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**Building bridges: Dialogue and interaction between teachers from
divided communities involved in a shared education project**

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Abstract

This chapter examines group talk between Catholic and Protestant teachers in Northern Ireland as they discuss their collaboration on a Shared Education project. Shared Education is an initiative which offers opportunities for teachers and pupils from different communities to engage with each other and to promote positive and harmonious group interaction across the divided society in Northern Ireland. The chapter discusses the historical, social and geopolitical context in which teachers represent themselves and how this informs their views on the role of (cross-cultural) educational initiatives. Using discourse analysis, we illustrate how the teachers' dialogue evidences both a struggle with competing and contested cultural positions and world views. We discuss how an exposition of teacher dialogue can be used as a tool of reflection in consideration of how to progress shared education.

Introduction

Northern Ireland is a society in transition from a conflict that lasted more than thirty years. Although the causes of the conflict are myriad and complex, in relatively simple terms the divisions between the two main communities can be described as relating to the aspirations of the Nationalist community (mainly Catholic) for a United Ireland and the Unionist (mainly Protestant) community for maintenance of the Union with Britain. A peace agreement reached in 1998 was based on a constitutional settlement and a series of

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reforms that the majority of people in the North and South of Ireland could accept. These included devolved government, the establishment of a Local Assembly with significant powers and a role for both the British and Irish Governments in the affairs of Northern Ireland. Although the period since the cease fires that heralded the Agreement has been relatively peaceful, some 20 years on, deep divisions remain. For many, particularly those in more economically marginalized communities, separation is an everyday reality which in some areas is intensified by ‘peace walls’ or barriers that divide Catholics and Protestants neighborhoods. While physical separation tends to be most intense in working class areas, a parallel school system for Catholics and Protestants cuts across class divisions, with around 93% of all pupils attending schools that are defined as predominantly ‘own’ religion. In reality, this means that many school-age pupils across all walks of life in Northern Ireland have very limited opportunity to meet with others who are not from a similar community background. The separate school system and efforts to resolve division through it, most recently through shared education, are the focus of this chapter and in the following section we describe the background to the shared education initiative and the role of the teachers involved in its delivery.

Background to Shared Education

Since the late 1970s efforts have been made to promote more positive intergroup relations through schools, with a series of initiatives designed to enhance intergroup contact and promote mutual understanding between pupils in separate schools (Gallagher 2016). Juxtaposed with these developments, the first integrated school opened in 1982. Integrated education is founded on the principle that Catholics, Protestants, those of all faiths and none should be educated together in ‘common schools’. There are now 65 integrated schools (out of more than 1000 school in total), accounting for around 7% of the overall school provision in Northern Ireland. In terms of effectiveness, contact schemes between separate schools were seen to have limited scope. Evaluations report ‘light touch’ engagement on the part of teachers and low take-up, with evidence suggesting that the short-term and one-off nature of encounters between Catholic and Protestant pupils had little impact on intergroup relations (Richardson 2011; O’Connor Hartop and McCully 2002). Integrated schools are generally reported as more effective, with research evidence highlighting the establishment of cross-group friendships and more pro-social intergroup attitudes and behaviour amongst pupils (Hughes *et al.* 2013; Stringer *et al.* 2009). The development of integrated education has however been slower than its founders would have hoped and the sector remains relatively niche (Department of Education 2019). Against this background, and accepting the seemingly enduring will of the majority of parents in Northern Ireland to have their children educated

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in separate schools, in the mid-2000s educationalists, with the support of an international philanthropic organization, began to think again about how best to support more enduring peacebuilding through schools. Drawing on research evidence which endorsed the potential of sustained intergroup contact (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006) and the value of institutional collaboration and shared practice in relationship-building in other parts of the UK (O’Sullivan, Flynn and Russell 2008) the foundations for shared education were established.

Shared education was first introduced in Northern Ireland in 2007, via three pilot programmes funded by the Atlantic Philanthropies and the International Fund for Ireland. Since its introduction, shared education has increased in scale and significance in the region, and is now supported by legislation that confers on the Department of Educationⁱ a duty to encourage, support and facilitate shared education (Shared Education Act 2016). At present, more than half of schools in Northern Ireland are involved in Shared education through two programmes: the Delivering Social Change Shared Education Signature Project, supported by Atlantic Philanthropies and involving schools with prior experience of shared education; and the Collaboration and Sharing in Education Programme, funded through the EU’s Peace IV programme and involving schools in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland. Both programmes are in receipt of matched funding from the Department of Education and are managed by the Education Authority.

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The shared education model seeks to promote inter-denominational partnerships between schools, at both primary and post-primary levels, which offer joint development opportunities for teachers and cross-group classes and activities for pupils. Its aims are threefold: 1. Social - to facilitate learning and interaction between pupils of different religious and cultural backgrounds, with a view to improving intergroup relations; 2. Educational - to extend educational opportunities for pupils and improve quality through the sharing of expertise between staff; 3. Economic - to conserve resources by reducing duplication across schools (Borooah and Knox 2013; Gallagher 2016). The social case for shared education, which is the primary focus for this paper, is elaborated in a policy framework published by the Department of Education (2015). The framework document, 'Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education' presents shared education as key to conflict recovery:

As a society emerging from conflict, building a strong and shared community is a key objective for government. Improving attitudes amongst young people is critical to achieving this objective. Against the background of an education system which reflects traditional divides in society Shared Education is a crucial way to break down barriers, nurture and improve community relations (Department of Education 2015, 5).

The policy refers to improving societal wellbeing by promoting a culture of mutual understanding through "significant, purposeful and regular

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engagement and interaction in learning between pupils from different community backgrounds” (ibid, 5).

Both integrated and separate schools are eligible for participation in shared education, though the primary emphasis is on promoting collaboration between Catholic and Protestant schools where children will have had limited or no previous opportunity to engage with peers from the ‘other’ communityⁱⁱ. In terms of relationship building potential, shared education is predicated on the principles of intergroup contact theory. Credited to social psychologist, Gordon Allport (1954), this theory states that contact with an individual from another group, typically one that is perceived negatively, should lead to a reduction of prejudice towards the group as a whole, particularly where four conditions are met. Amongst these are the establishment of intimate over superficial ties; collaborative (as opposed to competitive) engagement; the setting of superordinate goals – objectives that neither group can achieve working independently of the other; and the need for wider institutional support (Allport 1954). Synthesising five decades of research on contact in their 2006 meta-analysis, Pettigrew and Tropp found consistent support for the relationship between contact and prejudice across 38 countries, different age groups, and multiple settings including schools and workplaces (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).

One of the defining characteristics of shared education is that teachers in participating schools have significant freedom to develop their collaborative partnerships in ways which work best for them and their school

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communities. Hence whilst funding for shared education is contingent on a set number of contact hours for pupils (18) and statutory guidance is offered as to how progress might be evaluated, activities are not prescribed; rather they are worked out in negotiations between schools. Examples of shared education at primary school include, schools collaborating on specific curriculum based projects in arts or science, pupils transferring between schools for education in specialist areas (eg Information and Communications Technology (ICT)), or coming together in one school for activities such as sport or music. At post primary level, some schools collaborate to offer a wider range of subjects for pupils that relate to national level Examinations, with pupils transferring between schools to take subject options not available in their own school. Other partnerships bring together pupils for learning related to common compulsory subjects, such as 'Learning for Life and Work'. At both primary and post primary levels, curriculum based learning is often supplemented with an offering of shared extra-curricular opportunities and professional development for participating teachers is offered on a shared basis. Contact hours for pupils can range from a few hours a week at post-primary level, to whole days shared learning over an extended period (see Loader and Hughes 2019).

Research Evidence on Shared Education

In line with the social intent of shared education, a growing body of literature attests to shared education's potential to reduce prejudice among pupils: those who are involved in shared education or attend a participating school report a higher number of friends from the other community and more positive intergroup attitudes than their non-participating peers (Hughes *et al.* 2010, 2012, 2016). Moreover, students attending shared education schools in divided areas express more positive attitudes towards the outgroup than students attending non-participating schools in areas where relations were comparatively harmonious (Hughes *et al.* 2010). More recently, researchers at Queen's University have led research into the implementation and impact of the mainstreamed Shared Education Signature Project, managed by the Education Authority. The survey data for this research are still being analysed, but findings to date suggest a mixed picture. Exploring the types of shared activity that are associated with the greatest attitudinal change, findings from year 1 of the survey suggest that activities permitting more 'downtime' (that is, opportunities to interact with students from another school) may lead to more positive changes than subjects that do not include such activities (McLaughlin and Donnelly 2018). Notably, and perhaps unsurprisingly, activities that aim to extend pupils' understanding of their community, identity and the identity of others appear not to foster a higher number of friendships or more positive outgroup attitudes. Results from the first year of the programme also suggested that shared education that occurred

on a daily or weekly basis, and more frequently (involving more than seven meetings in a period) were associated with more positive changes in intergroup relations, although initial findings from year 2 – where monitoring data is more comprehensive – report at least equivalent outcomes from termly or annual contact (McLaughlin and Donnelly 2018).

Research on teacher engagement with the initiative has also been mixed, highlighting a number of challenges. Chief amongst these is reluctance amongst some teachers to engage with issues of difference and diversity (Loader *et al.* 2019). These teachers report not feeling equipped to tackle sensitive conflict-related issues in the classroom or express concern about the prospect of burdening pupils (Loader *et al.* 2019). More fundamentally, teachers are not always consistent in their understanding of shared education objectives, with some representing it as in essence an educational opportunity for pupils and others expressing greater commitment to relationship building imperatives, with the latter defined by some teachers in terms of dealing with sensitive conflict related issues (Loader *et al.* 2019). Regarding the negotiation process involved in defining the content of shared education activities, whilst teachers are generally committed to inter-school collaboration, a range of obstacles such as parental objections, timetabling and transportation challenges have had to be overcome (Gallagher 2016; Hughes *et al.* 2010).

Methodology

In this chapter we analyse a group interview involving three teachers from two schools who have initiated and developed a shared education project over three years. PC is the teaching principal of the Catholic school and VPC is the teaching vice-principal of the same school. PP is the teaching principal of the Protestant school. We are interested in examining the processes of engagement and in particular how teachers position themselves in relation to their own community background and how they navigate the challenging peacebuilding intention of shared education. The aim is to explore in depth engagement between teachers as they converse on the subject of shared education. The analytical approach we adopt deviates from our previous qualitative research in the area, which has been broadly thematic. In this respect, we are piloting discourse analysis as a new approach to qualitative research in shared education. Whilst some might question the validity of a study based on one group interview, we believe that the detailed analysis presented below allows us to reflect critically on the social goals for shared education.

This semi-structured group interview was conducted in late spring 2019 as part of a larger project exploring teachers' perceptions and experiences of involvement in shared education in Northern Ireland. The schools had been invited to participate in the project following a purposive sampling approach, which sought to reflect the variation in activities, pupil involvement and frequency of meeting across shared education partnerships.

The interview, which lasted approximately 45 minutes, was led by the first and second authors and took place on the Catholic school's premises at the end of the school day. With participants' permission, the discussion was recorded and transcribed for analysis by the second author. In this analysis phase, we drew particularly on techniques associated with discourse analysis. While more common forms of qualitative analysis explore areas of similarity and difference in participants' perspectives or experiences, discourse analysis focuses rather on the ways that interactants construct and convey meaning and what these interactions reveal about the social world (Willig 2014).

The growth of interest in discourse analysis across disciplines has led to the development of approaches emphasising different aspects of texts (Flick 2009). These include the practices by which power is maintained and manifested (critical discourse analysis), how social worlds are created in everyday interactions (conversation analysis), the discourses and repertoires that individuals draw on to describe personal experiences (discursive psychology), and how different groups use language and what this reveals about social relations (socio-linguistic analysis, which we draw on particularly in this chapter) (Willig 2014). Common to each of these approaches, however, is an interest in language and how people use it to construct and depict events, opinions and personas. In this chapter, therefore, our focus is on how teachers talk about shared education, their expressive choices in describing their involvement, and what these choices reveal of their feelings and assumptions about the initiative and about intergroup relations

more broadly. This involves attention to, *inter alia*, the use of vocabulary and the associations that this evokes; grammatical structure, including tenses and the active or passive voice; the use of rhetorical devices, idiom, metaphor and narrative; interactional practices such as turn-taking and responding; and non-verbal features such as pauses, hesitations and false starts. Attention to these elements can expose emotional responses, meanings, attitudes, social conventions and shared assumptions that a straightforward reading of an individual's words may not. In line with a socio-linguistic perspective, our analysis explores the text and its meanings in the light of existing theory and prior knowledge of contact and intergroup relations in Northern Ireland (Antaki 2008).

Analysis

Context of the schools

The two schools comprising the shared education partnership cater for primary-age pupils (ages 4-11) and are roughly equal in size at around 130 pupils each. The schools serve a village and rural hinterlands in an area which had little direct experience of the conflict, except for one high-profile incident in the later years of hostilities. While violence is now rare, excerpt 1 depicts a context in which 'peace' is characterised more by 'co-existence' and benign separation than by 'integration'.

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Excerpt 1

I2: So the village here would be kind of a- would it be a shared space? The actual village, would [both communities]-?

PC: [The village itself] I'd say would be more Catholic and the, the, the Protestants would be sort of more to the hinterlands of the village. The village itself would be [predominantly Catholic, wouldn't it, yeah?]

VPC: [XXX]
Would be predominantly Catholic, yeah.

PP: They keep us out on the edges.

PC: But businesses and that would be [XXX, they'd be all mixed], yeah.

PP: [Services XXX mixed]

I2: Yeah, yeah. That's interesting.

I1: Right, okay.

PC: And we have our chapel and then there's the... Is it Presbyterian or Church of Ireland up the...?

PP: Both. There's a Presbyterian and a Church of Ireland, and a Baptist there, just on [gives name of landmark] there.

PC: Yeah. So we're all in.

PP: We're all in the mix. All in the bubble.

Earlier in the interview, participants had portrayed the village as “quite a close community”, where “everybody knows everyone else”. Excerpt one, in comparison, suggests a more complex picture. The teachers report that the local Catholic population typically lives in the village and the Protestant population on the outskirts, revealing an understanding of ‘sectarian geography’ that is prevalent in Northern Ireland (see Dixon *et al.* 2019). Indeed, the Protestant principal’s barbed observation that “they keep us out on the edges”, while delivered with wry humour, suggest that this arrangement may not be equally acceptable to both groups. PP’s use of plural pronouns “they” and “us” without further qualification reveals, moreover, the salience of religious identity in discourse: she assumes that her interactants will recognise that she is referring to religious background and that “us” is the Protestant community, of which she is a member. The oppositional use of “they” to refer to the Catholic community not only assumes the binary and mutually-exclusive nature of identity in Northern Ireland but also emphasises the separation of these two groups. This separation and lack of mutual knowledge is further illustrated by PC’s ignorance of the location of the Protestant churches, despite the village’s comparatively small size (less than 1,000 inhabitants).

Where it occurs, cross-group interaction appears to be driven principally by material concerns, with businesses and services described as the major amenities used by both groups. These are described by PP and PC as “mixed” spaces, a term that tacitly contests the appropriateness of the

interviewer's word "shared", which PP and PC choose not to repeat. While the latter term has favourable connotations of co-operation and mutual engagement, "mixed" has more ambiguous and ambivalent associations. In Northern Ireland, for example, it is variously used to denote simple spatial co-presence, positive interaction between members of different groups, or the combining of groups and identities in a way that reduces the distinctiveness of each. PP and PC's preference for "mixed" and avoidance of the interviewer's "shared", however, suggests that the local area might not be characterised by reciprocity and mutuality associated with "sharing". Thus, though PP notes that "we're all in the mix", the tenor of the excerpt indicates that the schools and their communities operate within wider local context of separation.

Identity and intergroup relations in Northern Ireland

While excerpt 1 indicates that group identity is conceived in binary terms, it is also evident in the interview that these group identities are multifaceted. Each comprises religious, political and national dimensions [Catholic/nationalist/Irish or Protestant/unionist/British] that are assumed to be inseparable, such that the descriptors are virtually interchangeable. In excerpt 2 below, for example, PP compares a photograph of Queen Elizabeth II, a political symbol as the British head of state, not with a portrait of her

Irish political counterpart, but with artefacts of the Catholic faith as indicators of identity around the school.

Excerpt 2

PP: I've a picture of the queen up. It's stayed there, hasn't it? It's stayed there from Noah was a boy, it must be, you know.
And the symbolism that comes with, um...Catholic religion too. But the children just, at the start they would have asked a few questions.

Catholic and Protestant identities are, furthermore, depicted throughout the interview as distinct and immutable. Any challenge to the perceived integrity of identity is described unfavourably, with the teachers employing terms such as “mesh”, “merge” and “dilute”. The possibility of hybridity and the emergence of new identities during shared education are eschewed in favour of promoting ‘respect’ for these existing affiliations, as in excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3

PC: I think what you're trying to do is you're trying to teach the children respect [and mutual understanding].

PP: [It is respect. XXX]

PC: So if they have respect the, their differences as well as their similarities. You explore their differences. But you celebrate...

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VPC: You embrace the [difference...yeah].

PC: [You celebrate the differences] as well, do
you know? There's no point, as you said, trying to mesh
[the two]...=

PP [Trying to merge].

PC: = too much, you know. There are distinct differences and
you...

PP: That's it.

PC: You have to go with that, yeah.

With regard to dynamics between the two groups, excerpt 4 below frames Catholic-Protestant relations in antagonistic terms (“It wasn’t as harsh as ‘the enemy’ and- but...”), recalling the oppositional language of “they” and “us” in excerpt 1. Enmity between the two groups is portrayed as a result of segregation and consequent ignorance of the other group and its perspectives. According to this perspective, conflict is at least partly a result of faulty and incorrect thinking among individuals. The provision of opportunities for relationship-building is presented as an antidote to this ignorance, providing an opportunity to (re-)form opinions in the light of personal knowledge of the other.

Excerpt 4

PC: I think what's happened, or certainly in my generation, is, you
know, you learnt your own history, but you didn't know

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anybody else from the other faith so you couldn't really- There was an immedia- there was an immediate, um, barrier, I suppose, developed then, you sort of thought. It wasn't as harsh as 'the enemy' and- but that does infiltrate your thinking, do you know what I mean? So I think if you go ahead and you, you try and build relationships, genuine relationships between the children, and then allow them to discover their own...

As excerpt 4 indicates, historical understandings are perceived as significant in informing identity and the ways that each group relates to the other. History is also highly emotive, as excerpt 5 illustrates below. Here, we see a shift from the more passive absorption of historical perspectives in excerpt 4 (“you learnt your own history”) to the more active exploration of history (“when you start digging into history”), which provokes an intense emotional reaction. While teachers are typically expected to be ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ in their teaching, this exchange reveals some tension between this professional expectation and their strongly-held perspectives based on their personal and group histories. The latter are depicted as inevitable consequences of their heredity and so visceral as to be beyond their personal influence (“you can’t help that”).

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Excerpt 5

PC: But oh god, it's... When you start digging... I'm the first to put up my hand, I'm from a Catholic, nationalist background, um, and when you start digging into history-

VPC: Oh, you do, [yeah].

PC: [Your] blood starts coming out and you sort of think XXX (LAUGHS) and you can't help that.

The two preceding excerpts demonstrate a sense of ownership of a particular historical narrative among the Catholic teachers and imply the existence of a parallel narrative(s) with alternative interpretations. This is further acknowledged in excerpt 6, below. Though history is recognised here as multi-perspectival, the teachers sustain a binary understanding of history and identity in Northern Ireland in acknowledging only the Protestant/unionist and Catholic/nationalist perspectives (*“two different histories”*).

Excerpt 6

PC: You have to be realistic as well and say, yes, there are two different histories coming together here and we need to explore our own view of each's and then [you know, develop it that way].

PP: [Make up your own mind, yeah.]

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PC: But that would take a huge amount of preparation and I think you'd have to take a lot of advice with that as well.

As well as overlooking the histories of other, minority communities, this binary view assumes little divergence from a single, community narrative within each group. The language of “different histories” also indicates that these two narratives are understood to be largely discrete and contrasting. However, there is also some cautious recognition – albeit more so from PC than PP – of the importance of critically examining these histories through shared education. They advocate “explor[ing] our own view of each’s” (PC) before “mak[ing] up your own mind” (PP), although PC indicates the sensitivity of such exploration as she emphasises the large amount of preparation and advice that would be required in advance. This subjective, critical approach to history contrasts with the less critical position vis-à-vis other aspects of identity, particularly religious and cultural, with each group expected to “respect”, “embrace” and “celebrate” (PP, VPC and PC respectively) the differences between them.

Culture of avoidance

The aforementioned caution about discussing history is indicative of the culture of avoidance (Hargie 2014; Nelson, Dickon and Hargie 2003; Donnan and MacFarlane 1985) that persists in Northern Ireland around issues of difference. Discussions of matters on which opinion and feeling divides along

community lines are typically eschewed in mixed company. There are thus few opportunities for individuals to develop the dialogic skills necessary to converse on such topics with confidence and sensitivity. As a result, discussions of – or even allusions to – difference (insofar as they occur) are often characterised by uncertainty and inarticulacy, as outlined in excerpts 7 and 8. In these, PP’s struggle for the appropriate language is indicative of an unease with the naming of difference. In excerpt 7, her choice of the word “denominations” seems to represent an attempt to avoid the terms ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’, softening the identity boundary between her and her interlocutors. The use of hedging (“sort of”) serves the same purpose, reducing the directness of the reference to identity. The hesitation in both excerpts (“is a, is a...” and “a, a, a Catholic”) also reveals PP’s uncertainty about speaking about identity, particularly that of the other group, and suggests a concern to use appropriate terminology.

Excerpt 7

PP: But what came out of that was the spin-offs. You know, there was other spin-offs. So the [gives name of local society], of which is a, is a...I mean there's different sort of denominations within it.

PC: Oh yeah. It's across the community, yeah.

Excerpt 8

PC: Allow the children to develop their own, their own attitudes.

It's-

PP: Like it's okay to be a, a, a Catholic and work with a Protestant,
do you know, that sort of thing? It's okay.

A major strategy deployed by interlocutors in such discussions is the use of humour (Dickson and Hargie 2006; Nelson, Dickson and Hargie 2003). This can serve several functions, depending on the context: to deflect from the more serious exploration of conflict and the feelings of pain, guilt, discomfort and anger that this may engender; to signal friendliness and build rapport across the 'divide'; to soften (or, in some cases, sharpen) criticism by delivering it with wit; or to introduce levity to a tense situation. Excerpt 9 offers an example of the use of humour to navigate an intergroup encounter, both during the event itself and in the subsequent reporting of it during the interview. Here, PP and PC discuss their attendance at an event organised by The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) This association was founded in 1884 to protect and promote Gaelic sports, as well as Irish culture and language more generally, and has traditionally been associated with the Catholic nationalist community.

Excerpt 9

PP: Because I, I met [gives PC's name], was the G- we were
invited to the opening of the GAA club. So we were both

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invited as principals of the two schools to go up. And [name] got out of the car, “sure, you’ll go up in a puff of smoke when you go through here.” Like this here, you know, and I went through, “my father will turn in his grave if he knew I was here” (LAUGHS). But that's okay, because, like, as [gives PC’s name] said, nat- I came from a very loyalist background with red, white, blue, you know [XXX and flowers].

PC: [And there you were], standing at the GAA pitch.
(LAUGHS)

PP: It was a wonder I wasn't, like, shot down somewhere
(LAUGHS).

PC: And the good people were up making speeches in Irish and I was saying to her, “Did you catch that now? [Did you get that?]” (LAUGHS)

PP: [XXX].
What's that old foreign language about?

PC: And we were- the prayers were being said and I was-

PP: I was standing there proud to be a Prod, as I told her.
(LAUGHS)

VPC: They were praying for you.

PP: Praying for me. (LAUGHS).

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For PP, attending a GAA event entails some conflict between her loyalist heritage (symbolised in this extract by her father) and her professional commitment to shared education. As the teachers report, she managed this potentially discomfiting event using humour and exaggeration, bringing levity to proceedings but also emphasising her sense of difference. This was reinforced by PC's gentle mockery, making light of the situation but also fortifying these intergroup boundaries. Importantly, the jocular tone appears to have deflected any deeper discussion of either party's feelings about the situation at the time it occurred, just as light-hearted comments ("They were praying for you") deflect such discussions in the interview conversation. Humour thus serves as a strategy of avoidance. However, these feelings and opinions can appear to 'leak out' – notably, in this instance, when PP draws on a unionist trope of Ireland and Irishness as "foreign" in her reference to the Irish language.

In contrast to the teachers' strategies of polite avoidance was their description of the more direct approach of one family who refused their child's participation in a visit to a GAA stadium. In excerpt 10, this family is portrayed as deficient in understanding.

Excerpt 10

VPC: But, you know, that family - sorry for interrupting, just when you said that. Do you remember, he didn't want to go to Croke Park? We were taking them to Croke Park. And one of the reasons was,

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“well, why are you taking them to Croke Park? They're named after hunger strikers”. Wasn't that it?

PP: “Republics”.

VPC: And they, but they hadn't [actually got a full] understanding of what Croke Park-

PC: They'd no clue. Well, you know, they were totally...

PP: Just ignorant of the knowledge.

PC: Of the GAA. They don't under- The GAA, they nearly see the GAA as part of the provos. Do you know? It's all muddled together. They have no understanding of what the GAA is and does and stands for.

Here and elsewhere in the interview, this family is depicted as “ignorant”. Loader (2015) notes that ignorance is at times deployed to explain and dismiss sectarian behaviour in Northern Ireland, on the basis that an individual who behaves in a discriminatory way without complete understanding of a situation is less malign than one who acts with full knowledge. This perspective is indicated in the extract above by references to the family having “no understanding of what the GAA is” and mistakenly using the word “republics” rather than republicans. The family’s response is attributed to faulty thinking for which the solution is “education”; the assumption is that if they were more knowledgeable about the GAA, they would not express such views. Consequently, the parents’ concerns are dismissed and depicted as rather ridiculous by PC, despite the fact that some GAA stadia are indeed

named after prominent figures in the Irish nationalist movement, including Easter Rising leaders Padraig Pearse and Roger Casement. This lack of critical self-reflection and perspective-taking on the part of the teachers, and their dismissal of the family and their views as ignorant, allows them to avoid acknowledging and engaging with parents' concerns and to continue with their planned educational agenda.

Reflections on the rationale for shared education

The teachers in our study described a curriculum-based whole-school approach to shared education that was initiated 3 years ago. A series of workshops and classes were organised for pupils throughout the school relating to the curricular themes of the World Around Us. Some of these focused on indoor and outdoor play and involved engagement with parents and grandparents to explore games and pass times of previous generations. In addition, the schools offered the children opportunity to play sports that they are unlikely to have experienced otherwise, and have formed cross-school rugby and GAA teams. As part of shared education provision, the schools jointly offered Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) classes for parents and joint training for school governors. The Parent Teachers' Associations also meet jointly to plan fundraising and other activities. One outcome of collaborative activity and fundraising that teachers from both schools spoke of proudly is the creation of a community play park. The park

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which is in the vicinity of the controlled school was represented as a genuinely shared space, accessed by children from both schools. Buoyed by the success of the play park, plans are in place for a similar interschool fundraising effort this year.

Although all three teachers spoke with pride about the achievements of their schools' collaboration, twice during the interview the two teachers from the Catholic school expressed concern that shared education could potentially undermine separate education, and made it clear that their engagement with the initiative was conditional on the distinctive and separate Catholic education not being compromised.

Excerpt 11

VP: Parents still want their children to go to a faith-based school. And, you know, we would still want to hold tight to our Catholic ethos and everything that comes with that. And I know that, you know, [names the Protestant School] are, are going to feel, you know, the same way. I don't think that, you know, we're ever going to have integrated education in [names the town] or anything like that, and that's okay. You know, because if this model is working and it's working well, then, you know, at the same time, I don't think we need to dilute the two.

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Excerpt 12

PC: I think the first thing that I would think they'd [the statutory authorities] have to do is be, give absolute clarity that shared education does not mean integration. Because I think people naturally assume shared education is going to naturally go on to integration. And if it was made clear, no, we're not going down the route of integration, we're exploring shared, we want to share, that would be- Do you not think that would be a big first step, yeah? Because as soon as people hear, there's that misunderstanding again of "shared ed, sure, that's going down the route of-" You know, and there was even talk in the village here at one point, um, "sure isn't there going to be, the schools are going to be integrated? There's going to be an integrated school?" You know, there was a whimper going round that had to be just [CLICKS FINGERS] "no, that's not, that's not what it's about". So that would be the first thing I would say, but... I don't know.

The use of emphatic language in excerpt 12, such as "give absolute clarity that shared education does not mean integrated education" and "if it was made clear, no, we're not going down the route of integration", reinforces a 'separatist' position. At the same time, the same two teachers are keen that

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the origins of separate education and the rationale for it are explored as a means of promoting mutual understanding (excerpt 13).

Excerpt 13

VPC: That you do actually explore the differences between. And...you know, maybe looking back at the different histories and, you know, delving into that as well. And, you know, I don't think we're there yet, but certainly down the line, you know, we would like to take it to, I suppose, that next level. Where you are exploring the differences between the two schools and, you know, why we have the two schools and the differences between the two...[religions and things].

PP: [Because you just] accept it, you know. There's just an acceptance, as well. They're not really...

PC: But they don't really understand.

VPC: No... [no].

PC: They've [no real] comprehension of why there are two separate schools in... You know, if you ask the children that, they really wouldn't know why that is. And I suppose, yes, that is a route that we would like to explore, but-

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VPC: You're limiting them if you don't, you know, explore the differences. If you're just constantly thinking of all the similar- , you know?

The response of the teacher from the Protestant school in this exchange, and subsequently, suggests that she is less comfortable with taking shared education to “the next level”. Throughout the interview, when the idea of a more direct and focused approach to addressing difference is raised, she deflects by joking or changing the subject, and in the following extract she seems to be making the point that she does not see it as the aim of shared education to deal with sensitive conflict related issues:

Excerpt 14

PP: I think reconciliation for young children, they just don't understand it. They've nothing to reconcile with, do you know? Because they're coming in and they're just taking us at face value. They're small children, the reconciliation would have to start with the adults and the people that you were dealing with first. We don't have to look too far to look for people who can't even talk to each other that are getting paid to talk to each other. So you sort of have to reconcile that age group, but these children would not, you know- If that is an aim of shared education for children, I think that's the wrong aim. Because I don't think, it doesn't come into [their remit].

The same teacher valorises intergroup contact as an end in itself, and makes the point in the extract below and at another point in the interview, that simply creating opportunity for intergroup interaction will be sufficient to improve community relations.

Excerpt 15

PP: The community can all get along. We'll go to [names her school], you go to [names the Catholic school] and that's great, do you know? That's, that's fine to do that and it all works [very well].

Excerpts 13-15 reflect somewhat divergent positioning between the two schools, with the Catholic school teachers suggesting that contact should be a mechanism for exploring 'immutable' intergroup differences, and the Protestant school teacher suggesting that facilitating contact within a shared learning environment is sufficient. The positions adopted here to some extent resonate with debates in the contact literature on if, when and how sensitive and controversial issues should be addressed in intergroup settings. Allport's original contact theory presented conditions that are necessary for cross group contact to be effective in reducing negative stereotypes and prejudice (see above). Following this, 'positive' contact is often characterised by encounters emphasising harmony and/or commonality (Maoz 2011; Saguy *et al.* 2009). However, over the past decade, researchers have demonstrated that emphasising similarity over difference can lead to the minority group being

less likely to challenge the majority group on factors informing discrimination and disadvantage (Wright and Lubensky 2008; Dixon *et al.* 2012), potentially undermining the value of intergroup interactions. Perhaps of most relevance to the data reported here, there is ongoing debate about when in contact encounters it is best to introduce sensitive issues relating to difference, with some arguing that this should be done even in advance of contact (Turner & Cameron 2016) and others suggesting that dealing with controversial issues should be a longer-term objective (Miller 2015).

The fact that teachers in the Catholic school are apparently more concerned to tackle issues of difference may be indicative of wider community concerns and the nature of traditionally minority and majority group relations between the Nationalist and Unionist communities in Northern Ireland. Analyses of the causes of the Northern Ireland conflict generally point to the discrimination and disadvantage experienced by Catholics in a hegemonic Protestant and Unionist State. Although there were many Protestant victims of violence during the conflict years, the sense of disadvantage and victimhood was perhaps more keenly felt by the Nationalist (mostly Catholic) community. Given this, it is perhaps understandable that those in that community are more keen to explore systemic and structural conflict-related issues. Equally, it might be argued that Unionists, who were ascendant during the conflict years in terms of State power at least, are likely to be less inclined to want to do so.

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At one level, the fact that these teachers are able to express divergent perspectives, albeit clumsily and with some awkwardness, can be construed as a positive outcome of the shared education process. They are, in effect, engaging in a process of exploring group differences. However, the use of avoidance strategies, the absence of critical self-reflection and perspective-taking, and the dismissal of objectors, taken together with some dissonance in the readiness and willingness of the two schools to move towards a more substantive approach to dealing with difference, highlights potential risks of doing so. As noted, teachers carry the ‘baggage’ of their own community background and their personal history into the classroom. Most teachers involved in the delivery of shared education receive no specialist training; indeed, bespoke training currently offered by the Education Authority has had very limited sign-up from teachers. This interview suggests *the possibility for* shared education to progress towards an exploration of the systemic and structural causes of intergroup division and the manifestations of this in community polarisation and hostilities. However, it is also indicative of the need to better equip teachers to do so and to move at a pace that is acceptable to all partners. The sensitivities involved and the risks of disrupting evolving relationships by unwittingly causing offence or breaking fragile trust are apparent, even in this small case study and in the context of the very positive relationships that had developed between the three interviewees. The findings also point to the need for some reassessment of shared education policy which is currently vague on the substance of relationship building objectives.

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ⁱ The Department of Education in Northern Ireland has statutory responsibility for early years, primary and secondary education in the region. In respect of shared education, it

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works closely with another public body, the Education Authority. The latter has responsibility for delivering education services across Northern Ireland.

ⁱⁱ When we refer to Catholic and Protestant schools we are reflecting the fact that with the exception of integrated schools, the majority of 1000+ schools in NI are strongly differentiated by religion. For raw data and analysis see (<https://www.thedetail.tv/articles/how-integrated-are-schools-where-you-live>).