



Northern Ireland Council Integrated Education

Consultation for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration
Response

29th October 2010



The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the OFMDFM consultation document: Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration. We share the general concern expressed by many commentators on the weaknesses of this document and the lack of specific aims and objectives. We restrict ourselves in this response to the issue of education as dealt with in the document.

It is our opinion that the consultation document Cohesion, Sharing and Integration is deeply flawed and that this represents a failed opportunity to address, in a meaningful way, the challenges facing Northern Ireland society.

The document is flawed in the language it uses and the premises on which it is based. Instead of the proactive, aspirational and participative language of 'Building a Shared Future', it is framed in the language of the bureaucrat. CSI is a programme which will be dictated to people; not one in which they are invited to be involved. As such, it is limited in its vision. It does not reach out to the citizens of Northern Ireland and, instead of recognising and seeking to harness the potential, energy, creativity and idealism of our young people, it presents our youth as a problem to be managed.

This document contains no overarching vision of the reconciliation of which the 'A Shared Future' document spoke and instead replaces reconciliation with the limited objective of 'mutual accommodation'. The implicit premise is that the status quo remains and that there are some problems within it which must be managed. The outcome is a tick box approach to a series of problems which, intentionally or otherwise, stigmatises unfairly those who are young, disadvantaged or both.

This document is further based on the premise that there are fixed and unchanging cultures between which we promote intercultural respect. This is a faulty premise which does not recognise that cultural identity is not fixed at birth, that society is dynamic and diverse and that we are living in a changed society where people identify themselves in many different ways and where many resist being pigeon holed into the labels of the past. This is particularly true of our young people who do not want to view the future through the green or orange lenses of the past.

This document does not connect with past history and root causes; nor does it build on other documents produced in the past: Toward A Culture of Tolerance, Integrated Education, A Shared Future, Building a Shared Future, Eames/Bradley, 'Consultative Group On The Past Report'. As such, this document provides neither an understanding of the problems which exist nor an accompanying analysis of how they might be solved.

This document is not connected with the other consultation documents available to the public at the moment: the Review of Teachers Education, Early Years Strategy, Community Relations, Equality and Diversity Education. Such a lack of joined up thinking underlines the shared flaw in each document: rooted in an unquestioning stance on the status quo, they

do not challenge it. Instead, within the framework of the status quo, they take the easiest and least challenging approach to reform.

This is illustrated graphically in the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Document, in the way in which education is dismissed in two paragraphs which describe and implicitly accept the status quo. Three further paragraphs focus on community relations in schools and on the role of citizenship lessons. We know that young people learn more from the medium in which they are taught than from the message, the content of what they are taught. That segregated medium has not been challenged.

More than 90% of our children and young people from the ages of 3 to 18 are educated separately. In the Catholic sector, both maintained and voluntary grammar, which is attended by 45% of children in NI, only 1.6% of these children are other than Catholic. In the state Controlled school system, which is in principle open to everyone, only 4.5% of the pupils attending Controlled Primary, Preparatory, Secondary and Grammar schools are Catholic. In fact, of the 1068 Primary, Secondary and Grammar schools and Preparatory Departments in Northern Ireland, only 106 have 10% or more of the minority tradition enrolled and 60 of these are integrated schools.

This divided educational system is a direct legacy of our divided history. If we want to move beyond segregation, we need to examine how that educational system can be changed. Those involved in education understand that education as a social institution has transformative powers. We need to ensure that the long-term process of building a peaceful society is served, not hindered, by our educational system.

There are many models for desegregating education that can be looked at both locally and internationally. A revised CSI document should give serious consideration to them.

Those involved in Integrated Education wished to develop a concept of education which was based on sharing rather than replicating division. The aim was for this concept of education to become the status quo. The 61 existing integrated schools offer a model of this concept of shared education in a divided society which has been recognised and applauded internationally. These schools provide examples of good practice in ensuring appropriate religious provision where desired by parents and of celebrating cultural traditions and a range of diversity in an environment of mutual respect and parity of esteem. The success of these schools can be judged both through their levels of oversubscription and their record of academic success and through the ever-growing body of research which attests to the long term influence of integrated education in shaping young people who are open, tolerant and optimistic about a shared future.

In recent years a variety of other ways of promoting shared learning have developed. The provision for ‘transformation’, enabling schools to achieve integrated status, provides a pathway for schools to become more inclusive and to develop welcoming environments.

The Sharing Education Partnerships enable young people to meet as part of daily educational provision, linking schools and teachers in innovative partnerships which break down barriers at many levels.

The Area Learning Communities have the potential to ensure that all young people have an entitlement to a wide range of subjects in classes

which are economically viable through planned coordination and sharing of resources and expertise.

Outside Northern Ireland, there are many examples of shared schools where Catholic schools work in confederation with others to ensure an inclusive and diverse education. There are more than 20 joint schools, colleges and universities in America, Australia, Ireland and Britain. There is an onus on the Catholic Church to face up to the responsibility placed on them by the Eames/Bradley Report when it challenged all churches to discuss the (unintended) negative consequences of our denominational school system.

Proposals such as that for the Lisanelly Campus in Omagh have the capacity to provide quality education which would enable individual schools to protect their ethos while promoting excellence and cost effectiveness through daily sharing.

These options, which have the scope for extending significantly the limited or non-existent contact which at present exists between our young people, need to be engaged with and developed.

In addition, there exists a range of previously considered ideas from which to draw. The Triennial Action Plan for A Shared Future, under Shared Education addresses how reorganisation/rationalisation and capital investment decisions could be tested to see if they support greater sharing in education. New schools would be presumed to be shared in new shared housing areas. Collaboration and sharing opportunities would be sought in early teacher education and continuous professional development.

Teacher training in Northern Ireland continues to be segregated. This is a situation which is not challenged in the Review of Teacher Education presently out for consultation; this is a situation which should be addressed urgently.

Strikingly the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration document makes no reference to further or higher education and their role in promoting social cohesion.

If Integrated Education is to be truly encouraged then urgent review of the process for creation of Grant Maintained Integrated Schools is required, especially as Area Based Planning has not taken place. The transformation legislation also needs reviewed. In order to ensure that a serious analysis of how to dismantle our segregated system, NICIE argues that there is an urgent need for the type of commission proposed recently by Mr Robinson to review how we can quickly and cost effectively move to a shared system of education.

If we want our young people to play a proactive and positive part in shaping a better future, we can only do so through providing them with a sustained opportunity to share and learn together in a way which enables them to confront, challenge and understand difference. That is their entitlement.

Until such time as our schools are fully integrated, it should be an obligation on all schools to demonstrate how they are promoting the sharing and joint learning that is necessary to counteract the bigotry and hatred which we wish to leave behind as characteristics of the past.

Gandhi famously said: ‘Be the change you want to see.’ The challenge for the policy makers in Northern Ireland is to create, through its institutions, the change we all want to see. A revised Cohesion, Sharing and Integration document should give a lead in showing how this change can be created. It should provide a vision which speaks to our wish for a better future based on reconciliation and respect.

Noreen Campbell
Chief Executive Officer