



Shared Education Bill Committee Stage

Comments from UNESCO Centre, Ulster University

17 November 2015

1. The UNESCO Centre at Ulster University welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee for Education call for comments on the Shared Education Bill. The Committee Stage is extremely constrained and this is a concern to us, as we believe that the Bill, as presented, does not fully compliment the stated policy intentions outlined in the Departmental strategy, 'Sharing Works', or meet legislative standards of consistency.
2. We also have a concern that the Bill, in its current form, commits schools, in perpetuity, to the associated costs of implementing shared education, though funding has only been secured until 2018. Despite a number of calls for further clarity on this matter, the Department of Education gives no guarantee of future funding beyond a vague commitment to 'mainstream' funding for shared education after 2018. Without a clear commitment of additional funding beyond this date schools will have to make extremely difficult decisions about how to allocate already shrinking budgets in order to fulfil a programme which now has a legislative basis.
3. As the Committee calls only for comments on the '*contents of the Bill*' the UNESCO Centre makes the following observations:

Clause 1 – Shared Education

4. The purpose of the proposed Bill is to provide a clear, working definition of Shared Education, but the definition as introduced falls short of this standard.
5. The departmental policy for shared education, '*Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education*' clearly sets a context for shared education which the Bill does not reflect. For example, the policy explains that, '*Specifically, Shared Education involves the sustained provision of opportunities for children and young people from different community, as well as social and economic, backgrounds to learn together*' (*Sharing Works, DE, P15*). The definition contained within the Bill does not require any commitment to 'sustained' education together. We believe that this should be amended so that, 1. (2) reads:
"Shared education" means the **sustained** education together of –'
6. We have concerns around the possible future interpretation of parts of the definition of shared education provided in the Bill, not least, what constitutes a '*reasonable number*' of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons?

7. It could also be argued that various interpretations of ‘*socio economic deprivation*’ could lead to situations where schools that have taken part in shared education initiatives in the past, and who may have a role to play in the future, may be unable to access funding.
8. As raised previously by various stakeholders, the definition of shared education in the Bill is a narrow one, as opposed to the wider definition provided in ‘*Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education*’ (p.15),

‘Shared Education is described as the organisation and delivery of education so that it:

- *Meets the needs of, and provides for the education together of learners from all Section 75 categories⁴ and socio-economic status;*
- *Involves schools and other education providers of differing ownership, sectoral identity and ethos, management type or governance arrangements; and*
- *Delivers educational benefits to learners, promotes the efficient and effective use of resources, and promotes inclusion in terms of equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion involving a number, though not all, of designated section 75 groups.’*

The definition of shared education, as outlined in the Bill, provides no such detail or intent and is open to extremely wide interpretation. It is our understanding that one of the main reasons for a legislative definition of shared education was to bring clarity to those tasked with implementing the policy and the wider educational community. We fear that the definition contained within the Bill is not a helpful enough intervention.

Clause 2 – Power to encourage and facilitate shared education

9. The issue of ‘Power’ versus ‘Duty’ remains confused and confusing.
10. It is not clear on how the decision on the four bodies given the option of using the power to encourage and facilitate shared education was arrived at. If it is the case that Non Departmental Public Bodies meet the criteria, it is surprising that, for example, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta or NICIE are not included. The fact that both operate under existing statutory duties should not be a reason to exclude, as the Department of Education and CCMS are included in the list, and they currently have responsibility for existing statutory duties. Therefore it may be appropriate to amend the Bill as follows:

‘2.-(2) The bodies are-

- (a) the Department of Education;
- (b) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools;
- (c) the Youth Council for Northern Ireland;
- (d) the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment;
- (e) The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland;**
- (f) the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education; and**
- (g) Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta**

11. It may also be necessary to ensure that accountability, particularly in financial terms and in terms of progress towards targets set for shared education, is ensured when granting this

power to a number of bodies. This is crucial in terms of transparency and public accountability. We would suggest that the Bill be amended to add a subsection to clause 2 stating that:

‘2.-(3) The Department of Education will publish an annual report outlining expenditure and progress towards targets set in the Programme for Government relating to shared education.’

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