

SHARED EDUCATION AND INTEGRATED EDUCATION INQUIRY NI ASSEMBLY EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Oral Evidence Paper

Introduction

I would like to thank the Committee for inviting us here today to give evidence to its inquiry into shared education and integrated education. I welcome the Committee's decision to initiate an inquiry into these two important aspects of education in Northern Ireland and to garner the views of stakeholders.

As you may be aware, the principal aim of my office, as set out in legislation, is to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people. As part of my remit, I have a mandate to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children. Furthermore, my office bases all of its work on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – the UNCRC.

My presentation this morning will highlight the key findings emerging from a consultation which my Office undertook with children and young people, to explore their views and experiences of shared education. The Inquiry's Terms of Reference address the nature and definition of shared education, key barriers and enablers for shared education and what priorities and actions need to be taken to improve sharing. Children and young people discussed these issues during the consultation and I will make reference to their responses throughout the presentation.

Consultation with Children and Young People on Shared Education

As you will know, the Department of Education established a Ministerial Advisory Group to explore and bring forward recommendations to the Minister to advance shared education in Northern Ireland. In line with my remit, which I have just described, I offered to assist the Minister by consulting children and young people about shared education with the intention of ensuring that their views were incorporated into the Ministerial Advisory Group's report. The focus of the

consultation was on shared education however pupils and teachers from integrated schools participated therefore reference is also made to integrated education.

Although the Consultation was completed within a very short timeframe, NICCY was eager to ensure that as many children and young people as possible were able to participate. So, there were two strands. Firstly, workshops were conducted with primary school pupils (aged 8 to 10 years) and post-primary age pupils (aged 14 to 17 years) and secondly, surveys were completed by children aged 10-11 years and young people aged 16 years.

The surveys were commissioned from ARK, a joint initiative between The Queen's University, Belfast and the University of Ulster which devises the Kids' and Young Life and Times surveys. Two modules of questions relating to pupils' attitudes and experiences of shared education were included in each survey.¹

Thirty-eight workshops were conducted in 21 schools across Northern Ireland involving more than 750 primary, post-primary and special school pupils. A key objective was to ensure that pupils from as many school types as possible were able to participate, and care was taken to ensure that the sample of schools recruited, was as representative as possible.

The workshops explored pupils' awareness, understanding and experiences of shared education and their views about how it should be taken forward. They were also encouraged to identify opportunities and activities which they believed would be enjoyable and beneficial and to highlight any barriers which they felt might dissuade pupils from participating. Interviews were also conducted with principals or members of staff in order to contextualise pupils' responses or to clarify factual information provided.

Findings from the Consultation

Less than 50% of post-primary pupils indicated that the term, 'shared education' was familiar to them. Where they did recognise it, this was usually due to their knowledge of, or participation in shared classes at GCSE or 'A' level. Very few primary pupils were aware of the concept, although after it was explained, some suggested it referred to activities, such as joint projects or trips with other schools

¹ <http://www.ark.ac.uk/klt/>

in which they or other pupils had been involved. This lack of awareness was not entirely unexpected, as the term may not have been widely used in schools and a significant proportion of primary pupils indicated that they had not had any experience of shared activities.

Post-primary pupils' experiences of shared education, were in many cases linked to their participation in shared classes, although other 'shared' activities were also identified, such as joint residentials, drama productions or sports events with other schools. Pupils also talked about sharing sports facilities or transport. The potential for pupils to participate in shared activities appeared to be influenced by a number of factors, including the subjects they studied, the class or year group they were in and their involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Children and young people who had taken part in shared classes or activities expressed a range of opinions with regard to their experiences. Both primary and post-primary pupils welcomed the opportunity to interact and make new friends with pupils from other schools. They also enjoyed the experience of different learning approaches and gaining insights into other schools. One post-primary pupil summarised many pupils' responses by saying;

"I think it's a good way to mix with pupils from other schools, [and to] make new friends with people who have a different background or religion to us."

A clear benefit of shared classes for post-primary pupils was the expanded choice of subjects available at Key Stage 4 and 'A' Level. One pupil commented, that it "gives people more subject options...[it's a] unique opportunity."

Some pupils reported having less positive experiences. These often occurred where they had limited or negative contact with pupils from other schools. They talked about feeling uncomfortable if they were in a minority or feeling 'out of place' when they attended classes in another school. As one post-primary pupil said;

"Joint classes are a bit awkward. We all sit at one table – don't really mix with pupils from [the other school]."

Another pupil said;

"You feel like outcasts if you're going to class and walking through [the school] and they look at you in a different uniform."

A number of logistical issues, including transport arrangements and timetabling variations between schools, also impacted on pupils' experiences.

During the consultation, children and young people were asked to think about the kind of approaches and activities which they believed would be effective in the development of shared education. A significant majority of respondents to the KLT and YLT surveys agreed that shared projects, classes and facilities would be a good idea. Pupils in the workshops explored this question in more detail, calling for more collaborative learning approaches to be employed, and for additional subjects and activities to be included. Pupils said; "Group work and more mixing activities...would make it more enjoyable" and "[Subjects like] Technology, Art, PE, Science and Music – you could do them with other people better."

Pupils also highlighted the importance of introducing shared education at an early stage in a child's schooling, of undertaking preparation in advance of shared learning activities and providing opportunities for pupils to feedback on their experiences.

As well as highlighting opportunities for shared education, pupils were asked if they thought there were any barriers which might dissuade young people from taking part. In response, some students, mostly at post-primary schools, acknowledged that they would be concerned about sharing their education with pupils from particular schools. Their concerns related to academic ability, cross-community issues, standards of behaviour, and the increased potential for bullying. To illustrate these concerns, a grammar school pupil commenting on a non-selective school said;

"I don't want to sound stuck-up but they don't push you there. We get better grades."

And a primary pupil admitted;

"I don't like the fact that if another school joins with us...we will have bullies...the bullies will spread when we do shared education."

Logistical issues, including travel arrangements, timetabling and different school rules were again cited by many post-primary pupils (as well as principals and teachers), as significant barriers.

A majority of pupils thought it was important for pupils from different schools and backgrounds to have an opportunity to learn together. Indeed in a number of workshops, pupils contended that the aim of shared education should not be restricted to bringing pupils from the two dominant religious traditions together but instead, involve pupils from **all** types of schools. However, pupils acknowledged concerns about shared education occurring between particular school types. Reservations expressed by pupils at grammar schools have been mentioned. In response, some pupils attending non-selective schools felt that grammar pupils would regard them as “less able” and therefore be reluctant to become learning partners.

Pupils attending special schools were very keen to engage with their peers in other schools although a few did admit to being “a little nervous going somewhere new”. In response, pupils from mainstream schools highlighted a number of issues which they felt needed to be considered in advance of any shared activities with pupils at special schools, including the potential for bullying, accidents, logistical difficulties, and the challenge for teachers to effectively teach all pupils together. A special school teacher also welcomed the educational opportunities for pupils through her school’s membership of an area learning community, although she noted there was also resistance on the part of some mainstream schools to engage with special schools.

Irish medium school pupils reflected on the challenges they would encounter through collaborative learning with English medium schools where there would be limited opportunities for them to speak Irish. Integrated school pupils expressed a willingness to engage with pupils from all schools, suggesting that their experiences and the *modus operandi* in integrated schools could support other schools to effectively participate in shared education.

Principals’ and teachers’ responses echoed some of the views expressed by pupils, particularly in terms of the opportunities to build relationships and the logistical issues associated with arranging shared education activities. Additional challenges included funding, promoting shared education through cross-community links and for a minority of teachers, managing staff or parents’ concerns.

To conclude, I would like to briefly reflect on the findings.

Reflection on Consultation Findings

It was evident that shared education in most post-primary schools was associated with enhanced curriculum provision and the opportunity for pupils in Years 11 to 14 to participate in joint classes with other schools. In primary schools, pupils' experiences were generally through joint projects or trips with other schools. In some workshops, pupils indicated that participation in shared activities had only been available to other year groups. Given the commitment in the Programme for Government for all children to have the opportunity to participate in shared education by 2015, significant efforts will be required to expand provision across all year groups in primary, post-primary and special schools, if this is to be realised.

Many pupils recognised the value of shared education through the potential benefits for their learning and opportunities to develop relationships with pupils at other schools. While many recounted positive experiences, a significant minority offered less positive feedback. Some described collaborative activities and joint classes as '**shared**' but '**separate**', because pupils remained within their own school or friendship groups and interaction with pupils from other schools had been limited. Other young people talked about feeling uncomfortable when attending classes in another school, particularly where they were in a minority.

In taking shared education forward, it will be important that the objectives are very clearly communicated to all involved, and that pupils are encouraged and supported by all stakeholders to be **equal** and '**effective**' collaborators. The provision of quality learning experiences must be a priority for **all** pupils. Appropriate mechanisms such as school councils or 'buddy' systems should be put in place, so that where pupils have concerns, these can be dealt with sensitively and appropriately.

The attitudes of some post-primary pupils, particularly those who had less experience shared education, were strongly influenced by their perceptions of other schools and pupils. Perceived differences in ability, social background and religion influenced their desire to engage in shared learning initiatives. In some cases, pupils' views had been influenced by their parents or teachers. If shared education is to be regarded as a positive learning opportunity, there is a need to confront and challenge such preconceptions. Evidently, one of the most effective ways to do this is to involve pupils in positive shared learning initiatives, however it will also be important to consider other ways to address pupils' concerns prior to

their participation. As one principal commented, “It’s important to make people comfortable and get them in a position to embrace challenges”.

The consultation highlighted a range of issues relating to specific school types which should be considered by the Department of Education. Pupils and principals in Irish medium schools were keen that the Department consider how their schools could be included in shared education as it is taken forward. It will also be important to consider how mainstream schools can collaborate most effectively with special schools and be supported to address any attitudinal or practical issues arising. And, as already highlighted, pupils and teachers in grammar schools expressed reservations about the benefits of collaborative learning with pupils attending non-selective schools.

The perspectives of pupils and staff in integrated schools were quite distinctive. While many welcomed opportunities to engage in collaborative learning with other schools, they pointed out that they were already part of an effective shared learning environment. One principal reflected, “Shared education is fine as a starting point, but it needs more work”.

The consultation with pupils referenced the definition of shared education outlined in the Terms of Reference for the Ministerial Advisory Group and which is now displayed on the Department of Education’s website. This definition references the need for shared education to provide for ‘learners from all Section 75 categories and socio-economic status’ and to ‘...promote equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion’. Findings from the consultation indicated that some shared education activities fulfilled these requirements more successfully than others. In some cases, the main objective appeared to be supporting the provision of the entitlement framework in the post-14 curriculum and pupils’ access to a wide range of courses. In others, collaboration was occurring between schools of a similar management type or ethos. If pupils are to experience shared education, as defined by the Department, clear aims and objectives need to be outlined at the beginning of any shared initiative, to which all stakeholders can subscribe. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of activities, which also involves pupils, should be undertaken to ensure all objectives are being met.

The 2002 and 2008 concluding observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, recorded the Committee’s concerns that education in Northern Ireland

remained largely segregated. In 2002, it recommended that the Government take measures to establish more integrated schools and in 2008, it called on Government to take steps to address segregated education.

I welcome all genuine efforts to address separation in the education system in Northern Ireland and the introduction of measures which encourage greater collaboration and understanding, and which promote equality and respect for diversity. If shared education is to be implemented as envisaged by the Department, this will create both opportunities and challenges for schools. Therefore, it is vital that all those involved in the delivery of shared education are effectively supported in their efforts to provide positive and meaningful shared experiences which are educationally and socially valuable for all pupils.

NICCY, October 2014