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School collaboration in a divided society: shared education in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT: (200-250 words)

Northern Ireland is a society divided by political, national and religious identities. Between 1968 and 1998 there was a violent political conflict in which 3,700 people died. Throughout the conflict many looked to schools to work to improve community relations, even though the school system itself was divided on largely religious grounds. This chapter looks at education interventions in Northern Ireland aimed at promoting conflict transformation, with a particular focus on the shared education work of the 2000s which is based on collaborative networks of schools from the different communities. The collaboration involved in the shared education initiative is based on a participatory approach which emphasises teacher-led innovation and locally tailored school partnerships. This is in contrast to the defining features of the Northern Ireland school system which has always had a hierarchist character, even when education reforms in the 1990s introduced market principles and school competition. The chapter analyses education policy and practice in light of these frameworks and considers the potential tension between the shared education approach given the prevailing ethos of the Northern Ireland education system. It suggests that the consequences of this potential tension remain unclear.

KEYWORDS:

1. Education
2. Collaboration
3. Networks
4. Northern Ireland
5. Comparative
6. Policy

Introduction

In June 2020 the Department of Education in Northern Ireland reported that a total of 716 education settings were participating in 'shared education' activities involving collaboration between Protestant, Catholic and Integrated schools. A total of 87,385 pupils were involved in shared education classes in which they undertook classes with pupils from other schools, normally in each other's schools. These figures represented a rise in participation of 408 schools and 65,349 pupils from June 2016 (Department of Education, 2020) The pilot programmes which launched work on shared education began in 2007 with twelve schools (Gallagher, 2016). In this chapter we will consider the development of the shared education initiative within the framework provided by Hood (1998) and suggest that it is best represented as lying somewhere on the egalitarian-fatalist axis of the framework, but that it developed within an education system that is aligned with the hierarchist-individualist axis of the framework. We will further argue that this apparent dislocation may provide the basis for tensions as the shared education model becomes a more mainstreamed part of the education system in Northern Ireland.

The Churches and divided schools

In order to understand the significance of the shared education model it is necessary to understand some of the dynamics of the history of education in Ireland and Northern Ireland (Akenson, 1970, 1973; Farren, 1995). The first development of a mass education system on the island began in the 1830s with the establishment of the National Schools system. Prior to this a variety of school types existed, many run by different religious denominations in what was already a society riven by religious, political and national divides. The framers of the National Schools system indicated a preference for proposals to establish schools within the system that were presented collaboratively by Catholic and Protestant clergy. The ambition was not realized and the emergent system quickly took on a denominational character.

In response to growing political demands from Irish, mainly Catholic, nationalists for independence, in the face of opposition from British, mainly Protestant, Unionists, the island of Ireland was partitioned in 1921/22: this reflected the demographic pattern on the island such that Protestants were a minority on the island as a whole, but a majority in the north eastern part of the island (Darby, 1997). The Irish Free State, later Republic of Ireland, became an independent state with an overwhelming Catholic majority. The Catholic Church had a dominant civic role in the Irish Free State, most marked by its control of the education system: the new Irish government did not so much provide education as 'provide for' education by paying the Catholic Church to run the system in schools which it owned and managed.

The development of a hierarchist system

Northern Ireland had a number of important differences in circumstance. It became a self-governing region within the United Kingdom, with its own parliament and government. Northern Ireland continued to send MPs to the Westminster Parliament in London, but apart from a list of reserved matters, most domestic issues were the responsibility of the Northern Ireland parliament in Belfast and were rarely, if ever, discussed at Westminster. Unlike the Irish government, which essentially continued with the model of education provided by the National Schools system, the first Northern Ireland government sought to shift the administration away from the Churches towards new local

authorities, largely on the model developed in England and Wales in the latter part of the 19th Century. This attempt was unsuccessful.

The Catholic Church declined to hand its schools over to local authority control, despite incurring a de facto financial penalty as this meant the Church had to contribute to the costs of the schools. It had been expected that the Protestant Churches would hand over their schools to the local authorities to become fully funded 'state' schools, now that the State was firmly under the control of the Unionist government which was mainly supported by the Protestant community. In fact, this did not happen for almost a decade, during which time the Protestant Churches mounted a campaign for greater control and influence over the new 'state' schools. This campaign was ultimately successful and the schools were duly handed over to local authority control, but with the Protestant Churches given guaranteed rights of representation on school committees, control over the appointment of teachers and the establishment of religious education, as 'simple Bible teaching', enshrined as the only statutory element of the curriculum.

In other words, by the mid-1930s the school system in Northern Ireland had settled into a pattern it would retain for many years in which there were parallel systems of schools largely based on denominational interest. All schools received some level of public grant, but only the local authority, or 'state', schools were fully funded. The Catholic Church owned and managed its own schools and, at least initially, a significant number of staff in these schools were drawn from the clergy. The wider Catholic community had to contribute towards the costs of their schools. The local authority schools were in public ownership, but they were Protestant in all but name. Unlike the Southern States of the United States there were no segregationist laws which provided legal proscriptions on which categories of children could attend which schools, but the pupil and teacher composition of the schools were, for all practical purposes, denominationally homogeneous.

In terms of Hood's framework the education system that emerged displayed a 'light' hierarchist character, albeit with the operation and evolution of the system involving the inter-relationships between three different interests: the Catholic Church, the Protestant Churches, and the growing administrative apparatus of the local authorities overseen by the Ministry of Education. As the administrative apparatus of education scaled upwards, particularly after the major education reforms which can in the wake of the Second World War, the influence of the Protestant Churches was to diminish, slowly, but inexorably. By far the most intriguing relationship was that between the Ministry of Education, or rather the Northern Ireland government, and the Catholic Church.

Northern Ireland was born in the midst of violence in the aftermath of a war of independence between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the British armed forces between 1919 and 1921, which resulted in an estimated 1,400 deaths. After a truce was declared in July 1921 the violence continued in Northern Ireland through 1921 and 1922 with an estimated further 554 deaths. Northern Ireland now had a Catholic minority of about 30 per cent and a society divided by the over-determination of religious, political and national identities: this has been the dominant feature of Northern Ireland throughout its history (Darby, 1997). In this context the operation of a separate Catholic school system was significant as, apart from the Church itself, this represented the main civic institution of that community. Furthermore, as the teaching role of the clergy diminished over time, teaching positions in Catholic schools became one of the most important sources of middle-class occupations for Catholics in a society where many felt they faced discrimination in many areas of the labour market.

Education in Northern Ireland is often compared to the segregationist system operating in the Southern States of the United States before the 1954 Brown versus Board of Education decision. This

analogy is incomplete and, in all likelihood, fallacious (Gallagher, 2007). A more appropriate analogy is provided by the Northern cities of the United States where there were no formal segregationist laws, but high levels of community separation as a consequence of residential segregation and informal discriminatory practice. In the Northern cities of the United States middle class occupations were available to minorities largely in areas where they provided services to their own, separate, communities, but not in occupational sectors providing services to society as a whole, and so it was in Northern Ireland. There were plenty of Catholic small shop-keepers, but few managers in large-scale businesses; plenty of Catholic general practitioners, but few Catholic surgeons; plenty of Catholic teachers, but few Catholic education administrators (Aunger, 1975, 1983).

In this respect the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland government was fundamentally linked to the relationship over education and schools. It is therefore interesting to note that, for all the tensions and conflicts that existed between the Catholic community and the Northern Ireland state, barring one exception Unionist prime Ministers invariably appointed political figures from the more moderate part of the Unionist Party to the role of Minister of Education, almost as if it recognized the need to develop some form of rapprochement with the Church. Two examples seem to point to the outworkings of this.

In her consideration of the teaching of history in Northern Ireland, Smith (2005) pointed out that textbooks for use in the schools had to be approved by the Ministry of Education. Given the contentious nature of the past in Northern Ireland this regulation had the potential to become a source of conflict, but in fact only once was a history textbook banned for use in Northern Irish schools, and only then because of an illustration rather than because of content. As Smith (2005) points out, it was not just that the Ministry trod lightly in its use of its power to ban textbooks in Catholic schools, but the Catholic Church itself seems to have tried to ensure that it did not seek to use overtly partisan or oppositional textbooks.

A second example arises from the fact that the apparent Prime Ministerial imperative to appoint moderate figures as Minister of Education created regular friction with backbench Unionist MPs in the Northern Ireland Parliament as they tried to encourage the government to take a more robust and hostile attitude to Catholic schools. This came to a head when the 1947 Education Act was passed by the Northern Ireland Parliament (Walker, 2017). This Act mirrored the 1944 Butler Act in England by creating free secondary education. The Northern Ireland Act included a small rise in the level of public grant going to Catholic schools, but this was fiercely opposed by a section of backbench Unionist MPs and only the intervention of the Prime Minister calmed the situation sufficiently to allow the legislation to pass. Two years later, however, the backbench MPs took ‘revenge’ on the Minister of Education by blocking the passage of an unrelated piece of legislation and forced his resignation. In response the Prime Minister appointed the leader of the rebellion as Minster of Education, making him responsible for overseeing the massive construction programme for new schools and effectively neutralising the backbench opposition on education matters.

What emerged, in other words, was a parallel form of hierarchist management in which schools were locally administered either by the local authorities, or by the parish or diocesan authorities of the Catholic Church, and strategic discussions were held between the Ministry of Education and the Catholic bishops (see Figure 1). This arrangement reached its apogee in the mid-1960s when the Catholic Church made a formal agreement with the Northern Ireland government to allow, for the first time, government appointed representatives onto the Boards of Governors of Catholic schools in return for an increase in the level of public grant. Such an offer had been on the table as far back as 1923, but had never before been considered. This new climate was not to flourish, however, as a

growing civil rights campaign seeking an end to discrimination against Catholics gathered pace and would lead, in a few short years, to civil disorder and widespread political violence.

The background and outworking of the Northern Ireland Troubles is well documented (Darby, 1986; 1997). For the moment the most relevant aspect was the abolition of the Northern Ireland Parliament in 1972 and the establishment of 'direct rule' from Westminster. Under this arrangement MPs from Westminster were appointed to run a number of government departments in Northern Ireland which had two countervailing effects: one was an inclination on the part of some Ministers to suggest that policies developed for England and Wales ought to be transferred to Northern Ireland; or alternatively, it could enhance the power of the civil servants in a Ministry if an individual 'direct rule' Minister evinced little or limited interest in a specific portfolio. The system of local authorities had also been reformed by this point so that only five now existed for different regions of Northern Ireland. All-in-all it distanced the administration and oversight of education policy from democratic accountability and enhanced its hierarchist character.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The introduction of education markets

The next major shift in the system resulted from the 1989 Education Order (Northern Ireland). This was the Northern Ireland equivalent of the 1988 Education Act in England which introduced an education market and parental choice, and weakened the role of local authorities. It also shifted the axis of the education system towards an individualist orientation. The Northern Ireland legislation largely followed the pattern of the English legislation, with a number of local modifications. It provided the basis for parental choice of schools for their children, devolved some administrative and financial autonomy to schools, introduced annual performance tables, a statutory curriculum and a new form of school inspection. In England there was an intention to encourage greater diversity in school types to widen choice, but a wide variety of school types already existed in Northern Ireland and only a minority of schools were under local authority control. In addition, the education authorities in Northern Ireland had much less power and responsibility in comparison with England anyway.

Prior to the 1987 UK General Election there had been discussions between the Department of Education in Northern Ireland and the Catholic Bishops with the view to establishing a Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) to act as a type of managing authority for Catholic primary and secondary schools. As it turned out, these discussions ran counter to the market principles embedded in the 1989 Order so when the draft Order appeared the Bishops felt they had been blindsided as the proposals for CCMS were very much lighter than they had been led to expect. The situation wasn't helped by emerging research for the Standing Advisory Commission for Human Rights (SACHR) that seemed to show systemic underfunding of Catholic schools for many years (Osborne et al, 1992).

The net effect of all of this was a shift in the focus of the education system from a hierarchist to an individualist direction, but with a market-based system that was somewhat skewed. As noted, there was already a diversity of school types and local authorities had more limited power. The market place for pupils was skewed as a consequence of the system of academic selection as parental choice now left open the possibility that grammar schools would simply increase the proportion of

pupils in their intake, a pattern that was to occur within a decade when overall pupil enrolment numbers started to fall. And while the corporatist-style relationship with the Catholic Church was somewhat disrupted by some of the changes, there were efforts made to restore the rapprochement. Hence the conclusion that while the system did shift towards an individualist position, it did not quite cast off its hierarchist features.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Shifting towards collaboration

This then takes us to the next stage of the analysis where we return to the shared education initiative and the formalization of school collaboration within the education system. The origin of this lies in the educational response to the Northern Ireland Troubles from the late 1960s up to the peace agreement in 1998. When the political violence broke out in Northern Ireland some commentators focused on the denominationally divided school system and suggested it may have been responsible for fomenting societal divisions (Heskin, 1980). For some years there was a debate on this issue and three views can be discerned: first, there was a view that segregated schooling had encouraged religious divisions to such an extent that a shift towards common, religiously integrated schools, would make a significant contribution to restoring peace and calm; second, there was a milder view that while separate schools had not created societal divisions, they did help to fuel them and so some measures should be taken through education to address community relations and reconciliation; and third, there was a view that the conflict in Northern Ireland had little to do with community attitudes and more to do with discrimination and inequality in a majority-minority situation. In this view what was needed was a drive towards equality and social justice and, in that vein, the issue of separate schools was largely irrelevant and may even be a distraction.

There was no consensus in this debate and, in practical terms, the second view became the working assumption for education policy. Over the next quarter century a variety of education interventions were put in place to address community relations issues, including contact programmes that brought young Protestants and Catholics together for joint activities; curriculum initiatives on such areas as the teaching of history, religious education, mutual understanding or citizenship; and efforts to establish a sector of religiously mixed Integrated schools. In a gesture towards the equality agenda, and arising from research carried out for SACHR, Catholic schools were provided with a means to receive 100 per cent public funding and all of them availed of the opportunity (Cormack et al, 1991).

With the signing of the peace agreement in 1998 and the establishment of new shared political institutions there was also an opportunity to take stock of all the measures that had been put in place to address community relations throughout the conflict. In a comparative analysis of the role of education in divided societies, including Northern Ireland, Gallagher (2004) suggested that the measures in Northern Ireland had been worthy, but limited. Contact programmes tended to be short-term, often lacked any sustained focus on development, also tended to avoid dealing with difficult or controversial issues and were peripheral to the core curriculum or activities of schools (Hewstone et al, 2008). Some of the curriculum initiatives had been impressive, but in many cases it seemed that the 'received curriculum' for pupils often fell short of the 'planned curriculum' of the planners (Arlow, 2004; Richardson and Gallagher 2010). A new sector of religiously mixed integrated schools did emerge, largely as a consequence of the commitment and effort of parents, but despite official government support the sector grew to comprise about seven per cent of the pupil

population and then seemed to stall. Gallagher (2004) concluded that what may be required was not so much changing education structures in the hope they would somehow or other solve the problem, but rather to focus on ways to encourage greater levels of participative dialogue within and between institutions, and to do so in a more sustainable way.

There were plenty of examples of school collaboration to support improvement processes, but none in a context where the schools served different communities on political sensitive social dimensions (Atkinson et al., 2007). Support from two major funders, Atlantic Philanthropies and the International Fund for Ireland, allowed pilot programmes to start in 2007 and twelve schools in Northern Ireland were invited to participate. The invitation was to support them in trying to develop a network of partner schools which would provide shared education classes in which pupils from the schools would take classes in each other schools. The schools would be supported in developing partnership activity through resources, professional development activities and other activities across the network of participating schools. The research team would collect data on the progress of the partnerships and try to identify the elements of an effective partnership.

The first set of pilot projects ran from 2007 to 2010, and new funding allowed for additional, more focused pilot work from 2010 to 2013. Additional funding from The Executive Office (the prime ministerial office in Northern Ireland) allowed for the examination of a different type of school partnership which also engaged with a number of statutory and non-statutory agencies (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017). A Ministerial Advisory Group was established by the Minister of Education to consider the emerging evidence from these pilots and related projects, and recommended that shared education be mainstreamed across the education system (Connolly et al., 2013). Legislation to rationalize the administrative support system for education was supported by the NI Assembly in 2014 and made it a statutory duty of the new single Education Authority to facilitate, encourage and support shared education. This statutory duty was extended to the Department of Education in the Shared Education Act (2016). The Department is required to report to the NI Assembly on progress on shared education and the most recent (Department of Education, 2020) included the participation figures cited at the start of this chapter.

A more detailed consideration of the development of the shared education initiative and the body of evidence upon which it was based is provided by Gallagher (2016). The Northern Ireland model of Shared Education which emerged from the work contains three core elements. The first is to empower teachers to lead the development of each school partnership, which also means that each partnership will take on some distinctive features linked to its local context. We will consider the significance of this in more detail below. The second is that the partnership should seek to realise multiple benefits, rather than target a singular purpose. The rational for this was that a contribution to reconciliation was only one among a number of goals for schools in Northern Ireland and schools would be more likely to engage in collaboration with other schools is it helped them might a range of different goals, including school improvement. The third element was that shared education classes should not focus solely on school subjects that had traditionally been the focus for reconciliation work, but should include core curricular areas when possible. Linked to this was the encouragement of multiple levels of engagement across the partnership schools. The key purpose of this was to ensure the partnership work was visibly important to the schools and the communities they served, with the aim it would eventually become a ‘taken-for-granted’ aspect of the schools’ normal activities.

The issue of teacher empowerment and locally tailored partnerships emerged in the pilot programmes with the realization that the people best placed to identify the challenges and opportunities for shared education were the teachers working in the schools. We knew from social

network theory that there were potentially multiple routes to successful outcomes, while the traditional educational reliance on best practice was difficult when there was so little practice of any kind to draw on (Robinson et al., 2020). Drawing instead on the concept of 'next practice' (Hannon, 2008) we encouraged the teachers in the schools to identify and try out possible solutions to barriers they identified as placing constraints on effective collaboration. Given that we were trying to encourage a spirit of innovation in developing next practice solutions, we also made it clear to the teachers that it was okay to try out potential solutions even when they did not work, as that provided additional data on which to develop and try alternative solutions. This also meant that the character of each school partnership differed in some of the detail of their outworking: they all involved sustained collaborative relationships across the partnership, with shared classes involving pupils from different schools in the same classroom and increasing levels of teacher engagement across the partnerships. The specific disciplinary or subject areas on which shared activity was based varied across different partnerships, as did the year groups of pupils who were involved, but within a broad common framework of shared activity, the specific activities were distinctive.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

This concept was later extended in an initiative from the Education Authority to establish the network for Shared School Improvement (NSSI) in which teacher-led professional development programmes are identified and implemented, and expertise developed within one school partnership can be shared with other schools and school partnerships (Gallagher et al., 2020). The goal is to use social network principles to encourage the development of a self-sustaining school improvement process.

Key to all of these processes is that they are teacher-led and locally tailored, and avoid the rigidity of top-down processes that often seek to impose common templates or evaluate activity under a uniform set of criteria. Local teacher participation is central to making the partnership activities work, reflecting key elements of the egalitarian dimension of Hood's (1998) framework. In addition, and largely as a consequence of the reliance on social network principles, this type of collaborative partnership shares some features of the fatalist dimension on Hood's (1998) framework to the extent that the partnership is not working towards some prescribed endpoint such as, for example, that the schools must commit to working towards eventual merger into a single Integrated school. Rather the schools, their teachers, parents, pupils and local communities are free to develop the extent of their own collaboration, their rate of change, and their final location, which also implies that a range of possible outcomes are likely to occur.

One of the challenges facing the future of the shared education school partnership model is that it is occurring within an education system that remains heavily imbued with a hierarchist/individualist ethos. The current Northern Ireland government policy for school improvement is largely based on the General Education Reform Model (Hargreaves, 2012; Sahlberg, 2012) which uses market principles and relies on targets, competition and top-down systems of accountability, much of which may be inimical to partnership and collaboration on an enduring scale. The Northern Ireland model of shared education is now firmly established in our education system and a majority of schools are participating in collaborative partnerships. Furthermore, aspects of the model are being adapted for use in other divided societies, most notably Israel and North Macedonia, with plans to extend it further into other jurisdictions (Payes, 2013; Gallagher, 2017; Loader et al, 2018). There is not yet

any significant evidence of tensions between these approaches in Northern Ireland, but it seems unlikely that an approach based on an egalitarian/fatalist axis can function within a policy ethos characterized by hierarchist/individualist principles for too long. But neither is it yet clear which framework will be set aside.

Key lessons for practice and policy

This example from Northern Ireland shows the fluidity of education policy in a polity where stable government is challenged by long-standing political divisions. The shared political institutions created by the peace agreement were designed to encourage cooperation between the leaders of the different communities, though the practical reality is that some major policy debates in education have failed to achieve consensus precisely because the issues became embroiled in the older divisions (Gallagher, 2021). The shared education initiative, by contrast, did achieve a high level of political consensus, but it seems mainly because it emerged from the bottom up and by the time the point was reached for formal policy decisions a strong level of consensus had already been formed.

Hood's (1998) framework provides an interesting mechanism for framing education policy in this context even if the primary conclusion is that the shared education initiative seems to be based on a set of dimensions that are inconsistent with the long-standing ethos of the education system itself. The more interesting policy question, however, is whether this dislocation acts as a creative tension which produces further innovation in future, or a disruptive contradiction which must be resolved one way or the other.

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Figure 1: The Northern Ireland education system before 1989 with parallel State and Catholic school systems

Fatalist	***Hierarchist*** Parallel State and Catholic school system
Individualist	***Egalitarian***

Figure 2: The Northern Ireland education system after 1989 and the introduction of markets

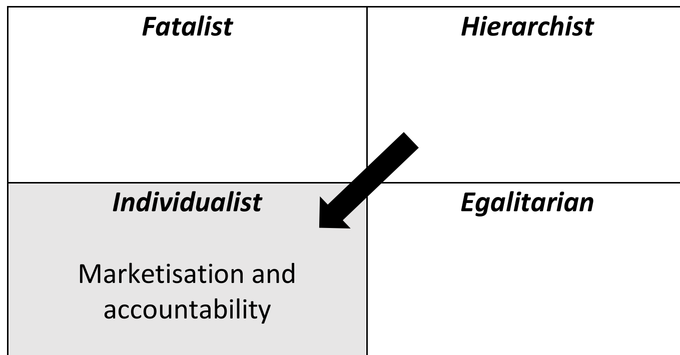

Figure 3: The Northern Ireland education system after 2014 and the implementation of collaboration and shared education partnerships