

Bracken Educate Together National School

A Case Study

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to
change the world.”

-Nelson Mandela



Educate
Together

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Abstract

Ireland has recently experienced a period of exceptional growth resulting from a combination of consistently high birth rates and unprecedented levels of immigration. This has imposed huge challenges on several existing aspects of Ireland's infrastructure, especially on the education system. Balbriggan, an area 32 kilometres north of Dublin city centre, experienced population growth of over 50% between 2002 and 2006; many of the subsequent challenges faced by the community established Balbriggan as a microcosm for national issues surrounding increased immigration. With abundant opportunities for affordable housing and easy access to Dublin city centre, Balbriggan became a very attractive town for immigrant families new to Ireland. As housing developments continued to grow in number, development of other infrastructure lagged behind. In 2007, a shortage of spaces in already-existing primary school facilities brought the issue to international attention when immigrant families were unable to obtain primary school placements for their children. At the request of the Department of Education and Science, Educate Together collaborated with local parents to establish an emergency primary school. Bracken Educate Together National School (originally scheduled to open in 2008) opened one year ahead of schedule in September 2007 to accommodate children who lacked a school place in the Balbriggan area.

The overwhelmingly non-white ethnic demographic of the school caught national and international attention and subsequently brought the very structure of the Irish education system under scrutiny for perceived inherent discrimination. By analysing all factors, reactions, and greater implications associated with the controversial opening of Bracken Educate Together National School, one can begin to understand some of the overarching issues plaguing Irish contemporary public schooling and gain insight into what steps should be taken to prevent future emergency situations.

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Relevant Acronyms

The following acronyms are used throughout this report as commonly accepted substitutions for several phrases, names, and titles. At their first appearance, all phrases are presented in full; thereafter, the acronym is used.

ETNS: Educate Together National School

DES: Department of Education and Science

INTO: Irish National Teacher's Organisation

VEC: Vocational Education Committee

NEWB: National Education Welfare Board

RTE: Raidió Teilifís Éireann (an Irish National Public Service Broadcaster)

GIS: Geographic Information System

NCCA: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Purpose and Methodology

Educate Together, founded in 1978, acts as the patron body for a growing number of schools in Ireland. As a national organisation, Educate Together provides resources, support, and guidance for local start-up parental groups seeking to open an Educate Together school in their area. Educate Together schools are multi-denominational environments where robust ethical curricula teach inclusiveness and promote understanding of many different cultures and beliefs. Educate Together focuses on providing an alternative option for parents who do not wish to send their children to a denominational school. Today, Educate Together acts as the patron of 65 primary schools and three secondary schools, and its ever-expanding network continues to reshape the Irish education landscape.¹

The authors of this report, Samuel H. Marks and Gayle C. Powell, were commissioned as independent research interns at the Educate Together National Office from June to August 2013. Under the guidance of Emer Nowlan, Head of Education and Network Development, and Paul Rowe, CEO, they drafted fundamental questions crucial to the understanding of the Bracken Educate Together National School (ETNS) opening and identified key interview subjects. In total, seventeen subjects were interviewed. In most cases, both researchers attended the interviews, but at least one researcher was present at each interview. All interviews were carefully analysed and transcribed. Transcripts can be made available from the authors upon request (contingent on interviewee consent). Please note that quotes from the interviews are frequently referred to throughout the body of this report. A complete list of interview subjects can be found in Appendix I.

The purpose of this report is to document factors that led to both the shortage of school places in the Balbriggan area and the subsequent decision to open Bracken ETNS. The researchers also seek to advise steps to be taken to prevent a recurrence of an emergency school situation in the future and place the situation in Balbriggan within the broader context of Ireland's changing landscape.

Different European Approaches to Immigration and Education

Many European nations have experienced a relatively recent increase in ethnic and cultural diversity through a rise in immigration. Once predominantly homogeneous countries, several now face challenges presented by a rapidly changing population demographic. While specific migration issues differ for each European country, Greece, Spain, and the Netherlands share integration challenges comparable to those experienced by Ireland. Each country has employed varied methods to adjust their education systems to better address the needs of a more diversified population. A brief comparative overview of the immigration situations and educational approaches adopted by each allows for a more meaningful evaluation of Ireland's attempts to meet the challenges associated with increasing diversity in its education system.

Greece

Greece has shifted from a country with net emigration to a population comprised of 10% migrants. The Greek education system is highly centralised, with the Minister of Education responsible for curriculum development, school structure, material distribution, and teacher employment. In the late 1990s, changing population demographics encouraged the national government to implement sweeping education reforms. The resulting legislative framework guarantees schooling to all children aged six to fifteen (regardless of their residence status).²

Most immigrant populations have concentrated in metropolitan areas. In 1996, Greece established intercultural schools for the education of pupils with special social or cultural needs. Today, 26 such schools exist. These schools operate with a great deal of autonomy, providing special courses on language and the students' respective countries of origin. However, these schools make up less than 1% of all schools in Greece, making access for most immigrant students extremely limited. As a result, most migrant pupils attend mainstream schools where no formal infrastructure to provide an intercultural education has been implemented. Consequently, education has become largely focused on de-facto separation (rather than integration), with intercultural dimensions of education restricted to a few schools (and largely ignored by most). Moreover, the Greek Constitution explicitly states that, "The prevailing religion in Greece is that of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ,"³ and the standardised curriculum of the country requires a set amount of religious education per week.⁴ Therefore, religious education almost always focuses on Orthodox Christianity. Students not identifying with this faith group may be exempted from religion classes; however, without a national framework for classes on other religions or topics, this option is rarely taken advantage of. Dialogue surrounding the education system thus remains artificially inclusive and supportive of diversity while functional reality is predicated largely on an understanding of and appreciation for a homogenous Greek society and culture.

Spain

Spain employs a particularly decentralised system where autonomous communities control the majority of the curriculum.⁵ Despite recent influxes of migrants, no specific national legislation has been created to help immigrant students adjust, highlighting a lack of political commitment to the issue. The dearth of national guidance has led each individual community to react differently to the changing demographic of the country. Many communities have attempted to provide for foreign students through language support classes and information services for

parents. Unfortunately, without sufficient funding and teacher training, such initiatives inevitably collapse.

Predictably, migrant populations tend to settle and concentrate in metropolitan areas. Most notably, many settle in Madrid, where the foreign population makes up 17% of the total populous (the majority having emigrated from non-EU countries).⁶ In some Madrid schools, foreign students exceed 70% of the student body.⁷ Nevertheless, no national policy currently exists to educate and prepare mainstream teachers for increased diversity in their classrooms. In response, Madrid has implemented the *Atención a la Diversidad* plan, which removes foreign students from mainstream classrooms and places them into small groups with a specially trained teacher.⁸ The legislation of this plan provides for two programs specifically designed to assist newly arriving students. *Aulas de Enlace*, one feature of the plan, addresses educational and linguistic needs of immigrant students who do not speak Spanish and helps students adapt to school norms. *Educacion Compensatoria* is a similar program focused on socially disadvantaged students.⁹ While such initiatives experience limited to moderate success, the lack of a unifying national policy makes sustainable progress difficult to achieve.¹⁰

The Netherlands

High levels of migration into The Netherlands date back to the governmental relaxation of immigration laws in the 1970s.¹⁰ At the time, many Dutch nationals assumed the influx of newcomers would be short-lived. Temporary policy focused on every foreign child's right to an education in the language and country of his or her origin. As the number of immigrants continued to rise and their permanency grew more evident, preserving and educating each migrant's own language and culture became impossible. As a result, negative sentiment towards migrant identities became more evident. Lawmakers adopted a radically different mentality whereby culture is something to be celebrated in private (but is viewed as an obstacle to successful integration in public). This change in policy was due in large part to an accumulated resentment towards migrant populations, further exacerbated by the assassination of Theo van Gogh, a high profile filmmaker, by Islamic extremists in 2004.¹¹ The combination of these two factors led many to believe that the Danish government's cultural pluralism approach had failed.

Current national integration policy now focuses on proportional education participation. Under this philosophy, schools with a disproportionately large number of ethnic minority students are rewarded with larger facilities.¹² Accordingly, administrators can reduce class sizes, allowing for greater individual attention and an increased ability to teach Dutch as a second language. However, policy procedure remains broad with little specificity, limiting the ability to gauge its ultimate success on a national scale.

Ireland

Ireland's reaction to the influx of immigrants is especially complex due to the historical connection between the Catholic Church and the public schooling system.¹³ In Ireland, all primary and secondary schools are privately operated (but publicly funded) by a patron body responsible for nominating a Board of Management. Through this mechanism, the patron can select the ethical curriculum employed by the school, usually one fundamentally based in a particular religious belief. Historically, Ireland has been a homogenous country of net emigration, with very little immigration. Until the twenty-first century, the population of Ireland steadily

declined and the overwhelming majority of the country followed the Catholic faith. As a result, over 91% of primary schools in Ireland fall under the patronage of the Catholic Church and thus legally enact policies and ethos education favouring Catholic students.¹⁴ While parents have the theoretical constitutional right to choose any school they wish, in many areas the Catholic Church controls the only viable options. Inevitably, the denominational nature of Irish education remains paramount and many non-Catholic children have no other option but to attend a Catholic primary school.

To this day, the Rules for National Schools state, “a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school.”¹⁵ Specified religious education has been removed from the prescribed primary curriculum but remains compulsory for all schools. Today, the patron takes exclusive responsibility for developing and implementing the content of a religious curriculum at each respective school. In recent years, educational infrastructure has become more accommodating of cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity.* Ruairí Quinn, current Minister for Education and Skills, has also acknowledged that greater diversity of primary schooling is necessary and thus established a Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector to achieve this goal in 2011.¹⁷ While Ireland (like many of its European counterparts) has attempted to alter the education system to reflect changing demographics, many obstacles still prevent equality in education for all students. A 2011 report on the criteria and procedures for opening new primary schools by the Commission on School Accommodation found that:

Irish schools have traditionally been characterised by homogeneity of student intake. There is a long tradition of segregation of students by belief, by different abilities, by racial affiliation as well as by class and gender. Maintenance of separate educational (and subsequently social) worlds is an often-unquestioned institutionalised practice.¹⁶

To cope with changing demographics, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) prepared a set of guidelines on ‘Intercultural Education in the Primary School’ in 2005. The guidelines, which were widely distributed to every primary school teacher in the country, defined Intercultural Education as:

1. It is education, which respects, celebrates and recognises the normality of diversity in all areas of human life. It sensitises the learner to the idea that humans have naturally developed a range of different ways of life, customs and worldviews, and that this breadth of human life enriches all of us.
2. It is education, which promotes equality and human rights, challenges unfair discrimination, and promotes the values upon which equality is built.¹⁷

*The organisation Educate Together has been a primary school patron since 1978 and has since created 65 primary schools with the aim of creating an educational experience that is multi-denominational and embraces diversity of all types. Educate Together schools employ a curriculum known as the Learn Together curriculum, which promotes a philosophy of education in which no child is considered an outsider and ethics are taught as a means to increase children's' understanding of the necessity for equality. The demand for this type of school is evident and many new schools continue open under the patronage of this organisation each year as the demographic of Ireland becomes increasingly diversified. (Source: Educate Together. <<http://www.educatetogether.ie/>>.)

The council's publication also provides suggestions as to how the primary curriculum can be developed to better reflect diversity and become more accessible to children from ethnic minority groups. In 2005, the NCCA also published 'English as an additional language in Irish primary schools, Guidelines for teachers' to assist mainstream classroom teachers in attending to the growing number of children whose first language is not the language of instruction.¹⁸ However, the government has not prioritised the implementation of these programs (as evidenced by the lack of general measures Ireland has taken in all schools to provide for changing population demographics). Language support has been introduced in schools where the proportion of ethnic minority pupils is especially high, but few additional measures have been put into place.¹⁹

Factors Contributing to Ireland's Growth

Booming International Economy and the Celtic Tiger

Global economic growth associated with the aftermath of the dot-com bubble and the resulting significant decreases in globalisation costs ushered in an era of increased job availability and international prosperity in the early twenty-first century. One of the largest beneficiaries of this era of expansion was Ireland, which experienced rapid economic development and an expanded employment sector.²⁰ This period is colloquially referred to as the "Celtic Tiger." Ireland's transition into the European Monetary Union in the 1990s combined with an investment in education resulted in large numbers of highly skilled Irish graduates who were able to benefit from the growth of Ireland's most rapidly developing sectors such as information technology and pharmaceuticals. Between 1996 and 2001, employment increased by almost 30%. This led to an emergence of labour shortages and thus attracted many immigrants.²¹

Availability of Affordable Housing

As rising numbers of immigrants settled in Ireland, the housing market responded accordingly. The subsequent construction of new housing developments spiralled out of control. The sudden surplus of affordable housing made immigration to Ireland an even more attractive opportunity and discouraged Irish nationals from leaving for other parts of Europe. In addition, Ireland's birth rate became and remains one of the highest among all the European nations.²² These factors combined to result in Ireland's rapid net population growth. Between 2002 and 2006, growth hovered around 2% per year, the highest recorded rate in Irish history.²³ A graph of Ireland's births per year from 1980 to 2009 can be found in Appendix II.

Balbriggan, a region 32 kilometres north of Dublin city centre, experienced a particularly large influx of immigration and an alarming level of growth. In one four-year period, Balbriggan's population increased by over 51%: from 10,294 residents in 2002 to 15,559 in 2006.²⁴ Several factors contributed to this growth, including the town's easy accessibility to and from downtown Dublin and the affordability of housing in the town. Balbriggan featured more economic and plentiful accommodation than comparable neighbouring cities of Swords and Blanchardstown.²⁵ In addition, town planners installed a disproportional amount of housing options to let, allowing for greater flexibility among migrant populations.* As Jack Smith**, Principal Officer for The Planning and Building Unit of the Department of Education and Science*** (DES) explained:

Subsequent analysis of the 2006 census data for Balbriggan showed that there [were] a large number of unoccupied, completed but unoccupied, dwellings in Balbriggan which would not have been a factor elsewhere to such a scale. The fact that those were available facilitated the large influx of families into the area...

*Nationally, almost 80% of households headed by non-Irish nationals were rented accommodations, with 38% of all dwellings they resided in being built in the previous five years (2000-2006). In addition, 55% of migrants occupied housing built after 1996, compared with just 25% of Irish nationals. (Source: Central Statistics Office Ireland. Ireland Census. N.p., 2006. Web.)

**Pseudonym (at subject's request)

***The Department of Education and Science was renamed to the Department of Education and Skills in 2010. (Source: "Department of Education and Skills." N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.education.ie/en/>>.)

so when the influx came, rentals were actually cheaper there because of the availability. A lot of people moved from Dublin 15 to that area.²⁶

Impacts of a Young Demographic

In addition to the sheer number of migrants coming to Ireland, an overwhelming majority of the migrant population in Balbriggan (and Ireland as a whole) was between the ages of 25 and 35.²⁷ Correspondingly, areas experiencing large migrant influx augmented the local birth rate and the number of children of primary school age, thereby placing increased strain on the capacity of local primary schools. The birth rate in Ireland increased by 9% in 2007 as compared to the previous year.²⁸ Emma O’Kelly, Educational Correspondent at Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTE), who closely documented migrant population growth and its effect on the school system at the time, noted:

Immigrants are typically in their early twenties and typically settle down and have babies. There was absolutely no forethought as to what that would mean for the education system and because of the [economic] boom, Irish people in their twenties weren't emigrating in such high numbers. Irish people in their mid twenties normally would have left the country, but they were staying put and having babies, so the demographic increase had been accounted for by hospitals, but there was absolutely no provision for building schools for them.²⁹

Proximity to The Mosney Centre

Balbriggan also attracted many newcomers due to its proximity to The Mosney Centre: one of the largest providers of accommodation and other services for refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland.³⁰ Marian Griffin, current Principal of Bracken ETNS, explained that many families receiving support from this centre already sent their children to Balbriggan area schools. Therefore, Balbriggan was a natural choice for their permanent settlement. Once many immigrants had arrived in Balbriggan the town became an even more appealing location for new immigrants:

There is [The] Mosney Centre between here and Drogheda about six or seven miles out the road. So when they were there, obviously, [the immigrants] got out once a week on the bus and they came to Balbriggan and got to know the area, so when they moved out from there they either settled in Drogheda up the road, or they settled in Balbriggan; and lots settled in Balbriggan. And equally, their children had been bussed from the Mosney out to the national schools in Balbriggan, so therefore, when they got to move out here their children were already going to the town schools, and then others and friends all came as well... and [thus] the population [of Balbriggan] began to grow.³¹

Due to the rapid pace and magnitude of growth, Irish city planners faced unprecedented challenges associated with expanding infrastructure at a sufficient rate. At the same time, the diversity of the immigrant population began to reshape the societal demographics of Ireland, rendering traditional methods of surveying and projecting the population’s needs ineffective. Therefore, several growth-heavy regions encountered difficulty in preparing for and accommodating the growing population, leading to stresses on several infrastructure systems.

Challenges Associated with Balbriggan's Growth

Planning for Growth

The growing population placed particular strain on the education system. In 2006, the DES lacked the capabilities to track population growth and movement trends. Instead, the Forward Planning Section* relied heavily on the input and opinion of existing schools in the area and their respective patron bodies to signal for expansion needs. Communicating the need for additional school places occurred at the discretion of existing schools and patrons. The DES also occasionally relied on parental requests for schools. In extreme situations, the DES used information provided through the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB), a statutory board established under the Education (Welfare) Act of 2000 that ensures every child's legal right to education.³² When residents approached and informed the NEWB of difficulty in finding school places, the NEWB could alert the DES.

On April 24th, 2007, the DES announced patronage for thirteen new primary schools to be opened in September 2007.³³ However, as it became apparent the thirteen new schools would struggle to accommodate the number of children needing a place, the DES explored alternative options. These options included bussing children to schools with availability in neighbouring areas. Dissatisfied, the DES was forced to open additional provisional schools on an emergency timetable in regions where children were unable to find school places for the coming school year. On May 29th, 2007, two more schools were added (citing previously underestimated population growth), bringing the total number of schools set to open in September of 2007 to fifteen. These two other schools, recognised outside normal procedures, were Esker ETNS in Adamstown, Lucan and Scoil Choilm in the Diswellstown area of Dublin 15.³⁴ At that time, the DES did not communicate the need for an additional school in Balbriggan.

Patronage for Scoil Choilm in Dublin 15 was awarded to the Archbishop of Dublin on a temporary emergency basis. Due to the diverse nature of the immigrant population, many students in Scoil Choilm's first class were neither Catholic nor native Irish, leading to a lukewarm reaction from the Church to the DES's request. The Archbishop of Dublin reluctantly complied to become patron, saying he, "...[was] reluctant to open another Catholic school in the area because [he believed] the existing schools [were] sufficient to cater for the Catholic population."³⁵ Educate Together was subsequently selected as the patron to open Esker ETNS. Due to the diversity of the student body, Educate Together was able to apply its multi-denominational education strategy effectively. Despite their emergency status, both schools opened in sufficient time to become operational for the start of school in the fall. As a result, neither school received significant media attention.³⁶ The success of Esker ETNS established Educate Together as a viable option to turn to in emergency situations and allowed the organisation to solidify its position as a patron able to move quickly and adapt to less than ideal circumstances.

*The Forward Planning Section is a division of the DES responsible for the planning of new schools. (Source: "Department of Education and Skills." N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.education.ie/en/>>.)

The degree to which DES forward planners prepared to create more school places in areas of rapid development is a subject of much debate. Smith and Sarah Wilson*, Assistant Principal for the Planning and Building Unit, maintained that:

...we had been very closely monitoring all enrolments across Dublin 15 and Balbriggan at that time. This move came in Balbriggan, and we'd been talking closely to the schools in the area, the existing schools in the area, during 2007 and 2006. As late as June 2007 the schools told us they could cope with the numbers; we suspected that they couldn't and we were making plans for the new school...³⁷

However, principals in the area's existing schools recall an unresponsive DES failing to attend to many warnings. Some claim that appeals to the DES over concerns of their oversubscribed schools had begun years prior. Fintan McCutcheon, principal of Balbriggan ETNS, recalled his warnings to the DES:

...all the time we were reporting to the Department of Education, saying to them there [weren't] enough school places in the Balbriggan area. And I don't know whether they were believing us because they kept asking us for evidence of this, and I would have people's enrolment forms filled in yesterday, things like that. A pile of enrolment forms people had filled in. But we weren't getting any response from them at all...³⁸

Similarly, Griffin, the principal of St. Oliver's N.S in Balrothery, Balbriggan in 2006, noted she, "...knew there was a crisis coming down the tracks from [her] other school," and claimed she was "saying to the Department of Education and even rang them a few times to say, 'look, all of these people are coming in.'"³⁹

Paul Rowe, Educate Together CEO, agreed that warnings came far earlier than the DES officials claimed, as he pointed out:

We were very aware of the emerging crisis of school accommodation, which we, of all organisations, were probably more aware of than anyone else. We were warning the Department for years about this, that this was coming down...⁴⁰

Smith disagreed with Rowe's recollections, asserting that no such warnings were communicated:

That [we were warned] is totally at odds with the actual facts. The opposite is the case. We had constantly monitored the numbers and when we looked at them and said, 'we are going to have a problem here.' I don't recall any talk at that time or previously about a new school in Balbriggan emanating from the schools or from anywhere out there. It was always, 'no we can cope, we can cope, expand the existing [schools], expand the existing [schools].'⁴¹

*Pseudonym (at subject's request)

In addition to adamantly insisting that warnings never came, Smith and Wilson maintain that the DES had been properly planning for new school accommodation by reserving future sites in Balbriggan. Smith stressed the difficulties the DES faced in analysing future required school places:

You couldn't [establish a new school] for certain until the numbers actually stacked up. Just to give you an example, the existing schools out there had pre-enrolment lists. On all of those, a lot of pupils were appearing twice and three times across the different lists. So you had a number like 300, 300 kids who want a place, which of course would set a huge alarm off, but when you weed out the duplicates you would have that number back to say, 100, so then you say, 'Okay 100, what ages are they? Are they all junior infants, or what ages are they in the spectrum of primary school children?' And then you say 'okay if they are up in age maybe other schools would be able to take them,' and then the 100 goes back down to maybe 60 or 70 or whatever it would be and then 'is that the definite number?' The difficulty we had in solidifying that number is that people were moving all the time, so the picture kept changing from week to week and we were constantly out to the existing schools. And a figure they may have given us last week (and bearing in mind that they were all assuring us up until June of that year that they could cope)... I think it was way earlier in March or April that we were certain that they couldn't cope, because even no matter what you strip out of the 300, you are going to be left with a core group of 60 or 70 pupils who will not have a school place so we started planning at that stage for a new school. We couldn't call it officially until June, when we finally figured out that numbers stopped changing, so we had made our sort of internal, contingency plans at that stage and we had our Ministerial approval for the school even though we hadn't issued a roll number. We had been looking at accommodation and been talking to the existing schools about expanding, and existing schools said, 'Oh we can cope without expansion' and then the situation changes to, 'well if you give us extra rooms we can cope.' So all of the expansion plans (first of all being their ability to cope) disappeared, then their ability to cope if they got additional accommodation, that disappeared. So we were definitely back to where we thought originally we would be heading, which was a new school.⁴²

The DES's understanding of the events leading up to Bracken very much contradicts other accounts. Overwhelmingly, those consulted without an association to the DES identify the root of Balbriggan's problem as a lack of planning by the government. McCutcheon stated, "The Department of Education and Science in Ireland is very unresponsive to the needs of particular localities."⁴³ Griffin concurred with him, commenting that, "They didn't do any planning. It was just a knee-jerk reaction..."⁴⁴ John Carr, General Secretary of the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), also agreed that, "What [was] happening in north Dublin [was] very likely to happen throughout the country unless proper planning [was] put in place."⁴⁵ He stated that he met with principals in the greater Balbriggan area all of whom, "...were overwhelmed and furious after being left to deal with parents who could not secure places" and very angry that, "...they had been left trying to explain a policy failure by the Department of Education."⁴⁶

School Patronage

In 1831, Lord Stanley, Chief Secretary of Ireland, established the Irish Board of National Education under the Irish Education Act with the goal to unite children from many different denominations. Stanley envisioned multi-denominational institutions where religious instruction occurred outside of the classroom.⁴⁷ Initially, officials were instructed to look favourably on patronage applications from mixed religious backgrounds. However, over time Catholic and Protestant Churches challenged this approach. Religious institutions preferred to manage schools under their own respective singular religious order. The influence of the Catholic Church continued to expand into all realms of Irish life (including the education system), as the Church invested enormously in the creation and management of schools. Accordingly, resultant policy changes placed increasing weight on the role of religion in formal education. The Rules for National Schools issued in 1965 noted that: “The State provides for free primary education for children in national schools and gives explicit recognition to the denominational character of these schools.”⁴⁸ The 1971 Primary School Curriculum highlighted the importance of religion in education, stating not only that, “The separation of religion and secular instruction into differentiated subject compartments serves only to throw the whole educational function out of focus,” but also that “Of all the parts of a school curriculum, Religious Instruction is by far the most important.”⁴⁹ Predictably, non-Christian students faced increasing alienation within the state-funded public education system as the Church’s influence grew.

Ireland’s Constitution explicitly provides for the right of parents to choose any primary school for their children. However, many regions only feature one primary school option (in most cases a school under the patronage of the Catholic Church). Today, developing metropolitan areas feature a wider range of options; however, multi-denominational schools only exist in nineteen counties (out of twenty-six), and most of these schools are not accessible to the rural population. Compounding the issue, the Education Act of 1998 requires that all schools develop an enrolment policy for use in scenarios of oversubscription. Schools backed by religious patrons enjoy the constitutional right to grant enrolment priority to children of their particular faith under the Equal Status Act of 2000 which states:

Where the establishment is a school providing primary or post primary education to students and the objective of the school is to provide education in an environment which promotes certain religious values, it admits persons of a particular religious denomination in preference to others or it refuses to admit as a student a person who is not of that denomination and, in the case of the refusal is essential to maintain the ethos of the school.⁵⁰

This policy, colloquially known as the ‘Catholic-first policy’ often makes it nearly impossible for non-Catholic students to secure school places in Catholic schools in rapidly growing areas where oversubscription activates enrolment policies. Inevitably, cities with oversubscription problems observe minority populations experiencing the most difficulty in securing enrolment; ultimately, this can result in unintentional de-facto religious and ethnic segregation.* A table illuminating

*Religion and ethnicity frequently correlate. (Source: Department of Justice, Equality, and Law Reform, comp. United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination: Ireland. Rep. N.p., June 2006. Web.)

the proportion of migrant pupils in all primary schools, a graph illustrating the proportion of migrant pupils in different school types, and a table displaying the belief profiles of students by school sector can be found in Appendices III, IV, and V, respectively. The distribution of ethnic minority pupils across the three types of primary schools shows that multi-denominational institutions are far more likely to have higher proportions of migrant populations than their denominational counterparts.

Despite the changing demographic and an increasing number of non-Catholic students, the Catholic Church still acts as patron for over of 91% of primary schools in Ireland. Conversely, multi-denominational schools account for fewer than 3% of the total. Today, roughly 10% of the school-going population does not have access to a patron body associated primarily with their religion or faith belief.⁵¹ A table of primary schools by patron body can be found in Appendix VI.

The 1999 Primary School Curriculum (which is still in use today) identifies six key areas for development: Language, Mathematics, Social Environmental and Scientific Education, Arts Education, Physical Education, and Social Personal and Health Education. Under the curriculum, the patron takes responsibility for the development and implementation of any religious or ethical curriculum. However, 30 minutes of each school day are reserved for required ethical or religious instruction. Within denominational schools, parents have the right to withdraw children from these periods of religious instruction, but in most circumstances no alternative exists. Children choosing to opt out of the patron's religious curriculum can theoretically be removed from the classroom, but this rarely happens due to a lack of supervision.⁵²

As Ireland modernises its education system, an intercultural approach to teaching has steadily gained popularity. This paradigm shift has reached even the most traditionally conservative organisations. For example, Dr. Diarmuid Martin, current Archbishop of Dublin, has affirmed his belief in the necessity of a reduction of Church influence in the school system. In the wake of Bracken, he stated:

I have clearly told the Department of Education and I've also said it quite publicly, that the Catholic Church, for historical reasons, is over-present in the management of schools for the new demographic of Ireland.⁵³

Despite this philosophical adjustment, progress has been extremely slow in achieving palpable change. Accordingly, most Irish primary schools still emphasise Catholic tradition as a part of their daily curriculum today and thus prefer Catholic students to those practicing other religions.

Oversubscription

Oversubscription rarely occurs in many localities. However, in areas of high demand, such as certain Dublin city suburbs, oversubscription can become a pressing problem. In 2007, Balbriggan faced limited availability of school places and thus many schools employed their enrolment policies. Because the Catholic Church acted as patron for four out of the six primary schools in Balbriggan, Catholic-first policies significantly affected individuals looking to enrol in school. Consequently, newly arriving immigrants seldom could secure a school place. McCutcheon recalled:

The pre-existing schools in the area started to enrol students according to Catholic-first policy because they are Catholic schools. It meant then that if you didn't have a baptismal certificate and there was a shortage of places, you were the person who didn't get a school place.⁵⁴

Gerry McKeivitt, then acting School Manager of Bracken ETNS and current Regional Development Officer for Leinster North, explained the phenomenon:

...you can't discriminate on the grounds of religion in this country... in schools or employment except in the case of these types of schools where you can. And you get derogation from all this legislation.⁵⁵

O'Kelly recounted interviewing immigrant parents and finding a similar story, recalling especially how, "They all said they had approached the local schools and had been told they weren't Catholic. So they hadn't a hope in hell [of getting a school place], basically."⁵⁶

A parent who sent his children to Bracken ETNS on its opening day reflected:

That's my own opinion, yeah [that Catholic-first policy was very much dictating who was getting school places]. We know Ireland is a Catholic country. They have priority over some things, whereby an individual cannot change. It's regarded as policy.⁵⁷

Rowe agreed, cautioning that while Catholic-first enrolment policies may protect the school's ability to administer the Catholic ethos education effectively, they can have other consequences:

What [the Catholic-first policy] means is that in any area where there is a shortage of school places, that the non-Catholic community will be disproportionately represented in the number of children left without places. And in that context, in the modern Ireland, they would be most likely immigrant children...⁵⁸

Anne McDonagh, Director of Education for the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, stressed the Church's commitment to providing inclusive and available educational opportunities. McDonagh disagreed that Catholic-first policies result in segregated schools, stating:

The Church's policy is to give preference to Catholics and to siblings of current students...but Catholic schools in Dublin alone have students from 104 countries and about 30 religious faiths.⁵⁹

Griffin agreed that Catholic schools did (in general) attempt to accommodate migrant pupils, noting:

At the time, St. Teresa's, which is a school near us here, they would have 30% of their school being immigrant[s], because at that time the children that were in the Mosney Centre, they were bussed into Balbriggan and each school took their quota. I was teaching just up here in the village [Balrothery] and we weren't ever asked because we were out of town and they obviously got enough schools in the

town to take the kids, so I suppose there would be a certain [significant] percentage.⁶⁰

Educate Together often expressed that Catholic-first policies did specifically not cause the Balbriggan crisis. On several occasions, Rowe publically stated that the lack of planning by the Department and out-dated legislative planning procedures combined to create the problem. Nevertheless, the Catholic-first policy played an undeniable role in the demographics of those children left without a place. To make Educate Together's opinion clear, Rowe wrote an article in *The Irish Times* published on September 8th, 2007, stating:

Catholic schools and their enrolment policies are not the cause of school place shortages. Neither are they the cause of religious discrimination in the system as a whole. Faith-based schools may lawfully prefer those of their religion when taking enrolments. It is appropriate that parents may choose such a school if this is their preference and be confident that the school accurately delivers their choice. What is unacceptable is that in most areas of the country there is no choice... There is an urgent need for the Minister and her Department to work with organisations like Educate Together to ensure that parents have access to multi-denominational schools if they so wish.⁶¹

The Creation of Bracken ETNS

After the DES's determination of a need for a significant number of places, government officials began contacting patrons regarding possible solutions.

On June 6th, 2007, Rowe received correspondence from Smith referring to the need for additional junior infant places to serve the areas of Balbriggan and Swords in the upcoming September. A DES-sponsored survey of existing schools in both areas had revealed pre-enrolment waiting lists of up to 400 and 252 children in Balbriggan and Swords, respectively.⁶² While acknowledging potential fluidity in pre-enrolment, Smith stressed the requirement for accommodation of four additional junior infant classes in Balbriggan and three in Swords, based on the expected numbers of children lacking a place. Accordingly, Smith requested that the already-existing Balbriggan ETNS and Swords ETNS each take an additional two streams of junior infants to alleviate the need for school places in their respective areas.⁶³ While Smith expressed interest in opening a second Educate Together school in Balbriggan in September of 2008 as a long-term solution, he did not propose it as an immediate course of action for September of 2007. In his correspondence, Smith noted that many patron bodies were being consulted on the matter.

On June 25th, Smith again consulted Educate Together, formally requesting that Balbriggan ETNS "...consider...taking two additional streams of Junior Infants... on an interim basis until September 2008, when hopefully a second Educate Together school would be established..."⁶⁴ In addition, the DES offered assurances that a second Educate Together school could be opened in Balbriggan in 2008 and agreed to cover all costs of temporary accommodation and construction related to the school's opening.

On July 25th, Smith again reached out to Educate Together, this time expressing the need to "plan accommodation for up to four additional junior infant classes in Balbriggan."⁶⁵ Once more, Smith did not mention opening an additional school; the external position of the DES remained that the opening of extra streams was a sufficient solution. However, at this date, the DES first put forth the idea of creating streams in a satellite location. The Sunshine House was proposed as a viable option for this purpose.

After extensive debate, the Board of Management of Balbriggan ETNS decided against accommodating more streams. Shortly thereafter, the Board of Management of Swords ETNS reached the same conclusion. Both schools' refusal cited a lack of ability to provide for such numbers in their already stretched facilities. On behalf of both schools' boards, Rowe wrote to Smith on August 17th, explaining that:

...due to the difficulties they face in securing accommodation for their existing enrolments and the lateness of the Department's approach, both boards felt the request was unreasonable and unfair... both schools are developing schools already taking on additional classrooms and both suffering financially as a result of the delayed payment system in place for national schools.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, Rowe did not preclude Educate Together from participation in the solution. In the same letter, Rowe wrote to Smith reiterating Educate Together's preparedness to act as a patron

for a new school to open in September 2007 on an emergency basis (and suggesting the name Bracken ETNS), contingent on special concessions from the DES. Rowe outlined the conditions under which the organisation would be prepared to act as a patron for the emergency school in the same letter, requesting the following:

- *The DES will make clear to the families concerned that the school will be an Educate Together School and will immediately contact each family to invite them to a meeting at which this option will be explained and their views heard.*
- *That the DES will immediately provide Educate Together with an outline project plan for both the temporary and permanent accommodation of the school.*
- *That the DES will take responsibility to provide any temporary accommodation that is necessary whilst the building programme is being completed.*
- *That such temporary accommodation will be such that the Board of Management of the school will have complete control over access to the space used for the school and be able to fulfil all its obligations to health and safety and the protection of the children.*
- *That the DES will provide all necessary furniture and equipment for the school.*
- *That the DES will provide appropriate funding for the management of the school to immediately kit out the school and employ secretarial and caretaking assistance.*
- *That the DES will show practical flexibility in teacher allocations in order to get the school up and running in the short time that is now available.*
- *That a New School Grant of €25,000 will be paid to Educate Together immediately as a contribution to the patron's costs in supporting this development in this year.*
- *That the DES will fund the employment of a sole manager and other administrative assistance until a Board of Management can be established and school secretary employed.*
- *That this sole manager will be employed by, report to and be accountable to Educate Together in the exercise of his/her duties.⁶⁷*

It is important to note that many patrons were subsequently approached regarding the opening of the emergency school in Balbriggan. However, Educate Together was the only patron body that displayed willingness. Wilson explained:

...all patrons were asked, I mean certainly we asked and consulted about it and Educate Together indicated its willingness and I don't think the others did, and the reason that they didn't was because they had a number of schools in the area of that ethos already; so I think it was as simple as that really...You might have been able to persuade them but the point about that was we had for about two years been talking about them in relation to expansion and the rest of it. It would have been a time thing at that point. Would we have had more time to go back out and start knocking on their doors again? Would it have been worthwhile for us to do that?⁶⁸

Wilson and Smith further explained that if Educate Together had not agreed to be the patron of the school the Minister of Education at the time, Mary Hanafin, would have become the de-facto patron until another permanent patron could be identified.⁶⁹ In this case, the Minister and the DES would have taken on all responsibilities usually delegated to the patron body.

McKevitt noted:

So whether [the Catholic schools] were asked to open the Bracken school I don't know, but certainly if they had been asked, they would not have wanted to open it; purely and simply because the majority of kids going there weren't Catholic. That's why we were asked; there was no other option. Church of Ireland wouldn't have done it (they already had a school in Balbriggan)... there was no other choice. There was a Gaelscoil* (which is the Irish speaking school); they wouldn't have wanted to do it...⁷⁰

On August 27th, Rowe received a phone call from Wilson. After limited discussion, Wilson abruptly asked, 'Will Educate Together become the patron for the new school needed in Balbriggan, yes or no?' Rowe recalled being quite overwhelmed by the question. With most of the national staff on holiday and limited access to his Board of Directors, the responsibility for the decision fell to himself alone. In addition, accepting the offer without the consent of the Board of Directors could pose a significant risk to his status as CEO of Educate Together. Despite the precariousness of the situation, Rowe was forced to make an immediate snap decision. With the requirement of an instant answer looming, Rowe accepted the position on behalf of Educate Together.⁷¹

Shortly thereafter, Educate Together set about compressing the traditionally yearlong process of opening a school into three weeks. Per Educate Together's request, the DES quickly arranged a meeting five days later, where the logistics and ethos of the new Educate Together School were made clear to interested parents. Rowe explained Educate Together's dependence on parental acceptance of and enthusiasm for the organisation's mission:

We insisted that the parents of the children involved must... buy into what we were offering. So the purpose of that meeting was to say 'look, we're glad to do this, but we're not going to open the school if all the parents in the school are desperately looking for a Catholic school.' That just wasn't going to work.⁷²

Immediately, a letter assuring parents that school places would be made available was distributed to those who had previously been unable to secure them.⁷³ The letter advised parents of the upcoming meeting and encouraged their attendance. On September 1st, 2007 the meeting was held in the Bracken Court Hotel in the centre of Balbriggan.

On September 7th, 2007, Wilson gave Rowe final confirmation, acknowledging the DES' formal obligations. Her response detailed the following:

*A Gaelscoil is a provider of primary education in Ireland where the Irish language is the medium of instruction and all other communication. (Source: "FAQs." *Gaelscoileanna – Irish Medium Education*. N.p., n.d. Web.)

- *The meeting was arranged and held on September 1 [of 2007].*
- *Sunshine House accommodation was secured and the Department will pay cost of rental and minor works necessary. The Department prioritised site acquisitions in Balbriggan for permanent accommodation of the school.*
- *The Manager has full control over access to Sunshine House.*
- *All furniture and equipment will be paid for by the Department.*
- *Arrangements made to issue payments of relevant grants to the school as soon as the school's bank arrangements have been finalised.*
- *Teachers may be appointed on a temporary basis.*
- *The Department will provide a grant of €25,000 towards the Patron's costs of starting up of the new school.*
- *The Department has been prepared to make a Sole Manager available to the school. The Department is providing in-house administrative assistance to the school as a once off measure.⁷⁴*

Originally, the DES reported a shortage of 32 places in Balbriggan, and announced the school would be ready to open a school for that number on September 17th.^{*75} However, by mid-September, the school had received over 100 enrolment applications. With just a few days remaining, the DES and Educate Together were forced to postpone the scheduled opening by one week to expand capacity and complete the hiring of the school's staff.⁷⁶

As enrolments continued to increase, application forms for permanent principal and teachers were widely distributed. At this time, McKevitt was appointed to manage the school until a Board of Management could be appointed. Rowe contacted McGovern and asked that she act as principal of the school on a temporary basis until the position could be filled by a permanent candidate. McGovern recollected the hectic nature in which she began her short tenure:

I had a phone call on a Wednesday night before the school opened on a Monday morning from Paul Rowe asking me if I would consider running the school for a little bit while they were recruiting a permanent principal... Of course I couldn't say straight away. I was fairly kind of taken aback by the request. I had to think a lot about it because I had seen lots of media about the school and what was happening...after much reflection and putting my own doubts aside about if it would be the right thing to do, I decided yes.⁷⁷

Rowe explained:

It was a critical thing, getting [McGovern] to agree. That was the big... I can remember being really excited. That was the big asset... once we had Frieda [McGovern] on board I was confident that all of the educational stuff would be done to a very, very high standard.⁷⁸

*September 17th was already two weeks late as most schools in Ireland begin during the last week of August or the first week of September. (Source: "Department of Education and Skills." N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.education.ie/en/>>.)

Beginning the next day, McGovern worked with McKeivitt to hire teachers. Interviews were conducted up until Sunday night (September 23rd) with teachers expected to start Monday. Hiring teachers on such short-term notice proved to be an immense challenge. Griffin was appointed permanent principal on September 22nd.⁷⁹ Simultaneously, classrooms were equipped with desks and whiteboards, while others in the Educate Together community donated materials and helped to set up.

On Monday, September 24th, Bracken ETNS opened with 78 pupils. The school consisted of two junior infant classes (with a total of 43 pupils) and 23 children in a combined senior infants/first class. A final classroom was a combination of seventeen children from ages seven to twelve.

Challenges Associated with the Opening of Bracken ETNS

Bracken ETNS faced many challenges within its first year of operation:

Hiring on Short Notice

All of those involved attested to the unconventional hiring process that administrators were forced to adopt in the process of bringing Bracken ETNS into operation. McKeivitt and McGovern interviewed candidates just days (and in some cases merely hours) before they were expected to start their positions. There was a high degree of uncertainty surrounding the permanency of the positions; Jillian Arcaya, Secretary of Bracken ETNS and the first employee of the school to be hired, recalled:

...even Gerry [McKeivitt] said when he hired me the first day, he said 'this school might not start, it might not go ahead. I can only promise you work till the end of September' because we didn't know if it was going to open or not. It was still so up in the air...⁸⁰

Due to the last minute application process and the suboptimal teaching environment, the school struggled to recruit teachers at a high level. As a result, Bracken ETNS opened with a very young and inexperienced staff. McKeivitt remembered:

School was opening on Monday, and we were still interviewing people for jobs on Sunday night. So we hadn't even got the first staff sorted out. We had people driving- we had this girl...she came over, drove off from London, drove up to Balbriggan, interviewed at 8:00 on Sunday night, she got the job, I don't know where she went, but she was there at 8:00 the next morning taking up her job.⁸¹

Rowe recounted the challenge in similar terms:

We probably didn't anticipate the difficulty we would have in accessing staff at such short notice. So the reason why we delayed the opening of the school for a week was because of the difficulty of recruiting sufficient staff to run the school... most of the staff that we did recruit were unemployed or teachers who had not been able to get jobs in Northern Ireland came down...but some of them came down for the interview and were offered, one of the existing staff said 'you can sleep on my couch, and you can start tomorrow.' That was the type of thing.⁸²

The young and inexperienced nature of the majority of the staff added complexity to an already stressful situation.

Constantly Fluctuating Environment

The environment of Bracken ETNS in its first year was anything but stable.⁸⁵ As McKeivitt noted in a letter to the DES in November of 2007:

We in Bracken Educate Together are dealing with serious integration and language issues at the moment. We are trying to address these issues with pupils, parents and the wider Balbriggan community.⁸⁶

These difficulties were exacerbated by the largely unstable nature of the school. McGovern recalled that even in the first few weeks she was principal, “the [pupil] numbers were increasing,” many of them children of immigrants who had heard about the opportunity to send their children to school through word of mouth.⁸⁴ Rowe also elucidated that by late October, the school, “...had 86 students from at least a dozen countries...90% [had] immigrant parents and 80% [were] black.”⁸⁵ In addition to the constant addition of new students, teachers frequently came and left quickly due to the high-stress environment. McGovern illustrated:

The Irish trained girl left in the first three weeks to get a job in the west of Ireland, and the only qualified person who had come from England also got a job somewhere else; so that gives you an idea of the stress. It was very difficult for them.⁸⁶

Unsuitable Accommodation

The continually fluctuating environment was also due in part to the temporary and less than ideal nature of the school’s accommodation facilities. Bracken ETNS opened in the Sunshine House, a temporary school accommodation facility that the DES had sourced. The Sunshine House, owned by the Sunshine Fund, operates as a holiday centre for disadvantaged children living in the Greater Dublin area.⁸⁷ Every summer, the Sunshine House hosts vacation programs whereby nominated children have the opportunity to engage in a wide range of activities. After some negotiation, The Sunshine Fund agreed to rent the facilities to the DES for the school and ultimately enjoyed a good relationship with the Bracken ETNS.⁸⁸

The Sunshine House offered an appropriate amount of space for the initially anticipated 32 children lacking school places in Balbriggan. However, as school enrolment numbers rose, the Sunshine House’s limited facilities quickly became insufficient for the number of pupils. Gaelscoil Bhaile Brigín, a second primary school that the DES had been unable to secure permanent accommodations for, also occupied the building; this further compounded the space issue. Arcaya remembered:

...it was basically a dormitory (a big huge room that they took all the beds out of). I remember the first of September when I went to have a look at it for the first time, the mattresses were there, the beds were there, but they cleared it all out...⁸⁹

McGovern recalled a frustrating start in the small building, noting that, “The premises were absolutely unsuitable for a school, it was a nightmare premises for a school.”⁹⁰ Griffin also described the location as “a very unsuitable premise,”⁹¹ continuing:

We were upstairs and we couldn’t use the front stairs, we used to use the back stairs. There were two or three toilets upstairs in one little cubicle and that was it. We had at least sixty kids up there.⁹²

In addition, The Sunshine House lacked many resources. McGovern explained:

Already, they had desks and a few things, but they were lacking in [supplies] for junior infants, which the majority were... [they] needed all kinds of play items and we were very lacking in all of that.⁹³

Parents who sent their children to Bracken ETNS on its opening days did not have many concerns regarding the operation of the school. However, they did voice apprehensiveness about the Sunshine House accommodation. One parent elucidated:

The only worries at the time were that initial place at the Sunshine House because it was not a good place for them because it was too small because us parents always believe, because of where we come from, we always believe in multiplication. We believe there will always be increase so that place will never be big enough for them and it looks so old and I said 'By god I hope this building will not collapse one day' and like they planned for this building [the current Bracken ETNS building] and I was like 'when is it going to happen?'⁹⁴

Further adding to the uncertainty of the school's accommodation was the fact that another temporary school site was going to be necessary for May and June. The Sunshine Fund required full control of the building by the end of May to begin preparations for its summer programs. As early as June 2007, the DES had promised a provision of temporary accommodation for Bracken ETNS by September 2008 on the Flemington site, where Balbriggan ETNS operated in prefabricated buildings.⁹⁵ However, no plans had yet been made as to where Bracken ETNS would be housed for May and June of 2007.

McKevitt wrote to an official in the Planning and Building Unit in November 2007:

We are also planning for our pupil intake for next year and had hoped to begin offering places in January. We need to know as a matter of urgency what accommodation will be put in place for us for May/June and from September. We have reservations about being placed in further temporary accommodation for any significant length of time outside of the area which will be our permanent location. We need to be in a position to explain to our parent body exactly what the situation is as early as possible. We are not against campus sharing on the Flemington site in principle, but feel that any delay in moving to Castlelands [the proposed site of permanent accommodation] will seriously jeopardise the development and the integration of this school. We also request that we be consulted about any permanent solution to the accommodation issue.⁹⁶

Smith and Wilson, who held ultimate responsibility for sourcing the accommodation for the school, recounted:

We wanted to find accommodation within Balbriggan and there was surprisingly little accommodation available, ready to go accommodation...that didn't bring it

to the uncertain territory of planning permissions and all that type of thing, because there wasn't time to do that.⁹⁷

Luckily the DES was able to secure a location for Bracken ETNS in time. At the end of May Bracken ETNS left the Sunshine House for the Balbriggan Cricket Club. Arcaya described it as “cramped, warm, and crowded...worse than the Sunshine House,”⁹⁸ and explained:

So we moved out of Sunshine House on the first of June that year to the Cricket Club so we had to basically pack everything up decide what was going into storage and decide what we were going to need for the month of June... We needed something that was local enough and there was nothing else available and it was either shut the school down for the month of June or move there.⁹⁹

The facilities were wholly inappropriate for a primary school and the DES had to move quickly to prepare the site for the students' arrival, transforming it into classrooms and meeting rooms. Arcaya continued:

...It was a wide open space and we just kind of made it into offices and classrooms and then downstairs there was kind of a bar actually and a function room for the Cricket Club so we had to take all the desks out every Friday evening because they would use it obviously for the weekends and stuff and then they would put the desks back in Monday morning and start again.¹⁰⁰

As June came to a close, Bracken ETNS staff members moved materials from the Balbriggan Cricket Club into storage. Over the summer, as promised by the DES, a permanent school building was constructed to house Bracken ETNS. The school year commenced on a Monday in August; on the Friday prior, staff members were granted access.¹⁰¹ Over that weekend, staff members successfully removed everything from storage and worked to organise the school in preparation for its opening the following Monday. Bracken ETNS has been located at this site in Castlelands, Balbriggan ever since and still operates there today.

Relationship with Gaelscoil Bhaile Brigin

An awkward and tense relationship existed between Bracken ETNS and Gaelscoil Bhaile Brigin (the Gaelscoil that shared the Sunshine House for 2007-2008). A week before Bracken opened, the Gaelscoil issued a press release titled, “Department criticised for inconsistency: Two schools share building but are not treated equally.”¹⁰² The Gaelscoil's complaints stemmed from their still-pending application for permanent recognition, corresponding lack of funding, and temporary accommodation. Having been in operation for over a year, many at the Gaelscoil felt snubbed when Bracken ETNS received instantaneous permanent recognition, the benefits of full funding, and the permanent site associated with that status. The principal of the Gaelscoil incredulously commented on the differences, noting, “We must question how the Department can arrange funding and facilities for one educational institution with more urgency than another.”¹⁰³ The Gaelscoil looked upon the special treatment extended to Bracken as unfair and unwarranted. Rowe recollected:

...the Gaelscoil raised the issue that the Educate Together emergency school was given preferential treatment to them, and they'd been on the queue for accommodation longer than Bracken.¹⁰⁴

Despite funding and accommodation differences, the most apparent contrasts between the two schools were the respective demographic compositions of both. McGovern explained:

Literally, all the children going in one gate [were] black and the other children going into the Gaelscoil [were] white... there was just such a stark difference between the populations of the two schools.¹⁰⁵

Irish-medium schools tend to be some of the least ethnically integrated in the country. Over 67% of Irish-medium schools have no pupils from ethnic minorities, while such populations remain heavily underrepresented throughout the entire Gaelscoil network.¹⁰⁶

Griffin defended the discrepancies in funding and accommodation, noting that obvious differences between the two warranted dissimilar treatment:

But you see you can't blame the Department of Education, there was this huge number of immigrant children. The Gaelscoil wasn't going to educate them, not one of them, not because they didn't want to, but because of the Irish language. You weren't going to go as an immigrant into a Gaelscoil to start speaking in Gaelic when you couldn't speak English. So if you were in the Department of Education your priority was where there was most demand and this is where we were, and so they gave us the grants.¹⁰⁷

O'Kelly remembered:

There was a huge amount of sensitivity, especially with the Gaelscoil, because they didn't want to be accused of being racially exclusive and they also didn't want this school to have priority over them, which I thought was kind of odd, I have to say. There was a lot of tension I think. I got the impression there was a lot of tensions between all the schools.¹⁰⁸

Issues with Children

A wide range of complex emotional, behavioural, and learning difficulties also posed significant challenges to administrators and school staff. In 2007, the Bracken ETNS student body consisted of predominantly junior infants. In Ireland, children may begin schooling any time between the ages of four and six.¹⁰⁹ While many established schools have entrance policies prohibiting young four year-olds from entrance, Bracken ETNS had no such stipulation at the time. As a result, junior infant classes were excessively large with many very young children. Griffin acknowledged that, "Most schools had refused to take the children because there was no place," but in some cases it was just "because the children were too young."¹¹⁰ She described the reality of having so many immature, untrained students as "mayhem."¹¹¹ McGovern reflected:

I suppose what we weren't prepared for and I don't think you could have prepared for it, with so many inexperienced teachers... the cohort of young junior infants and senior infants and first class that arrived that really had very little previous educational experience. A lot of them hadn't been to playgroup so it was really, really difficult and very, very stressful.¹¹²

Another challenge associated with age of the pupils and the rapid opening of the school was the difficulty in integrating the youngest children into the school environment. At a traditional school, junior infants only attend school for half of the day for the first month of school. However, logistical challenges and the already truncated school year prevented Bracken's administrators from implementing this policy. Therefore, junior infants streams were introduced directly to full school days without time to adjust. McGovern recalled:

We had them in for the whole school day and, like the pattern in any school (and certainly in North Bay when I was there), is that you introduce the junior infants very gradually over a three week period so they come a few hours in the morning and that's enough for them for the first day and then you work up. Because it hadn't been planned and because there was no teacher input, we opened with all these infants for the *whole day*... so that I think was a small mistake in the opening but it had huge implications in terms of how children settled in the first couple of weeks.¹¹³

Young age played a partial role in the behavioural issues that emerged. However, cultural and language barriers further complicated the problematic situation. McGovern illustrated:

...we had children with special needs that emerged very quickly, we had children who were really upset and couldn't communicate because English wasn't their first language, we had parents that couldn't communicate with us as well.¹¹⁴

Diverse backgrounds meant students had different understandings of acceptable behaviour and expected forms of discipline. Furthermore, several children had experienced significant trauma, hindering their ability to cope with the structured classroom environment. McKeivitt recollected:

This little girl from Afghanistan, she had never been educated...she [was] about 7 or 8, and she'd never been to school before, so this was the first school she was in ever. [She] and her brother went into the school, and she couldn't read or write, she couldn't speak English. And we had a lot of those type of kids, we had a family from Somalia where the father had been shot in front of the son, so the son was very traumatised, and he was actually in Mosney (the refugee centre), and he was traveling down because he was very traumatised, very bad English. The mother was also having twins, so really harrowing sort of stories.¹¹⁵

Nevertheless, children who attended the school on the first day recalled a generally positive experience. Most did not fixate on the challenges associated with a diverse classroom, instead sharing thoughts like, "Everyone spoke English,"¹¹⁶ and:

I was in the first class and I felt a bit more comfortable because there were more non-Irish people... because at my old school it was only me, there were no other black kids.¹¹⁷

Lack of a Parental Base

Prior to the opening of the emergency schools in Balbriggan and Adamstown, all Educate Together schools came about as a result of grassroots parent-led efforts. Typically, a group of committed parents desiring an Educate Together option in their area would campaign for a school to be opened under the patronage of Educate Together. As a result, when opening a school Educate Together was confident in parental awareness of and commitment to its unique philosophy and educational model. However, in Balbriggan, the creation of Bracken ETNS was driven not by parental demand for an Educate Together school but by pressures from the DES to provide a school. Because none of the parents involved had actively sought an Educate Together school, most were unfamiliar with the organisation's precepts and tenants. In this case, Educate Together was not selected for its ethos, but rather for its willingness to act quickly. This lack of parental understanding of and desire for the Educate Together patronage model posed additional challenges. Educate Together faced difficulty in establishing a Board of Management and a Parents Association. Parents were also slow to develop trust in the school and its capability to provide an acceptable education. Rowe recalled his apprehension in pursuing the project without prior desire from local parents:

We were worried... Parents hadn't had a clue what Educate Together was, and we normally work with a group of parents who are buying into this. So we were worried about that.¹¹⁸

Griffin agreed:

There wasn't one child that came that the parents had chosen an Educate Together school at the time. No. Any of the Irish kids I had they had recently moved into Balbriggan themselves and there [were] no school places and so they came to us.¹¹⁹

McCutcheon explained this key difference between his school and Griffin's and the challenges posed to Bracken ETNS as a result:

We were formed by a committee of parents in Balbriggan who most definitely wanted their children to attend an Educate Together school, and even though not all who were on that committee at the end sent their children to the school, nonetheless, a good many did and they would have been like Irish people who were living in Balbriggan who wanted this choice and that set of people became our first Board of Management, our first Parents Association, and have been and continue to be a huge support of this school. Now Bracken never had that set of people because (unlike other Educate Together schools) they weren't formed by the demand from a group of parents to do that. They wouldn't have had that kernel of people so they would have had to seek an initial Board of Management with

the help of Educate Together in that regard. And there were people in the community who didn't have any connection with the school on the Board.¹²⁰

Lacking a parental base, Educate Together had to go about establishing a Board of Management in a new way. An action plan to create a Board of Management was drafted in late 2007 with the following steps:

- *Complete identification of key potential members by February 15th, 2008.*
- *Select a Board of Management on February 20th, 2008.*
- *Hold a celebratory public announcement in early March.*¹²¹

The plan stressed that the search for a Board should begin with a message effectively explaining the role of parents in school management. Those who wrote the action plan help parents understand the role of a Board of Management in an Educate Together school. Ultimately, the Board would be responsible for addressing behaviour issues (particularly with the junior infants), sourcing short-term and long-term accommodation, and developing the school's ethical education. In addition, the Board would be tasked with creating a Parent Teacher Association.¹²²

Resources

Bracken ETNS relied on several outside sources for financial support, physical materials, and guidance.

DES

Due to the unconventional constraints surrounding the opening of Bracken ETNS, the DES agreed to the additional concessions Educate Together sought.* Many of those involved recall the arrangements with the DES as truly out of the ordinary. Griffin recalled:

...for years all I had to do was pick up the phone, call the Department, and say 'Hello this is Bracken Educate Together and I need such and such.' And it's not like I was holding them for ransom, but they listened very well.¹²³

McGovern recounted a similar situation during her time as principal, as she explained, "Bracken probably got, in a way because of the political controversy around it, it probably got more support than any other school. I would say it has actually."¹²⁴ Rowe agreed, noting, "The fact that we got a direct route for funding and resourcing, stuff like that, that was obviously a great asset,"¹²⁵ and remarked that the retired Departmental inspector made available to the Bracken staff was "useful and... very helpful."¹²⁶

McKevitt further stressed Bracken ETNS's reliance on the DES's extra support through the hectic situation:

We were assigned an official from the Department to work with me full-time so I had someone from the Department of Education on the phone and if there were any issues at all I'd call and he'd sort it out...We cut a lot of corners here, and we were able to do that because we had a direct line into the Department of Education.¹²⁷

Wilson and Smith downplayed the special provisions made for the school. Wilson maintained that, "Other than sourcing the accommodation. Every school is resourced in the same fashion"¹²⁸ and Smith agreed, noting:

It would be very unusual to start a school with the number that started in Bracken. So they probably started off with a much greater level of resources than most schools would. But any school: more students, more teachers, more money, more space, more everything.¹²⁹

Balbriggan ETNS

At its opening in 2005, Balbriggan ETNS encountered similar challenges and obstacles to those facing Bracken ETNS in 2007. Consequently, school leadership at Bracken ETNS relied on McCutcheon's experience in dealing with difficulties. Accordingly, Griffin grew to count on McCutcheon's advice as an invaluable asset throughout the school's first year; as she recalled,

*Refer to "The Creation of Bracken ETNS" for details of the concessions offered.

she often “went down to Fintan because his school would have been the same as [hers] two years ago. The same kind of issues were there.”¹³⁰ McCutcheon also looked fondly upon the great relationship between the two schools in 2007, and was quick to note that the two still share a positive relationship today. As McCutcheon explained:

Marian [Griffin] would have just frequently rung me in the early days, and indeed we still do. We still correspond a lot with one another in regards to, 'What would you do about this? What would you do about that? What's the regulation here? What's the rule there? How would you go about getting this?'¹³¹

In addition to providing basic advice, Balbriggan ETNS helped Bracken ETNS achieve recognition as a disadvantaged school. Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), a program run by the DES, prioritises and targets resources to the most disadvantaged schools. To identify disadvantaged schools, the DEIS uses a variety of different indicators to assess need, such as the percentage of travellers in the community and the number of single parents.¹³² Among other things, schools participating in DEIS receive additional staffing for better pupil-teacher ratios. Starting in 2005, Balbriggan ETNS had lobbied the DES for such status for two years. McCutcheon noted that, “Because we had lobbied hard and done well there, one or two other Educate Together schools were able to come in on the back of our hard work in that regard.”¹³³ In desperate need for extra teachers, Bracken ETNS was able to combine its application with Balbriggan ETNS, thereby achieving disadvantaged status (despite its young age) immediately.

Educate Together National Office and Network Support

The Educate Together National Office also provided great support and guidance to Bracken ETNS and dedicated significant amounts of time and resources to ensure the school's successful operation. Through an effort loosely coordinated by the National Office, volunteers and staff at other Educate Together schools helped by providing advice, materials, and manpower when available. McGovern recounted:

I had great help from other people like so many teachers in North Bay. They sent out books, resources, and a teacher on a career break came out as a sub for me for a few days. North Dublin - Sally Shiel's school - also sent out resources as well, and Swords down the road with Gerry [Kelly], he sent things and his staff was hugely supportive. It was a sense of the Educate Together community coming on board as well, and needless to say the office, and Paul [Rowe] and Deirdre [O'Donoghue], and all of them were great.¹³⁴

McKevitt agreed, noting, “It was probably one of the few times that the whole organisation, volunteers, actually pulled together, it really was, and we did pull a rabbit out of a hat here.”¹³⁵ Griffin remembered:

The [Educate Together] National Office was brilliantly supportive. They did a lot of Board of Management training and put in the regional officer, Gerry McKevitt,... [everyone] was so helpful and they really lived out the ethos.¹³⁶

The Educate Together National Office worked closely with the school and the DES to bring Bracken ETNS to fruition.

Reactions

The opening of Bracken ETNS elicited a wide variety of responses.

Media Coverage

The emergency opening of Bracken ETNS attracted worldwide media coverage. The story was covered in many internationally recognised outlets, including *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Boston Globe*, *Al Jazeera*, and *Le Monde*.

Throughout the summer of 2007, local and national media covered the shortage of school places in areas with a burgeoning population. On August 30th, news outlets began reporting that Educate Together would open an emergency school in Balbriggan.¹³⁷ However, media coverage on the specifics of the school remained limited until the informational meeting for parents of potential attendees on September 1st, hosted by the DES and Educate Together. O’Kelly had been closely following the effects of population growth on the educational system and attended the meeting out of interest. After sitting through the media-closed meeting with just a radio recorder, she was anxious to break the Bracken story. O’Kelly recalled the specific group makeup that caught her attention and indicated the potential explosiveness of the story:

...It was just the most extraordinary thing to see: this massive queue of parents who had not managed to get a school place and they were *all* black. So it was an unbelievably stark illustration of the problems there and I remember at the meeting I was standing up, sitting down, thinking ‘I need to ring the newsroom, I have to get a camera out here,’ but I knew I couldn’t get a camera at the time. It was just shocking really, really shocking to see. So I sat through the meeting, I tried to grab as many of the parents afterwards to talk to.¹³⁸

O’Kelly instantly realised the significance of the implications surrounding the event: for the first time, the discriminatory nature of the Irish education system became undeniably clear. The visible proof offered at the meeting immediately brought the issue to prominence; as she noted, “It was incontrovertible now that there weren’t enough school places, and the people who were suffering as a result were the newly arrived immigrants.”¹³⁹

O’Kelly recalled RTE’s immediate reaction: the organisation decided to make the Bracken meeting the leading story on its Saturday evening broadcast and then again Monday on *Morning Ireland*. The news caused a national eruption of emotion, as Rowe explained:

By the afternoon [after the news broke] there was this urban district councillor accusing Educate Together of bringing the immigrants to Balbriggan in order to open the school...So she was given full reign on what we call ‘The Drive Time Show’, which is the 5:00 to 7:00 [P.M]. It was then, it’s still, the premiere news show... the biggest audience figures of all the radio stations. So it was right on this show and it was just, to be blunt about it, it was a pack of nasty, vicious lies. And I remember having to argue and threaten RTE with a case for defamation before they let me get on air to counter... So that happened, and then it was all over the

papers the next day, and the next day, and the next day, then the international media picked it up.¹⁴⁰

O’Kelly believed the significance of the story stemmed from the exposé it elicited. In her opinion, the story took off because “The government could no longer say that there wasn't a problem, because it was so stark what happened in Balbriggan and at that meeting per se.”¹⁴¹ Rowe agreed, explaining:

The significance of it was the politics of what caused it in the first place, which is the planning crisis and then the religious discrimination on school enrolments, which combined to create the crisis. And then it was the ability of this particular event to shine... to create a mirror to the Irish education establishment... For the first time, they had to seriously acknowledge this institutionalised, this deeply ingrained religious discrimination, which permeates the entire system even still today.¹⁴²

DES officials had a different outlook on the notability of the story. Smith and Wilson maintained that the gravity of this case was not primarily due to the ethnic makeup of the student body, but more about the delay in the opening of the school. Smith recalls that the school faced insurmountable challenges in meeting its original opening date, forcing a further delay of one week. As Smith elucidated:

...that the school was three weeks late added an extra spin to it because never before had we had, even with all the new schools that we'd opened at the time, they'd all opened on time. So the fact that a school was late and we had a large bunch of children who couldn't go to school for the first week in September- that added hugely to the story... Had that school opened on day one how would the story have been different? What would the angle have been? The angle would have now been 'oh we now have a school that is made up almost exclusively of non-Irish nationals.' Well yipidee we had that before and it was never newsworthy. The newsworthy bit was that it was late and there were all sorts of arrangements and blahdedah but that really crystallised for us and our current Minister. He has often stated his recurring nightmare is someday we will have children turn up for their school and they will look into a field and the school won't be there and that is the effect that Balbriggan sort of had. You have to have school places there in September, it's not like an operation you have been told you can defer for six weeks or six months. The school year starts September or end of August and school places have to be there.¹⁴³

The first day of school brought a strong media presence into Balbriggan. McGovern described the frenzy surrounding the event:

[There were] phone calls to the school, requests for interviews particularly the first day. I just thought it was so intrusive to arrive at the school on the first day with all the media standing outside the gate. I just felt so badly for those children and their families; already they had been in the media and I just thought, give

them the first day in the school just like any other mam or dad or kid arriving at school.¹⁴⁴

McKevitt also recollected a similar experience:

There was a big circus going around, there absolutely was... The *Irish Daily Mail* here, they offered us money, they wanted to take a photograph of all the kids in the school and put it on the front page of the newspaper. Now what they wanted to do was to show all these black kids on the front of the newspaper. We refused.¹⁴⁵

While the media camped outside of the school, staff worked hard to ensure the press did not gain access to the children. Rowe explained:

We had to try and barricade, to bring people on the day that the school opened to keep the press at the end of the road, to stop them from interviewing every parent, asking them whether they felt that they were being racially discriminated against because of the fact that they had to go to this Educate Together school and they couldn't get into local schools. Now we have generally good relations with the education correspondents in the Irish media and they were fine. But it was the news correspondents and the international media we had considerable more difficulty trying to keep them... we tried to stop them photographing the children coming in...¹⁴⁶

To deal with the overwhelming presence of the media, Rowe held a press conference later in the afternoon in the Bracken Court Hotel. Rowe stressed that the demographic makeup of the school did not result from racism among school authorities, but rather from a lack of planning, the prevalence of the Catholic Church in Irish education, and the inadequate supports in place for new and developing schools:

As an educational body committed to equality, we naturally share the concern voiced by many commentators that ethnic minority families appear to be bearing the brunt of the shortage of school places in Balbriggan and in other areas of rapid housing growth around Dublin. We have been outraged by the media description of this school as being 'a school for blacks' and wish to state categorically that this is not the case.¹⁴⁷

Rowe continued with a plea for privacy and respect for students and their families:

I would ask all of you in the media to give us some time and space away from the glare of lenses and microphones and allow us to get on with our work. Our job is to establish a school atmosphere of care and kindness in which children can be empowered to learn, teachers can deliver excellence in teaching and all can work together in respect and equality. When we have got up and running, the starter motor is done with, and the Minister has given us a first, second and even a third

gear, we would be delighted to invite you back to talk to our permanent staff, parent representatives and student body.¹⁴⁸

At the press conference, O’Kelly described a significant interruption from a discontent Balbriggan resident:

...this councillor arrived named May [McKeown] and started basically ranting and shouting and screaming in the meeting. I can't even remember what her point was but it was something like 'Balbriggan isn't racist' and there might have been a touch of ‘they should go away’ in it. It was an odd, aggressive intervention.¹⁴⁹

The unexpected guest was May McKeown, Chairperson of the Balbriggan Town Council. McKeown, who arrived unannounced and uninvited, accused Educate Together of using artificially inflated numbers to justify the opening a new school. McKeown expressed concerns that the opening of another ETNS in Balbriggan did not reflect parental demand. At the meeting she interjected:

... [two Educate Together] schools in Balbriggan -- it doesn't suit the community. We have to examine the needs of all the community. We need a balance. My purpose in being here is that I represent the people of the town. School principals have maintained a dignified silence... My main concern is where these people came from since June. I want to find out are they living in the town. I want to be assured they are all living in Balbriggan, and have lived here for some time.¹⁵⁰

McKeown also attributed a perceived lack of school places to unfair stresses on the infrastructure, noting that the fast growth rate made it:

... hard to keep the infrastructure right... There is no town in Ireland that has had such enormous growth so fast, such an influx of non-nationals...we have always welcomed everybody... All this hype has angered people.¹⁵¹

However, while Educate Together staff members remained hypersensitive to the media’s presence, parents who sent their children to the school don’t recall the media being a concern. One parent reminisced:

The first day there was media from TV stations and newspapers and other stuff, just to cover the event. It didn’t really make any difference; we dropped off our children joyfully: joyful that we had a place to drop our children...and apart from the media cameras... we came in with our own camera too. And we did it joyfully; it was fantastic.¹⁵²

Louise Daly, Educate Together National Office Team Assistant, took charge of coordinating the organisation’s response to the extreme increase in press coverage. Daly recalled:

Lots [of attention]- lots from national and international- this was the first time we’d ever really had any international call for interviews: *The Washington Post*, and South African papers, and *Al Jazeera*, and French *Le Monde*, who wanted

interviews with Paul [Rowe], just around then. It was international news for a day or two. It was big.¹⁵³

The media firestorm continued throughout the school's first year. McGovern left three weeks after the school opened, but the press did not, as Griffin, her replacement, explained:

We were haunted by the media for a year, a full year after the school opened. The media would be looking for interviews, they wanted the story, they wanted to know how it was going, was there racism?¹⁵⁴

She continued:

I did give a lot of interviews, but I was careful who [I spoke to]. Like Ron McCormick from *The New York Times*, and I spoke with him before, and I wanted to know in what kind of a spirit he was going to write this article and he was very positive. One day I remember somebody came, I can't remember who it was now, but they asked to speak to the parents and we said, 'Yes we would ask.' And a few parents volunteered for an interview, but the particular person wanted to do personal stories from these women and they came out of the interview raging. They said, 'We just want to forget about what happened to us. We do not want to do that,' and they wouldn't speak, they wouldn't tell the story.¹⁵⁵

Media coverage eventually subsided as Bracken ETNS's reputation changed from that of an emergency school to that of a permanent fixture in Balbriggan's educational community. Nevertheless, its opening brought about an unprecedented level of media coverage and created a great controversy that remains a significant event in the history of the Irish education system today.

Strategies for Interacting with the Media

Several different strategies were employed to handle the amount of media attention Bracken ETNS received. Principals of the school, McGovern and then Griffin, both shared the similar goal of keeping the children protected from the press. They also worked tirelessly to keep the reputation of the school intact by limiting media exposure to the immense challenges the school faced.^{156, 157} Both focused on the future of the school and all of the possibilities ahead. From a national perspective, Educate Together also had to ensure the organisation's reputation remained positive, as Rowe explained:

The main thing we decided was a media profile position, which we have developed very distinctly in the media. And that is that we were very much more in sorrow than in anger, very much we practiced a soft delivery. Concentrating on just trying to focus on the core issues, not getting into arguments with people. So we really practiced that presentation and that's really what we decided to do, and we just stuck to that line all the way through. And we answered everybody to be honest... just to explain what we were doing, and let civic society debate the whole issue themselves.¹⁵⁸

The DES (and especially Smith and Wilson) faced significant media criticism; Wilson described how they managed:

It is just something we had to deal with. Again, we could have a bad news week this week over something else; again it is just something you deal with. It is a bit of a distraction in terms if you are out there looking for accommodation or out there trying to talk to the patrons or parents or whatever. It is a distraction because you are only one person, we are only two people or whatever you have to deal with that and it's immediate, but it's not important in the picture of what you are trying to achieve or do and really badly eats into your time.¹⁵⁹

Smith agreed:

Well you are a bit like a goalkeeper in any sport; the ones you save are forgotten, it's the one you let in that you will forever be remembered for. You go about your business. Any planner is going to get stick for whatever one doesn't go right or goes wrong but again the school opened, there were places there in very short time. It just was unfortunate that it was a couple of weeks late.¹⁶⁰

Balbriggan Community

The Balbriggan community displayed several mixed reactions to the opening of Bracken ETNS. Griffin recalled a cold welcome from the established Irish national community of Balbriggan, noting cynically that, "They didn't send their children to the school mostly and ignored us as much as they could."¹⁶¹ Parents who did send their children to Bracken concurred:

There are Irish Nationals who don't even want their kids to come here. They took them away, none of them have ever been here. I remember at the beginning of the school...it was just non-Nationals. Just if you have anybody with white skin, one or two people. They are not Irish, they are just Eastern European. First of all, they didn't want to stay. They left or they came back again after a few years. So now they moved their kids out of the school simply because all of the colours are black. So Asians and Blacks were the founding members of this school. Predominantly blacks.¹⁶²

McGovern also remembered hostility from the local community as she recalled:

The local councillor [May McKeown] was very terrible. It was awful for the parents to see this in the media and the terrible way these people went on. It was just uncalled for really and it just deepened the whole thing.¹⁶³

Rowe agreed, noting, "I was very disappointed by the racist response by some local politicians."¹⁶⁴ McKevitt further expanded on community resistance:

There [were] also quite a lot of racists, just outright racism going on. I mean, one of the town councillors up there [May McKeown], I remember crashed the press conference we had when the school opened, she said stuff about how we should

be sending these kids back home where they came from, and we were trying to make the point that they were actually born here, most of them were actually born here... There were no windows broken and there was never any graffiti or anything like that. But there was always an undercurrent of racism up there.¹⁶⁵

In addition to the tensions between the local community and Bracken ETNS, frictions with the INTO complicated Bracken ETNS's relationship with other local schools. Rowe remembered:

Oh, [other schools] were very hostile. And the president of the INTO went and had meetings with the principals of the other schools, and issued a statement saying that the Catholic-first policy had nothing to do with the crisis...So there was very significant hostility from the teacher's union, and that's John Carr, the General Secretary of the INTO at the time.¹⁶⁶

While the overwhelming reaction was quite positive, some notable negative reactions were transmitted to the organisation in the form of email correspondence. These opinions highlight the extremity and emotion surrounding the situation.

One resident emailed:

I refer to your recent radio discussions on the concern for children primarily as I understand from Africa who have been unable to get school places in Dublin... the population group in question are from Africa and are almost exclusively those seeking 'asylum or refugee status' in Ireland... you need to reflect on the absolute fact that many of the black children who could not get places in Dublin Primary Schools will in time be deported together with their families and siblings. This will in turn free up places for other children to be accommodated.¹⁶⁷

A man from South Africa noted:

This is one of the consequences of race mixture. Since apartheid was removed, this type of thing has snowballed in South Africa, until it has now become out of control. Our once good schools have become cesspools of vice and Satanism as other cultures and religions have crept in. Our once exemplary kids of all races have become corrupt little problems. Our school certificates are not worth the paper they are printed on. We beg you: keep your schools racially separated and trouble-free and Irish... Return non-compatible people (i.e. people of non-white or mixed race) to their countries of origin. Either that or be responsible for killing your nation.¹⁶⁸

Another correspondent wrote:

I want you to back off and stop bullying our government into opening immigrant schools. Irish people do not want them. You are people trying to force taxpayers like myself into wasting our money on opening immigrant schools for ethnic

people... You need to stop your insane policy at promoting multi-denominational schools because Ireland has had enough with immigrants.¹⁶⁹

A Balbriggan resident stated:

You are a teeny minority of people that want ethnically mixed schools... I send my child to an Irish school. I would never send him to an ethnically mixed school because that's bad for his perception of what it means to be Irish. If I wanted to send my child to an Educate Together school, I'd sooner send him to Africa instead.¹⁷⁰

A Dublin resident wrote:

I am contacting you regarding your attempt this week to destroy our state run schools to the forces of multiculturalism. I am appalled and shocked that you want multi-denominational and multi-faith schools established in Dublin as well as in Ireland at the expense of the Irish taxpayer. Don't you see that Irish people don't want immigrants or their children in our country? Immigrant children are taking (OUR) children's school places and it's right that the schools enforce Catholic only policy to stop this... I will tell my kids to avoid talking to foreigners whenever they are at school... In the meantime I'd suggest you get a life and start doing some real work rather than bullshitting the way you have done this week.¹⁷¹

Parents of Children Attending Bracken ETNS

While some of the Balbriggan community remained hostile to the opening of Bracken, many migrant parents expressed a relieved attitude at the school places that became available for their children. McGovern remembered parents who were, "absolutely delighted."¹⁷² O'Kelly had similar recollections, as reflected by an interview she conducted with a woman on one of the opening days of the school:

And this African woman looking at the camera and saying 'thank you Ireland for giving me a school for my child,' so that was the sense and the feeling that I certainly got from the parents, that they were just extremely happy to have somewhere to send their children because it was obviously a deep and severe worry to them. That was definitely the feeling at the time, they were just so happy to have a school.¹⁷³

In spite of challenges and controversy surrounding the school, parents of those attending refused to be fazed by the situation. Many fondly recall the first day (and the subsequent year) as a source and pride and happiness. A parent who sent his children to Bracken on its opening day fondly stated, "This school is a history on its own. This school will not be left out"¹⁷⁴ and another proudly attested:

So we are the first parents that started this school- I'm really, really happy that my children have really made history. My child has passed through the sixth class and

he's going to secondary school and each time he talks to me and says, 'when I was in primary school I was one of the pioneers of the school.'¹⁷⁵

Government

Education Minister, Mary Hanafin, endured significant criticism for the lack of school places in growing communities.¹⁷⁶ Constantly accused by organisations including the INTO and primary school patron bodies as the root of the problem, she struggled to defend herself. In September 2007, Hanafin continually deflected blame towards rapid population growth and allayed controversy over Bracken's ethnic demographic. She stated, "...it might be a colour issue but not necessarily a race issue."¹⁷⁷ Both denominational and multi-denominational patron bodies largely agreed that the unresponsive government played a huge role in the development of the problem. Dr. Diarmuid Martin, Archbishop of Dublin, told *The Irish Times* that he blamed the poor planning by the DES and other state agencies for the crisis in school places in north and west Dublin.¹⁷⁸ Hanafin defended herself by noting that it was because families were moving into the area as late as April that the Department hadn't been able to provide places in time.¹⁷⁹

In addition to criticism from the Irish population, the Minister faced disapproval from the United Nations. In 2005, Educate Together approached the United Nations asking the body to analyse the religious discrimination in Ireland's education system.¹⁸⁰ Consequently, the United Nations Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination called for an amendment of the Equal Status Act and for an increased availability of multi-denominational education, noting that racial and religious discrimination intersected and hence non-Catholic children of immigrants could face unintentional de-facto discrimination.¹⁸¹ However, Hanafin disregarded the suggestion, noting that the legislation in Ireland at the time "reflect[ed] the Irish education system" and thus did not require any changes.¹⁸²

Rowe explained the discrepancy between the opinion of the UN and that of the government:

The Minister at the time, Mary Hanafin, had said this was not a recommendation to the Irish state, this was merely the observation of a committee; that was her position. The [Irish Government representatives] at the UN had stated publicly in front of the UN committee that, 'Oh, in Ireland, our Catholic schools are public and inclusive,' and that therefore this allegation of religious discrimination and access in esteem was inappropriate. So this was the government attitude, that there was nothing wrong with the system.¹⁸³

On October 10th, 2007, in a parliamentary debate of the House of the Oireachtas, Deputy Brian Hayes asked the Minister of her views on the emergence in effect of segregated primary school provision in Balbriggan. Hanafin responded that, "In recent years unprecedented levels of investment have been provided both to improve existing school facilities and provide extra school places where needed."¹⁸⁴ She defended her Department's work in Balbriggan, noting that:

As soon as it became clear applications for the schools had grown to such an extent that a new school would be needed this year, my Department acted swiftly to secure accommodation for up to 120 children in a new school in Sunshine House.¹⁸⁵

She stated that the current ethnic demographic of Bracken reflected the nature of the families that had recently moved to the area. Moreover, Hanafin reassured her colleagues that, “Under the National Development Plan, €4.5 billion is being invested” to provide sufficient school places in all developing areas which, “is absolutely vital to ensuring that enrolment policies do not lead to immigrants being unable to secure places.”¹⁸⁶

Deputy Hayes then asked the Minister to consider establishing a national forum on education to address the patronage of schools. He thought it necessary that a public discussion be had on the issue, as opposed to secretive bilateral discussion between the Department and various education patrons.¹⁸⁷ Hanafin responded bluntly, “There is nothing secretive about the manner in which the Department works.”¹⁸⁸

Senator Alex White, a representative of the Labour Party, again called on the government to establish a National Convention on Education to address the future of Irish education to ensure that a Balbriggan situation did not arise again. He explained:

What many cannot understand is how the DES and government agencies do not seem to have the basic demographic information on population movement including immigration trends that would at least ensure meaningful advance notice of a demand for places... Active, forceful, and tenacious intervention by the State is required.¹⁸⁹

Many other senators agreed with the necessity of a national convention, including Senator Fidelma Healy Eames, Fine Gael Spokesperson on Education and Science, who stated:

I see such a forum as the way forward in terms of bringing all the issues into the open... I ask the Minister to commit to putting a national and local database system in place so that we can track our children. We have far more accountability in our national cattle herd.¹⁹⁰

Senator David Norris added:

It is very dangerous that churches should be exempt from equality legislation...I note that the Roman Catholic hierarchy has indicated it no longer wants complete control of this area of education and is preparing its exit strategy of some kind. It is important we know the motivation for this and how it will be accomplished in order that we can have proper, integrated education.¹⁹¹

Senator Joe O'Reilly continued, “I recommend that the Minister rethinks the idea of the forum. She is capable of playing her part in the process and it is too good an opportunity to miss.”¹⁹²

After the fourteen senators spoke on the topic, Mary Hanafin responded to concerns raised, defending her Department's work and plans for the future before stating:

I do not see the need for another forum just to bring people together to talk, when we have plenty of ways of ensuring everybody's voice is heard. The important thing is to continue to move forward.¹⁹³

Subsequent Results

Effect on Educate Together as an Organisation

Before Bracken ETNS opened, Educate Together operated on a relatively small scale with only four staff members employed by the National Office and 43 national schools. The media coverage associated with Bracken provided a platform for Educate Together to truly make its name and its mission known to Ireland (and even more significantly, to the world). Rowe recalled the large effect the extended coverage had on his organisation, noting the increased awareness and understanding that Educate Together has enjoyed since 2007. He explained:

The overwhelming response was... ‘fair play to Educate Together for stepping up and taking this on.’ And the response was very negative towards the government, to the Department of Education, and the people who came out to attack us, to be honest, we gave them a lot of rope to hang themselves. That was altogether a situation which was overwhelmingly positive towards us and within probably a month, completely transformed our national profile in a positive way.¹⁹⁴

Daly agreed:

It put us in the spotlight, in the media spotlight, and I think, when I started working here, when I said where I worked, people kind of would go, ‘Where?’ And I was constantly explaining, ‘Oh, Educate Together, we’re a multi-denominational patron for Primary Schools in Ireland, etc, and this is what we do.’ You know the way. And then, very soon after Bracken, people stopped asking, they recognised...¹⁹⁵

Educate Together’s role in the Balbriggan crisis elevated public opinion of the group. Increased publicity and awareness paid dividends far exceeding the scope of the Bracken incident. Again, Rowe concurred, noting:

It was a huge opportunity for Educate Together, it completely transformed our profile in particular in Irish policy and opinion formers, in that field. Whether it completely transformed our profile amongst the general public, it created a very positive image, or a very positive association.¹⁹⁶

Changes in DES Planning Process for New Schools

The Department implemented sweeping changes to prevent a recurrence. Prior to 2007, schools opened on a reactive basis whereby a patron body identified a demand for its particular type of school in a given area and applied for recognition of a new school. A New Schools Advisory Committee would then consider applications and refuse or grant recognition to the patron body one year prior to the new school’s opening.¹⁹⁷ Historically, Ireland’s population had been constant or in decline; as a result, the DES rarely needed to plan for new schools in growing areas.¹⁹⁸ Smith explained the challenges his office faced as the Celtic Tiger growth put pressure on a reactive system:

The procedures in place for the establishment of a new school at the time did not allow the Department to react to any sudden or significant shift in population that would give rise to the need to establish a new school.¹⁹⁹

In 2006, no patrons applied to open a school in the Balbriggan area for the 2007 school year.²⁰⁰ Therefore, the DES was forced to forego standard procedure when it determined the need for additional school places the following summer. DES school planners first sought and received approval from the Minister, then reached out to patrons directly. In this way, Bracken ETNS became one of the first schools opened on a DES proactive (rather than reactive) basis; for the first time, the DES identified the need based on demographic information, created a school, and then sought a patron body.

In 2008, Batt O’Keeffe, Minister of Education, asked the Commission on School Accommodation to review the procedures in place for new school openings and halted the process for new school applications from patrons. Guidelines were established for a framework for cooperation between the DES and planning authorities to ensure the timely and cost-effective provision of school facilities.²⁰¹ In addition, the National Development Plan 2007-2013 required that the DES develop a comprehensive Geographic Information System (GIS), engage with planning authorities at the earliest stages of planning, and supply estimates of future accommodation requirements to planning authorities for the preparation of relevant planning frameworks.²⁰²

These changes enabled the DES to carefully determine need based on tracked demographic information, removing the onus from patrons. Through the GIS, the DES can utilise newly developed technology to identify areas where changing populations warrant more school places then accept applications from all patron bodies for the new school. Afterwards, an independent group adjudicates the DES’s examination of the applications and makes recommendations to the Minister. In turn, the Minister makes the ultimate decision on patronage for the new school.²⁰³ The DES believed this approach to be more appropriate for post-Celtic Tiger Ireland; as Smith explained:

...that is what operates today and to allows us to fulfil that role in a fairly satisfactory manner we developed the GIS which allows us to plug in to all child benefits, all births, any sort of data that can be helpful. So we can look at all the information in relation to demographics versus what we have as capacity in schools so we can flag a couple of years out where we might have difficulties, where demand of places is going to exceed supply. So we then look to see okay 'we expand existing schools or do we try and increase diversity by creating new schools or do we need to kick off the new schools process?' So we can do that a year or two ahead of when we need the school instead of trying to react in a very short period of time thereby eliminating the likelihood of having another Balbriggan scenario.²⁰⁴

Wilson agreed that newer methods act as a reliable safeguard against future systematic failures:

Prior to when we got introduced to GIS and got all the data that we needed to be accurately able to monitor demographics, every September was a huge concern and a worry for us in the developing areas when the Celtic Tiger was roaring wildly. Now we don't need to worry about the Septembers because we have predicted what is going to happen and we have accommodation in place. It is much more managed.²⁰⁵

Rowe similarly believed the changes to be effective:

... as a result of Bracken, the Department introduced an additional resource, the GIS...up until then they really did depend on people like us telling them where the shortages were, or the NEWB coming to them. They had no idea where the population growth was, the local authorities didn't, weren't able to tell them where they thought the situation was, they had no means of planning for calculating the future population dynamics.²⁰⁶

Wilson and Smith noted that identifying areas' needs for school places only solves half of the problem. Prior to Bracken, school patrons held the responsibility for the provision of the starting accommodation for new schools. Today, that aspect of planning lies with the DES. Rowe was very happy with the DES's decision to take on the responsibility of finding sites for new schools, as he explained:

We'd had a longstanding campaign that the accommodation of the school should be a responsibility of the Department, so in this case the Department did take responsibility for that... And in the following year, eight of the twelve schools opened in permanent accommodation on day one, so we thought that we had progressed that very well.²⁰⁷

Increased Funding

Despite the economic downturn, projections indicate that primary school enrolment numbers will continue to grow. The analysis of recent demographic patterns and birth rate trends predicts future requirements whereby the total enrolment in primary schools may grow from 505,600 pupils in the 2009-2010 year to 569,600 by 2018: corresponding to an additional 2,285 classrooms over the same period.²⁰⁸ Current projections forecast that it is likely that all primary school sectors will experience a rise in pupil numbers in the future as the number of children of primary school age is expected to increase in number until at least 2018. Migrant children currently represent 10% of all primary school students; that proportion is also expected to grow.²⁰⁹

As a result, investment in the School Building Programme continues to increase. Since 1992, funding has increased by almost 600%.²¹⁰ Under the National Development Plan 2007-2013, close to €4.5 billion has been allocated for primary and second-level school infrastructure, with a focus on delivering additional school places in rapidly developing areas such as Balbriggan.²¹¹

Bracken ETNS Today

While Bracken ETNS faced huge difficulties during its rocky beginning, many challenges still burden the school today. Most logistical complications have been solved over time, yet Bracken ETNS faces new predicaments every day.

Bracken ETNS may no longer hold the title of ‘the school for blacks’, but the school’s student body remains made up of predominantly ethnic minority students. The demographics of the school are such that a large concentration of families involved have faced significant trauma. The repercussions on children of such situations often result in greater educational, emotional, and behavioural challenges. In addition, many children come from cultures and regions where child abuse and marital discord are common. Consequently, children attending Bracken ETNS often show signs of victimisation, further complicating their ability to participate in a classroom setting. To help families cope with these experiences, the school has invested heavily in therapies for the children and encourages staff to attend professional development courses on topics such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Furthermore, the school hosts a human rights month each year to inform children of their rights.²¹²

Bracken ETNS also works closely with parents and families of children with difficult backgrounds. Griffin noted that she often has referred parents to counsellors and local help centres:

...the different styles of parenting, and that was a very big issue for us... and the methods of discipline from some of the immigrant families (not some, most of them), and the severity of the discipline, and that type of thing that we have had to address. I would have a lot of contact with social services; there have been a lot of issues around that and working with parents. I am trying to protect children and their human rights. Another issue is marital discord: some of the women who have come over here and they are coming from an oppressive regime and they are over here maybe on their own before the father comes, and they see that here you have rights and you don’t have to put up with this and that. I have had many African men cry in this office because the wife is just off to the shelter with the kids, would not be beaten anymore. I am very conscious that when we are educating our children everyday, you can’t learn if you’ve got a brick in your head, which means that there is trauma and hassle and everything. You just can’t learn! So I would say a big part of our work has been to address that with parents and say, ‘Can we help? Can we manage?’ And try to talk to the kids and empower them. We try to get the children as well to trust us, so if things aren’t well they would tell. And I say ‘I can’t keep a secret all the time, but I will do my best to help. If you don’t tell me it will never stop.’ So that would be a big chunk because I feel if you don’t be there for those kids, how can they learn and how can they be secure?²¹³

Due to the diverse background of the student body, language barriers also continue to be a huge challenge. Griffin described how the school prioritises English as a Second Language education:

Well the Department provided us with language teachers. It was very challenging for us as teachers. The first thing that I did was go to the INTO to this English as an additional language course online and every Tuesday after school [the staff] sat down... Every week, once a week we sat down and we studied how to teach English as an additional language and we reflected on our kids, how best to teach them, what methods to use. We developed our skills around how would you deliver the curriculum to children who haven't got English. We did the basic keywords with history and geography and try to build it up like that. We worked at it and it appeared to work quite well for us.²¹⁴

Due to its unique challenges and demanding atmosphere, Bracken ETNS continues to struggle to recruit experienced teachers. Resultantly, the school's staff remains young. Griffin works tirelessly to ensure her staff members receive as much additional training as possible:

Yes, our teachers are extremely young, working in a very complex environment, dealing with quite demanding kids. The way you empower them is to give them responsibility and then you provide them with the training and we do what we can. So if anything comes up like behavioural issues then we sit down and we say well 'what can we do? How can we solve this?' It's that kind of model I use because otherwise, you couldn't survive here.²¹⁵

Despite the obstacles it has faced, Bracken ETNS has become a hugely popular and successful school. The school operates at maximum capacity, currently educating 404 pupils. When asked to reflect on the success of the school, Griffin described:

Well, the vision was that no matter the background of the children they were going to get as good of an education as we could possibly provide, that we would try to make it very inclusive, that the children would be valued, and that their identity for themselves would be celebrated. Now, I don't know what someone else would say but we think we are great. I will say from the point of view of integration, the community and the town we are getting used to each other.²¹⁶

McCutcheon attested:

...I think Bracken is very successful, and indeed it has also taken its own direction as well. It is very responsive to its school community. It is a thriving school and there would be other schools in the Balbriggan town that have continued to exist since Bracken and ourselves... and you can see them also experiencing the same difficulties that we would have experienced in our early days; and in one or two of those situations, they definitely would not have been as successful as Bracken has been in developing their services and developing a quality school.²¹⁷

McGovern explained:

...the huge work that has gone in by the principal and the staff there in terms of delivering a very excellent education for those children is commendable. I mean

Marian [Griffin], who took over for me, I mean her enthusiasm and commitment and all of these things absolutely commendable. I couldn't question them for a second and I guess when you look at the success criteria, I mean, the parents love the place, they are very happy.²¹⁸

|

Conclusions

The authors of this report have made several conclusions regarding lessons that can be learned from Bracken ETNS and steps that can be taken to help prevent a reoccurrence of a similar incident in the future.

Failure to Communicate

Better communication between both sides is paramount in preventing another shortage of school places. While the DES's accurate prediction of the need for an additional school remains disputed, better communication between DES officials, Balbriggan school administrators, and interested patron bodies may have resulted in the need for Bracken ETNS being discovered earlier. Balbriggan school principals reported communicating their growing concerns leading up to 2007; however, it is unclear if proper channels existed or were utilised to alert DES officials of the impending crisis. Moving forward, it is essential that communication lines between all parties involved in the education system remain open and clear and that effective and inclusive dialogue remain a priority between and among all those involved.

Lack of Forward Planning

Research suggests that the DES may have had difficulty in monitoring the growing populations and fluid demographic changes in the area. While the DES maintains that no contemporary methods existed to give sufficient warning, research indicates that there may have been adequate information available to anticipate such challenges. Even without taking into account the unprecedented levels of migration, the high birth rate in Ireland at the time should have been evidence enough for the need for more school places in the Balbriggan area. While it may have been impossible to avoid complications stemming from rapid population growth, future situations are more likely to be averted if planning bodies continue to expand the breadth and depth of their understanding of migration trends and population growth. By continuing to augment analytical capabilities, future officials can ensure access to ample time, resources, and information to enhance their planning capabilities. While the development of the GIS has helped to allay concerns of a recurrence, continued innovation remains necessary for the DES to predict and act on rapid growth.

In addition, it seems clear that the DES might have communicated externally with others in a more timely fashion. The time lag between the DES communication to Educate Together on June 25th and that of July 25th raises questions about whether the severity of the situation was clear. Research suggests that had planning for a new school commenced on June 6th (at the first notice from the DES), much of the difficulty Bracken ETNS faced could have been defrayed. While internal communication among the DES is unavailable for this time period (and thus one cannot fully examine the full appreciation of the DES for the situation), ensuring continued external contact with other parties can help avoid gaps in understanding in the future. In addition, the failure to announce a new school until August exacerbated the complexity of the situation; in the future, the expedition of external communication can help all parties involved recognise the severity of the issue and can ensure solutions are reached in a timely fashion.

Legislative Failure

There is much evidence that the policy context also contributed to the acuteness of the situation. The shortage of provision for additional school places with new housing developments illustrates that there may be a lack of concern to plan for and adjust to a newly growing population. Planning requirements for infrastructure expansion (including schools) alongside new housing developments could be put in place to help prevent a similar situation from occurring again.

Ineffective Education of Migrants

Research suggests that the immigrant population was not acutely made aware of their rights and responsibilities as residents in Ireland. Consequently, this may have prevented migrant children from entering the school system in a more orderly fashion. Moreover, the shortage of primary school places in Balbriggan contributed to an eventual breaking point scenario; such was observed in the area when new migrants realised their right and need for schooling and then flocked to schools in overwhelming numbers. This scenario was highlighted by the fact that seventeen older children, aged seven to twelve, entered Bracken ETNS upon its opening. While there is no way to confirm their residency in Ireland prior to 2007, this large number of older students indicates that many may not have been aware of their rights to schooling. Despite their age, it's possible many of these students had never been to school before. Better informing new residents of the legal requirements and procedures concerning education is essential to decrease the chance of further school shortage crises.

Role of Catholic Schools and the Gaelscoil in Balbriggan

It appears that the enrolment policies of other local Catholic Schools and the Gaelscoil are not, in themselves, responsible for the events in Balbriggan. Due to the unique mission of both school types, their primary goals involve education for a specific subset of the Irish population. Therefore, it is evident the onus to plan for additional school places for individuals falling outside of that subset cannot be placed onto the school itself.

While it is true that the patronage system allows organisations to utilise schools to promote a specialised faith-based message, such schools cannot be faulted for taking advantage of their legislative rights to do so. Whether the patronage system requires sweeping reform to correct this deficiency is a topic for a different debate. However, in the current context, denominational schools cannot be expected to abandon their enrolment policies in favour of doing the “right” thing (in this case, accommodating migrant children.)

Role of the Media

There is strong evidence that media coverage of the issue greatly enhanced awareness of the situation and raised several significant questions regarding the education system on a national level. In addition, media exposure may have played a role in dramatising the critical nature of the situation, which led to significant changes in the structure of the Irish education system. Media coverage also seems to have played a significant role in elevating Educate Together's status and reputation. Research suggests that Educate Together benefitted greatly from media coverage. The increased attention the organisation received may have helped it to grow and develop further than it would have on its own.

While several Educate Together staff members have indicated that the media presence distracted parents and children attending the school, many of those involved did not consider the media to be a significant hindrance. Indeed, some parents even remarked that media attention helped further their cause. It can be argued, therefore, that the role of media in the Bracken school opening was largely positive as it led to necessary legislative change without significantly disturbing the schooling environment.

Greater Context

Bracken ETNS brings to light many of the issues surrounding public schooling in Ireland and raises questions about the sustainability of the current model. Although the Balbriggan situation has not reoccurred since, issues seem to persist in planning for diversity and growth in educational provision in Ireland. Ireland's issues stemming from changing migration patterns into and out of the country have continued long after the collapse of the Celtic Tiger (and evidence suggests will continue to do so). Fresh efforts may need to be made to develop more inclusive approaches to education access in order to prevent further instances of educational inequality (as observed in Balbriggan in 2007). Research suggests that Ireland could revisit how it develops internal infrastructure and policies to better support a larger and more diverse body of students.

Overall Conclusions

Bracken ETNS's emergency opening in 2007 highlights the many challenges associated with accommodating rising immigrant numbers and the unusually high birth rate at the height of the Celtic Tiger. The event played a significant role in shaping the public's perception of migrant populations, the DES, and Educate Together as a national organisation. Accordingly, it appears as though each aforementioned group experienced dramatic changes as a result of the school's opening. Further exploration and follow-up is necessary for the continued understanding of the rapidly developing region of Balbriggan and how the area and others like it cope with new procedures introduced in a modern-day Ireland.

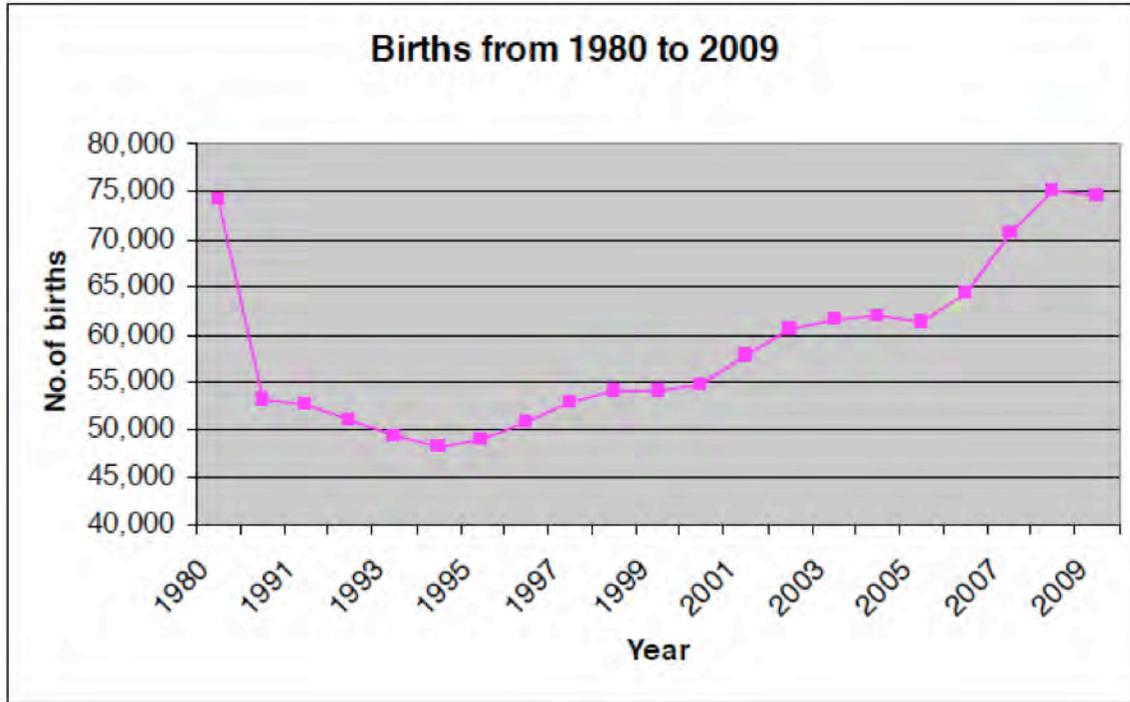
Appendix I: Complete List of Interview Subjects

- June 25th: Gerry McKeivitt- Current Regional Development Officer for Leinster North and former New Schools Officer for Educate Together.
- June 26th: Fintan McCutcheon- Current principal of Balbriggan ETNS, the other Educate Together primary school in Balbriggan.
- June 26th: Marian Griffin- Current principal of Bracken Educate Together National School.
- June 27th: Louise Daly- Current School Support Officer and former Team Assistant for Educate Together.
- July 5th: Paul Rowe- Current CEO of Educate Together and former member of Ardee Educate Together National School Board of Management.
- July 8th: Emma O’Kelly- Educational Correspondent at RTE.
- July 8th: Frieda McGovern- First principal of Bracken Educate Together National School.
- July 10th: Jack Smith and Sarah Wilson- Principal and Assistant Principal, respectively, for the Planning and Building Unit, Department of Education and Science.*
- July 19th: Four parents who sent their children to Bracken ETNS on its opening day and still have children involved in the school today.**
- July 19th: Three children who attended Bracken ETNS on its opening day, two of whom still attend the school today.**
- July 19th: Jillian Arcaya, Secretary of Bracken ETNS.

**Note: The names of these two civil servants have been changed to pseudonyms at their own request. All references have been updated to reflect the pseudonyms to protect the identities of these individuals.*

***Note: The names of these subjects have been omitted from this report due to privacy concerns.*

Appendix II: [Irish] Births from 1980 to 2009



Source: Central Statistics Office Ireland. Ireland Census. Web.

Appendix III: Proportion of Migrant Pupils in All Primary Schools (%)

Proportion of migrant pupils in all primary schools (%)

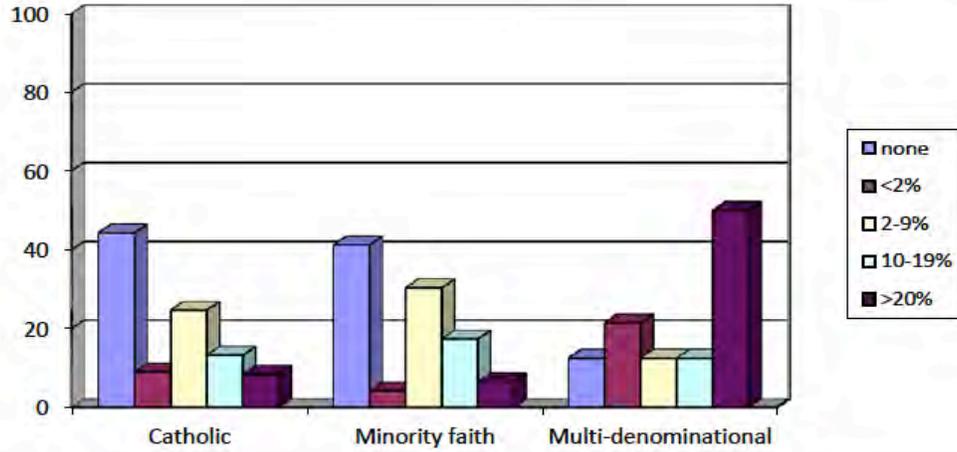
None	43.7
<2%	8.6
2-9%	25.4
10-19%	13.5
>20%	8.9
Total	100.0

Source: Adapting to Diversity

Source: Darmody, Merike, Emer Smyth, and Selina McCoy. School Sector Variation Among Primary Schools in Ireland. Rep. N.p.: Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2012. Print.

Appendix IV: Proportion of Migrant Pupils in Different School Types

Proportion of migrant pupils in different school types



Source: Adapting to Diversity study.

Source: Darmody, Merike, Emer Smyth, and Selina McCoy. School Sector Variation Among Primary Schools in Ireland. Rep. N.p.: Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2012. Print.

Appendix V: Belief Profile by School Sector

Belief profile by school sector

	Catholic	Minority faith	Multi-denominational
Faith background	Catholic schools predominantly Catholic (90% of children and 87% of mothers)	Mostly made up of 'other' religions with 30% of Catholic intake	Around half of pupils and their mothers Catholic, 19% from 'other' religions and 30% had no formal religious affiliation
Families with religious affiliation: frequent attendance at religious services	53% of children	47% of children	42% of children

Source: GUI data.

Source: Darmody, Merike, Emer Smyth, and Selina McCoy. School Sector Variation Among Primary Schools in Ireland. Rep. N.p.: Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2012. Print.

Appendix VI: Primary Schools in the 2010-2011 Academic Year

Primary schools in the 2010-2011 academic year

Catholic	2884	91.1%
Church of Ireland	180	5.7%
Multi-denominational ¹²	73	2.3%
Presbyterian	14	0.4%
Interdenominational	8	0.3%
Muslim	2	0.1%
Methodist	1	0.0%
Jewish	1	0.0%
Quaker	1	0.0%
Other/unknown	1	0.0
Total	3165	100

Source: www.education.ie.

Source: Darmody, Merike, Emer Smyth, and Selina McCoy. School Sector Variation Among Primary Schools in Ireland. Rep. N.p.: Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2012. Print.

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