

LOUGH VIEW INTEGRATED PRIMARY AND NURSERY SCHOOL



Learning and growing together

October 20, 2014

Dear Mr McCallion

Thank you for this opportunity to provide a response to the Education Committee on the debate around the future in terms of shared/integrated education.

The request by the committee for information in regard to this issue is timely as there seems to be a growing misconception that integrated and shared education are one and the same thing and have the same potential benefits. They are not the same and it is my view that Shared Education as currently envisioned will fall far short of what integrated schooling regularly achieves.

Under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement our local administration is obliged to facilitate the growth of integrated/shared education, the inference being that it can help heal the breaches in what is still a deeply divided society and so help us build a shared future. The work of the integrated schools that have emerged over the last 30 years clearly evidences the vital contribution that schools can make to peace building and has had an influential 'ripple out' effect within education and wider society to the extent that most people now accept that greater sharing is a necessary and good thing. The challenge however is how to take this forward in a way that has a lasting and meaningful impact. Hence the debate on shared/integrated education!

For those of us who work within the integrated sector it seems that the 'Shared Education' model which enables schools to share sites, facilities and promotes some limited pupil and teacher contact is now regarded by DE as its preferred strategy. This is in contrast to the integrated model whereby children and staff from the two main traditions and from none are fully immersed together in a single school community. Indeed the DE's ambivalence to 'Integrated Education' can be evidenced by the fact that it required a recent judicial review (Drumragh IC) to remind it of its statutory obligation to facilitate integrated schools.

Why this strategy? Why is Shared Education being promoted as the way forward in terms of a more integrated model of schooling? I wish the answer was grounded in international

research and case studies in N. Ireland which made a compelling case. Sadly it appears not to be and the reality may simply be political pragmatism.

Put simply 'Shared Education' is less threatening to the various vested interests in our education system and wider society including political parties, the Catholic Church, the Transferors lobby etc. It's the deal they can all do without really giving up anything that really matters to them.

While there may be those who believe that it can make a difference, promoting 'Shared Education' may simply create the illusion that our politicians and the educational establishment are doing their bit to promote a 'shared future', when in reality they are falling far short of what really needs to be done.

As a concept 'Shared Education' sounds fine but what does it mean in practice? The shared campus concept seems to represent the extent of the DE's ambitions in terms of shared education. My worry is that it will only serve to illustrate how different school communities can co-exist in some benign form of educational apartheid where separate uniforms, timetables and doors regulate the amount and quality of contact between the young people concerned. While for some this might be a step forward in terms of what has gone before, is it good enough?

By comparison within my own integrated school, which is diverse and inclusive in terms of race, religion, social class and ability, it is the sharing of a uniform and the time spent together in class, in the playground, on the sports-field or over lunch that helps our children grow their understanding and acceptance of one another. Moreover it is this regular and meaningful sharing which helps us grow a sense of common identity and community, whilst acknowledging the diversity intrinsic to our school.

To put my comments into context I should add that before working in the integrated sector I spent 14 years in the controlled sector including several years as a VP in a school on a loyalist housing estate where sectarian and racist attitudes were just a fact of life. While working in the controlled sector I was involved in a succession of EMU/CRED (community relations) projects between controlled and maintained schools and can report that although they did no harm that they achieved little of lasting value.

The final point worth making is an economic one. N. Ireland has an education system it can't really afford. A segregated school system has meant too many schools and an unnecessary replication of services, something clearly evidenced in the Common Funding Review led by Robert Salisbury several years ago. Area Based Planning raised the hope that a clear sighted economic appraisal would acknowledge the unsustainable cost of continued segregation and open minds to the difficult decisions that lay ahead i.e. closing non-viable schools and promoting real sharing.

Instead what initially emerged were sectoral solutions for rationalisation led by CCMS and the ELBs. Subsequently 'Shared Education' has emerged as a possible solution in some instances, but there is a lack of clarity around what is shared, with whom and to what degree. It would seem prudent that before more public money is spent on 'Shared Education' we have some agreed definition of what it is, how best it might work and what its potential is to help us build a shared future.

If we are serious about building more cohesive communities and a genuinely shared future, 'Shared Education' needs to aspire eventually to be what the best integrated educated schools already are. It is the best way forward and existing models of integrated schooling, together with the wealth of leading edge experience within our schools in how to successfully integrate school communities (children, teachers and parents) are there to be built upon. In addition to this, in other countries, including mainland UK, there are alternative models of effective shared/shared education that could be considered. A good example is the Emmaus School in Liverpool, a joint faith primary school which allows for representation on the school Board for both Catholic and Anglican clergy.

I am willing to concede that there will be no easy 'one size fits all' solution in terms of integrated education but promoting the tokenism and limited ambition of 'Shared Education' seems like a cop out.

In conclusion the narrative of many integrated schools is of how ordinary people desiring change for the better, for their children and their communities came together and worked sometimes against the odds to build a better future. It takes courage, commitment and a belief that real change is possible. The challenge for politicians and DE is to do the same!

Yours sincerely

M McKnight Principal

