Exploring Religious Balance in Integrated Schools

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Glossary

B/GFA - Belfast/Good Friday Agreement

DE - Department for Education

DFC - Department for Communities

EU - European Union

FETO - Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998

IEF - Integrated Education Fund

NICIE - Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education

NIHE - Northern Ireland Housing Executive

NISRA - Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

RFA - Ruth Flood Associates

SEUPB - Special EU Programmes Body

Executive Summary

The Integrated Education Fund (IEF) and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) commissioned this project to examine how issues of religious balance are managed and perceived within Integrated schools. Research was conducted by Ruth Flood Associates (RFA), and the results of our analysis are detailed in this report. There were three research components: a literature review, qualitative focus groups with school leaders, and qualitative interviews with stakeholders.

The literature review utilised websites and publications of stakeholder bodies, and journal articles and publications specifically related to our research questions. The bibliography was developed in conjunction with IEF and NICIE. Six focus group discussions were conducted with school leaders, as well as one supplementary interview with a school leader who could not attend the focus group sessions. These resulted in 22 participants representing 17 Integrated schools of varying types. Eight qualitative interviews were conducted with stakeholders from across sectors relating to Integrated Education in Northern Ireland. Transcriptions from the focus groups and interviews were analysed by the RFA research team using a list of guiding questions developed in conjunction with IEF and NICIE. Anonymised quotations are included in this report to contextualise the analysis and provide voice to school leaders.

Literature review

The literature review was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the current guidance on religious balance within Integrated Education from governmental and stakeholder bodies?
2. What research data is available concerning religious balance within schools?
3. How are terms of identity (religious, national, and political) described and defined in contemporary public and academic literature?
4. What relevant demographic changes have occurred in Northern Ireland over the past three decades? How have these changes shaped terms of identities?
5. Considering changes in how terms of identity are used, how do other sectors approach community balance? What designations do they use (i.e., religion, religious background, community background, etc.)?

The literature highlighted that the use of terms of identity in Northern Ireland is complex, particularly considering demographic changes such as increased secularisation and the use of neutral terms of identity (e.g., 'no religion' and 'neither unionist nor nationalist'). People are using traditional terms of identity differently than they did in the past. However, most sectors – under the guidance of the Equality Commission – continue to use the religious terms 'Protestant' and 'Roman Catholic' to measure community balance, though these terms are not considered indicative of actual religious practice (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2020).

The literature can largely be summed up by reiterating that "the structures embedded in Northern Ireland's governance are predominately concerned with the two traditionally opposed communities, which is understandable given the divisive historical context, but is increasingly unable to keep up with changes in modern society (Mitchell, 2020)."

Integrated schools have a consistently stronger religious balance than schools not in the Integrated sector, but few Integrated schools achieve the 30% minority representation recommended by the DE – let alone the 40/40/20 split recommended by NICIE. Data from the 2022 school census and the 2021 national census suggests that parents categorise their children differently depending on the context in which they are asked, further complicating the use of religious identity as a marker of community balance.

Focus groups with school leaders

Analysis of the focus groups conducted with school leaders resulted in six overarching themes.

Current practice was examined. It was confirmed that all schools use the terms Catholic, Protestant, and 'Other' to determine religious balance, and these designations are generally seen as familiar terms in post-conflict Northern Ireland. School leaders explained that they accept the designations chosen by parents on school intake forms and do not seek out additional information concerning community background to confirm these.

Challenges implementing religious balance were discussed. There are divided perspectives on what the terms Protestant / Catholic / Other mean and whether they are the most appropriate designations to use in Integrated Education. Some participants felt that these terms are meant to capture community background and not religion, thus they may not be the most appropriate to use. However, no workable alternatives were suggested by these participants. Other school representatives felt that religion remains an important aspect of what these designations are meant to measure, thus Protestant / Catholic / Other are the most appropriate terms to use. In addition to these divided perspectives, school leaders agreed that the increasing number of 'Other' designations complicates maintaining religious balance.

'Other' includes, but is not limited to, the rising number of newcomers (particularly those of other, non-Christian faiths), those from traditional communities who reject religious labels, and an increasing number of 'mixed' Protestant and Catholic families. This makes it difficult for Integrated schools to determine if they are striking a balance of community background as well as religious practice. Adding sub-categories to admissions criteria to clarify what parents mean by 'Other' was rejected by school leaders as unnecessary and an administrative burden. A few participants expressed strong negativity toward the word 'Other' and its use as a category because it can be demeaning to people who have strong identities, but do not identify as Protestant or Catholic. Again, no workable alternative was provided.

A final challenge of implementing religious balance was the consensus that parents can sometimes be 'tactical' to improve their child's

chances of obtaining a school place, choosing the identity they believe has greater chance of admission, rather than one that reflects their family's community background. This can bring into question the validity of the religious balance within schools.

Also addressed in the focus group discussions with school leaders were their responses to NICIE's 40/40/20 guidance. This guidance encourages schools to work toward a religious balance of 40% Protestant pupils, 40% Catholic pupils, and 20% 'Other' pupils. The importance of 40/40/20 was acknowledged by participants in the post-conflict, still segregated context of Northern Ireland in which there is a continued need to mix pupils from the two traditional backgrounds. Some participants thought that 40/40/20 is a formal requirement they are held accountable to, whether by NICIE, their school board of governors, or by political and public perception. In terms of subgroups of schools, oversubscribed schools implement strict religious balance percentages. However, some leaders from these schools did not feel 40/40/20 is the most appropriate balance in the wake of changing demographics such as the change in the number of 'Others.' On the other hand, some schools struggle to achieve a religious balance of 40/40/20 because they are undersubscribed in one religious designation. Some leaders from these schools expressed indifference toward the 40/40/20 guidance, while others expressed their desire to one day reach a 40/40/20 religious balance.

School leaders discussed the 2022 Integrated Education Act. Most participants were positive about the inclusion of socioeconomic status and ability in the definition of Integrated

some leaders would welcome a change to the 40/40/20 guidance, with many of them citing 35/35/30 as more representative of their local communities

Education as this has long been part of the Integrated Education movement. There was a mixed response to the concept of 'reasonable numbers' of Catholic and Protestants – while some participants were positive about this flexibility of language, others expressed uncertainty about what 'reasonable numbers' means, and concern that changing the language in their admissions criteria could open the school to challenge by parents.

Suggested changes from school leaders were also discussed. Only one change was recommended – some leaders would welcome a change to the 40/40/20 guidance, with many of them citing 35/35/30 as more representative of their local communities and the applications they receive from prospective students.

Finally, the practical support that would be helpful to schools was discussed. Participants expressed the need for guidance / resources for communicating to parents about why a religious designation is required and how it will be used, as communication with parents is a consistently tricky issue. Participants would also welcome

more intentional collaboration across Integrated schools regarding religious balance – many of them responded positively to the focus group experience that allowed them to learn how other schools manage this. There was also a desire for more public education about Integrated Education because school leaders consistently come up against incorrect public perceptions about their schools, such as the idea that Integrated schools must meet the 40/40/20 threshold to be officially integrated. School leaders felt that better public understanding would mitigate some of the challenges they face.

Interviews with stakeholders

Analysis of the interviews with stakeholders also resulted in several overarching themes. When the objectives of using Protestant / Catholic / Other were discussed, most stakeholders agreed these terms assist in the integration of pupils from the two traditional communities considering historic and continued segregation in Northern Ireland. At the same time, participants recognised that Northern Ireland is changing – though whether the focus of Integrated Education should shift away from the two traditional communities in light of demographic changes was not agreed upon by participants.

Most stakeholders agreed these terms are used as shorthand for community background, which is complex in contemporary Northern Ireland. Some participants noted that religious designation can, at times, overshadow the importance of an Integrated ethos, particularly in public perception.

Some stakeholders viewed NICIE's 40/40/20 guidance as less important than developing an Integrated ethos, while others felt that this guidance remains an appropriate aspiration for Integrated schools. Most agreed the increasing number of those who designate as 'Other' complicates religious balance.

Some participants reacted positively to the language of the 2022 Integrated Education Act, particularly the inclusion of all abilities and socioeconomic backgrounds. Others were sceptical about the inclusion of all abilities and socioeconomic backgrounds in written legislation because these categories are difficult to measure and can distract from religious balance within Integrated schools.

Stakeholders provided suggestions for supporting schools' communications with parents. Several of them felt that centralised, written guidance for Integrated schools would aid in the difficult task of communicating with parents about religious designation.

When the religious balance of school leaders and staff was discussed, some stakeholders said religious balance within teaching staff can be difficult to achieve, even in the wake of new legislation requiring teachers' backgrounds to be monitored. Religious balance amongst auxiliary staff and boards of governors was also described as difficult to achieve and maintain. Participants discussed the important role school leaders play in the religious balance of their schools, and how the development of a healthy Integrated ethos can be lost with leadership change. This led some to recommend that there should be continued training for all school leaders and staff in terms of diversity and the development of an Integrated ethos.

Conclusions

Following our analysis across the project, we have concluded the following:

1. Integrated schools are agreed on aims and ethos, but perspectives on the wider role of Integrated Education differ

The research demonstrates how Integrated schools, and more generally people who have worked in and with Integrated Education, speak a common language around embracing and celebrating diversity. There is recognition of division in society and the positive role education can have in bringing about greater integration. Integrated schools vary greatly, however. Aspects of this include whether schools are primary or secondary; their geographical location and demographics; their size; their set up as an Integrated school or whether they have transformed; and whether they are oversubscribed or undersubscribed. We conclude that all of these aspects, to varying degrees, contribute to the outlook of a school's leaders on the aim and focus of Integrated Education.

For example, for some there is a perception that their school is in a part of Northern Ireland that has remained divided along traditional lines. They see their role as contributing to community integration in this specific context. Others represent a school in an area where there is perception that the traditional lines of division are weakening. More 'mixed marriages' and an influx of newcomers means their school is still working towards community integration, but perhaps with less focus on traditional division. Some still see the original aim of integration between Catholic and Protestant pupils and their families as the primary reason for the sector to exist. Others see that original reason to have evolved into a wider approach where traditional ties are weakening.

Wider still, there have been questions asked about the strategy of the sector. Specifically, is the way forward to see as many schools as possible transform to become Integrated, even if (at least in the short term) there is a religious imbalance?

2. The importance of religious balance depends on an Integrated school's perspective / context

We conclude that the need for a 'healthy' religious balance depends on the school's outlook regarding its role in society. For some, the local community is still divided along traditional lines, better, but ultimately not dissimilar to how it was twenty or thirty years ago. Finding a balanced religious intake is considered of great importance in this context. Others represent schools that perhaps did not see so much of the Troubles and there is a perception of much greater community cohesion. There are Integrated schools, for example, drawing from catchment areas that were not even built during the Troubles. Religious balance in intake is seen as important, but not as critical. In many cases, schools like this are seeing a rise in the 'Other' category as people move away from traditional labels.

3. Religious designation still has its place within Integrated Education

While there was some discussion around whether there was any need for religious designation, most participants

agreed that, in the context of a society that is still showing many aspects of division, there was still a need for Integrated schools to have some data regarding their overall composition. We conclude that religious designation is a useful metric for schools to use to aspire toward balance, even if it only shows part of the picture.

4. The current terms for religious designation have limitations

There was also agreement the current designations have their limitations. We conclude that 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' are primarily religious labels that, in most cases, are used as shorthand for cultural / community background and, to some degree, political outlook. It is clear from the research that there are limitations to using these terms, as they mean a range of different things. A religious definition is one interpretation of the designations, but this is problematic for a society that is becoming increasingly secular.

5. There are no obvious replacements for the terms in current use

Some participants considered alternatives to the current terms but were quick to point out the shortcomings of making any changes. We conclude there is no obvious alternative terms that are easily preferable. We reflect that the two traditional narratives within Northern Ireland concern religious, political and cultural descriptors. While there have always been exceptions to this, in decades past, knowing one of these descriptors allowed for accurate assumptions to be made about the other two; this is clearly changing. More research work is needed, including with parents, to consider terminology. This is further expanded on below with specific reference to 'Other'.

6. 'Other' has become a potentially offensive term in a changing Northern Ireland

Several participants described discomfort with using the term 'Other' as a designation. 'Other' is used as a catch-all category for those of other religious faiths, those who are non-religious, those who do not wish to associate themselves with the connotations of Catholic or Protestant, and those who are in mixed family units. These individuals have identities and beliefs that are potentially devalued by the label of 'Other.'

Addressing this concern is challenging, particularly given the reticence school leaders showed toward the suggestion of adding more categories to an already complicated admissions process (e.g., 'non-religious,' 'mixed family,' 'other religion'). We suggest more research be conducted to explore alternatives to the 'Other' designation and strength of feeling toward potential changes. Examining how parents may feel about their children being designated using alternate terms – and what these alternative terms may be – was not an aspect of this project, and any suggestions made in the current

We suggest more research be conducted to explore alternatives to the 'Other' designation

report could be problematic without proper testing and broader insight. This is worth considering for future study.

7. 40/40/20 is useful, though flexibility would be welcome

There was some consensus amongst participants that being given a target ratio is useful for ensuring minority representation and for protecting the public reputation of an Integrated school. However, there was also consensus that more flexibility would be welcome in the wake of changing demographics and an increase in schools that are transforming. Some school leaders desired the guidance to be changed to 35/35/30 and one school had already made this change to their intake criteria.

Integration is contextual depending on a school's situation. It became clear in this research that some school leaders were not aware that the NICIE guidance of 40/40/20 is aspirational. We recommend that NICIE make it clearer to schools that this is the case.

We also suggest that further consideration is given to the aspiration of 40/40/20 and any effects associated with changing this, within the upcoming review of the Statement of Principles for Integrated Education.

8. Communicating Integrated Education outside of the sector

Some school leaders expressed frustration with religious balance because they were being held accountable to 40/40/20 by those in the public / political sphere who viewed these numbers as a requirement to be considered Integrated. 40/40/20 has never been required in legislation, and many participants felt this public perception detracted from understanding of the mission and ethos of their schools.

Similarly, school leaders described having difficulty communicating both religious designation and the Integrated ethos of their school to potential parents who were unfamiliar with Integrated Education. There is little cohesion in the way Integrated schools communicate with parents. We would recommend that a piece of written guidance be created providing schools with advice on ways to discuss religious balance and the ethos of Integrated Education with parents. (See Appendix 4 for examples of written communication used by Integrated schools.)

It is clear from this research that there is an ongoing communications issue around the ethos and practice of Integrated schools that school leaders are struggling to address amid the demands of the day-to-day running of their schools. Some participants requested that the support bodies conduct a marketing campaign to better explain Integrated Education to the wider public, though we acknowledge this is outside the normal remit of IEF and NICIE and would need to be part of a larger strategic plan with other stakeholder bodies.

9. Participants desired more collaboration across Integrated schools

Some focus group participants expressed positivity toward the focus group experience in and of itself. They enjoyed hearing the experience and practice of other school leaders and how they approach religious balance in their own contexts.

Additionally, some stakeholders thought there could be more ongoing professional development and training for school leaders concerning religious balance and diversity. We understand there are already training and professional development sessions available through NICIE. Advertising the collaborative element of these training sessions, and perhaps including more collaborative elements, may add to their appeal for school leaders.

It is worth noting that participants were eager to read the final report from this project. There was excitement that religious balance was being thoughtfully examined by IEF and NICIE, and participants expressed optimism that the Integrated Education sector will continue to be a leader in creating a more diverse and inclusive Northern Ireland going forward.

1. Project Background

1.1 Introduction

The Integrated Education movement in Northern Ireland is in a complex position. Demographic and social attitude changes are occurring within a still-segregated society. At its inception in the 1980s, Integrated Education's primary goal was to bring together children from two communities who were engaged in ethnonational conflict – British Protestant unionists and Irish Catholic nationalists. The terms 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' were used to define these communities, as was – and still is – common practice. More recently, however, many people in Northern Ireland are rejecting these religious labels, intermarrying, or arriving from outside the region, which has led to a rise of those identifying as 'Other' instead of Protestant or Catholic. This has changed how Integrated Education is defined and poses questions of how the movement will operate going forward.

A Private Member's Bill recently enacted with Royal Assent the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, which widened the definition of Integrated Education to include "those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons … those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not; and … those of different abilities." This Act thus put into legislation what was already important for Integrated schools – to include those of all abilities and socioeconomic backgrounds – while continuing the government's position of not requiring Integrated schools to achieve specific ratios of Protestant / Catholic / Other designations.

The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), however, has long recommended that Integrated schools aim to achieve a religious balance of 40% Protestant, 40% Catholic, and 20% 'Other,' with the understanding that these may be aspirational numbers for schools depending on their community context. The Department for Education (DE) published guidance for schools wishing to transform to Integrated status in 2017 recommending schools aim for 10% minority representation in the short-term and 30% representation in the long-term (Department for Education, 2017).

The rationale for requiring a certain level of minority representation is so those in the minority feel comfortable in their identities and confident to share their perspectives and experiences in a mixed setting (Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, 2022). This remains an important aspect of Integrated Education.

However, terms of identity in Northern Ireland have shifted in meaning, and Protestant / Catholic / Other are used differently in various contexts. For

example, the Equality Commission of Northern Ireland uses these terms to monitor fair employment of Protestants and Catholics, yet explicitly states that these identities are "NOT used to convey religion, religious belief, or non-belief. Specifically, the terms are used to convey the community to which an individual has stated that they belong, or which they might reasonably be perceived to belong, based on evidence of a connection with that community" (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2020, p. 4). Despite this approach, religion does continue to play a significant role in Northern Ireland (Ganiel, 2024), and thus the terms are not completely divorced from their original meaning, which adds complexity to their use. Individuals interpret these terms differently and it is difficult to know whether individuals are claiming a community affiliation, a religious practice, or are rejecting one or both of these.

The problem facing the Integrated Education movement addressed in this research project is how Integrated schools currently manage religious balance and how they can be best supported by the support bodies[1] in the aforementioned changing social landscape. Specifically, this report set out to explore views on how school leadership addresses the topic of religious balance with prospective parents, how religious balance enables schools to meet the legal definition of Integrated Education, and what effective practice exists in relation to capturing and communicating the rationale for asking about pupils' backgrounds with all stakeholders. Additionally, this report addresses how school leaders can be supported in their dealings with parental perceptions around their choice of religious designation and the use of the pupil data capture form, a requirement of the DE.

1.2 Research methodology

The research involved the following components: Desk research and engagement with schools leaders and key stakeholders. More information is provided on each of these elements below.

Desk research

The desk research conducted was guided by five overarching research questions agreed with IEF and NICIE:

1. What is the current guidance on religious balance within Integrated Education from governmental and stakeholder bodies?
2. What research data is available concerning religious balance within schools?
3. How are terms of identity (religious, national, and political) described and defined in contemporary public and academic literature?
4. What relevant demographic changes have occurred in Northern Ireland over the past three decades? How have these changes shaped terms of identities?
5. Considering changes in how terms of identity are used, how do other sectors approach community balance? What designations do they use (i.e., religion, religious background, community background, etc.)?

1 This project was commissioned by the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) in conjunction with Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE).

RFA gathered an initial list of relevant literature, developed based on 1) websites and publications of stakeholder bodies, 2) previous research projects of a similar nature, and 3) searching for journal articles and publications specifically related to our research questions for example using key terms or phrases. This initial list was presented to representatives of IEF and NICIE for approval, and then expanded based on their recommendations. This list also expanded as the literature review revealed appropriate sources to support more fulsome responses to the research questions.

A draft version of this literature review was sent to representatives of IEF and NICIE for review, and amendments were made accordingly.

School leader focus groups

The opportunity to attend a focus group discussion on the research themes was offered to schools in June 2024 with the suggestion that attendance might include appropriate staff and/or governors. June being a busy time of the year for schools meant that sign up to the research was more limited than we would have liked. However, in total we engaged with 22 individuals largely school staff (including five governors) from 17 schools, through six qualitative focus group discussions and one supplementary interview.

Across the groups/interview there was slightly more engagement from Grant Maintained Integrated schools (11 of 17) than Controlled Integrated schools (6 of 17), and more engagement from primary schools (10 of 17) than secondary schools (7 of 17).

The map overleaf shows the broad geographic spread of the schools that contributed to the discussions.

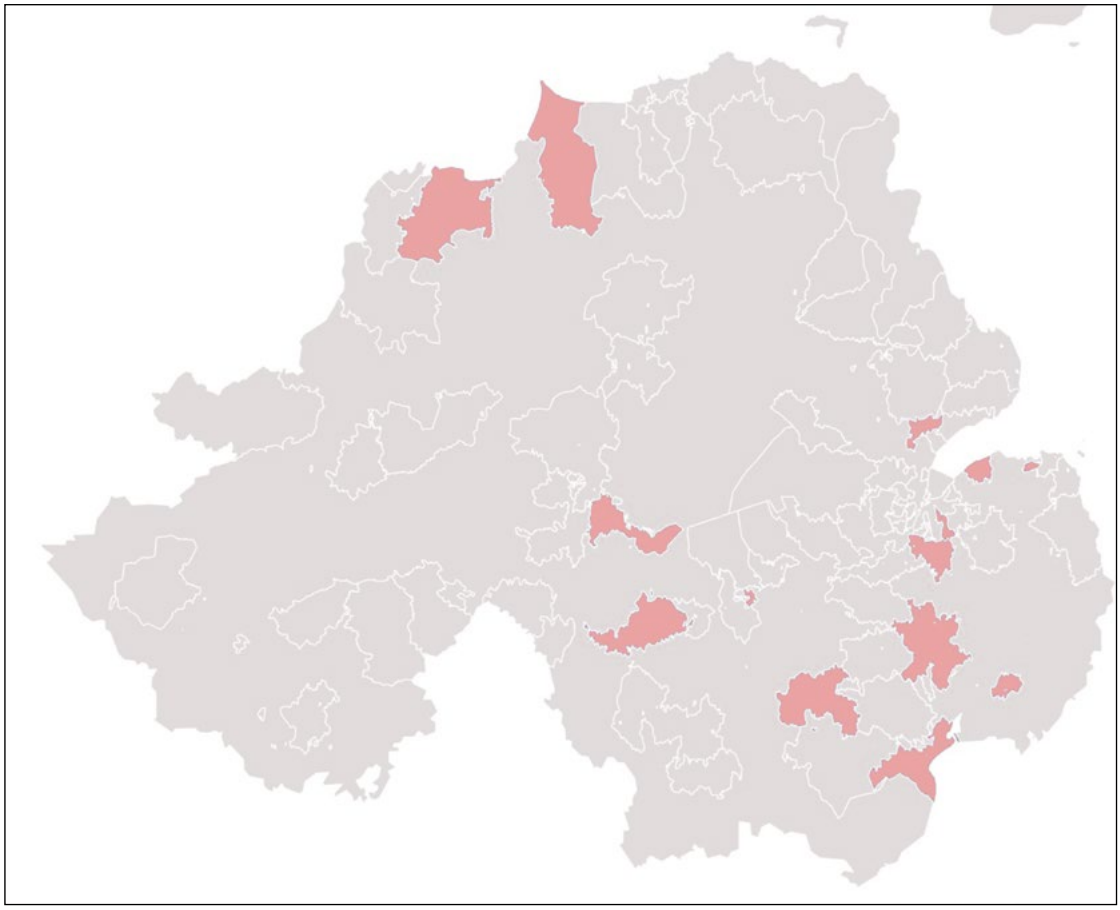
Figure 1 – Attendance at Focus Group Discussions

Discussion	Date	No. of attendees
Focus Group 1	3 June 2024	5
Focus Group 2	4 June 2024	1
Focus Group 3	5 June 2024	4
Focus Group 4	10 June 2024	8
Focus Group 5	11 June 2024	1
Focus Group 6	12 June 2024	2
Supplementary Interview 1	19 June 2024	1

Figure 2 – Split of Engagement from Different Types of School

Primary / Secondary	Grant Maintained	Controlled	Total
Integrated primary school	7	3	10
Integrated secondary school	4	3	7
Total	11	6	17

Figure 3 – Split of Engagement by Geography



Focus groups were held online via the application Zoom. Each focus group was led by a member of the RFA research team, and all were structured using a discussion guide agreed upon by RFA and representatives of IEF and NICIE (see Appendix 2). These Zoom sessions were recorded with permission from participants, and the audio was then transcribed using the software CoLoop.

Transcriptions from the focus groups were analysed by the RFA research team using research questions from the discussion guide. Anonymised quotations from participants are included in the write-up (Section 4 of this report) to contextualise the analysis and provide voice to school leaders.

It is worth noting that focus groups were held based on participant availability rather than school type. There had been discussion between representatives of IEF and NICIE and RFA about specifying focus groups. For example, there could have been one group for Grant Maintained secondary schools, one for Grant Maintained primary schools, one for Controlled Integrated secondary schools, and one for Controlled Integrated primary schools. However, focus groups were conducted in June, which is a busy time of year for school leaders, and thus it was determined that specifying focus groups would limit the number of participants we could gather due to limited availability.

As a result of having a wide approach to recruitment, participants often came to the discussions with a different set of experiences. This led to interesting discussions about religious balance in Integrated Education, but it was also apparent that there was some hesitancy to engage in discussion about complex issues on the part of some participants. Participants were, at times, seemingly careful in their language around complicated subjects. It is difficult to say if this was due to the complexity and sensitivity of the subject itself, or if some school leaders were cautious of contradicting others in the group.

Stakeholder interviews

Eight qualitative interviews were conducted with stakeholders from across sectors relating to Integrated Education in Northern Ireland. A list of stakeholders was compiled by representatives from IEF and NICIE and presented to RFA. RFA then contacted stakeholders and conducted the interviews.

A discussion guide agreed upon by RFA and representatives of IEF and NICIE was used to structure these conversations (see Appendix 3). The interviews took place online via the application Zoom or over the telephone, depending on stakeholder preference and availability. Interviews were recorded with participant permission, and the audio was then transcribed using the software CoLoop.

As with the focus groups, transcriptions from these interviews were analysed by the RFA research team using research questions from the discussion guide. Anonymised participant quotations are included in the write-up (Section 5 of this report) to contextualise analysis.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this project is the small sample size. Representatives from 17 Integrated schools attended focus groups out of the 70 officially Integrated schools in Northern Ireland (24% of all Integrated schools).

This project was designed to gather qualitative information concerning practices and attitudes toward a highly complex subject and therefore sought to gather views across the sector. Every type of Integrated school was represented (e.g., primary and secondary, oversubscribed and undersubscribed, management type, urban and rural), and there were differing perspectives on several aspects of religious balance in Integrated Education.

It is worth noting that the qualitative research was conducted in June, which is a busy month for school leaders, thus subscription to focus groups was limited by their schedules. If this project had been conducted at a different time of year, there may have been more representatives available to take part.

This project was designed to gather qualitative information concerning practices and attitudes toward a highly complex subject.

2. Literature Review

Summary Findings

The use of terms of identity in Northern Ireland is complex, particularly considering demographic changes such as increased secularisation and the use of neutral terms of identity (e.g., 'no religion' and 'neither unionist nor nationalist'). People are using traditional terms of identity differently than they did in the past. However, most sectors – under the guidance of the Equality Commission – continue to use the religious terms of 'Protestant' and 'Roman Catholic' to measure community balance, though these terms are not considered indicative of actual religious practice (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2020).

The literature can largely be summed up by reiterating that "the structures embedded in Northern Ireland's governance are predominately concerned with the two traditionally opposed communities, which is understandable given the divisive historical context, but is increasingly unable to keep up with changes in modern society (Mitchell, 2020)."

Integrated schools have a consistently stronger religious balance than schools that are not in the Integrated sector, but few Integrated schools achieve the 30% minority representation recommended by the DE – let alone the 40/40/20 split recommended by NICIE. Data from the 2022 school census and the 2021 national census suggests that parents categorise their children differently depending on the context in which they are asked, further complicating the use of religious identity as a marker of community balance.

2.1 Current guidance on religious balance[2] within Integrated Education

The first formally Integrated school in Northern Ireland was established in 1981 by a parent-led charitable group called 'All Children Together.' The group was largely established in response to the outbreak of ethnonational conflict in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the stakeholders believed that social and educational mixing of children would reduce the existing social and political dissonance[3] (Furey, Donnelly, Hughes, & Blaylock, 2017, p. 138). Eight years later,

2 'Religious balance' throughout this project specifically refers to the labels 'Roman Catholic,' 'Protestant,' and 'Other.' It is worth noting that 'community balance' is used in this report as well as 'religious balance' due to the complex historic nature of the 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' labels, which are often used to refer to the two traditional communities of Northern Ireland, regardless of religious practice. This is explored further below.

3 This assumption was largely based in the American sociologist Gordon Allport's concept of Contact Theory, which contends that interpersonal contact between conflicting groups can reduce negative stereotypes of those from the 'Other' group and can improve intergroup relations long-term if groups are given equal status and are working toward a common goal (Early, Devine, Liu, & Schubotz, 2024). Contact theory has been challenged, though –Jackman and Crane (1986) found the intergroup contact proposed by Allport actually led to increased tensions between interracial groups at times. This is not to say that intentional cross-community efforts do not work, as much research has shown that integration can reduce community tensions when done well (Al Ramiah, Hewstone, & Schmid, 2011; Ferguson & McKeown, 2016). This is to say that intergroup contact alone does not improve situations of conflict.

the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 was passed. Article 64 of this order states, "It shall be the duty of the Department to encourage and facilitate the development of Integrated education, that is to say the education together at school of Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils" (McAlpine, 2024). This order provided for the development of new Integrated schools and allowed existing schools to gain 'Controlled Integrated' status, and it guaranteed that the Integrated Education sector was financially supported by the government. This act considered Integration to be religious in nature, based on Protestant and Roman Catholic identities with an explicit Christian ethos (Furey, Donnelly, Hughes, & Blaylock, 2017).

The Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, the most recent legislation concerning Integrated education, provides the following definition for "Integrated education":

1. "Integrated education" means the education together, in an Integrated school, of

    a. those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons;

    b. those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not; and

    c. those of different abilities.

This is a notable change to the concept of "integration" from the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, which defined Integrated Education in terms of Protestant and Catholic religious identification.

The 2022 Act goes on to define an "Integrated school" as that which "intentionally 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." However, the Act provides no defining measure of religious balance within Integrated schools, simply stating that schools should attract "reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils." The Research and Information Service Bill Paper (Devlin, 2021) commissioned by the Assembly explains:

> "'Reasonable numbers' are not quantified in the form of targets; this is consistent with Section 66(2) of the 1989 Order and Section 2(2) of the Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 which refer to 'reasonable numbers' only. However, whilst not defined in existing legislation, the aim for new Integrated schools, and those schools wishing to transform to Integrated status, has been to achieve a minimum of 10 percent of their first year intake drawn from the minority tradition and, in the longer term, to attract at least 30 percent of pupils from the minority tradition within the school's enrolment."

The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), a support body for the Integrated sector, proposes a different balance. NICIE, founded in 1987, produced a Statement of Principles in 1991 that was reviewed and updated in 2008. The first principle is Equality, which recommends

Integrated schools aspire to "an annual intake of at least 40% pupils from a perceived Catholic background and at least 40% pupils from a perceived Protestant background" allowing for up to 20% of pupils to identify as 'Other' or 'no' religion. While these percentages could ideally be attainable, it is difficult to obtain this balance in practice – particularly for schools that have recently transformed from a non-Integrated status (e.g., Catholic Maintained or Controlled schools) to become Integrated schools. The 2021 Research and Information Services Bill Paper says:

> [The Department of Education (DE)] guidance for schools who are considering the process of transformation recognises the challenges that a 30% target can present for individual schools, dependent on the demographics of the local area and also due to the increasing numbers of pupils designating as 'Other' or 'no religion'. Schools with particularly low numbers of pupils from the minority community are directed to advice and support from the Department and NICIE.

This information is largely drawn from a DE guidance paper for schools wishing to transform to Integrated status in 2017. This 2017 paper further explains that, while the DE will not hold schools to any specific threshold of religious balance, it does expect that the school will provide evidence that balance can be achieved. This could include endeavours like drawing comparisons between the historic and current nature of enrolments at the school or providing expressions of interest from members of the minority community. Primarily, the school "should demonstrate *how* it intends to attract pupils from the minority religious community" such as "making links with non-traditional pre-school settings" (Department of Education, 2017, p. 25). As mentioned above, the DE recognises that achieving 30% representation of the minority tradition can be difficult depending on the demographics of the local area and the increasing number of those who identify as 'Other' or 'no religion.' In line with this, a school's Integrated status cannot be removed unless the Education Minister approves a further Development Proposal to change a school's management type. "The religious balance within a school does not affect its legal position as a Grant-Maintained or Integrated school" (Department of Education, 2017, p. 36).

Thus, the current guidance on religious balance within Integrated schools is not defined in legislation, but is dependent upon demonstration of goodwill and the aspiration to have the minority community represent at least 30% of pupils. NICIE currently recommends schools work to increase this to a 40% Catholic / 40% Protestant / 20% 'Other' split where possible. We understand that NICIE is due to review this guidance in the near future.

2.2 Available research data on religious balance within schools

The Department of Education (2023) reported that in 2022/2023 there were 1121 recorded schools in Northern Ireland, including nursery schools (93), primary schools (782), post-primary schools (192), special schools (39), independent schools (14), and a hospital school (1). Of these schools, 70 were formally Integrated schools

– meaning only 6.2% of existing schools were Integrated. In terms of pupil population, 348,226 pupils were recorded in the DE census, of which 27,200 (7.8%) attended integrated schools.

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) conducted a study for the DE concerning the breakdown of religious balance within schools in Northern Ireland in 2020/21 (NISRA, 2021). The school census figures revealed the following information:

This data indicates that, on the whole, Integrated schools do have a stronger religious balance than other schools.[4]

Looking specifically at the Integrated Education sector, the aforementioned Research and Information Service Bill Paper requested data from the DE on the number of schools "with a religious breakdown of at least 10% and at least 30% of pupils from the minority community (Protestant or Catholic) in 2020/21. The data reveals that almost three quarters of Integrated schools (72% or 47 schools) had a religious breakdown of pupils that fell below the threshold of 30% of pupils from the minority community (Protestant or Catholic) in 2020/21" (Devlin, 2021, p. 18). The specific breakdown was:

- 20 out of 22 Controlled Integrated primaries did not meet the 30% threshold,
- 14 out of 23 Grant Maintained Integrated primaries did not meet the 30% threshold,
- All 5 Controlled Integrated post-primaries did not meet the 30% threshold,
- 8 out of 15 Grant Maintained Integrated post-primaries did not meet the 30% threshold.

It is worth bearing in mind that many Integrated schools have a significantly high proportion of pupils who identify as "no," "other", or "unknown" religion. "Of the Controlled Integrated schools,

Table 2.2.1 Percentage of school population in each management type according to religion (NISRA 2021)

School management type	Protestant	Catholic	Other/No/ Unknown Religion
Controlled	63.6%	7.6%	28.8%
Controlled Integrated	42%	23.3%	34.7%
Grant Maintained Integrated	33.4%	40.4%	26.2%
Voluntary	25.5%	60.3%	14.2%
Other Maintained	5.6%	85.1%	9.3%
Catholic Maintained	1.2%	93.9%	4.9%

4 Schools in the Controlled sector persistently claim to be more religiously diverse than would be expected, but Taggart and Roulston (2022) argue that the percentage of Catholic-identifying pupils remains low in non-Integrated Controlled schools, and these schools are likely drawing on the increase in "Other" or "no" religion-identifying pupils to make this claim – despite the fact that most 'no religion' identifiers in Northern Ireland come from Protestant backgrounds, as discussed in the following section.

11 primary schools and 4 post primary schools have at least 30% of pupils with this designation." The numbers for the Grant Maintained Integrated sector are ten primary schools and two secondary schools with at least 30% of pupils designating as "no," "other", or "unknown" religion (Devlin, 2021, p. 19).

A brief addendum to this data concerns how parents choose identities for their children. 2022 DE research, as requested by Parents for Inclusive Education NI,[5] reveals some discrepancy between the 2022 DE school census data and the 2021 Northern Ireland census data:

This data suggests that parents are more likely to provide a religious identity for their children in a (non-anonymous) school census than the (anonymous) national census. While motivation is not clear in this data, it is worth noting that the ways parents categorise their children can depend upon the context in which they are being asked to choose an identity.

2.3 Current literature on identity in Northern Ireland

Ethnonational identity is embedded in the social and political structures of Northern Ireland

The study of identity in Northern Ireland is extensive and spans decades. Much of this research is in relation to the common understanding that the period of conflict (1969-1998) was a conflict of ethnonational identity between British Protestant unionists and Irish Catholic nationalists (O'Leary & McGarry, 2016). Ethnonational identity is embedded in the social and political structures of the region. The 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA), for example, is inherently dependent on the 'two-traditions' paradigm, which is the assumption that there are two distinct communities that have been in direct conflict and reducing this conflict requires equality of both cultural groups. The political identifications of 'unionist,'

Table 2.2.2 Percentage of religious designation of children: School census versus national census (Parents for Inclusive Education NI)

Census	Protestant	Catholic	Other Christian	Other Religion	No Religion	Unclassified
2022 School Census (Primary)	28.2%	49.7%	4.9%	1.9%	12.5%	2.8%
2021 NI Census (0-14 years old)	23.6%	47.4%	6.8%	1.5%	19.4%	1.3%

5 Parents for Inclusive Education NI is a parent-led group that aims to "make schools in NI inclusive for all families, celebrating diversity and providing an environment where every child can thrive" (Parents for Inclusive Education NI, 2023). The current focus of the group is to increase transparency of Religious Education within schools, thus they are interested in the religious identification of student populations.

'nationalist' and 'other' thus underpin the consociational (power-sharing) arrangements at Stormont – political parties are required to designate along these lines to ensure no one community has political dominance over the other.

Identities do not always align with constitutional/political aims

In theory, unionists desire Northern Ireland to remain in the UK and nationalists desire Northern Ireland to be united with the Republic of Ireland. However, in practice these identities do not always align with constitutional/political aims. Indeed, Coakley (2021) calls 'unionist' and 'nationalist' *communal* terms of identity rather than political terms of identity because they are often used to refer to one's cultural background in everyday life. An example of this can be seen in data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey, which annually measures the social attitudes of a broad representative sample in Northern Ireland. The survey asks if participants identify as 'nationalist,' 'unionist,' or 'neither.' It also asks what participants think the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be: remaining in the UK (either with direct rule from London or with devolved government at Stormont), a united Ireland, or Northern Ireland becoming an independent state. The percentage of those who identify as 'nationalist' rarely matches the percentage of those who wish for a united Ireland, and the percentage of 'unionists' rarely matches the percentage of those who desire to remain in the UK.[6] This means that terms of political/communal identity are informed by ethnonational community background, often to a greater extent than political attitudes.

In addition to this, there has been a consistently high percentage of people in Northern Ireland who identify as 'neither' unionist nor nationalist, and in recent years these 'neithers' have represented between 20-40% of the population (ARK, 2022, 2023, 2024; NIRSA 2012, 2022). While there are individuals who identify as 'neither' because they do not know how they would vote in a united Ireland referendum, many 'neithers' do have a constitutional preference between remaining in the UK and reuniting with Ireland (Hayward & McManus, 2019).

There has been a consistently high percentage of people in Northern Ireland who identify as 'neither' unionist nor nationalist

6 It is worth noting that the difference in percentages is often dependent upon the wider political context. In 1998, for example, 40% of participants identified as unionist, 25% as nationalist, and 33% as 'neither.' However, 57% of participants said they wished to remain in the UK and 22% said they would like to reunify with Ireland. In 2014, after several years of devolution and parity of esteem for both communities, 32% of participants identified as unionist, 25% as nationalist, and 40% as 'neither.' However, 66% of participants said they wished to remain in the UK and 17% wished to reunify with Ireland. This changed again post-Brexit when UK politics became unstable and EU membership was removed for British citizens. In the 2022 NILT survey, 31% of participants identified as unionist, 26% as nationalist, and 38% as neither. However, 48% said they wished to remain in the UK and 31% wished to reunify with Ireland. This supports the argument that 'unionist' and 'nationalist' identities are not proxies for actual political desires, and these political attitudes are shaped by the political landscape in which people live.

This indicates that the rejection of unionist/nationalist identities is often an attempt to separate oneself from association with either community or political tradition.

In Northern Ireland the definition of terms of identity are flexible

Individuals understand terms of identity differently depending on their lived experiences, such as community of origin, political engagement, education, a period of time living abroad, etc. This flexible definition of terms of identity exists at all levels of identity in Northern Ireland, whether national (British, Irish, Northern Irish, or a combination), religious (Protestant, Catholic, Other, or no religion), or communal (unionist, nationalist, or neither) (Coakley, 2021; Hayward & McManus, 2019). The implication of this on the current project is that it is increasingly difficult to make assumptions about what individuals mean when they identify in a certain way, particularly when they opt to reject traditional identities by defining themselves as 'Northern Irish,' 'neither unionist nor nationalist,' or 'no religion.' As Haughey and Loughran (2024, p. 196) argue, "there are clear limitations to using ethnonational identity as a proxy for political opinion in Northern Ireland."

Religious identities play a significant role in Northern Ireland

For the purposes of this research, it is important to note that religious identities play a significant role in Northern Ireland. Religious adherence

the terms 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' are commonly used, typically as signifiers of community background as opposed to actual religious adherence

(e.g., church attendance, belief in God, prayer) remains relatively high in Northern Ireland compared to other Western societies (Ganiel, 2024), though there has been a clear increase in the number of individuals identifying as "no religion" in the region. For example, in the 2011 Northern Ireland census 10.1% of respondents claimed "no religion," but this number rose to 17.4% in the 2021 census (NISRA, 2012, 2022). Furthermore, the 2023 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey asked participants "Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion? If yes, which?" Twenty-six per cent of respondents identified as "no religion," which is a significant increase from the first NILT survey in 1998 in which only 9% of respondents identified as 'no religion' (ARK, 1999, 2024). [7] Despite this shift, the terms 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' are commonly used, typically as signifiers of community background as opposed to actual religious adherence (Muldoon, et.al., 2007). Coakley (2021, p. 32) explains that religion "is a social

7 The number of people identifying as 'no religion' in NILT surveys has steadily increased. To provide some examples, 12% of respondents identified as 'no religion' in the 2009 NILT survey, 15% in the 2012 survey, and 17% in the 2018 survey (ARK, 2010, 2013, 2019).

phenomenon that defines communal identity by pointing towards ancestral bonds that link people to a perceived past, differentiating them from the rival community, whose collective narrative rests on a conflicting historical myth." This means that religious identity is more often used to signify one's understanding of their family lineage than faith practice, and these terms of identity are heavily influenced by the political and social landscape of contemporary Northern Ireland. O'Leary (2019, p. 11) argues Northern Ireland's "two largest descent groups are religiously labelled" because Catholic-identifiers typically perceive themselves as "descendants of the native Irish, who preceded in residence the English and British conquerors of Ulster" while Protestant-identifiers "mostly regard themselves as the descendants of British settlers in Ireland." Despite 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' being used as signifiers of one's community, they still hold association with organised religion for many in Northern Ireland (Ganiel, 2024), and are thus more likely to be rejected by individuals who no longer attend religious services or practice religious faith – even if these individuals maintain strong British/unionist or Irish/nationalist identities.

Individuals from a Protestant background are more likely to identify as 'no religion'

An important aside to this is that individuals from a Protestant background are more likely to identify as 'no religion' than those from a Catholic background upon leaving institutionalised religion (Wilkins-LaFlamme, 2016). There are many factors that influence this, but many social scientists argue that, in Northern Ireland in particular, the Catholic Church has historically provided social support and cohesion in the face of anti-Catholic discrimination, whereas Protestant churches never had to provide the same level of cohesion. Todd (1990, p. 35) explains that the Catholic Church "organised religious, educational, socio-cultural and to some extent political activity … Irish language and cultural activities and Gaelic games, although not directly under the auspices of the Catholic church, involved closely overlapping social networks. Thus, by the 1930s there was constituted an almost self-sufficient society within society in Northern Ireland." Meanwhile, Protestant churches did not need to provide its members the same level of social support because British Protestants could largely depend on the government to provide for similar needs (e.g., social housing, support in emergencies such as flooding, employment, etc.). There are also several Protestant denominations within Northern Ireland, and each operates largely independently of the rest, resulting in smaller community groups that are not cohesive overall (Ganiel, 2008). Thus, when an individual opts to leave a Protestant church, their Protestant identity can, at times, be easily left behind as well. To identify as Catholic, however, encapsulates a broader social identity that is more comfortable to maintain apart from religious practice for many. This is relevant to the current project because Integrated Education uses Catholic, Protestant, or 'Other' identities to determine, measure, and maintain religious balance (Northern Ireland Council of Integrated Education, 2022),

but these terms of identity are not adhered to in the same way by individuals from different religious backgrounds and thus may not always be the best measure of balance.[8]

Identity salience changes depending on context

It is also worth addressing the concept of identity salience, because this plays a large role in how and when individuals claim terms of identity. Each individual holds many varied and, at times, competing identities. Specific identities are activated, and thus become salient, in different social circumstances (Cassidy & Trew, 2004). For example, an individual may not think about their Catholic identity in day-to-day life, but this identity is activated and becomes salient in specific instances (e.g., when asked to fill out a form that asks for their religious identity, when they attend Christmas mass, when attending a GAA match, etc.). Stryker and Serpe (1982) explain that social networks shape identity salience because individuals are more committed to identities that they associate with their most important social relationships. Thus, the more important a certain identity is to one's family, friends, neighbours, and/or colleagues, the more committed an individual will be to that identity and rejecting that identity would be difficult and likely not desirable for said individual.

Identity salience also affects those who do not hold strong ethnonational or religious identities. An increasing number of people in Northern Ireland claim 'no religion,' Northern Irish, and 'neither unionist nor nationalist' identities (Ganiel, 2024, Hayward & McManus, 2019; McNicholl, 2019). These identities are likely salient in a variety of circumstances, such as when filling out demographic information on forms, when voting, or when deciding where to send their children to school. However, given how ingrained ethnonational identities are in the social and political context of Northern Ireland (McGarry & O'Leary, 2016), identities from one's community of origin may suddenly (and unexpectedly) become salient in certain situations. For example, a parent from a moderate British unionist background who no longer uses those terms of identity, does not attend a Protestant church, and does not vote for unionist political parties may be surprised to find themselves strongly against their child learning the Irish language in school. This is largely because communal identities developed in childhood are activated when perceived threats to those identities surface, whether logical or not (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). This adds a layer of complexity to determining balanced representation in Integrated schools as individuals not only interpret terms of identity differently, but also experience identity differently in different circumstances.

8 This is complicated in education by the fact that "an explicitly Christian ethos is required by law for all publicly-funded schools in NI; schools in NI are not permitted to be secular" (Taggart & Roulston, 2022, p. 9) and Religious Education (RE) is required in school curriculum. Indeed, Catholic Maintained schools are distinct from Controlled schools (which are primarily considered to be Protestant) specifically based on religious terms, which also makes religious identity more relevant to this sector than most. However, RE curriculum is required to be non-denominational, and therefore does not limit access to learning about one Christian tradition or the other (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations, & Assessment, n.d.), and wider societal factors, such as the rise of secularisation, are bringing into question the relevance of using religious identities to determine community balance, even within the education sector (McAlpine, 2024).

2.4 Demographic changes

As mentioned above, secularisation has impacted the use of religious identities in Northern Ireland – particularly for those from a Protestant background – leading to an increase in those who identify as 'no religion' (NISRA, 2022; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2016). There are four additional demographic shifts that have impacted identity in Northern Ireland worth highlighting: the use of the Northern Irish identity, the increased in-migration to Northern Ireland, the increased number of 'mixed' partnerships/marriages, and Brexit's impact on Northern Ireland (specifically in terms of identity).

The Northern Irish identity has become increasingly popular

First, the Northern Irish identity has been used in the region for decades (Whyte, 1990) but has become increasingly popular post-1998 – both as a standalone identity and in conjunction with British and/or Irish identities (McNicholl, 2019). The B/GFA allows citizens of Northern Ireland to claim British, Irish, or both identities (The Belfast Agreement, 1998), and it has become common for large-scale data collection in the region to include Northern Irish as an identity option, such as the census and NILT surveys (ARK, 2023; NISRA, 2022). The first census to do so was the 2011 census, which revealed that 29.19% of the population claimed this identity either as a sole identity or as one of multiple identities (NISRA, 2012). In the 2021 census, 31.58% of the population claimed a Northern Irish identity, an increase of 2.39% (NISRA, 2022). The NILT survey has measured the use of the Northern Irish identity since 1998, though participants must choose their primary identity: British, Irish, Northern Irish or 'Other.' This likely impacts the representation of the Northern Irish identity in the survey results – while individuals could claim multiple identities in the census, they had to choose the most salient identity in the NILT survey. An increase can still be seen; in 1998, 23% of participants identified as Northern Irish (ARK, 1999), in 2008, 29% identified as such (ARK, 2009) and in 2017, 27% identified as such (ARK, 2018). In 2021, this increased to 31% (ARK, 2022).

The question of what the Northern Irish identity means for the individuals who claim it has been the focus of academic research. Garry, O'Leary, and Pow (2023) asked participants to rate how strong their British, Irish, Northern Irish, and European identities were on a scale of 0 (non-existent) to 10 (very strong). There was a near-even split between those identifying positively on the British (46% of respondents), Irish (48% of respondents), and Northern Irish (52% of respondents) scales. The slight majority of those identifying as Northern Irish "results from significant proportions of both Catholics and Protestants making this affirmation: two-fifths of Catholics and two-thirds of Protestants." Particularly of note for this project is that Hayes, McAllister, and Dowds (2007) found that the Northern Irish identity is very popular amongst those who have attended Integrated education, indicating that integration can have a mitigating effect on ethnonational divisions and encourage pupils to use collective terms of identity. However, one must be cautious about jumping to conclusions because use of the Northern Irish identity does not always indicate moderate political and social attitudes. Garry and McNicholl (2015, p. 2) argue that this identity "is

particularly susceptible to differing interpretations in meaning due [to] its terminological ambiguity", meaning individuals from the far ends of either Protestant unionist or Catholic nationalist sentiment can claim a Northern Irish identity and interpret it in a way that fits with their worldview.

'Northern Irish' is a collective term of identity that still means different things to individuals from different backgrounds

The Northern Irish identity is thus a collective term of identity that still means different things to individuals from different backgrounds – whilst a British unionist person can consider themselves Northern Irish and British as others in the UK can consider themselves Welsh or Scottish and British, an Irish nationalist person who uses the Northern Irish identity would be unlikely to consider it an inherently British identity (McNicholl, 2019). There are also those who claim the Northern Irish identity instead of British or Irish identities, thus rejecting traditional national identities (Garry & McNicholl, 2015). What is relevant about the Northern Irish identity to this project is that individuals in contemporary Northern Ireland are using terms of national identity differently than they did in the past, just as they are using religious identities differently in the wake of secularisation. Determining community balance based on national identity would be difficult, particularly given that it is enshrined in the B/GFA that individuals can hold multiple national identities.

In-migration in Northern Ireland has increased and is considered to be having a calming effect

The second demographic change worth mentioning is the increased in-migration that occurred in Northern Ireland post-1998. Before 2001, the percentage of those living in Northern Ireland who were born outside of the UK and Ireland remained below 1.1% of the population. In the 2011 census, this rose to 1.81% and then increased significantly to 4.5% in 2011. The number of foreign-born residents rose again to 6.53% in the 2021 census, and this would likely be a higher number if those born in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland were included in this data.[9] This is important because Bjarnason, Shuttleworth, Stevenson, and Finell (2022, p. 10) found that, specifically in Northern Ireland, in-migration as well as return migration (those from Northern Ireland who left the region and returned) have "a calming effect in areas of entrenched conflict by disrupting a deep cleavage."[10]

9 It is worth noting that Brexit has made immigration to Northern Ireland more difficult for EU nationals, and this may reduce the influx of migrants over time (Devlin, 2022). It is yet to be seen what the long-term effects of this will be on demographic changes in the region.

10 However, the influx of migrants – particularly that of refugees and asylum seekers – has posed a challenge for schools in every sector in Northern Ireland (Devlin, 2022; Gray, et. al., 2023). Language barriers, educational disruption, and (at times) traumatic histories experienced by newcomer pupils require additional support for these students in the midst of already limited educational resources. Minority ethnic students also tend to experience racism and negative bias from a young age, both within and outside school settings (Integrated Education Fund, 2010). Examining this in more depth is beyond the scope of this project, particularly given that little research has been conducted to examine how Integrated and non-Integrated schools manage minority ethnic student issues differently, but it is worth acknowledging that in-migration poses unique challenges in education.

Those born outside of the UK and Ireland are very unlikely to hold the same national (British, Irish, Northern Irish) or communal (unionist, nationalist, 'neither') identities as those from the region, and they are more likely than the local population to have religious beliefs that are not Protestant or Catholic (Bjarnason, Shuttleworth, Stevenson, & Finell, 2022). This means that Integrated schools may be more attractive to parents from outside the region, further increasing the demand for places.

The number of 'mixed' partnerships/marriages seems to have increased

The third demographic change to address for this project is the increased number of 'mixed' partnerships/ marriages occurring in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association (NIMMA) defines mixed marriage as a partnership "across traditional Christian divisions" in the midst of sectarianism, thus consisting of one Catholic and one Protestant (NIMMA, 2020). It is difficult to quantify the number of these relationships as it is not measured in the census, but NIMMA estimates that around 20% of marriages are mixed (Bradfield, 2023), which is significantly higher than the estimated 11% in the early 2000s (Todd, 2018a), which was again an increase from the fifty years prior. However, this is still a relatively low number[11] and is fundamentally an estimate based on survey data such as the NILT survey. The actual numbers of mixed partnerships are likely higher, though specific research would need to be conducted to determine this.

The increase of mixed partnerships/ marriages is important because they challenge "familial and communal continuity over generations, through its impact on the children, and because it is a symbolic and practical example of the permeability of social boundaries" (Todd, 2018, p. 152). As the Northern Ireland peace process has reduced the threat of violence and increased globalisation in the region, inter-community relationships have become (at times) easier to develop and maintain. When 'mixed' couples have children, questions concerning their education, religion, and cultural traditions are raised (Todd, 2018), and many such couples desire to send their children to Integrated schools in which they have access to both Catholic and Protestant, as well as 'Other,' cultural traditions and education (Lloyd & Robinson, 2011).

Brexit's impact on identification in Northern Ireland

Finally, it would be remiss to not mention Brexit when discussing demographic shifts and changes to identity in Northern Ireland. Brexit – a portmanteau of 'British Exit' – refers to the 2016 UK referendum on European Union (EU) membership in which the majority of voters opted to leave the EU. 'Brexit' also refers to the

11 This percentage may be low because increased secularisation in the region has made it more socially acceptable for a couple to live together and have children without getting married (Ganiel, 2016). Indeed, Lloyd and Robinson (2011, p. 16) found that those "who lived in same-religion partnerships were three times more likely to be married than those who lived in mixed-religion partnerships. ... It may be that people with different religious beliefs find that living together is one way to avoid dissent among families and friends when it comes to choosing a place of worship or compromising by marrying in a registry office in order to avoid church disapproval."

subsequent UK/EU negotiations, which are still ongoing. Much research about the impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland has been conducted from a variety of perspectives, such as economics (Hayward, 2021), politics (Phinnemore, 2020; Tonge, 2016), and the peace process (Cochrane, 2020). What is important for this project is the consistent finding that Brexit has heightened community divisions through volatile politics[12] and has thus changed the way people from Northern Ireland identify.

Importantly, the B/GFA includes a provision for a public referendum to be called by the Secretary of State of Northern Ireland in order to determine whether Northern Ireland should remain in the UK or reunite with the Republic of Ireland. Discussions of a potential United Ireland referendum went from being peripheral at best to being the centre of much political discourse in the wake of Brexit. This is largely because the Irish border went from being virtually non-existent to becoming a land border between the EU and a non-member state, which caused huge logistical and political concerns (Cochrane, 2020; Hayward, 2018).

However, these discussions of a united Ireland referendum have posed as a threat to unionism, which has caused many to embrace Protestant British unionist identities wholeheartedly. This is in part because their understanding of their British identity is dependent upon being a British citizen and the thought of this changing is viewed with trepidation. Nationalism has been threatened by a separation from the Republic of Ireland via a land border and a lack of joint representation in the EU. Unionism has been threatened by a potential united Ireland and frustration with the UK government's lack of understanding of Northern Ireland issues (Murphy & Evershed, 2022). Additionally, the moderate centre ground is consistently frustrated with both sides, as the huge political boost of the Alliance Party seems to indicate (Tonge, 2022). Altogether, Brexit has caused a rift in community relations that has impacted how individuals choose to identify – whether through an entrenchment in previously held identities or in the rejection of these identities.

2.5 Other sectors' approaches to community balance and identity

In this section we explore how other NI organisations discuss and/or apply community balance. An important introduction to this information is to outline the categories used in the Northern Ireland census, which is conducted every 10 years. The 2021 census utilised the religious categories of 'Catholic,' 'Presbyterian,' 'Church of Ireland,' 'Methodist,' 'Other Christian,' 'Other Religion,' and 'No Religion.' Notably, 'Protestant' is not a category as the census measures adherence to denominations within Protestantism. The identity section of the 2021 census is presented via the categories 'British only,' 'Irish only,' 'Northern Irish only,' 'British and Irish only,' 'British and

12 The details of how Brexit shaped Northern Ireland politics – particularly aspects like the role of the EU in Northern Ireland, the DUP's confidence and supply deal with May's Conservative government, the Northern Ireland Protocol, etc. – are beyond the scope of this literature review. For an excellent explainer, see the book *A Troubled Constitutional Future: Northern Ireland After Brexit* by Murphy and Evershed (2022).

Northern Irish only,' 'Irish and Northern Irish only,' 'British, Irish, and Northern Irish only,' or 'Other' (NIRSA, 2022).

The DE conducts an annual census of primary and secondary school pupils based on enrolment data provided by all schools in Northern Ireland. From 2005/2006 to 2017/2018, the religious categories utilised were 'Protestant,' 'Roman Catholic,'[13] 'Other Christian,' 'Non-Christian' and 'No Religion/Not Recorded.' In the 2018/2019 school year, the final three categories were combined, resulting in the categories of 'Protestant,' 'Catholic,' and 'Other Christian/ Non-Christian / No Religion / Not recorded,' which are still used today (Department of Education, 2023).

The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is also conducted annually and aims to capture the social attitudes of a representative population sample to see how these attitudes shift over time (ARK, 2023). The 2023 survey has two different presentations of religious identity available. One uses the categories 'Catholic,' 'Protestant,' and 'Other,' while the second provides much more detail, including fifteen Protestant denominations, four non-Christian religious categories, 'no religion,' and 'Catholic' (ARK, 2024).

1. Fair employment / equality legislation uses 'Protestant,' 'Catholic' and 'Other' as indicators of community background

The Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 (FETO) requires employers to monitor the composition of their work force and ensure equality within the workplace (Article 55). The Fair Employment Code of Practice defines monitoring as "establishing the community background of your existing workforce (that is, how many belong to the Protestant community and how many belong to the Roman Catholic community)" (quoted in Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2020, p. 4). The Equality Commission's annual report (2020, p. 5) further explains:

> In this specific context, the terms 'Protestant' and 'Roman Catholic' in fair employment monitoring are thus NOT used to convey religion, religious belief, or non-belief. Specifically, the terms are used to convey the community to which an individual has stated that they belong, or which they might reasonably be perceived to belong, based on evidence of a connection with that community. The term 'non-determined' is used where a community background is neither stated nor can be reasonably determined.

Thus, legally, employers across sectors in Northern Ireland are required to ask employees to designate as Protestant or Roman Catholic, making religious terms of identity the primary indicator of community balance. What is important to note is that the Equality Commission considers the terms Protestant and Roman Catholic to be the best indicator of community background. Thus, the meanings associated with the terms has shifted from indicating religious practice (as would have been assumed through much of the twentieth century)

13 In the 2012/2013 school year, 'Roman Catholic' was changed to 'Catholic,' and remained so in all subsequent DE school censuses.

to indicating a cultural and social upbringing and community network (Coakley, 2021).

Interestingly, the authors of the Equality Commission's annual report chose to present statistics only concerning those who were determined to be Protestant and Roman Catholic, thus removing those 65,435 individuals (11% of the work force) who were 'non-determined' from the report. Given the above account concerning the identity in Northern Ireland – and, specifically, the large number of people who do not designate as Protestant or Roman Catholic – this seems to be a notable omission. It highlights that the structures embedded in Northern Ireland's governance are predominately concerned with the two traditionally opposed communities, which is understandable given the divisive historical context, but is increasingly unable to keep up with changes in modern society (Mitchell, 2020).

2. Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) provides no specific religious or community balance guidance in their literature

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) was established in 1971 to bring an impartial, fair and unbiased approach to housing in the region amid sudden and severe segregation in the face of political conflict. A key objective of NIHE's work post-1998 has been promoting good relations within communities through housing (Northern Ireland Housing Executive, 2015) as NIHE is "responsible for renting and maintaining of around nine per cent of housing stock in NI"

the structures embedded in Northern Ireland's governance are predominantly concerned with the two traditionally opposed communities … but is increasingly unable to keep up with changes in modern society

(Gray, et. al., 2023, p. 152). Housing remains segregated, despite the reduction of single-identity electoral wards[14] between 1998 and 2011 (Gray, et. al., 2023, p. 151). NIHE's Community Cohesion Strategy 2015-2020 states "one of the key Housing Executive aims within this Strategy is a commitment to promote mixed housing where it is practical, desirable and safe" (p. 3). The question for this project is how NIHE defines "mixed" in an increasingly diverse Northern Ireland.

Between 2008 and 2011 NIHE developed a pilot Shared Neighbourhood Programme which aimed to support and encourage 30 shared neighbourhoods "where people choose to live with others regardless of their religion or race, in a neighbourhood that is safe and welcoming to all, and threatening to no-one" (Northern

14 These are defined as areas where 80% or more of the population identify with one religion.

Ireland Housing Executive, 2015, p. 13). This pilot was expanded into a mainstreamed programme that, as of 2023, had resulted in 33 shared housing developments and 44 Good Relations Plans, which are bridging programmes for residents of the developments and those living within 5 miles of the developments (Gray, et. al., 2023). However, demographic information of those who live within these shared developments are not readily available, thus it is difficult to definitively determine what terms of identity they are using to ensure the developments are indeed shared.

There are, however, indicators that 'Protestant' and 'Roman Catholic' are the main terms used by NIHE. For example, in a brief for the delivery of the Shared Housing Programme, NIHE uses Shirlow and Murtagh's findings that "the majority of NI's population resides in areas that are, at minimum, 80% either Catholic or Protestant," to define their aims to "create a community where division does not restrict the life opportunities of individuals and where all areas are open and accessible to everyone" (Department for Communities, 2019, p. 5). Additionally, NIHE worked with Queen's University Belfast to develop a mapping tool to track the segregation of housing in Northern Ireland over time using census data. The outputs of this mapping system use the Protestant and Catholic identities to show that housing segregation decreased between 2001 and 2011 (Shuttleworth & Lloyd, 2018). It is important to note that this particular project was dependent upon terms of identity used in the Northern Ireland censuses of 1971, 1991, 2001, and 2011. In 1971 and 1991, 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' were defined as religious identities, but in 2001 and 2011 they were defined as 'community background' identities, which further indicates that the meaning behind these terms has changed over time. The report for this project also acknowledges that the demographics in Northern Ireland shifted with the increased number of immigrants between 2001 and 2011, particularly as (predominantly Catholic) Eastern European countries like Poland and Lithuania joined the EU and people from those countries were able to move to Northern Ireland. The authors posit that the rise of Catholic identification in certain areas is due to the influx of these migrants as opposed to movement of Irish Catholics in the region (Shuttleworth & Lloyd, p. 10), which further begs the question of whether religious identification is the best metric for measuring traditional community balance. This report – just like the Equality Commission's 2020 Annual Report – did not map housing occupied by those who identified as 'Other' or 'No Religion,' again highlighting the complexity that these non-designating populations bring to metrics of community balance and how they can be removed or ignored for ease of data analysis.

In terms of community balance, rather than terms of identification, an interesting aspect of this is that shared communities must meet certain criteria to continue receiving funding from the Department for Communities (DFC). One of these criteria is, "Allocations to the Scheme have resulted in one community not being in the dominance of more than 70%" (Department for Communities, 2019, p. 15). The lack of clarity in how these communities are defined begs the question of who is expected to make up the remaining 30%. One can comfortably presume that the DFC is primarily concerned with ensuring

neither Protestants nor Catholics represent more than 70% of residents, but it is unclear where 'Others' would fit into this community balance. For example, would it be acceptable if a shared housing community is 70% Protestant and 30% 'Other'? Or would a certain percentage of Catholic-identifying residents be required? This is not explicit in the literature, nor is it clear why the DFC have chosen 70% instead of a lower percentage. What is important to note is that the DFC requires a maximum majority of 70%, which is strikingly different from NICIE's guidance that Integrated schools aspire to a maximum majority of 40%.

NIHE have confirmed there is no designation of 'mixed' in the context of a housing application. When applying for social housing, applicants select the Common Landlord Areas (CLAs) in which they are interested in living. Within these CLAs, some areas/estates may be more desirable to those seeking a 'mixed' area. If such a preference is stated, this will be recorded in the comments against that CLA to be taken into consideration when allocations are being made. Applicants can also exclude certain landlords when choosing a CLA. So, if there is a particular mixed/shared housing development within a CLA that the applicant only wants to be considered for, all other properties owned by other social landlords within that CLA can be excluded so they will only be considered for allocations that arise within their preferred shared housing development.

Altogether, NIHE does not provide any further insight into potential alternative ways to measure community balance at this stage.

3. Special EU Programmes Board (SEUPB) also uses vague language to describe 'cross-community' efforts in Northern Ireland

The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) manages EU funding for projects designed to bring peace and prosperity to Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland. The current round of programming is titled PEACEPLUS (2021-2027), which is providing approximately €1.14 billion to projects in six thematic areas.[15] The programme overview emphasises peace, inclusivity, and cross-community projects, yet is ambiguous about how these concepts are defined in the Northern Ireland/ border counties context. The output indicators (the specific, measured deliverables) and the result indicators (the measured effects on the direct population targeted/users of the infrastructure) required for PEACEPLUS projects use language like "110,000 people from different communities engaged jointly in implementation of local action plans," "10 capital shared spaces jointly developed and implemented," and "5 strategies and action plans jointly developed" (SEUPB, 2020, p. 59). At times these are clearly defined as cross-border projects, but the naming of local communities is missing despite consistent references to 'cross-community' goals. The terms

15 These are 1) building peaceful and thriving communities, 2) delivering socio-economic regeneration and transformation, 3) empowering and investing in our young people, 4) healthy and inclusive communities, 5) supporting a sustainable and better connected future, and 6) building and embedding partnership and collaboration.

'Protestant' and 'Catholic' are only used once when quoting the pre-existing Shared Learning Together Education Programme (p. 23), and unionist/nationalist and British/Irish identities are not used at all. On page 5 of the project overview, the SEUPB writes, "Membership of the Local Community PEACEPLUS Partnerships will reflect the diverse nature of our communities (including newcomers) and be managed to ensure the desired levels of representation and inclusivity."

This vague language likely reflects the SEUPB's awareness of the complex use of identities established above. It is increasingly difficult to quantify community balance in Northern Ireland, though previous iterations of PEACE funding under the SEUPB did use religious identities to refer to the two traditional communities, and these terms were used in certain output indicators. This includes the most recent programme, PEACE IV (2014-2020), which had four thematic areas, including "children and young people." SEUPB required that programmes under this thematic area be delivered on a cross-community and/or cross-border basis, with "variation between participating groups of the two main community backgrounds not normally more than 20%. For example, if a Programme has 50 young people from a Catholic background, it should have a variance of no more/less than 20% (10 young people) from a Protestant background. As the Programme has 50 young people from a Catholic background, it should have between 40 and 60 young people from a Protestant background" (NIRSA, 2016, p. 23). It is easy to see how this level of specificity of community representation could cause problems for small community projects, particularly if parents did not identify their children as Protestant or Catholic.

The Equality Commission, NIHE, and the SEUPB thus do not provide alternative designations for community balance. The Equality Commission specifically mandated that 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' are "NOT used to convey religion, religious belief, or non-belief," but are reflective of "community background," which can lead to confusion and frustration for individuals who do not wish to identify along religious lines. NIHE uses less definite language, which can also lead to confusion. The Shared Housing Programme depends on a general understanding of the two traditional communities without clearly defining them, so it is unclear how community balance is ensured – particularly with the inclusion of newcomer communities and individuals who do not belong to the two traditional communities. The SEUPB is equally vague, using terms such as 'jointly developed and implemented spaces' and 'people from different communities' without defining these groups. This may prove to be beneficial for monitoring PEACEPLUS funding, which can be used in virtually any sector across Northern Ireland and the border counties. This type of language would be less helpful for Integrated schools attempting to measure community balance. These are just three examples of a perpetual problem sectors in Northern Ireland face attempting to promote cross-community equality and inclusion in the face of changing demographics and uses of terms of identity.

3. Discussions with School Leaders

3.1 Current practice

The designations used are 'Protestant,' 'Catholic,' or 'Other'

All schools interviewed for this project used these three categories to determine the religious balance within their schools, both in terms of pupils and of staff. One school also recorded the religious designation of the parents or carers of the children to get a 'broader understanding' of their school community. Another school recorded the number of Muslim pupils because these students made up a significant minority in the school body.

The designations are generally seen as familiar terms in the post-conflict Northern Ireland context

Some participants consider the formal designations as useful due to their familiarity amongst the wider population of Northern Ireland.

> *"I was born in the Protestant designation, but not by choice, just by birth. So, if I were going to apply for school, that's probably what I would tick. I think it would be very difficult to change that kind of thinking. And the terms are still correct. … In terms of census and those things, those are the terms that would be used. So I think people are used to them and I think they understand why they have to designate to a point."* (Focus Group 2)

Importantly, there was acknowledgment that Northern Ireland remains a segregated society and ensuring a school is Integrated requires measurement of some sort. Protestant / Catholic / Other, were seen as being familiar terms used in many other societal contexts, and therefore seem to be the best way to ensure a mix of different backgrounds.

> *"We also need to be very careful that Integrated schools are able to prove that they are Integrated, because otherwise it's very easy for a school to say, 'Well, we are Integrated because we celebrate these cultural events.' … The issue why Protestant, Catholic, None and Other has to remain in Northern Ireland, [is] because that is the source of so much of the conflict we have had here. And so much of our social life in Northern Ireland is still very, very segregated."*
> (Focus Group 3)

Schools accept the designations chosen by parents on intake forms

School leaders explained that they accept the designation parents choose on their children's intake forms without seeking additional information (also called 'residual' information) to support this claim. The Equality Commission recommends employers use the residuary method of determining employee community background, which includes examining "surnames and other names, address, … sporting or other leisure pursuits or interests, … clubs, societies or other organisations belonged to …" (The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland,

2020). No school leaders in these focus groups pursued this type of residuary information, and most participants explained they have to accept the designation on an intake form as an accurate description of parental understanding of Protestant / Catholic / Other.

> *"There's a line in our criteria that says I can only take into account the information uploaded onto the online transfer application. So, in our admissions criteria, we have about three pages long, just with lots of legislative things for this reason .... I can only take the information that is uploaded or noted with the child's application. I have children ... say, from [a primary school in a loyalist estate]. They tell me that they're Catholic. And I'm thinking, 'Okay, right. That's unusual to attend [that] primary school and to live in that area [and be Catholic].' But we can't question that."* (Focus Group 2)

Another participant said there were rare cases in which parents put a different designation on their child's intake form for secondary school than the designation they had selected for primary school. Even in this situation, the school ultimately registers the child under the designation the parents put on the intake form (Focus Group 3). Another oversubscribed school had a firmer stance on designation when communicating with parents than most other schools. The school's representative for this project viewed designation as a legal requirement and thus explained to parents that they may be asked to prove their child's religious affiliation, even though the school does not ask for this documentation.

> *"Our [intake criteria] is very legalistic ... We've had to use the DE references to what would be Protestant faith, what would be Catholic faith... and it's kept us legally on the right track... We would have parents who sometimes say, 'I'm not sure what I want to identify my child as.'... And I would say ... this is a legal process and if your child is baptised by a minister or a priest, then ... if you were asked for the proof of it, you'd have to be able to stand over that ... It can be quite the piece of work, having to do admissions and having to check that people are being honest... but it is hard for parents to sometimes come down to a conclusion."* (Focus Group 4)

3.2 Challenges implementing religious balance

There are divided perspectives on what the terms Protestant / Catholic / Other mean and whether they are the most appropriate designations to use in Integrated Education

School leaders wrestled with the question, 'What exactly are Protestant / Catholic / Other meant to measure?' Several participants described these terms as shorthand for community designations or political beliefs without religion itself playing a strong role.

> *"One thing that I would raise as a question is what's the most important statistic? Is it that you're Protestant or Catholic or is it ... which community you identify yourself with? ... I think that's the most important, making sure*

that there's an even divide of communities." (Focus Group 4)

"It raises the question of how Protestant and how Catholic [are] they? … A lot of them … may say 'Protestant' but wouldn't go anywhere near a church, it has probably more to do with what cultural background … I certainly find that in my school, the 'Other' group is the largest growing group, and they are 'Other' because they don't go to church, and they don't want their children to be labelled as one or the other." (Focus Group 3)

"Some people … are switching off religion… The world we're in is incredibly different… [from] even 30 years ago with regard to religion. And we have to move with it… Maybe [we should be] getting a sense of other markers that are important to people because some people … are just switching off the Protestant / Roman Catholic tags." (Supplemental Interview 1)

If Protestant / Catholic / Other are meant to capture the balance between traditional communities in a specifically Northern Ireland context, then religious terms may no longer be the most appropriate terms to use. Participants most commonly did not suggest alternative terms, but when they did, other common terms of identity used by the two traditional communities in Northern Ireland were agreed to be even less fitting. 'British' and 'Irish' are not mutually exclusive thanks to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and 'unionist' and 'nationalist' were also rejected as being too overtly political. No workable alternatives were suggested in the focus groups.

If Protestant / Catholic / Other are meant to capture the balance between traditional communities in a specifically Northern Ireland context, then religious terms may no longer be the most appropriate terms to use

Amid this discussion, the idea of broadening religious balance to include cultural community background was viewed with scepticism by some participants as this could unnecessarily complicate the issue of balance in Integrated Education.

"To me, when you keep it quite simple, it keeps it easier for people. When you start to go into [questions about] community, then it feels like it's got a political slant … I just worry about that … It depends on what you want to value … And if it opens itself up so wide, then what's the difference between [my school] and just any other school? Unless you have something intentional and planned about it?" (Focus Group 4)

While many participants felt that the formal designations are shorthand for community background, other school representatives felt that religion is an

important aspect of what Protestant / Catholic / Other is meant to measure. This was described both in terms of the Christian ethos that remains an aspect of Integrated Education, as well as the importance of celebrating other religions to increase student comfort with diversity.

> *"I think we're still in a place at the minute where we do need to use those terms, because there still is very strong religious beliefs in Northern Ireland … Children who do come from deprived backgrounds do really need that support that I think the ethos of Integration allows in terms of experiencing the world with a different lens, learning about all the different cultures and just having that child-centred focus in terms of developing that whole child, all aspects of them, spiritually, emotionally, all of it. And obviously, there's very much a Christian ethos at the centre of Integrated Education …. So, I think it's really important that there's a [religious] balance." (Focus Group 2)*

> "We had our school formal, and we didn't have it until after sundown [because our Muslim students were fasting for Ramadan]. So, we did our speeches and our awards first so that the meal could come out after sundown. And that was the children's decision when they had their formal committee. You know, it's lovely. And then again, when you talk about Ash Wednesday, I would take the children over to the local chapel to get their ashes, and we have a group of children who'd come over to observe and find out what's going on. 'Why are you doing this? Tell me all about it.' So, you've got the lead-up to assemblies, but you also have the children who just want to get over and see what's going on. It's about that respect for the culture, for the tradition and taking that fear out of asking questions and being open and honest. It is so lovely and refreshing." (Focus Group 1)

Thus, for some participants, the relevance of religion within Integrated Education added weight to the argument for using Protestant / Catholic / Other to measure balance within schools.

The increasing number of 'Other' designations complicates maintaining religious balance

A particular challenge for Integrated schools is the imprecise nature of the 'Other' category. This includes, but is likely not limited to, the rising numbers of newcomers, particularly those of other, non-Christian faiths; those from traditional communities but who reject religious labels; and an increasing number of 'mixed' families. This makes it difficult for some schools – particularly those that are oversubscribed – to know if they are striking a balance of community background as well as religious identity when aspiring to a 40/40/20 balance.

> *"In the last year, we would have had equal number of applications for our 'Other' sector and one of the other sectors …, exactly the same. And in 2021, again, one of them was equal. … it almost feels you have as many families designating as 'Other' as … Protestants."* (Focus Group 5)

> *"I think there's a whole combination in that 'Other' category … [who are] conflating religion with politics… I think… there's a move away from*

identifying as Christian… I think what I'm seeing is that more people are disconnecting from church … They're not just [not] attending… it's more than that. Some of the Catholic families, there still is a loyalty nearly of church attendance. It seems to be less so in the Protestant families… I think the 'Others' have increased because we've got a significant increase in newcomer families … Muslim would be the main one, and then some Hindu families as well. … I think there is a stronger cultural element in the Catholic Nationalist community … Cultural Protestantism for many is not attractive. They don't see themselves as orange or loyalists. So therefore, it's easier to disconnect from it or disconnect from the religious part of it, even though it's conflated with politics and history." (Supplementary Interview 1)

Adding subcategories to the 'Other' designation was discussed but dismissed

Participants struggled to provide potential alternative terms to the 'Other' category. The suggestion of adding sub-categories, such as 'mixed background' or 'non-religious,' was not met with enthusiasm by participants as it was likely to further complicate the already difficult nature of religious balance.

"I think [a mixed-marriage category] would overcomplicate it. I don't think it's necessary … I just think we're trying to get an open and honest reflection so that schools can strategically plan for the work they need to do … Like if you're sitting at 90% Protestant, you really need to be looking at that." (Focus Group 6)

"The measurement of the success of Integration really… from the Department's perspective is all related back to purely statistical evidence of numbers of children who are designated in a particular group … I'm not really sure what's to be gained by splitting the 'Other' group into subsections … It takes a very long time to administer the admissions process… behind the scenes, there's an incredible amount of administrative work, checking the applications, preparing for open day, preparing your criteria." (Focus Group 4)

Some participants expressed strong negativity toward the word 'Other' and its use as a category

In addition to the above-mentioned imprecise nature of the category, the term 'Other' was described as potentially uncomfortable and demeaning for individuals who do not wish to designate as Protestant or Catholic. These individuals have identities and beliefs, and they may not want to be defined by what they are not. This includes those who hold strong religious beliefs that are not Christian.

"The None/Other is a bit problematic as well, to be honest, because you're asking people who maybe have very strong faith from a Jewish background or a Hindi background or a Muslim background, and you're asking them to put themselves in the same category as other

people would identify as None/ Other. And that seems a bit odd … You're basically saying, 'Are you Protestant, Catholic, or are you something else?' And something else just feels a little bit condescending, I suppose." (Focus Group 3)

"For me, an Integrated ethos isn't identifying somebody as an 'Other.' And I know I keep going back to this, but … somebody who is a Muslim does not want to be identified as the other. They want to identify their faith, their religion. They want it to be celebrated. That's what we talk about in Integrated Education, that we come together regardless, but without diluting it. You still identify in your faith or in your interests or whatever. But for me, this word 'Other', it belittles people who are not a Protestant or Catholic. And that is a concern for me. That isn't Integration at all." (Focus Group 3)

Parents can be 'tactical' to improve their child's chances of obtaining a school place

Several school leaders shared experiences in which parents asked them what designation would ensure their child obtains a place in the school. This attitude on the part of parents was described as understandable to some extent, but against the spirit of religious balance. These leaders advised parents to be honest and choose the designation that best suited their child. However, it is a common suspicion – and, in some cases, evidence was offered – that parents do sometimes designate their child in the category that will potentially increase their likelihood of receiving a place. This can bring into question the validity of the religious balance within the schools and can lead to difficult situations with parents.

"I had to go to an appeal tribunal because a parent genuinely felt that we had applied our admissions criteria incorrectly. Her rationale for that was because there was a child within the same class, in the same primary school as her daughter, who got in and her daughter did not. But I could see that the child who got in had designated differently to her daughter. And that was very difficult because I couldn't disclose that information… all I could say in the tribunal was "They weren't looked at within the same category." … They lived in a predominantly Protestant estate, and the parent was going, "But I know that they are Protestant." I was going, "I can't discuss that. All I can tell you is that your daughter and that child were not looked at within the same religious category … and that's why that child got in and your daughter did not." … [The tribunal found that] the admissions criteria were applied correctly because … there's a line in our criteria that says, I can only take into account the information uploaded onto the online transfer application … We can't question [how parents designate their child]." (Focus Group 2)

3.3 School leaders' responses to 40/40/20 guidance

The importance of 40/40/20 religious balance is acknowledged in the context of Northern Ireland

Several school leaders acknowledged the initial goals of Integrated Education in relation to NICIE's guidance, recognising the need for continued mixing of pupils from the two traditional backgrounds in the post-conflict context of Northern Ireland.

> *"The school was founded in 1985 by a group of parents …. Those parents at that time really felt very strongly that there wasn't a system of education that allowed their young people to be taught together in terms of … the two main religious groups within Northern Ireland …. We do have a number of founding parents that are governors within our school. And I suppose, thinking back to whenever the school was formed, they do feel strongly that the two main religious groups should be well represented."* (Focus Group 2)

> *"I think that if you strip back completely on [schools] being planned to still reflect the two main traditions as the very essence of why Integrated schools started, then there is no going back on [40/40/20] … We wouldn't be prepared to lose sight of the two main traditions still being the very essence of what we want to make sure we don't step back into the past."* (Focus Group 4)

> *"I think we can't lose sight of what the actual purpose of Integrated Education was in the first place… to address the difficulty in the community in Northern Ireland."* (Focus Group 4)

40/40/20 was thought to be a formal requirement school leaders were accountable for

Several participants described feeling held accountable to achieve a 40/40/20 balance by NICIE and/or their school board of governors, or by political and public perception.

> *"We have then these figures to try to achieve and we can't avoid them. It's in the same way we can't avoid inspectors in schools, even though we might complain about them. But you know it's there and it's a reality, and we'll have to find a way to make it work."* (Focus Group 4)

> *"You can find questions that have been asked in Stormont over the last decade of questioning the validity of a school calling itself an Integrated school because it wasn't 40/40/20, yet it was a school that was absolutely bang on the money for reflecting the religious balance within the area, the context that it found itself in. And it had a very developed Integrated ethos. But nevertheless, those questions have been asked. 'That school calls itself an Integrated school, but it's not an Integrated school because it's not 40/40/20.' So that's something that we need to be very mindful of."* (Focus Group 3)

> *"There was an expectation … this was what was expected – and it wasn't really within schools. It was … local politicians and people within*

the education board. That's how they defined Integrated schools, 40/40/20. It actually empowered people who were in opposition to Integrated schools … They could attack schools by saying, 'Oh, you're not really Integrated if you don't meet this criteria.'" (Focus Group 3)

Oversubscribed schools implement strict religious balance percentages, but some leaders do not feel 40/40/20 is the most appropriate balance for their schools

Representatives from oversubscribed schools explained that they must turn students away at intake due to lack of available places. All but one utilised 40/40/20 to determine these placements as this is written into their intake criteria – one school had changed their intake criteria to 35/35/30.

"Our admissions years ago … was always 40/40/20 and [at that point] we were 45/45/10 … but [we changed our admissions criteria to] 35/35/30. That was to try and allow for the growing number of Others." (Focus Group 1)

For the rest of the oversubscribed schools, adhering to 40/40/20 was described as beneficial in terms of public and parental perception. If an oversubscribed school is challenged as not implementing religious balance, school leaders can provide the intake criteria and annual intake numbers to prove there is religious balance in the school.

However, there were frustrations amongst some representatives of oversubscribed schools. The significant rise of 'Other' designations means that schools are turning away students who are in this category, even if they meet every other criterion and come from families that want an Integrated education for their children. Schools are thus giving places to students who meet very few required criteria because they designate in the minority religion category. Some leaders of oversubscribed schools desire a change in the NICIE guidance to create more even proportions between the three categories, such as 35/35/30.

"We would call ourselves a first-choice school. Our first criteria is that you have to have us as your first or your second preference … the governors' feeling [is] that if people don't really want Integrated Education, they shouldn't be coming to us … Our admissions criteria is applied separately and discretely to each of those religious categories. I have three separate spreadsheets. The Catholic spreadsheet this year, where I had to go down to – the criteria was much lower, and everyone who identified as a Catholic young person this year got in because I had [many] places to give and I [couldn't fill] them all …. So everyone who applied, even people who had us as a third preference, which is unheard of, got in … However, I had [far too many] applications in the Protestant category … So generally, in the Protestant category, children who don't meet any [of the other] criteria, they don't get in … [and parents know, I've heard them say] 'There's no point in putting 'none' or 'Other' down because you've only [a few] spaces.'" (Focus Group 2)

Some schools struggle to achieve a religious balance of 40/40/20 because they are undersubscribed in one religious designation

In contrast to oversubscribed schools, schools who were undersubscribed did not need to turn pupils away and accepted all students who applied for places. Some representatives of these schools were comfortable with this. They explained that they pay limited attention to the 40/40/20 guidance, in part because they do not feel this reflects the demographics of the community in which their school is situated, and in part because 40/40/20 is not as important to them as implementing an Integrated ethos.

> *"There's this set … percentage that you should have, but, you know, it has to reflect the area … I do think [40/40/20] is aspirational … I think you need to look at the catchment area and the Integrated ethos is where we are bringing children together from all and no faith and celebrating that diversity and educating them … I don't necessarily think it has to be [40/40/20] … to be a truly Integrated school, I think [the school] has to represent the community that it serves in society."* (Focus Group 1)

> *"In the area [our school] recruits from, [80+%] of the school going population has identified or is perceived as Catholic. How can you possibly have 40/40/20? And the growth is in Muslim and non-traditional religions."* (Focus Group 1)

> *"For me, I ask why? Why are we [using religious designations]? I feel sad when we're still talking about this because … for me personally, the religious makeup of a school isn't what makes it an Integrated school. It's what you do with the children, it's the ethos of the school. … What work do we do to make sure that by the time the children leave our school that they are excited about difference and diversity and not frightened of it?"* (Focus Group 3)

A few undersubscribed schools that have 40/40/20 in their admissions criteria expressed indifference, or even antipathy, to the guidance. There was acknowledgment that a singular guidance for religious balance within the entire Integrated Education sector is difficult to implement.

> *"I've never used it, I never will because I've never agreed with it. So if I don't buy into something, I'm not going to hang it around my neck."* (Focus Group 3)

> *"We haven't had to apply the 40/40/20, but it is in our criteria … because you have to state something in your admissions criteria about religious balance. But I have also sat on … boards of governors, admissions subcommittees where they have applied 40/40/20 whenever the school has been oversubscribed into P1. And I remember sitting there going, 'This is all very odd.' The statistics within the school are nowhere near 40/40/20, but we have to apply 40/40/20 within the admissions criteria because that's what's sort of been pushed right from the start. So I think it could be very problematic."* (Focus Group 3)

> *"[Religious balance] has never been a real problem for us in our [town], but … our [town] itself is changing …*

> *This has thrown up more questions for me … [we have] to look at our situations, but to try and find a uniform consensus across the whole sector? I think that is going to be extremely difficult."* (Focus Group 4)

On the other hand, there were participants from undersubscribed schools who were striving toward a 40/40/20 balance because they perceived it as a worthwhile aspiration. These participants recognised the importance of ensuring the minority was adequately represented.

> *"Anecdotally … people would say, 'Oh, well, [our school] is a Catholic school in anything but name ….' I would like our Protestant balance to be stronger than the local area, because what I think that does is it gives those young people from a Protestant background a confidence to speak their truths, to speak their identity."* (Focus Group 1)

There was also recognition that newly transformed schools experience difficulty shifting their school from a one-religion majority to one with religious balance. Participants from newly transformed schools engaged in recruiting efforts in the minority community to attempt to improve the minority representation in their schools.

> *"[We do] outreach with local primary schools, you know, Controlled, CCMs and so on. And we would have events in school inviting our Primary 7 pupils, too. And then there's work that goes on … outreach. It might be different departments within our school – technology, science, PE departments would go out and support classes and support activities."* (Focus Group 3)

There was comment that 40/40/20 balance was viewed as a long-term aspiration for these schools, but unlikely to happen soon given both the historic nature of the school and the (lack of) religious balance in the surrounding community.

> *"I knew the people in the school who wanted, for all the right reasons, to transform. But they're taking very gentle steps to reflect their current community, which would stand at about 15% of the minority religion in their area. But 15% isn't far off 20. So, they can start with 15 and move it to 20. And then there's a different journey for … a Controlled school, and if they could get to the 40/40/20, I mean, that would be something pretty amazing for them. But maybe they're never going to get there. I don't know. I just think that if we're all sitting with different numbers, I can maybe understand it a little bit better in a school that's transforming because they're on a journey."* (Focus Group 4)

This loosely reflects the DE guidance that newly transformed schools initially begin with a target of 10% minority representation, with the goal of meeting 30% within a reasonable time frame (Department of Education, 2017).

3.4 School leaders' responses to the 2022 Integrated Education Act

School leaders were shown a slide detailing the specific language of the 2022 Integrated Education Act. Some participants were familiar with the Act, but many were not. There were varied attitudes toward the Act, but consistent positive and negative aspects were found across focus groups.

School leaders were positive about the inclusion of socioeconomic status and ability in the definition of Integrated Education

Socioeconomic status and ability were considered to have long been part of Integrated Education, and seeing it written in legislation was viewed favourably.

> *"I'm really pleased that socioeconomic and different abilities features on the act definition because that is reflective of the work that we're doing within Integrated schools."* (Focus Group 6)

> *"To me, the integrated school should be a really well-balanced comprehensive school. And so I think those [three main points in the legislation] move us towards that rather than away from it. So I'm comfortable with that."* (Focus Group 1)

There was a mixed response to the concept of 'reasonable numbers'

Several school leaders were also happy with the concept of 'reasonable numbers of both Roman Catholic and Protestant children and young persons.' The flexibility of language allowed schools to reflect their local community without being required to meet 'arbitrary' targets.

> *"[I like] where it says about a reasonable rather than certain percentages set in stone, because ultimately, it's outside the control of the school and the governors who applies for the school … All we can do is set out our stall and hope that it attracts families, so … I think it's more useful than setting 40/40/20."* (Focus Group 3)

One representative from a newly transformed school expressed relief upon learning about this language and learning that 40/40/20 is not in legislation as it removed some of the pressure to reach a certain goal in the immediate future.

> *"For us, as a newly Integrated school, this would be great in that you don't feel … you're not achieving or you're failing because you're not reaching that percentage … whenever you're so early on in a journey. It takes time to have the religious balance."* (Focus Group 3)

Some other school leaders were uncertain about the vague language of the 2022 Act concerning 'reasonable numbers.' One representative from an oversubscribed school expressed concern that changing the language in their school's admissions criteria could open the school to challenge by parents.

> *"I'm not sure what the word 'reasonable' would be referring to, and I think governors in schools, and especially Grant Maintained schools where the governors do have a lot of authority, would probably feel more comfortable to have something like the NICIE guidance … to feel like they are not going to be taken to a tribunal for being unfair…."* (Focus Group 2)

3.5 Suggested changes from school leaders

Some leaders would welcome a change to the 40/40/20 guidance

As mentioned previously, some school leaders said that a 35/35/30 religious balance would be a welcome change to NICIE guidance given shifting demographics in Northern Ireland. One school had already changed their admissions criteria to 35/35/30, and another school representative explained that this is also the balance that they are reflecting, but they have not made the change to their intake criteria. Some school leaders indicated that they would feel more confident in changing their admissions criteria to 35/35/30 if they had NICIE's support, particularly through a change in the guidance.

> *"We're pretty much reflecting the 35/35/30. But we haven't just taken that final step of … changing it, because it's a big deal to do it, and you don't want to get it wrong."* (Focus Group 4)

> *"I think there's a reservation about changing [from 40/40/20] still, regardless of knowing that the option is there … I certainly think that there'd be a reservation about it by changing a longstanding criteria that is being used by the majority of Integrated schools … I think that it would be interesting to see if NICIE are interested in adapting their statement … to go for an alternative breakdown … It's hard to go against something that NICIE will recommend."* (Focus Group 5)

> *"I'm quite interested in thinking about the census that was done recently and looking at, is it time for a 35/35/30% model? … I'm also intrigued by [non-Integrated] schools … pitching themselves to be cross-community. I'm just keen to safeguard the uniqueness of an Integrated school and would be worried in case NICIE and the IEF don't think very seriously about the purpose of an Integrated school and its origins… as we maybe look at the changing landscape of society."* (Focus Group 4)

3.6 Desired practical support

Guidance/resources for communicating to parents about why a religious designation is required and how it will be used

All schools faced challenges in communicating with parents about the need for religious designation and how to designate their children. Some school leaders appeared to be more confident in their school's communication concerning religious balance and Integrated ethos than others, but there was agreement that having a single source of guidance to draw from would be beneficial.

> *"You've got to spend a lot of time explaining the religious balance as well, because you are trying to sell your school … but you don't want to spend half an hour going through the nitty gritty of how … this process works. … If you read [the admissions criteria] it is like reading a foreign language if you're not used to doing it. And I've had to tweak it that many times*

because you literally are sitting down there with people crying their eyes out." (Focus Group 4)

"I think that would be great, actually, if there was a little bit more support because... much of the communication that is done with the parents is potentially oral ... but at the same time there's no deeper conversation .... Again, there's probably not an awful lot out there, guidance-wise, on the rationale behind [religious designation].... The likes of the NICIE statement there ... [and] the Integrated Education Act, that's all accessible for parents to read. But I suppose there's no real world, 'Why have NICIE said 40/40/20? Why are they recommending that?' That's never really been discussed ... Nor is there any real, I suppose, in-depth definition of ... what is 'Other?' (Focus Group 5)

More intentional collaboration across Integrated schools regarding religious balance

Several participants responded positively to the focus group experience as it allowed them to learn how other schools manage religious balance and discuss current practice in a collaborative setting. They would welcome more opportunity to discuss this issue with other schools.

"Even this conversation just connecting with two other schools and governors and staff ... is hugely invigorating ... Maybe a wee reminder to NICIE and IEF ... schools really value that kind of support ... they're just like a comfort blanket over you or ... something under you lifting you up collectively." (Focus Group 1)

"I know we have the Integrated Schools Together, but, I don't know, make a noise, a bigger bang, promote it more." (Focus Group 1)

A consistent frustration experienced by school leaders was incorrect public perception about Integrated Education

One school representative also expressed a desire for collaboration between school leadership and NICIE in relation to the Statement of Principles, which they sign up to as an Integrated school.

"The Statement of Principles that we have, I think it would be helpful if there was, for those sort of areas, a workshop available and maybe an opportunity to think through those things? That has not happened in my experience." (Supplementary Interview 1)

Public education about Integrated Education

A consistent frustration experienced by school leaders was incorrect public perception about Integrated Education. This included perceptions such as Integrated schools are neutral spaces (rather than diverse spaces), Integrated schools must meet the 40/40/20 threshold to be officially integrated, and Integrated schools are inherently non-religious. These perceptions can have a negative effect on the running of the school, as well as the development of an Integrated ethos – especially when it comes to parents who send their children into Integrated Education with

misconceptions of the schools. There was thus a desire amongst some participants for a public education campaign to dispel common myths and improve general understanding of Integrated Education. This was considered as something that NICIE/IEF might be best placed to undertake.

> *"One of our big problems that we tackled about three or four years ago was a lot of parents putting down 'none' because they seemed to be under the perception that Integrated Education was about having no religion."* (Focus Group 4)

> *"I think that there is the assumption that attending an Integrated school can dilute your faith … I think that it would be very useful if NICIE produced some sort of advertisement for the TV or something that actually was describing to the public what Integrated Education actually is … actually looking on the four principles of Integrated Education and how they are reflected. … Some parents think you don't do [RE]. Like, the amount of times that you get asked, 'Do they prepare the Catholic children for sacraments?' You know, 'Do the ministers come in? Do they hold assemblies? Do you do prayers in your school?' Questions … that only … become known to parents when their children are actually enrolled in the school."* (Focus Group 5)

One participant drew a comparison between public perception of Integrated schools and that of grammar schools, namely that Integrated Education is less academically demanding. This perception could be changed with better understanding of Integrated Education.

> *"People in less deprived socioeconomic areas who in the Protestant tradition are still… bound to the eleven plus… bound to selection, to the traditional grammar school generational system… As they see it, their brighter children will still opt for a grammar education … their consideration of Integrated Education and its all-ability factor tends to be very much for a child that they think could not cope with a grammar school academically."* (Focus Group 1)

Another school leader described how parental misunderstanding of Integrated Education challenged the Integrated ethos of their school at times, which could be mitigated if there was better public understanding of the sector. This participant shared an experience in which a student was reprimanded for sectarian behaviour, but the parents did not see a problem with their child's actions.

> *"My question is, 'You realize we're an Integrated school and that we celebrate all religions and cultures, and I really struggle to understand why you haven't bought into this fully and why this has taken place.' And the answer has been, 'I wanted my child to go to a good school.' And that concerns me, because it is a very, very specific thing that people are selecting. … When you're selecting to come along to an Integrated school, we're set apart. We're actively saying that we don't want someone coming here with a closed mindset. We want you to come here with an open mindset and a willingness to embrace all cultures and … help Northern Ireland move forward positively."* (Focus Group 2)

4. Stakeholder Interviews

The eight stakeholders interviewed for this project came from varied backgrounds and thus represented a wide range of experience. The following themes capture their views both in terms of consensus and in terms of contrasting perspectives.

4.1 Objectives of Protestant / Catholic / Other

These terms assist in the integration of pupils from the two traditional communities in light of the historic and continued segregation in Northern Ireland

Several stakeholders described religious designation as central to ensuring children from the two traditional communities are exposed to each other and that those from the minority community are adequately represented. The use of Protestant / Catholic / Other was considered by some participants to be the most appropriate form of designation in the post-conflict – yet still segregated – Northern Irish society.

> *"The primary objective of designation is to ensure … you have a mix within your school … If we are there in equal numbers, we can express ourselves … we can wear our identity with pride. That's not the case if there's an imbalance. … [Tony Spencer, founder of Integrated Education] used to talk about the naturally segregated tendencies of Northern Ireland … we've all seen them. We've seen the street that is mixed, and then suddenly one group becomes in the majority, and then suddenly it's monoculture."* (Stakeholder Interview 1)

> *"The old theory right at the start was that if you didn't have a substantial balance … that facilitated your child sitting beside a child from the opposite background, and moving through school together, and learning to understand each other, and break down barriers … The traditional view would be once the balance would have fallen below a certain level, a certain critical mass, then it became tokenism."* (Stakeholder Interview 3)

> *"We've had peace now for the last 26 years, but we don't have proper reconciliation. If we had proper reconciliation, it probably wouldn't matter that much, but we don't have it now. And you still find various things happening in Northern Ireland, which are sectarian and stuff like that. Until that moves on, until the next generation – it could be another ten years or possibly longer before this full and proper reconciliation."* (Stakeholder Interview 8)

Participants also recognised that Northern Ireland is changing

Within this discussion, there was acknowledgment that the aim of creating balance between the two traditional communities is happening in a changing context with an increase in those who do not identify as Catholic or Protestant.

> *"The clue is in the word balance, trying to get a breadth and a balance across things because our mission, well, our vision … is that the children be educated to be confident in their own identity, but also to engage and embrace the identity of Others. And it is our sole mission… to promote peace and reconciliation through Integrated Education. Therefore, we have a very specific goal of schools becoming better at including those from the two main traditions, but also taking into the wider context whereby people are not wanting to perhaps identify with those traditional labels."* (Stakeholder Interview 7)

Another stakeholder felt that using Protestant / Catholic / Other designations is no longer appropriate as these labels can reemphasise community divisions, which is counter to the goals of Integrated Education.

> *"This idea of identifying people by tribal backgrounds is something that keeps us in this constant wheel of crap in Northern Ireland. You know, it's pushing people into these boxes constantly."* (Stakeholder Interview 2)

However, one interviewee argued that even in the changing context of Northern Ireland, segregation remains primarily between the two traditional communities and therefore Integrated schools should continue to focus on a measurable balance of Protestant and Catholic pupils.

> *"I think it's hugely important we realise that that is our founding purpose. Of course, all schools will have diversity within them… but Integrated schools were founded for a specific purpose because Catholics and Protestants were at war … I think we can't lose sight of that. … I think it's too easy to slip into the… 'we're a changing society.' Yeah, we are, but we still vote on… orange and green lines… That has not changed."* (Stakeholder Interview 1)

4.2 Limitations of Protestant / Catholic / Other

These terms are used as shorthand for community background, which is complex in contemporary Northern Ireland

Several stakeholders said that the terms Protestant / Catholic / Other are meant to capture community background instead of religious practice, which is growing increasingly complex as Northern Irish society shifts.

> *"It's not simply about religion … During the height of the Troubles, Protestants and Catholics weren't actually fighting and rioting because Catholics believed in transubstantiation … It was about what tribe you were associated with … I absolutely think it goes far beyond just simply whether you go to a Protestant church or … to the Catholic [church] … It's far broader than that."* (Stakeholder Interview 1)

> *"We've always known that the definition, in Northern Ireland, of Catholic and Protestant are both extremely diverse definitions anyway. And that is part of the problem. We're still talking about religious balance when Catholic and Protestant is as much about*

religion as it is about culture, as it is about politics, as it is about sense of identity … We continue to use those terms even now, even when fewer people are expressing themselves as overtly practising a religion, be it Catholic, Protestant or another faith." (Stakeholder Interview 6)

Some participants felt that Protestant / Catholic / Other are no longer the best terms of identity to use, but they struggled to provide alternative categories or explain how this should be changed in practical terms.

"I'm not sure what the substitute is, and I've gone round and round this many times in my mind, because the reality for me is inter-education still stems from a desire for reconciliation between the two main communities, and they're probably still best represented by 'Catholic' and 'Protestant.' I think when you're asking parents, though, … 'Are you a Catholic or Protestant?' increasingly the answer is 'No, I'm neither' or 'I'm Other.' But … that response doesn't allow you to capture the culture and identity and background. And that's really what we're talking about rather than religion. I think it was always maybe a proxy for tradition and culture. … I mean, nationalist [or] unionist feels wrong. I haven't been able … to come up with an alternative." (Stakeholder Interview 5)

"[There is an emphasis on] a range of diversity of backgrounds and so forth, I think we maybe need to spell that out much more clearly and stop defining Integrated Education only by this Catholic / Protestant / Other, which has stuck. It's stuck for over 40 years. And I understand exactly why that is, and it shouldn't cease to be an emphasis of the Integrated system, but I think we have to see it in a much more inclusive way. So the terminology is really important and … I think the Integrated system has to make a stronger case for that diversity of background, rather than just appearing to focus on the two groups and a few who are not quite one or the other." (Stakeholder Interview 6)

However, most participants felt that religious designation, or designation of some sort, is important for Integrated Education to ensure there is a measurable mix of pupils in the student body.

Religious designation can, at times, overshadow the importance of an Integrated ethos in public perception

While not necessarily a limitation of using Protestant / Catholic / Other, some participants noted how these terms can often be seen as the most important marker of Integration, particularly by those outside the Integrated sector. There was recognition that the quality of teaching and development of an Integrated ethos can be overshadowed by religious designation.

"That is one of the problems: we've focused on how people define themselves rather than how the education is done in an inclusive and diverse way. Sometimes I think it's been the wrong focus. There's a school that I've been involved in …. They were a former controlled school. They were struggling. They had a handful of Catholic pupils, they had a couple of Catholic teachers

and they desperately wanted to be an Integrated school. But when people looked at it from the outside, they said, 'Oh, well, you're really still a controlled school. You only have a few Catholics, that's very nominal. You're not really an Integrated school.' But actually the quality of what they were trying to do, and I think they were genuinely committed to it, was Integrated Education, inclusive teaching. So the focus has been on numbers and on proportions rather than on the quality of what is actually being done in the education." (Stakeholder Interview 6)

4.3 Stakeholders' responses to 40/40/20

40/40/20 was viewed as less important than developing an Integrated ethos by some stakeholders

Some interviewees felt that stringently adhering to a 40/40/20 balance is not as important in contemporary Northern Ireland as reflecting the local community of a school and maintaining an Integrated ethos.

"I recognise the legacy of the Integrated sector is something which was bringing people from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds together .... But we're 40-odd years plus down the line now. We live in a society which is very diverse now ... and was diverse at that time as well. ... I think that broadly, [Integrated] schools should be able to think about the community area they're in ... They should be trying to get some sort of balance there, but I don't think there should be any real rigidity in it." (Stakeholder Interview 2)

"[We need to] move to some form of a model whereby it is reasonable if a school reflects the balance within this community ... where it's maybe 90% one community background and 10% another. If you have a school that reflects that balance ... and where the ethos of the school and how it deals with curriculum and extracurricular activities and all the rest of it is [reflective of Integration] ... and it's not dominated on the governance of the school by a single identity, then maybe that's what we realistically should be aiming to achieve." (Stakeholder Interview 3)

Others felt that 40/40/20 remains an appropriate aspiration for Integrated schools

Other stakeholders felt that a proportionate balance of religious designation is necessary to ensure minority students feel confident in sharing their perspectives, and 40/40/20 provides an appropriate target for Integrated schools.

"I think it's too easy to say as an Integrated school, 'We are reflecting the demographic of our surroundings.' ... I think you've got to do more than that ... [When] you see the balance changing, deteriorating... what do you do? You try to attract the minority. You go out and reach out to those feeder schools ... you can make your balance nearer 40/40/20 ... If it's not equal, then you've got to do something about it. You've got to strive and target." (Stakeholder Interview 1)

One stakeholder explained the complexity of their perspective on

40/40/20, which exemplifies the nuance of this topic. On one hand, undersubscribed schools are struggling to achieve this, while oversubscribed schools are often hitting these 40/40/20 targets at intake. However, in terms of oversubscribed schools, *"parents are clever. They'll figure out, 'Well, there's more chance of you getting in because there's less Catholic supply to that school.'"* Thus, it's difficult to say if even the oversubscribed schools that achieve 40/40/20 on paper are an equal mix of the two cultural traditions in NI and are inclusive of other cultures and religions. *"Therefore, we have to have a conversation about the 40/40/20 thing. But my concern would be that to throw the baby out with the bathwater, we could lose the essence of the mission of Integrated Education … ensuring peace and reconciliation through those two major cultural traditions"* (Stakeholder Interview 7).

The increasing number of those who designate as 'Other' further complicates religious balance

An important aspect of the 40/40/20 guidance in contemporary Northern Ireland is the growth of the 'Other' designation, which most stakeholders acknowledged complicated questions of religious balance. Participants considered this to be due to rising secularisation, the increase in mixed marriages, and the increasing number of newcomer families of different faith backgrounds.

> *"As time has gone on, I guess the relevance or the appropriateness of [40/40/20], or the realism of that has probably widened quite a bit with the demographic changes and the vastly greater number of people who are not prepared to designate as Catholic or Protestant – many, many more people are designating as Others." (Stakeholder Interview 3)*

> *"The reason for the designation, I understand. I knew some of the people who were setting up the Integrated schools back in the day. And I absolutely understand why they wanted to be clear that this was for both and others. But I think these days it makes things a little bit difficult because within the Other, there are many people who are not religious, but there are also people who have other faiths, … other belief backgrounds." (Stakeholder Interview 6)*

> *"I also think the issue for us is that category of 'Other' is just too wide and there should be ones for 'no religion,' 'unknown,' 'other Christian,' 'newcomer families,' whatever, whatever. It's just too narrow just to be 'Other' at the end of the day." (Stakeholder Interview 8)*

> *"It is the case that we're dealing with a different set of parents in Northern Ireland now, a lot more mixed marriages. I think there's a lot more people who vote differently now. The centre ground in Northern Ireland politics, represented by the Alliance party, has grown… There's a bigger proportion of people who would naturally seek to have their school become a more open school to all backgrounds, more diverse in the teaching staff and the curriculum within it. So I suppose a lot of it is just natural."* (Stakeholder Interview 3)

Additionally, some stakeholders described discomfort with the term

'Other' because it was perceived to diminish the identities held by those who do not wish to designate as Protestant or Catholic.

> *"I think there's a suggestion that, 'Well, if I'm an 'Other,' I don't really have any strong identity or culture … particularly coming from Northern Ireland … because I'm not actively designating. I'm okay with everything, or I'm fairly neutral on everything.' And I think that does a disservice to a large percentage of people in that category who probably do have a very strong identity. But it doesn't really come to the fore because it's 'reasonable numbers of Catholics and Protestants' [in the legislation]. It's not 'reasonable numbers of Catholics, Protestants and Others,' so it's almost like a big group is sort of pushed to one side a little bit."* (Stakeholder Interview 5)

> *"I think identifying anybody as 'Other' is fairly derogatory… if you're going to count me as unidentified, I can identify myself … [having] to lump people into these categories is something that's really difficult for those people who do not identify as Catholic and Protestant."* (Stakeholder Interview 2)

4.4 Stakeholders' responses to the 2022 Integrated Education Act

Some participants reacted positively to the language of the Act, particularly the inclusion of all abilities and socioeconomic backgrounds

Several stakeholders felt positively about the 2022 Act. One interviewee felt that the language around 'reasonable numbers' of Catholic and Protestant school children "loosened the road" to transformation for schools interested in Integrated Education (Stakeholder Interview 6). Some participants highlighted the inclusion of all ability and all socioeconomic backgrounds as particularly welcome.

> *"It puts in black and white that it's all ability … I think that's hugely important that that's there in the Act …. [Social inclusion is] really important as well because the eleven plus, … the selection procedure – that has had an effect on class right through our history …. Integrated schools are all ability schools… That's a really good thing because you will get grammar schools who, if you read their prospectus, they're 'practically Integrated.' Well, no, they aren't because they've excluded half the population."* (Stakeholder Interview 1)

> *"The balance of pupils that they would have in [non-Integrated] schools comes about as much by accident as anything else … If you take a controlled school which would say, 'We have a good diversity of children in the school,' but their board of governors might be predominantly from the Protestant churches … sporting activities and other extracurricular stuff would not reflect the diversity of the school. So those are not Integrated schools. The legislation has dealt with that."* (Stakeholder Interview 3)

Some participants were sceptical about the inclusion of all abilities and socioeconomic backgrounds in written legislation

There were stakeholders who were more hesitant about embracing these aspects of the 2022 Act. One interviewee questioned the exclusion of grammar schools from Integrated Education, as well as the measurability of socioeconomic balance.

> *"One of the tests for me would be, can a grammar school transform? Don't know. There have been a couple in the past that were interested and then didn't proceed any further because then you've got the issue about all abilities. … So that'll be one issue going forward. Socioeconomic – how you're going to judge that? Free school meals? It's not a great way. There should be other ways as well. I think this will become more important as more schools transform."* (Stakeholder Interview 8)

Another stakeholder was concerned that including all abilities and socioeconomic backgrounds in legislation will distract from the religious balance of Integrated schools.

> *"It's also about socioeconomic background and all ability. And it's maybe easier to be distracted by that because … it's really hard to get to grips with the Catholic and Protestant thing because … you're aware of the sensitivities. I think it's possible that there's a distraction and it's easier to think about the socioeconomic and the all ability, particularly around special needs and inclusion …. I think the other two elements were always there from the very start, but weren't actually in legislation …. There has to be that reminder [that] Integrated Education, for me, that the spirit is still around the two main communities. With everybody else included, but you cannot lose sight of that."* (Stakeholder Interview 5)

4.5 Stakeholders' suggestions for supporting schools' communications with parents

Centralised, written guidance for Integrated schools would aid in communicating with parents about religious designation

Given the complexity of religious designation, several stakeholders expressed the view that communicating adequately with parents is highly important for Integrated schools. Support for schools in this area would address how to explain the need for designation to parents, and how parents should approach choosing a religious designation for their child. Participants thought that doing this well could lead to a more accurate representation of community balance in schools. These stakeholders indicated that stronger centralised, written guidance from governmental and/or support bodies regarding how to communicate with parents would be welcome.

> *"For some parents, [filling out the admissions criteria] might be the first time they've been asked such a thing. … there is a lot of confusion between why that's important, and*

it is really important to us … getting that message in the leadership and the staff and the governors of the school [so] they're then able to translate that message to the parents. … We would always say, 'This isn't about declaring what religion you are or what church you attend …, it is about the experience that you as a family bring to the school life." (Stakeholder Interview 7)

"I think there's something around explaining to parents why you're collecting the data and that it's … a requirement under legislation in terms of being an Integrated school, as required by Department of Education, and it allows the school to more accurately reflect and work with the diversity in the school setting. If you don't know who you have, how can you work towards it? … I don't think people should feel forced into this. It's always very sensitive … because people have a right, of course, to describe themselves whichever way they want to. But I think if maybe parents understood more about why the questions were asked, I wonder, would you get a more reflected position?" (Stakeholder Interview 5)

"[It] would be great if there was a … more detailed explainer in writing … [and] all Integrated schools used the same standard questions …, [or even had] a leaflet when parents are interested in the school to explain the importance of [religious designation]." (Stakeholder Interview 8)

"I think there needs to be a conversation across the support bodies in relation to [a standard approach to communicating with parents about religious designation]." (Stakeholder Interview 7)

There was acknowledgment that there is no singular approach that would fit all schools, as one participant explained, *"Each school knows its community better than somebody coming in. I could say, 'Well this is a statement you should use,' but that may well not work for a particular community"* (Stakeholder Interview 5). However, this stakeholder recommended offering school leaders examples of how other schools describe religious designation in written communication with parents and allowing the school to create their own version from these templates. This would provide leaders with some standardised language while allowing them to craft the most appropriate message for their school body and local community. Appendix 4 provides some examples of how schools currently communicate with parents in relation to religious balance.

4.6 Religious balance of school leaders and staff

Religious balance within teaching staff can be difficult to achieve, even in the wake of new legislation requiring teachers' backgrounds to be monitored

Participants recognised how obtaining and maintaining a religious balance within teaching staff can prove difficult for Integrated schools. A few stakeholders made reference to the Fair Employment (School Teachers) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, which came into effect in May 2024. This Act requires schools to monitor the

backgrounds of teaching staff, who were previously exempt from the Equality Commission's monitoring process (Labour Relations Agency, 2024). One participant explained, *"I just see that as an opportunity for having some really good conversations [because] … people have multiple identities and to label somebody as just one thing is just a nonsense in today's world"* (Stakeholder Interview 7). This stakeholder felt that this monitoring process will provide schools with an opportunity to have healthy conversations around diversity in their teaching work force. Another participant, who mentioned the Act, felt that it would not mitigate the difficulties Integrated schools have in creating religious balance amongst teaching staff.

> *"Trying to ensure a balance in the staff, it's one thing seeking to have a balanced intake from different communities… within the student population. But frankly, now the legislation has changed around fair employment in the teaching field… In the early days, we tried to ensure it was a 50/50 balance in the teaching staff as well, but that proved very, very difficult, and I'm sure loads of schools struggle with that."* (Stakeholder Interview 3).

One stakeholder articulated a different challenge concerning the religious balance of teaching staff, as well as that of school leaders – namely that there is very little representation of those from 'Other' minority backgrounds.

> *"I would have thought that … some of the minority groups, the Muslim community, the other faith and belief communities, humanists, whatever, would need to feel that they are being represented in governing bodies. I've always had a personal concern that one of the issues in education generally in Northern Ireland is that minority faith communities especially are not represented within the teaching profession. I mean, looking at the intake in [teaching colleges], there seems to be virtually nobody coming from a minority ethnic or minority faith community. That, I think, is something that would be really, really important in order to visibly … make that change in terms of saying that we are more than just Catholic and Protestant."* (Stakeholder Interview 6)

Religious balance is also difficult to maintain amongst auxiliary staff and boards of governors

Religious balance of auxiliary staff can be particularly challenging for schools that find themselves in a community that is predominantly one community. One participant explained this is often because auxiliary staff are not paid well enough to justify traveling long distances to work. Balancing the board of governors was considered easier because governors hold voluntary positions and schools can seek out members of the minority community with the help of the support bodies. However, another stakeholder felt that obtaining religious balance amongst governors was challenging because there is a shortage of willing volunteers. They explained that it is difficult to get a board of governors who are all *"keen to be there and motivated," let alone a board of governors with strong religious balance. "Schools are rarely oversubscribed for governors, put it like that"* (Stakeholder Interview 5).

School leaders play a role in the religious balance of their schools

When discussing school leaders and religious balance, a few participants emphasised that school governors and principals play a critical role in the religious balance of their school. These stakeholders suggested that the development of a healthy ethos often depends on the approach of a schools leadership – and when leadership changes, that focus can be lost. Maintaining and developing a religious balance also depends on the actions of the principal to effectively gather that information.

> *"Having had anecdotal conversations and having seen a lot of the admissions criteria ..., I would say there are some schools who really understand [the ethos of Integrated Education]. But you see, that is only as deep as the leader of the school and the governing body and their understanding. And once that leader moves or changes, that process can be lost."* (Stakeholder Interview 7)

> *"How quickly [schools reach religious balance] ultimately depends on the principal of the school and the board. Why the principal of school? Because most of the parents she would meet would be in open days and things like that. So if she states at that stage, 'We need this religious balance and it's only for the purpose of the Department, it's for nobody else, but we need this information,' then that encourage parents to put down a perceived background. And if the principal doesn't do it, a lot of parents just stick them into 'Other' category and that doesn't help at the end of day. ... So it has to be the principal's opening address when she first meets parents. Then, secondly, the board should be reinforcing that as well. They should be asking the questions about the religious balance of the school, of the pupils."* (Stakeholder Interview 8)

There should be continued training for all school leaders and staff in terms of diversity and the development of an Integrated ethos

Given the role school leaders play in the religious balance of their schools, several stakeholders felt that Integrated schools need to have continued professional development around fostering an Integrated ethos and practice, particularly through the lens of diversity. There was some perception that this has not received enough attention.

> *"[Diversity training] needs to continue into post-professional development ... to bring these issues into the discussion and to keep teachers focused on the broader issues .... I know NICIE have done some things in that regard... and yet on the issue of how to talk about religion in Integrated schools, plans for conferences [and] plans for work with teachers have always been shelved. They've never been seen as a sufficient priority. ... It's not just about how do you teach religion in a mixed, diverse class, but it's also about what sort of language are we using, what are the sort of values that we want to instil through Integrated Education."* (Stakeholder Interview 6)

> *"I also think there needs to be the training for the principal [about*

> *developing an Integrated ethos], so it needs to be workshops for all principals to go on the Transformation Action Plan. … And I think that as well, if you're going to do that level of training, it'd also be very important to do it for the boards of governors, so they understand the significance of it too."* (Stakeholder Interview 8)

One participant added that encouraging this type of training might require positive accountability on the part of the support bodies.

> *"I think most of the schools take [anti-bias training] on board, but I think [NICIE and other support bodies] should be clocking the schools that are not doing it or the schools who don't have good balance, and they should be positively targeting them and encouraging them to do something about it. You have to give schools time. That's fine. … But I think we should be targeting those schools that don't have good religious balance on the boards or the pupils or the staff."* (Stakeholder Interview 8)

5. Conclusions

Following our analysis across the project, we have concluded the following:

1. Integrated schools are agreed on aims and ethos, but perspectives on the wider role of Integrated Education differ

The research demonstrates how Integrated schools, and more generally people who have worked in and with Integrated Education, speak a common language around embracing and celebrating diversity. There is recognition of division in society and the positive role education can have in bringing about greater integration. Integrated schools vary greatly, however. Aspects of this include whether schools are primary or secondary; their geographical location and demographics; their size; their set up as an Integrated school or whether they have transformed; and whether they are oversubscribed or undersubscribed. We conclude that all of these aspects, to varying degrees, contribute to the outlook of a school's leaders on the aim and focus of Integrated Education.

For example, for some there is a perception that their school is in a part of Northern Ireland that has remained divided along traditional lines. They see their role as contributing to community integration in this specific context. Others represent a school in an area where there is perception that the traditional lines of division are weakening. More 'mixed marriages' and an influx of newcomers means their school is still working towards community integration, but perhaps with less focus on traditional division. Some still see the original aim of integration between Catholic and Protestant pupils and their families as the primary reason for the sector to exist. Others see that original reason to have evolved into a wider approach where traditional ties are weakening.

Wider still, there have been questions asked about the strategy of the sector. Specifically, is the way forward to see as many schools as possible transform to become Integrated, even if (at least in the short term) there is a religious imbalance?

2. The importance of religious balance depends on an Integrated school's perspective / context

We conclude that the need for a 'healthy' religious balance depends on the school's outlook regarding its role in society. For some, the local community is still divided along traditional lines, better, but ultimately not dissimilar to how it was twenty or thirty years ago. Finding a balanced religious intake is considered of great importance in this context. Others represent schools that perhaps did not see so much of the Troubles and there is a perception of much greater community cohesion. There are Integrated schools, for example, drawing from catchment areas that were not even built during the Troubles. Religious balance in intake is seen as important, but not as critical. In many cases, schools like this are seeing a rise in the 'Other' category as people move away from traditional labels.

3. Religious designation still has its place within Integrated Education

While there was some discussion around whether there was any need for religious designation, most participants agreed that, in the context of a society that is still showing many aspects of division, there was still a need for Integrated schools to have some data regarding their overall composition. We conclude that religious designation is a useful metric for schools to use to aspire toward balance, even if it only shows part of the picture.

4. The current terms for religious designation have limitations

There was also agreement the current designations have their limitations. We conclude that 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' are primarily religious labels that, in most cases, are used as shorthand for cultural / community background and, to some degree, political outlook. It is clear from the research that there are limitations to using these terms, as they mean a range of different things. A religious definition is one interpretation of the designations, but this is problematic for a society that is becoming increasingly secular.

5. There are no obvious replacements for the terms in current use

Some participants considered alternatives to the current terms but were quick to point out the shortcomings of making any changes. We conclude there is no obvious alternative terms that are easily preferable. We reflect that the two traditional narratives within Northern Ireland concern religious, political and cultural descriptors. While there have always been exceptions to this, in decades past, knowing one of these descriptors allowed for accurate assumptions to be made about the other two; this is clearly changing. More research work is needed, including with parents, to consider terminology. This is further expanded on below with specific reference to 'Other'.

6. 'Other' has become a potentially offensive term in a changing Northern Ireland

Several participants described discomfort with using the term 'Other' as a designation. 'Other' is used as a catch-all category for those of other religious faiths, those who are non-religious, those who do not wish to associate themselves with the connotations of Catholic or Protestant, and those who are in mixed family units. These individuals have identities and beliefs that are potentially devalued by the label of 'Other.'

Addressing this concern is challenging, particularly given the reticence school leaders showed toward the suggestion of adding more categories to an already complicated admissions process (e.g., 'non-religious,' 'mixed family,' 'other religion'). We suggest more research be conducted to explore alternatives to the 'Other' designation and strength of feeling toward potential changes. Examining how parents may feel about their children being designated using alternate terms – and what these alternative terms may be – was not an aspect of this project, and any

suggestions made in the current report could be problematic without proper testing and broader insight. This is worth considering for future study.

7. 40/40/20 is useful, though flexibility would be welcome

There was some consensus amongst participants that being given a target ratio is useful for ensuring minority representation and for protecting the public reputation of an Integrated school. However, there was also consensus that more flexibility would be welcome in the wake of changing demographics and an increase in schools that are transforming. Some school leaders desired the guidance to be changed to 35/35/30 and one school had already made this change to their intake criteria.

Integration is contextual depending on a school's situation. It became clear in this research that some school leaders were not aware that the NICIE guidance of 40/40/20 is aspirational. We recommend that NICIE make it clearer to schools that this is the case.

We also suggest that further consideration is given to the aspiration of 40/40/20 and any effects associated with changing this, within the upcoming review of the Statement of Principles for Integrated Education.

8. Communicating Integrated Education outside of the sector

Some school leaders expressed frustration with religious balance because they were being held accountable to 40/40/20 by those in the public / political sphere who viewed these numbers as a requirement to be considered Integrated. 40/40/20 has never been required in legislation, and many participants felt this public perception detracted from understanding of the mission and ethos of their schools.

Similarly, school leaders described having difficulty communicating both religious designation and the Integrated ethos of their school to potential parents who were unfamiliar with Integrated Education. There is little cohesion in the way Integrated schools communicate with parents. We would recommend that a piece of written guidance be created providing schools with advice on ways to discuss religious balance and the ethos of Integrated Education with parents. (See Appendix 4 for examples of written communication used by Integrated schools.)

It is clear from this research that there is an ongoing communications issue around the ethos and practice of Integrated schools that school leaders are struggling to address amid the demands of the day-to-day running of their schools. Some participants requested that the support bodies conduct a marketing campaign to better explain Integrated Education to the wider public, though we acknowledge this is outside the normal remit of IEF and NICIE and would need to be part of a larger strategic plan with other stakeholder bodies.

9. Participants desired more collaboration across Integrated schools

Some focus group participants expressed positivity toward the focus group experience in and of itself. They enjoyed hearing the experience and practice of other school leaders and how they approach religious balance in their own contexts.

Additionally, some stakeholders thought there could be more ongoing professional development and training for school leaders concerning religious balance and diversity. We understand there are already training and professional development sessions available through NICIE. Advertising the collaborative element of these training sessions, and perhaps including more collaborative elements, may add to their appeal for school leaders.

It is worth noting that participants were eager to read the final report from this project. There was excitement that religious balance was being thoughtfully examined by IEF and NICIE, and participants expressed optimism that the Integrated Education sector will continue to be a leader in creating a more diverse and inclusive Northern Ireland going forward.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Desk research references

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Appendix 2 – Qualitative discussion guide for focus groups

Exploring Religious Balance in Integrated Schools:

Discussion Guide for focus groups with Principals and Governors

1. **Introduction to the focus group (@2-3 mins)**
    - Researcher introduces themselves: RF Associates working for NICIE and IEF
    - Purpose of this research project is to **explore and analyse policy** and practice regarding religious balance in Integrated schools. Looking to: **identify definitions and designations** used; consider if there are **alternative categories**; identify and analyse how religious balance is **currently approached by Integrated schools**, including how the topic is addressed with prospective parents and how the school meets the current legal definition of Integrated Education
    - Focus group is anonymous to encourage honest and open response, no right or wrong answers, please say what you think
    - Ask for confidentiality beyond the group. Acceptable to talk about 'other schools' generally, but not specific schools, people and circumstances
    - Recording the focus group to support note making, ensure we capture the key points of the discussion, and allow us to use unattributed quotations
    - 60-90 minutes (depending on size of group)
    - Permission to record
2. **Background of the participants and schools (@10-15 mins)**
    - Could you each introduce yourselves briefly, including school you're currently working in /governor for; time there; size of school, location of school, transformed etc.
3. **Current practice (@20 – 40 mins)**
    - What formal definitions are currently used to record religious balance in your school? (When parents designate.)
    - How do you feel you meet the current legal definition of Integrated Education in terms of developing a religious balance in your school?
    - Does this current practice sit easily / uncomfortably with you?
    - Is any 'informal' data used to add to religious balance? (Numbers of pupils taking sacraments; post codes / areas pupils come from; uptake for certain sports / clubs / activities)
    - What is the objective of these definitions / markers? (Why is it important to know this? Does every school have the same reasons? Do some place more / less importance on this than others?)
    - What are the limitations to the formal definitions? [Have formal definitions on a slide we can share to help discussion]

- What are the difficulties / challenges to approaching and managing this? [In terms of school development; diversity within school; with DE; with parents]
- How do you approach designation for religious balance with parents? What methods of communication are used? Is this primarily a part of a pupil joining a school (most commonly in P1)? Or is this an ongoing aspect?
- What is working well / less well regarding comms with parents / carers? What are the key difficulties they experience? (E.g. does over subscription play a part? Ethical concerns over choosing an option that isn't perceived to be accurate / relevant? Discomfort with having to choose an option? Perception of Integrated school as a neutral, rather than diverse space.)

4. **Changing / developing practice (@15 mins)**
    - Are there any alternative approaches and definitions? What would the benefits of these be? How might these be captured?
    - Are you aware of any helpful / useful practice happening elsewhere in other bodies / organisations?
5. **Support (@10-15 mins)**
    - What information and support would be most useful to you, as school leaders / governors, in your context?
    - What information and support would be most useful to parents?
6. **Closing up (@2-3 mins)**
    - Anything else?
    - Anything to return to?
    - Thanks and close

Appendix 3 – Qualitative discussion guide for stakeholder interviews

Exploring Religious Balance in Integrated Schools

Discussion Guide for interviews with Stakeholders

1. **Introduction to the interview (2-3 mins)**

   - Researcher introduces themselves: RF Associates working for NICIE and IEF
   - Purpose of this research project is to **explore and analyse policy and practice** regarding religious balance in Integrated schools. Looking to: **identify definitions and designations** used in different contexts across NI; consider if there are **alternative categories**; identify and analyse how religious balance is **currently approached by Integrated schools**, including how the topic is addressed with prospective parents and how the school meets the current legal definition of Integrated Education
   - Interview is anonymous to encourage honest and open response, no right or wrong answers, please say what you think
   - Recording the interview to support note making, ensure we capture the key points of the discussion, and allow us to use unattributed quotations
   - 30-40 minutes
   - Permission to record

Note: The following questions will not be answered evenly by stakeholders, so some of the questions here will receive little or no response, depending on the interviewee.

2. **Context and background of the interviewee**

   - Could you confirm your current role [if not already obvious] and your engagement with Integrated schools (both now and over time)?
   - In general, what has been your experience, in relation to the policy and practice around religious balance in Integrated schools? (Might include: experience as a teacher / principal / governor; responsibility around data collection / data monitoring; responsibility for development of mixed intake in Integrated schools)

3. **Current practice**

   - The main definitions used in integrated education are Protestant, Catholic, Other. Are you aware of any other definitions/data being used as far as you are aware?
   - What do you see as the objective of these definitions?
   - What do you think are the limitations of these definitions? How well do you think they work currently? What complications arise for schools when using them?

- How do you see schools approaching and managing this topic? [In terms of their school development; with DE; with parents] What are the difficulties / challenges?
- Do you think Integrated Education Act 2022 has affected school practice in this area, if at all?

Info included below for reference in case need to refer to in conversation:

Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989: Defined integration in terms of Protestant and Catholic religious identification

The Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022: The most recent legislation concerning integrated education, provides the following definition for "integrated education":

"Integrated education" means the education together, in an integrated school, of

a. **those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons;**

b. **those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not; and**

c. **those of different abilities**

An "integrated school" as that which "intentionally 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".

Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE): NICIE, founded in 1987, produced a Statement of Principles in 1991 that was reviewed and updated in 2008. The first principle is Equality, which recommends integrated schools aspire to **"an annual intake of at least 40% pupils from a perceived Catholic background and at least 40% pupils from a perceived Protestant background" allowing for up to 20% of pupils to identify as 'other' or 'no' religion** (Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, 2022).

- How easy/difficult is it or has it been to have religious balance across staffing and Board of Governors - and what kind of approach has been used to achieve this?

4. **Changing / developing practice**

- Are there any possible other different approaches and definitions in your view? If so what, and what would the benefits of these be?
- Is there helpful / useful practice happening elsewhere in other bodies / organisations?

5. **Support**

- What information and support would be most useful to schools – especially principals, SMT and governors?
- What information and support would be most useful to parents?

6. **Closing up**

- Any other comments that you would like to make?
- Thanks and close

Appendix 4 – Examples of communications concerning religious balance with parents

The following communications were collected from various Integrated schools by a stakeholder interviewed for this project who shared them with RFA.

Example 1

ABC PS has a long tradition of welcoming children from all backgrounds and traditions and in recognition of this we are now in the process of requesting to become an Integrated school. Since part of being an Integrated school means having 'reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Catholic pupils (Integrated Education Act 2022), it is important that we have the most accurate information possible about the different religious and cultural backgrounds of our pupils. Most (but not all) children growing up in Northern Ireland are likely to be doing so within a community which is perceived as Protestant or Catholic, even if their families do not attend church. We would therefore appreciate it if could take some time to consider which of the categories below best describes your child's situation. If you do not identify with the terms Catholic or Protestant or any other religious grouping, or if you have a different faith background, please compete the form using Other.

Example 2

As an integrated school, our key purpose is to educate together children of different religious traditions and community backgrounds. It is very important that we try to capture information about this as accurately as possible. Please use the headings below to best describe your religious denomination or perceived community background.

Example 3

Northern Ireland has a unique political and cultural identity. As such, those who have grown up here are likely to have done so within a community which would be culturally perceived as Roman Catholic or Protestant. If this is the case for you, we would appreciate it if you could indicate which one, even if you don't personally ascribe to either as a religion. If you do not identify with either the terms Protestant or Roman Catholic, or if you identify with another religious grouping, or if you do not identify with any religious grouping, please complete the form using Other.

Example 4

Integrated schools must maintain 'reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Catholic pupils (Integrated Education Act 2022). Thus, in order for a school to carry Integrated status the law obliges us to count the number of Catholic and Protestant children on the enrolment of the school. For many of us being identified as coming from one tradition or another is not a problem whilst for some people it is more of an issue. For those in employment or applying for training or education courses completing this type of return has become more commonplace because of Fair Employment legislation. In the case of the school, it is perhaps helpful to look at this as a matter of community background because regardless of whether we practise our religion or not most of us in Northern Ireland have come from one of the two main traditions which are most commonly described as Protestant or Catholic. We are therefore asking you to indicate your perceived community background and that of your child. This is to comply with the Department of Education's requirement for detailed community statistics for Integrated schools.

Notes

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