



How education needs to change: A vision for a single system

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How education needs to change: A vision for a single system

1. Purpose

Education in Northern Ireland has been the focus of many articles, many papers and much discussion over many, many years. Most of these have highlighted the various failings of a system that, notwithstanding the commitment and professionalism of those who work within it, is not working as well as it could be. Much research has illustrated the ways in which it contributes to a costly pattern of socioeconomic and community division that feeds societal instability. The sixteen papers produced so far by the UNESCO Centre's Transforming Education ¹ project at Ulster University have added further grist to this particular mill.

There has, however, been a charge levelled that critiques of the current system's shortcomings are of limited value in the absence of a considered and clearly articulated vision of what should replace it. This brief paper is an attempt to address that gap by exploring what a 're-set' education system might look like.

It is in the nature of a *vision* that it is speculative and may possibly even be fanciful: a dream. The vision articulated here has inevitably been framed by the perspectives and priorities of the researchers who have worked to develop each of the Transforming Education papers; at the same time it must also be acknowledged that the work has been empirically thorough. Thus, the vision described below is grounded in a comprehensive analysis of where we are now, including an awareness of the system's strengths and informed reflection on its inadequacies and inefficiencies.

2. Context

Those architects of education who drew up blueprints for a national system of basic schooling for the island of Ireland in 1831 - and their successors who developed a model to meet the needs of the new state of NI in 1922 - would be dismayed by the current extent of segregation in schools here. Both aspired to a model of education that saw children from the Catholic-Irish and Protestant-British cultural/political/religious (ethnic) traditions learning alongside one another in the same classroom. Perhaps understandably, there were suspicions from all sides as to the government's motives both in 1831 and again in 1922. All churches were concerned that it would herald a secularisation of education, and that their influence would be diminished. In 1829, in a state dominated by a minority (Anglican Protestants), the Catholic population and the 'dissenting' Protestant denominations had just emerged from a period of draconian subjugation under Penal Laws, and were particularly fearful of their position and the impact this would have on their flock.

The desire of the government to develop universal and shared education, whatever the motives, were not realised and a segregated system resulted. Segregation is still endemic in the current system and has proven to be resolutely resistant to almost every effort to introduce progressive reform. The segregated pattern is maintained by policies, practices and perceptions, and fortified against any structural change by a bewilderingly complex bulwark of constituted organisations, boards, councils and committees. Furthermore, schools in NI are divided not only by religion, politics and cultural identity but also by dis/ability, gender and class. Mark Langhammer, the NI Secretary of the National Education Union commented:

“Northern Ireland’s system isn’t just the most socially segregated in the UK – it is the most socially segregated education system in the developed world.” ²

¹<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/topic/education/unesco-centre/research/transforming-education>

²Langhammer, M. NEU (2021) <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/belfast-news/ni-education-system-report-ignores-20723171>

Maintaining this segregation has required the establishment of myriad support structures – as well as contributing to the maintenance of social and community division, this duplication is economically and environmentally costly.

In order to “help build a shared and integrated society” the NI Executive’s New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) document makes a commitment to “support educating children and young people of different backgrounds together in the classroom”. NDNA recognises that, “the education system has a diversity of school types, each with its own distinctive ethos and values” but considers that this is “unsustainable”.³ On 10th March 2020 the NI Assembly resolved to call on the Executive to: “Urgently... establish an external, independent review of education provision, with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and the prospect of moving towards a single education system.”⁴

The NI Executive subsequently recruited a panel to conduct an Independent Review of Education (IRE). The panel started work in October 2021 and is due to report back in March 2023. Their task is daunting – not least in determining what is actually meant by the term ‘single education system’. Indeed, it is legitimate to ask, outside of totalitarian systems, is there anywhere where a single education system actually exists? In free market, pluralistic economies, education is a commodity with commercial value. Historically, and traditionally, religious organisations have been at the forefront of the development of systems of schooling around the globe – with the aim of nurturing future generations while at the same time inculcating their beliefs and practices into the worldview of future generations, or proselytising to increase numbers through the conversion of non-believers. This has significantly contributed to the development of a pattern of educational provision in NI that is characterised by a diverse range of school types.

3. Features of the current system

Each of the papers produced through the Transforming Education project has explored one specific aspect of education in NI – often casting a critical light on little explored dimensions of the system. Taken together these have exposed a pattern of systemic, structural segregation that is endemic in education in NI. By reviewing all of these papers as a collective body, certain underlying themes emerge.

3.1 The prominence of denominational influence^{5&6}

In order to be provided with state funding, all schools in NI must operate within a system of legislation that is underpinned by a specifically Christian worldview. Mainstream Controlled schools are *church related*, in that they work within the ethos of Christian values and principles whilst unapologetically confessional Catholic Maintained schools aim to produce religious commitment to Catholicism. In spite of having been largely established in the absence of any official church representation, Integrated schools are also required to be essentially Christian in character.⁷

The trustees of Catholic education in NI and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) - the employing and planning body for Maintained schools - require that any teacher applying for permanent employment in a Maintained primary or nursery school must have completed a Certificate in Religious Education that meets criteria laid down by the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference.

Over the last ten years, 99% of (the almost exclusively Catholic) students who completed a primary or post primary BEd at St Mary’s University College completed the Certificate, as had 100% of those undertaking the primary PGCE at Ulster University (which is mixed). However, the Certificate is not an integral part of the course for those studying for a primary BEd at Stranmillis University College, whose students are mostly products of the Controlled sector, and fewer than a quarter of these students had taken the option of studying for the Certificate as an additional qualification.

The influence of a Christian-centric perspective pervades not only the daily routine (act of worship) and timetable (the content of the RE syllabus) but also the operational day-to-day and strategic management of schools and, to some extent, the management of the entire education system in NI. Places are reserved for nominees of the Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist churches (i.e. those churches that transferred their schools to state control in the 1920s and 30s) on Boards of Governors of Controlled schools. The Board of every CCMS school includes governors appointed by the Catholic trustees. Church representatives also sit on the boards of the Education Authority, the Controlled Schools’ Support Council and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

According to the 2011 census, nearly a quarter of the NI population (23.5%) are not connected to any of the four Christian churches that are embedded within the NI system of education. A Life and Times survey conducted in 2019 reported that 20% of respondents had ‘no religion’; the figure for 25-34 year olds was 37%.⁸ It is appropriate to ask whether, in an increasingly unreligious and multi-faith society, it is still appropriate for the [Presbyterian, Anglican and Methodist] transferor churches and the Catholic Church to wield the influence that they do.

On 5th July 2022 the High Court of Justice in NI ruled that the current syllabus “can only have the effect of promoting Christianity and encouraging its practice” and that, consequently “RE is not conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralist manner.”⁹ The court reached the same conclusion in respect of the requirement for daily collective worship, but crucially the question as to how this situation might be remedied was left open.

This ruling was specifically in respect of the religious dimensions of schooling in the Controlled primary sector, but it must undoubtedly impact upon curriculum reform and lead to a revision to existing law. It will therefore inevitably cut across sectoral boundaries.

³UK and Irish Governments (2020) New Decade, New Approach -

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf

⁴NI Assembly, Hansard Report, 10th March 2020 <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2020/03/10&docID=297457>

⁵Milliken, M. (2019) Transforming Education Briefing Paper 2: Religion and Education https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/476076/transforming-education-02-Religion-and-Education.pdf

⁶Milliken, M. (2020) Transforming Education Briefing Paper 4: The Certificate in RE https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/536553/Briefing-Paper-The-Certificate-in-Religious-Education.pdf

⁷Taggart, S. and Roulston, S. (2022) Transforming Education Briefing Paper 16: School Ethos: what is it and is it under threat in NI? <https://>

⁸Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (2019) <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2019/Background/RELIGION.html>

⁹<https://www.judiciaryni.uk/sites/judiciary/files/decisions/Summary%20of%20Judgment%20-%20Court%20delivers%20decision%20on%20the%20challenge%20to%20teaching%20arrangements%20for%20religious%20education.pdf>

3.2 The cost and complexity of administration¹⁰

NDNA recognises that the current system of education is not sustainable, due in no small measure to the cost of running the system as it is currently configured. For example, the Department of Education (DE) is also responsible for funding the Education Authority and eight other Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs). The current pattern of ALBs is more extensive than had been the case prior to proposals made in 2006 for rationalising the administration of education through the creation of an Education and Skills Authority (ESA). These ALBs

- receive grants from DE to cover staff salaries, administration costs and the implementation of an annual plan;
- has separate sections for finance and human resources;
- has at least one administration building to service and maintain; and
- has its own management structure and governing board.

There is also a range of other bodies aligned with each of the various sectors, many of which receive grants for on-going operational and other costs. There is a need for this expensive and divisive structure to be rationalised, revised and streamlined.

3.3 School governance and the replication of division¹¹

In NI, schools are managed in partnership between head teachers and boards of voluntary governors. The role of school governor is a complex and challenging one. Careful selection processes and training are both vital to ensure that schools have governors equipped with the necessary skills. The size and composition of boards is determined by a complex set of formulae that ensure that they are made up of representatives of specific stakeholder groupings i.e. trustees/transferrors/funders, teaching staff, parents, and state funding bodies. Denominational representation is enshrined in legislation.

Governing bodies are tasked with maintaining school ethos and can therefore be expected to reflect the identity and community composition of the institution's founders. The Boards of Governors of Controlled and Maintained schools are highly unlikely to include more than a very small minority of governors (if any) with a community identity that does not match the community composition of the pupils and staff team. It is also the Board of Governors that appoints teachers to the staff team.

The established system of Governance of schools in NI therefore serves to enshrine self-replication and solidify community separation.

3.4 The systemic separation of teachers

Almost all workers can rely on legislation to protect them from discrimination on grounds of their faith. That protection had been denied to teachers until March 2022 when the NI Assembly passed legislation to repeal the exclusion of teachers from Fair Employment regulations (i.e. Article 71 of the 1989 Fair Employment and Treatment Order). The exception, in combination with a number of other policies and practices, has contributed to a situation where the overwhelming majority of pupils are very unlikely to be taught by a teacher from outside their own ethnic community – particularly in primary school. The distribution of teachers between the various sectors of education in NI demonstrates notable levels of consistency in respect of community identity:

- **2% of those teachers employed in Catholic Maintained (CCMS) primaries had attended a Controlled primary school in NI.**
- **7% of those teachers employed in Controlled primary schools had been educated in a CCMS primary.**¹²

Four institutions in NI offer Initial Teacher Education (ITE) – Queens University, Ulster University, Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College. Demand for ITE places in these institutions is consistently high and the application process is very competitive. All four ITE institutions are open to applications from students from all sections of the community, but there are indications that the composition of the student bodies at the two University Colleges still reflect the religious divide to varying degrees. Even at the ostensibly more mixed institutions (Queens and Ulster) there are indications that there may be significant social separation between students from the two communities.¹³

The history of structural separation in education has affected the development, culture and membership profile of the teaching unions. More than 98% of teachers are members of teaching unions and there is a strong correlation between teachers' professional and community identities and the union that they choose to join.¹⁴

A high proportion of teachers remain community consistent throughout their entire education, including their ITE, and career. Exploring controversial issues in Shared Education and other settings is recognised as being important for reconciliation, but many teachers lack the confidence and skills to engage in community relations programmes that deal with issues relating to the enduring community separation.¹⁵

¹⁰Milliken, M. (2021) Transforming Education Briefing Paper 9: Administrative Structures in the NI Education System https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/818230/TEUU-Report-09-Administrative-Structures-NI-Schools-3.pdf

¹¹Milliken, M. (2020) Transforming Education Briefing Paper 5: Governance of Schools https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/640563/TEUU-Report-05-Governance-of-Schools.pdf

¹²Milliken, M. (2019) Transforming Education Briefing Paper 1: Teacher Deployment https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/409458/TEUU-Report-01-Feto.pdf

¹³Milliken, M. (2020) Transforming Education Briefing Paper 7: Initial Teacher Education https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/794235/Community-division-and-student-separation-in-Initial-Teacher-Education.pdf

¹⁴Milliken, M. (2021) Transforming Education Briefing Paper 11: Teaching Unions https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/828902/TEUU-Report-11-Teaching-Unions.pdf

¹⁵McAuley, C. (2022) Transforming Education Briefing Paper 15: Citizenship education in Northern Ireland – an opportunity not yet realised? https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1150338/TE-UU-Report-15-Citizenship.pdf

3.5 The cost of ‘choice’

In 2019, the NI Affairs Committee found that there was a large amount of wasted capacity in the education system.¹⁶ For example, across NI there are 32 instances of pairs of schools offering primary-aged education to two different communities an average of just 670 yards apart. In 20 cases one of the pair does not meet DE’s sustainability criteria (8 Maintained and 12 Controlled). Additionally, there are six cases where neither school in the pairing is sustainable. While collaboration between schools through Shared Education is encouraged, this does not address duplication, and its impact on systemic change might be negligible. There is potential for small communities to retain a single school rather than risk closure of two unsustainable schools currently catering separately to each community.¹⁷

There are also further costs resulting from the fragmented nature of education in NI. This is reflected in a very complex series of school types, often with overlapping catchments. Inevitably this increases the amount of home-school travel. State-funded home-school transport moving children to a school of their choice already costs at least £81 million each year. Academically selective schooling and community segregation in post-primary schools adds approximately 144 million miles a year in extra travel. The carbon dioxide output from the additional travel is more than 20,000 tonnes – making a significant negative impact during a global environmental crisis.¹⁸

3.6 Starting segregation early

The NI Executive advocate for accessible, affordable and universal childcare as a contributory step towards consolidating a united, post-conflict society and 92% of children across NI attend pre-school. However, 69% of pre-school settings are strongly segregated, with 47% entirely segregated. In effect the current system ensures that most of our children are segregated by community background from the age of three.¹⁹

3.7 The sharing or integrating debate²⁰

Around 93% of children in NI attend schools that are largely segregated along religious/ethnic lines. The development of sectarian attitudes is more likely where children are separated in an already divided society. Attending school together might help them to get to know one another, to learn to understand and respect diversity and thereby equip them to live in a diverse society. The segregation that is evident in the classroom is reflected in the staffroom and the board room.

As much as £1bn may have been spent over the last decade on educational initiatives that seek to address the implications of this segregation. Two approaches have developed: Shared Education and Integrated Education. These represent markedly different responses. Integrated Education has an ideal at its heart. Integrated schools form combined communities not reliant on another school to enable reconciliation. On the other hand, Shared Education accepts the reality of a dual system but proposes increased cooperation between schools on either side of the community divide. Schools involved in Shared Education are reliant on another school to facilitate reconciliation. Shared Education is a pragmatic response. It is grounded in empirical research, and it has been endorsed by those at the head of the consociational Executive. However, it leaves the divided system untouched and unchallenged. Maintaining the separation of school sectors may be perceived to be to the long-term benefit of political parties who are seeking to maintain their respective powerbases.

3.8 The illusion of school choice

The 1989 Education Reform (NI) Order applied free market principles to schools in NI, including introducing competition between schools and open enrolment. In theory, this gives parents the opportunity to select any school for their children.

Only 7% of pupils in NI attend Integrated schools yet, in a 2021 poll undertaken by LucidTalk, 71% of respondents agreed that every school in NI should be Integrated. However, over a quarter of households (28%) are located in areas of NI where access to Integrated primary schools is limited and a similar percentage (26%) are remote from Integrated post-primaries. In smaller settlements, access to Integrated Education and Irish Medium Education is very restricted and, in many cases, entirely impractical because attendance would require a long and time-consuming journey each school day. Even where Integrated schools are accessible to households, that choice is often not available because of over-subscription; the number of Integrated schools is insufficient to meet the demand for places.²¹

¹⁶NI Affairs Committee (2019) Education Funding in Northern Ireland <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmniaf/1497/149707.htm>

¹⁷Roulston, S. and Cook, S. (2019) Transforming Education Briefing Paper 03: Isolated Pairs

https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/506878/TEUU-Report-03-Isolated-Pairs-REVISED-VERSION-08-JANUARY-2020.pdf

¹⁸Roulston, S. and Cook, S. (2021) Transforming Education Briefing Paper 12: Additional Costs https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/828903/TEUU-Report-12-Additional-Costs.pdf

¹⁹Roulston, S. and Cook, S. (2020) Transforming Education Briefing Paper 6: Pre-school education in Northern Ireland https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/751800/TEUU-Report-06-Pre-School.pdf

²⁰Milliken, M. (2022) Transforming Education Briefing Paper 13: Integrated and Shared Education

https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/1028320/TEUU-Report-13-Integrated-and-Shared-Education.pdf

²¹Roulston, S. and Cook, S. (2021) Transforming Education Briefing Paper 8: Parental Choice https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/809019/TEUU-Report-08-Parental-Choice.pdf

3.9 A system that embeds underachievement

There is little evidence that social mobility is increased by academic selection and there is considerable evidence that it generally does not happen. Grammar schools are acting as yet another mechanism to segregate children in NI - this time on the basis of socioeconomic status. Rather than helping children be the best they can be, academic selection may be having a negative impact on many children's educational experiences and their life chances. A selective system which promises improved attainment and increased choice may actually have the effect of reducing overall educational achievement, particularly for those learners from the most deprived areas. The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the current arrangements for school transfer at age 11 contribute to the social and financial costs of a stressful process that serves to benefit a few (generally already privileged) pupils while damaging the life-chances of a large proportion of the school population. The current transfer arrangements:

- increase social segregation;
- are traumatic for many children;
- distort the curriculum; and
- achieve little other than protecting the advantages of a few.²²

4. A single education system

4.1 Principles

In light of the above, it is proposed that a single system should be based on a series of key principles, grounded in the values of the society that it will help to create and to serve:

1. **Forward Facing - looking to the future not set in the past. Delivering the education that is needed 'now' and not what was appropriate 'then'; 'this is the way we've always done it' is anathema to this vision.**
2. **Best value - not wasteful, ensuring the best and most economically sustainable use of the available physical and human resources.**
3. **Inclusive and diverse - ensuring that all children are able to learn together, irrespective of their religious faith, gender, dis/ability, academic aspiration or social-economic status.**
4. **Environmentally sustainable - the system must aspire to having the lowest possible carbon footprint; by ensuring that children attend their local school home-school travel will be minimised, thereby reducing emissions and pollution.**
5. **Effective and Efficient - schools should actively help learners to become the best they can be, giving them all of the opportunities that can be provided for them - a single system can do that more efficiently and more fairly.**

4.2 A model of a single education system

4.2.1 Management reform

Education in a learning system which learns from other systems

Ultimately any reform of education should only be done to improve outcomes for learners. They should be at the heart of any proposals. We should look at systems in other countries and investigate what works there. For example, the Transition Year in the Republic of Ireland gets widespread support in helping the personal development of young people.²³ There could be many changes in the detail of what is done: a variety of assessment possibilities available, parity of academic and vocational routes in education, extending the skills-infused curriculum beyond Key Stage 3 in practice as well as in theory, the replacement of GCSE A* to C as the go-to measure of success in schools, increased local autonomy for schools and teachers to devise curricula which support the needs of their learners, co-constructing curricula alongside the community and the learners themselves.

This will require increased flexibility and a revolution in assessment processes and other measures that put learners and their needs at the core of education. All of these and more could help to transform schools from organisations, the success of which is largely evaluated against a narrow measure of academic success with teachers who feel that they are in a surveillance culture²⁴ and with schools labouring under persistent problems of underachievement, to educational beacons within their community which strive to achieve the best for all their pupils.

Schools will be learning organisations, with staff who are trusted and valued, performing because of a passion for learning and improvement and the wellbeing of all learners, and not because of punitive, high-accountability educational structures. Schools will be at the heart of their communities, leading community development and enhancing achievement for all children.

²²Roulston, S. & Milliken, M. (2021) Academic Selection and the Transfer Test *Transforming Education Briefing Paper*, 10, Ulster University, March 2021

²³Roulston, S. (2021) *Education across the island of Ireland: comparing systems and outcomes*.

https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1046820/TEUU-Report-14-Education-Across-Ireland-FINAL95.pdf

²⁴Skerritt, C. (2020) School autonomy and the surveillance of teachers. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, pp.1-28.

4.2.2 Governance

Imaginative governance structures introduced

At present each school has a Board of Governors comprising volunteers from the community. In our divided system, governors in each school are often chosen from the community from which the school is drawn, rather than from wider society. In some cases, attempts to widen the background of governors in schools have failed and governors have had to resign.²⁵ Thus, it might be perceived that some governors are appointed because of their affiliation rather than their skills.²⁶

Governors give of their time freely, and many work tirelessly for their schools. Nonetheless, there may be better ways in which schools could be governed. Governing bodies may be too large, and evidence shows that the effectiveness of a governing body is unrelated to its size.²⁷ As well as reducing their sizes, the numbers of Boards of Governors could be reduced, as currently it is difficult to recruit governors, particularly those with the specialist skills required in a governing body. There are other models of governorship which increase the proportion of the governing bodies assigned to parents, particularly those with the required skills. Boards of Governors might govern clusters of schools, rather than individual schools. However, it will remain important to have local representation in governors, and there is a lot of evidence to suggest that partnerships between schools and communities can be very powerful in shaping transformation.²⁸

In the school of the future, the ‘distance’ between schools and the parents of the learners in those schools will be reduced and parents, and learners, will be closer to the decision making regarding how the school runs, the curriculum that is taught, the ethos, ICT deployment, assessment and the rest. The school will be an integral part of the community, serving it and its needs and supported by it.

4.2.3 Teachers

An end to the potential for religious discrimination in schools

Fair Employment legislation was introduced into NI in 1976, but alongside clergy and private households, teachers were excepted, an arrangement continued when the first act was superseded in 1989. As a result, schools in NI could, quite legally, have discriminated for appointments or promotions of teachers on grounds of religion. Nor did schools have to monitor the community background of their teaching staff, something which is required of all other organisations with more than ten employees. This exception from the Fair Employment and Treatment Order (FETO) had an impact on teacher mobility across school sectors, which contributes to the reduction of diversity of teaching staff in most schools.²⁹ The removal of this exemption from schools was unanimously supported in the NI Assembly in 2022 and, although its actual implementation has been delayed for a further two years, this legislative change can reasonably be expected to start to have an effect in schools in the coming years.

Northern Ireland will be a place where a law allowing schools to discriminate on religious grounds is unthinkable, and staff rooms across the country will become more diverse and mixed, modelling an inclusivity which will influence learners, parents and the wider community.

Initial Teacher Education structures reformed

NI has four Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers. Two of these largely prepare teachers from one community to teach in schools which serve those communities. Paradoxically, it is these providers who receive additional premia payments – additional money to sustain small, specialist institutions – making the preparation of teachers in those establishments more expensive. Many of those teachers will have attended schools within their own community and gone straight into Initial Teacher Education to complete an undergraduate degree which awards Qualified Teacher Status, and they then most likely will return to work in the sector in which they went to school.³⁰ This whole process, taking up to 19 years, could be experienced with limited or no contact with the other community. Yet, it is those very same teachers who may be required to support educational initiatives which aim to develop aptitudes and dispositions in young children to prepare them to grow up in a plural but divided society. Additionally, as a result of this high level of duplication, ITE is much more expensive to run than it need be.

Many reviews have been conducted into the ITE system in NI and all have recommended addressing that “fragmentation and duplication”, as Professor Pasi Sahlberg in the last review in 2014³¹ termed it. This could be best accomplished by reducing the number of providers and educating teachers together.

The new system will have fewer ITE providers in Northern Ireland – perhaps one for primary teachers and another for post-primary – and neither of them will serve only one section of the community. Pre-service teachers will be prepared for taking up positions in schools together, developing their pedagogic skills alongside others from all communities.

²⁵Gibson, F., Michael, G. & Wilson, D. (1991) *Discrimination and Education* <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/discrimination/gibson1.htm>

²⁶Milliken, M. (2020) *The Governance of Schools*. https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/640563/TEUU-Report-05-Governance-of-Schools.pdf

²⁷Balarin, M., Brammer, S., James, C. & McCormack, M. (2014) “*The School Governance Study*” *Business in the Community*. <https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/school-governance-study-bitc-bath-university2.pdf>

²⁸Valli, L., Stefanski, A. & Jacobson, R. (2018) School-community partnership models: implications for leadership, *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 21(1), 31-49.

²⁹Milliken, M. (2019) *Employment Mobility of Teachers and the FETO Exception*. https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/409458/TEUU-Report-01-Feto.pdf

³⁰Milliken, M. (2020) *Community division and student separation in Initial Teacher Education*.

https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/794235/Community-division-and-student-separation-in-Initial-Teacher-Education.pdf

³¹Sahlberg, P. (2014) *Aspiring to Excellence. Final Report of the International Review Panel on the Structure of Initial Teacher Education in Northern Ireland*. Available at <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/20454/1/aspiring-to-excellence-review-panel-final-report.pdf>

4.2.4 Inclusion

Under existing legislation (largely unchanged since 1947) all schools funded by the state are required to provide RE “based upon the Holy Scriptures... but excluding instruction as to any tenet which is distinctive of any particular denomination”. The curriculum needs to be radically reformed to offer something more fitting for a diverse, multi-faith, pluralistic society.

The responsibility for devising the RE syllabus currently lies with Churches’ Religious Education Working Group. This group is exclusively Christian. Its members are drawn from only four denominations – the Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church. It is unrealistic to expect such a panel to act as an objective arbiter for the teaching of morality, values and beliefs. It follows that, if the syllabus is to be revised then so too must the group that draws up the syllabus.

The involvement of the churches in teaching matters has also had an implication for the inspection of schools. Currently the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) is only entitled to inspect RE if it is specifically requested to do so by a school’s Board of Governors – a very rare occurrence. Thus, unlike every other statutory subject taught in schools, there is no systematic, quality control mechanism in place to assess the teaching of RE. Revisions to the arrangements for RE need to allow for inspection.

In addition, whilst it may have been generally acceptable to require schools to provide a daily act of collective worship in 1947, this seems very remote from most people’s experience in the 21st century. “A daily act...” has been ignored by large numbers of schools for many decades, leaving many schools technically in breach of the law. There is an urgent need for reform of this unrealistic expectation.

The legislation requiring schools to teach a Christian focused programme of RE and to conduct a Daily Act of Collective Worship need to be repealed. Church involvement in the drawing up of the RE specification needs to be revised in order that a genuinely pluralistic and inclusive programme of education can be developed, delivered and quality assured in practice.

4.2.5 Teaching

Citizenship at the heart of a new curriculum

As happened with earlier initiatives in NI aiming to promote reconciliation in schools (such as Education for Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage), the teaching of citizenship in post-primary schools has gradually diminished since its first introduction into the curriculum, consigned to the edge of a curricular system which tends to prioritise examination success.³²

Citizenship “aims to promote harmonious co-existence and foster the mutually beneficial development of individuals and the communities in which they live”.³³ As such, NI schools would seem to require it as a core part of the curriculum. Local and Global Citizenship (LGC) became part of the statutory curriculum for all learners in NI from 2007, with ‘local’ deliberately included to remove any possibility of avoiding local controversies. Since then, however, citizenship’s position in the curriculum has declined and “the diminishment of LGC in schools has created a critical curriculum gap in developing the civic and political literacy of young people”.³⁴ This is largely ascribed to citizenship education’s low status in schools which has been attributed to the forms of accountability for schools; these tend to value narrow examination performance, rather than programmes which aim to be transformative.³⁵

In a school fit for the future, the purpose of education will have been re-evaluated, and there will be a move away from a reliance solely on examination results to measure the success of a school. Citizenship will take its place at the core of the curriculum, developing young people as informed members of society, being prepared through their education to take an active role in social and political life.

Teachers prepared for raising and addressing controversial issues

Many people in NI have learned to avoid controversial issues in conversation to avoid giving offence, or to avoid possible confrontation;³⁶ in the old adage ‘whatever you say, say nothing’. Teachers are not exempt from this trait, and there is considerable research that suggests that few teachers address controversial issues in their teaching.^{37 38} While this may avoid situations which are uncomfortable for some, or which might give rise to strong opinions being expressed, if controversial issues are not addressed openly, then opportunities for learning, particularly in learning situations which are mixed, are not exploited.

³² Worden, E. and A. Smith, A. (2017) Teaching for Democracy in the Absence of Transitional Justice: The Case of Northern Ireland, *Comparative Education*, (53)3, 379- 395.

³³ De Coster, I., Sigalas, E., Noorani, S. and McCallum, E. (2017) *Citizenship education at school in Europe*. Eurydice Brief. Brussels: European Commission.

³⁴ O’Connor, U., Worden, E., Bates, J. and Gstrein, V. (2019) Lessons learned from 10 years of citizenship education in Northern Ireland: A critical analysis of curriculum change, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, (31)3, 479- 494.

³⁵ McAuley, C. (2022)

³⁶ Harris, R. (1972). *Prejudice and tolerance in Ulster: A study of neighbours and strangers in a border community*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

³⁷ Pace, J.L. (2019) Contained risk- taking: Preparing preservice teachers to teach controversial issues in three countries. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 47(2), 228- 260.

³⁸ McAuley, C. (2022)

It may be understandable why teachers do not take the opportunities to bring these issues into their classrooms. There are occasions when exploring potentially controversial issues is likely to increase problems of class management. They may cause distress to some learners, or provoke anger and confrontation. These are situations for which youth workers, in their engagement with communities at interfaces or in reconciliation programmes, are prepared. Teachers too require skills to be able to resource and deliver opportunities for dialogue, extending those discussions beyond the mundane into the controversial, and there is evidence that they do not currently have these.³⁹ Communities have to hear what other communities think, and individuals have to learn to negotiate difference rather than avoid it.

The schools we aspire to have in Northern Ireland will equip young learners with more nuanced understanding of the 'other' through opportunities to explore controversial issues in safe environments, supported by teachers who have developed the skills to do this. Teaching controversial issues will be a core part of Initial Teacher Education for all pre-service teachers and a popular option for Continued Professional Development of established teachers.

4.2.6 The School Estate

Single community schools rare or absent

This would be a less divided system of education. We divide most children, starting with 3-year-olds,⁴⁰ into schools which primarily serve just one community. The majority of children attend a school which is reflective of, and often closely under the influence of, the churches which their parents may or may not attend on a Sunday, but to which parents may claim to belong. The conditions in which separate education systems developed, with separate schools essential to provide support for communities that were otherwise under threat, no longer exist. With threats to communities much diminished, NI has changed. Bringing communities together in a single school works – there are many examples of it across NI, largely but not exclusively in Integrated settings. Outcomes include more moderate political views⁴¹ and an increase in mixed friendships.⁴² The positive impacts of cross-community schools have been seen to continue into adulthood.⁴³ Add to that the repeated polls and surveys which indicate widespread and sustained public support from across communities and across political parties for schools educating children together.⁴⁴ There are many advantages to having a system which does this. The financial advantages of avoiding duplication are the easiest to convey, although putting a firm figure on the amount that would be saved is challenging. Every estimate however, points to very significant savings, with more than £1million per week close to the median figure for many estimates.⁴⁵ In such a scenario little or no monies would need to be assigned to facilitate cross-community programmes between schools (Shared Education).

There are also significant, if less tangible, savings to be made in reducing travel to schools, with attendance moving to nearby schools rather than travelling past one or more schools to attend one which fits a particular denomination.⁴⁶ That also has very considerable environmental benefits. However, all of these benefits are tiny compared to the potential for building a less divided community with reduced prospects of divisions leading to unrest or worse. These social benefits may be immeasurable, but they too will bring economic benefits as this part of the UK becomes more attractive to inward investment.

These joint community schools will ensure that they are welcoming to all who attend, respecting all the cultures and providing opportunities to pursue a range of sports and other cultural activities. They will be inclusive of both of Northern Ireland's major traditions, but also should reflect the increased diversity across Northern Ireland, including the diversity of non-Christian religions, and also the decrease in religiosity overall.⁴⁷ These schools will welcome and celebrate all traditions and educate all learners in classrooms which are naturally mixed and inclusive.

³⁹Education and Training Inspectorate (2018) *The Shared Education Signature Project Evaluation Report*

<https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/shared-education-signature-project-evaluation-report.pdf>

⁴⁰Roulston, S. and Cook, S. (2020) *Pre-school education in Northern Ireland* https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/751800/TEUU-Report-06-Pre-School.pdf

⁴¹Tausch, N., Hewstone, M., Kenworthy, J. B., Psaltis, C., Schmid, K., Popan, J. R., J. R., Cairns, E. and Hughes, J. (2010) Secondary transfer effects of intergroup contact: Alternative accounts and underlying processes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 99 (2), 282-302.

⁴²McGlynn, C., Niens, U., Cairns, E. and Hewstone, M. (2004) Moving out of conflict: The contribution of integrated schools in Northern Ireland to identity, attitudes, forgiveness and reconciliation. *Journal of Peace Education*, 1(2), 147-163.

⁴³Hayes, B., McAllister, I., and Dowds, L. (2007). Integrated education, intergroup relations, and political identities in Northern Ireland. *Social Problems*, 54(4), 454-482.

⁴⁴Publitas (2021) *Northern Ireland Attitudinal Poll*. <https://view.publitas.com/integrated-education-fund/northern-ireland-attitudinal-poll>

⁴⁵Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (2016) *Cost of Division A benchmark of performance and expenditure*. <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/independent-audit-cost-division>

⁴⁶Roulston, S. and Cook, S. (2020) *Home-school travel in a divided system: at what cost?* https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/828903/TEUU-Report-12-Additional-Costs.pdf

⁴⁷Hayes, B.C. and McAllister, I. (2004) *The political impact of secularisation in Northern Ireland*. Institute for British-Irish Studies.

https://www.academia.edu/3152016/The_Political_Impact_of_Secularisation_in_Northern_Ireland?auto=download

A move to all-ability post-primary schools

One of the greatest catalysts for underachievement in NI appears to be academic selection.⁴⁸ In those countries where this had been a feature of the education system, it has now largely been abandoned. In NI, however, some political groupings and a middle class who perceive benefit in it for their children steadfastly refuse to countenance, or even to properly debate, its replacement. Academic selection labels those children who choose not to sit the tests or get poor results – around 50% each year – as ‘failures’ at age 11. Working class children are especially poorly served by this imperfect process.⁴⁹ Any attempts to revise the testing, such as incorporating the current two sets of tests into one, is merely tinkering with a flawed system which outside researchers have repeatedly described as socioeconomic rather than academic selection.⁵⁰ The result is that non-grammar schools have to work hard to build back confidence in learners. They have some success as the continued closing of the gap on grammar schools in GCSE performance attests.⁵¹ However, there remains a negative impact on underachieving, damaged children often from poor families concentrated in schools where social deprivation is high.⁵² Unsurprisingly, there are high rates of attrition from such schools and the result is the well-attested and persistent ‘long tail of underachievement’ in boys in both Protestant and Catholic working class communities,⁵³ something which has proven impossible to address effectively under the current system.

Removing academic selection would allow schools to reflect the full range of abilities which has been shown to increase overall outcomes across education systems, and reduce social inequalities. Some comprehensive-intake schools currently divide children into grammar and non-grammar streams. That practice has been shown to have limited value at best,⁵⁴ and there should be consideration of moving away from that as well.

A school fit for the future will be inclusive of all learners, irrespective of social class and ability. All learners will be given opportunities to achieve, and there will not be an arbitrary age when their futures will be decided on supposed ability. Learners will be educated together, learning from each other and contributing to a reduction in social divisions. Achievement will increase overall, and the proportion of children who leave school early will decline. Skill sets across the board will increase and this will help to develop economic prosperity in the longer term.

⁴⁸Roulston, S. and Milliken, M. (2021)

⁴⁹Perry, C. (2016) Academic Selection: a brief overview. Northern Ireland Assembly, Research and Information Service Briefing Note <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/27352/1/4816.pdf>

⁵⁰Henderson, L. (2020) Children's education rights at the transition to secondary education: School choice in Northern Ireland. *British Educational Research Journal*, 46(5), pp.1131-1151.

⁵¹Department of Education (2019) Year 12 and 14 Examination Performance at Post-primary Schools in Northern Ireland https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Year%2012%20and%20Year%2014%20Examination%20Performance%20at%20Post%20Primary%20Schools%20in%20NI%202018_19.pdf p.24.

⁵²Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland*. OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education, OECD Publishing.

⁵³Early, E., Miller, S., Dunne, L. and Moriarty, J. (2022) The influence of socio-demographics and school factors on GCSE attainment: results from the first record linkage data in Northern Ireland. *Oxford Review of Education*, pp.1-21.

⁵⁴Smyth, E. (2020) Educational Inequalities: The Role of Schools. Against the Odds-(In) *Equity in Education and Educational Systems*, 5, p.107

5. Summary & Considerations

Descriptions of how we got here, and the roots of a system divided into effectively Catholic and Protestant systems with a small, although still growing, number of Integrated schools, can be found elsewhere.⁵⁵ Similarly, the development of a system of academic selection at 11, still common across most of NI, is charted in other sources.⁵⁶ Suffice to say, we have a system which is extremely complex and the resultant duplication is costly, inefficient and unsustainable. The current organisation of schools is defended by those sectors of the community who feel that they stand the most to gain from the current divisions and who believe that they will lose were the divisions to begin to be removed. This does not always reflect the needs of those most impacted – the children and young people themselves. Upholders of the status quo include churches whose influence in all sectors of education in NI remains strong. It includes many of those politicians whose primary intention is presented as a protection of their own communities, even when those same communities might be better served with different policies.

The middle classes, whose hegemony over grammar schools seems unassailable, also resist change. And yet, for NI, *“the overall performance figures for pupils on average are on a par with or slightly below those for England. NI has one of the most unequal education systems in the world. It has the lowest proportion of working adults without a degree and the lowest rates of adult literacy in the United Kingdom”*.⁵⁷ Additionally, *“in 2017, 16.6% of NI residents aged 16 to 64 had no qualifications, compared to 8.0% of all UK residents.”*⁵⁸ It also has a much lower rate of enrolment into Higher Education than other parts of the UK and many other countries.⁵⁹ This adds up to a skills shortage in NI and, most likely not unconnected, the region has some of the poorest economic conditions and some of the lowest economic growth rates in the UK.⁶⁰ We can either accept these dismal statistics, which have resisted the tinkering of the past, or we can enact radical change.

On its own, this vision will not solve the problems of a divided system emerging from conflict. We need parallel and equally audacious improvements in housing, employment, social structures, government and elsewhere. But it is a start, and we do need to start somewhere. There are also hard decisions to be made – should we continue with a broadly faith-based system of education, or move to a secular one? How do we assure mixing in areas which are predominantly one community? How do we avoid creating local schools which reflect the disparities in local incomes and have little diversity?

We need radical change, not tinkering about the edges, and our communities need leaders who are brave enough to articulate the need for change to their communities and bring them along on a journey of improvement. This journey will be difficult for some but as a society we cannot afford, in all the meanings of the term, to retain the current system.

⁵⁵Milliken, M., Roulston, S. and Cook, S. (2021) *Transforming Education* <https://view.publitas.com/integrated-education-fund/transforming-education-in-northern-ireland-briefing-papers-collection/>

⁵⁶Roulston, S and Milliken, M. (2021)

⁵⁷Lord Rooker, debating the Education (Northern Ireland) Order (2006) [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2006-07-10/debates/06071026000001/Education\(NorthernIreland\)Order2006](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2006-07-10/debates/06071026000001/Education(NorthernIreland)Order2006)

⁵⁸NISRA (n.d.) <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/uk-national-wellbeing-measures-northern-ireland-data/education-and-skills>

⁵⁹NISRA (n.d.) School Leavers <https://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/PivotGrid.aspx?ds=10421&lh=73&yn=2008-2019&sk=130&sn=Children%20Education%20and%20Skills&yearfilter=2019>

⁶⁰Statista (2021) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1084737/eu-28-adults-with-tertiary-education-attainment/>



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