
The Aspect Group of Prospect represents nearly 3,000 professionals in the education, children's services and social care field. It is the major organisation representing Advisory and support staff in the education and examinations sector in Northern Ireland

They are based throughout the UK, and work across a range of sectors serving the interests of children and young people, including the public, private, faith, voluntary and community sectors.

The main activities of ASPECT members in N. Ireland are the training and development and ongoing support of teachers, managers and governors within schools and the continued development of those schools. The Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (C.A.S.S.) and C.C.E.A. operate in a complex and changing environment within the constraints of increasingly limited resources.

The notion of "shared identity" in Northern Ireland is problematical with the community at large divided along Unionist/Nationalist lines. Cultural identity and sectarianism are issues that remain deeply influential in many areas. In recent years newcomer families have settled in many areas of Northern Ireland and are making significant contributions to the life of their local communities. Aspect group members support the schools' efforts to integrate these children and young people into the education system.

'Despite almost 20 years of relative peace since the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994, many scars of 'The Troubles' remain visible in daily life. While the recent riots are an obvious example, the Protestant and Catholic communities remain divided, often physically, with education also, largely, split along religious lines. (Neil Ferguson and Maren Michaelsen, Royal Economic Society's 2013)

That being the case there is a need for an education system which provides and encourages access for all to high quality education which concentrates on the needs of society and provides young people with the skills and opportunities to meet those needs.

The focus should be on how schools can explore a range of shared options based on educational provision and access rather than on a political or philosophical basis. The QUB Centre for Shared Education defines the concept as

"any collaborative activity within or between schools or other educational institutions that can: contribute towards school improvement, provide access to opportunity, encourage more effective use of resource and promote social cohesion"

The Department of Education "Sustainable Schools Policy" and the principles of Area Based Planning, reflect the need for children to be educated in accordance with an acceptance of diversity in the nature of education provision, including Controlled, Catholic Maintained, Integrated, Irish Medium or other.

Not everyone is at a stage where a shared campus would be a viable option. In the most developed arrangements there is a history of collaboration between the schools involved with support from communities, CASS service and employing authorities. The Department of Education should consider

how it can facilitate a range of options to promote cooperation, ranging from very low key arrangements to very high levels of collaboration among schools from different sectors and ensure that the climate across all sectors is conducive to the promotion of shared education.

There is a need for engagement to be carefully planned and reflective of the context of the history and culture of the local area. The desire to be part of this undertaking must come from the schools themselves by assessing the situation in their local community and identifying a 'sharing partner' or partners with whom they are keen to collaborate. This element of the process allows schools to gauge local attitudes and come forward with appropriate solutions. Such an approach is crucial to fostering ownership and commitment, attributes vital to the potential future success of any partnership. Support should be provided to assist school partners to address the issues that arise in such endeavours.

The PIEE Project initiated by the N.E.E.L.B. supported "*regular and sustained engagement between pupils and teachers from two or more schools of different management types,*

and concluded that the benefits from a Shared Education approach include:

- (i) *Educational Benefits; to provide an enhanced quality of educational provision and experience to the schools and young people involved*
- (ii) *Societal benefits; to improve community relations, reconciliation and community cohesion in light of a divided and troubled past*
- (iii) *Economic benefits; to maximise educational provision and resourcing in light of a diverse and often rural schools estate which has experienced pressures, ('How to Create and Maintain a Primary Partnership', NEELB, 2013)*

The Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (C.A.S.S.) made a key contribution in initiating and sustaining this work, providing strategic direction, governance and support and in recent times Board officers have been involved in innovative work involving sharing at a local community level .

The result of these efforts, based on rigorous evaluation, has proven to have a significant impact on local communities.

Aspect Group of Prospect is supportive of the Shared Education concept and sees it as part of the progressive improvement and normalisation of the way the different sections of our divided society interact and coalesce. Aspect is also supportive of the inclusion in the Programme for Government of efforts to increase the level and scope of shared education. Our members will continue to make significant contributions to the shared education initiative and to lead from the front in researching and establishing sustainable projects in the future.