



Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas

Response to: Sharing works - a policy for shared education

Issued by: Department of Education

February 2015

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Women's Regional Consortium: Working to Support Women in Rural Communities and Disadvantaged Urban Areas

1. Introduction

1.1 This response has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas, which is funded by the Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland.

1.2 The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups working in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.¹ The seven groups are as follows:

- Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project Lead
- Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- Women's Support Network (WSN)
- Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- Women's TEC
- Women's Centre Derry (WCD)
- Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

1.3 The Consortium will be the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium will ensure that there is a continuous two way flow of information between government and the sector. It will ensure that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of

¹ Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisations.

consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium will ascertain the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and take these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which will ultimately result in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

1.4 This response is informed by women's views and perspectives articulated at focus group events organised at Chrysalis Women's Centre, Greenway Women's Centre and FWIN between 3 and 5 February 2015. Appendix 1 provides further detail on this engagement.

2. General comments

2.1 The Women's Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education's 'Sharing works: a policy for shared education'.²

Because socio-economic status can be a prime determinant of educational outcomes, including literacy levels, qualification and grading,³ and 'low income is a strong predictor of low educational performance',⁴ girls and women from poorer backgrounds may be at greater risk of educational disadvantage and underachievement. And, as research affirms, underachievement remains a key factor underlying women's experience of exclusion, vulnerability, marginalisation and poverty in the Northern Ireland case as beyond, given its relationship to life outcomes in respect of, inter alia, autonomy, social mobility, earnings and power/authority.⁵ To compound

² Department of Education, 'Sharing works: a policy for shared education', DE: Belfast, 2015.

³ K. Lynch and J. Baker, 'Working paper 28, equality in education: an equality of condition perspective', *Theory and Research in Education* Vol. 3, No.2: 131-164, 2005.

⁴ D. Hirsch, 'Experiences of poverty and educational disadvantage', JRF: London, 2007, p.1.

⁵ Ibid. See also, PWC, 'Longitudinal evaluation of the learner access and engagement pilot programme - final report', DEL: Belfast, 2012; H. McLaughlin, 'Women living in disadvantaged communities: barriers to participation', Belfast: WCRP, 2009; M. Feeley, 'Making good learning partnerships: examining the experience and potential with the community-based women's education sector and the further education sector', Equality Commission for Northern Ireland: Belfast, 2002; and, K. Lynch and M. Feeley, 'Gender and education (and employment): gendered imperatives and their implications for women and men: lessons from research for policy makers', European Commission: Brussels, 2009.

matters, the relationship between poverty and underachievement at school 'is part of a wider cycle *in which family disadvantage is passed on from one generation to the next*'.⁶

The debate on shared education informs a perspective on this relational conjunction according to which educational segregation along class and identity lines, as exemplified and reinforced by Northern Ireland's selective education system, can constrain individuals' learning experiences and outcomes, ultimately contributing to the production and reproduction of educational 'winners' and 'losers'.⁷ And, as the consultation document notes, it is claimed that countering such segregation through shared education 'has the *potential* to impact on raising educational standards and reducing underachievement'.⁸

From this perspective, we welcome the consultation exercise as affirmation of the Executive's intent to help address underachievement by 'encourag[ing] and facilitat[ing] ...the advancement of shared education' cross-sectorally, to include the 'education together of ... those who are experiencing significant socio-economic deprivation and those who are not'.⁹

That said, we have a number of concerns about the claimed potential of the proposals to remedially impact (i.e. 'reduce') underachievement in the Northern Ireland case.¹⁰ Underlying these concerns is consideration of the possible implications of the following interacting factors, which may conceivably restrict that potential: extended austerity, characterised by the prolongation of severe fiscal constraints and associated retrenchments; the absence of the requisite political will to engage in substantive structural change to the current selective educational system; terminological ambiguity across the consultation documentation; and, an apparent research deficit on

⁶ Hirsch, *op. cit.*, p.3.

⁷ On this, see P. Connolly, D. Purvis and P.J. O'Grady, 'Advancing shared education report of the Ministerial Advisory Group, MAP: Belfast, 2013.

⁸ Department of Education, *op. cit.*, p.iv.

⁹ Department of Education, 'Shared education bill', DE: Belfast, 2015, p.1.

¹⁰ Department of Education, 'Sharing works', p.iv.

the subject at hand that threatens to undermine the development of robust evidence-based policymaking.

Participant discussion across the engagement events underlined these concerns and raised associated issues, as will be shown in the remainder of the paper.

2.2 Specific comments

Addressing underachievement: academic selection and structural change

2.2.1 In the absence of substantive structural change to the current selective system of education in Northern Ireland, the Consortium is concerned that any realisation of the Executive's ambition to 'reduce underachievement' through shared education might ultimately prove piecemeal.¹¹

Social class 'intersects with gender and ethnicity in complex ways to reproduce educational inequality' associated with underachievement among girls from poorer backgrounds, which can profoundly affect later life outcomes in respect of, inter alia, social mobility, employment and health.¹² As noted, the notion of shared education informs a perspective on underachievement according to which educational segregation along class and identity lines, as sustained by the selective education system in Northern Ireland, can innately constrain individuals' learning experiences and outcomes, ultimately contributing to the production and reproduction of educational 'winners' and 'losers'.¹³

Consequently, educational segregation under academic selection is associated with 'significant achievement gaps'.¹⁴ Evidence for this claim-making in the Northern Ireland case includes a 'clear tendency' for grammar school and non-grammar school attendance to fall along a class faultline (between more and less privileged cohorts), and the accompanying stark

¹¹ Ibid., loc cit.

¹² E. Perry and B. Francis, 'The social class gap for educational achievement: a review of the literature', RSA: London, 2010, p.18.

¹³ See Connolly, Purvis and O'Grady, op. cit.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.ix.

statistic that, as compared to her secondary school counterpart, a grammar school student at 16 is over three and a half times more likely to gain the basic standard of five or more GCSE passes at grades A*-C.¹⁵ Furthermore, where pertinent national comparatives are drawn, this system ‘is associated with larger achievement gaps in relation to socio-economic background *than elsewhere*’.¹⁶ A human rights dimension pertains: the cumulative adverse impact of academic selection on educational inequality ‘undermines the fundamental rights of all children and young people’.¹⁷

As research affirms, by reinforcing class-based segregation, selective schooling represents a ‘serious obstacle’ to the realisation of shared education, with the result that ‘advances in relation to shared education will remain *seriously limited* while the current system of academic selection at age 11 continues in Northern Ireland’.¹⁸

On this view, to reduce this social class gap in Northern Ireland education in substantive ways, government must address a fundamental structural ‘challenge’:

finding an alternative system that is more sophisticated, flexible and responsive to the needs of children and young people ... and that, as a result, is capable of driving up the overall standards of Northern Ireland compared to other countries whilst also significantly reducing the unacceptable gaps in achievement that currently exist for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.¹⁹

Put differently, the ‘challenge’ is to structurally overhaul the educational status quo in order to construct a more socially just system. In the absence of such structural reform, sharing endeavours appear innately constrained. Accordingly, leading educationalists recently urged ‘caution’ in advancing the

¹⁵ Ibid., p.xxii.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.68.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.109. These rights are set out in the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.110.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.68.

notion of sharing in the Northern Ireland case '*if there is no deeper commitment to structural and social change*'.²⁰

Against this background, while focus group participants recognised the inherent virtue of pursuing more inclusive learning opportunities through sharing, such as might positively impact achievement and promote cross-sectoral equality, they nevertheless stressed that the statutory focus on sharing should not be allowed to distract from or trump the wider issue at stake in this debate, i.e. the distinctly *structural* challenge of how to raise educational standards *universally*.

In short, selective structures sustain educational inequality and, consequently, underachievement is a complex structurally-generated problem requiring complex, holistic structural remedial change.²¹

In pursuit of a more socially just educational system in Northern Ireland, the Consortium recommends that, in progressing these proposals, the Executive give further consideration as to how it could/should take due account to the selective educational status quo as both (a) a '*serious obstacle*'²² to shared education'; and, (b) a structural reproducer of educational inequality and the social class gap in education that helps sustain such inequality.

Austerity and the economic case for shared education

2.2.2 The Consortium is further concerned that the Executive's case for shared education is premised on controversial and contested claim-making; and that, in a context of extended austerity, there is an attendant danger that the economic dimension to that controversial and contested discourse might dominate and distort this debate.

²⁰ U. Hansson, U. O'Connor Bones and J. McCord, 'Integrated education: a review of policy and research evidence 1999-2012', University of Ulster: Belfast, 2013, p.6.

²¹ Perry and Francis, op. cit.

²² Connolly, Purvis and O'Grady, op. cit., p.108.

The Executive's case for shared education is set out in social, educational and economic terms. In outlining the supposed economic case, the document claims that shared education should make 'more effective and efficient use of limited resources to improve value for money'.²³ This claim remains inherently controversial and contested, not least of all because gaps in the literature render incomplete the evidence base for making that case:

the economic benefits of ... sharing needs clarified ... estimates of the economic benefits of changes to the education system have proven difficult ... the possible financial savings which [a shared] education system could provide have not yet been fully researched... arguably greater savings could be made through the rationalisation of schools rather than sharing existing resources.²⁴

Participant discussion drew attention to this controversy, impugning the notion of a case. For instance, it was posited that while sharing between separate schools might have the potential to accrue some savings, significant additional costs were also possible, such as those associated with travel between campuses.

To compound matters, this evidence shortfall on the economic case for sharing forms part of a wider research deficit on the cumulative benefits of sharing, so that claim-making around the supposed educational and social benefits of sharing also remains controversial and contested. For example, in respect of the interaction between the supposed educational and social benefits of sharing, recent research notes 'a lack of longitudinal research to identify the long-term impact of sharing and the need to establish whether the positive effects identified are transferable to situations outside the narrow confines of the educational environment'.²⁵

Where there is credible evidence of possible meaningful educational outcomes from sharing, proper attention needs to be paid to the virtue of a

²³ Department of Education, 'Sharing works', p.5.

²⁴ Hansson, O'Connor Bones and McCord, op. cit., pp.67-8. We, of course, acknowledge that attempts have been made to make this economic case (most recently, Oxford Economics, 2010); but the point here is that the cited sources are sufficient to urge caution with regard to same.

²⁵ Connolly, Purvis and O'Grady, op. cit., p.44.

given initiative,²⁶ *regardless of whether or not there is a substantive supporting economic case/argument*. But in a context of extended austerity, characterised by severe fiscal constraints and associated retrenchments, there is a danger that economic discourse and motivations might dominate this debate, sidelining the educational, so that what is at stake might be reduced to the economic first and foremostly.

Motivated thus, participants called for enhanced monitoring and review mechanisms to accompany all emerging initiatives to ensure that, as one discussant put it, what is proposed ‘*is really shared education*’ and ‘*not just sharing ... to deal with economic issues*’. However, given both prevailing and projected fiscal implications, it was also held that government pursuit of more inclusive educational opportunities across all section 75 categories might in practice be increasingly difficult to meaningfully realise in the longer term, despite the budgetary commitment outlined in the document.

The Consortium recommends that the Executive take the necessary steps to ensure that, in a context of extended austerity, the debate on sharing does not get dominated by controversial and contested economic discourse; and that, for the sake of properly informed evidence-based policymaking, due account is taken of the research deficit that underlies that controversy and contestation.

Definitional ambiguity – need for clarity

2.2.3 For reasons that follow, definitional ambiguity and inconsistency across the consultation documentation threaten to undermine the meaningfulness of the proposals.

As already implied, the consultation document sets out the case for shared education in terms of its potential to realise certain educational, economic and societal gains. In so doing, it presents a distinct tripartite characterisation of

²⁶ Of course, it is accepted that there are no guarantees of positive outcomes from shared education experiences and that outcomes can be difficult to establish, whether to accurately predict pre-sharing or evaluate post-sharing; *ibid*.

the purpose of shared education that ‘conflate[s] any activity which involves collaboration between schools *whether the purpose is educational, societal or economic*’.²⁷ By contrast, elsewhere in the document, in setting out the aim of shared education, the economic dimension is omitted, with the result that a bipartite purpose is instead presented viz.: ‘deliver[y of] educational and social benefits to learners’.²⁸

Further ambiguity pertains over the documentation’s interpretation and understanding of shared education. The proposed bill defines the latter as the ‘education together’ of those ‘*of different religious belief or political opinion [as well as] ... those who are experiencing significant socio-economic deprivation and those who are not*’.²⁹ The former is, of course, consistent with the widely accepted understanding of integrated education in the Northern Ireland case, encompassing ‘the legacy of mixed Catholic and Protestant schooling’.³⁰ By contrast, the consultation document itself presents an interpretation of shared education that makes generic reference to ‘different community backgrounds’, without any specific allusion to ‘different religious belief or political opinion’.³¹ For obvious reasons, terminological clarity and consistency remain prerequisites of effective policymaking: it is more difficult to evaluate outcome of delivery where such ambiguity prevails in the policy framework.

This critique of definitional ambiguity was prevalent across participant discussion. It was argued that if government was serious in its intent to address underachievement through shared education by engaging all affected stakeholders, including parents, in this emerging debate, then it should properly inform that debate by providing the requisite level of clarification on the nature of the relationship between integrated and shared education and the distinctions between both. This imperative was judged particularly

²⁷ Hansson, O’Connor Bones and McCord, *op. cit.*, p.18.

²⁸ Department of Education, ‘Sharing works’, p.13.

²⁹ Department of Education, ‘Shared education bill’, p.1.

³⁰ C. McGlynn *et. al*, ‘Moving out of conflict: the contribution of integrated schools in Northern Ireland to identity, attitudes, forgiveness and reconciliation’, *Journal of Peace Education*, Volume 1, Issue 2, 2004.

³¹ Department of Education, ‘Sharing works’, p.iii.

important in a perceived public sphere context that prioritises integrated education over shared education and conflates/confuses both.

The Consortium recommends that the documentation framework accompanying this policy manoeuvre should be properly ‘proofed’ to ensure the absence of any definitional ambiguity such as might potentially interfere with effective delivery, monitoring and review.

Meaningful and substantive shared education opportunities

2.2.4 We have noted the research deficit that threatens to undermine the development of robust evidence-based policymaking in this area. Despite this threat, in so far as there is *some* robust evidence to support the view that shared education can potentially have *some* beneficial impact on educational underachievement, and segregation-associated underachievement remains a major concern in Northern Ireland, there is clearly *some* educational case to be made for shared education in this jurisdiction.

Given the nature and extent of the social class gap in education that academic selection helps sustain here, it is imperative that any remedial action on this dilemma should take the form of *meaningful and substantive* sharing opportunities. Yet, as already implied, in a context of extended austerity characterised by intensified competition for already scarce public resources, between comparatively compelling priorities across different kinds of vulnerable constituencies, we have misgivings about the Executive’s potential to properly deliver on this front.

Despite such scepticism about the potential of government to deliver under extended austerity, participants appealed for long-termism and sustainability as requisite cornerstones of all emerging sharing initiatives. Discussants also proposed a number of measures that government and other affected parties could/should undertake to potentially enhance that delivery. These included: the development of more meaningful pre-school and informal sharing opportunities; the imposition of a regulative requirement on all schools to ‘sign-up to a shared education commitment’ and participate in a ‘shared

education day'; the cessation of teacher training along religiously segregated lines; the identification and addressing of barriers to shared education affecting different constituencies, such as rural and special needs, including infrastructural shortfalls in access and transport; the designation of teachers in schools as 'shared education officers'; the provision of robust teacher retraining on sharing; and, sponsorship of capacity-building programmes among community stakeholders to advance the ethos of sharing among parents.

In consideration of the last point, participants identified a number of barriers to parental engagement. These included longstanding impediments to the development of cross-community 'trust' associated with the so-called 'legacy of the Troubles'. As one discussant put it: 'the main dividing issues between children in [Northern Ireland] remain ... sectarian' and 'a lot of work needs to be prioritised in that area' to potentially advance sharing through enhanced parental engagement. Suggestions to stimulate such engagement included stakeholder sponsored mixed-media information and awareness-raising strategies as well as increased parental consultation.

The Consortium recommends that, in pursuit of more meaningful and substantive shared education opportunities across all section 75 constituencies, the Executive should commit to a comprehensive evaluation of the particular and specific barriers to shared education affecting all stakeholders, and then undertake sufficient measures to ensure that proper account is taken of these barriers as it progresses its proposals.

2.2.5 Rural sharing: community impact

Research characterises the rural school as 'part of the fabric of the community',³² ascribing to it a distinct role in countering rural isolation by providing a much-needed focal point and meeting space for community members, particularly women whose socially ascribed role of primary carer

³² C. Perry and B. Love, 'Rural schools', NIA: Belfast, 2013, p.5.

may exacerbate isolation by constraining participation in the public sphere. Consultation feedback underlined this point, anecdotally reporting that such space may be especially important to women carers who, as individuals not originating from a given rural locality, may experience a more pronounced form of isolation.

Such discourse informs research that affirms the significant contribution rural schools can potentially make to the sustainability of rural community life and how, consequently, their closure can adversely impact rural community cohesion and well being.³³ Accordingly, shared education has been presented as a way to pre-emptively address the risk to community life posed by the threat of closure. Broadly, the suggestion here is that rural sharing, for example, within a federation model of joint leadership and governance arrangements, can potentially mitigate that risk by increasing capacity among schools facing closure under budgetary pressure, such as that associated with extended austerity.³⁴ Of course, as previously observed, research also indicates the need to proceed with caution in making any economic case for sharing. The substantive point here is this: given what is at stake in this debate on rural in virtue of the nature of the relationship between school and community, there is a normative imperative in setting out the rural case for sharing to ensure the sustainability and long-termism of any proposed project.

The Consortium recommends that the Executive, as it progresses these proposals, take due account of (i) the role of rural schools in countering rural isolation; and, (ii) the potential of shared education to address the threat to that role posed by the prospect of school closure.

3. Conclusion

At the heart of this debate is the substantive social justice question of how best to address the relationship between poverty and low achievement. In a Northern Ireland context of stark educational inequality sustained by class-based segregation under academic selection, this consultation exercise

³³ *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

advances shared education as a potential mechanism for reducing underachievement. Yet it has been argued that in so far as this selective status quo helps sustain that underachievement, the latter is a complex structurally generated problem that can ever only be properly addressed through substantive and holistic structural remedial change.³⁵

In the absence of such change, this structural status quo will conceivably continue to produce and reproduce educational ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ along a social class faultline between the more and less privileged, profoundly restricting the opportunities and life outcomes of the latter thus contributing to the reproduction of intergenerational disadvantage and deprivation.

³⁵ Perry and Francis, *op. cit.*

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Appendix 1
Women's Regional Consortium: focus group events
Department of Education's 'Sharing works: a policy for shared education'

Focus group locations and dates

- Chrysalis Women's Centre, Craigavon: 3 February 2015
- Greenway Women's Centre, Belfast: 5 February 2015
- FWIN, Derry: 5 February 2015

Participants' profile summary

Overall composition: included some venue staff, board members, volunteers, service users and, more generally, women living and working in different localities and sectors, including parents, young and older people. In addition, elected local government representative (councillor) present at FWIN event.