CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	A brave new vision for education in Ireland: The Dalkey School Project 1974-1984
Authors	Hyland, Áine;Green, Desmond
Publication date	2021;2021
Original Citation	Hyland, Á. and Green, D. (2021) A brave new vision for education in Ireland: The Dalkey School Project 1974-1984. Dublin: Educate Together, 16pp.
Type of publication	Book
Rights	© 2021, Áine Hyland and Desmond Green.
Download date	2026-11-15 16:42:31
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/18147

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

A Brave New Vision for Education in Ireland: The Dalkey School Project 1974-1984

Áine Hyland
with Desmond Green



This is the final chapter and summary of a book *A Brave New Vision for Education in Ireland: The Dalkey School Project 1974 – 1984* [1] which documents the early years of the Dalkey School Project. The Dalkey School Project National School was Ireland's first multi-denominational national school since the foundation of the State in 1922. The title of the book is taken from the keynote address delivered by the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, at the annual general meeting of Educate Together in May 2016. In his address the President congratulated the founders of the Dalkey School Project, referring to their "courage, commitment and pioneering nature" at a time when Ireland "had yet to overcome a cultural conservatism that had dominated Ireland since independence".



The book describes events in the early years of the 1970s in St. Patrick's Church of Ireland (Anglican) National School, Dalkey, Co. Dublin which led to the decision of a small group of parents to seek state sanction and state aid for a school which would be independent of the churches and where children of all religious backgrounds and none would have equal right of access and would be equally respected.

It chronicles the struggle between 1974 and 1978 to achieve this – a struggle that was protracted and controversial. The founders had to overcome the objections of both church and state as well as to raise considerable funds before the Dalkey School Project National School was opened in temporary premises in Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin on 1st September 1978. The challenges encountered before a purpose-built school in Glenageary, Co. Dublin was finally ready for occupation in 1984 are also discussed.

One might have expected that the 1970s would have been a propitious period for an initiative such as the Dalkey School Project. The 1960s had been a decade of growth and development, socially, culturally and economically. Emigration began to fall for the first time in decade and according to historian Mary Daly:

"One of the recurrent themes in the 1960s was that Ireland had abandoned its preoccupation with the past to focus on the present, redirecting its energies towards economic and social development instead of the previous fixation on national sovereignty. National pride and national commitment were increasingly linked with economic success and Ireland's greater involvement in world affairs."[2]

[1] The book A Brave New Vision for Education in Ireland: The Dalkey School Project 1974 – 1984 was published by Áine Hyland in October 2020. The print version is available from Amazon and a Kindle version is available from Amazon/Kindle.
[2] Mary E. Daly, *Sixties Ireland: Reshaping the Economy, State and Society, 1957-1973*, p. 362.

The sixties were politically stable with a Fianna Fáil government in power from 1957 to 1973. The Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, initiated a number of economic and social reforms during the decade. The Labour Party had issued a policy document entitled Challenge and Change in Education in March 1963 which called for far-reaching changes in educational structures [3]. The publication in 1966 of Fine Gael's Policy for a Just Society suggested that there was cross-party support for social reform [4]. Education had experienced increased investment and significant change following the publication of the Investment in Education report in 1966. At primary level, a policy of amalgamating small rural schools was adopted and the number of national schools fell from more than 4,000 in the mid-60s to about 3,500 in the mid-70s. During the late 1960s, a new child-centred primary school curriculum was piloted and this new curriculum was introduced in all national schools in 1971. Free post-primary education was introduced in 1967 with free transport provided for pupils who lived beyond a three-mile radius of their nearest school. Comprehensive schools were built in catchment areas where there was no other form of post-primary education and by the end of the 1960s discussions were taking place about the setting up of Community schools. The curriculum offered in Vocational schools was expanded to enable pupils to sit the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations. Between 1965 and 1970, enrolments at post-primary schools increased by almost 50% with most of the increase occurring in voluntary (denominational) secondary schools. The expansion of post-primary education led to heated debates about the control and management of the new Comprehensive and Community schools with the Catholic Church eventually gaining control [5].

In higher education, the first of the Regional Technical Colleges were built and an expanded scholarship and grant system was introduced to enable young people from poorer families to access university education.

The 1970s initially promised further economic and social expansion. The population of the Republic continued to grow - from 2,978,248 in 1971 to 3,364,881 in 1979, a 13 per cent increase [6]. Ireland had become a member of the European Economic Community in 1973 and this led to a liberalisation of a number of Irish laws and practices including the removal of the ban on married women working and the introduction of equal pay for men and women.

But the political situation was volatile. The "troubles" in Northern Ireland broke out in 1969 and were exacerbated by the shooting of civilians on Bloody Sunday in Derry in January 1972. Sectarian violence escalated during the 1970s and some of the violence spilled over to the south with the Monaghan and Dublin bombings in May 1974 and the murder of the British Ambassador to Ireland, Christopher Ewart Biggs in Dublin in 1976. There was a growing determination by the mid-1970s among many politicians and citizens, north and south, to bring an end to sectarian violence and to make whatever social or legislative changes that would contribute to this.

[3] J. Walsh, *The Politics of Expansion: The transformation of educational policy in the Republic of Ireland, 1957-1972.*
[4] Declan Costello, *Fine Gael Policy for a Just Society, 1966.*
[5] E. Randles, *Post-Primary Education in Ireland 1957-1960*, Dublin: Veritas, *1975 and Louis O'Flaherty, Management and Control in Irish Education: the post-primary experience*, Drumcondra Teachers' Centre, 1992.
[6] Irish Central Statistics Office, Census figures, 1971 and 1981.

Political instability in the south was reflected in the number of general elections - no fewer than five – which were held between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s, with a total of eight Ministers for Education during the same period.

The economic situation was also unstable. When a coalition of Fine Gael and Labour took over from Fianna Fáil in 1973, the level of public debt was higher than ever before and the new government was under considerable pressure to cut back on public expenditure. An international oil crisis exacerbated economic challenges. The rate of inflation increased significantly in the early years of the 1970s and also in the 1980s. Consumer prices doubled and government expenditure as a proportion of GNP increased from 38 to 49 per cent between 1969 and 1976 [7]. The conservatism of Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave and some of his Ministers together with the economic downturn meant that the momentum for change, especially social and educational change, had slowed considerably by the mid 1970s.

The 1970s were a decade of consolidation and retrenchment in education. To quote Séamas Ó Buachalla [8]:

The decade from the end of the Fianna Fáil administration in 1973 (to the end of the 70s) was characterised by severe tensions between demand and supply of educational services. For the ministers in question funding an over-expanding system became a major problem.... The economic recession further restricted the scope of policy to little more than coping with the rising costs of the system.

According to Ó Buachalla, Richard Burke, who was Minister for Education from 1973 to 1977 "lacked the strong commitment to planning which had characterised the ministers of the sixties".



Burke was not a reforming Minister and one of his first actions on his appointment as Minister in 1973 was to close down the Development Unit of the Department of Education. He overturned some decisions of the previous government, for example he re-opened the national school in Dún Chaoin in the Kerry Gaeltacht which had been closed some years earlier as part of the policy of closing small schools [9].

[7] D. Ferriter, *Ambiguous Republic: Ireland in the 1970s*. Dublin: Profile Books, 2012.
[8] S. Ó Buachalla, *Education Policy in 20th century Ireland*. Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1988, p. 288.
[9] Colm Ó Snodaigh, *Dún Chaoin: Oscail an Scoil*. 2018.

Seán O'Connor, who had been one of the leaders of educational change in the Department of Education in the late 60s and early 70s, retired as Secretary of the Department in 1975 and his successors, Dominic Ó Laoghaire who was Secretary from 1975 to 1979 and Liam Ó Laidhin, who was Secretary from 1979 until 1984, were cautious and conservative and supportive of the educational status quo [10].

The story of the Dalkey School Project began with a controversy in the early 1970s in St Patrick's Church of Ireland national school in Dalkey over pupil enrolment. St. Patrick's was a Church of Ireland national school whose principal, Florence Armstrong was an inspirational teacher who welcomed children from all religious backgrounds and none. She believed that there was no place for 'indoctrination and evangelism' in a classroom [11].

She encouraged parental involvement in the school and by the early 1970s the school boasted a strong parent teacher association. Under Ms. Armstrong's leadership the school had grown from a one-teacher school in the early 1960s to a five-teacher school in the early 1970s.

Demand for places continued to grow but the school could not accommodate any more pupils in the limited space available. The Church of Ireland rector, who was manager of the school, was not happy with the growing de facto multi-denominational character of the school, nor was he willing to extend the school building to respond to growing demand.

Instead he decided to introduce a policy of prioritising the enrolment of children of Church of Ireland and other Protestant families. The parents appealed the decision of the rector to the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin who was patron of the school, and while he tried to broker a compromise, no solution was reached.

In March 1974 the decision to give priority to Protestant children was endorsed by the Minister for Education Richard Burke – a decision which caused consternation among parents and the principal. This was the first time in the history of Irish education that a Minister for Education had "instructed" a national school manager to give priority of enrolment to children of any one religion. The decision seemed to contravene the basic principles of the national school system, which for almost 150 years had guaranteed equality of access for children of all religions.

By summer 1974 following legal advice, the parents realised that the multi-denominational "experiment" introduced in St. Patrick's N.S. over the previous decade had effectively come to an end. A different approach would have to be taken if children of all religions and none were to continue to be educated together. If the Church of Ireland was no longer willing to support a multi-denominational school, then the parents would have to go it alone and set up their own school. And that is what they decided to do.

The Dalkey School Project was set up in summer 1974 with the aim of setting up national schools which would be:

1. Child-centred, with an approach to education based on the 1971 New Primary Curriculum
2. Co-educational (boys and girls would be educated together)
3. Multi-denominational (children of all religions and none would have equal right of access to then school and would be equally respected)
4. Run by a management committee with significant democratic involvement of the parents
5. Planned to develop towards an 8-teacher school

[10] See for example D. Ó Laoghaire, *The Missionary Impulse: A Tribute to Vocational Education*. Dublin: 1991 and D. Ó Laoghaire, "Some Schools more equal than others" in Magill, January 1988.
[11] J. Smyth, "Cavan Visionary Remembered" in *Anglo-Celt*, 26th July 2020.



From its earliest days, the Dalkey School Project recognised that most Irish people were happy with the denominational character of primary education and it emphasised that it in no way sought to undermine the rights of those people. But given that there were more than 3,500 denominational national schools in the country such people were well catered for. Conceding that those who wanted their children educated together were probably a minority the Project pointed out that such parents did not have even one school in the country.

The Dalkey School Project was formally inaugurated as an association with a constitution and articles of memorandum in February 1975. Those who initiated the project were parents of children who had attended St. Patrick's N.S. as well as others who had not been involved in the St. Patrick's controversy. The founders were a mixed bunch. They included members of many religions – Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, other Christians, Jehovah Witnesses, Baha'is and Muslims – as well as atheists, humanists and agnostics. They came from a wide range of social backgrounds, nationalities, professions and occupations, but the one thing they all had in common was a determination to open a multi-denominational national school where all children would have equal right of access and would be equally respected.

The first task undertaken by the founders was to carry out a survey of the Dalkey area to identify the extent of the demand for such a school.

The survey was carried out in autumn 1975 in a professional way and with military precision. A random sample of 25% of houses – 1356 households in all - within a one and a quarter mile radius of Dalkey Town Hall were included in the survey. A questionnaire seeking the views of households on multi-denominational education, co-education and democratically controlled schools was distributed by over 50 volunteers. Almost 80% of those surveyed replied to the questionnaire and the outcome surprised even the most optimistic observers. 75% of respondents favoured multi-denominational schools: 82% preferred co-education and 75% expressed a preference for democratic control of schools. Even taking account of the non-response rate of slightly over 20% it was clear that a significant majority of respondents supported the aims of the Dalkey School Project. Two years later, in 1977, the findings of a nationwide survey undertaken by Fr. Micheal MacGréil of St. Patrick's College, Maynooth and published in the report *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ireland* mirrored the results of the Dalkey survey [12].

But the Minister for Education, Richard Burke, was not impressed. For over a year he refused to engage with the Dalkey School Project, ignoring successive letters and requests for a meeting. It was not until May 1976 that a substantive reply was received from the Minister and this reply was a flat refusal to even consider sanctioning a new multi-denominational school in the Dalkey area.

[12] Micheál MacGréil, *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ireland*, Maynooth 1977.

He was satisfied that the accommodation available in the existing schools was "fully adequate" to meet requirements. He stated that it was not open to him "in accordance with the provisions of the Rules for National Schools" to make grants towards the cost of an additional national school in the area [13].

The subsequent six months were frustrating and it was difficult to see how the Dalkey School Project could overcome the intransigence of the Minister. While there were occasional chinks of hope, as for example when the leader of the opposition, Jack Lynch publicly declared his support for some pilot projects in integrated education both north and south, many of the founder members were beginning to lose hope. The Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave was under pressure from right-wing groups to copper-fasten the role of the religious and of religion in Irish education and there was even a suggestion within government circles that legislation would be introduced to this end.

A political crisis in November 1976 sparked by the unprecedented resignation of the then President of Ireland, Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh had an unexpected outcome. The election of Patrick Hillery as President and the consequent nomination by Taoiseach Charles Haughey of Richard Burke as a European Commissioner resulted in the appointment of a new Minister for Education, Peter Barry. Barry was more open to the concept of multi-denominational education than his predecessor but his tenure as Minister was short and no breakthrough occurred during his time as Minister.

The unexpected decision by Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave to call a general election in early summer 1977 was seized by the Dalkey School Project as an opportunity to launch a major campaign both nationally and in the Dún Laoghaire constituency. All Dáil candidates in the constituency were lobbied.

While political commentators and indeed most observers expected the sitting government to be re-elected, to everyone's surprise and the delight of those who had lobbied for state recognition of multi-denominational education, Fianna Fáil was elected to government with a significant majority. Four of the T.D.s elected in the Dun Laoghaire / Rathdown constituency had publicly expressed their support for the Dalkey School Project, as had the new Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, and the new Minister for Education, John Wilson. In August 1977 newly appointed Minister Wilson declared his approval in principle for a new national school for the Dalkey School Project and asked that the necessary preliminaries be completed to enable the school to open in July 1978 [14].

The challenges and practical obstacles that had to be overcome in order to get the school off the ground were considerable. The Dalkey School Project had to show that it would be an appropriate "corporate body" to act as Patron of a national school, a position that was filled in the denominational sector by the Bishop. It had to provide a policy document on religious education which would be acceptable to the Department of Education. It had to commit to obeying the Rules for National Schools and to teaching the national school curriculum. It had to provide evidence that there would be long-term demand for such a school and that there would be a viable number of pupils available. As promoters of a new school the Dalkey School Project would have to provide temporary premises in which to start the school, a site on which a new school building could be built and the finance necessary to provide temporary accommodation, to contribute towards the cost of the new building and to the costs of running and maintaining the school building. Teacher salaries would be provided by the State as well as a capital grant of up to 90% of the cost of the building.

[13] Letter from the Minister for Education's secretary to Micheal Johnston, 25th May 1976.
[14] In the 1970s, the national school year started officially on 1st July.

From September 1977 to September 1978 it was a case of all hands on deck. In early 1978 the Department of Education approved the Dalkey School Project as school patron. A further canvass of the area together with a pre-enrolment list of prospective pupils showed that there would be demand for at least a three-teacher school. Thanks to the generosity of a local family, the Kirwans, a suitable temporary premises and a site for a new school building in Glenageary were made available. In March 1978, formal approval to open the school was granted by the Department of Education and a roll number was allocated for the new school. At last there was light at the end of the tunnel.

The following months were a period of intense activity. In early April it emerged that the temporary premises in Glenageary would not be available and a massive search to rent an alternative building failed to find a suitable alternative. At the last minute, in June 1978, a group of parents and supporters clubbed together to buy a large private house in Dun Laoghaire and leased it to the Dalkey School Project for use as a temporary premises for the school. The setbacks and challenges of obtaining planning permission for the temporary premises were nerve-racking and extraordinary efforts were made to ensure that the school would open on 1st September which it did. The highs and lows experienced by the founder members and the resilience of the pupils as well as the courage of the teachers who undertook professional risks in accepting posts in the school in the early years are documented in the book. The excitement of the pupils on D-Day, 1st September 1978, are reflected in the quotations from some of the first pupils enrolled in the school.

Although the founders had anticipated that the school would be in temporary premises for only a year or two, this did not prove to be the case. It was to be six years before the new building in Glenageary Lodge was ready for occupation in spring 1984.

During those six years as enrolment increased the school was accommodated in four separate temporary premises in Vesey Place, York Road, Dun Laoghaire, Mountown and Sallynoggin. Securing planning permission for the new building in Glenageary was another challenge. There were local objections to the building of the school. Some were linked to ideological objections on the part of various lobby groups, others were typical of the type of objections that were made to many building developments. From an economic point of view the timing of the building was unfortunate. To quote Diarmuid Ferriter [15]: “If the Irish economy had endured a troubled 1970s it was set to experience a traumatic 1980s”.

The period from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s was a period of huge economic inflation. Financial cutbacks were experienced in every department of government. In the four-year period from 1980 when the grant for the new building was sanctioned until 1984 when the pupils and teachers moved to the new building, construction costs nationally increased by 45%. The extent of fund-raising which had to be undertaken to meet the local contribution towards the cost of building the school were formidable.

Throughout all this period, the Dalkey School Project secured and maintained a high and mostly positive profile in the national media. Regular information briefings were held, press releases were distributed and the Project provided speakers at seminars, conferences and discussion groups. The education correspondents of the national newspapers, in particular John Horgan and Christina Murphy of the Irish Times and John Walshe of the Irish Independent provided regular media coverage. Journals such as Magill and Hibernia commented supportively on the activities of the Dalkey School Project. Local newspapers such as Southside covered some meetings and events.

[15] D. Ferriter, *Ambiguous Republic: Ireland in the 1970s*.

All political parties were kept informed of developments and care was taken that the Dalkey School Project should not become over-associated with any one party or ideological group. Early supporters included local T.D.s Barry Desmond and David Andrews followed later by Martin O'Donoghue and Seán Barrett. At national level Jack Lynch was a consistent supporter, initially as leader of Fianna Fáil in opposition and later as Taoiseach. A key Fianna Fáil supporter was John Wilson, T.D. for Cavan / Monaghan. When he was appointed Minister for Education in summer 1973 one of his first decisions was to give approval in principle for the opening of a multi-denominational national school in Dalkey. On the Fine Gael side, Gemma Hussey was a supporter from the beginning. As a member of Seanad Eireann, she publicly supported the Dalkey School Project in the early 1970s and as Minister for Education from 1983 onwards she brokered a solution to what had been a long-standing controversy about the grant for the new school building. By ensuring that the Department of Education abided by its original agreement to pay 90% of the cost of the new building, an intervention by Minister Hussey in 1983 resulted in a potential saving to the Project of more than Ir£32,000 [16].

Hussey also included a commitment to multi-denominational education in *The Programme for Action in Education 1984-87*, which was the first such government commitment. Garret Fitzgerald, T.D. was also supportive, especially after he became Taoiseach in 1983 although he had been cautious in his support in the 1970s when Liam Cosgrave was Taoiseach.

There were of course many who objected to multi-denominational education, some of whom, either intentionally or otherwise, misinterpreted the aims of the project and accused the founders of "trying to drive God out of education [17]".

The fact that the Dalkey School Project had emerged during a period when controversy over the control and management of Community Schools was at its height contributed to the antagonism of conservative and religious right-wing groups. Religious and cultural prejudices emerged into the open. The most active and outspoken objectors to multi-denominational education were religiously conservative organisations such as the Council for Social Concern and the Irish Family League, which operated from the headquarters of the Knights of St. Columbanus in Ely Place, Dublin 2. Between 1975 and 1977 the Council for Social Concern published three pamphlets condemning multi-denominational schools – *Have the Snakes Come Back?* in 1975; *Is Integrated Education the Answer?* in 1976 and *The Dalkey School Saga: Has the Government Surrendered to the Multi-Denominational Pressure Groups?* in 1977.

Prejudice against the Dalkey School Project was also apparent among some civil servants, some local authority staff and some churchmen. Referring to this in a talk which he gave in November 1976, Micheal Johnston spoke as follows [18]:

Prejudice alas there is around us in Ireland; its influence is all too evident, most obviously of course in the North, but it is here in the South just as deeply ingrained in all of us, and all of us have an enormous task to shake it off, to keep it under control. It is of course often confused in our minds with our cultural background, with our religious beliefs, with our national identity – all inextricably intertwined here in Ireland.

It was inconceivable to many that a small group of lay people would deign to challenge, much less dismantle, the close and long-standing relationship between church and state in matters of education.

[16] The equivalent in 2020 Euro prices of about €115,000

[17] Oliver J. Flanagan, T.D., quoted in D. Ferriter, *Ambiguous Republic: Ireland in the 1970s*, p. 130.

[18] Speech of Micheal Johnston at a Debate on 24 November 1976 in Earlsfort Terrace, "That Religion Breeds Prejudice".

Barry Desmond opined that the founders were "very effective campaigners – dealing with the ultra-Catholic ethos of the Department of Education". He referred to the "singular antagonism" of Minister Dick Burke "slowly but surely going through the interminable procedures of the Department of Education [19]". As he saw it "Liam Cosgrave and several of his fellow Fine Gael ministers had hoped that the project would fade away". An article in Magill magazine in the 1980s stated that the opening of the Dalkey School Project represented "a triumph over prejudice, intolerance and polite stone-walling on the art of the coalition government lasting four years [20]". It was undoubtedly a David and Goliath struggle.

The many people who contributed to the success of the Dalkey School project in its early years are mentioned throughout the book. Foremost among them were Micheal and Pat Johnston, who had been key protagonists in the earlier controversy in St. Patrick's (Church of Ireland) N.S., Dalkey. Micheal's leadership and his unwavering determination throughout the first decade of the DSP was central to its success. His media skills ensured that the DSP remained in the public eye throughout the first decade and beyond. He was a convincing public speaker and his many speeches were very well crafted. He was absolutely confident that the Dalkey School Project would be a success – even if it took some time. He never gave up and was unfailingly optimistic throughout the ten years from 1974 to 1984 when the school moved to the new building in Glenageary.

His wife Pat was unstinting in giving of her time and expertise to the many fund-raising activities over the years. Their house in Burdett Avenue was the registered address of the Dalkey School Project company and was the venue for hundreds of meetings and interviews.



Their daughter Anna and their son, Josh, enrolled in the DSP National School when it opened on 1st September 1978 – the then four-year old Josh was the first pupil registered on the school roll.

Helen and Hugh Fahy were also key to the success of the Dalkey School Project. They had not been involved in the St. Patrick's N.S controversy and when they attended the preliminary meetings of the DSP in 1974 and 1975, they brought a fresh perspective to the movement. Helen was the first secretary of the Dalkey School Project and her background as a civil servant in the Department of Education before her marriage brought an expertise and understanding of the national school system which was invaluable. She was also an inveterate fund-raiser and her total commitment and that of her husband Hugh to the DSP never wavered. Their sons Eoin and Colm enrolled in the school on the day it opened - 1st September 1978.

Desmond Green first came on the scene at the inaugural meeting of the Dalkey School Project in February 1975.

[19] B. Desmond, *Finally and In Conclusion: A Political Memoir*.
[20] C. Herbert, Magill magazine.

He was also an "outsider" i.e. he had not been involved in the St. Patrick's controversy. A chemical engineer Desmond had spent a number of years as a graduate student in New Brunswick in Canada. He was a practising Catholic and his wife Gale was a Canadian Episcopalian. Desmond's business and financial acumen as well as his diplomatic skills were an invaluable asset to the Project. Desmond led the Dalkey survey in 1976. He was chair of the building committee for the new school and with treasurer Richard More O'Ferrall he ensured that the many financial challenges were met on time and satisfied in full. He was a calming influence on occasions when tensions arose. His daughters Siobán and Deirdre enrolled in the school the day it opened.

My husband Bill and I were involved both in St. Patrick's N.S and the Dalkey School Project. Our two older daughters were pupils in St. Patrick's N.S. and they had already completed sixth class by the time the DSP school opened. Our youngest daughter Sonja was one of the first pupils enrolled in the Dalkey School Project N.S. in September 1978. Bill's expertise as a statistician and a strategist were central to the planning and development of the Project. His inside knowledge of the Department of Education, where he was senior statistician was often useful although he was always careful to abide by the Official Secrets Act. Barry Desmond later described Bill as "the strategist of the campaign … he had the vision … he was the broad brush-strokes man" [21]. Belinda Moller described him as "the conceiving architect of the Educate Together school system" and stated that his role and influence were "pivotal" [22]. I can vouch for the thousands of hours that Bill spent – often throughout the night – working out solutions to the problems that arose and painstakingly identifying the pros and cons of possible solutions. My own years as a civil servant in the Buildings Branch of the Department of Education in the early 1960s meant that I had an in-depth knowledge of the rules and procedures for new schools and new school buildings, knowledge that proved to be useful when we met with obstacles and challenges in getting the Dalkey School Project off the ground.

There were numerous others who played an invaluable role in ensuring that the dream of starting a multi-denominational school became a reality. Among these were Hilary and Donald Pratt and the Kirwan family, who provided a site for the school building in Glenageary and offered a temporary premises for the school in 1978. While this temporary premises (Glenageary House) was ultimately not available for a school, the offer of the building at the time broke the logjam with the Department of Education officials and unleashed a flurry of activity which led to official approval for the opening of the Dalkey School Project N.S. There were many, many others, some of whom are mentioned throughout the book, without whom the project could never have succeeded. To quote Desmond Green [23]:

… there were some people more in the centre ….. but the total picture could not be seen unless you saw each ripple in the pond. There was no point in determining that the ripple at the centre was the most important. Actually, all the ripples were equally important in order to get a full picture …

Crucial to the success of the school were the principal Florence Armstrong and her staff, especially Jayne Doran and Síle Harrington, who were the first teachers appointed to the school in 1978 when there was considerable uncertainty surrounding its future. To quote Belinda Moller [24]:

Florrie Armstrong is a symbolic figure in this story. But, because she was not leading or initiating the management and structural changes core to the strategic development of the movement, the reader might be forgiven for thinking that she was an absent figure. It is important to remember that she was symbolic to the multi-denominational movement as a whole because she was one of the first principals in the country to demonstrate new practices in educating children of different denominations together. In fact, much of the activity recounted in this story was indicative of the implicit support for Florence Armstrong's work and the work of the staff.

[21] Barry Desmond, *Finally and in Conclusion: a Political Memoir*.
[22] B. Moller, op. cit.
[23] Belinda Moller, op. cit., p. 154
[24] Belinda Moller, op. cit., p. 165

The internal dynamics of the movement were not always smooth. There were tensions and differences of opinion within the organisation. Some of the differences derived from deep-seated cultural differences. The tradition of the Anglican Church of sharing power and of lay people being active members of their church meant that those from a Protestant tradition were generally more outspoken and more willing to challenge authority and the status quo. They had come from a tradition of open discussion where dissent could be seen as constructive. Many from a Catholic background were uncomfortable challenging authority, especially when they were accused by those authorities of undermining traditional values and practices. To quote Belinda Moller: "The tension was in the desire to hold to traditional values whilst also changing individual behaviour and outlook" [25].

Looking back at the early days of the Dalkey School Project, Micheal and Pat Johnston's daughter, Anna, later stated that for many pupils the Project had been a big part of their childhood lives long before they sat in their new classrooms on the first day of September 1978. She remembered that her family

had pretty much lived in Dalkey Town Hall every Saturday morning for years (at the DSP Market) and streams of people passed through our house daily to plan and scheme … or to cook or stuff envelopes or simply to find out more. My (then) four-year-old brother Josh even played mummies and daddies DSP style with his friend Sonja Hyland: "Oh! It's eight o'clock darling, time for a meeting". We spent all summer of 1978 in Vesey Place with parents digging and lifting and cleaning as the excitement built.

For many of the founder members, the ten years from 1974 to 1984 were the most challenging and ultimately the most satisfying years of our lives.



We worked incredibly hard to achieve the goal we were committed to, i.e. to open Ireland's first multi-denominational school. We met unexpected obstacles along the way and learned how to overcome them. We addressed numerous challenges, some of which were demanding and sometimes painful. We learned new skills and developed expertise which for some eventually led to new careers. We made many friends (and a few enemies) and maintained these friends ever since. One of the most consistent and involved founder members, Anne Johnston, summarised the decade from 1974 to 1984 as follows:

It was ten years of very hard work and dedicated effort but I was then – and still am – immensely satisfied that I stood beside so many courageous people, some of whom took painful decisions to abandon institutions and social groups where they had forged or inherited deep roots. I admired our first teachers who took a deal of criticism but had faith not only in the cause itself but also in the personnel driving it. They were true trailblazers, but then in a different way were the many other colleagues who became firm friends. Today it is a source of quiet, sometimes emotional satisfaction to listen to my grandchildren singing the anthem of gratitude the present generation of DSP pupils wrote this year, the 40th since we began. They are well aware and immensely proud of their school and that itself is a tribute to the current teaching staff.

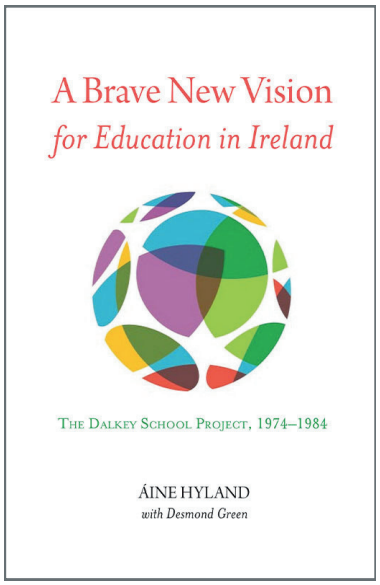
[25] Belinda Moller, op. cit., p. 192.

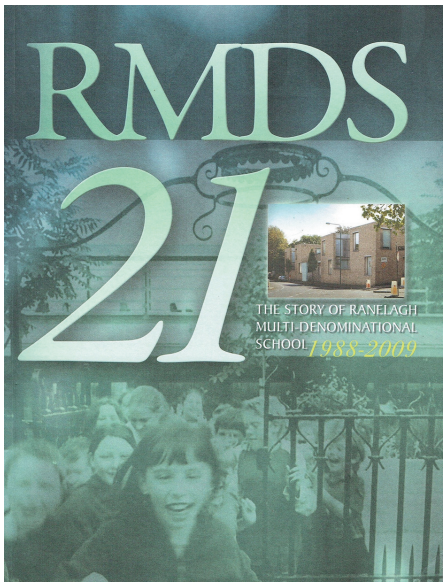
Books on the early multi-denominational school movement:

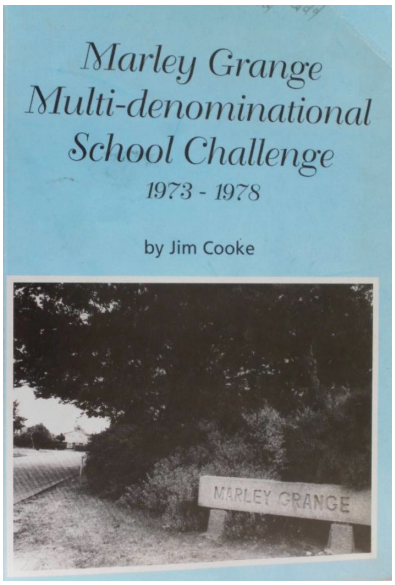
A Brave New Vision for Education in Ireland: The Dalkey School Project 1974-1984 - Áine Hyland

Marley Grange Multi-Denomimational School Challenge 1973 - 1978 - Jim Cooke

RMDS 21: The Story of Ranelagh Multi-Denominational School 1988 - 2009 - Tara Horan









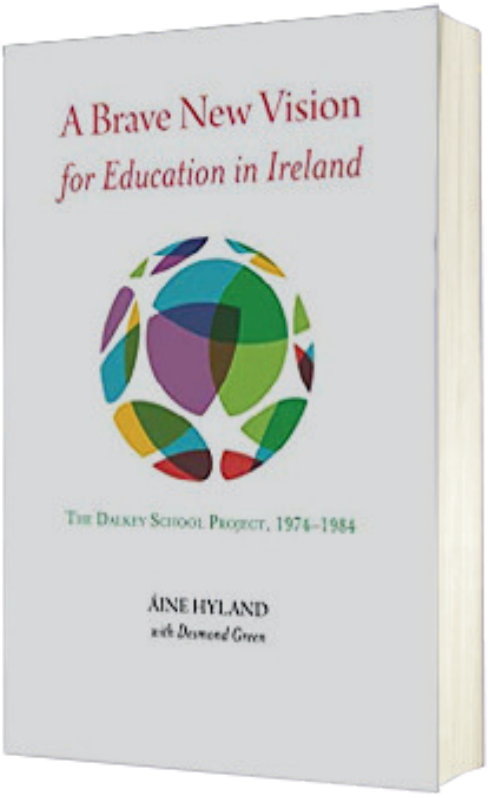









Letters
Fire



Educate Together
16/17 Upper Ormond Quay, Dublin 7
T +353 1 429 2500
info@educatetogether.ie
www.educatetogether.ie
Company Number 286202
Charity Number 20033309