources had to do with such paucity of children. A figure that could run into the forties of millions of pounds, maybe more, while thousands of teachers and other staff lose their jobs, while children continue to be failed, has been suggested for this lurch into the worst of all possible carve-ups.

I would appeal to all power-brokers in the education world of Northern Ireland, particularly the CCMS, one of whose spokespersons has stated that the CCMS 'neither supports nor opposes integrated education', to reconsider the false path we are placing our children on with this 'Shared' trade-off. Why? Because it is not really 'shared' at all – not in the true meaning of that word. But it most assuredly looks like a trade-off to those of us looking-on powerlessly from the sidelines. If someone in Birmingham - England or Alabama - suggested a 'shared' campus, a la Northern Ireland, between Muslim and Jewish, or black and white children, in either place, the idea would be derided, and rightly so. We must ask ourselves what the essential difference is between such a disingenuous proposal as this, in those places, and that planned for the Moy, and other places in Northern Ireland. Shared education is segregation with a smiley mask on.

Because of the 'parental choice' millstone, politicians are afraid of rocking the educational/electoral boat and will opt for the line of least resistance. I believe that an Enquiry among the people of Northern Ireland, proposing universal Integrated education would command the support of the vast majority of people of good-will. The tail has wagged the dog for long enough and it is time people were given the choice of declaring what kind of society Northern Ireland should be. Intransigent rumps have held sway for far too long and it is time that the voice of the people, free from the browbeating of prelate, politician or propagandist, was heard and acted upon.

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