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Blog article by Chief Commissioner Dr Michael Wardlow

Education: Learning to live together

To be meaningful, shared education must include all our children - and that means it should provide practical opportunities for young people to establish relationships with those who happen to be born with a different cultural identity or into a different racial background or who are differently abled.



Well, although the two main Executive partners did come together to vote for a proposed budget, the Assembly has broken up for the summer with many vital issues still unresolved. Let us hope that common sense prevails and our politicians can get the Assembly back on the road again addressing the key inequalities still facing our society.

It is times like this that militate against trying to encourage our young people to vote let alone to take an interest in local politics. The voting potential is great, as there are about 330,000 young people attending just over 1,000 schools at present. For so long I have heard the mantra that “children are our future”. Well, if this is true, then that future will be a markedly different one to what we have experienced so far and all of us would do well to reflect on the facts as we know them.

For a start, the under 18 cohort is a falling number in real terms and as a percentage of the overall NI population, which is an aging one. There are more Catholic children (168k) than those of other Christian (127k) and other religious traditions (c3k). In addition, there is a growing number of children who have no religion recorded (30k) reflecting a growing trend in the recent census figures. Add to this the fact that there are now almost 12,000 newcomer children, compared to 2,000 ten years ago, and that children with special needs now account for 1 in 5 of the total school-age population.

Education, of course, is at the heart of our engagement with all our young people - and essential to their development as the citizens who will shape Northern Ireland in the years to come. These facts suggest strongly that we will be facing a new type of school provision in the foreseeable future.

Despite these seismic changes, it remains the default position that the majority of young people are educated with little or no contact with those who they consider to be “different”. This difference does not only affect religious affiliation or community background, but touches on issues of race and disability as well.

This approach to education provision cannot be the best way to educate our young people in how to live together in what is becoming an increasingly multi-cultural, pluralist society. Sectarianism hasn't gone away and racism continues to raise its head with regularity as police figures show. Homophobic bullying and harassment continues to present as a real life issue for many LGBT people and disability protections have now fallen behind those available in GB. Add to the mix the issues related to poverty and poor educational achievement, particularly amongst working class Protestant boys, Black and Minority Ethnic pupils and children with Special Educational Needs and/or disabilities; and it becomes all too apparent that we need to address urgently how we can better share our educational estate.

Recent consultations on Special Educational Needs and shared schools highlights the need to tackle our fragmented education system in a way that addresses outcomes for young people rather than simply changing structures, although they may need a radical alteration as well. As one example, the Commission's response to the shared education consultation was robust and while we welcomed the consultation exercise and the detail provided, we consider that for the potential of shared education to be realised in practice, it must be appropriately defined in legislation and clearly articulated through a coherent and coordinated policy framework.

We need wider action to address the structural barriers to shared education. These include academic selection at age 11; the exception of teachers at secondary level from the Fair Employment and Treatment Order and the need for greater sharing and collaboration in teacher training.

A shared experience should be central to the education system as a whole, encompassing all stages of educational provision – pre-school; early years; primary; post primary; special needs; and tertiary levels. It needs to impact meaningfully and substantively on all learners, who should routinely be taught together, via a shared curriculum in shared classes.

There is also a need to promote good relations and tackle prejudicial attitudes in all spheres, both inside and outside schools, so that steps taken to promote good relations in schools are supported by actions and behaviours at home and in the wider community.

In addition the Commission considers that the Executive's vision should be clear that it includes raising levels of educational attainment, and also seek to encapsulate that partnerships should be sustainable and aimed at positively changing the relationship between pupils, school and the wider community.

More inclusive schools will not in themselves solve N.Ireland's endemic sectarianism and other prejudices. They can at least allow for more practical opportunities for young people to establish relationships with those who happen to be born with a different cultural identity or into a different racial background or are differently abled. Going back to the earlier quote, if you reflect upon it, children are actually not our future, they are part of our present, in the here and now, and for that reason need to be considered as citizens who are valuable for who they are and not just how they might vote.



Read the Chief Commissioner's blog "*Here's the thing...*"

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