

Together: Celebrating Diversity in Our Schools

19 September 2023 | Malone House, Belfast

SUMMARY REPORT

Northern Ireland is becoming an increasingly diverse society, and many schools are striving to celebrate that diversity in their everyday practice. As part of [Good Relations Week 2023](#), the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) brought together a variety of organisations and schools to share effective practice on diversity and inclusion but also to highlight where there may be room for improvement.

We'd like to extend our huge thanks to Peter Osborne (IEF Chair) for chairing the event and to all the contributors:

- Eileen Chan-Hu, CRAIC NI
- Kate Diamond, Solás
- Mark Douglas, Botanic Primary School
- Jo McParland, Cara-Friend
- Catherine McHugh, St Patrick's College Dungannon
- Susan Jones, Fort Hill Integrated Primary School
- Lisa Dietrich, Community Relations in Schools
- Sean McNamee, St Paul's Primary School Belfast
- Mary Potter, Council for Integrated Education
- Eimear McKeown joined by pupils, New-Bridge Integrated College
- Portadown Integrated Primary School

Event participants represented a range of organisations and sectors and we're grateful for everyone's contributions to discussions and feedback throughout the day.

A summary of key points from the presentations, participant discussions and the feedback is included below.

For more information about the event, please contact: jessica@ief.org.uk | 028 9069 4099



Effective Practice: Inclusion, Understanding and Respect in Our Schools

This event aimed to provide a snapshot of the important work that is ongoing in schools and communities to celebrate the diversity of our children and young people – not just in terms of culture and religion but also different abilities, socio-economic backgrounds, gender etc. Each contributing organisation and school presented examples of effective practice linked to their individual contexts and circumstances. We hope that the event encouraged reflection on how these examples can be useful for school communities and organisations that support schools across Northern Ireland.

The contributors emphasised the importance of celebrating and encouraging conversations on diversity within school communities as well as wider society. They highlighted the key role played by teachers in supporting pupils and their families, helping the integration of refugee/asylum seeker children and facilitating wider diversity and inclusion work. The need to engage with parents to break down barriers was also highlighted as an essential aspect of inclusion and celebration of diversity within school communities. Not least, the event also highlighted the importance of hearing and listening to the voices and experiences of children and young people in these conversations.

The discussions and feedback confirmed that there is a need for more awareness-raising among all schools of the work and support ongoing and available across Northern Ireland on inclusion and diversity that they may be able to avail of.

A number of examples of effective practice were highlighted in participant feedback and discussions, some of which are included below:

- The 'Personality Wheel' and the 'Dimensions of Diversity' diagram introduced by Eileen Chan-Hu ([CRAIC NI](#)), the advice to review school policies, to learn about ourselves in order to understand other cultures, and to acknowledge how much better off we are because of our society's diversity.
- [CRIS](#)' Buddy Up programme and bringing together pupils as well as teachers.
- [Cara-Friend](#)'s LGBTQIA+ Inclusive Schools' Charter and training for schools, including the 'All Out' Anti-bullying Workshop.
- [Solás](#)' work with/support for children and young people and their families, highlighting that 'diversity' and 'inclusion' also applies to learning needs, and the importance of volunteers to deliver its programmes.
- [NICIE](#)'s support for diversity and inclusion programmes in Integrated schools, including 'A Bias Busting for Beginners – An Introduction to Anti-Bias in Education'. Although primarily aimed at Integrated schools, this resource is available to all schools and anyone who is interested through the [online version](#).

In terms of the contributions from schools, participants for example highlighted:

- The celebration of CNR/PUL cultures in addition to other cultural traditions to aid integration with local communities and increase mutual awareness.
- Schools' intergenerational, community relations and anti-bullying work and projects.
- The use of a Culture Trail and implementation of a 'Diversity' calendar.
- Schools driving to food banks to help ensure that pupils have access to food.

- Botanic Primary School's IISC (Induction and Intensive Support Class) programme introduced to meet the needs of newcomer pupils and their families.

Outside the contributing organisations and schools, a number of organisations and initiatives were highlighted as doing great work in terms of celebration of diversity in schools:

- Shared Housing was highlighted as providing important support to both schools and local communities in terms of diversity and inclusion. Connswater Homes' support for Integrated College Glengormley was mentioned as one example.
- The Theatre of Witness and other initiatives at the Playhouse in Derry/Londonderry was mentioned as helping to bring people together across divides, looking at commonalities and building a shared future.
- Irish Football Association and Gaelic Athletic Association partnership.
- Morton Community Centre in South Belfast and their work with refugees.

In addition, comparing practice in Northern Ireland with other contexts was recommended as a useful tool for informing practice.

Integrated Education was also mentioned in the feedback, highlighting that Integrated schools across Northern Ireland are examples of effective practice regarding their approaches to the celebration of diversity and difference.

Room for improvement?

Participants and contributors were all asked to highlight any areas where they thought improvement might be needed regarding how diversity is celebrated in our schools.

It was concluded that there are many factors that make diversity and inclusion work complex in school settings. For instance, there are many pupils who need support related to Special Educational Needs and mental health. There is also a growing proportion of pupils who speak other languages and come from different nationalities. In addition, the continued presence of peace walls and community division in many areas was mentioned as a significant complicating factor.

There was a call for clear and quantifiable examples and evidence of how work in/with schools is leading to positive impacts and outputs as a way to ensuring that this work is valued sufficiently by government.

A few themes emerged throughout the event regarding potential areas for improvement:

Teachers/school staff

- Educational professionals are overworked and overwhelmed.
- Teachers shouldn't be expected to assume roles that they aren't trained for. As one participant noted, there is uncertainty of what teachers will face on any given day and what role they will be asked to assume – "teacher, parent, social worker, police officer, caretaker etc".
- There is a lack of staff development and support for teachers to access specialised and appropriate training. Some noted that diversity training is sometimes 'squeezed in' or not covered at all and that not enough time is allocated to planning for effective practice.
- Separate teacher training institutions, i.e. St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College.

Policies and procedures

- Policies should be reviewed to ensure that they work and are appropriate for the setting.
- Schools should be provided with clear guidance on policies regarding diversity and inclusion practice.
- Policies should enhance, protect and ensure equity.
- BOG/leadership should be held accountable and trained to devise policies.

Finance

- Our schools are not sufficiently resourced.
- The effectiveness of funding is not appropriately measured and evaluated.
- The most identifiable barrier to equality in educational settings is money and funding.
- The things considered 'extra' are the first to get cut. Many great projects and organisations have been impacted by funding cuts, including projects working to fill attainment gaps within schools and supporting disadvantaged children and young people, primary school counselling, the Engage programme etc.
- Education should be delivered for young people, not for budget.
- Many projects vital to the education of our children and young people relies on the work of volunteers.

Cultural and community diversity

- It needs to be recognised that cultural diversity is not limited to religion, costumes etc. but also includes lived experiences.
- There is a lack of inclusive language, e.g. the term 'newcomers' may cause offense.
- There is a lack of diversity among role models.
- Language barriers need addressed to ensure that education is accessible to all.
- Celebrations associated with Protestant culture are often negatively perceived.
- All within a community do not want to celebrate the same thing – celebrations can be important to some but not to others. There is a lack of conversation around this within school communities.
- There is insufficient access to Integrated schools to meet the demand of parents.
- Schools involved in Shared Education most often do not consider the options of amalgamation or Integration.
- Newly Integrated schools can face challenges due to intentional intimidation, such as flags placed outside the school.

Parents

- Parents' values, beliefs and views can make exploration of some aspects of diversity more difficult in schools.
- Many parents choose schools based on academic reputation.

Religion

- Religion in schools needs to be discussed.
- There is a lack of accommodation for those of 'no religion'.
- Students opting out of RE and religious events can contribute to organisational difficulties and conflict within a school.

- A Christian ethos and perspective can be perceived by some as a barrier for Integrated schools.

Additional barriers

- Intergenerational trauma
- Insufficient facilities on many school premises to meet provision with regards to bathrooms (i.e. inclusion/provision for all including LGBTQIA+).
- The effects of social media on how children view themselves and others in terms of culture, disability, body image etc.
- Many families and children arrive in Northern Ireland with significant levels of trauma.

Ways to overcome potential barriers?

A range of recommendations regarding how inclusion and diversity practice in our schools can be improved were highlighted during the presentations, small group discussions and in feedback following the event. Included below are some examples of these.

- Schools need to engage with parents regarding values and beliefs.
- Examples of effective practice in schools and organisations working with school communities need to be recognised and highlighted.
- Awareness needs to be raised of the importance and benefits of diversity.
- It needs highlighted that knowledge is a key building block regarding respect and inclusion.
- Schools need to engage with the local community and celebrate 'local' culture as well as other cultures and religions.
- Encouraging supportive adults in the life of children.
- Organising events to help minority groups have their voice heard and valued.
- Schools should utilise available support from professionals, e.g. NICIE, Cara-Friend, CRIS and other organisations offering training, resources and advice.
- Government should ensure that funding is made available for worthwhile projects.
- Schools should ensure that pupils' preferred name and pronouns are utilized, that they adopt a gender neutral uniform policy, gender neutral and inclusive toilets and changing facilities, provide training for staff and pupils, ensure they know how and when to engage with parents on LGBTQIA+ issues and achieving the LGBTQIA+ Inclusive Schools' Charter
- Early intervention and support should be provided to children in mainstream primary schools across NI with additional educational needs but who are NOT receiving statutory support and are therefore at risk of educational failure, further exclusion and/or isolation.
- Schools should provide opportunities for pupils to have meaningful and sustained engagement with those who are different from themselves, to learn about and with others, and have access to education which respects and gives expression to their individual identities, while providing opportunities for them to explore the diversity of the world in which they live.
- Government should ensure that there is sufficient Integrated Education provision to meet the demand of parents and communities.

Conclusion

We were delighted with the large number of contributions and perspectives shared at our event, highlighting some of the excellent work that is going on to ensure that diversity is celebrated within our school communities. As one participant noted, the wide range of speakers indeed demonstrated “the great work being done around diversity in schools/organisations”.

There was a clear appetite for more in-depth conversations on inclusion and diversity in schools and for more sharing and promotion of effective practice on these themes. The IEF hopes to support more events and opportunities for engagement to enable those conversations to continue.

Feedback from our participants was overwhelmingly positive, confirming that they found the event both useful and interesting. In their feedback and during the small group discussions, participants also highlighted the optimism and passion expressed at the event for positive change in our society. In particular, the contributors were commended for their honesty regarding how they dealt with their particular set of circumstances and their commitment to working with children from diverse backgrounds.

As participants confirmed that networking and making connections were an important aspect of the event, email addresses for our speakers are therefore included below to enable follow-up conversations.

If you have any questions or would like more information about the event, please don't hesitate to get in touch with us: jessica@ief.org.uk | 028 9069 4099

Event Contributors:

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AGENDA

Welcome & Introduction | Peter Osborne, IEF Chair

CRAIC NI | Eileen Chan-Hu

Solás | Kate Diamond

Botanic Primary School | Mark Douglas, SENCO

Facilitated table discussion

Cara-Friend | Jo McParland

St Patrick's College, Dungannon | Catherine McHugh, Principal

Fort Hill Integrated Primary School | Simon Patterson, Principal & Susan Jones MBE, Community & Integration Coordinator

Morning break | Tea/Coffee

Portadown Integrated Primary School | Video

Community Relations in School | Lisa Dietrich

St Paul's Primary School | Sean McNamee, Principal

Council for Integrated Education | Mary Potter

New-Bridge Integrated College | Eimear McKeown, Integration Coordinator and Head of Art & Design & pupils

Facilitated table discussion

Close | Peter Osborne, IEF Chair

Lunch & Networking