

## Northern Ireland Affairs Committee – Inquiry into Integrated Education

### Written evidence from Pivotal

Pivotal is the independent public policy think tank for Northern Ireland. Pivotal aims to help improve public policy in Northern Ireland, through promoting a greater use of evidence in decision-making and by involving a wider range of people in talking about policy issues. Pivotal is independent of political parties and political ideologies, and operates outside of government. We aim to promote and enable discussion about policy issues in Northern Ireland that is evidence-based, inclusive and accessible.

This evidence from Pivotal does not attempt to address all the questions in the Call for Evidence. Instead, it provides some findings about integrated education from Pivotal's recent research with young people, and in so doing provides responses to a number of the questions. These views and experiences help to inform our understanding of young people's hopes for the future, but also give insights into some of the barriers to greater integration in education. We hope that this contribution of young people's voices from our research is helpful.

### Research findings

Pivotal's research in 2021 [Should I stay or should I go? – reasons for leaving Northern Ireland for study or work](#) looked at why so many young people leave Northern Ireland and do not return. It identified ongoing community divisions as a 'push' factor influencing decisions to leave, which were also a deterrent to returning to Northern Ireland later in life. Continued segregation in education was mentioned specifically by research participants as a day-to-day outworking of community division.

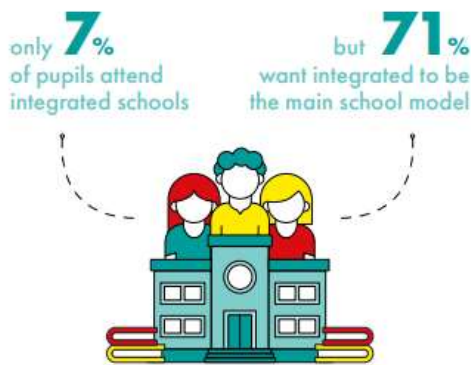
During 2023 Pivotal completed a research project with young people about reconciliation and deprivation in Northern Ireland. The methodology for the project was a literature and policy review, interviews with experts and practitioners, plus a survey and focus groups of young people. Our findings were published in four reports:

- [Reconciliation and deprivation – twin challenges for Northern Ireland](#)
- [Youth voices – life, work and study in Northern Ireland](#)
- [Youth solutions – improving education, training and employment in Northern Ireland](#)
- [Youth solutions for building better communities in Northern Ireland](#)

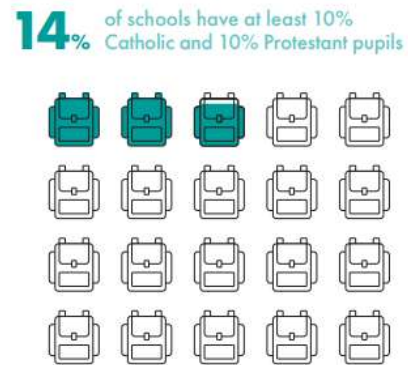
The first report [Reconciliation and deprivation – twin challenges for Northern Ireland](#) reviewed the existing literature and policy on reconciliation and deprivation, together with 15 structured interviews with experts and practitioners.

The research found that public support for integrated education has long been evident, yet has not been translated into sustained growth in the sector. Support for the sector is wide but shallow, with

family traditions, faith and school reputation often taking priority over broader hopes for integrating society.



Source: Pivotal using Dept of Education, Lucid Talk



Source: Pivotal using NI Council for Integrated Educ'n, DoE

Our first report made the following conclusions:

- There is strong societal support for greater integration in education and housing, but much less has been achieved in practice;
- A lack of integration in education and housing as the fundamental building blocks of society have contributed to the absence of wider reconciliation between communities;
- While many community-based reconciliation programmes have done important and useful work, the fact that education and housing remain largely divided mean these efforts are often swimming against the tide of day-to-day life;
- Many interviewees expressed a fear that we have drifted away from the aim of reconciliation expressed in the Belfast Good Friday Agreement, and that instead we are “settling for separation”;
- Questions were raised about the political priority given to achieving reconciliation by political leaders.

### Young people’s views on integrated education

Findings from our 2023 survey with over 250 young people and focus groups with 92 young people in 2023 are in our three reports: [Youth voices – life, work and study in Northern Ireland](#), [Youth solutions – improving education, training and employment in Northern Ireland](#) and [Youth solutions for building better communities in Northern Ireland](#)

Our survey and focus groups with young people revealed strong support for greater integration in education:

- 75% of young people felt that schools were a good place for young people from different backgrounds to meet;
- 77% said that more integration in education would help build greater understanding between young people from different backgrounds;

- 67% said that a new integrated school system would help move Northern Ireland forward;
- 64% said that they would like young people from different backgrounds to be educated together.

Thematic analysis revealed twice as many positive comments about integrated education than negative ones. Below are some quotes from our research which are representative of the views expressed by young people:

*“From nursery you’re not going to like know about any of that stuff and you’re going to become mates with people who’s from different areas and then by the time you grow up and realise you’re still mates with them probably. Like you’re not born sectarian.” – Male, 15, North Belfast*

*“I feel if we start moving in that direction then slowly but surely we’ll get there but yeah especially in primary schools as well if they start that earlier for them it’s not going to be such a big change for these young people going into secondary school.” – Male, 22, West Belfast*

*“It would be easier. It would be so much better. Like it wouldn’t be all fighting and all because they would all just learn to grow up together.” – Female, 14, North Belfast*

However, our survey also found that just under one quarter of respondents felt that young people should only be educated with others from the same community background. This finding was explored further in the focus group conversations, which revealed some ambivalent or negative views about integration in education, including a small minority who were firmly opposed to an integrated education system. The concerns expressed were in three main areas:

1. Residential segregation - segregation in housing was reported as a problem for young people travelling to a school outside their own area. Young people often felt unsafe in areas they identified as being of a different community background. This was particularly acute for young people living in interface areas and was felt to be a barrier to educating children and young people together.
2. Sectarian bullying - young people felt that there could be an increased risk of sectarian bullying within an integrated education system. Some young people reported that they had already experienced bullying due to their community background in school while others felt it would be a source of conflict which could lead to physical or verbal abuse.
3. School subjects - history was most commonly identified as an area of potential contention within an integrated school system. Young people spoke about a sharp division between ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ narratives and their desire to learn their ‘own’ version of history. Similarly, young people expressed concern about subjects such as Physical Education and Languages which they felt would have to be compromised within an integrated system.

## **Shared Education**

The Committee may also want to consider Shared Education as a way to increase contact between pupils from different community backgrounds. Shared Education seeks to bring children and young people from different backgrounds together to learn during school time.

Pivotal's recent survey asked young people who had taken part in Shared Education programmes to rate their experiences in terms of supporting their education, learning about others from a different community background, and making and maintaining friendships with others from a different background. Most young people rated their experiences as excellent or good:

- 63.5% rated Shared Education as excellent or good at supporting their education
- 62.8% rated Shared Education as excellent or good for learning about others from a different background
- 60.1% rated Shared Education as excellent or good for making friends from different backgrounds

However, fewer participants rated the Shared Education Programme they experienced as excellent or good for keeping in touch with friends from a different background after the programme ends (37.8%).

## **Future research**

During 2024, Pivotal will complete a new research project to suggest policy solutions to reduce segregation in education and housing in Northern Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement included a commitment to "facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing", and our research aim is to examine why greater integration has not been achieved. The project will begin with a literature and policy review, and it will then generate new evidence through interviews with experts and practitioners, followed by focus group discussion with young people. We plan to publish two reports including policy ideas from this project during the year.

**Ann Watt**  
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**19 January 2024**