



Committee for Education
Email: committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk

24 October 2014

RE: PlayBoard NI Response to the Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education

PlayBoard is an independent charity and the lead organisation for the development and promotion of children and young people's play in Northern Ireland. Since our establishment in 1985, PlayBoard has been committed to supporting the child's right to play through a combination of: service delivery, service development; campaigning, lobbying; awareness raising and working in partnership with others to put play on the agenda of policy makers and resource providers. The organisation takes great pride in promoting best practice in Play, Playwork and play based School Age Childcare services.

PlayBoard's mission is to drive the play agenda, ensuring that at every level of decision making across society, the child's right to play is not only recognised but is made a reality within the lives of children, young people, families and communities. Children and young people's views, aspirations and perceptions of themselves and the environment in which they live, are at the heart of PlayBoard's work. Our vision is of a society where the right to play is realised.

We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education. As an organisation we are deeply concerned about the largely segregated nature of our education system. We believe that play, and playwork in particular has a critical role to play in bringing children together - through their natural and shared drive to play - something which is unfortunately all too often overlooked and underutilised by your department, our schools and educational institutions.

PlayBoard's work over the past 30 years has included a considerable body of work aimed at using play as a positive vehicle for bringing school communities together. We would urge that cognisance be given to the untapped potential of play to become one of the central lynchpins that attracts children, teachers and parents to the idea of sharing services and spaces across and between schools.

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Shared Education as a mechanism to achieve Integrated Education

PlayBoard is deeply concerned about the large number of children that are segregated from the age of 3 years until they enter either the workplace or tertiary education. We believe until the structure of Northern Ireland's school system is changed or schools collaborate more effectively with each other, this problem will remain.

The integrated education movement has against the odds etched an important sector within the segregated system, an achievement that has to be applauded. However the fact remains that over 90% of children still attend either a controlled or maintained school, with only 6.7% of primary and post-primary pupils attending integrated schools¹. A further concern is the low number of children attending the 'other' school system, particularly at primary level. More worrying is that at primary level only 1% of Protestant children attend Catholic schools (with 5.7% of Catholic children attending controlled schools)². Furthermore, no maintained school has adopted the status of an integrated school. These few points alone highlight the need to radically change the structures of the system or more probably the processes used to create and enable contact between children and young people within the school setting.

In this response we do not want to be drawn into nuances of differentiating integrated and shared education because we appreciate there are benefits and shortcomings of both. We acknowledge also that the division is not just in relation to religion but there are repercussions for social class, which is more discernible at the post-primary level. Rather we would see shared education as a necessary precursor to achieving a system whereby the label of controlled, maintained or integrated is not an inhibitor for any parent or child.

In light of our experience of delivering a shared education programme we would broadly agree with the seven principles identified by the Ministerial Advisory Group³ as being required to create a blueprint for education. We believe the implementation of points 5, 6 and 7 as set out below are particularly important. They are to:

- Help children and young people develop a greater awareness of and respect for diversity, in all its forms, and equips them with the knowledge and skills to be able to live in an open, inclusive and confident society;

¹ Knox and Borooh (2014). Briefing Notes for Committee for Education, 15th October 2014

² *ibid*

³ Connolly, P., Purvis, D., & O'Grady, P. J. (2013). *Advancing Shared Education: A report of the Ministerial Advisory Group. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast.*

- Respect the rights and dignity of all children and young people, ensures that their views and opinions are heard and responded to and promotes their safety and wellbeing; and
- Acknowledge the central importance of good leadership in schools and the quality of teachers and support staff and thus places a particular emphasis on ensuring high quality initial teacher education and continuing professional development opportunities that encourage teachers and educationalists learning and sharing together.

Furthermore, as a rights-based organisation we absolutely agree with recommendation 11 of the Ministerial Advisory Group which calls for fulfilment of duties under Article 12 of the UNCRC. Indeed the findings of the NICCY report '*Shared Education The views of children and young people*⁴' highlights the importance of listening to the views of children and young people on all matters affecting them. The report identifies how children and young people believe that shared education should be introduced at an early stage and there is a need to ensure that effective practical arrangements are in place; they suggest trialling shared education initiatives, expanding shared education to all schools and ensuring that pupils are consulted about on-going developments and their views are taken into account. Notably some respondents indicated that;

the collaborative activities and joint classes in which they had participated, had been a 'shared' but 'separate' experience, as pupils had remained within their own school or friendship groups and interaction between pupils from different schools had been limited.

On this point NICCY note that '*it will be important to clarify what is intended through 'shared' learning and to ensure that pupils are encouraged and supported to be genuine and equal collaborators*'. We would suggest that through the vehicle of shared play many of the silo mentalities that can linger within school or friendship groups may be dissipated.

We would also point out that in relation to fulfilment of the UNCRC's article 31, the right to play, [General Comment 17](#) is very clear that schools have a role in relation to post conflict safety.

States are obliged to ensure ... active measures should be taken to restore and protect the rights under article 31 in post-conflict ... situations, including ... creating ... safe spaces, including schools, where children can

⁴ NICCY (2013). Shared Education The views of children and young people source at http://www.niccy.org/downloads/2013/publications/Adult_Report.pdf

participate in play and recreation as part of the normalization of their lives⁵ (para. 57(e)).

The general comment also references the role of schools to play a major role in fulfilling the obligations under article 31, including: physical environment of settings; structure of the day; school curriculum and educational pedagogy. Moreover there is little doubt that play is important to education and we also believe it has the potential to be critical to achieving the aim of shared education particularly that relating to promoting *'...good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion⁶'*.

Our experience of Shared Education practice in schools and school age childcare settings

As stated above PlayBoard has issue with upholding a school system that enables children to be segregated on the basis of their religion. However, given that there is little as an organisation we can do about achieving a single education system; the remainder of this response outlines how we believe play is important to the shared education approach.

Over the past number of years PlayBoard has delivered a number of play programmes within the school setting, culminating in the 'Spaces to Be' programme. 'Spaces to Be' brings together children from maintained and controlled schools located in interface areas to play and come into contact with each other.

Play is special to children because despite perceived differences, the one uniting factor throughout childhood is play. It is through play that children understand each other and their world around them. They are all equal, and it is through play that children and young people's learning in cooperation and conflict resolution skills begin. Play is an excellent vehicle to bring children from different backgrounds together because it is innate and a universal desire.

We would also highlight that although the school day is an ideal setting for shared education, it is hugely time constrained. Therefore we would suggest that considerable benefit can be accrued from extending the 'shared' approach outside of the 'formal' school day, through for example extra-curricular activities

⁵ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013). General Comment no. 17, on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31) (CRC/C/GC/17), United Nations, Geneva, Switzerland. Available at: http://www.playboard.org/uploads/CRC-C-GC-17_en.pdf

⁶ Connolly, P., Purvis, D., & O'Grady, P. J. (2013). Advancing Shared Education: A report of the Ministerial Advisory Group. *Belfast: Queen's University Belfast.*

as identified by the Ministerial Advisory Group and through shared school aged childcare within the workings of OFMDFM's Bright Start Strategy⁷.

Our work in schools: Over the past two years PlayBoard has piloted and developed the implementation of our 'Spaces to Be' programme within the wider Contested Spaces programme. This pilot programme is jointly funded by OFMDFM and Atlantic Philanthropies and uses play to facilitate participating schools to address community and cultural barriers enabling respect for difference and inclusion of others within the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding strand of the statutory curriculum.

The 'Spaces to Be' programme is premised on PlayBoard's ['Spaces to Be – Mapping Identity and Belonging toolkit'](#). The resource builds on PlayBoard's many years of playwork experience and practice of working with children, young people across Northern Ireland. Through practical and playful exercises which are directed by the children and young people themselves, the toolkit aims to promote the creation and programming of innovative 'shared space', building reconciliation through play.

Using a play methodology, the 'Spaces to Be' programme seeks to promote and improve the relationships between and across two interface/contested space communities. In its current incarnation, P5, P6 and P7 pupils from two schools in each area come together and through a range of play-based activities come to understand and respect difference relating to religion, culture, gender and disability. The programme is underpinned by the [Playwork Principles](#), which puts children at the centre of their play experience. Playwork enables children to be free to: choose, personally direct and be intrinsically motivated, to play.

The aim of the 'Spaces to Be' programme is to enhance children's capacity for positive development by giving them access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities. Through contact with the 'out-group' they become more inclined to develop mutual respect for the other group's cultural events, symbols and practices. This is achieved by using practical and playful exercises that support the school curriculum, and encourage children and young people to explore their understanding of difference.

School Age Childcare: PlayBoard is also passionate about leading the development of the School Age Childcare sector, a sector which provides childcare and age appropriate play opportunities for children aged between 4 and 14 years. School Age Childcare settings provide a caring and safe

⁷ OFMDFM (2013). BRIGHT START The NI Executive's Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare A Strategic Framework and Key First Actions. Belfast: OFMDFM. Available at: <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/bright-start-strategic-framework-key-actions.pdf>

environment, offering a range of active and stimulating play activities for children.

Crucially, due to the cross-community nature of most settings, School Age Childcare providers have the ability to provide for many children an opportunity to meet with, interact and engage with children from another community or cultural background on an almost daily basis. Given the largely segregated nature of the education system the importance of School Age Childcare provision in helping to build a united community should not be underestimated.

The Executive recently launched 'Bright Start', the first stage of the Northern Ireland childcare strategy and this has seen the beginning of a much needed investment in the development and growth of School Age Childcare capacity across Northern Ireland. It is critical that this investment is protected and that the impact of providers in supporting cross-community contact is acknowledged by government.

Concluding Comments

As a relatively new post-conflict society Northern Ireland has made progress, however for many children – know or unknown to them - it remains a divided society. At the heart of much of the division is the segregated schooling system, which enables the status quo of children having little or no contact with the other group, to remain. Integrated education caters for less than 10% of the school population but the stark reality is that for the other 90% they are identified as enrolled in either a Catholic or Protestant school. To make serious inroads into bringing children into contact with the 'other' group, shared education offers the best vehicle to shift the status quo and we believe play has a critical role to play in achieving this.

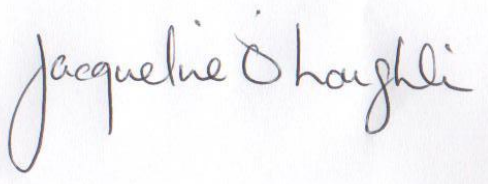
As an organisation we are under no illusion that implementing a play programme within a school setting is challenging; and to implement a contact based play intervention is even more challenging. However, it is our firm belief that the challenges are outweighed by both the innovative nature of play as a mechanism for contact and the potential impact it has to bring about better intergroup relations for future generations. We have learned through our experience of 'Spaces to Be' that shared education is a journey requiring buy-in from schools, principals, teachers and parents who need to be 'empowered' to engage in a process that allows them to identify and confront problems and overcome barriers. We would like to reiterate a number of the messages highlighted by the Ministerial Advisory Group including:

- School collaboration presents significant practical challenges in relation to matters such as timetabling, curriculum planning and transport and thus strong leadership within schools is essential;
- There are resource implications for schools wishing to engage in shared education and thus some mechanism for supporting and incentivising schools to be involved in cross-sectoral collaboration is required.
- There is no 'one size fits all' model for how schools should collaborate but, rather, how this is done will vary from one context to the next
- It is important that particular models of collaboration are not imposed on schools but that they are allowed to develop organically, reflecting the needs and situations that exist at a local level.

Given the unique ability of play to bring children and young people together through a common, natural drive we strongly advocate that shared education approaches recognise the importance of play within the school curriculum, school playground, extracurricular activities, the school estate and the wider school age childcare sector.

There is little doubt that play is of considerable importance to childhood. It is our hope, that play - the uniting bond of all children - can be effectively harnessed through this initiative and others to build a shared future for the coming generations and end the harm that occurs because of segregation.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jacqueline O'Loughlin". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.

Jacqueline O'Loughlin
Chief Executive Officer