



**Response to the CALL FOR EVIDENCE to inform the COMMITTEE
STAGE OF THE SHARED EDUCATION BILL**

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 PlayBoard is an independent charity and the lead organisation for the development and promotion of children and young people's play in Northern Ireland. Since our establishment in 1985, PlayBoard has been committed to supporting the child's right to play through a combination of: service delivery, service development; campaigning, lobbying; awareness raising and working in partnership with others to put play on the agenda of policy makers and resource providers. The organisation takes great pride in promoting best practice in Play, Playwork and play based School Age Childcare services.

PlayBoard's mission is to drive the play agenda, ensuring that at every level of decision making across society, the child's right to play is not only recognised but is made a reality within the lives of children, young people, families and communities. Children and young people's views, aspirations and perceptions of themselves and the environment in which they live, are at the heart of PlayBoard's work. Our vision is of a society where the right to play is realised.

PlayBoard as the lead organisation for the promotion, development and delivery of play, playwork and School Age Childcare in Northern Ireland and as a regional voluntary youth organisation funded by the Youth Council for Northern Ireland welcome the opportunity to inform the Committee Stage of the Shared Education Bill.

- 1.2 In our response we welcome the definition of Shared Education to encompass informal education and to move beyond a remit for just schools. We also reflect on the rationale for embedding Play within the Shared Education agenda by highlighting the ability of play, and playwork in particular, to bring children together - through their natural and shared drive to play - something which is unfortunately all too often overlooked and underutilised by the department, our schools and services responsible for providing educational benefits to children or young person or which are ancillary to education.

2.0 Shared Education Bill as introduced at First Stage

- 2.1 We welcome the dual mandate of the Shared Education Bill to include *'those of different religious belief'* and *'those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not'*.

We welcome also the definition of Shared Education set out in para 1(3)(b) as encompassing "relevant provider" to include *'services of any kind (including youth service) which provide educational benefits to children or young person or which are ancillary to education'*. The expansion of the definition of Shared Education beyond schools bodes well for the implementation of the Shared Education agenda within children and young people's lives.

We also welcome the inclusion in para 2(2)(c) of the Youth Council for Northern Ireland as a listed body having the power to *'encourage and facilitate shared education'*.

- 2.2 Inclusion of the youth services within the Shared Education Bill acknowledges the important role that youth service play in the informal education of children and youth people. Furthermore the inclusion of the Youth Council for Northern Ireland acknowledges the vast remit of the voluntary youth sector both in terms of age range and the diversity of its funded organisations, including PlayBoard.

3.0 Play as an enabler of Shared Education

- 3.1 Play is special to children. Despite perceived other differences in their lives the one uniting factor throughout childhood is play. It is through play that children understand each other and their world around them. In play they are equal, and it is through play that children and young people learn to develop strategies to engender cooperation and conflict resolution skills. Moreover, play is an excellent vehicle for bringing children from different backgrounds together because play is innate and a universal desire.

3.2 **Play in Schools** As we noted in our previous response to the Committee's Inquiry of Shared and Integrated Education, schools have a role to play in relation to post conflict safety and in fulfilling children's realisation of article 31 of the UNCRC (the right to play). General Comment 17¹ is clear that

States are obliged to ensure ... active measures should be taken to restore and protect the rights under article 31 in post-conflict ... situations, including ... creating ... safe spaces, including schools, where children can participate in play and recreation as part of the normalization of their lives (para. 57(e)).

Our work in schools: Over the past number of years, PlayBoard has delivered play programmes within the school setting, including the 'Spaces to Be' programme, which was part of the bigger Contested Spaces programme funded by Atlantic Philanthropies and OFMDFM. PlayBoard's 'Spaces to Be' programme brought together P5, P6 and P7 children from maintained and controlled schools (located in interface areas), to play and come into contact with each other. Within the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding strand of the statutory curriculum, this pilot programme used play to facilitate participating schools to address community and cultural barriers to enable respect for difference and inclusion of others.

3.3 **Shared Education through Youth Services and Playwork** As noted in 'Priorities for Youth'², youth services encompass children and young people aged between 4 – 25 years. 30% of Northern Ireland's youth population avail of youth services, underscoring the critical role of youth work within children and young people's lives.

We contend that practitioners, particularly those working with the younger age range, are more likely to use playwork methodologies (either knowingly

¹ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013). General Comment no. 17, on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31) (CRC/C/GC/17), United Nations, Geneva, Switzerland. Available at: http://www.playboard.org/uploads/CRC-C-GC-17_en.pdf

² Department of Education (2013). Priorities for Youth: improving young people's lives through youth work, Bangor: DE.

or unknowingly). Playwork lends itself particularly well to the younger age range of youth services. The unstructured and emergent style of playwork contrasts and compliments the more structured and planned approach taken by youth work practitioners. Regardless of the approach used (playwork or youth work), these services are typically referred to as youth work and are delivered by youth workers.

- 3.4 **School Age Childcare services** Prior to entering the school system, through their childcare many children may experience for the first time contact with children from the other predominant community. Due to the cross-community nature of most settings, School Age Childcare providers have the ability to provide for many children an opportunity to meet with, interact and engage with children from another community or cultural background on an almost daily basis. In effect School Age Childcare represents an opportunity to achieved Shared informal Education.

Given the largely segregated nature of the education system the importance of School Age Childcare provision in helping to build a united community should not be underestimated. Therefore we strongly urge that the role of the School Age Childcare sector in meeting the objectives of Shared Education is given serious consideration.

4.0 Concluding Comments

- 4.1 PlayBoard accepts that the Shared Education agenda is probably the necessary precursor required to achieve a system whereby the label of controlled, maintained or integrated is not an inhibitor for any parent or child.
- 4.2 In informing the Committee's Call for Evidence we strongly agree that the Shared Education agenda looks beyond the 'formal' school day and recognises the benefits to be accrued from, for example shared play between schools during the school day, School Aged Childcare, and Playwork within the context of the Youth Service.

- 4.3 We urge that cognisance is given to the untapped potential of play to become one of the central lynchpins that attracts children, teachers, parents, youth workers and playworkers to services that provide educational benefit to children or young persons or which are ancillary to education.
- 4.4 PlayBoard welcomes further discussion with the Department on any of the points mentioned above and is happy to be considered for oral evidence sessions in relation to the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill

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