



Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC)

Submission to the NI Assembly Committee for Education

Shared/Integrated Education Inquiry

October 2014

Submission by the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) to the NI Assembly Committee for Education: Shared/Integrated Education Inquiry

The TRC welcomes this opportunity to offer comments on Shared/Integrated Education at the request of the Assembly Education for views and opinions to inform its Inquiry. It submits this response on behalf of the Boards of Education of the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland.

Introduction

The three transferor churches have in recent years strongly affirmed by resolution at their annual meetings of General Synod, Presbyterian General Assembly and Methodist Conference, their commitment to the concept of shared education. In 2014 for example the following resolution was passed by the Presbyterian General Assembly:

That the General Assembly warmly support the on-going development of Shared Education in Northern Ireland and call upon the Department of Education to ensure that its policies and schemes provide a range of incentivised options to encourage and facilitate schools to participate in models of sharing appropriate for their local community.

Sharing is a challenging concept to develop with schools especially as they have for many years been encouraged to become self-reliant and responsible for their own governance and educational outcomes. It certainly makes sense at a time of scarce resources for schools to find ways of working together to provide the maximum learning opportunities for pupils. One key imperative is the educational benefit particularly at post-primary level, because sharing enables schools to provide pupils with access to a much broader range of courses and qualifications. There are also demonstrable reconciliation benefits as contact with the 'other' community enables traditional barriers to be broken down, understanding to be meaningfully developed and friendships engendered.

There have been a variety of independently funded shared education programmes running in schools across NI for a number of years. The TRC has been represented on the advisory body for the Shared Education Programme (SEP) led by Queen's University Belfast. Our experience of being involved in this work over several funding phases has been extremely positive. We have been impressed by a remarkable development of curriculum focused shared education initiatives across a very wide range of schools delivering beneficial outcomes for pupils and schools alike. There is also clear benefit for the community of enhanced social cohesion and promotion of good relations.

Responses to the terms of reference set out in the request from the inquiry:

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

- 1.1. The Ministerial Advisory Group on shared education which reported in 2013 endorsed a definition of shared education from its remit: it ‘involves two or more schools or other educational institutions from different sectors working in collaboration with the aim of delivering educational benefits to learners, promoting the efficient and effective use of resources, and promoting equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion’.
- 1.2. The Group examined all barriers to advancing sharing including different types of schools, underachievement, academic selection and socio-economic status. The Group made 20 recommendations. Three recommendations identified the need to address the vexed issue of academic selection; these are unlikely however to attain widespread support due to the diversity of views on this educational issue. However the TRC believes that the main recommendations addressed issues could be tackled immediately: the need to mainstream shared education; supporting schools in shared education; schools and other institutions working together; area-based planning and the school estate.
- 1.3. In his response to the report, the Minister committed to include a statutory definition of shared education in the hoped for Education Bill and provisions for the new Education and Skills Authority (ESA) to encourage and facilitate it. We now know that the Executive has decided not to pursue the establishment of the ESA. It is important that a definition of shared education is agreed and that the new Education Bill to create a single Education Authority includes provision to encourage sharing.
- 1.4. The TRC sees shared education as a spectrum of types of sharing – shared facilities, courses, pupils, staff, and buildings. There can be a variety of modes of sharing with neighbouring schools working together to share campuses, classrooms and programmes for the educational benefit of their pupils with no threat to the ethos of any school. This can include teachers and or pupils moving from school to nearby school across sectoral divides and phases or purpose built facilities shared by two or more schools. We would also see the Integrated schools having an important contribution to make in sharing alongside other types of schools.
- 1.5. In our view there should be a particular encouragement towards shared education given to the two largest sectors of schools – Controlled and Maintained, which are attended by a majority of children from Protestant or Catholic backgrounds. Incentives should be introduced to promote the development of creative ways to share which are consonant with the local needs and settings of individual schools and their communities.
- 1.6. The TRC believes that Shared Education can make an invaluable contribution to the educational outcomes for pupils and that a statutory obligation to facilitate and encourage it would ensure that the Department of Education would provide a long term commitment to its development and not see it simply as a temporary albeit valuable programme.
- 1.7. The TRC has worked with NICIE particularly in the development of controlled integrated schools and recognises the contribution that Integrated Education has made. Our view is

that a fully integrated system of schools while perhaps an ideal is not realistically achievable province wide and that there is so much more to be gained by encouraging and facilitating collaboration and sharing across existing sectors.

- 1.8. The transferors have been supportive of the recently announced DE Shared Education Campus Scheme, where schools are invited to apply for funding to set up shared education campuses. The churches are particularly inspired by the Lisanelly education campus in Omagh and have worked closely with the WELB and school management authorities in taking forward this visionary shared education project which has government support.

2. Identify the key barriers and enablers for Shared Education and Integrated Education.

- 2.1. One of the key benefits of shared education in programmes we have observed is that it encourages collaboration rather than competition in particular between small primary schools. Partnerships developed between schools of different management types have also enabled enhanced community cohesion without compromising the distinctive ethos of any school.
- 2.2. Key to the success of sharing is the need to secure parental and governor support from the outset. It is vital too that account is taken of the local context of the schools. Alongside this it is essential to build the capacity amongst principals to manage sharing within the partnership through support and training. Shared staff development of the wider group of teachers has also been found vital for the establishment and building of good relationships between partner schools. Sufficient resources must be available to provide substitute cover to allow staff to meet and plan their work together.
- 2.3. Teachers have found they need to develop a new range of skills and approaches to teaching pupils from different backgrounds within the same classroom environment. NICIE through its Sharing Classrooms Deepening Learning (SCDL) project has been found to provide very useful training and resources to support teachers in these transformed classroom environments.
- 2.4. Some of the most successful partnerships between controlled and maintained schools particularly at primary level have been with schools in close proximity to each other. This maximises the potential for sharing at many levels of school life. However other programmes eg the University of Ulster's *Dissolving Boundaries* (DB) programme have used internet technology as an effective way of linking schools which are geographically separate. The DB programme has enabled joint projects through online contact and supplemented by face to face contact. It has been found by teachers to make a good contribution to literacy, numeracy and ICT skills.
- 2.5. Experience of the outworking of various shared education programmes eg the QUB SEP project and the NEELB PEE project suggests that the ownership of the partnership by the schools was vital. Schools applying in pairs and coming up with a shared programme relevant to their local school circumstances proved the most valuable way of initiating and sustaining collaboration.
- 2.6. The curriculum must be the driver of collaboration; partnerships should be developed in order to meet the curriculum needs of pupils through the provision of subject areas of mutual interest which one school on its own is unable to provide. At post-primary this has been found to be an important way of delivering the entitlement framework of access to 24/27 subjects at KS4 and post 16 respectively.

- 2.7. The downside of programme driven initiatives is that once the funding phase has been exhausted the future of collaboration is jeopardised. It is important that funding for shared education becomes much more mainstreamed to allow relationships to fully develop and for the maximum long term benefit to flow from collaboration.
- 2.8. An issue arises regarding ownership of schools in shared campus settings. We understand that the Catholic trustees are the 'owners' of catholic voluntary and maintained schools while controlled schools are 'owned' by the Education and Library Board. When facilities are designed to be shared a question arises about who owns the buildings of the 'enterprise'. This is a relevant question in a number of shared settings and in particular when the potential of jointly managed schools is being explored.

3. Identify and analyse alternative approaches and models of good practice in other jurisdictions in terms of policy interventions and programmes.

- 3.1. The TRC does not have specific knowledge of shared education experience in other jurisdictions although it is aware that QUB has much experience of work in divided societies for example Macedonia.
- 3.2. The transferors and Catholic trustees do however have an interest in developing the concept of jointly managed church schools in Northern Ireland. A small number of such schools exist in GB mostly jointly between the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches. During 2013 discussions began between the Transferor Churches, Catholic authorities and the Department of Education on developing a working model for such a school. The proposal is that the three transferor Churches and the Catholic Church would be joint trustees and managers of a school. There would be a jointly appointed board of governors and an agreed vision and ethos for the school based upon the Christian faith. The provision for Religious Education would be agreed by the Churches and parents. Jointly managed schools would offer a different model to formally Integrated schools as they would be organically linked to and supported by the two main Christian traditions in NI.
- 3.3. It is not envisaged that many jointly managed schools will emerge in the future; however it might be considered in certain rural situations for example in a situation where the Controlled and Maintained schools may have separate challenges to their sustainability. Instead of a village losing both schools, a jointly managed school with pupils from both religious communities might have greater viability and enable a school to be retained in the community.
- 3.4. There are many practical matters to be worked out before such a school might be established including the legal issue of joint ownership. However there is willingness among the Churches and considerable openness among many parents to pursue the proposal. A guidance paper is currently being developed by a working group comprising the four churches and Department officials. It is hoped that this will be published by DE in the next few months.

4. 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.

- 4.1. It is difficult to know how widely the concept of ‘shared education’ is known or understood by the wider community. It is likely also that among principals, staff and governors there is a variety of understandings or interpretations of shared education. There is therefore a key communication and training strategy needed to ensure that the concept is better understood. In particular it is essential that the idea of local sharing solutions for local communities is stressed. A clear and accepted definition of shared education would certainly help along with examples of what is and what is not an acceptable expression of sharing.
- 4.2. Research carried out by QUB has shown that meaningful engagement in collaborative partnerships does benefit community relations. There is a considerable body of evidence to show the reconciliation benefits of sustained contact across school sectors. Research suggests that separate schooling is more likely to contribute to bias towards one’s own group and prejudicial stereotyping of those from other groups. By considering the impact of participation in the Shared Education Programme on cross-group friendships and intergroup anxiety, researchers have confirmed the value of contact as a mechanism for promoting more harmonious relationships. The TRC believes that shared education has demonstrated tangible positive benefits for enhancing good relations in communities and urges that it is a priority task for the Department and proposed Education authority.
- 4.3. The importance of support for schools in developing collaborative partnerships has been demonstrated. For the controlled sector this is more challenging as unlike the maintained, integrated and Irish medium sectors they currently have no sectoral support body. The TRC has strongly advocated the establishment of a controlled sector support body, and is pleased that following the Minister for Education’s recent proposals, the executive has agreed a way forward for the creation of a single education authority with a commitment to fund a sectoral body for controlled schools.
- 4.4. A key role for such a body will be to work alongside other support bodies in matters of mutual interest including promotion of tolerance and understanding. A vital component of this aim will be to develop potential for sharing and collaboration across sectors.
- 4.5. The TRC believes that Special Schools are an essential part of the educational provision among the community of schools. Teachers from Special schools have much to offer other schools in terms of skills and expertise in working with children with special educational needs. Additionally the inclusion of special needs pupils in partnership activities will do much to enrich the educational experience of all pupils. Special schools should therefore be included in any proposed shared education plans for a local area. Particular care should be taken to ensure they are included in any proposed partnerships.

Conclusion

A key requirement for the success of shared education is a long term commitment and strategic decision to develop a culture of collaboration. Shared education presents a good model contributing to a better society in NI as it moves forward from its difficult past. Sharing enables children who will eventually live and work in society to spend some of their childhood learning alongside children from other traditions. As Northern Ireland emerges into a brighter future it is important that we find ways of addressing inherited prejudices and negative stereotypes and that young people can be confident in their own identity and beliefs yet develop openness to and understanding of the outlooks of others. Shared education seems to offer one way to help these things happen, not by dismissing differences but by 'creating interdependencies and making boundaries porous' (QUB SEP Learning Forum conference report, 2012)

Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC)

Chair: Rt Revd KR Good

Vice-Chair: Miss SR Rainey

Secretary: Revd IW Ellis

Contact address:

Church of Ireland House,

61-67 Donegall St

Belfast

BT1 4QH

Tel: 028 90828860