

SHARED EDUCATION AND INTEGRATED EDUCATION INQUIRY NI ASSEMBLY EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Evidence from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)

Introduction

Shared Education constituted a significant commitment in the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government (2011-15). This was detailed through a series of key objectives, including the establishment of a ministerial advisory group to bring forward recommendations to the Minister to advance shared education. Two objectives also stated, that by 2015, all children would have the opportunity to participate in shared education and the number of schools sharing facilities would have substantially increased. A further priority was that there would be significant progress on plans for the Lisanelly shared education campus. There was no reference to integrated education within the Programme for Government.

The Department of Education (DE) asserts that the provision of opportunities for children and young people from different types of schools to learn together through shared education has the potential to deliver a range of educational benefits to learners, to promote good relations, respect for diversity and social cohesion and to promote the efficient use of facilities and resources.¹ However, while shared education has been recognised as a step in the right direction, concerns have been expressed that it will not achieve a fully inclusive and integrated system which brings together children of all abilities and religions and none². Reviews of current DE policies have suggested that integrated education has been 'superceded' by shared education and that the wider political focus is now on

¹ <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Official-Report/Committee-Minutes-of-Evidence/Session-2013-2014/July-2014/Inquiry-into-Integrated-and-Shared-Education-Department-of-Education-Briefing/>

² <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/debateni/blogs/steven-agnew/i-have-a-dream-today-but-the-reality-of-shared-education-in-northern-ireland-is-a-nightmare-30014590.html>.

education policies which plan for separate schools development rather than 'structural change and a unified system of common schools'.³

This paper by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) will highlight key findings emerging from a consultation conducted by her Office with children and young people concerning their views and experiences of shared education. The focus of the consultation was very much on shared education however pupils and teachers from integrated schools participated therefore some reference is made to integrated education too.

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

The Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was created in accordance with 'The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order' (2003) to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Under Articles 7(2)(3) of this legislation, NICCY has a mandate to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people by relevant authorities. The remit of the Office is children and young people from birth up to 18 years, or 21 years, if the young person is disabled or in the care of social services.

In determining how to carry out her functions, the Commissioner's paramount consideration is the rights of the child and NICCY is required to base all its work on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)⁴. The UNCRC is a comprehensive, international human rights treaty which enshrines specific children's rights and defines universal principles and standards for the treatment and status of children around the world.

The UNCRC and the Committee on the Rights of the Child

Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC contain key provisions which detail a rights-based approach to education. Article 28 is primarily concerned with the right of access to education, on the basis of equality of opportunity. Article 29 of the UNCRC addresses the aims of education and the benefits that every child should

³http://www.unescocentre.ulster.ac.uk/pdfs/pdfs_unesco_centre_publications/2013_04_whatever_happened_to_integrated_education.pdf;

<http://news.tes.co.uk/b/opinion/2014/07/23/the-growing-pains-of-integrated-schooling-in-northern-ireland-is-a-lesson-for-england-after-trojan-horse.aspx>

⁴ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>

be able to enjoy as a consequence of their right of access to education. This is of particular relevance to the provision of shared education, as it states that the education of children and young people should be directed towards preparing them for responsible life in a free society, in a spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of gender, and friendship. Article 29 also requires that Government directs education towards the development of children's personalities, talents and mental and physical abilities. In parallel to this, it also states that children and young people's education should be directed towards respect for their parents, their cultural identity, and the cultural identity of others. The aims of shared education which are associated with the promotion of equality of identity, respect of diversity and community cohesion may be perceived as supporting the realisation of the rights enshrined in Article 29.

In its Concluding Observations in 2002, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which oversees the implementation of the UNCRC, welcomed the development of integrated schools in Northern Ireland, but recorded its concerns that, at that time, only approximately 4% of schools were integrated and education remained largely segregated. It recommended that the Government increase the budget for, and take appropriate measures to facilitate the establishment of additional integrated schools in Northern Ireland. In its next report in 2008, the Committee reiterated its concerns that 'segregated education was still in place' and recommended that the Government take measures to address this situation.

Since that Report, the proportion of integrated schools in Northern Ireland has risen slightly to 7% with an estimated pupil population of 22,000.⁵ Recent commentaries suggest that demand currently outstrips provision and a number of integrated schools have applied to increase their intakes⁶. A variety of stakeholders have also called upon DE to meet its statutory responsibility to promote integrated education, as laid out in the 1989 Education Reform Order, and to respond positively to calls to expand places in integrated schools.

⁵ http://www.deni.gov.uk/enrolments_in_schools_1314_-_february_release_-_final_rev.pdf

⁶ http://www.ark.ac.uk/publications/books/fio/10_fio-education.pdf
<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/parents-demand-800-increase-in-integrated-primary-school-places-29367225.html>
<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/school-heads-rail-at-catholic-sectors-dig-at-integrated-education-30685222.html>

Shared Education: NICCY's Report of the Views of Children and Young People

NICCY conducted its consultation with pupils between October 2012 and January 2013). The Consultation provided interesting and reflective insights into pupils' experiences, and their ideas about how shared education might be most effectively taken forward.

Decisions regarding the further planning and development of shared education provision should be informed by the views and experiences of those who will be most directly impacted. NICCY would therefore strongly advocate that pupils of all ages, from every type of school in Northern Ireland are consulted in a meaningful way and that their feedback contributes to the further development and implementation of shared education. NICCY is aware that the Department of Education plans to seek feedback from pupils on a biennial basis. It will be important that pupils of all ages are enabled through effective mechanisms to share their experiences and provide advice regarding how provision should be reviewed or changed.

Background

As highlighted above, the Department of Education established a Ministerial Advisory Group to explore and bring forward recommendations to the Minister of Education to advance shared education in Northern Ireland. In line with her statutory duty to 'keep under review, the adequacy and effectiveness of services provided for children and young persons by relevant authorities,' the Commissioner offered to assist the Minister by consulting with children and young people to explore their views and experiences of shared education, with the intention of ensuring that these were effectively incorporated into the Ministerial Advisory Group's report. An interim report was duly forwarded to the Advisory Group in February 2013 and a final Report of the Consultation findings was published in April 2013.

Approach to the Consultation

NICCY wished to ensure that as many children and young people as possible were able to participate, therefore the consultation involved two strands:

- Workshops with primary age pupils (8-10 years) and post-primary age pupils (14-17 years) and;

- Surveys completed by children aged 10-11 years and young people aged 16 years.

For the surveys, two modules of questions relating to pupils' attitudes and experiences of shared education, were commissioned from ARK, a joint initiative between The Queen's University, Belfast and the University of Ulster.⁷ ARK conducts annual surveys of P7-age pupils through the Kids' Life and Times (KLT) survey⁸ and 16 year olds, through the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey⁹. The questions included in the KLT and YLT surveys on shared education and area-based planning were devised by NICCY in partnership with members of the ARK team. The module of questions was very similar in both surveys in order to facilitate comparisons between the different age groups of respondents.

Alongside the surveys, 38 workshops were conducted in 21 schools across Northern Ireland involving more than 750 primary, post-primary and special school pupils. During the school visits, interviews were also conducted with principals and/or members of staff in order to contextualise pupils' responses and where necessary to clarify factual information reported. The interviews also enhanced the research team's understanding of any relevant issues facing a school and the community context in which it was located. A key objective was to ensure that pupils from as many school types as possible were able to participate, and care was taken to ensure that the sample of schools recruited, was as representative of the various school types in Northern Ireland as possible. Eight of the ten post-primary schools selected, were involved in shared education initiatives through their membership of area learning communities or involvement in the Sharing Education Programme (The Queen's University, Belfast) or Shared Education Programme (The Fermanagh Trust)¹⁰.

The workshops explored pupils' awareness, understanding and experiences of shared education and their views regarding how it should be progressed. They were encouraged to identify opportunities and activities which they believed would be enjoyable and beneficial and to highlight any barriers which they felt might dissuade pupils from taking part. Pupils' perceptions of the importance of children

⁷ <http://www.ark.ac.uk/>

⁸ <http://www.ark.ac.uk/klt/>

⁹ <http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt/>

¹⁰ It is important to note however that pupils from these schools who participated in the workshops were not necessarily involved in shared education.

and young people from different schools and backgrounds learning together were explored and to conclude, pupils were invited to identify any issues which they believed Government should consider in taking shared education forward. Recognising the relevance of area-based planning to shared education and potential impact of the proposals on schools and pupils, the sample cohort was also asked to share their views on this issue¹¹. Quotes from pupils who participated in the workshops are presented in the findings below.

FINDINGS

Recognition of the term 'shared education'

When asked if they recognised the term 'shared education'; less than 50% of post-primary pupils indicated that it was familiar to them¹². For those who did recognise it, this was usually due to their knowledge of, or participation in shared classes. Very few primary pupils were aware of the concept, although after further explanation, they identified a range of activities, including projects and trips, which they believed constituted shared education. This was not unexpected, given the age range of pupils, the fact that the term may not have been widely used in schools and that a significant proportion of primary pupils consulted, indicated that they had not participated in shared education. Post-primary pupils' experiences were in many cases linked to their participation in shared classes, although other forms of 'shared' activities were also identified, such as joint residential or day trips and shared sports facilities or transport. The potential for pupils to participate in shared activities appeared to be influenced by a number of factors, including the subjects they studied, their class or year group and their involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Experiences of shared education

Children and young people who had taken part in shared classes or activities expressed a diverse range of opinions regarding their experiences. Both primary and post-primary pupils welcomed the opportunity to interact and make friends with pupils from other schools, experience different learning approaches and to gain insights into other schools, although as noted earlier, primary pupils had significantly fewer experiences of shared education;

¹¹ For the sake of brevity, this issue is not explored in the current paper, however details of pupils' responses may be found at http://www.niccy.org/downloads/2013/publications/Adult_Report.pdf (p.59).

“I think 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” [post-primary pupil]

“It was more fun and you got to talk to different people” [primary pupil]

“It’s interesting to see other schools” [special school pupil]

“It gives you a less biased view of what they [*other schools*] are like” [post-primary pupil].

A clear benefit of shared classes identified by post-primary pupils was the expanded choice of subjects available to them at Key Stage 4 and ‘A’ Level.

“Gives people more subject options – unique opportunity” [post-primary pupil]

“Without [*School X*] I wouldn’t be able to do my...course...but I would rather do it in a school of the same religion” [post-primary pupil].

Less positive experiences of shared education were also reported by some pupils. These had arisen through pupils having only limited or negative interactions with young people from other schools, from a sense of being in the minority or of feeling ‘out of place’ when attending classes in other schools;

“Joint classes are a bit awkward. We all sit at one table – don’t really mix with pupils from [*the other school*]” [post-primary pupil]

“Children from the other school mustn’t like us. They swear and put their fingers up” [primary pupil]

“I felt really crap and just sat there...I didn’t talk to anyone in the class for two years” [post-primary pupil]

“You feel like outcasts if you’re going to class and walking through [*the school*] and they look at you in a different uniform” [post-primary pupil].

A number of logistical issues, including transport and timetabling also impacted on pupils' experiences;

“It’s awkward because of the timetables. You have to get taxis to [School X] so we have to cut short classes here as they are a different length to classes there...” [post-primary pupil]

Therefore, while a majority of pupils spoke positively about shared education, a significant minority gave quite negative accounts of their engagement with other schools.

Taking Shared Education Forward...Identifying Effective Practice

During the consultation, children and young people were asked to think about the kind of approaches and activities which they believed would be effective in undertaking shared education. Pupils shared a wide range of ideas whilst also identifying a number of challenges which they felt should be addressed. A significant majority of respondents in the KLT and YLT surveys agreed that shared projects, classes and facilities were a good idea. Eighty-six percent of sixteen year olds completing the YLT survey agreed that joint projects were a good idea while 72% noted that joint classes were a positive initiative. Fifty-nine percent of P7 pupils thought joint classes were a good idea and 73% felt similarly about joint projects.

Pupils participating in the consultation workshops called for more collaborative learning approaches to be employed, and for additional subjects and activities to be included;

“Group work and more mixing activities...would make it more enjoyable” [post-primary pupil]

“Find out about them...find out about their thoughts...get to know them” [primary pupil]

“Technology, Art, PE, Science and Music – you could do them with other people better” [post-primary pupil]

“We could link up with pupils studying ‘A’ level Irish in English medium schools” [Irish Medium School pupil].

They also highlighted the importance of introducing shared education at an early stage in a child's schooling, undertaking preparation in advance of shared learning activities and consulting with pupils about their experiences.

"Mixing at primary school would be better than at secondary as by that stage people have framed opinions and been influenced by parents" [post-primary pupil]

"Team bonding should be essential beforehand" [post-primary pupil]

"You need to talk it through before you start" [special school pupil].

A number of pupils in schools who had limited or no experience of shared education argued that classes or activities involving similar types of school to the one they attended, would be more appropriate. Most pupils however advocated for pupils from all kinds of schools and backgrounds to join together in shared education activities. One primary pupil suggested; "We should join with people not as fortunate as us and people who have special needs".

Taking Shared Education forward...potential barriers and challenges

As well as highlighting opportunities for shared education, pupils were asked if they thought there were any barriers which might dissuade young people from participating in shared education activities. In response, some students, mostly at post-primary level, acknowledged that they held particular views about other schools and pupils, relating to academic ability, cross-community issues, standards of behaviour, and the increased potential for bullying. In the KLT and YLT surveys, by far the most common concern expressed by respondents was the possibility of having to share their education with children or young people who were considered to be 'nasty', 'disruptive' or 'annoying'. Sixty-eight percent of respondents to the KLT survey highlighted this as did 75% of YLT respondents. Similarly, workshop participants referenced this concern alongside a number of other issues;

"I don't like the fact that if another school joins with us...we will have bullies...the bullies will spread when we do shared education"
[primary pupil]

“I don’t want to sound stuck-up but they don’t push you there. We get better grades” [post-primary grammar pupil]

“Think about the complexities between Protestants and Catholics – it’s ok at certain schools but not all” [post-primary integrated pupil]

“Some people mightn’t like other schools and just want to be friends with ones in their own school” [primary pupil].

Logistical issues, including travel arrangements, timetabling and different school rules were cited by many post-primary pupils (as well as principals and teachers), as a significant barrier;

“It would just take forever to get there” [post-primary pupil]

“You would have to set consequences for anyone from a different school if they did anything bad” [primary pupil].

The consultation with participants clearly identified opportunities for and barriers to shared education. Pupils provided candid feedback but also sought, where possible, to suggest measures which might address some perceived or actual difficulties.

Sharing with Pupils from different types of School

During the consultation, pupils were asked if they thought it was important for pupils from different schools and backgrounds to have an opportunity to learn together. A majority of pupils from all school types generally concurred with this proposal. Indeed in a number of workshops, pupils contended that the aim of shared education should not be restricted to bringing pupils from the two dominant religious traditions together but rather, involve pupils from **all** different types of schools. However pupils also acknowledged the challenges of promoting shared education between particular school types. In every workshop conducted in a grammar school, pupils expressed reservations about collaborative learning with pupils from non-selective schools. These reservations concerned the academic ability and behaviour of pupils in non-selective schools and the standard of teaching; “I want to be sure I pick subjects where the standard of teaching is good...too risky to move *[to another school]*” [grammar school pupil]. Similarly some pupils attending non-selective schools felt that grammar pupils would regard

them as being “less able” and therefore be reluctant to become learning partners; “It’s how they view us. Because we’re not grammar, we’re not as smart” [non-selective school pupil].

Pupils attending special schools were generally very keen to engage with pupils from other schools. While sometimes acknowledging they were “a little nervous going somewhere new”, pupils were “happy to meet pupils from other schools...anywhere, any age...” When asked about shared education opportunities with pupils from special schools, mainstream primary and post-primary school pupils generally welcomed the opportunity. Respondents did however highlight a number of issues which they felt needed to be considered in advance of any shared activities, including the potential for bullying and accidents, logistical difficulties, and the challenge to teachers to effectively teach all pupils together.

Irish medium school pupils reflected on the challenges they would encounter through collaborative learning with English medium schools where there would be limited opportunities for them to speak Irish. Some said they would be happy to learn in English while others were not; “It’d be pointless to learn a subject in English if you are doing all the rest of your education in Irish” [Irish-medium school pupil]. Integrated school pupils expressed a willingness to engage with pupils from all types of schools although some felt that pupils from other schools did not “fully understand” integrated schools. They believed however, that their experiences and the *modus operandi* in integrated schools could helpfully support other pupils to participate effectively in shared education. As one integrated school pupil proposed; “...if we met with other schools we could set an example”.

Principals’ and teachers’ responses echoed some of the views expressed by pupils, particularly in terms of the opportunities to build relationships and the logistical challenges associated with arranging shared education activities including timetabling constraints and requirements regarding curriculum delivery. Additional challenges included the availability of funding, promoting shared education through cross-community links and for a minority of teachers, the management of staff and parents’ concerns.

Further comments from pupils about these issues and area-based planning are documented in the Report. Copies were forwarded to members of the NI Assembly Education Committee last year. It may also be accessed at http://www.niccy.org/downloads/2013/publications/Adult_Report.pdf

Reviewing the Findings

From the consultation, it was evident that shared education in post-primary schools was often associated with enhanced curriculum provision at GCSE and 'A' level and the opportunity then for pupils in Years 11-14 to participate in joint classes with other schools. A few post-primary pupils also referred to shared school facilities or taking part in shared activities, such as sports or drama. In primary schools, pupils' experiences of shared education were generally through joint projects or trips with other schools. In some of the primary school workshops, pupils indicated that participation in shared activities had only been available to pupils in other year groups. The objective of shared activities in many primary schools, was to encourage cross-community contact, and where it occurred, the impetus arose from a principal's or teacher's desire to actively engage with other primary schools through new or existing collaborative working relationships. Given the commitment in the Programme for Government for all children to have the opportunity to participate in shared education by 2015, significant efforts will be required to expand provision across all year groups in primary, post-primary and special schools if this is to be realised.

The consultation with pupils through the workshops and surveys, demonstrated that many pupils recognised the value of shared education and potential benefits it afforded in relation to learning and social integration. Many of those who had experienced shared education gave positive accounts of their participation in joint classes and activities, however a significant minority professed to having more mixed experiences. Some pupils described collaborative activities and joint classes as being 'shared' but 'separate' due to the fact that pupils had remained within their own school or friendship groups and interaction with pupils from other schools had been limited. Others referred to the uncomfortable experience of being in a minority when attending classes in another school and to the logistical challenges associated with the delivery of shared educational provision.

It will be important that the objectives of 'shared education' are sufficiently clarified and that pupils are encouraged and supported to be genuine and equal collaborators. As shared education is taken forward, there should be a focus on ensuring that quality learning experiences are available to all pupils. Where they have concerns and where difficulties arise, appropriate mechanisms should be put in place (e.g. school councils, buddy systems), so that pupils can be facilitated to raise issues and be confident that they will be dealt with sensitively and effectively.

From the findings, it was evident that some post-primary pupils' attitudes to shared education, particularly those who had less experience, were strongly influenced by their perceptions of other schools and pupils. Perceived differences in pupils' ability and religion influenced their views and desire to engage in shared learning initiatives. In some cases, these views had been strongly influenced by the views of parents and teachers. If shared education is to be regarded as a positive learning opportunity, there is a clear need to confront and challenge such preconceptions. Evidently, one of the most effective ways to do this is to involve pupils in positive shared learning initiatives, however it will also be important to consider other measures which may alleviate pupils' concerns and challenge negative perceptions, prior to their participation.

The consultation clarified issues pertaining to specific school types which should be considered more closely. Irish-medium school pupils were keen to engage in shared initiatives however the challenge of providing dual medium activities or classes have, thus far, served as a barrier to their inclusion. Principals of Irish medium schools were keen that the Department of Education consider how their schools could be included in shared education initiatives as it moves forward. The inclusion of special schools in shared learning initiatives was evidently regarded as more challenging by some pupils and teachers. Therefore, it will also be important to consider how mainstream schools can collaborate most effectively with special schools and manage any logistical and practical issues which may arise. As also noted, pupils and teachers in grammar schools expressed reservations about the benefits of joint learning initiatives with pupils attending non-selective schools, due to perceived differences in academic ability and behaviour standards. The perspectives of pupils and staff in integrated schools were quite distinctive. While many welcomed opportunities to engage in collaborative learning with other schools, they emphasised that pupils and staff were already part of an effective shared learning environment. Pupils felt that their experiences of being part of an integrated school could helpfully support other schools engaged in shared education initiatives.

If schools are to provide shared education in line with the broad and diverse remit outlined in the Department of Education's definition, this will create significant and specific challenges for some. Careful consideration should be given to ensuring that all schools are supported appropriately and effectively in their efforts to provide positive and meaningful shared experiences which are also educationally and socially valuable.

NICCY would like to thank the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee for the invitation to submit a written response to its inquiry into Shared Education and Integrated Education.

Should you require any further information concerning this submission, please contact Dr. Alison Montgomery at Alison@niccy.org or 02890 316185.