



***Report on Research Methods for Assessing
Demand for Integrated Education in Northern
Ireland***

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Executive Summary

Context

- The first integrated school in Northern Ireland was established in 1981, with the number of integrated schools increasing from 17 in 1992/1993 to 70 in 2022/2023¹.
- The Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 outlines five purposes of integrated education ranging from the delivery of educational benefits for pupils to promoting good relations.
- The Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 places responsibility on the Department of Education and the Education Authority to encourage, facilitate and support integrated education. However, there is no standardised or agreed operational methodology on how to assess demand.

Methodology

- The report outlines current approaches to assessing demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland. Publicly available information was synthesised from key stakeholders including the Education Authority, The Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and the Integrated Education Fund (IEF).
- A rapid literature review was conducted to identify methods used in the international context to ascertain demand or preferences for education provisions. These were assessed for their potential to be applied to ascertaining demand for integrated education in the Northern Ireland context.

Current Approaches to Assessing Demand for Integrated Education

- The current approaches to assessing demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland include first preference applications of pupils to schools; over/undersubscription rates of integrated schools; parental ballots; expressions of interest; registrations on www.integratemyschool.com; attitude surveys; and participatory research methods such as deliberative polls and Community

¹ Including nursery settings.

Conversations.

- Parents apply for a place for their pre-school or school-aged child at a pre-primary/primary/post-primary school through the Education Authority's centralised admissions portal. If a school receives more applications than there are available places (oversubscription), the school can apply admissions criteria to decide who receives a place.
- Admissions criteria are determined at all school phases (pre-school, primary and post-primary) by the Board of Governors. In pre-school settings, the first admissions criterion is socio-economic disadvantage.
- Existing schools can transform to integrated status following a parental ballot initiated by either the Board of Governors or a written request by parents of 20% of pupils. At least 50% of parents must vote in the ballot for the result to be valid and there must be a majority (over 50%) in the poll in favour of the transformation for it to occur.
- Expression of interest forms, endorsed by NICIE, gather information about the level of support and demand for an integrated education setting within a geographical area. These forms are used in relation to existing schools that are interested in transforming, or for new schools.
- The website www.integratemyschool.com is an initiative from the IEF which provides parents with the opportunity to register their support for their child's school to become integrated.
- Attitude surveys, including opinion polls, micro polls and cross-sectional surveys, have been used to indicate support for integrated education among parents, or among the wider community.

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- Participatory research methods such as deliberative polls and Community Conversations can provide in-depth insights into community needs and preferences for future school provision in a local area.
- Deliberative polls can demonstrate a change or consistency in attitudes between the pre- and post-deliberation poll, as participants gain information and discuss the topic in focus.
- While existing methods to assess demand for integrated education may record support for the principle of integrated education, they do not record the full range of factors considered by parents when selecting a school for their child. These may include school locality, convenience, admissions criteria and school quality.
- There is a mismatch between articulated preferences for integrated education (for example, in attitude surveys), the availability of places in integrated schools, and the uptake of these places.
- There are area-specific and school-specific differences in demand and supply of integrated education. In some areas and schools, the actual demand for integrated education cannot be met and so schools are heavily over-subscribed. In other areas, places in individual schools remain unfilled and there appears to be no sustainable demand for integrated education. Demand is therefore a complex issue.
- In the international context, studies acknowledge the importance of parental choice in education and highlight the factors that influence their decisions. However, there is a lack of published research examining measures for assessing demand for different school types across geographical contexts.

Recommendations

The recommendations can be divided in two main themes:

1. Capturing demand for integrated education (Recommendation 1)
2. Understanding demand for integrated education in the future (Recommendation 2)

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- *Recommendation 1: Improving the way demand for integrated education is captured through research and the schools admissions portal.* This could be achieved by (re-)designing appropriate survey questions, utilising administrative data portals, and undertaking qualitative and mixed-methods research.
- *Recommendation 2: Promote a greater understanding of integrated education and its unique contribution to the education system in Northern Ireland, in order to understand demand specific to integrated education.* This could be achieved through promoting the added value of integrated schools academically, pastorally and through extra-curricular activities. In addition, increasing the availability and accessibility of information on integrated education for parents, children and young people is required.
- The recommendations must be considered within the context of the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, and the realms of political will and area planning.

Introduction

The first integrated school in Northern Ireland (Lagan College) was established in 1981. Within the following eight years, a further six integrated schools were established, all supported by charitable or philanthropic funding. The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 provided a statutory framework to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education. Since then, the number of integrated schools has steadily increased in Northern Ireland, with 70 recorded in 2022/2023 (2 integrated nursery schools, 47 integrated primary schools and 21 integrated post-primary schools [Department of Education, 2023]). Most recently, the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 was passed. These educational, societal and legislative changes provide the impetus for reliable and robust indicators to assess and monitor the demand of integrated education.

The report is structured into four key sections. Section 1 provides context to integrated education in Northern Ireland and a review of the literature. Section 2 outlines the methodology of the project. Section 3 presents the current approaches to assessing demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland and evidence from the international context. Section 4 presents a discussion of the main findings and recommendations for future practice. In this report, we refer to integrated schools (and education more broadly) as those which hold legal status as integrated. This does not include religiously mixed schools.

Section 1: Context and Literature Review

Introduction

This section provides context to integrated education in Northern Ireland. The key policies impacting school provisions in Northern Ireland are outlined, along with definitions of the three key concepts used in this report – integrated education, demand, and parents. An overview of the structure of the education system, public attitudes towards integrated education in Northern Ireland, and evidence from the international context on school mixing are also discussed.

Integrated Education

The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 provided a statutory framework to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education. Within this framework, the Department of Education was responsible for encouraging and facilitating integrated education. The Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 allowed for the establishment of the Education Authority and outlined its duty to encourage, facilitate and promote shared education. The Shared Education (Northern Ireland) Act 2016 also outlined the responsibility of the Department of Education to encourage, facilitate and promote shared education.

The Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 extended the responsibilities of the Department of Education and the Education Authority to encouraging, facilitating, and supporting integrated education. This legislation states that the duties of the Education Authority and the Department of Education in supporting integrated education must not subordinate their duties of promoting shared education or other duties outlined in the Shared Education (Northern Ireland) Act 2016.

The definition of integrated education has evolved over time. The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 defined integrated education as the educating of Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils together at school. However, an Independent Review of Integrated Education published by the Department of Education in 2017 highlighted the need to review the definition of integrated education to reflect the changing demographic structure and diversity of Northern Ireland (Topping & Cavanagh, 2017).

Most recently, the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 defined integrated education as educating pupils from different cultures, religious beliefs or those of none together. Integrated education should include a “reasonable” number of Protestant and Catholic pupils. However, the definition of integrated education also refers to educating pupils from different socio-economic backgrounds and different abilities together. The Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 therefore provides a more inclusive definition of integrated education through its three-fold approach which encompasses three key characteristics of pupils: their culture/religion, socio-economic background and academic abilities.

There are five core purposes of integrated education, as outlined in the Integrated Education Act 2022 (Section 2):

1. To deliver educational benefits to children and young persons.
2. To promote awareness and appreciation of human rights.
3. To promote equality of opportunity.
4. To promote good relations.
5. To promote respect for identity, diversity and community cohesion.

Demand

Although the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 refers to demand, there is currently no agreed operational methodology on how to assess demand for education provisions in Northern Ireland. Consequently, there is a lack of a clear understanding and coherence in how demand can, or should, be measured. Such information is vital for providing a consistent assessment of parental demand for integrated education over time, and to assist future planning.

Sections 5 and 6 of the Integrated Education Act 2022 refer to demand for integrated education. As stipulated in the Act, the Department of Education is responsible for assessing and reporting on the demand for, and supply of, integrated education. The Education Authority are also responsible for ascertaining the demand for integrated education.

Section 5 can be seen as referring to the demand for integrated education at the local level, based on demand of existing schools, and has two key components:

1a) Identifying, assessing, monitoring and aiming to meet the demand for the provision of integrated education within the context of area planning and the overall sustainability of the school estate. This includes monitoring the number and success of applications for integrated education.

1b) Providing sufficient places in integrated schools to meet the demand for integrated education within the context of area planning and the sustainability of the school estate. This includes examining evidence of expected future demand for integrated provision.

Section 6(3) of the Act can be interpreted as referring to future regional demand for integrated education and states that demand refers to:

“...the extent to which parents would prefer their children to be educated at grant-maintained integrated or controlled integrated schools rather than at schools which are not grant-maintained integrated schools or controlled integrated schools.”

This report utilises the definition provided in Section 6(3) of the Act which focuses on parental preferences for integrated education.

Parents

In the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, parents are those known to the school's Board of Governors as the parent of a registered pupil at the school and those who are named as a parent of a pupil in the register. This definition is provided in relation to parental ballots outlined in Section 3a. The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 (Article 44) states that:

“...so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, pupils shall be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents”.

The Structure of the Education System in Northern Ireland

Integrated schools are situated within the wider education system in Northern Ireland. The Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 defines an integrated school as one that:

“Intentionally supports, protects and advances an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, between those of different socio-economic backgrounds and between those of different abilities, and has acquired grant-maintained integrated status, or controlled integrated status” (Section 2a & 2b).

The post-primary education system in Northern Ireland practices a dually selective system through academic selection (grammar/non-grammar schools) and religious affiliation (reflected predominantly through school management structures). The range of school management structures in Northern Ireland are outlined below according to a recent Department of Education report (Robinson, 2023)².

- *Controlled* schools are managed and funded by the Education Authority through a Board of Governors that consists of representatives of parents, teachers, the Education Authority and representatives of the transferors (nominated mainly from the Protestant churches).
- *Voluntary* schools are funded by the Department of Education and managed by a Board of Governors. The Board of Governors are composed in accordance with the school’s management and often include representatives of the foundation governors, parents, teachers, and in most cases, representatives from the Department of Education and the Education Authority. The Board of Governors are the employing authority for voluntary schools. Most voluntary post-primary schools are grammar schools.
- *Maintained* schools are managed by a Board of Governors which consist of members nominated by trustees and representatives of parents, teachers and the Education Authority. Maintained schools are funded by the Education Authority for running costs and the Department of Education for capital building works. For *Catholic Maintained* schools, the Council for Catholic Maintained

² A briefing paper by Milliken (2020) also provides useful information on the governance of schools in Northern Ireland.

Schools is the employing authority of teaching staff and manage these schools through a Board of Governors consisting of trustees (most of whom are Catholic), parents, teachers and representatives from the Education Authority. The Education Authority is the employer of non-teaching staff in Catholic Maintained schools. Other maintained schools are not Catholic maintained and include *Irish Medium* schools (Irish-speaking schools) but not exclusively.

- *Controlled integrated* schools are either new schools set up as controlled integrated settings, or those schools that are established through the transformation of a controlled or maintained school that has acquired integrated status. The Education Authority is the employer and management authority of controlled integrated schools.
- *Grant maintained integrated* schools are established by parent groups or schools that go through the transformation process and choose to become grant maintained. These schools are funded by the Department of Education and managed by a Board of Governors that is the employer and employing authority.
- *Independent* schools set their own curriculum and admissions policies and are funded by fees paid by parents and income from investments.

The New Decade New Approach Deal (2020) outlined the support of the Northern Ireland Executive in educating children and young people of different backgrounds together to build a shared and integrated society. Most recently, the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) (2022) outlines that in the development of a new school³, one of an integrated status must be considered as a primary step in the school's development plan (Section 8). A consultation with relevant parties such as pupils, families, teachers, governors, sectoral and community bodies must therefore take place. A report must be collated of the process which provides an assessment of the extent to which integrated education was considered for the new school and levels of demand for integrated education.

Integrated schools have steadily increased in Northern Ireland over time. For example, in 1992/1993, there were 14 integrated primary schools (three controlled integrated and 11 grant maintained) and three integrated post-primary schools (all grant

³ This does not include new schools that arise from the amalgamation of existing schools.

maintained). In 2022/23, there were two controlled integrated nursery schools, 47 integrated primary schools (24 controlled integrated and 23 grant maintained) and 21 integrated post-primary schools (six controlled integrated and 15 grant maintained) (Department of Education, 2023).

Integrated schools have a lower proportion of pupil places that are unfilled compared to non-integrated schools. The Department of Education (2021) reported that in the academic year 2021/2022, 19.4% of places in non-integrated primary school were unfilled compared to 12.4% of places in integrated primary schools. This trend was also apparent in non-grammar post-primary schools (14.7% compared to 10.3% respectively). Despite this, only 9.0% of post-primary pupils in Northern Ireland are educated in an integrated setting and this decreases to 6.1% of primary pupils (Department of Education, 2021). The socio-economic profile of integrated and non-integrated schools is similar; 27.8% of pupils attending integrated primary schools were entitled to Free School Meals compared to 28.5% attending non-integrated primary schools. This trend was also evident among non-grammar post-primary schools (35.6% in integrated schools compared to 37.4% in non-integrated schools [Department of Education, 2021]). However, more recently, the Department of Education (2022) reported that overall, for the academic year 2021/2022, 32% of pupils attending integrated schools were entitled to Free School Meals, compared to 28% of pupils attending non-integrated schools.

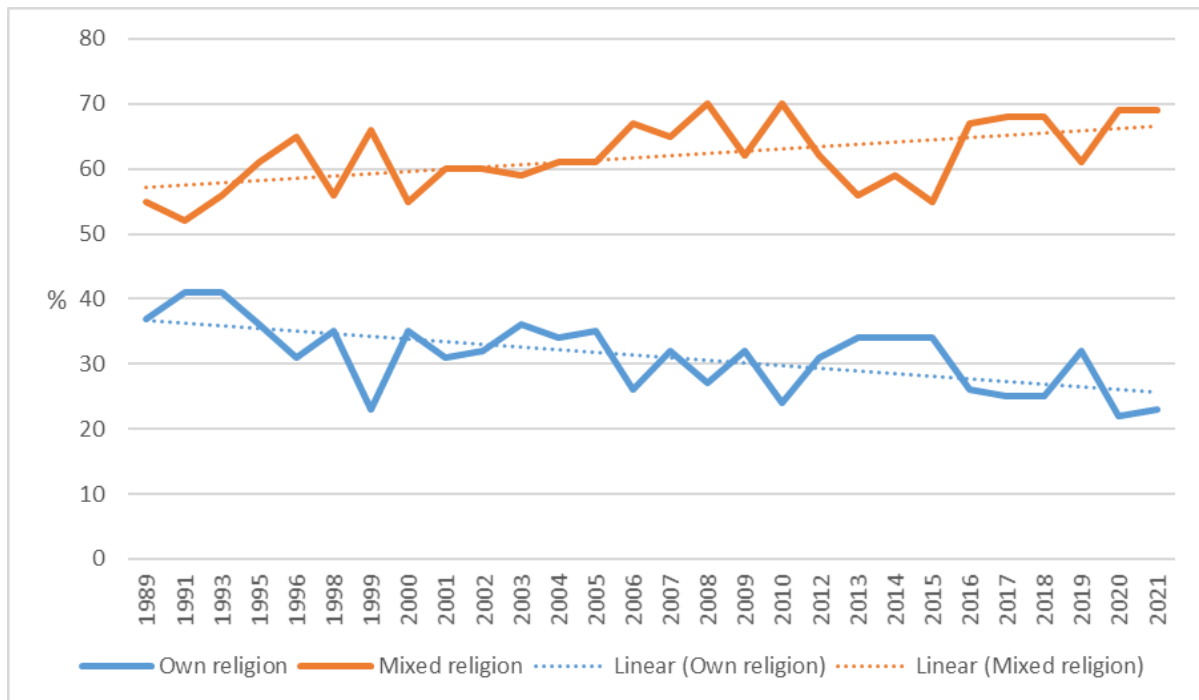
[Public Attitudes Towards Integrated Education in Northern Ireland](#)

Public attitudes on the mixing and integration of education have been considered by surveys and opinion polls. By mixing, we refer to schools that are now attended by pupils from different religious backgrounds, often due to unplanned processes (for example, demographic changes in an area). However, these schools do not have an explicit integrated status, management, or ethos.

In general, attitudinal surveys have suggested high levels of public support for integrated or mixed schools (Devlin, 2021). The main sources of such evidence include LucidTalk opinion polls funded by the Integrated Education Fund (IEF), and data from ARK's Life and Times series. For example, the Northern Ireland Life and

Times (NILT) Survey in 2001 reported that 73% of respondents believed the government should encourage more integration in schools according to religion (ARK, 2002). Figure 1 indicates that in 2021, 69% of NILT respondents reported that if they were sending a child to school, they would prefer a mixed-religion school (ARK, 2022) - compared to 55% of respondents in the 1989 Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey. The opinions of 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland reflected similar trends in the Young Life and Times (YLT) Survey, with 64% reporting there should be more integration in schools in 2014 (ARK, 2015a). The Kids' Life and Times (KLT) Survey highlighted that Primary 7 children were aware of divisions in the education system, with 36% believing schools were divided for children in Northern Ireland (ARK, 2015b).

Figure 1: Preferences for own religion or mixed religion schools in Northern Ireland 1989 - 2021



Sources: 1989-1996 Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey; 1998-2021 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey.

However, as noted by Hansson, O'Connor Bones and McCord (2013), it is important to note that many survey questions use the words “mixed”, “shared” or “integrated” interchangeably when referring to schools attended by large proportions of both Catholic and Protestant children. For example, shared education initiatives encourage the partnership of schools from different sectors to work together to provide

opportunities of collaborative and meaningful learning for pupils and staff (Education Authority, 2020). While different in terms of concept and policy from integrated education, public understanding may not be so nuanced. This conflation of terminology, as well as other methodological issues relating to the measurement of parental demand, are reviewed in Section 3.

International Context

Mixing of different social groups in education is practiced in other contexts that have experienced conflict and social group divisions such as Israel and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The aim of mixing in education in these contexts is to develop egalitarian opportunities, respect and co-operation by establishing multicultural education settings where pupils from different backgrounds learn together, whilst their separate identities are respected (Bekerman et al., 2009; Bekerman & Nir, 2006; Osler & Pandur, 2019). This aim resonates with the purpose of integrated education in Northern Ireland, which seeks to collectively educate pupils from different cultures, religious beliefs or none, and the definition of an integrated school as one which intentionally supports, protects and advances an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between pupils (Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022). However, these examples in the international context are all geographically, temporally and culturally specific. In particular, these initiatives do not necessarily share all three criteria of integrated schools in Northern Ireland, especially the education of pupils from different socio-economic backgrounds and different abilities, along with the education of pupils from different cultures and religious beliefs.

Bilingual/binational schools were established in Israel in 1983 to bring together the Jewish and Arabic communities to facilitate good relations and a peaceful society (Hughes & Donnelly, 2006). Similar to integrated schools in Northern Ireland, bilingual/binational schools in Israel are based on the principles of nurturing a pupil's identity through teachings of their culture and tradition, whilst also imparting knowledge and respect for the culture and tradition of others. In addition, integrated education in Northern Ireland and bilingual/binational schools in Israel aim to find common ground between different cultures to build a shared citizenship in a society (Hughes & Donnelly, 2006).

The education system in Bosnia-Herzegovina is segregated along ethnic lines. The Brčko district is the only area to implement mixing in schools in the country, where pupils from different ethnic backgrounds (such as Bosniak, Croat and Serb) are educated in their own languages and maintain their own ethnic identity (Hansson, O'Connor Bones & McCord, 2013).

In the Republic of Ireland, the *Educate Together* initiative comprises state-funded multi-denominational schools which aim to reflect the wider societal ethos of social, cultural and religious components that simultaneously exist in harmony (Hyland, 1996). *Educate Together* schools number 96 primary schools and 21 second-level schools which collectively educate over 37,000 pupils (Educate Together, n.d.). These schools are focused on the equality of treatment of different beliefs and cultures (Hansson, O'Connor Bones & McCord, 2013).

Similarly, joint church schools in England between Anglican (Church of England) and Catholic denominations have created a Christian ethos which respects differences between the Christian denominations, whilst acknowledging their similarities (O'Sullivan, O'Flynn & Russell, 2008).

Section 2 – Methodology

This project aimed to assess the way demand for integrated education is currently captured in Northern Ireland. Specifically, there were three aims:

1. To describe the current methods utilised by Northern Ireland stakeholders in determining the levels of demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland and outline the advantages and limitations of each.
2. To carry out a literature review to identify potential alternative or additional methods for assessing parental/community demand and preferences regarding education-related indicators used in other contexts and in other types of education systems that have the potential to be applied to ascertaining demand for integrated education in the Northern Ireland context.
3. To assess potential advantages and disadvantages of these methods for ascertaining demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland and to draw conclusions and make recommendations for potentially suitable methods of measuring demand moving forward.

In Section 3a, this report synthesises the current methods used by stakeholders to assess demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland. These measures were identified by accessing publicly available resources from key stakeholders in integrated education in Northern Ireland. This included the following organisations:

- Department of Education (DE).
- Education Authority (EA).
- Integrated Education Fund (IEF).
- The Council for Integrated Education (NICIE).

Meetings with DE, EA, and NICIE were held to gain greater in-depth information on the measures and processes used by each organisation/department to assess demand for integrated education.

Academic literature was utilised to identify factors that may be affecting the uptake of integrated education in Northern Ireland (e.g., geographical location of schools, local school provisions, parental convenience, pupil outcomes from schools – see Morgan et al., 1993). The academic literature informed the discussions on the strengths and

limitations of current approaches used to assess demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland. To identify relevant academic literature, a rapid literature search using key terms such as “integrated education”, “parents” and “Northern Ireland” was conducted on the academic databases ERIC (EBSCOhost) and Scopus.

In addition, as outlined in Section 3b, academic literature was searched to identify alternative measures used in other countries to assess parental demand for education provisions. Similarly, searches on the academic databases ERIC (EBSCOhost) and Scopus were implemented to identify literature in the international context that assessed demand for school provisions. These searches included key search terms such as “integrated education”, “parents”, “demand” and countries such as “Malaysia”, “Hong Kong”, “Australia”, “USA”, “Canada”, “Finland”, “United Kingdom”, “Israel”, “Cyprus” and “Germany”. To account for the variation in terminology used across geographical contexts, the terms “inclusive education”, “inclusive education demand in diverse communities” and “culturally responsive education provision” were also included in the searches, as informed by the results of earlier searches for international evidence. The academic literature also informed the discussions on the strengths and limitations of alternative measures used to assess demand for school provisions in the international context.

Section 4 presents the discussion, conclusions, and recommendations for potentially suitable methods of measuring demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland moving forward.

Section 3

Section 3a: Current Approaches to Assessing Demand for Integrated Education in Northern Ireland

Introduction

A range of approaches have been used by stakeholders to monitor demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland. These include:

- 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.integratemyschool.com.
- Attitude surveys (micro polls, opinion polls and surveys).
- Participatory research methods (deliberative polls and Community Conversations).

This section presents each of these methods respectively. A description of each method and their associated strengths and limitations in assessing demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland is outlined, to highlight areas requiring further consideration.

First preference applications of pupils to schools

Parents in Northern Ireland apply for a place for their pre-school or school-aged child at a pre-school/primary/post-primary school through the Education Authority's centralised admissions portal.

In pre-school settings, the Board of Governors of each school or the Management Committee of voluntary/private playgroups⁴ are responsible for the creation and implementation of the admissions criteria if the pre-school receives more applications than the number of available funded places (Education Authority, 2023a). However,

⁴ Which participate in the Pre-School Education Programme.

legislation requires pre-school providers to give admissions priority to children who are from socially disadvantaged backgrounds⁵.

When applying to primary and post-primary schools, parents are recommended to list more than one school. For example, for post-primary applications in the admissions portal, it is recommended that at least four schools are listed in order of preference. Importantly, admission to the first preference school is not guaranteed (Education Authority, 2023b). To this end, if schools receive more applications than they have places available, admissions criteria, determined by the Board of Governors, are applied to decide who receives a place (Education Authority, 2023b). As outlined by the Education Authority (2023b), if a child is not accepted by their first preference school, they are considered by the second preference school. This process continues until a child is allocated a place at a school, with such places allocated to those who best meet the admissions criteria.

The Executive Office (2023) reported that in 2020/21, 24% of first preference applications to post-primary integrated schools did not result in admission to that school, compared to 10% in 2013/2014. The report (*ibid*) noted that this trend reflects an increasing oversubscription to popular post-primary integrated schools, which may be interpreted as an increased demand for integrated education. The increase in demand resulted in the Department of Education granting additional temporary places to integrated post-primary schools for the September 2021 intake (NICIE, 2021). Despite this, it should be noted that the increase in first preference applications to post-primary integrated schools not resulting in admission may also be the result of an increase in the Year 7 cohort size in recent years (Education Authority, 2023c). This means there may be more pupils applying for a limited number of school places, rather than structural or policy factors driving this disparity. However, the size of the Year 7 cohort varies each academic year, meaning this argument requires analysis every year to determine its accuracy. This argument also applies to *oversubscription of integrated school places* as a measure of assessing demand, which is outlined below.

⁵ Socially disadvantaged background is defined as a child whose parent has an entitlement to income support; income-based jobseeker's allowance; income related employment and support allowance, or universal credit.

Although first preference of post-primary schools has been used to ascertain parental demand for integrated education, it can be questioned whether first preference is a robust and valid measure of demand. For example, parents may not list a school as first preference due to known oversubscription and subsequently a reduced chance of admission.

Strengths

- The Education Authority's centralised schools admissions portal is used by all parents with pre-school or school-aged children to apply for a pre-school, primary or post-primary school place.
- The centralised admissions portal captures the decisions and school preferences of all parents of children across the education system.
- An overview of which schools or school structures that are most commonly applied to as first preference can be derived from first preference data. This can also be considered according to locality to assist with area planning.

Limitations

- First preference data are cross-sectional and only provide insights into the preferences and decisions of parents with pre-school/school-aged children at one time point. Preferences across the education system cannot be tracked for specific cases.
- Information gleaned from the portal provides the number of pupils who are initially allocated a place at a specific school, but the final number can vary due to processes such as appeals.
- It is difficult to ascertain actual preference for a school from first preference data due to the admissions criteria developed by some schools which may skew the data.
- Some schools' admissions criteria stipulate that giving the school first preference is a prerequisite to be considered for a place. This may result in a higher number of first preferences for a specific school in the admissions applications, or it may deter some parents from stating first preference due to the high level of competition for allocated places.

- In addition, school admissions criteria may prioritise those whose elder siblings already attend that school. The choice to attend a post-primary school may therefore be determined by the later impact on younger siblings who may also wish to attend the school.
- The portal data does not necessarily reflect local demand for integrated schools due to the complexities of the admissions system.
- The breakdown of first preference applications to integrated pre-primary or primary schools and the number of first preference applications who received a place is not available at the time of writing.

Oversubscription or undersubscription of integrated school places

Oversubscription or undersubscription of integrated school places across the education system can be determined by the first preference data of applications of pupils to schools, collected by the Education Authority's centralised admissions portal. As outlined above, if schools receive more applications than they have places available, the use of admission criterion is implemented to decide who receives a place (Education Authority, 2023a, 2023b). Across pre-school, primary and post-primary settings, the Board of Governors determine the admissions criteria to be used to allocate school places (except in pre-school settings where legislation requires socially disadvantaged children to be prioritised). This data provides an insight into whether a school is oversubscribed or undersubscribed, according to whether it receives more/fewer applications than places it has available. As discussed above, The Executive Office (2023) reported an upward trend in first preference applications to integrated post-primary schools that did not result in admission to the school. The report suggested that this reflects an increasing oversubscription to popular post-primary integrated schools. However, demand for integrated education is not accurately reflected in the data from the admissions portal for instances where there is no local integrated education provision in an area.

In addition, data from the Northern Ireland School Census, published by the Department of Education, outlines the number of approved enrolments⁶, actual

⁶ Set annually by the Department of Education. Supernumerary admissions lie outside the admissions process and are not subject to approved enrolment limits.

enrolments (all pupils enrolled in the school on the day the School Census is completed), supernumerary pupils⁷ and available places for each post-primary school in Northern Ireland. However, it is noted that data on available places cannot be used to equate to the number of 'empty desks' or 'spare capacity' in the school⁸.

Strengths

- Different data sources are available to provide insight into the oversubscription or undersubscription of schools in Northern Ireland. For example, data from the Education Authority's centralised admissions portal and the Northern Ireland School Census.
- Data are based on parental preferences and choices (centralised admissions portal) and pupil numbers admitted to a school (Northern Ireland School Census).
- The centralised admissions portal is completed by all parents with a pre-school or school-aged child. The Northern Ireland School Census is annually completed by all schools in Northern Ireland. Data are therefore representative of schools and pupils in Northern Ireland.

Limitations

- Data from both sources are cross-sectional, providing insight into admission trends for different schools and school structures at one time point only.
- Available places data published by the Department of Education (based on the Northern Ireland School Census) cannot be used to equate to the number of 'empty desks' or 'spare capacity' in the school as it may or may not accurately reflect the physical capacity of a school. This source is therefore limited in its use for determining the oversubscription or undersubscription of schools.

⁷ Those pupils admitted to the school based on the content of a Statement of Special Educational Needs which names a particular school that must admit the child, a successful appeal to an Independent Exceptional Circumstances Body or a successful appeal to an Independent Admissions Appeal Tribunal.

⁸ This information is taken from a spreadsheet 'Available places – post-primary schools, 2022/23, published by the Department of Education, available here - <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Available%20places%20-%20Post-primary%20202223.XLSX>.

- Grammar schools are consistently oversubscribed (Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, 2001), which may have a consequential impact on the admissions of non-selective schools.
- Oversubscription data does not necessarily ascertain local demand for integrated schools as oversubscription could be affected by factors such as proximity and convenience, educational outcomes of a school and how admissions criteria may affect younger siblings. These are discussed in more detail below.
- The data may not be an accurate reflection of demand as parents may be less likely to apply to a known oversubscribed school due to a low chance of admission.

Parental ballots

Existing schools can transform to integrated status and are supported through this process by the operational guidance provided by the Department of Education (2017), *Integration Works: Transforming Your School*. This guidance outlines what integrated education and the transformation process are; key issues that may arise and potential solutions; legal and administrative requirements; and support available during the transformation process.

As outlined in The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989:

“... in the case of any controlled or voluntary school which is eligible for grant-maintained integrated status, a ballot of parents on the question of whether grant-maintained integrated status should be sought for the school shall be held in accordance with Article 70 if either – (a) the Board of Governors decides by a resolution passed at a meeting of that Board to hold such a ballot; or (b) the Board of Governors receives a written request to hold such a ballot which meets the requirements of paragraph (2).”

Transformation to integrated status can be initiated by either the Board of Governors of a school, or a written request from parents of at least 20% of children registered at the school on the date the request is received by the Board of Governors (NICIE, 2023b; Smith, 2001; The Education Reform (Northern Ireland), 1989). Regardless of

the approach taken to initiate the transformation process, a parental vote, operated through a secret ballot and postal vote, is required by law. The wording of the parental ballot must state the new school status (for example, controlled integrated) and date the status change would take effect.

As stated in The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, the Board of Governors are responsible for securing all necessary arrangements for the parental ballot to be conducted no earlier than 28 days and no later than three months after the date the resolution was passed, or the request was received. The Board of Governors must also give written notice that a ballot is to be held to the Education Authority (if a controlled school), school trustees (if a voluntary school) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (if a Catholic maintained school). The Board of Governors' responsibilities also include providing information about the procedure for, and consequences of, acquisition of grant-maintained or controlled integrated status for the school to parents eligible to vote in the ballot. This information includes informing parents about the constitution and powers of the Board of Governors if the school was transformed and how the school would be funded. The Board of Governors is also responsible for informing parents of their entitlement to vote in the ballot and providing all eligible parents with the opportunity to vote.

If an adequate proportion of parents vote in the ballot (at least 50%) and the majority of parents vote 'Yes' (over 50% of those who voted), the school can begin the transformation process to integrated status (outlined below). In contrast, if there is a turnout of at least 50% of parents in the ballot and the majority of these parents vote 'No', the school retains its original management structure and status. However, if the overall turnout of parents is less than 50% of those parents who are eligible to vote, the Board of Governors is responsible for ensuring that another ballot is held within 14 days beginning with the day on which the total number of votes cast in the first ballot is determined, in accordance with The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989.

If the parental ballot is successful, it is the responsibility of the Board of Governors to submit a Development Proposal for Transformation for consideration to the Education Authority and Department of Education, with the final decision being made by the

Minister of Education. The Department of Education considers the evidence of unmet parental demand for integrated education in the area provided in the Development Proposal for Transformation. This can be evidenced through the results of the parental ballot, the availability of integrated schools in the local area (including oversubscription at local integrated schools) and other expressions of interest or support (Department of Education, 2017).

In addition to meeting sustainability and area planning requirements for the school transformation (discussed further in Section 4), in line with the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, the Department of Education will not approve a proposal unless a reasonable number of Catholic and Protestant pupils are likely to attend the school. The reasonable religious balance for the locality is considered according to evidence such as the historic and current nature of enrolments at the school, expressions of interest from members of the minority community, and the demographics of the local area (Department of Education, 2017). This aligns with the focus of area planning on establishing a network of sustainable schools which are of the correct size and type within a locality by assessing the current and projected demand in an area (Department of Education, 2017).

Strengths

- Parental choice is central to the ballot outcome.
- Parents are provided with all necessary information about what a transformation to an integrated school would mean before voting (as required by The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989). For example, the procedure for, and consequences of, acquisition of an integrated status, and the constitution and powers of the Board of Governors are outlined to parents.
- At least 50% of parents must vote in the ballot for the result to be valid.
- Voting is anonymous, which reduces the likelihood of social desirability.
- If the ballot is successful, demand for integrated education in the local area is considered through the evidence submitted as part of the Development Proposal for Transformation.

- If the ballot is successful, the transformation to integrated status is considered on a case-to-case basis, accounting for the variation between localities such as demographics.

Limitations

- Parental ballots are required by law (The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989) to be conducted via postal vote. This may be a barrier for parents who are unfamiliar with postal surveys. It could also be a barrier for large schools, due to parent apathy to a postal vote.
- Demand from parents in the locality with children not yet in the education system or those who are not parents are not considered.

Expressions of interest forms

Expression of interest forms have been used as one of the main methods to assess demand in development proposals and cases for change for schools in Northern Ireland. Expression of interest forms are endorsed by NICIE and are not generated by the Department of Education or Education Authority. The forms can be collected by bodies such as parent groups and transforming schools to gather information about the level of parental demand for integrated education provision in a geographical area (see NICIE website for an example). For instance, if a new school is proposed for an area with no current access to integrated provision, the demand for integrated education is measured through the over-subscription rates in nearby schools and the completion of expression of interest forms (NICIE, 2023c). These forms gather information such as the names of a pupil and parent, address and contact details, and can also include questions on a pupil's date of birth, sex, and community background.

Strengths

- This method can take into account some geographical or spatial factors in the demand for integrated education which are not captured everywhere. For example, unfilled demand for integrated provision may be high (or low) in a specific locality, depending on the current range of education provision in the area.

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- Dependent upon how often expression of interest forms are collected, this method could show how demand levels remain consistent or change over time in the wider community to provide evidence of demand for the proposed school/transformation.
- Collection of this data allows for the participation of the wider community, including parents, grandparents and those who are not parents but reside in the locality.

Limitations

- There may be a disparity between expressing support for integrated education and submitting applications to attend such a school. Thus, local support for integrated education provision does not necessarily result in parental demand for school places; there can be a disparity between attitudes and behaviours.
- The methods used to distribute expressions of interest forms and collect responses are not systematic in their approach. With regards to data collection, it is not clear who may receive an expression of interest form. This is an important aspect to consider as the demographic profile of respondents may impact the reported outcomes of expressed support and interest in integrated education provisions in an area.

Registrations on www.integratemyschool.com

The website www.integratemyschool.com is part of the Integrated Education Fund resources and provides parents with the opportunity to register their support for their child's school to become integrated.

Strengths

- This data demonstrates preliminary support for integrated education provision by transforming existing schools.
- Parental choice is central to the method. The website is an anonymous method for parents to express support for their child's school to transform to integrated status. This may help inform a school's decision to explore transformation.

- It is possible to acknowledge geographical influences on demand. Demand for integrated provision may exceed (or not exceed) in different areas due to the available education provisions.

Limitations

- There is limited potential to influence a school's status. Registering support on www.integratemyschool.com does not result in a school's change of status to integrated. According to The Education Reform Order (Northern Ireland) 1989, a parental ballot must be conducted.
- Demand from parents in the locality with children not yet in the education system or those who are not parents are not considered.

Attitude Surveys

Attitude surveys provide a useful vehicle to record public opinion on a range of key social policy issues, such as opinion on, and level of support for integrated education. This can be seen as an indicator of demand. However, there can be a disjuncture between attitudes and behaviour. In other words, demand for integrated schools may not reflect survey data showing high support for integrated education, as parental choice can involve more pragmatic and structural factors.

This section outlines three main types of attitudes surveys which relate explicitly to demand for integrated education, either by parents or by the general public: cross-sectional surveys, opinion polls, and micro polls. The surveys described within this section are exemplars of the specific method, and we acknowledge that many more surveys have been undertaken. For a discussion of the difference between cross-sectional surveys and opinion polls, see Robinson (2018).

When reviewing data from any type of survey, it is important to understand its methodology and other technical details. For example, how many people completed it, how participants were chosen (the sampling method), how the poll was undertaken (online, phone, face to face, etc.), who paid for the poll, and why it was carried out (Kellner, 2018). An examination of these issues will help identify any possible biases in the research. For example, if the use of a particular sampling method means that certain groups are under-represented (sampling bias), then the findings are not

generalisable to the total population. Weighting procedures can be used to address some sampling bias.

As well as the technical and methodological issues, the wording of questions in a survey or poll is key to obtaining the most useful data. For example, are the questions leading the respondent to respond in a particular way? Does the respondent understand the question? For example, and of specific relevance to this report, does the respondent understand the difference between shared education, integrated education and a religiously mixed school? The number of questions is also important. Too few questions may not tap into all the nuances of a specific topic; in contrast, too many questions on a topic may cause respondents to disengage with the survey or poll.

Strengths

- A large number of people are asked the same questions in the same way. This provides a record of public opinion on a range of specific issues.
- Surveys and polls can be carried out quickly, especially if using online or postal methods.
- All of the surveys discussed in this section are cross-sectional, which means that the responses of each participant were recorded at only one point in time. Therefore, a different sample of participants is used each time the poll or survey is carried out. If the survey or poll is repeated and the sampling and other aspects of the survey or poll remain the same, it can be possible to explore if/how attitudes have changed across all the participants as a group.
- If the number of participants is large enough, analysis of specific groups (for example, parents, people across different socio-economic groups, participants living in rural areas) can be undertaken.

Limitations

- It is not possible to explore if/how the attitudes of individual respondents have changed over time, given that a different sample of respondents takes part in each wave of the survey or poll.

- Surveys and polls record *what* people think about an issue. However, qualitative research methods are more appropriate ways to fully explore *why* people hold specific attitudes.
- The number of questions can be restricted by the cost or available space on the survey. If the number of questions is small, the survey may not cover all the important issues or nuances of the topic, thus reducing the usefulness of the data.

1 Cross-sectional surveys

The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey is a cross-sectional survey carried out by ARK (based in Queen’s University and Ulster University). This annual survey records the views of a random sample of adults aged 18 years or over residing in Northern Ireland to key social policy issues. It is used extensively by academics, NGOs and policy makers. For example, NILT data are used as statistical indicators to monitor progress of the *Together: Building a United Community* good relations strategy (OFMDFM, 2013). Further details are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey

Funder	Various – relevant questions mostly funded by OFMDFM and The Executive Office
Date	Annual since 1998
Aim	NILT records the views of a random sample of adults aged 18 years or over to key social policy issues. The range of questions and topics varies each year, although some questions are repeated regularly, to provide a time series. For more information on NILT, see www.ark.ac.uk/nilt
Sample	A random and representative sample is selected based on the Postal Address File. The standard target number of respondents is currently 1,200. The data are weighted to reflect sampling methodology (1989-2019); age/gender/district council (2020-2021).

	Between 1998 and 2019, NILT was run as a face-to-face survey. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions, it switched to an online survey in 2020 to 2022.
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Strengths

- The survey involves a random sample of adults aged 18 or over across Northern Ireland.
- The large number of respondents means that the results can be analysed by demographic and socio-economic factors, for example, parental status, age of children and occupational status.
- Questions on support for schools of mixed religion are asked of all respondents, thus providing an indicator of community-wide support.
- Although the survey is cross-sectional, many questions have been asked every year. NILT is based on the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes (NISA) Survey which ran from 1989 to 1996, and some questions are included in both NILT and NISA, providing data for over 30 years. This time series allows an exploration of trends over time.
- NILT includes a large number of questions on other relevant issues, such as good relations, political and social attitudes, which can be cross-analysed.
- Although integrated education *per se* has not been a major focus of the survey (except in 1999), the length of the survey would allow, should funding be available, for a suite of questions on integrated education, thus exploring the topic more deeply.

Limitations

- The most relevant question is ‘And if you were deciding where to send your children to school, would you prefer a school with children of only your own religion, or a mixed-religion school?’. Whilst this is often cited as providing evidence for integrated education, it does not explicitly refer to it. Nor does the question refer to primary or post-primary schools.
- The number and content of questions varies each year due to the range of funders, and so relevant questions are not necessarily repeated year on year.

- If the number of relevant questions is small, the topic cannot be explored in depth.
- NILT is designed to be analysed at Northern Ireland level only, and so does not allow for analysis of opinion for smaller geographic areas.

2 Opinion polls, Northern Ireland level

Compared to surveys such as NILT, opinion polls are usually quite short. This means that they are quicker for respondents to complete, thus reducing participant burden. Opinion polls can focus on one topic, or else involve a small number of questions on each of a range of topics. Some polling companies, such as YouGov, operate an online panel to which members of the public can join by registering their interest. The polling company will then draw a sample of people from the panel – often based on specific socio-economic or demographic criteria – to participate in an individual survey. In order to ensure that generalisations can be made, it is important that the sample is representative of the population. Therefore, weighting procedures are often carried out.

For example, the IEF commissioned LucidTalk to undertake Attitudinal Polls on education provision in Northern Ireland in 2018, 2019 and 2021 – see Table 2. These surveys provide information on general support for integrated education across a wide geographic area.

Table 2: IEF LucidTalk Attitudinal Poll 2018, 2019 and 2021

Funder	Integrated Education Fund
Date	2018 (1,520 respondents), 2019 (1,424 respondents), 2021 (2,001 respondents)
Aim	To seek the public's views on the education offered to young people and on the opportunities for reform of the system.
Sample	Northern Ireland (NI) LucidTalk online Opinion Panel (10,000-13,000 members) which is balanced by gender, age-group, area of residence, and community background, in order to be demographically representative of Northern Ireland.

	<p>Data auditing process is carried out to ensure all completed poll-surveys were genuine 'one-person, one-vote' responses, and to collate a robust and accurate balanced NI representative sample.</p> <p>For more information on the 2021 Poll, see https://view.publitas.com/integrated-education-fund/northern-ireland-attitudinal-poll/page/1</p>
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Strengths

- Opinion polls are short and so reduce burden on the respondent.
- The administration of the poll is quick to carry out, as it uses an existing Opinion Panel.

Limitations

- The number and content of questions can vary each year due to the range of funders, and so relevant questions are not necessarily repeated year on year.
- Only a small number of questions on a topic are asked, and so the topics cannot be explored in depth.
- Online Panels can be biased, as members register to join (instead of being randomly selected), and a reliance on online registration may disadvantage some groups.
- The poll may be designed to be analysed at Northern Ireland level only, and so does not allow for analysis of opinion for smaller geographic areas.

3 Micro-polls

Micro-polls are short opinion polls carried out in a local area, with a relatively small number of respondents. They provide a mechanism to record attitudes within a small area.

For example, the IEF commissioned LucidTalk to undertake Attitudinal Micro Polls on education provision in Northern Ireland in 2018, 2019 and 2021. These micro-polls are targeted in local areas to measure local attitudes towards integrated education provision – see Table 3. The micro-polls ask respondents if they are parents, and if

so, they are asked a series of questions. However, all respondents, whether they are parents or not, are invited to leave comments on the topic.

Table 3: IEF Micro Polls

Funder	Integrated Education Fund
Date	16-19 March 2018
Aim	To obtain a representative view of opinion in the area regarding specific issues, with a focus on the views of parents. The standard target response number is 120 – 250, dependent on the population size.
Sample	LucidTalk NI Opinion Panel. In addition, IEF circulated a link to the poll to local community groups. For more information, see https://www.ief.org.uk/our-work/research/micro-polls/

Strengths

- Micro polls can record opinion in local areas about a key issue affecting that locality.
- Micro polls are short and so reduce the burden on respondents.

Limitations

- Only a small number of questions on a topic are asked, and so the topics cannot be explored in depth.
- The sampling method may introduce bias, as it involves an online panel, as well as the circulation of the link within the community. Thus, it is likely that only those respondents who are very interested in the topic will respond.

Participatory research methods

This section focuses on two participatory research methods: deliberative polls and Community Conversations. These methods are most beneficial when focusing on a very tightly defined topic or question.

Deliberative Poll

Opinion polls can gauge the mood of the general population but may often provide little more than sound bites (Fishkin et al., 2007). A deliberative poll explores what the public would think if they had been given the opportunity to learn about a specific policy issue, and to present their conclusions to decision makers. Overall, a deliberative poll consists of three stages:

- A random selection of people is asked to complete a questionnaire, either through face-to-face interviews or by telephone.
- The participants are then brought together for a set of deliberations and discussions on a set of topics. Briefing materials may be sent out in advance.
- At the end of the session, participants are polled again, using the same questionnaire as previously.

This allows for an exploration of respondents' views before and after the deliberations to gauge if the deliberation process has had an effect on individual attitudes. Fishkin et al. (2007) argues that any changes in opinion represent the conclusions that members of the public would reach if they had the opportunity to become more informed and engaged by the issues.

For example, Fishkin et al. (2007) undertook a deliberative poll in Omagh, in order to gauge the opinion of parents of school-aged children about education provision. Consensus was agreed on some of the topics under discussion. However, there were some topics where there was no agreed conclusion or solution, thus necessitating further negotiations with policy makers and other stakeholder organisations. Fishkin and colleagues argue that the deliberative poll process allowed these negotiations to take place in the knowledge that any policy decisions could be informed by the discussions and poll results, thus reflecting parental choice.

Strengths

- A deliberative poll is a participatory process, involving a range of parents and other stakeholders.

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- Participants are provided with relevant and unbiased information, so that they can make an informed decision during the deliberations.
- The process works best with focusing on a tightly-defined topic or policy issue.
- The process gives the participants time to fully reflect on the topics.

Limitations

- Consensus may not necessarily be reached on all topics.
- The process takes time, which may necessarily exclude some participants (such as parents, or those with other caring responsibilities).
- Given the small number of people involved in the process, it excludes many people who may be directly involved or affected by the issue. In addition, the selection of participants is important, in order to ensure that specific groups are not over- or under-represented.
- It has been argued that deliberative democracy outcomes on a specific topic are often interwoven with wider debates (such as constitutional preferences), and so the deliberative process may reflect or encourage such divisions (Luskin et al., 2012).

Community Conversations

A Community Conversation is another participatory approach to civic engagement, and as its name suggests, takes the form of an engaged group conversation or discussion around a topic of importance to a local community. Community Conversations fit within the framework of deliberative democracy, within which working towards consensus through information, dialogue and debate can inform and precede formal consultation and decision making (Bates & O'Connor Bones, 2021). It also fits with the need for greater citizen participation in decision-making and policy implementation recognised in the New Decade, New Approach Deal (2020).

While this approach can be employed over a range of social issues (such as health), it has been used in the context of identifying needs and preferences for future school provision in a local area (Bates & O'Connor Bones, 2018). As Community Conversations are used in different contexts, there are often differing interpretations

about what is meant by the term (Bates & O'Connor Bones, 2021). The four stages are:

- Preparing the ground and developing trust (e.g., defining the issue, research scoping, relationship building, designing the conversation process).
- Logistics (e.g., neutral venue, preparing documents).
- The Conversation (getting started, ethical considerations, note-taking, summary evaluation).
- Follow-up (data collation and analysis, writing up, presenting and dissemination, reflection, stakeholder engagement and impact).

Full details of the methodology are set out in the *Community Conversations Toolkit* (Bates & O'Connor Bones, 2018).

For example, Community Conversations were used in two rural areas (Augher, Clogher and Fivemiletown; Carnlough and Glenarm) in 2017 where there was an over-supply of school places. In both cases, the Conversation centred around identifying the best way forward for sustainable primary school provision in the area. It enabled parent and community voices to be heard on the best way forward for sustainable primary school provision, prior to any consultation process by area planning teams in the Education Authority and Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (Devlin, 2021).

Strengths

- Community Conversations provide an opportunity for a diverse range of community members and stakeholders to come together to identify, discuss and generate potential solutions to a pressing issue facing the community. They can help participants find common ground leading to insights that generate options to move forward.
- This approach offers a community-focused and evidence-based method which can lead to meaningful, effective policy implementation and potential social change.
- Community Conversations provide a bridge between individuals and communities on the one hand, and policy makers and statutory stakeholders

on the other. This approach provides policy makers with a deeper understanding of the community's view.

Limitations

- In order to be effective, Community Conversations must involve representation and participation from the full set of stakeholders throughout the process (for example, schools, parents, wider community, and policy makers).
- Given the small number of people involved in the process, it excludes many people who may be directly involved or affected by the issue. In addition, the selection of participants is important, in order to ensure that specific groups are not over- or under-represented.
- The framing of the Conversation should align to the needs of the statutory bodies that have a relevant responsibility for the topic (such as school provision) or there will be no effective policy implications.
- Organisers must recognise that individual perspectives can be shaped and influenced by personal networks and experiences, rather than what would work best for the community.
- Community Conversations are not a panacea, or appropriate for all topics. It is important that unrealistic expectations are not raised among the stakeholders, especially as it can be a challenge to see outcomes of a Community Conversation process implemented at a policy level (Bates & O'Connor, 2021).

General limitations to existing measures

Although this section (3a) has outlined that each method has its own strengths and limitations, there are also generic limitations that apply to the existing measures used to assess demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland. These limitations are centred around the failure to capture many of the reasons for parents selecting integrated schools for their child's education. For example, research by Morgan et al. (1993) highlighted the following factors:

- *Ideological preference*
Parents indicated that they wanted their children to attend a school where they would meet members of other communities to develop better relationships across the whole community. Improvement of community relations was central

to this theme and was grounded in political, religious or social beliefs. Contrastingly, ideological preferences can also be used as explanations as to why parents do not choose integrated education for their child.

- *Educational factors*

Quality of education provided, and the educational progress of children was central to parental decisions. This means that some parents will choose an integrated school based on the outcomes of pupils, rather than a commitment to integrated provision. Gallagher and Smith (2002), using data from the 1999 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, reported that parents had not sent their child to an integrated school because the facilities at other schools were better.

- *Proximity and convenience*

Parents will often choose the school closest to their home, or on their route to work. Other factors such as whether there is after-school care or transport home available may also impact parental choice. Roulston and Cook (2021) reported that integrated schools are not convenient for many households in Northern Ireland, with less than 11% living within one mile of an integrated primary school, while 22% of households are more than six miles by road from the nearest integrated primary school. A similar trend is apparent at post-primary level (Roulston & Cook, 2021). This means if there are no integrated schools in a locality, then there is no choice for integrated education for parents or pupils.

In addition, factors such as school reputation, school leadership, pastoral care quality and admissions criteria (such as feeder primary schools to post-primary schools and admissions of younger siblings), and how this impacts parental choices and subsequent levels of demand is not captured in existing measures.

Section 3b: Methods Used to Assess Demand for Education Provisions in the International Context.

This section presents the methods used to assess parental demand for education provisions in the international context. It is important to note that education provision in this section is not restricted to integrated education, as the focus is on the methods used to determine parental demand. In the international context, research predominantly focuses on parental decisions and reasoning for selecting specific school provisions, rather than the methods used to ascertain demand for education provisions. This indicates a research gap in the wider academic literature.

The findings from relevant studies conducted in the Republic of Ireland, Israel, Australia and the USA (outlined below) highlight that assessing parental demand for education provisions is a complex and multifaceted process. While many studies acknowledge the importance of parental choice in education and highlight the factors that influence their decisions, there is often a lack of clear measures for assessing demand. Despite this, some studies yield valuable insights into the factors that shape parental decision-making. For example, Yahya et al. (2012) found that parents in Israel opted to send their child to a bilingual school, not because of its peace-promoting, ideological framework, but rather to provide their children with a higher quality education than what was available in their local area. In addition, McCarthy (2016) reported that geography, school culture, and race intersect to influence the decision-making process of parents when choosing a school for their children in Australia.

Republic of Ireland: Parental Preferences on Primary School Patronage

The Department for Education and Skills (2013) conducted surveys in 38 areas in the Republic of Ireland to explore parental demand for a wider choice in the patronage of primary schools in their local area. Areas were selected if the population was between 5,000 and 20,000 inhabitants in the 2011 Census and the population increased by less than 20% between 2006 and 2011. Due to the population stability in these areas, there was little prospect that new schools would be established. As a result, alternative patrons could only become involved in school provision in these areas through possible divestment of existing school provision, provided there was sufficient parental demand for a wider choice of patronage. The parental survey was primarily conducted

online; however, paper surveys were also available. There was a total of 12,813 responses to the survey. Table 4 presents the questions of the survey that are relevant to measuring parental demand for a wider choice of school patronage.

Table 4: Survey Questions to Assess Parental Demand for a Wider Choice of School Patronage

<p>Q9 What Primary school(s) is/are your child(ren) attending?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools Within the Town Boundary • Schools Within 2km of the Town Boundary • Schools Within 5km of the Town Boundary • Other
<p>Q11 Please state the preferred language of instruction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you have Children not yet in school: English, Irish • If you have Primary School Children: English, Irish 	
<p>Q12 Would you prefer to have a wider choice of patronage provision/school type in [area name]?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you have Children not yet in school: Yes, No, No Preference • If you have Primary School Children: Yes, No, No Preference 	
<p>Q13 If there was a wider range of school types in [area name] would you avail of one of the new school types for your child(ren)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you have Children not yet in school: Yes, No, No Preference • If you have Primary School Children: Yes, No, No Preference 	
<p>Q14 only applies if you answered Yes to Q13.</p> <p>Q14 Prospective Patrons have expressed an interest in providing alternative provision in the [area name]⁹. Please select below in order of preference the patron body of your choice: (e.g. 1, 2, 3 etc)</p> <p>If you have Children not yet in school / if you have primary school children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An Foras Pátrúnachta (Multidenominational) • Educate Together • Mayo VEC • Other: please specify below 	

⁹ This table provides an example of the survey from the Ballina area. The answer categories for Q14 and Q15 may therefore be specific to this area.

Q15 only applies if you answered No to Q13.

Q15 If you do not want additional patrons, of the current Patrons please select your preferred patron by order of preference: (e.g. 1, 2, 3 etc)

If you have Children not yet in school / if you have primary school children:

- The Catholic Bishop of Killala
- The Catholic Bishop of Achonry
- The Church of Ireland Bishop of Tuam, Killala & Achonry
- An Foras Pátrúnachta - Catholic

Only applies if you answered No to Q13.

Q16 If the current schools were reorganised, would you send your child to a coeducational (mixed) school, in preference to a single sex school?

- If you have Children not yet in school: Yes, No
- If you have Primary School Children: Yes, No

Travel Distance:

Q17 How far does your child(ren) currently travel to school? (approx. km)

Q18 What is the greatest distance you are willing to allow your child(ren) to travel to school? (approx. km)

Strengths

- The data provide the ability to explore parental preferences based on different criteria such as residential area, type of school a child attends (based on school name and location) and the age of children (pre-primary or primary school age).
- The survey acknowledges that distance may be a factor in parental preferences due to the practical constraints that parents may face when selecting schools.

Limitations

- The survey does not capture all factors that influence parental preferences, such as school reputation, teaching quality or extracurricular activities.
- Some parents may not be able to express their preferences due to socio-economic or cultural factors.

Republic of Ireland: Attitudes towards the structure of the education system

Healy (2011) also considered the structure of schooling in the Republic of Ireland. His qualitative research focused on professionals who had first-hand experience of societal change (especially secularisation), such as politicians, religious leaders and educational media correspondents. These interviews included the question:

“According to the Census the second largest grouping, after Roman Catholic, is that of those stating ‘no religion’. Will a more pluralist system also offer real choice for parents who do not wish religious instruction to form any part of their children’s education?”

Limitations

- The focus of the question is perceptions rather than measuring actual parental attitudes or preferences.
- The study does not include interviews with parents, limiting the ability to accurately assess parental demand for different school provisions.

Bilingual/Bi-national Schools in Israel

Hughes and Donnelly (2006) examined the promotion of better relations in bilingual, bi-national schools in Israel and integrated schools in Northern Ireland. The four schools selected for this study were primary schools with a pupil age range of 4–11 years. Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with primary school principals, teachers and parents in Israel and Northern Ireland. The interviews covered five key areas:

- 1) Understanding of, and value attached to, the integrated/bilingual/bi-national approach to education in a divided society.
- 2) Understanding of, and commitment to, the delivery of the school’s core values (tolerance and respect).
- 3) Perception of facilitating or inhibiting factors in relation to the delivery of those values.
- 4) The practices adopted, challenges faced, and mechanisms developed to overcome perceived difficulties in achieving them.
- 5) Perceived effectiveness of schools in terms of meeting stated objectives and having an impact on negative social attitudes.

Yahya et al. (2012) also examined parental perceptions and attitudes towards bilingual schools in Israel. Interviews with 21 parents of children who attended a bilingual school in Israel were conducted. One question from the interviews was relevant to ascertaining parental preference of education provisions. This question asked participants “*Could you tell me about how you reached the decision to send your child/children to the school?*”

Strengths

- Both countries (Israel and Northern Ireland) experienced conflict and their education systems reflect social divisions in the respective societies.
- Parents are included in the sample of both studies (Hughes & Donnelly, 2006; Yahya et al., 2012), providing insight into parental attitudes and perspectives.
- The study conducted by Yahya et al. (2012) considers how parents decided to send their child to a bilingual school. This provides an understanding of influential factors that may determine parental choice.

Limitations

- There is no clear focus on, or measure of, assessing parental demand in either study (Hughes & Donnelly, 2006; Yahya et al., 2012).
- These studies do not consider potential confounding variables that may affect perceptions or attitudes, such as socio-economic status or cultural background.

Rural and Remote Schools in Australia

McCarthy (2016) examined parental choice of boarding schools for their child(ren) who resided in rural and remote areas of Australia. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with 36 participants which included non-Indigenous parents, school principals and education system-level representatives. The study examined how rurality/remoteness influenced parental choice of boarding school; how parents living in rural and remote areas informed their choice of boarding school for their child; and how school culture and race influenced boarding school choice.

Strengths

- There was a diverse sample, including non-Indigenous parents, school principals, and education system-level representatives, which provides a comprehensive overview of factors that influence parents' choice of schools.
- The study acknowledges the influence of rurality and remoteness, school culture and children's safety on parental choice.

Limitations

- All factors that influence parental choice may not be captured, such as academic performance or extracurricular activities.
- No clear method for assessing parental demand for boarding schools.
- The study did not involve Indigenous parents.

Charter Schools in the USA

Frankenburg and Lee (2003) compared charter schools in the USA with non-charter public schools according to their racial and ethnic composition¹⁰. This study provided a clear definition of the education provision of a charter school and highlighted that there was a strong demand for the schools by minority parents as they sought alternative education provisions to segregated, concentrated poverty and low-achieving public schools. This conclusion was based on a poll, but no further information is available on this method. As a result, a limitation of this study is the lack of detail about the measure used to assess parental demand for charter schools. Similar to the Northern Ireland context, Frankenburg and Lee (2003) highlighted that parental choice in their child's education was a central component in the USA.

Strengths

- The comparison of charter schools and non-charter schools indicates demand for alternative education provisions by minority parents.
- The study acknowledges the centrality of parental choice in their child's education.

¹⁰ Charter schools are publicly funded, but are typically governed by a group or organisation under a legislative contract (or charter) with the state or jurisdiction (Convertino, 2017).

Limitations

- There is a lack of information about the measure used to assess parental demand for charter schools.
- The study focuses on the state level, limiting the generalisability of the findings to other regions or countries.
- The study does not explore the reasons why minority parents prefer charter schools over traditional public schools. Racial and ethnic characteristics are not fully examined in how they impact school choices.

Section 4 – Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this project was to assess the way demand for integrated education is currently captured in Northern Ireland. Specifically, there were three substantive objectives:

1. To describe the current methods utilised by Northern Ireland stakeholders in determining the levels of demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland and outline the advantages and limitations of each.
2. To carry out a literature review to identify potential alternative or additional methods for assessing parental/community demand and preferences regarding education-related indicators used in other contexts and in other types of education systems that have the potential to be applied to ascertaining demand for integrated education in the Northern Ireland context.
3. To assess potential advantages and disadvantages of these methods for ascertaining demand for integrated education in NI and to draw conclusions and make recommendations for potentially suitable methods of measuring demand moving forward.

In this section of the report, we present our conclusions and provide some recommendations.

‘Demand’ and ‘choice’ for integrated education

As we have reported, currently there is a strong mismatch between articulated preferences for integrated education (for example, as evident from in commissioned LucidTalk polls or the annual Life and Times surveys), the availability of places in integrated schools, and the uptake of these places. There are area-specific and school-specific differences, whereby in some areas and schools the actual demand for integrated education cannot be met and schools are heavily over-subscribed, whereas in other areas places in individual schools remain unfilled and there appears to be no sustainable demand for integrated education.

The evidence therefore suggests that ‘demand’ is a complex issue in its definition and operationalisation, as is school choice. Demand can be viewed as reflecting parental choice, and choice is generally perceived positively and as a right. Paragraph 3 within

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children (United Nations, 1948). Parental choice was legally introduced and emphasised in the 1989 Education Reform Order for Northern Ireland but requires critical evaluation as a concept.

The 1989 Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order applied free market principles to schools in Northern Ireland by introducing competition between schools and open enrolment (Roulston & Cook, 2021). Thus, parents are given the opportunity to select any school for their children. However, 'choice' is not equally distributed, with schools developing their own admissions criteria to admit pupils, up to the maximum number of places set for each school. While attitudes surveys regularly show support for mixed-religion schools, school admissions criteria, oversubscription, and structural issues (such as distance from a specific school), means that many parents do not obtain their preferred option. Seventy schools (including nursery school settings) in Northern Ireland now have integrated status, and only 7% of pupils attend integrated schools.

When it comes to choosing a school for their children, there are various factors that impact on parents' decisions, and whether or not a school is integrated is only one aspect. The following is an incomplete list of such factors, some of which have been discussed throughout the report.

- Convenience of the school.
- Academic reputation of the school (both primary and post-primary), and available subject choices (post-primary).
- Quality (and reputation) of the pastoral care at the school.
- Admissions impact for younger siblings.
- Whether the chosen primary school is a feeder school of the desired post-primary school.
- Family traditions and pressures; safety concerns, in particular, but not exclusively, in religiously-segregated communities.

'Demand' for and 'choice' of integrated education therefore needs to be understood in this context of school choice and its complexity. First and foremost, as already stated,

it needs to be recognised that the majority of parents do not actually have a school 'choice' but make pragmatic decisions that may not resemble their ideal 'choice', and, again, for some families in certain geographic areas and in disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances, there is no choice at all¹¹. This means that parents with positive dispositions towards integrated (or otherwise religiously, ethnically and/or socio-economically mixed) education, may still not choose to send their children to such a school because pragmatic requirements and practical advantages outweigh those of their actual school preference. On the other hand, for others, the fact that a school has an integrated status may play no role at all when they choose this school over alternatives; others again may send their children to a school, *despite* it being integrated. 'Demand' for integrated education can therefore only be understood in this context of pragmatic decisions and limited choices, and demand for integration needs to be decoupled from the notion that it must, somehow, be related to specific social attitudes. It may well be, but it may equally not be. Demand for 'integrated education' is intertwined with demand for good schooling across the education system, as well as pragmatic, logistic and structural influences. In that sense, demand for integrated education does not exist in a vacuum, it is dependent on the choice of (alternative) schools available; it is a contextualised demand.

The following recommendations can therefore be divided into two main themes:

1. Capturing demand for integrated education.
2. Understanding demand for integrated education in the future.

Capturing 'demand' for integrated education

Recommendation 1: Improving the way demand for integrated education is captured through research and the schools admissions portal.

Re-designing survey questions

The fundamental issue with the current ways of measuring demand for integrated education is that it is done as if the decision for or against integrated education is a

¹¹ As previously outlined, a report authored by Roulston and Cook (2021) further discusses the lack of school choice, especially for integrated education provisions in certain geographic areas in Northern Ireland.

one-dimensional decision, which it evidently is not. Future ways of capturing 'demand' therefore have to be cognisant of the complexity of school choices when capturing reasons why parents choose, or express preference for, specific schools or school types. It needs to be acknowledged that an integrated school status is likely to be just one of many reasons why a school is chosen, or it may not be a factor at all. Whilst attitude surveys such as the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey and Young Life and Times Survey have consistently shown a positive relationship between attitudes towards, and/or experiences of, religiously mixed or integrated education, as well as shared education, the causality of this relationship is unclear. Preference for or against mixed religious schools or integrated education in the way it is presently captured should not be seen as a reliable indicator for demand. Apart from the inability to evidence causality, social desirability bias can also be at play when the question of preference for or against mixed religion schooling or integrated education is detached from other factors that impact on school choice. People are more likely to express a preference for mixed religious schooling or integrated education, as in the context of the Northern Ireland Peace process, this will be seen as a socially desirable pathway or 'the future' of education. In practice, however, this preference of religious mixing and/or integration may for reasons discussed above not translate into actual school choice, even if spaces in a suitable integrated school would be available. Future ways of assessing demand for integrated education should therefore attempt to take account of the complexity of school choices and all the factors involved.

ARK has, in the past, experimented with questions that attempt to capture a variety of issues that children and young people feel would be important in a school they would like to attend. For example, in 2012 and 2015, 16-year-olds taking part in the YLT survey were asked what aspects Government should think about when reforming the school system. Various answer options were presented, and multiple answers were possible, including:

- Saving money.
- Making sure pupils can study any subject they want to, no matter what school they go to.
- Not having separate schools for Catholic and Protestant pupils.

- Keeping separate schools but giving more opportunities for Catholic and Protestant pupils to get to know each other and do things together in school.
- Making all post-primary schools 'all-ability' schools, so there are no grammar schools and no transfer tests.
- Making sure pupils don't have to travel too far to get to school.

Similarly, in 2010 respondents to the KLT survey were presented with a hypothetical scenario of being a school principal of an over-subscribed school who has to make admission decisions. They were asked which children they would permit to attend the school, and what order of preference they would apply.

Questions like these take account of the complexity of education decisions, and a similar question could be drawn up to capture school type preferences, including demand for integrated education. A survey question could, for example, look like this for primary school choices:

If you were deciding what primary school you wanted your children to attend, please state how important or unimportant the following aspects would be when you make your school choice?

(Answers on a 5-point scale from 'very important' to 'not important at all', as well as a 'don't know' option.)

Example answer categories could include the following factors:

- The school is conveniently situated.
- The school has a good pastoral care system.
- The school prepares children for a transfer test.
- The school is a rights-respecting school.
- The school is an all-ability school.
- The religious ethos of the school.
- The school looks after children with Special Educational Needs or Additional Needs.
- The school is an integrated school.
- The school provides an Irish Medium education (Irish speaking school).

- The school offers a good after-school programme.
- The school is a feeder school for my preferred post-primary school.
- Other important factor _____

However, for an answer category considering the integrated status of the school, the wording would need to be in such a way that people know it is specifically referring to integrated schools and not a conflation with mixed religion schools. Over time, a strengthening or weakening of demand for integrated education could be captured with a question like this. Similar questions could also be designed for post-primary education preferences.

Utilising administrative data portals

A good platform to capture actual factors that determine school choice from a large number of parents is the electronic school admissions portal, as this is used by all parents, or those with parenting responsibility, for registration of pre-school and school-aged children in Northern Ireland. The portal therefore provides a prime opportunity to capture influences on parents' decision-making processes at the time that the decisions are made. A similar question to the one above could be asked of consenting parents who visit the portal to register their school preferences. This may help to assess demand of integrated education and how/if this changes over time. A question that considers the factors that underpin a parent's decision as to which school is named as first preference (from pre-school to post-primary) could be included on the portal. This would provide an opportunity to understand what parents prioritise when selecting a school for their child at different stages of the education system, allowing a disaggregation between factors such as school reputation, outcomes, locality, and management structure, amongst others. Permission and ethical approval would be required for such data to be collected via this portal, and arrangements would need to be put in place to store such data in line with data protection legislation (such as GDPR).

Qualitative and mixed-methods approaches

Measures to assess demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland are complex, as outlined in the above sections. Quantitative measures alone will not provide an

adequate understanding of parental demand. There is a need to consider qualitative enquiry or mixed-methods approaches that provide an opportunity to explore and understand the reasons for parental decisions, which either drive an increase or decrease in demand for school provisions. For example, interviews and focus groups can help identify and further explore the decisions parents make when identifying their school preferences. Community Conversations can be a useful method when focusing on a specific issue, for example, education delivery in a specific area and whether or not a new integrated school could be established and would be likely to have sustainable enrolment. Although qualitative methods, such as Community Conversations, involve a relatively small number of people, their outputs can be supplemented by survey data, thereby allowing the input of a larger number of participants.

The evidence base via research and consultations should be strengthened to understand the perspectives of all stakeholders in education with regard to integration. This includes the perspective of school leaders regarding attitudes towards potentially transforming to an integrated school in the future. A qualitative study in this area could explore factors such as:

- School leaders' priorities.
- School leaders' willingness to transform to integrated status in the future.
- The barriers for schools to transform to an integrated status in the future.
- Analysing schools that have formally changed their management structure to integrated to understand the processes they followed and the rationale for the transition (for example, the appeal of an inclusive ethos or an alternative approach to increase pupil numbers).

Future research could also consider an analysis of the Integrated Education (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 and the processes it followed before being approved by the Northern Ireland Assembly. Undertaking such research into the level of support (or lack of support) from politicians across the different political parties in Northern Ireland, and the reasons for their stance, can help inform future policy direction into school provision.

Understanding demand for integrated education in the future

Recommendation 2: Promote a greater understanding of integrated education and its unique contribution to the education system in Northern Ireland to understand demand specific to this school structure.

As discussed above, demand for integrated education should not be seen as a one-dimensional issue. Integrated education does not exist in a vacuum but is part of a complex education system that reflects wider societal segregation in Northern Ireland. Understanding demand and what this means practically going forward is central to the next steps.

Demand for integrated schools versus demand for good schools

Integrated schools and good schools are not mutually exclusive; an integrated school can be considered a good school and a good school can be of integrated status. Although integrated schools and good schools are not mutually exclusive, these are two distinct concepts that must be considered separately.

It is unquestionable that the main objective of any school is to provide good education to its pupils. Demand for integrated education is not going to increase if a school does not manage to teach children and young people to their best academic ability. Nonetheless, schools' extra-curricular activities and pastoral support also provide 'added value', and it is therefore important that it is clearly articulated what this added value is.

As discussed above, an integrated school status may only be one aspect that attracts parents to a school. There are other important aspects that parents consider when enrolling their children into schools. In order to maintain and increase demand, integrated schools need to meet parental demands. To inform their school development plans, schools should regularly consult with parents in their catchment areas to make sure they offer a curriculum and extra-curricular activities that meet parental demand. This planning could include things like:

- Best practice in terms of pastoral care and Special Educational Needs/Additional Needs.

- Easy transport to the school.
- Attractive after-school activities.
- Appropriate and broad subject choices.
- Achieving rights-respecting school status and/or eco-school award.
- Unique offers that other schools in that area do not provide.

Most integrated post-primary schools currently self-define as all-ability schools. This means that admission to the schools is largely not dependent on good scores in transfer tests, which may promote preference of such schools for some parents/children. One of the few exceptions is Lagan College which operates a dual entrance policy whereby part of the College's pupil cohort is directly recruited into a grammar stream, provided they have achieved the required transfer test results, whilst the other stream enrolls pupils using criteria not based on the transfer test. As pupils progress, there is a level of fluidity and flexibility which means that pupils can move in and out of grammar school level classes depending on their academic performance.

Whilst there is strong academic evidence that the transfer tests should be abandoned (for example, Brown et al., 2021), in the absence of the political will to enforce such a ban, integrated post-primary schools need to be aware that an all-ability policy that discourages high-achieving pupils from enrolling because they choose grammar schools instead, means that the schools are not actually all-ability schools. Taking into consideration all aspects of the research on demand, as outlined above, existing integrated schools should have conversations on how to attract pupils of all academic abilities.

Understanding and promoting integrated education

One central issue is that of informed decision making. Given the complexities of the education system in Northern Ireland, do parents fully understand the nuances of each type of management type and school? Or indeed, the difference between 'mixed', 'shared' or 'integrated' schools?¹²

¹² The authors acknowledge there are no shared schools in Northern Ireland but only shared education partnerships.

Further consideration should be given to the availability and accessibility of information on what integrated education is. There is a clear need to ensure that all caregivers understand what it provides, and how it compares with other forms of education provision. This information should be easy to access and understand and it should be available to parents and children/young people when they make decisions about what school to attend. The schools admissions portal could be central to informing parents and increasing their understanding and knowledge of the education system in Northern Ireland. The portal could potentially include an information sheet on the school management structures in the education system that clearly indicates the variation between each of these. This would assist parents in making an informed choice about school preference.

In 2022/23, 348,925 children and young people were registered in schools in Northern Ireland (Department of Education, 2023). The current information and legislative focus are almost exclusively targeted at parents and their demand. Although the views of children and young people may be taken into account within individual families, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1990) states that children have the right to be included in all decisions affecting their lives, and school choice is arguably one of the main decisions affecting their lives. Consequently, there is a strong case to reach out to children and young people directly with accessible information about school choices. In the first instance, integrated primary schools could be encouraged to provide more child-friendly information about integrated post-primary education around the time when pupils make their choices about what post-primary school to attend.

Political will and area planning

When considering demand, supply must also be considered simultaneously, along with issues of sustainability in terms of school size and environmental concerns. Over time, fluctuations in birth rates and demographic changes such as migration will impact upon school enrolment rates and area planning.

Compared to other parts of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland has a comparatively high proportion of small (rural) schools and a relatively low pupil-teacher ratio. Whilst this may have advantages for the social cohesion of the communities where these

schools are located and have benefits for the pastoral care system, smaller schools are also more expensive to run, and may only be able to offer a narrower curriculum. At the moment, the expansion of integrated education through the establishment of new schools is dependent on wider area planning consent. In light of current demographic trends and financial pressures on public funding, the opening of new integrated schools will almost inevitably affect enrolment rates at other local schools - potentially leading to school closures. A transfer of existing controlled or Catholic maintained schools into integrated schools that have long-term sustainable enrolment may also affect the enrolment of other local schools. However, these arguments are context dependent and will vary according to local school provisions and demand in an area. This will likely see political tensions at community level where these schools are based, despite the Department of Education (2017) outlining that Development Proposals for Transformation of an existing school must consider the wider context of the network of schools to align with area planning.

The Integrated Education (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 permits the opening of new integrated schools or transfer of existing schools to integrated status if it meets area planning demands. For this to materialise, there needs to be joint-up approach in area planning which treats school planning within the context of wider area planning. Sustainability therefore plays a role in the transformation of existing schools to integrated status and the establishment of new integrated schools. In order to make new integrated schools sustainable, the planning of these must go hand in hand with the planning of other mixed religion and integrated services and facilities, including more integrated/mixed-religion housing, leisure centres, parks, public transport, care homes, business opportunities, etc. Environmental sustainability should also be central to these discussions as at present children who attend integrated schools often experience longer commuting journeys to and from school, given that only a small proportion of households live in close proximity to integrated schools (Roulston & Cook, 2021).

Currently, Northern Ireland remains a largely segregated society as reflected through residential neighbourhoods. The largely religiously segregated education system is also a direct consequence of this neighbourhood segregation. Local schools will therefore reflect the local population. Integrated education is only likely to grow in line

with actual demand if, over time, the proportion of segregated housing is reduced. This requires political will and vision beyond school planning.

The preferences of children and young people should also be considered more in area planning decisions. The current evidence from the Young Life and Times survey consistently shows that about half of all 16-year-olds would prefer mixed-religious schools. In reality, only currently 7% of pupils attend integrated schools, whilst about twice that proportion attend schools that are relatively mixed religiously. There is therefore a strong case to proactively encourage the growth of religiously mixed and integrated schools to meet the demand from young people. Ensuring children and young people's voices are heard in area planning aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Central to moving forward is a working definition of *demand* being provided to all key stakeholders to ensure that any action aligns with policy and statutory requirements.

Conclusion

The education system in Northern Ireland is complex and confusing, reflecting the historical, political and social context of the region. At a general level, the diversity of management structures reflects religious affiliation and/or academic selection. Within this mix, integrated education provides a mechanism to promote reconciliation among divided communities within Northern Ireland. Over the past 50 years, organisations such as All Children Together, the Integrated Education Fund and the Council for Integrated Education have worked tirelessly to promote integrated education as an option for parents, children and young people, and this has been aided by legislation such as the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 and the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

The report has highlighted and reviewed the multiple ways that parental demand for integrated education has been measured, including preference data on the school portal, over- and under-subscription of integrated school places, parental ballots, expression of interest forms, attitudinal surveys, and registration on the website www.integratemyschool.com. While each of these serves a specific purpose, this report has outlined the strengths and limitations of each data collection method, whilst

illustrating that there are different levels of demand that can be captured through the existing measures. For example, parent-level demand, school-level demand, and wider community/societal level demand. Although Sections 5 and 6 of the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 refer to 'demand', there is limited information on what this means in practice. In turn, this prevents relevant measurement of the demand for particular types of schools.

All of the methods reviewed in this report provide some useful information, and when pieced together, provide part of the jigsaw of evidence necessary to assess demand. Our recommendations provide a framework for a mixed-method approach to assessing demand, including survey and qualitative research, and policy analysis. It is also important to aid parents in understanding the complex education system. It is only by fully comprehending all the options, can parents, families and policy makers make fully informed decisions.

End.

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