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The story of Catholic schools in Northern Ireland: past, present and possible future

Gallagher, A. (2018). The story of Catholic schools in Northern Ireland: past, present and possible future. In T. P. Burgess (Ed.), *The contested identities of Ulster Catholics* (pp. 93-110). Palgrave Macmillan.

Published in:

The contested identities of Ulster Catholics

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

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The past, present and possible future of Catholic schools in Northern Ireland

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If the 1798 Rebellion highlighted the problem of trying to govern a country in which a Catholic majority was ruled by a Protestant minority, the 1801 Act of Union was an attempt to address this by shifting parliamentary representation to London. Even if the Catholics were then given the vote, they would always be a controllable minority in Westminster. Or so was the plan. Even though a commitment to extending the franchise to Catholics had been part of the deal underpinning the Act of Union, George III refused to support it on the grounds it would violate his coronation oath to defend the Protestant faith. The consequence was the rise of Daniel O'Connell and agitation for Catholic Emancipation, followed by a demand for Home Rule for Ireland. This also contributed to the increasingly sectarian character of Irish politics: the Irish Catholic interest gravitated around Home rule and nationalism, while the Protestant minority on the island gravitated towards Unionism, or defence of the Union between Great Britain and Ireland. No-where was this more acute than in the north east of the country where a local Protestant majority saw no emotional, cultural or religious affinity with Irish nationalism. The fact that this region was industrialised meant that all economic logic pointed to maintaining the Union to keep open access to the global market provided by the British Empire.

In 1836 the administrators in Dublin Castle saw value in developing a National System of schools. Such education as existed was largely controlled by the Churches, but Dublin Castle saw a possibility that the new National System of schools could act as an integrating force to bring the country together. When invitations were issued for applications to establish schools in the National System, it was declared that preference would be given to applications involving joint bids by representatives of different denominations. Another rule was that religious instruction was to be provided outside normal school hours and clergy from any denomination would have the right to access any school to provide religious instruction to children of their faith community. These aspirations were to be short-lived: Presbyterians in the North objected to the possibility that Catholic priests could enter their schools and sought the right to organise schools for Presbyterians alone. The Catholic Church was happy to follow suit and so very quickly the National Schools took on a decidedly denominational character. Inter alia, Catholic influence on education increased over time, largely due to sheer weight of numbers (Akenson, 1970).

The Home Rule crisis in the early 20th century was to change everything and even though nationalists protested against the idea of partitioning the country, some form of partition had effectively been conceded in the negotiations before the outbreak of the First World War. As the country moved towards partition it was equally clear that one of the great areas of concern for the Catholic Church lay in the treatment of their schools in a new Northern Ireland governed by Unionists (Phoenix, 1994). When partition did occur many nationalists supported a strategy of 'non-recognition' of the new Northern Ireland government. This has significant implications for education policy not least because one of the first acts of the new government was to establish the Lynn Commission to bring forward recommendations for the future organization of schools. The Bishops declined to nominate any representatives to the group and so the deliberations proceeded without any Catholic input. A more immediate consequence was that a significant proportion of Catholic schools refused to engage with the new Ministry of Education at all and, for a short time, the salaries of their teachers were paid from Dublin (Akenson, 1973; Farren, 1995).

The predominant view among the Unionist government at this time was to move away from the denominational arrangements which characterized the National School system and towards something more akin to English practice in which Local Authorities owned and managed schools. The recommendations of the Lynn Commission broadly reflected this preference, suggesting arrangements through which the Churches should transfer their schools to Local Authority ownership, though their recommendations on religious education were somewhat confused and controversial. The Minister of Education, Lord Londonderry, felt their recommendations came too close to creating two types of denominational schools, one Protestant and one Catholic, but with only the former fully funded by the State. His proposals in the 1923 Education Act removed this ambiguity to the extent that it required that religious education be provided outside the normal school day and that no religious test could be applied for the recruitment of teachers in State schools. His hope was that the Protestant Churches would quickly hand their schools over to the new Local Authorities. He had no expectation that the Catholic Church would follow suit, but there was an attempt to offer a 'middle way' in which schools could accept some level of public representation in return additional levels of public grant. In fact the Catholic Church denounced the new State schools as 'godless' institutions and maintained their distance from the Ministry.

More surprisingly the Protestant Churches also declined to hand their schools over and agitated for a series of concessions: these included amendments which removed the ban on religious education during school hours, provided local control over the appointment of teachers and the removal of the ban on religious tests, and automatic rights of representation on School Boards for the Churches if they handed their schools over to Local Authorities. By 1930, and over Londonderry's objections, these concessions were given. For all practical purposes the new State schools had become de facto Protestant schools and were fully funded (Akenson, 1973). The parallel system of Catholic schools was offered a small increase in grant, but was still in a less favourable position. This increase in the level of grant was cited by the Ministry as evidence of fair treatment, on the grounds that it offered Catholic schools in Northern Ireland better conditions in comparison with Catholic schools in England. For the Bishops, however, the fact that Catholic schools in Northern Ireland now were treated less favourably in comparison with arrangements in the National system before partition, was the focus of their anger. Not for the first, or last, time both sides of the argument looked to different criteria and arrived at different conclusions.

The next significant moment in education policy arose after the Second World War when expansion was part of a widely adopted policy of educational reconstruction across Europe. In England the terms of this debate had been set by a series of reports published in the pre-war period, but they found expression in the 1944 Education Act which delineated primary and secondary stages of education and, for the first time, made secondary education available free (Barber, 1994). Although there were debates in parliament on whether secondary education should be organized on selective or comprehensive grounds, the pre-war reports had largely come down in favour of a selective system and that was what emerged in 1944. Schools would be organized into separate grammar, technical and vocational schools, and only those pupils who achieved 'pass marks' on selective tests would gain places in the academically-oriented grammar schools.

A broadly similar arrangement was adopted in Northern Ireland in the 1947 Education Act, but whereas in England most of the debate focused on the issue of academic selection, in Northern Ireland it was dominated by denominational concerns. The Protestant Churches were unhappy because even though the 1947 Act continued previous arrangements for religious education, it also included a conscience clause for teachers. Unlike the 1930s, however, the Unionist Government did not concede on this point,

possibly because of advice from the Attorney General that to do so may be ultra vires the discrimination clauses in the 1920 Government of Ireland Act. The Catholic Church was unhappy and argued that the level of capital grant was so low that it imposed an unduly heavy burden on the community and made it unlikely that they could build new secondary schools to the desired timetable. The Ministry conceded the issue of capital grants and agreed an increase in the level of grant aid. Even with this, the cost to the Church and community and meeting their 'voluntary contribution' to capital costs meant there was a time lag in the growth of new secondary schools, to the disadvantage of the Catholic schools. More generally, the parallel school systems that had been established in the 1920s was rolled forward to the secondary and grammar schools. The burden of the voluntary contribution did, however, mean that the Catholic Church did not devote resources to supporting nursery schools or special schools, which partly explains why these sectors are, today, generally mixed in terms of the religion of their pupils (Osborne et al, 1992/3).

By the 1960s a new mood was evident in Western Europe - economic growth, Vatican II, the election of John F Kennedy as US President, the rise of pop music and the hippies – all seemed to presage a new age of optimism and hope, and rather astonishingly this was echoed in Northern Ireland. A Unionist Prime Minister visited a Catholic convent for the first time, and perhaps even more significantly, met the Taoiseach of the Republic of Ireland. The Nationalist Party accepted the role of Official Opposition in the Northern Ireland Parliament. And the Catholic Bishops agreed a deal with the Ministry of Education that, in effect, meant they accepted arrangements that had been on the table since 1923. From this point all Catholic schools would accept public representatives onto the School Boards and would receive an increased level of public grant. In a quid pro quo, the role of the Protestant Churches was confirmed for all State schools, even when the schools had never been transferred from the ownership of the Churches. But just as the parallelism of the school system was being confirmed, Northern Ireland fell apart as protest marches for Civil Rights collapsed into riots and disorder, and the British Army was sent in by the London government to stabilize an increasingly unstable political situation. The British Army in turn provided a target for resurgence Republican paramilitary groups, which in turn provoked the organization of Loyalist paramilitary groups. Within a few short years Northern Ireland had collapsed into virtual civil war and would not emerge into peace for almost thirty years (Darby, 1997).

As the political disorder spread many commentators wondered if separate schools for Protestants and Catholics had contributed to community divisions and suggested that a common system of religiously integrated schools might be most propitious way forward (Heskin, 1980). The Head of the Catholic Church in Ireland, Cardinal Conway, had published a pamphlet which sought to challenge this assumption, arguing for the holistic experience provided by Catholic schools and its continuity with family life. He argued that only in an environment where teachers and pupils shared the same beliefs, and these were reflected in the character and atmosphere of the school, could a true Catholic education be provided (Conway, 1970). Whatever one thinks of this argument it was noteworthy that the Civil Rights Campaign in Northern Ireland had focused on claims that the Catholic minority suffered discrimination in relation to employment, housing and political rights. Despite being heavily modelled on the US Civil Rights Movement, the Northern Ireland campaign never highlighted separate schools as an issue or proposed 'desegregation' of schools as a goal. Indeed, apart from those commentators who argued that common schools might act as a binding force for society, some unionists argued that State schools were open to all young people, and that Catholic schools should be dissolved or run as entirely private institutions (Ulster Unionist party, 1968). In the event there was no consensus on the effects of separate schools, save from a tacit acceptance by many that schools should act in some way to promote tolerance and reconciliation. Even this was not a view held by all, however: some felt that schools should act as oases of calm and provide respite for a society that seemed to be tearing itself apart. From

this perspective schools should provide an escape from the harsh reality of an increasingly divided society, even if, at the end of the school day, children would return to that harsh reality.

For those educators who felt some more pro-active approach was required a variety of interventions were pursued. The earliest, and most enduring, involved the development of common curriculums and textbooks in such areas as the teaching of history, religion, mutual understanding and, more recently, citizenship. Another early intervention involved taking groups of young Protestants and Catholics from violence-afflicted areas away on holiday together, using the effects of contact to defray myths and stereotypes. Later the contact approach was taken up by schools and pupils engaged in joint projects. Later still this was linked to the curriculum and schools were encouraged, but not required, to use contact as one element of the programme of education for mutual understanding. In 1981 the first planned Integrated school was opened, with seven staff and 28 pupils. There had been legislation in the 1970s which had permitted existing schools to change to Integrated status, but despite lots of rhetorical support, no school successfully navigated the transition. The 1981 initiative was prompted by parents seeking to prove that an Integrated school could thrive, and it did, and over the next decade another dozen or so of these schools opened (Gallagher, 2004).

The year 1989 provided to be a pivotal point for education in Northern Ireland, for a variety of reasons. The IRA hunger-strikes of the early 1980s had ratcheted up political and community tensions, and changed the political landscape. In its aftermath there appeared to be a recognition that there was no military solution to the Northern Ireland problem and that some political resolution had to be found. Three particular developments came together in an unexpected way, one focused on the issue of equal opportunity for Catholics, the other two related to different aspects of education reform.

The British Government's immediate response to the Troubles in Northern Ireland had been to pass a series of reform measures to address issues raised by the Civil Rights campaign. The last significant measure was the 1976 Fair Employment Act which outlawed direct discrimination on the basis of religion or political opinion. In 1973 the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights (SACHR) had been established to advise the Secretary of State on the human rights aspects of legislation and policy. In 1987 SACHR published a critical analysis of the effectiveness of the 1976 Fair Employment Act (SACHR, 1987), highlighting the continuing significance of the 'unemployment gap' between Protestants and Catholics such that the latter were about twice as likely as the former to be unemployed and this was one of the factors leading to the passage of strengthened fair employment legislation, including a statutory requirement on employers to monitor the religious composition of their workforces annually, in 1989. The SACHR report had examined a number of contributory factors to the unemployment gap between Protestants and Catholics including the role of education. Most significant was evidence which suggested that, on average, leavers from Catholic schools had lower qualifications than leavers from Protestant schools, and it was suggested that may have impacted on labour market opportunity and the unemployment gap.

SACHR commissioned further work to explore the impact of this achievement gap and to consider some of the reasons why it existed resulting in a series of research papers published between 1989 and 1992. One study focused on the issue of capital funding: virtually all Protestant schools received 100% capital grants, but Catholic schools received 85% grant. One study focused on the administrative arrangements for handling projects, the time involved in moving projects along various stages of the approval system, and the time delay between payment of bills and receipt of grant. The study concluded that these arrangements resulted in a financial and administrative burden on the authorities of Catholic schools; that this burden probably impacted on the educational delivery of the schools; and that this contributed

to the attainment gap between leavers from Protestant and Catholic schools. More surprising was evidence of an unexpected differential in per capita recurrent funding levels for Protestant and Catholic schools, to the disadvantage of the latter. A consistent pattern of per capita differential was found across primary, secondary and voluntary grammar schools. There was no evidence of direct discrimination against Catholic schools in the determination of funding levels, but the study concluded that the per capita differential in recurrent funding probably impacted on the educational delivery of Catholic schools and hence on the attainment gap among leavers from Protestant and Catholic schools (Osborne et al., 1992/3).

Analysis of data on the schools' estate confirmed that Protestant primary and secondary schools had more per pupil teaching space in comparison with Catholic schools. While this may have been effected by differential population growth in the schools, there was also evidence that Catholic post-primary schools had less per pupil teaching space for specialist subjects, in particular science and craft, design and technology (CDT), in comparison with Protestant post-primary schools. Among grammar schools this overall pattern was heightened by the fact that proportionately more of the per pupil science teaching space in Catholic schools was located in temporary accommodation. Further analysis highlighted a relative 'shortage' of places in Catholic grammar schools, as compared with Protestant grammar schools, and this gap in places was likely to increase. Given that leavers from grammar schools generally achieved higher performance levels, this also contributed to the religious achievement gap (Gallagher et al., 1994a).

All of this evidence suggested that, despite an overt commitment to equal opportunity on the part of government in the 1980s, the data showed that, in many important areas, the Catholic education system was not accorded full equity of treatment. Not surprisingly the Catholic authorities were unhappy when the research evidence emerged, but this was compounded by the fact had emerged after two other incidents.

In the first two terms of the Thatcher Government in London (1979-83, 1983-87) there had been little direct attention given to education. After their 1987 electoral success the Government unveiled the 1988 Education Reform Act which introduced major changes to the education system in England and Wales by moving it away from Local Authority direction towards an education market-place in which schools directly competed for pupils. The Northern Ireland version of this legislation was the 1989 Education Reform Order which carried over many of the market approaches, including parental choice, league tables, a statutory curriculum and more prescriptive inspections. It also included a series of measures addressing the role of education in promoting reconciliation, including formal support for the development of Integrated schools. One aspect of this was to give all Integrated schools access to 100% capital grants. The Catholic Bishops sought a judicial review of the 1989 Order on the grounds that the 1973 Constitution Act made discrimination in the provision of services, including the funding of schools, illegal, and that the order discriminated against Catholic schools. The Department of Education defended the 1989 Order and won its case, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. The judge accepted that the Order meant that all Catholic schools received 85% capital grants, while all Integrated schools, and virtually all Protestant schools received 100% capital grants. However, he also noted that a small number of Protestant grammar schools also received 85% capital grants. On that basis while he accepted that the 1989 Education Order did discriminate against Catholic schools in relation to capital grants, because a few schools other than Catholic schools were in the same position, this amounted to indirect discrimination, rather than direct discrimination. Since only direct discrimination was illegal in the 1973 Constitution Act, the case for judicial review failed.

The second incident also revolved round the 1989 Education Reform Order. In the late 1980s the Department of Education and the Catholic authorities had been in discussion to rationalise the relationship between Catholic schools and the Department. Each Catholic school operated under the authority of a local parish priest or, in some cases, a Bishop, and it was these individuals, as school managers, who engaged with the Department on a variety of issues, including capital development projects. The Bishops were interested in establishing a single Catholic schools' authority, through which they could exercise control over the sector as a whole. The Department was interested in having a single body to engage with on what were often complex initiatives. Tacit agreement was reached that a Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) would be established which would be the employing authority for teachers in Catholic schools, and provide management and strategic leadership for the sector. When the 1989 Education Reform Order was published, however, most of the strategic powers of CCMS had been removed. The reason for this was that the concept of a new Catholic authority to manage the schools was inimical to the market principles which had been imported from the English legislation. The surprising thing is that no-one from the Department seems to have talked with the Bishops about the reasons for the change.

Thus, in quick succession the Catholic Bishops felt they had been misled over a commitment to establish a new Catholic Authority to provide strategic leadership for their schools; a judge had ruled that new legislation had discriminated against the provision of capital grants to Catholic schools, but not seriously enough to be illegal; and evidence had emerged to suggest there had been systemic under-funding of Catholic schools for decades, probably leading to lower levels of performance for pupils leaving those schools. To make matters worse, all this occurred at a time when other departments of government were making significant claims on their commitment to equal opportunity. In fact, in a striking demonstration of its commitment, the government's response after the SACHR investigation was rapid. In 1991 the Government opened discussions with Catholic authorities over the level of grant to be made available for capital developments in schools and, in 1992, announced new arrangements through which all schools could receive 100% capital grants: virtually all Catholic schools opted for this as soon as it became available. In the same year the Department of Education funded the creation of two new Catholic grammar schools. Thus, while the 1989 Education Reform Order committed government, for the first time, to support initiatives towards the development of new integrated schools, the government also seemed to acknowledge that, for the foreseeable future, most pupils would continue to be educated in religiously separate schools and that it was committed to equitable treatment of these separate schools (Gallagher et al., 1994a, 1994b).

What happened next was a sea-change in the circumstances of Catholic education in Northern Ireland. The new financial arrangements allowed Catholic schools to improve their facilities and invest more in their activities. Although CCMS did not have the type of strategic power originally hoped for, it was able and willing to take robust action in Catholic schools to promote school improvement. The effects of this were not evident for a few years, but in that time the achievement patterns reversed such that leavers from Catholic schools had, on average, higher performance than leavers from Protestant schools. This was also a point at which demographics started to have an impact as a long, steady decline in the number of young people began. This started to put pressure on school enrolments and meant an increase in school closures. Ironically, however, what this demographic decline also did was to make it harder to open new Integrated schools, with the result that the period of rapid growth in the Integrated sector started to tail off.

The growth of the Integrated sector had largely been driven by the establishment of new schools, but with demographic decline this became an increasingly less viable option. The 1989 Education Reform

Order had allowed for the option of parents in an existing school to vote to change its status to an Integrated schools. Over twenty schools have taken this option, but all have involved Protestant schools voting to transform. The Catholic authorities had made it clear that they opposed the option of transformation and that they would resist any attempt to transform a Catholic school. The argument they offered was that a school belonged to a community, not just the parents who happened to have children in it at a particular point in time. In consequence they intimated that if a vote did result in the successful transformation of a Catholic school to Integrated status, they would immediately seek to open a new Catholic school in the same area. In fact this determination was never tested as less than a handful of Catholic schools have ever looked at the option of transformation and only one has actually voted to do so: in this case the option was turned down by the Department of Education on the grounds that the school's enrolment was already too small and the vote to transform was simply a means of trying to avoid closure.

The new sense of confidence in the Catholic school system was then tested by two challenges, both of which remain to the present day. One of these challenges was educational and dealt with the thorny issue of academic selection; the other was political and concerned the response of the education system more generally to the Peace Process. We will deal with the latter first.

The Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998 and endorsed in referendums held in both parts of Ireland in the same year. In the immediate aftermath most attention focused, quite properly, on the efforts of the politicians to get the new agreed political institutions up and running, but the Agreement also set in motion a series of educational initiatives. Education was identified as an area of common interest in the work of the British-Irish Council and as a focus for north-south cooperation. It agreed to place a statutory duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate Irish Medium education in line with provision for Integrated education (a similar statutory commitment to encourage and facilitate Integrated education already existed). The main measure was to commit further support for those working through education to promote reconciliation and mutual understanding, and the Agreement specifically mentioned the 'promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society, including initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing'.

The Department of Education established a group of educationalists, including the present author, to join a group tasked with pursuing this goal, the TACOTIE (Towards a Culture of Tolerance In Education) group. The Catholic Bishops and CCMS were invited to join, but the Bishops declined. At the first meeting of the group the CMS representatives challenged the terms of reference of the group and suggested that if its purpose was to find ways to expand Integrated education, then they had no useful contribution to make. If, on the other hand, its role was to find ways in which all schools could contribute to the promotion of reconciliation and mutual understanding then they were quite happy to participate. The terms of reference were altered, or clarified, so that CCMS stayed, and the work of the group continued over the next few years. Two spin-off groups were established, one to produce support materials for schools wishing to transform to Integrated status and one which produced a critical report on the curriculum programme for Education for Mutual Understanding. By the time the main TACOTIE group was moving towards the conclusion of its deliberations the political context had lost most of the positivity generated by the Agreement and referendums. The group's final report contained a number of recommendations, but momentum behind the process had, to a significant extent, petered out (DENI, 1999).

Perhaps more significant was the decision by the Catholic Bishops to establish their own review group to consider ways in which the Catholic education system could contribute to the new environment created

by the Agreement. This group had a much larger membership and included a number of people from other school sectors in Northern Ireland (the present author was also invited to join this group). Apart from reaffirming the importance of Catholic education and its role as a vehicle for promoting reconciliation there were two main outcomes of the process. The first was that it provided an opportunity to discuss, in some detail, the issue of academic selection. The Bishops had traditionally been favourably inclined towards selection and did not formally change their view as a consequence of the discussions, but there was evidence of some shifts in positions as a consequence of the debates. As will be discussed below, this was to lead to a formal change in the Bishops' position once a wider public debate on academic selection took place a few years later.

The second significant change was a recasting of the way Catholic education should work. Prior to this the primary purpose of Catholic education was to maintain the faith community, and there was an implicit assumption that a Catholic school was defined by the fact that the teachers and pupils in the school were members of the faith community. The Bishops' main report arising from the work of the group, published in 2001, changed that: while stating that Catholic education fulfilled a 'service of public usefulness' and that this took its shape 'in the perspective of the Catholic faith', the Bishops went on to state that their schools '[were] not reserved to Catholics only, but [are] open to all who appreciate and share its educational project' (Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland, 2001). This was a sea-change in approach and was, at least in part, inspired by examples of Catholic schools in other places, including the Netherlands and South Africa, which had expanded their mission to focus on their values, rather than the people who happened to be in the schools. While there was a sea-change in rhetoric, however, 15 years later there was limited evidence of any change in practice. There are a small handful of Catholic schools in Northern Ireland that have a religiously diverse pupil enrolment, but most continue to enroll almost exclusively Catholic pupils who are taught by almost exclusively Catholic teachers (Pluralism in Education, 1996).

The second challenge related to a debate on academic selection which lasted for many years, did not result in any significant changes in policy or practice, but was marked by a significant shift in the position of the Bishops, although this may only have resulted in a weakening of their authority. Academic selection was established in Northern Ireland through the 1947 Education Act which largely followed the 1944 Education Act for England and Wales. Prior to this most children were educated in elementary schools where they stayed until age 14 years, while a small proportion attended fee-paying grammar schools. The 1947 Act created primary and post-primary stages of education and opted for a selective system of secondary and grammar schools, with entry to the academic curriculum provided by the latter to be mediated by a Transfer Test, popularly known as the 11+. Part of the original justification for academic selection was that scientific tests could identify children with academic potential, regardless of social background. In most places where they were used the evidence of experience demonstrated, by the 1960s, that this claim was not substantiated, and so there was widespread change towards comprehensive arrangements for post-primary schools, at least until the end of the the period of compulsory education.

Not so in Northern Ireland. Despite similar evidence on the socially regressive effects of academic selection, the Northern Ireland Government decided to retain academic selection. There were attempts to move away from selection by the Direct Rule Ministers of the 1976-79 Labour Government, but these were stopped by the succeeding Conservative Government (Sutherland, 1990). It was not until Labour were returned to power in 1997 that the issue was re-opened when the new Direct Rule Minister with responsibility for education commissioned a report on the effects of the selective system. The research re-stated many of the findings that had emerged in other contexts and highlighted the high level of

inequity of outcomes created by the selective systems. It also highlighted the way opinions on the system were sharply divided, largely on the basis of which route people had taken through it (Gallagher and Smith, 2001). By the time the research was published in 2000 the NI Assembly was up and running and Martin McGuinness was the Minister of Education, and he established the Post Primary Review Group, to be chaired by former Ombudsman, Gerry Burns, to review the research evidence, consult on options for the future and bring forward recommendations.

The Burns Report recommended, among other things, the end of academic selection and sparked a debate that continues for the next seven years (Burns Report, 2001). Inter alia, in almost his last act as Education Minister, before the Assembly was suspended in 2002, Martin McGuinness announced that academic selection would end, but offered no view on what arrangements would replace it. The debate continued and a series of reports and consultations added to the voluminous body of evidence, claims and counter-claims. The issue became embroiled in politics when the main unionist parties took positions in favour of academic selection, while the main nationalist parties took positions against academic selection. The issue appeared on the negotiation table when the 2006 Draft Education Order, tabled by the Direct Rule Secretary of State, included a clause to abolish academic selection. In the St Andrews Peace Talks the unionist parties won a concession that this clause would only be activated by a consensus vote in a restored NI Assembly, knowing that they would be able to block any such proposal.

When the Assembly was restored Sinn Féin still had control of the Education Ministry, but was unable to end academic selection, so the Minister did the next best thing which was to abolish the official 11+ tests. Two consortia of grammar schools promptly established their own 11+ test regimes and used them to select pupils for entry to their schools. The first use of these unofficial tests was in 2008 and they have continued in use to the present day.

The challenge for the Catholic sector was that the Bishops and CCMS came out in favour of ending academic selection in response to the Burns Report and have remained faithful to this commitment ever since. In 2009 they went as far as proposing that academic selection in all Catholic grammar schools should be phased out no later than 2012. This call has, in large measure, been ignored by the Catholic grammar schools. At the time of writing three Catholic grammar schools have stopped using selection, three others have declared the intention to stop using selection, and two admit all pupils, but use selection tests for streaming purposes. More than 20 Catholic grammar schools continue to defy the Bishops, though it is interesting that neither the decision of some to change, nor the decision of most not to change, has provoked any visible public reaction from parents. It may be that the process of change will continue, albeit slowly, but the experience is likely to reduce the authority of the Bishops in the longer run.

The story of Catholic education in Northern Ireland is broadly captured by a change from a position of dominance, before partition, to one of marginalisation, throughout the period of unionist rule in Northern Ireland, to a new found level of confidence in a new Northern Ireland which is struggling to fulfil the promise of peace. Catholic schools enjoy equitable levels of funding and influence, and the achievement gap, which once worked to their disadvantage, has now flipped so that the Catholic sector outperforms all other schools sectors. There remain significant patterns of inequality in outcomes across all sectors, but the Catholic schools have been somewhat more adept at addressing aspects of the challenge of social disadvantage and underachievement. There are regular calls for an expansion of integrated education, but few practical suggestions on how this might be achieved. The latter part of the 2000s saw the emergence of a new strategy called Shared Education, which promoted collaborative networks involving Protestant, Catholic and Integrated schools so that teachers and pupils would move

between schools to take classes, and share resources and expertise. Shared education was explicitly developed to address issues related to reconciliation and social cohesion, but also highlighted the role of collaboration in promoting school improvement and the more effective use of resources. The strategy found favour with all the main Churches, and has been taken up with alacrity by most of the political parties. It has been mainstreamed in government policy through a 2016 Shared Education Act which requires the Department of Education and Education Authority to encourage, facilitate and promote shared education (Gallagher, 2016). The authority of the Bishops may not be what it was, but perhaps it was never as high as many imagined: the Bishops' interest in Catholic schools is largely religious, but for many Catholics in Northern Ireland their schools also fulfilled important social and cultural purposes. Throughout the period when Catholics faced significant barriers of discrimination in access to high quality jobs, teaching provided an important source of high status employment, while the schools provided rare public space where people could express their sense of Irishness (O'Boyle, 1993). The wave of secularism was late to come to Northern Ireland, but it has arrived and religious practice has declined. Systemic discrimination in the labour market is a thing of the past, and Catholics are no longer on the fringes of social, political or cultural life in Northern Ireland. In such a context it might be thought that the outlook for Catholic schools was somewhat parlous, but in fact they continue to thrive largely, I suspect, because so many of them are good schools, with strong and positive links to their local communities. These features are likely to keep them in rude health for a considerable time to come.

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