

Paper presented at IHRC Seminar

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Educate Together

For the purpose of clarity, I would like to state from the outset that in contrast to the other members of this panel I do not represent a faith or belief community but am speaking for a model of Irish education that has been developed over the past 30 years to deliver - amongst other educational objectives - human rights and equality to children “irrespective of their social, cultural or religious backgrounds”. In the 1970s a group of parents and educationalists from a variety of religious backgrounds gathered together to create a model of school in which children of all religions could be educated together in an atmosphere of respect. Critically, at a meeting at which it was proposed that this atmosphere should be broadly Christian in nature, Micheal Johnston, the first chairperson of Educate Together, stated that the guiding principle should instead be that no child should feel themselves an outsider in the operation of the school. I will return to this a little later in relation to the proposed children’s rights referendum but I honestly believe that this softly expressed principle is actually the over-arching and fundamental issue in relation to the handling of religion in schools.

Today, there are 58 Educate Together schools educating 13,000 children in Ireland. As a network, we face escalating demand from parents and have more than 40 current applications to open new Educate Together primary schools on the desks of the Department of Education and Skills and an increasing number of second-level applications. Educate Together has recently started its own teacher education and management courses and there is now also increasing interest for this model of education to be available in other jurisdictions.

The Educate Together model

The Educate Together model sets as a legal foundation a guarantee of equality of access and esteem to children irrespective of their social, cultural or religious background. This legal guarantee is set by independent conviction, above but supported by statutory and constitutional provisions. In practice, this means that there can be no discrimination on religious grounds in the operation of the school. No registration, labelling or separation of children on such grounds or in its management structures. The school provides a comprehensive and holistic ethical education programme that enjoys discrete contact time with all students and defines the values system legally upheld by the school as what we in Ireland describe as the school's "ethos". This programme is built around fundamental moral and ethical values that have proved to be common to families of all backgrounds. However, this programme is not passive in the area of religion morality or spirituality. It comprises formal strands of moral and spiritual devel-

opment, equality and justice, ethics and the environment and one of belief systems. In this strand, children are empowered to explore the major belief systems of the world, both theistic and non-theistic, and are provided a safe and supportive environment in which they can express their own identity and constructively and critically engage with, and learn from, the identity of others. The teacher acts as guide in this interaction and ensures that this interaction takes place in an atmosphere of respect.

At the same time, Educate Together schools provide facilities for any group of parents - outside the compulsory school programme - to operate faith-formation classes of their choice. The school authorities only require that such classes are properly organised, insured and conform to child protection obligations.

In practice, this approach allows for the full moral and ethical development of children, provides a high level of awareness and understanding of of faiths and beliefs, guarantees equality of esteem and ensures that no child is marginalised separated or isolated during the compulsory school day on account of their own religious identity or that of their families. It provides for the religious rights of families to have facilities to transfer their faith and it also ensures that no teacher is placed in a situation in which they must teach as religious truth a belief that they may not themselves hold.

Experience of the 'opt out facility'

Over the years, the parents who seek out Educate Together schools for their children have deep and difficult experience of the constitutional and statutory 'opt out facility' available to them in Irish denominational schools.

A typical story would be of a parent of a minority belief background considering how they should ask for their child to be absent from the Catholic programme in their school. They find out that they must simply make a formal request to the principal, and I would like to stress that in most cases this is handled in a sensitive and appropriate manner, but that in almost all cases there is no proper facility for their child, who will be often simply left at the back of the class. The parent, is aware that their child has not chosen their religion and is naturally primarily concerned for their child's socialisation in school, in almost all cases decides not to avail of this right. Thus the infringement of their and their child's intellectual and religious rights is driven under the surface and not confronted.

Even a cursory glance at the demographic trends in Ireland today will demonstrate the scale of this issue. We are experiencing a dramatic, generation on generation change in the attitude of the indigenous population coupled with the impact of an equally dramatic widening of the scope of religious diversity driven by inward migration. This necessitates a planned and appropriate government policy to address this issue.

Case before the International Convention of the Elimination of Racial Discrimination(ICERD), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), International Convention on Civic and Political Rights(ICCPR) the Council of Europe Framework Convention on National Minorities(CoE CNM).

Educate Together has been asking the Irish state to address this issue as a matter of policy for a number of years, and as a result of the slow progress of this effort decided to take this to a number of international treaty organisations starting with ICERD in 2005. The Committee of ICERD recognised the “intersectionality of religious and racial discrimination” and recommended that the Irish government increase the availability of multi-denominational (and non-denominational) schools. This recommendation has been echoed and reinforced by the other treaty organisations mentioned.

“FFISH” and “FFOSH”

The conference has heard a wide range of papers in relation to the legal environment internationally and domestically. In Educate Together’s opinion a critical question is the place of religious education and in particular faith-formation in schools.

We feel that the way in which the connected, sometimes integrated but separate roles of religious formation and religious education in schools will be a key differentiator within the system and particularly at primary level.

'FFISH' - Faith Formation In School Hours as part of an integrated curricular approach will become increasingly untenable unless there is a readily available alternative for families who do not want it for the education of their children. This will increasingly become a demand from members within faith communities as well as those of minority belief.

'FFOSH' - Faith Formation Outside School Hours, coupled with religious education programmes like the Belief Systems Strand of Educate Together's "Learn Together" curriculum will become increasingly popular as an appropriate and respectful approach that allows for equal treatment of children of different backgrounds.

Legal and other issues

Impact of Children's rights referendum

The Irish discourse on religion and education has been dominated by the constitutional position of the rights of parents and of religious organisations. However education is fundamentally and inalienable a matter of the intellectual rights of the student. It is a process that cannot deliver its own full potential as a prime driver of social prosperity unless it takes as its first principle the nurturing of the unique identity of the individual and their infinite potential. In the case of young children, the respect for that identity and its growth in equality with others is a delicate and sensitive matter that must be embraced by the entire atmosphere and workings of a school.

The impact of the forthcoming referendum to insert the rights of the child into the Irish constitution will I hope necessitate a renewed focus on the intellectual and religious rights of children in schools and a drive for reform and policy change for all those who manage schools.

Exemptions from equal status legislation

The extraordinary trend towards diversity in our population at a time of rapid expansion of our school-going population is raising significant challenges at a time of severe constraint on State resources. In particular, it will place enormous pressure on the continued legal ability of state funded religious schools in areas where there is no other choice to discriminate on religious grounds in matters of enrolment.

Provision of equality based alternatives to religious schools

There is now an solid case, supported by extensive recommendations from treaty bodies, popular opinion, and in my lay opinion the law, and clearly evidenced demand for a national policy to create a national network of schools that provide the same level of guaranteed equality of access and esteem to children as is provided in the Educate Together model.

Thank you.