

The Northern Ireland Assembly's Education Committee

Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education

A Personal Journey

Although now retired my teaching career included 14 years as principal of a controlled primary school with 120 pupils, two years as an EMU Development Officer with a local ELB and 16 years as principal of an urban integrated primary school with 365 pupils. I hold an MA in Peace and Conflict Resolution Studies.

During my time working in EMU I had the opportunity to host a Danish headteacher on an exchange programme. In Denmark the vast majority of pupils are simply enrolled in the local community school nearest to their home. At the end of his stay he wrote the following:

“I find that here in NI you separate your children on almost every conceivable pretext. You send them to different schools based on age, ability, gender, religion, social class and more recently based on preferred language. If we were to introduce such a system back in my own country I fear that children might grow up to be suspicious or ignorant of each other. They might even grow up to hate each other. In a country where inter-communal mistrust is so prevalent I cannot understand why you would wish to take such profound risks with each new generation of impressionable young people.”

This would not be an uncommon view. Our neighbours in Europe can see only too clearly what we apparently cannot see for ourselves. If an education system artificially separates groups of children during their most formative years they will indeed grow up in a state of ignorance and will be grossly ill-prepared for life in a dual-cultural or pluralist society.

We have provided and nurtured a system which has allowed vested interests groups and individual institutions to put their aspirations ahead of the needs of young people. We devise elaborate schemes to bring young people together through sporting and cultural initiatives yet we ignore the elephant in the room – our almost exclusively divided school system.

Each August we salve our collective conscience when we extol the virtues of our high achievers yet conveniently ignore the fact that our lowest achievers are amongst the poorest anywhere in Europe.

THE PROBLEM: SEGREGATED EDUCATION

I departed the controlled primary sector because I became convinced that we were doing a disservice to our children. Year on year we were turning out pupils who were indeed numerate, literate and IT competent but who had no knowledge whatsoever about the other eleven year olds who were simultaneously leaving the maintained primary on the other side of the town. Education has to be about more than mere academic performance. It must also be about how we behave towards our fellow man and how we relate to him/her. Institutional separation denies pupils the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with their neighbours and it is therefore harmful to society.

THE SOLUTIONS

For the past thirty years there has been a growing awareness of the detrimental effect of segregation and tentative solutions have been sought.

(i) EMU

In the decade 1985 – 1995 many EMU projects were lightweight, unsustainable and unsustained. There was insufficient contact for trust to build amongst either staff or students so little benefit was achieved. Some of the better quality EMU projects however were akin to Shared Education in that they involved sustained twice weekly contact between classes over a lengthy period. At the end of the decade however the majority of initiatives were judged it to have been expensive experiments and logistically too complex to sustain. Teachers who had been responsible for so much additional planning were relieved when they could return to normal i.e. simply planning their own curriculum for their own students.

(ii) SHARED EDUCATION

Despite its laudable objectives this initiative has to date only involved a tiny minority of students. Even if expansion were deemed a priority too few schools are currently physically close enough for shared education to take place. Buses travelling back and forth between schools is both a unwarranted expense and a logistical nightmare. Children apparently working collaboratively yet wearing different uniforms simply highlights the contrived nature of the exercise.

Schools are already complex institutions and teaching is already a stressful occupation. Combining groups of students for varying periods of time with different staff on different sites only adds to the complexity of the educational process. It may certainly be possible for some extra –curricular activities and it is certainly feasible at 6th Form but for the vast majority of students in the majority of schools meaningful Shared Education will not be achievable.

(iii) INTEGRATED EDUCATION

The obvious solution is integrated education. Frustrated at the lack of government action parents took the initiative and created the current planned integrated school movement. Parents recognised that it takes sustained contact over months and years to create the atmosphere necessary for trust and mutual understanding to develop and it is only fully integrated schools which can offer this maximum contact time.

Integrated schools are the most cost effective strategy for creating and sustaining contact - there is nothing artificial or contrived about integration. Integrated schools do not dilute ethos nor do they shy away from difficult issues. Staff in integrated schools work together as a single team finding solutions to everyday issues. Together they devise innovative solutions to contentious events – *such as the election of a new Pope or the birthday of the Queen.*

It is sad reflection on our political and church leaders that it was left to parents to establish such schools. The 1989 legislation clearly states that DE should ***encourage and facilitate*** integrated education. In my view all it done to date is to merely ***permit*** integrated education.

“I do not know of any measures which would prepare the way for a better feeling in Ireland than uniting children at an early age and bringing them up in the same school, leading them to commune with one another and to form those little intimacies and friendships which often subsist through life”

Dr James Doyle, Roman Catholic Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin , 1826

Almost two centuries on we have yet to recognise and deal with the travesty of segregation.