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A difficult subject

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Maurice Fitzsimons grew up in a Catholic housing estate in Belfast. He attended a Catholic primary school, a Catholic grammar school and went to St Joseph's Catholic teachers' training college. Then, apparently set for a career in one of Northern Ireland's Catholic schools, he "had a think".

He decided to apply for a job at Belfast's new Lagan College, founded in 1981 as Northern Ireland's first integrated school. It is committed to bringing together Catholic and Protestant children, as well as those of other faiths and none.

"When I graduated, there was the integrated sector just beginning, and I thought: I want to get involved. But it was not popular. I remember I met our priest in a restaurant one day, and he asked me, in a very friendly way, what I was going to do with my life. I said I was going for a job at Lagan College. 'Oh,' he said, 'that place,' with a tone to his voice. And then he said: "You shouldn't - your chances of getting a job in a Catholic school after that would be very small."

Fitzsimons did not take his advice. His time teaching at Lagan in the mid-1980s does not seem to have done his career any harm, although perhaps his priest would not see it that way. I spoke to him in his large office at Hazelwood College in Belfast, another integrated school where he is deputy head.

A little while before our talk, I had gone with him to the weekly extended assembly in the school hall. As we entered, Eileen Lenehan, the head, was warning the pupils against playground violence that had taken place, "even with sectarian comments".

Faced with these situations, she said, the pupils should count to 10 slowly. She advised them to take the anger management courses the school offered. Then, more happily, she announced that the girls' year 10 netball team had won the netball cup - the first integrated school to do so. To conclude, she asked the assembly to follow her in reciting the Lord's Prayer, which, Fitzsimons whispered to me, was that week the Protestant version. I asked him what the Catholic version was, and he couldn't remember.

Fitzsimons's lapse of memory pointed to one sign of success of the integrated schools' success: they really do make religious differences less important.

It was an impression that grew when I talked to three of the school's senior pupils - Chelsea, Christine and Christopher, 18-year-olds who are the elected representatives of their senior classmates. Chelsea and Christine said that their parents were regarded as Protestants, more because they were not Catholic than because of any faith.

Chelsea had attended a state ("Protestant") primary school, and had herself chosen Hazelwood, because she and her parents had heard it was a good school. "I didn't really know about the Protestant- Catholic... thing until I came here and it was talked about," she said.

Christine's parents were a mixed-marriage couple who sent her to an integrated primary. Christopher's family was Catholic, "but my mum works on the Shankill Road" - the heart of loyalist Belfast, which had been a dangerous place for a Catholic. "She was very clear on integrated schooling. She wouldn't have me go to a Catholic school - she said that division was rotten for the society."

These young people's parents were of the "Troubles" generation. The pupils themselves had spent almost half of their lives in the relative peace that followed the 1998 Good Friday agreement that committed all sides to resolving their differences by peaceful and democratic means. Christine and Christopher remembered seeing riots but it did not seem a vivid memory. Both of the girls wanted to go the University of Ulster, while Christopher, more daring, has applied to do a law degree at Knox, a liberal arts college in Illinois.

Hazelwood, like all the integrated colleges, is both mixed-sex and comprehensive, which means that, unlike the grammar schools, it does not choose pupils by academic ability. It seems to be able to give its pupils a strong academic grounding, is formidably well equipped and plans to apply for specialist school status in "creativity and digital arts".

Those were the things the three student representatives wanted to talk about. They were polite when I asked about religious issues, but these seemed peripheral to them - in part, Chelsea said, because they were openly discussed and shown not to matter (some sectarian playground abuse apart).

Northern Ireland, or Ulster, had a malign inheritance when the border was finally drawn in 1925 between it and what became, eventually, the Irish Republic. The Protestant-unionist majority had threatened armed rebellion if forced by the British government into an all-Irish state; it feared retribution from republicans, the domination of a powerful and ideologically intense Catholic Church and an importation of the hatreds of the civil war which raged in the south from 1922-23. The threat succeeded: the province remained British and - uniquely among the regions of the UK - substantially self-governing, through a parliament in Stormont. But some 30 per cent of its citizens were Catholic, most of whom resonated to the building of the Irish state in the south, imbued as it was with Catholic social teaching and practices - positioning itself as the spiritual, if not yet the physical home of all Irish Catholics.

In Northern Ireland, the Catholic nationalist parties refused to play the part of a constructive opposition in a parliament they could never hope to dominate and the church refused its blessing to state schools set up in the aftermath of partition. Catholic schools received state funding and the two main religious communities remained segregated through their schooling, although the separation was never complete, especially at grammar school level.

But the divisions largely held - in communities, schools, work and even in sports. The Protestant-unionists said that their state schools were open to all, and that the Catholics were perverse, or priest-ridden, in refusing to attend. The Catholic-nationalists said that discrimination against them and Protestant cultural dominance meant they needed a space within which they could be

themselves.

Walls went up and largely stayed up: they became real when the violence of some loyalists, fearing a rebellion under the guise of civil rights agitation, smashed into Catholic communities in 1968 - and the IRA, seizing on the sectarian war to become the saviours of their people, started a vicious 30-year terrorist campaign.

I started my reporting life in the province in the early 1970s, when bombs, shootings and burnings were an everyday occurrence. British soldiers and Northern Irish policemen - the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the first two words of the title an affront to nationalist sensibilities - wore helmets, flak jackets and boots. They had side arms in their holsters and machineguns at the ready. Razor wire, barricades and watch towers divided communities.

My rented flat was between the Protestant Shankill and the Catholic Falls Roads. It had been a mixed area, but was rapidly becoming unmixed after visits from republican squads who suggested that unwelcome elements might find it uncomfortable to stay. On one occasion a group of British squaddies found themselves pinned down behind the low walls enclosing a brick forecourt. IRA fire whipped down a road at right angles to mine, wounding one soldier who screamed in agony for half an hour till armoured "pigs" came and the IRA men melted away.

I - and many of the citizens of the province - still see Northern Ireland through that prism. We still wonder at the way Belfast, never beautiful but with some fine Victorian buildings, is now safe for evening strolling and drinking and boasts unguarded shopping arcades and public buildings.

Taking a taxi in from the airport, I remarked on this to the driver. Quite unbidden, he began talking about the need for integrated schools, wishing that he (a Protestant) and his children had attended one. Realising my interest, he took me on a detour to show me Holy Cross school, a Catholic girls' establishment where, in September 2001, girls walking to the school were stoned and abused by loyalists from a Protestant enclave, Glenbryn, in the largely Catholic Ardoyne area. "That's what happens when you get them separated like that," my driver said.

Holy Cross came up again in my conversations at Hazelwood. Fitzsimons recalled it, saying that Hazelwood buses had occasionally been stoned, too, though with nothing like the venom seen at Holy Cross. It was his way of signalling that integrated schooling has been, and to a degree still is, a bold venture - for the teachers, for pupils who often travel outside their Protestant or Catholic enclaves and, most of all, for parents.

Integrated schooling has always been a bottom-up affair, driven by concerned teachers and parents rather than the authorities. Its forerunner was the All Children Together movement, started by Colm and Anne Murray-Cavannagh, and its first solid achievement was the founding of Lagan in 1981. The school began in a disused scout hut in South Belfast, off the largely Protestant Malone Road, with 28 pupils, two full-time and five part-time teachers and no backing from the state.

It no longer takes as much courage as it did to send one's children to such schools or to teach at them. The integrated schools movement has, since the mid-1980s, received both funding and support from the state, but it remains a minority choice, if a growing one, and still needs missionaries.

At the offices of the umbrella body for the schools - the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, with the pleasant acronym of Nicie, I met two women, June Wilkinson and Danny Judge, who give much of their spare time to the cause. Wilkinson told me that she had canvassed some 500 people at the government office where she worked to sign a petition in aid of a new school. Judge is a member of a group campaigning for a new primary school. They will receive government funding from this September if they can get the minimum numbers of pupils required.

This is still difficult, sometimes painful, territory. In spite of the Good Friday agreement and March's decision by Sinn Fein and Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party to share power in a devolved government, the two communities still view each other with distrust, even hatred.

"The challenge within my group is to understand each other," says Wilkinson. "It's not just about the children. In the first place, it's about the parents." They still face a good deal of prejudice, and persistent accusations of being "middle class" (something of an insult in Northern Ireland) and strangers. Says Judge: "People think they know what [integrated schooling] means, but more often than not, they don't. Some politicians say it's just for the middle classes. Others say it's social engineering. People were saying our group is all from outside the area. There's not one of us from outside the area."

Activists such as Judge and Wilkinson are important to the campaign, because integrated schools still only account for some 6 per cent of school places in Northern Ireland. Leading unionist politicians, and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, share a distaste for integrated schools, if on different grounds. Iris Robinson, a Westminster and Stormont MP for the DUP, argued in a variety of newspaper pieces that integrated schooling already exists in practice - in the state, or controlled, schools. "There is," she wrote in Belfast Sunday Life, "no such thing as 'Protestant' state schooling in the same way as there is Roman Catholic schooling. It is a concept dreamt up by the integrated lobby to justify their existence."

On a recent edition of BBC Northern Ireland's weekly news show Hearts and Minds, Donal McKeown, auxiliary bishop of Down and Connor, more suavely insisted that Catholic schools must remain, saying that "all types of schools have a future. We [Catholics] are recognised as making a contribution, a uniquely successful contribution... We are concerned that the faith option remains, rather than some vague, state-dominated ideology."

Gently, the Catholic Church continues to draw a line - no longer as harshly as before, but just as firmly. "Catholics," says David Russell, Nicie's policy officer and an academic at Queen's University, "will never give up on faith schools. The school is part of a trinity - family, church and school. The bishops hold the schools in trust. It's not a matter of choice."

The people who push integrated education, especially Michael Wardlow, the chief executive of Nicie, a wiry, intense man with much of the missionary about him, often point out that, asked if they favour their children going to school together, most parents say "yes".

Something of a test of this was held in the town of Omagh, to the west of the province, in February. Russell, a (Protestant) Queen's academic and Ian O'Flynn, a (Catholic) former Queen's colleague who now teaches at Newcastle University, asked James Fishkin, the Stanford University professor, to conduct a poll on education in the province.

I know Fishkin. He is the father of "deliberative polling" - the selection of small groups of citizens to discuss various topics. I had written about a deliberative poll he carried out in Athens, to choose a mayoral candidate for one of the city's suburbs from the ranks of the centre-left Pasok party. He is a man of huge energy and enthusiasm. His system, which he and its supporters see as a way to revive and inspire democratic engagement, asks representative samples of citizens to debate issues, testing their knowledge, engagement and opinions before and after their deliberations. Fishkin, already deep in preparations for a mammoth deliberative exercise for the European Union, needed little persuasion to drop everything and come - while warning, as he did so, that his system was not designed for divided societies and might not work.

Omagh was chosen because of its compact size and because it is regarded as having relatively good relations between the Catholics - who are in a majority of some 60 per cent - and Protestants. With the aid of the Mori polling organisation, questionnaires were distributed to a sample of households. One Saturday, 130 people filed into the town's further education college for a day's deliberation.

I chose to stay with one group of eight women (few men came to the event). As in all such groups, some were more vocal than others when Karen, the moderator, asked what they thought of integrated education.

There was a long pause. Finally, Ursula broke it, saying: "I like the idea of a Catholic education. It strikes a balance between education and morality. It's nice to have a faith-based education - I am very happy with it." Jacqueline agreed, saying that the frightening thing about state education was that it treated children like units. "The important thing is ethos. I can't see much of an argument for integrated education. The government is naive to think that if we all go to the same school everything will be fine. In any case, people in this town do get on."

Another woman, Elizabeth, broke in, speaking with some passion. "I don't think it is naive. There's a lot of racism in Omagh. I do think we must think about our schools. I think we are deluding ourselves if we say we are talking to reach other."

A woman who had spoken little, Sandra, said that children needed to "know who they were" by going to a school that supported their identity. Those who had spoken had been, by their accent and manner, middle class. Bridget, who seemed working class, then spoke: "I am a Roman Catholic but I married a Protestant. My kids go to a Catholic school. But if people were taught side by side it would be better. There's a lot of bitterness in this country. My daughter says, my Mammy's [republican] green and my Daddy's [unionist] orange and she's proud of it!"

Ursula observed that "the problem is history, not religion. Catholic history is Irish and Protestant is British." A woman, the youngest in the room who did not give her name and who had been silent, spoke up suddenly and firmly: "I strongly believe that integrated is the way to go. I am also in a mixed relationship. I'm Protestant and the children's father is Catholic. If they were brought up integrated they would have friends from both sides."

Ursula came back, with some urgency: "Do we want an atheist society? Do we want the separation of church and state to have gone to the lengths it has in Britain?" Elizabeth answered: "I would love the state and religion to be separate. I think that to say there should be a Catholic ethos in schools [is] arrogant. We're all basically Christians."

The lines had been drawn. In that group, it seemed the strongest lines were drawn by the Catholics, who were drawn to an ideal of faith infusing education. Later, in the plenary session, one of the panel of experts, Mary O'Connor, a nun who was a Catholic school headmistress, took the same line as Bishop McKeown on Hearts and Minds - an oblique but firm insistence on the need for faith in the classroom. "Schooling is not just education. It is a preparation for life. Schools cannot cure the ills of society. Reconciliation must happen in a broader form than in schools."

My group, which broke up with no agreement and perhaps with some subdued ill feeling, was not itself representative. The day produced a good deal of change, which gladdened the hearts of those who believe in integrated education. The percentage believing Protestants were "open to reason" (a revealing question) increased from 36 per cent to 52 per cent and the percentage believing Catholics were "open to reason" increased from 40 per cent to 56 per cent. Agreement that "better relations will come about only through more mixing of the two communities" started high at 61 per cent and moved to an even higher 69 per cent.

One thing did not change. Support for increasing the number of integrated schools, around 70 per cent before the day's discussion, remained about the same. People, it seemed, really did think common schooling more important than differing religions, and had thought so before being asked to discuss it.

Almost the last question of the day, in the closing plenary, was put to Michael Wardlow, the head of Nicie. Why, a woman asked, do parents send their kids to integrated schools? Wardlow, crouching over the end of a table set on a stage, said: "A willingness to envisage a shared society."

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