

Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF)
Response to the Integrated Education Bill (2021)



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1. Introduction

The vast majority of children and young people in Northern Ireland are educated separately within the Catholic Maintained or the Controlled sectors. The discourse surrounding integrated education in Northern Ireland has however been given renewed attention, due to the 'integrated Education Bill' (2021) introduced in Stormont. In essence, the main premise of integrated education is to educate Catholic and Protestant children and young people together within the same school, therefore generating respect, understanding and tolerance of different cultures, identities, and religious beliefs.

The Integrated Education Bill makes provision about the promotion and provision of integrated education, whilst providing for its reform and expansion. In sum, the recommendations/key messages include, widening the statutory definition of integrated education to recognise all cultures and religious beliefs; the inclusion of mandatory training for teachers which should be developed in consultation with children and young people, and requiring the Department of Education to actively promote an integrated education system.¹

The Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF) welcomed the opportunity to respond to the Education's Committee's call for written evidence into the Integrated Education Bill (open from 16th July to the 10th of October 2021). In doing so, four facilitated focus groups were held with 60 young people (aged 14-19) to ensure that their views, concerns, and perspectives were explored and considered. The remainder of this report sets out the key findings to emerge from the focus group discussions and concludes with several observations identified by young people themselves as priority areas for further exploration and engagement with elected representatives and policy makers.

The report is structured as follows:

2. Findings

The following section outlines the key findings to emerge from the facilitated focus group sessions with young people, which were guided by the questions listed in Figure 1. Presented thematically, the findings are directly related to the key tenants of the Integrated Education Bill and offer an insight into young people's views and perceptions of the matter at hand.

¹ Integrated Education Bill (as introduced).
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/legislation/bills/non-executive-bills/session-2017-2022/integrated-education/integrated-education-bill---as-introduced---full-print-version.pdf>

Figure 1: Semi-Structured Questions to Guide Focus Group Sessions.

1. How would you define integrated education?
 - a. What words come into your head
 - b. Have you heard of it before?
 - c. Is it about religion?
2. Do you have any experience of integrated education?
 - a. Specifically, family and/or friends
3. Do you think we should do more to promote integrated education?
 - a. Accessing information about them
 - b. Where are they located
 - c. What form should it take
4. Do you see benefits to attending an integrated school?
 - a. Personal relationships
 - b. Myth busting about the 'other' communities
 - c. Societal benefits

2.1 Definition

During each focus group session, there was a level of ambiguity about what constitutes integrated education and how it can be defined. For many, it was a relatively vague concept, with the majority asserting that 'younger children have limited to no knowledge or understanding of integrated education' or whether they would like to attend a school with an integrated ethos.

"If you asked an 11-year-old if they wanted to go to an integrated school the majority wouldn't know what it is."

In sum, participants had their own views and perspectives about what integrated education means, what it entails and what are perceived to be the main benefits and challenges of attending a 'mixed-school.' In sharing their own personal experiences of integrated schools, several participants stimulated the discussion, leading to a more considered debate about how integrated education should be reflective of diversity within Northern Ireland. To that end, young people acknowledged that the focus should be widened beyond traditional 'orange and green,' to ensure that there is an understanding of other cultures and religious beliefs, most notably Islam.

In fact, there was a prevailing consensus that integrated education was about 'unity,' bringing young people together and fostering positive relationships across social and community divides. Such sentiments are best captured in the following statements.

"An opportunity to meet young people from different backgrounds especially in a place such as Northern Ireland where most people live separate lives depending on their religion."

“Bringing young people together from multiple genders, religions, and ethnic backgrounds.”

Finally, for some, integrated education was viewed as a way to heal the wounds from the conflict and the past as outlined by one participant who simply stated that.

“It’s all about the peace stuff and was about trying to get kids on different sides of the interface to like each other.”

2.2 Knowledge and understanding

Building on the initial discussions around definitions of integrated education the young people were asked to reflect on what they understood its purpose to be. It’s important to note that there was a consensus, particularly from those that had no experience of attending an integrated school, that it was a challenging topic to initiate and sustain a conversation on. As one young person noted:

“Integrated education is a difficult and boring topic to engage on with young people. I don’t think many have thought about it”.

Following on from this the young people were asked to consider what words they would associate with integrated education. The majority of words and phrases were extremely positive with the assumption being that it was about bringing people together and ensuring differences were explored and discussed:

Figure 2: Young people’s words associated with ‘integrated education’



The conversations were dominated by views that the emphasis on integrated education should be on difference between religion, ethnicity, and gender. Those that had attended integrated schools suggested that:

“Integrated schools are now just a recognition that this place is more than just two tribes and is about showing that there are all religion’s, all races and people from different backgrounds living here”.

However, one young person that had over fifteen years’ experience of attending integrated schools captured the overall sentiment best when they stated that:

“Integrated schools bring people together and create an environment where it doesn’t matter who you are or where you are from”

It was clear that for those with experience it was all about religion and managing differences between Catholic and Protestant young people. While for those with no experience the emphasis was/should be on issues surrounding race, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity.

2.3 Personal experiences

As part of the discussions the young people that had a personal experience of an integrated school were asked to share some of their experiences. It was interesting to note that the overwhelming sentiment from the discussions was one of optimism, positivity, and happiness:

“I have made friends from across communities, and it has broadened my horizons and I’ve learnt about people’s backgrounds from a multitude of perspectives, and it makes me recognise that there is so much more that unites us than divides us”.

“It was nice to quickly realise that religion in my school wasn’t really an issue, and that nobody really cared about your background...this was so different to where I live”.

“I went to an integrated secondary school so had no real concept of integrated education, and it was a huge shock for me and a reality check that there were all these people with different backgrounds out there with no interest in my own religion”.

“I gained a lot from going to school. It started me out in life very open minded and it taught me empathy, understanding, and it just taught me to think about people from different backgrounds to me...as you get older people are set in their ways but I was much more considered”.

The emphasis was on religion and community background with the young people constantly reinforcing the point that integrated schools were the first opportunities they had for meeting people that were not from their own community. It was also suggested that for many young people integrated schools became the place where they could challenge stereotypes, rumours and pose questions about sensitive topics relating to identity:

“It was a very safe environment to ask all the questions I had about religion and culture and why some young people wore different school uniforms and played different sports”.

It was interesting to note that there were also some alternative perspectives, which suggested that integrated schools were primarily focused on neutrality and were reluctant to critique or emphasis any one specific religion and/or tradition:

“I think integrated education is so focused on making sure the two communities (Catholic and Protestant) are represented equally...for example, we would have had religious classes were instead of teaching about a variety of religions and different cultures and backgrounds, ethics even, they very much focused on taking the Catholic community out and putting them through getting their Holy Communion and everyone else was put in another classroom to go through whatever the plan was for that day...it doesn't really allow for an inclusive and critical environment”.

During the discussions several young people that attended controlled and maintained schools compared their experiences with the young people that had went to integrated schools. They talked about the use of sectarian language and how they used to describe young people from the 'other community. They noted how they used school uniforms to identify young people and label which community they came from. However, for a small number there was just regret that they had missed the opportunity to meet and mix with the 'other community':

“We never had the chance to mix with people from other religions and that's very unfortunate, things could have been so different”.

2.4 Raising awareness

The conversations then shifted towards what the young people felt were appropriate ways to raise awareness and focus more attention on integrated education. There was a consensus from most of them that:

“You don't hear about integrated education much...you have to go looking for it”.

For the majority of young people this was the first time they had sat down and engaged in a discussion about integrated education. Even those that had experience of these schools had never reflected on what the school meant in the context of Northern Ireland and a society emerging out of a conflict. As one young person stated:

“There needs to be more done to promote them because of the benefits associated with them...they break down stigma and barriers around religion; they increase knowledge about community differences, and they highlight what issues we share and not divide us”

There was a sense from several young people that through raising awareness and drawing attention to the positives:

“There would be more integrated schools constructed which would lead to more choice which would mean more young people attending them”.

When asked about ways to raise attention on integrated education the young people were full of innovative ideas:

“Michelle O’Neil and Jeffrey Donaldson should do a tiktok video on the benefits of integrated education...that’s what we need to see”.

“They should do a programme like ‘educating Cardiff’ but focus on an integrated school...this would allow people to see what happens and what the curriculum focuses on”.

“There needs to be better use of Facebook, Instagram, and twitter to promote the benefits of integrated education”.

One further point worth noting was the view that it was suggested that any process of raising awareness should also address the perception that integrated education was very much focused in places like Belfast and large urban spaces. Several young people felt that geography dictated opportunity and that any focus should highlight accessibility issues surrounding integrated schools.

2.5 Why is it important?

As the conversations began to draw to a close the young people were asked to reflect on what they felt was most important about integrated education. There was a consistency in the responses from most young people with the emphasis being on reducing fear about the ‘other’ community and decreasing opportunities for sectarianism:

“It breaks down the stigma about the ‘other’ side and then people will become less bitter and stop living off the past”.

“Integrated schools are about bringing people together and it’s about building peace...in school you can break down stereotypes brought about by religion”.

“Less potential for rioting if there are integrated schools”.

“The integrated school is an opportunity to break down some of the barriers which kids face and break down the stuff they are bring told at home”.

“It also provides for a more balanced education than you would get in a school that has single identity staff and pupils...if you have a diverse range of staff and diverse range of pupils then you create a healthy environment where you can cultivate a range of challenging conversations”.

“You can understand other cultures and in the community, you hear the negative stuff about the ‘other’ community but in school you can challenge the stereotypes and learn more about ‘other’ communities”.

“Integrated schools are all about promoting understanding and acceptance among young people”.

“You are not just relying on your family and peers for knowledge and learning...you are going to a school and experiencing difference...you have more of a chance of being non-biased”.

It was interesting to note that throughout these conversations there was no focus on the academic benefits and/or limitations of attending an integrated school. All the focus and attention were on relationships among young people and creating opportunities for challenging negative stereotypes and not on the curriculum or the standard of teaching.

2.6 Challenges

In terms of articulating potential challenges associated with the promotion of integrated education the young people drew attention to its definition, the lack of political support and the issues associated with the location of schools:

“I am from Bangor...but there are very few Catholics that live there...so there is no demand for integrated education...how do you ensure there are opportunities even if numerically the demand is not there”.

“How do you facilitate integrated education in areas that are exclusively Protestant or Catholic?”

“I don’t even know where my closest integrated school is...we have no choice...also it’s not (integrated schooling) viewed among my family and friends as being a grammar school, so I think there is a stigma attached to it”.

There were several young people that raised the issue of access in relation to integrated schools alongside the perception that some integrated schools prioritised sharing and bringing different religions together over the quality of their teaching:

“There are under 70 integrated schools in NI with less than 7% of young people going to these schools so I think this is down to a lack of choice, access, and information for parents”.

“When you leave Belfast there is a lack of option and choice for parents and the onus is on the department to fix that and create opportunities for young people”.

“Even though the government says everyone has a chance to go to an integrated school, they don’t because of access and costs incurred to travel”.

“It depends on what the point of integrated education – is it about academic performance or about building relationships between people of different religions...defining the answer raises the issue about what success looks like?”

“There is the myth that needs rubbished, and it has been passed down by families...my mother said it to me and it’s that you get a better education in a Catholic school...this is just not right”.

The other main challenge raised by the young people centred on whether integrated education could move beyond a focus on traditional divisions on Northern Ireland and begin to encompass the changing demographics in Northern Ireland society:

“Integrated education did emphasise both religions so there was clear understanding about what they meant...but society is changing we have such a diverse place now and that needs to shape content”.

“Integrated education emerged because of the orange and green communities here...now it’s more complex with multiple ethnic groups living here, can integrated education adapt to the new forms of diversity in this place?”

2.7 Moving forward

Finally, the young people had the opportunity to reflect on the discussions and outline any thoughts they had on the future of integrated education. Initially, some felt there was an opportunity for development in the area:

“It’s 2021 and young people are certainly more accepting of each other...social media, snap chat, Instagram we now know more about each other now and religion is becoming less important so these schools should expand their remit and focus”.

“There are opportunities for more group work in these schools and youth workers coming in to engage with young people on what integrated means in the context of Northern Ireland in 2021”.

While for others there was a sense of frustration that politicians were having to create new legislation in support of integrated education, particularly as it was over twenty years since the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement:

“The fact that we are having this conversation about ‘integration’ in 2021 is quite ridiculous but it is something that we must go through to get that long term vision for the future of this place...It is important that these schools provide safe places for discussions about the troubles and what happened”.

“Everybody should have the opportunity to attend a school and I find it scary that in 2021 that is not an option...children are like sponges they absorb so much and we should want them to absorb positivity and the understanding of difference and realise people are more alike than they think”.

It was also suggested by a smaller number of young people that there is an obligation on our elected representatives to promote and support the role out of integrated education across Northern Ireland:

“Think about New decade – New approach...if our politicians are saying they will deliver on this then not to support integrated education is just a joke...It is so hypocritical”.

“The focus is on the education board and our politicians about what future they want especially with young people...if they are serious about a society for everyone then they need to invest in integrated education”.

Others were more conciliatory and felt that all forms of schooling should be promoted by politicians and that everybody should be able to choose the form of school they want to attend:

“I think integrated schooling should be promoted but I also know that some people are passionate about their faith so these schools should exist, but people should have more choice about where they want to go”.

Finally, it seemed that one young person captured the overall sentiment in the discussions best when they stated the following:

“I had no interaction with a Protestant until I was 15 and that’s simply not good enough, it creates a barrier moving forward and if we are going to move on as a society we need integrated education because if we stick with the segregated model we will see sectarianism growing and bias and so we need integrated education for progression and change and we need politicians to actively promote the agenda of integrated education”.

3. Observations

The findings from the focus groups illustrated that for the most part young people don’t discuss integrated education. However, the conversations revealed that when presented with the opportunity, it is a topic that most young people have a lot of thoughts, views, and opinions on. The main points of interest, include the following:

- a. Young people have minimal opportunities to consider the benefits of integrated education.
- b. There is a knowledge gap among young people in terms of the purpose, vision, and values of integrated education.
- c. For the most part integrated education is framed through an orange and green lens.
- d. Issues surrounding accessibility, location and integrated education seem common.
- e. The academic element of integrated education appears to be of secondary importance when put alongside bringing different religions together.
- f. Politicians have a considerable role in promoting integrated education and improving opportunities for young people to attend integrated schools.

In terms of next steps, there may be an opportunity for the Northern Ireland Youth Forum to bring together young people and elected representatives involved in the integration education bill to explore:

- The definition and terminology associated with integrated education and whether there is potential in developing a more comprehensive information package around what integrated education entails alongside the potential personal and societal benefits
- What would the increased provision for of integrated education involve and how would that affect the lives of young people, particularly those that do not reside in urban settings?
- Is there a role for young people to support the department of education in promoting and developing integrated education?

