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EDUCATION IN DIVIDED SOCIETIES NETWORK (EDS-N+)

BRIEFING PAPERS

Paper 1: Shared Education: lessons from an education initiative in Northern Ireland

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EDS-N+ BRIEFING PAPERS

Paper 1: Shared Education: lessons from an education initiative in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has had a denominationally divided school system since its inception in 1921, though the historical roots of this pre-date the partition of Ireland (Akenson, 1970, 1973). It was not until 1981 that a planned religiously integrated school sector was developed (Moffatt; Gallagher et al., 2003). The system remains largely divided on denominational grounds though there are no formal rules barring entry to any schools on religious grounds and some limited cross-over in participation. The religiously integrated schools expanded after 1981, but still comprise only seven per cent of the student population. There is also a small sector of Irish Medium schools in which all teaching is carried out through the Irish language, and a small group of independent Christian schools which seek no public funding so that their teaching can be bible-based. The main formal difference between categories of schools lies in the composition of their governing bodies, particularly in regard to which Churches are represented, and patterns of ownership. Virtually all schools are fully funded by public authorities, work with the same curriculum and have teachers trained to a common framework. The three universities and six further education colleges comprising the tertiary education system are secular.

The education divide in Northern Ireland reflects a wider political divide in which religious, political and national identities intersect. Politics is largely organized on confessional lines with an irridentist struggle providing the basis for political instability throughout the history of the polity. Up to the 1960s there were regular instances of civil disorder and occasional campaigns by the IRA, an illegal paramilitary organisation seeking to extricate Northern Ireland from the UK and incorporate it in a united Irish Republic (Darby, 1997).

During the 1960s a Civil Rights organization agitated for an end to alleged discrimination against the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, but was met by an aggressive response from the police and descended into another spat of civil disorder. The scale of the disorder was greater than in previous occasions and soon IRA groups attacked the police, claiming to defend Catholic neighbourhoods. Such was the degree of escalation that the UK government ordered the British Army to intervene and restore order, but the escalation simply increased and Protestant paramilitary groups started to emerge. The situation escalated still further, with the introduction of internment without trial, the establishment of IRA-controlled 'no-go' areas in some urban settings, an IRA bombing campaign largely against commercial targets and a series of tit-for-tat sectarian assassinations (Darby, 1997). The violent conflict did not end until the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) (1997) and the establishment of new shared political institutions based on consociational principles (Lijphart, 1975; Wilson, 2010). The NI Assembly (NIA) operated under a set of procedures which required consensus voting on contentious issues and coalition government, though the pattern of cooperation has been fitful: the NIA started in 2000, but went into suspension between 2002 and 2007, and again between 2017 and 2020.

At the outbreak of political violence in the latter part of the 1960s some suggested that community division was exacerbated by separate denominational schools (Heskin, 1980), whereas others suggested that the core problem was rooted in social injustice and a failure to provide equality for the Catholic minority (Conway, 1970; Aunger, 1975). With no consensus on the effects of separate schools, two broad areas of intervention were put in place over the next thirty years, one focused on reconciliation and the other on equality.

The interventions focused on reconciliation included curricular reform (Richardson and Gallagher, 2011), contact programmes to bring young people together on joint projects and activities (O'Connor et al., 2002) and the establishment of religiously integrated schools (Hayes et al., 2009). Although there was significant learning from all these interventions, their impact was limited (Gallagher, 2004). Thus, for example, many of the curricular reforms were innovative, but impacted on relatively few pupils; the contact programmes were generally not used to address issues related to conflict or division, and often lacked any real ambition to promote change; while the growth of the religiously integrated school system stalled at about seven per cent of the school age population.

These interventions failed to make systemic change for a number of reasons. The ideas, and intentions, behind the programmes were generally quite good, but the quality of implementation was mixed. Too many projects were dependent on individual, committed teachers, thereby allowing others to abjure any responsibility for the issue. While education leaders generally identified the goal of reconciliation as a priority for schools, it was clear that it was only one among many priorities for system leaders, most of which were clearly felt to be more important in practice. Finally, the education system in Northern Ireland is risk-averse and has often encouraged, implicitly or explicitly, the avoidance of controversial or difficult issues (Gallagher, 2004; 2016).

The second set of interventions on equality emerged in the mid-1980s when evidence linked the differential outcomes from schools, to the disadvantage of those leaving Catholic schools, to lower levels of public funding for Catholic schools (Gallagher et al., 1994). In consequence the government, which was already committed to a policy of equality, agreed that Catholic schools should have access to full public funding. Since then, performance patterns have changed so that now the average levels of performance achieved by leavers from Catholic schools are marginally higher in comparison with leavers from Protestant schools: in 1975/6 11.8% of leavers from Protestant schools had three or more A Levels (grades A*-E) in comparison with 7.5% of leavers from Catholic schools. By 2017/18 the proportions had risen to 50.3% and 56.3% respectively (Source: calculated from Department of Education statistics).

The peace process leading up to and beyond the GFA allowed space for an extensive debate on the future relationship between the communities in Northern Ireland and the extent to which government should promote connections between the divided communities. In the peace agreement itself proposals on education reflected the tension between promoting a sense of commonality alongside the recognition as it contained support both for integrated education and for Irish Medium education.

What emerged after this was a different approach entirely which accepted the right of communities to separate schools (Minority Rights Group, 1994), but sought ways to create connections between schools by making the boundaries between them porous and establishing bridging processes so that pupils could move between schools to take classes and teachers would work together on running shared classes and other professional development activities. Cross ethnic connections within civil society had proved to be beneficial elsewhere (Varshney, 2002), while connecting communities had been a feature of work on effective communities of learning (Wenger, 2000) and provided opportunities for dialogic

engagement (Flecha, 1999). Furthermore, this model drew on ideas from social networks, as a way of refocusing the relationship between schools, and highlighted the potential of creating positive interdependencies within the school system.

Gallagher (1998; 2004) explored these ideas through a comparative analyses of the role of education in divided societies and concluded that no single structural arrangement 'solved' the challenges of diversity, but proposed that school collaboration aimed at supporting participative dialogue might offer a way forward. This was later developed in a proposal for networks of locally based partnerships between Protestant, Catholic and integrated schools (Gallagher, 2016) in which pupils and teachers moved between schools to take classes on a regular basis to provide sustained contact (Hewstone et al., 2008), while protecting the ethos and existence of separate schools.

Atlantic Philanthropies and the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) funded pilot projects on 'shared education' between 2007 and 2013 which involved over 140 schools in 24 partnerships. A significant corpus of research has emerged on different aspects of shared education, including work on the impact of contact (Hughes, 2014), a consideration of its role in improving standards (Booroah and Knox, 2014), the sustainability of partnerships (Duffy and Gallagher, 2015) and the role of shared education in promoting tolerance or reconciliation in divided societies (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017). There has also been a growing international interest in the shared education model with related work being undertaken in North Macedonia (Loader et al., 2018), Israel (Payes, 2013, 2015) and the United States (Kindel, 2015), while Gallagher (2013) has tried to locate this approach within the wider conspectus of structural and curricular initiatives in divided or diverse societies.

The Northern Ireland model of shared education contains three core elements focused on contact, focus and empowerment:

Contact: Shared education partnerships should involve routine engagement between the schools with as much student contact through shared classes as possible. Regular shared classes throughout the school year provide the most powerful experience of contact and as many students as possible should be given opportunities to experience contact. Furthermore, shared classes should provide opportunities to encourage students to explore the value and challenge of diversity

Focus: Engagement through shared education should be focused on core activities of the partnership schools, such as running shared classes in core curriculum areas and not just in subjects related to community relations issues. The partnership between the schools should be visible and explicit, and given a high profile by the school leadership, so that everyone in the schools and their communities are aware of the partnership and its purpose.

Empowerment: The contexts of schools and communities can vary considerably, as can the opportunities and constraints in developing partnership activity. For this reason teachers have to be empowered to lead the development and outworking of school partnerships, and should be encouraged to explore innovative solutions to address challenges they face. This implies they should be given space to reimagine how schools might work and encouraged to try innovative solutions to problems, even if all of them do not work: this is the only way to extend the boundaries of the possible in practice. In consequence, the work of each school partnership should be locally tailored to take advantage of the opportunities in its context and address the distinctive challenges they face.

Each of these elements deals with weaknesses in previous education initiatives in Northern Ireland. Previous contact programmes tended to involve small numbers of students, were time-limited and often failed to address difficult or contentious issues. Moreover, in many instances these initiatives tended to be peripheral to the main life of the schools involved. Initiatives tended to be top-down from the centre of the system, were often applied in a uniform manner and to the extent they were evaluated, this tended to focus on the numbers involved, rather than the quality of engagement or any changes that resulted. Top-down initiatives also tended to take a prescriptive and overly rigid approach to targets, thereby failing to provide a level of flexibility to take advantage of opportunities and discourage innovation.

An additional dimension of the Shared Education work in Northern Ireland was that it involved direct engagement with policymakers from an early stage as part of a strategy to mainstream the approach within the school system (Gallagher, 2016). Pilot programmes aimed at developing effective models for collaborative school partnerships ran from 2007 to 2013 and a number of measures were taken to ensure openness to the experience and outcomes. An independent advisory group was established and a wide range of education stakeholders were invited to join so they could oversee the outworking of the pilot programme and help shape its direction. Regular seminars and workshops were held to explore

emerging evidence from the pilots and examine related research and practice. Regular briefings were provided to the main political parties and members of the Education Committee in the NIA to ensure they were aware of developments and this helped to generate a high level of consensus in support of the work. A Ministerial Advisory Group was established by the Minister of Education to examine the evidence on shared education (Connolly et al., 2013) and recommended that it be taken forward officially. A Shared Education Signature Programme (SESP) was established by the Education Authority in 2014 effectively to institutionalise the work of the pilot programmes. A report from the NIA Education Committee (2015) recommended additional support for shared education and European Peace Funding (Peace IV) provide funding support to expand partnership work in schools further. A Shared Education Act was passed by the NI Assembly in 2016 making it a statutory duty for the Department of Education and the Education Authority. In a relatively short period, the shared education model seems to have transformed the educational landscape in Northern Ireland. At the last count there were 716 schools involved in shared education partnerships and 87,385 pupils participating in shared classes (Department of Education, 2020). In addition the Education Authority has established a Network for Shared School Improvement (NSSI) as a mechanism for promoting teacher-led professional development and the sharing of best practice across school partnerships in order to work towards a self-sustaining school improvement system. A major capital programme has also been established to develop 'shared campuses' in which new build schools from different communities will be built on the same site with shared specialist facilities: work on two campuses is underway and others are in planning.

This initiative has had significant success in fostering new policy and practice across more than half of the schools in Northern Ireland. It also achieved, and held, a high level of political consensus, with all the main political parties supporting the 2016 legislation. In comparison with previous interventions, the main difference in shared education lay in its bottom-up character: funding support from two independent foundations allowed for some freedom in pursuing innovative solutions (Hannon, 2008). The project empowered teachers to identify challenges and lead on the development of solutions, and to establish programmes of work for individual school partnerships that addressed the problems and potential of their local context. These two features, teacher empowerment and locally tailored solutions, both emerged as keys to the success of the model of school partnership. While the model of shared education achieved a high level of political consensus, this was achieved because of the leadership shown by teachers and schools in working towards effective models of collaborative practice.

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