

Open Letter to Committee Integrated Education

I am not an 'academic', I am not politically minded and I am not particularly religious. Yes I have my faith as such but that's about as far as it goes.

What I am is a single mum with a demanding job and two fantastic kids. My children are now 19yrs and 15 yrs old and I would do practically anything within my power for them. I made a very conscious decision that they would be educated in an environment free (well as free as can be expected) from sectarianism and tribalism as possible.

My own upbringing was one of working class with two fantastic parents who happened to be protestant Christians. However, my life was interjected with bombs, needless killings and my mother wanted to know my every move. 'in case I got caught up in an incident!!'. My parents were unionist voters, a fact I only became aware of in my late twenties, but had friends from all walks of life. As my mother worked in Community Development she had worked quite a bit with ex prisoners and some would like to call themselves 'combatants'.

I went to Methodist College, which in some way was 'integrated' even back then, with me having friends from Hong Kong and Dubai.

I have seen the destruction that sectarianism can cause to children. They hate, they fear and they don't respect and it breaks my heart that these kids are missing out on so much of life as my kids know. How do I know this for a fact? I have been a Police Officer for 25 years, working in North and West Belfast, the worst area for bitterness, youth crime and segregation in the North of Ireland! Yes, class, unemployment etc does have their impact, but these kids aren't being given the opportunity to experience the 'other side'.

When I sent my kids to Lagan College, it was to try to reinforce what I had already been teaching them - that we in some ways are all the same yet different and it's OK to embrace the differences.

I have seen the Pastoral care given by Lagan, they 'care' for the kids in their 7 hrs/day control. I admire the staff for wanting to give every child the opportunity to be the best they can be in life. I have seen that they are FULLY integrated - what I'm trying to say is Protestant, Catholic, Seikh, atheist, muslim, able bodied, disabled, girls boys and those in between, rich, poor and all colours sit side by side in class. Gifted and talented, and those academically challenged are all given the opportunity to be the best they can. This is where other schools fail miserably. There isn't that diversity encompassed in one learning location.

My kids have grown up with friends from every part of the City - Cregagh estate, Ladybrook and even rural areas such as Ballywalter. They have experienced a full

life, swapping stories, life experiences and most of all RESPECTING others. They have come to realise that just because Conal lives at the bottom of the Ormeau Road, it doesn't mean he is an IRA sympathiser, its fine that Orla speaks fluent Irish - but this does not mean she is intending to disregard English and force everyone to speak Irish! They learn that by embracing the differences, we can actually move forward and that, is something which this wee country really needs.

It has saddened me greatly to that certain political parties and academics are not 100% behind Integrated Education. What are they afraid of?? Why do they not want to offer these experiences to the kids of today and tomorrow? For them to block this opportunity for our youth is tantamount to criminal in my eyes!

I read an article that only 6% of kids go to a recognised integrated school - and this was pounced on by CCMS, however, the CCMS did not take into consideration how many of those other 94% would have attended an Integrated school IF THE CHOICE was available.

As I say, Im not an academic or politically motivated, I just care about this wee country's future. I care about the kids and I would love to see at some stage other kids experience the same as my kids have been fortunate to.

I know it will take time and money to implement these changes however, these are changes which must be made as a RIGHT for families to decide that they want their kids to be educated in an all-inclusive environment. Again I say to the opposers of this - What exactly ARE you afraid of???