

Response to Consultation:

The Committee for Education: Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education



Northern Ireland Youth Forum
October 2014



Introduction

The Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee for Education's inquiry into shared and integrated education.

The NIYF aspires to supporting young people to affect change in their communities and we are strong advocates of young people as emerging leaders. The NIYF prides itself in involving young people in the policy making process and supporting young people to engage directly with decision makers at the very highest levels. Young people make up one third of the population of the North of Ireland and have a vital role to play in effecting social change.

We aim to support young people and to help build their self-confidence and belief in themselves, so that they can raise and discuss issues of importance to them. The NIYF's work is cross community in nature and focuses on social issues. We place equality, diversity, independence and interdependence central to our ethos. We believe that all young people should be listened to and respected and we place understanding and acceptance of cultural and political diversity at the forefront of our work. We work to achieve a situation of empowerment – where young people are proactive in the decision making process.

The NIYF, in partnership with BYTES manages a Big Lottery funded project entitled 'Champions 4 Change' (C4C). The C4C project encapsulates the youth model of the NIYF:

- 1/ Personal Change – The belief in young people to affect personal change.
- 2/ Peer Change – The belief in young people to assist and support their peers
- 3/ Community Change – The belief in young people collectively to affect change at a community level.
- 4/ Societal Change – The belief in young people to bring about change in wider society; at local, national and international levels.

Methodology

The C4C programme seeks to engage young people aged 16-20, who are in Need of Employment, Education or Training. It aims to develop their ability to make personal change and influence peer, community and societal change. As part of this process, C4C staff engaged with sixty-two young people from a diverse range of religious, political, academic and economic backgrounds - to discuss their views on shared/integrated education.

To facilitate discussion the young people were provided with the following information:

Inquiry into Shared / Integrated Education

The Committee for Education is part of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Its job is to think about schools and youth services in Northern Ireland. It is currently reviewing the nature and definition of Shared Education and Integrated Education.

What is the Inquiry about?

The Committee wants to know what you think about the different types of education.

Options

- What is good about Shared Education?
- What is good about Integrated Education?
- What is good about Separated Education?
- Should more Shared Education be encouraged?
- Should more Integrated Education be encouraged?
- Should more Separate Education be encouraged?
- What should be done to promote your option in schools?
- What part should pupils or parents play in supporting this option

Essentially, you are being asked to give your view on what type of education system we should have in the future, these are the main options;

Integrated – Young people are taught in the same school irrespective of their religious and indeed, non-religious beliefs.

Shared - Young People come together for some subjects and then return to their own school.

Separated - Young people attend a school that reflects their own faith.

Free Choice – The Department of Education should support the choice of the board of governor's or governing body of each school to decide for themselves what way their school operates.

Some background information

At the heart of this inquiry is whether or not we can and should live together i.e. shared housing, recreational facilities, education etc... However, this does not mean that to achieve one you must agree with the other. Most venues within the city centre would be seen as shared spaces; pubs, shops, restaurants, cinema etc...however these can be maintained

and indeed developed further without people having to be educated together or living next to each other.

Summary of Group discussions

In general the vast majority of young people (59) expressed the view that integrated education should be supported. They were mindful of the dangers that this may pose to some young people in certain areas. In these circumstances they were of the view that shared education could be safely supported.

Whilst being overwhelmingly supportive of Shared/Integrated Education, there was a marginal separation as to how this should be progressed:

32 x believed that the government should encourage shared/integrated education, but they shouldn't legislate for it.

27 x of those who responded indicated that they felt shared/integrated education improves community relations and the government should legislate for it.

NOTE: Although the numbers of young people who had actually attended an integrated school was very small (6) they all agreed it was extremely beneficial to them in establishing links with the other community and understanding their religious counterparts. These six participants came from areas that they described as integrated.

The prevailing view of the other participants was; shared education improves young people's understanding of the other community, however it does not equate to an increase in the maintenance of relationships beyond the school environment.

Many of the respondents felt that sectarianism was more of an issue for older people than them.

They felt that many politicians reinforce sectarian attitudes.

Group Discussions

Participants were invited to give an overview of the type of education they received and to discuss the merits of this. This was an ice breaking activity, to get the young people to think about the issues surrounding education. They focused on the specific issues of shared and integrated education, via a number of preset questions. This is a selection of their views to each question;

Should there be Integrated Education?

"Yes!, It provides you with the opportunity to meet new friends"

"I think so, it helps break down barriers between people who live in different area's"

“Yeah! You’re able to get other people’s opinions about things”

“Schools should not only be mixed in relation to Catholic’s and Protestants, but boys and girls” (This view was widely supported).

“I would support integrated education but others wouldn’t”

“I would like it, but there are things about it I would need to think about”

How should Integrated Education be introduced?

“In our school the teachers made sure the class was even” (equal numbers of Catholic and Protestant pupils).

“It needs to start from primary school up”

“Parents should be given the chance to visit integrated schools to see if that’s what they want”

Should there be Shared Education?

“Shared education should be supported especially in rural areas”

“In areas where integrated education wouldn’t work, because of people’s safety, they should be encouraged to share classes, they (pupils) could go into the other school in buses”

“In those schools that have too many people in their area wanting to go to the school, they could do shared education. They might be able to get people from the other side to come and live in their area to go to their school”

What are the benefits of Shared or integrated education?

“It enabled us to meet up at shared spaces” (city centre shopping centres)

“You get the chance to hear what they think of living in their area”

“I went to house parties in their area, it didn’t bother me. Before I went to school with them, I wouldn’t have walked through their area”.

“Integrated education may eventually lead to integrated housing”

Blockages to Integrated/Shared Education

“Our parents have the issues not us, sectarianism starts at home. Go in to school with people from the other side isn’t going to make much difference in what you think if you go home to sectarian attitudes. ”

“Politicians reinforce segregation”

“Communities reinforce segregation”

“Some area’s given their local history with the other side may not want to mix”

“In some areas it would be dangerous for you to walk through their area to get to your own house after school”

“Students should be asked to vote on it, in each school and if they want to remain on their own then they should”

“The government should be left out of any decision about it (shared/integrated education) they should take the views of parents, pupils, teachers and those running the school and then do what they want”

“The government should have a say as they fund the school, but they shouldn't have the final say”

“Some schools are already over subscribed to by people from the local area, how could they be integrated?”

“I was bullied in my School (shared education) my name clearly identified me as a ...”

“Schools should remain segregated”

Other Comments

“It shouldn't matter where you go to school”

“There should be a mixture of schools, that suit the needs of local communities”

“There should be another Irish language secondary school” (This view was widely supported)

“There should be youth drop-in centres in neutral areas that would support integration in education”

“Teachers need trained to assist integration”

“The quality of education is more important than the type”

Religious Education should be left to the home”

The C4C project welcomes the opportunity to respond to the aforementioned inquiry and to ensure that the views of young people are heard at the highest levels of political governance. During this process, it was inspiring to hear that young people were moving away from sectarian views of each other irrespective of the school that they had attended. It is also noteworthy that despite their own personal views on integrated/shared education they recognised it wasn't for everyone and shouldn't be forced upon them.



LOTTERY FUNDED