

**Address for the Launch of the
Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector
in Clock Tower, DES, Tuesday 19th April 2011
by
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The Irish Desire for Education

One of the most significant and remarkable features of Irish society over recent centuries is the great desire for education evidenced by the population. Even in the darkest era of our history, with penal legislation, dispossession, and poverty the lot of so many, education was still highly prized. Even before the state gave support to schooling, through the national school system, the educational census of 1824 recorded that there were over 9,000 ‘hedge’ schools in existence. They catered for two out of every five children of school going age at the time, long before compulsory attendance. These were schools of the people, by the people, for the people.

When the national state-aided school system was set up in 1831, just 180 years ago, the people grasped at the opportunity provided. The system proved to be far more successful and more inclusive than had been originally envisaged. Within thirty years there were 5,632 national schools, with 804,000 pupils on roll. This hunger for education has continued to be a hallmark of our people. In more recent times, when free post-primary education was introduced in the mid-sixties, pupil numbers increased by about 100% within twelve years. Similarly, when free undergraduate fees were introduced, in the mid nineties, student numbers enrolled in tertiary education soared.

I draw brief attention to this phenomenon because I consider it a great attribute of our people, and is a national asset which is by no means replicated in many other countries. The desire for changed school patronage structures today is in the tradition of this active interest in, and desire for education, in line with peoples’ values and beliefs.

As the Irish national school system grew up historically, Ireland had more schools per head of population than in other parts of the then United Kingdom. By 1900, there were 8,684 national schools in operation. The national schools grew up very close to their communities, and this nurtured another phenomenon of the system. That is, the great sense of loyalty, community ownership, local identification with the national school. Attending the local school during their formative years and then, as adults, witnessing successive generations following suit, the school became embedded in the life of the community. People establish emotional attachments to institutions such as schools which are intimately bound up with the life of a community. Furthermore, local activities and meetings often took place in the schools, and many national teachers tended to become leaders in community affairs. Over time, schools also became closely associated with affiliation to the local churches. Such features form part of the traditions, the legacies built up over the 180 years of the national school system. People here present have been both receivers and shapers of a school system of which we can be proud.

Change and the National School System

While tradition has been a significant feature of the legacy of the past, the national school system has combined this with change, as it has responded to the evolving political, social, economic and cultural circumstances of society's development. The system experienced changing ideological, curricular, pedagogic and financial policies as it developed. Perhaps, the most significant range of changes in the schools has occurred during this last generation. I started my career as a primary teacher, just fifty years ago, in 1961. The national school system I entered then is almost unrecognisable from the national schools I have visited recently, on behalf of the Teaching Council.

Among landmarks of that change which come to mind are:-

the closure of small schools policy in the 1960s; the introduction of school bus transport; the dramatically new primary curriculum of 1971; the new styles of school buildings, heating and equipment; the new B. Ed degrees for primary teachers; the growth of gael scoileanna; the introduction of Boards of Management, representative of trustees, parents and teachers; the development of new school patronage bodies; the abolition of corporal

punishment; the introduction of Plean Scoile; the adoption of the inclusive school policy; setting up of the National Parents Council Primary; improvements in pupil – teacher ratios; the introduction of Special Needs Assistants and Resource Teachers; the incorporation of migrants from more than 160 countries; the development and introduction of the splendid revised curriculum in 1999; the establishment of the Primary School Support Services; the adoption of whole-school planning and whole school evaluation; the incorporation of ICT for pedagogy and administration; the landmark development of the Teaching Council and its impact for standards for the teaching profession; new plans for initial, induction and continuing professional development; the new plan to improve literacy and numeracy. Another striking feature of the system is the continuity of the tradition of attracting very high calibre candidates for teaching in the national schools.

I mention such developments to remind us that in the recent past our primary school system has been anything but static – it has been dynamic and developmental. The various stakeholders have operated co-operatively and constructively to make our national schools educationally progressive places, and happy and fulfilling places for children.

The Consultative Policy Tradition

In the recent past, Ireland has established a distinctive consultative tradition for educational policy. Some of what has been achieved has been admired greatly in international fora. In 1993, the National Education Convention was convened whereby 43 stakeholders, including the Department of Education, as it was then known, engaged collectively and constructively on a wide spectrum of educational policy issues. In 1998, the National Forum on Early Childhood Care and Education was convened, at which 32 stakeholder representatives participated and reached a great deal of consensus. In 1996 and 1998, consultative fora were held on adult and continuing education, which shaped the first coherent policy on lifelong learning. In 2003, a consultative forum of all involved parties was held on the teaching career. In June 2008, a consultative conference was held on “The Governance Challenges for Future Primary School Needs.” All of

these consultative fora were under the auspices of the Department of Education. The ones in the 1990s contributed greatly to three Government White Papers on Education, and to an unprecedented raft of educational legislation, which has given Ireland the legislative framework, which a modern education system needs. All this was achieved by mature democratic process, without social cleavage or alienation.

I make reference to this consultative tradition to stress that we have a good track record in using our collective wisdom to come up with acceptable solutions on, at times, complex issues on which there are varying viewpoints. In the context of the new Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, it may be worth recalling how the National Education Convention in its Report (Chapter 5) draw attention to this emerging issue and concern. Chapter 5 concluded:

Without affecting the rights of religious authorities to establish schools with a clearly defined ethos, and to be aided by the state, there needs to be much wider agreement on the rights of nonbelievers, or other minorities within schools whose dominant ethos is not that of the majority. In this situation, the Secretariat suggests that the Department should enter discussion with the main religious authorities to try to promote understanding of, and sensitivity to the issues involved.¹

Eighteen years on, and with the trends noted then, now much more prominent, Irish society needs to face up to, and seek to resolve current problems on primary school provision and patronage.

The Current Challenge and its Context

As you are all aware, Article 42 of our 1937 Constitution “acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the family and guarantees to respect the unalienable right and duty of parents to provide ... for the education of their children.” The central role of parents is still a bedrock principle. The state’s role is a supportive one. The modus operandi of the primary school system that may have reflected the composition of Irish society in 1937, and subsequently, no longer satisfactorily reflects the needs of the very changed composition of Irish society in the twenty first century.

It may also be relevant to note that contemporary Ireland has paid much more attention to the rights of children than was formerly the case. In 1992, Ireland became a signatory to the United Nation Convention on Children's Rights, which has a significant section on education. The National Children's Strategy also emphasised children's educational rights. We now have a Children's Office and an Ombudsman for Children. The Minister for Children plans to hold a national referendum on the constitutional rights of children, in the near future. These developments also emphasise the desirability of re-examining the forms of school provision in relation to the rights of future generations of our young citizens.

Minister Quinn, in his opening address, has clearly set out the context and the challenge which face us at the Forum. He stated, "for nearly two centuries 95% of education provision at primary level has been denominational, largely under the patronage of the Christian Churches." Having paid justified tribute to the patronage and managerial bodies who have operated the schools, he sets out the challenge in a most disarming and engaging way:

I see the objective for this Forum as being a very simple one. As a society, the patronage of our primary schools should reflect the diversity within our population.

The objective may be simply stated, but its achievement is complex. This is not due to human cussedness and stubborn defence of proprietorial rights. Rather it is linked to the fact that the education of the young is an issue of great importance and sensitivity, that values and belief systems are involved, rights and responsibilities are in play. To try to move to a balance of rights, there is a need for mutual understanding of positions, an acceptance of different stakeholders' bona fides, a respect for divergence of viewpoint, an empathy for varying perspectives, and a reaching out with a sense of generosity to reach compromise and best possible solutions. In this context, I am reminded of a quotation from the late Professor Kevin Boyle, at a conference we held on Pluralism in Education, in 1996. He stated:

There is a positive component to the concept of tolerance which is linked to the idea of pluralism. That is beyond mere toleration to acceptance of the other. Tolerance is recognition and acceptance of the other and equally an attitude that

prides itself in no superiority to others. A tolerant society is one which recognises and accepts the uniqueness of human groups, however distinguished from other groups, whether by colour of skin, by ethnic background, national origin, by culture, religion, or language, or other attributes which alone or in combination define their collective identity.²

This is the concept of tolerance which ought to underpin our relations with our fellow human beings. At the same conference, Dr. Geraldine Smyth remarked, “Pluralism is about how we can live together in the one world-house (oikoumene), about how we can live with an ecumenical spirit.” In relation to compromise in the context of promoting pluralism in education she stated:

In the quest for what will best contribute to the common good, compromise holds the power to liberate and consolidate across divisions and ancient loyalties and allegiances. Compromise carries us beyond an individualist solution and holds out the possibility of a new and shared future. Compromise invites us to face one another, to take one another seriously enough to enter not just a contract but a mutual promise that implies, in some way, a taking of responsibility together for the future.³

With such concepts of pluralism, tolerance and compromise in mind, it is hoped that the work of the Forum can proceed productively, and not reflect the characterisations in last week’s media of “a war”, and “a raging debate”.

The Forum is to focus on school patronage and pluralism. Pluralism is not a threat to existing practice. It is not a narrowing down, a confining, or an infringing process, rather it seeks to open up, to widen choice, to embrace diversity. It is noteworthy that the Government’s White Paper, Charting Our Education Future (1995) posits ‘Pluralism’ as the first of the principles underpinning this policy document. Under this heading it stated;

The State should serve the educational rights of its citizens to participate in and benefit from education in accordance with each individual’s needs and abilities and the nation’s resources, within a framework which entitles individual schools and colleges to promote their philosophical values⁴.

The pluralist issue has continued to be a live one in the discourse by a variety of commentators. Here I just quote from two such reflectors on the education system. In 1997, the noted theologian and educationalist, Rev. Dr. Dermot Lane wrote:

The Catholic Church, therefore, should welcome the development of other alternative forms of educational choice such as Gael Scoileanna, multi-denominational education and non-denominational education ... such diversity of form and choice in education can only be good for Catholic education as it will act as a stimulus to develop what is distinctive about its own identity and ethos. The absence of diversity in education in the past has not always served the best interests of Catholic education ⁵.

In the year 2000, the late Sr Teresa McCormack, of CORI, wrote:

There is now a very strong consensus in Irish education that the most appropriate way of accommodating the growing pluralism in society is through the availability of a diversity of school types. There is a commitment on the part of the government, arising from a corresponding concern in contemporary society, to try to ensure that, as far as possible, parents will be able to choose schools that reflect their religion, ethical or cultural values ⁶.

While charting a way forward for the challenge before us is difficult, and has a number of sub-issues attached to it which need to be resolved, it is also important to note that it is a confined task. We are not being asked to chart a whole new primary system, as if it were a green field situation. Rather, it is more a matter of adjustment, whereby forms of patronage may be devised which will meet, as far as possible, the needs of non-believers, or other minorities for whom the overwhelmingly denominational pattern of patronage is not acceptable. It is also encouraging that there is a general acceptance of the need for change, with an admirable proactive stance being taken by Catholic Church authorities, who at present monopolise national school patronage. Among other statements on the matter, issued by Catholic Church authorities recently was “A Position Paper by the Catholic Schools Partnership” issued on the 6 April 2011. It endorsed the principle of parental choice in education and pointed out that “throughout the world democratic societies provide funding and legal protection for a plurality of school types.” It went on to state, “If sufficient demand for a school under different patronage (from denominational) can be demonstrated then all of the stakeholders should work in partnership towards this goal” ⁷.

It is also contextually relevant that since the 1970s new forms of school patronage have developed, other than denominational. These include Educate Together, Foras Pátrúnachta na Scoileanna Lán Gaeilge, and the VEC Community National Schools. These bodies have been building up experience and achievement in school patronage, and have important insights to offer. They have explored new ground, experimented with new approaches, and won the confidence of parental groups.

As the Minister has also noted, the Forum will shortly have the benefit of two relevant reports available to it – the report of the Commission on School Accommodation and the report of the Irish Human Rights Commission on Religion and Education. All this deliberative and consultative work will be helpful to Forum members and the Advisory Group in their reflections and debate. From a number of perspectives it could be said that “the time is ripe” for such a Forum. Though a small state, we have a complex education system. As we go forward, mutual trust and interdependence are crucial issues in buttressing social solidarity and communal well-being. We owe it to the heritage we have benefitted from and to future generations to resolve the problem issues involved.

In undertaking this task, Ireland, as an independent democracy is facing up to its responsibilities to the various United Nations and EU Conventions relating to educational provision for all citizens to which it is a party. The planned review of Ireland’s human rights record by the United Nations Human Rights Council in October of this year provides a timely stimulus for us to make improvements on our school patronage provision. Most societies experience difficulties in trying to ensure that their school systems satisfactorily reflect the desires and concerns of their citizens. Furthermore, arrangements arrived at one epoch are subject to subsequent change in the light of societal developments. Ireland, in addressing this problem, can learn from successful experiences elsewhere, and should be open to good practice. Nevertheless, because a state’s education system tends to be shaped and moulded by the historical experiences and traditions of individual countries, there is no set pattern which can be applied. The value of the Forum is that it gives us the opportunity of exchanging views and exploring possible lines of action which lead to possible satisfactory outcomes for our particular

situation. The fact that the Forum was requested by some of the stakeholders would indicate that they intend to engage wholeheartedly in the process.

Minister Quinn has designated three main themes on which he wishes the Forum to focus, which I summarise as follows:-

- establishing the demand for diversity where the existing school provision is inadequate;
- the practicalities of managing the diversity of patronage;
- how diversity can be accommodated where just one or two schools operate, and the population does not justify another one.

The Minister allows that other themes may emerge, but these are the core issues on which he wishes the Forum to concentrate.

The Work Process of the Forum

Bearing in mind the Minister's wishes, the following is an outline of the work process of the Forum.

Thirteen main stakeholders are being invited to prepare written submissions in line with the concerns of the Minister regarding the patronage issue. A paper setting out the context, theme and submission details will be available at the end of this meeting. The deadline for the submissions is 7 June 2011. As a feature of the transparency which is associated with the Forum it is planned to put the submissions on the website shortly after receiving them. The Advisory Group will study and analyse the submissions prior to a key working session of the Forum. This will take place in the Clock Tower over three days, 22, 23, 24 June. Each of the thirteen groups will have a time slot allotted to it on these days, during which members of the Advisory Group will question and discuss with them issues arising from their submissions. These sessions will be open to representatives of all stakeholders, and a limited number of places will be available to the general public. Members of the public may also make written submissions, along the lines set out in the documentation.

Subsequent to this, the Advisory Group will discuss and collate outcomes of the sessions. They will analyse any other written submissions received. On an on-going basis they will consult relevant background literature and documentation on the theme. In the course of their deliberations the Advisory Group may consult with any stakeholder regarding clarification or perspectives on issues involved.

The Advisory Group aim to prepare an Interim Report by early November 2011. It is planned to hold a Conference during November where main recommendations of the Interim Report can be discussed. Subsequent to this, the Group will prepare a final report to be submitted to the Minister by the end of the year.

In all their dealings, the Advisory Group will seek to conduct their business with a sense of trust, respect and constructive dialogue. They approach the issues in an open-minded, learning mode, seeking to elicit the best wisdom available on the issues, in a co-operative spirit, with all these interested.

While the Advisory Group welcomes the secretarial support supplied by the Department of Education and Skills, it wishes to stress that it is an independent agency. Its independent advice will be totally based on its appraisal of all relevant issues. The spirit in which the Group approaches its work is one of civic service on an issue of public importance to Irish society. Their aim is to help, with other stakeholders to adapt the primary school system so that it may serve better the needs of Irish children and their parents. The fact that the CSO projects an increase in pupil members of more than 12% between 2010 and 2018, during years of economic recession, makes it all the more urgent to plan for their future educational well-being. In the interests of the common good, let's hope that our efforts at the National Forum will be successful. The Advisory Group commits itself to apply its best efforts to ensure success.

References

- ¹. John Coolahan (ed) Report on the National Education Convention (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1994), p. 33.
- ². Kevin Boyle, “Pluralism and Tolerance in a Changing World” in Pluralism in Education: Conference Proceedings, N.P. (1996), pp. 32,33.
- ³. Geraldine Smyth in *ibid.*, p. 5
- ⁴. Government of Ireland, White Paper: Charting Our Education Future, (Stationery Office: 1995), p.6.
- ⁵. Dermot A. Lane, “The Expanding Horizons of Catholic Education”, in P. Hogan and K. Williams, eds. The Future of Religion in Irish Education (Dublin: 1997), pp. 128-137, P. 137.
- ⁶. Teresa McCormack, “Future Directions for Trusteeship” in C. Furlong and L. Monahan eds. School Culture: Cracking the Code (Dublin: 2000), pp. 151-162, p. 159.
- ⁷. Catholic Schools Partnership, “Catholic Schools in the Republic of Ireland: A Position paper (Catholic Communications Office, April 2011) pp. 2, 10.