

The Unlikely History of Integrated Education in N Ireland

Integrated Education and Mixed Housing were specified in the 1998 Belfast Good Friday Agreement as “*an essential aspect of the reconciliation process*”. But to this day well over 80% of pupils in Northern Ireland are educated in schools attended almost entirely by pupils of their own tradition. And many neighbourhoods are almost entirely segregated - including over 90% of public housing.

Yet Northern Ireland has been warned by the 2009 (Eames-Bradley) “Report of the Consultative Group on the Past”:-

*“Any society moving forward from conflict has no choice but to address the separations that exist between its people. These separations are negative and destructive when they exist in housing, employment and social life. Specifically the arguments about the ethos or quality of education provided in the faith based sectors have to be balanced against **the reality that reconciliation may never be achieved if our children continue to attend separated schools**”.*

So why does Northern Ireland have two parallel systems of ‘de facto’ Protestant and Catholic schools - since three governments have tried to create a non-denominational school system?

1831: Failure by the Whig Government:

In 1831 all of Ireland was ruled from London. The Chief Secretary of Ireland, the Whig Lord Edward Stanley, allocated finance to fund a single national school system to be attended together by all children. His aim was crystal-clear. Applications for funding were to be made jointly by Protestants and Catholics; and religious education had to be kept rigidly separate from the “3 Rs”.

-The Catholic bishops largely agreed.

-The (anglican) Church of Ireland told the government that if it, the Established Church, did not manage the new system, the Church of Ireland would not participate in it.

-The Presbyterian Church had its strong, historical drive for education so that people could read the scriptures. And its evangelical wing refused to accept a school system that even partly excluded access to the bible. Evangelicals protested and held large public meetings - and even attacked schools of fellow Presbyterians who had accepted the new school system. Eventually the Government conceded what were in effect Presbyterian schools. Church of Ireland children largely continued to attend their own schools. So the Catholic children mostly went to schools which no other children attended. Government-financed denominational schooling was now firmly in place.

1923: Failure by the Unionist Government:

In 1923, following the creation of Northern Ireland, the Unionist Minister for Education Lord Londonderry guided through the new NI Parliament an Education Act, provisions of which forbade the use, in education authority schools, of religious criteria in appointing teachers; and forbade also denominational RE teaching during compulsory school hours. But in 1925, his own Government yielded to pressure from a newly formed “United Education Committee of the Protestant Churches” and repealed those provisions. The Catholic Church had never transferred its church-managed schools to the government and continued with its own denominational schools. Separate denominational schooling remained intact.

1974: Failure by the first NI Power-Sharing Executive:

The first (Unionist-SDLP-Alliance Party) power-sharing executive included integrated education in its Programme for Government. But that Executive was brought down by the Ulster Workers’ Council strike. This failure of power-sharing government was followed by 24 years of direct rule from Westminster and some 2,000 further “Troubles” killings.

1981: Parent Power Begins - “All Children Together”:

Finally a group of parents, in the face of indifference or hostility from most politicians and churches, opened Lagan College in 1981, without any government funding. From that one school with 28 pupils in 1981, there are now 65 formally integrated schools across Northern Ireland, educating 23,000 pupils - 1 in 14 of all pupils.

De-segregating the housing of Northern Ireland is largely left to the NI Housing Executive. (The Fair Employment & Treatment (NI) Order 1998 does forbid religious or political discrimination in the sale of property).

And uniting our school systems is left to individual parents. Teachers are specifically exempt from the Fair Employment laws. (The law allows all schools to discriminate on religious grounds in their recruitment of teachers). While an “Independent Review of Integrated Education” was commissioned by Minister for Education John O’Dowd MLA and duly received by his successor Peter Weir MLA, no major policy recommendations can be implemented in the current absence of a Minister and functioning Assembly.

So this “essential aspect of the reconciliation process” of educating Protestant and Catholic children together, is largely left to individual parents and charitable fund-raising. (The Integrated Education Fund has to date raised £20 million). At the same time, most of the Dept of Education’s £1.1 billion budget is spent educating pupils apart this year and every year.

One is reminded of the words of Mitchell B. Reiss, US Special Envoy to Northern Ireland, in 2004:

“After taking on this assignment, I was astonished to learn that roughly 95% of Northern Ireland schoolchildren are educated in segregated schools. As Americans, we have first-hand experience with segregation, not so long ago. And we know it doesn’t work. Segregation short-changes the students by denying them exposure to one half their society. And it weakens the country by embedding misunderstanding and distrust”.

He was right.

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