

## Response to the Education Committee on the Draft Shared Education Bill

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**The Corrymeela Community is pleased to respond to the Draft Shared Education Bill Consultation.**

**We would welcome the opportunity to share our experience directly with the Committee.**

**In writing this response we recognise that there may be elements contained within it that are more relevant to the ‘Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education’ document. We do feel however that our responses could strengthen the proposed legislation.**

### **1.0 History of our involvement with youth work and schools work that promotes an openness to difference and reconciliation.**

**The Corrymeela Community, founded in 1965, as a cross community reconciliation organisation, has continuously initiated diverse Schools Community Relations Programmes since 1966, using a mixture of its own charitably donated resources as well as support from a variety of philanthropic, public and peace funding sources.**

**Within the Membership of this voluntary organisation we have many educational practitioners associated with Mutual Understanding, Shared Education and Integrated Education.**

**This includes:**

- Higher Education Lecturing Staff who have been involved in the professional formation of teachers, educational managers, Boards of Governors and Principals; and**
- School principals, senior school staff and experienced teachers active in the promotion of mutual understanding, citizenship, shared and integrated approaches.**

**Additionally there are now many youth workers, in full time and voluntary community relations practice, who developed their interest in this work through volunteering or being engaged with reconciliation practice at our residential centre over the past 50 years.**

### **2.0 The Context**

**Formal and informal (youth work) education in an ethnic frontier society, such as ours, can readily become a contested theme for people from all traditions.**

**How different people and traditions view education needs more widely understood by us all**

if we are to really focus on how we build a system centred on:

- the personal, social, intellectual and spiritual development of our children and young people;
- enabling them to embrace a shared future together, with diverse others;
- engaging parents and carers, from all backgrounds and traditions, as partners in this enterprise;
- support professional teaching staff, youth workers, support staff, management and Boards of Governors work to the fullest possibilities offered to us through the current and exciting Northern Ireland Curriculum.

**In view of the different educational providers and the current structures that exist in Northern Ireland, it is important that all initiatives that seek to promote an openness to difference, mixing, sharing or integration are welcomed and supported.**

It is also important that all educational work is subjected to quality challenges around the extent to which they are explicit about working to reconstruct this society as one characterised by mutual respect and a willingness to share a common life together- between children, young people and adults-in this society.

We welcome all contributions that moderately, or fully, promote sharing and integration and we are working to promote such a supportive culture around our schools.

Schools and the youth service have a central role in assisting us become a shared, mutually respectful and united society. This goal is a task for adults to drive forward.

**COMMENTS:**

**3.0 Under the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum accompanying the proposed Bill:**

*Para 4: a broader education policy framework designed to improve educational outcomes for young people and tackle the significant tail of educational under-achievement.*

This proposal would be strengthened if it was explicitly linked to a statement about the need to build a reconciled society based on mutual respect. We believe this approach will make a significant contribution to tackling under achievement. At present, it ignores the history of antagonism and fear that has characterised this political frontier society (Wright, 1987) and

that has skewed and often limited the widest opportunities being available to many children and young people through degrees of separation (Jenvey, 1973).

The recent and very welcome political agreements have now committed all political parties and civil society to move away from this state of affairs and the Shared Education approach should be conceptualised with this wider vision.

We suggest that the initial introduction to the Shared Education Bill places it within a wider continuum of 'integrated-mixed - shared education' approaches and that the underachievement challenge is situated within this wider framework. It may be helpful to comment on how this legislation interacts with the duty of the Department to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education as per the 1989 Education Reform Order (NI). Likewise, in what way is this Bill supporting the promotion of integrated education as per the Belfast Agreement.

#### **4.0 There should be an explicit commitment of all strands to promote ease with difference.**

Adult educators, both in schools and youth service provision, should be committed to promote new relationships and understandings between themselves and the children and young people they work with.

In other societies trust building and poverty reduction are inter-connected strands of activity (Morrissey & Gaffikin, 2010) and they work best as interdependent approaches. Yes but they emphasise the socio economic and do not preface all with the need for new relationships

Addressing under achievement is best addressed from a broader strategy where our children and young people learn to live together with different others and where the energy, imagination and creativity that is released when people work without fear, antagonism and distrust raises motivation levels and levels of attainment.

The 1998 Belfast Agreement was a major political agreement to address the fractures and divisions in this society.

The subsequent agreements and the most recent of the 17<sup>th</sup> November 2015, recommits the British and Irish Governments to:

*“maximising for citizens the political cohesion of our society, political inclusivity and participative democracy; and the achievement of a comprehensive peace”*

This initiative should be explicitly linked to and preface the proposed legislation on Shared Education.

**If Shared Education is a new strand to the development of educational approaches referred to as ‘integrated education’ (See the Good Friday Agreement 1998) and ‘mixed education’ approaches then this should be stated as one element in a continuum or raft of approaches, not either assumed or left unsaid.**

Given the longevity of the historical strands of our educational system to which Integrated and Irish medium approaches are more recent additions, the new Shared Education thrust should also raise the need for developing school and youth service organisational cultures that are open to different others, that include or acknowledge different others in their governance, working cultures and organisational practices.

A Shared Education approach would give greater benefits if there was a governance culture, an organisational and an adult and youth worker / teacher culture that was promoted and eventually repeated, patterned and structured (Senge) in the daily working practices of the institutions.

If adult society embraces the challenge of sharing and creates organisational and relational cultures ‘of sharing’ our children and young people are more likely to move effortlessly into these safer spaces.

## **5.0 COMMENTARY ON CLAUSES**

**In the proposed legislation, Clause 1 provides a common definition of shared education.**

**We question this.**

Historically shared education has been, at the very least, a way of mitigating and managing the worst effects of a segregated education system in terms of religion and class. At best the concept could offer a radical vision of change and transformation. We would agree with the Ministerial Advisory Group’s conclusions that shared education needs to provide a framework for transforming our education system.

This should not be just another policy initiative but primarily provide a framework for creating a world-class education system for Northern Ireland.

**Shared education is one additional strand of an 'integrated-mixed -shared' continuum of practice and it should primarily and explicitly state that it is committed to children, young people, teachers, youth workers and their governance committees building a societal culture that prepares them to play a full and active role in building and sustaining an open, inclusive and confident society.**

## **Clause 2: Power to encourage and facilitate shared education**

*Clause 2 confers on the listed bodies (the Department of Education; the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools; the Youth Council for Northern Ireland; and the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations) a power to encourage and facilitate shared education.*

**The current framing of Clause 2 proposes a narrower raft of agencies being seen as promoters and appears to exclude the very community and voluntary sector providers that have been essential to keeping a vision of a reconciled society afloat.**

**It is our view that this clause is too narrow and will limit the development of a wide range of approaches essential to this initiative.**

Since 1969 the (previously Ministry of) Department of Education has supported Mutual Understanding work. However this work has primarily been funded by local charitable organisations, the externally offered Peace Funds and International Philanthropy and, often alone, was developed and maintained by voluntary and community providers. Such partnerships have been essential to the maintenance of this important work.

It is to be regretted if this is happening by oversight, or worse, if it is now the deliberate policy of the Department to cut off the most valuable, often internationally best informed practice, that many voluntary and community organisations have brought to this work since 1966. This voluntary and community practice has been informed by Human Rights Principles and UN Principles on the Rights of the Child, something the Department states in many of its documents.

**We urge the Department to reconsider this omission.**

## **6.0 In Conclusion:**

It would be a measure of the maturity of the political system if a robust relationship involving the statutory providers of education, along with the voluntary, community and critical philanthropic organisations was envisaged. Good public policy will come from our legislators through open and robust engagements with the full diversity of providers. It is also important that the Integrated and Irish Medium sectors are involved in this as well.

We repeat how important it is that we all urgently promote diverse manners of structural and relational work that builds a more open, shared, and future oriented inclusive society based on mutual respect and, eventually trust between diverse people.

To support this visionary task, the promotion of shared, mixed and integrated educational structures are important, as they will bring quality experiences of being at ease with different others to staff, parents, carers, children and young people, as members of these enterprises.

They will also develop a societal culture of respect and mutual understanding-a space in which we can then more earnestly turn to address issues of underachievement and isolation that many young people experience in this society.

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