

# Federation of Irish Societies

THE IRISH COMMUNITY : THE MISSING COMPONENT IN THE PLANNING  
AND PROVISION OF MULTI CULTURAL  
EDUCATION

A Background Paper On The Need For Inclusion In The Formulation,  
Planning and Practice Of Multi Cultural Education

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RECOGNITION OF THE PLURALIST SOCIETY

(I)

The recognition of the pluralist nature of British society is a comparatively recent phenomena. It is now acknowledged that the concept of a culturally homogeneous population is demonstrably erroneous. The complexities of contemporary society have been examined by comprehensive Educational and Socio-Economic research. Education has been correctly identified as an area of primacy regarding the fundamentals of the multi cultural issue.

"Education For All, The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups" appeared in March 1985. The origins of the committee being traceable to expressions of concern by the West Indian community regarding their children's academic performance. The West Indian community was accorded priority in the committee's brief but the needs of all ethnic minority groups were to be examined. In some respects "Education For All" is merely a logical progression of the spirit and tone of the E.E.C. Directive on the Education of Children of Migrant Workers. This Directive was issued on July 25th 1977 and came into legal force amongst E.E.C. member states on July 25th 1981. Articles 1 and 3 are pertinent to Swann, as is the statement made by Mr Carlisle on March 24th 1980. The Secretary of State made it clear the Directive would be applied irrespective of the country of origin of children concerned. The inclusion of E.E.C. and non E.E.C. nationals being implicit. One can not logically separate "Education For All" from "E.E.C. Directive 77/486/E.E.C. on the Education of children of Migrant Workers".

EDUCATION FOR ALL: RACISM

Lord Swann's inquiry team identified several salient facts, primary amongst these being: "people of ethnic minority origin were, and still are, feeling the effects of prejudice and discrimination.... Society was not, and still is not, according equality to ethnic minorities."

In the 1950's and 1960's assimilation was the dominant philosophy, and cultural diversity was regarded as a hindrance to social and economic advancement. Greater recognition has now been accorded to ethnic background and a multi cultural approach has been adopted. All ethnic minority groups experience Racism, the degree is variable, but it is a common factor. The inquiry team distinguished two aspects of Racism, individual prejudice and institutionalised Racism. Prejudice is described as preconceived and irrational evaluation of a person or group based on assumed characteristics. The role of education in the context of prejudice is:

(2) "...to counter any mistaken impressions or inaccurate, hearsay evidence which he or she may have acquired within the family, peer group, or more broadly from the local community



or the media''.

Prejudice is based on ignorance and an outlook of mental rigidity. Ignorance is:

(3)''...in the literal sense, a lack of knowledge on which to base informed opinions and judgements''

An application of the definition of prejudice and ignorance, outlined by the inquiry team, relative to the brief of ''Education for All'' is most interesting. The Irish community does not appear, except in a minor and peripheral context, anywhere in the entire document. The inquiry team are culpable as regards two fundamentals it identified as worth of attention. The effective exclusion of the largest, national, Ethnic Minority group in Britain to-day, defies all logic. One can only assume that the committee had a preconceived view, and collectively shared a lack of knowledge, of the Irish community.

#### EDUCATION FOR ALL: ETHNIC IDENTITY AND EDUCATION

The central conclusion of the committee's deliberations was that:

(4)''...education is societies best hope for changing the attitudes of coming generations'

It is intended that education should seek to foster an atmosphere of tolerance and understanding, so eradicating prejudice and discrimination in society at large. An examination of the communities categorised under ''Other Ethnic Minority Groups'' revealed they all shared a strong sense of Ethnic identity. It was additionally discovered that they all shared:

(5)''common and all but universal experience of prejudice and discrimination at the hands of the majority community. Prejudice, it is clear, crosses the colour divide.''

A strong sense of Ethnic identity is a key characteristic of the Irish community in Britain. This numerically dominant national Ethnic group has long experienced prejudice and discrimination of a varied kind. One may trace the lineage of the Irish stereotype to the writings of Gerald de Barry in the closing decades of the 12th century. It is a highly disturbing fact that not only does the stereotyped Irishman have such a long pedigree, but also continues to be propagated. It may well have been a revelation to the Swann committee to discover prejudice and discrimination as transcending the colour divide. The Irish have known and experienced Racism of this nature for years. Internalisation of negative attitudes towards the Irish have also clearly occurred within other Ethnic Minority groups.

#### ANTI IRISH PREJUDICE: THE STEREOTYPE

One would expect children not only to reflect their parent's opinions in particular, but

also society in general. Two separate pieces of research, separated Geographically and by ten years, reveals such attitudes. In the Nottingham survey, children were requested to place English, Germans, Indians, Irish, Jews, Pakistanis and West Indians in preference order. The children placed the Irish 6th out of the 7, and considered the Irish to be:

(6) "Violent and dull... only a minority of the children attributed a positive characteristic 'cheerful' to the Irish."

The Nottingham survey supported earlier findings. Quantified results from the last decade established:

(7) "...the proportion of negative stereotypes attributed to the Irish (45.6%) was higher than that found for any other group apart from Arabs (49.1%). The most prevalent stereotype was that relating to the notion of stupidity in the Irish... effectively transmitted by many sections of the media!"

In each case the surveys were conducted in multi Ethnic comprehensive schools. It is clear in what regard the Irish are held by the wider community. An Irish child's peers obviously will not hold them in any great esteem should they assert their national identity. Irish culture, and the Irish community, are targets for derisive and demeaning comments. Name calling and abuse are common characteristics of Racist attitudes amongst children. Irish "Jokes" are convenient vehicles for both manifestations; any attempt to register complaint by an Irish child, their identity being under direct attack, elicits the monotonous refrain 'Have you no sense of humour?' The motivating force behind Irish "Jokes" is anything but humour. An analysis of these 'jokes' by Edmund Leach, a leading Cambridge Anthropologist, made this point very clear. He examined several best selling collections of Irish "Joke books" and concluded that the Irish, as depicted, were:

(8) "...not so much a figure of fun, as an object of contempt merging into deep hostility, He is a drink addicted moron, reared in the bog, who wears his rubber boots at all times, cannot read or write, and reverses the logic of ordinary common sense. His female counterpart shares the same qualities except that she is sexually promiscuous, rather than perpetually drunk."

The fact that such literature is in great demand, and has a reliable market, is illustrated by the fact that W.H. Smith and Son declined to remove these books from sale. The explanation provided by the company, which appeared in the 'Irish Post' of 7 2 86 stated that as demand is so high, commercially it was not a sound proposition. The implication is that one may



attack Irish identity with impunity, in the full knowledge of mass public support and encouragement. The overt anti Irish Racism of the 19th century has evolved into a more subtle manifestation of the manner in which the Irish are perceived by the wider community. The reality of the Irish community as compared to public perceptions, are poles apart. The public's perception is based on ignorance and a preconceived view of the Irish. Irish 'Jokes' act to reinforce this ignorance.

#### EDUCATION: THE ETHNOCENTRIC APPROACH.

An Irish child will be fully aware that an assertion of Irish identity is not a positive asset. The denial of Irish identity by second generation children stems directly from the low status such an assertion places them in. The effective dismissal of the Irish as not worth of consideration is one way in which this low status value judgement is expressed by society. The peripheral role accorded the Irish community in 'Education For All' and in Multi Cultural Education in general, is a devastating indictment. One must assume that the Swann team considers anti Irish prejudice either of little importance, or they were totally unaware of its existence. One has, by implication, both prejudice and ignorance, two facets of society the Swann team saw as in need of urgent attention.

Anti Irish prejudice manifests itself in more covert and subtle ways to-day than in the past. The form of Racist manifestation one sees directed at the Asian and Afro Caribbean communities differs little from that directed at the Irish in past centuries. The different nature of contemporary anti Irish prejudice; whether in relation to the past experiences of the community, or in relation to anti Asian prejudice, doesn't invalidate it as a subject to be tackled. Anti Irish prejudice does not stay within the confines of school playgrounds, it permeates the formal learning process. Formalised Education, and subject content serve to reinforce the pressures on an Irish child to disassociate themselves from their Irish identity. History is the most prominent sphere to feature Irish - British relations. An analysis of how text books portray these encounters reveals that:

(9) "Ireland exists only in relation to British concerns, and then only in terms of violence and lawlessness, and hence irrationality. Complementary images of Irish inferiority and British superiority are thus reinforced."

Irish history in British schools begins with 1168, in the main at least, the implication being that nothing happened prior to that date. In a similar way it would appear from most standard text books that nothing happened in Ireland between the battle of the Boyne and the rising of 1798. There is a 108 year void in Irish history of the late 17th - late 18th



centuries.

If one takes a single episode in Irish history, the potato blight, this selective Ethno-centric attitude is exemplified. The standard presentation to explain the lack of food lies in the portrayal of a primitive agricultural system and the lack of a developed social and economic infrastructure. Facts which are missing from this simplistic scenario portray a more revealing picture of events. Irish agriculture at that time was producing food sufficient to feed 24 million people, that being three times the contemporary population. The total population of the island to-day is in the region of 5 million. Ireland is the only European nation which has a lower population in the 20th century compared to the 19th.

Apart from the potato the Irish farmers grew additional crops for rent payment. Non payment of rent resulted in eviction and the physical destruction of house and home. Starving Irish men, women and children were faced by an impossible situation. If the rent were consumed they would ultimately have no food, no home and no future. Eviction was tantamount to a death sentence, blight or no blight. The exportation of food, rent payments, continued unabated as if nothing had altered. The only outward evidence of changed circumstances were the armed troops now accompanying the food convoys to Irish ports. A conservative estimate of direct population loss due to starvation being 12%, or 1 million persons. Indirect population loss due to emigration was on the same scale, 12%.

The label 'Famine' which is commonly applied to this national disaster conveniently obscures the reality of food supply availability in the 1840's. Standard presentation can hardly be described as providing an accurate portrayal of the circumstances, or of being balanced. An Irish child, hearing the accepted version of events will naturally be highly perturbed. Self doubt will arise when the message is conveyed via the authoritative figure of the teacher, supported by the written word.

The stereotyped Ireland, a large rural population, poorly developed economy and a reliance on agrarian activities, is merely reinforced and perpetuated by this type of presentation. Modern day perceptions of Ireland differ little from those encountered in history books. Other areas of the curriculum also display the Ethnocentric attitudes found in history.

#### IRISH ARTS AND CULTURE: DIMINUTION OF IDENTITY V DEMONSTRATEBLE PRIDE

Subjects apart from history are in one sense, less overt in their presentation of Ireland and the Irish. Ireland's existence is ignored, or one has a distortion and dilution of any Irish link. In general terms the country exists in a void. Mainstream Geography does not include Ireland when examining Western Europe. In crude terms, the continent of Europe is



delineated along its western edge by the seaboard of Britain. The wide expanse of the Atlantic being devoid of any land mass of any significance west of Wales. Ireland makes but fleeting appearances in the context of the E.E.C., in its own right the country is a non place.

English Literature has subsumed the leading Irish authors of modern times; Swift, Wilde, O'Casey, Synge and Shaw, being notable examples. An attempt was made to subsume Seamas Heaney in 1983. It may be linguistically correct to classify these authors under the heading English Literature, literature and the arts are, however, a cultural phenomena. It has been an Irish cultural environment which produced these authors, not an English one. The 1983 edition of 'The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Verse' included Mr Heaney's work, he objected on the grounds of being an Irish author. This logical and legitimate statement produced incredulity amongst letter writers to 'The Guardian'. The actions of Penguin books, and the reactions of 'Guardian' letter writers are merely illustrative of a logical extension of the prevalent attitude. Irish arts and literature, like Ireland itself, are not recognised as having a separate existence. It is a paradox that Irish culture is subject to such a process of annexation. One has a subtle attack on Irish identity in so far that perceived Irish achievements of note become British. There is the clear implication that for these achievements to be legitimate and to be accorded recognition, they must be linked to British standards. Should an Irish person reach the sub-consciously set British standards, they therefore become British themselves. At best one can describe this whole process as highly pernicious.

One of the principal areas in which the second generation manifest their Irish identity is in the field of the performing arts. The participation in, and promotion of; Ireland's song, dance, language and cultural heritage by Irish children, is widespread. In Britain this participation occurs predominantly in membership of Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann. The value of Irish culture has been recognised by several European organisations. In 1985 the Council of Europe chose Comhaltas to be a major focus in the European Year of Music. The European Year of Music had the support of, the E.E.C., the European Cultural Foundation and the Cultural Relations Committee. A touring group of 25 performers, the bulk of them Irish, visited Belfast, Leeds, Luxembourg, Copenhagen, Hanover, Strasbourg and The Hague in the course of their performances.

Irish children are the proud inheritors of an acknowledged cultural heritage, rich in vitality and with a unique character. The Council of Europe not only recognised this, they also saw Irish culture as something of great worth to be displayed in front of a European audience. The rest of Europe, clearly, does not share the same perceptions of Ireland as those found in Britain.



In view of the core concepts of "Education For All" there is clearly a case for a place on the curriculum dealing with Irish studies and Irish culture. In terms of alleviating prejudice, acknowledging the role of minority cultures, and promoting positive self identity amongst the second generation, there is a pressing need for such inclusion. Irish children, it has been found:

(IO) ".....tend subjectively to experience themselves as members of a low status minority group, for some, the embarrassment is such that they refuse to have anything to do with the Irish. For some, this is a spur to developing pride in their origins."

There is something fundamentally wrong if the ethos and concepts of "Education For All" are not applied to the Irish community. It is abundantly clear that a distorted picture of Ireland and the Irish exists amongst a numerically large and diverse cross section of society. To leave these individuals in their disturbing state of prevailing ignorance is a highly alarming prospect. One has a national problem and consequently one must deal with this on a national scale. Local initiatives have been instigated, these are highly commendable, but a national programme is really required. Ignoring the Irish aspects of Multi Cultural Education is by implication selective bias. The public's perception of the Irish is a stereotype based on ignorance, it is this which an Irish imput should seek to rectify. Irish studies would be as valid in a school predominantly composed of Asian children, as in one with a large Irish population. It is in fact schools with a large non Irish composition that Irish studies are most needed. A lack of understanding of this aspect, is a lack of understanding of the aims and objectives of Multi Cultural Education and the meaning of the term 'Education For All'

#### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Detailed recommendations would be premature at this stage, broad outlines can however be indicated.

(a) Prejudice concerning the Irish community is prevalent and damaging to both the Irish community, and those amongst whom these ideas hold sway. The different nature of anti Irish prejudice, compared to that directed at the black minorities, does not invalidate the need to tackle this prejudice.

(b) The role of Irish arts in promoting understanding at all levels of education, and alleviating prevalent negative concepts, should be examined as a potential way forward. The role of the arts in promoting positive identity amongst Irish children, and promoting a realistic image of Ireland amongst the wider community being an ultimate aim.



(c) Teaching materials and general resource information, in relation to any specifically Irish topics, are few and far between. The planning and dissemination of such material requires urgent attention.

(d) Agencies, individuals and organisations which could assist in the aim of promoting Irish aspects in education need to be involved; whether in a consultative, participatory or informative role.

(e) Consultation with, and the participation of, the parents of Irish children; in helping to identify needs, requirements and problems requires implementation

(f) Any Irish input in schools must be aimed at all children if it is to be effective. One would be seriously failing in respect to this matter if Irish studies were to be seen as being for Irish children only.

(g) Any attempt to implement an Irish aspect to education in Britain's schools requires some kind of national coordination.

(II) "The education of the nation's children is a matter of profound importance, and the hopes and expectations of parents, children, and minority communities are, or should be, of crucial consideration in their own right."

It is in the light of that statement that an Irish dimension to Multi Cultural Education should not only be seriously considered, but also be implemented.

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