

Response to the Independent Review of Education.

Introduction

The responses I offer towards this critical and long overdue debate are based on my experiences in the field of education, particularly since 1970 when I came to Northern Ireland.

In Queen's University, I was a lecturer in the Social Studies Department involved in postgraduate work with students training to be social workers. I saw at first hand the results of an education system that divided pupils by perceived religion and at 11 by perceived intelligence. The students were honours graduates but the schools they had attended differed greatly in status and in resources depending on their fate at 11. They were all able but those with least social capital had been least assisted by the school system.

From 1989 to 2001 I was a member of the Belfast Education and Library Board and Chair of it for the last four years. 1989 saw the introduction of the Common Curriculum and Open Enrolment, the setting up of CCMS and statutory provision for Integrated schools.

All these developments had considerable effect on enrolments and the school estate in Belfast where there were sixteen Grammar schools, of which fourteen were voluntary, and among the secondary schools were four which soon became Group 1 schools under special measures.

There were population movements with an outflow of Protestants and, within that community, overnight shifts during the Shankill feuds. Open enrolment led to a depletion of numbers and a narrowing of the ability range in many secondary schools.

We were well aware of the empty classroom situation and the increasingly inequable status of post primary schools. Rationalisation was hampered by the lack of any overall planning strategy not only between the sectors but also between adjacent ELBs. The fact that it was so difficult to rationalise the estate meant that it was in very poor condition. Territorial wars, religion and politics played their part.

Although rationalisations did take place they avoided the logical solutions like creating a comprehensive school, as with Wellington/Balmoral, or joining Larkfield with Dunmurry High but in an adjacent board. The former was not done despite the obvious success of the three all ability integrated schools, Lagan, Hazelwood and latterly Malone in and around Belfast.

In 1992 I became a governor of the Integrated Education Fund and was Chair when, in 1998, we launched our ten year strategy for furthering integrated education. Because, apart from crisis management, there was no strategy at that time from Government the IEF had to factor in the capacity to withstand shifts in government policy.

The ELBs seemed to have responsibilities but little power to enforce in a way which would have avoided the waste of resources in the fissured estate they had to administer and within which to deliver a fair education system. The power to encourage and facilitate Integrated Schools, for instance, does not lie with them but rests with the DE.

Arising out of this background I submit responses in some of the areas that seem appropriate.

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July 2006