



Response to Education Committee Inquiry

into

Shared and Integrated Education

October 2014

1. NIPSA is the largest locally based public sector trade union and also the biggest union representing non-teaching and academic support staff with well in excess of 8000 members in the Education Sector. NIPSA represents the full range of workers in education across administrative and managerial grades and professional support staff as well as every category of school based staff.
2. NIPSA welcomes the opportunity to provide some thoughts in respect of this Inquiry and would welcome participation in the broader debate about the future provision of education for children and young people. The Union apologises for the slight delay in submitting this response and hope that this submission can be considered by the Committee along with the others.
3. It is not totally clear whether this Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education is a follow on from the Ministerial Advisory Group which considered the issue last Autumn, or whether it is meant to compliment that piece of work, or indeed whether it is totally separate. It would of course be somewhat ironic if it was the later.
4. Consideration of this topic has to be seen in the context of the reality of how we live our lives beyond the school gates. In a society where many of us live separately, have different medical practitioners, worship at different churches (if at all) socialise separately, watch, play and support different sports and teams, remember the same historical events differently and have different moral compasses when considering those events it is not difficult to understand that the subject of education is a complex one. There is clearly a wider community integration issue which goes far beyond education. We should therefore tackle the issue in the context of it being only one, albeit critical, piece of a much bigger jigsaw.
5. If we are serious as a society in wanting to break down barriers, tackle divisions and prejudices and develop a new shared future for all citizens it would seem sensible to suggest that the way to advance that vision is to take the matter out of the stuffy rooms of Stormont and engage directly with the community. Ten or twenty responses on a topic as important as this is insufficient to form a definitive view.
6. During the Patton Review of Policing a number of years ago the debate was brought into the heart of the community. There were also written submissions to compliment the community consultation. It would send a powerful message to the general public if the Education Committee, in partnership (or in collaboration/with the Minister and the Department) was to initiate a consultation programme across the whole community.
7. This generation has failed children and young people. Perhaps it is time that the next generation should be given a more significant say in what shape the future provision of education should take.

8. A project could be initiated, whereby all 1200 schools in the education sector are asked to participate, though internal debates or joint projects/submissions with nearby schools from a different sector. It would be an exciting and invigorating exercise to view young people themselves actively engaged on this issue.
9. It is important to consider the impact of the current Area Planning process which continues unabated at present, where each sectorial interest, in the main, addresses its own issues. Should that process proceed to conclusion the benefits, or otherwise of shared education or integrated education will be but an academic debate as the education infrastructure will have been determined for another generation.
10. In the FE Sector young people from the age of 16 have come together successfully to continue study or learn new skills. The earth has not stopped spinning for those students, or indeed their families. A model therefore already exists which clearly demonstrates that it is possible to retain a certain identity, which is not necessarily diluted or damaged when exposed to those who are different.
11. There are many examples of schools who have embraced newcomers to these shores into their school community with significant success. Again that success has been achieved without any negative diminution of rights or identities.
12. Phrases, often glibly used such as 'parental choice' have to be considered in the wider context of a long term vision for the whole of society of a shared future. That future can no longer be put on hold until the child and young person reaches the age of 18.
13. There are many legacy issues of our most recent conflict. Fixing this particular legacy issue will require significant injection and long term commitment of additional financial resources. This cannot be achieved by salami slicing existing budget allocations. Addressing divisions in communities and division in our education system can only be achieved through a united Assembly speaking with one voice seeking ring fenced additional resources from the British Government to tackle the issue. The UK government has to take responsibility for the failure over several generations to encourage the development of a society at peace with itself and being comfortable in embracing its differences, without fear of undermining the growth of a community where differences are respected and celebrated. Their actions and inactions over the years have contributed to the difficulties which the community is now trying to deal with. They have a responsibility as a result to make a separate financial contribution to build that shared future.
14. For completeness the NIPSA response dated November 2012 to the Ministerial Advisory Group on the Advancement of Shared Education is attached along with this submission.

MINISTERIAL ADVISORY GROUP ON THE ADVANCEMENT OF SHARED EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Response Form for Written Submissions

**Closing date for the receipt of responses is
5:00pm on Friday 9 November 2012**

Submissions made after this date will not be considered

If you require the form in another format (such as large print, Braille, on audio cassette, easy read or on computer disk) and/or other languages please contact:

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Please note that all written submissions will be made publicly available on the Ministerial Advisory Group website. By submitting a completed form you are giving your permission for the form to be made available in this way.

The Ministerial Advisory Group will conduct face to face interviews with a sample of individuals and organisations selected to represent as wide a range of stakeholder perspectives as possible in November and December. If you would be interested in being considered for interview, please tick the box below.

I would be interested in meeting the Ministerial Advisory Group yes

1. RESPONDENT DETAILS

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I am responding: As an individual
On behalf of an organisation yes
(Please tick one box)

2. DEFINITIONS

The following definitions have been provided as part of the terms of reference for this review:

Education: includes pre-school education, early years services, primary schools (including nursery schools), post-primary schools, special education provision and youth services.

Shared education: means the organisation and delivery of education so that it:

- meets the needs of, and provides for the education together of learners from all Section 75 categories and socio-economic status;
- involves schools and other education providers of differing ownership, sectoral identity and ethos, management type or governance arrangements; and
- delivers educational benefits to learners, promotes the efficient and effective use of resources, and promotes equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion.

Section 75 categories: Section 75 and Schedule 9 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a statutory obligation on public authorities to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity:

- between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- between men and women generally;
- between persons with a disability and persons without; and
- between persons with dependants and persons without.

3. QUESTIONS

Question 1

Given the definition of shared education outlined above, what are your views on the best way to advance shared education in Northern Ireland?

The Assembly should co-ordinate an open, inclusive and non-judgemental dialogue, initiated at political level but also involving wider civic society in promoting the advantages of shared education, not just from an educational perspective but more importantly from a shared future perspective. To do so will require agreement to promote sharing as a positive experience rather than being imposed on communities by those who "know better."

Engagement at local community level to listen to concerns or potential obstacles should be commenced to ensure that whatever apprehensions or concerns which may exist (real or perceived) are addressed in a comprehensive and transparent manner.

The move to a shared education environment should not be predicated or justified on grounds of budgetary constraints. Whilst this may seem attractive to politicians it is less likely to obtain community buy-in. Generations of young people, now adults, have been educated in a separate, isolated and often wrongly justified system. The difficult and sensitive process of obtaining society approval for something which hasn't been sought before at political level should not be underestimated. Most people recognise that a normal society does not or should not segregate its children at 3 years of age. However the reality due to political opinion, religious views, security concerns, demographics and a tendency to live as adults within the community of childhood has made it easy to justify perpetuating the status quo of segregation

Society needs to accept that housing, schools and workplaces benefit from diversity, tolerance and embracing difference.

An open Forum, involving the political parties, the trade union movement and the wider community, to bring together those with a similar view would be a good place to start

Question 2

What do you feel are the barriers to advancing shared education in Northern Ireland?

History, laziness, comfort zones, continuing sectarian viewpoints which are not tackled openly, religious preferences and a fear of change all contribute to the view that it's best not to take this issue on. In some ways it is the one major last hurdle to get over before the eventual realisation that it is ok to be different without having to be separated.

Separately if the Assembly is serious about advancing shared education it actually needs to seek additional funding from Westminster to pay for the changes required to make this a reality. Otherwise we will only scratch around at the surface, similar to the proposals contained in the ELBs' Area Plans. With a distinct lack of resources or a lack of commitment to obtain the necessary resources this agenda will not be advanced. Furthermore it may make society suspicious about whether there actually really is a genuine attempt to promote shared education

Question 3

How should the advancement of shared education meet the needs of, and provide for the education together, of learners from all Section 75 categories (outlined above) and all socio-economic backgrounds? Have you any particular experiences or advice to share in relation to any of these groups?

If children and young people were educated together and had equal access to education and educational outcomes then the elitist system which currently exists would not be able to flourish. Whilst the current system continues, which favours those from more affluent backgrounds and consequently discriminates against those young people from either less privileged backgrounds or disadvantaged communities those Section 75 categories will continue to be irrelevant as far as education is concerned. It is no accident that the proponents of maintaining some form of academic selection at such a young age are quite often from a very similar economic background. They also have the means or access to the means to move their children or their home to accommodate those preferences. The current system, non-shared as well as the voluntary grammar system perpetuates division not just along community background lines, but also along class lines.

Question 4

How do you think the advancement of shared education might address issues such as ethos and identity? Please comment specifically on how such issues can best address the right of learners to participation, safety and welfare, and dignity and respect in educational settings.

Sometimes this community appears to think that nowhere else in the world do people exist beside or near each other who do not share the same religious beliefs (or none) or the same politics. There are many examples in other European countries where a shared (or inclusive) education system caters perfectly well for diverse ethos and identities. If the wider community can accept that issues such as safety, identity and culture are not under threat by moving to shared education then they are more likely to embrace the concept. What is needed are “champions” for the cause who can act as advocates for the vision, without being seen as part of a wider conspiracy to force people down a road which they haven’t yet bought into

The Irish medium secondary school Coláiste Feirste provides a non-selective educational experience but consistently demonstrates very good academic results by children and young people, many of whom (but not all) live in areas of multiple deprivation and lower socio economic income ratio than many other similar performing schools. The children often also come from a bi-lingual family background or have parents who have little or limited Irish language, which adds an additional strain or layer of complexity when trying to develop a holistic family contribution to the education of those young people. However these facts do not negatively impact on their educational experiences or outcomes. Whilst the issue of shared education is clearly a different challenge to that facing Irish medium education, the point is that hurdles can be faced and overcome and children can still manage to thrive, both personally and educationally.

Question 5

What are the implications of advancing shared education for the curriculum and the types of knowledge and skills that are taught in educational settings? Please comment specifically on how the right of learners to develop a broad range of essential life skills should be met.

There is no doubt that the curriculum would need to be developed to take account of a shared educational system, which would by necessity also take into account mixed abilities in terms of academic or more vocational interests/talents of the young people. The balance also needs to be achieved between what employability skills are required, but also, equally importantly, what life skills and interest topics are also covered to ensure that young people obtain a more rounded and "adult ready" experience

Question 6

How do you think shared education can be advanced in ways that ensure equality of opportunity and access to education for all learners?

This is a much wider question than just about shared education. This directly relates to political decisions which are taken which perpetuate class division in education, access to support mechanisms and encouragement to move to 3rd level education. So, issues such as reducing EMAs or entitlement to EMAs, oppressive university fees and student loans all play a part in discouraging certain groups of young people from advancing in education, regardless of their ability. The income of a family also contributes to decisions of young people. The changing economic fortunes of certain communities and a historically different perspective by some sections of the community of the requirements of achieving academically also have to be tackled.

In many areas, certain groups of young people perform less well. A recent report into the educational underachievement of working class protestant males in Belfast clearly demonstrated that there is a wider structural problem to be tackled to ensure that young people aren't ignored or left behind, just because of their background. Whilst this may not be a problem exclusive to that particular category of young people it does nonetheless demonstrate that a problem clearly exists and is one that needs to be resolved. Shared education in itself may not address or resolve this issue; it does however have the potential to assist in breaking a cycle of underachievement.

Question 7

Is there any particular research evidence on shared education that you believe should be considered? If so, please provide full references below and, where possible, attach a copy with your submission (preferably in electronic format).

I have no further evidence to share at this time in relation to Question 7

Thank you for your time. Your views are important and will be considered carefully by the Ministerial Advisory Group.

Updates on the work of the Ministerial Advisory Group can be found on the website:
<http://www.qub.ac.uk/mag>

END.

