



# **Hazelwood Integrated Primary School**

## **Board of Governors**

### **Response to**

### **Department of Education Committee request for Evidence: Integrated and Shared Education**

**October 2014**

## **Introduction**

Hazelwood Integrated Primary School was established in September 1985 by parents who were committed to providing Integrated Education to their children in North Belfast. They believed that bringing children together (Protestant and Catholic) from an early age would help heal the divisions that had blighted Northern Ireland society for many years.

We have over 450 children attending our Primary School and Nursery, 50% of whom are entitled to Free School Meals, 30% having Special Educational Needs and over 10% are newcomer children. The religious breakdown for the school is 46% Catholic, 30% Protestant and Other/None 24%.

We are an integrated, co-educational, inclusive school. We value all our pupils as individuals and respect their right to be different and to excel in different ways. It is our intention that all children attending Hazelwood Primary School will develop an understanding, acceptance and appreciation of those from different cultural backgrounds.

Historically, the communities located within the Whitewell area have experienced sustained inter-community issues for many years. However, it is our view that Hazelwood Integrated Primary has had a positive impact on easing tensions and improving community relations.

## **Why Integrated Education?**

A report commissioned by the Integrated Education Fund in 2011<sup>1</sup> demonstrated that there was strong public support for integrated education with almost nine in ten people favouring integrated schools. In fact, many surveys such as: Millward Brown Ulster (2008, 2003); Ipsos MORI (2011); Young Life and Times Survey (2003-2011); and Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (1999-2010), all highlighted that support and preference for integrated education remains high. For example the 2003 survey showed a majority of people surveyed (82%) personally supported integrated education in Northern Ireland and in 2011 this had increased to 88% of those surveyed. Respondents also seen Integrated Education as 'very important to peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland' increased from 60% in 2003 to 69% in 2011. The Northern Ireland Life and Times (1999) and Young Life and Times (2003-2010) surveys found that over one third of respondents would like to send their children to an integrated school if there was one in the vicinity.

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<sup>1</sup> Attitudinal Survey on Integrated Education <http://www.ief.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Attitudinal-Survey-Final-Report.pdf>

As a Board of Governors of an Integrated Primary School we are somewhat dismayed that the recent political and policy discourse has moved away from Integrated Education – where support is extremely high – to ‘shared education’. ‘Shared Education’ is not the same as Integrated Education. We believe ‘shared’ is a disguise for politicians saying that for the foreseeable future our children (from all communities) will continue to be educated separately. This is not what we want for our children and it is not what we want for future generations growing up in Northern Ireland.

It is unacceptable to be promoting ‘shared education’ while there is a complete lack of regard for the statutory responsibility on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate Integrated Education.

Many policy initiatives in Northern Ireland do not reflect many of the preferences expressed by parents from many surveys (as noted above) which consistently support Integrated Education which they see as promoting mutual respect and understanding. We would remind you that the concept of Integrated Education was endorsed in the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, 1998, being seen as a way to contribute to peace and reconciliation.

Integrated Education is not about Catholics going in one door and Protestants in another – being educated in separate parts of a building. Integrated Education is about children from all sections of our community learning and sharing together, experiencing all religions, building trust, having a mutual understanding and respect for their own and each other’s religion and differences.

Surely we do not need to remind you of the problems related to segregation? Integration in school from a young age has been well documented to make a positive contribution to societies in Northern Ireland. A ‘shared school’ lacks the deeper commitment to structural and social change for our children – we cannot allow the commitment shown to our children offered by Integrated Education to be lost.

Our school not only provides benefits for children and young people, it also offers benefits to the local area and society as a whole within Northern Ireland. Research conducted by Montgomery et al<sup>2</sup> noted that Integrated Education fostered good relations and had ‘significant and positive social influence on the lives of those who experience it.’ Other

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<sup>2</sup> Gallagher, T., Smith, A. and Montgomery, A. (2003). Integrated education in Northern Ireland: Participation profile and performance. Coleraine: UNESCO Centre

research<sup>3</sup> also noted that pupils attending an Integrated School adopted a more positive position on issues such as politics, religion and identity.

An example of our integrated approach is seen day and daily in our activities. All our children celebrated the Queen's Jubilee in 2013, children take part in Gaelic sports, children are involved in projects relating to Protestant history, Irish Language as well as learning about other faiths. The school is also seen as a beacon for the community with sporting and leisure classes held in the evenings and weekends, the school has also acted as a centre for mediation when tensions have developed among local groups.

Northern Ireland is a society in transition, demographics are changing. It is no longer an issue of Catholics and Protestants but about all religions. The model of Integrated Education lends itself to ensuring newcomer children are treated with respect and mutual understanding and they feel a sense of inclusion in school and community life.

Below is a personal statement from a Governor and a Parent:

*I am a mother of 4 children, who have all attended Hazelwood nursery, primary and college. As a parent from a strongly nationalist tradition living in segregated North Belfast I made a conscious decision to send them to school where they would make friends with children from other traditions and grow up with an innate awareness that there were different ways of viewing our society and 'others' were not to be feared or regarded as suspicious. Hazelwood was the right choice.*

*Integrated education is not just about 'throwing together' children from protestant/catholic backgrounds but has a core commitment to:*

- *Equality and diversity*
- *Child centred education*
- *A partnership with parents*
- *Christian ethos*

*Hazelwood takes an active daily role in these principles, taking the 'whole child' into account, not just their academic ability or social standing. They explore and celebrate the traditions of different cultures throughout the year; e.g. when my children made their first communion and confirmation their whole class attended. They in turn attended their friends' cultural events and gained first-hand knowledge of diverse cultural backgrounds.*

*Today, they are in their 20's and still remain in close contact with the friends they made at school. While taking an active part in their personal cultural background, they have learned to express this in an informed way and are comfortable in any social setting.*

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<sup>3</sup> Stringer, M., Irwing, P., Giles, M., McClenahan, C., Wilson, R. and Hunter, J. (2010) Parental and school effects on childrens political attitudes in Northern Ireland. British Journal of Educational Psychology (80), pp. 223-240. DOI: 10.1348/000709909X477233.

*Integrated Education is not just about sharing a building but giving children an opportunity to discuss history, politics and culture from different perspectives in a safe environment and seeing those with different opinions as friends first and foremost. This can only be learned by growing up together, attending the same classes and forming a close social bond with others by having similar childhood experiences; through attending Hazelwood my children have learned that difference is to be celebrated not feared. **Terry McKeown***

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that public opinion supports Integrated Education as a means of contributing to peace and reconciliation as well as promoting mutual respect and understanding. We have demonstrated that Integrated Education makes a positive contribution to children and societies within Northern Ireland, promoting positive attitudes and reducing sectarian attitudes. There is little doubt that Hazelwood Integrated Primary has made a positive impact upon the lives of all children and the community within the Whitewell area. We would therefore recommend the Education Committee makes a clear statement of support to encourage more integrated education as a way of supporting a shared future for all of our children.

The Board of Governors of Hazelwood Integrated Primary is pleased to make this response, we would be very happy to give oral evidence to the committee if needed.

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