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**The role of school-based contact in reducing social distance: qualitative insights from Northern Ireland and the Republic of North Macedonia**

Ana Tomovska Misoska, University American College Skopje

Rebecca Loader, Queen's University Belfast

Correspondence to: [tomovska@uacs.edu.mk](mailto:tomovska@uacs.edu.mk)

# **The role of school-based contact in reducing social distance: qualitative insights from Northern Ireland and the Republic of North Macedonia**

Education plays an important role in bridging divisions and promoting positive intergroup relations. A number of initiatives aimed at improving relations in conflict-affected societies have been based on the contact hypothesis. However, very little attention has been devoted to the potential of such interventions to reduce social distance between groups. Moreover, the voices of the young people involved in such programmes have rarely been taken into consideration. This paper tries to address these gaps using a qualitative methodology. It presents the views and experiences of post-primary pupils involved in planned educational contact encounters in two countries that have experienced interethnic violence: Northern Ireland and the Republic of North Macedonia. The findings suggest that planned contact can be effective in reducing social distance. However the programmes need to provide opportunities for more frequent meetings, more personalized communication between pupils, and the sensitive exploration of contentious issues to ensure long-lasting changes.

Keywords: intergroup contact; social distance; intergroup relations; peace education

## **Introduction**

Educational systems have an important role in conflict-affected societies. They should provide useful ways to bridge divisions between the groups involved in conflict, deal with mistrust and promote positive intergroup relations (Bush and Saltareli, 2000; Salomon, 2004). In this article, we explore this contribution in two societies that have been afflicted by violence and continue to experience deep division: Northern Ireland and the Republic of North Macedonia. In both countries, conflict has occurred along ethno-national lines, involving ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians in North Macedonia, and Catholics

and Protestants in Northern Ireland. Both countries also have similar framework agreements – the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland and the Ohrid Framework Agreement in North Macedonia – which brought active violence to an end, although issues remain with their implementation (Wilson, 2011). While there have been improvements in relations between groups in both countries, and research indicates greater openness to mutual cooperation (ARK, 2017; Maleska, 2010), ethnic separation and perceptions of social distance persist.

Division in both contexts is reflected in the education system, which has been criticised for perpetuating ethnic separation. In North Macedonia, in line with the constitutional provision for mother tongue instruction, Albanian and Macedonian pupils are largely educated separately, resulting in limited contact between them (Myhrvold, 2005). Some schools continue to use only one language of instruction, but even where multiple languages are used in a school, pupils are separated into different buildings or shifts (Petrovska-Beska et.al., 2009). Division similarly persists in Northern Ireland, where more than 90 per cent of pupils attend separate Catholic or Protestant schools (DENI, 2017), a situation that has provoked concerns locally and internationally (Booth, 2013; Gallagher, 2011). Integrated schools were founded from the early 1980s to educate children from Catholic, Protestant and other backgrounds together, but this sector remains small, educating only 7% of pupils.

Recognising the need for an approach that can bridge existing divisions while respecting parents' rights to choose their children's education, both countries have recently introduced programmes to promote greater integration within existing educational structures. In Northern Ireland, this has taken the form of 'shared education', which involves the development of collaborative school partnerships across denominational lines as a means of improving social relations and enhancing educational

provision. Partnerships typically comprise 2–4 schools that work together to provide joint curriculum classes and activities for pupils on a regular basis, with pupils travelling between partner schools to participate. In North Macedonia, a similar effort has been the Interethnic Integration in Education Project (IIEP). As in Northern Ireland, this sought to build links between monolingual schools, or across campuses and shifts within multilingual schools, and promote contact between students through curricular and extracurricular activities for ethnically or linguistically mixed groups (Gulevska et al, 2015).

This paper examines the contribution of these shared and interethnic education initiatives to enhancing intergroup relations in both countries. To do so, it employs a concept – social distance – that is rarely utilised in educational work yet can be useful in exploring the behavioural outcomes of contact. Previous studies have noted the positive effect of shared and interethnic education on the frequency and quality of contact and on pupils’ intergroup attitudes (Hughes *et al.*, 2012; Petroska-Beska and Osmani, 2014), but none has employed social distance as a lens through which to explore their impact. Research from Northern Ireland has found, however, that some pupils continue to experience discomfort or hostility during shared education (Gallagher et al, 2010; Loader, 2015), indicating that social distance may persist or even increase. In this study, we explore further the contribution of contact-based interventions to narrowing social distance, and, based on these findings, consider the potential of such programmes in developing more cohesive societies.

## **Conflict and education in Northern Ireland and North Macedonia**

### **Northern Ireland**

Northern Ireland was created by the partition of Ireland in 1921 to assuage the region's majority Protestant/unionist community, which opposed Irish independence from Britain. It currently has a population of almost 1.9 million (NISRA, 2019), which comprises approximately 48% Protestant and 45% Catholic residents (NISRA, 2012). Protestants have traditionally identified as British and wished to remain part of the United Kingdom, while Catholics have typically claimed an Irish identity and favoured the reunification of Ireland. Persistent tensions between the two groups erupted into violent conflict in the late 1960s amid protests about the Protestant government's discriminatory treatment of the Catholic/nationalist population. This was only concluded by the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Peace Agreement, having cost over 3,500 lives (McKeown, 2009). Despite the cessation of violence, division remains evident, with survey evidence in the wake of Brexit suggesting an increase in numbers identifying as 'unionist' or 'nationalist' (Hayward and Rosher, 2020).

The education system reflects these social divisions, with approximately 92% of pupils attending Catholic maintained or controlled (*de facto* Protestant) schools (DENI, 2017). Analysis from 2012 found that half of pupils were attending schools where at least 95 per cent of students shared the same ethno-religious background (Torney, 2012). Concerns about the impact of educational separation during the conflict led to the foundation of integrated schools from the early 1980s, to educate Catholic, Protestant and other children together, and the creation of cross-community contact programmes to bring pupils from separate schools together for short-term activities and trips (Gallagher, 2011). Integrated schools appear to have positive effects on cross-group friendship and attitudes (Hughes et al, 2013), but despite parents professing support for the integrated sector in local polls (Hansson, O'Connor and McCord, 2013), the sector remains small. Moreover, while contact initiatives generated some innovative practice, their impact was hindered

by their short duration, unclear aims, and teachers' concerns about facilitating interaction (O'Connor, Hartop and McCully, 2002; Richardson, 2011).

Shared education was introduced in Northern Ireland from 2007 as a bridge between separate and integrated provision (Hughes and Loader, 2015). Informed by intergroup contact theory (see Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006), it aims to foster regular encounters between Catholic, Protestant and other young people as a means of building relationships and improving intergroup attitudes. It does so by encouraging and incentivising the development of partnerships between Catholic, Protestant and integrated schools to deliver joint classes and activities for pupils in mixed groups. These classes take place at each school and pupils travelling between institutions to participate; outside these sessions, they participate in classes with their co-religionists as usual. To maximise its impact, shared education emphasises sustained (rather than short-term) engagement), built around schools' curricular priorities. However, the design of the programme, including the types of activity and numbers of pupils involved, is left to school partners to determine according to their circumstances – e.g. pupil age range, schools' size and location, and the nature of intercommunal relations locally (Gallagher, 2016). The main stipulation is that programmes offer “significant, purposeful and regular engagement and interaction in learning between children and young people from different community backgrounds” (DENI, 2015, p.5).

Initially delivered through three pilot programmes led by two education providers and a voluntary organisation, shared education has largely been funded and managed since 2015 by the Department of Education and its delivery arm, the Education Authority (Gallagher, 2016). Approximately two-thirds of schools in Northern Ireland are currently involved in some form of sharing (DENI, 2019). While the type of activity is not mandated, guidance is provided in the form of a self-assessment framework to help

schools develop their provision – for example, by increasing the breadth and depth of shared activity and devising strategies to support learning in mixed groups (ETI, 2014) In line with principles of contact theory, research evidence has suggested that participation in shared education can have a favourable impact on pupils’ levels of cross-group friendship, outgroup trust and intergroup attitudes (Hughes *et al.*, 2012; Reimer *et al.*, 2020), though no studies to date have explored social distance.

### *North Macedonia*

The Republic of North Macedonia<sup>i</sup> was founded in 1991, gaining independence from the former Yugoslavia. It has a population of approximately 2 million<sup>ii</sup>, of which ethnic Macedonians comprise the majority and ethnic Albanians are the largest minority, followed by smaller proportions of Turks, Roma and Serbs. The structure of the population varies around the country, with the majority of Albanians living in the western and northern parts of the country where they comprise up to 80% of residents. Two distinct discourses of ethnic nationalism in North Macedonia, one Macedonian and one Albanian, have led to separation and the polarisation of social space (Atanasov, 2005; Trajkovski, 2005). Ongoing tensions between the two groups resulted in violent conflict in the north-west of the country in spring and summer 2001, which was concluded by the Ohrid Framework Agreement in August of the same year (Balalovska, Silj, & Zucconi, 2002). Almost two decades on, Albanian-Macedonian relations in North Macedonia continue to be marked by intolerance and suspicion, and contact is limited. This is true even among young people, who demonstrate low levels of intergroup trust and high levels of social distance (Topuzovska Latkovic *et al.*, 2013).

The educational system has been a product of, and *de facto* contributor to, ethnic separation in the country. The majority of Albanian and Macedonian pupils are educated



in their first language, either in monolingual schools or in separate shifts or buildings with multilingual schools (Petrovska-Beska et.al., 2009). Though mother tongue education is recognised as an important minority rights measure, this has resulted in the further separation of Macedonian and Albanian pupils (Myhrvold, 2005). There has been limited mitigation for this within existing structures: research suggests that the educational system lacks capacity to address issues connected to diversity and the promotion of better intergroup relations (Mickovska, Aleksova and Raleva, 2009; Petrovska-Beska et.al., 2009). In the absence of contact with the other, stereotypes remain widespread among pupils, one study finding that Macedonians view Albanians as dangerous and active enemies and Albanians view Macedonians as harmless and helpless (Petroska-Beska, 2012).

Modelled after the shared education initiative in Northern Ireland [reference], the Interethnic Integration in Education Programme in North Macedonia aimed to create opportunities for cross-cultural engagement to reduce this separation and challenge negative intergroup perceptions. Managed by USAID and two non-governmental organisations in education and civics, the project comprised four strands: community outreach to promote the benefits of ethnic integration; capacity-building with educators develop the skills to advance integration; the provision of activities to foster interethnic integration across all schools, incentivised by opportunities for school refurbishment; and the creation of ‘demonstration schools’ to engage in a more intensive programme of integration activities and serve as models to other institutions (IIEP, 2016). School-based activities were intended primarily to promote contact between students in ethnically/linguistically mixed groups, build relationships and improve attitudes (Gulevska et al, 2015). These included extracurricular clubs (which are mandatory at primary and secondary level in North Macedonia), multicultural workshops exploring the

country's cultural and religious heritage, and, in some cases, mixed classes within the regular curriculum.

While, as in Northern Ireland, the programme of activities was left for schools to determine, more detailed guidance was provided to schools. This included a manual of sample activities (Dedova et al., 2013) and guidelines on creating the appropriate conditions for positive contact (Negrievska, Petrovska-Beska and Balazi, 2012) – for example, by including equal numbers of pupils from each ethnic group in shared activities. By the end of the project all primary and secondary schools in the country had been involved in some form of activity (Petroska-Beska and Osmani, 2016). As a result of the initiative, systemic level indicators for interethnic integration have been added to the school inspection regime and there is legal provision for state support of activities for interethnic integration via an annual grant system. Some of the activities for interethnic integration between pupils now form part of the Youth Ethnic Integration Project which started in 2017.

## **Intergroup contact and social distance**

### ***Intergroup contact theory***

The models of shared and interethnic education envisage that social relations will improve as pupils from different backgrounds meet, interact and begin to build relationships. In this regard, it has been informed by developments in social psychology, specifically intergroup contact theory. As formulated by Gordon Allport (1954), this states that positive contact with a member of another group – usually a group towards which there is some antipathy – should lead to a reduction in prejudice, not merely towards that individual, but also towards the wider group. To facilitate these positive encounters, Allport proposed four conditions of contact: equal status of individuals within the

encounter, the presence of common goals, co-operation in pursuit of those goals, and support from relevant authorities.

Research since the publication of Allport's work has provided consistent support for a negative association between contact and prejudice across different settings, including schools and universities, and age groups (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). This remains even where Allport's conditions were absent, though contact effects were stronger in their presence. Additionally, contact via friendship appears particularly effective at reducing prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew, 1998). Research suggests that friendship achieves these effects by changing affective feelings and behaviours – e.g. reducing anxiety about interaction and increasing empathy – which in turn promotes more positive attitudes (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008; Swart et al, 2011).

### *Social distance as a measure of prejudice*

Within the contact literature, multiple variables have been employed as measures of 'prejudice', including outgroup attitudes and beliefs, outgroup stereotypes and intergroup trust. We focus in the current study on the implications of contact via shared and interethnic education programmes for pupils' perceptions of social distance. In intergroup theory, the concept of social distance has encompassed the level of understanding between different individuals and groups (Bogardus, 1933), individuals' openness to varying degrees of intimacy in intergroup relations (Williams, 1964; Parrilo and Donaghue, 2005), and perceptions of certain groups as acceptable or non-acceptable members of a society (Cehajic, Brown and Castano, 2008; Svob et.al., 2016). In research, social distance has most commonly been operationalized using Bogardus's (1933) social distance scale, which measures willingness to accept interaction with members of an outgroup. This focus on intended relationships can make social distance a particularly

valuable measure, as even in cases where individuals express no overt prejudice, a tendency to avoid closer contact with the outgroup might still be present (Warner and DeFleur, 1969; Williams and Eberhardt, 2008).

Certain authors, notably Karakayali (2009), outline multiple components of social distance: affective, cultural and habitual, normative, and interactive. Affective distance is a subjective category seen as the extent of sympathy and affection towards the outgroup (Karakayali, 2009). Cultural and habitual distance subsumes various subconcepts connected to the understanding of relations between different cultures. One of these, known as psychocultural distance, encompasses the similarities and dissimilarities between the symbols, dominant themes and representations of different cultural systems (Karakayali, 2009; Szalay and Maday, 1983). Another subconcept, power distance, is connected to resource allocation and differences in the type and volume of capital possessed by different groups (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991; Bourdieu, 1990). Normative distance encompasses the distinction between ingroups and outgroups – “us” and “them” (Karakayali, 2009) – and specifies what kinds of relations are acceptable between members of different groups. Finally, interactive distance deals with the frequency and length of interactions (Karakayali, 2009).

Reflecting on these components of social distance, it is interesting to note that normative and interactive distance may not be correlated: while members of two groups might have frequent contact, thus reducing interactive distance, the nature of relations and relative status might not change, thus maintaining normative distance. This means that pleasant interpersonal encounters might occur but leave existing conceptions of the outgroup and relationships between the groups intact (Park, 1924; Warner and DeFleur, 1969). Indeed, politeness in interpersonal relations may sometimes suggest higher levels of social distance (Stephan, Liberman and Trope, 2010). Nevertheless, social distance can

indicate whether an encounter leads to a desire for more contact. As such, it is important to look at how contact affects individuals' willingness and motivation to engage in and sustain closer intergroup interactions, such as friendship ties, as a way towards broader integration and social cohesion in diverse societies (Ata, Bastian and Lusher, 2009).

### ***Social distance measures in contact research***

While, historically, social distance has not been widely employed as an outcome measure in contact research, its use has increased over the past 15 years. In line with the effect of contact on other variables, studies have found that both the amount and quality of intergroup contact predict reduced social distance, with contact quality (of which friendship is often the main indicator) having the stronger influence (Binder et al, 2009; Eller and Abrams, 2004). This appears true for both majority and minority group members (Bastian, Lusher and Ata, 2012; Holtman et al, 2005), although it appears less consistent for minority groups (e.g. Binder et al, 2009).

Exploring the mechanisms by which contact reduces social distance, researchers have highlighted a number of the same mediators identified in studies of contact's effects on intergroup attitudes, including intergroup anxiety, perceived threat and learning about the outgroup (Ata, Bastian and Lusher, 2009; Binder et al, 2009; Eller and Abrams, 2004). While these studies were conducted in largely peaceful areas, research undertaken in a former conflict zone, Bosnia and Herzegovina, has additionally identified mediational effects of forgiveness, empathy, trust and perceived outgroup variability (Cehajic, Brown and Castano, 2008). This suggests the importance of making group dynamics and differences salient within the encounter to promote such responses and ultimately reduce social distance. Conversely, avoiding or ignoring experiences of difference, inequality

and discrimination may result in resistance to interaction and thus even greater social distance (Tredoux and Finchilescu, 2007).

To date, research exploring the effects of contact on social distance has been largely quantitative in nature. While this has identified a relationship and underlying mediators, it has revealed little about the content of encounters that reduce – or, in some cases, increase – social distance. Moreover, studies to date have largely overlooked participants' own perspectives on contact, preferring academic concepts that may lack meaning to those involved in everyday encounters (Dixon, Durrheim and Tredoux, 2005). We seek to address these limitations in the current study. We undertake a qualitative, interview-based study to examine young people's views and experiences of contact via shared and interethnic educational programmes, exploring whether and how such initiatives can attenuate social distance between participating groups.

## **Methodology**

The research utilised semi-structured interviews as its method of data collection in Northern Ireland and North Macedonia. This approach allowed access to participants' accounts of their experiences and the meanings attached to these, and was particularly appropriate for exploring the nature and content of contact, which are often overlooked in quantitative studies. With the caveat that this study is small-scale and exploratory in nature, conducting research across two contexts also enabled us to compare findings from different settings and generate insights with application beyond one country and culture. This is especially important as the shared education model develops in other national contexts, including Kosovo and Israel (RIT Kosovo 2019; Payes, 2018).

Interviews were conducted in small groups, each comprising 2-4 participants of shared and interethnic education programmes. We chose to focus on pupils as they are targets of

these initiatives and, for our purposes, the group among whom a reduction in social distance is most important. (Analysis of teachers' perspectives is available separately in [reference].) At the time of the fieldwork, pupils in Northern Ireland had been participating in shared classes at least weekly for eight months, while pupils in North Macedonia had been engaged in mixed activities for two academic years, but met less frequently – typically fortnightly. The small-group format was selected to allow conversation both between researcher and participant(s) and among participants themselves, as well as to reduce the status differential between researcher and pupils (Cohen et.al., 2004; Eder and Fingerson, 2001). This format allows for children to respond at their own time without feeling pressured to respond immediately after questions are being posed and enables the researchers to observe how participants collectively construct meaning (Eder and Fingerson, 2001). In the process, the researchers were constantly aware of the need to balance the discussion between the more dominant children in the setting and those who are less dominant, and to seek clarification about certain events with nondirective probing questions (Eder and Fingerson, 2001; Lewis, 1992) to address the risks of more assertive characters dominating the discussion and leaving the less confident quiet and intimidated by this group setting (Gallagher, 2009; Lewis, 1992).

Interviews were conducted in English in Northern Ireland and in Macedonian and Albanian in North Macedonia. In North Macedonia, interviews were undertaken and transcribed by the first author, an ethnic Macedonian, and an Albanian-speaking research assistant. The first author is an academic at [university] with long-standing interests in education and peacebuilding. This research was undertaken as part of a fellowship awarded to her by the Open Society Foundations and hosted at [institution], where she had previously completed her doctoral studies. In Northern Ireland, interviews were

conducted and transcribed by the second author, a research fellow at [university] with interests in education and intergroup relations. The second author is resident in [city] but originates from elsewhere in the UK and is typically perceived as a non-partisan ‘outsider’ to the conflict, in comparison with the first author’s ‘insider’ perspective in her context. We recognise the potential (and unavoidable) influence of these subjectivities on the data collection, but sought to mitigate their influence through our joint analysis of the data. Both authors were in their early-to-mid 30s at the time of the study and neither had any prior relationship with the schools, pupils or teachers involved in the research.

Twenty-eight pupils were interviewed in Northern Ireland (16 Catholic and 12 Protestant) and 25 in North Macedonia (11 Albanian and 14 Macedonian), all aged between 15 and 18 years. To enable pupils to converse freely on the sometimes sensitive subjects of intergroup relations, each interview comprised pupils from the same ethnic background. Interviews lasted between 30 and 55 minutes and addressed topics including the aims of shared/interethnic education, pupils’ experiences of shared classes/activities, cross-group relationships, and intergroup relations in each country. The data were analysed following Braun and Clarke’s thematic approach and utilizing the qualitative analysis software, MAXQDA. The authors worked together to develop the coding framework, conduct the analysis and prepare this manuscript.

### *The school settings*

In North Macedonia the research was conducted in one multilingual secondary school, catering for pupils aged 14–18 in separate Albanian and Macedonian language shifts. The school was located in the western part of the country, in a medium-sized town that was not directly affected by violent conflict, although it is quite near to some of the regions where fighting occurred. The majority of the population in the municipality is



Albanian, followed by Macedonians and a sizeable Turkish minority, and the same ethnic structure applies to the school itself. Most of the pupils are from the town and the neighbouring villages, but some attend from other municipalities. A small group of pupils come from areas affected by violence in 2001. The school has been involved in the IIEP from the beginning as a so-called 'demonstration school'. This means that it received particular support in developing activities for mixed groups of pupils (planned by teachers in partnership with support staff from the project) which were also showcased during project-related events as examples to other schools. As part of the project, the school developed a number of contact activities for ethnically/linguistically mixed groups of pupils, including a mixed drama club, a journalism club, sports clubs, multicultural workshops, and joint excursions. The activities changed each year to enable more pupils to become involved, and, while the frequency of the meetings varied by activity, most occurred twice a month. As the school operates in shifts and had no free space during these times, activities typically took place between the shifts. Although this made it difficult to increase the number and frequency of activities, working between shifts had the benefit of enabling pupils from different year groups to become involved. As most activities were extra-curricular, only pupils with an interest took part. Other pupils were informed about the activities during specially planned events that showcased the project's work.

In Northern Ireland, data were collected in a shared education partnership comprising two secondary schools, one a Catholic grammar school and the other an all-ability Protestant school. These are located approximately a mile and a half from each other in a rural town. More than two-thirds of the town's residents are Protestant, and this identity was evident in the display of unionist flags in the town centre. There is a large Catholic population towards the south of the town and in the surrounding townlands.

Relations between the two communities have historically been strained and the local council has previously acknowledged the town's 'sectarian' image, though rates of reported sectarian crime were low during the period preceding and including the fieldwork.

The partnership was established in 2010 through the Sharing Education Programme (SEP), a pilot initiative coordinated by [institution], and since 2015 has been part of the shared education programme managed by the Department of Education. During the academic year in which data collection took place, the partnership delivered two shared courses: a personal effectiveness course for pupils in year 13 (age 16-17) and a vocational engineering qualification in years 13 and 14 (age 16-18). These were standard post-16 courses and typically comprised a quarter to a third of pupils' timetabled hours of learning. Consistent with the rest of the curriculum, the syllabus for these courses was standardised by the examinations board, but the planning and delivery was left to the three teachers (one Catholic, two Protestant) who led the classes. The two classes were taught in mixed groups across both schools, with pupils and their subject teacher travelling between the schools as their timetables required. Pupils pursuing these subjects met relatively frequently, typically between once and three times per week, and contact was in most cases restricted to the classroom setting.

## **Findings**

### ***Motivation, expectations and social distance***

A key feature of these partnerships in both Northern Ireland and North Macedonia was the voluntary nature of participation. Exploring the reasons for pupils' decisions to take part, interviews found that motivation differed between the two contexts. In North Macedonia, the most frequently cited motive for involvement was to get to know students

from other backgrounds. Pupils spoke of a keenness to *'meet the other nationalities'* and to *'learn about their religion, their language, customs, traditions'*. In several interviews, participants also referred to cross-group friendships as a desirable outcome of participation. Revealing a willingness to engage with the other group, such comments suggest that perceptions of social distance between the groups were comparatively low, even at the start of the programme. This may be a function of the programme itself: with its emphasis on interethnic integration, including in its nomenclature, it may have had little appeal to those opposed to closer intergroup relations.

In Northern Ireland, while pupils often described cross-group relationships as a benefit of shared education, few spoke of choosing shared classes from a desire to meet or build relationships with the other religious group. Rather, they described the opportunity to pursue the course in personal effectiveness or engineering as their principal motivation. In this respect, the programme provided an incentive, in the form of a qualification, for pupils to engage in contact even where perceived levels of social distance might be high: as one pupil commented, *'as long as you get taught, it doesn't matter who you're with'*. Pupils' pragmatism was also evident in comments in six interviews that shared education could be beneficial in preparing them for the mixed environments they would encounter in the workplace or at university. While such remarks suggested an instrumental view of contact – that is, that pupils primarily valued the opportunity to become more adept at 'mixing' – they also suggested a desire among participants to reduce levels of social distance between groups.

Interestingly, in Northern Ireland, while incentives such as qualifications aimed to encourage more reluctant pupils into shared education, there remained a widespread belief that only those already possessing more positive intergroup attitudes would choose to participate. Illustrating this, interviewees contrasted their cohort of sixth-form students,

who were described as “*more understanding*” of group differences, with a minority of younger pupils who were considered “*very bitter and sectarian*” and unlikely to participate in shared classes in future. Shared education participants were thus characterised as open and willing to engage with outgroup pupils (indicative of low social distance) and non-participants as unwelcoming to others, if not openly hostile (indicative of high social distance). Despite this presentation of understanding and social confidence, anxiety nonetheless emerged as the most prevalent emotion among pupils before beginning shared activities, as it did in North Macedonia. This suggested an uncertainty around intergroup contact that reflects the rarity of sustained encounters in both countries.

### ***The role of shared and interethnic education programmes in reducing social distance***

Interviews in both countries revealed some positive impact of contact via shared activities on the different dimensions of social distance, particularly interactive and affective distance. Interactive distance, especially, was narrowed through these programmes as it became part of pupils’ routine to meet each other. During these regular meetings, it was apparent that certain types of activity – described by pupils as fun-filled pursuits aimed at helping them get to know each other – were particularly effective in reducing interactive distance. In Northern Ireland, for example, pupils talked fondly of the ice-breaking activities that had helped them in their mutual interactions:

Interviewer: Why do you think that you have become that much more friendly?

Catholic-Female1: Just getting to know each other, and all the trips we had. The trip to laser quest and bowling with them.

Catholic-Female2: Yeah, that probably broke the ice. A lot more, yeah, just going over and actually talking to them.

While activities permitting informal conversation helped to reduce social distance in the early stages of the programme, meeting over an extended period of time also encouraged positive perspectives on interaction to develop. Pupils described instances where feelings of distance, uneasiness and anxiety were reduced over the course of the programme. This was especially apparent in the case of language use in North Macedonia. At the beginning of the programme, reflecting the nature of the relationship between Macedonians and Albanians, the use of pupils' mother tongue was just another reminder of the social distance between the groups.

Interviewer: How did you feel during the activities?

[...]

Male-Macedonian: Well, OK, maybe not completely normal... It was a bit strange with the languages, especially at the beginning...

Female-Macedonian: We had difficulties in understanding each other... so we had to rely on people that knew Macedonian and Albanian and Turkish to translate so we can understand each other.

Careful use of language during joint activities, and effective translation by teachers, helped pupils to feel at ease in the contact situation and to begin to perceive the use of different languages as acceptable. In such situations, students who were proficient in both languages, who in most cases were Albanian, acted as facilitators of the group's work and promoters of more relaxed intergroup relations. Language thus diminished as a marker of interactive social distance during pupils' encounters. Among Macedonian students, increased comfort and the realisation that knowledge of other languages could enhance intergroup communication led some to express willingness to learn some Albanian words. This sharing of language(s) helped to generate a positive atmosphere among participants,

reducing affective distance and in some cases leading to the formation of deeper personal relationships.

Interviewer: What is it like in the Integrated activities? How did you feel?

Male-Albanian: there was no conflict between us so everything was good. Some of the Albanian students knew Macedonian so they helped the others with the unknown words.

[...]

Interviewer: How do you think the students from other ethnicities have been feeling?

Female-Albanian: The Macedonians tried to help us when we could not speak in their language. They wanted to learn Albanian so they learned some words.

I met a very good friend. She was Macedonian but she could talk in Turkish and Albanian so she was the only person I could talk to without problems. I went out with her several times. (Albanian female)

Reducing affective and interactive distance, as in these examples, could in turn reduce normative distance, as it became acceptable to have friendly encounters with the outgroup. These effects were most pronounced in the personal effectiveness class in Northern Ireland, where pupils described the teacher as supportive of interaction and the relaxed atmosphere as conducive to building relationships. Several pupils from this class continued to interact with new friends outside the lesson, via social media or text message. In North Macedonia, similarly, pupils viewed the drama club as an opportunity to get to know each other better. In these classes, the teachers arranged coffee meetings after the activity, which helped to deepen pupils' relationships.

Interviewer: Did involvement in such activities help you in getting to know each other?

Male-Macedonian: Well, you get acquainted with each other, you communicate.

Interviewer: How often did you meet?

Female-Macedonian: Well, besides being together during drama session, we went out together as well for coffee.

Male-Macedonian2: After the session.

Female-Macedonian: I mean even now some of the students are into University now but we still get together. All together Macedonians, Albanians.

Male-Macedonian2: I was also with her in that and we really do that.

For the majority of pupils in both countries, shared/interethnic education provided a rare chance to meet somebody from the outgroup on a frequent basis, with such opportunities otherwise limited outside these programmes. In describing the relationships they had formed with outgroup pupils, most participants used the term ‘friend’, indicating that they perceived low interactive and affective distance between them. However, probing the nature of these relationships revealed that for most of the students, these ‘friendships’ extended only to being polite when meeting each other in shared public spaces, as one pupil in Northern Ireland illustrated.

Well, we go past them on the street and you would say hello to them and whatever, and just be friendly. Because I've seen [another student] outside school once or twice, just walking past and we would say hello and maybe stand and talk for a wee minute.

(Protestant male)

Participants who described more intimate relationships than this – for example, where they communicated on social media or met for a night out – were relatively few in number, comprising only a fifth of those interviewed. This suggests that, while these programmes represented an improvement on the status quo, they could have been more

successful in addressing the various dimensions of social distance. We explore this further below.

### ***The limitations of shared and interethnic programmes in reducing social distance***

Two areas where shared and interethnic education could have had greater success were, first, in reducing social distance among pupils in all mixed classes and activities, as the impact appeared greater in some activities than others; and second, ensuring that these effects transferred beyond the school to other settings. While the majority of interviewees reported positive feelings towards their outgroup classmates, some suggested that shared classes had done little to decrease social distance between them. This was attributed primarily to the nature of the shared activity, where the focus on completing work-related tasks hindered contact of a more personal nature.

Interviewer: Have you got to know people?

Catholic-Male: Not really.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Catholic-Male: Not sure. It's not that they don't talk to each other, but it's just not really the type of thing...We would talk more about work than anything else to each other.

Even where activities were effective in reducing interactive and affective distance between pupils, these positive effects were largely restricted to the programme and the school setting. Outside the school, pupils continued only to have interactions with their own group, as one Albanian pupil exemplified when commenting that she had “*made new friends...but we communicated just in the activities*”. This suggests that an approach focusing on the reduction of interactive and (to a lesser extent) affective distance was not



sufficient to 'normalise' cross-group relationships and thus reduce normative social distance, particularly beyond the school.

Contributing to the maintenance of normative social distance was the use of school space – buildings, classroom, entrances – in ways that preserved separation between students. In Macedonia, this was most apparent in the shift system, which designated the building as available for use by ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians (and others) at different times of day. While, officially, the use of shifts was a response to the lack of capacity within school buildings, it also served to regulate (and limit) contact between students. In Northern Ireland, similarly, contact between pupils outside the classroom was limited by decisions to locate shared classes in outhouses, rather than the main building of the school, and admit students through rear entrances only.

My class, we're not allowed to go in through the front doors. We have to go in through the back doors. I don't understand it, because sometimes they forget us at the back door and we're standing there and people are walking past, looking and saying, 'why are they out there?' (Catholic female)

Whereas the presence of pupils from both schools might have signalled institutional support for 'mixing' and contributed to a reduction in normative social distance, pupils' responses suggested that these actions led them to feel that contact – at least with peers not directly involved in shared education - was undesirable and carried some personal risk. This perception was reinforced by the tendency for visiting pupils to arrive slightly later and leave earlier than their classmates, meaning they were moving around the school while other students were in class. While the schools regarded this as a timetabling issue, it was perceived by some interviewees as a strategy to “*keep [visiting students] all isolated*”.

While normative distance proved more difficult to overcome than interactive and affective distance, so, too, did cultural and habitual distance – i.e. that which is related to differences of culture, power and status between groups. In both countries, interviews revealed a preference for polite, pleasant encounters that did not address or explore in depth the nature of relations between the groups. In Northern Ireland, for example, the majority of pupils indicated that they were anxious to avoid issues of identity, difference or intergroup relations because they were uncertain how to engage in such conversations and feared negative consequences from doing so.

Interviewer: Right, and if [cultural festivities] are going on in town, does it ever get brought up in any of your shared classes? Do you ever talk about the Twelfth or St Patrick's Day<sup>1</sup>, what you're going to do or anything like that?

Catholic-Female1: No.

Catholic-Female2: I think it would be a touchy subject. Like, they're nice people and all, but I just...

Catholic-Female1: You wouldn't want to offend them in any way or anything either.

As we describe on page 5, shared education activities are largely left for schools to determine according to their priorities and community contexts. The stipulation for “significant, purposeful and regular engagement and interaction in learning” does not require schools to engage in discussions of identity or intergroup difference. In this partnership, it was clear teachers created few formal or informal opportunities to explore

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<sup>1</sup> The Twelfth (of July) is the festive day commemorating the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 and is celebrated almost exclusively by the Protestant/loyalist community. St Patrick's Day commemorates the patron saint of Ireland and tends to be celebrated more by Catholics than by Protestants.

such issues, focusing primarily on course content, and pupils were (as the quote above highlights) reluctant to broach these topics themselves. Consequently, ‘cultural and habitual’ distance remained largely intact in this partnership.

There was greater engagement with diversity in North Macedonia, mostly via activities exploring cultural similarities and differences between the groups. Pupils reported visiting places of religious significance, discussing traditions with elderly members of the communities, writing words and proverbs in different local languages, and enjoying traditional foods.

Interviewer: Which activities help you get closer to each other?

Female-Macedonian1: Well, we talk to each other and realize we have the same viewpoints on certain things.

Interviewer: Have you ever talked about similarities and differences during the activities?

Female-Macedonian1: Yes.

Male-Macedonian: Well, when we are working together on a project... we talk to each other... we ask them how they do certain things... differences at home, religion and all.

Female-Macedonian2: We also had a project where we visited older women, one Macedonian, one Albanian and one Turkish and they told us stories, customs, events... and we realized we have similar viewpoints, the same traditions, maybe a few are different. It might look different but it's similar, the same.

As this excerpt suggests, these activities helped to promote warm feelings and reduce some measure of social distance between pupils. However, with the emphasis on ‘sameness’, the programme – like that in Northern Ireland – avoided engagement with

the deeper and more engrained issues of power and inequality that can maintain social distance between groups, as numerous authors have highlighted (Park, 1924; Stephan, Liberman and Trope, 2010; Warner and DeFleur, 1969). The implications of these approaches were exemplified in North Macedonia, where, despite careful attention to the equal use of students' mother tongues within the programme, wider issues relating to the status and usage of the Albanian and Macedonian languages were overlooked. These issues include the preference of Albanians, using the rights granted to them after the Ohrid Peace Agreement (Balalovska, Silj and Zucconi, 2002), to employ the Albanian language exclusively in situations where they are the majority. This practice is regarded by the majority Macedonian population as too great a concession (Jasari et.al., 2011). Despite this being such a contested issue, it was not discussed during interethnic activities and pupils' norms around language were largely unchallenged. While some Macedonian pupils were willing to use Albanian words during the encounters, as discussed above, most expressed reluctance to learn or use the language in other settings. Beyond the interethnic programme, then, language persisted as a marker of social distance.

*Improving the impact of contact via shared/interethnic education on social distance*

In both countries, pupils suggested that increasing the frequency of their meetings would be helpful in reducing social distance. Comparing the relationships they had developed through shared classes and activities with those forged at their own school, they indicated that the former would have benefited from more time together.

Male-Macedonian-1: For such a short time to create friendship it's hard.

Interviewer: But you said you are involved the whole time?

Female-Macedonian: Well, yeah, but it's not the same level of friendship when you are together the whole time and when you see each other only once a week.

Male-Macedonian-1: And only for an hour or so.

In Northern Ireland, pupils talked about increasing the number of shared classes to improve the frequency of contact, while in North Macedonia they favoured linguistically and ethnically mixed shifts that would permit everyday encounters between pupils. Interviewees also suggested that meetings and activities that offered more opportunity for interaction of a social nature, where they could discuss various topics beyond the task they were undertaking, would be beneficial. While such measures would help to reduce social distance over the course of the project, pupils also placed particular importance on strategies to initiate interaction and promote trust in the early stages of shared classes and activities. One interviewee suggested that, by encouraging interaction from the beginning, these programmes could reduce the likelihood that norms of separation would become entrenched.

It would be harder to change if you weren't talking for a year and then you started talking. It would be hard to mix with them, like, you wouldn't know what to talk about. But if you were talking to each other from the very start, it would be easier.

(Catholic male)

To fulfil this purpose, pupils in Northern Ireland requested more 'icebreaking' activities, of the type discussed above. Their comments also suggested that more careful attention to the layout of the classroom could help to reduce social distance – for example, arranging furniture “*in a big circle so that everybody can talk to each other*” (Girl, Protestant), rather than being “*sectioned off*” into different groups of desks. In North Macedonia, one group of Macedonian interviewees also advocated greater consideration

of the composition of groups, particularly during sporting pursuits. Reflecting on occasions where “*Macedonians play all on one side and Albanians play all on other*”, they proposed greater mixing of students within teams to foster greater cooperation and closeness.

Despite their anxieties about addressing difference, there were also indications that pupils wanted more opportunity to engage with contentious issues. This accords with arguments that meaningful reductions in social distance in conflict-affected societies can only come through engagement with potentially divisive topics (Nagda and Gurin, 2012). Where pupils were involved in activities that explored cultural and habitual distance, they tended to respond positively, as the excerpt below demonstrates.

I think what really helped as well was that we had a Spirit of Enniskillen day, where everyone met up and we all did activities and stuff together, and got talking about each other's views and things like that... Usually we'd be separate and not really have to do with each other, but it really got opened up and it was good to hear people's thoughts... We talked a lot about how we've been brought up as well, and even religion and things like that, so that was good to hear. (Protestant female)

When approaching such topics, however, the data indicate the importance of considering the broader social context and introducing these subjects gradually as pupils get to know one another and feel more at ease. Without this appreciation of local norms and sensitivities, there was a risk that the introduction of controversial issues could reinforce, rather than reduce, social distance. This was illustrated in Northern Ireland in the description of an activity from the programme's induction day.

Catholic-Male1: There was a group that you'd go to that side if you believe Northern Ireland's part of Britain...and then if you didn't, you'd go there [indicates other side], and if you were a bit iffy on it, you'd go in the middle [...]

Catholic-Male2: Yeah, so it just made it a bit uneasy and brought a bit of bitterness back, cos you sort of forget. If you're real into nationalism and stuff and you're a part of Ireland and that's it, and then someone says, "if you believe you're a part of Britain, go over there," and then you go over there, over to the Ireland side, it sort of would spark an argument, really, and tensions could rise.

Recommendations for careful planning of shared tasks and dialogue, the classroom environment and the group's composition highlight the importance of skilled teachers, trained in the management of mixed groups, if shared education is to reduce social distance. While previous work in Northern Ireland has found that teachers do not always recognise the particular skills required for teaching mixed classes (Loader, 2015), pupils' appreciation and acknowledgement of the teacher's contribution was clear.

It was great because the teachers helped and clarified the unknown words. And they made us feel good so we wanted to continue with more activities. (Male pupil, Albanian)

I went to [the other personal effectiveness class] one day and the first thing Mrs Adams did was introduce everyone to me so that there was no 'oh, who's that, who's that?' and I thought that was really, really good, you know? She doesn't want anyone to be uncomfortable. (Female pupil, Catholic)

Such comments underline the significance of the teachers' role in shared and interethnic education and the need to prepare them effectively for its particular demands.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored the capacity of educational contact-based work to reduce social distance between pupils from different ethnic/religious groups in post-conflict societies. It focused on the perspectives of post-primary pupils involved in ethnically mixed activities in Northern Ireland and the Republic of North Macedonia. Although the study is limited in scope, its main aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics and mechanisms involved in the reduction of social distance, as well as to explore possible improvements to contact programmes to enhance intergroup relations in post-conflict societies.

The paper draws upon data from two similar but distinctive contexts to generate insights to inform future efforts in similar settings. While the initiative in Northern Ireland had a stronger curricular focus with more frequent meetings, North Macedonia's programme featured fewer meetings but included more activities focused on identity, culture and intergroup relations. As such, pupils in North Macedonia seemed to be more explicitly motivated to get to know members of the other group better, whilst in Northern Ireland pupils' motive for involvement was principally to study a specific subject. Despite this difference, the data suggest that these interventions helped to reduce social distance among pupils in both settings. Of the dimensions of social distance discussed by Karakayali (2009), interactive and affective distance appeared to be most altered by shared and interethnic education. Perceptions of interactive distance decreased as it became more routine for pupils to interact with the other group on a regular basis. Among some participants, this led to positive change in feelings towards peers from the other ethnic/religious group and it became acceptable to declare these outgroup pupils to be friends, indicating reduced affective distance. For those pupils who continued their



acquaintance beyond the contact situation, moreover, normative social distance appeared to be reduced.

Discussions with pupils suggest that contact helped to reduce social distance by alleviating the anxiety they initially felt regarding interaction. This is in line with other findings that show intergroup anxiety to be a key mediator of the effects of contact on social distance (Binder et al, 2009; Eller and Abrams, 2004; Tredoux and Finchilescu, 2010). What this study adds to the existing body of knowledge is the need for the careful balancing of opportunities for the positive contact that generates these affective changes with the exploration of issues and experiences of difference. An illustrative example was the language issue in North Macedonia. For pupils, the language difference in that context served as a marker of ethnic identity. In situations where the use of languages was carefully balanced to ensure the equal status of participants (Allport, 1954), linguistic difference could serve as a mechanism for promoting good interpersonal and intergroup relations – though, as the study showed, some of these positive effects did not extend beyond the contact situation.

This study indicates several possible improvements to educational contact-based interventions to reduce social distance further. First, pupils considered more frequent meetings to be necessary for the development of closer relationships. Second, the inclusion of activities that encouraged pupils to interact and get to know each other on a personal level was identified as potentially helpful. Third, educators should be mindful of aspects of provision that sustain social distance, including the use of separate shifts, buildings and entrances for different groups, as well as seating arrangements that inhibit interaction. Creating an environment that supports the aims of shared and interethnic education may require complementary changes in school and wider educational policy. Moreover, while the schools in this study appeared to avoid contentious topics, such

issues should be addressed if cultural and habitual distance is to be reduced and long-lasting changes in mutual relations are to be achieved in post-conflict societies (Nagda and Gurin, 2012). This should be done carefully and gradually, however, to avoid exacerbating social distance, and teachers should receive appropriate training to lead the exploration of contentious topics as well as to promote interaction among pupils.

Finally, we believe this article underlines the value of ‘social distance’ as a concept within research and practice in improving intergroup relations. For researchers, it provides an important lens through which to explore the practical, symbolic and psychological factors that enhance or inhibit closer relations between groups. Examining contact’s relationship with social distance rather than prejudice also shifts researchers’ focus from the psychologies of individuals to the relationships between groups, throwing new light on intergroup dynamics. Moreover, for practitioners, reducing social distance may be a more realisable aim than reducing prejudice, which requires change to participants’ negative beliefs and attitudes – arguably a greater demand. Finally, social distance may be a useful guiding principle when devising programmes to improve intergroup relations. Conceptualising social distance in four dimensions (interactive, affective, normative and cultural-habitual) may help in designing activities that encourage interaction and increase the acceptability of contact while also examining issues germane to intergroup difference and conflict. This, in turn, should increase the capacity of such programmes to promote social cohesion and to enhance equality between groups.

### **Geolocation information**

The research was conducted in Northern Ireland and the Republic of North Macedonia. The latter (formerly ‘The Republic of Macedonia’) officially adopted its current name in February 2019. Though our data were collected before this date, our paper reflects the updated nomenclature.

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The authors reported no conflicts of interest.

## **Data availability statement**

The data used in this project are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

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<sup>i</sup> The state was founded as the Republic of Macedonia and renamed in 2019, ending a long-standing international dispute, predominantly with Greece, with the use of the name 'Macedonia'.

<sup>ii</sup> Due to political interference, there has been no census in North Macedonia since 2002, when this figure was 2.02 million. Official figures place the population at 2.08 million, but other estimates suggest the population has fallen to between 1.6 and 1.8 million (Judah, 2020).