

Speech by the Koulla Yiasouma, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, at the South Belfast Partnership Board on 27 March 2015



A Celebration of what's good in Education in South Belfast

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Introduction

Welcome the opportunity to participate in this conference particularly this early on in my term, as educational inequalities is going to be one of the key issues I shall be concentrating on over the next four year. So I am going to take the opportunity to set out my stall with regards to the issues I am thinking about with regards to education for the whole of NI.

Not only do I want to thank and congratulate SBPB for arranging this conference and addressing these important issues by having such a positive focus – sharing, celebrating and transforming. It is so important that we take the opportunity to acknowledge the many positive aspects of our education system, the benefits and opportunities provided to children and young people through the work of teachers, classroom assistants, school managers and Boards of Governors - essentially all of those involved in the provision of

education. Too often the focus is on what is wrong – and there are of course shortcomings but there are also enormous benefits in identifying and sharing good practice.

I want to applaud SBPB's Strategic Regeneration Framework which recognises that education must be reflective of local community needs alongside those of wider society. It is so important that the community has a sense of ownership of its education provision and has a significant role in planning and monitoring its delivery so that it meets the diverse needs of the local population – in terms of age, gender, social and cultural background, I believe the focus on family engagement in education is a critical one – involvement of families in a child's education from the earliest years has shown to have positive outcomes for the child's development and for family relationships.

Community engagement in education is similarly important. This is seen in support provided to local schools, the use of school facilities through extended school policies, and the sharing of good practice, evidence of effective learning and resources.

It's an old adage but a successful education system comes from an effective partnership of school, home and community.

Children's Rights

NICCY's work is governed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which is an international human rights treaty that grants all children and young people a comprehensive set of rights which the UK ratified in December 1991.

The Convention contains a comprehensive set of rights covering a wide range of issues, including health and development, education, freedom of thought and association, protection from violence, exploitation and abuse and respect for the views of the child. As the body legally tasked with promoting and protecting all 42 rights I must emphasise how important they all are and what I have highlighted here are the guiding principles of the UNCRC.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child examines every government on their progress and the reporting process for the UK is currently underway with examination next year. NICCY, along with the other three UK Commissioners is compiling a report on our assessment of the Government's performance against the UNCRC and it will not be a surprise that education will be part of that report and if I have my way a significant part of the process.

The report will contain an assessment on progress against the recommendations and observation of the last examination in 2008. As you can see not only did the Committee mention pupil participation, complaints, bullying and school suspensions and exclusion as issues across the 4 nations but they made two specific recommendations for NI. They described segregation as the problem it is and they are clearly frustrated at our lack of ability to resolve the academic selection issue. Let's not forget that our education system is not only segregated on the basis of religion but social class and gender.

NICCY is also required to promote an understanding and awareness of rights particularly amongst children and young people themselves. In the Kids' Life and Times and Young Life and Times surveys issued in 2014, we asked children and young people if they learned about children's rights at school. 72% of P7 pupils and 58% of 16 year olds said they had. When asked if they felt this had helped them to speak up about their rights in school, 59% of P7 pupils and 41% of 16 year olds agreed that it had. These responses are encouraging – clearly many schools are talking to pupils about their rights and what they mean for them. However, there is room for improvement and NICCY will continue to support schools and teachers to promote the UNCRC and a greater understanding of what children's rights mean in practice.

Pupils' views of Education

Naturally we are always interested to know what children and young people think about education and their views and experiences of school or further education. These will be key in assisting me frame our position on the key education issues and inform advice to government. In engaging directly with children and young people I have consistently found them to be very reflective, honest and articulate. They have also been very reasonable, creative and innovative when providing solutions or suggestions for improvement.

As I have said we commissioned ARK at Queen's and University of Ulster to consult with children and young people about their experiences of education. Specifically we asked them about **Article 29** of the UNCRC - the goals of education. Pupils were therefore asked if they thought that the things they learned at school helped them to develop their talents and abilities, to make decisions, to resolve conflict, to be healthy, to maintain positive relationships, to develop critical thinking skills and to encourage their creative talents.

Overall, children and young people were very positive. As you can see primary pupils were particularly positive with the majority either 'agreeing' or 'strongly agreeing' that their school had contributed to helping them develop these abilities and skills. Responses varied according to the ability or skill being addressed, however in each case the majority of pupils agreed or strongly agreed that their school had helped them develop abilities or skills. We also asked children and young people if they felt important in their school –did they feel they mattered? This was not as promising. This question is a significant one and while the responses from children and young people demonstrate that many teachers and schools do make pupils feel valued, surely we should be aiming for a number in the high 90s (%wise). All of our children must feel important in school. It goes to the fundamental question of who is school for?

The survey also asked children and young people if they believed that what they had learned in school had helped them to deal with challenges arising in their lives. 33% of 16 year olds and 30% of P7 pupils answered 'Yes' to this question and when asked which particular issues these were, 1,700 young people gave a wide range of responses but the general themes included the ones you see on the overhead:

- having a better understanding and control of their emotions
- better equipped to deal with stress and relationships
- learning tactics to deal with bullying,
- receiving support in cases of family breakdown, bereavement
- developing increased confidence, self-belief and independent thinking skills
- being supported in learning and preparation for exams
- providing a better perspective on life.

The next slide captures some of their comments from the survey

We all know that young people's ability to learn is greatly impacted on what is going on for them outside of school as well as inside and many children and young people value their schools and the support and encouragement offered to them by teachers. Children and young people are clearly willing to turn to teachers and other staff for help and guidance when difficult issues arise in their lives or when they face challenges with their learning. However I am aware that this places additional pressures on the school community, requiring teachers and other staff to adopt many roles. It is important we acknowledge and celebrate the positive contribution which many teachers make in the lives of our

children but it is not reasonable to ask them to be educators, mentors, social workers, behaviour therapists and confidantes unsupported. This is where other statutory agencies have a role and of course the voluntary and community based organisations which are particularly vibrant here in South Belfast.

Inequalities in Education

My biggest concern by far, is the intolerable educational inequalities that exist in educational access and attainment in NI as a range of different groups of children continue to encounter barriers to and gaps in educational services and support. NICCY has been monitoring government action and responses to these children's needs for some time and will continue to do so.

I am aware that South Belfast has a very diverse population. There are significant socio-economic disparities where there are areas of deprivation alongside very affluent areas.¹ The 2014 Neighbourhood Renewal Measure of Outcomes Report on Inner South Belfast indicated:

- Underperformance against current literacy and numeracy target and that the absence rate of primary and post-primary school children has remained consistently high

But

- On a positive note, that no young person left schools with no GCSEs.

The challenges facing children with special educational needs accessing services and support have been well documented. These relate to delays in the assessment of children's needs, inadequate numbers of educational psychologists and a systematic failure to specify and quantify the nature of support to be provided. The Minister of Education has just introduced a Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Bill to the Assembly which aims to introduce legislative changes in support of a policy for a revised SEN and inclusion framework. NICCY will be carefully assessing these legislative proposals and the implications for children and young people.

¹ <http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/nra-inner-south-belfast-mor-2014.pdf>

Similarly well-documented are the low levels of achievement amongst Protestant boys from lower socio-economic backgrounds. A report published by the Community Relations Council last year indicated that less than 20% of Protestant boys who are in receipt of Free School Meals, achieve five GCSEs at A* to C2.

This is a considerably lower level of achievement compared with other pupil groups and in particular with Catholic girls, 77% of whom achieved five GCSEs at A* to C. A variety of research reports, working groups and international studies have identified the strong correlation between social disadvantage and low educational attainment³. Whilst the Minister has acknowledged that the 'levels of inequality in the education system remain unacceptably high'.⁴ and has sought to address this by introduction policies and providing additional funding and service to schools serving higher proportions of disadvantaged pupils too many young people continue to leave school with inadequate educational attainment. The gap between the haves and have nots is unacceptable.

The nature of educational provision for pupils in alternative education settings has also been a focus for NICCY. This includes young people in alternative education programmes (EOTAS) and young people currently detained in secure settings. Alternative community embedded education provision is vital for a small number of children to support them to reach their potential but effective links must be established with, mainstream schools and that pupils are effectively supported to re-integrate into their schools.

Regardless of where a child is being educated they must have access to the NI Curriculum, independent advocacy and be enabled to take complaints or be engaged in the decisions made about their learning and care.

I mentioned young people leaving school with little or no educational attainment and who feel excluded and on the fringe often being described as (NEET) not being in education, training or employment. Recently released figures indicate that 13.2% of 16-24 year olds are in this category⁵. These young people may have experienced a wide range of challenges in their young lives, encountering numerous barriers from early childhood. They

² http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/nipmr_2014-03.pdf

³ <http://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/CentreforSharedEducation/Filestore/Filetoupload.490612.en.pdf>

'Purvis Group' 2011: Educational disadvantage and the Protestant working Class: A Call to Action'

⁴ <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/ni/?id=2014-05-06.4.1>

⁵ <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news-del-280214-support-vital-for>

may include being care experienced, have been bullied, have a physical or learning disability, have or had mental health problems, been in contact with the criminal justice system, have experience of drug or alcohol abuse or grown up in challenging family or community settings. There is also a need for more effective integration of services and support through better inter-departmental and inter-agency working. This would achieve greater collaborative working and more effective information sharing. The Department of Employment and Learning has demonstrated good intent in addressing these issues although I would question the efficacy of some of their most recent decisions in supporting young people to enter education, employment or training in a sustainable way. Issues I will be addressing directly with the Minister.

It is critical that the provision of support and opportunities for young people takes into account the wider issues impacting on them. Young people who are outside of education, training or employment may have little self-confidence or resilience. They may experience anxiety or depression and have difficulties committing to or sustaining their involvement in programmes. Also many families may not have access to appropriate support networks. There is therefore a need to think about such young people in a 'holistic' sense – to consider the multiplicity of issues affecting them and the profound impact these have on them and on their ability to engage in education. Community based and often community run family support and youth organisations, in particular play a critical part in this.

Shared Education

Now to shared education, something that I, personally, have yet to form a clear position on even though this is an issue which NICCY has been working on for several years. The Office acknowledges the benefits for pupils from different backgrounds, communities and schools having opportunities to learn together and develop a greater understanding of each other – their differences and similarities.

The diverse population of South Belfast with families coming from many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds reminds us that shared education more than catholic or protestant and I am aware that the SBPB has provided support to families through the development of a 'Parents' Guide to Starting School' produced in various languages. NICCY conducted a consultation with pupils in primary, post-primary and special schools across Northern Ireland in late 2012, about their experiences and views of shared education. This work provided interesting and valuable insights into pupils' experiences, and their ideas about how shared education might be most effectively taken forward.

Many gave positive accounts of their participation in joint classes and activities, referring to opportunities to positive learning experiences in other schools and the opportunities to make new friends, however a significant minority⁶ described having more mixed experiences, where interaction with children from other schools had been negative or limited.

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. Pupils offered many constructive suggestions in this regard. NICCY would therefore advocate that pupils of all ages, from every type of school in Northern Ireland can contribute to the further development and implementation of shared education.

It is important that the objectives of 'shared education' are sufficiently clarified and that children and young people are encouraged and supported to be genuine and equal collaborators. As shared education is taken forward, it will be essential that quality learning experiences are provided to all pupils, and that all schools are supported appropriately and effectively in their efforts to provide positive and meaningful educational and social sharing experiences.

Of course the school system in NI is facing considerable challenges, not least the area planning process which the Department of Education is undertaking with the intention of 'ensuring that the education service is efficient and effective and makes the best use of available resources'⁷

I am aware that the draft area plans for South Belfast have included proposed school amalgamations⁸ and the Belfast Education and Library Board has also identified significant numbers of unfilled places across schools within the Board area.

All of these brings challenges for teachers, parents and communities and can be unsettling and difficult for children. I believe that all change processes need to be well planned,

⁶ Around 40% of pupils who participated in the workshops and who had taken part in shared education initiatives described having had mixed experiences (38 workshops convened with 750+ pupils across NI)

⁷ http://www.deni.gov.uk/area_planning_guidance_-_issued_14_february_2012.pdf

⁸ BELB (June 2014) Fane Street, Donegall Road and Blythefield Primary School have been proposed for amalgamation.

communicated effectively to all stakeholders and handled sensitively by the Departments, BELB and all those making key decisions. Children must of course be at the heart of such change and their rights and best interests must be the key focus throughout.

What I will say in conclusion is that there are many wonderful things about the education system in NI generally and in South Belfast particularly but what I know is that gaps are too big and to quote Goretti Horgan too much money is spent on maintaining a system segregated on the lines of gender, religion and social class. This is an untenable position and one which I will be focussing on during my term.

Thank you.