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Young people's views on sharing and integration in education

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This research paper presents the findings of a series of focus groups and two surveys conducted with children and young people, exploring their views on shared and integrated education

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Key Points

- This paper considers the views of children and young people gathered through focus groups and through additional analysis of existing survey data;
- More primary pupils have participated in shared education (88% compared to 55% at post-primary);
- A majority of respondents to the survey thought that shared education was a 'good idea', with greater support evident at post-primary;
- Catholic students were more likely to state that shared education was a good idea and less likely to say that they had not enjoyed the projects they had participated in than their Protestant counterparts;
- Students tended to be less willing to share projects with schools of a different management type;
- A number of students questioned the value of shared education and suggested that it could emphasise differences;
- Potential advantages highlighted by young people included increased educational opportunities, making new friends and greater tolerance;
- Perceived disadvantages included having to mix with people perceived as being very different to them or disruptive, challenges around integrating during shared education and having to travel to another school;
- There was support for integrated education among most participants in the focus groups, although some stated that they preferred to attend school alongside others of a similar background;
- This paper has highlighted a number of areas that could be given further consideration, including:
 - The reasons why more primary pupils have participated in shared education;
 - The different levels of support for and enjoyment of shared education between Protestants and Catholics;
 - The reluctance of some students to take part in shared education with schools of a different management type;
 - The perception of some participants that shared education may accentuate differences between pupils;
 - The extent to which pupils from different schools integrate when they take part in shared education.

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Committee for Education is carrying out an inquiry into shared and integrated education. This research paper explores the views of children and young people gathered through a series of focus groups and an analysis of the 2012 Kids' Life and Times and Young Life and Times survey data.

Experience of shared education

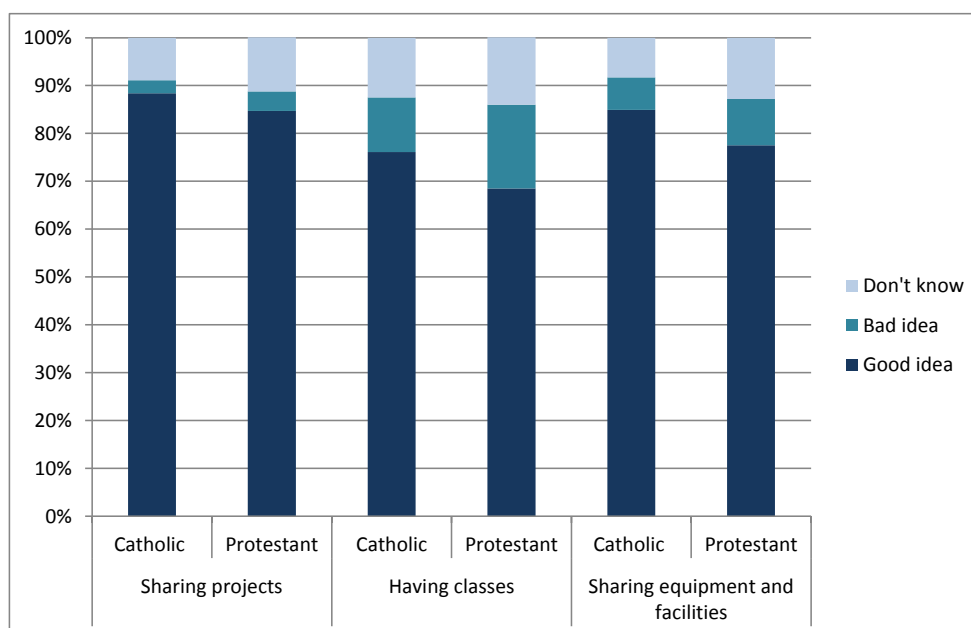
Data from the surveys shows that more primary school pupils have participated in shared education - 88% of primary survey respondents had shared projects with pupils from other schools, compared to 55% at post-primary. Most of those who had participated stated that they enjoyed it 'sometimes' or 'mostly'.

Views on shared education

A majority of survey respondents thought that sharing classes with children from other schools was a 'good idea', with greater support at post-primary (72% compared to 59% at primary). There was more support for sharing projects than classes with other pupils.

With regard to religious background, Catholics were more likely to believe that sharing in education was a good idea, and less likely to note that they did not enjoy the shared education projects they had participated in (4% compared to 13% of Protestants).

Figure 1: Do you think that the following activities are a good idea?



The evidence also suggests that students tend to be less willing to share projects with schools of a different management type. For example, while 98% of grammar respondents would be happy to share projects with another grammar, a lower

proportion stated that they would not mind sharing with a non-grammar (85%) or special school (74%). Students from integrated schools were the most willing to share with schools of a different management type.

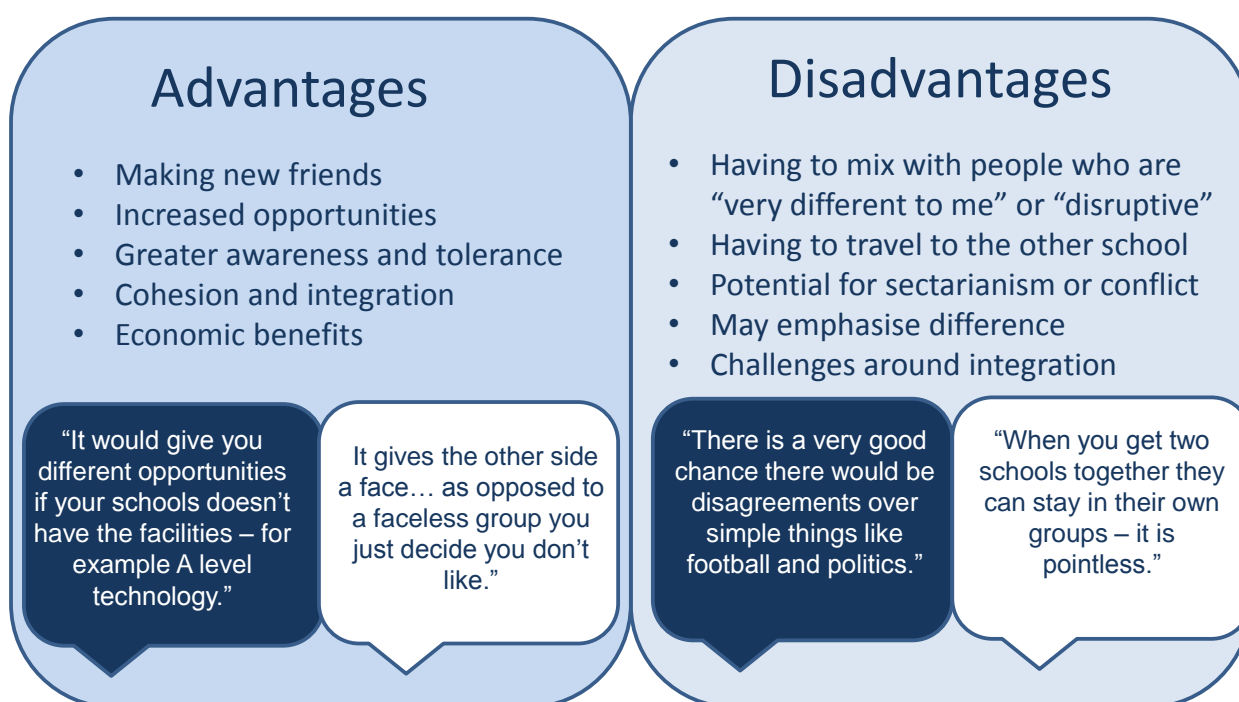
A majority of participants in the focus groups were in favour of shared education, although some were reluctant to share with schools of a different religious denomination. A number of students questioned the value of shared education, suggesting that it could actually emphasise differences between people of different backgrounds.

“Shared education is getting Protestants and Catholics, putting them on the same campus and that is it. It is almost promoting their differences.” (Focus group participant)

Advantages and disadvantages of shared education

Participants in the focus groups and survey respondents highlighted a range of potential benefits and disadvantages that could arise from sharing with other schools; these are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Perceived advantages and disadvantages of shared education



With regard to the perceived benefits, post-primary survey respondents were more likely to highlight making new friends and doing different classes as a benefit; while a higher proportion of primary pupils thought that doing interesting projects would be an advantage.

In terms of disadvantages, Protestant respondents were more likely to be concerned about mixing with children of a different religion (8% compared to 4% of Catholic respondents).

There were also differences by school management type, with just under a quarter (23%) of non-grammar respondents stating that mixing with people very different to themselves would be a disadvantage, compared to 16% of grammar students and 10% of respondents from integrated schools.

Integrated education

A majority of participants in the focus groups supported integrated education. However, some students stated that they would prefer to attend a school alongside others from a similar background, and highlighted the importance of school choice. Students from Irish-medium and integrated education were also supportive of the integrated model. The perceived advantages include:

- Greater cohesion and integration;
- More inclusive for pupils from a range of backgrounds;
- Greater choice.

However, some pupils identified a number of potential disadvantages, including reduced community identity, challenges around integrating and concerns about which subjects or sports they would be required to study or play.

“No one is rejected; they are accepted for who they are.”

“People need to be specific to one community, or they don’t know who they are.”

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted a number of areas that could be given further consideration, including:

- The reasons why more primary pupils have participated in shared education;
- The different levels of support for and enjoyment of shared education between Protestants and Catholics;
- The reluctance of some students to take part in shared education with schools of a different management type;
- The perception of some participants that shared education may accentuate differences between pupils;
- The extent to which pupils from different schools integrate when they take part in shared education.

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1 Introduction

The Committee for Education is currently undertaking an inquiry into shared and integrated education. In order to consider the views of children and young people, this research paper highlights the findings of a series of focus groups conducted with children and young people. It includes a data analysis conducted by the Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe) of the 2012 Kids' Life and Times Survey¹ and Young Life and Times Survey².

2 Methodology

A series of ten focus groups was held with primary, post-primary and special schools, comprising controlled, Catholic maintained, integrated, Irish-medium and voluntary grammar schools. The Assembly's Education Officers facilitated the groups.

The Kids' Life and Times Survey is an annual online survey of Primary 7 (P7) children carried out in school. In 2012, a total of 4,200 P7 children participated in the survey, mostly aged between 10 and 11 years old. The Young Life and Times Survey is an annual postal survey of 16 year olds; 1,210 young people participated in 2012. These surveys included modules on shared education.

The datasets were downloaded from the ARK (Access Research Knowledge) website, a resource aimed at making social and political information on Northern Ireland available to a wide audience, and analysed by RaISe using SPSS. This allowed for further analysis of the Young Life and Times Survey by school type and pupils' religious background. Questions on school management type or religion were not asked in the Kids' Life and Times Survey.³

3 Experience of shared education

Data from the Kids' Life and Times and the Young Life and Times Survey shows that more pupils from primary schools have participated in shared education than their counterparts at post-primary.

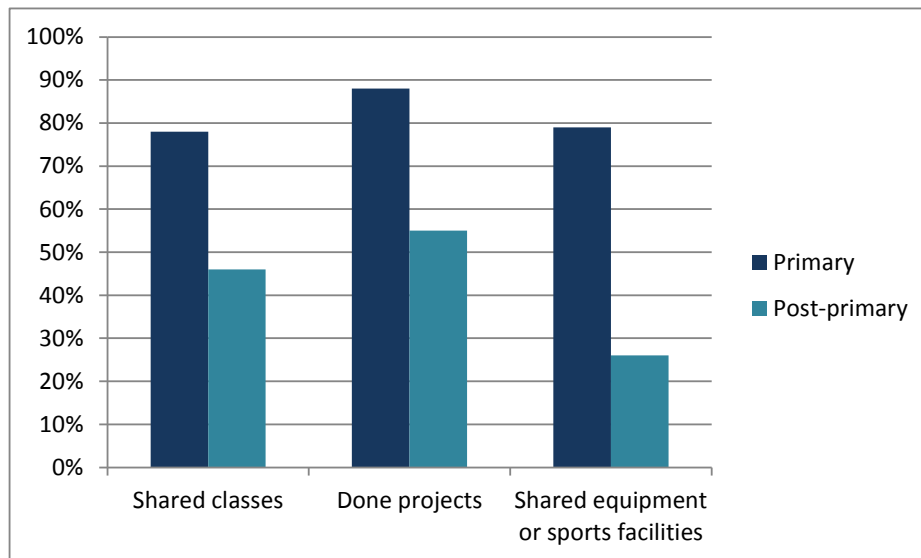
Under three quarters (71%) of post-primary and 61% of primary respondents reported that some of the pupils they participated in shared education had a different religious background.

¹ ARK *Kids' Life and Times* [online] Available at: <http://www.ark.ac.uk/klt/>

² ARK *Young Life and Times Survey* [online] Available at: <http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt/>

³ Please note, cells containing three or less respondents have been suppressed (*).

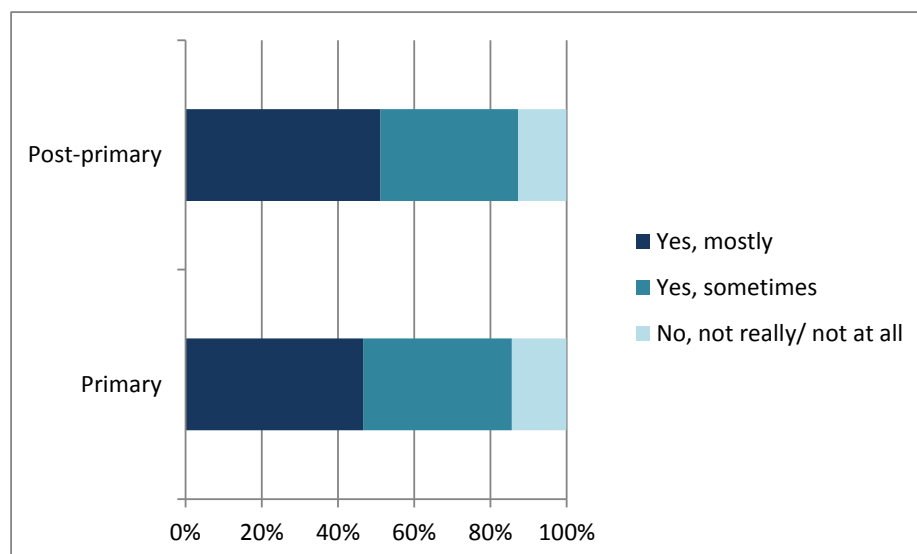
Figure 3: Have you ever participated in the following activities with children from other schools? By school phase



Pupils from non-grammar post-primaries were least likely to have participated in shared education (20% stated that they had not), followed by pupils from grammar schools (18%). Students from integrated schools were most likely to have participated in shared education, with 11% stating that they had not previously done so.

The surveys indicate that most children and young people who participated in shared education enjoyed the experience either ‘sometimes’ or ‘mostly’. For example, 88% of primary respondents and 91% of post-primary respondents enjoyed doing projects with other children.

Figure 4: Did you enjoy having classes with the other children? By school phase



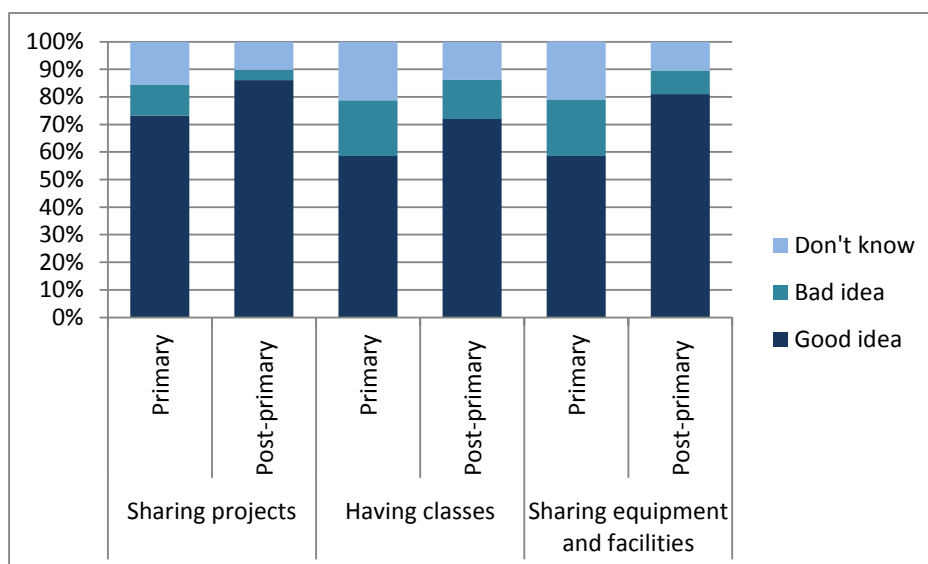
However, there were marked differences by religious background, with 13% of Protestant respondents stating that they did not enjoy the shared education projects they participated in, compared to 4% of their Catholic counterparts.

4 Views on shared education

The survey evidence suggests that a majority of young people believe that sharing classes with children from other schools was a 'good idea'. There was generally more support at post-primary, with 72% of respondents believing that sharing classes is a good idea compared to 59% of primary pupils. There was also greater support for sharing projects compared to having classes or sharing equipment.

In the survey pupils from integrated schools were more likely to feel that sharing projects, classes and equipment with other schools was a good idea - 88% stated that sharing classes was a good idea, compared to 70% of grammar and 73% of non-grammar respondents.

Figure 5: Do you think that the following shared education activities are a good idea? By school phase



In the focus groups the majority of primary school pupils supported shared education and stated that they would be willing to take part in classes with pupils from schools of a different religion. Pupils from an integrated primary highlighted a preference for fully integrated education rather than shared education.

"I think it [shared education] would be good, because we learn from a young age that we are all the same and we shouldn't fight with them." (Primary participant)

At post-primary many students were very supportive of the concept, highlighting benefits such as increased access to resources and integrating with people from a different background.

“It gives you the opportunity to make more friends. You would meet more people and meet people of different religious beliefs; it would give you a flavour of different religions.” (Post-primary participant)

However, some post-primary students were reluctant to share classes or resources with students from other schools. They highlighted concerns around logistical and financial issues, as well as concerns around mixing with pupils from other schools, the potential for sectarianism and having to share resources with others.

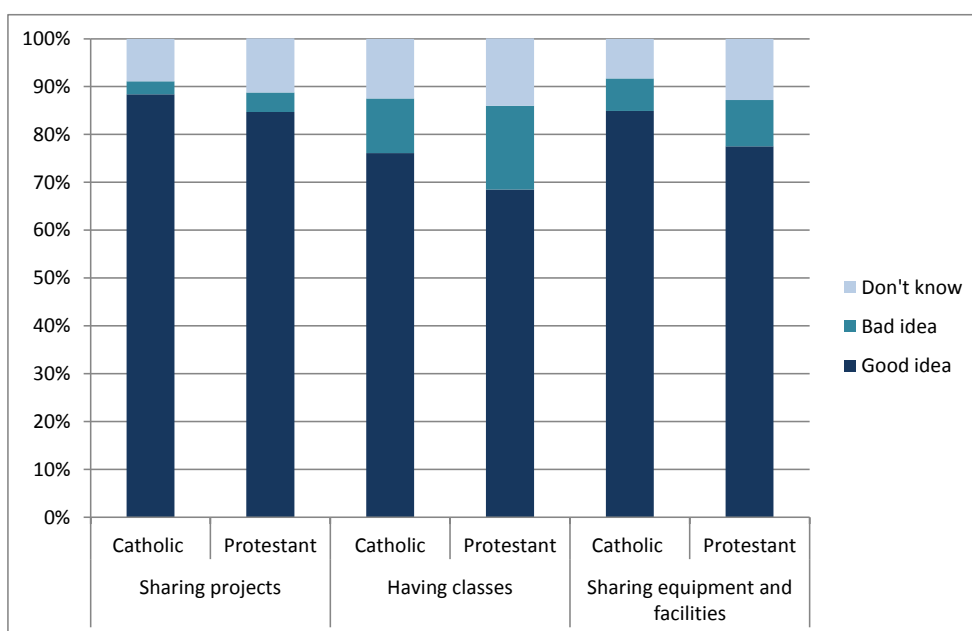
“It could be complicated, like if someone walked in in a Rangers top and one in a Celtic top and that starts something.” (Post-primary participant)

“There are already issues with facilities – if another school comes in it would cause more problems.” (Post-primary participant)

Some focus group participants agreed in principle to the idea of shared education, but voiced fears around having to study particular subjects, for example Irish, or play particular sports.

With regard to religious background, Catholic survey respondents were more likely to state that shared education with pupils of a different religion was a good idea. When asked whether they would mind doing a project with children of a different religious background, 83% of Catholic students stated that they “would not mind at all”, compared to 79% of Protestant respondents.

Figure 6: Do you think that the following shared education activities are a good idea? By religious background

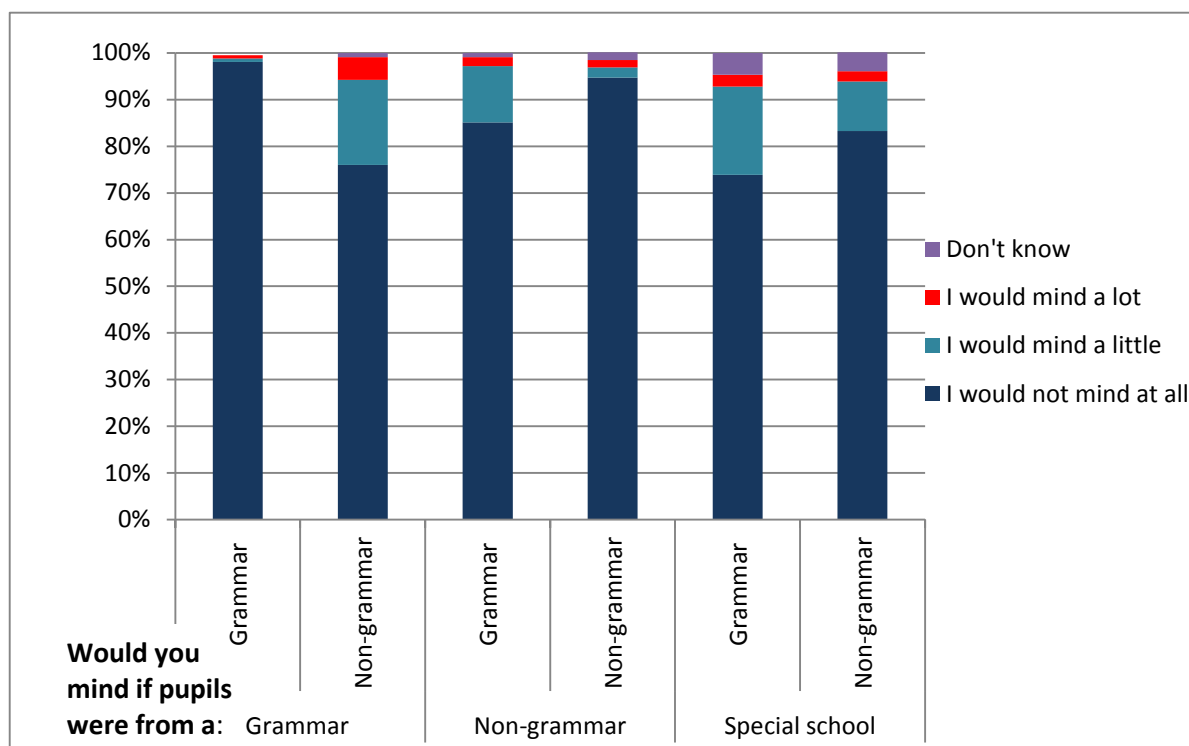


Our analysis of the survey data also found that students tend to be more willing to share projects with other schools of a similar management type. For example, 98% of grammar school respondents stated that they “would not mind at all” sharing projects with pupils of another grammar school, while 85% would not mind sharing with a non-grammar and 74% would not mind sharing with pupils from a special school.

Similarly, 95% of non-grammar students would not mind sharing with another non-grammar, while 76% would not mind sharing with a grammar and 83% would not mind sharing with a special school.

Students from integrated schools were the most willing to share with schools of a different management type, with 95% stating that they would not mind sharing with a non-grammar, 79% noting that they would not mind sharing with a grammar, and 85% saying that they would not mind sharing with a special school.

Figure 7: Would you mind if young people from the following types of schools came to do a project with your class? By school management type



In the focus groups some pupils questioned the extent to which shared education promotes integration in practice, suggesting that it may instead highlight differences between people of different community backgrounds.

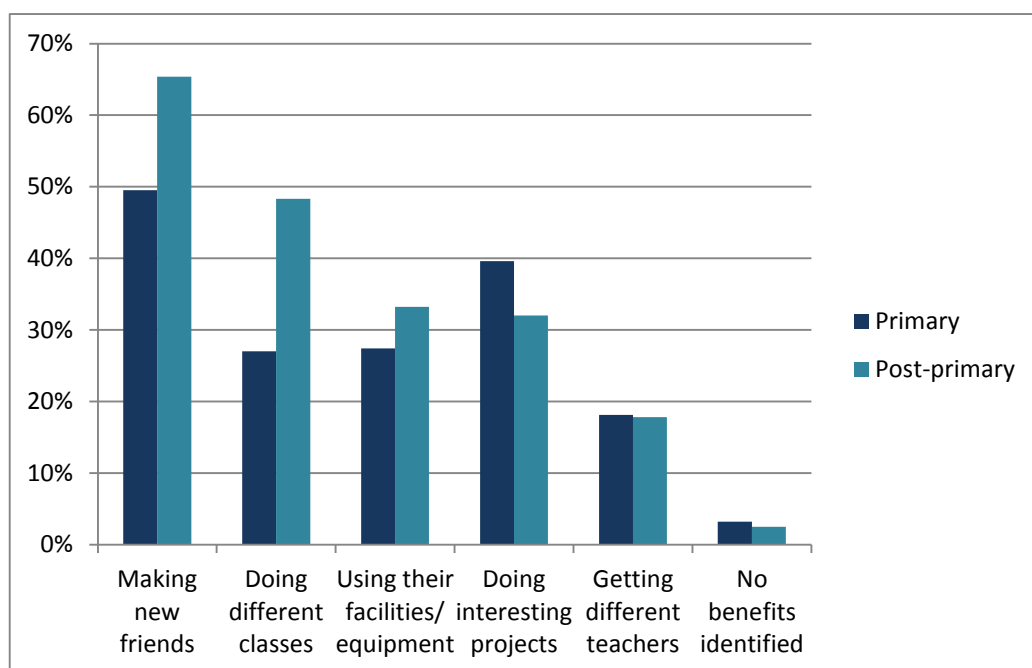
“Shared education is getting Protestants and Catholics, putting them on the same campus and that is it. It is almost promoting their differences, which in turn causes sectarian behaviour – we all know how that turns out.” (Post-primary participant)

“It would raise awareness of differences. You are saying ‘you two are different – work together’, whereas you might not even have realised.” (Post-primary participant)

5 Advantages of shared education

Answering a multiple-choice question in the survey, students identified a number of potential benefits of shared education. These are illustrated in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Potential benefits of shared education (survey results)



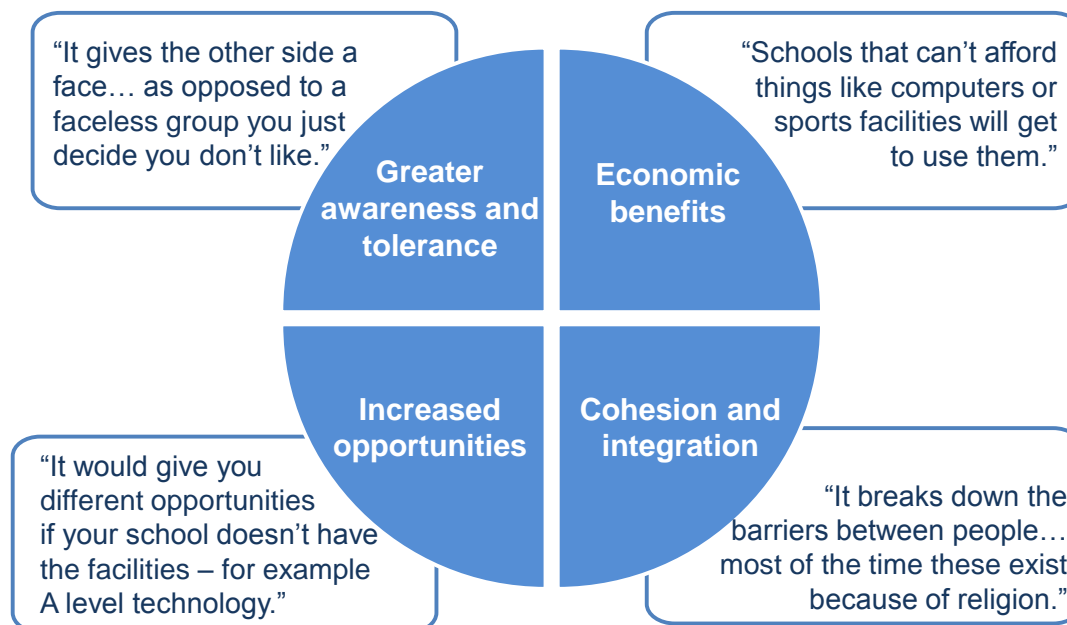
The survey highlighted few differences in opinion by religious background for this question, although Catholic survey respondents were more likely to note having the opportunity to be taught by different teachers as a potential advantage (20% compared to 16% of Protestants).

Participants in the focus groups highlighted a number of potential benefits they felt could arise from sharing classes, projects or sports with pupils of a different religious background; these are illustrated in Figure 9 overleaf.

Many of these centre on mixing with people from a different background, and as a result promoting tolerance across communities. Some students also alluded to the

potential economic benefits and the greater opportunities that could be afforded by schools sharing resources and facilities.

Figure 9: Perceived benefits of shared education identified by focus group participants



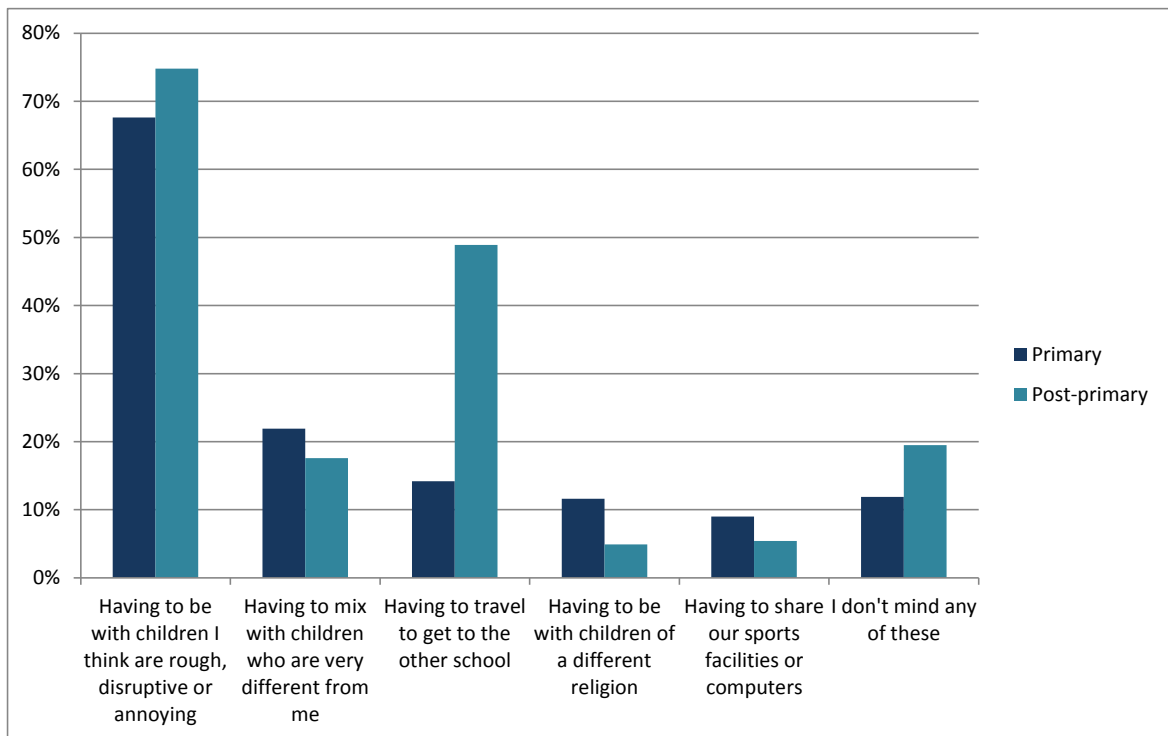
6 Disadvantages of shared education

Again answering a multiple-choice question in the survey, respondents highlighted a number of disadvantages they thought could arise from shared education (Figure 10 overleaf). The most common concern of both primary and post-primary respondents to the survey was having to mix with children they thought were 'rough, disruptive or annoying'.

Mixing with children of a different religion was cited as a potential disadvantage by a minority of respondents: 12% of primary pupils and 5% of post-primary pupils. This was of a greater concern for Protestant students (8% compared to 4% of Catholic respondents). A fifth of post-primary students did not select any of the disadvantages in the questionnaire.

There were also differences by school management type, with 23% of non-grammar respondents highlighting having to mix with people very different to themselves as a concern, compared to 16% of grammar students and 10% of respondents from integrated schools.

Figure 10: Potential disadvantages of shared education



Participants in the focus groups also highlighted a number of disadvantages they thought could arise from sharing classes or taking part in activities with students from schools of a different religion, outlined in Figure 11.

Figure 11: Perceived disadvantages of shared education identified by focus group participants



7 Views on integrated education

At primary, a majority of focus group participants supported the idea of integrated education. At post-primary pupils generally advocated integrated education over shared education, pointing to benefits around inclusion and integration. However, a minority of pupils stated that they would not like to attend an integrated school, preferring instead to attend school alongside pupils from a similar background.

Students who attended integrated schools were particularly supportive of the model, with most preferring it to shared education. Some, however, supported school choice and advocated having both shared and integrated approaches available. Participants in Irish-medium education were also supportive of integrated education.

“I like both ideas, but my favourite would be integrated education... I think it brings people together.” (Primary participant)

“Without full integration opinions aren’t going to change. We still have our Protestant and Catholic schools; we mix for computers but we still go home to our Protestant and our Catholic schools.” (Post-primary participant)

The following figure highlights the main potential advantages and disadvantages of integrated education highlighted by participants in the focus groups.

Figure 12: Potential advantages and disadvantages of integrated education



8 Conclusion

This paper has shown that a majority of pupils are in favour of shared education, with most also supportive of integrated education. However, some participants in the research highlighted a number of concerns and potential disadvantages around sharing projects, classes or facilities with students from other schools. Areas that could be given further consideration include:

- The reasons why more primary school pupils have participated in shared education than their counterparts at post-primary;
- The different levels of support for and enjoyment of shared education between Protestants and Catholics;
- The reluctance of some students to take part in shared education with schools of a different management type;
- The perception of some focus group participants that shared education may accentuate differences between pupils;
- The extent to which pupils from different schools integrate when they take part in shared education.

