

Hi, my name is Catherine and I'm a member of the NICCY Youth Panel.

Personally, I am a Protestant who comes from a Protestant family. However, I also have immediate Catholic relations. So, I understand this isn't the case for the majority of people. Yet, it does offer a perspective that no matter what cultural or political background people come from, they are still people who may even be more similar to you than you realise.

When you put it into perspective, we live in a relatively small country, yet our education can be so varied across different sides of the community. There are hundreds of people, perhaps even in the same city as you, who will have a different style of education than what you experienced. For example, there are variations in subject choices and examination styles etc. It makes you think just how much division there still is as both communities don't have complete common ground in such a prominent sector of our society such as education.

As someone who is religious myself, I can see why people might be apprehensive if they felt that their personal or denominational religious beliefs might be less valued than others. No everyone should be forced into an integrated style of education if that's not what they want for their children and young people. Religion certainly can still have a respected input into school life while children can also feel the benefits of having a deeper sense of community while still having a full and comprehensive education that can prepare them for entering the workplace as a respectful and well-educated individual. If there were more integrated schools, it would give parents and children more choices, especially if they would consider sending their child to an integrated school but the opportunity to do so isn't practical, i.e., Nearest school is too far away.

Just last week the Commission for Victims and Survivors, in its *'It Didn't End in 1998'* report, made the recommendation:

"Increasing the provision (and funding) of integrated education, particularly given the increasing demand and oversubscription, is key and thus attention should be given to the UNCRC Concluding Observations in 2016 that a 'fully integrated education system' is actively promoted."

The prospect of integrated education isn't completely new. The successful creation Lagan College has led to a following 67 other integrated schools being created which shows how integrated education is possible. The fact that Lagan College has founded during the Troubles shows how desperately people wanted to create less division and promote more inclusion. These factors remain key reasons behind why people want integrated education in today's world. From looking at polls from the public, there is a clear demand for integrated education which could potentially grow even more in the future.

The Executive's Office Good Relations report (2019) highlights a significant increase in the percentage of first preference applications to post-primary integrated schools that do not result in admissions to that particular school – an increase of 11% - from 10% in 2013/14 to 21% in 2018/19. This represents an increasing oversubscription to post-primary integrated schools.

Research evidence as identified the UNESCO Centre, University of Ulster, January 2013 suggests that integrated schooling has a significant and positive social influence on the lives of those who experience it, most notably in terms of fostering cross-community friendships, reducing prejudicial attitudes and promoting a sense of security in religious, racial, or ethnically diverse environments. Other research has found that the intergroup contact of integrated or mixed schools can influence social attitudes, with pupils adopting more positive positions on key social issues such as politics, religion, identity and mixed marriages.

If we can see how much of positive impact upon our lives that integrated education can have, then we would probably be more motivated to pursue more action towards it, if there was a majority sense of approval for the bill. This could all happen even before the Independent Review of Education is published in the future.