Shared Education
The Views of Children and Young People
Children and Young People’s Report - 2013
What is this report about?

This report is about what children and young people think about shared education in schools and what ideas they have about how Government can improve shared education.

Shared education means different schools working together to share classes, activities, facilities or equipment.

What is NICCY?

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (also called NICCY) promotes and safeguards children’s rights and best interests. NICCY’s job is to make sure Government respects children’s rights and best interests. The Commissioner is Patricia Lewsley-Mooney and she has a team of people who help her in her work.

What are children’s rights?

Children’s rights are listed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (also called the UNCRC). The Government signed the UNCRC and has promised to respect children’s rights and make sure that all children can enjoy their rights.

The UNCRC protects different rights which are important for children. This includes rights to:

- Be safe and healthy.
- Be supported in their family or wherever they live.
- Get a proper education.
- Be heard and have their views taken seriously.
What is shared education?

Shared education means children from all different kinds of nursery, primary and post-primary schools learning together. This includes:

- Integrated schools and Irish-medium schools
- Special schools for children with disabilities
- Secondary schools and grammar schools
- Schools in towns and in the country
- Schools attended by pupils from different communities and religions

Government thinks shared education will help schools to:

- Give children a better choice of activities and classes.
- Make sure children meet other children they might not know.
- Help young people to learn about other schools.
- Help schools to share resources and save money.
Why has NICCY written this report?

Government has decided there should be more shared education in schools and NICCY wants to make sure Government listens to what children and young people think about shared education when it is planning how to do this.

Listening to children and taking what they say seriously is one of the rights Government has promised as part of the UNCRC.

Listening to children and young people

NICCY wanted to make sure as many children as possible had a chance to say what they thought about shared education. To make sure this happened NICCY did two things:

• Visited classes in 21 different schools to talk to over 750 children aged 8-10 years and 14-17 years. We went to lots of different types of schools in different parts of Northern Ireland so we could hear a whole range of different ideas.
• Worked with Queen’s University Belfast and the University of Ulster to send surveys to children aged 10-11 years and 16 years that over 5,300 children and young people filled in.

What NICCY asked children and young people

In visits to schools and in surveys we asked:

• What children and young people thought shared education was.
• What experience children had of shared education and what they thought about this.
• What ideas children had to improve shared education.

The surveys questions NICCY asked were part of the Kids Life and Times Survey and the Young Life and Times survey. You can find out more about by visiting:

http://www.ark.ac.uk/klt/ and http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt/
We found out that lots of children did not know what shared education was. In visits to schools:

- Most children in primary schools had not heard of shared education.
- About half of young people in post-primary schools had not heard of shared education.

Some children and young people went to schools which shared GCSE, ‘A’ Level or other exam classes with other schools or did shared activities outside school. Some children were already doing activities with other schools but did not know it was called shared education.

Children said shared education was:
- ‘People from different backgrounds all going to one school’
- ‘…different types of people in one school; different abilities and different religions’
- ‘To get to know other people’
- ‘We put two different religions together to see if we could work together’

We found out that shared education works differently in different schools.

- Most post-primary schools we visited had joint classes with other schools in subjects like Maths, Art and Childcare but not all pupils took part in these. Young people said there were also other activities like trips, visits and sports with other schools.

- In visits to primary schools most children had not taken part in shared education but over half of P7 children in the survey had visited another school to do activities, have classes or use equipment. This is because children in P7 often do more shared activities.

- Some primary schools like Irish-medium and preparatory schools talked less about having shared activities with other kinds of primary schools.
What children think about shared education

We found out that children had lots of different views about how shared education worked.

Lots of primary school children and most older young people said there were good things about shared education. In some schools, including an integrated school and a special school, young people were very positive.

In many of the schools we visited some children also talked about worries they had about shared education.

Learning about other schools

In visits to post-primary schools about a third of young people said that understanding more about other schools and different groups of children was a good thing.

‘You find out what it’s like at other schools – you hear for real’

‘It gives you a less biased view of what they are like’

‘[We can] teach each other things’

Getting a better education

Young people also said that sharing with other schools improved their learning, including being able to use better facilities and have different teachers. In school visits, being able to choose more subjects was important for lots of older young people.

‘It’s a good idea because some schools have better equipment for certain subjects so it makes sense to share them’

‘Gives people more subject options - unique opportunity’

‘I go to the Tech. It’s good to have a change of scenery’

‘There are not going to be people of just one academic, social class, religious background in the real world so it’s good to start doing this when you go to school’
Meeting new friends and bringing people together

This was a good thing that most children and young people talked about in visits to schools and in surveys. In visits, pupils from integrated schools talked about the importance of bringing different communities and groups together.

‘It’s not good to be separated’

‘I love meeting new people, going to schools’

‘It’s a good way to mix with pupils from other schools, make new friends with people who have a different background or religion to us’

‘It would be good as ... people from all different communities can come together to learn and it may break down barriers’

Good things about shared education
Bullying and prejudice
Some young people told us that when they went to other schools pupils said things because of their religion or because they went to a secondary school. In visits to some primary schools children talked a lot about being worried about bullying.

‘Sharing classes made us uncomfortable due to the religious comments they made’

‘According to the grammar school, we’re all chavs ... not as smart’

‘They seem to hate us’

Not getting to know other pupils properly
Children talked about pupils not mixing much with each other and said it was important to have a good range of shared classes and activities to help everyone join in.

‘... nobody talks to each other and we sit at opposite sides of the classroom’

‘People only talk during activities because they have to’

‘It was really awkward at lunchtimes as we just sat there and they all stared at us’

‘Everyone has their guard up’

Feeling singled out
Some children said it was easier when shared classes happened in their own school so they did not feel in a minority or when there was a good mix of pupils from different schools.

‘You feel like outcasts if you’re going to class and walking through and they look at you in a different uniform. People coming here would feel the same’

‘You could be too intimidated to share your ideas’

‘There’s only one other person from the other school in the class. Nineteen of us and one of him. Didn’t talk much’
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Worries about shared education

Practical problems
Children and young people talked about problems because of different timetables and travelling to other schools. Schools in country areas and a special school said that transport was an important issue for them.

‘It’s awkward because of the timetables. You have to get taxis ... so we have to cut the classes short here as they are a different length to classes there’

‘It’s hard because we’re so far out’

‘What will the financial costs be to the school ... to pupils?’

Not helping children to learn
A small number of children said shared education was not making a difference or could be worse for their classes. Some young people in grammar schools worried that shared classes might be a lower standard.

‘We wouldn’t miss them if [joint classes] stopped ... don’t need shared education’

‘... I don’t want to sound stuck up but they don’t push you there. We get better grades’
Important things for Government to think about

Children and young people said some of the worries they talked about could stop them wanting to get more involved in shared education. They said it is very important Government and schools help with issues like bullying and costs.

NICCY asked school principals and teachers about shared education during visits and they talked about lots of the same things as children. Some staff and children said Government should also listen to what parents and carers think.

Ideas to improve shared education

Children and young people had lots of ideas about how Government and schools should work together to make shared education better.

1. Start shared education earlier and help children more
   - Shared education should be started earlier in primary schools and all pupils should be able to take part.
   - Schools should talk to children about any worries they have, make sure children meet before they are in class together and do team activities.
   - Schools should agree rules or codes of conduct and teachers should know if someone has been bullied and make sure this does not happen again.
2. Plan shared education well

- Government should do more trials of shared education and some children said it would be good to have a ‘buddy’ or mentor scheme.
- Classes should be chosen carefully so they work well, for example, pupils in an Irish-medium school said they could do shared English classes and children said classes with group activities like sport and science would work.
- Problems with school timetables, travel and money should be sorted out. Some children also said that shared activities should be done in a place that does not belong to one school.
- Some young people said it was important that shared education was not just about main religions and that they wanted to mix with different nationalities, social classes and with children with disabilities.

3. Listen to children and young people

- Lots of children and young people said it was important for Government and schools to make sure they talk to children about shared education and involve them when they are making plans.

What Government should do

- When Government is planning shared education it should listen to all the ideas in this report.
- Government should make sure it tells children how it plans to have more shared education in schools.
- It is very important that Government asks children and young people more about shared education and listens to what they say.

What NICCY will do

- NICCY will talk to Government about this report and what children and young people want Government to do to make shared education better.
- NICCY will check on Government’s plans to have more shared education in schools and see if they have been involving children and young people in their decisions.
Thank you!

NICCY would like to thank all the children and young people who talked to us when we visited schools or who filled in surveys. We would also like to thank the principals and staff at schools we visited.

We have also written a bigger report about this consultation. You can find out more about this and NICCY’s work by contacting us:

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Please contact the Communications team at NICCY if you require alternative formats of this material.