



**Queens University Belfast**

**Shared Education Advisory Group**

**Report on Parental Consultations**

**Proposals for Shared Education in Northern Ireland**

**Parenting NI  
November 2012**

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## **Introduction**

In October 2012 the Parenting Forum commenced the task of carrying out a consultation exercise with parents on behalf of the Queens University Ministerial Advisory Group on Shared Education. An important aspect of this review was to engage in a transparent consultative process that would provide a platform for parents to air their views, concerns and objections to the new proposals.

The Parenting Forum was approached to carry out the consultation with groups of parents across Northern Ireland. The Parenting Forum has considerable experience in carrying out such exercises as it has regular contact with a network of parents and parent support groups throughout Northern Ireland and is well placed to carry out real and meaningful consultations with parents within an agreed frame-work. Over a seven week period 6 focus groups were accessed. In total this included 55 parents caring for 155 children and young people. An unusually high number of parents had children with special needs, although only one group was targeted. However only one parent represented ethnic and minority groups. Participants were mainly female with a twelve male representation, some parents worked and some did not work outside of the home.

## **The Consultation Process**

As agreed with the Advisory Group, the initial plan was to enlist co-operation from groups of parents from the existing Forum membership as many of these parents had previous experience of consultation. Opportunities were also given to groups that the Forum had not worked with in the past. Focus groups were chosen from across Northern Ireland in schools and community settings which were both urban and rural.

The Parenting Forum used three of their own internal facilitators for all of the focus groups. Consultation with parents requires highly skilled and experienced facilitators who are capable of working sensitively with diverse groups and facilitators were chosen accordingly. Parents clearly valued the opportunity to be consulted on the document and readily contributed their views and their experiences.

## **Consultation Methodology**

A consultation pack was designed to ensure a uniform approach across all the focus groups in collecting and collating the information. The pack also aimed to give parents an insight into the rationale and user friendly materials were designed in order to present the proposals to the parents in a way that would encourage debate [see Appendix 1- Facilitators' Pack]. Focus groups were used as the data gathering method because they brought parents together in a way that allowed them to share their experiences and their opinions, to identify issues of individual and common concern. The Parenting Forum was aware of the need to consult with parents from across Northern Ireland to provide a wide geographic spread from urban and rural communities.

## **The Groups**

It is worth noting that many of the groups consulted contained parents who had children attending a mix of schools in a geographic area. In one instance, a number of parents scheduled to attend a mixed group session withdrew as they felt that it was an attack on grammar schools. A seventh school had agreed to take part in the consultation but had to withdraw. As agreed the groups targeted included:

2 primary

2 post primary

1 early years

1 alternative to education provided

## Parent Profile Information

Total number of parents consulted: 55

<b>Gender:</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>		
	12	43		
<b>Marital Status:</b>	<b>Single</b>	<b>Married</b>	<b>Sep/Div</b>	<b>Other</b>
	8	33	11	3
<b>Belong to ethnic/minority group?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>		
	1	54		
<b>Parent with disability/special need?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>		
	8	47		
<b>Ages of Children:</b>	<b>0 - 5 years</b>	<b>6 - 10 years</b>	<b>11 - 17 years</b>	<b>18+</b>
<b>Male</b>	12	14	23	18
<b>Female</b>	6	8	40	16
<b>Sex unspecified</b>	2	1	7	8
<b>Children with disability/special need?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>		
	29	26		
<b>Community:</b>	<b>Urban</b>	<b>Rural</b>		
	32	23		

Sep/Div = Separated/divorced

## Exercise 1

This exercise was designed to introduce shared education to the group and to have an overview of their understanding and experiences. In almost all of the groups some parents initially answered 'no' to their children having experience of shared education but when other parents gave examples they changed their minds and provided examples. Some parents focused on integration of children from different backgrounds and abilities within their current school setting.

### 1. Have your children ever experienced opportunities for shared education?

- Yes. Most parents said that their children had.
- Most of the parents with children attending an alternative school had not experienced it.

### 2. What did they do?

The responses to this question varied and in order to present the information the responses have been grouped in categories.

#### **Arrangements between schools**

- Partnership arrangements between schools where kids went to another school and made smoothies or did a project (P6 and P7)
- Extended schools / EMU Programme
- One primary school came to another to use computers
- In transition year the young people go to local college and have an opportunity to try new things
- School twinning a good start, even to get teachers mixing
- Going to another school to study subjects
- Going to the local college to undertake vocational courses
- Visiting other schools particularly in transition years
- Contested Spaces project in Lisnagelvin School in Derry with 9 schools involved. Children out one day a week, curriculum related
- Grammar and High School share facilities as different specialisations

#### **Programmes and training**

- Love for Life - one parent recently went to sex education talk for parents from the three local schools (cross community)
- Primary school was integrated in every way, inclusive of young people from all backgrounds.
- A variety of parenting programmes where parents from a number of schools in the area came together for these

### **Additional or extra curricular activities**

- Roe Olympics
- A language unit is coming to the school which will make it more inclusive
- When the army camp was open the school had many kids from an international context
- Child (protestant boy) sings in choir so has to attend First Communions
- Sports and football teams are mixed
- Music provision by Western Board where kids plan an orchestra
- Christmas concert
- Ulster project, mixed group and go to America
- High School meet with Special School and help out with literacy, Christmas sale etc.
- Rugby tour to South Africa forms global connections
- Cross community work

### **Concerns**

- One parent questioned the need for a consultation as he felt that we are there in terms of shared education. It is happening already so what was the need?
- One parent was concerned that this was all about an attack on grammar schools.

### **3. What are your feelings about this?**

Almost all of the parents were very positive about the experience and the benefits for their children. However some parents raised questions and concerns. The responses have been groups into themes.

#### **Breaking down barriers and deal with prejudices**

- Chance to get to know that other kids are not so different
- Communicating with others from different environments face to face is good
- “The kids are leading the way, teaching us how to relate to others from different cultures”
- Preferred boys and girls to be taught together
- Good to meet children with special needs – other children don’t know how to react when they see a child with a special need so it breaks down barriers Parents are very aware of how other people look at children with special needs

#### **Benefits**

- Good for children with special needs to get out into other schools or colleges as it helps when they are moving on and they have to use transport etc.
- New experiences build confidence



- Opportunities to study different subjects that are not available in their school

### **Concerns**

- Different school may have a different ethos / approach / rules which is challenging when children and young people attend different schools
- Some of the parents of children attending an alternative school thought it could lead to bullying / victimisation

## **Exercise 2**

**This exercise was designed to take parents through key questions directly relating to the public consultation questionnaire.**

In most of the groups there was a discussion about the current systems and geographic location of schools which mean that it could be difficult to advance shared education. Parents felt that attitudes would need to change from some parents, communities and schools themselves before real changes could be put into place. The responses to the questions often overlap and are interlinked.

### **Q1. What are the best ways to ensure shared education moves forward in NI?**

#### **Funding and Accountability**

- Needs legislation to make it happen and there is a need to check it's happening as school may say they are part of Shared Education but do not always understand what this means in practice
- Needs funding / money to help it work
- Agreement from ESA

#### **Parental and Schools Input**

- Listen to schools and parents as they know best
- Parent power to ensure that Shared Education is a reality – this is linked to good parenting
- Need to bring everyone on board; parents, teachers and politicians to work together.

#### **Provision of Education**

- One shoe does not fit all – children with special needs may not be able to participate in Shared Education because their physical needs supersede everything else
- Better basic education and vocational education linked to better understanding of cultural and other differences
- Create ways to engage kids from underprivileged backgrounds
- All schools to be integrated so kids can go to their closest school. Some kids can't as schools are attached to a local parish. CCMS and controlled sector need to work together to sort this out.

- Religion was a recurring issue in one group and the group was divided about how they felt. 8 participants felt that religion should have nothing to do with schools and kept completely separate. A few others felt that Christian values should underpin our education system and new communities (BME) should respect that. A few others felt that world religion should be taught but not focussed on any particular religion.
- Cosmopolitan fluid society where no one is seen as minority. Lots of diversity and people from all over the world to make us integrate. More outside influence.
- Start mixing kids from a young age from nursery and playgroup right up. Secondary is almost too late.
- School twinning a good start, even to get teachers mixing.
- Super schools where all backgrounds are included but it needs investment to do it right.
- Need to be taught as individuals, something there for everyone no matter what their needs are. Kids need to have aspirations to achieve and do well. Give them hope.
- Adults need educated on shared education
- Pupils need better support – emotional as well as physical
- Integrating gender is important

## **Q2. What are the barriers to advancing a shared education system?**

### **Current system**

- Location of some schools would mean that children would have to go into another community. Not everyone would accept this and it may lead to bullying or more serious violence
- CCMS and the restrictions on the staff that they employ mean that some teachers cannot teach in their schools
- ESA input on shared education
- Numbers: in Derry there is a majority Catholic population and in any school Protestants will remain a minority. Where there is a 'majority' there will be discrimination against those in the minority.
- Children who have complex needs which cannot be met other than in their current setting. Health and education together
- Snobbery and attitudes of some schools particularly some grammar schools who feel they are better than secondary schools
- Class was seen as a major barrier as working class kids do not get the same opportunities.
- More state interference to support kids who are neglected. There is a spiral of deprivation that passes down through generations. Need to break the cycle.
- EMA keeps kids in school
- The need for mutual understanding of everyone in society and how moving forward after the troubles can be a barrier
- In secondary schools prejudice is already entrenched, it is too late.

## Funding

- Money / funding is needed for school buildings and training
- Need for new buildings in neutral locations
- Better transport
- Schools get paid per pupil and schools might manipulate 'shared education' to get more kids through their doors permanently rather than just popping in to share resources.
- Geography and logistics. The cost of kids travelling to other schools. Logistics for teachers, needs resourced. Bus insurance and risks.

## Other

- There was scepticism about the motives for government wanting to advance shared education. What is the purpose of this consultation? Is it to promote shared education or is it really about cutting costs? Group concerned that the government is planning to privatise education and introduce 'academies' as in England.
- We have high expectations for new communities or ethnic minorities who arrive in our schools as we expect them to speak the language, adapt to our culture. Most people felt that it was important for them to keep their culture but some members felt they should adapt to a Christian society and Christian values.
- Culture was a difficult issue as the group felt our own culture was so divided that we would not know how to help other new cultures integrate. We need to address our own prejudice first. Inner city parents have more entrenched prejudice.
- Lack of respect and discipline with kids.
- People who work with kids with special needs – not having the skills needed if the children are involved in mainstream education even if it is only part time
- Time, it might take three generations to start seeing huge changes. Change is slow.
- Fear. Parents at the Derry consultation commented that many parents were too afraid to come along tonight to a discussion about shared education.

### **Q3. How should Shared Education ensure it meets the needs of all learners and provides opportunities for learners to be educated together, regardless of their sex, gender, race, political opinion, disability and economic background?**

Many of the parents who have a child with a complex disability felt that shared education would not meet their child's needs.

Most parents talked about a system that reflects the needs of individual children and how they can reach their full potential. There were extensive discussions in many groups about the academic versus the vocational needs of children and how the Department would ensure that all children were given equal opportunities. One or two parents mentioned education systems in other European countries where children who do better with vocational studies are separate from those following an academic path.

## **Individual Needs**

- Need to know the needs of ALL learners. Particular needs have to be addressed to ensure that the children and young people can participate and this may mean having to employ other professionals to meet these needs
- Early intervention to ensure that children accept the integration from nursery age
- Costs of rugby kit and trips and sports fees cannot be afforded by poorer families and puts pressure on kids and parents and also subjects kids to peer pressure.

## **Delivery in schools**

- Multi disciplinary approach to support children not just with educational requirements in a school setting
- Extra support for pupils that need it
- Where does Statementing sit in Shared Education?
- More teachers
- Smaller classes, especially if mixed ability
- Kids should have a say in big decisions.
- Teach some subjects in ways that suit the kids - link them to real life
- Homework clubs in the community, libraries more accessible.
- More languages should be taught in primary schools eg: Mandarin, Eastern block languages
- Uniforms are good to unite pupils and not make individuals stand out
- Two paths for education, academic and practical and there should be two different sets of exams. In Primary school all kids are lumped together.
- Mixed opinion about out two tiered education system. Some of the participants felt this was needed to ensure all needs were addressed and others felt this was not fair.
- 2 key areas were identified for any education system:
  1. A strong focus on self esteem, personal development. More important than educational attainment. When they have good self esteem they will flourish.
  2. The basics at primary level. All kids need to have a strong grasp of reading, and number work (English and Math). Many kids reach secondary standard without these.

## **Q4. (Question 6 in the questionnaire) How do you think that moving shared education forward will ensure that learners will have equal opportunities to learn?**

- Very abstract and aspirational. How would it be rolled out?
- It should overcome social inequality and create ways for kids from working class backgrounds to achieve their potential.
- In NI we are mostly white and have been nearly all white until recently. This increase of people from other countries will continue, so we can prepare ourselves for this. We are ignorant about a lot of these issues. We need to start shared education when the kids are really young in nursery and continue the whole way up through the education system.

- Good example (Camphill which is a mixed community setting primarily for young people with disabilities) – ethos, opportunity, respect
- Take account of the needs of vulnerable young people
- One person commented that shared education should not include different academic ability and this should be kept separate. This should not be in section 75.
- Shared education is a very wide net and there is a danger of being too wide and vague. Needs to have clear agenda/purpose.
- Shared education is not for everyone, some parents won't agree eg: special needs kids should be in the right setup
- More after schools clubs

### **Exercise 3**

**Q4. How do you think the advancement of shared education might address such issues as ethos and identity? How can Shared Education address the following issues for learners:**

#### **Opportunities for participation**

- After school meetings
- School meetings such as student councils to help children and young people have their say
- Open school facilities for community to meet in - not good to lock schools up at 4pm especially in rural areas
- Leadership from school principals. Schools need to work together on this and collaborate, not compete
- Teach citizenship
- Be clear about what it is. Does it suit all children?
- Voices of parents, children and teachers need to be heard
- Funders / MLA's etc should come into the schools are listen to the school community – children, young people, parents, teachers etc.

#### **Be safe and their welfare needs are met**

- Swipe cards for all lunch pupils so those taking free school dinners can blend in with the same form of payment
- We should address these issues (agreed by all group except one) but in an environment that is safe, where people are trained for this and using a range of methods like drama etc.
- Better cross community work
- Use the buddy system
- Need better supervision of kids on transport and in class. Better security in schools
- Ensure that each school has a full time mental health councillor
- have respect and dignity no matter who they are
- Better understanding of bullying particular social exclusion and isolation – having school policies does not go far enough
- Use uniforms so that all children and young people blend in

### **Have respect and dignity no matter who they are**

- One person thought that differences didn't need to be talked about as it just reinforces difference. Need to focus on similarities
- Start young enough when kids are comfortable to talk about anything e.g. Puppet show about diversity in local playgroup at the minute
- Parents need to move across boundaries/communities. Move away from preconceived ideas or notions. Some won't want to change

### **Q5.**

#### **(a) In moving shared education forward in NI, will there be a need to change the curriculum to include particular skills or knowledge for learners?**

- Some parents said 'no' as the curriculum is always changing and teachers never get a chance to get used to it or have a say in how it changes.
- Many participants felt it did need to change. It needed to value different routes not just academic. Needed different exams for people who are not academic. More hands on. (some people disagreed with this)
- Need social education
- Respect and dignity
- Less packed timetable to allow for this
- Religion to be taken out. Religion is political here so that needs to change
- Less assessment, there is over assessment at the minute in Primary where you have to assess every move.
- The content of the curriculum was seen as a barrier by some. History was used as an example of how subjects can be taught from one side/perspective. People need to know their history or culture but we need to look beyond this.
- The curriculum limits kids options for careers as it limits their skills - there is a need to be more holistic in education which should be reflected in the curriculum
- A focus on all kids getting basic English and Maths at an early stage is key
- Personal Development and mental health as a core part of education.
- Invest heavily in primary education as this is the key area. By the time secondary stages come it is too late.
- Management/leadership in schools is important and they need to have high expectations of teachers and support progress.
- Schools and teachers in NI are good and better than the UK so we need to be careful not to go down the same route as the rest of the UK.
- Need to have incentive for kids to achieve in school and jobs at the end.

### **Q5.**

#### **(b) How can they ensure that the rights of all learners to develop a broad range of essential life skills are met?**

- Leadership from above to ensure that essential skills are met
- Teaching participation, togetherness, tolerance, respect: all these things happen when you have to consider others.
- One person said that her son with dyslexia got very little support at school and she had to fight every day to get support even though he had an educational Statement.

- There needs to be extra support invested in school to deal with the range of needs and abilities. Staff time needs to be allocated to this and not cut which has happened in the past.
- Awareness raising about disability
- Mix able and disabled may have different needs to be able to attain essential skills
- Use different methods of teaching
- Get parents involved
- Have a meeting at the beginning of each school year with pupils, parents and teachers. Not a talk but interactive so they get to know each other.
- Develop a budget for the school parent's forum
- Financial education is important and needs to be part of curriculum
- Need life skills: coping with money/shopping to be able to exist in the community, to have choices, pathways open to young people, more exposure to other children for those with a disability is more important sometimes than what they achieve
- Access to education for those who need help
- Wider horizons
- Curriculum needs to reflect ongoing needs to attain essential skills
- Everyone needs to take responsibility for life skills; parents, teachers and the local community. All parents need to get involved, not just the usual suspects
- Parenting programmes are important to educate parents too
- More staff (which they are cutting). Security for staff
- Counselling for kids
- Don't put kids with special needs into a box
- Each school should have a Share Shop for books, uniforms, sport clothes and equipment. Legislation that suppliers of PE kits and uniform can't charge high prices.

### **Final comments made by parents during the sessions**

- Some of the parents felt that it was a worthwhile consultation but were very sceptical as to why the government was taking an interest in this and they worried it was for cost cutting measures.
- They felt there were a lot of questions and sometimes the question was not very clearly worded.
- Parents felt that strong leadership is needed both from the Department and Principals to ensure that Shared Education is advanced in a way that supports all learners regardless of their abilities to reach their full potential.

## **Summary of Key Findings**

**The responses given by parents to the questions often overlap and are interlinked. Parents tended to jump about when thinking about one question and often responded to either previous questions or those yet to be asked. In summarising the key findings in the report, the overarching information has been recorded under themes.**

### **General**

The majority of parents were in favour of advancing shared education as they felt that it would benefit children and young people, both opening up opportunities to enhance learning and give them a better understanding of children from different backgrounds and capabilities. Some parents felt that shared education is good in theory but it may be aspirational for all children to be included, especially for children who have complex physical disabilities.

Parents also reflected on the wider community and how society's prejudices may be a barrier to advancing shared education. This was voiced from a number of perspectives including disability, racism and sectarianism. Parents felt that much needs to be done to educate adults including other parents.

There was a level of cynicism from some parents about the reason for the consultation taking place and they queried if one of the key outcomes would be to close schools.

### **Current System**

A recurring issue throughout the process was that of the current system. This was discussed under a number of questions and different issues emerged. Primarily parents felt that in some areas the geographic location of schools would not lend itself to advancing shared education. They felt that in some of these areas there would be a question of the child or young person's safety, not only from other school children but also from other members of some communities.

The teaching of religion within the current system was often raised as a barrier to advancing shared education. Many parents were critical of CCMS which was said to only employ teachers who have studied religion as part of their degree. This may not be the case but it is the parents' perception.

All parents were in favour of making changes which children would experience from an early age as they felt that ongoing behaviours and prejudices can be embedded in children by the time they enter post primary education.

Parents felt that in order to advance shared education there needs to be strong leadership at different levels, not least the Department of Education and that funding would need to be available particularly in the early stages to 'make things happen'.



## **Practicalities**

Parents raised a number of questions regarding the practicalities of advancing shared education and ensuring the safety of all children. They felt that timetabling is often too full to allow young people sufficient time to move from one setting to another to avail of subjects and facilities in other settings. They felt that transport was a key issue if children need to travel to other settings and queried how this would be supervised.

Parental involvement was seen as crucial to ensuring that shared education becomes a reality. Some parents stated that parents may need to be educated themselves to deal with prejudices they may have which are often passed on to children.