COMMENTS ON THE SHARED EDUCATION BILL FROM THE CENTRE FOR SHARED EDUCATION AT QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY TO THE COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION, NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

The Centre
The Centre for Shared Education was established by the School of Education in Queen's University in May 2012.

Vision
We are an applied and interdisciplinary Centre committed to researching and promoting evidence based practice in all areas of shared education. Shared education is broadly defined as,

> *Collaborative activity between schools from different sectors that is underpinned by a commitment to reconciliation objectives and can contribute towards school improvement, access to opportunity and more positive intergroup relations in divided societies.*

We are particularly interested in the role of shared education in societies that are divided on ethno/religious lines, and our work is underpinned by a commitment to the principle that all schools have role to play in promoting social harmony.

Mission
Our mission is to promote shared education as a mechanism for the delivery of reconciliation and educational benefits to all children. This mission is delivered through 3 core strands of interlinked activity:

Research
The Centre supports a programme of comparative national and international research that aims to enhance understanding of school-based sharing, the collaborative process, and associated outcomes. Our work is theory driven and empirically based, and we work in partnership with leading experts from a range of academic disciplines.

Programme
A major Programme for Sharing Education (SEP) in Northern Ireland was delivered through the Centre. SEP offers a model for exploring the possibilities of sharing in a deeply divided society that is seeking to build peace after a long period of violent conflict. The model can be shared globally and we are currently working with academics, policy makers and practitioners in other divided jurisdictions to develop similar programmes.

Education and training

We have an established training programme for practitioners in Northern Ireland, and we have offered in-country courses to other jurisdictions. Our aim is to consolidate and extend existing training provision and to develop a short course programme that can be tailored to meet the requirements of practitioners in a range of sharing contexts. In addition, we are in the process of developing a Masters pathway Intercultural Education. We anticipate that this programme will be delivered in regular and online formats.

Response to the Current Draft of the Shared Education Bill

The Centre for Shared Education has previously provided the Committee briefing notes presenting the rationale for shared education in divided societies and a summary of our own research and programme activities. Drawing on our experience and knowledge of shared education we now present the Education Committee feedback on the current draft of the Shared Education Bill introduced to the Assembly on Monday 2 November 2015.

The Centre for Shared Education welcomes the introduction of the Shared Education Bill. As the Bill progresses to the Committee Stage, we would request that the following points regarding the contents of the Bill are taken into consideration.

Appropriate Designation of Groups
Community Background
For shared education to have a positive impact within divided societies it is paramount that the individuals involved in intergroup contact are representative of the communities in conflict. In Northern Ireland various arguments have been advanced as to the nature of division, relating to for example, socio-economic status (Smith & Chambers, 1991), ethnonational differences (McGarry & O'Leary, 1995), and religion (Hickey, 1984). The use of one line of demarcation however simplifies a much more complex dynamic with multiple social groupings interlocking and mutually reinforcing one another (Cairns & Darby, 1998; Darby, 1995; Ruane & Todd, 1996).

In Section 1, point 2a, Shared education is defined as,

> **..the education together of – (a) those of different religious belief including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons**

We would argue that 'religious belief' is not the most relevant categorisation to use within the Shared Education Bill and instead advocate the use of the term 'community background'. This reflects a number of considerations, the first being that 'religious belief' implies a level of religiosity that may not be relevant in a portion of the population. While 'religious identity' may more accurately capture the feelings of association with a particular religious group, there is a lack of clarity about what is implied within this in Northern Ireland – that is, whether it is conceived principally in terms of belief and practice or is

taken to indicate, more broadly, one's cultural and political affiliation (Wolffe, 2010).

Further, religious identity is fluid and what it means to ascribe to a particular religious group is influenced by wider social and political dynamics. There can be little doubt for example, that traditional cultural and religious identities are often eroded by secularization. In Northern Ireland, between 2010 and 2014 results from the Young Life and Times Survey reveal a marked increase in the number of young people that report that they do not regard themselves as belonging to any particular religion. While these individuals may not identify with a particular religious identity this is not to say that religion remains socially insignificant.

We would argue that the term 'community background' references a broader social identity, that moves beyond the confines of individual religiosity and more accurately addresses self-categorisation within a divided society, encompassing religious, cultural, and political elements, among others. As noted by Demerath, an individual does not have to be involved in religious participation or have a personal sense of involvement per se to identify with a wider cultural religious heritage of a community (2000).

The term 'community background' reaches across multiple domains and, moreover, takes into account the changing demography of Northern Ireland. We believe it more accurately captures the defining variables that compromise identity in this society. Belonging to a particular community background is based on an understanding that individuals generally perceive themselves and are perceived by others to belong to a larger group and not a fixed, homogenous entity. What it means to be a member of this wider group may change over time as individuals adapt to what they believe being a member entails (Tajfel, 1978, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979); for some it may mean regular religious attendance, for others it may mean particular national identities, and for others it may be defined by parental background.

Proportions
Additionally, we believe that with the substantial variations in pupil body populations in schools across Northern Ireland that a focus on 'reasonable numbers' is inappropriate. Instead we would argue that it is more appropriate to refer to the proportions of children and young people from different community backgrounds.

Taking these points into consideration we suggest the following amendments to Section 1, point 2a,

> *Those of different community and cultural backgrounds, including a reasonable proportion of children and young people from Protestant and Catholic community backgrounds.*

Clarification

In addition to the education together of children from differing community backgrounds, Section 1, point 2b states that shared education will also include,

> **Those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not**

It is unclear how socio-economic deprivation is being defined in this context, and why it is deemed relevant in the context of sharing between schools ALL of which will comprise a proportion of pupils from lower and higher socio-economic groups - albeit that these proportions will vary significantly depending on school location and type. We cannot propose an alternative here but would ask that the following questions are considered: How will socio-economic deprivation be appropriately measured, and what practical measures can be taken to ensure that this will be carried out? In Section 1, point 2a stress is placed upon 'reasonable numbers'. A similar emphasis is not apparent here and it is unclear why.

Appropriate Designation of Providers

Section 1 concludes by stating that shared education is,

> **…secured by the working together of two or more relevant providers**

Point 3 further states that relevant providers means a person providing,

(a) **education at a grant-aided school, or**
(b) **services of any kind including youth services which provide educational benefit to children or young persons or which are ancillary to education.**

The Centre for Shared Education defines shared education broadly as, "Collaborative activity between schools from different sectors that is underpinned by a commitment to reconciliation objectives and can contribute

towards school improvement, access to opportunity and more positive intergroup relations in divided societies." We feel it is crucial that relevant providers must also come from the differing school sectors including schools which are predominately Catholic, predominately Protestant, integrated, special schools, and youth services.

Therefore, we would suggest the following amendment to the closing statement of Section 1, point 2,

> *… secured by the working together and co-operation of two or more relevant providers of different sectors*

With sectors defined in the Bill as those schools which are comprised of predominately Catholic pupils, predominately Protestant pupils, integrated schools, youth services, and special schools.

Stronger Language
We would also suggest amending the language in Section 2 from "Power to encourage and facilitate shared education" to,

> *Duty to promote, encourage, and facilitate shared education*

The use of stronger language reflects the support of the Department of Education and reflects language used in Section 64 of the 1989 Education [Northern Ireland] Order which placed a statutory duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate integrated education.

A final note, on 4 November 2015 the Department of Education proposed the possible inclusion of an additional paragraph to the Shared Education Bill which would establish a body to support ownership and governance arrangements for shared campus schools and other schools wishing to create a shared entity. On the whole we support the establishment of such a body and will welcome sight of final wording of the proposed additional paragraph. We will be happy to provide further feedback at that time.

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