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# A review of existing methods used to assess demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland

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## Abstract

The education system in Northern Ireland (NI) is complex with the diversity of management structures reflecting religious affiliation and academic selection. Within the system, integrated education provides a mechanism to promote reconciliation among divided communities. Integrated education has been aided by legislation—most recently, the Integrated Education Act (NI) 2022, which places responsibility on the Department of Education and the Education Authority to encourage, facilitate and support integrated education. However, there is no standardised or agreed operational methodology on assessing demand for this. This study aims to examine the current approaches to assessing demand for integrated education in NI by collating existing evidence from key stakeholders and reviewing academic literature. Publicly available information was synthesised from the websites of key stakeholders, and a rapid literature review was conducted to identify methods used in NI and internationally to ascertain demand for education provision. The literature review returned limited results, and the review of key stakeholders' websites illustrated that although existing methods used in NI monitor support in principle for integrated education, they do not capture the full range of factors considered by parents when selecting a school. As a result, the findings indicate a mismatch between articulated preferences for integrated education, the availability

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of places in integrated schools, and the uptake of these. This study concludes that although existing methods provide part of the evidence jigsaw necessary to assess demand, alternative approaches must be considered to acknowledge the existing complexities within the education system and wider societal structures in NI.

#### KEYWORDS

education policy, schools, student centredness

## Context and implications

### Rationale for this study

The Integrated Education Act (NI) 2022 places responsibility upon the Department of Education and Education Authority to measure demand for integrated education, however there is no operational methodology for this.

### Why the new findings matter

Although the current methods provide part of the necessary evidence jigsaw to measure demand, these alone are not sufficient.

### Implications for policy makers

The findings from this study can be applied to Northern Ireland and other international contexts that practice a selective education system. The recommendations of this study can be used to assess demand levels for different school provisions, not only integrated education. As the Integrated Education (NI) Act 2022 requires the demand for integrated education to be assessed and reported upon, it is important that demand is accurately measured through robust methods. In addition, the consideration of factors that drive demand is essential to understand school choice within the wider societal context, thus ensuring a holistic approach in its examination.

## INTRODUCTION

The education system in Northern Ireland is complex and reflects the historical, political and social context of the region. Throughout the compulsory education system of primary (pupils aged 4–11 years) and post-primary (pupils aged 11–16 years) schools, the diversity of management structures closely reflects the religious segregation of pupils. This is exacerbated further at post-primary level where schools are segregated into grammar and non-grammar schools based on academic selection tests (McMurray, 2020), which aim to test the academic ability of pupils. Within the segregated system, integrated education intends to educate pupils of varying abilities from different religions and socio-economic backgrounds together.

In 1981, Lagan College, the first formally integrated school in Northern Ireland, was established. As with many of the early integrated schools in the 1980s, Lagan College was newly established, made possible through charitable or philanthropic funding (for example, BELTIE—the Belfast Charitable Trust for Integrated Education). However, the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 provided a statutory framework to encourage and facilitate the establishment of integrated schools and also guaranteed that this was financially underwritten/supported as long as the schools proved to be viable institutions.

Legislation that permitted the transformation of existing state-controlled schools—which, at that time, were de facto schools with pupils, staff and governors from an exclusively or almost exclusively Protestant community background—into integrated status had existed before Lagan College was established in 1981. This legislation was introduced and passed by the House of Lords in 1978, following the initiative of Lord Dunleath, a member of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the Dunleath Act was never successfully applied. The only meaningful attempt to transform an existing school into formally integrated status was undertaken by Throne Primary School in North Belfast in the late 1970s. Although the school had declining pupil numbers, the transformation effort failed because it did not genuinely seek change in how the school was managed. Subsequently Throne Primary School closed, and in its place and premises, Hazelwood Integrated Primary School opened in 1985. The most recent legislation of relevance is the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, which places responsibility on the Department of Education (DE) and Education Authority (EA) to encourage, facilitate and support integrated education.

Within the mix of school management structures that are often closely affiliated with religion, integrated education provides a mechanism to promote reconciliation among divided communities within Northern Ireland. Despite the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 emphasising the need to assess demand, there is currently no standardised or agreed operational methodology on how to do this. To this end, this study, funded by the Integrated Education Fund (IEF), aimed to examine how demand for integrated education is currently captured in Northern Ireland (Early et al., 2023). Methods used to assess demand for education provisions in the international context were also considered. Based on the results of this study, recommendations are provided which emphasise the need for a mixed methods approach and the recognition that the voice of children and young people should be central to these discussions. We argue that our study results have transferrable value for capturing demand for school types in other contexts beyond Northern Ireland, where parental choice is a factor in determining which school their children and young people attend.

## Northern Ireland background

The history of the conflict in Northern Ireland is complex and contested (McKnight & Schubotz, 2014). Between 1969 and 1998, over 3700 people were killed and tens of thousands were injured (Breen-Smyth, 2018). The conflict has often been described as being between two groups: Protestants and Catholics. However, rather than a focus on theological differences, the conflict can be seen as reflecting territorial allegiances (national identity), as well as constitutional and political preferences (Hayes & McAllister, 2013).

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998, symbolically marking the end of the conflict. The Agreement led to the devolution of government institutions, and the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive to facilitate a system of power sharing between political parties based on a consociational model (McGarry & O'Leary, 2004). However, the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive has been suspended multiple times, most recently between 2017 and 2020, and from 2022 to present day (December 2023), due to political differences between the political parties. The suspension of the Northern Ireland

Assembly and Executive has led to a political vacuum and an impasse for policy and legislation development that has affected all areas of society from education to health to housing.

Despite the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday peace agreement in 1998, the impact of the conflict is still evident in a range of economic, health and social issues (Gray et al., 2018). In particular, there are still high levels of spatial and social segregation between Protestants and Catholics in terms of where people live, are educated (schools), socialise and work. As a consequence, many young people in Northern Ireland continue to live lives that are largely segregated from people in the other main group, either living in geographically segregated spaces or, where this is not possible, adopting patterns of life that tend to avoid contact (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006). Such segregation is not necessarily the *cause* of conflict; nevertheless, that separation is likely to play a significant role in establishing and maintaining conflict. Other issues include persistent high levels of poverty and inequality in Northern Ireland. In 2021/22, 16% of people were considered to be in absolute poverty (before housing costs), and 18% of children were living in relative poverty (Department for Communities, 2023).

The demography of Northern Ireland is also changing and this is evidenced in two ways. Firstly, increased inward migration to Northern Ireland has resulted in a rise in the size and diversity of communities of people from minority ethnic backgrounds. Figures from the 2021 Census in Northern Ireland found that 3.4% of the population belonged to minority ethnic groups compared to 1.8% in 2011 and 0.8% in 2001. The 2021 figure is nearly double that of 2011 and four times the 2011 figure (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2022).

Secondly, the proportion of people not affiliating with any religious background has steadily increased. The annual Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey undertaken among adults aged 18 years and over, showed that in 2022, 28% of respondents did not identify with any religion. In 1998, the first year the NILT survey was undertaken, this figure was 9% (ARK, 2023a). According to the Young Life and Times survey (YLT) of 16-year-olds, the proportion of those in Northern Ireland who are not identifying with any religion was 38% in 2022, but only 12% in 2003, when the YLT survey started (ARK, 2023b).

## The structure of the education system in Northern Ireland

Integrated schools are situated within the complex education system in Northern Ireland, which is dually selective at post-primary level through academic selection (grammar/non-grammar schools) and religious affiliation. In 2022/2023, there were 1121 schools recorded in Northern Ireland, of which 93 were nursery schools, 782 were primary schools, 192 were post-primary schools, 39 were special schools, 14 were independent schools and 1 was a hospital school (Department of Education, 2023a). Of the 1121 schools, 70 were formally integrated schools (2 integrated nursery schools, 47 integrated primary schools and 21 integrated post-primary schools [Department of Education, 2023a]). This means that 6.2% of schools (70 out of 1121 schools) are integrated, and only 7% of pupils attend integrated schools.

Working across Northern Ireland to manage statutory formal and informal education provision are DE and EA. The responsibility for education policy mostly rests with DE, whose main statutory areas of responsibility are education provision for children aged 0–4, primary, post-primary and special schools (schools specifically organised to provide education for pupils with special educational needs) and the youth service (Department of Education, n.d.-b). The EA was established under the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014, and its role is to deliver education services, and to ensure that these services are available to meet the needs of children and young people (Education Authority, 2023a).

There are five types of school management structures (Robinson, 2023), which in part, reflect the religious and social segregation of society in Northern Ireland—see Table 1. *Controlled* schools are managed and funded by the Education Authority through a Board of Governors, which includes representatives from the Protestant churches. Subsequently, the majority of pupils attending controlled schools in 2022/23 affiliated as Protestant (primary schools: 56.6% compared to 7.9% of pupils who affiliated as Catholic; post-primary schools: 68.7% compared to 7.1%) (Department of Education, 2023b). *Voluntary* schools are often grammar schools and are funded directly by the Department of Education and managed by a Board of Governors. These schools can be under Catholic management or ‘other’ management. For those under Catholic management, the majority of pupils were Catholic, whereas in voluntary schools under ‘other’ management the majority of pupils were Protestant (Department of Education, 2023b).

*Grant-maintained* schools include Catholic Maintained schools which are managed by a Board of Governors who are nominated by trustees, most of whom are Catholic. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) is the umbrella body that employs the teaching staff of these schools and has an advocacy and training role for the Catholic Maintained school sector. In 2022/23, the majority of pupils attending Catholic Maintained schools were Catholic (primary schools: 93.1% compared to <1% of pupils who were Protestant; post-primary schools: 92.5% compared to 1.8%) (Department of Education, 2023b). Other grant-maintained schools include Irish Medium schools but not exclusively. At primary level, 69.8% of pupils attending other maintained schools were Catholic compared to 7% of pupils who were Protestant (Department of Education, 2023b). Figures for post-primary level were suppressed at the time of writing. *Independent* schools are funded by fees paid by parents and income from investments. A breakdown of pupils’ religious affiliation for this school management structure was not available at the time of writing.

Formally integrated schools consist of two types: controlled integrated and grant maintained integrated. *Grant-maintained integrated* schools are newly established schools whereas *controlled integrated* schools are established through the transformation of an existing controlled school into integrated status. The EA is the employer and management authority of controlled integrated schools. Grant-maintained integrated schools are

TABLE 1 School management structures in Northern Ireland.

School structure	Funder	Management
Controlled	Education Authority	Education Authority through a Board of Governors which includes representatives from the Protestant churches
Voluntary (often grammar schools)	Department of Education	Board of Governors
Grant-maintained (Catholic Maintained schools)	Department of Education	Board of Governors nominated by trustees, most of whom are Catholic and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
Other grant-maintained (includes Irish Medium schools)	Department of Education	Board of Governors nominated by trustees
Independent	Fees paid by parents and income from investments	Varies according to school
Integrated (controlled integrated and grant-maintained integrated schools)	Controlled integrated: Department of Education Grant-maintained integrated: Education Authority	Controlled integrated: Education Authority Grant-maintained integrated: Board of Governors



funded by the Education Authority and managed by a Board of Governors that is legally the employer and employing authority. Of the 70 integrated schools recorded in Northern Ireland in 2022/2023, 32 were controlled integrated schools and 38 were grant maintained (Department of Education, 2023a). In 2022/23, 32.9% of pupils attending controlled integrated primary schools were Protestant compared to 27.1% of pupils who were Catholic. The largest proportion of pupils attending controlled integrated primary schools affiliated with other or no religion (40.0%). The breakdown for controlled integrated post-primary schools was not available at the time of writing. In grant-maintained integrated primary schools, Catholic pupils made up a larger proportion of the cohort compared to Protestants (38.6% compared to 27.8%). Similar trends were apparent in grant-maintained integrated post-primary schools for the academic year 2022/23 (40.3% compared to 34.2%) (Department of Education, 2023b).

## Integrated education

Theoretically, the initial activists and pioneers of integrated education drew on contact theory approaches, in particular the work of the social psychologist Gordon Allport, who argued that interpersonal contact could help reduce stereotypes and improve inter-group relations, provided this contact was long term, with equal status for the groups involved, and that the respective groups worked together towards a common goal—such as, the ending of violent sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland (Allport, 1954). Some activists in the integrated schools movement also directly referred to the work of Carl Rogers, another American social psychologist, who argued that there was a direct correlation between low self-esteem and dogmatism. An increase in self-esteem would therefore, in turn, lead to better ratings of strangers—here the respective out-group in an integrated education setting—and the in-group, that is, one's own community (see Rowley, 1993). This was the response of the proponents of integrated education to critiques who argued that integrated education would only water down children's and young people's identities.

To date, terminology such as 'mixed', 'shared' and 'integrated' education are used interchangeably to refer to schools attended by large proportions of Catholic and Protestant children. However, these terms differ conceptually and in policy. For example, 'mixed education' often refers to schools that are attended by Catholic and Protestant pupils but are not of formally integrated status. 'Shared education' involves two or more schools educating pupils from different religious and socio-economic backgrounds together, while retaining their ethos and management structure (Department of Education, n.d.-a). Shared education was introduced to reduce divisions between the two main communities (Catholic and Protestant) in Northern Ireland (Connolly et al., 2013). In addition, its introduction aimed to reduce divisions according to factors such as socio-economic background, ethnicity and special educational needs (Connolly et al., 2013). Subsequently, shared education has the overall aim of promoting good relations between social groups, promoting respect for different identities and improving community cohesion (Department of Education, n.d.-a). The Shared Education Act 2016 embeds this in legislation and places responsibility on DE and EA to encourage, facilitate and promote shared education. Notably, shared education comprises different models, ranging from pupils from different schools travelling to one selected school to complete a shared class or activity, to two schools being located on one campus. Although these concepts are distinct from formally integrated education, the continual conflation of terminology can lead to issues relating to the measurement of parental demand for education provisions.

Initially, integrated education referred to schools set up with the specific intention and ethos of educating Protestant and Catholic pupils together (the Education Reform

(Northern Ireland) Order 1989). However, the concept of integrated education no longer only refers to schools attended by Protestant and Catholic pupils. An Independent Review of Integrated Education highlighted the need to review the definition of integrated education to reflect the changing demographic structure and diversity of Northern Ireland (Topping & Cavanagh, 2017). To address the shift in the socio-demographic constitution of Northern Ireland, highlighted earlier, the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 provides a definition of integrated schools which reflects the divisive structure of the education system. Integrated schools are defined as those that '*intentionally* [our emphasis] supports, protects and advances an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, between those of different socio-economic backgrounds and between those of different abilities'.

Attitudinal surveys have consistently suggested public support for integrated schools (Devlin, 2021). For example, the NILT survey in 2001 reported that 73% of respondents believed the government should encourage more integration in schools according to religion (ARK, 2002). The opinions of 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland reflected similar trends in the YLT survey, with 64% stating there should be more integration in schools in 2014 (ARK, 2015a). More recently, a LucidTalk attitudinal survey, funded by the Integrated Education Fund (IEF), was conducted in March 2023 and reported that 66% of respondents agreed that integrated schools should be the main model for the education system in Northern Ireland (IEF, 2023). In this survey, those aged between 18 years and 34 years showed the highest rate of support for integrated schools (73%).

## Assessing demand for integrated education

As noted, since the establishment of integrated education, there have been educational, societal and legislative changes in Northern Ireland that have affected its development. Consequently, this provides the impetus for ensuring reliable and robust indicators are utilised to assess and monitor the demand of integrated education, which exists within a largely segregated system.

The Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 stipulates that the DE is responsible for assessing and reporting on the demand for, and supply of, integrated education, and the EA is responsible for ascertaining the demand for integrated education. Despite Sections 5 and 6 of the 2022 Act referring to demand for integrated education, there is currently no agreed operational methodology on how to assess this, as reiterated in the Strategy for Integrated Education in Northern Ireland by the Department of Education (2023c).

The approach to assess demand to date has therefore resulted in a lack of a clear understanding and coherence in how demand can, or should, be measured; all of which is essential to assist future education planning. To this end, this study critically evaluates the current approaches to assessing demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland and provides recommendations for assessing demand in the future, which may transfer into other contexts.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research aims and questions

This study aimed to assess how demand for integrated education is currently captured in Northern Ireland (Early et al., 2023). Specifically, there were four research questions:



1. What are the current methods utilised by Northern Ireland stakeholders, and the associated strengths and limitations of the identified measures, in determining the levels of demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland?
2. Are there alternative methods for assessing parental/community demand and preferences used in other contexts and in other types of education systems that have the potential to be applied to ascertaining demand for integrated education in the Northern Ireland context?
3. Moving forward, what are potentially suitable methods of measuring demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland?
4. What are the implications for other contexts beyond Northern Ireland where parental choice is a factor in determining what school children and young people attend?

## Methods

To address Research Questions 1 and 3, this study conducted a targeted search of publicly available resources from key stakeholders in integrated education in Northern Ireland (Table 2). This included the DE, EA, IEF and Council for Integrated Education (NICIE). Following this targeted search, meetings with the DE, EA and NICIE were held to gain greater in-depth information on the measures and processes used by each organisation/department to assess demand for integrated education.

In addition, two rapid literature searches were conducted to address the research questions. Firstly, academic literature was searched to identify any additional methods used to assess demand in Northern Ireland that were not captured through the key resources outlined in Table 2. This literature search also informed discussions on the strengths and limitations of current approaches used to assess demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland (Research Question 1), as it identified factors that may be affecting the uptake of integrated education in Northern Ireland. A second literature search was conducted to specifically target the international context and potential measures used to ascertain demand for education provisions that could be applied to Northern Ireland (Research Question 2). In

TABLE 2 Key stakeholders and publicly available information utilised.

Stakeholder	Online, publicly available resource
Department of Education	School Census—School Enrolments & Available Places Source: <a href="https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolment-school-level-data-202223">https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolment-school-level-data-202223</a>
Education Authority	School Admissions—Criteria for pre-primary to post primary. First preference data is used to determine over/undersubscription rates Source: <a href="https://www.eani.org.uk/parents/admissions/applying-for-a-school-place">https://www.eani.org.uk/parents/admissions/applying-for-a-school-place</a>
Integrated Education Fund	Integrate My School website Source: <a href="https://www.ief.org.uk/integrate-my-school/">https://www.ief.org.uk/integrate-my-school/</a> Opinion Polls Source: <a href="https://www.ief.org.uk/our-work/research/2186-2/">https://www.ief.org.uk/our-work/research/2186-2/</a> Micro Polls Source: <a href="https://www.ief.org.uk/our-work/research/micro-polls/">https://www.ief.org.uk/our-work/research/micro-polls/</a> Community Conversations Source: <a href="https://www.ief.org.uk/our-work/publications/community-conversation-toolkit/">https://www.ief.org.uk/our-work/publications/community-conversation-toolkit/</a>
Council for Integrated Education	Expression of Interest forms Source: <a href="https://nicie.org/what-we-do/helping-integration-grow/start-a-new-school/eoi/">https://nicie.org/what-we-do/helping-integration-grow/start-a-new-school/eoi/</a>

turn, the results from these searches informed the discussion around Research Questions 3 and 4.

## Literature searches and search strategies

To address Research Question 1, two academic databases, ERIC (EBSCOhost) and Scopus, were searched in March 2023 and July 2023. The latter search was conducted to ensure there were no new relevant studies since the original search in March 2023. These academic databases were selected due to their comprehensive coverage and relevance to the research area, as well as their advanced searching and filtering. To identify whether there were additional methods used to assess demand in Northern Ireland, the following search string was implemented on both databases:

“integrated education” OR “integrated school” OR integrated AND education OR school AND “Northern Ireland” OR “parental choice”

The search was limited to title, abstract and keywords on both databases, and the records returned had to be written in English. On ERIC, the results were further refined according to geographical context due to the large number of initial records returned. In this database, geography was limited to the predefined option of ‘United Kingdom (Northern Ireland)’. No geographical restrictions were applied on Scopus. In addition, there were no restrictions placed on publication date or type on either database. Following this process, ERIC returned 409 records and Scopus returned 150 records. For studies to be eligible for inclusion in this review, it was essential that they focused upon any method that is used to assess demand for education provisions in Northern Ireland. The results on both databases were screened at title and abstract by two members of the research team and none met this eligibility criteria. Despite this, some studies returned in the searches, such as Morgan et al. (1993), identified factors that may influence parental choice of school for their child. These studies are included throughout to support the presented arguments but do not identify measures of assessing demand, which is central to Research Question 1.

Secondly, the databases (ERIC and Scopus) were also searched using a different search string to assess whether alternative methods for assessing parental/community demand for specific education provisions in other geographical contexts were evident, and whether these could be applied to the context of Northern Ireland (Research Question 2). To search the databases for eligible studies, the following search string was implemented:

“parental demand” OR method\* OR measure\* AND “integrated education” OR “integrated school” OR “charter school” OR “intercultural education” OR “inter-cultural school”

As above, this search was also limited to title, abstract and keywords, and records written in English on both databases. No further restrictions were placed on the searches. ERIC returned 138,432 records and Scopus returned 24 records. Due to the large number of records returned in ERIC, which was unmanageable to screen within the scope of this study, the phrase “parental demand for integrated education” was subsequently searched using SmartText searching. SmartText searching is a strategy available on EBSCOhost that allows natural language to be used (e.g., a phrase or sentence) to find relevant studies (EBSCO, 2018). This search strategy returned 2902 records, which were screened by the lead author. To be eligible for inclusion, studies must have focused upon the methods used to ascertain demand for education or school provisions by parents or the community in any geographical context. However, as above, this

search also returned limited results that were eligible for inclusion in this review due to the lack of focus on the methods used to ascertain demand for specific provisions. Finally, the authors also conducted a hand search of websites, such as the Department for Education and Skills (Republic of Ireland), to screen for potential documents that may be of relevance but were not returned on the academic databases. In sum, [Table 3](#) provides an overview of the methods used to address the research questions of the current study.

## RESULTS

The results provide a critical evaluation of the current methods used by Northern Ireland stakeholders to determine levels of demand for integrated education (Research Question 1). This is followed by an exploration of whether alternative methods in other contexts exist and whether these could be applied to Northern Ireland (Research Question 2).

### Current methods to assess demand for integrated education

The current methods used to assess demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland were identified through the publicly available information on the websites of key stakeholders. The academic literature search on Scopus and ERIC did not return any records that identified additional methods that are currently used to measure demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland. As a result, the seven existing methods to assess demand for integrated education, which are critically evaluated in this section, were identified from the sources outlined in [Table 2](#). These methods included first preference applications of pupils to schools; over/undersubscription of integrated school places; expressions of interest forms; registrations on the website '[integratemyschool.com](http://integratemyschool.com)'; attitude surveys and participatory research methods, and parental ballots on the integrated status of existing schools.

**TABLE 3** Summary of methods used to address research questions.

Research question	Method
1. What are the current methods utilised by Northern Ireland stakeholders, and the associated strengths and limitations of the identified measures, in determining the levels of demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targeted search of key stakeholders' websites.</li> <li>• Literature search (ERIC and Scopus)</li> </ul>
2. Are there alternative methods for assessing parental/community demand and preferences used in other contexts and in other types of education systems that have the potential to be applied to ascertaining demand for integrated education in the Northern Ireland context?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature search (ERIC and Scopus)</li> </ul>
3. Moving forward, what are potentially suitable methods of measuring demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recommendations are based on the findings from Research Questions 1 and 2</li> </ul>
4. What are the implications for other contexts beyond Northern Ireland where parental choice is a factor in determining which school their children and young people attend?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based on the findings from Research Questions 1, 2 and 3</li> </ul>

## Administrative data methods: First preference applications and subscription rate of schools

Administrative data collected by the EA can be used in two methods for assessing demand for integrated education: first preference applications to schools and the under/oversubscription rate of specific school types (inferred from the first preference application data).

Applications for pre-school/primary/post-primary school places in Northern Ireland are completed by parents of (pre)school aged children through the EA's centralised admissions portal. If schools receive more applications than places available, admissions criteria, determined by the Board of Governors, are applied to decide on the place allocation among pupils in primary and post-primary schools (Education Authority, 2023b). Importantly, some schools' admissions criteria stipulate that giving the school first preference is a prerequisite to be considered for a place. As a result, this may lead to a higher number of first preferences for a specific school in the admissions applications, or it may deter some parents from stating first preference due to the high level of competition for allocated places.

The oversubscription or undersubscription of integrated school places across the compulsory education system is determined by the first preference data of applications of pupils to schools collected by the EA's centralised admissions portal. Based on these data, the Executive Office (2023) reported that in 2020/21, 24% of first preference applications to post-primary integrated schools did not result in admission to that school, compared to 10% in 2013/2014. The report (ibid.) noted that this trend reflects an increasing oversubscription to post-primary integrated schools, which may be interpreted as an increased demand for integrated education. However, the increase in the number of first preference applications to post-primary integrated schools not resulting in admission may also be the result of an increase in the Year 7 (the final year of primary school) cohort size in recent years (Education Authority, 2023c). This means there may be more pupils applying for a limited number of school places, rather than structural or policy factors driving this disparity. Another potentially useful data source is the annual Northern Ireland School Census, published by the Department of Education, which outlines the number of approved enrolments, actual enrolments, supernumerary pupils and available places for each post-primary school.

## Expressions of interests and registration on 'integratemyschool.com'

Expression of interest forms, endorsed by NICIE, are one of the main methods to assess demand in development proposals (as part of the parental ballots process) and cases for change for schools in Northern Ireland. The forms are collected by bodies such as parent groups and transforming schools to gather information about the level of parental demand for integrated education provision in a geographical area. These forms gather information such as the names of a pupil and parent, address and contact details, and can also include questions on a pupil's date of birth, sex and community background. In addition, the website 'integratemyschool.com' is part of the IEF operation and provides parents with the opportunity to register their support for their child's school to become integrated. The collected data provides evidence of preliminary support for transforming existing schools to an integrated status. Such data may help inform a school's decision to explore transformation to an integrated status, however the extent of its influence is limited, as this method alone cannot determine a change in management structure.

## Attitude surveys and participatory research

Three types of attitude surveys have been utilised to record public opinion on, and level of support for, integrated education in Northern Ireland. These surveys are cross-sectional (e.g., the annual NILT survey), opinion polls, and micro polls (e.g., LucidTalk polls funded by the IEF at a specific time point), which can be used as an indicator of demand. Greater detail on these methods is outlined by Early et al. (2023).

When interpreting the data from attitude surveys, it is important to consider the sampling method, how the survey was conducted (e.g., online, phone or face-to-face), question wording, question structure, question order, who funded the survey and the purpose of the survey. By considering these factors, potential biases in the data collection and results can be identified (Kellner, 2018).

Deliberative polls and Community Conversations are participatory research methods that have been used to measure demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland. A deliberative poll explores what the public would think if they had been given the opportunity to learn about a specific policy issue, and to present their conclusions to decision makers. It consists of a random selection of people completing a face-to-face or telephone questionnaire before being brought together for a set of deliberations and discussions on the set topic. Participants are then polled again, using the same questionnaire to determine if their attitudes have changed (Fishkin et al., 2007).

Similarly, Community Conversations refer to an engaged group discussion about a topic of importance to a local community. These Conversations provide an opportunity for a diverse group such as community members and stakeholders to discuss and generate potential solutions to an issue facing the community (Bates & O'Connor Bones, 2021). Subsequently, this approach is community-focused and evidence-based which provides policy makers with an in-depth understanding of the community's view, which can lead to effective policy implementation. However, to be successful, representation and participation from all stakeholders is required (e.g., schools, parents, wider community and policy makers). Community Conversations fit within the framework of deliberative democracy (Bates & O'Connor Bones, 2021), and the need for greater citizen participation in decision-making and policy implementation, which was recognised in the policy framework New Decade, New Approach Deal (2020), which restored the devolved Assembly and Executive in Northern Ireland following its suspension in 2017 owing to the collapse in power-sharing between the two largest political parties.

## Methods written in legislation: Parental ballots

Parental ballots are a method used to assess demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland. The legislative basis for parental ballots is the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, which states that a school's transformation to integrated status can be initiated by either the Board of Governors, or a written request from parents of at least 20% of children registered at the school to the Board of Governors (NICIE, 2023; Smith, 2001). This method is structured as a secret ballot and postal vote, which states the new school status and date of the status change. At least 50% of parents are required to vote in the ballot for its outcome to be valid. For a school to begin the transformation process to integrated status, the majority of parents (over 50% who voted) are required to vote 'Yes' in the ballot. If the majority of parents vote 'No', the school retains its original management structure. Figure 1 illustrates this process.

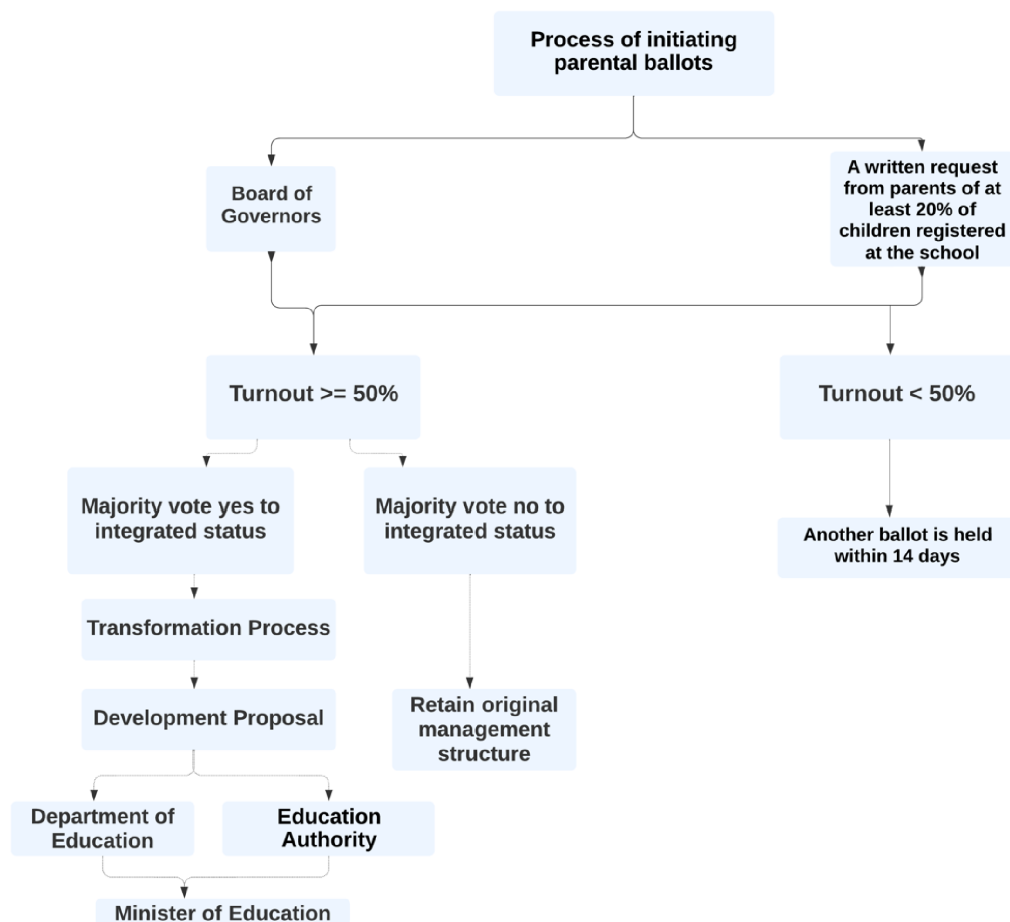


FIGURE 1 Process of parental ballots.

### Critical evaluation of existing methods

Although each method currently used to assess demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland has its own strengths and limitations, there are some cross-cutting factors that can be considered in their collective evaluation. For example, the following themes are relevant to all identified methods: the (lack of) representativeness of attitudes towards demand for integrated education from all community stakeholders, accounting for geographical variation, the extent of participants' understanding the nuances associated with integrated education, and the lack of understanding why people hold specific attitudes.

### Representativeness

Expression of interest forms, registrations on the website 'integratedmyschool.com', attitude surveys (sample dependent) and participatory research methods have the potential limitation of not providing a representative account of the demand levels for integrated education from all stakeholders in the community due to the methodological approach implemented. Specifically for participatory methods, the limited number of people involved in the process may exclude some who are directly affected by the issue, leading to an over- and under-representation of



particular groups. In addition, the website '[integratemy-school.com](https://www.integratemy-school.com)' does not measure demand from parents in the locality with children not yet in the education system or those residing in the locality with no children. Over- or under-representation of social groups is therefore a significant factor to consider with these methods as demand from non-parents in the community is only accounted for through attitude surveys or expression of interest forms.

On the other hand, parental ballots, first preference data, under/oversubscription data and attitude surveys have the potential to provide representative data on parental demand for integrated education. For example, first preference data records the preferences of all parents of (pre)school aged children and parental ballots include all parents directly affected by the potential change of school management structure. However, the requirement for parental ballots to be conducted via a postal vote may be a barrier for parents unfamiliar with postal surveys, parents with limited access to transport or posting facilities, and parents who are disengaged with postal votes; thus limiting the potential representativeness.

Representativeness can also be considered according to tracking attitudes and decisions of attending specific education provisions over time. Data from the outlined attitude surveys and participatory methods are cross-sectional, and therefore only provide insight into school preferences and decisions of parents with (pre)school-aged children at one time point. As a result, parental preferences or decisions cannot be tracked across the compulsory education system. Despite this, if a large, representative sample takes part in an attitude survey, subgroup analysis can be conducted to examine how/if attitudes towards integrated education differ across social groups (e.g., socio-economic background, rurality of residence and parental status).

In addition, depending upon the frequency of expression of interest forms being collected and submissions to the website '[integratemy-school.com](https://www.integratemy-school.com)', these methods have the potential to illustrate how demand remains consistent or changes over time in the locality. However, such trends must also be interpreted with caution if the expression of interest forms are not distributed systematically, meaning that the results are not representative of the local population.

## Centrality of respondents

In parental ballots, parental choice is central to the outcome of the school management structure, which directly affects them and their child(ren). This method provides parents with the ability to make an informed choice about their education provision preference as the Board of Governors must circulate information about the vote, including details of the new proposed school structure. Similarly, deliberative polls are a participatory process where individuals have the opportunity to make an informed choice once they have been provided with relevant information, as well as the opportunity to discuss the topic from different perspectives (Fishkin et al., 2007). However, this is a time-consuming process involving a limited number of people. In addition, there may be no consensus agreed on the discussed topic(s). In other methods such as Community Conversations, it is important that the framing of the Conversation aligns with the needs of the statutory bodies that have a relevant responsibility for the topic or there will be no effective policy implications, which may be considered a limitation of this method to assess parental demand. However, as noted, this method does fit with the need for greater citizen participation in decision-making and policy implementation.

## Social desirability

It is important to acknowledge that there can be a disjuncture between attitudes and behaviour. The anonymity of voting in parental ballots is likely to reduce social desirability bias

in responses. However, in other methods such as surveys, there is a risk for social desirability bias, even when they are completed in self-completion mode, but particularly when completed face-to-face. Respondents may feel that more integration between Catholics and Protestants is a desirable outcome, and they may fear that preferences for single-religion schools may be misunderstood as an anti-peace attitude. To illustrate as an example, one respondent to the 2003 YLT survey felt the need to justify their response to the question if they would prefer to send their children to a single-religion or mixed-religion school (ARK, 2003), by stating:

Although I would send my children to a Catholic school, I would always be tolerant of other religious views, I would discourage bigotry at all times. This is what my parents have done and I now feel indifferent but tolerant towards Protestants.

This response illustrates the social pressure to defend single-religion environments, so it is likely that there is a level of over-reporting of mixed-religion schooling preferences in attitude surveys.

## Robustness

As some schools stipulate in their admissions criteria that the school must be listed as first preference for consideration of a place, it raises the question of whether first preference data is a valid method of assessing demand. In addition, other administrative sources such as under/oversubscription data and the School Census have limitations in their robustness for measuring demand levels for school provisions due to the purposes for which the data are collected and the subsequent interpretation. For example, School Census data on available places cannot be used to equate to the number of 'empty desks' or 'spare capacity' in the school as the physical capacity of a school may not be accurately reflected in the enrolment number (Department of Education, 2023d). In addition, there may be disparities between the number of pupils initially allocated a place at a specific school and the final number due to processes such as appeals for exceptional circumstances or parents' assertion that a school has failed to correctly apply its admissions criteria (ibid.). Due to the complexities of the admissions system (e.g., variation in admissions criteria between schools and perceived likelihood of receiving a school place), these administrative data sources do not necessarily reflect local demand for integrated schools.

## Geographical variation

Under/oversubscription data, expressions of interest forms, the website '[integratemyschool.com](https://www.integratemyschool.com)' and some attitude surveys have the ability to gather data on the geographical variation in demand levels for integrated education, while acknowledging that demand may be higher in some areas due to the lack of integrated provision available. The extent to which the other methods can consider this geographical variation in demand is limited, which relates to the above issues on representativeness. However, with methods such as expression of interest forms and the website '[integratemyschool.com](https://www.integratemyschool.com)', there may be a disparity between expressing support for integrated education in an area and submitting applications to attend such a school. Subsequently, support for integrated education in the locality does not necessarily translate to demand for school places.

## Nuances of terminology

Attitude surveys and participatory research methods can highlight the lack of understanding from participants about the nuances associated with the term 'integrated education'. This is due to interchangeable terminology such as 'mixed education' and 'shared education' being used when referring to schools attended by large proportions of both Catholic and Protestant pupils (Hansson et al., 2013). As highlighted earlier, these terms are conceptually distinct in practice and policy. The lack of understanding by respondents, and the conflation of terminology, can impact all methods currently used in measuring the levels of parental demand for integrated education. For methods such as attitude surveys, the length of the survey can feed into this potential issue. For example, if there is limited space it may be difficult to explore the nuances in the required detail. This issue emphasises the need to ensure clear, accessible information is available for all stakeholders, including children and young people. However, for methods such as parental ballots and Community Conversations, which provide participants with information about integrated education, this limitation may be reduced or mitigated.

## Understanding why people hold certain attitudes

Finally, the methods currently used to assess demand for integrated education provide data on people's attitudes but not why these views are held. This highlights a limitation of the present focus on predominantly quantitative measures to ascertain demand levels and indicates the need for a greater holistic approach to ensure an in-depth understanding of demand across Northern Ireland is captured.

## Non-methodological limitations

The current methods also encompass non-methodological limitations that can be considered in their evaluation. These limitations are centred on the failure to capture the reasons for parents selecting integrated schools for their child's education, such as ideological preference (Morgan et al., 1993), school reputation, school leadership, pastoral care quality and admissions criteria. School quality is also a pertinent factor affecting parental choice (Morgan et al., 1993). Gallagher and Smith (2002) reported that based on the 1999 NILT survey, parents did not send their child to an integrated school because the facilities at other schools were better. In addition, the influence of proximity and convenience of the school to the pupils' home or parents' workplace is not captured in existing measures (Morgan et al., 1993). Roulston and Cook (2021) reported that integrated schools are not convenient for many households in Northern Ireland, with <11% living within one mile (ca. 1.6 km) of an integrated primary school, and 22% of households are more than 6 miles (ca. 10 km) by road from the nearest integrated primary school. A similar trend is apparent at post-primary level (Roulston & Cook, 2021). Therefore, despite integrated schools having a lower proportion of pupil places unfilled compared to non-integrated schools across primary and post-primary level (Department of Education, 2021), there are various reasons why this may be the case, which are centred on these factors which may influence parental choice of school.

## International context

Mixing of different social groups in education is practiced in other contexts that have experienced conflict and social group divisions, such as Israel and Bosnia-Herzegovina. For example, bilingual/binational schools were established in Israel in 1983 to educate Jewish and Arabic communities together. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the education system also reflects segregation, with only one district (Brčko) practising ethnic mixing in schools. However, as noted, there is conflation between the terminology of mixed schooling, shared education and integrated education. In these contexts, mixing in education aims to develop egalitarian opportunities, respect and co-operation between pupils from different backgrounds (Bekerman et al., 2009; Bekerman & Nir, 2006; Osler & Pandur, 2019). This resonates with the purpose of formally integrated education in Northern Ireland and the definition of an integrated school provided by the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. However, examples in the international context are geographically, temporally and culturally specific. In particular, these contexts do not necessarily share all three criteria of integrated schools in Northern Ireland (culture/religion, socio-economic background and abilities).

The academic literature searches did not return any records that identified additional or alternative methods that are currently used in other geographical contexts or had the potential to be used to measure demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland. In the international context, research predominantly focuses on parental decisions and reasoning for selecting specific school provisions, rather than the methods used to ascertain demand for education provisions. This highlights a substantial gap in the academic literature and reflects the international relevance of the current study for contexts where parental choice is a factor in determining which school their children and young people attend. Despite the lack of clear measures for assessing demand for education provisions in the international context, some studies did yield valuable insights into the factors that shape parental decision-making. For example, Yahya et al. (2012) reported that parents in Israel opted to send their child to a bilingual school, not because of its peace-promoting, ideological framework, but rather to provide their children with a higher quality education than what was available in their local area. In addition, geography, school culture and race intersected to influence the decision-making process of parents when choosing a school for their children in Australia and the United States of America (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003; McCarthy, 2016).

## DISCUSSION

This study has identified and critically evaluated the current methods used to assess demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland. The evidence suggests that there is a mismatch between articulated preferences for formally integrated education (for example, as evident from commissioned LucidTalk polls or the annual NILT survey), the availability of places in integrated schools and the uptake of these places. There are area-specific and school-specific differences, whereby in some areas and schools the actual demand for integrated education cannot be met and schools are heavily over-subscribed, whereas in other areas, places in individual schools remain unfilled and there appears to be no sustainable demand for integrated education. It can subsequently be argued that 'demand' is a complex issue in its definition and operationalisation. Such arguments apply not only to the education context of Northern Ireland but also countries beyond this region that practice an education system that upholds parental choice as a central component in determining the school attended by pupils.

Demand can be viewed as reflecting parental choice, which was legally introduced and emphasised in the 1989 Education Reform Order for Northern Ireland. Parental choice is

also a right under Paragraph 3 within Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that their child will receive (United Nations, 1948). The centrality of parents in the methods used to assess demand can be further understood according to the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 (Article 44) which states that pupils will be educated according to their parents' wishes so far as it is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training, and in avoidance of unreasonable expenditure. In addition, the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 (Section 6[3]) states that demand for integrated education refers to the extent to which parents would prefer their children to be educated at grant-maintained integrated or controlled integrated schools rather than schools of other management structures. However, the concept of parental choice requires critical evaluation. For example, 'choice' is not equally distributed, with schools developing their own admissions criteria to admit pupils, up to the maximum number of places set for each school. Although attitudes surveys show support for integrated schools, school admissions criteria, oversubscription and structural issues means that many parents do not obtain their preferred option. In addition, for some families in certain geographic areas and in disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances, there can be little choice of schools with different management structures (Roulston & Cook, 2021).

This means that parents with positive dispositions towards integrated education, may still not choose to send their children to such a school because pragmatic requirements and practical advantages such as locality, convenience and school quality outweigh those of their actual school preference. On the other hand, for others, the fact that a school has an integrated status may play no role at all when they choose this school over alternatives. 'Demand' for integrated education can therefore only be understood in this context of pragmatic decisions and limited choices, and demand for integration needs to be decoupled from the notion that it must, somehow, be related to specific social attitudes. It may well be, but it may equally not be. Demand for 'integrated education' is intertwined with demand for good schooling across the education system, as well as pragmatic, logistic and structural influences. In that sense, demand for integrated education does not exist in a vacuum, it is dependent on the choice of (alternative) schools available; it is a contextualised demand. The complexity of this process is also likely to apply to contexts outside of Northern Ireland, where multiple education provisions are available for pupils to attend, and parental choice is central to deciding which school is attended.

However, it should be acknowledged that parental demand for specific education provisions is not always the same as societal demand. For example, demand for grammar schools is high in Northern Ireland but international evidence clearly indicates that societies with comprehensive education systems fare much better overall, with lower proportions of underachieving students and higher equality rates (Farquharson et al., 2022; OECD, 2012; Pfeffer, 2015). Consequently, although meeting 'demand' can be of interest in certain situations, such as demand for integration in divided societies, meeting some other types of 'demand' in isolation, such as academic selection, could have potentially unintended negative consequences. Despite this, the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 states that integrated schools educate pupils of different abilities together. For integrated schools to be 'all ability', it is important that higher achieving pupils are not excluded. To this end, some integrated schools in Northern Ireland, such as Lagan College, operate a dual entrance policy whereby some of the pupil cohort are admitted into a grammar stream, provided they achieved the required transfer test results, whereas the other stream enrolls pupils using criteria that is not based on academic selection. More recently, due to parental demand for a grammar stream in integrated schools, other integrated settings such as Strangford Integrated College have been approved to use academic selection as part of the admission criteria for a proportion of the pupil cohort.



With this in mind, the third research question of this study asks what potentially suitable methods of measuring demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland in the future are. This relates to the final research question that addresses the implications of the findings for other contexts beyond Northern Ireland. Considering Research Question 3, this study recommends that the best approaches require a greater child/young person-centred focus to ensure that the voices of those central to the education system are heard. There are two overarching areas this study recommends to assess demand for integrated education in the future: firstly, improving how demand for integrated education is captured through research methods and the EA's schools admissions portal and, secondly, promoting a greater understanding of integrated education and its unique contribution to the education system in Northern Ireland to understand demand specific to this school structure.

## Improving how demand for integrated education is captured

This study identified various methods used to assess demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland. These included the use of administrative data collected from EA's schools admissions portal and research methods, such as attitudinal surveys (e.g., the annual NILT survey). These methods have significant strengths that contribute to the evidence needed to assess demand levels for integrated education. However, they could also be better utilised to measure demand more effectively in the future (outlined below), thus addressing Research Question 3.

The schools admissions portal reflects an administrative data source that has the ability to capture the factors that influence school choice from parents of (pre-)school aged children in Northern Ireland. For example, a question that considers the factors that underpin a parent's decision as to which school is named as first preference (from pre-school to post-primary) could be included on the portal. This would provide an opportunity to understand what parents prioritise when selecting a school for their child at different stages of the education system, allowing a disaggregation between factors such as school reputation, outcomes, locality and management structure, among others. Permission and ethical approval would be required for such data to be collected via this portal, and arrangements would need to be put in place to store such data in line with data protection legislation (such as GDPR).

Attitude surveys provide a potentially representative insight into support for integrated education and the extent to which demand for school provisions is evident across social groups in Northern Ireland. However, a fundamental issue with how demand for integrated education is currently measured through attitude surveys is that it is done as if the decision for or against integrated education is a one-dimensional decision, which it is not. Considering Research Question 3, future ways of capturing demand therefore have to be cognisant of the complexity of school choices when capturing reasons why parents choose, or express preference for, specific schools or school types. This also applies to the contexts outside of Northern Ireland. Specifically in Northern Ireland, it needs to be acknowledged that an integrated school status is likely to be just one of many reasons why a school is chosen, or it may not be a factor at all. Preference for or against mixed religious schools or integrated education in the way it is presently captured should not therefore be seen as a reliable indicator for demand. Apart from the inability to evidence causality, social desirability bias can also be at play when the question of preference for or against integrated education is detached from other factors that impact on school choice. People are more likely to express a preference for integrated education, as in the context of the Northern Ireland Peace process, this will be seen as a socially desirable pathway or 'the future' of education. In practice, however, this preference of integration may, for reasons discussed above, not translate into actual school choice, even if spaces



in a suitable integrated school would be available. Future ways of assessing demand for integrated education should therefore attempt to take account of the complexity of school choices and all the factors involved.

However, as demand is a complex issue, not only in Northern Ireland but in the international context, quantitative measures such as those outlined above will not alone provide an adequate understanding of parental demand for integrated education. To address Research Question 3, considering qualitative or mixed methods approaches that provide an opportunity to understand the reasons for parental decisions are therefore required. For example, interviews and focus groups can help identify and further explore the decisions parents make when identifying their school preferences. Community Conversations can be a useful method when focusing on a specific issue, for example, education delivery in a specific area and whether a new integrated school could be established and would be likely to have sustainable enrolment. Although qualitative methods, such as Community Conversations, involve a relatively small number of people, their outputs can be supplemented by survey data, thereby allowing the input of a larger number of participants, whilst reflecting the flexibility of combining potentially suitable methods to measure demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland (Research Question 3). This, again, highlights the strengths of current methods, which can be considered in conjunction with other methods to provide a greater, robust indication of demand for integrated education.

## Promoting a greater understanding of integrated education and its unique contribution

Assessing demand for integrated education, or any other education provision, is not and should not be viewed as a one-dimensional issue in Northern Ireland or contexts outside of this geographical region. As outlined, integrated education is situated within the wider education system in Northern Ireland, which reflects segregation according to religion and academic ability. Given the complexities of the education system in Northern Ireland, a key question to consider when assessing demand for schools is whether parents fully understand the nuances of each type of school, or indeed, the difference between 'mixed' or 'integrated' schools. It is therefore necessary to prioritise the availability and accessibility of information on what integrated education is to ensure parents understand what it provides, and how it compares with other forms of education provision. The schools admissions portal could be central to informing parents and increasing their understanding and knowledge of the education system in Northern Ireland. For example, the portal could potentially include an information sheet on the school management structures in the education system that clearly indicates the variation between each of these. This would assist parents in making an informed choice about school preference.

However, within this process children and young people are central. In 2022/23, 348,925 children and young people were registered in schools in Northern Ireland (Department of Education, 2023a). The current information and legislative focus are almost exclusively targeted at parents and their demand. Although the views of children and young people may be taken into account within individual families, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1990) states that children have the right to be included in all decisions affecting their lives, and school choice is arguably one of the main decisions. Consequently, there is a strong case to reach out to children and young people directly with accessible information about school choices. In addition, relating the discussion back to Research Question 3, it is important to capture the views and experiences of children and young people in the current and future methods used to assess demand for integrated education.

Overall, these recommendations (and Research Question 3 more broadly) must be considered in relation to political will and area planning, within which the preferences of children and young people should also be recognised to align with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The current evidence from the Young Life and Times survey consistently shows approximately half of all 16-year-olds would prefer mixed-religious schools in Northern Ireland (55% in 2014, ARK, 2015b). A strong case to proactively encourage the growth of religiously mixed and integrated schools to meet the demand from young people is therefore evident.

Currently, Northern Ireland remains a largely segregated society as reflected through residential neighbourhoods. The largely religiously segregated education system is also a direct consequence of this neighbourhood segregation. Local schools will therefore reflect the local population. Formally integrated education is only likely to grow in line with actual demand if, over time, the proportion of segregated housing is reduced. This requires political will and vision beyond school planning. At present, the Integrated Education (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 permits the opening of new integrated schools or transfer of existing schools to integrated status if it meets area planning demands. For this to materialise, a joint-up approach in area planning is required, which treats school planning within the context of wider area planning of other mixed religion and integrated services and facilities, including housing, leisure centres, parks and public transport. Environmental sustainability should also be central to these discussions as at present children who attend integrated schools often experience longer commuting journeys to and from school, given that only a small proportion of households live in close proximity to integrated schools (Roulston & Cook, 2021). However, in light of current demographic trends and financial pressures on public funding, the opening of new integrated schools will almost inevitably affect enrolment rates at other local schools—potentially leading to school closures. A transfer of existing controlled or Catholic maintained schools into integrated schools that have long-term sustainable enrolment may also affect the enrolment of other local schools. These arguments are context dependent and will vary according to local school provisions and demand in an area.

The final research question of this study considers the implications of the findings for other contexts beyond Northern Ireland, particularly in countries where parental choice is a factor in determining which school their children and young people attend. This study reflects the challenges in assessing demand for education provisions in a country that provides a choice to parents and pupils, and this is likely to resonate in other contexts that practice education systems with a selective component, or those that face wider social integration challenges. Assessing the methods used to measure demand for education provisions, as evidenced in this study, provides an opportunity to critically reflect on current practices in other contexts, while allowing practical recommendations to be developed to aid future measurement tools with high levels of reliability and validity. The evaluation of methods can also ensure the preferences of diverse social groups in a country, especially those experiencing social divisions, are represented. However, it is acknowledged that the methods and recommendations presented in this current study may need adapting to be successfully implemented in other contexts that experience their own unique challenges to education and its placement in wider society. Finally, the findings of this study highlight the importance of ensuring that the processes, methods and funding required to measure the effectiveness of an education provision is embedded in the corresponding policy at its inception to ensure evaluation can begin imminently. By doing so, the ability to determine the strengths, limitations and demand for a specific education provision is accommodated longitudinally and/or cross-sectionally. This applies to all contexts that practice education systems with variation in the available education provisions. In sum, by addressing Research Question 4, the findings of this study can be utilised to facilitate the sharing of best practices between contexts to promote more robust evaluations of demand for education

provisions. In addition, this study addresses a gap in the current international evidence on methods used to assess demand for education provisions.

## CONCLUSION

The methods reviewed in this study provide some useful information for assessing demand for integrated education, and when pieced together, provide part of the jigsaw of evidence necessary to assess demand. For example, the existing methods illustrate that there are different levels of demand that can be captured: parent-level, school-level and community/societal-level.

However, as highlighted, there are limitations that must be acknowledged. Underpinning the success of assessing demand appropriately in the future is ensuring a definition of 'demand' is provided to allow relevant measurement according to Sections 5 and 6 of the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. This will also ensure that any action aligns with policy and statutory requirements. In addition, overarching limitations exist with the current measures, particularly the inability to record the full range of factors considered by parents when selecting a school for their child. In addition, the centrality of parental preferences for education provisions limits the extent to which current methods recognise the preferences of children and young people who are directly affected by the legislation and measures used to assess demand.

This study therefore emphasises the need for a mixed-method framework for assessing demand for integrated education (or other education provisions) in the future, which includes methods such as administrative data, surveys, focus groups and Community Conversations. Finally, central to the education system are children, young people and their families. It is therefore a necessity to ensure they understand the complexities of the education system and the school structures available to them. It is only by fully comprehending all the options, can parents, children, young people and policy makers make fully informed decisions, not only in Northern Ireland but across geographical contexts that practice education systems with different school structures.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data presented in this paper are secondary sources that are freely accessible online.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was based on publicly available secondary data. No ethical issues were involved in the study.

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