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Educational approaches in contested space contexts: The development of Shared Education in Northern Ireland

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Educational approaches in contested space contexts: The development of Shared Education in Northern Ireland.

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Title page

Good afternoon my name is Gavin Duffy. I am research fellow from the School of Education at Queen's University Belfast.

Our presentation for this symposium will focus on an exploration of the concept of contested space from the perspective of Northern Ireland. Contest over politics, nationality, symbols and the past are commonplace in our society which is emerging from conflict. Our education system could also be described as a contested space given that pupils from different religious and cultural backgrounds are for the most part educated separately. Our presentation will explore how the practice of shared education - that is pupils from different denominational schools learning together and their teachers and school leaders collaborating - can have a positive impact in a divided society context.

Slide 2

Most societies are heterogeneous, either as a consequence of historical mismatches between borders and peoples, or economic or other forms of migration. Contested spaces refer to those places where members of different

communities intersect or interact. For the most part this means maintaining a type ethnic distinction or separation expressed through different religious, cultural and political practices.

In divided societies, communities are more likely to live apart, and in such contexts contested spaces are both more common and more likely to become sites of contestation. They become the places where, at best, boundary markers are more evident or, at worst, interfaces where violence can be commonplace. This photograph is from Northern Ireland. In the centre of the photograph you can see a so called peace wall snaking through a part of Belfast separating a Catholic and a Protestant community. I could have chosen from probably thousands of photos which depict violence at interfaces in Northern Ireland but I instead I have opted to display a photograph which illustrates an obtuse normality.

Slide 3

In Northern Ireland as with other divided societies, institutional differentiation can emerge that is where services and goods are provided by communities for communities and in many situations a type of bounded contentment arises where individuals are content to live within their own communities rather than move across contested spaces or use services and institutions perceived to belong the other community. As an example of institutional differentiation a separate education system exists in Northern Ireland, where the vast majority of Catholic and Protestant pupils are educated separately. The majority of schools are either Catholic maintained schools owned by the Catholic Church and managed by the Catholic Council for Maintained Schools or Controlled schools managed by Local Education Authorities. There are also educationally

selective grammar schools, similarly separate and a small religious integrated sector, which educates approximately 7 percent of the school population. It is worth noting that there are no formal barriers to students from any denominational community attending a school, so the separate schools reflect, to a significant extent, parental choice.

The key point in this slide is that for the most part, Catholic pupils attend Catholic schools and Protestants attend Controlled schools.

In our paper we explore the interstices between school sectors and consider the idea that separate schooling for Protestant and Catholic pupils creates a type of contested space.

Slide 4

Throughout the years of political violence in Northern Ireland, many felt that separate schools exacerbated difference and inculcated pupils into their distinct cultural identities thus limiting opportunities for mutual understanding. As a result, there have been a series of educational initiatives which have been designed to promote tolerance and mutual understanding including: contact programmes designed to bring Catholic and Protestant pupils together, ensuring that within separate schools, pupils were offered common curricular subjects. An entirely new integrated education sector was established, designed to teach Catholic and Protestant children in the same schools and lastly, ensuring that Catholic and Protestant schools were funded equally - historically Catholic schools received less state funding than Controlled schools.

While research into these initiatives, over three decades, revealed many examples of excellent work, there was however limited evidence of any

systemic impact, in terms of making sustainable connections between pupils educators and indeed communities.

Slide 5

As previously stated institutional differentiation in Northern Ireland, has led to a separate education system where distinct institutional boundaries have formed between Catholic and Protestant schools. Responding to the limitations of previous initiatives a new approach termed 'shared education' was conceived, which imagined systemic change by encouraging separate schools to form collaborative networks or partnerships. In doing so it was thought the historical and denominational boundaries between the two main school sectors could become porous and stronger interconnections between pupils and between educators could develop.

Slide 6

Shared education in Northern Ireland essentially involves Protestant and Catholic schools engaged in regular and sustained collaboration, where pupils will learn together, studying high value core subjects in each other's schools; where teachers and school leaders from different schools will work together, sharing resources and expertise and creating new knowledge and new practice.

Slide 7

The Sharing Education Programme (SEP) developed at the School of Education at Queen's University Belfast has encouraged and supported schools to establish cross sector collaborative partnerships - this has involved three phases. The first phase, between 2007 and 2010, involved twelve post primary school partnerships, comprising of 65 schools. The second phase, between

2010 and 2013, involved 12 new school partnerships, totalling 72 schools. The third phase, between 2013 to the present involves the continuing support of existing partnerships from the second phase and other related partnerships. In this phase there are 16 partnerships. Collectively we have worked with over two thirds of all post primary schools in Northern Ireland.

Slide 8

The Sharing Education Programme or SEP is underpinned by a number of theoretical models. The work of Allport (1954) is important given that the contact hypothesis describes ideal conditions where intergroup relations can lead to reduced prejudices. Shared education is also underpinned by a range of theoretical perspectives broadly termed network theory. Contributions made by Steven Katz and colleagues (2010) have been particularly influential, given that this body of work posits a logical relationship between collaboration and school improvement. Other related research which focuses on collaborative effectiveness in educational contexts has also been influential, particularly research which describes the characteristics of strong and effective collaborative partnerships. All of which is discussed in more detail in our paper.

Slide 9

By 2011 various models of shared education had emerged. These models varied in terms of quality, effectiveness and sustainability. The continuum model presented here provides a typology, describing the different types of collaborative arrangements which existed, thus making distinctions between schools which remained in isolation of one another, where partnership

arrangements were emergent and ad hoc or where contact between schools was less regular and sustained through to collaborative arrangements where schools were developing sustainable and effective partnerships, to the point where the practice of shared education had normalised between partnerships and in some cases where deep, collegial and even symbiotic or interdependent relationships were forming. In the paper we describe each of the categories on the continuum in further detail.

Slide 10

Over the next few slides we will present a case study based on a partnership of schools that was involved in SEP. The following is based on a three year ethnographic study between 2011 and 2014, where Duffy and Gallagher carried out ethnographic observations in primary and post primary schools. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were also conducted in each of the schools. Participants included school leaders, teachers, pupils and parents.

We have opted to present this partnership so as to demonstrate how effective collaboration can deliver both social and educational impacts but also because the schools in this partnership operate in one of Northern Ireland's most contested space settings.

An initial sense of this can be gleaned from the fact that the city has two names; those from a nationalist/Catholic background refer to the city as Derry and those from a unionist/Protestant tradition would typically refer to the city as Londonderry.

Recent decades, particularly during the period of the troubles the city has witnessed civic protests, intense political and ethnic violence and electoral manipulation. All of which has resulted in dramatic changes to the cultural and

religious make-up of the population, effectively locating the Protestant minority on one side of a river and the Catholic majority on the other. All of the maintained schools in the partnership are located on the Catholic side of the city, often referred to as the 'city side' and all but one of the controlled schools is located on the other side of the river where most of the Protestant population live, mostly referred to as the 'water side.' Data revealed that prior to becoming involved in shared education, pupils, educators and parents were anxious and reluctant to move across the contested space into each other's communities, opting instead to remain within their own communities and use their own services and amenities.

Slide 11

The Foyle Contested Space Education Partnership formed in June 2011 and was made up of eight schools - five primaries (3 Catholic and 2 Protestant) and three post-primaries (2 Catholic and 1 Protestant). The partnership evolved out of the first phase of the SEP programme.

The cross-sectoral partnership developed an educational programme for pupils aged between 8 and 15 which utilised elements of the curriculum to address social issues facing young people growing up in the city. There were a total of 1161 pupils involved in shared learning. The partnership required the collaboration of 8 Principals, 3 vice principals, 35 teachers, 29 of which were primary school teachers and 6 were post-primary teachers and four teaching co-ordinators. Pupils took turns to visit each other's schools on a weekly basis and learn in each other's classrooms over a period of three years.

There was consensus among educators and recognition from parents that irrespective of cultural or religious differences, young people growing up in the city faced the same social issues. This in turn provided a collective or superordinate focus for the partnership. Schools created a shared curricular programme which explored five social need themes, including

- Anti-social behaviour
- Improving community relations in a contested space setting
- Substance misuse
- Health, sexual health and resilience
- Appropriate and safe use of the internet and social media

Slide 12

Data analysis revealed both social and educational impacts emerging from the partnership. In terms of social impact there were five broad themes: collaboration and shared learning enabled significant movement of pupils, educators and parents across the contested space setting, where previously there was little motivation. Meaningful and sustained contact between pupils and between educators has occurred and from this professional and personal relationships have formed. Participants frequently talked about anxieties reducing and their prejudices being challenged as a consequence of learning together or working together. And lastly we found evidence that links between schools and community services had been strengthened given that schools opted to invite community or statutory groups with expertise in the five need themes to talk to pupils and advise teachers on how to approach subjects such as sexual health or substance misuse. In our paper we provide a particularly

salient example of this, describing how relationships between the Police and Catholic schools had improved.

Slide 13

In terms of educational impact the practice of collaboration between educators has created new professional networks, many of which are supplemented by personal relationships between staff. Teachers describe a wealth of opportunities for professional development and capacity building either by working together or as a consequence of working with external agencies as mentioned in the previous slide. Collaboration enabled educators to share resources and expertise and crucially develop new knowledge and new practice. According to pupils examining social need themes in shared classrooms was engaging. Schools opted to locate many of the social need themes within the local context of the city. Pupils frequently talked about themes such as substance misuse and internet safety as the most impactful lessons. In the paper we also provide a significant example of how collaboration can promote school improvement. We describe how the post primary schools are now collaborating on other areas beyond social needs where they have explored science provision, special educational needs and leadership development.

Slide 14 (Last Slide)

Shared education is now common parlance in Northern Ireland, receiving particular attention from educationalists, policymakers and is widely discussed in the media. The potential of shared education as a model capable of

delivering both social and educational benefits has received significant support and traction from Government and there have been a series of actions and commitments in the last three years. These include:

- Commitments that every child in Northern Ireland should be afforded the opportunity to take part in shared education by 2015
- There are commitments to build ten shared education campuses across Northern Ireland, these will either be new facilities where schools are collocated on the same campus or developing existing schools so that their facilities and space can be shared. The initiative is now underway and two rounds of applications from school partnerships have been received – many of which are school partnerships that have evolved from the Sharing Education Programme at Queen’s
- A programme jointly funded by Government, a Philanthropic organisation and the Department of Education has been launched, which includes £25m of funding to support a new shared education initiative which aims to establish hundreds of cross-sectoral partnerships across Northern Ireland.
- Lastly, shared education is now enshrined in legislation, whereby the Education Act (Northern Ireland) (2014), places a duty on a newly established Education Authority to ‘encourage, facilitate and promote shared education.’ Alongside this, the Education Minister has also proposed a specific piece of legislation which will define shared education and describe the duties of state.

In conclusion shared education has evolved over almost a decade.

Beginning as a concept, it was tested as a programmatic pilot, and more

recently it has been adopted as a new and systemic approach to education in a divided society. The approach can evidence social, educational and economic benefits. Shared learning and collaboration between separate schools reimagines an almost a century old system and offers a mechanism of transforming contested spaces into shared spaces by blurring the boundaries between school sectors and improving the interconnections between communities.