

DEMAND FOR INTEGRATED EDUCATION: FINDINGS FROM THE 2024 NORTHERN IRELAND LIFE AND TIMES SURVEY

KEY FINDINGS

The key findings from the 2024 survey were that:

- Regardless of having a school aged child or not, 55% of respondents said they would prefer to send their child to an Integrated school.
- For respondents whose eldest child had ever attended an Integrated primary school in Northern Ireland, 47% reported the Integrated status of the school as an important factor in influencing school choice, and 22% stated this was the most important factor in their choice of primary school
- At post-primary level, 17 out of the 36 respondents whose eldest child currently attended an Integrated post-primary school in Northern Ireland stated that the Integrated status of the school was an important factor in determining choice of post-primary school. Four respondents stated it was the most important factor.
- School choice for primary and post-primary schools is driven by a range of factors, with the most important being the quality of education, the accessibility of the school and proximity to home, regardless of the Integrated status of a school.
- Geographical variation in Integrated school attendance is evident. Attendance at an Integrated primary or post-primary school was highest among those living in an urban area. 'No Integrated school being nearby' was cited as a reason for not attending an Integrated primary and/or post-primary school, even if respondents' preference would have been for their child to attend such a school type

INTRODUCTION

1. Since The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, a statutory framework has placed responsibility upon the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate Integrated education. The Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 extended this framework outlining that the Department of Education and the Education Authority are responsible for encouraging, facilitating, and supporting Integrated education.
2. Along with the development of policies, the definition of Integrated education has changed over time. The first definition was provided by The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 as educating Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils together at school. However, more recent reports such as the Independent Review of Integrated Education recommended an update to the definition of Integrated education to reflect “Northern Ireland’s changing demographic and increasing diversity” (Topping and Cavanagh, 2017, p.25). The definition has most recently been expanded in the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 (‘The Act’). The Act defines Integrated education as educating together “those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons; those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not; and those of different abilities”.
3. The purpose of Integrated education, according to the Act is to: deliver educational benefits to children and young persons; promote awareness and appreciation of human rights; promote equality of opportunity; promote good relations, and promote respect for identity, diversity and community cohesion.
4. Section 5 and Section 6 of the Act outline the duties of the Department of Education and Education Authority in monitoring and ascertaining the demand for Integrated education in Northern Ireland, which is defined as “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” (Section 6). However, there is currently no agreed methodology on how to monitor or ascertain demand (Department of Education, 2023), though such data are required to ensure an accurate assessment of demand for Integrated education over time.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

5. The overall aims of this report were to:

- To examine the attitudes and preferences for Integrated education;
- Investigate factors influencing school choice.

MAIN FINDINGS

6. The main findings from the 2024 survey were that:

- Overall, a small majority of respondents (55%) said that they would prefer an Integrated school, with 17% saying that they would not prefer this. However, 23% said that they had no preference and 5% said that they did not know.
- Nearly one quarter (23%) of respondents had children at primary or post-primary school in Northern Ireland (NI) at the time that the fieldwork was conducted. These respondents were then asked to think about the type of primary school that their eldest child attended. Nearly one quarter (23%) of these children were currently or had ever attended an Integrated primary school, with a further 71% attending another type of school in Northern Ireland. 3% said that their children did not attend primary school in Northern Ireland, and a similar proportion said that they didn't know the type of primary school that they attended.
- When those respondents with an eldest child who attended/attends an Integrated primary school were asked what the most important factor was when deciding on a school, quality of education was stated by one half of respondents (52%).
- When those respondents with an eldest child who did not attend an Integrated primary school were asked what the most important factor was when deciding on a school, quality of education was stated by 72% of respondents
- Of those parents whose eldest child did not/does not attend an Integrated primary school, four in ten said that they would have liked them to attend an Integrated primary school. Conversely, 32% said that they would not have liked that. However, over one quarter of respondents (28%) said that they did not know.

- The 78 parents who would have liked their child to attend an Integrated primary school were asked why this did not happen. The most commonly identified reason was that there was no Integrated primary school nearby (66%).
- Those respondents whose child did not attend an Integrated primary school in Northern Ireland were asked if they would have wanted their child's primary school to transform to be an Integrated school. While 41% said that they would, 33% said they would not and a quarter of respondents (26%) said that they did not know.
- For children not attending Integrated post primary schools, again, quality of education was most commonly identified important factor when making the decision about their child's school (71%).
- One third (34%) of respondents said that they would have liked their child to attend an Integrated post-primary school, 40% said they would not have liked this, and one quarter (26%) said that they did not know.
- Those respondents whose child did not attend an Integrated post-primary school in Northern Ireland were asked if they would have wanted their child's post-primary school to transform to be an Integrated school. While 38% said that they would, a similar proportion (35%) said that they did not, and a further 26% said that they did not know.

CONCLUSION

7. The school system in Northern Ireland is complex, as are the factors that parents consider when choosing a school for their child. This is clearly reflected in the data from the 2024 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey. The results highlight that although the Integrated status of a school is important to parents when decisions are made about the school their child should attend, it is only one factor, and not necessarily the most important, influencing their choice.
8. The key trends from the 2024 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey highlight that the quality of education provided by the school, how easy it was to travel to the school, its proximity to home, and the facilities of the school were the most important factors in parental choice of primary and post-primary school, even when accounting for the Integrated status (or non-Integrated status) of the school. However, this does not mean the Integrated status of the school is irrelevant. Indeed 47% of respondents whose eldest child had ever attended an Integrated primary school in Northern Ireland, and 17 out of 37 respondents whose eldest child was currently attending an Integrated post-primary school stated that this was an important factor. The findings suggest it is pertinent to understand the importance placed upon the Integrated status of a school within the wider, more complex landscape where educational and logistical factors are central to parental decision making. The analysis clearly shows that one factor does not determine school choice.
9. Reasons for preferring an Integrated school varied according to where the respondent lived. For example, attendance at an Integrated primary school or an Integrated post-primary school was higher among respondents living in urban areas than those in rural areas. This aligns with findings from Roulston and Cook (2021) who reported that Integrated schools are not convenient for many households in Northern Ireland. That research found that 11% of households are within one mile of an Integrated primary school, while 22% are more than six miles from the nearest Integrated primary school. A similar trend was reported for post-primary schools. Among NILT respondents, two thirds of parents who stated that they would have liked their child to attend an Integrated primary school reported that the key reason the child did not do so was because there was no Integrated primary school nearby. In particular, this was the case for the majority of those living in a rural area.

10. Overall, the findings of this report indicate that the landscape for choosing a primary or post-primary school in Northern Ireland is complex. It is not just one factor such as the Integrated status of a school that influences parental choice. The importance placed by parents on the quality of education and accessibility of a school is consistent at both primary and post-primary level. There is also concern about appropriate SEN provision. Thus, how the school meets the totality of needs of the child is also an important area for consideration, especially under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

METHODOLOGY

Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey

11. The 2024 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey involved 1,199 respondents aged 18 years or over. The survey was administered using Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI). However, respondents were also given the option of completing the survey by phone, thus allowing the survey to be as inclusive as possible. The 2024 survey received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast, where the survey coordinator (Dr Paula Devine) is based.
12. Fieldwork was undertaken by Ipsos, and this contract was awarded after a public tender process. Data collection was conducted between 6th September 2024 and 19th November 2024. The fieldwork comprised two phases. Firstly, a pilot survey was undertaken to assess the reliability and accuracy of the questionnaire and the script, and to allow for any changes to be made ahead of the mainstage fieldwork. Question wording and understanding were tested, along with any routing and filtering. Secondly, the mainstage fieldwork was launched with minor changes to the questionnaire, including amendments to questions and response options. During fieldwork, data was continuously quality assured to ensure the highest quality of the final outputs.
13. The sample for the 2024 NILT survey consisted of a stratified random sample of addresses selected from the Postcode Address File (PAF) database of addresses. This database is considered the most comprehensive and up-to-date address listing available in the UK. The PAF, maintained by Royal Mail, is the most widely used sample frame for high-quality social surveys in the UK and contains a list of all delivery points in the country. A random sample was drawn for each Local Government District (LGD) to achieve the desired sample size of 8,000 addresses, distributed proportionally across the 11 LGDs. The Postcode Address File (PAF) provides a good sampling frame of addresses, however, it lacks information on household size, thus requiring further selection processes to be applied to convert the listing of addresses to a listing of individuals, from which, one person (the 'selected respondent') can be chosen to complete the survey.
14. In order to ensure representation of the Northern Ireland population, a weight factor was created, based on age, sex and LGD.

THE PROJECT

15. The project was undertaken by ARK (QUB) and funded by the Department of Education. The total cost of the project was £22,850.

16. The full research report entitled 'Demand for Integrated Education: Findings from the 2024 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey' is available on the Department of Education website at [DE Website - Research Publications](#).

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The nature of Youth Work in Northern Ireland: purpose, contribution and challenges	RB 2/2005
Parental attitudes to the statutory assessment and statementing procedures on Special Educational Needs	RB 3/2005
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Effective Pre School Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Pre-School Experience and Key Stage 2 Performance in English and Mathematics	RB 1/2010
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Study into how the education system can improve the attendance of looked after children at post-primary school	RB 1/2011
Research into the Nature and Extent of Pupil Bullying in Schools in the North of Ireland	RB 2/2011
Needs assessment and feasibility study for the development of high level diagnostic tools in Irish for children with special educational needs in the Irish medium sector	RB 1/2012
Research into Improving Attendance in Schools Serving Deprived Areas	RB 2/2012
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Attitudes to Shared Education: Findings from the 2020/21 Young Life and Times and Kids' Life and Times surveys	RB 1/2022
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