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From shared schools to shared space: integrated education initiatives in Northern Ireland in comparative perspective

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Abstract

Political parties and the general public in Northern Ireland usually agree that community relations could be improved by more widespread provision of 'integrated education' in the region (Lucid Talk, 2014). Integrated schools in Northern Ireland involve children from both the Catholic/nationalist and Protestant/unionist communities being educated together in the same classroom. Currently, most children from a Catholic/nationalist background attend Catholic schools, whilst the majority of their Protestant/unionist counterparts attend state schools. This article compares the policy on integrated education pursued by the first power-sharing executive (1973–74) with those of the current executive. The evidence suggests that there has been a drift away from integrated to shared education models, where the only true sharing taking place is of the facilities and infrastructure (DOE, 2013). The latter kind of school is much less likely to lead to the promotion, at an early age, of tolerance and mutual understanding between the region's two main communities. The evidence therefore suggests that the first power-sharing executive, during a more difficult security climate, had a considerably more ambitious integrated education policy than its contemporary counterpart, ostensibly operating in a post-conflict context.

Key words: Northern Ireland; community relations; peace process; segregation; power-sharing; sectarianism

Introduction

Despite the passage of almost seventeen years since the signature of the Belfast/Good Friday peace agreement, Northern Ireland remains plagued by inter-communal sectarian divisions between the Catholic/nationalist and Protestant/unionist communities. Whilst no longer suffering the kind of intense violence that characterised the region throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the residual threat from dissident republican factions opposed to the peace process, and loyalists engaged in criminality and intra-paramilitary feuding, remains (See e.g. Morrison, 2013; Nolan, 2014; Horgan, 2013). And, although security has improved, the precarious political situation has been described as little more than a 'reluctant peace' in one recent academic study (Cochrane, 2013).

Perhaps more worryingly, inter-communal relations are still tense, in spite of many years of relative stability. Since 2007, a power-sharing executive has held office

consistently, comprising representatives of both political traditions. Despite this outward air of stability, however, regular, and often inflammatory public debates concerning issues such as flags, parades, the Irish language, and the legacy of the conflict have soured relations between the two main parties in the executive, The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin, the republican political party previously linked with the former Provisional Irish Republican Army.

One of the catalysts for the recent downturn in community relations, and subsequent inter-party disputes, was a democratic decision taken by Belfast City Council in December 2012 to restrict the flying of the Union Flag at City Hall to eighteen designated days per year (Byrne, 2013: 5). Although this is normal practice throughout most of the United Kingdom, the decision caused outrage among unionists, (particularly working-class unionists commonly referred to as loyalists), and resulted in four months of street protest and regular instances of public disorder. A recent report into the restriction of the flying of the flag, and subsequent disturbances, acknowledges that these events led to a significant deterioration in relations between the nationalist and unionist communities (Nolan, 2014: 11–12). Politically, the flying of flags became part of wider discussions about the future governance of Northern Ireland between the parties comprising the power-sharing executive, chaired by US diplomats Richard Haass and Meghan O’Sullivan.

The ‘Haass talks’ failed to reach agreement on the substantive issues of flags and other issues related to public expressions of communal identity in Northern Ireland, including contentious parades, and mechanisms to deal with the legacy of political violence in the region, or ‘dealing with the past’ (Panel of Parties, 2013; See also McDaid et al., 2014). In December 2014, however, following protracted discussions aimed at breaking the political deadlock, the parties agreed to revisit many of the Haass issues through the establishment of various independent and other bodies (Northern Ireland Office, 2014), but they essentially remain unresolved or are at best ‘works in progress’. This summary provides some insight into the challenging contexts within which education, and community relations policies, have been formulated in Northern Ireland over the last number of years.

Despite the many problems Northern Ireland faces, the contrast between the present day and the early 1970s is stark. This is particularly true regarding the levels of violence during the two periods, which was at its most intense during the early-to-mid-1970s (Jackson, 2003: 269). Nevertheless, the relative absence of violence has seen few attempts to improve community relations through integrated education initiatives.

This article, which draws on the archival records of the first power-sharing executive, as well as more recent official policy documents, demonstrates that the challenges faced by contemporary policy makers are (absent the levels of violence) markedly similar to those which pertained over forty years ago. However, the evidence suggests that where the first power-sharing executive prioritised and was prepared to support ambitious integrated education policies in an attempt to tackle

future segregation, the current 'post-conflict' executive has embraced a model based on shared resources and facilities at the expense of truly shared education.

The first power-sharing executive and community relations, 1973–74

Northern Ireland's first power-sharing administration was agreed in November 1973 and took office in January 1974. The creation of the executive had two aims: the restoration of devolution to Northern Ireland, and the encouragement of centre-ground, moderate politics that might eventually lead to greater peace in the region. In retrospect, this was a considerable achievement, the product of protracted discussions in extremely trying circumstances (See McDaid, 2013: 22–25). This was all the more significant, given the fact that, between 1921 and 1972, Northern Ireland was governed by a single party, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). In April 1972, however, in the midst of violent conflict, the British government introduced direct rule from Westminster, intended as a temporary measure. It soon became apparent that the British government would not accept the restoration of devolution if the governing party would be supported by only one community.

This was confirmed in a White Paper of March 1973, which stated that any return to devolved government must involve power-sharing between nationalists and unionists. Following protracted discussions, a power-sharing executive comprising the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the (non-violent) nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), supported by the non-sectarian Alliance Party, was duly formed in November 1973.

The executive took office on 1 January 1974, but collapsed just five months later in the face of a strike organised by the Ulster Workers' Council (UWC), a collective of loyalist paramilitaries, trades unionists, and anti-power-sharing unionist politicians (Fisk, 1975; Anderson, 1994; Aveyard, 2014; McDaid, 2013). Whilst the executive did not remain long enough in office to have a serious legislative impact (Birrell and Murie, 1980: 79), it nevertheless made serious attempts to formulate policies that would address the entrenched communal social divisions within Northern Ireland, specifically in the area of education policy – although this has received comparatively little attention in the scholarly literature concerning this period.

The prevalence of the constitutional issue in Northern Ireland politics has relegated discussion of social and economic policies to 'a secondary role' (McAllister, 1977: 62). In the case of the 1970s, the violent conflict during that decade has understandably attracted greater academic attention than the seemingly more mundane realms of social policy. Nevertheless, the first power-sharing executive formulated one of the most progressive and ambitious strategies for integrated education in the history of Northern Ireland, aimed at strengthening community relations and developing greater respect and understanding between the

communities. However, it must be noted that the ambition of the strategy was also a potential drawback, even if the executive had remained in office long enough to see the policies through, due to the significant costs involved.

Despite the costs, integrated education was at the forefront of the first executive's efforts to improve community relations. That this occurred at a time when the violence was at its most intense is all the more remarkable, and provides an interesting contrast with the education policies of the current executive.

The first executive's programme for government, *Steps to a Better Tomorrow*, although somewhat vague on detail, made the link between integrated education and improving community relations explicit. The new administration, it promised, would undertake 'detailed investigation of the role of education in the promotion of community harmony and the development of pilot experiments, after consultation with interested parties, in integrated education.' Nevertheless, there was no sense that the executive planned to introduce compulsory integrated education programmes, since it referred to the 'primacy of parental rights' as one of the fundamental principles of its educational policy (Northern Ireland executive, 1974). The programme also referred to the need for more integrated social housing, which was ambitious, if somewhat foolhardy, at a time when inter-communal violence was at its height (McDaid, 2013: 186).

The executive's Minister for Education, Basil McIvor, planned to introduce an expansive nursery schools programme, and also the provision of nondenominational or 'integrated' schooling for older children in an effort to tackle sectarianism in the region. McIvor envisaged that nursery schooling would be available to every child in Northern Ireland. The proposed project required considerable capital investment, since he argued that the nursery schools would have to be specially constructed on new sites, away from existing primary schools. If the schools were constructed on land housing existing schools, whether religious or state primary schools, this might 'militate against integrated nursery education in the areas concerned' (Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), 1974a). The plan also attempted to tackle segregation of a different kind, since it was suggested that children with learning disabilities would be educated with mainstream pupils.

Officials at the Ministry of Education considered that the scheme would require the recruitment of approximately eight-hundred nursery teachers, and a similar number of assistants within five years, in order to ensure its success. None of this was cheap, with estimates that the nursery school plans alone would require £6.5 million in government funding. Despite the costs involved, there was general cross-party approval for the nursery education plans in the Assembly, but especially among pro-power-sharing parties. The plan was in line with the overall aims of the executive's programme for government. Like that document, it displayed elements of social progressivism, although perhaps also some of the naïve optimism of a new administration.

More ambitious still, however, was the proposal that integrated education should be developed for children studying at primary and secondary levels across Northern Ireland. These campuses were to be known as 'shared schools'. However, it is important to note that what was envisaged was a fully integrated system. The distinction is an important one, since, as will be seen, the current power-sharing executive uses the term 'shared schools' to mean something quite different from fully integrated schooling (see for example Department of Education, 2013).

McIvor's proposals envisaged the creation of integrated primary and secondary schools. Both Catholic and Protestant church people were to be represented on their boards of management. Whilst such church involvement was recognised as potentially problematic, it was regarded as the best way to get the scheme started. Attempting to fight 'all battles at once' would ensure the scheme foundered before it began (PRONI, 1974b). He also acknowledged that the plans were likely to cause considerable controversy, as education had long been a contentious matter in Northern Ireland (Akenson, 1973). However, this might in fact benefit the Executive since the policy was 'put forward to give practical support to the spirit of power-sharing and the development of community harmony' and to encourage inter-faith co-operation on schools policy (McDaid, 2013: 117). It might, though, be questioned how realistic this goal was during a period of apparent polarisation of the communities in the region.

It was not planned at that stage to alter the overall schooling system in Northern Ireland, given the above-mentioned focus on parental choice in the executive's policy document. Integrated schools were therefore to be newly constructed ventures, separate from the existing system. Whilst McIvor recognised that this arrangement might only 'touch on the edge of the [sectarian] problem' it was thought worthwhile on the basis that new attitudes may be created throughout the schooling system. It was also thought desirable that the executive should be seen to show an example in respect of cross-community initiatives. The ambitious nature of the scheme was evident in the estimated cost of the proposals: £13 million, over £6 million more than the annual budget of the Department of Health and Social Services, Northern Ireland's highest spending department (PRONI, 1974b). High costs, however, were not the only potential obstacle.

Whilst most of the churches were largely positive about the scheme, the Catholic Church was fundamentally opposed. Jonathan Bardon (2009) has aptly summed up the reactions of the Catholic, and other, church leaders to the proposals: Methodists welcomed the plans wholeheartedly; Presbyterians were broadly favourable; the Church of Ireland was cautiously supportive; and the Catholic Church was hostile.

This was evident in the significant public opposition to the scheme from within the Catholic hierarchy (*Irish Times*, 1 May 1974). The latter (not unreasonably) had previously argued the roots of the conflict in Northern Ireland were political, not religious, and that integrated schooling would thus not address the root causes

of conflict and sectarianism (Conway, 1970: 7). The extent of the opposition from leaders of the Catholic Church would have considerably affected the scheme's chances of success, even if the executive had survived. However, the proposed schemes on integrated and nursery education proved to be general casualties of the downfall of the executive at the hands of the UWC. It was not until seven years after the doomed first executive mooted its plans for non-denominational education that the first integrated school, Lagan College, Belfast, was opened. Incidentally, Basil McIvor, the former executive education minister, was chairman of the college (McIvor, 1988: 133).

Although the plans for integrated education were extremely costly, and faced considerable opposition from senior Catholic clergymen, they illustrate that the executive was seriously attempting to tackle the emergence of sectarian attitudes among youth in Northern Ireland. In many ways, the 1974 executive seems to have been more ambitious in the use of education policy as a means of tackling sectarianism and segregation than its contemporary counterpart, whose educational strategy will now be considered.

From integrated education to shared schools

Whilst devolution has, theoretically, been restored to Northern Ireland since the signature of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the assembly was suspended a number of times due to political difficulties. The longest such suspension occurred between 14 October 2002 and 7 May 2007, as parties struggled to reach agreement on the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, and a commitment from the largest nationalist party, Sinn Féin, to publicly support the Police Service of Northern Ireland (Dixon, 2008: 300–15).

These conditions were eventually met, and devolution restored in May 2007, following the St Andrews Agreement of 2006 (Wilford, 2010). However, in the intervening period, Northern Ireland had been governed by direct rule ministers from Westminster. This meant that policy, including, of course, educational policy, was formulated by successive Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland and their ministerial teams. In 2005, direct rule ministers unveiled their flagship community relations policy document, *A Shared Future*. Whilst integrated education was regarded as the 'barometer of good relations' between communities, the document also argued that both integrated and denominational schools had a role to play in creating a 'shared society' (OFM/DFM 2005: 25).

A Shared Future, whilst recognising the legal obligations to promote integrated schooling in Northern Ireland, placed greater emphasis on schools providing more 'opportunities for sharing part of their learning and educational experiences with young people from different communities, and the opportunity to cross the traditional community divide in educational provision.' This could take a number of

forms, for example 'schools sharing sports facilities and open opportunities to learn subjects not readily available within one particular school or sector' (OFM/DFM, 2005: 25–26).

This sharply contrasts with the 1974 policy proposals which clearly envisaged something much more expansive and radical regarding what was meant by 'shared schooling'. It is notable that when devolution returned to Northern Ireland after 2007, the promotion of shared, as opposed to integrated, schools remained a policy priority for the current executive.

This trend has continued since the restoration of devolution in 2007. A 2010 consultation document published by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, the Programme for *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* (CSI), was vague about education policy, and only made brief reference to integrated education. Like the previous *Shared Future* document, it also made reference to the role those schools outside this sector had to play in 'providing shared space and addressing issues such as sectarianism' (OFM/DFM, 2010: 16), but was rather thin on detail. This prompted criticism from a group of academic experts from Queen's University Belfast, who argued the executive did not appreciate the seriousness of the problems created by segregated education (Marshall et al., 2010: 8). The CSI document certainly suggested a diminution in the importance attached to integration initiatives on the part of the executive.

More recently, this tendency in policy was confirmed when the executive published a more expansive community relations policy document in 2013, entitled *Together: Building a United Community* (OFM/DFM, 2013). The document listed as a 'headline commitment' the creation of ten 'shared educational campuses' throughout Northern Ireland. The benefits of the proposed model of sharing are defined as follows by the executive:

We believe that creating more opportunities for socially-mixed, shared education, with a view to achieving a full shared education system in Northern Ireland, is a crucial part of breaking the cycle of inter-generational educational underachievement unemployment, and sectarianism; and improving good relations amongst and for our young people. This must also be considered within the context of the increasing diversity of our society, which is reflected within the school environment.

(OFM/DFM, 2013: 48)

These campuses would be based on the 'Lisanelly model', a proposed shared campus under construction near the town of Omagh in the west of Northern Ireland. The Lisanelly site plans to bring together six denominational or state schools on one campus, with some sharing of common facilities such as sports halls and performance areas (*Belfast Telegraph*, 24 October 2013). Nevertheless, the students may never actually take lessons together, and could, to all intents and purposes, remain educated apart from each other. This could potentially impact upon the

proposed societal benefits trumpeted by the policy's advocates. Whilst ministers have warned of cuts to the education budget, the Minister for Education has made £25 million available for shared educational campuses to be developed. It appears, therefore, that shared schools will be preferred over integrated education for the foreseeable future, despite the statutory obligation to increase integrated provision, its potential social benefits, and fact that almost 80 per cent of those surveyed, from both main communities, would support their child's school becoming an integrated campus (see Lucid Talk, 2014). This is not always replicated among political party members, which may explain the current reluctance to pursue the integrated education agenda. Indeed, recent research on members of the DUP suggests that a considerable majority of that party's members (58 per cent) would favour sending their children to schools solely with their co-religionists (Tonge et al, 2014: 148).

Conclusion

This article has compared the integrated education policies of both the first, ill-fated power-sharing executive of the 1970s with those of the present day executive. It is clear that the first executive had much more expansive plans for integrated education than the current administration. This was despite the fact that it took office during the most violent years of the Northern Ireland conflict. Admittedly, its proposals were costly and may have been too ambitious given the economic climate of the time. Nevertheless, they provide a portrait of an administration prepared to take radical decisions in order to grapple with a deep-seated societal problem, despite the potential costs, criticisms, and opposition that such an approach would bring. Indeed, the fate of the executive itself offers perhaps the best evidence that, in 1974, a full programme of integrated education was an idea whose time had not yet come.

The situation since the onset of the current peace process, however, cannot be explained so easily. The sharp declines in the levels of violence might have provided opportunities for the development of better community relations, and integrated schools might have offered an ideal place to begin such a move (for more on communal segregation in Belfast, however, see Gormley-Heenan et al., 2008). The evidence in this paper, however, supports the view that there has been a substantial 'policy shift' in favour of shared education at the expense of integration – despite the statutory obligation to encourage and facilitate the former (Smith, 2014: 2).

Indeed, despite these obligations, only 6 per cent of all pupils in Northern Ireland attend integrated schools (Smith, 2011: 65). This suggests that policy makers –in both direct rule and devolved contexts—have not adequately delivered on integrated education over a number of decades. This may provide critics of the current peace process in Northern Ireland with further evidence that the segregationist principles on which the region's consociational political model is built

are self-reinforcing (See e.g. Dixon, 2005; Taylor, 2009). The present-day executive, though, has at least succeeded where the first failed, in being relatively successful in building the peace. However, in education policy as elsewhere, it has yet to demonstrate the capacity of managing the equally difficult task of fostering inter-communal reconciliation among the region's divided communities.

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