



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Integrated Education Bill:
Northern Ireland Commissioner for
Children and Young People

10 November 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Chris Lyttle (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Nicola Brogan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mrs Diane Dodds
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Robin Newton

Witnesses:

Ms Koulla Yiasouma	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
Ms Mairéad McCafferty	Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I give a warm welcome to Koulla Yiasouma, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), and Mairéad McCafferty, the chief executive at the Office of the Northern Ireland Commission for Children and Young People. I advise you both that you have a maximum of 10 minutes to make an opening statement. Most people have gloriously disregarded any guidance that I have given them on timings today. *[Laughter.]* Koulla, if you stick to that, we really will be in the twilight zone, but do your best. *[Laughter.]* We are really glad to have you both with us.

Ms Koulla Yiasouma (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People): Thank you, Chair. I have only brief opening remarks, so I hope that I will be the star evidence giver for the day.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The star pupil. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Yiasouma: Thanks for the invitation to Mairéad and me to speak to you today. We are really pleased to be here. I will not pretend that we have been through every detail of the Bill or that we have taken legal advice, but we will give our overview, particularly of what the Bill intends to achieve and the word “promote”.

As you are aware, as the Commissioner for Children and Young People, I am obliged to take account of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which, as you would expect, says quite a lot about children’s education. Specifically, article 29 states:

"States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:

... The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential ... The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms ... The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values ... The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance"

— and, for the week that is in it —

"The development of respect for the natural environment."

Therefore, in our view, anything that seeks to progress our education system has to bring us closer to achieving the aims articulated in article 29. That is obviously the test by which we judge the Integrated Education Bill.

Many of you will have seen an article in 'Scope NI' on Sunday that outlined the history of trying to introduce integrated education in Northern Ireland. That dates back to 1831 — 190 years ago. As you know, the first integrated school was established in 1981 by a group of determined and visionary parents and educators. Some 40 years later, despite legislative provision to encourage and facilitate integrated education and recommendations from local and international processes to promote and embed integrated education, just under 7% of our primary and post-primary schools are integrated or state that they are integrated and just under 8% of children attend integrated primary or post-primary schools.

I absolutely accept that not every child who goes to a maintained school identifies as "Catholic" and not every child who goes to a controlled school identifies as "Protestant"; it is far more complicated than that. Regardless, we have a segregated education system, along with segregated housing and segregated communities. The consequence of that segregation is an inefficient system, with various bodies and structures supporting the different sectors. We have one education system but multiple sectors.

There is still some uncertainty about the full cost of our education system, but studies, including one undertaken by Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre five years ago, noted that the difference of additional annual public spending across a range of areas incurred in Northern Ireland in comparison with other jurisdictions of the United Kingdom is between £400 million and £800 million. We spend that on our segregated communities. Those reports also estimate that the additional cost of our education system in Northern Ireland is £1 million a week. Imagine what we could do with £50 million if we had one education sector. I have heard the Committee's discussions. At the same time, to counteract that segregation, the Education Authority's (EA) report on shared education records that, in 2017 and 2018, we spent £285 million on encouraging contact between controlled and maintained schools.

You will have seen from our written evidence that we are generally supportive of the Bill and its intention to add "promote" to the Government's duty towards integrated education. In my view, the Bill simply compels government to implement properly its duties from the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 and, indeed, the Good Friday Agreement by being explicit and introducing such statutory responsibilities in progressing that. We recommend that clause 2 be strengthened to include reference to children's rights and article 29 of the UNCRC. If we agree that the aim of the education system is to nurture all children, including a respect for one another's culture and identity, of course it is right that integrated should be the first option, as outlined in clause 7, but we have to bear it in mind that only one new school has been opened in Northern Ireland in the past five years.

Contrary to the song, our vision of integration should not be one of a melting pot. In that scenario, we all become the same: a brown/grey sludge-type thing. Integration has to be about the fruit cake, in which you can see each piece of fruit and the sponge or, in this case, the school holds them together and helps them to complement and celebrate one another. To quote Jane Elliott:

"We don't need a melting pot in this country, folks. We need a salad bowl. In a salad bowl, you put in the different things. You want the vegetables — the lettuce, the cucumbers, the onions, the green peppers — to maintain their identity. You appreciate differences."

Together, those make a great entity. That is really what we are looking for in our education: not an education that artificially brings together children but one that supports children to be themselves,

whatever that may be, to celebrate their culture and to follow and celebrate their religion, if they have one.

We must move away from the idea that school sectors are better or worse than one another or that they compete — they should not. A single education system should bring together the best of all sectors, and I am yet to be convinced that having so many sectors benefits our children. The Bill does not, in my view, favour one sector over another but instead tries to level the playing field.

As you have already discussed, the Bill does not operate in a vacuum of reform of our education system. The review of education, which is chaired by Dr Keir Bloomer and has already been established, should, when it reports, outline the broad and long-term vision for education in Northern Ireland, including how we improve children's experience and attainment of education. We believe that the Integrated Education Bill will get us off the starting blocks.

Thank you for listening. That was within 10 minutes, Chair, surely.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am astonished. Thank you very much indeed, commissioner, for those opening remarks. In the interests of fairness across all sessions, I will stick with three minutes for questions.

Mr Sheehan: I welcome Koulla and Mairéad to the Committee this morning.

Most of us instinctively agree with our children being educated with children from different backgrounds, be they religious, cultural, political or whatever. Most people think that that is a good idea, and I have no doubt that you agree with that. What I want you to do is to set that to the side for one moment and focus on the draft legislation. Legislation, if it is not properly drafted, can sometimes have unintended consequences. I want you to focus on that and tell me whether you see any problems in the draft legislation or anything with which you feel uncomfortable.

Ms Yiasouma: I understand what you are saying about unintended consequences. We talk about integrated education and divided communities. The community that you represent in West Belfast, Pat, identifies predominantly as one religion. The idea that you would open a school in the middle of the Falls Road, for example, call it "integrated" and make children from all over Belfast travel to that school because it is integrated is anathema. Our vision is that the local school is the best school. That is the conversation that we will have with the review: the local school — the school in your community — is the best school for your child. It is absolute folly to think that integrating the education system will solve Northern Ireland's issues: it will not.

Genuinely, on reading the Bill — bearing in mind that I am not a lawyer — I do not see how it will suddenly throw the education system into flux. Genuinely, when I read the Bill, I thought, "Finally, we will get to a place where we will give effect to the idea of encouraging and facilitating integrated education where the community wants it and where it is right for that community", bearing in mind, Pat, that we are not opening new schools in Northern Ireland. We already have processes for integrating schools. Schools are moving from being for one sector to integration. I see no significant flaws, but I am mindful that we need to tease out that word "promote". I am mindful of that and that we are looking to a more radical reform of the education system. The Bill has to be seen in that context.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Pat, that was three minutes, but I will try to let you ask another question. I ask responders to be mindful as well. I am really sorry about the timings. Thanks.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for your generosity, Chair. I have no difficulty with what you say, Koulla. The difficulty with legislation is that, for example, you say that a community should decide what type of school it wants or needs: it does not say that in the Bill. One of the other outworkings of the legislation would be that the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), as an educational body, would have contradictory statutory obligations. It would have an obligation to its own sector but would also have an obligation to every new school being presumed to be an integrated school.

You are wrong to say that no new schools are opening, because there has been a significant number of amalgamations of schools over recent times. They are classed as new schools. Again, there is no definition of a new school in the Bill. I will not delay any longer. That is just an issue that I see as problematic.

Ms Yiasouma: OK.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Pat. Maybe you will have an opportunity to respond to that again, Koulla.

Mr Newton: I welcome the commissioner and Mairéad. It is good to see you again.

I will just pick up on a point that you made. Obviously, if we were starting to build an education system, we would not start from where we are and would not design what we have. The economic benefits to be gained by having one overall education sector are obvious. However, we are where we are. New draft legislation is coming through. There is a presumption that each new school would be integrated. In your answer to the Deputy Chair, you mentioned where new schools will be created. It may be an amalgamation, but it will still be a new school. On the reform of education, you also made the point in your response to the Deputy Chair that, if the draft legislation goes through, it will be law before we have the reform of education report and guidance. Could you, in your general support of the Bill, comment on that?

Ms Yiasouma: Mairéad, do you want to answer that question?

Ms Mairéad McCafferty (Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People): Yes. As the Committee has highlighted, there are concerns with the wording and the articulation of the Bill. As was noted in the earlier session, Kellie Armstrong has noted the concerns around the use of the word "promote". We have to bear in mind the definitions that, as Pat said and as you referred to, Robin, have been omitted from the Bill. That is the purpose of the Committee sessions and your scrutiny of the Bill. Those areas can be addressed.

As you say, Robin, we are where we are, and it is very much the case that, with the Bill as is, a number of issues need to be addressed, but it is a direction of travel. As has been raised with the Committee in previous sessions and by us, parental choice is key in how they want their children to be educated, and it is important that children and young people have a voice in that. Surveys over the years have shown the desire on the part of parents, children and young people to be integrated and educated together. That has been evidenced a number of times in research papers and surveys, so it is very much about accepting that this is the direction of travel. We live in a divided society in which there is segregation, and we want to move towards a more normalised society. As Koulla said, it is very much about respecting the identity of all. This is not about respecting one sector over or to the cost of another; this is about making sure that we make room for all. It is not an either/or. It is about inclusion and respect for identity, and, fundamentally, that includes respecting the rights of children and young people to be educated together as well.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is almost four minutes, Robin. Do you want to ask a final question?

Mr Newton: Yes, Chair. Thank you. I will be quick.

I recognise that part of the commissioner's role is to encourage and facilitate integrated education. I have two questions. Will you outline your support for shared education? How do you respond to the comments from Mr Gerry Campbell from CCMS, who indicated that, if the Bill becomes law, we would create, for that sector, a two-tier system?

Ms Yiasouma: I will quickly go back to the review of education. The review will not report for 18 months, because it is a big job. We will then have several years, I imagine, based on previous history, of discussion around the review and implementation. It is unfair to expect the Bill to be delayed while we spend what is likely to be years reviewing and reforming our education system.

My support of shared education is on the basis that it is a journey towards a fully integrated system. That is where my support for shared education comes from. My belief is that shared education is not an end in itself; it is a road to somewhere.

I appreciate the duty that is being placed on CCMS as a statutory education body, and I understand the difficulties, but, to reiterate what Mairéad has just said and what I said, it is about how we have the right system in place for the children of that community. This may be one of the amendments that you might want to consider, but, for me, this is not about — I do not know how it to say it without being offensive — what other sectors feel. One sector has not been given the support that it should have been given and has had legislation since 1989 that has not been given full effect, and this is about trying to level that playing field a little. That is the best way that I can answer that question, Robin.

Mr Newton: I thank the commissioner and Mairéad.

Mr McCrossan: Commissioner and Mairéad, you are most welcome back to the Committee. Thank you very much for your presentation and for your answers so far. I will get straight to it. You suggest that demand for integrated education outstrips supply. Although that is true in a number of instances, the official figures given to the Committee tell us that 82.2% of integrated primary schools were undersubscribed in 2020-21. Similarly, 75% of integrated post-primary schools were undersubscribed. Were you aware of those figures? How do you see your support for clause 7, which presumes that all new schools should be integrated schools, in light of them?

Ms Yiasouma: I was not aware of the undersubscription. The Department of Education's statistics for 2020-21 show that, in integrated primary schools, 12.4% of places were unfilled compared with 19.4% in non-integrated primary schools. In post-primary integrated schools, 10.3% of places were unfilled compared with 14.7% in post-primary non-integrated schools. My question to you about undersubscription is this: what is the level of undersubscription in the other sectors? We need to compare like with like, because the figures that I have for the last academic year, 2020-21, show that integrated schools have fewer unfilled places than non-integrated schools. We can bandy statistics about, but that is my response, and it supports what we hear and what we have seen. I heard what the CCMS representatives said about the LucidTalk poll from earlier this year on general support for integrated education, but the Department's figures show me that there is still a significant demand for integrated education. That is my response to your question.

Mr McCrossan: There is no doubt that there is demand, but, given that it is a relatively new sector compared with the other sectors, which have been around for a lot longer, why is it not buzzing or showing the level of demand that is presumed by the Bill? The undersubscription does not suggest that it is.

Ms Yiasouma: But the numbers on unfilled places do. Could it be because the 1989 legislation to facilitate and encourage integrated education has not been properly implemented? Proponents of integration have faced an uphill battle, but we are seeing a sea change. We support the Bill because that sector has been the Cinderella for too long, and we have not given full effect to the 1989 legislation or the duty outlined in the Good Friday Agreement to facilitate and encourage integrated education. That is why the word "promote" needs to be in the Bill. If parents do not want their children to go to those schools, they will not send them there, but, from what people say and what the polls and statistics show us, there is a demand, and, if parents had the option of integrated education, they would choose it.

Mr McCrossan: I appreciate your answer, but the 82% figure is worrying and quite stark.

In your submission, you say that article 29 of the UNCRC is of particular relevance to the provision of integrated education. Do all our schools not promote preparing children for a responsible life in a free society and in a spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance and equality of gender and friendship? Is that not the case in all our schools? That was the message that I got from CCMS earlier this morning.

Ms Yiasouma: You picked one section of article 29, which is fair enough. However, there is clear evidence that Northern Ireland's education system as a whole does not meet the requirements of article 29. There are schools in every sector in Northern Ireland that can stand up and stand proud that they do, and I accept that. However, I do not think that every school in every sector meets the requirements of article 29. Generally, our education system does not, as a whole.

Mr McCrossan: Similarly, do all our schools not —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You have a total of five minutes, Daniel. Make this your final question, please. Thanks.

Mr McCrossan: Similarly, Koulla, do all of our schools not seek to facilitate:

"The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities"?

Why do you single out the integrated sector for those particular comments? Do you think that this [Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]?

Ms Yiasouma: I have not singled out this sector. I have said that any clause in legislation that talks about the purpose of a school sector, which, in this Bill, is the integrated education sector, should include article 29. If we were having a discussion about reform of CCMS legislation, I would make the very same submission to you.

Mr McCrossan: Koulla, I have taken this from what you have said. You have said that this is of particular relevance to the provision of integrated education.

Ms Yiasouma: Yes, it is, because —

Mr McCrossan: So, I am citing to you what you said.

Ms Yiasouma: Absolutely. It is because of what I said about bringing children together and supporting children to celebrate each other and to celebrate who they are. That is of particular relevance to article 29. I think that the integrated sector or a school with an integrated ethos absolutely does that more easily and more smoothly than some schools in some other sectors, Daniel, and I stand over that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am starting to wonder why you voted to let the Bill pass to Committee Stage, Daniel, but we will come back to that on another day.

Mr McCrossan: Chair, it is important to challenge some of these things.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): There is challenging, and then there is just disagreeing with the principles of the Bill, it seems.

Mr Butler: Hello, Koulla, and hello, Mairéad.

I have asked this of the Bill sponsor, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and different people who have been in: what, if talking to a parent, is your basic understanding of what integrated education is? Can you answer that in 10 seconds? What, without getting into explaining why you say what you say, is the purpose of integrated education?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Feel free to take longer than 10 seconds.

Mr Butler: No, seriously.

Ms McCafferty: Clause 2 sets out what integrated education should look at, but it is very much about educating our children together in an inclusive way rather than regardless of identity. So, it is a very —

Mr Butler: I will jump in here, Mairéad, because I agree with you. Integrated education should be about educating our children together. However we come round to this point every time. To be fair to Koulla, she said that it is not about bussing, although she did not use the word "bussing". Either it is about educating our children together or it is not, or it is about the ethos. Sometimes, we go round the houses when talking about what integrated education means to parents, to pupils, to educators and so on. We need to bottom this out because it is one of the issues that we face, and, Koulla, you covered it well. It is not so much about the schools but about how we live. We live in segregated societies. Are we talking about bussing pupils, and, if we are not, we will not educate our children together, because we will not move out of —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Robbie, you realise that we bus pupils across the length and breadth of Northern Ireland.

Mr Butler: Yes, and that is brilliant. If that is what it is about, that is what integrated education should be about.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am not saying that bussing pupils across Northern Ireland is a good thing, by the way.

Mr Butler: Chris, sorry. Data received from the Department revealed that almost three quarters of integrated schools had a religious breakdown of pupils that fell below the threshold of 30% of pupils from a minority community. If integrated schools, as they sit today, do not meet that threshold of

educating children together — we already bus them, Chair — and they are not necessarily doing what we think integrated schools should do, how do we deal with that in the Bill? I am in favour of educating our children together. Does the Bill deal with that? I do not think that it does.

My final question might be one for you to pick up, Koulla. Does the Bill move us closer towards a single education system or further segment an already sectoral system?

Ms Yiasouma: Mairéad, do you want to jump in? I will then *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* education.

Ms McCafferty: Yes. I appreciate the points that you make, Robbie, but we have to recognise the context of Northern Ireland and why we are where we are today. It is slightly unfair, given that the integrated education sector has been in existence only since 1981, to expect it, in terms of its aims, to have achieved the proportionality that you talk about.

It is very important to recognise — people have already said this — that there is a direction of travel, not just in education but across our society, in how we live together in this shared space. We keep talking about earlier intervention, and we want to make sure that our children are exposed to children of all kinds of cultural backgrounds and identities, not just, as we tend to get caught up with, given the historical evolution of Northern Ireland, the Catholic and Protestant communities. It is very much about having that inclusive approach.

We do not want integration to be artificial. The fact that it was parents who started the first integrated school is a key point. It was very much about parents saying that they wanted their children to be educated together, they wanted to live together, and they wanted to end the segregation that has been the bane of our lives across this society for so many years. It is very much about recognising that as a direction of travel. We have not arrived there yet; we are still on the journey, as people say. I do not like using clichés, but that is part of it, and it is very much about recognising it as such.

Ms Yiasouma: In answer to your question about whether the Bill takes us closer to a single education system and sector, I think that it does. As I said earlier, the lack of promotion has meant that it has not grown in the way that it should.

Whether we like it or not, Northern Ireland's education system is riven with sectoral interests and division. I am not saying that the CCMS, the Education Authority, NICIE or whoever do not have the best interests of children at heart. I have had those conversations with them, and I know that they do. I am saying that there is an undertow of sectoral interests, and we need to remove it.

Whether the Bill just props up another sector is a matter of debate. Nevertheless, I believe that an integrated ethos will absolutely bring us closer. I look forward to the day when we do not have maintained, controlled and integrated sectors. I look forward to when we have one system in which the local school is the best school for that community's children, and that is where their parents send them.

Mr Butler: Hear, hear.

Ms Yiasouma: Integration will not remove divisions in our society.

Mr Butler: I agree with you totally on that, Koulla. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Robbie, if you are looking for wider definitions, statements of principles are available. NICIE's statement of principles is one that you can refer to for a definition. I will not read it out, because we are way over time.

Mr Butler: I have read it, Chair, thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. In that case, I will say briefly that it points to mixed pupils, mixed staff and mixed boards of governors. Obviously, that differs slightly from what happens in some schools.

Mr Butler: Some, for the reasons that I gave, are failing to hit the target.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes, but the comparator of the mixed nature of the school is starkly different from the non-mixed nature of many other schools. However, you and I can continue that discussion elsewhere.

Mr Butler: Perhaps we can pick that up [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*]

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

Mrs Dodds: Hello to everyone, and thank you for your contributions so far. Koulla, I wrote this down: you said that the Bill does not elevate one sector over another. How do you justify that in light of, for example, clause 5(1)(a), which ensures that there is a duty to:

"increase the demand for the provision of integrated education"

or clause 4(1), in which the Department would have the duty:

"to encourage, facilitate and promote"

integrated education, which it does not have to do for any other sector? How would you convince other education sectors that that does not promote one sector over another?

Ms Yiasouma: It goes back to what I said at the beginning, which is that we are at the starting point. We agree that we want to educate our children together. It is not about a melting pot; it is about the ethos of education. We agree that integrated education comes from further back. Whether the Department overtly promotes other sectors is not the issue. The fact is that integrated education has not enjoyed the focus, investment or promotion that other sectors have had, formally or otherwise. Other sectors have nothing to fear from the Bill if they are confident in the quality of education that they give their children.

The Bill has an action plan, and it will be interesting to see what promotion looks like. I understand that the Department cannot say, "Do not send your child to that school; send your child to this school.". However, it is how the Department helps parents and children to understand what goes on in an integrated school and helps them to see that as a viable choice for the children in their communities. I stand by my belief that the Bill does not unduly advantage the integrated sector, bearing in mind my belief that it has been unduly disadvantaged over the last 40 years. It levels the playing field.

Mrs Dodds: That is your belief. What the Committee will vote on is a law that can be legally enforced and judicially reviewed. Therefore, we have to be clear about what we are doing. There is no point in saying, "It does not matter if every new school has to be an integrated school, because we are not opening new schools anyway".

Ms Yiasouma: No. That is not —

Mrs Dodds: That is the point: we are writing the law.

Ms Yiasouma: Yes.

Mrs Dodds: That is where the Bill will cause conflict and raise a huge number of issues.

I went to a local grammar school in Banbridge. My children went to a local grammar school. That was my choice, and it was not just for academic reasons; it is a very well integrated school. Today, you have given the impression that the only schools that will teach respect for other traditions etc are integrated schools. If I did not know anything else, I might take that out of today's evidence.

Ms Yiasouma: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to clarify that. I do not think that I said that only integrated schools celebrate cultures equally and give the space to do that. I do not believe that that is what I said, and it certainly is not what I meant. It may have come across that way. What I meant to say was that schools across every sector, of course, celebrate different cultures. However, the ethos of schools varies across sectors. The integrated schools that do that well have an obligation to ensure that children can follow any religion or none. That is what I am talking about.

I am not for one minute suggesting that there are many schools in other sectors that do not encourage respect, particularly those that take part in shared education. I am not saying that; I am saying that the quality is not consistent and that such encouragement is not always embedded in the ethos of the school. In an integrated school, that opportunity should be a core ethos. You can have a controlled school that celebrates other cultures of others. Nevertheless, the services in that school are run by the Catholic Church because it is deemed to be a Catholic school. Those children are not having their culture celebrated in the routine religious observances that happen in that school. Parents who send their children there know that — I am not saying that they do not — but it does not feel very inclusive for the children.

I do not want you to think that I am suggesting that schools do not teach respect; of course they do. However, teaching respect and living respect are sometimes different things, and we need to ensure that that happens in every school.

Mrs Dodds: May I just add quickly —?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You have had seven minutes, by the way, Diane, just so that you know. I am being generous to you.

Mrs Dodds: I know. Lots of members have had more time.

I wrote down exactly what you said, Koulla, which was that an integrated ethos does that "more easily" than any of the other sectors.

Ms Yiasouma: Yes.

Mrs Dodds: I am pretty sure that many of the other sectors would disagree with you.

Ms Yiasouma: I said that —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. We —

Ms Yiasouma: Sorry, Chris, I have to respond. I said that an integrated school does it more easily, and I absolutely stand over that. I am not saying that other sectors do not do it, but an integrated ethos does do it more easily. Thank you for allowing me to clarify that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

Diane, you definitely got longer than anyone else. That is my generosity.

Ms Yiasouma: She asked an interesting question.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes, she did. In that context, it brought to mind Peter Robinson's phrase that our education system is a "benign apartheid". I will move us on.

Ms Brogan: Koulla and Mairéad, thanks so much for appearing before the Committee this afternoon.

Normally, I agree with most of what you say. Today, I have to disagree. Although I still agree with much of what you said, my issue is with the word "promote". This last number of weeks, we have heard evidence from lots of sectors. We have delved into the Bill, and two things that keep coming back to us are the use of the word "promote" and the presumption in clause 7 that all new schools will be integrated. There are huge flaws in those two areas; there is no denying it. In fact, the Bill's sponsor, Kellie Armstrong, acknowledged that those were two major issues.

Koulla, I take your point that you see a need for the word "promote", given that integrated was left behind in the past and needs that elevation. One sector that pops into my head straightaway, however, is the Irish-medium sector. Why should integrated education be elevated above that sector, never mind the other sectors? That is wholly unfair. Where do you stop? Do you bring Irish-medium education on to the same level, and do the two then compete with each other? That is one reason why I cannot agree with you at all on that.

Diane made the point about the presumption that all new schools will be integrated, and Kellie Armstrong said a few times that schools were not being built in the North. If we are to make the Bill law, we cannot work on that premise. I do not want to put my name to that. It would be there for ever, or for however long the law lasted, so I cannot agree with that.

We need to look at how we can support families and parents who want their children to be educated in the integrated sector. Have you thought of ways other than using "promote" in which we can do that to meet the demand for integrated education? The demand is there. First, we need to measure that demand accurately. We then need to find ways to support it properly. However, that should be done without elevating integrated education above other sectors.

Ms McCafferty: As you said, Nicola, Kellie is already looking at the wording and at how some of the aims are articulated. The Committee is also looking at that in its scrutiny of the Bill.

Of course, words other than "promote" could be used that would be supportive of integrated education. Since the 1989 Order, "encourage and facilitate" have been used, but their use did not result in the support that should have been provided to the integrated education sector or, indeed, as you say, to the Irish-medium sector.

The work of NICCY goes back to what the UN committee says. Back in 2016, at paragraph 73(e) of its concluding observations, it called for the active promotion of an integrated education system. I go back to the point that was made earlier: the integrated ethos is about not just the children but the whole make-up of the school community, which includes the board of governors, the teaching staff, the ancillary staff and all support staff. The UN committee used the word "promote". As you pointed out, that can create a difficulty when putting it into law and what that looks like in practice. I do not think that it is beyond legislators such as the Committee to come up with a word that is as appropriate but does not give rise to the difficulties that you and others have outlined.

Does that answer your question, Nicola? Koulla wants to come in as well.

Ms Brogan: It does to an extent, Mairéad. Yes, we can change the wording. However, if it will mean the same thing and still elevate the integrated sector above another sector, I do not know whether that is a solution

Ms Yiasouma: First, the Bill refers to regulations, and two things will, I think, happen in those regulations. One is a clearer definition of actions that "promote". Secondly, clause 7 allows for "special circumstances". The definition of those terms is where the way forward lies. I am a big fan of "promote". As Mairéad said, perhaps we can find an alternative word, but "promote" is in NICCY's legislation.

I have talked a lot about one sector, but we are probably talking about two sectors, because we have to allow for the provision of parents and children who choose to be taught in the medium of the Irish language. I concede that, although we are talking about a single system, we will probably be talking about two, or possibly three, sectors. I do not know whether Ulster Scots will open schools, but, when it comes to the Irish language, we have to allow for children to be taught in the language of their choice.

On reading the Bill, I did not see elevation; I saw a more level playing field.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I have to bring this to a close, Nicola, sorry. Do you want to make a final comment?

Ms Brogan: I understand that, Koulla. It is not until you get into the thick of it that you see how other sectors are affected. I agree that the "special circumstances" in clause 7 need to be clarified. Before we pass anything, we need to have that clarification.

Thanks so much to both of you. It is always really interesting to talk to you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am glad to say that we have an integrated Irish-medium school in east Belfast.

Ms Yiasouma: East Belfast is always ahead of the game.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Koulla and Mairéad, thank you so much indeed. We really appreciate your written and oral evidence. We will give full consideration to it as part of the Committee Stage. Thank you.

Ms Yiasouma: Thank you, Chair.