

Why Second Level?

The Rights of Parents and Children

When the first Educate Together primary school opened in Dalkey, Co Dublin, thirty years ago, it was as result of prolonged campaign by pioneering parents determined to claim their constitutional and human rights to choose a particular multi-denominational ethos for their children's education. Their vision was that this choice would also be made available at second-level in time. The right to choose does not cease when children reach the age of twelve, and pressure has been mounting on Educate Together to expand its successful multi-denominational, coeducational, democratic and child-centred model into the post-primary sphere ever since the day the Dalkey school opened.

Until now, groups of parents who have mobilised around the country in an attempt to establish Educate Together second-level schools have been frustrated in their efforts. In a context of powerful educational and institutional structures that are resistant to change, the task facing parents is daunting and for many their children are now older and time has run out. Educate Together now feels compelled to move to support these, and indeed all parents, at a national level, in their various campaigns to exercise their right to choice.

The Need for a New Approach

However, there is much more to this move than supporting parents. Educate Together believes that fundamental reform of second-level education in Ireland is long overdue. Irish society has been undergoing huge social, economic and demographic change in recent decades. Calls for a different approach to education which will reflect these changes and better prepare young people for life in 21st century globalised Ireland have come from bodies as diverse as the Combat Poverty Agency and Forfás.

Calls for change are often met in public discourse with broad references to Ireland's "great" education system. It is certainly true that the introduction of universal second-level education in the 1960s, and investments in science and technology education at third level in the 1980s have been important factors in the substantial economic growth that Ireland has enjoyed since the 1990s. However, focussing exclusively on the system's strengths has meant that inequalities and other weaknesses have remained largely unchallenged.



The percentage of students staying in school until the leaving certificate, having increased consistently since the 1960s, plateaued in the 1990s. Since then, the proportion of young people leaving school with few or no qualifications has remained stubbornly at around 14%. The number of working class boys and Travellers leaving school early is of particular concern. Dropout rate at university is also high, suggesting that many students are leaving school ill-prepared for what lies ahead.

Even a cursory glance at newspapers of late is enough to establish that all is not well with young people in Ireland today. According to a recent report from the Department of Health and Children, suicide now accounts for 22% of all deaths in the 10 to 17 age group. Widespread concern regarding teenage alcohol consumption seems justified, in that drunkenness is repeatedly shown to more prevalent among Irish teenagers than among most of their European counterparts.

The extensive longitudinal study which is currently being carried out by the ESRI on behalf of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment does not, so far, paint a pretty picture of life in post-primary education. Perhaps the most worrying finding to date is that students' attitudes to all aspects of school become significantly less positive over the course of the junior cycle.

Educate Together believes that there is a need for a new model of second-level schooling; one which provides a positive learning experience for all students; which recognizes students' individual differences as a resource, stimulating creativity and innovation and promoting the highest educational standards.

The Educate Together Ethos and the Irish Post-primary Context.

The four core principles of the Educate Together ethos are as valid at second-level as they are at primary; there is a need for schools which are actively multi-denominational, co-educational, child, or learner-centred and democratically run. There is also potential to ease students' transition from primary to post-primary schooling through a closer blending, not just of ethos but also of curriculum and teaching methodologies.

The particular multi-denominational ethos of Educate Together schools is one which has much to offer in a society in which ethnic minorities have for too long been ignored. In



Educate Together schools respect for cultural, religious and indeed other difference is promoted not by ignoring difference, and not by simply celebrating it in a patronising or tokenistic manner, but by exploring the differences that individual pupils and teachers bring to the school. The Learn Together Ethical Education Curriculum which is taught in Educate Together primary schools has been held up as an example of best anti-racist practice internationally and there is great potential for Educate Together to offer further leadership in this area.

50% of second level schools are voluntary secondary schools, owned and controlled by religious denominations or orders. These schools enjoy the same exemptions from equality legislation as their primary counterparts and are permitted to discriminate in terms of admissions and employment of teachers in order to protect religious ethos.

However, this does not mean that the remaining 50% of second-level are multi-denominational in ethos. Many community colleges, comprehensive, vocational and community schools have a Roman Catholic or Protestant ethos. Religious representation on Boards of Management, as well as legal stipulations that that religious instruction must be provided, ensure that the dominant religious denominations maintain an influence over the majority of second-level schools.

In many Community Schools and Community Colleges Catholic religious denominational activities are a normal part of school life and religious education takes the form of denominational religious instruction. While parents (not students) can choose that their children opt out of such activities, Educate Together believes that it breaches students' rights to equality of access if they are to be excluded from a part of the curriculum on a regular basis.

Since adolescence is an important time for identity formation, what effect does categorizing a young person as an outsider in this way, without discussion or consideration of the issues involved, have? Are all students not entitled to a holistic education which includes the development of knowledge and understanding of ethical, moral and religious issues? These questions can be glossed over in the many second-level schools in the country operating in this contradictory environment; multi-denominational, non-denominational or inter-denominational in name, but without a clearly articulated ethos.



The predominance of denominational education has also led to a high proportion of single-sex schools, meaning that parents who wish to choose a co-educational school for their children can be faced with limited options. The second principle of Educate Together's ethos, that schools be co-educational, is about more than simply widening choice for those parents, however; it is based on principles of equality. This principle does not simply mean that both boys and girls attend the school; it means that the culture of the school is such that girls and boys will enjoy parity of esteem and that there is a strong focus on equality in terms of academic, social and psychological outcomes.

The third of Educate Together's four core principles is that education should be child, or learner-centred. It is widely accepted that learners of all ages learn in different ways and at different paces. While there has been change both in curriculum and in teaching methodologies at primary level to reflect this important principle, progress is not as evident at second-level and in many schools the teacher-centred "chalk and talk" approach is still the norm. Inspectors' reports across the range of subjects refer regularly to the need for better recognition of different learning styles, differentiation and more active learning approaches.

In Educate Together schools, the child-centred principle applies to all decision-making, not just to pedagogical approaches. This means that in every decision that is made in the school, the needs of the learner must be paramount. It also implies that students themselves should be involved in decision-making, and the establishment of Student Councils in many schools is encouraging in this respect. While there are many teachers and many schools involved in excellent practice at second-level, it is Educate Together's view that there is a great distance to go before a truly learner-centred approach is a reality across the board.

The last of Educate Together's four principles is that schools should be democratically run. This principle has been well exercised at primary level and Educate Together schools around the country are managed in an environment of participation and discussion, rather than one of hierarchical control.

A historical tradition of hierarchical structures in second-level schools in Ireland means that many parents approach them with an air of trepidation, and there is a trend for parents to become less involved with their children's education when they move to second-level. Since there is overwhelming evidence that meaningful parental participation



is of huge educational benefit to students, and given the need for parents to optimize communication at what can be a difficult time for their teenaged children, surely meaningful participation of parents in decision-making in schools should be a priority?

What will an Educate Together Second-level School be like?

Exactly what an Educate Together second-level school will be like, following this democratic principle, is a matter for the various members of each school community: the students, the parents and the teachers; with due regard for the wider community in which the school is situated. However, being bound to uphold the Educate Together ethos as laid down in the Association's charter means that these new second-level schools are likely to have certain characteristics in common.

The principles of equality and respect will permeate the school; through the curriculum, through relationships between teachers, students and parents, through the way learning is organized and through the teaching methodologies employed. At all levels of decision-making, the best interests of the student will be central.

Students will not be treated as a troublesome group who must be controlled, but as individuals with valid contributions to make to their own learning and that of others. They will be involved in the school's decision-making processes and will learn to take responsibility for their own learning and development, becoming resourceful lifelong learners, as well as responsible citizens with a contribution to make to society.

Curriculum and pedagogy will take account of the different learning styles of students. Skills, knowledge and attitudes will be developed through a variety of teaching and learning methodologies. Each student will learn to discover and develop his or her own particular potential at his or her own pace. This is not just good practice; it is necessary if the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) is to be effectively implemented.

There will be space in the life of the school for a range of activities and experiences which go beyond the traditional academic subjects. The inclusion of cross-curricular themes and projects will make topics more accessible for students with language and learning difficulties, while at the same time providing greater opportunities for interested



students to really stretch themselves. Critical thinking and initiative will not only be encouraged but nurtured and developed through all of the activities of the school.

Teachers will thrive in this active learning environment. Teaching in an Educate Together second-level school will be a rewarding professional experience. The inclusion of students and parents in decision-making and the instilling of values of responsibility will mean that discipline issues are minimized. The atmosphere of equality and respect in the school will mean that individual teachers' views will be respected and teachers will be fully involved in the decision-making of the school. Continued professional development, both formal and informal, will be encouraged and teachers will have the opportunity to work together to evaluate and improve practices in the school on an ongoing basis.

The school will not operate as an isolated institution. Instead it will be an active participant in the various local, national and global communities of which it is a part. Relationships with other education providers and community organizations, including primary schools and youth groups, as well as further and higher education institutions, will be actively developed.

Parents will be welcome in the school; not just welcome to come along to a meeting once a year to be told by the professionals how best to support their children's learning, but welcome to participate in the life of the school in a meaningful way. Their views on all aspects of school life, including curriculum and pedagogy, will be valued and they will be encouraged to participate in the democratic process by which the school is managed.

A Golden Opportunity

Educate Together is poised to become the first new national entrant into second-level provision since the 1930s. Thus it has a unique opportunity to pioneer a model of second level provision that, while challenging educational priorities and standards in the system as a whole, will draw on current good practice in schools in Ireland and elsewhere.

The ideals outlined here are not unattainable; an educational environment which fosters confidence and respect for difference, as well as a passion for learning, exists in Educate Together primary schools. Educate Together feels it is time to make this environment available at second-level.