

Education Committee Enquiry on Shared and Integrated Education. October 2014

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My professional life has been in education at primary and third level as well as for the glass industry. Social policy underpins this work and because of this the educational system in Northern Ireland has been of particular interest.

Since 1974 I have been involved particularly in the development of schools in which pupils from the main Christian traditions and others could be educated together. Northern Ireland is a relatively small place and the potential for the people to join in a common purpose for the health of the economy and cultural life is severely weakened by the often fatal fissures of political and religious division.

Succeeding generations have inherited and suffered from separation in education, in where they live and in their different views of the world. They have grown up without knowledge of 'the other'. Ignorance breeds suspicion , fear and often antagonism.

Despite this distance growing numbers have come together, shared their working and social lives and formed relationships. So why do the structures stay rigid? Why cannot those who wish to do so be able educate their children together? Why always the religious labels dominating choice?

It was a desperate group of parents who in 1981 decided to tempt fate and open Lagan College. A school for all children of all abilities and social class. The parents were embarking on a personal journey of discovery about their own feelings and those of their fellow travellers , What were the essentials of their faith ,their philosophy and their culture.? How would all these factors be melded into a secure environment in which their children could share but not flaunt all that mattered to them.

There was nothing easy about the task either physically or mentally .There was a common purpose and determination with which to counter the problems and some hostility. The community that grew around the school, parents and staff, pupils and wider family

circles were and are an example of how a shared Northern Ireland could be if that phrase was a sincere aspiration.

Forty Integrated schools have been started by parents since then. Lagan College has grown from 28 to 1200+pupils and heavily oversubscribed ,as are many of the forty. This year ,2014,the Integrated Primary school that grew nearby to Lagan had to turn away 19 pupils who applied as their first preference . Forge IPS not far away had no room for 24 similar applicants. A few years ago a local controlled PS applied to transform to Integrated status but it was discouraged by the two Education and Library Boards and turned down by DENI. That PS could have absorbed the demand.

We have been grateful for the courage of the controlled schools who have transformed and the Transferors who have seen the possibilities therein. A Transforming school has a challenging task as it is not starting from scratch. They do have a building but they have to go the journeys and carry the existing staff and parents while reaching out as they

incorporate 'the other'. Often they are judged by their original capacity notwithstanding demographic changes and the need for a transformed integrated school to grow organically as its character is little appreciated.

Throughout the years since 1981 Government policy has changed regularly and the development of more integrated places has been chequered. There was considerable growth during the 1990-2000 period but from then increasing blocks have been inserted, in particular that saying no new school should affect an existing one.

During the period 1970 to the present time my impressions and experiences of the education system has been shaped by various roles. I was a Lecturer in the Social Work at QUB and learnt at first hand the experiences of the students I was privileged to tutor. At one time seven of my tutorial group of twelve had honours degrees but had failed the 11+. Integrated colleges are All Ability. I also served as a Lay Magistrate on the Juvenile Panel. Young people from most of the Belfast

schools came before us over the 25 years. The effect of disadvantage was reinforced by the lack of parity of esteem between selective and non-selective schools. Underlying was the sectarianism of ignorance. The disturbances surrounding many of the community rituals and the time of year dictated the affiliations of those before us. And gave too many a criminal record.

For 12 years I was a member of the Belfast Education and Library Board, with the last 4 years as Chair. During that time I got to know many of the schools from all sectors and appreciated the difficulties of running a system segregated 4 ways, by religion and ability and with the concentration of 14 Voluntary grammar schools in the city.

Bringing children together can only be done with great care and sensitivity. Ancestral voices are quickly summoned. Throughout all these years teachers have been very honest that to engage in discussion of sensitive issues whether religious or historically political, requires that they are trained and supported. The submission from the North

East Education and Library Board describes well the groundwork needed for Shared Education.

After so many years of turbulence it is surely incumbent upon us to seize the initiatives that have been shown in education, the arts, sports and community action to enhance the potential for development of a functional and progressive society with a common purpose.

The community action that has prospered against all the odds are the schools founded by parents so that their children can learn together and know each other. Across the divides of ability, class, religion and politics they offer a choice for those who wish to share their futures.

To this end it seems imperative that the concept of Community Audit be instated in a robust and non-partisan fashion so that planning for the future of education in any area is decided by the people of that area. In this way, if supported by politicians and stakeholders, there might be a possibility that the aspirations of parents and the different educational interests could converge.

