

Submission on Shared/ Integrated Education

Prepared by Oakgrove Integrated College Derry-Londonderry for the NI Assembly Committee on Education

October 24th, 2014

This submission is prepared by the school's Vice Principal who is also responsible for Integration within the school and into the wider community, locally, nationally and globally. It is based on interviews and surveys with staff, students, past students and reflective discussions with some of parent representatives of the Board of Governors.

Established in 1992, Oakgrove Integrated College sees its role as being one of facilitating reconciliation by creating a safe but challenging place where people from different backgrounds can work, play and learn together. Central to what we do is a consideration of how we can advance efforts to create a more peaceful society, whilst also meeting the statutory demands of the Department of Education. In balancing many demands, we emphasise our founding duty to promote integration by developing in young minds an ability to think beyond/below/above/ around the barriers created in society.

The Committee must recognise that each sector responding will speak from its own experience. In our case, our reflections are focused on how our contribution can help to advance a change in provision so that there can be greater reconciliation through education across our society. It should be recognised that the integrated schools alone were set up as a model of how to achieve reconciliation, modelling a way of living together in community with those who are different, and celebrating the diversity. While there are flaws in every model, we humbly suggest that when an integrated school returns to its core value of trying to heal and to reconcile, there is a great deal of opportunity to engage young people creatively for diversity which it is hard to replicate in any other setting.

It has been suggested that the voice from the integrated sector is too small to be given equal weight to that of others; we contend that the small voices of other groups have provided crucial guidance at previously important times in our conflict-resolution journey. We hope that the experience we have learned about sharing throughout our twenty-two years in this school will provide insights to share more widely. Small political parties made great contributions, and small religious groups such as the Religious Society of Friends created important opportunities to foster seeds of peace. Small gestures by the many who suffered in our history pointed others towards a better way; wisdom in the smaller voice should not be ignored.

If each sector is seen simply to speak for itself, then the over-arching aim of the inquiry will be forgotten. In presenting our thoughts, we have focused on those aspects of our journey which

we feel point most helpfully a way to bringing young people together for meaningful exchange which will result in a more normal society. The Committee should see through the mists of our clouded multi-layered system and distil what is essential for a better future. Many projects are worthwhile, but those which bring lasting change are the essential ones, and those which should receive support. The US began the end of its segregated society by making changes which people did not want. It may be that our society needs to be told by leaders of courage that a different way must be found, which will foster truer reconciliation.

Our school was designed as a child-centred institution, and we routinely solicit the views of young people, especially around issues of segregation, integration and sharing in society. A small selection of student views are given at the end of this document; should the committee wish to see further evidence of attitudes towards integration, bi-annual Holocaust Day surveys and other school-based data dating back to 2004 will provide this.

Students suggest that The Committee should focus closely on what shared or integrated education is about. It aims to promote reconciliation, and so we must look with honesty to those things which have brought this about. In our experience, the opportunity of students working together through issues which divide or unite provides a model of use in wider society and for later life. Students learn most of these lessons not through formal interactions in the classroom, but in the informal contacts where friendships are developed, issues explored and trust built.

We strongly believe that attitudinal change comes **not** through intellectual but through emotional responses. Opportunity for this type of emotional growth are limited in any experience which does not have young people continually working with those whose experiences are different. In segregated settings, learning such as that envisaged by CRED or LLW provisions is bound to be limited to learning about, rather than from "the other". We believe that only in fairly constantly mixed settings, where there is a constant encounter with "otherness" will the opportunities exist to grow, learn and develop understanding of what a reconciled, shared community can look like.

It is our hope that The Committee will allow us to present orally, and to hear from student voices. If doing so, we would speak not only of the experience of an integrated school, but also of those projects which have enabled us to reach out to others, most significantly:

- The work of the Spirit of Enniskillen Trust (and how a way must be found to preserve that work);
- The work of a schools UNITY Project to challenge prejudice, based on the model given by Steve Wessler, founder of the Maine Centre for the Prevention of Hate Violence;
- The shared learning about the first world war and its lessons for a modern, divided society made possible by the work of the International School for Peace Studies.

- Theatre of Witness and its ability to reach beyond segments of a divided society and show how friendships can exist which defy the stereotypes often encountered in a more limited, less emotional understanding of history.
- Hands For A Bridge, an after school project linking our students with those in South Africa and Seattle, to explore issues of identity in a community of division, and which has brought our young people to a deeper awareness of themselves and our community.

We have felt that these models have proved to be effective, at low cost, and involving genuine sharing, rather than the sometimes superficial contacts which have sometimes arisen from funding opportunities rather than a genuine desire to build community.

It is in our nature to respond positively to every invitation to engage with others. Alongside many positive experiences, there have been others which did nothing to further trust, and indeed have seemed more about achieving balance for political/ financial or other purposes than about furthering the stated ideals of reconciliation, peace-building or connecting young people.

The Committee could give thought to the reasons why people involved themselves in shared education, and examine closely the possibility that work is driven by less noble motives than those stated; in a divided, underfunded educational system where schools compete, it must be recognised that less than the best practice can take place yet be presented in ways which look attractive. In our society emerging from conflict, few are willing to be critical of any initiative purporting to further peace, yet in making decisions about the future, we must be critical since only genuine reconciliation will prevent those darker and more sinister forces in society taking hold in ripe young minds.

Our experience is that for genuine trust to be built, there should be space to make mistakes, to speak honestly. This is hard to do when funding is involved, and where the value is judged in numbers touched, rather than changes recorded in attitudes towards others. The showcasing of projects which have been heavily funded does not inspire confidence that change has come about. It simply shows that targets have been met for funding purposes, without critically examining at a grassroots level whether those were the targets which ever ought to have been set.

As individuals on the Committee, members could give thought to what they themselves have found to work. All MLAs must have experienced progress on an individual level with others which they may once have thought impossible. What is it that allows individuals to form working friendships with those with whom they may remain opponents on many areas relating to politics, for example? The answer which we have found is the sustained opportunity to look for common ground, which is found when people are beside each other on a sustained basis and which is not possible in other settings.

Students in our school have trained staff; some staff now report that they think differently because of what they have learned from students. There is a place for young people from different backgrounds to work with politicians, not to learn from them about politics, but for politicians to learn from them about reconciliation, building bridges and not being afraid to learn from their mistakes.

In conclusion, we would ask The Committee to reflect on the question: what is shared about? We suggest it is about building a society which will foster reconciliation between individuals and across communities. If societies are reconciled when individuals have this experience, then there are individual examples to help us as we struggle to understand. Recently, the family of murdered journalist James Foley spoke of how he believed in changing the world, person by person, act of love by act of love. Amid the rubble of Enniskillen, as his daughter's life ebbed from her, Gordon Wilson said that the "bottom line was love", "I bear no ill-will, I bear no grudge". As he left us in our hope of a better future, Senator George Mitchell reminded us two friends from different traditions, buried side by side as a reminder of our brokenness, and where our failure to engage would lead us back, if we chose that route. And in what he said at the funeral of Elizabeth O'Neill, the Minister's words should remind us still: "Sectarianism lives in all of us."

None of those voices who urged us to move our way to peace pointed to their own success, but rather encouraged others to give their best for peace. The church leaders and individuals who so much ground work for peace did not celebrate their success – they facilitated the dialogue. In looking to see how our future can be better, we would urge The Committee to be careful to support and encourage what is genuine, not what makes the soundbite. The voice of children is clear when it is heard - they want to be together, to have opportunities to learn together, to develop understanding of the other, to learn about the past, and to share stories wherein the healing will be found.

We commend our thoughts to The Committee and will be happy to share further information which may help.

We wish you well in this difficult, life-changing and critical task.

John Harkin

October 24th, 2014

**A sample of thoughts on integrated education selected from reflections by current/
recent past pupils of Oakgrove Integrated College, Derry-Londonderry**

- I can't imagine my schooling years in a non-integrated school. Why? Because it just makes life in this world feel a bit more "right" when you're in an environment that promotes interest in everyone around you. No matter what gender, background, or nationality. I really appreciated this, being a Jehovah's Witness - I felt respected, and that I had a voice within the school. The good attitude that the school promotes really rubs off on its students, as I always felt respected by my peers, especially in a-level years, and many were interested to find out more about me and my faith, which was really encouraging to me. A synonym of "integration" is "blending". We generally blend food because different foods together taste nice, or sometimes even nicer than when eaten on their own. I think the blending that integration does for young people makes their attitudes and personalities much more tasteful to the figurative palette of society. I like to think this contributes to communities of happier and more peaceful people. - Jay
- You must become the change you wish to see in the world - Mahatma Ghandi - Jason
- I feel that moving from an all Catholic school to an integrated school completely changed my personality and my own thoughts on the world. . If I hadn't moved to Oakgrove and experienced the integrated education I wouldn't have been able to look at each individual for their own self and their own qualities. I learnt that we shouldn't look at people as Catholics or Protestants or Muslims etc and that we shouldn't judge people based on what religion they are, what they look like how they talk etc. I feel that being in integrated education has helped me a lot with my journey to university and has helped me meet and respect the new people here in Manchester from various different backgrounds etc. - Caitlin
- Being able to share my education with people from all races and religions is something I've always been grateful for. When I watch the news and see the conflict and tragedy happening around the world because of race, religion and culture its an eye opener. Although we have problems with in our school, it is a sanctuary for me and many other students... somewhere where each and every one of us are judged not by our race, religion or culture but the content of our character. - Rachel

- Shared/Integrated education, holds the key to peace through breakdown of bias and grudges that have been passed down from family members. This is achieved through allowing children to make decisions for themselves with an open mind removing a wall between the concept of "us and them". Learning playing and developing in an integrated environment that prepares children for work life. As segregation in the work place is not allowed, why should it be allowed in schools?
- Orla
- I count myself very lucky to have gone to Oakgrove. Not only did I receive a brilliant education but my entire time there has undoubtedly shaped who I am today. I met people and experienced things I know I would never have gotten the opportunity to do, had I not gone to an integrated school. I have also had some experience of shared education as in 6th year I travelled to another school for one of my subjects. Although this was a good experience it was different from my normal classes. I think this was because even though we were brought together for class, there was not much of an opportunity to really mix with the pupils from the other school and it seemed that our differences ran deeper than our notably different uniforms. Integrated education goes far beyond simply bringing people together. It is about giving young people the knowledge and power to better understand themselves and others, and use this to make changes to how they live their lives, by moving beyond their differences and focusing on shared experiences. - Geraldine
- Hands For A Bridge (A project based within Oakgrove Integrated College) helped me so much through my high school years. Being in Hands For A Bridge as well as an Integrated School meant I could put the discussions we had in group meetings into action. Making sure to look after the younger ones, trying not to exclude people, not judging someone on their appearance and never joking to someone about their race or culture. I learned not to do these things because I had the opportunity to talk to fellow students in Hands For A Bridge and find a common thread was at one point or time we felt excluded, isolated and alone because of who we are and what we believe. Hands For A Bridge gave me empowerment. I became much more confident and it helped me believe I could truly make a change in the world. 'If you cannot do great things, do small things in a great way', sums up who I've been. I have the confidence and self belief to know you can change the world one person at a time. Being there for the other students, taught me compassion. Knowing when to be quiet, to let someone else speak and let out what's on their mind is a vital lesson in life. I really don't think I'd be the same person I am today if it wasn't for my integrated school and for Hands For A Bridge, even now, 2 years after leaving school I still feel a sense of belonging to a community, one that I am proud to support. - Bethany