



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Shared Education Bill:
Centre for Shared Education,
Queen's University Belfast

25 November 2015

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Peter Weir (Chairperson)
Mrs Sandra Overend (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kennedy
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Robin Newton
Mr Seán Rogers

Witnesses:

Mr Michael Arlow	Queen's University Belfast
Dr Danielle Blaylock	Queen's University Belfast
Professor Joanne Hughes	Queen's University Belfast

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): I welcome our witnesses: Professor Joanne Hughes from the Centre for Shared Education; Dr Danielle Blaylock, a research fellow at the Centre for Shared Education; and Mr Michael Arlow, a lecturer in shared education at Queen's. I invite you to make a short presentation, after which we will move to questions.

Professor Joanne Hughes (Queen's University Belfast): Thank you. First, we would like to say that we very much welcome the introduction of the Shared Education Bill and the opportunity to present our oral evidence. We request that a number of points be taken into consideration as the Bill progresses to Committee Stage, and our written submission elaborates on those.

The first relates to the appropriate designation of groups. For shared education to have a positive impact in divided societies, it is paramount that the individuals involved in the inter-group contact are representative of the group's intention. Clause 1(2)(a) defines shared education as the education together of:

"those of different religious belief, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons".

We argue that the terms "religious belief" and "Protestant and Roman Catholic" are not the most relevant descriptors to use in the Shared Education Bill. We propose instead the terms "community and cultural background" and "Catholic and Protestant community background". First, "Protestant and Roman Catholic" may imply a level of religiosity that is likely to be irrelevant to a significant proportion of the population. There can be little doubt, for example, that traditional cultural and religious identities are often eroded by secularisation. Our written submission references life and times survey data showing that, between 2010 and 2014, there was a marked increase in the number of young people

who reported that they did not regard themselves as belonging to any particular religion. While those individuals may not identify with a particular religious identity, that is not to say that religion remains socially insignificant. We argue that the term "Catholic and Protestant community background" captures a broader social identity that extends beyond the limits of individual religiosity and more accurately addresses self-categorisation and categorisation of other in a divided society and takes account of religious, cultural and political dimensions amongst others. We argue that the term "community background", in encompassing multiple domains, can also take account of the changing demography of Northern Ireland, which is important in respect of the Bill applying to other ethnic and religious groups. We believe that it more accurately captures the defining variables that comprise 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 as belonging to a larger group and not to a fixed, homogenous entity.

Our second point relates to proportions. We believe that, with the substantial variations in pupil body populations across Northern Ireland, a focus on "reasonable numbers" is inappropriate. We argue that it is more relevant to refer to the proportions of children and young people from different community backgrounds. Taking those points into consideration, we suggest that clause 1(2)(a) be replaced with:

"those of different community and cultural backgrounds, including a reasonable proportion of children and young people from Catholic and Protestant community backgrounds."

We also ask for some clarification. First, in addition to the education together of children from different community backgrounds, clause 1(2)(b) states that shared education will 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 the proportions will vary significantly depending on the school's location and type. We cannot propose an alternative, but we ask that the following questions be 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 clause 1(2)(a), stress is placed on "reasonable numbers", but a similar emphasis is not apparent here, and it is unclear why.

Our second point relates to the appropriate designation of providers. Clause 1(2) concludes by stating that shared education:

"is secured by the working together and co-operation of two or more relevant providers."

Clause 1(3) further states:

"'relevant provider' 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 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 that it is crucial that relevant providers must also come from differing school sectors, including predominantly Catholic schools, predominantly Protestant schools, integrated schools, special schools and youth services. As currently defined, you could have schools from the same sector working together because they have relatively small proportions of other community pupils. Therefore, we suggest that the closing statement of clause 1(2) instead read:

"secured by the working together and cooperation of two or more relevant providers of different sectors".

We would want sectors to be defined in the Bill as:

"those schools that are comprised of predominantly Catholic pupils, predominantly Protestant pupils, integrated schools, youth services and special schools."

The title of clause 2 is:

"Power to encourage and facilitate shared education".

We suggest amending that to:

"Duty to promote, encourage and facilitate shared education".

We believe that the use of stronger language reflects the commitment of the Northern Ireland Executive to shared education and reflects language used in article 64 of the 1989 Education Order, which placed a statutory duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate integrated education. On a final note, on 4 November 2015, the Department of Education proposed the possible inclusion of an additional paragraph in the Shared Education Bill to 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 paragraphs.

We will be happy to provide further feedback at that time.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): OK, Joanne, that is very useful. Let me just pick up on a couple of points. One of the areas of the debate that has been raised is, either from a definitional point of view or the purpose side of it, the absence in the Bill of a focus on educational attainment as one of its goals. One solution that has been suggested and would be very much in line with the Committee's report is that, in addition to whatever changes are made to the actual definitional wording, a sort of purpose clause or something of that nature might be added. Would you comment on that? Do you think that it would be helpful?

Professor Hughes: From our point of view, shared education is primarily about reconciliation objectives and promoting better relations between different groups in society. The research evidence on educational attainment is inconsistent in this society and in others, although there has not been that much research done in this society. We do not think of the Shared Education Bill as being concerned with educational attainment.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): OK. There is another issue I suppose. I think again it probably comes down to how people perceive these things and definitions because I suppose some of us would see very much the focus on the community relations side of things; others see that as one element but also see the issue of educational advancement and the efficiency of use of provision. I will leave that aside. From the point of view of —

Professor Hughes: Sorry, I should have said "educational attainment". In terms of educational outcomes, there are additional outcomes from shared education that have been demonstrated in some of the research that we have done to date. That included the sharing of resources, specialist teaching and so on.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): That is useful to know. There is one area that may or may not be in the Bill but which will clearly be a key question that will have to be dealt with and properly responded to. Whatever provisions you have within this, there is then the issue of how you measure the effectiveness of it and any actions that flow from it. From your experience, have you any thoughts on how measurement of effectiveness is best dealt with?

Dr Danielle Blaylock (Queen's University Belfast): Right now, the Centre for Shared Education is taking part in a five-year longitudinal study of intergroup attitudes and experiences of contact. From our research, we know that there are variables in the literature that it would be important to measure, as we move forward with the Shared Education Bill, to see how they are changing and progressing. Our strongest belief, though, is that it needs to be school-specific. We cannot give a general average that everybody should reach for. We need to look at it in terms of the progress that each school is making and each child is moving forward with and that the significant impact is happening at the

school level instead of talking about it broadly in terms of all schools needing to reach a specific number. Everybody starts at a different level.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): Danielle, whatever exact definition eventually emerges, in looking at shared education we are looking at projects that will involve at least two providers and, generally speaking, probably two schools or more in that regard. Should that evaluation of effectiveness cover how it is impacting on a project-by-project basis? Presumably, that would be one of the tests of whether things are being done in the right manner.

Dr Blaylock: Yes. Any evaluation needs to look at it on multiple levels. Therefore we can talk about it in terms of the child, the attitudes and experiences that the child specifically has; the project, with case studies and qualitative work; the school, on the wider level; and then, perhaps, how it looks at the community level.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): As you say, there are sort of different levels. Obviously, if we simply have a generality of the thing of saying, "This has been in place. It has made X amount of improvement". What that actually means is that, in certain areas it has been very successful and in others — at a broader level and whatever educational project can be — it can be a mixed bag in terms of how it is working on the ground. At least by drilling down, we can see how it operates.

Mr Kennedy: Thank you for the presentation. What percentage would be a reasonable proportion, and do you take account of other factors, such as demographics and social conditions?

Professor Hughes: Reasonable proportion has to be understood in the context of the schools involved in the interaction or contact. If the schools have higher or lower proportions, the engagement has to be reflective of that and of the wider demographic.

Mr Kennedy: You are not being precise about the numbers or percentage.

Professor Hughes: It is impossible to be precise.

Dr Blaylock: Our concern was that you might have a school with a larger number of children that is not reflective of the proportion with minority or majority status. We thought that it was more appropriate to talk about each school on the basis of the proportions that exist in it. That was where our push was. It is not so much a matter of what we feel is the best proportion to look at.

Mr Kennedy: How do you determine that, on the basis of equality, you are rewarding those who are either further ahead or not as far ahead, as measured by what you seek to achieve?

Professor Hughes: It is a fair point. It underlines some of the difficulties with talking about proportions and, indeed, numbers here. We have to do things case by case.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): But I suppose to take the example on it, which is what we are trying to tease out a little bit, I mean you are obviously saying that proportions are more important than absolute numbers. To take an example, say two secondary schools came together, bringing 950 members from one community and 50 from the other, and, on the other hand, you get two rural primary schools with 60% from one community and 40% from the other. The two secondaries would have greater physical numbers, but the proportion of mixing would be a lot more in the second example on it. You are saying that the second case may be more directly relevant to sharing than the first. I am putting words into your mouth in that regard. I am just getting an understanding of where you are coming from so that I can grasp that directly.

Mr Lunn: Thank you for your presentation. Somebody mentioned the purposes clause. When we heard from you previously you emphasised the educational benefits rather than the benefits to society or reconciliation. Today, I am picking up a different message.

Professor Hughes: We have always emphasised the benefits of reconciliation; it is written into our mission statement for the centre. That is not to say that we do not believe that there are educational benefits. I should have said "attainment" earlier. We believe that there are educational benefits in the form of opportunities created for children and young people. For example, in shared education some

kids will have the opportunity to take subjects that they might not otherwise have had the opportunity to take, had there been no shared education project in their area.

Mr Lunn: I am reading the Clerk's summary of what has gone before, and he says:

"CSE previously advised the Committee that the objectives of shared education should foreground educational improvement while including measures to facilitate community reconciliation."

I do not want to argue with you, but it is important to have both. Which is the priority?

Professor Hughes: What we have said is that shared education has worked partly because it has foregrounded educational outcomes. That is why teachers and schools have been able to buy into it in a way that they were not always able to buy into community relations initiatives in the past, not least because teachers themselves feel very apprehensive about dealing with reconciliation per se. We have shown through the research evidence that shared education has worked to improve negative social attitudes and to reduce prejudice, while giving children other opportunities.

Mr Lunn: Have you been able to assess the value in societal terms?

Professor Hughes: Yes, absolutely.

Mr Lunn: One of the things that people keep asking is how you assess that.

Professor Hughes: We have done that through the surveys that we have undertaken. Dani mentioned the five-year longitudinal study that we are involved in. We also undertook a study of pupils who had participated in shared education vis-à-vis those who had not and showed that the reconciliation outcomes were more positive for those who had been involved in shared education initiatives. Our qualitative evidence seems to support that as well, albeit that the outcomes are not the same for every child and are often area-specific. In areas, for example, where there were high levels of intercommunity violence in the past, you cannot expect the outcomes of shared education to be as extensive as where there are opportunities for children to extend friendships beyond the school setting, for example.

Mr Lunn: Thanks for that. Were you here to listen to the NICIE and IEF evidence?

Professor Hughes: Yes.

Mr Lunn: Do you have any sympathy with their view that the Bill should reference their input as well and that there should be linkages? The continuum was also mentioned.

Professor Hughes: We absolutely think that integrated education is a very powerful way of reducing prejudice, and our research evidence has shown that. I suppose that we might have some slight reservations about the idea of a continuum and that shared education necessarily leads to integrated education, depending on how those things are defined.

One of the values of shared education is that, in a plural society, there will be groups that want to retain a distinctive school identity. They are comfortable with the idea of sharing but not with the idea of a fully integrated system because they believe that they would compromise their identity in that. I suppose that, in a plural, multicultural society, you have to respect that.

To abstract it from Northern Ireland to some of the work that we are doing internationally, I will give you one example from the work that we are doing in Macedonia. Formerly, they had an integrated system, and, as part of their peace agreement, ethnic Albanians got the opportunity to have education in their first language. Their system moved from being integrated to separate. Shared education is acceptable to them, but integrated education would never be acceptable. The notion of a continuum is something that we would probably struggle with a bit.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): On that, Joanne, I appreciate that there should always be the opportunities or whatever, but I just wonder if there was too explicit a continuum is there a danger — you mentioned this — that, at times, schools have maybe sort of jumped in when they see the practical benefits rather than, shall we say, the particular ethos of things, if I can put it that way. You said that they were maybe a little apprehensive about shared education but, once they got into it,

found it to be useful. Is there a slight degree of danger that, if you have too explicit a continuum, some schools may feel that they are entering a conveyor belt that will lead to an inevitable outcome, and that might act as a degree of deterrence to them to get on to that?

Professor Hughes: That is my sense from our research to date. Some schools and teachers came into it very reluctantly. Some embraced the idea of shared education, but some were very concerned about what it might mean for them and their professional identity. Some of them see themselves as teachers who teach a subject; they are not there to address the problems of Northern Ireland.

Mr Lunn: It might surprise you that I actually agree with what you said —

Mr Kennedy: Steady now.

Mr Lunn: — that schools that are comfortable in their own space and ethos and format should be — I would not say "encouraged", but they should certainly be allowed to continue in that way. If they can benefit from sharing in societal and education terms, that is fine. However, those who enter into sharing with enthusiasm could come to the conclusion, or, if you like, the continuum, that the way to go is to come together and form an integrated situation. My understanding is that they should be encouraged to do that, and I think that that is the Minister's view. Do you agree with that?

Professor Hughes: Sorry, could you repeat the end of that?

Mr Lunn: I do not know if I could. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Newton: They should have the choice.

Mr Lunn: My understanding is that the Minister has a duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education. If shared education develops in a way that is envisaged or hoped for, it should lead to a situation in which schools may consider that there is no point in remaining separate and sharing and that they may as well be together under one roof. In line with the Minister's responsibility and obligation, the shared education movement and the Department should encourage that.

Professor Hughes: Shared education certainly makes the boundaries between different schools more porous, but it does not mean ultimately that schools have to shift their ethos or identity to become integrated.

Mr Lunn: They do not have to; I am not saying that they have to.

Professor Hughes: Shared education has been demonstrated to create more porous boundaries between schools, and that is a good thing.

Mr Lunn: I will wait to see the first time the Department announces that two schools that have been sharing have decided to become one and get married.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): It would be like the first marriage on 'Blind Date'. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lunn: I hope so. It is a long-term project.

Professor Hughes: Maybe that relates to the final point. Michael, do you want to say something about that?

Mr Michael Arlow (Queen's University Belfast): In clause 2, power is given to encourage and facilitate shared education. We argue that we prefer the language of "duty" on the Department to encourage shared education. That relates to some of the questions that our colleagues from NICIE raised. What happens when the money stops? If there is a statutory duty to foster and encourage shared education —

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): Michael, just on that, I presume that there is sort of a potential there on that basis that there would probably be a double amendment. If you were talking about a duty, then you do not talk about "may"; you probably talk about "shall". That is the difference between a duty and a power; there is probably a consequential sort of thing to that.

Mr Newton: Thank you for coming. Joanne, you lead a very interesting life between Israel, America and Macedonia.

Professor Hughes: I am not sure that my children think that. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Newton: You kind of skipped over the socio-economic aspect. Can you expand on that? That is the part that I believe is the most interesting and strongest aspect of the Bill, if we can achieve it. Can you give further explanations or expand on the comments that you made?

Professor Hughes: For us, shared education is primarily about reconciliation, and there is no question that it is important that different socio-economic groups are brought together. Some of our research evidence has shown that shared education is not as impactful for pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds. They often have negative experience of contact, and the outcomes may not be as extensive. I am not entirely sure how you legislate for that in the context of the system that we have. I suppose that that is why we are asking you for more clarification of that aspect.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): I am not sure who is asking whom at this point.

Mr Newton: I understand the point that you make. To me, it is the most exciting aspect of what we are trying to do. If we can achieve it, it is the aspect that will have the greatest impact on our society.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): I will take that as a comment rather than a question. Seán is next, finally.

Mr Rogers: Joanne addressed my questions in earlier answers.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): It is always good when someone who is giving us evidence addresses the questions ahead of members asking them; it is a good sign of the relevance of your contribution. Joanne and your colleagues, thank you for your evidence; it has been very useful. Because of the relatively tight time frame, we will be coming to conclusions fairly quickly in relation to this, but it has been a very valuable session for us. Thank you.