



The Labour Party in Northern Ireland

Submission of the Northern Ireland Constituency of the Labour Party To the Education Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly's Inquiry on Integrated Education and Shared Education

“Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see”

(Postman, 1982).

The Party would like to put forward the following as its contribution to the inquiry on Integrated and Shared Education

“We live in a world that is prone to many expressions of prejudice, in which religious attitudes still play a disturbingly significant part. Sometimes these attitudes are deliberate and malicious; but perhaps more often they are due to a straightforward lack of awareness and understanding – the ignorance that creates the vacuums into which the prejudices may rush! Northern Ireland is just one of the places where the negative impulses of prejudice have damaged people’s humanity. “

If racial, cultural or religious prejudice is so easily learned then surely people can also learn skills in tolerance and respect for others. It may not be so easy, but it is surely important in order to counter those learned responses which all too quickly diminish, demonise and dehumanise others. This is surely a key value in education – to enhance people’s dignity and sense of humanity and their respect for others. It is clearly expressed in Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child:

“the education of the child shall be directed to ... the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin”.

(Richardson, N, 2008)

Northern Ireland has moved massively forward in the years since the signing of the Belfast agreement in 1998. However, there is still a long way to go before we can claim to be a normal, democratic society. There are huge divisions that still exist in our society and the kind of educational system that exists perpetuates those divisions. However, education has a powerful role in transforming societies and not least those which are emerging from years of conflict. However, we have to ask of all our sectors of education - Are we truly focussed on fulfilling the needs and aspirations of our young people for the next 20 or 30 years or are we tinkering at the edges of what

is for many students a failing system? Are our schools providing the vital foundations to prepare their pupils for living in the future or are we more concerned with defending our corner?

The Party recognises the work that the Shared Education Programme, and other similar programmes have done in schools and it recognises that for a number of schools this may be the only way forward at this stage in their development. However, using the definition given for shared education as “*Shared Education is broadly defined as any collaborative activity within or between schools or other educational institutions that can: contribute towards school improvement, provide access to opportunity, encourage more effective use of resources, and promote social cohesion*” means that it is a “weak” form of programme compared to the “strong” form for ‘Integrated Education’. This also applies to the “Shared Campus” concept. Supporters of the shared campus model argue that “*they increase the number of academic offerings, develop appropriate school sizes and more effectively use the available school buildings.*” In both schemes educational outcomes are reported as positive though are often ill-defined and difficult to quantify, and have so far only affected a very small numbers of pupils. In Northern Ireland terms they would be classified as “integration light” compared to an integrated school whose ethos and curriculum is based on there being a united community with peace and reconciliation at its core in an all-inclusive and mutually respectful shared space and with educational outcomes that, given the selective nature of the post-11 system, are very good.

Both of the ‘weak’ schemes depend very much on the goodwill of all concerned, the governance of the scheme, and its funding. Can they survive in the long-term? The learning community partnerships, as presently constituted, are generally not working to their full potential and as funding is being reduced for their operation, it will be interesting to see how long they can last.

Our present system of provision of education is very costly because of the nature of the provision. However, the present system of Area Based Planning is flawed in that its decisions were being mainly made on a sectoral basis and without the full input from all sectors. So when proposals for a particular area are being set out, communities should always be given the option to consider cross-sector amalgamations and integration as a possibility.

The party would like to make the following recommendations:-

- (1) That the Northern Ireland Executive accept its responsibility “to facilitate and encourage ‘Integrated Education in the process of reconciliation and the creation of a culture of tolerance at every level of society’”.
- (2) That the Department of Education be held accountable for the implementation of its statutory duty under Article 64 of the 1989 Education Reform (NI) Order ‘ to encourage and facilitate integrated education’.
- (3) That all pre-school and nursery education be designated as integrated and that in future planning for such provision that it be placed to enable children from all communities to access it.
- (4) That targets be set, in the area-planning process for both primary and post-primary schools such that at least one quarter be integrated schools.
- (5) At the post-16 stage there should be moves towards the provision of sixth-form colleges and/or the development of post-16 centres linked to FE Colleges. Most non-grammar schools and some grammar schools offer very restricted curricular packages at this level and most are uneconomic. Collaboration can work in some cases where the schools/FE are very

close together, eg Limavady, but generally the costs of collaboration are quite significant and are based on the needs of the institutions rather than the students. An integrated regional approach to the provision of post-16 education based firmly on the needs of students rather than the individual institution is required.

- (6) That for “Shared Education” the Education Minister should bring forward, at the earliest possible opportunity, a statutory definition of shared education which makes explicit that it must involve meaningful cross-community interaction by pupils on a sustained basis.
 - (a) Using this definition, the Department of Education must make it a statutory obligation for schools to ensure that all their pupils are provided with the opportunity to participate in shared education on a regular basis.
 - (b) The Department must also make available sufficient funding to ensure that all schools can ensure that their pupils have the opportunity to participate in meaningful cross-community shared education and CRED programmes on a regular basis.
 - (c) The Department must institute a robust system of monitoring which enables it to evaluate, on a regular basis, whether and how each individual school is implementing shared education and CRED, including the extent and quality of cross-community engagement which is offered by each school.

- (7) That the provision of teacher training be rationalised as a matter of urgency. There are presently too many providers and professionally it does not seem sensible to have, for the needs of the service, training at 3 different institutions. The establishment of an inclusive centre of excellence to train our young teachers would help to build a united and prosperous community.

- (8) That the new single authority, when undertaking planning provision on an area basis, should not only involve all the school providers on an equal basis, but should ensure that there is proper consultation with parents and students.

The Party is very willing to amplify its comments before the Select Committee.