

Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education

Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education

Submission from Nigel Frith, Principal of Drumragh Integrated College

23rd October 2014

‘We have flown the air like birds and swum the sea like fishes, but have yet to learn the simple act of walking the earth like brothers.’

- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

1. Introduction

1.1 Drumragh Integrated College is a grant-maintained, integrated, post-primary 11-19 college. It opened in 1995, having obtained the minimum number of pupils required for commencement. It was based in the Victorian Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital building until 2009, when it moved into its present, much-appreciated new accommodation on the Crevenagh Road, Omagh. There are currently just over 660 students on roll.

1.2 The College’s ethos is genuinely and pro-actively integrated, as evidenced for example by its effective approaches to Ash Wednesday, Remembrance and responding to conflict. Drumragh IC was one of the first schools in Northern Ireland to achieve the ‘Excellence in Integrated Education Award’, in 2010. Its mission statement is ‘Excellence for Everyone’. We strive to offer a shining example of integration in practice and to provide a quality of education that is second to none.

1.3 I have had the privilege of being the principal of Drumragh Integrated College since September 2005.

2. The nature and definition of Shared Education and Integrated Education, including consideration of the need for a formal statutory definition and an obligation in statute to facilitate and encourage Shared Education

2.1 A working definition of shared education, endorsed by the Ministerial Advisory

Excellence for Everyone

Group in their March 2013 report, 'Advancing Shared Education', is this:

Shared education involves two or more schools or other educational institutions from different sectors working in collaboration with the aim of delivering educational benefits to learners, promoting the efficient and effective use of resources, and promoting equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion.

2.2 Integrated schools are based, amongst other things, on the 'Statement of Principles'. This Statement declares that:

The integrated school provides a learning environment where children and young people from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds, as well as those of other faiths and none, can learn with, from and about each other. The promotion of equality and good relations extends to everyone in the school and to their families regardless of their religious, cultural or social background. Integrated education is value-driven and child-centred. It is delivered through a holistic approach with an emphasis on developing every aspect of a child's or young person's potential.

2.3 High quality shared education and integrated education both have the potential to transform society, based on contact theory; the more time children spend together side by side, in a mutually respectful safe space, the more transformation of values is possible. Wherever shared or integrated education can achieve these goals, it should be led, encouraged and facilitated; because this is what NI needs for the future. But this should only apply to **quality** shared or integrated education, where conditions are pro-active, where much much more is happening than children from different communities or schools being introduced to each other; where in fact they are immersed in a learning experience that encourages the development of mutually respectful values on a day-by-day, moment-by-moment, practical and meaningful basis. This is about quality contact, in other words, not lip service nor superficial and ineffective approaches.

2.4 Quality shared education **and** quality integrated education should both be formally defined, with a statutory obligation to facilitate and encourage them – as is currently specified in Article 64 of the 1989 Order. The obligation should however be very clear and insistent in distinguishing between quality and ineffectiveness. Every school should be required to fulfil one and/or the other duty, and facilitated in doing so with excellence. All educationalists and politicians should be united in seeking not just academic success, but the effective shaping of young people's values so that they can lead Northern Ireland out of its dark past.

2.5 Integrated schools are not the only solution to society's ongoing problems but they are a key part of the solution. It is the responsibility of us all to work together to resolve these difficulties, for the sake of our children, society and the future of Northern Ireland.

3. The design and aims of integrated education; 'the thing works'

3.1 Some people have a limited or flawed understanding of integration, thinking it is just a mixing of cultures and at worst encourages a 'watering-down' of one's own beliefs. In fact integration encourages young people to respect difference, to define themselves and to present themselves confidently. It is an all-ability, inclusive approach to education, thereby reducing barriers to learning and encouraging excellence.

3.2 The integrated sector has defined expectations and requirements regarding religious and cultural balance amongst the student body, the staff and even the governors. These are largely to create a sense of community wherein no-one feels isolated and where mutual respect can flourish.

3.3 Looking beyond the importance of balance and admissions, an essential difference between an integrated and a mixed learning environment is what happens after the student body has been enrolled. We do not simply admit students from different traditions and expect them to 'muddle along', nor to pretend that everyone is the same. Our approach counters sectarian, divisive messages and positively promotes mutual respect.

3.4 The ethos of an integrated school is deliberately planned. It involves **tolerance**, not simply **toleration** of someone from another tradition or culture. We are alert to the dangers of sectarian attitudes and actions. Difference is not 'swept under the carpet' but rather is recognised and embraced, with respect. This is all done strategically and staff are aware of how to both encourage and monitor its effectiveness.

3.5 Some examples based on approaches taken at Drumragh IC will perhaps prove helpful. First of all, the delivery of the curriculum is carefully handled. In Religious Education, students are given a balanced, respectful presentation of different religions and beliefs, encouraging them to accept difference and to explore what they believe themselves. In History, different views of historical events and perspectives are recognised, with an emphasis on thinking skills and analysis. Elsewhere, where the curriculum is perhaps less sensitive in a sense, teaching is still deliberately mindful of the views and backgrounds of those present.

3.6 Important events in the Drumragh Integrated College calendar also illustrate the distinctiveness of an integrated ethos. Remembrance involves a proactive education programme in the weeks running up to it, where staff help students to understand the college's view of this annual event. Remembrance is seen in the college as a time to remember and respect those who have died in war, but also to strive to learn the lessons of history; that dialogue and understanding, not violence, are the keys to a peaceful society. This perspective is also presented in whole-college assemblies, and students are then invited to wear poppies or not, as they choose.

3.7 Another example of the integrated ethos in action at Drumragh IC is Ash Wednesday, a central event for the college every year. Here the whole college community is brought together for the Ash Wednesday service. Clergy from both Catholic and Protestant denominations are welcomed, to speak during the services and, in the case of the priest, to administer the ashes. The service opens with the principal stating that for **all** of us the service is an opportunity to consider how we are living our lives and, if we see the need, to resolve to make changes for the better. The terms 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' are not used, but later in the service it is explained that those who would like to receive ashes are welcome to do so. It is emphasised that **equally**, those who would prefer not to receive ashes may remain seated, to listen to the quiet music, consider the quotations being shown through the projector, to think, or to pray as they choose. The whole college community is together in this often beautiful service, respecting each other's differences.

3.8 When something significant is going on in wider society, the college will often explore it with its student body. During the Queen's Jubilee, for instance, the college held a tea party, including a fun fashion parade, despite the fact that there are more Catholic than Protestant students in the college. During the flags protests the college explored what was going on, in assembly, explaining the background, talking about what was happening and drawing the conclusion that while protest can be justified, violence and rioting cannot.

4. What do young people say about integration?

4.1 There is a variety of research studies, reports and surveys on the impact of integrated education. The following however are the views of a number of students who attend Drumragh Integrated College, where the voice of students – the major stakeholders of our education system – matters:

4.2 'I really value integrated education because in a sense it teaches children to unlearn any personal grievances against groups of people... School is about learning,

becoming a more educated person and academic growth. To me it seems wrong to stunt that growth with segregation of people.'

4.3 'I came to this school because it's the better type of school, because no matter what you believe or where you're from you can make friends with anyone... It is important to meet people from different backgrounds so you can learn about other people's point of view.'

4.4 '... my best friend is a different religion and I'm glad she is because I learn about her and she learns about me and we learn to accept each other.'

4.5 'An integrated school is good because you have more of a community.'

4.6 'The friends I meet inside of school are now some of my best friends outside of school.'

4.7 'The difference between shared education and integrated education is that shared education you still have the different schools with different uniforms only sharing some things for a while but integrated education has all the one uniform and all the one school and you're together all the time.'

4.8 'Stop worrying about the political side of this. Worry about the thousands of lives that depend on integrated education.'

4.9 'In today's society integrated education is fundamental to safe and settled students. The Belfast flag riots are in my opinion a direct result and a fantastic reminder of how people cannot get on... 20,000 people can make a dramatic difference... integrated education has never been more relevant in today's society. Take a look around you.'

5. What do some parents say about integration?

5.1 The following are comments made by two parents of students at Drumragh Integrated College:

5.2 'Although some progress has been made politically, Northern Ireland is, in many ways, still a divided society. This has an enormously negative effect on individuals, families, and communities. On a very real level, economical and social advance is compromised, which negatively impacts both on a national as well as on an international level. Real, tangible positive change is badly needed and long overdue. The only way true change can take place at grass-root level is through altering the perspective and perceptions of our young people. Prejudice and stereotypes need to

be broken down and fear of “otherness” eradicated. This is a gradual process which can only happen when communities mix on a daily basis.

Integrated schools have a unique opportunity to be at the forefront of this long-term effort by educating young people from all communities together. They need to be given full support by DE in their endeavours to provide co-educational facilities for as many pupils as possible.

The management and staff at Drumragh Integrated College are doing an excellent job at providing the best possible integrated education, with a strong leadership, vision and passion. The teaching body are equally motivated and motivating, forward thinking, advocating inclusion, tolerance and acceptance of all and embracing of differences. I feel very thankful and privileged that my daughter has been able to obtain a place at the school a few years ago. She is thriving academically and personally, is very happy there, and has developed a very mature social attitude. The more children are given such an opportunity, the better for their future and for the future of Northern Ireland.

Sincerely,

Dr Dagmar Corry, PhD, CPsychol, AFHEA, AFBPsS’

5.3 ‘I think deciding to send a child to a different type of education is difficult here. Both my husband and myself were educated in grammar schools, so our parents made that decision. There is always that worry, are we sacrificing something else because we believe in Integrated Education? We have never regretted sending Ellen here, even after she did both sets of tests for the other schools and had the choice of where to go. Rather mean of us! She is pushed and challenged as we had hoped. Even more importantly, she is also very happy.

Gayle Hegarty
Programme Manager
Drug and Alcohol Training Programme
Western HSCT’

6. Key barriers, potential enablers and priorities for developing integrated education

6.1 Lack of vision, tribal politics and systemic inertia have restricted the further growth of integrated education; and that is a disgrace.

6.2 Inertia is dangerous when in fact change is needed so urgently, for our legacy to the young people in our schools to be the right one - comparable to the myth of Nero fiddling while Rome burned.

6.3 A key solution is to facilitate integrated education wholeheartedly and actively; for DE and the Assembly to embrace as never before a vision of the potential of education to lead the way in shaping a unified, diverse and peaceful society.

6.4 Parent power has achieved a remarkable 6-7% of the NI school population in integrated education, either by starting new schools from nothing or through transformation. So what could be achieved if both the Department of Education and our political leaders supported it fully? At present the integrated sector largely continues to move forward despite, rather than because of, full encouragement and facilitation.

6.5 Support that could and should be given to integrated education includes:

- Pro-active, practical support where there is demand for an integrated school in a particular area, either to build from nothing or to transform to integrated status;
- Helping over-subscribed integrated schools to grow;
- Promoting choice and gauging public demand for integrated education, as part of area planning;
- Giving the integrated sector a statutory seat and voice on area planning groups;
- Giving the integrated sector a statutory seat and voice within the new single education and library board;
- In other words, giving each sector a statutory voice and role within the educational system.

7. Conclusions

7.1 We all need a strong vision and committed focus not on the past nor on the status quo, but on how to make life better in the future.

7.2 The integrated sector is well defined and very clear about what it strives to achieve.

7.3 Integrated education should be given equal emphasis, political support and resourcing with quality shared education – two routes to the same vision.

7.4 In a society that is scarred and struggling toward real peace, it seems completely obvious that young people should be educated together – all day, every day. A central goal of integrated education is the transformation of young people's hearts and minds. This is achieved by actively helping them to respect difference and encouraging them to form friendships that break down barriers. This is not always easy, but it matters. And so we can shape a future that includes tolerance, peace and healing.

Nigel Frith

Principal

Drumragh Integrated College

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