



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Integrated Education Bill:
Transferor Representatives' Council

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:

Dr Peter Hamill	Church of Ireland
Dr Anita Gracie	Methodist Church in Ireland
Dr Andrew Brown	Presbyterian Church in Ireland
Miss Karen Jardine	Presbyterian Church in Ireland

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I give a warm welcome to Dr Andrew Brown, the vice chair of the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC), who is from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland; Dr Peter Hamill, education officer from the Church of Ireland; Karen Jardine, a public affairs officer from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland; and Dr Anita Gracie, a board of education member from the Methodist Church in Ireland. Folks, you are very welcome today. Apologies for the delay. I am glad to give you up to 10 minutes in which to make your opening statement before we take questions from members.

Dr Andrew Brown (Presbyterian Church in Ireland): Chair, thank you very much. I cannot see on my screen whether I am being seen by everyone else. Will you confirm whether I am?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You are.

Dr Brown: That is wonderful.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): In your full glory.

Dr Brown: Thank you very much. Thank you for inviting us to speak to the Committee today and to give our views and opinions on the Bill. We feel that it is very important that we do so. I will let my colleagues speak — you have already introduced them — and I will just top and tail.

It is important that we are here. I will give folks a tiny bit of background. I do not mean to teach my grannies how to suck eggs; you know the education sector as well as anyone in Northern Ireland. You will know that the Presbyterian Church, Church of Ireland and Methodist Church, together under the

umbrella of the Transferor Representatives' Council, have been involved in education in Northern Ireland for a decade. We transferred our schools to the control of the state when the state of Northern Ireland was formed. Presbyterian, Methodist and Church of Ireland schools were transferred to the control of the state. In so doing, the Churches have retained a degree of influence and involvement over and within the education sector. Transferor representatives sit on boards of governors, are regularly consulted and sit on various other education bodies in the education system.

TRC, as a body, has been around for 35 to 40 years. We are, essentially, the policymaking arm of those three denominations in education. One thing that has been hugely important for us is that, when we transferred our schools to the control of the state, there was a quid pro quo. We got to sit on boards and have influence. We transferred to the control of the state not only the buildings but pupils and staff, and we did that in the understanding that the Christian ethos and values of a non-denominational Christian ethos, which are incredibly important in the controlled sector and, indeed, are important to and stated by the three major sectors in Northern Ireland's system, are promoted, maintained and defended in perpetuity. That is really why we are here. Again, I give you our thanks. I will hand over to my colleague Anita from the Methodist Church, who will give you some further information.

Dr Anita Gracie (Methodist Church in Ireland): Thanks, Andy. Thank you, Chair, and thanks for the invitation to speak.

I have two main points to make, the first of which is to say, from the outset, that the TRC and our constituent Churches are by no means against integrated education; in fact, we very much favour educating the whole community together. That is why our controlled schools in areas of high ethnic and cultural diversity have become the most diverse school communities of any sector. The example that is often given is Methodist College Belfast, which has, for a very long time, had high numbers of pupils from all Christian denominations, as well as from all faiths and none. A more recent example is Fane Street Primary School, where the majority religion currently is Islam; in fact, controlled schools educate at least 30% of newcomer students in Northern Ireland. We use those facts to counter the perception that is out there at the moment, particularly in the debate around this issue, that controlled schools are the preserve of the Protestant community. With Protestant involvement in schools in all areas, aspects and roles down at around 63.4% — that is the figure from 2019 — our schools are open to pupils from all denominations of Christianity, and our staff in teaching and non-teaching roles also include many who are not from the Protestant community. That number continues to grow because we have no barriers. We do not use any selection form that includes an applicant's religion, faith or adherence, church membership, church attendance or anything like that. That number is growing exponentially.

Controlled schools of different types that were set up because of need — for example, nursery schools and special schools — were not set up denominationally, as you know, and they are within our fold as well. Those are places and examples of where integration has occurred naturally and, indeed, follows the needs and make-up of the community. That is what we would like to do and see naturally, rather than artificially putting together targets for denominational percentages that might, in the future, entail the bussing of pupils from one community to another in order to hit those targets. My second point is about parental choice and parental pressure, which are demanding more integrated schooling. As I said, we do not oppose that at all. However, we can also see in the Bill the hand of those who want to remove the option of a faith-based school ethos from parents who want their children to be educated in such an ethos. That is a right. It is enshrined in human rights standards such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and, in countries like England and Wales, for example, there is a far wider diversity of schools and the option for parents to send their children to state schools or to faith schools of various denominations and faiths. All those schools are diverse in make-up, but their values and ethos are very much in keeping with the Church or faith organisation that has set them up. We suggest that the most inclusive and egalitarian thing to do is to have a variety of models of schools that can, depending on their ethos, be chosen by parents in order to reflect the ethos with which they identify, and that includes a faith-based ethos for those who want that.

Dr Brown: Anita, thank you very much. I will ask Peter to speak now.

Dr Peter Hamill (Church of Ireland): Thank you, Andy. Thank you, Chair. Apologies; I have building work going on in the house, so that is why I look like I am landing a plane. Can you hear me all right?

Dr Brown: Yes.

Dr Hamill: That is grand. They cut the power about 10 minutes ago, which caused complete panic, and I had to reset the internet function.

I reinforce what Anita said. I appreciate that the Committee has been hearing evidence all morning and that it has heard a lot of these points before, but we would like to reinforce what has been said. We are concerned about the timing of the Bill. The independent review of education is reviewing the whole education system and attempting to create a plan for us all to embrace, and we are concerned that the Bill interferes with that and possibly puts one sector or one type of school above another.

We are also concerned about the resource factor and that resources will be focused on one type of school. We feel that that would be detrimental to existing schools. We certainly believe that funds should be spread equitably — I use that term carefully — across the education system and should be focused on supporting the children first, including children in need, and they should not favour one type of sector or school. We need to improve our education system, as was said this morning, and not divert funding in favour of one type or flavour of school.

We already have an area planning system in place. It may not be perfect, but the relevant stakeholders all work well together. Everybody has a voice at that table, and that is very positive, but our concern is that the Bill may disrupt that area planning process, and, although not intended, we are concerned that it may actually divide and cause problems, rather than enhance the system and create a positive way forward. We do not feel that area planning should be tied to one type of solution.

Those are my points. Thank you.

Dr Brown: Peter, thank you very much for that. Karen will address the Committee now, Chair.

Miss Karen Jardine (Presbyterian Church in Ireland): Chair, I would like to raise a couple of issues. The first is about the definitions used in the first couple of clauses. To clarify one point, when Andy spoke at the start, he mentioned Churches being involved over the last decade. I think he meant "century".

Dr Brown: Yes. *[Inaudible.]*

Miss Jardine: I just wanted to get that on the record.

Dr Brown: Thank you.

Miss Jardine: The suggested definition in clauses 1 and 2 borrows really heavily from the wording used to define the purpose of shared education in the Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2016. If that definition already exists in legislation, it is unclear to us how having it in those clauses is helpful or why is it necessary to duplicate it in that way. Anita referred to the Christian ethos and character, which is important to us, as Churches, and that is part of integrated ethos as well and continues to be part of the definition used by the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) in its 'Statement of Principles' document. That is not mentioned in the clauses that deal with the definition of integrated education, so we just wanted to raise that.

There seems to be some contradiction between clause 1 and clause 7. Clause 1 gives a definition of integrated education as:

"including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons".

There has been a lot of talk about the presumption that a new school would be an integrated school, but clause 7 states:

"the religious demographics of any area"

should not be taken into account. What, then, does an integrated school look like in a single-identity residential setting? Could there be an unintended consequence of the legislation diluting the nature and character of the integrated ethos and integrated education?

Chair, if you will indulge me for just a moment, I want to make a general comment about private Members' legislation. It reflects some of the earlier conversations the Committee had before it started

its evidence sessions today. The ability and tenacity of individual Members to sponsor Bills are strengths of our legislature, but, in the current mandate, it has become increasingly prevalent for individuals to bring forward legislative proposals, like this one, that are significant in their scope and reach. Despite that, there does not appear to be any obligation on MLAs — I am not just talking about this Bill; it is happening with other Bills as well — to provide information on the consultation they have undertaken. Yes, there is the explanatory and financial memorandum, but you can just write a line to say that you consulted. An MLA does not have to say how they have developed their proposals or which organisations or individuals were consulted.

A couple of the issues that were raised and talked about lots today on the wording of "promotion" or "presumption" could maybe have been picked up through an earlier consultation phase if sectoral bodies and the Churches had been engaged with. It places a really big burden on the Committee, especially given the unique circumstances of the mandate. By contrast, Departments have to engage in a number of consultation exercises throughout the policy development and legislative drafting stages, and they have a specified list of consultees that are representative of all section 75 categories. I do not want to overburden individual MLAs who are seeking to bring forward private Members' Bills, but might the Committee consider approaching the Committee on Procedures with a request to review how private Members' Bills are developed and specifically the requirement to consult and how information on consultation exercises is provided? Thank you.

Dr Brown: Thank you, Karen. Chair, apologies for my slip of tongue earlier. I should have said that we are and have been involved for the last century, since we transferred our schools to the control of the state at the outset of the state. That concludes our opening statement.

I will conclude by wishing you all the best, Chris. We understand that you are stepping down. You have been a great leader of the Committee, with an obvious passion for education. We wish you all the very best in the future.

We look forward to getting into a bit of back and forth with your colleagues and you. Should there be any questions, we also understand that we are all that stands between you and your lunch.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I cannot ask you any difficult questions after that. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Brown: Yes. I am sure that the *[Inaudible]* is really going to stop you. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks for those kind words. I am keen to bring members in to engage with you, so I will try to avoid asking questions. I will just make two points.

The sponsor of the Bill has addressed and can address this matter, but, as far as the Bill's aim to remove the option of faith-based ethos schools is concerned, it is pretty much impossible to do that. That is also not the intention, given that all schools in Northern Ireland are non-denominationally Christian. It is worth emphasising that that is not the intention of the Bill.

On your point about consultation, it would be worth heeding that feedback, and there is an ongoing review of private Members' Bills. Insofar as MLAs need to take responsibility for how they consult, we, as citizens and key stakeholders, need to take responsibility for how we respond to consultations as well. The process can move promptly at times, and you need to get in there and make your voices heard. Hopefully, that is what the Committee has facilitated through the Committee Stage of the Bill.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks to all of you for coming to the Committee. I will try to be brief, because I know we are fairly short of time. A lot has been said about ethos, and Andy raised it again with Chris. I agree with Chris's assessment that there is no attempt in the Bill to remove the Christian ethos from schools here. Will you explain to the Committee what you see as the difference at the moment, if any, between the ethos of the schools you represent and the ethos in the integrated sector?

Dr Brown: When the 'Statement of Principles' for the integrated sector was written in 1989, it clearly said that the integrated sector was based on Christian values, as are the controlled and maintained sectors. As the Chair and Pat said — thank you both for saying it — schools in Northern Ireland are based on non-denominational Christian values. That is a glaring omission from the Bill, and it concerns us. Does that answer your question?

Mr Sheehan: No, because I am asking about the current ethos in the schools that you represent. For example, I need to mention Methodist College. What is the difference between the ethos in Methodist and the ethos in an integrated school?

Dr Brown: I will speak about the ethos in controlled schools. You will understand, Pat, that we came here today to represent the interests of the Churches in the controlled sector. The overarching ethos for controlled schools is the support of high-quality education for children and young people from all faiths and none in order to enable them to learn, develop and grow together in the ethos of non-denominational Christian values and principles. My understanding is that the integrated sector, as it stands, under the 'Statement of Principles' charter, is also founded on non-denominational Christian values.

Miss Jardine: I will come in on that. The things that have been talked about — diversity, inclusivity, tolerance, equality, compassion and care for one another in the school community — are all part of the ethos to which we ascribe and aspire. In that sense, there is not much difference between them. Anita helpfully outlined the nature of the diversity in the controlled sector. One of the things we have not mentioned is shared education and the value and the opportunities it has provided for children and young people to mix and to get to know each other and that sort of thing.

Sometimes we hear commentary in the media from people who are perhaps from our generations, saying, "I never met anybody from the other religion until I went to work, university or college". It is not necessarily the same story for our children and young people today. Sometimes there is a risk of legislating on the basis of our own experience, rather than on the experience of what is coming through and is evidenced through various reports about shared education.

Dr Brown: That is really helpful, Karen. Another thing, Pat, is that clause 1(2) suggests:

"An 'integrated school' is a school which intentionally promotes, protects and improves an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none".

For us, that defines what a controlled school in Northern Ireland currently is, and that happens under the cornerstone Christian values of tolerance, respect, duty and obedience, as Karen said. I could go on all day about those.

Mr Sheehan: Yes. I am sure that the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) representatives who attended the previous Committee session would agree that their sector promotes the same values. Chris, do I have time for another quick question?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): A final quick one, Pat.

Mr Sheehan: Andy, you suggest in your written briefing that there should be an audit of the demand for integrated education through the area planning process. Will you explain briefly how that would be done?

Dr Brown: I will pass over to whichever of my colleagues wants to pick up on that. Peter, Karen and Anita all sit on different area planning organisations and committees in Northern Ireland. Which one of you guys wants to pick up on that?

Dr Hamill: It looks as though it is me. Pat, an audit has to be an audit of specific areas. That is where it needs to take place. The problem with audits is that you can always ask the question in whichever way you want to ask it. We need to be clear when asking people about the type of education they want. Some reports say that parents go for the school that provides the best education for their children. That is what we need to look for, rather than specifically asking, "Which type of school would you like to send your child to?". I hope an audit could be done through area planning.

Mr Sheehan: OK. Thanks for that, Peter.

Mr Newton: I welcome Dr Brown, Dr Hamill and Dr Gracie, and I extend a friendly welcome to Karen in particular. The Assembly's loss is the Presbyterian Church's gain. Thank you. It is good to see Karen again.

Committee members are sick of hearing me say this, but my wife and I chose Methodist College for our family because we believed that it was a truly integrated school offering all the best choices in that field. The CCMS indicated in its evidence that, if the Bill were to proceed, there might be a two-tier system, with one system being favoured. Can the witnesses comment, in whatever way they feel, on paragraphs 4, 5 and 9 of their response?

Dr Brown: Robin, thank you very much for your warm welcome. Indeed, Karen's joining us was very much our gain. We appreciate your comments.

We have suggested that the Bill has the potential to create an uneven playing field. We already find that in Northern Ireland, and we very much find it in the controlled sector. If one looks, one can see that, in certain areas, nursery schools and special schools, which, incidentally, are integrated, fall into the controlled sector, yet I hear time and time again from colleagues about a new development proposal being put in for another nursery school in an area where one is not needed. I hear from colleagues in controlled schools that there seems to be pressure on those schools. I am not saying from where that pressure is coming or who it is being applied to; I am just saying that, at times, there are different sorts of pressures coming in to transform to integrated status, because of — this is what I am hearing from colleagues — the financial incentives in so doing. That undermines the sectors that are already there. Colleagues in the nursery sector therefore know that any new money and capital spend will go to that new school, which may not be necessary in an area. We understand the facilitation of integrated education, but we have an issue with its promotion, because we feel that it will be deleterious to the other sectors that are already cash-strapped. Very often, new schools are not required; it is the refurbishment of and capital expenditure on existing schools that are required.

I will pass over to any of my colleagues who wish to comment on that.

Miss Jardine: I will come in on Robin's question on clause 6. Thank you for your kind words.

To echo what you heard from the CCMS and the Catholic Schools' Trustee Service this morning, why would a school or a sectoral body with a different ethos be required to promote something that is not their ethos? Again, in our conversation with Pat, we talked a little about what that ethos looks like and the fact that it may not be that different. To ask the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC), in our case, or the CCMS to advocate and include provision and the other things that are mentioned in clause 6 would go against their principles, operational policies and procedures, and that would create a real clash.

Dr Brown: Robin, you have mentioned paragraph 5 of our submission. If one looks at the aspirational numbers for the creation of an integrated school in NICIE's statement, one will see that the aspiration is for the percentage to rise to 30%. I understand that there is a ratio of 40:40:20 aimed for. How can those figures be achieved in an area where one section of the community predominantly or entirely lives, as happens very often in areas of socio-economic deprivation and disadvantage? Thank you for your questions. I hope that that question is addressed.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Chair.

Dr Brown: Anita may wish to come in.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am keen to keep us moving on. Go ahead briefly, Anita.

Dr Gracie: Very briefly, you will find that controlled schools have been extremely responsive to demographic shifts. For example, the demographic at Lurgan Model Primary School, which is in the centre of Lurgan, has shifted over the years. The population in that controlled school, which continues to be controlled, is over 70% Catholic. The school is very much involved and has brought in clergy to help prepare pupils in RE lessons for the sacraments and such things.

As Andy said, there is no necessity to convert a school to a different sector in order for it to be inclusive. That is what we are trying to say. We can be integrated and inclusive within our ethos and sector without having to build a new school. In an urban area, that may well be on a greenfield site and may move the location of the school. That will make it a new school, which will then take pupils away from schools in the area that are struggling to maintain numbers.

Mr Newton: Thank you. I assume that my time is used up, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It is, Robin. You can ask a final brief question. You have been pretty compliant for most of the day.

Mr Newton: The comments that you have made are very similar to those of the CCMS. Paragraph 9 of your submission states:

"The TRC is concerned that Clause 6 unworkable [sic]."

Without putting words in its mouth, that view would be echoed by the CCMS. Each of the education bodies has its own ethos. The point that Dr Gracie made at the end is something that I would encourage, particularly on the shared education initiative from the Executive. From all the evidence that we have received, there is too much stacking up against the workability of the Bill, certainly in its present format.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Karen mentioned the experience of this generation of children, who do not get to the end of their education pathway without interacting with people from different backgrounds. A case is being made for inclusivity and natural integration. How do you respond to the Ulster University research that seems to suggest that only 7% of pupils in controlled schools are from a perceived Catholic background and only 2% of pupils in Catholic maintained schools are from a perceived Protestant background?

Dr Brown: I do not know where the university has got that information from. From the latest statistics from the Controlled Schools' Support Council, we are talking about around 63%.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That includes a lot of integrated schools. My understanding is that the Ulster University research is on non-integrated schools.

Dr Brown: Peter has some stats on that. I think that the overall number falls from something small like *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]* Peter, you have the stats from this morning.

Dr Hamill: I picked up the stats this morning. To be fair, I did not take out the figures for integrated schools; I took out the figures for Irish-medium schools and looked at the difference. The figures do not change dramatically when the other types of schools in the controlled system are removed.

Dr Brown: Controlled schools are open to those of all faiths and none. That is very simple, and, as Anita said when she used her Lurgan example, the controlled schools are also fleet of foot and understand the demographics. For instance, schools in the Rosetta area are taking in pupils of all faiths and none, and that is happening throughout Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It is Ulster University research. Perhaps I can engage with you directly on that, given that it is not something that you recognise. If, however, it can be substantiated that 7% of pupils in non-integrated controlled schools are from a perceived Catholic background, is that a concerning percentage for you?

Dr Brown: Again, I do not recognise those figures. I presume that that is part of research done by Ulster University. *[Interruption.]* Peter, if that is your building work, you may want to go on mute, mate. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Hamill: Sorry.

Dr Brown: That may well be part of the Ulster University research that has been sponsored by the Integrated Education Fund (IEF). As I said, I do not recognise those statistics, but it is from one of a series of pieces of desktop research that the centre in the university has done.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Do the sponsor and the fact that it is desktop in nature take away from the research's veracity?

Dr Brown: I do not recognise the figures. They do not resonate with me or correlate with what the figures that I have suggest.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. We will move on.

Mr McCrossan: Our guests are most welcome. Thank you for your opening remarks and for taking questions. I have a number of questions and will go straight to them so that I can get them covered. You set out a number of concerns about how the Bill could affect funding for schools in other sectors. Please elaborate on that and on how you believe children might be affected? Are your concerns about capital funding or recurrent funding?

Dr Hamill: Thank you, Daniel. I will take those questions, as I mentioned that issue. Our concerns are about both recurrent funding and capital funding. There is a perception that, for capital funding, integrated schools get priority. I am not necessarily convinced that that is the case, but that is the perception.

Ongoing funding is the concern. If the Department of Education, which sorts the funding, is having to give priority to integrated schools, the danger is that funding will go to integrated schools rather than to schools that need it. Many of our school buildings in Northern Ireland are not fit for purpose, and those buildings should be the priority rather than the creation of new schools. Does that answer your question?

Mr McCrossan: Yes. I appreciate that. Thank you.

I also notice that you alluded to NICIE's inclusion of "Christian in character" in its definition of an integrated school, but the Bill sponsor has omitted any mention of that in the Bill. Is that an omission that should be addressed in legislation? If so, what do you propose be added to the Bill?

Miss Jardine: I will take that, because it is something that I mentioned in my remarks. Having not had the opportunity to talk to the Bill sponsor about the Bill, I am not sure what the rationale behind that is. It may be because it is already included in NICIE's 'Statement of Principles' that it was felt that it was not necessary to put it in the Bill. That is something for the Committee to explore with the Bill sponsor when she is back with you in the coming weeks.

Mr McCrossan: OK. Was that brought up in any engagement that you have had with the Bill sponsor, or are you saying that there has not been any?

Miss Jardine: We have not had any engagement with the Bill sponsor. That reflects some of the comments that I was making about consultation. As far as I am aware, back in 2015-16 and in this most recent phase of the Bill process, there has not been engagement with the Churches or the TRC.

Mr McCrossan: From the outset, one of the main concerns that I had was that, in order to inform the legislation and ensure that there was wider consultation, everyone had to be spoken to. We sought those clarifications and were given reassurances that that had happened. You are not the only body that has told us that that has not happened. We have raised other concerns as well, and we have shared our concerns about the lack of consultation on matters. What you say adds to those considerable concerns.

You tell us that clause 6, which requires a range of education bodies to include provision for integrated education when developing policies and strategies, is unworkable. Why do you suggest that? What specific effects could clause 6 have on the ethos and operation of schools in other sectors?

Miss Jardine: I will speak to that, because I spoke to it earlier. There is a sense that other education bodies are being asked to do things that are not within their remit. If the legislation passes, those things will obviously come within their remit. We believe, however, that it creates a conflict of interest when it comes to including provision for integrated education. There are integrated schools in the controlled sector, but that is not their primary aim and focus. Clause 6 would divert the sectoral bodies away from what their primary focus should be. In the case of the Controlled Schools' Support Council, as its name suggests, that is about support for controlled schools. The clause places unfair duties on the other sectoral bodies, which then become unwieldy and unworkable, as we have said.

Mr McCrossan: OK. I appreciate that. Finally, very briefly, some people view the implementation of the Bill as an important step towards having a single education system. Could the Bill achieve that? What is your vision for a single education system, and how do we move towards that?

Dr Brown: One of the points that we raised in our opening remarks was the fact that we stand on the cusp of having an independent review of education. We think that the Bill is rather presumptive and

pre-emptive, given that the review has not yet started taking evidence. I know that, as a body, the TRC is at the moment doing its own navel-gazing on the upcoming review, as are the Churches and every other education body. We are considering for ourselves what our vision of education is. I can tell you that the Presbyterian Church is having a conference on 29 January — if any of you were interested in attending, we would love to see you there — at which we will look at our vision for the role of the Churches in education in the 21st century and beyond, Daniel.

Mr McCrossan: I have just noted that date, because I am interested in engaging with that.

Dr Brown: You will be more than welcome.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, all.

Mrs Dodds: Good afternoon, everybody, and thank you for your evidence so far. What do you think clause 6 would impose on schools that is not already imposed or expected of them?

Miss Jardine: Again, I will speak to that. As Anita already mentioned, many of our schools in the controlled sector are inclusive. They include a broad range of backgrounds from our locality and from different ethnic groups. Sometimes, we have an expectation that schools will resolve all the ills of society, but that is an unrealistic expectation. Our teachers are there to provide high-quality education for our children and young people in order to help prepare them for being out in the world. It is not the responsibility of schools to develop, adopt, implement and revise policies and strategies and plans to promote integrated education. Clause 6 places an onerous burden on the sectoral bodies, and, through them, on schools, to do things that they are not designed to do or are there to do.

Mrs Dodds: OK. I am not sure whether clause 6 is a definition of what integrated education is or whether it has integrating children as a general aim. The clause is unclear in what it would do and would therefore end up causing confusion. That is my sense of it. I do not know whether you agree with that. Which of those meanings do you think the clause has?

I also want to pick up on your point about consultation and on the fact that this is very major and, as you and the CCMS both indicated, fairly radical legislation. As I understand it, there was no consultation undertaken prior to the introduction of this provision, which instead relies on consultation from about five or six years ago. It is worth reminding everyone of that.

Miss Jardine: I am not even sure how that consultation from five or six years ago happened. We have no report from that consultation and no sense of who was spoken to at the time. I may be wrong about this, because we have all come into our roles post that time, but, as far as I am aware, the TRC was not approached, nor were the three Churches that we represent.

Dr Hamill: I think —.

Mrs Dodds: It may well be worthwhile for the Committee to ask for a look at that consultation and for information on how that consultation informed the Bill as it currently stands.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* at Second Stage. That should be easy to do.

Mrs Dodds: It would be worth doing.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you. You see: I can be good.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Every now and again. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Brogan: Thank you to everyone for attending this afternoon. You will have to forgive me if I make you repeat yourselves. We have heard a lot of evidence this morning, so I apologise in advance.

I want to make it clear from the outset that, as I have already said, I am for integrated education, but there are flaws in the Bill that have been highlighted to us and that we have all identified. Those need

to be worked out before the Bill can be progressed. The two main flaws are the use of the word "promote" and the presumption that all new schools will be integrated.

We need to find a way in which to support parents who want their children to be educated in an integrated school. We need first to find out what the demand is and then work out how we meet it. I put this question to the Children's Commissioner as well. Without using the word "promote", how can we facilitate that need and make sure that children who want to be educated in an integrated school can be?

Dr Brown: Thank you for your comments and for your welcome, Nicola. They are much appreciated.

It has to come down to what we mean by "integrated school". In many respects, I could say that there already is an integrated sector out there: it is called the controlled sector. We have given you statistics and taken you around various schools in Northern Ireland that are naturally integrated. I had a student who was going to a Catholic maintained school. I was interested in the school that she was going to, so I googled it. Its website talked about its ethos of Catholic education and also about how it welcomes those of all faiths and none.

This is already happening. It happens through shared education anyway. These things happen naturally. If you look back to the old days, when I was at school — those were the old days — there was a desire and understanding that we needed to know and learn more about each other. We tried to do what, in those days, was called "education for mutual understanding" (EMU). Those things sort of worked, but they did not really. We have moved so far from two buses arriving at a forest park and two groups of pupils walking on either side of a road before leaving again. Sharing happens on a weekly basis in schools throughout Northern Ireland. Classes meet on Google Classroom and other platforms. They share, and teachers plan together. They do that by celebrating who they are and what they stand for, while understanding that there are differences in society. Those things are being done, and that is what parents sign up for. I know of few parents who are agin the current process of sharing and of shared education. They find it to be a very positive thing, but they are not being asked to divest themselves of their cultural identity and of the community identity that is so incredibly important to them.

Ms Brogan: Thanks, Andy. I agree with you on that, and I get the positive sentiment, but I imagine that others will not. I will leave that point there.

You mentioned earlier the independent review of education and the fact that the panel has been set up and has started work. I want to touch on that. If we proceed with the Bill, there is the possibility of having unnecessarily created two jobs of work. There will be delays, and I have not made my mind up on what will be the right decision, but can I get your viewpoint on that, please?

Dr Hamill: As Mrs Dodds said, this will be enshrined in law. Our concern is that the review panel will have to adjust its findings depending on what happens with the Bill. We would be happier with the independent review being able to work without any adjustments being made at this stage. That is what we favour.

Ms Brogan: OK. As I say, I still have not made my mind up on that, but I appreciate that your viewpoint, Peter.

That is all from me, Chair. Thanks, everyone, for your evidence this afternoon.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks very much indeed to all our witnesses. You have raised issues to which we will give good consideration during the closing part of the Bill's Committee Stage. All the best.