



Photography by Aengus McMahon

Taking Integration
to a New Level

**Cranmore
Integrated
Primary
School**

Cranmore Integrated Primary School is located in South Belfast and is one of the network of schools The Ireland Funds have assisted throughout Northern Ireland.



The concept of “integrated education” has long been associated with the coming together of Protestant and Catholic children to bridge understanding. While Cranmore IPS very much embodies that coming together, they are also proud of the integration of diverse cultures and abilities within their student body. In particular, a focus on children with special needs is one of their key priorities. Kevin Curley of Texas has partnered with The American Ireland Fund to assist Cranmore IPS and in particular, to enable a “Sensory Room” within the school to serve this special group of children. *Connect* magazine visited Cranmore IPS and watched three children benefit from this unique offering. To the visitor the room simply looks like a colorful, calming playspace filled with lights, motion, and textures. But School Principal Hamilton explained that each element had been chosen after research of other successful special needs programs.

The Sensory Room

As Explained by School Principal Helen Hamilton

“The integration and inclusion of children with special educational needs are at the heart of our school ethos; and so over the years, we have attracted an increasing number of children with significant behavioural difficulties related to Asperger’s Syndrome. This has presented a huge challenge for us as, in the past, lack of understanding and knowledge often made life more uncomfortable for these children.

The Sensory Room provides activities that focus on specific senses such as vision and touch. It nurtures the well-being and sense of togetherness in the children who use the room. It enables them to engage in physical play and exploration and provides them with opportunities for relaxing, stimulation, communication and the release of stress. It also provides respite for their class teachers and peers who are benefiting from calmer classrooms.

Achieving good practice is not easy and the levels of one-to-one support is quite labour intensive but giving the classroom assistants autonomy and responsibility for designing the activities, reviewing and evaluating the children’s experiences has brought about huge professional development for them. They continually review and evaluate children’s learning and make decisions about how this can be complemented by

classroom learning activities. All children go to the Sensory Room twice daily for fifteen minutes each time with two classroom assistants. These sessions are not used as a reward strategy for completing work or for appropriate behaviour but an entitlement of the child.

Detailed observations, children’s comments and anecdotal evidence leads us to believe that each child benefits differently. It is evident that the children are less stressed by school and that they are more controlled, motivated and engaged in their learning. We have not witnessed an outburst of challenging behaviour for some time.

The setting up of the Sensory Room has helped our children to participate in the world around them and to respond to its challenges appropriately. We are embracing the spirit of the proposals for special needs and inclusion by providing equality of opportunity for all our pupils; and a more personalised learning approach for those whose needs require it. The last word on evaluation should go to the P5 pupil who said: ‘I am so happy to have a magnificent sensory room, it really calms me down.’”

■ The American Ireland Fund in partnership with key donors has granted over \$100,000 to Cranmore IPS. *Connect* magazine spoke with donor Kevin Curley whose Shamrock Shootout Golf Tournament has benefitted the programs at Cranmore IPS about his support of integrated education, the focus on the sensory room and what working with The American Ireland Fund has meant to him.



Kevin Curley
with students
from Cranmore
Integrated
Primary School

Q: *Why have you chosen to partner with The American Ireland Fund in your support of integrated education?*

A: The American Ireland Fund is a tremendous organization with great people and leadership. They have set a worldwide example for countries to engage and reengage the diaspora. There is a sense of purpose and camaraderie that is rare for any organization. I attribute that to the high performance leadership of the AIF and the like-minded supporters all over the world.

Q: *Why have you made such a personal investment in integrated education in Northern Ireland?*

A: We first met supporters of the Integrated Education Fund in France and we were quite taken with the concept of Catholic and Protestant children going to school together and becoming a major part of the long term solution in Northern Ireland. I am Catholic and attended Catholic schools most of my life. My wife on the other hand is Protestant so we immediately connected with the IEF concept of integrating the two faiths.

Q: *You have visited Cranmore IPS and have supported several programs here. What is special about this school?*

A: We were seeking to support Cranmore because we wanted to get behind a specific school and build a relationship with that school. I have met Helen the principal and found her to be highly energetic and a great leader for the Cranmore community. The children were fantastic and we look forward to our own children visiting Cranmore in the near future.



For more information on Cranmore Integrated Primary School and its innovative programs visit www.irlfunds.org/connect



