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Shared education: a case study in social cohesion

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ABSTRACT
Adopting a social cohesion framework, we consider how the shared education model in Northern Ireland reflects distributive, ideational and relational dimensions of social cohesion, and the processes through which its implementation may be contributing to a more socially cohesive society. We use this case study to reflect on the current conceptualisation of social cohesion in the literature and to argue for dynamic and interdependent connections between aspects of cohesion that are often assessed in isolation. Our analysis draws on the body of research on shared education that has accumulated since the first pilots were introduced in 2007.

Introduction
Shared education emerged in post-Agreement Northern Ireland as an approach to peacebuilding. Delivered through the divided schools system, the model promotes curriculum-based collaboration as a mechanism for improving intergroup relations between pupils and teachers from different community backgrounds, and enhancing educational opportunities for all. In the relatively short time since the model was first piloted in 2007, opportunity for shared education has been offered in around two-thirds of all schools, and there is now a legislative and policy framework in place to support mainstreaming the approach. Drawing on the extensive evidence base for shared education and conceptual literature relating to social cohesion, we examine the impact of the model on participants and at a wider societal level. In so doing, we highlight the aspects of the shared education approach that seem to position it for effectiveness, and the interplay between levels and dimensions of social cohesion that seemingly act as mediators and moderators of shared education outcomes.

We begin with an overview of social cohesion literature and a background to the shared education approach, then employing social cohesion as an analytical tool we consider how shared education both reflects core distributive, relational and ideational dimensions of social cohesion and highlights an immutable dynamic between these dimensions as they are reflected and refracted at different levels of society (individual, community and institutional). In this discussion, we reflect on the implications of our analysis for the conceptualisation of social cohesion.

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Social cohesion

Interest in the concept of social cohesion has fluctuated over time, but its most recent resurgence can be traced to the mid-1990s, beginning in Canada and subsequently gaining traction in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the UK, as well as in supranational institutions including the European Union, OECD and Council of Europe (Hulse and Stone 2007). However, the definition and usage of the term has differed among these countries and institutions (Chan, To, and Chan 2006), giving rise to the criticism that, while widely used, social cohesion as a concept has lacked clarity. These differences in usage are partly a result of social cohesion’s popularity among two distinct constituencies, social scientists and policymakers (Hulse and Stone 2007). While the former have adopted social cohesion as an analytical concept to examine socio-economic and political changes (Hulse and Stone 2007; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017), policy actors have more commonly used it as a ‘framing’ concept to examine relationships between issues such as poverty, employment and migration, guided as much by political imperatives as scientific rigour (Beauvais and Jenson 2002).

Surveying definitions of social cohesion, it is possible to observe a range of priorities: reducing social and economic inequalities; fostering social relationships and trust between citizens; and developing shared values and identities. This variation has been captured in a series of typologies, including that of Kearns and Forrest (2000, 996), which outlines five dimensions of social cohesion: ‘common values and a civic culture; social order and social control; social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities; social networks and social capital, and territorial belonging and identity.’ Condensing these categories, Hulse and Stone (2007) discuss two dimensions of social cohesion: 1) reducing disparities, inequalities and exclusion, and 2), strengthening social capital and social relations – and introduce a third, cultural dimension, comprising common values and shared identity. Similarly, Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) espouse an ‘ideational’ dimension, which comprises shared values, identification and a sense of the common good, and a ‘relational’ dimension, encompassing social bonds and networks – and add a third, ‘distributive’ dimension, which focuses on the allocation of social, cultural and economic resources. We draw on Schiefer and van der Noll’s typology to explore this variation in greater detail in the next section.

Second, social cohesion is variously described in the literature as a process or a state. Kearns and Forrest (2000, 998–999) definition of social cohesion as ‘the harmonious development of society and its constituent groups towards common economic, social and environmental standards’ suggests that it is a goal to be worked towards; in comparison, Chan, To, and Chan (2006) consider ‘cohesion’ to be a descriptive attribute of society and not an ideal to be achieved. Third, and related to this, there appears some divergence in whether social cohesion is a cause or a consequence of other social processes. Conceptualised as a goal, social cohesion appears the result of antecedent actions such as wealth redistribution; as an attribute of society, it may equally predict other social consequences – for example, health outcomes among the population (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Jenson 2019)
'Relational’, ‘ideational’ and ‘distributive’ dimensions of social cohesion

The relational dimension

The relational dimension of social cohesion has typically been defined in terms of the quantity, quality and strength of people’s relationships with others, particularly family members, friends and members of the local community. This perspective often reflects an understanding of the contribution of social capital to social cohesion, drawing especially on the work of Putnam (2000), and the concept of ‘bridging capital’, which fosters connections across groups (Koonce 2011). The relational dimension has commonly operationalised and measured in terms of the frequency of visits within the local community; numbers of relationships across ethnic, religious, class, age or gender lines; and membership of and/or involvement in organisations and voluntary bodies, including neighbourhood groups, sports teams, political parties and religious institutions (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Friedkin 2004; Jenson 2019; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017). Trust in other people and in society itself, has been employed as a significant indicator of the relational dimension (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Koonce 2011; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017). Studies from ethnically and/or religiously divided societies, specifically, including Bosnia, Cyprus and Northern Ireland have used ‘trust’ as both a measure and predictor of social cohesion (Psaltis 2012; Tam et al. 2009; Whitt 2010).

Although the relational dimension of social cohesion is used most frequently in the literature, it has not been without criticism. This has primarily addressed its perceived separation from wider power dynamics and the marginal role accorded to institutions to drive social cohesion via, for example, fostering trust and promoting discourses favourable to cohesion (Jenson 2019). Moreover, commentators influenced by alternative perspectives on social capital, particularly Bourdieu’s, argue that social capital and its advantages are not equally available to all and thus that it reproduces rather than mitigates inequality, exclusion and division (Cheong et al. 2007; Kalra and Kapoor 2009).

The distributive dimension

The distributive dimension of social cohesion has been particularly prevalent in transnational organisations including the EU and OECD, and emerged in response to perceived threats to social solidarity as a result of globalisation (Jeannotte 2000). Proponents of this dimension seek to address social and economic inequality, social exclusion and political disenchantment, which they regard as inimical to social cohesion (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Chan, To, and Chan 2006). In comparison with the relational and ideational dimensions, the distributive dimension places greater responsibility on institutions to reduce social divisions – for example, through redistributing resources and opportunities between regions or social groups and by encouraging civic and political participation. Consequently, while the relational dimension typically utilises individual and especially neighbourhood-level measures, the distributive dimension adopts regional or national measures such as the median income share or measures of health and educational outcomes, comparing these by socio-economic status, gender and ethnic or national background (Beauvais and Jenson 2002).

Criticism of this approach has questioned, first, whether the distributive dimension should be considered a component of social cohesion. Commentators have argued
instead that conditions like equality should be considered antecedents or consequences of social cohesion, defined more narrowly in terms of relational or ideational dimensions (Chan, To, and Chan 2006; Koonce 2011). Second, commentators have questioned the commitment to the distributive approach even among its supposed advocates, arguing that the preference for ‘social cohesion’ over, simply, ‘redistribution’ reflects a reluctance among policymakers to introduce truly redistributive policies (Novy, Swiatek, and Moulaert 2012). Novy, Swiatek, and Moulaert (2012) also note a greater compromise between competitiveness and social cohesion in policy discourse from the mid-2000s. While they observe a shift to viewing social cohesion as a driver of economic growth rather than an end in itself, Jenson (2019, 14) notes an increasing emphasis on job creation as they key to development in conflict-affected societies, with social cohesion ‘frequently only a station along the way to another end’.

The ideational dimension

The ideational dimension of social cohesion focuses on shared values, common goals and a shared sense of identity within a society (Kearns and Forrest 2000; Beauvais and Jenson 2002). From this perspective, cohesive societies are those in which shared norms and values are clearly defined and attract widespread consensus and adherence, without coercion (Koonce 2011). Historically, these values have included a shared history and sense of cultural and national identity; however, in increasingly diverse societies, there has also been an emphasis on the tolerance of diversity as a unifying value (Jenson 2019). Within this, the role of government has been to manage difference through institutions – for example, in defining the parameters of citizenship and developing the school curriculum.

The most substantial concerns regarding the ideational dimension of social cohesion have centred around the legitimacy of asserting ‘common values’, particularly in multicultural societies. Hulse and Stone (2007) cite the experience of Canada, where a ‘common values’ approach was eschewed on the basis that it overlooked the multiple identities and attachments present within a plural society. Such concerns may grow stronger in divided societies, where culture and identity are typically strongly differentiated and an emphasis on commonality risks being viewed as assimilationist, particularly by historically oppressed groups. Hulse and Stone also acknowledge criticism of ‘values’-focused discourse for drawing attention from systemic issues of social justice and human rights and sustaining an exclusionary status quo. Finally, researchers like Chan, To, and Chan (2006) argue that commitments to shared values are not a necessary feature of cohesion, though they acknowledge that other ‘ideational’ aspects, such as shared identification and an orientation to the common good, are characteristic of cohesive societies.

Levels of measurement and analysis

Social cohesion is most commonly conceptualised as a property of a society, typically the nation state as the unit with the greatest influence over citizenship and social policy (Chan, To, and Chan 2006). However, in addition to nation states, social cohesion has also been conceptualised as a property of geographic entities under shared governance arrangements – most notably, European countries within the EU – and, on a smaller
scale, of local communities and regions (Schiefer and van der Noll 2017). However, when it comes to the level of analysis and measurement of social cohesion; however, there has been greater variation depending on the dimension of social cohesion favoured by researchers. Those who prioritise the relational dimension typically adopt a ‘bottom-up’ approach, focusing on relationships at the individual and community levels, whereas those who prioritise the distributive dimension tend to favour a ‘top-down’ analysis focusing on the role of institutions (Hulse and Stone 2007). Those with a particular interest in the ideational dimension may consider both the institutional and (particularly) community levels (Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier 2019).

Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier (2019) observed that multidimensional studies of social cohesion remain uncommon. However, noting the reference to multiple levels in prominent descriptions of social cohesion – specifically, those of the OECD (2011) and Council of Europe (2008), – they advocate analyses that consider each of the individual, community and institutional levels and their interactions:

Cohesion happens in the intersection of the three mentioned levels, and therefore all three levels need to be considered to understand social cohesion . . . For individuals to act, they need favourable communities (climate with compatible sets of norms and values) and institutions (formal structures, norms and values) that do not forbid or limit the individual’s actions and choices (Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier 2019, 244)

As Kearns and Forrest (2000) recognise, such multidimensional analysis also permits comparison of cohesion across different levels, offering insights into divergences across a territory. While communities might be cohesive at the local level, for example, there may be significant variation between regions and across territories as a whole. In divided societies such as Northern Ireland, this multidimensional analysis can be of value in two ways: 1) in identifying how the regional government (currently led in Northern Ireland by two parties with strongly diverging political and constitutional perspectives) supports or undermines individual and community-level activities to foster cohesion, and, in turn, to what extent individuals and communities endorse or resist government-level actions in this regard; and 2) in exploring differences in the interactions between institutional and community levels according to local histories, demographics and experiences of conflict.

**Shared education**

Shared education was introduced in 2007 to foster greater integration across Northern Ireland’s divided education system and thus to increase social mixing with the aim of enhancing social cohesion. It is the most recent of a series of interventions to reduce denominational separation in the region’s education system, which date to the formalisation of education in Ireland in the 19th century (Gallagher 2016; Gardner 2016). Plans to create a non-denominational national school system from the 1830s were unpopular with church authorities and ultimately failed; renewed attempts to create a single education system in Northern Ireland following partition in 1921 were similarly unsuccessful when churches refused to cede their schools to state control. While the Protestant churches relented in the 1930s and transferred control of their schools to the state (now known as ‘controlled schools’), Catholic schools remain outside full state control, though they
receive parity of state funding (Byrne and Donnelly 2006; Smith 2001). Today, 46% of Northern Ireland’s primary and post-primary schools are designated Catholic schools and the same number are Protestant in character (DENI 2020a).

This largely parallel educational system has been contentious, particularly since the period of conflict from the late 1960s, with commentators citing separate schooling as a contributor to intercommunal divisions (Gallagher 2016). A small body of research has provided support for such concerns, reporting minimal engagement among staff and pupils across denominational school boundaries; limited or erroneous knowledge of the other group’s religion, culture and identity; and expressions of suspicion and/or fear towards peers from the other community (Darby et al. 1977; Hayes, McAllister, and Dowds 2013; Hughes et al. 2013; Murray 1985; Stringer et al. 2009). In addition, as imperatives around cost and efficiency have become more prevalent in education policy, so too has criticism of the expenses incurred in sustaining separate denominational sectors (Independent Strategic Review of Education 2006; Roulston and Cook 2020; Ulster Economic Policy Centre 2016).

Concerns about the impact of separate education in the 1970s resulted in renewed efforts to integrate education, albeit through small-scale, bottom-up intervention. A parent-led movement, All Children Together, was formed to challenge social division by educating children from Catholic, Protestant and other backgrounds together in new, explicitly ‘integrated’ schools. Through this movement, the first integrated school, Lagan College, was founded in Belfast in 1981. Supported by private and philanthropic funding, the new integrated sector grew slowly during the 1980s, but increased in number from 10 to 43 between 1989 and 1999 following the extension of state funding to integrated schools in the 1989 Education Reform (NI) Order (Fraser and Morgan 1999; DENI 2020a). There are currently 65 integrated schools in Northern Ireland, educating approximately 7% of the pupils (DENI 2020a, 2020b). Research into integrated schools is positive regarding social relations, with pupils reporting more cross-group relationships and more favourable intergroup attitudes and behaviours than their peers at separate schools (Stringer et al. 2009, 2010; Hughes et al. 2013). However, while notionally popular with parents and the public (Hansson, O’Connor-Bones, and McCord 2013) the integrated sector has experienced a significant slowing of growth over the past 15 years (DENI 2020a). The reasons for this merit further investigation, but may include parents’ attachments to denominational schools as communal institutions and to grammar schools for their perceived academic benefits, a lack of support for integrated schooling from major political parties and churches, and a weak legislative framework for integrated education (Blaylock and Hughes 2013; Hansson and Roulston 2020; Roulston and Hansson 2019; Topping and Cavanagh 2016).

Given these constraints, it became clear in the early 2000s that the integrated sector would not deliver the change necessary for greater systemic integration, at least in the medium term. In response, educationalists at Queen’s University proposed the new model of ‘shared education’, subsequently introduced with funding from Atlantic Philanthropies and the International Fund for Ireland. Shared education seeks to advance integration via the development of collaborative school partnerships between Catholic and Protestant schools. Schools are encouraged to collaborate across all aspects of activity that are relevant to them (staff training, resource development, governorship, etc.), though perhaps its most significant feature is the joint provision of classes and activities
for pupils who travel between one another’s schools to participate in mixed groups on a regular basis. In this regard, shared education aims to facilitate sustained interaction between pupils from different groups, harnessing the benefits of contact for improving intergroup attitudes (Allport 1954), but without requiring change to schools’ religious character (Gallagher 2016).

In developing the model of shared education, the initiative’s architects sought to address the educational and financial imperatives facing schools alongside peacebuilding aims. This approach was informed by the experience of previous community relations initiatives in separate schools, including short-term cross-community contact programmes, which had often been marginalised within the curriculum as staff focused on improving measurable academic outcomes (Hughes et al. 2016). Promotional material outlined shared education’s contribution to the curriculum, the opportunity for teachers to support and learn from one another, and the potential to reduce costs through sharing resources. In this regard, it echoed the arguments for educational collaboration that were already in circulation (Independent Strategic Review of Education 2006; DENI 2009). Though improving social relations was not the programme’s sole aim, research undertaken during the pilot phase (2007–2013) indicated its favourable impact on pupils’ intergroup attitudes and relationship patterns (Hughes et al. 2010, 2012). Teachers were also positive about shared education’s impact on relationship-building and their own professional development, though they also highlighted the complexities of timetabling and transporting pupils between schools (Borooah and Knox 2013).

The shared education model, and these early research findings, attracted interest from major political parties and it became a key priority in the 2011–2015 Programme for Government. In 2012, a Ministerial Advisory Group was appointed to provide guidance on the development of shared education, and in 2015, the Shared Education Signature Project (SESP) was launched as a mainstream initiative managed and co-funded by the Department of Education (Atlantic Philanthropies being the other funding body). By March 2018, over 49,000 pupils were involved in the SESP, an increase of almost 300% increase on 2 years earlier (Donnelly and Burns 2020). Shared education was also placed on a statutory footing with the commencement of the Shared Education Act in 2016, which included commitments to ‘facilitate, support and promote’ shared education. Subsequently, the EU’s Peace IV programme has granted £26 m to support shared education between schools with no previous history of collaboration (Gallagher 2016).

Drawing on evidence for shared education that has accumulated over the last decade, in the following section, we assess the impact of the model and consider the processes through which impact has been generated. In so doing, we reflect on some of the ambiguities and creative tensions within the policy framework for shared education that whilst arguably necessary to advance the model, moving forwards may need to be resolved in order to ensure shared education’s continuing contribution to social cohesion.

**Distributive**

Arguably, the emergence of the shared education model must be understood in the context of distributive antecedents. Dating back to the 1980s, the British Government in NI adopted a three-pronged approach to resolving the NI conflict. This comprised
facilitation of a multi-party talk process, leading eventually to the signing of the Good Friday Peace Agreement in 1998; fair employment legislation and additional measures to tackle discrimination against the Catholic community and reduce inequalities, and Community Relations policy, aimed at promoting more positive relations between Catholics and Protestants. The latter was reflected in initiatives such as the establishment of the Central Community Relations Unit at the centre of government, the establishment of a District Council Community Relations Programme and support for the Community Relations Council – an arms-length Non-Governmental Organisation (for a comprehensive overview, see Knox and Hughes 1994). In education, community relations policies and interventions included targeted support for integrated education, which aimed to educate Catholic and Protestant pupils together, and within the separate education system, support for curricular and contact interventions aimed at promoting mutual understanding and facilitating encounter between pupils who would otherwise have limited opportunity to meet (Knox and Hughes 1994). Considering the emergence of shared education and the current mainstreaming agenda, two points may be of relevance.

First, by the mid-2000s when the idea for shared education is first mooted, the political and social landscapes in NI had undergone some significant transformation. The armed conflict that had so divided the Catholic and Protestant communities has largely been brought to an end with the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. With this came greater normalisation of society, reflected in more freedom of movement for many people, and the opening up of shared spaces, particularly in the urban centres of Belfast and L/Derry (Nolan 2012). Alongside this, data were beginning to show the positive impact of equality reform measures. In a publication released by the Equality Commission in 2004, *Fair Employment in Northern Ireland: A Generation On*, a group of economists and social scientists concluded that while some historical imbalances remained, discriminatory practices had largely been eliminated and a level playing field for Catholics and Protestants created. A continuing narrowing of the employment gap between Catholics and Protestants in both the public and private sectors followed, and by 2014 it was reported that the gap between the Catholic proportion of the economically active (as measured by the census and the Labour Force Survey) and the corresponding proportion of those in monitored employment had largely closed (Wilson 2016). Longitudinal data also pointed to shifting trends with respect to educational attainment, with the first Peace Monitoring Report in 2012 showing that educational attainment of Catholics was by that point in advance of Protestants, not just in qualifications gained at school but also in entry to higher education (Nolan 2012). However, significant gaps remain between the two communities on indicators of deprivation, with Catholics scoring consistently lower than Protestants on poverty indicators (Nolan 2012), progress made is seen in surveys that measure perceptions of equality (Hughes 2006).

Second, whilst previous community relations initiatives in schools are deemed to have had little impact because they were ‘reconciliation’ or contact-focused, and seen by some to tackle symptoms rather than systemic causes of disadvantage and division (McEvoy, McEvoy, and McConnachie 2006), the fact that they were mostly non-contentious arguably paved the way for shared education. Unlike its antecedents, and integral to building inter-group relations, shared education also has a clear distributive agenda. This is articulated in the threefold aims of delivering educational benefits to learners,
promoting the efficient and effective use of resources, and promoting equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion (Connolly, Purvis, and O’Grady 2013). Where previous initiatives foreground reconciliation, and offer intergroup contact as an ‘add on’ or extra-curricular activity, the shared education initiative proposes school collaboration as a means of delivering a range of core curriculum-based educational opportunities for pupils and teachers, whilst at the same time addressing the need for relationship building (Gallagher 2016). These opportunities include extending the range of curriculum-based subject choices for pupils, who can avail of the options on offer not just in their own school, but in partner schools; sharing of resources and expertise between partner schools; teacher exchanges that extend opportunities for teachers who might otherwise be limited to working within one denominational sector; and access to additional resources for smaller schools.

With respect to its distributive focus, evidence for the effectiveness of the shared education approach is beginning to accrue. A recent report to the NI Assembly, as required by the Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, reviewing progress made on advancing Shared Education, notes that as shared education programmes have developed, participation rates have increased significantly. By June 2019, 61% of Northern Ireland’s Primary, Post Primary, and Special schools were involved in Shared Education, with around a quarter of the pupil population engaged in sharing (DENI 2020c). Drawing together evidence from a range of surveys, research papers and ad hoc evaluations, the report concludes that though extensive sharing of resources, including physical infrastructure, equipment and teaching materials, shared education is having a positive impact on educational outcomes for children. Chiming with these findings, a simulation study of four post-primary shared education partnerships identified higher educational attainment and increased earning power as likely outcomes of the enhancement (increased resources) and extension (wider subject choice) benefits offered through the partnerships (Borooah and Knox 2013). Borooah and Knox (2017) also used school leaver data to examine the nature of inequality in NI schools and considered shared education as an alternative policy option for tackling inequality and segregation. They found that high levels of school segregation by religion correlates with higher achievement for Catholic pupils and worrying levels of underachievement for Protestant boys, particularly those from low-income families. They propose shared education, through matching stronger performing schools (more likely to be Catholic) and weaker schools (more likely to be Protestant) within close geographical proximity, to ‘reduce the performance gap between schools and, in so doing, to tackle segregation in Northern Ireland’ (Borooah and Knox 2017, 331). Although Borooah and Knox’s paper is based on modelling, there is now considerable qualitative evidence to support their proposition that shared education can contribute to school improvement and therein educational outcomes for all pupils.

A report on teacher experience of shared education highlights access to a wider range of GCSE O and A levels through shared education as a motivating factor for some pupils and points to this as influencing better outcomes for schools (Hughes et al. 2020). Moreover, shared education has helped to sustain high-quality provision by affording opportunities for teachers to learn from one another and ensuring continuity of staff during periods of absence. In one indicative example, Duffy and Gallagher (2016) report a case study of collaboration between two Catholic and Protestant post-
primary schools in one of NI’s most divided cities. During the data collection period, the Protestant school had been placed in formal intervention for Science by the Education and Training Inspectorate for NI due to less than satisfactory performance. The Catholic school, which is a specialist science school, offered to work with the Protestant school, and in the following months shared expertise and resources. When the inspectorate returned the science department in the Protestant school was rated ‘outstanding’. In a follow-up reciprocal arrangement, the Protestant school, which has particular expertise in special educational needs, collaborated to share this with the Catholic school with a view to improving SEN provision in the latter (see link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qh-9DB_7Ckg for a short film on this shared education partnership).

Aside from direct educational benefits, there is some evidence to suggest that relating to the links between school and community, where local relations have been strained historically shared education may afford protection to vulnerable minority groups in areas. This is perhaps best illustrated by the example of a shared education intervention in Fermanagh, where a small Protestant primary school collaborates with two bigger Catholic primary schools. In this case, the small school, which has only around 40 pupils, is serving a Protestant community located within a much bigger Catholic/Nationalist area. Protestant schools are at risk of closing because of low enrolment, and if it closes, the Protestant community is likely to be lost from the area, as new parents will want to be in relatively close proximity to their local school. By collaborating with the local Catholic schools, the Protestant school and indeed the Protestant community remains viable. In an area that experienced many losses during the conflict years, this distributive dimension is clearly important for social cohesion in the area and for Northern Ireland more generally, where fears have been expressed in recent years of the Balkanisation of the state due to district council boundary changes. In this case, the relationship between the schools enhances the educational opportunities in particular for children in the Protestant school, but also the experience of the Catholic pupils and teachers who will have been living in close proximity to their Protestant neighbours within small rural communities, but who would not otherwise have an opportunity to meet (for a short documentary on this shared education project, produced by Fermanagh Trust, see: https://vimeo.com/366277301).

While this example indicates shared education’s capacity to contribute to school sustainability, this cost-saving potential appears not to have been fully harnessed to date. In research by Loader and Hughes (2019), stakeholders with a long history of involvement in shared education reported that school planning processes had rarely considered shared education, despite its promise as an alternative to closing or amalgamating schools. This may be a consequence of the separation of area planning, good relations and school improvement functions in policy and delivery; however, it also remains the case that, despite being a core aim of the programme, cost savings through shared education have yet to be demonstrated in a substantive way. Indeed, although shared education’s proponents have been concerned to ensure its sustainability from the outset (Duffy and Gallagher 2014), its delivery incurs a number of inescapable costs, notably for transport between schools and for staff cover to enable teachers to attend planning days. Moreover, research highlights that insufficient funding of these elements is likely to impede the frequency and progression of shared activity and thus the
development of relationships between staff and pupils (Hughes et al. 2020; Duffy and Gallagher 2014).

That greater funding is likely to lead to better outcomes is not surprising, but it is problematic where shared education has cost reduction as one of its aims. Currently, these costs are met by the government, but may increasingly be delegated to schools, particularly given ongoing financial constraints at the departmental level. If reducing expenditure continues to be central to the model’s rationale, then programme managers will need to demonstrate how these up-front costs can be offset by savings that shared education offers elsewhere (for example, in staff training or resource development). This is particularly important in the context of the Independent Review of Education, which was announced as part of the New Decade, New Approach deal (HM Government 2020) that accompanied the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly in January 2020. The Review’s Terms of Reference restates the potential of ‘models of sharing, cooperation and integration’ in schools ‘as a basis for delivering long-term improvements in the quality, equity and sustainability of the system’ (DENI 2021, 2). While the preceding evidence is indicative of the initiative’s contribution to improvements in quality, further evidence of cost-effectiveness is required to prove its sustainability. If this cannot be demonstrated then shared education’s economic aims, and its relationship with social and educational imperatives, may need to be reconsidered.

More fundamentally, while a noted advantage of shared education is that it facilitates pupil contact without the need for (potentially unpopular) systemic change, its lack of challenge to inequitable educational structures has also been a cause of criticism (Hansson and Roulston 2020). According to this argument, shared education upholds the status quo of both denominational division and socio-economic stratification, the latter fostered by widespread academic selection, which is, in turn, associated with significant disparities in educational outcomes (Gardner 2016). From a distributive perspective, such concerns are augmented by grammar schools’ relatively low rate of participation in sharing (Loader, Hughes, and Turner 2019), and the existence of grammar school-only partnerships among those which are involved. There is a risk that such partnerships allow elite schools to safeguard their status through accessing the educational benefits of collaboration with other elite schools and notably not sharing their facilities or expertise with other, ‘low-ranking’ institutions. Such an example is illustrative of Hansson and Roulston (2020, 13) concern that, while shared education may offer ‘increased opportunities for closer co-operation and collaboration, the fundamental structure/system of education, with all its flaws, may not be fully addressed.’ In response, given that debates on systemic reform are long-standing and opposition is intransigent (Gardner 2016), it is arguable that the same unequal system would persist in the absence of shared education, but without the distributive benefits associated with the model. It should also be noted that inequalities associated with academic selection have been challenged during the development of shared education, most notably in the report of the Ministerial Advisory Group (Connolly, Purvis, and O’Grady 2013), though with little success.

Relational

The primary aim of shared education is the promotion of more positive social relations between pupils and teachers from Catholic and Protestant community backgrounds who,
because of the parallel education system in NI, may otherwise have limited opportunity to interact. Based on some variant of the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954), the emphasis is on building trust and mutual respect via schools’ collaboration in the achievement of shared educational objectives. With respect to relational objectives and social cohesion, the research highlights some noteworthy outcomes that illustrate the impact of the intervention at individual, group and community levels.

At the individual level, a quantitative study comparing pupils who participated in shared education with peers from the same school who did not, found that participants had less in ingroup bias, greater outgroup trust, reduced intergroup anxiety, and more positive behavioural intentions towards members of the outgroup including a greater desire for future contact. These outcomes were moderated by an increased number of cross-group friendships and reduced intergroup anxiety (Hughes et al. 2010). More recently, a large-scale longitudinal study comprising 56 post primary schools and more than 5000 pupils, that compared school and pupil level data for participants and non-participants in shared education found that schools involved in shared education reported higher levels of trust and a range of outcomes for pupils, including, more intergroup contact, more favourable outgroup attitudes, more outgroup trust, and more intergroup empathy for participants in shared education when compared with non-participant peers (Reimer et al. 2020). Significantly, Reimer et al. also found that for outgroup attitudes and outgroup trust the mean difference between students who participated and did not participate in shared education was largest for students who reported to never have had positive contact experiences and for students who reported to very often have had negative contact experiences.

A recent survey of teachers involved in shared education also highlights positive outcomes, with participants reporting more (and more positive) cross-community friendships, greater likelihood to engage in approach behaviours towards members of the other community (e.g., seek them out, find out more about them), and greater professional satisfaction than teachers not currently involved in shared education. Additionally, those teachers who reported more positive contact experiences with partner teachers were more likely to share problems, trust more, report less anxiety, and have greater comfort in discussing issues of identity with their shared education partners. Those who experienced positive partner contact also reported more positive attitudes, greater trust and less intergroup anxiety when considering members of the other community outside of their partner schools. Greater comfort in discussing issues of identity with a shared education partner teacher and greater trust in a shared education partner teacher were mediating factors; underlying processes that could explain the relationship between positive experiences and better relationship outcomes for teachers and their partnerships, as well as attitudes towards the other community in general (Hughes et al. 2020).

Qualitative research based on interviews with teachers and pupils provides support for these positive findings, identifying where shared education has resulted in new friendships across denominational boundaries and greater comfort in the presence of the other group (Hughes 2014; Loader 2015). However, these studies have also identified examples where relationships in shared classes have not progressed, group boundaries have been reasserted (through, for example, acts of staring or name-calling), and pupils have expressed unease in the presence of outgroup members, particularly when moving
around the partner school (Loader 2015, 2021). While some of these less favourable experiences may be inherent in the model of shared education, particularly its requirement that pupils cross denominational boundaries in a divided school system, qualitative research points to generative processes that may enhance positive outcomes where present. Loader, Hughes, and Turner (2019) report that relating to the density of contact, opportunity and some of the curricular content, teachers reported that pupils from Catholic and Protestant communities had developed new perspectives around diversity, including a more inclusive understanding of ‘community’ and an appreciation of the commonalities between them. Other research documents a range of variables that seemingly moderate outcomes. These include: school leadership and commitment to shared education objectives (Duffy and Gallagher 2015; Loader, Hughes, and Furey 2020); role modelling of positive relationships by collaborating teachers from different school sectors, and teacher confidence and competence in tackling contentious issues in the classroom (Donnelly and Burns 2020; Loader, Hughes, and Furey 2020); classroom organisation that facilitates interaction between pupils from different schools (Hughes 2014; Loader 2017); opportunity for ‘down time’ and informal interaction during school hours for pupils from different communities (Hughes 2014), and smaller class or group sizes (Loader 2017). Outside of the school setting, good community relations in school catchment areas and shared spaces within a locality are highlighted as factors that afford pupils opportunity to extend friendships made at school to their ‘outside’ school environment (Hughes 2014; Loader, Hughes, and Turner 2019). Even where pupils’ relationships had not reached the threshold of friendship, research has found that positive engagement between pupils from different schools was accompanied by a reduction in low-level intergroup tensions outside school (Loader, Hughes, and Turner 2019).

Qualitative research also demonstrates some significant outcomes at group and community levels, with shared education seen to offer opportunities for schools to model positive interaction and favourable relations to their catchment community – something those in divided areas regarded as especially important in shaping local relations. Joint concerts, shared fundraising events, and public congratulations for a partner school’s successes were all considered to have important symbolic value in areas where intergroup hostility remained, although the persistence of hostilities could in some cases circumscribe their impact (Loader 2017). In practical terms, moreover, such events brought parents and visitors into one another’s schools, and even into a particular part of the local town, for the first time (Loader and Hughes 2019). The ‘reshaping’ of relationship patterns was defined by Loader and Hughes as a notable outcome of shared education:

The examples offered by participants highlighted the potential of the model to begin to reshape patterns of relationships… One notable outcome, particularly for those emphasising the partnership-building aspect of shared education, was the growth of connections between the schools (at all levels, from pupils to principals, auxiliary staff to teachers and boards of governors), between the parents, and with other organisations in the local community. Participants described shared education schools and partnerships becoming hubs for the local community, which, in some reported cases, had provided the impetus for shared activity beyond the school (Loader and Hughes 2019, 38).

One example, often cited as particularly illustrative of a generative dynamic between relationship building, trust and social cohesion, is that of the Ballycastle schools partnership. In Ballycastle, a divided rural market town located on the North Antrim coast, the
Catholic and Protestant post-primary schools have been collaborating to deliver a curriculum-based shared education programme at key stage 4 since 2008. In fact, collaboration between the schools predates the shared education programme – and principals in both schools refer to high levels of trust and good relations between staff and within the wider community. Working collaboratively and in consultation with the local communities, and reflecting the success of shared education work to date in promoting better educational outcomes for pupils and good community relations, the schools have proposed a new shared campus to replace the existing schools. The new campus, approved under the Government’s Together Building United Communities Scheme, launched in 2014, retains the distinctive ethos of each school and comprises some common and some separate buildings (Doyle 2020).

**Ideational**

Given the competing constitutional aspirations in Northern Ireland, there is no serious expectation of fostering social cohesion through a narrative of common national identity, as has been the case in England (Healy 2019; Vincent 2019). Rather, as noted above, the rationale for shared education coalesces around an aspiration for a more shared society. The tension inherent is how to balance shared values relating to good relations, whilst also recognising and respecting difference and the rights of the ‘other’. The evidence suggests that this is an ongoing dilemma. At one level, there are indications that the widespread implementation of shared education across Northern Ireland has been a catalyst for shifting societal norms. Borooah and Knox (2013) and Gallagher (2016) report that as the ‘boundaries between schools have become more porous’, inter-group interaction has normalised. Other evidence points to the emergence of cross-cutting identities based on the opportunity for sustained engagement between young people and their teachers (Hughes 2014). Such identity affiliations are seen to challenge the monolithic Catholic and Protestant ascriptions that have traditionally characterised inter-group relations in Northern Ireland.

Another significant effect of shared education, particularly as partnerships progressed and developed a stronger identity, is that schools report greater commitment to the local community as a whole. Where previously the immediate and largely homogenous school community (staff, pupils and their parents) was the focus, participation in shared education partnerships is seen to encourage a sense of responsibility to all young people in a local area and a greater sensitivity to the impact of the school’s actions on local community dynamics. As reported by Loader and Hughes (2019), this had even led schools to decline opportunities that would have benefitted them but might have disadvantaged another sector or damaged community relations.

In NI the demarcation of territory is pervasive and a common feature of how communities and individuals organise. From peace walls to kerb paintings and murals depicting one community narrative or the other, through less obvious ‘mental mapping’, research has shown that social lives and interactions are constrained by boundary marking (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006). Schools and churches belonging to the ‘other’ community are generally seen as ‘no go’ areas. Shared education starts to challenge some of these boundaries by inviting children, teachers and in some cases parents to use space that is normally associated with the other community. In this sense, it can lead to a degree
of remapping as some previously ‘out of bounds’ space is reassigned as shared (Duffy and Gallagher 2017). The extent to which this happens and the form it takes can depend on the individual partnership. In some urban or conflict-affected areas children traverse boundaries to attend the other school – but even though the distances are often short, children travel in taxis because there are safety risks of moving through territory that one or both communities determines as exclusive. However, there are spaces within the ‘other’ schools that may be more comfortably inhabited, even allowing for the discomfort that pupils initially report in crossing the physical boundaries of another institution (Loader 2021). In some rural communities, where relations in the wider community are better, schools that would have been previously be associated with one community or the other are now used by parents and children from both communities – sometimes this is seen in relation to the shared education activity and sometimes it relates to a shift in the profile of those who use the school in the evening for classes or other events. (Hughes 2014; Loader and Hughes 2019)

The above suggests some shifts towards more cohesive ideation, it is also the case though that reported barriers to shared education are most often articulated with respect to the ideational dimension. Specifically, with respect to how to deal with the question of community differences real and perceived, and contested historical and political narratives. Whilst most participant schools are comfortable with pupils coming together and are committed to promoting better educational outcomes for all, when it comes to tackling more controversial issues there is much less consensus. Hughes (2014) and Loader (2015) report a hierarchy of perceived softer and more challenging issues identified by pupils, ranging from religious and cultural differences at one end of a scale, to perspectives on the conflict and constitutional aspirations at the other. Other research points to degrees of willingness among teachers to tackle conflict-related issues, with some teachers completely unwilling, through to others exploring differences more proactively (Loader, Hughes, and Turner 2019), though individual case studies have also highlighted the risks of schools adopting a more ‘gung-ho’ and potentially more risky approach to difference.

In a recent case study of one school partnership, Hughes and Loader (forthcoming) reported that Catholic schools were more willing to engage with historical and political narratives, than their partner Protestant school. The avoidance of such engagement on the part of the latter was a source of some frustration to the partners from the Catholic school (Hughes and Loader forthcoming) and may indicate the influence of broader social change when exploring contentious subjects. Nolan (2013, 8), for example, writing about community narratives of conflict, observes that the ‘nationalist narrative is of an upward trajectory, while the unionist narrative is one of loss’. These dynamics and the (shifting) relationships of power may shape individuals’ willingness to confront conflict-related issues. Where schools had engaged with more controversial issues, this was not without risk, with some research highlighting objection from parents and the wider community (Hughes 2014; Duffy and Gallagher 2017). In cases where schools had been assisted to address more controversial issues, there was some evidence that this had some positive outcomes with respect to reassessing hostile and negative stereotypes (Duffy and Gallagher 2017).

Difficulties in addressing issues of conflict also speak to a lack of clarity concerning shared education’s mechanisms for change. In this regard, Donnelly and Burns (2020, 16) argue that:
[t]he concept of Shared Education is imbued with multiple definitions and meanings and that this can cause uncertainty for teachers and may compromise the contact process for pupils. The policy guidance is clear that contact is the key objective of Shared Education, yet the training that has been offered to primary schools suggests that teachers will address issues of diversity . . .

As Donnelly and Burns go on to argue, these are quite separate aspirations, entailing differences in programme design and in the pedagogies adopted. A failure to agree to a common approach and develop the skills for this among teachers may ultimately undermine the programme’s effectiveness, even resulting in negative outcomes (Donnelly and Burns 2020).

This example is one of the several where a ‘creative ambiguity’ in shared education’s design risks inhibiting its transformative potential. Another is in the inclusion of educational and economic aims alongside social objectives in the programme. While, as discussed above, this has been deemed necessary to attract schools who might be reluctant to participate in a reconciliation-focused programme, it has also allowed schools to subjugate social goals to educational ones without breaching the terms of the programme. In this regard, a difference of emphasis has been observed between those who regard shared education as a reconciliation-focused initiative that utilises collaboration as the means of bringing staff and pupils together, and those who consider it a collaborative initiative with improvement in social relations as one of several, equally important aims (Loader and Hughes 2019).

A third example of this ambiguity is a reluctance among shared education’s proponents to specify an ultimate destination for shared education – whether that is the creation of more integrated schools, the development of Northern Ireland’s first jointly-managed (Catholic/Protestant) schools, more children attending schools of the other denomination, or another outcome. Reluctant to deter denominational schools suspicious of an integrationist agenda, shared education has not committed to an end goal. While this may be understandable, at least in the programme’s early stage, this lack of ‘vision’ may have unintended consequences. On one hand, shared education may lose momentum and its progress towards social cohesion will stall; on the other, the vacuum may be filled by the very rumours (about integration) that the policy’s ambiguity was intended to avoid. Whatever the outcome, the decision not to commit to an end goal risks limiting the potential of shared education to foster social cohesion.

**Discussion**

In Northern Ireland, a society in recovery from a long history of conflict, social cohesion is as much an aspiration as a work in progress, and shared education attests to this. As outlined above the model disrupts systemic segregation in education, therein reshaping inter-group relations within and beyond the education system, such that cohesive idea-
tion and new patterns of identity and belonging are emergent. Juxtaposed with this, the approach exposes areas of disadvantage in education and shows some potential to improve educational outcomes for all participants. These are obviously positive develop-
ments, and signpost a journey towards a more socially cohesive society, but as noted, some tensions have become apparent as the delivery of shared education rolls out. We discuss below how adopting a holistic multi-level and multi-dimensional approach to
analysing the contribution of shared education has helped expose some limits and possible barriers to ongoing progress towards social cohesion.

In line with Fonseca et al, we propose that multi-level studies of social cohesion such as the analysis of shared education presented in this paper are important, not least because what happens at one level of society (individual, community and institutional) relates to the potential for social cohesion at all levels of society. As suggested above, the institutional climate of greater equality in NI, and the peace process in general presented an opportunity for shared education. Alongside this, the limitations of antecedent ‘relational’ initiatives, either because they were ‘add on’ (short-term contact schemes) or had low community level take up (integrated education), became drivers for new thinking. Also, the shared education pilots may have been developed and delivered by committed individuals, but community and institutional level support are clearly essential to the ongoing mainstreaming process. Adopting a holistic approach to measurement of social cohesion in turn demands analysis of its different dimensions, and the intersection and interdependences between dimensions and levels of social cohesion. While acknowledging the constraints of a separate, stratified education system, our study suggests that distributive antecedents as well as a distributive policy focus are important elements in the effectiveness of shared education thus far. This creates an environment for relationships between individuals, schools and in some cases communities to flourish with consequent ideational impact at a wider societal level. At the same time, the relational potential for shared education can be mediated and potentially limited by scope to interpret amorphous policy (institutional level) objectives, and by funding constraints at institutional level.

Understanding the inherent generational processes and the fracture points where levels and dimensions of social cohesion intersect can help pinpoint the potential barriers to social cohesion. As shown in our analysis, the cost saving imperative for shared education is, in the medium term at least, inconsistent with inescapable costs associated with creating effective and sustainable collaborations between schools. This is best exemplified by the case of the Ballycastle partnership referenced above, where the experience of schools collaborating over time generated levels of trust and mutual support at school and community levels that in turn informed the decision to propose a new shared campus, incorporating both schools on the same site. This ambitious project is evidence of bottom-up social cohesion in action and whilst it is unlikely that a shared campus could have been imposed top down, institutional support in the form of the shared education programme was germane to the incubation process and will be essential in bringing plans for the campus to fruition. In the long term, it may be possible to argue the economic case for shared education, but there can be no getting away from the fact that if shared education is to embed systemically, considerable investment will be needed in the short to medium term. The Ballycastle shared campus will be funded through the Department of Education’s shared campus programme (2014). However, this is a finite funding pot linked to a government commitment for just 10 such campuses. Taken together with an end date of 2023 for the current shared education programme delivered through the Department of Education, a concern is that schools may be required to become prematurely responsible for sustaining their partnerships. Against other educational pressures and priorities this is likely to be too big an ask of them.
Another fracture point highlighted in our analysis relates to the tension between the relational imperative for shared education, and the nebulous articulation of social objectives at the policy level. While creative ambiguity at an institutional level may have been a useful device in soliciting support from teachers in the early stages of implementation, especially those who were nervous of ‘reconciliation’ intent; as the programme has evolved, this same ambiguity has become potentially limiting to social cohesion. As highlighted, the risk of stakeholders imputing malign intentions on the part of government (shared education is a backdoor to full integration), alongside misaligned positions between partnering schools and related missed opportunities to deliver through shared education dialogic opportunities between divided groups, are clear and pressing risks. Not attending to these risks could endanger nascent partnerships and ultimately limit social cohesion gains. One of the criticisms levelled at relational studies of social cohesion is that they can exculpate state actors from responsibility to create a political climate that promotes trust, dialogue and cohesion, and does not compound division through nebulous or inconsistent policy and rhetoric. Arguably, in this respect, shared education could benefit from more ‘top down’ discourse of ‘sharing’ and cohesiveness. While shared education’s introduction in Northern Ireland coincided with the restoration of power-sharing and a period of (relative) political stability and cooperation, recent years have seen increasing fractiousness among political leaders. Tensions between the leading unionist and nationalist parties, the DUP and Sinn Fein resulted in the suspension of the NI Assembly between January 2017 and January 2020, and highly publicised disagreements over Brexit arrangements and COVID-19 regulations have hampered the Executive since its reconstitution. Teachers of shared education may be justified in questioning the value and impact of their efforts to foster cohesion at school when such rancour and division persist at the political level.

As reflected in conceptual debates on social cohesion, distributive cohesion is most often associated with state or institutional level analysis and macro-level measurement, while relational cohesion is generally represented and examined at individual, group and community levels. Ideational cohesion is considered the preserve of both state and community and is frequently considered within both domains. In summarising the contribution of the analysis presented in this paper, we would argue that stand-alone studies that isolate for consideration one dimension and/or focus on only one level of social cohesion are likely to miss the intersectional and interdependent processes that help build cohesion and potentially disrupt it. In addition, and bridging Kearns and Forrest’s definition of social cohesion as a goal to be worked towards (2000) and Chan and colleagues interpretation of social cohesion as a descriptive attribute of society (2006), our analysis underlines that it can be both. The implications of this for the evaluation of shared education and other initiatives designed to promote social cohesion are two-fold. At the point of design, assessment of implementation processes (formative evaluation) will help elucidate generative processes of cohesion and the role of antecedent actions as predictors. Outcome evaluation on the other hand should offer a barometer of social cohesion over time and space (such as, for example, school, community and societal norms) and some indication of the contribution made by the intervention to normative patterns of action and behaviour.
Notes

1. Although controlled schools are supposedly non-denominational, their intake comprises largely pupils from Protestant backgrounds. Moreover, the continued presence of representatives from Protestant churches on school governing bodies means they may be more accurately described as de jure and not merely de facto Protestant in nature.

2. These numbers include sectors of ‘Catholic’ or ‘other’ (i.e. Protestant) voluntary grammar schools, which receive a capital grant from the Education Authority and retain autonomy over teacher employment (EANI, 2021). Northern Ireland retains academic selection across most areas at age 11 and one-third of post-primary institutions are grammar schools.

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