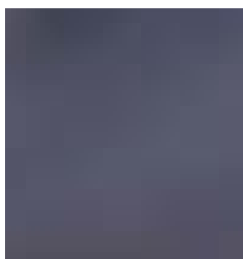
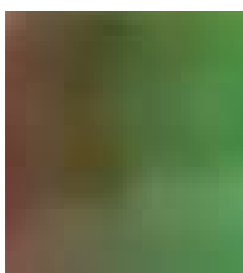




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The Education and Training Inspectorate  
Promoting Improvement



February 2024

How effectively are children being prepared    
for living in, and contributing to, a **DIVERSE SOCIETY?**

THE VIEWS OF LEARNERS AND LEADERS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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# 1. Introduction

Building trust between different people and groups within societies has been identified as a defining challenge for our times.

**António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations (2021)**

Globalisation is changing the world in which we live. As demographic, environmental, technological and other factors create rapid change to our local and global communities, we all must learn to live in a more complex, interconnected world. Northern Ireland is also changing rapidly. There is clear

evidence that we are becoming increasingly diverse. For example, the 2021 census indicated that 65,600 people belonged to [minority ethnic groups](#); this was around double the 2011 figure and four times the 2001 figure. The 2021 census also noted that the number of people with a limiting long-term [health problem or disability](#) had increased by 23.6% from 374,600 people in 2011 to 463,000 people in 2021. The 2021 census was the first in Northern Ireland to explore [sexual orientation](#) and reported that 2.1 per cent of the population identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or other. In this context of increasing diversity, the need to build acceptance of difference is underpinned by the most recent [Police Service of Northern Ireland statistics](#) for hate-motivated incidents and crimes.

As a society, we have a collective responsibility to build a peaceful and shared society. It is crucial that we, and future generations, live and progress together through developing an empathetic understanding of others and an appreciation of interdependence at both local and global levels. Our children and young people need to be prepared to respond to challenges now, and in the future, as informed and active citizens. Consequently, the opportunities provided by schools to help children and young people acquire and develop the understanding, knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help them contribute to building a fair, equitable and peaceful society are crucial.

The understanding, knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to participate effectively in a diverse society have been defined as [‘global competence’](#) by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD definition of global competence includes openness towards people from other cultural backgrounds, respect for cultural differences and global mindedness. The OECD notes that globally competent individuals can examine local, global and inter-cultural issues, understand and appreciate different perspectives and world views, interact successfully and respectfully with others, and take responsible action for collective wellbeing and sustainability.



The [OECD reported](#) that *‘the global competence of our youths today may shape our future as profoundly as their reading, math and science skills’*. The importance of global competence was recognised in the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which included for the first time, an assessment of global competence. Among the key findings of this [assessment report](#) were that:

- young people have the capacity and willingness to engage with global issues - but taking action needs active teacher support; and
- including global issues and intercultural learning in the curriculum is not enough - building teachers’ global competence is essential.

The promotion of a culture of peace, non-violence and global citizenship was also highlighted in the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) adopted by the United Nations in 2015. These goals articulated a shared plan to end poverty, reduce inequality and protect the planet. Goal number 4, which focuses on quality education, notes that by 2030, all learners should acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development. Furthermore, the United Nations vision for quality education, shared at the 2022 [Transforming Education Summit](#), affirmed that education has a key role in preparing learners to ‘fulfil their responsibilities to their societies and to be active and responsible citizens in their own communities, in their countries and, in the world’.

## 2. Legislative background and policy context

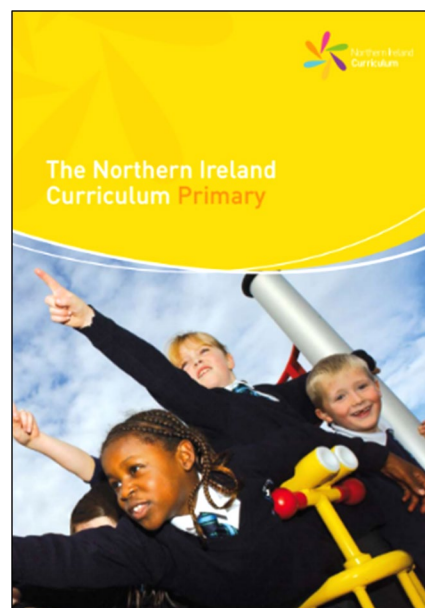


The [Children’s Services Co-operation Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2015](#) highlighted the importance of society to the wellbeing of children and young people. For example, the Act states that wellbeing includes living in safety and with stability; making a positive contribution to society; living in a society which respects rights, and in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted.

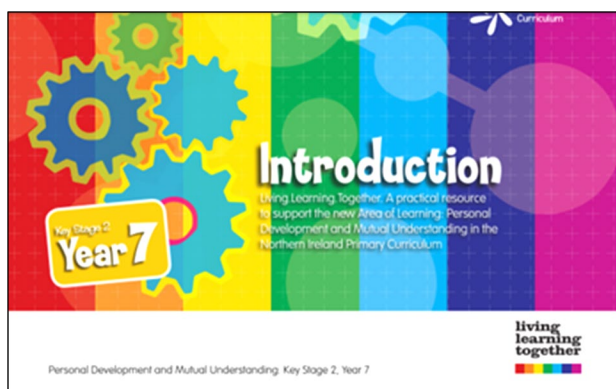
The [Children and Young People’s Strategy \(2020-2030\)](#) notes that children and young people have a central role in creating a society in which diversity is respected and where people of all backgrounds are acknowledged and feel valued and should be encouraged, helped and supported by adults to create a shared society where people feel welcome and difference is

accepted. The Department of Education’s [Corporate Plan 2023-28, Every CHILD](#) underpins this through its priority of ‘inspiring all our children and young people to make a positive contribution to society’.

The [Northern Ireland Curriculum \(NIC\)](#) aims to empower children and young people to develop their potential and to make informed and responsible choices and decisions throughout their lives. The learning opportunities provided should help children and young people develop as: individuals, contributors to society and contributors to the economy and environment. The NIC specifies the key elements which should be infused across all areas of learning; these include citizenship, cultural understanding, media and ethical awareness. The NIC also identifies a range of attitudes and dispositions that should be fostered and developed such as concern for others, community spirit, tolerance and respect.



The curriculum for the three primary key stages is set out in six areas of learning, one of which is Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU). PDMU plays a crucial role in supporting children to develop as contributors to society. Strand 2 specifies the statutory requirements related to mutual understanding in the local and global community. These requirements include age and stage appropriate statements for learning about



relationships, similarities and differences, managing conflict, human rights and social responsibility and valuing and celebrating cultural difference and diversity.

To support the teaching of PDMU in primary schools, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) developed the [Living. Learning. Together.](#) resource, which covers both PDMU strands.

### 3. Focus of this exploratory evaluation

The purpose of this exploratory evaluation by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) was to review, and share effective practice of, how the mutual understanding strand is preparing children for living in, and contributing to, a diverse society. This report is informed by discussions with school leaders and groups of children, as well as review of documentation shared with the inspectors and a review of the CCEA resources which support learning and teaching for mutual understanding. Due to ongoing industrial action by the teaching unions, there were no observations of lessons.

A total of twelve primary schools participated in this exploratory evaluation and were visited by inspectors between March and May 2023. The schools were provided with information about the exploratory evaluation and the key areas for discussion prior to the visit. Inspectors engaged with 18 leaders (principals, vice-principals and PDMU coordinators) from the twelve primary schools and held discussions with 88 children across ten of these schools. We would like to thank the schools who supported this work.

## 4. Key findings

### 4.1 Are schools committed to mutual understanding?

- All of the leaders with whom the inspectors met, were highly committed to the promotion of mutual understanding; this was often cited as being central to the work and life of the school and linked to the school's ethos and/or vision. Leaders discussed their work to create a culture of respect for, and acceptance of, everyone. Frequently, personal experiences (for example, growing up during the 'Troubles') contributed to the leaders' views on the importance of enabling children to become caring, compassionate, and responsible adults. Leaders viewed mutual understanding as being very important for the children's relationships and general wellbeing.
- In all of the schools visited, the children with whom the inspectors met, valued diversity and demonstrated empathy towards, and an acceptance of, others. One child commented *'Don't judge someone when you first meet them, get to know them'*. Another child reported that, *'We are all different, but we respect everyone'*. Others recognised the similarities between religious and cultural traditions; for example, children discussed the common features of Lent and Ramadan.

### 4.2 What are the benefits for children?

- The children in these schools are developing well the understanding, knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help them live in, and contribute to, a diverse society. They demonstrated a very good understanding of diversity and articulated clearly how people can be different and/or similar, for example, by eye colour, race, religion, disability, and gender.
- The children reported that they benefitted from learning about diversity, which helped them to:
  - develop their own confidence and resilience;
  - empathise with others;
  - deal appropriately with any conflict; and
  - have better communication skills, in particular talking and listening.
- The children were generally aware of justice, injustice, and social responsibility. For example, in some of the discussions, they talked about supporting Fair Trade and the negative impact on others/the environment of buying cheaper goods. Most of the children had a very good understanding of their responsibility to promote fairness and support others who face challenges.

- Where school- and eco-councils councils existed, the children generally had a good understanding of the principles of democracy, the importance of using their vote wisely and of electing peers who would work to improve school life for everyone. In three of the schools, children had linked with their local councils to learn from public representatives.
- In four of the schools visited, leaders spoke about delivering lessons on the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child. In discussions, the children in these schools demonstrated a very good knowledge of human- and child- rights and a solid understanding of their importance.
- In discussions with the inspectors, all of the children demonstrated very well the attitudes and dispositions of the NIC big picture such as concern for others, respect, and community spirit. The children described how they applied their learning to make a tangible difference to others. Across the schools, activities included:
  - local and global charitable activities such as collecting food for the local food bank, fundraising for street children in Mexico and long-term sponsorship of the education of children in Africa;
  - promoting equity through, for example the School Council working out plans for fair access to playground space and equipment; and
  - responding positively to local issues, for example, in one school, children explored the impact of vandalism in the local playpark on the community.

### **4.3 How are schools developing mutual understanding?**

- Mutual understanding is typically developed through a cross-curricular approach rather than bespoke lessons, which provide a meaningful context for the learning. The key area of learning identified was the World Around Us, with the history strand being the most common vehicle for learning about mutual understanding. History was valued by these schools as highly useful for exploring different perspectives and viewpoints including the following examples:
  - some of the schools are engaging in challenging work around different perceptions of events such as the Easter Rising, the Battle of the Somme and the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement;
  - in the context of the Irish famine, children are exploring the causes of modern famine and their responsibility to help those in need; and
  - in learning about the Titanic, children are investigating the treatment of passengers in different steerage classes.

- The leaders talked about how class novels are utilised to promote the children's understanding of challenging themes such as racism, disability, homelessness, illiteracy, and arranged marriage.
- Across these schools, there is generally a good balance of local and global issues. The schools are responsive to the children's interest in contemporary issues, such as poverty in the local community, the war in Ukraine and the earthquake in Syria/Turkey.
- A wide range of external/additional programmes are used to support mutual understanding. For example, the leaders reported that programmes such as [Roots of Empathy](#) developed the children's understanding of the needs of others.
- The leaders talked about the importance of creating effective partnerships with parents and members of different ethnic communities to support the children's understanding of diversity. For example, they discussed how parents had visited classrooms to talk about how they celebrate religious festivals such as Diwali and Ramadan.
- Leaders described how active and experiential learning approaches supported the development of empathy. These approaches included 'hot-seating', small group discussions and courtroom situations, where children researched and presented evidence to support different points of view.
- The schools reported that the Living. Learning. Together resource is still used widely but would benefit from being updated. They have actively sought out resources produced elsewhere and would welcome the creation of bespoke local resources relating to history and contemporary local and global issues.

#### 4.4 How are leaders promoting mutual understanding?

- In the schools visited, mutual understanding is afforded high value and importance by the leaders, with these schools actively seeking out programmes and funding to support this work. Often, the schools had a long history of being involved in cross-community, north-south and global programmes which highlighted their commitment to mutual understanding. The importance of active citizenship is embedded within the mission statements and aims of the schools.
- Generally, provision for mutual understanding is mapped, monitored, and reviewed by co-ordinators and reported to senior leaders in these schools. In the most effective practice, planners are evaluated monthly by the PDMU co-ordinator and feedback to staff is provided.
- Leaders talked about the importance of reflecting mutual understanding in school policies. For example, uniform policy had been reviewed in several schools in order to promote greater equality.



- The leaders reported on high levels of consultation with children and parents though, for example, focus groups and surveys. Feedback was used to inform the provision for PDMU.
- Commitment to achieving the [Rights Respecting School Award](#) in one school had led to significant learning about the importance of respecting the rights of all.
- Schools reported that the delivery of mutual understanding requires specialist teacher professional learning and support from the Education Authority (EA), particularly in relation to building capacity to manage sensitive and controversial matters in the classroom.

#### 4.5 What are the main challenges for mutual understanding?

- Some of the schools reported that due to the impact of Covid-19, more children are presenting with emotional difficulties which has led the schools to focus more on personal development (Strand 1) than mutual understanding (Strand 2).
- In some of the schools visited, both leaders and children identified the demographics of the school communities and local area as resulting in limited exposure to children from other faiths and backgrounds.
- In one school, for example, staff reported that while they were committed to embracing diversity, this was at times, challenged by parental and community views. It was reported some prejudice towards newcomer children, asylum seekers and their families had been expressed. In this school, the staff required courage and commitment in dealing with this challenge.

## 5. Conclusion

The commitment to creating a culture of respect for, and acceptance of, diversity was evident in all of the schools visited, with mutual understanding being valued, and embraced, by the learners and the leaders. The evidence indicated that overall, the children in the schools who participated in this exploratory evaluation are being prepared well for living in, and contributing to, an increasingly diverse society.

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Improvement  
Stepping Forward Together

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