

## **Inquiry into Shared/Integrated Education**

### **Submission from Colm Davis on behalf of the Governors, parents, staff and pupils of Tor Bank School, Dundonald.**

My name is Colm Davis and I'm both privileged and proud to be Principal of Tor Bank School (a Special School for children and young people who have severe learning difficulties). I also represent National Association of Head Teachers at both local and national levels and have extensive knowledge and understanding of educational working models in England, Wales and NI. I co-chair the Strategic Leadership Forum for Special Schools in NI and represent special schools on the General Teachers' Council. I also Chair the Dundonald Extended Learning Community, a partnership with 5 other mainstream and special schools. I have been teaching 33 years and have a strong passion for ensuring that children and young people with learning disabilities get the best possible inclusive opportunities to enable them to function independently in the local community in which they are expected to work and live. I've also been involved in many Charities over the past 30 years that have focused on promoting equality while supporting peace and reconciliation, my more recent success being with the charity in which I was Chair and Director Forward Learning.

Up until 1987 children with Severe Learning Difficulties were often deemed uneducable and were therefore denied the right to education in a school under DENI control. Social Services and institutions such as Muckamore Abbey Hospital provided a caring environment for them and they automatically transferred or transitioned to Day Centers or Adult workshops. Employment within the Community was rarely attainable and their rights were often compromised by being denied the right to progression routes to employment or life-long learning.

However, thankfully history was made when the 1987 Education Act handed the responsibility of educating these children and young people to DENI (now DE) and the Education and Library Boards. Under the umbrella of the controlled sector, special schools for children with Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD – includes children with profound and multiple learning difficulties) were born and a new phase in their lives (and in education) began. With it, the drive for equality of opportunity gathered momentum and partnership working with Colleges and supported employment agencies gave these young people hope that they could get real jobs beyond Adult Workshops for the Mentally Handicapped. Many of the Adult Workshops were closed and the concept of Supported Employment Agencies gathered momentum. Parents were grateful that at long last their children and young people were being given the same rights to education as those children in mainstream schools. However, we believe their rights continue to be undermined and their opportunities limited by the many initiatives from DENI (in the past) and DE which tend to focus on more enhanced opportunities for mainstream school children to the detriment of those SLD Sector. With the lack of clarity in much of the guidance for schools as to how these children and young people 'could be fitted in' to many of these mainstream initiatives, school leaders of schools with an SLD designation have continued to 'second guess' or to put their own interpretation into how the recommendations contained within this guidance can be implemented successfully with-in the context of an SLD environment. As a result of staff enthusiasm and determination, the schools and pupils within them have continued to thrive and parents have felt their children are included rather than excluded.

We believe that now is the time for NI to take another 'crucial' step in making history once again by giving schools who have children with Severe Learning Difficulties 'integrated status' and the benefits that goes with that branding, label or status. Let me outline and clarify our case further on the next few pages.

## Tor Bank School Context

During 2013-2014 school year, Tor Bank received the **UNICEF Level 2 'Rights Respecting School Award'** for their outstanding contribution and commitment to the principles of upholding and supporting childrens' rights. As an 'outstanding' community school (ETI March 2012) Tor Bank caters for the specialised individual needs of 171 children and young people who have severe to profound and multiple learning difficulties. As a positive and vibrant inclusive community, it provides a supportive and empathetic environment in which parents, teachers, classroom assistants, therapists, nursing staff and other stakeholders share and work in collaboration to plan, design and deliver high quality programmes to meet the holistic needs and complex learning preferences of the individual pupil .Tor Bank considers itself to be an enabling school which is strongly committed to an inclusive agenda for all pupils. We seek to provide an 'enriched' curriculum for each individual pupil in a carefully structured environment which enables them to learn happily and effectively. We strive to work in partnership and collaboration with parents and other stakeholders to meet the 'holistic needs' of each individual pupil throughout their schooling career.

Throughout all aspects of teaching, learning and development, pupils are presented with curriculum strategies and opportunities specifically designed to help them to make connections with the world in which they are expected to live presently and in the future. We strongly believe that connected learning will help our pupils to make sense of the world they are expected to live in and therefore realise their full potential.

The curriculum offered is designed to meet both the Northern Ireland statutory requirements and the individual needs of the pupil. At all times the focus therefore is on needs of the individual child. Curriculum programmes and opportunities therefore are presented to the pupil in small steps and progressive stages of development to enable pupils, staff and parents alike to monitor and record progress systematically. The outcomes from this process enable staff to plan activities for the next stage of learning based on success to date.

The curriculum offered at Tor Bank also aims to provide relevant learning opportunities to enable each young person to develop as an individual, as a citizen and as a contributor to the local economy and the environment. The key elements that under pin our curriculum are contained within our cross curricular themes, all aspects of curriculum delivery and everyday life in Tor Bank.

**Review the nature and definition of Shared Education and Integrated Education as it applies across all educational phases – including consideration of the need for a formal statutory definition and an obligation in statute to facilitate and encourage Shared Education;**

**Recommendation: *“The current definition should explicitly refer to learners of all abilities in all schools”***

Currently shared education involves two or more schools or other educational institutions from different sectors working in collaboration with the aim of delivering educational benefits to learners within an ethos of promoting equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion. Integrated education has similar aims and explicitly seeks to educate together children from protestant and catholic traditions, as well as those of other faiths and none, in an inclusive, welcoming and aspiring environment.

Tor Bank strives to deliver the aims and educational benefits attributed to shared education and, moreover, have an intake from protestant and catholic traditions, as well as those of other faiths and none. The population within Tor Bank has always been multi-faith and multi-cultural. Arguably the first controlled integrated and fully inclusive schools, special schools have been denied the opportunity to be considered as Integrated schools yet have possibly the best models of shared education that have been developed over the past 60 years or so in collaboration with partner schools within their local community.

**Identify the key barriers and enablers for Shared Education and Integrated Education for Tor Bank.**

**Recommendation: *‘Special schools need to be enabled to become integrated in law’.***

**1. Barriers for Special Schools regarding Shared Education and Integrated Education;**

Under NI legislation, all but one of the existing Special Schools in NI is considered to be under the control of the ‘Controlled Sector’. Special Schools like Tor Bank, were the first integrated schools in NI yet we have been excluded from being re-branded ‘Integrated’ by legislation which continues to ignore this fact. We strongly believe that the staffing and pupil composition meet all the requirements to be considered to have integrated status. We have therefore embarked on a consultation process with NICIE to investigate the possible transformation into a fully inclusive and integrated specialist school. Representatives from NICIE have met with staff and Governors to seek

out their views and we strongly believe that we making positive steps along the path to becoming a 'Fully Inclusive' School. We are excited about these prospects but will seek out more views.

The fact that Tor Bank is perceived as a controlled school inhibits its journey to becoming a fully inclusive school. Being a special school, parents do not have choice about which sector to send their children to; it is therefore all the more important that it should be formally recognised as an integrated school in order to provide maximum assurance and welcome; maximum confidence for internal and external perceptions. Additionally, if the school is seen as a controlled school the school will not be seen as a community space and will be limited in its ability to promote community cohesion.

## **2. Enablers for Shared Education and Integrated Education;**

Shared and Integrated education's focus on raising school standards and to following a school improvement agenda which gives greater curriculum entitlement and inclusive opportunities to all children is in harmony with the aims and objectives of Tor Bank School.

Tor Bank's enrolment reflects the increasing number of 'New Comers' or ethnic minorities in the community. The school's knowledge and understanding of diverse cultures is becoming more enhanced as newcomers become more fully integrated into Tor Bank Community.

We believe that Tor Bank is now uniquely placed to act as a hub for community inclusion and peace reconciliation, the new building generating a new phase in its life and development.

### **Identify and analyse alternative approaches and models of good practice in other jurisdictions in terms of policy interventions and programmes;**

The function of a special school is to ensure that our children and young people are equipped with the knowledge, skills and understanding to become more fully included and independent members of their local community in which they are expected to live and work. This has been fully recognised by DE, by the Health Trusts (in its closure of Institutions such as Muckamore Abbey for Children with its focus now being on Community re-integration) by parents and by mainstream schools alike in that they have continued to endorse and be supportive of the role a special school plays within-in the seamless continuum of specialist educational provision available to nurture and support the needs of all learners in NI. In Tor Bank like many of our other Special Schools in NI, the commitment to relationship building, respecting others, showing unconditional positive regard towards others and valuing people has been recognised as models of 'best practice' by educators and stakeholders alike. However, it is worth noting that this continuing success has not been nurtured or cultivated in a segregated vacuum of isolation, but rather with-in a collaborative partnership framework with other schools and agencies that schools with SLD created before any recent policy direction 'pushed' other mainstream schools down the collaborative route.

My colleague Dr Peter Cunningham in his submission succinctly describes this in his statement below:

*"It is my view that mainstream schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all and while I believe that there will always be*

*the need for special school provision it need not be segregated provision. The day of the inclusive special school is very much with us and the invaluable contribution we continue to make recognised by our mainstream school partners". (Dr Peter Cunningham – Ceara Special School, Lurgan).*

Some recent examples of effective and existing collaborative activity in Tor Bank can be found in the following snapshots of partnership activity:

- There is a trend toward increased connectivity, collaboration and partnership working between special schools and mainstream schools, and special schools and special units in all areas of NI;
- All Special schools are now part of every Area Learning Community (ALCs) in NI and the collaborative strand is deeply embedded in most of the collaborative work that exists within and between schools, despite special schools not being suitable platforms for delivering the requirements of the Entitlement Framework because of the type of accreditation opportunities offered for their special learners within their school;
- In many ALCs, staff in special schools often advise and support their colleagues in 'mainstream' schools to help deliver the inclusive agenda to enable them to cope with the diverse range of pupils with SEN within their schools.
- Tor Bank now plays an instrumental role within the Dundonald Extended Schools Learning Community and is leading the way regarding the transformation of the remaining schools into Rights Respecting Schools.
- To encourage further understanding of disability and the challenges of supporting effective inclusive practices, Tor Bank encourages students from the local Grammar Schools and Secondary Schools to participate in work experience and community placements within the school. On average in most weeks throughout the school year, as many as 15 students spend at least 1 week in the school for this purpose and some of these students also support our students to attend Brookland's Youth Club.
- Tor Bank School Development Plan commits to strengthening more inclusive links and collaborative partnerships with local mainstream schools. It already has strong collaborative links with Bloomfield Collegiate, Tullycarnet Primary School, Brooklands Primary School, Dundonald Primary School, St Joseph's Primary School, Downpatrick Primary School, Brooklands Primary School, Lagan College, Newtownbreda High School, Knockbreda High School, Longstone Special School, Dundonald High School and Our Lady and St Patrick's Grammar School.

**Consider what priorities and actions need to be taken to improve sharing and integration – including the effectiveness of the relevant parts of the CRED policy; the need to engage more effectively with parents/carers; and the role of Special Schools;**

**Recommendation: “Special schools need to be enabled to become integrated in law”**

We strongly believe that *integrated and shared education* ‘aims to provide high quality learning experiences for all our young people. While there are some efforts to engage special schools in shared education the fact that they are often viewed as being part of a completely different sector impacts negatively upon the learning opportunities and experiences of young people attending special schools - many of whom come from the most disadvantaged parts of society. The fact that special schools are **not allowed by law to be recognised as integrated in law** compounds this obvious discrimination and limits their present and development. Their Governance and freedom to control their own destiny, future and status is being continually undermined by an ‘antique’ and ‘antiquated’ funding system that continues to allow ELBs to control the budget allocation and enrolment criteria. However, despite this we have continued to lead the way in producing the highest quality education for our children and young people and ETI inspection reports continue to recognize and endorse the high standards that are within our special schools.

It is important that existing and new parents of children attending Tor Bank School continue to get Governor, Staff and ELB reassurance about the inclusive, integrative nature of Tor Bank School. However, we strongly believe that only formal recognition of the fully inclusive nature of Tor Bank by the Assembly, DE and legislation, will provide further persuasive evidence. It would also help to create and extend the range of existing opportunities through the additional funding streams and support required to help prepare our young people more effectively for the additional challenges they will encounter in their everyday lives outside of Tor Bank School.

Teachers, Classroom Assistants, parents, other stakeholders and partners working collaboratively with Tor Bank welcome the opportunity to remove any perceptions of Tor Bank as a “**controlled**” school and any discussions to rebadge it as an *‘integrated school’*. This would enable the child-centered ethos to be more formally recognised and supported within an inclusive community framework. They firmly believe that ‘Tor Bank – **‘A fully inclusive School’ and/or Tor Bank as ‘ a Specialist Integrated Community School ‘** can only serve to benefit the staff, children, parents and stakeholders even further.

More importantly, demographically, Dundonald is considered a predominantly protestant community who are proud of Tor Bank School and have embraced it as ‘their school’. However, they’re fully aware that even in the darkest times of the troubled past, children of all faiths and backgrounds were transported into Tor Bank School from all areas and traditions and this was accepted by them. Throughout that period and even during this current phase of Tor Bank’s history, the enrolment criteria continues to be defined and controlled by SEELB. In this new era of ‘Shared Futures’ it is crucially more important to be able to provide firm reassurance to parents and the wider community that Tor Bank is being recognised as a fully integrated community specialised

school and as such, is playing an instrumental role in the creation of community inclusion and cohesion.

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I strongly believe that Tor Bank is now uniquely placed to act as a hub for community cohesion, community inclusion and peace reconciliation, however, recognition of its fully inclusive, integrated character is the vital strap line to enable this ideal to succeed. We urge you to strongly consider the role and status of Tor Bank School within any present or future strategic thinking on Shared Futures.

Colm Davis

Principal

Tor Bank School (Special)

23<sup>rd</sup> October 2014