

Assessing Demand for Integrated Education in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

In 2023, the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) (an independent charitable foundation supporting the growth and development of integrated education in Northern Ireland) commissioned ARK to assess demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland. Although Sections 5 and 6 of the recent Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 refer to ‘demand’, there is limited information on what this means in practice. The project had three aims: (1) to evaluate the current methods used by stakeholders to assess demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland, (2) to examine international evidence on measures used to assess demand in other countries that may inform practice in Northern Ireland, and (3) to outline future practices that could be used to measure demand for integrated education. This Policy Brief discusses the key findings and recommendations from the project report (Early et al., 2023).

Legal context

The first integrated school in Northern Ireland (Lagan College) was established in 1981. Lagan College, like many other of the early integrated schools, relied on support from parental initiatives and philanthropic organisations such as All Children Together (ACT), the Belfast Charitable Trust for Integrated Education (BELTIE) and, since 1992, the IEF. Since then, the integrated education sector has been aided by legislation such as the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 and the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, which extended the responsibilities

of the Department of Education and the Education Authority (EA) to encourage, facilitate and support integrated education.

Over the years, the number of integrated schools has steadily increased, with 70 recorded in 2022/2023 (Department of Education, 2023a). This represents six per cent of the 1,121 schools in Northern Ireland. As a result, at the time of writing only seven per cent of pupils in Northern Ireland are educated in integrated schools.

The definition of integrated education has evolved over time. In 1989, the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order defined integrated education as educating Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils together at school. However, recognising the demographic and societal changes that have occurred in Northern Ireland since the beginning of the Peace Process, the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 provided the more inclusive definition of educating pupils of different cultures/religions, socio-economic backgrounds and abilities together. In that sense, integrated schools are schools that consciously challenge the prevailing religious segregation and academic selection that defines the Northern Irish school system. As defined by the 2022 Act integrated schools intentionally support, protect and advance an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding. For a detailed explanation of school management structures in Northern Ireland, see Robinson (2023) and Milliken (2020).

Attitudes and demand

Attitude surveys have consistently shown high levels of public support for more religious mixing and integration in schools (Devlin, 2021). Seven out of ten respondents to the 2021 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey (69%) would prefer that their children attended a mixed-religion school (up from 35% in 1998). The Young Life and Times (YLT) survey of 16 year olds shows a similar pattern (52% in 2020-2021).

However, as noted by Hansson, O'Connor Bones and McCord (2013), many survey questions use the words “mixed”, “shared” or “integrated” education interchangeably which impacts our understanding of attitudes towards integrated education in particular. For example, the NILT and YLT surveys track the level of support for mixed-religion schooling. However, due to the question wording, the data do not provide clear evidence on public attitudes towards integrated education specifically, as this differs from mixed-religion schools.

These surveys undoubtedly indicate support for change away from the largely segregated school landscape in Northern Ireland. However, demand for integrated education is not geographically uniform. In some areas and for some schools, the demand for integrated education cannot be met and schools are oversubscribed. In contrast, some integrated schools are undersubscribed. The evidence therefore suggests that ‘demand’, which is a central focus of the Integrated Education (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, is a complex issue.

The Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 outlines that the Department of Education is responsible for assessing and reporting on the demand for, and supply of, integrated education whilst the Education Authority is responsible for determining demand for integrated education. However, there is currently no agreed and reliable methodology on how to do this. Demand for integration needs to be considered in the context of multi-dimensional factors that determine school choice where integration is likely to be just one factor of many.

Measuring demand

The development and assessment of any policy requires reliable and robust indicators. In relation to integrated education, these processes are currently limited by the lack of an agreed framework for measuring demand. At present, a range of methods are used by stakeholders such as the EA, IEF and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) to monitor demand for integrated education, including:

- First preference applications of pupils to schools.
- Oversubscription or undersubscription of integrated school places.
- Parental ballots on the integrated status of existing schools.
- Expressions of interest forms.
- Registrations on the website www.integratedmyschool.com.
- Attitudes surveys (micro polls, opinion polls and surveys).
- Participatory research methods (deliberative polls and Community Conversations).

Each method has its own strengths and limitations, and a full discussion of these is available in the project report (Early et al., 2023). Some of these limitations apply to all existing measures and are centred around their failure to capture many of the reasons why parents select integrated schools for their child’s education. Such factors include school quality, proximity to home or parents’ workplace, and school admissions criteria, as well as a preference for integrated education. School choice and the demand for specific school types are therefore multi-faceted.

Recommendations

The project report (Early et al., 2023) outlined a set of recommendations to better measure demand for integrated education. These are aligned with the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and emphasise that demand for integrated education is situated in a complex landscape. For example, parents who support integrated education may not send their children to an integrated school because of the practical advantages of other schools, such as proximity to home. In contrast, for other parents, a school being integrated may play no role in their decision. Understanding demand for integrated education therefore needs to be considered separately from the notion that it is related to specific social attitudes. Demand for integrated education does not exist in a vacuum and is dependent on the choice of (alternative) schools available, which is context specific.

The report had two recommendations centred around capturing demand for integrated education and understanding demand for integrated education in the future.

Recommendation 1

Underpinning this recommendation is the assertion that parental choices/preferences for different school types in Northern Ireland must be understood within the complex interplay of factors that influence the decisions they make. As outlined above, a school being integrated may only be one reason in the decision-making process.

Therefore, the way that demand for integrated education is currently captured through research and the school admissions portal (a centralised system used by all parents to apply for a pre-/primary/post-primary school place for their child) should be adapted. This could be achieved through various methods such as (re-)designing appropriate survey questions, undertaking qualitative and mixed-methods research, and utilising the existing admissions portal. The centralised school

admissions portal provides a unique opportunity to capture reasons for school choice, at the time that decision is being made. However, given the complexities involved, quantitative measures alone will not provide an adequate understanding of parental demand. Qualitative or mixed-methods approaches are, therefore, recommended to further explore the myriad reasons for parental decisions of school choice. This will, in turn, enable a more nuanced and informed assessment of demand.

Recommendation 2

The second recommendation highlights how assessing demand is dependent upon parents'/children's awareness of the different school types available and what they have to offer. This is particularly pertinent for integrated education given its unique contribution to the education system in Northern Ireland. A key question to consider is whether parents and pupils fully understand the different management types of schools available. As such, increasing the availability and accessibility of information on integrated education for parents, children and young people would be beneficial. This would allow parents, children and young people to understand how integrated schools compare to other schools thereby ensuring that informed decisions are made about school choice. In this way the specific value of integrated schools academically, pastorally and through extra-curricular activities could be more fully understood. To maintain and increase demand, integrated schools, perhaps even more than other school types, need to be attentive and responsive to parental and pupil needs. Schools should therefore regularly consult with parents within their catchment areas to make sure they offer a curriculum and extra-curricular activities that meet parental demand.

Children's Rights

Current information on integrated education is almost exclusively targeted at parents, and legislation prioritises parents' choice of a school for their children. However, the views of children and young people should also be considered when it comes to schooling, and this does not currently happen. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) stipulates that children have a right to express their views, wishes and feelings in all matters affecting them, and that these views should be considered and taken seriously. Schooling is clearly a matter that significantly affects children and young people, which the UN's Committee on the Rights of the Child (2001) have continually emphasised, noting that education should enable children to express their views freely and allow participation in school life. A fundamental concern raised by the Committee over 20 years ago, and, arguably, still relevant today, is that children are not systematically consulted in education about matters affecting them (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2002). Indeed, Kilkelly et al. (2004) reported that not having an opinion in the decisions that affected them was the most important issue to children in Northern Ireland. This view is supported in the Kids' Life and Times (KLT) survey in 2012, where 59 percent of Primary 7 (P7) children identified their right to have their ideas listened to and taken seriously.

ARK's KLT and YLT surveys of 10-11 year olds in P7 and 16 year olds, respectively, have elicited opinions on rights and education. Data from the 2014 YLT and KLT surveys show that 62 per cent of 16 year olds and 36 per cent of P7 children felt that there should be more integration in schools in Northern Ireland (Stockinger, 2015). However, what the term 'integration' refers to in the surveys is not specified. For example, it is not clear if respondents believed there should be more integration in schools based on pupils' religion/culture, socio-economic background and/or abilities, as defined in the 2022 Integrated Education Act. More broadly, the surveys also

found 49 per cent of 16 year olds in 2014 and 14 per cent of P7 children in 2020 had heard of the UNCRC. A higher proportion of 16 year olds (58%) had learnt about children/young people's rights at school in 2014. With this in mind, there is a need to take children's and young people's views on their education and choice of school more seriously to shape future planning.

Recommendation 2 of the project report is centred around ensuring that the specificities of integrated education are better understood to allow the opportunity for greater community cohesion and equality in a society transitioning from sustained violence to peace. Considering integrated education is placed within a largely segregated education provision in Northern Ireland, this complexity has been acknowledged for some time by the UN's Committee on the Rights of the Child, which stated that political parties in Northern Ireland have been asked to 'actively promote a fully integrated education system (...) in order to ensure that it facilitates social integration' (CRC, 2016, p.19). In their combined report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Children's Commissioners of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales agreed that 'academic selection and separated schooling continues to exacerbate inequalities, advantage children from more affluent families, and reinforce social and religious divides.' (Children's Commissioners, 2022, p. 57). Relating to this, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People recommended that integrated education should be encouraged, and the government should move towards a single education system that is compliant with Article 28 and 29 of the UNCRC. An Independent Review of Education, as stipulated in the New Decade, New Approach deal (UK government and Irish government, 2020), is currently ongoing and is considering the practicalities of moving towards a single education system in Northern Ireland. However, what a single education system refers to is not clearly defined.

Conclusion

Integrated education does not exist in isolation but is part of a complex education system that reflects wider societal segregation in Northern Ireland. For example, 80 per cent of households in estates constructed by the Housing Executive were religiously segregated in 2011 and this increased to 94 per cent in Belfast (Housing Executive, n.d.). Within this system, integrated education provides a mechanism to promote reconciliation among divided communities. Reliable and robust indicators to assess and monitor demand for integrated education are therefore central to ensuring that stakeholders meet their duty under the Integrated Education (Northern Ireland) Act 2022. The 2022 Act allows the opening of a new integrated school or the transformation of an existing school to integrated status if it meets area planning demands. However, there needs to be a joined-up approach in area planning which treats school planning within the context of wider services such as housing, leisure centres and public transport. In this approach, economic, school and environmental sustainability should be central to decision making.

Parental demand for integrated education is currently measured in various ways, including preference data on the school admissions portal, over- and under-subscription of integrated

school places, parental ballots, expression of interest forms, attitudes surveys, and registration on the website www.integratemyschool.com. Each of these methods serve a specific purpose and provide one part of the jigsaw of evidence necessary to assess demand under the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. Although Sections 5 and 6 of the Act refer to 'demand', there is limited information on what this means in practice. This prevents relevant measurement of the demand for particular types of schools. A working definition of 'demand' is therefore central to ensuring key stakeholders fulfil their responsibilities of measuring and assessing demand under the Integrated Education (Northern Ireland) Act 2022. As outlined in the recent Strategy for Integrated Education in Northern Ireland (Department of Education, 2023b), no single data source or measure will provide the type or range of information needed to measure demand, resulting in the need for a suite of measures. Importantly, the range of methods recommended in the project report (Early et al., 2023) provides mechanisms for recording and understanding the preferences and choices of parents, children and young people in relation to all types of schools, regardless of whether they are integrated or not.

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