

Interculturalism, Ethos and Ideology

Barriers to Freedom and Democracy in Irish

Primary Education

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'the ethos, not just the institutions, of society ought to be deschooled' (Illich 1971, 3)¹

Introduction

In this paper, I will address the philosophical underpinnings of the 'interculturalism' debate in the Republic of Ireland, most especially as they relate to the politics of schooling. As a country with a distinctly 'monocultural' tradition, recent significant immigration into Ireland has created a crisis in educational provision. Almost uniquely in Europe, Ireland has a monopolistic denominational tradition in schools, with 99% of primary schools being denominational, with 93% Catholic and 6% Protestant. Only 1% of schools are multi-denominational (there are *no* nondenominational schools²). In this context, change is beginning to happen, with several hundred new government schools being planned which are intended to cater for the increasing diversity of the population (the indigenous Irish population is also increasingly diverse in terms of a religious/nonreligious perspective). Alongside this, there has been a concerted intercultural programme put in place to cater for all schools, irrespective of religious or ethnic makeup.

In this article, however, I will look at some of the key tensions which this surface-level diplomacy masks. Although originally envisaged as 'multi-denominational' schools, the new government schools are increasingly being put under pressure to introduce specific religious instruction and in effect to denominationalise. Additionally, the intercultural guidelines and procedures (NCCA Guidelines 2006) which have been introduced in schools are often

ignored in practice while, even if operationalised, their theoretical and philosophical basis is more than suspect. Trying to please all ideologies – a mixture of Christian, traditionalist, liberal, egalitarian and Marxist – the documents seem to end up simply confusing teachers and students and pleasing no one. While acknowledging the goodwill and progress which has been made in Irish education in recent years, this article argues that the Irish educational system is still a long way from being a pedagogical system of 'freedom and democracy'.

However, the tensions which are present in the Irish education system do not simply relate to issues of ethos or cultural difference. The Irish Primary School Revised Curriculum of 1999 in principle outlines a progressivist or even 'radical' pedagogy, with emphasis on active and group learning and individuality of the child within a supposedly child-centred overall framework. Despite this, there are clear and unresolved tensions between a 'constructivist' epistemology in some areas and a more 'realist' epistemology in others. While teachers are meant to act as a conduit for the facilitation of the child's individual learning and development, an overload of content and time constraints leaves one wondering at the effects on the 'individuality' of the teacher him/herself. Additionally, the recent turn towards a more 'performativity' based model with regard to assessment (in the WSE or Whole School Evaluation), begs the question as to how this more technicist model of assessment coheres with the more constructivist and radical approaches to learning, which are meant to be integral to the implementation of the curriculum itself. This issue is reinforced by externalist market pressures on schooling, especially at second level, but, increasingly, also at the later stages of primary school which become 'feeder' schools for the most sought after second-level places. Moreover, the second-level schools themselves tend to be rated hierarchically simply in terms of their grade averages or percentage success in sending their students to university level education (school 'league tables' are now published in the Irish press on an annual basis). It is within this wider context, of an increasingly instrumentalised education sector, that the debate on ethos and intercultural education is thus taking place.

The Forbidding Labyrinth of Irish Educational Ethos³

As stated above, almost uniquely in Europe, Ireland has a monopolistic denominational tradition in schools. Additionally, all five of the Third Level Colleges of Education, for the education of teacher students, are denominational, with four being Catholic and one Church of Ireland. At the same time, however, Irish society and culture is experiencing radical change and heterogeneity, with increasing immigration and significant shifts in the attitudes of indigenous Irish people towards religion and the Church. Nominal Catholicism is on the increase, leading to questions concerning the implications of this growing disengagement from institutional and orthodox religion. Here, I will look at how this most peculiar situation has come about and at its serious implications for children, parents and teachers.

A matrix of culturally unique factors has contributed to the evolution and consolidation of the Irish primary education system as it is currently maintained. For the purposes of this discussion, my focus will be on Catholic education,⁴ which has been and continues to be by far the most preponderant ethos in the country. Historically, this Catholic system was characterised by a large number of school principalships which were under the power of the clergy and a large number of teachers who were priests or nuns. The Church's dominance in Irish education is a mix of a Church which wanted to keep control over the transmission of morals and a government which was happy to let them do it: not just in terms of the government being in agreement with the Church, but also insofar as this deferral of authority left the government off the hook in terms of funding schools.⁵ The fact that the Church continues to own the property of the schools has obviously caused some difficulty for any attempts at setting up alternative schools. It also could lead one to argue that these schools are, in effect, not public schools at all, but private schools (owned by the Church and not the state). The 'privacy' of these schools is also exemplified in the autonomy the Church has over the determination of religious education in the curriculum. In the recent *NCCA Guidelines on Intercultural Education*, the only area left out of NCCA

consideration was religious education (the rather sad irony here being that religion is precisely the most interculturally relevant area in the curriculum).

At a higher level even than principalships, the management of the schools tended to come under the exclusive control of the Church. Even recent Christian commentators, however, have pointed to a rather specific strain of denominational education in an Irish context, which has tended to abstract a one-dimensional 'managerial' approach to education from a much more complex post-Vatican II Christian hermeneutics. As James Norman observes:

The Vatican documents suggest that patrons/trustees cannot legislate for an ethos, it is something that can only be facilitated from within the life of the school. The trustees of Irish Catholic schools have adopted a paternalistic understanding of ethos, which can be said to have developed an attitude of compliance among those who work in Catholic schools (Norman 2003, 15).

While post-Vatican II documents such as *The Catholic School* (1977) refer to the need for a 'synthesis of faith and culture' (Norman 2003, 8), the Irish Catholic Church's approach has been to eschew this kind of pastoral or dialogical approach in favour of a reinforcement of the role of Catholic trustee who acts as a 'guarantor' of the ethos for future generations. This latter perspective outrules from the beginning any real possibility of change or transformation based on dialogue: the future is 'guaranteed' in advance. Additionally, the organic synthesis between faith and culture, envisioned post-Vatican II, seems to be jettisoned in favour of a top down *domination* of even the possibility of cultural dissent or difference.

This approach has had significant effects on both the approach to moral education and to religious education respectively, although as we will see below, the 'substantive' nature of Catholic ethos is intended to pervade the whole curriculum equally. As Kevin Williams has noted, moral education, in an Irish context, has traditionally come under the remit of religious education (Williams 2003, 15). Given the traditionalist and nondialogical nature of Irish Catholic education already described, this, for the most part, meant that moral education and questions of ethos became a matter of rote-learning rather than in any way discursive or philosophically challenging. This

situation changed somewhat with the introduction in 1995 of *Relationships and Sexuality Education* (RSE) in Irish primary and secondary schools (Williams 2003, 16). However, as Norman notes, the Irish Catholic Church's perspective on RSE implies 'that Catholic moral teaching on sexuality is static and it does not allow in any way for the amount of interpretation and debate that actually occurs, even within the realm of official Church teaching' (Norman 2003, 28). This traditionalist approach led the Irish Catholic Bishops to call for a guarantee that RSE would only be taught in Religious Education classes and this finally led to the State agreeing that there would be no syllabus for RSE, but merely a set of guidelines and resources to be made available to schools (Norman 2003, 27).

Significantly, the type of religious education involved initiation into the sacraments *during school time*. Up until recently, this would have involved for the most part a constituency of Catholic children, although there were significant exceptions. In the case of non-Catholic children within the system, allowance was made for the possibility of withdrawing from such religious instruction, if parents deemed it desirable. However, from an educational perspective, no formal alternative was provided for such children. Increasingly, as the constituency of children in Catholic schools includes a significantly non-Catholic grouping, the integral aspect of the sacramental preparation is becoming problematic. Joe Dunne refers to this issue in his important essay 'The Catholic School and Civil Society'. Recognising that 'there is no necessary connection between catechesis and schooling' (Dunne 1991, 24), Dunne goes on to discuss the implications of the fact there precisely has been and continues to be such a necessary connection within the Irish Catholic system: 'catechesis can never be simply one element among others in the school programme. It is expected rather to inform and in some sense to integrate the whole programme' (Dunne 1991, 24). From an intra-Catholic perspective, this is simply a positive sign of a 'robust' approach to the religion-education connection: 'any religion worth its salt will make demands that are absolute and inclusive' (Dunne 1991, 25). However, Dunne also recognises the problems occurring for those who not share this religious

persuasion. In such instances, the 'get-out' clause may not be in reality a meaningful option, if the religious demands on the integrated curriculum are 'robust' and 'absolute': 'this fact creates severe legal difficulty – in that it makes it hard to see how a child's constitutional right to opt out of the religious instruction of a school can actually be exercised without requiring her to opt out of the whole programme – thereby violating another right guaranteed to each child by the constitution, viz. the right to attend a school in receipt of state funding' (Dunne 1991, 25-6). As Dunne concludes, 'it is not easy to see a satisfactory solution' (Dunne 1991, 26).

Given that a significant number of Catholic schools now have up to 30% non-Catholic children in their schools (the Church recently independently introduced a pilot scheme of 33% non-Catholic enrolment, for example, in some areas of West Dublin), it doesn't seem exaggerated to say that there is a serious crisis ahead for Catholic schooling and its self-understanding in Ireland. How can a 'robust' and 'absolute' Catholic education make those claims on its child students when almost half of them do not belong to the faith? This would appear to be a situation dreamt up by an absurdist poet. Unfortunately, for many children and parents, it is an all too real problem. There is of course an additional problem here, not from the perspective of the non-Catholic children, but from the perspective of the children whose parents may not have a strong view either way in relation to religion. From the point of view of the integrity of the sacraments themselves, there is a real possibility that a significant number of children and parents take part in the religious sacraments more as a 'secular initiation rite' (Dunne 1991, 30), or for the sake of convenience. This thus leads to a decline in the 'integrity of the object-domain of catechesis' (Dunne 1991, 30).

Of course, this situation does not simply affect children and parents. The implications of this rather tortured and contradictory position for the integrity of teachers and teaching is also very evident. Dunne also relates this problem to the 'freedom' of the teachers to dissent from the overarching (religious) homogeneity of the system, or to be honest about such dissenting. 'No less than parents, there are teachers who profess or practice no religion.

What is their lot, however, especially at primary level, when, having come through a denominational system of teacher-education, they must find employment in an almost exclusively denominational school system?' (Dunne 1991, 45). From my own experience of lecturing and working with teacher-students over the last eight years, this is a problem which is significantly increasing for teacher-students. While ten or twenty years ago, it could be assumed that almost 100% of teachers would be practicing Catholics, it now seems as if a significant decrease has taken place and continues to do so. In surveys I have conducted with students themselves, approximately 20-30% of teacher-students are not practicing Catholics, and thus have a problem when faced with the monolithic system of employment. This situation is complicated by a legal system which gives the teachers very little redress or protection if they choose to dissent from the status-quo position. On one level, legislation would seem to provide some level of support for teachers or students who do not agree with the traditional perspective. The Government White Paper of 1995 requires all schools 'to ensure that the rights of those who do not subscribe to the school's ethos are protected in a caring manner'. Similarly, the Education Act states that 'the language and cultural needs of students should be catered for' (qtd. in Furlong and Monahan 2000, 133). However, what is referred to as 'the deed of variation' in denominational schools, in effect their mission statement (which has legal binding), states that all denominational schools are allowed to do 'what is reasonably necessary to protect their ethos and to prevent an employee or a prospective employee from undermining the religious ethos' (qtd. in Furlong and Monahan 2000, 133). The reference to 'prospective employee' is significant in the measure to which it may be employed in principle to question a student at an interview. That is, a student may in principle be asked a question concerning their religious practice, given that this is deemed to be admissible by the deed of variation. But, given that students have studied for three years at university to achieve a degree, they may feel that telling the truth and possibly excluding themselves from the possibility of a job in 93% (if not 99%) of schools, is too high a price to pay.

Their predicament is added to by the fact that, in such a context, they would have little redress even under the Employment Equality Act, which also states that schools should be allowed to discriminate on this basis, in order to protect their ethos. In a situation of minority schools, this value of protecting ethos would have more justification, but it seems difficult to understand, given the vast preponderance of these denominational schools. Instead, it unfortunately leads to what Dunne refers to sympathetically as 'exile, silence or cunning' on behalf of the teachers (Dunne 1991, 45). In other words, it seems likely that some teachers or teacher students may end up lying about their religious perspective or practice, so as to obtain (or maintain) their teaching post. Who can blame students who use their 'cunning' in this context? There would seem to be little option for the practically-minded, or simply those who would like to work and teach. The tragedy is that such a bizarre and depressing reality is allowed to continue.

This is not simply an issue for schools but for the Colleges of Education themselves. Today, philosophical thinking regarding education within the Colleges of Education still comes under the remit of a denominational ethos. One of the difficulties in this context stems from the fact that this structure seems at odds with a growing diversity within the population and indeed, within the primary school sector. There are now 28 Educate Together primary schools in the Republic which are based on a 'multi-denominational' philosophy of education, yet all student-teachers qualifying in the Republic graduate from denominational third level colleges (Rowe 2000, 145). It is arguable that this demonstrates a lack of respect for philosophies other than denominational ones and also, by implication, constitutes a democratic deficit when it is clear that a growing number of parents, children, students and teachers, can no longer be seen as included within the traditional culture.

On Interculturalism - The Task of Recognising Cultural Difference in Education

The film *La Haine* (Kassovitz 1995) captures a picture of intercultural existence which is often occluded by 'politically correct' discourse. The very

title of the film ('Hate') designates an emotion which is off-bounds for much discussion of educational and political programs. 'Hate' is regarded as pathological, as not something to be discussed as a legitimate response to the dilemmas or tensions of everyday, intercultural existence. This is reminiscent of what Frantz Fanon⁶ says of attitudes to the violence of the natives, amongst the colonisers. 'How could they?' or 'It simply demonstrates how uncivilised they are', conveniently forgetting that the whole edifice of colonialism in the first instance was built on the violence of the coloniser (Fanon 1986). This whitewashing of explicit conflict or negativity (but only when they originate on the side of the oppressed) is the theme of *La Haine*, which can be seen as a filmic representation of the intrinsic justice of such a hateful or violent response to oppression (at least in some instances). In *La Haine*, the oppressor is presented as being French conventional society, and most especially, the police force which maintains the centralised power system of this society. I employ this example from film to exemplify how fraught the issue of interculturalism is in our contemporary societies. Often, the issue of culture or cultural identity cannot be separated out from other issues such as religious identity, gender or sexual identity. Most especially, the issue of class identity or socio-economic status and resources is one which cuts across the issue of intercultural rights or lack thereof. In education, the problem of culture and the problem of class all too often intersect to the disadvantage of the 'immigrant' or 'newcomer' child.

In the last section, I looked at the significant barriers which exist in an Irish context to the achievement of a genuinely intercultural education. What sense can we make of the claim of interculturalism when the system remains so blatantly one-dimensional? Kevin Williams has commented on the 'paucity' (Williams 2003, iv) of critical studies on the relation between religion and education in Ireland. This point could be generalised to refer to philosophical consideration of Irish education *per se*. One of the problems here relates to the consideration of an issue such as denominational education as a policy issue rather than a philosophical issue. Thus, the issue of denominational education becomes one of resources, lobby groups, political power, etc. It is

viewed as an area where the philosophical issues have already been resolved (or at least 'decided upon') and where all that remains is a putting into practice of the results. This has not been helped by the fact that the dominant approach to denominational education, outlined by the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland, has taken a 'managerial' rather than critical or dialogical perspective (Norman 2003). Significantly, however, a more philosophical approach to educational provision and the issue of denominational or multi-denominational values has begun to materialise. It is clear that this approach was generated in an Irish context by the arrival of the aforementioned Educate Together movement and their explicit concern with 'values education' or 'ethics education' (Rowe 2000, 171). More recently, a specific liberal strand within Catholic education has sought to also offer a philosophical basis for, in this case, a defence of denominational education.⁷ I have looked in detail at this approach in an earlier essay. Here, I will concentrate more specifically on the problematic of interculturalism. It is helpful, in this context, to look at the genealogy of the term 'interculturalism' as it has become distinguished from either 'multiculturalism' or 'anti-racism' respectively (Tormey and Haran 2002).

The term 'multi-culturalism' originated in the 1970's, in the UK most particularly, as an attempted educational response to growing ethnic, religious and cultural diversity in the schools. Philosophically speaking, this paradigm simply suggests that cultures exist side by side i.e. it says nothing about how these cultures can be integrated together. In general, it was associated with an attempt to concentrate on the 'cultural' aspect of multi-culturalism, fostering awareness of cultural distinctiveness and seeking to present diversity as a positive phenomenon. It is arguable that one of the disadvantages of the 'multiculturalist' approach is that it fosters a certain isolationism, by allowing specific cultures to remain detached from their wider social and political milieu. In effect, in emphasising culture alone, it runs the risk, firstly, of exoticising the 'other' and secondly, of de-politicising the nature of cultural dialogue and conflict. It was in direct response to this purported failure that so-called 'anti-racist' education was introduced into schools. In

contrast to the culturalist emphasis in multi-culturalist education (which, it was also argued, tended to essentialise cultural differences), an anti-racist education evolved and developed in schools which was not concerned so much with the issues of culture but rather with fighting racism in schools. This pedagogical methodology sought to explicitly politicise educational discourse, and can also be seen in the context of the more volatile multi-cultural climate of the late 1970s in Britain and elsewhere. No longer was it possible to detach 'culture' from 'politics'. Anti-racist education also had clearly made the move into moral education and away from simply 'learning about other cultures' modules. As Haran and Tormey show, this itself led to a new riposte from some educationalists. Quoting Erich Fried, it was said that 'a fascist who is nothing but a fascist is nothing but a fascist. However, an anti-fascist who is nothing but an anti-fascist is not an anti-fascist' (qtd. in Haran and Tormey 2002, 55). The moral certainties involved in anti-racist education were thus criticised from at least two perspectives. In the first case, they were criticised because they tended to adopt a 'transmission' or 'top-down' model of pedagogy. The teachers had the answers and there was no genuine room for student dissent, for fear of being classed as a 'racist'. But secondly, and more worryingly, there was the sense that any child who encountered one of these programmes might show all the outward signs of assent (lots of nodding the head), while having internalised none of the content or disposition.

This has led to the evolution of a third pedagogical paradigm. In contrast to both the previous models, interculturalism (also sometimes known as 'critical multiculturalism') seeks to combine the two emphases: a) this approach celebrates cultural diversity and cultural awareness and b) it links this cultural awareness to an emphasis on anti-racism and a politicisation of culture.⁸ Interculturalism, while respecting cultural difference, does not see it as definitive in some essentialist sense. There are of course dangers on this intercultural side as well. Most especially, there is the real possibility that an emphasis on dialogue and communication between cultures can all too easily become distorted into a majority demand that minority cultures conform to the overarching 'essential' identity. So, just as 'multiculturalism' can err on the

side of essentialising cultural difference, so too 'interculturalism' runs the risk of essentialising the majority culture definition of what constitutes authentic citizenship. In the current political climate, this danger is very real. The challenge of interculturalism, then, is to seek to foster dialogue towards more authentic citizenship for all cultures within a state or community, while avoiding either isolationism or the tendency to assimilationism.

On my terms, the Irish education system remains not simply monocultural but fundamentally undemocratic. In philosophical terms, Charles Taylor has looked, in his essay 'The Politics of Recognition', at how this problematic of identity has come to the fore in recent times. This essay provides a stirring genealogy of the development of the discourse of interculturalism, of rights and recognition, and its relation to the evolution of modern liberal thought, foregrounding both its strengths and its interminable tensions and strains. Taylor, although ultimately defending a particular version of liberalism, presents a subtle and nuanced picture of the acute tensions which exist not simply between liberalism and the discourse of interculturalism, but also within liberalism itself between those who would wish to defend a 'difference-blind' liberalism and those who would outline a more 'difference-sensitive' liberalism (Taylor 1994, 56ff). If the key debate here involves the opposition between those defending a 'politics of equality' versus those defending a 'politics of interculturalism' (what Taylor refers to as a 'politics of difference'), it is no less true to say that these respective categories are hardly univocal. Just as the intra-liberal division might be significant, so too (indeed rather more radically) those defending an interculturalism remain at odds with each other, more often than not.

Broadly speaking, the essay concerns itself with the question of a genealogy of interculturalism (or 'multiculturalism') as an example of the struggle for recognition which has become such a constitutive element within contemporary discourse (Taylor 1994, 25ff). For Taylor, it is this very concept of 'recognition' which marks the key transition from the pre-modern to the modern world. But in its evolution through modernity, this concept takes on a dual aspect, stressing both individualism and universalism and it is the vying

for attention between these two strands of modernity which Taylor reads as the key to the development into yet another new epoch; that of postmodernity. While hardly an uncritical advocate of modernity (he is critical of its excesses), Taylor is nonetheless keen to defend the positive potential of the modern project in philosophy and values. He is also eager to distinguish the affirmative dimension of modernity from the aspects of the postmodern era which he considers to be 'nihilistic' (singling out here Nietzsche and the 'neo-Nietzscheans' Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault for especial ire) (Taylor 1994, 70). Taylor's argument with regard to the discourse of recognition and rights can thus be read as a microcosm of the debate between neo-modernity and postmodernity, most especially as it has implications for the political realm. A relevant Derrida text in this debate is his 'Hostipitality' essay, where he argues that 'we do not know what hospitality is' and where he speaks of the 'double bind' of hospitality: 'the troubling analogy in their common origin between *hostis* as host and *hostis* as enemy, between hospitality and hostility' (Derrida 2006, 223, 227). Taylor's analysis, on my interpretation, is at its least convincing when it addresses the work of Derrida and the neo-Nietzscheans, where he seems to jettison his usual subtlety and resorts to caricature. Derrida's work, in particular amongst this sub-group, seems constructive in its engaging with both the responsibilities and acute tensions of the intercultural problematic. In an Irish context, Derrida's emphasis on 'hostility' captures the vehemence of the mutual antagonism central to the debate on schooling, which is often more than just rational disagreement. In this measure, Derrida's analysis can be connected to the earlier discussion of the film *La Haine*.

For Taylor, key to the interculturalism debate are the concepts of recognition and identity and these require significant deconstruction. Identity designates something like a person's understanding of who they are; of their fundamental defining characteristics as a person. We have come to assume, Taylor is claiming, that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others. Thus, a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around

them mirror back to them a confining or contemptible picture of themselves. It is worth analysing for a moment this key distinction between individual 'person' and group identity, a distinction which Taylor elides somewhat in this essay. K. Anthony Appiah, for example, in his essay 'Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction' (Appiah 2006), claims that there is an underestimation of the individual self in Taylor's discussion of the politics of recognition. Appiah points to two main issues here. First, that Taylor underplays oppositional aspects of individualised authenticity, which he associates with Lionel Trilling's classic discussion *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (New York, Viking Press, 1955). Second, that even if one sees such oppositional notions of the self as too subjectivist, nonetheless, our collective identities do not have to be as essentialist as Taylor claims. As Appiah observes, 'a politics of identity can be counted on to transform the identities on whose behalf it ostensibly labors' (Appiah 2006, 163). This, we might say, is an *existentialist politics of identity* as opposed to an essentialist one. Again, in an Irish context, what this points to is the unpredictability of the future of schooling. Who can predict what the religious and nonreligious constituencies will be in Ireland in ten years? No one.

Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm; can be a form of oppression, thus imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being (Taylor 1994, 25). One form of common misrecognition can be what might be termed *a patronising recognition*, which really amounts to another form of nonrecognition or misrecognition. Jürgen Habermas deals interestingly with this issue of 'patronizing benevolence' in his essay 'Religious Tolerance: The Pacemaker for Cultural Rights'. This is a considerable issue in education, due to the power differentials which often exist between educator and educated, for example, in the area of educational disadvantage. From a religious ethos perspective, there is a strong argument that the current Catholic 'tolerance' of the non-Catholic child or parent in their midst, often amounts to precisely a 'patronising recognition'. Habermas argues that only a 'network of relationships of reciprocal recognition' (Habermas 2006, 204) can

overcome this problem. 'It requires that integration of all citizens – and their mutual recognition across cultural divisions as citizens – within the framework of a shared political culture' (Habermas 2006, 205). What is most significant about this essay is that Habermas rejects the assumed political neutrality of the secularist state, and instead points out that 'political neutrality can be violated just as easily by the secular or laical side as by the religious camp' (Habermas 2006, 203). What constitutes political neutrality in a democracy is thus an ongoing *project* and cannot be predefined by, for example, secular assumptions.

It is precisely these threats of significant oppression through nonrecognition, misrecognition and 'patronizing benevolence' which I think we must keep in mind, as we attempt to deal with the recalcitrant dilemmas of Irish educational ethos. Paradoxically, at the present time, it is arguable that our dominating educational ethoi are contributing more to the damaging aspects which Taylor speaks of, than to the good.

The Dilemma for Interculturalism: Is Ideological Education Avoidable or Contestable?

As I stated at the beginning of this essay, the tensions which are present in the Irish education system do not simply relate to issues of ethoi or cultural difference. The recent turn towards a more 'performativity' based model with regard to assessment (in the WSE or Whole School Evaluation) begs the question as to how this more technicist model of assessment coheres with the more constructivist and radical approaches to learning which are meant to be integral to the implementation of the curriculum itself. This issue is reinforced by externalist market pressures on schooling, especially at second level, but increasingly also at the later stages of primary school which become 'feeder' schools for the most sought after second level places. As, for example, Dunne has claimed, one can argue that the issue of religious ethos is not the most significant factor to take account of as we look towards the future of Irish schools: 'if we read the signs of the times, the most important lines to be got clear may not, after all, be between different religious denominations' (Dunne

1991, 45). For Dunne, it is rather the growing instrumentalism or technicism which constitutes the greater threat to the integrity of teaching and education. Certainly, there is truth in this, but the approach of this essay has been to suggest that in order to properly engage the issue of technicism or instrumentalism, we must first address the issue of ethos, which arguably underlies everything else.

Ethos is of course much more than 'religious' ethos. In many respects, every school is individual. My own dialogue with the teacher-students who come through the denominational system leads me to believe that they are an extraordinary group of young people: uncommonly committed, intelligent and creative. On the ground, their action within the current system is undoubtedly changing the situation for the better at a grass-roots level and leading to genuine engagement with the 'new Ireland'. Moreover, older teachers (although often caricatured as traditionalist) are themselves frequently at odds with the existing structures. This is my precise point – however good the individual teachers may be, the structural constraints of denominational education have a significant impact on the possibilities available for teachers, students and parents with regard to education. In isolating this aspect of ethos, I am not claiming that it defines completely what is possible. But I am claiming that, without significant change at this level, it is hard to uphold the idea that Irish primary education is authentically democratic.

In a recent article on Irish education, Aidan Seery⁹ has taken up the theoretical framework of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek in order to present a powerful conception of ideology, which is beginning again to have an influence on educational discourse. The notion of ideology takes its cue from a specifically Marxist tradition of thought and has become discredited in recent times due to the sense (especially within postmodern discourse¹⁰) that it relies too heavily on an obsolete notion of 'false consciousness'. In the measure to which postmodernist epistemology undermines any notion of objective knowledge (or clear and distinct consciousness), the possibility of defining something as false consciousness becomes ironised. Against this,

however, Žižek wants to claim the ongoing relevance and indispensability of the concept. According to Žižek, we are compelled to accept the unrelenting pertinence of the notion of ideology as 'a generative matrix that regulates the relationship between visible and nonvisible, between imaginable and non-imaginable, as well as the changes in this relationship' (Žižek 1994, 7). Despite the apparent freedom we have as individuals in late capitalist society, Žižek is making the claim that such freedom masks a fundamental enchainment which operates in complex ways, both on our minds and (increasingly and more insidiously) on our bodies. Education is one of the primary processes by which such ideological indoctrination and enslavement are constituted. For Žižek, what is crucial in relation to ideological processes is their ability to dominate and oppress people and not their epistemological content. Consequently, the postmodern discourse has confused what ideology is really concerned with, by focusing exclusively on issues of epistemology. Rather, ideology is primarily a political operation, or more specifically, an operation of power used by some against others, *a relation of oppressor and oppressed*: 'we are within ideological space proper the moment (whether true or false) a content is functional with regard to some relation of social domination ('power', 'exploitation') in an inherently nontransparent way: the very logic of legitimising the relation of domination must remain concealed if it is to be effective' (Žižek 1994, 8).

Žižek returns us to the Hegel-Marx relationship, showing how Hegel had introduced, apropos of religion, three stages of ideology (Žižek 1994, 9ff). In the first instance, there is ideology of the traditional, doctrinal sort, 'ideology as a complex of ideas (theories, convictions, beliefs, argumentative procedures)', a set of ideas represented by some dominant group in a society (Church, party, etc.) which is then inculcated explicitly to the 'people'. Second, we have institutional ideology, 'ideology in its externality, that is the materiality of ideology', as outlined for example by Louis Althusser's conception of 'ISA's' or Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser 1994, 155). Here, the doctrinal content is not stated explicitly but rather is intrinsic to the institutional practices (or what Bourdieu, following Aristotle, calls 'habitus')

(Bourdieu 1994, 135). Finally, we have the most recent and complex of the ideological practices, what Žižek refers to as 'ideology in and for itself', 'the most elusive domain; the 'spontaneous' ideology at work at the heart of social reality itself'. Žižek leaves open the issue of whether this is really ideology at all, citing Marx's own preference for the term 'fetishism' (Žižek 1994, 15) over ideology to represent this aspect of the dynamics of oppressive power. Žižek adds the following explanation of this third phase: 'not ideology qua explicit doctrine nor ideology in its material existence but ideology as the elusive network of implicit, quasi-spontaneous presuppositions and attitudes that form an irreducible moment of the reproduction of non-ideological practices; we live in a society of the spectacle' (Žižek 1994, 12).

Taking each of these kinds of ideology in turn, it is possible to see how they might apply to the context of Irish education. In the first case, the ideology of an explicit content is easily connected, for example, to the traditional role of the Churches in Ireland (most especially the Catholic Church) in their conception of education as denominational and as carrying through the mission and message of the Christian Gospels. More recently, the dominance of this Catholic ideology has come under severe strain in Ireland and, as Seery describes, there now exists a competing set of ideologies vying for educational hegemony - market theory, the poetry of *bildung* and culture, the ubiquitous rhetoric of personal developmental psychology, while the prose of Christian formation remains also in the ideological mix (Seery 2008, 134ff).

The second main type of ideology Žižek describes is also strongly present within education – the ideology as represented through institutional practices. Again, Catholic education in Ireland is a good example of this. Even though Catholic explicit ideology is on the wane, the institutional power of the Church retains a near-stranglehold on Irish primary education, the statistics on which have previously been stated. This signifies perfectly Žižek's second level of ideology. Although explicit doctrinal ideology may be weak, the ideology is maintained through the *habitus* of institutional processes. Another example of this in Ireland is the practice of having one's children baptised or getting married in a Church, despite no longer being a regular practicing (or

even believing) churchgoer. This is ideology as institutionally maintained, in effect a process of socialisation which continues to exert its power despite many people actually disagreeing with the explicit ideological content, which props up such institutional power.

Finally, there is the third kind of ideology which Žižek describes, ideology as the 'elusive network of implicit, quasi-spontaneous presuppositions and attitudes'. On Žižek's terms, this is a specifically late-capitalist version of ideology. In our current society, we are presented with the vision of having great individual freedom or what liberals like to call 'equality of opportunity'. Žižek's claim here is that this version of events, this capitalist philosophy, operates as an ideology or presupposition in contemporary society. Whatever our political persuasion, we tend to think of ourselves as freer or less dominated than previous generations. However, on Žižek's terms, this masks a more sinister reality. Capitalist society maintains a hegemony on our freedom and autonomy – what we consider our independence is simply a myth, a ruse. However, this ideological machine is not so easy to locate in its machinations. For Žižek, it doesn't operate at a conscious level but rather at an unconscious stratum. As Seery notes, 'the part of the body under siege by modern ideologies is no longer the rational consciousness of the Cartesian subject but the Freudian/Lacanian unconscious' (Seery 2008, 142).

In educational terms, we might here take the example of the Revised Irish Primary School Curriculum of 1999. This presented itself as going beyond the 'ideology' of the traditional school, fostering autonomy and individuality in children. Žižek's claim is that this discourse of capitalist or liberal autonomy, of self-esteem and individuality of the learner, often masks an undercurrent of domination and reification. The difficulty here is that the explicit rhetoric of this discourse refutes the notion of objectification. However, the message here is at odds with the reality of the practice. On Žižek's terms, this is ideology at work once more, but in a more subtle and complex way than before. Certainly, the underlying or implicit tensions outlined in the introduction with regard to the Revised Curriculum might be

seen here as coming under the category of Žižek's third phase of ideology. For example, there are clear and unresolved tensions between a 'constructivist' epistemology in some areas and a more 'realist' epistemology in others. With emphasis on active and group learning and individuality of the child, one nonetheless wonders at the effects on the 'individuality' of the teacher. What time does the teacher have to foster their own individuality in the measure to which they are completely overloaded by the facilitation of the myriad individualities in their classroom? The surface-level diplomacy, on closer inspection, reveals a more complex and tortured picture. Are Irish teachers in 2009 really any more empowered than their predecessors in 1970's or even 1950's Ireland? Could it even be conceivable that they are less free as teachers, less autonomous (despite all appearances to the contrary)? And what of today's students? Are they more or less enabled to be creative and reflective? The rhetoric of the curriculum would certainly suggest they are more enabled, but the WSE and the ubiquitous criterion of performativity or competence might suggest otherwise.

Of course, it is precisely within this wider context of an increasingly instrumentalised education sector that the debate on ethos and intercultural education is taking place. To this extent, while I have already described the more traditional (monocultural) approach to education in Ireland as falling under Žižek's first two categories of ideology, it is arguable that the very attempt to reform the Irish system of education and make it more authentically intercultural might also be interpreted as ideological. Aside from the issue of epistemological content in the intercultural programme – the attempt, for example, to move beyond monocultural epistemology – there is also the issue of the power relationships in this discourse. As Žižek warns, ideology is less about epistemology and more about power (Žižek 1994, 27ff). The questions we need to keep in mind, then, are questions such as who has the power to implement the intercultural programmes, or who decides what constitutes authentic interculturalism? Is it the teachers, the students, the policy makers, the majority communities or minority communities? And consequently one can ask: in what measure is ideological education (in the

pejorative sense already described) avoidable or contestable?¹¹ In other words, despite all the good intentions, is there not a danger that the educational and cultural-political problems here are being reinforced rather than overcome? Fiachra Long, in a recent essay, has drawn attention to this issue and related it to what he sees as a malaise within Irish educational and philosophical discourse, introducing the concept of a culture of 'noise':

in a noisy environment, people can speak without listening and engage in discourse without changing; there is an obscenity of sound with no one to listen; there is an acceptance of talk about aims but no aspiration to unify these aims or establish their coherency. This lack of an underlying engagement in discursive practices means that a general silence greets fundamental differences in culture and outlook and the field is ripe for advocacy claims (Long 2008, 32).

This would be the negative side of Taylor's 'politics of recognition'.¹² An interculturalism which reverts to the worst aspects of anti-racist education (in its dogmatism) and multi-cultural education (in its vagueness). It is to be hoped, however, that there are more positive possibilities accruing to the interculturalist paradigm, which can impact significantly on an Irish educational system, undeniably in need of radical transformation. As Žižek has demonstrated so powerfully and inspirationally, we must maintain today the tension that keeps the critique of ideology alive, despite the lines which separate 'reality' from 'ideology' becoming increasingly blurred.

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¹ Illich's extraordinary and prophetic call for a 'deschooling of society' raises the issue of whether any solution is to be found for the problems discussed herein within an institutionalised setting, for example in universities or schools. On this, cf. Ivan Illich *Deschooling Society* (New York, Marion Boyars, 1971). Jean-François Lyotard's work on the politics of the university asks a similarly radical question: 'cultural desire is the desire to put an end to the exile of meaning as external to activities. It is at the same time the desire to put an end to the exile of activities as estranged from their sense. Its instrument cannot be the university, which dwells in this very exile, and is the product of it' (Jean-François Lyotard, 'Dead Letter', p. 39 in *Political Writings* translated by Bill Readings and K.P. Geiman [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993]). For a more detailed elaboration of Lyotard's educational philosophy see my 'Re-Politicising Education – Interpreting Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* in a Contemporary Context' in *Yearbook of the Irish Philosophical Society* 2008, edited by Catherine Kavanagh (forthcoming).

² This is a constitutional issue. In the measure to which the Irish constitution necessitates a religious dimension to be included in educational formation, non-denominational schools are unconstitutional.

³ For an earlier approach to this problem of ethos and education in Ireland, see my 'A Perspective on Ethos and Education in an Irish Educational Context', in *Religion, Education and the Arts journal*, Philosophy of Education special issue, ed. Ian Leask (Dublin, 2005).

⁴ Some of the references here take their cue from Williams, 'Foreword'. However, the respective interpretations of the references differ considerably.

⁵ However, one should make a distinction here between the overarching policy of a conservative Church and an often more radicalised and empowering clergy on the ground. Here, it is only right to acknowledge the immensely positive contribution which many priests and nuns made to the life of schools and education, and indeed beyond, at third-level also. To give just one instance from my own experience, the example of the late Fr Fergal O'Connor (lecturer in political philosophy and political activist) stands as having made an extraordinary contribution to the culture and self-understanding of Ireland. On a personal level, he was the teacher most responsible for cultivating in so many of my generation a love of philosophy and education. His daemonic character is brilliantly captured in (another friend and student) Joe Dunne's critical eulogy to Fergal, 'Figures of the Teacher: Fergal O'Connor and Socrates' in *Questioning Ireland: Debates in Political Philosophy and Public Policy*, ed. Joseph Dunne, Attracta Ingram and Frank Litton (Dublin, IPA, 2000).

⁶ On this point, cf. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (Penguin, London, 1986). For an analysis of Fanon's relevance for intercultural problematics, see my 'Two Examples of Intercultural Philosophy – On Henri Lefebvre and Frantz Fanon' in *Interculturalism: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives*, ed. Jones Irwin and Diane Powell (London, Rodopi, forthcoming 2009).

⁷ An interesting example of this latter is Dermot Lane's essay 'The Expanding Horizons of Catholic Education' in Padraig Hogan and Kevin Williams, *The Future of Religion in Irish Education*. Lane begins by acknowledging the faults or mistakes of what he refers to as "post-Reformation" Catholicism in Ireland, which continued to exist up until "the mid-1960s" (p. 130). Since this time, he sees the Church as genuinely attempting to expand its horizons towards ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue, as well as some pivotal aspects of modernity (pp. 130ff), and as attempting to integrate such changes into its approach to education in Ireland.

⁸ The most obvious example of its impact on Irish education is the *NCCA Guidelines to Intercultural Education* (Dublin, NCCA, 2006). This is a substantive document, containing extended theoretical discussion, as well as practical lesson plans for teachers. I would argue, however, that while it is a welcome intervention, it suffers from two main problems. First, its status as a 'guidelines' document means it can be conveniently ignored, if so desired. The current overload within the school schedule only reinforces this problem. Second, its theoretical approach of a kind of 'consensus politics' ends up eliding the issues of real 'intercultural' conflict. The positive challenge ahead is to develop these ideas at a more integrated curricular level, at both primary and second level. In my view, this should involve the introduction of new, relevant subject areas at second level especially; such as Philosophy, Sociology and Psychology.

⁹ Aidan Seery 'Slavoj Žižek's dialectics of ideology and the discourses of Irish education' in *Irish Educational Studies: Journal of the Educational Studies Association of Ireland*, Volume 27, Number 2, June 2008.

¹⁰ In recent years, the discipline of the philosophy of education (so long the bastion of the British analytic tradition) has come face to face with the cutting-edge of French and German continentalist postmodern theory. The signal importance of the groundbreaking work of such philosophers as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault for schooling and the relationship between education and culture has at long last become apparent

¹¹ Žižek's own approach is of course also contestable, as is my attempt to apply it in a specific Irish context of education. But as Seery notes, and I would concur, Žižek's analysis does seem to offer a 'challenging framework for the critique of educational discourses that seems deserving of a wider reception in educational theory'.

¹² Another Irish educational theorist, Denis O'Sullivan, makes a related point when he says that 'educational discourse within the public sphere continues to betray an inadequacy of conceptualisation and language to engage with the fundamental shifts in meaning and practice diagnosed'. O'Sullivan's *Cultural Politics and Irish Education since the 1950s: Policy, Paradigms and Power* (Dublin, IPA, 2005) constitutes a mammoth contribution to this ongoing debate.