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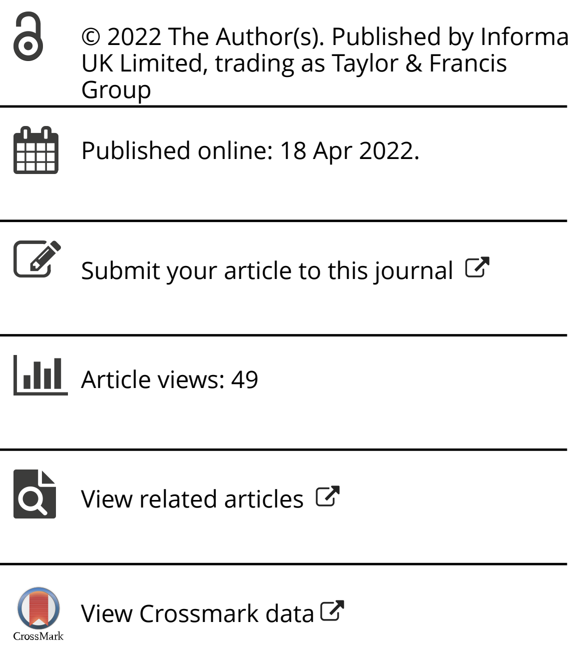

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Northern Ireland pupils transcend cultural difference through transformed integrated schools: *we don't think about religion when we're passing the ball, we just do it*

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ABSTRACT

Schooling for Northern Ireland children has over decades been in denominationally separate schools, until an integrated system was instigated by concerned parents in the late 1970s amidst growing political violence. By educating together Catholic and Protestant pupils and those of other religions or none, the hope was to contribute to peace in a conflict-prone society. The first integrated schools were planned and government funded. Then, in the early 1990s, some segregated schools sought to transform to integrated status through a detailed, formal process. In individual, face-to-face interviews, 11- and 16-year old pupils ($n =$ 20), representing both school sectors and both the main cultural backgrounds, described their experiences of learning side by side for the first time with peers of a different tradition. Both younger and older pupils could discern the differences between their previous (segregated) and current (integrated) settings, saw the benefits of accepting and acceptance, and perceived sameness as well as difference. They could appreciate the global perspective, understood the purpose of outward, visible changes such as emblems and school displays, and welcomed curriculum change, particularly in Physical Education. Pupils understood the value of having difficult conversations without acrimony at the same time as learning about and respecting others' viewpoints.

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Introduction

The island of Ireland is a widely diverse society 'in terms of nationality, ethnic background and religion' (Rougier and Honohan 2012, 254). From 1901, it was constitutionally part of the United Kingdom with England, Scotland and Wales (Farren, Clarke, and O'Doherty 2019). However, following colonisation by English and Scottish Protestants in the north-east meant the rest of Ireland was predominantly Catholic. A movement by Irish Nationalists led to independence for the Republic of Ireland in the south and the island was 'partitioned [divided] into Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State under the terms of the Government of Ireland Act 1920 and the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921 (5)'. The two entities created had some powers of self-government, with the Act

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'accepted by northern Protestants, but … rejected by southern Catholics who continued to demand total independence for a unified Ireland' (McGuinness, Abbott, and Cassidy 2013, 176). Northern Ireland, however, although 'geographically part of the island … is politically part of the United Kingdom' (Roulston and Cook 2020, 155).

Educationally, most schools were previously denominational and controlled by the churches. After Partition in 1921, control of the Protestant schools was transferred by their churches to the state whereas the Catholic church retained control of theirs, hence, state (*de facto* Protestant) and maintained (almost exclusively Catholic) schools, respectively (McGuinness, Abbott, and Cassidy 2013). Following Partition, meaning Northern Ireland became a separate jurisdiction, segregated schools were established and remain in the majority today (Roulston and Cook 2020), with over 90% of Catholic and Protestant children attending religiously separate schools. The deployment of teachers reflects this divide and remains 'the current reality' (Blaylock et al. 2018, 643). However, there is a balanced religious background in integrated schools with similar numbers of teachers educated in Catholic and Protestant schools (Milliken, Bates, and Smith 2020).

Defining integration

A definition of integration is '[bringing] together children and adults from Catholic, Protestant and other backgrounds in each school. The schools strive to achieve a religious balance of pupils, teachers and governors, and they acknowledge and respect the cultural diversity they represent' (IEF 2020 n.p.). NICIE's (2014) anti-bias curriculum centres on 'the development of inclusion, respect, sharing and openness – essential aspects of the school's ethos and practice in the delivery of the 'formal Northern Ireland Curriculum' as well as the hidden curriculum (8)'. It emphasises both difference and similarity, the former including 'socio-economic background, culture, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion or disability', highlighting 'the potential of schools to challenge negative attitudes, values and practices' (10).

The global dimension

Integration is not confined to Northern Ireland and is found within and beyond Europe but has 'particular resonance' here, given the long-standing divisions between Catholics and Protestants (Hayes, McAllister, and Dowds 2007, 455). In the Republic of Ireland's predominantly Catholic educational context, Hyland (1996, 10) describes Educate Together schools which aim to reflect 'the ethos of the society in which many social, cultural and religious strands exist in harmony and mutual respect'. They arose in 1983 to develop multi-denominational schools and 95 national (primary) and 19 second level schools now educate some 30,000 pupils (Educate Together n.d.).

While Montgomery et al. (2003) found primary and post-primary pupils in Northern Ireland to be aware of religious divisions and to understand that integration united them with a high value placed on friendships with those from different backgrounds, there is relatively little international research on pupils' relationships in contexts with a contested hegemony, and where a society has been emerging from conflict. However, Jews and Palestinians also study in separate school systems although the groups believe the split

to be tolerable, even effective (Swirski 1990). Taysum et al. (2020) present a theory of participation emerging from evidence gathered through partnerships between schools in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, Russia, Israel, and Nigeria. They develop this regarding young people pursuing independent interests and ambitions to enable them to become drivers of social change (see also Taysum 2020). The evidence identified participation principles of inclusion, respect, trust, and cross-cultural critique of alternative world views to arrive at a shared multicultural world view, and the generation of new knowledge to enable this.

Numerous countries, including Israel, South Africa, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Guatemala have tried to initiate reconciliation processes within conflicted societies by making integrated provision for children 'who are more normally educated apart' (Zembylas and Bekerman 2013, 403), such as revising the curricula for example the 'rewriting of history textbooks' (Zembylas et al. 2009, 410). Whether separation means inequality has been a contested viewpoint in many nations' school systems (Gavison 2000).

Moving towards integration

The move towards integrated schooling in Northern Ireland was at a time of bitter political conflict and violence between groups of Catholic Nationalists and Protestant Loyalists from the late 1960s resulting in 'an even more segregated society' (Zembylas et al. 2009, 410). Decades on, life here is characterised by division in almost all elements of society (Irwin 2019).

However, in 1974, a group of parents formed All Children Together (ACT) believing that educating children separately potentially contributed to the conflict (McGlynn et al. 2004), although this was not solely blamed for hostilities (Gallagher et al. 2019). In 1981, the first planned integrated secondary school opened outside Belfast 'with 28 pupils, no money, no permanent building, and an armed police guard on the first day' (*The Nation 2019*). Morgan et al. (1992, 19) underlined parents' efforts that helped integrated schools come into being, their ongoing participation being 'specifically encouraged'. The demography in integrated schools in the majority of cases is shown to be mixed – 'urban and rural, mixed social class, medium levels of unemployment and mixed political leanings' (Montgomery et al. 2003, 3).

Types of integrated school

There are two types of integrated schools. Those that are new, planned and receive government aid are called Grant Maintained Integrated (GMI). They were guided by the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) established in 1987 to coordinate geographical location, funding and staffing (Smith 2001), to support parents as well as 'influencing and informing the public' (Perry 2016, 6), and to foster its own anti-bias approach to education (NICIE, IFI, and EFF 2008, 2014). GMI schools now number 38 (23 primary, 15 post-primary) and are managed by Boards of Governors that include teachers, parents and members appointed by the Department of Education (DE) (EA 2019). The admissions ratio is 40:40:20 when over-subscribed, representing Catholic and Protestant pupils and those of other or no religion, with a similar pattern among staffing and Boards of Governors.

This paper reports pupils' experiences in a second type of integrated school emanating from a vastly different starting point and all originally *de facto* Protestant schools which have 'transformed' to Controlled Integrated (CI) status (NICIE n.d.). Motivation for this momentous step in a conflict-prone country can be to embrace the pure ethos of integrated schooling or, pragmatically, to counter falling rolls and retain viability, or both. Transformation can be initiated through the Board of Governors or at the written request of at least 20% of parents, culminating in a secret ballot through the Electoral Reform Services in London (DE 2017). DE expects that a reasonable balance of Catholic and Protestant pupils will attend the school (at least 10% of the minority tradition initially) and, once transformed, it can 'qualify for mainstream funding' (Lundy 2000, 278).

The first Protestant schools to transform did so in 1991 (a primary and a post-primary) although Lundy doubted that any Catholic school would ever take this step because of 'the composition of the Board of Governors and the general ethos … in maintained schools' (282). However, following positive ballots, four Catholic primary schools and one Catholic post-primary school have applied for integrated status. In 2021, the first Catholic primary school in Northern Ireland was granted Ministerial approval for transformation and another has recently voted for transformation. Three schools in the Republic of Ireland have taken 'the historic step' of becoming multi-denominational (*Irish News*, August 28, 2019). NICIE provides a transformation programme (NICIE 2005) with 27 CI schools now opened (22 primary, 5 post-primary). Also in 2021, the first two Controlled Nursery Schools were granted transformed integrated status, a process prohibited in the 1989 Education Reform Order (NI) and only repealed in 1998. Overall, from September 2021, there are now 68 integrated schools educating approximately 7% (24,861) of the school going population (352,364) (DE 2021).

Reactions, attitudes and challenges

Montgomery et al. (2003, 2) described the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order (HMSO 1989) as 'something of a watershed for the development of integrated education' funding both GMI schools and those wishing to transform. The 1996 Education Order clarified the transformation process and the then Minister for Education, Michael Ancram MP, 'particularly welcomed 'transformation proposals'' (McGonigle, Smith, and Gallagher 2003, 3). There was endorsement for integration in the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (1998), and through the government's aim of developing a more pluralistic society (OFMDFM 2003).

The Department of Education considered transformation more financially sensible than setting up new schools (DE 1999). Its guide to transformation stated that '[it] aims to encourage and support an increasing network of sustainable integrated schools providing high quality education' (DE 2017, 2; see also IEF 2017). DE details the roadmap for transformation including the school's priorities, how to implement the process, the resources needed and 'the key outcomes it intends to achieve over an initial three year period' (16). Supporting the integrated ethos in a country emerging from conflict, DE stated that, 'One of the 12 strategic outcomes in the draft Programme for Government 2016–21 is that 'We are a shared society that respects diversity. Improving attitudes among young people is critical to achieving this aim'' (5).

Large-scale attitudinal surveys like Ipsos MORI (2011) show continuing support for integrated schooling, a convincing majority (90%, $n = 1007$) believing it can promote a better, shared future for Northern Ireland and have an important role in peace and reconciliation. Recently, NICIE (2020) reported that the existing 65 schools were unable to meet this demand but stated 'In the financial year 2019–2020 over 50 schools have engaged with IEF and/or NICIE … to explore what becoming integrated might mean for them' (7). This school year, four schools have transformed (three primary, one nursery; three Protestant, one Catholic) the largest number to do so at one time for a decade (*Irish News*, January 17, 2022).

Roulston and Cook's (2020) key point is that 93% of pupils here attend an effectively Catholic or Protestant school even in small, rural areas resulting in 'duplication of services supplying the needs of each community' (155), citing the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's acknowledgement of much 'duplicated provision' within the system (NIAC 2019, 19). Roulston and Cook (2020) emphasise, too, the key importance of, and potential for, bringing together different cultural traditions for future peace.

Challenges, however, accompanied these convincing arguments. Transforming schools were seen as Protestant, hence, there was a need for 'an incremental widening of a long-established culture' (Topping and Cavanagh 2016, 6). New (GMI) schools, on the other hand, are 'created from scratch' (Marriott 2001, 33). Moreover, McGonigle, Smith, and Gallagher (2003, 3) pointed out that those who favoured planned integrated schools were concerned that 'this overt preference for the transformation route' could adversely affect their funding.

At school level, Abbott and McGuinness (2020) showed that Headteachers in transforming schools must sustain the ethos of integration, make changes in a measured fashion, and achieve and retain a religious balance. They must be sensitive to parental reactions, ensuring they are well informed and reassured that integration poses no threat. Curriculum adaptation related mostly to History, Religious Education (RE) and Physical Education (PE). There was thus the opportunity for teachers in History 'to explore competing narratives about major historical events', in [PE] to remove the cultural gulf by enabling pupils to participate in sports traditionally associated with another tradition, and in [RE] 'to develop young people who have respect for diversity, in the hope that benefits accruing from these efforts outweigh any misgivings' (NICIE, IFI, and EFF 2014, 20–21).

A conceptual framework for integration

The overarching aim of integrated schools is to prepare young people to 'address conflict and controversy rather than avoiding them' (NICIE, IFI, and EFF 2014, 18), and for teachers to 'foster a positive and appropriate response' to diversity (24). The concept of critical multiculturalism (Kincheloe and Steinberg 2001) was proposed as a robust framework for practice in integrated schools (Hunter 2008). Whereas monoculturalism represents a belief in a single, dominant culture, at the other end of the spectrum critical multiculturalism allows for, and encourages, hard conversations to take place. On this basis, McGlynn (2003; citing Mahalingham and McCarthy 2000) advocated that schools address and celebrate difference in such a way that pupils 'question the inequalities existing in society' (13).

Integrated schools thus seek to provide high quality education and to 'foster an understanding of the two dominant traditions and to overcome negative stereotypes' (Hansson, O'Connor-Bones, and McCord 2013, 12). In their anti-bias curriculum, NICIE, IFI, and EFF (2008, 4) welcome difference without dilution of personal convictions. In their later edition, bias is, however, described as 'a normal part of life and an awareness of bias is crucial to ensuring inclusivity' (NICIE, IFI, and EFF 2014, 8). Marriott (2001) asserts that to respect others' views they must first be understood then valued, even at the risk of intense debate, emphasising that respect does not necessarily mean agreement but requires taking other people and their actions seriously (8).

Integration and inclusion

Integration is in close synchrony with inclusion, the latter long prioritised in education (Hegarty 2001; Kugelmass and Ainscow 2004; Mackey 2014). Although inclusion is still perceived in some countries as concerning special educational needs, it is now seen globally as a principle 'that supports and welcomes diversity among all learners' (Ainscow 2020, 9). Florian (2019, 696) spoke of its wider parameters within 'the many different socio-cultural-historical contexts in which schooling occurs'. Similarly, integration can mostly concern catering for additional needs in regular classrooms (DfES 2003), but integrated schools here, whether planned or transformed, are additionally committed to making provision not only for different religions, but for ability, ethnicity, gender and experiential history. The principles and ethos of inclusion in its widest sense form a key component of integrated schooling, not solely regarding religiously shared education.

Aim and objectives

The study's aim was to examine the journey to integration through the pupils' eyes. Its objectives were to examine changed features of their educational experience following transformation at whole-school, classroom and informal (friendship) levels, and to determine the extent to which they and others feel included in a range of situations. It is desirable that research should elicit children's views as they are keenly aware of 'the ethos of the school' (Cullingford 1991, 2) and provide 'the best sources of information about themselves' (Docherty and Sandelowski 1999, 177).

Methodology

A qualitative approach using one-to-one, semi-structured interviews sought to elicit 'detailed accounts' (Ary et al. 2006, 485) and generate key themes (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011). Each interview took 15 minutes with longer if children needed more time to respond (Kellet and Ding 2006). Rapport was established, there was an opportunity for 'explicit continuation of assent' (Lewis 2002, 111) and the interviews were audio recorded. Full ethical approval was granted by the University's Research Ethics Committee complying with BERA's (2004) guidelines. Parents provided voluntary informed consent, pupils gave assent, and there was assurance of confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw.

Table 1. Primary and post-primary pupils by religion ($n = 20$).

	Primary	Post-primary	
Catholic	5	3	8
Protestant	4	6	10
Atheist	1	1	2
Totals	10	10	20

The 10 schools were selected on a convenience basis and had an average experience of transformation of 6.3 years (primary 4.8; post-primary 8.8). In the five primary and five post-primary schools, two pupils (one male, one female, one Catholic, one Protestant as far as possible) were randomly selected by the Class and Form Teachers from Years 7 and 12, respectively, totalling 20 (see Table 1). There were two atheists (one primary, one post-primary). The criterion for inclusion was that pupils were enrolled while transformation was underway. The 10 Year 7 children (age 11) had attended their school for between three and seven years (four for six, three for seven, two for five and one for three years). Eight of the 10 Year 12 pupils (aged 16) had, since Year 8, attended their school for between one and five years, one for three, and one for two years.

Data analysis involved repeated reading of the transcribed data and categorising the main themes. Because of small numbers, the first school visited in each sector was used for pilot purposes with the data included in the analysis. Selected extracts illustrated the text (Braun and Clarke 2006) 'to keep the flavour of the original data … [and] to be faithful to the exact words used' (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011, 539). School sector (primary (p)/post-primary (pp)) and religion (Catholic (C), Protestant (P) or Atheist (A)) were indicated as the latter was ascertained at the end of each interview. Limitations were the small sample size of 10 schools dictated by the scope of the study, and 'the parameters of generalizability in this type of sample [being] negligible' (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011, 156).

Findings

The findings were organised under beginning transformation, attending an integrated school, pupils' perceptions of 'difference', their feelings about those perceived as 'different', changes in school name/signage/emblems, in assembly, in class, and in friendship patterns.

Beginning transformation

Numerous differences in the 10 schools were recognised since transformation began (17: 9p, 8pp), both practical and philosophical. Change occurred at whole school and individual level: 'If you'd come here when I was in first year, it would have been different. *I* would have been different. Now, there are more cultures … more integrated' (pp, P). There was 'the freedom to speak your mind' (pp, C); 'I'm not worried about 'can I say this? You just know it's a way of life' (pp, C). Pupils referred to the respect generated for others, the welcome given to those from the minority tradition and, importantly, the complete absence of sectarianism previously experienced in a segregated school.

Attending an integrated school

All 20 pupils understood the features of an integrated setting, exemplified by referring to learning about others of different religions and reflecting on the ability to take a broader view (14: 8p, 6pp): 'You can interact with other religions' (p, C); 'Because we're integrated … you aren't stuck with one religion' (pp, P).

> It's good because you get to learn about different people … maybe not the same religion or same colour as you, then you can understand that there are other people in the world besides you. (p, P)

Pupils additionally recognised the benefits of integration as actively embracing different cultures and countries (10: 4p, 6pp): 'If Africans weren't accepted somewhere else, they'd be accepted here' (p, P); 'It brings everyone closer. A whole different thing' (p, P). The integrated atmosphere was conducive to interacting with others, with no discrimination and everyone accepted (9: 4p, 5 pp): ' … it's not going to be biased in any way' (pp, A).

> It definitely gives you a bit of a lift. You don't have to be scared of what you're going to say … you're not scared to socialise with people from different backgrounds or different ethnic origins. (pp, C)

> … several bonds because they can learn about each other, get to know each other and get to know their religion. (pp, P)

Pupils' perceptions of difference

The most frequently cited differences were belonging to another nationality or culture (19: 10p, 9pp), belonging to a different religion (16: 7p, 9pp), having a disability (15: 7p, 8pp), having a different skin colour (6: 4p, 2pp), or having learning difficulties (3: 2p, 1pp) with notable recognition of, and empathy towards, peers with any impairment or additional need. There was both awareness and acceptance: ' … different … but really the same' (pp, C).

> There's a boy from China and he can't speak English and has to translate with his hands to the teachers. Another boy is Hindu. (p, P)

> We have people here from Pakistan so you're socialising a great deal and there's a mixture from England, Scotland and Wales. (pp, P)

> There's Christians and non-Christians – people who might not believe in God … or be Muslim so have different beliefs. (pp, C)

> 'X' has got a disability of her leg, I think. (pp, C)

> There are people who are dyslexic … (p, P)

> We have classes especially for [differently abled pupils] … a couple last year had Down's Syndrome and you just went up and they would have talked to you all day. It was lovely. (pp, C)

How pupils felt about those who are 'different'

Pupils' feelings about those perceived as 'different' were positive – 'I'd class them all the same' (pp, C) – and almost half simultaneously underlined their 'sameness' (9: 2p, 7pp).

Contact was mutually beneficial: ' … because you can learn from *them*' (p, P) and a welcoming attitude was clear: 'Treat them the same. Let them join in' (p, P).

> At an integrated school you know you can be yourself. (p, P)

> I have my own beliefs and other people have theirs. It's good to have a different mix [otherwise] you're not going to get to know different cultures and even people who have something wrong with them. (pp, C)

> I treat everybody the same way as I'd want to be treated, and if someone needed help I'd have no bother … I'm stumped now, I can't find the word. Not bothered who they are. (pp, C)

Changes in school name/signage/emblems

Most visibly, schools' names changed 'from just being a normal school to an integrated school' (p, C) (14: 8p, 6pp), coupled with a new or modified school badge (11: 5p, 6pp) and a slightly different uniform: 'They changed the uniform but [not] the colour' (p, A). In spite of these adjustments, two pupils noted no difference – 'It's just like yesterday' (pp, C); ' … the people inside, they're still socialising' (pp, C).

Posters, signs and emblems characterised the integrated ethos and pupils' awareness of it (9: 2p, 7pp) – 'nothing that's offensive' (pp, P). Posters were 'about bringing people together' (pp, P), one pupil perceptively underlining the need for balance and neutrality.

> [Our teacher] did a Polish, Indian and Philippines display. (p, C)

> Pictures of teams would tell you that we're a mixed school in terms of colour, religion, whatever. (pp, P)

> … we had to make this big curtain that says 'Welcome' in all the different languages. I did Irish, and there's French and Spanish and African. I like that. (p, P)

The wearing of personal emblems/jewellery denoting a pupil's religion was acceptable, but nothing sport-related in view of affiliation with a particular religion.

> … as long as it's nothing too harsh, as long as it doesn't insult anyone else … people are allowed to wear their cross if they're Catholic, as long as they don't wear a Celtic [football] top, something that could start a fight. (pp, P)

Just two pupils spoke of flying a flag in the school grounds and how this had been changed to avoid giving offence: 'The flag has changed from the Union Flag to the school's customised flag' (pp, C); ' … the integrated flag so people will feel more comfortable sending their son or daughter' (pp, P).

Changes in assembly

The most frequently cited change in assembly was the increase in visitors talking about acceptance of difference, particularly ministers of religion (8: 2p, 6pp): ' … most Fridays' (pp, C).

> It used to be mainly ministers and clergymen from the RAF [Royal Air Force] camp. Now, [they're] from all the different cultures and religions. (pp, C)

Another Catholic pupil from the same school, however, said that priests had yet to visit which was thought disappointing. Three primary children said that the Principal now talked about the need for wider knowledge and understanding of other religions and races.

> We've more whole-school assemblies … didn't have that in my old school … talk more about world-wide problems … instead of your own little school. (pp, P)

A new post-transformation emphasis on right, wrong and moral values was highlighted.

> When I came here, there'd be a lot of emphasis on Christianity. Since it's become integrated … what's really important, isn't really your religion – yes, important to you – but it's more how you act towards people. (pp, P)

One Protestant pupil understood that some now took the sacraments, sometimes people spoke in their own language in assembly, and singing was more multi-cultural.

> [The Principal] says a prayer at the end but … if you don't believe in praying, no-one makes you do it. (pp, P)

> A couple of people give us a wee speech in their language and a prayer … (p, C)

> We used to sing songs about Jesus and God, but now we don't. We sing about Muslims and stuff like that but only sometimes. (p, A)

Changes in class

Curricular changes identified predominantly concerned PE and RE. Firstly, separate schools traditionally offer different sports. Catholic schools usually provide Gaelic Football and hurling (for boys) and camogie (for girls), and Protestant schools offer Rugby and cricket (for boys) and hockey for girls. New sports, however, were enthusiastically welcomed (15: 11p, 4pp) and both the enjoyment and benefits of joint participation were identified because of sharing skills, demonstrating peer learning: 'It's good because we all play cricket and [a boy from a Catholic school] didn't … he'd copy us when we play, then when he plays hurling we follow him' (p, P).

> Gaelic football has been brought in and it's actually got mixed religions playing … a good impact … (pp, C)

> We were all used to soccer and I never thought of playing Gaelic. … I've liked it. It's been good fun! (p, P)

> They didn't have Irish dancing before. (p, C)

Sporting arrangements also included mixed religion teams, further removing segregation: 'There was an all-Catholic football team and a Protestant team … now they can be mixed. Mixed is better' (p, C); '… pretty good that we can all play each other's sports' (p, P). Sport had the potential to unite people with a shared aim that transcended their religious beliefs, thereby fostering an inclusive ethos – 'We don't think about religion when we're passing the ball, we just do it. We just play the game' (pp, P).

Secondly, the key difference in RE was learning about different religions (13: 7p, 6pp), some focusing on the two main Northern Ireland traditions (both Christian) – 'Teaches

you both sides' (pp, C), others giving wider responses but with a good understanding of the new *status quo* – 'a focus on all religions' (pp, C); 'We learn about Buddhists and monks' (p, A).

Awareness of different cultures was sharper as was the inherent moral dimension within a diverse group, and of sensitive efforts by staff not to label anyone as 'different': 'Our teacher, a Catholic, always makes sure it's not one-sided' (pp, P).

> In RE … there's been a big difference about people going to church and chapel. The first time X came in, it was all very strange because she was the first person ever to go to sacrament in our school … then she came back with the wee ash on her head. (p, P)

> When we were learning about First Communion, the non-First Communion people would be sent [to another teacher], and do a different type of RE. (p, C)

> … we've looked at the Jewish and other religions, seeing what other religions view as wrong. (pp, P)

Two post-primary pupils placed the question of differences in RE in the context of citizenship, addressing forms of discrimination and placing explicit emphasis on the discussion of these compared to before transformation.

> In citizenship, we'd learn a lot more about race, all ethnic groups, diversity and prejudice, compared to first year. We face it, discuss it and don't ignore it. (pp, P)

> … it was interesting … you didn't get deep into it, but do you see now? You'd be doing spider diagrams and what causes this racial discrimination. (pp, P)

Friendship patterns

Three-quarters of pupils had both Catholic and Protestant friends (15: 8p, 7pp) with some recognition, however, that this was a new experience.

> Believe it or not, two of my best friends are actually Protestant and I'm Catholic, so that's just really strange. (pp, C)

> Some of my friends are Protestant, some are Catholic, but I wouldn't be one-sided into Protestant or Catholic … lots of my friends are Catholic. (pp, P)

Primary pupils' reasons for choosing friends were simply because they got on well with them (7: 4P, 3C). Notably, differences of varying kinds were acknowledged but were felt to be immaterial in forming friendships (3: 1A, 1C, 1P) – 'We're friends because we're all the same, but different in our own ways' (p, C), and, pleasingly, three did not see religion as an issue within friendship – 'It doesn't come into it' (p, C). Three others referred to friends of different races: 'My best friend's from a different country and I really like that' (p, A).

> I'm friends with Catholics, I'm friends with Protestants, I don't think there are any Jews in our school but, yeah, I'm friends with everybody … if I'm sad and sitting on my own, they'll ask, 'What's wrong?' (p, P)

> There's a boy from the Philippines and he's different coloured. English is his second language and there's a Polish person who needs to learn some English. My friends are Protestant and Catholic, but religion and skin colour don't matter. (p, C)

Post-primary reasons related largely to personality and mutual liking (7: 4P, 2C, 1A). Three talked about a 'connection' (1C, 2P), two asserting firmly that 'It's the person that counts' (1C, 1P) and made no difference to friendships formed. Like their primary counterparts, several completely discounted religion as the basis for making friends.

> Why would I, if someone was my own religion, be friends with someone who isn't nice, shows no respect to me, no respect to anyone else? Just because they're my religion doesn't mean I'm going to like them. (pp, P)

> It's not even a religion difference … There's a connection. (pp, C)

> I just identify with whoever talks to me and it's dead on because I'm their friend and they're my friends. I wouldn't not talk to someone because they're Protestant and I'm Catholic. (pp, C)

Discussion

The pupils conveyed, in their own language, the ethos of integration, referring to interaction with, and learning about, others, something not previously experienced and certainly not in the older pupils' former primary schools. Most spoke spontaneously of accepting and being accepted, and of a school atmosphere free from discrimination (NICIE, IFI and EFF 2014). Difference for pupils comprised ethnicity, religion, disability, skin colour, and learning difficulty. Strikingly, these issues were met, understood, and discussed (Kincheloe and Steinberg 2001; Marriott 2001; Montgomery et al. 2003). Almost half accentuated 'sameness', both 11- and 16-year-olds articulating that 'everybody should be nice and then we'll all get along'. It was not just recognition and acceptance of difference, but also open-minded intentionality to be part of equality of treatment for all.

Most pupils discerned changes in school of both a philosophical and practical nature, and some could identify experiences prior to, and after, the move to integrated status (Montgomery et al. 2003). There was keen awareness of the sensitivity associated with different national flags or emblems, and recognition that the dynamics of the school setting were typified by a culture that avoided giving offence. There was considerable appreciation of the wider issues of different world religions, races and cultures now highlighted in assemblies.

Curriculum changes (Zembylas et al. 2009) were welcomed, for example in RE when cultural awareness increased in meaningful ways through learning how others worship, and the addition of sports traditionally associated with other schools enabled Protestant pupils to turn to Catholic peers and vice versa for expertise. The mixed membership of teams provoked the astute comment 'We don't think about religion when we're passing the ball. We just do it', demonstrating a mature, common-sense outlook.

At whole-school, classroom and informal levels, most believed they fitted in with friends from different traditions, insisting that religious belief was not a foundation for friendship. Deeper perceptions from post-primary pupils supported active recognition, not avoidance, of different beliefs and the growth of mutual respect and greater understanding among pupils since transformation began. The absence of sectarian issues was recognised and they could discuss openly matters not previously touched upon – Marriott's 'intense debate' (2002, 8) – in keeping with the most salient features of critical multiculturalism (Kincheloe and Steinberg 2001).

There was evidence from the pupil data about the integrated sector impacting positively on their lives, their value sets, their ethical viewpoint and developing ideology (Taysum 2020**)**. Their candid views reflected the aims and ethos of integrated schooling, showing that they can transcend both cultural and religious difference as a natural development in a more multicultural educational setting.

Recent progress has been made with both Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland Catholic primary schools transforming, and some 50 schools currently exploring integrated status (NICIE 2020). This may form a sound basis, a persuasive argument, and strong justification for taking forward a genuinely pluralist attitude through transformation. A much wider comparative study could address the attitudes of school leavers who have attended transformed integrated, Catholic and Protestant schools.

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