

Present Day

Good Evening everyone! My name is Paddy Smyth.

And as you may have seen from the programme, I was privileged enough to attend Lagan College and have just finished my A Levels last June.

I was also very humbled to be given the position of Head Boy on my last year.

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I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education for inviting me today

and I would love to share with you my experience of integrated education, how it has benefited my life, my own personal journey and the great things that have come out of it.

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So if we go way back to January 2009 – it only feels like yesterday. I was finishing my last few months at a rural protestant primary school near Ballygowan, Co.Down.

I was heading to the Lagan College Open Day.

I remember so vividly, the traffic was so heavy it was snowing, as there was an accident just beside the big power station.

I was sitting playing Snake on my big brick of a Nokia, having not moved in about 20 mins.

I remember this so clearly, asking my Mum and Dad "Look, can we just not turn around and go down to McDonalds??"

They were persisting to go and I'm very happy that they did.

Fortunately, we managed to get through the gates of Lagan and that was the beginning of my adventure. – and here I am!

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Attending an integrated school has been such an amazing experience.

This is what really stuck to me –

Learning in an environment where people come from all different cultures and backgrounds, getting to know them and what they believe in

These were the conversations I loved having.

It also means that I could see things from another person's viewpoint and broaden my minds beyond our own cultures and traditions.

For the first time in my life, I was learning about places and cultural backgrounds in Belfast that I never knew existed and

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It's been great to have forged lifelong friendships with people from across all areas of Belfast – North, South, East and West – and beyond that! Embrace this diversity was incredible.

Sounds bizarre but when I was 11 years old I didn't know what a catholic was. When I look back on that now and as you sit here now, it sounds crazy!!

It shows the importance OF integrated education and how far I've come from not knowing this to being so passionate and eager for young people to be educated in an integrated school.

I remember when I was in my last few months of P7, just after the open day, my classmates were asking me

"Why are you going to Lagan College?"

"Just go with us", and trying to encourage me to go to the local state school.

They said they have never heard of it.

But I can assure you all, they all have definitely heard of it now

I am extremely proud to be a past pupil of Lagan College and am so thankful for all of the opportunities I have been given during my time at Lagan.

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Since leaving the College I've always tried to promote its values, which were instilled in me throughout the last 7 years – to be open, friendly, loyal and treating everyone the same, regardless of where they come from and what they believe in.

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Integrated schools are SO MUCH MORE than just a place of education – we are an all-inclusive family that doesn't allow labels or stereotypes to affect the way we talk/treat one another.

When I talk to friends from different schools, I realise that Lagan is not just a fantastic school with great facilities, but a school that allows individuals to celebrate their different cultures and values every way possible.

It was great to see recently that a school so close to home, Killyleagh Primary School, has recently taken the step to become integrated.

It's amazing that more people are recognising that we need more schools that welcome and cherish all sections of the community.

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Also, Lagan's integrated ethos heavily encouraged me to meet new people from different backgrounds and faiths from outside of the school campus.

During my GCSE's, through the Boys' Brigade, I was given the option to take part in a series of residential weekends, Organised by Northern Ireland Children's Enterprise, with uniformed organisations from all different religious beliefs and backgrounds such as Scouts, Catholic Guides Ireland and Girls' Brigade.

If I hadn't attended an integrated school, I'm not sure if this would have appealed to me so much, but I jumped at such an opportunity because I knew how important integrated education is and the potential it has to change the attitudes of the next generation.

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A vital part of integrated education supports people's right to be themselves

And allows us all to worship in whatever way we feel comfortable.

This was shown clearly through my journey at an integrated school at our special assemblies to mark events from all faiths in the calendar month.

Even though we can be ourselves, we are also united by our belief that together 'we are one'.

Coming from a Christian background, I personally know people who thought that going to an integrated school can affect our beliefs negatively.

I believe that I'm a testament in how I was able to grow in my faith at my time here.

For young people, having a faith at school is incredibly different but I felt that in the school I went to that this was never an issue and was always encouraged which is again such a wonderful thing.

I really feel that if every community in Northern Ireland adopted Lagan's College's ethos and the ethos based upon integrated education, we would live in a much better place, replacing unfair prejudice with mutual trust and understanding.

We work and live and interact with people from all different backgrounds but with Lagan College's motto– Ut Sint Unum – That they may be one – that we have been taught together in a school that brings people of all faiths, cultures and backgrounds together.

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I am incredibly proud of Lagan College and the integrated education system that has grown so rapidly in Northern Ireland since 1981. I believe that integrated education is so important in our lives and has helped us transform society and the way our young people think and interact with each other.

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Over 7 years ago I would never have imagined that I would be standing here, reflecting on how my attendance at an integrated post primary school has changed my life for the better.

That I would be attending an Open Day in 2009 and then speaking at the Open Day in 2016.

There is so many people in our society that need to understand the importance of Integrated Education.

It has given me, not only tremendous confidence, and a first class education, but also, wide ranging values, which I know will have a lasting impact on my life and those around me.

And I really really hope that MORE young people in Northern Ireland will come to know the life changing experience of integration education.

