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Authors	Hyland, Áine
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"Audacious and Brave?" The early days of multi-denominational education.

The setting up of the Dalkey School Project N.S. in 1978.

(Article by Áine Hyland for NAPD's ***Leader*** – 17th October 2018)

A headline in the Irish Times on 23rd August 2018 read: "**Principal resigns in protest over entry policy".** The article, by education correspondent Carl O'Brien, opened with the sentence: "A principal has resigned from a Church of Ireland primary school in protest over moves to prioritise the enrolment of children who are actively involved in the parish and attend church services". The story related to the resignation of principal Eileen Jackson from St. Patrick's National School, Greystones, Co. Wicklow on the basis that a decision had been taken that priority access would be given to children who are "accustomed members" of the Church of Ireland parish of Greystones. The school's Board of Management had decided that children who were "active members of the parish", as certified by the parish rector, would be given priority admission to the school.

Reading this article brought me back almost 45 years to a similar situation which occurred in another Church of Ireland National School, St. Patrick's, Dalkey, Co. Dublin, in 1974. St. Patrick's, Dalkey had been a small one-teacher national school from the early 1890s until the 1950s. A new dynamic and forward-looking principal, Florence Armstrong, was appointed in the early 1960s and under her visionary leadership, the school grew rapidly until it was a five-teacher school by the early 1970s. It was a pilot school for the then new and progressive Primary School Curriculum of 1971 and had become increasingly popular with families of all religions and none from the area. Many of the parents of St. Patrick's, Dalkey would like the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, who was patron of the school, to endorse what had become a *de facto* multi-denominational school, but this was not to be.

By 1973 the school had outgrown the parish building in which it was located and the school's PTA was of the view that the building should be extended. The school manager (the local Church of Ireland rector) and the Select Vestry of the parish were unwilling to agree to this proposal and instead, the manager decided to restrict entry to the school. On 8th March 1974, a letter was sent to the manager by the Department, on the instructions of the Minister for Education, Richard Burke, T.D., supporting the manager's decision and "directing" him to restrict enrolment. The letter included the following paragraph:

> "As is stated in the Preface to the Rules for National Schools under the Department of Education, the State gives explicit recognition to the denominational character of national schools. In accordance with this principle, it would be expected that priority in enrolment would be given first to children of Church of Ireland parents living within the school district; second to children of other Protestant families – and thereafter – to the extent to which space might be available – other children; and it is suggested that acceptance of children for enrolment should, in future, be decided on that basis".

Extensive lobbying was undertaken during the following months by the PTA, which proposed that if the Church of Ireland was not willing to accept children of all denominations, a new and separate multi-denominational school should be set up under new patronage. However, this suggestion was rejected by the then Taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave, who stated that It is was the Minister's intention "to preserve the present system of identifying schools, generally, with parishes". He added: "The historic development of our primary education system on these lines has proved valuable and the continuance and expansion of the system on similar lines can contribute significantly to a healthy community development".

By summer 1974, it was clear that neither the Church of Ireland nor the Minister for Education would concede to the parents' request that the de facto multi-denominational nature of St. Patrick's N.S., Dalkey would be allowed to continue. My late husband, Bill Hyland, and I were among the parents who came together to pursue what was to be a major challenge – to set up a multi-denominational school, thereby disturbing the equilibrium that had existed for almost a century between Church and State in the provision of primary education. Our two older daughters, then 9 and 7 years of age, were pupils in St. Patricks and we were determined that our then newly born third daughter would have the same opportunity to attend a school where children of all religions and none were equally welcomed. We both had a background in education. Bill was senior statistician in the Department of Education and I had also worked in the Department for five years, but had to resign on marriage in 1964. I had subsequently qualified as a secondary school teacher and in 1974 I was completing a Masters in Education in Trinity College.

For me personally, the letter of 8th March 1974 to the manager of St. Patrick's N.S. from the Department of Education was a turning point. While I was aware that the system of national education in Ireland was effectively denominational, I was also familiar with the Rules for National Schools, which did not give exclusive rights to the main Christian Churches to act as Patrons and managers of national schools. Indeed the 1937 Constitution of Ireland specifically recognised "the inalienable right and duty of parents" to provide for the education of their children, and also stated that the State "shall endeavour to give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiatives".

For those of us who were determined to set up the first multi-denominational school since the foundation of the State, it was to be a hard-fought battle on a number of fronts. We would first have to get recognition as Patron of national schools, which would require us to set ourselves up as a limited company, then find a temporary premises in which to start the school; purchase a site for a permanent building; raise the local contribution towards the building costs; satisfy the department on a number of fronts including demonstrating that the school would operate in accordance with the Rules for National Schools (as interpreted by departmental officials!). The summer of 1974 saw the beginning of an intense lobbying campaign. It also saw the beginning of numerous meetings by interested parents and others to pursue the aim of starting a multi-denominational school.

On 30th June 1974 a preliminary meeting was held in Rosses Hotel in Dun Laoghaire attended by 40 people, at which a Steering Committee was set up. The so-called "St.

Patrick's parents" were anxious to extend the membership and leadership of the project to include parents and others who had not been associated with the St. Patrick's saga. By that stage the basic principles of the proposed school had been teased out and the name Dalkey School Project had been mooted for the movement. On 23rd February 1975, the inaugural meeting of a new limited company - the Dalkey School Project - was held. A constitution of the limited company was adopted, the principles of the proposed school were agreed, and the board of the company was elected. The proposed new school (1) would have a child-centred approach to education (2) would be co-educational and (3) would be multi-denominational – i.e. Catholic, Protestant and other children would have equal right of access to the school, and each child would be equally respected. The school would be a National School, run by a management committee which would be predominantly democratic in character. The school would (initially) be planned as a pilot project to develop to an eight-teacher school (corresponding to the eight years of the National school cycle).

The phrase multi-denominational, with its explanation, was very deliberately and consciously chosen. There had been considerable debate about whether the school should be non-denominational (i.e. where no religious education would be provided); or inter-denominational (which implied the involvement of various churches in its management and in the development of a religious education curriculum); or multi-denominational. The decision was taken that the school would be "multi-denominational" as defined in the constitution of the Dalkey School Project i.e. that children of all faiths and none would have equal right of access and would be equally respected.

In order to gauge the extent of interest in such a school a door-to-door survey was carried out in the Dalkey area in autumn 1975. The results of this survey showed that there was strong support for such a school in the extended Dalkey area. Of the more than 1,000 questionnaires returned, 75% indicated support for a multi-denominational school and more than 85% agreed that multidenominational national schools should receive the same level of financial support from the state as denominational schools. The number of families who indicated that they would send their own children to such a school if it were set up convinced us that such a school would be more than viable.

However, not everyone was in favour of such a school. The then Minister for Education, Richard Burke, was strongly opposed. In September 1975 he attacked the motivation of the founding group, stating that "the suggestion that education in schools under the control of persons of their own religious faith and by teachers of their own religious faith, promotes disharmony and dissension in the community". He went on: "… indeed I regard it as a libel on teachers to suggest that in educating children in accordance with the particular teachings and beliefs of the religion of their homes the teachers implant the seeds of intolerance and encourage attitudes of bigotry. It is arrant nonsense".

Criticism was also voiced by right wing Catholic groups. A "Group of Catholic Parents" under the pseudonym *Vera Verba* published a pamphlet (on St. Patrick's Day 1975) entitled "*Have the Snakes Come Back"*- criticising the changes in Irish education which it alleged were being led by people with communist and anti-Christian leanings. The following year, the same group published a pamphlet entitled "*Is Integrated Education the Answer"* which strongly criticised individuals (including Jack Lynch, then leader of Fianna Fáil) who had voiced even the most measured support for integrated or multi-denominational education.

A year later, a pamphlet entitled "*The Dalkey School Saga*" published by the Council for Social Concern (COSC), with an address at No. 8 Ely Place, Dublin 2, was circulated to every house in the Dalkey area. The pamphlet referred to the St Patricks PTA as having been "infiltrated by secular humanists and political activists of a radical bent", whose plan was to "hijack the school by wresting it from the control of the Church of Ireland". They were "naked aggressors trying to grab the school from the Church of Ireland ..." It condemned the "atheistic outlook" which it alleged was being promoted by the Dalkey School project and stated:

> "We submit that there is no need for such a school as this which can only be divisive. It can only be hostile to religion in an age when it was never more needed. The Project has consciously set itself up as a "beacon" to encourage similar projects elsewhere. Dalkey could be a precedent for major trouble in other areas".

During 1975 and 1976, a series of letters was sent by the newly-formed Dalkey School Project company to the Minister and the Department of Education seeking sanction to start a school, none of which received a substantive reply. A major fund-raising campaign was undertaken, including a successful weekly market which was held in the Dalkey Town Hall. This weekly event served not just as a fund-raiser, but as a public awareness campaign and a community-building exercise. Every opportunity was availed of to get national media attention. The members of the Dalkey School Project became expert political lobbyists, lobbying both local councillors and sitting and potential TDs, but always careful not to become associated solely with any one political party.

The election of summer 1977 provided a breakthrough. All candidates in the Dun Laoghaire constituency were asked for their support. Two Labour candidates, two Fianna Fáil candidates and one Independent candidate indicated support and a leaflet naming the supporters was circulated by the DSP. Three of the supporting candidates were elected – Barry Desmond (Labour), and David Andrews and Martin O'Donoghue (Fianna Fáil). More importantly, John Wilson, then Fianna Fáil spokesperson on education, had stated prior to the election that if Fianna Fáil formed the next government and if he was Minister for Education, he would approve the opening of a school under the patronage of the Dalkey School Project.

Fianna Fáil won a landslide victory in the 1977 General Election and Mr. Wilson was appointed Minister for Education. True to his word, on 18th August 1977, he gave "a categorical assurance" that a multi-denominational school in Dalkey would go ahead. He stated that Fianna Fáil was committed to such projects where they were viable and people wanted them. John Walshe reported in the *Irish Independent* the following day that talks would begin the following month between Department of Education officials and the Dalkey School Project on the practicalities of setting up the country's first multi-denominational school.

The period from September 1977 to summer 1978 was hectic. The DSP committed to opening a school in temporary premises in September 1978 and within a very short time there were over 200 children on the waiting list. The Department asked for a commitment that the school would provide (denominational) religious instruction within school hours "with access to clergy" for all children whose families requested such instruction. They also asked that a list of children by religion and by school currently attended be provided. It was

difficult to convince the Department that under its own rules, responsibility for religious education was a matter for the school Patron, not for the Churches but we eventually succeeded. A protracted correspondence followed about the Patron's Policy on Religious education, which was developed with great care and following widespread consultation. In summary, the policy distinguished between the Religious Education Core Curriculum and denominational instruction. The Religious Education Core Curriculum, which would be delivered by the teachers during the school day, was designed "to help children to understand the religious traditions of life and thought that they will meet in their environment; and to help them to be sensitive to the ultimate questions posed by life and to the dimension of mystery and wonder that underlies all human experience". Denominational Instruction would be a matter for parents and while the school would not provide such instruction, it would facilitate it, if possible within school hours. While initially efforts were made to facilitate the provision of denominational instruction within school hours, over time this proved impracticable for resource and other reasons. Today, Educate Together schools no longer facilitate the provision of denominational instruction within school hours.

Procuring temporary premises in which to start the DSP school was to prove a major challenge. Over 20 potential premises were identified and visited, but none of them was available. The local management of some premises such as sports halls or youth clubs indicated willingness to rent out space for the school, but when they approached their national patrons, their willingness was vetoed. Eventually at the eleventh hour, in June 1978, eleven families whose children's names were on the waiting list contributed to the purchase of a three-storey terraced family house on Vesey Place, Dun Laoghaire to enable the school to start. The premises were far from ideal, but a commitment had been made to open the school that autumn and we were determined not to fail at this late stage. The summer months were spent refurbishing the house to make it (at least minimally) suitable for a school and planning and bye-law permission were sought from Dun Laoghaire Corporation. The day before the school was due to open, bye-law approval was refused and all the parents were notified, but a decision was taken to open on 1st September (as planned) and to appeal the decision. Fortunately, the appeal was ultimately successful, but I will never forget the stress and worry of knowing that in the early months of its existence the school was operating in a building that did not have full local authority approval.

There was great excitement when the school opened on 1st September. 92 pupils were enrolled – enough to ensure that the school could open as a three-teacher school. Those of us who had worked non-stop throughout the summer - to refurbish and paint the classrooms, instal new toilets and a playground, not to mention attending what seemed to be never-ending meetings and looking after paper work and correspondence with officialdom - were exhausted. Personally, I did not share the excitement of the opening – I was very conscious of the enormity of the action we had taken and the challenges that still remained to be overcome. While we had procured a site for permanent premises (this was a pre-condition of opening in temporary premises) the site had not yet been approved nor had planning permission been obtained. There would be considerable fund-raising ahead as unlike nowadays, the cost of the site as well as of re-furbishing the temporary premises had to be paid for by the Patron. Other parents were however, jubilant and were more able to

celebrate the opening while working towards the successful future which the school eventually experienced.

We were fortunate to have recruited Florrie Armstrong as the founder principal – many of us knew her from the time she was principal in St. Patrick's Dalkey and we knew that she would be a wonderful educational leader, as she proved to be. We were also fortunate in the teachers who accepted posts in the school that first year and in subsequent years. Most of them left secure positions in other (denominational) schools, in spite of the fact that they knew that the future of the Dalkey School Project was still precarious and that they would have no right to redeployment (panel rights) if anything went wrong.

The school grew rapidly. Within five years it was an eight-teacher school, as planned, and before it moved to its permanent purpose-built home in 1984, it was located in four separate temporary premises – in the house in Vesey Place, in the Presbyterian Church Hall on York Road, in what had been a parish hall for the Church of Ireland in Mounttown (now St. John's Latin-rite Catholic church) and in a classroom in Sallynoggin V.E.C. school. It was not easy for pupils, parents or teachers.

Following the opening of the Dalkey School Project N.S., more parent groups around the country began to campaign for multi-denominational education. During the following two decades, multi-denominational schools opened in Bray, North Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Kilkenny, Sligo, Dublin North Bay, Ranelagh and Galway. The Department of Education refused to allow these schools to open under a single patron, and each school had to go through the tedious process of setting up its own patron body and negotiating separately with the Department. This inevitably slowed up the growth of the sector, which was probably the intention of some unsympathetic civil servants.

At the annual general meeting of Educate Together in 2016, the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins saluted the Educate Together movement which he stated had been "a critical and committed agent of change in the Irish education system". He referred to the "pioneering" members of the Dalkey School Project as "audacious and brave". I must admit that I didn't feel audacious or brave in those early days. It was a very difficult and challenging task to start the first multi-denominational school – probably one of the most difficult challenges I ever encountered. We were going against the tide and were seen as outsiders and "aliens". Even though we consistently pointed out that the aim of the project was to provide an alternative few schools in a system of more than 3,500 denominational national schools, we were demonised and accused of planning the "demolition" of the denominational school system and of attempting to secularise the national school system.

In spite of the obstacles and difficulties, the Educate Together movement forged ahead and by the mid-1990s, ten multi-denominational schools had been set up. While Educate Together had been set up as a co-ordinating body for multi-denominational schools in 1984, it was not until the mid-1990s that a national office with a CEO and paid staff was opened. The office, led for the past twenty years by Paul Rowe, has done trojan work in extending the network of Educate Together schools. Today - 40 years after the opening of the DSP National School - there are 83 national schools and 13 second level Educate Together schools in the country and there continues to be considerable interest in opening further such schools.