Exploring Young People's Experiences of Integrated Education: An Educational Response to Division in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

Integrated education was established in Northern Ireland in 1981 as an educational response to division, with the aim of promoting mutual respect and understanding by encouraging interaction among students from different and conflicting backgrounds. Currently, these schools largely exist in two models: grant-maintained and transformed. In the context of a renewed policy drive to enhance support for integrated education, coupled with an increasingly diverse society, this study explores the unique challenges faced by both models in fulfilling the sector's stated aims. The findings suggest that while students in both types of school shared values of respect, understanding and interaction, these processes were articulated and implemented differently. The study also highlighted the dual challenge now facing integrated schools: addressing intergroup divisions beyond the Catholic-Protestant dichotomy, while also combating online misogyny.

Introduction

In societies experiencing or emerging from intergroup conflict, education is generally acknowledged as having the potential to stimulate positive social change. The source of debate, however, lies in how education policies should be structured and implemented within these contexts. Some scholars argue that maintaining separate schools for different groups can help to preserve their respective autonomy and legitimise identities (Parekh, 2006; Grace, 2003; Halstead and McLaughlin, 2004), thus creating the conditions necessary for positive relations at the intergroup level. Conversely, others contend that separate schooling reinforces intergroup divisions (Hand, 2003; Short, 2003; Davies, 2005; Berkeley, 2008) by entrenching 'us and them' mentalities through minimised

opportunities for intergroup interaction, which are crucial for dismantling stereotypes and fostering empathy (Allport, 1954). Therefore, if transformative change is to occur within divided societies, education policy must reflect this ambition by helping children to understand, respect and engage with those from different backgrounds.

While both approaches recognise the importance of education for peacebuilding, the challenge is determining which policy is most effective. This debate has long been central to Northern Ireland's complex education system. Though division between the Catholic and Protestant communities is manifest throughout society, it is most pronounced in schools, where the majority of children attend institutions corresponding to their community background (Roulston and Milliken, 2023). As a result, schooling is often perceived to have maintained, or at least contributed to, the continuing sense of suspicion and distrust between the two main communities.

Several attempts have been made to respond to division in schools since the 1980s. While the success of these educational initiatives has varied (Dunn and Morgan, 1999; Gallagher, 2004), the most radical effort to challenge the divided education system was the integrated education movement. Integrated schools in Northern Ireland are defined as those that:

> intentionally support, protect and advance 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. (Integrated Education Act, 2022, ss. 1–2a)

Against a backdrop of violence and political resistance, Northern Ireland's first integrated school, Lagan College, was opened in 1981 by a group of pioneering parents drawn from both the Catholic and Protestant traditions, with just twenty-eight pupils enrolled. Having almost reached its forty-fifth anniversary, the integrated sector is now comprised of seventy-six schools across Northern Ireland, accounting for just under 8% of the entire school estate (DENI, 2025). Though the expansion of integrated education has been significant, community division within the wider education system remains a defining feature. Recent policy changes under the Integrated Education Act (2022), however, have made the expansion of the integrated sector more achievable. In short, the Act increases the responsibility of educational bodies to assess and address parental demand for integrated

education. Maximising interactions between students from diverse backgrounds is intended to respond to the "broader challenges of a divided society in the future" (IEF, 2022, p. 1).

Notwithstanding this legislative development, questions continue to arise concerning the efficacy of the integrated sector in meeting its objectives, as research suggests that 'integration' is interpreted and implemented inconsistently across schools (Montgomery *et al.*, 2003; McGlynn, 2008; 2011). The impact of the sector is further hampered by the weaknesses associated with the transformation process. Currently, there are two routes to establishing integrated schools in Northern Ireland: grant-maintained integrated (GMI) and transformed integrated. The former refers to integrated schools that have been opened by parents, while the latter concerns those that have *transformed* from separate-school status. As of September 2025, almost half of Northern Ireland's integrated schools have successfully undertaken the transformation process (EA, 2025a), a lengthy and complex legal procedure that has brought with it many challenges (Loader and Hughes, 2025; Topping and Cavanagh, 2016). Further questions are posed when the increasingly multicultural composition of Northern Irish society is considered (NISRA, 2022). Though the integrated sector has committed to celebrating all students from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds (Integrated Education Act, 2022), rhetoric used by supporting bodies, such as the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, often refers to the "two main traditions" (NICIE, 2022, p. 2), and so maintaining focus on traditional intergroup divisions may neglect the complex dynamics between students of different backgrounds in a more diverse, post-Agreement NI.

Deploying intercultural education as a conceptual lens, this study explores young people's experiences of integrated education within two different school contexts—one grant-maintained and one transformed—to consider the unique challenges that might be posed by these different school types as they seek to fulfil their sector-wide objectives. Consonant with the stated aims of the integrated ethos (NICIE, 2022), findings suggest an experience in both schools largely underpinned by understanding, respect and contact between those of different backgrounds, though students articulated these processes differently depending on the school they attended. These findings illuminate the challenges associated with the

transformation process, as well as those linked to how integration is understood and enacted more generally. Additionally, the findings expose the dual challenge now facing integrated schools: reconciling intergroup divisions beyond the traditional Catholic-Protestant dichotomy in an increasingly multicultural society, while also combating the rise of online misogyny. This article concludes with implications for how integrated education may be understood to better reflect the experiences of young people.

To contextualise the research findings, this article begins with a synopsis of the history of integrated education, which clarifies the different types of integrated school. Then, drawing upon intercultural education literature alongside the sector's stated aims (NICIE, 2022; 2021), the following sections outline a conceptual framework for integrated education, to identify the challenges it currently faces when responding to division.

Types of Integrated School

As already noted, there are two types of integrated school in Northern Ireland: GMI and controlled 'transformed'. The former concerns schools like Lagan College, established by parents and built from the ground-up. These schools are managed by a Board of Governors, who act as both the employer and the employing authority, and are therefore responsible for the employment of all staff within the school. During its foundational years, Lagan College faced a precarious future and was entirely reliant upon charitable donations, as well as parents' own contributions, before achieving grant-aided status in 1984 (Bardon, 2009, pp. 111–127). By 1987, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE, hereafter) was established to coordinate efforts to develop integrated education. The sector was later strengthened under the Education Reform Order in 1989, which not only placed formal responsibility on the government to "support initiatives towards the development of integrated schools" but also created a legal procedure where the "parents of pupils in existing Protestant or Catholic schools could vote to transform their school to integrated status" (Gallagher, 2004, p. 127). The introduction of this transformation process marked the beginning of what would become the Department of Education's preferred, more "financially prudent" route of expansion for integrated education (McGonigle *et al.*, 2003, p. 2). While a

less costly alternative than establishing GMI schools, evidence suggests that separate schools wishing to transform sometimes do not view the process as a genuine ideological commitment to integration, but rather a "cynical manoeuvre" to avoid school closure (Gallagher, 2004, p. 131). Gardner (2016, p. 350) goes a step further, terming transformation due to falling numbers as "faux integration" and suggests that this has undermined the potentially transformative impact of the sector overall. Even for schools who have demonstrated a legitimate commitment to integration in principle and in practice, transformation is no easy task, as staff are challenged with negating existing perceptions that they are of "one tradition" (Abbott and McGuinness, 2020, p. 4): a lengthy process requiring an "incremental widening of a long-established culture" (Topping and Cavanagh, 2016, p. 60).

Among Northern Ireland's seventy-six integrated schools, thirty-eight were created by parent groups and hold GMI status. A further two schools (All Children's Integrated Primary School and Forge Integrated Primary School) were also created by parent groups but hold controlled-integrated, rather than GMI status. Like grant-maintained schools, controlled-integrated schools are managed by a Board of Governors. However, the Education Authority—the body responsible for the delivery of education services in Northern Ireland—is the employing authority within these schools, hence the term 'controlled-integrated'.

The remaining thirty-six schools have transformed from separate-school status to controlled-integrated status through the laborious process of transformation. Schools wishing to transform must formulate a transformation action plan, followed by a parental ballot, before carefully constructing a proposal for development (DENI, 2017). Only then will the school be considered for transformation and, if successful, the process of implementing the new status ensues. Yet for schools that endure the lengthy approval process only to have their proposal rejected, staff, parents and other stakeholders may feel that their efforts have been disregarded. Ultimately, the decision rests solely with the Minister of Education who, against the wishes of his own department, recently vetoed the transformation of Northern Ireland's largest post-primary school on the basis that it did not have the potential to attract reasonable numbers of Catholic pupils (Meredith, 2025). The Minister's decision has culminated

with parents and supporters feeling "extremely concerned" that their "democratic wishes" have been rejected (Caskey, 2025, para. 4). Recent research by Rebecca Loader and Joanne Hughes (2025, p. 29) sheds light upon similar experiences, with stakeholders lamenting the "bureaucracy and uncertainty" that accompanies the process. Given that GMI schools and transformed schools have developed distinctively within the integrated sector, both face unique challenges in upholding their stated aims.

Conceptual Framework

While those who support separate schools insist that they are a "hallmark" of a truly diverse society (Commission for Catholic Education, 2014, p. 2), others contend that the "mere fact of separate education allows for prejudice and stereotypes to flourish" (Hewstone and Hughes, 2015, p. 66). Therefore, if transformative social change is to occur within post-conflict societies like Northern Ireland, education policy should reflect this ambition by providing young people with the tools necessary to understand, respect and interact with those who are different from themselves: an assumption that finds its roots in intercultural education theory and is potentially facilitated by integrated schools. According to UNESCO intercultural education posits an educational framework that:

> aims to go beyond passive coexistence, to achieve a developing and sustainable way of living together in multicultural societies through the creation of *understanding* of, *respect* for and *dialogue* between the different cultural groups. (UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education, 2006, p. 18)

This definition offers a useful departure point when identifying instances of synergy between the objectives of intercultural education and the stated aims of the integrated ethos. Firstly, integrated schools make a commitment to "empowering [pupils] as individuals to affect positive change in a shared society", by giving them the opportunity to meet those of different backgrounds, "to live, learn and grow together in understanding, rather than mistrust" (NICIE, 2022, p. 2) and this is consonant with the aims of intercultural education (UNESCO, 2006; Rapanta and Trovão, 2021; Elias and Mansouri, 2023; Conti, 2025). To develop a deep and cooperative understanding between cultures, intercultural education strives to engender reciprocal respect between them; this objective is reflected by the stated

aims of integrated schools, which encourage pupils to "demonstrate mutual respect and understanding" (NICIE, 2022, p. 6). Finally, just as intercultural education seeks to develop a shared society through processes of meaningful dialogue (Gorski, 2008; Rapanta and Trovão, 2021; Conti, 2025), so too does integrated education recognise the importance of "dialogue and negotiation" for transformative change to occur (NICIE, 2022, p. 2). Indeed, NICIE are explicit about "being proactive and seeking out opportunities to express, learn from and value difference", and that such interaction is what makes integrated education "unique" (2021, p. 12). Taken together, the objectives of intercultural education appear to be closely aligned with the stated aims of integrated education: to intentionally bring together students from different communities and respond to the division between them (NICIE, 2022; 2021).

Challenges Facing Integrated Schools

Though there are several conceptual overlaps between intercultural and integrated education, how these objectives extend beyond rhetoric is less clear. Despite the sector's unifying commitment to reconciliation (NICIE, 2022; 2021), research suggests that there is no single model of integration in schools across Northern Ireland. Although variation between school environments is to be expected, given that each is uniquely composed, there are more fundamental differences in terms of how integration is understood across the sector, with some educators viewing it as the passive mixing of communities, while others adopt a more proactive approach when responding to division (Montgomery *et al.*, 2003; McGlynn, 2008; 2011; Abbott and McGuinness, 2020; Loader and Hughes, 2025). In other cases, the 'avoidance culture' that persists throughout Northern Ireland, where issues provoking controversial discussions are typically avoided, appears to permeate some integrated environments (Donnelly, 2004; 2008), and so opportunities for intercultural dialogue are forfeited. Even beyond the integrated sector, teachers across Northern Ireland often feel ill-equipped to tackle controversial issues due to a lack of adequate training, as well as feelings of discomfort (Donnelly *et al.*, 2021). These feelings, however, may be particularly pronounced within transformed integrated schools, given that teachers are not yet supported by a well-established ethos and

culture in the same way that GMI schools are (Abbott and McGuinness, 2020).

As the uniqueness of integrated education is ostensibly centred around its intentional facilitation of intergroup contact within an otherwise "inherently segregated and contested society" (NICIE, 2022, p. 2), one of the most prominent critiques facing the sector is the community imbalance present in many integrated schools. More than half of Northern Ireland's twenty-one integrated post-primary schools have a Catholic/Protestant enrolment of less than 30% (DENI, 2024), thereby limiting potential opportunities "to learn with, from, and about each other" (NICIE, 2022, p. 1). Though proponents have long argued that the essence of integrated education is rooted in its ethos and not a mere "numbers game" of community enrolment (Bailey, 2021, p. 78), intercultural theorists assert that learning is only sustainable "when it is done with, rather than to, the cultural other" (McCandless *et al.*, 2020, p. 958). In the absence of diversity, integrated classrooms risk essentialising the identities of the 'other' as they cannot appeal directly to the perspectives and experiences of those who are different. To *essentialise* a culture is to attribute "stereotypical characteristics to large swathes of people passed solely on a single identity dimension" (Gorski, 2013, p. 86), the possibility of which is heightened in divided contexts like Northern Ireland where "segregation manifests […] in various ways" (Roulston and Cook, 2025, p. 453). Hence, the integrated sector's admissions criteria are "complicated by demographic change and persistent segregation at neighbourhood and community levels" (Loader and Hughes, 2025, p. 66). Consequently, achieving a balanced enrolment becomes challenging in practice, thereby reducing the potential for meaningful intercultural exchange.

The Research

Though the integrated sector has explicitly outlined its aims (NICIE, 2022; 2021), as noted above, interpretations vary across the sector, with each integrated school shaping young people's educational experiences differently. Such variation is compounded by imbalanced community enrolments, inconsistent approaches to dealing with difficult issues, as well as the challenges associated with the transformation process. Recognising that much data previously analysed is now relatively dated, it is useful to

consider these challenges in a contemporary context and in the light of Northern Ireland's changing demography. Therefore, this research aims to understand the unique challenges facing two schools reflecting GMI and transformed models of integration as they seek to fulfil their sector-wide objectives. From this, several research objectives are posed: to *understand* young people's experiences of integrated education; to *identify* any challenges hindering their experience; to *consider* teachers' responses, and to *suggest* how these potential obstacles may be overcome.

Sample

The data were collected between March and June 2024 in two integrated post-primary schools. To maintain anonymity, these schools have been given the pseudonyms of Hillbank and Forestview. Hillbank has transformed from controlled-secondary to controlled-integrated status, providing a useful site to explore the related challenges. Given that Hillbank had been known locally as a 'Protestant school' prior to its transformation, it had a predominantly Protestant enrolment with a small Catholic minority at the time of study (DENI, 2023/24). Forestview, by contrast, did not transform to integrated status but is instead a long-established GMI school and was selected for this reason. As shown in Table 1, most pupils attending Forestview were from a Catholic background, with a minority of pupils (< 20%) identifying as Protestant (DENI, 2023/24).

	Integrated Status	Catholic Enrolment	Protestant Enrolment	'Other' Enrolment
Hillbank	Transformed	< 10%	> 60%	< 30%
Forestview	Grant-maintained	> 50%	< 20%	< 30%

Table 1: Integrated Status and Community Enrolment during the 2023/2024 Academic Year

As neither school enrolled the aspirational intake of 40% Catholic, 40% Protestant and 20% 'other' background (NICIE, 2022, p. 3), both were suitable examples for considering the challenges associated with community imbalance within integrated education. Overall, 136 students took part in the research, all of whom were in Year 11 (aged fourteen–fifteen). Year 11 pupils were selected because the date of Hillbank's transformation process meant that most students in this range could articulate their integrated experience relative to what the school was like *before* its official transformation. To maintain consistency, participants from Forestview were also in Year 11.

Research Design

The aim of this research reflects the interpretivist principle of understanding: to gain access to people's experiences and perspectives, to interpret "their social world from their point of view" (Bryman, 2008, p. 17). As integrated schools are intentionally 'student-centred', the emphasis placed upon learning from the lived experiences of individuals is especially important. Without their perspectives, it is impossible to fully understand the challenges they face. For this reason, qualitative methods were used to collect the data.

Essay writing was selected as the principal method of data collection because participants are granted a degree of anonymity and confidentiality that cannot be guaranteed during interviews (Elizabeth, 2008). To encourage honest responses, participants were asked to complete their submission anonymously.[1] The unstructured nature of this task meant that a variety of perspectives could be collected from *all* students, rather than a small, interviewed sample. For their task, participants were given the title, 'What integrated education means to me'; this was completed by pupils during class time and without conferring with their peers, to generate as unstudied a response as possible. The data were then analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022), where submissions were repeatedly reviewed to identify key themes and their corresponding codes. Overall, 136 written responses were collected: seventy-six from Hillbank and sixty

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[1] As written tasks were completed anonymously, all data cited will be accompanied by participants' gender, nationality, community and political background, if known. For focus group participants, any known identity information ascertained from the discussion will be denoted beside quotations.

from Forestview. Several pupils were then invited to take part in focus groups to elucidate the findings identified from the written task. Group discussions were selected rather than one-to-one interviews as group settings help to "promote a comfortable atmosphere of disclosure" (Williams and Katz, 2001, p. 2) wherein participants feel free to share and even "challenge each other's views" (Bryman, 2008, p. 475). Due to timetabling constraints, participants were selected by teachers according to the following criteria: there should be no more than six participants per group, a mix of boys and girls and, for Hillbank specifically, involve some pupils who attended the school *prior* to its transformation. To maintain their anonymity, all names have been pseudonymised. In Hillbank, six pupils took part (four boys, two girls), four of whom had attended the school since Year 8 (Emma, Sarah, Callum and Craig), while Shaun joined in Year 10, and Warren in Year 11. In Forestview, four pupils took part (two boys, two girls) all of whom attended the school since Year 8 (Alanna, Katie, Eóin and Ezra). To clarify any concerns raised by the written responses or focus groups, six teachers were interviewed: Claire (Senior Teacher), Philip (History) and Lauren (Religious Education i.e. 'R.E.') from Hillbank, and Simon (Principal), Patrick (Pastoral) and Rebecca (R.E.) from Forestview. All interviews, including focus groups, were semi-structured, took place on school premises during school hours and were recorded and transcribed.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Queen's University Belfast in February 2024. As most participants were under the age of sixteen, a participant information sheet was circulated to parents who were free to opt-out on their child's behalf, though none chose to do so. Formal consent was obtained from all participants who were free to withdraw from the study at any time. However, none chose to do so.

Findings

When asked what integrated education means to them, most written responses relayed an experience that encapsulated both the stated aims of the integrated ethos and intercultural education theory, underpinned by concepts such as '*understanding*' and '*respecting*' each other by '*bringing together*' those of different backgrounds. Yet a core difference between the

two schools was how these processes were articulated. Participants attending Forestview generally conveyed experiences that appeared to value the 'intentionality' of integrated education (NICIE, 2022; 2021), while many from Hillbank reflected an apathetic outlook, feeling that '*nothing had changed*' post-transformation, with others expressing some hostility towards their school's status. Negative experiences, however, were not limited to the transformed environment of Hillbank, as participants from both schools explained how prejudiced attitudes, particularly racism and misogyny, have permeated their respective environments.

To Learn 'From' or to Learn 'About' Others?

Learning to understand one's own culture, as well as that of others, is a core objective of intercultural education (Hill, 2006; UNESCO, 2006; McCandless *et al.*, 2020); one that resonates with the integrated ethos as pupils are encouraged to demonstrate "mutual respect and understanding" towards those who are different (NICIE, 2022, p. 6). The salience of this was recognised by pupils attending Forestview, many of whom explained the need to learn '*from*' other perspectives, to better understand "what it's like for them" (Northern Irish, male). In fact, their understanding of integrated education in general appeared to reflect an openness and curiosity towards the experiences of others, both of which are necessary attitudinal components for developing intercultural understanding (Perry and Southwell, 2011; Chiriac and Panciuc, 2015; Deardorff, 2009). Students explained that they learn from others in school by delivering presentations, having class discussions and taking part in 'spectrum debates' where they are:

> given a statement like, 'abortion is wrong', and there'll be one side of the room 'agree', and the other side 'disagree'. (Alanna, Irish/Feminist)

They praised having the opportunity to "learn about what other people think about stuff" (Eóin, Irish/Nationalist) and to "debate with [others] without getting into a heated argument or anything" (Alanna, Irish/Feminist). Dialogic activities such as these not only help to develop "skills of discussion and argumentation" (Compass, 2023, p. 337), but so

too do they introduce young people to perspectives and experiences beyond their own, helping to foster respect and understanding in the face of difference. These conversations were not limited to reproductive rights but also extended to critical discussions surrounding "the deeper issues of identity and the politics" (Rebecca, R.E, Forestview) underpinning the Northern Irish conflict. This approach reflects the stated aims of the integrated ethos, as engaging with contested socio-political identities is "the essence of what is different about an integrated school" (NICIE, 2021, p. 12).

If intercultural learning is to have a transformative social impact in post-conflict contexts, this necessitates intentional engagement with the various perspectives that have shaped the past (Hammack and Pilecki, 2015). Students at Forestview seemed to value this as part of their integrated education, claiming that they "wouldn't really know" about the conflict or "what the terms meant if it wasn't for that" (Katie, Irish/Nationalist), and so their experiences are worth noting, given that conflict-related issues are typically avoided in Northern Irish schools (Donnelly *et al.*, 2021). In fact, several written responses referred to educating '*together*' those of different backgrounds, to learn from others so that they "don't go back to the rough times of The Troubles" (Irish, Republican, male), illuminating a marked awareness among Forestview students of the sector's wider commitment to peace and reconciliation.

In Hillbank, many participants explained that integrated education means to learn '*about*' others yet focus group pupils struggled to give any examples of "practical things" (Callum, Protestant/Loyalist) they had experienced in school. While two written responses mentioned celebrating various cultures by "cooking different foods" (Nigerian, Protestant, Female) and putting up displays "about how each religion celebrates Christmas" (Northern Irish, Protestant, Female), this type of cultural learning does not appear to readily engage with individuals' perspectives or lived experiences, which risks essentialising identities present in the school (Gorski, 2008), as was recognised by one pupil:

> Integration is just a word which declares 'we accept anyone here' […] but, in reality, we just have curry dishes served in the canteen. (Northern Irish, Protestant, Female)

Both the integrated ethos and intercultural education theory share in their encouragement of *mutual* understanding, a process that requires meaningful and sustained learning through interaction, allowing pupils to engage critically with their own experiences and that of others, to encourage more respectful relations between them (McCandless *et al.*, 2020; Rapanta and Trovão, 2021; UNESCO, 2006). The dissonance presented between the stated aims of the integrated ethos and the experiences outlined by students at Hillbank might reasonably be justified by the school's relatively recent integrated status, as it has only officially begun its "journey to integration" (Wardlow, 2013, p. 117). As suggested by McCandless *et al.* (2020), creating an educational environment that is grounded in mutual respect and understanding requires a considerable investment of time, due to lengthy, back-and-forth processes of meaningful dialogue and sustained interaction: an opportunity that is not immediately available within transformed contexts. This may help to explain why participants from Hillbank referred to learning *about* others, while those from Forestview focused primarily on learning *from* one another, given that reciprocal understanding may be more easily achieved when supported by a well-established integrated ethos.

Yet there is also evidence to suggest that Hillbank may have succumbed to the avoidance culture experienced in other integrated contexts (Donnelly, 2004; 2008), through which prejudiced attitudes are not being actively challenged. Given that Hillbank was once known as "a Protestant school" (Claire, Senior Teacher, Hillbank), it is perhaps unsurprising that an 'us and them' mentality was identifiable among students, with staff explaining that some would be more welcoming towards those "from other parts of the world or different faiths than maybe they would someone who was Catholic" (Lauren, R.E., Hillbank). To illustrate, one pupil explained how they did not like attending an integrated school because they chose Hillbank as a "Protestant option", and that they did not "believe that Protestants and Catholics mix well together" (British, Protestant/Loyalist, male). Similar attitudes were also expressed during the focus group, particularly with reference to how the conflict is taught in school:

> Like, in history, we learned how the IRA was formed and all of them, but nothing about Protestant paramilitaries. (Callum, Loyalist/Protestant)

When asked to reflect upon the attitudes of his students, Philip (History, Hillbank) admitted that while he would like to encourage "more inclusivity with people's perspectives" during history class, he had no time to do so because the "course is that long that you have to get through it". As integrated schools exist within a wider education system that "privileges interschool performativity and competition" (Hughes *et al.*, 2016, p. 11), teachers are subject to the same prevailing neoliberal forces as in other school contexts, which have the potential to constrain "the extent to which they could engage children and young people with reconciliation-related issues" (Magill *et al.*, 2009, p. 96). Therefore, implementing intercultural objectives becomes challenging, as educators find themselves in a "tug-of-war" situation between their desire to foreground experienced-based learning and meeting their performance-based demands (Desmarchelier, 2022, p. 498). In the interim, prejudiced outlooks towards the Catholic community that "run deep" (Lauren, R.E., Hillbank) in some students remain unaddressed, thereby inhibiting Hillbank's potential to respond to division among students and to meet the sector's stated peace and reconciliation-based aims. This experience is likely heightened by the lack of Catholic students attending Hillbank (Table 1), coupled with the perception that most are "not comfortable to come out and say they are Catholic" (Claire, Senior Teacher, Hillbank). While Claire (Senior Teacher, Hillbank) felt that their tendency to "sugar coat" Catholic-Protestant relations was one of their shortcomings as a school, they have introduced traditional elements of Irish-Catholic culture, such as GAA, to try and encourage understanding towards the 'other'. The impact of this, however, may be negligible if Catholic pupils continue to feel uneasy about expressing their identity, as intercultural understanding cannot be expected to thrive unless perspectives are communicated and experiences exchanged (McCandless *et al.*, 2020; Conti, 2025; Gorski, 2008). These findings speak to current discourse surrounding the "delicate balance" of community identities within integrated schools (Leonard, 2025) and pose questions regarding the efficacy of the integrated ethos in developing mutual understanding in transformed environments where achieving a balanced enrolment can be challenging, coupled with neoliberal approaches when addressing 'the past'.

Such attitudes towards the 'other', however, were not limited to those attending Hillbank. While many students at Forestview spoke highly of their experience of integrated education, feeling that it has helped them to better '*understand*' the beliefs and identities of others, this did not necessarily translate into their attitudes. For instance, several pupils attending Forestview stated their republican[2] identity in their written task, yet when asked to reflect upon this during the focus group, participants were visibly shocked that so many had identified with something they felt was linked to violence:

> Katie: Did people say republican more than they would say nationalist? I'm kind of surprised by that.
> Eóin: I'd say people are getting them confused.
> Ezra: Yeah, because to me a republican is someone who would support a paramilitary.
> Katie: Yeah, it feels more violent.
> Eóin: Yeah, I think people get confused between republican and nationalist. They hear republican more and so they say they are republican, though they mean nationalist.
> Alanna: They mean nationalist.

Despite claiming that their integrated education has made them "more open-minded" (Ezra, English/Irish, Buddhist), their dismissive—or indeed unaccepting—views towards their peers' self-reported identity seems to refute this. To claim that those who identify with republicanism are simply 'confused' is to minimise their beliefs and speaks directly to past findings by Furey *et al.*, where integrated school pupils appear to distance themselves from "those who lack the 'intelligence' to move beyond identity-based struggle" (2016, p. 149). These attitudes suggest that Forestview's previously outlined approach to learning '*from*' others may lack that critical engagement required to fully understand the plurality of complex interests that have long shaped division in Northern Ireland. This response is especially striking when considered against the Catholic majority at Forestview (Table 1), where one might expect the views of the

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[2] Traditionally, in Northern Ireland, republicanism has been associated with the Catholic community. Once defined by political violence, republicanism in the post-Good Friday Agreement (1998) era is generally understood to encapsulate "variants of nationalism, national and ethno-religious identity, liberationist ambitions, socialism and its relationship with national self-determination" (Hoey, 2019, p. 77).

minority community (i.e. Protestant) to be marginalised, rather than those traditionally associated with the majority.

Though perhaps not as obvious an othering process as the traditional 'us and them' mentality expressed by participants at Hillbank, both articulations are nevertheless inconsistent with the stated aims of integrated ethos which encourages pupils to "respect difference" (NICIE, 2022, p. 2). While the NICIE (2021) anti-bias curriculum offers a useful framework for addressing issues relating to sectarianism and the conflict in integrated schools, much of the guidance is concentrated around cultural celebrations and symbolism, which may inadvertently reinforce prejudiced outlooks if divorced from conversations relating to power and inequality. This is especially pertinent as integrated schools operate within a wider education system that foregrounds academic performance, and so teachers may feel ill-prepared to readily engage with such complex issues if it means "sacrificing coverage over material for which both they and their students will later be held accountable" (King, 2009, p. 221). As both schools hold differing integrated status and have developed distinctively within the sector, their seemingly shared struggle to fulfil the sector's aim of developing "mutual respect and understanding" (NICIE, 2022, p. 6) may signal the need for specialist training for teachers, so that they can appropriately identify and respond to both overt and covert 'othering' processes in the classroom, as without genuine acceptance of difference, intercultural objectives cannot be expected to thrive.

Managing Diversity

As Northern Ireland becomes increasingly diverse, integrated schools have a duty to ensure equality "between and within the diverse groups that compose the school community" (NICIE, 2022, p. 3). Though this equality-based aspiration was reflected in the written responses of many participants across both schools, it was not a universal experience. In Hillbank, perceptions of inequality were identifiable, with students referring to what they felt was the preferential treatment of minority background pupils following their school's transformation:

> There is definitely a difference in how different races are treated, we are not treated equally. People in hijabs get to skip lunch

queues and would get prioritised by teachers. (Northern Irish, Protestant/Loyalist, Female)

Staff explained that while Muslim students have a separate canteen to access halal alternatives, they still "queue up just like everyone else" (Claire, Senior Teacher). Interestingly, what Claire explained as making necessary accommodations for pupils' religious identities has been viewed as preferential treatment by some students. These competing narratives not only lend support to the challenges facing transformed schools as they continue the "incremental widening" of their ethos (Topping and Cavanagh, 2016, p. 66), but also demonstrate the practical challenges associated with the delivery of intercultural education: the inherent tension presented between respecting difference and giving recognition to individual identities, while simultaneously encouraging a shared school community. It is also worth noting that all students who referred to unequal treatment belonged to the majority-Protestant community, and so it would appear that "efforts to advance equality between groups have been perceived as threatening" (Shuman *et al.*, 2022, p. 1889), with some pupils viewing integration as a zero-sum process that "just pushes different cultures bar the one that was at Hillbank" (Northern Irish, Protestant/Loyalist, Female). These findings suggest that Hillbank may not have fully communicated the provisions needed to include minority groups into the school community, which may have exacerbated intergroup tensions between majority-culture pupils and those of minority backgrounds, culminating with instances of overt racism where minority pupils reportedly "receive snarky comments from some people that think they can say racial slurs and get away with it" (Black-British, male).

Despite their long-established integrated status, similar experiences of racism were also conveyed in Forestview, with one pupil explaining that "if we are picked on by someone white and from here, nothing will be done" (Arab/White, Female). This was confirmed during the focus group, as students are heard "saying the N-word, and stuff" (Alanna, Irish/Feminist). The occurrence of racist incidences in both contexts, coupled with a shared perception that disciplinary action will not be taken, may bring the responsiveness of staff into question. Indeed, focus group participants from Hillbank felt that staff could be "doing more" by showing pupils "how to start conversations the right way [and] not to be

disrespectful to anyone" (Emma, Loyalist/Protestant), suggesting that the interventions outlined by teachers, including assemblies and class-based learning about diversity, may not platform the dialogic response that students wish for. Though well-intentioned, Hillbank's approach perhaps mirrors the tokenistic responses seen in other transforming schools when dealing with difference (Loader and Hughes, 2025), demonstrating the potentially limiting effects of intercultural education when delivered as an isolated activity, rather than an embedded process (Conti, 2025; Ermenc, 2005). In other words, engaging with intangible concepts like 'diversity' during assembly will provide little opportunity for critical reflection and is, therefore, unlikely to challenge racially prejudiced behaviour in school.

Though focus group participants at Forestview felt that racism is being "actively challenged" (Alanna, Irish/Feminist) by other students, the practices of some staff appear to counteract this:

> Last year [pupil name] was told to do a presentation about Zimbabwe and what his life was like there. But then he got too scared to do it and he asked me to do it. (Eóin, Irish/Nationalist)

Eóin's experience exemplifies how intercultural learning can be hampered when teachers adopt an approach that is too instructive: by *telling* pupils to share their experience, rather than responding to genuine curiosity in the classroom, this makes the learning process feel forced and uncomfortable, especially for minority-background pupils who often have an aversion to "being put on the spot by teachers" (Loader *et al.*, 2023, p. 41). In fact, interculturalists caution against learning activities:

> that other or essentialise non-dominant groups or that, absent from a commitment to social justice, require dominated groups to make themselves ever more vulnerable for the educational benefit of the privileged. (Gorski, 2008, p. 522)

If learning processes like these are replicated across the school, students at Forestview may not fully understand the complex power relations underpinning racial prejudice, potentially hindering their commitment to fostering equality between all pupils "regardless of ability, race, gender or sexual orientation" (NICIE, 2022, p. 2).

Though the impetus for racially prejudiced behaviour may differ in each of these contexts, they share in their contradiction of the integrated ethos and are indicative of how intercultural education is often contingent upon the intercultural competence of the teachers and their ability to facilitate "inclusive classrooms that welcome students from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences" (Cushner and Chang, 2015, p. 4). If integrated schools are expected to respond to divisions including and beyond the 'traditional' Catholic/Protestant dichotomy in an increasingly multiethnic society (NISRA, 2022), staff may wish to actively engage students in critical dialogue examining how racism manifests itself both in school and in wider society, like that proposed by the intercultural education literature (Elias and Mansouri, 2023; Conti, 2025), to aid the development of mutual understanding and respect. This is especially pertinent given that the recently revised legal definition of integrated education (Integrated Education Act, 2022) does not explicitly include individuals of different races and ethnicities, despite growing racial tensions in Northern Ireland.

Combating Misogyny

As integrated schools aim "to promote the self-worth and self-esteem" of pupils when expressing *all* aspects of their identity, including their gender (NICIE, 2022, p. 2), the prevalence of misogynistic attitudes reported across both schools was unanticipated. Focus group participants at Forestview explained how online 'manfluencers' like Andrew Tate have had a "detrimental effect" (Alanna, Irish/Feminist) on their year group, with instances of misogyny ranging from disrespect towards female staff, to more sinister examples of sexualisation, where photos of female students are being added to "porn sites" by their male peers (Ezra, English/Irish, Buddhist). Though not mentioned explicitly by students at Hillbank, Philip (History) explained that male pupils have expressed attitudes towards women that have left him "aghast", and this was attributed to "this whole idea of Andrew Tate". As both schools are located in different areas with distinct enrolment profiles, their shared experience of misogyny suggests that this is a cross-cutting issue, as young boys from a variety of social backgrounds are subject to the same online "algorithms [that] are feeding increasingly violent and misogynistic content" (CSJ, 2025, p. 54). These attitudes are especially troubling when considered alongside the rising rate

of femicide in Northern Ireland, with twenty-nine women and girls murdered since 2020 (Harte, 2025).

Acknowledging that sexist norms are "very deeply ingrained" in Northern Ireland (NICIE, 2021, p. 58), integrated schools are expected to actively address and discourage such attitudes, for which both schools have adopted contrasting approaches. According to Philip (History), Hillbank have deployed a curricular focus on women's issues, specifically relating to suffrage and gender inequality during history class, in the hopes of generating intercultural competences of empathy and understanding. Conversely, Forestview have implemented a school-wide restorative approach:

> We're in a place of learning so it's about educating […] they come in here and we talk about [what they've seen online]. They can say, 'I didn't know that wasn't okay' and then we learn why it's not okay. (Patrick, Pastoral)

Though Forestview's discursive response reflects the restorative practice demonstrated in other integrated contexts (Payne *et al.*, 2010; 2022), this approach may be insufficient for addressing the "virulent strains of hatred and violence directed towards women" that young boys are exposed to online (Haslop *et al.*, 2024, p. 2), as focus group participants admitted that their peers purposely "hold back" their misogynistic behaviour to ensure that "there's no teachers to hear them" (Katie, Irish/Nationalist). In Hillbank, Philip's learning-based attempts also appear to have had little impact, admitting that:

> There's a couple of young bucks now when we're talking about women, [clicks tongue and shakes head] it's not good. (Philip, History)

While integrated education aims to empower "all religions, social and cultural backgrounds, regardless of ability, race, gender and sexual orientation" (NICIE, 2022, p. 2), gender was excluded from the recently reformed legal definition of integrated education (Integrated Education Act, 2022). The dissonance presented between the legal articulation and the sector's stated aims may culminate with the evasion of gender-based divisions in some integrated contexts, potentially hindering the inclusive

environment these schools aim to foster. While addressing the rise of misogyny certainly requires government-level intervention aimed at preventing social media platforms from exploiting their vulnerable and impressionable young audiences (Kumar, 2025), it is nevertheless important to recognise that young people can learn to eschew broader group-based prejudices while leaving harmful attitudes towards women unchanged. Therefore, in the absence of effective system-wide policy, integrated settings may wish to introduce intersectionality-sensitive intercultural education practices in the interim, as both aim at "empowering students as individuals" (Conti, 2025, p. 7; NICIE, 2022, p. 2).

According to the intersectional paradigm, individuals cannot be reduced to a single category (Crenshaw, 1989), and so it is necessary to combine primary categories—for instance, students' community background—alongside factors like their race and/or gender, to ensure that the complexities underpinning their identity are fully realised. In doing so, young people can cultivate their intercultural competences, specifically their empathy towards the unique experiences of others (Deardorff, 2009; Conti, 2025). Dialogic practices could aid this process, perhaps by enhancing the learning processes that are already valued by students, such as 'spectrum debates', to introduce a gendered lens. As both schools are relatively balanced in terms of their gender profile (DENI, 2023/24), this avoids the risk of any individual being spotlighted (Loader *et al.*, 2023) or essentialised (Gorski, 2008), providing the conditions necessary for fruitful dialogue to occur. Such practice could even serve as a precursor for more confrontational intercultural pedagogies, as conversations surrounding gender inequality can broach challenging topics of discrimination and power before the complex intersections associated with intergroup relations come into play, thus creating the micro-foundations for mutual respect and understanding to be engendered.

Conclusion

Amid a renewed policy drive to enhance support for the development of integrated education, NICIE (2024, p. 9) have called for the promotion of a better public understanding of what integrated education entails. Yet the alignment between the challenges identified by this article and those presented by existing research suggests that issues relating to community

balance, avoidance culture and the transformation process persist within these integrated settings. These challenges are further compounded by contemporary issues relating to racism in a more diverse, post-Agreement Northern Ireland, coupled with the rise of online misogyny. Together, these factors pose considerable barriers to the sector's ability to fulfil its stated aims, potentially hampering its overall impact as an educational response to division if left unaddressed.

The question now facing integrated education is how this changing context might impact its mission and delivery. While the reformed legal definition (Integrated Education Act, 2022) now extends beyond Catholic and Protestant relations, its failure to capture race, ethnicity and gender risks leaving public understanding of the sector concentrated at the community level. Intercultural theorists such as Gorski (2008) warn against binary understandings of intercultural education, proposing a more nuanced, intersectional and contextually situated understanding of identity-related issues. Of course, all schools in Northern Ireland have a responsibility to respond to the issues that are affecting and dividing their young people but given the integrated sector's intentional commitment to empowering students "as individuals to affect positive change in a shared society" (NICIE, 2022, p. 2), this duty may be especially pronounced within these educational environments. Therefore, this article aligns with recent calls for a sectoral "review of how 'integration' is understood and communicated" (Loader and Hughes, 2025, p. 76) so that integrated education can respond more effectively to the experiences of young people in a society that is rapidly changing yet remains largely divided along sectarian lines.

However, there are a number of limitations to this study that are important to recognise. As this article considered the responses of only two integrated schools, with a cross-section of Year 11 pupils therein, it cannot be said that the findings will hold throughout both schools, let alone the entirety of the integrated sector. Further, the results presented are contextually situated, and this is important to reflect upon given Northern Ireland's continually changing sociopolitical landscape, bringing with it new challenges and opportunities for integrated education, as well as the schools' respective positions on their 'journey to integration'. Despite these limitations, there are several overlapping experiences detailed by

participants that may resonate with other schools across the sector. More specifically, these findings have helped to illuminate the challenges associated with intercultural education when deployed in divided contexts, as educators grapple with seemingly incompatible aims of respecting difference while also promoting sharedness within a wider education system that prioritises neoliberal objectives of academic performance and interschool competition.

Recognising the challenge placed before educators, the Education Authority have recently worked alongside NICIE to develop a *Framework for Integrated Education* (EA, 2025b). Prompted by the Education and Training Inspectorate's "enhanced focus on the context, ethos and culture of the school or organisation and its vision and values" (ETI, 2024, p. 1), the framework offers:

> a self-evaluation tool designed to help all integrated schools evaluate the nature, extent and quality of their integrated ethos and then set targets for its development. (EA, 2025b, p. 2)

Though the integrated ethos should, in theory, already permeate all aspects of the school (NICIE, 2022; 2021), the ETI's decision may spur intentional engagement with "contemporary issues" (EA, 2025b, p. 7) in classrooms where it currently lacks, including those outlined in this article. In fact, the framework stresses the need for schools to be receptive to "development through effective self-evaluation, planning, monitoring, and review" (EA, 2025b, p. 3), and so the willingness of Hillbank and Forestview to participate in this study should be recognised, as it is indicative of their openness to critical reflection, to better respond to division in Northern Ireland moving forward.

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