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Transforming our education systems, North and South

THE MOVEMENT to establish shared schools in Ireland, known as “Integrated” in Northern Ireland¹ and “Educate Together”² in the Republic, has gathered pace in recent years. In total, 182 schools have been established at primary and post-primary level, catering for 57,900 students. These schools are providing education that – as well as bringing children from different religious traditions together – actively develops mutual understanding and respect.

Speaking in July 2021, President Michael D Higgins praised the contribution that these schools are making to “a peaceful and fulfilling future for all of the children on the island of Ireland”, arguing that “the ethos of practical equality that informs the Integrated Education and Educate Together movements is pivotal for our common future”³.

However, despite growing demand, only 6% of all children attending primary schools in Ireland in 2021 attend schools that bring children together in this way, and both jurisdictions in Ireland continue to be criticised by various UN human rights committees for not providing alternatives to denominational primary education.⁴

With the total number of schools at primary and post-primary level north and south now approaching 200, and demand increasing, it is timely to consider the profile of these schools and the challenges they face in their bid to transform the education system and society.

- 1 The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (legislation.gov.uk)
- 2 Educate Together schools were referred to as ‘multi-denominational’ until 2015 when this was changed to ‘equality-based’. See section 2 for further information as to the model this describes.
- 3 <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/presidentialpraise-for-integrated-education-efforts-40581456.html>
- 4 Darmody, M. and Smyth, E., 2018. Religion and primary school choice in Ireland: school institutional identities and student profile. *Irish Educational Studies*, 37(1), pp.1-17.

The facts

There are currently 68 Integrated Schools in Northern Ireland and 116 Educate Together schools in the Republic of Ireland.

	1981	1991	2001	2011	2021
Integrated Schools (NI)	1	16	46	62	68
Educate Together schools (ROI)	2	10	21	60	116

Although both Integrated Education (IE) in NI and Educate Together schools in ROI emerged from similar parent-driven movements in the 1970s and early ‘80s and share many features, their different social and political contexts have led to differences between the two models at primary and post-primary levels.

In the North

Integrated Education in Northern Ireland’s stated aim is to ensure that the management, control and ethos of the school are such as are likely to attract reasonable numbers of Protestant and Roman Catholic backgrounds⁵. The Department of Education (DE) has a duty “to encourage and facilitate” Integrated Education under the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. The NI Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) is the organisation tasked with promoting, supporting and growing Integrated Education (IE) by providing advice to parents and existing schools on the development and provision of IE.

NICIE’s vision is of a society where children are educated together, confident to express their own identity and culture and to accept and be prepared to engage with the identity and culture of others. Its mission is to promote reconciliation in Northern Ireland through Integrated Education. The body’s Statement of Principles⁶ explains that the schools are essentially Christian in character and welcome those of all faiths and none. The Statement covers four areas of concern: Equality, Faith and Values, Parental Involvement and Social Responsibility.

Today, Integrated Education operates a network of 1 nursery school, 47 primary schools and 20 post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, catering for 25,000 students; 7.3% of the student population.

Altogether there are 996 primary and post primary schools in Northern Ireland, less than 15% of which have a 10% or more leavening of the minority denomination in the student body, (including integrated schools and what are termed in NI ‘super-mixed schools’).

5 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1989/2406/article/64>

6 <https://www.nicie.org/about-us/statement-of-principles/>

Analysis shows that circa 82% of children in NI have less than a one in ten chance of becoming friends with someone from the other main tradition in their own school.

How do Integrated schools get established?

Integrated schools become established either as new schools, by parent groups with the help of NICIE and the Integrated Education Fund (IEF), or through the transformation of an existing Catholic Maintained or a Controlled school.⁷

Schools wishing to transform to integrated status engage in a structured process, through which communities assess the demand for integration, draft a ‘case for change’ for the DE, and participate in integrated ethos training for staff and governors, as well as creating an anti-bias culture within the school.

Growth over 40 years has been huge, from 1 school in 1981 to 68 in 2021. However, it requires more than the effort of parents and schools to encourage existing schools to transform to integrated status, and it is difficult to scale up that change without political and church support. The challenge is for churches and politicians to consider what can be done to ensure that children and adults can create genuine, respectful relationships through the creation of schools as shared spaces where all feel they belong and are intentionally included as members of the school community. This is what Integrated Education does on a daily basis.

Educate Together schools in the Republic of Ireland

As a school patron body and membership organisation, Educate Together has specific statutory duties and responsibilities in relation to the governance and management of schools. Its Charter commits the organisation to establish and support schools which are: equality-based (defined as ‘all children having equal rights of access to the school, and children of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds being equally respected’), co-educational, child-centred, and democratically-run.

‘Ethical Education’ is a key component of the Educate Together model. This curriculum has been developed in primary and post-primary schools over 40 years and focuses on questions of equality, justice, sustainability and active citizenship. It is taught, both as a discrete subject, and integrated across other subject areas. An important aspect of Ethical Education at both primary and post-primary level is the study of Belief Systems (primary) and Beliefs and

⁷ Schools “controlled” by the state, some having been transferred to the state from the 3 main Protestant churches in 1947, traditionally have a Protestant Christian ethos; those “maintained” by the Catholic Church serve the Catholic Community and have a Catholic ethos.

Worldviews (post-primary). As well as learning about world religions, students are helped to reflect on their own religious and cultural traditions and those of others within an atmosphere of respect.

Today, Educate Together operates a network of 95 primary and 21 post-primary schools in Ireland, catering for over 34,000 students - around 4% of the total student population.

Until 2009, any prospective patron could apply for recognition of a school anywhere in the Republic of Ireland by providing evidence of sufficient demand. However the new process established in 2010 is based solely on demographic growth. Under this system the Department announces the need for new schools and invites applications from prospective patrons.

Patronage selection processes have indicated a preference for equality-based, multid denominational and Irish medium alternatives and minimal demand for the denominational models that continue to dominate the system. Of the 90 schools opened since 2011, the majority have been Educate Together schools, with a number of Irish medium schools (Gaelscoileanna) and Community National Schools also established. Just one Protestant and one Catholic secondary school, and no denominational primary schools, have been opened under this system in the past ten years.

While this system based on demographic growth has provided alternatives to denominational schools over the past decade, the trouble is that it only applies in areas where the population is increasing. There is currently no mechanism through which parents in areas of stable population can register their interest in Educate Together or other school types and this severely limits their options.

Historical development in NI . . .

A system of “national” education in the Ireland was established under the “Stanley Letter” in 1831⁸, when all of Ireland was governed by the Westminster parliament. The aim was for all children to be educated together in schools that would provide “combined literary and separate religious education.” However, the schools had become almost entirely segregated along denominational lines by the 1860s due to resistance from the various churches to the idea of joint management.

During the 1970s, increasing parental demand for children to be educated together gave rise to campaigns that resulted in new school types being established north and south where children could be educated together. In NI, a small group of parents from both sides of the religious divide came together with the aim of educating Catholic and Protestant children together.

Motivated by a shared belief that learning side-by-side could foster understanding, these parents became the campaigning group All Children Together⁹. The group faced opposition from churches and politicians. Despite these obstacles, and significant financial restraints, these determined parents set up Lagan College in 1981, the first Integrated school in Northern Ireland.

Since the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in 1998¹⁰ the numbers of students being educated in IE in Northern Ireland has more than doubled. Whilst there was a huge surge in the number of schools established between 1985 and 2005, the numbers slackened off after the economic crash of 2008, when NICIE could no longer borrow money. Focus then turned to the establishment of integrated schools through the process of “Transformation”. This process can take up to four years from positive parental ballot to eventual approval of the development proposal by the Minister of Education.

In 2021 four schools transformed to integrated status, including the first ever Catholic primary school (Seaview Primary School in Glenarm). The trajectory is turning upward again due to an increased desire in schools to enhance their sustainability by attracting parents from both sides of the community. NICIE and the IEF are working with up to 30 schools at various stages of the journey towards Integrated Education status.

For the first time since 2009, NICIE and the IEF are working with a parent group in the Mid Down area to establish a new Grant Maintained Integrated school. NICIE is also partnering with the Education Authority and the Controlled Schools Support Council (CSSC) to establish a new Controlled Integrated school from the amalgamation of a Grant Maintained Integrated school and two Controlled schools. These developments indicate a new surge in the growth of Integrated Education as it continues to create safe spaces for children and adults to encounter one other, fostering courage to build respectful relationships and replacing fear with curiosity.

9 <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Struggle-Shared-SchoolsNorthern-Ireland/dp/1903688876>

10 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-belfast-agreement>

In reflecting on the development of integrated schools in NI, it is helpful to reflect on the community context: -

- Only 31% of Northern Ireland people regard themselves as living in “mixed” neighbourhoods and 80% of public housing is segregated.
- 90% of public housing in Belfast is segregated.
- Up to 100 “Peace Walls” still divide neighbourhoods.
- Up to 60,000 people have moved house because of fear or actual intimidation.
-

... and in the Republic

The growth of Educate Together schools has been driven by voluntary initiative through the Educate Together movement, which has its roots in the Dalkey School Project National School, founded in South Dublin in 1978. This school was founded by a group of parents from different backgrounds who came together to campaign for a school which was child-centred, co-educational, multi-denominational, and democratically run. The barriers faced by these parents were considerable, and the transformational story of the Dalkey School Project is well-worth reading¹¹.

Similar campaigns led to schools being established in other areas and the first three schools formed a national umbrella organisation in 1984, named ‘Educate Together’. The Educate Together Charter was formulated in 1990 - a fundamental statement of aims that are shared by all member schools.¹²

By 1995, Educate Together had grown to 14 schools across Ireland and the incorporation of the national body into a company limited by guarantee was completed in 1998. In 1999, the State abolished the requirement that Educate Together schools provide their own sites and pay 15% of building costs, removing a considerable restraint to progress.

A Religious Education Core Curriculum was developed between 1980 and 1989 through a process which involved consultation with teachers and parents, as well as an advisory committee including representatives of different faith groups.

11 Hyland, A. & Green, D. A Brave new Vision of Education in Ireland – the Dalkey School Project 1974 – 1884, Hyland

12 <https://www.educatetogether.ie/app/uploads/2019/01/Educate-Togethers-Charter.pdf>

This curriculum involved learning about religions at a time when this was not the norm in religious education in denominational schools¹³. As the organisation grew in the late 1990s, this was developed further into an Ethical Education curriculum and the Learn Together Ethical Education curriculum was launched in 2004.

An important milestone in the historical development of the Educate Together model was the policy decision, reached in the mid-1990s and adopted by the organisation's membership in 2012, to facilitate denominational instruction or 'faith formation' outside school hours rather than during the school day. This position was reached after much deliberation and was believed to be necessary in order to guarantee equality to every child in the school community.¹⁴ However, it should be stressed that this did not amount to the removal of religious education from the school day. On the contrary, the Ethical Education curriculum provides a rich space for the exploration of the beliefs of all students within an atmosphere of respect.

In recognition of the continued imbalance of provision, the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism was established in 2011. The Forum envisaged the divestment or reconfiguration of Catholic schools to other patrons, and many bishops have expressed support for this in theory. However, without a strategy or any mechanisms for proper consultation, or for dealing with complex land issues, progress has been very slow to date¹⁵.

Demand for change

In Northern Ireland, the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) and NICIE work closely together to assess and meet demand for IE, and initial parental demand is assessed by IEF's Parental and Community Engagement Campaign, and the platform <https://www.integratemyschool.com/>. In the last few years, there have been 8 parental ballots in existing schools in NI to transform to integrated status, and based on official data, the demand for integrated education remains high.

13 Hyland, A. Religious Education in the Dalkey School Project, in Hyland, A. and Green, D. A Brave new Vision of Education in Ireland – the Dalkey School Project 1974 – 1884, Hyland: Appendix 2 pp301 - 318

14 https://www.educatetogether.ie/sites/default/files/20110804_ffish-ffoshreport_final.pdf

15 <https://www.noteworthy.ie/divestment-catholic-primaryschools-stalemate-part-one-5463812-Jun2021>

A NI Attitudinal Poll by LUCID Talk¹⁶ launched in July 2021 shows 71% of NI people believe Integrated Education should be our main model of education. This is an increase of 5% since a previous poll in 2013. The findings come as the NI Executive prepares to launch an Independent Review of the education system as part of the New Decade, New Approach Agreement¹⁷ reached in January 2020. This agreement described the NI education system in its current form as ‘unsustainable’ and pledged to examine the prospects of moving to a ‘single system of education’.

No one knows what a single system of education would look like, but NICIE would contend that it should involve, as a core principle, the education together of children from all Christian backgrounds along with those from other faith traditions in the one school community. A school where all voices can be heard and respected, moving away from the identities of ‘them’ and ‘us’ to ‘us as a school community’. The LUCID Talk poll, published over 23 years after the Belfast Agreement’s pledge to encourage and facilitate integrated education, also showed that almost 79% of people in NI agree that all schools, regardless of management type, should aim to have a religious and cultural mix in its pupils, teachers and governors.

The four main Churches in NI say they are in favour of educating children together, despite the fact that the mixing of those who identify as Protestant and Catholic (whether religiously, culturally or politically) in schools in NI remains rare. Yet data indicate that the desire for change in the NI education system is strong.

In the Republic, demand for Educate Together schools has increased significantly in recent decades, reflecting both broader societal trends and increased awareness of this school model. In a survey conducted by the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) in 2012, 46% of parents indicated they would prefer to send their children to primary schools offering Educate Together’s equality-based model.¹⁸ Demand for a post-primary Educate Together option built as the network grew, and in 2014, the first three Educate Together post-primary schools opened in Dublin and Louth.

16 Integrated Education Fund - Northern Ireland Attitudinal Poll - Page 1 - Created with Publitas.com

17 2020-01-08_a_new_decade__a_new_approach.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)

18 https://www.ippn.ie/index.php?option=com_mtree&task=att_download&link_id=3899&cf_id=24

High levels of demand are also reflected in Department of Education surveys and new school patronage selection processes. Surveys carried out in urban areas in 2012 and 2013 as part of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism indicated demand for alternative primary provision in all areas, with demand at sufficient levels for change in 28 out of 43 areas. Educate Together was the patron of choice in 24 out of the 25 areas where it was listed. It is expected that demand would be even higher now, ten years on.

New school patronage selection processes have indicated a clear preference for equality-based, multi-denominational and Irish medium alternatives. Of the selection processes entered by Educate Together, patronage was awarded to Educate Together in 64% of primary and 60% of post-primary processes, making Educate Together the main provider of new schools in the country and showing strong demand for this equality-based model.

Challenges for Integrated Education

There are not enough school places in integrated schools, especially in areas of highest demand. Although education policy in NI is framed within ‘parental preference’, NICIE would argue that there is limited choice if parents do not have access to an integrated school within reasonable travelling distance or if the school is oversubscribed.

Grant-maintained integrated schools do not have Transferors and Trustees named as constituents on their governing bodies, and there may be some resistance from Trustees (the Catholic Church) and Transferors (from the three main Protestant Churches) to integrated education. However, Controlled integrated schools, of which there are now almost 30, have, as of right, two Protestant Transferor and two Catholic Trustee representatives on their Board of Governors. This mixed church representation in integrated education is nurtured and encouraged.

Controlled schools’ statutory and support bodies believe that they are, effectively, integrated schools. However, the statistics do not bear this out: only circa 8% of pupils in controlled schools identify as coming from a Catholic cultural/ religious/political background. Similarly, Catholic trustees also assert that their schools are increasingly mixed, but statistics show that only around 1% of pupils in Catholic schools identifies as coming from a perceived Protestant background. The challenge for NICIE is to engage with the churches and see what they can do to ensure these statistics change over time.

The imminent Independent Review of Education as per New Decade New Approach¹⁹ 2020 commits to the following:

- ‘The Executive will establish an external, independent review of education provision, with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and the prospects of moving towards a single education system.
- To help build a shared and integrated society, the Executive will support educating children and young people of different backgrounds together in the classroom (page 7).’

There has been a policy aim to make efficient use of limited public finance in education in NI. The will to try to rationalise the schools’ estate in NI is clearly articulated through the Strategic Area Planning process but that must also include proper planning for Integrated Education as a real choice for parents who want it, as supported by the recent Integrated Education Bill 2021²⁰.

The two traditional education management types of Controlled primary and post primary (largely Protestant) and Maintained (by the Catholic Church) will not be the solution to a change in the preferences that parents make for their children, as the statistical mix of Protestant and Catholic has changed little over the last number of decades.

All political parties in NI have committed to encouraging, facilitating and promoting Shared Education.²¹ However, it should be remembered that this only implies collaboration between two or more providers for a limited period or for some activities, so it can never replace full time Integrated Education for pupils in the same school, every day.

Addressing the myths

There are many myths perpetuated about Integrated Education. One such myth is that integrated schools are not popular, whereas in fact they have a lower percentage of unfilled places in both primary and post primary schools than do the other sectors (not including grammar schools) and some of the integrated post-primary schools are among the most oversubscribed in NI.

19 2020-01-08_a_new_decade__a_new_approach.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)

20 Integrated Education Bill (niassembly.gov.uk)

21 Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 (legislation.gov.uk)

Transformation is a journey of change within the whole school community and it can take many years to build trust with the minority community. Reaching one's destination starts with taking the first steps. If parents at Lagan College had not taken the first steps back in 1981, would others have had the confidence to do what they have done subsequently?

Another myth is that Integrated schools are 'middle class'. In fact DE figures on Free School Meals show that integrated schools are close to the average for the other non-integrated schools. Among integrated primary schools, 19 of the 45 schools have FSM levels of between 30 and 70%, much higher than the average, and 7 out of 20 integrated post-primary schools have FSM rates of between 40 and 57 %, again higher than the average.

There are various approaches to the teaching of Religious Education in Integrated schools but ultimately, they all offer RE as part of the curriculum as laid down by the four main churches, like all grant-aided schools in NI. The emphasis in integrated schools on Antiracist Approaches to Education prepares those concerned to understand the contribution they can make to the intentional inclusion of children and young people from very different backgrounds.

Challenges for the Educate Together sector

As outlined above, Educate Together represents a small share of provision at both primary and secondary level, despite significant demand and growth, reaching approximately 5% of total enrolment at primary level and 2% at post-primary. There are still large areas of the country where there are no alternatives to denominational primary schools, and it is now widely accepted that the profile of Ireland's education system is out of step with demand and demographics.

Most of the growth in multi- and non-denominational provision has occurred in areas of population growth through the New Schools Programme, leaving other areas without choice: there are still five counties without a single non-religious primary school²². Where Educate Together schools are established, they quickly become oversubscribed, placing pressure on schools to operate equitable admissions policies. To ensure that all children and young people have access to this model of education, we have to find new ways to expand provision and meet demand, especially in areas of stable population. Successive governments have set targets to increase the number of multi- and non- denominational schools to 400 by 2030.

²² In Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan, Longford and Tipperary there are no Educate Together or Community National Schools.

However, there is no strategy to achieve these targets, and no significant resources have been invested in stimulating change since the Forum on Patronage concluded its work in 2012.

Teacher education

At primary level Initial Teacher Education (ITE) has historically been provided in denominational Colleges of Education where a strong emphasis is placed on religious ethos and confessional religious education. Introducing Ethical Education in these third-level settings has proved challenging. Provision remains minimal and qualified teachers often feel unprepared to teach in equality-based schools. Changes are needed so that student teachers learn to teach Ethical Education and feel confident to teach in these settings.

Funding

While grant aid is available for some of the work Educate Together does to open and manage schools, this falls far short of the cost of being a school patron and management body. Religious voluntary schools in Ireland are supported by churches, dioceses, parishes or religious trusts with considerable assets. The state has therefore not needed to fund the necessary functions of school patronage, presenting challenges for newer patrons.

As a voluntary patron, Educate Together is required to raise considerable income simply to open and operate schools. Member schools pay subscriptions, and as the network grows this has the potential to ensure the organisation's financial viability. However, schools in the Republic of Ireland are underfunded and are forced to fundraise for basic income themselves

Impact

In considering the impact of Integrated Schools in Northern Ireland and Educate Together schools in the Republic we can reflect on outcomes for students who attend them, as well as wider system impact. Although there are differences in the two models, both school types aim to foster inclusion, respect and equality. This section sets out the extent to which these aims are achieved.

In Northern Ireland research has shown that pupils at integrated schools have more positive inter-group attitudes compared to their peers at separate schools (e.g. Hayes & McAllister, 2009; Stringer et al, 2009).

Furthermore, research has established a direct link between the purposeful integrated school ethos and positive cross-community relationships²³:

. . . the integrated school, with an ethos that openly supports social cohesion, shows a greater tendency towards cross-group interactions and best friendships than those found within the separate school. In line with contact theory, these findings suggest that it may not be enough to simply create opportunities for intergroup contact but that optimal conditions, such as institutional support, may be a prerequisite for positive relationships to flourish.

As a relatively new development, members of the Integrated Education AlumNI (former pupils of IE) bear testimony to the unique experience they have had in Integrated Education in NI.²⁴

NICIE would argue that the model of IE developed over the last 40 years, is one that can be scaled up and planned for – if there is a will. It is also hoped that through Strategic Area Planning, IE will be viewed as a mainstream option equal to that of Jointly Managed Schools.²⁵ Both of these, along with shared campuses and amalgamations will lead to more opportunities for children and young people to be educated together in high quality, fit for purpose accommodation, enabling all children to reach their full potential.

Like the Republic of Ireland, NI is a much more diverse place to live in today than when Lagan College opened its doors in 1981 and the education system is responding to that diversity, including the diversity that exists within Catholic and Protestant cultures/political viewpoints. The perpetuation of separate communities will continue if more integration is not undertaken. Integrated Education is about learning together for a shared society in NI.

In the Republic

For more than 40 years Educate Together has pioneered a particular model of equality-based education; challenging inequalities and striving to ensure that all children reach their full potential.

23 <https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/publications/integrating-northernireland-cross-group-friendships-in-integrate>

24 <https://www.integratedalumni.org/>

25 Jointly Managed Schools (education-ni.gov.uk)

A diverse and inclusive school network has developed, welcoming students from a range of backgrounds.

15% of Educate Together national schools are in the DEIS scheme to support educational disadvantage. 43% of Educate Together primary schools have specialist classes for children with additional needs, compared to 21% of all primary schools, and research conducted by the ESRI in 2020 showed a higher proportion of students with additional needs in Educate Together post-primary schools than the national average²⁶.

The same research showed that Educate Together schools are on average more diverse than other school types, and that alongside this diversity, students express strong feelings of inclusivity and have a very high respect for people from other cultures. Sense of belonging is strong across all student groups, with children from minority backgrounds and those with disabilities feeling equally included – which is not the norm.

The European IncludEd project provides a comprehensive analysis of barriers to inclusion and identifies Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) that overcome these barriers²⁷. A study of Educate Together primary schools in 2012 showed that practices in these schools adhere closely to these SEAs, thereby effectively promoting inclusion and social cohesion²⁸.

In terms of system impact, a key contribution of the Educate Together sector has been the development of its Ethical Education curriculum, which focuses on questions of equality, justice and sustainability and supports students to critically reflect upon the world around them. This curriculum is at the heart of Educate Together schools' ethos, and the organisation has worked with partners in Ireland and abroad to develop and resource it.²⁹

A final impact worth mentioning is the development of parish infrastructure in many Catholic parishes where Educate Together primary schools (and CNS and multi-denominational Irish medium schools) are located. Because sacramental preparation is the responsibility of parents in these schools, rather than being managed by teachers as it is in Catholic schools, this has led to greater involvement of parents and the development of new parish teams.

26 <https://www.esri.ie/news/study-of-educate-together-secondlevel-schools-provides-a-positive-outlook-for-the-sector>

27 https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/files/esl/downloads/13_INCLUD-ED_Book_on_SEA.pdf

28 Lalor, John (2013) *Educate Together: an inclusive response to the needs of a pluralist Ireland?* PhD thesis, Dublin City University

29 <http://ethicaleducation.eu/about.htm>

This has been welcomed by parents and clergy alike, and is in line with plans outlined by Catholic Bishops to involve parents more actively in sacramental preparation³⁰.

Conclusion

The NI educational landscape has changed forever through the development of Integrated Education, but It remains necessary to keep pushing for more! Integrated Education is not the only way to create a more harmonious society in NI, but it does contribute positively to that aim. It encourages people to be confident in their own beliefs but willing to engage with others, deepening inter community relationships. What is needed now is for parents to make their voices heard if this is something they want for their family and for the future.

The Department of Education in the Republic announces the need for new schools and invites applications from prospective patrons. The focus is on areas where the population is increasing. But what about the areas where populations are declining? Should those parents not also have the choice of a non-denominational school for their child?

In the Republic of Ireland, growth in Educate Together schools has been driven by parental demand and voluntary initiative. There is no standard mechanism for capturing and acting on parental demand in areas of stable population, and no clear process for schools to be able to transform from their existing status to an Educate Together school when there is demand for change. In the absence of these structures, growth has lagged seriously behind demand.

Both authors would contend that choices for education should be further enhanced to include more Educate Together schools in the Republic and more Integrated Education schools in Northern Ireland. Transforming education is naturally evolutionary rather than revolutionary and it should reflect the aspirations of people and the society they wish to create. From small acorns big oak trees grow! We are beginning to be able to take shelter under some big trees.

30 E.g. <https://dublindiocese.ie/significant-changeproposed-in-sacramental-preparation/>