



Submission to the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education

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Shared Education

1. The concept of shared education is not a new one. Contact and sharing between schools has been taking place at various levels for over 30 years. For example, research from the 1980s focused on the development of inter-school links between schools from different sectors in Strabane, Limavady and Enniskillen – the same communities that are represented in Shared Education programmes today.
2. Many of the practices from these early programmes (sustained and regular contact, a curriculum focus, shared classes rather than fragmented events) are being claimed as ‘new innovations’, and some of the challenges raised about mainstreaming (financial costs, logistical challenges, and sustainability both in terms of level of contact that is achievable and the ability of schools to absorb costs once external funding is unavailable) were also identified in this early research and development work.¹

¹ Smith and Dunn (1990) Extending Inter School Links: An evaluation of contact between Protestant and Catholic pupils in Northern Ireland, Centre for the Study of Conflict.

<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/csc/reports/extend.htm>

3. There is no compelling evidence to suggest that these important policy concerns have been resolved in the intervening 30 years. In fact, based on the Department's own data the evidence suggests quite the opposite. On previous occasions when the Department has cut funding for shared education the result has been a dramatic drop in school participation. For example, when the Department of Education cut funding for inter school contact from £4.5 to £1.1 million in 2009, the number of pupils participating dropped from 10% to 3.8%.²
4. There are positive aspects to shared education. It has been delivered in difficult circumstances and in challenging funding landscapes, primarily through the dedication and hard work of committed teaching and school management staff. However, the primary focus is on change at the interpersonal and intergroup levels. The Department Business Plan for Shared Education (p.49) identifies three main measures of this aspect (Cross group friendships; Positive action tendencies; and Intergroup anxieties). These will measure any progress achieved by shared education programmes, but the baseline should also include the same measures for integrated schools where one might expect equally positive results given that pupils are in sustained contact on a daily basis.
5. More importantly, this focus on interpersonal and intergroup relations does not tell us how any attitudinal or behavioural changes can have an impact on institutional and systemic change. In other words, there is no evidence to suggest that these changes would lead in the direction of more inclusive schools or a more integrated education system. Indeed, the recent literature on shared education seems to avoid stating whether this would even be a desirable outcome.
6. The current policy debate is of utmost public concern due to a number of issues:
 - Court rulings critical of the Department of Education's interpretation of its statutory duty to 'encourage and facilitate' integrated education in Northern Ireland.
 - A policy shift by the Northern Ireland Executive towards shared education and away from its statutory duty to 'encourage and facilitate' integrated education (Art 64, NI Education (1989) Order), as evidenced through commitments in the *Programme for Government* and the *Together: Building a United Community Strategy*.
 - This shift incentivised by philanthropic funding supporting shared education projects.
 - A proposed £25 million programme from the NI Executive to fund shared education.
 - The creation of 10 'shared campuses' by 2018 one of which will cost £125 million.

Government Proposals to Invest in Shared Education

7. The Department of Education has recently developed a business plan to promote a £25 million Shared Education project in Northern Ireland schools over the next four years. Closer inspection of the Business Plan reveals a number of problems and suggests that shared education may be an expensive diversion in the current economic climate which invests in separate schooling rather than tackling what is a de facto segregated education system. This is a time to pause and ask if this course of action is the best use of taxpayers' money in a climate of increasing financial cuts to frontline education services.

² OFMDFM 'Good Relations Indicators – 2012 Update', published Jan 2013.

The costs of shared education projects are not realistic and the full cost is not sustainable.

8. There are a number of concerns with the Department Business Plan, not least that the full cost is unsustainable, even in the short term. The Business Plan estimates that scaling the programme up to apply to the entire system would cost £44 million, but there is no plan for sustainability beyond a commitment from the current Education Minister that the costs will be 'mainstreamed' after four years. The Department's own cost analysis indicates that the annual running cost at the end of four years if scaled up will be £15 million per year (equivalent to £20,000, or one Special Needs Assistant per school) and this will need to be absorbed into already shrinking school budgets. It is not a sustainable solution for schools to find this amount over and above other costs at a time of massive cuts in expenditure. We know from previous experience in community relations that when additional funding runs out schools simply cannot afford to maintain programmes and they have to be cancelled.
9. We also know that these are costs that will need to be incurred every year onwards because the Department's own business case indicates that, of the £25 million allocated to shared education, £5 million will be spent on transport, and a further £15 million on additional teacher cover and other programme costs such as facilitators and renting premises (p.22-23). It also means pupils spending a great deal of their time moving between schools to take part in classes at different times of the week. Simply put, this involves a level of pupil movement between schools which will sound unrealistic and unachievable to most practising teachers and prove a logistical nightmare for most school principals.
10. Perhaps most worrying is that the Plan envisages that only 65% of schools (762) are likely to participate in the programme since the rest will be too isolated to participate (p.19) – ironically the business plan states that *'the application criteria will exclude schools currently working in isolation'* (p.18) which seems to completely defeat the purpose of shared education by excluding the most important target group of the initiative.

Added bureaucracy and administrative costs

11. The Business Plan also plans to set up a bureaucratic structure of committees (at 5 different levels) to oversee the project, including 15 new advisory posts at £36,000 per year (the equivalent of 25 newly qualified teachers), plus additional administrative posts, at a time when the intention is to streamline the Education and Library Boards and reduce costs. It is depressingly clear that the greater part of this investment will be used up on bureaucracy and logistics, while the future of many front line staff is under threat.

The legal basis for spending taxpayer's money on shared education is not clear.

12. The Department Business Plan identifies two pieces of legislation that it suggests provide a basis for spending public funds on shared education:

Article 64 of NI Education (1989) Order to ‘encourage and facilitate’ integrated education (yet a judicial review recently ruled that shared education is a different concept from integrated education, therefore this programme would not be a fulfilment of that duty); and

Section 75 of the 1998 NI Act requires all public bodies to promote equality and avoid discrimination – this does not currently apply to schools, but it does not need to be introduced through Shared Education – OFMDFM already has the power to change this by simply making all schools subject to Section 75.

13. Presumably the lack of a strong legislative basis for spending public finance on shared education is one reason why the Department wishes to create a definition of shared education. This would be a mistake for a number of reasons. Firstly, it would be contrary to the existing statutory duty to ‘encourage and facilitate’ integrated education which the recent High Court ruling by Justice Treacy is not the same as shared education.³ Secondly, it would actually leave the Department open to new legal challenges if it fails to meet the extremely challenging targets set by the Shared Education business plan.

Shared Campuses (Omagh presented as the ‘flagship’ costing £125m)

14. Shared education is just one of two ‘flagship’ initiatives outlined in the business plan - the other is to create 10 ‘shared educational campuses’ by 2018. The plan to bring together six separate schools on one site in Omagh will cost approx £125m, however the logistical challenges of bringing 4,000 pupils together on a single campus, but attending separate schools, each with its own principal, staff, most likely different uniforms, arriving daily to enter separate buildings, share some facilities, but probably leaving on separate buses at the end of the school day, are huge. It is not clear what the added value of this is.
15. International examples include building ‘two schools under one roof’, which is fraught with problems, for example, in Bosnia, where a two schools under one roof system has heightened animosities leading to the Bosnian Supreme Court declaring them illegal (November 2014).⁴
16. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has also carried out research and spoken against the concept of ‘two schools under one roof’.⁵
17. The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Vernor Muñoz Villalobos made a report to the UN General Assembly (2007) and raised concerns about ‘the excessive fragmentation and politicization of the education system; and the segregation between ethnic groups’.⁶
18. UNICEF (2009) has also produced a research report on the negative impacts of the divided school system Report (2009) on Divided Schools.⁷

³ [http://www.courtsni.gov.uk/en-GB/Judicial%20Decisions/PublishedByYear/Documents/2014/\[2014\]%20NIQB%2069/j_j_TRE9202Final.htm](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk/en-GB/Judicial%20Decisions/PublishedByYear/Documents/2014/[2014]%20NIQB%2069/j_j_TRE9202Final.htm)

⁴ <https://news.vice.com/article/bosnia-herzegovina-court-orders-end-to-ethnic-segregation-of-schoolchildren>

⁵ <http://www.osce.org/bih/57446>

⁶ http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/8session/A.HRC.8.10.Add.4_en.pdf

⁷ http://www.unicef.org/bih/Divided_schools_in_BHWEB_1.pdf

Is Current Policy Approach Really Transformative?

19. Despite the rhetoric, little has changed in more than 30 years; 93% of our children continue to attend separate schools based on religious affiliation, separation of our children through education during their formative years is systematic and funded by tax payer's money - this is not a good foundation for an integrated workforce that can compete within a global economy.
20. In the current economic context, with dire warnings over the future of up to 2,500 teaching and support staff in our schools, surely it is time to tackle the fundamental, unnecessary, and financially unsustainable divisions in our education system. Government should not continue to hide behind the smokescreen of 'parental choice'. In reality parental choice is limited by what government chooses to provide.
21. Current government policy is at odds with the wishes consistently expressed by parents that their preference is for all children to attend school together in the same classroom on a daily basis. International experience shows that culture and faith can be respected and provided for within common schools without any detriment to the quality of education - in fact, some would argue that the quality of education is enhanced in these more plural environments.

Some Alternative Proposals for Discussion

This submission should not be seen as a counsel of despair – much good work goes on in our schools on a day to day basis, led by committed teachers. But our teachers and school management should not be the people left facing insurmountable funding decisions in four years when the choices may come down to funding limited sharing or cutting back on front line staff. More sustainable options for the millions to be spent on Shared Education are available, many could be implemented immediately and hold the transformative power that shared education seeks to deliver:

- Instead of using the four-year £25 million fund to promote contact between separate schools, equivalent levels of funding should be offered to schools and Boards of Governors that wish to explore possibilities of **voluntary amalgamations between the traditional school sectors**. The Department should 'encourage and facilitate' this sort of structural and systemic change over the next 4-5 years, rather than underwriting separate schooling.
- Instead of reinforcing existing school sectors why not introduce a range of measures that open up all schools to the possibility of becoming more plural and diverse, in terms of their **management**, their **workforce** and their **enrolments**:

- ✓ **Make all schools subject to Section 75** – this could be a much more direct way of ensuring equality and non discrimination and already within the power of the Executive to implement
- ✓ Change the regulations for **governing bodies** so that every school has a Board of Governors composed of people from diverse backgrounds since all schools are funded by all tax payers.
- ✓ Remove the exemption of schools from **Fair Employment legislation** so that we can begin to see our children taught by teachers from diverse backgrounds rather than one tradition.
- ✓ Fund **teacher education** arrangements that educate our student teachers together. Encourage them to seek employment in any school, rather than the current perception among many student teachers that they are more likely to be employed in the sector associated with their own tradition. (A single teacher employing authority to oversee the fair employment and universal deployment of teachers)
- ✓ **Facilitate genuine parental choice** by giving parents a real say in any education planning decisions that will affect their children, rather than continue with planning arrangements based on the consolidation of traditional 'sectors'.
- ✓ Incentivise and reward existing schools to **recruit more pupils from other traditions.**