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School partnerships in a post-conflict society: addressing challenges of collaboration and competition

School leaders using school partnerships to overcome turbulence and address challenges in a post-conflict society: Northern Ireland

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Abstract

In societies emerging from conflict, education plays an important part in instituting peace and reconciliation, and school leaders are key to this. This paper explores the role of school leaders in Northern Ireland, a society emerging from conflict. Despite the peace agreement of 1998, Northern Ireland's communities are still deeply divided, and this is reflected in education. The school leaders who were interviewed as part of this research work within school partnerships as part of 'shared education' projects which involve schools working together and with twin aims of improving both educational and reconciliation outcomes for young people. The challenges that school leaders face when working in partnership in post-conflict societies have not been given the attention they deserve in the literature, so this work is significant in that it brings together a focus on school, drawing on theories of turbulence to examine how principals can best be empowered to be agents of change, in turn empowering pupils. While the focus is on Northern Ireland, the outcomes from this study will be of wider interest and significance for school leaders facing similar challenges in other divided situations.

Keywords Schools; school leadership; principals; Northern Ireland; turbulence theory; shared education

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Introduction

There is a growing recognition that schools working independently, or even competitively, may find advantage in collaboration. Ainscow *et al*. (2006) highlight the capacity-strengthening from which schools in challenging circumstances benefit when they collaborate. Alternatively, Hall and Wallace (1993) view school collaboration as a subversive response to central pressure for schools to compete. While they recognise that much collaboration is 'bounded', they recommend a

> *...more 'extended' collaborative professionality reflecting ...internal and external collaboration to protect ... against externally imposed competition and to deliver a corporate local service to pupils in the community* (1993, p. 110*)*.

Some systems appear to have developed strong state-initiated collaborative networks designed to improve the education system, despite operating in a competitive environment (Pino-Yancovic, 2019). Schools may be encouraged by government to collaborate in order to address issues which arise from social division and a divided society (Duffy and Gallagher, 2014). The research in this paper was conducted within such a divided society in the context of school partnerships and shared campuses emerging from the Shared education programme in Northern Ireland. In-depth interviews were undertaken with school principals to examine how they undertook their roles, and their experience of light, moderate, severe or extreme 'turbulence' was explored (Gross, 2014; Taysum and Arar, 2018). How school leaders navigated that turbulence and how the governance systems in schools endorse principals' attempts to empower school formed the context of this study.

A divided society emerging from conflict

Although geographically part of the island of Ireland, Northern Ireland (NI) is part of the United Kingdom and politically separate from the Republic of Ireland in the south and west of the island. Since its inception, NI society has been fundamentally divided. This division is largely ethnosectarian, with colonial roots (Clayton, 2014) but is often reduced to the terms 'Catholic' and 'Protestant'. While these social divisions are much more complex than a simple Protestant/Catholic binary suggests, nonetheless that cleavage continues to be deep and enduring. The population comprises a majority of 'Protestant, Unionist, British' and a minority of 'Catholic, Nationalist, Irish', but the Protestant majority has been diminishing steadily and, for the first time ever, there were more Nationalist than Unionist members elected to the UK Parliament in December 2019.

The divisions in NI led to a 30-year period of civil unrest, euphemistically termed the 'Troubles', from 1968. This resulted in more than 3,600 deaths and 30,000 injuries, half of whom were civilians (Worden and Smith, 2017). The conflict ended with the signing of Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, heralding the establishment of power-sharing local government and a move towards a post-conflict society. However, even the fact that the name of the peace agreement is contested does suggest continued uncertainties: Nationalists, largely

Catholics, generally term it the 'Good Friday Agreement', while Unionists, mostly Protestants, use 'Belfast Agreement' or 'Stormont Agreement' (Morgan, 2000, p. 6).

Following the signing of the peace agreement, a devolved assembly was established in NI in 1999. There is little right/left politics in Northern Ireland; most political parties instead represent particular ethnosectarian factions. As Birrell and Heenan (2013) highlight, this results in policies being influenced by the 'salience of communalism' with politicians making choices based on the needs of 'their' communities, rather than decision-making on grounds of wider social need (2013, p. 777). It had been hoped that the devolved government would be consensual but

> …experience demonstrated that consociational arrangements had the potential to lead to other outcomes in policy style, to impasses and no or delayed decision-making (Birrell and Heenan, 2013, p. 769).

Wilford (2010) points to government departments, often run by Ministers from different political parties, working in silos with little cross-communication. Additionally, devolved governments have fewer resources (Keating, 2007) and a civil service with limited experience of policy development (Parry, 2005). The consequence is limited evidence-informed policy-making. Birrell and Heenan (2013) conclude that

> …this results in poor policy outcomes and seemingly intractable positions which reflect the continuing existence of deep cleavages which run along communal lines
>
> (2013, p. 780)

These divisions led to five suspensions of the Northern Ireland Assembly from its establishment in 1998 to 2020. When operating, the devolved government in NI at least provided some strategic direction and occasional, albeit intermittent and faltering, progress. A breakdown of trust led to the longest suspension of the devolved government so far, lasting three years from January 2017. During that time, decisions were left with senior civil servants who were reluctant to implement or change policy. Devolved government only resumed in January 2020 and deep societal divisions persist in Northern Ireland. There remains '…the potential for ethnocentric tension to re-emerge' (Shirlow, 2018, p. 193) and these divisions are evident in the education system in Northern Ireland.

Divided education

Northern Ireland is a small region of the UK, with a total population of 1.88 million and just over 300,000 pupils. Neoliberal education policies (Ball, 2003) have resulted in autonomous, self-managing schools with devolved budgets, each requiring a Board of Governors, within a robust system of accountability (DENI, 2017). Funding is allocated according to pupil numbers and a range of other factors[i] and delegated to the governing bodies in each school. In effect, this puts schools in competition with each other, particularly as budgets shrank by 9.3% in real terms between 2013 and 2017, and

...it is clear the system is coming close to a tipping point (NIAO, 2018, p. 3).

While the effect of New Public Management on education in Northern Ireland is little different from that in other regions of the United Kingdom, Ireland or wider afield (see Gunter *et al.,* 2016), there are additional challenges to schools and school leaders in NI which are rather different from those faced elsewhere, many of which are a consequence of a divided society, emerging from conflict.

<mark>Insert Table 1 close to here</mark>

The structure of NI's education system is fragmented and complex (Table 1). Despite efforts to remove it, selection at age 11 determining whether a learner attends a Grammar school, considered more academic, or a Non-Grammar secondary school is still common. As well as adding another layer of schools, there is considerable evidence that grammar schools in NI are socially selective (Shuttleworth, 1995; Gallagher and Smith, 2000). Henderson (2020) employs Tomaševski's (2003) phrase 'inter-generational transmission of privilege' to describe the impact of selection in Northern Ireland (Henderson, 2020, p.6). While adding further complexity to school governance, that aspect of NI's divided education is beyond the scope of this paper.

The additional fragmentation in post-primary education is the result of segregation by ethnosectarian affiliation. Schools across Ireland had become denominational before the partition of Ireland in 1920 and, after the establishment of Northern Ireland, churches were resistant to any attempts to impose an integrated system (Farren, 1995). Eventually, Protestant interests allowed 'their' schools to come under government control establishing a Controlled Schools' sector, including 16 controlled grammar schools. The Catholic Church, however, understandably suspicious of a Protestant and Unionist-dominated state, retained control over their schools, which became the Catholic Maintained sector. Grammar schools, some with a Catholic ethos and some with a Protestant one, are in a Voluntary sector apart from controlled grammars. Other sectors have emerged since. Most recently a sector in which all instruction is in the Irish language has grown up. There is also a slightly longer-established sector in which Protestants and Catholics are educated together, Integrated schools. Despite initially steady but now slower growth in the Integrated sector (Abbott and McGuinness, 2020), Gallagher (2003) estimated that 92% of Catholic learners in Northern Ireland attend 'Catholic' schools and 94% of Protestants attend 'Protestant' schools.

It is this divided and fractured educational provision which had to provide education throughout 30 years of civil unrest. Muldoon *et al.* (2000) cite Leitch and Kilpatrick's (1998) study of Northern Ireland schools which found that the troubles impacted on schools in four main ways: continuing societal tension and disturbance, traumatic incidents, sectarian attacks on schools and staff and incidents which impacted on learners and their families. While 'schools are a reflection of the society in which they are located' (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2013, p. 195) and teachers, learners and school leaders comprise part of the society which is experiencing conflict, recent biographies would seem to confirm that schools in NI tried to

remain bastions of normality (see O'Callaghan, 2014) often providing an oasis of calm for learners whose lives were otherwise characterised by sectarianism and violence (Cairns, 1987). Unlike conflicts in many other countries, there were few school closures and teacher education, for instance, remained largely intact. The main post-conflict challenge for NI's school leaders is not rebuilding the infrastructure of education, but of considering how they can contribute to creation of a community which, while showing few signs of becoming united, will no longer be engaged in widespread sectarian violence.

There are many challenges in educational provision. Some of these relate to the financial cost of a fragmented education system. The chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee quotes a figure for the cost of segregation as 'around £1.5 billion' (House of Commons, 2019, p. Q252). Financial challenges were exacerbated by a lack of government in Northern Ireland over three years from January 2017. Without an Education Minister and in a policy vacuum, few decisions were taken. However, a number of initiatives, such as Area Learning Communities and the Shared education initiative, implemented before the suspension of the political process and which continued to operate during the three-year political impasse, may mitigate some of these structural issues.

Area Learning Communities

Both the Burns Report (2001) and the Costello Report (2004) had recommended that post-primary[2] schools should move towards greater collaboration and less competition; both envisioning schools working together in geographical clusters. Collaboration between many public bodies was encouraged to increase efficiencies across NI (OFMDFM, 2010) and, in the case of schools, to broaden the curriculum for learners (DENI, 2013). The Education (NI) Order (2006) introduced the Entitlement Framework which required schools to provide 24 subject choices at Key Stage 4 (14-16 year-olds) and 27 at Post-16 – now reduced to 21 at each stage. In each case, at least one third of the subjects must be general (academic) and one third applied (vocational/professional/technical). The Entitlement Framework has been described as '*one of the greatest challenges for leadership*' (McGuinness, 2012, p. 212) in Northern Ireland's schools, but it proved a powerful impetus to the establishment of clusters of post-primary schools in Area Learning Communities (ALCs). A school lacking a specialist teacher for a subject could still offer it on their curriculum and work with another ALC school to have it delivered there for all pupils in the Community. In 2019/20, there were 27 ALCs involving 250 schools, comprising Post-Primary Schools, Special Schools with Post-Primary aged children and Further Education Colleges. Some ALCs have only two schools, but they generally comprise between 6 and 10 schools (DENI, 2019).

The Chief Inspector's Report (2016) highlighted that '*...the most effective practice was characterised by purposeful and meaningful collaboration within the respective Area Learning Communities (ALCs) to enhance progression pathways.*' (ETI, 2016, p. 18). The paradox is that School Inspections are not seen to value school collaboration as they might. McGuinness *et al.* (2013) note that there are

few incentives for school leaders to take risks or be innovative with new, collaborative enterprises …In other words, there exists a potential clash of priorities for heads between school collaboration and school competition – whether that is competition for pupil numbers or in league tables (McGuinness *et al.*, 2013).

Additional challenges include the movement of learners from one school to another to attend classes. Logistical issues concerning timetabling and transport also needed to be tackled, and these were exacerbated when some schools in a partnership are some distance away from others. Expecting schools to collaborate in a divided system will not always be straightforward and another challenge identified was in '*…the leadership capacity of the head teacher [and] their willingness both to make links with other schools and their ability to involve teaching staff … in the collaborative venture*' (QUB, 2008, p. 34). While primarily established to allow a broader curriculum to be offered to learners, an incidental aim of ALCs was to use school collaboration to address reconciliation in an education system which largely divides children along ethnosectarian lines. However, one study found '*a discernible reticence amongst principals to engage collaboratively with schools outside of their faith/denomination*' (QUB, 2008, p. 35).

Shared education

The educational drivers for Shared education seem to emerge from frustration at the limited success of previous efforts such as curriculum developments and contact schemes in achieving widespread community cohesion. Even Integrated education, despite its continued growth, is making slow progress (Gallagher, 2016). Shared education has been defined as

…two or more schools or other educational institutions from different sectors working in collaboration with the aim of delivering educational benefits to learners …promoting equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion (Connolly *et al.*, 2013, p. xiii).

Partnerships involve joint, curriculum-based classes and activities taking place

…on a regular basis – typically at least once a week for a year at post-primary level…[and partnerships encourage schools]*…to develop programmes of classes and/or activities that address the educational priorities of participating schools…* (Loader and Hughes, 2017, p. 119).

In many schools, Shared education is used to deliver the Entitlement Framework with pupils moving from one school to another and different schools sharing the teaching.

Shared education has attracted significant financial and political support, culminating in a Shared Education Act passed in the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2016 which required the Department of Education (NI) – DENI – to 'encourage, facilitate and promote shared education'. Thus, it has been possible to claim with confidence that

> *...in a relatively short period of time, shared education seems to have transformed the educational landscape in Northern Ireland* (Gallagher, 2016, p. 372).

Gallagher (2019) has suggested that half of all schools in Northern Ireland are involved in Shared education (p. 32), although the extent to which some of these initiatives are spread within and across schools is not clear and the numbers of pupils involved might be comparatively small. The long-term sustainability of funding is also unclear (Smith and Hansson, 2015, p. 15) although the social networks which have been developed through Shared Education are claimed to build 'boundary-crossing relationships' (Robinson *et al*., 2020, p. 12).

Hughes and Loader (2015) are explicit about Shared education 'foregrounding' curriculum over reconciliation priorities, an approach designed to allow parents, teachers and school leaders to agree to shared activities when otherwise they might be reluctant. While this pragmatic approach may have led to its greater acceptance, there is a danger that reconciliation may be overlooked. Hughes and Loader accept that

> *...the challenge faced by shared education is to ensure that the nature of the encounters does not, intentionally or unintentionally, suppress the exploration and critique of differences in identity and experience* (Hughes and Loader, 2015, p. 1150).

Furthermore, there is a concern that Shared education may allow politicians and others to avoid making more fundamental structural changes to educational provision in Northern Ireland (Roulston and Hansson, 2019).

Turbulence

In such a volatile and uncertain context, with a fragmented education system, shrinking resources and a complex and ambiguous system of government, Northern Irish school leaders have had to develop their skills and competences in dealing with turbulence. Since the late 1990s, Gross has been using the metaphor of turbulence during flight as a typology by which school leadership in different contexts can best be understood. Some turbulence may be useful within a system as '*turbulence is a normal part of flying and a normal part of curriculum leadership that can be studied and understood*' (Gross, 1998, p. 113), but excessive turbulence is much less desirable. Turbulence theory has the potential to help us to better understand school leadership in the Shared education context in Northern Ireland.

Shapiro and Gross (2013) contend that positionality, cascading and stability underpin the dynamics of turbulence. 'Positionality' challenges school leaders to use a multi-dimensional approach to the relative situation of colleagues in their schools, particularly as individuals experience turbulence differently. A combination of turbulent events can lead to 'cascading', as staff are faced with multiple pressures and are pushed and pulled this way and that. In a

context of New Public Management pressures, with continued austerity, and emerging from a deep conflict, school leaders in NI should be familiar with such buffeting. The third dynamic, 'stability', should be manifest in those principals who know their context well and who are involved in building support structures to help them to address turbulence to reduce its impact as it emerges.

In this paper, we are focused on the extent to which a turbulence framework can contribute to understanding the leadership challenges that might be faced by school leaders involved in Shared education initiatives in NI.

Methodology

Following ethical approval from the University, semi-structured in-depth interviews (Denscombe, 2007) were conducted with eight school leaders in Northern Ireland, reflecting a range of school sizes, locations and types. Six led post-primary schools while two were primary principals; all had experience of working in formal or informal partnerships with schools from different sectors to their own and across Northern Ireland's community divide. Schools in both rural and urban areas were included, and all the main school sectors were represented. A range of school sizes were selected, with some having total enrolments of less than 100 pupils and others with more than 1,300. The proportion of pupils with Free School Meal Entitlement is a commonly used measure for deprivation (Gorard, 2012); half of the schools in this study had 40% or more pupils in receipt of free school meals. There were four male and four female interviewees, and their experience of being a school leader ranged from one to over 25 years (see Table 2).

The interviews examined, *inter alia*:

- the positive experiences of school leaders in relation to principalship and working with governance systems and structures;
- the opportunities and challenges of work for equity and renewal in educational systems; and
- the extent to which school leaders feel that current governance systems equipped them to empower school communities, allowing learners to become societal innovators.

Interviews were transcribed, and inter-rater checking was employed to enable thematic analysis. Using a hybrid approach to thematic analysis, the coding categories and themes emerged through an inductive/deductive approach to the analysis and combined *a priori* themes and issues with *posteriori* illustrative examples.

Findings and discussion

The interviews produced considerable evidence of the positive aspects of being a school leader. A common feature was the positive benefits of working alongside a governing body and there

were many examples of mutually supportive practice between school leaders and the members of their Boards of Governors.

All respondents also commented on the informal professional support networks that they had established. One said

> *...there's a little network of a few of us who would deliberately get together from time to time and spend a day together, we might bring along some specific issues we want to go through, we might simply just spend a day networking and chatting and sharing experiences... and that is very supportive* (D).

These networks helped school leaders to feel '*less lonely*' and '*it just makes me feel like I've got some sort of support there as well, you know I'm just not by myself all the time*' (A). Support from the surrounding community and from professional networks was felt to be particularly important for schools which are involved in cross-community initiatives, and there was a recognition by the school leaders that professional collaboration with colleagues in partnership schools in different sectors was key to achieving progress. One said

> *...the most enjoyable thing within our context here is that sort of professional collaboration with our colleagues in [name of school in a different sector]* (B).

while another reflected positively on Area Learning Communities bringing '*...principals together in a structured way*' (G).

Most of the school leaders also found a supportive wider community invaluable in fulfilling their role. One respondent highlighted the need for that community support, saying

> *...I enjoyed that support and that rapport we have with the wider community* (G).

These support networks were particularly important as the principals were very aware of the wider uncertainties in which they were trying to lead their schools. One commented on

> *...another wave [of uncertainty] that has just hit us too, with Brexit and Europe ...and Trump ...the world has become unpredictable and nobody quite knows where it's going.* (D)

While these positive aspects of school leadership and co-operation between schools were highlighted by each of the interviewees, much of the discussion focused on the challenges of school leadership, particularly in a divided society. These are ongoing challenges, but they can be compounded at particular times when ethnosectarian tensions are raised in the communities. One such time is around Remembrance Day, a memorial day observed since the end of the First World War in Commonwealth countries, which generally involves individuals wearing a poppy in the weeks before the day itself. In NI this event, almost from its inception, was focused around the battle of the Somme and became an icon of Protestantism and loyalism

(Rigney, 2008, p. 90). While perceptions are slowly changing, the wearing of a poppy continues to be regarded as a symbol of Protestantism (Grayson, 2010, p. 332). A similar issue occurs on Ash Wednesday, a Christian day of prayer and fasting. While observed in many Protestant as well as Catholic churches, in Ireland the placement of ashes on the forehead is practiced by Catholics alone. Thus, just as the poppy is thought to mark out the wearer, so does ash on the forehead. Rituals, symbols and anniversaries can pose challenges in some school settings. Schools with a largely heterogeneous intake may experience fewer problems, although Shared education might change this. In Integrated schools, attended by both traditions, it can pose its own problems. One Principal of an Integrated school explained that his school's response to Remembrance was forged out of a challenge when a pupil had his poppy coloured green, white and orange – the colour of Ireland's national flag – by other pupils. Having reflected on that event, the school now organise high-profile assemblies when Remembrance is discussed and explained, and '...*at the end of assembly, we give them the choice, would they like to wear a poppy or would they not*'. Similarly, on Ash Wednesday a service is held in the school with both Protestant and Catholic clergy.

> *We begin by saying this is an opportunity to take some time out, to reflect on our lives, to think about improvements we should be making. And halfway through the service ...we simply offer them the choice of receiving the Ashes or not. But everybody stays in the same room and they see their friends going up or not going up. And they make their own choices. We have even had one or two difficult conversations with parents who wondered why their child had gone up for ashes when it wasn't remotely linked to their own community and context… I take it as a*
>
> *sign of success, and I am quietly delighted that a youngster would feel open enough and happy to do that* (D).

This provides an example of turbulence being navigated and precipitating systemic change, improving provision and addressing potential conflict.

Some principals articulated the influences in the wider community such as from paramilitary groups which are still active in many communities in Northern Ireland (Ferguson and McAuley, 2020). These can undermine any attitudinal changes in the young people who the schools are trying to bring together and may restrict any benefits of Shared education. One remarked that

> *...the differences in terms of the potential for lack of cohesion are still there, they are real and you get a sense too, these children could be open [to] manipulation from ...outside in the community as well, so you are mindful of that too* (C).

Finance is a challenge for all schools in Northern Ireland and those who are additionally seeking to forge partnerships with other schools have added costs. '*It's about having staff with paid responsibilities*' (C) one said, while another declaimed with regret that

> *...our biggest enemy now is the shrinking budget. I just don't have the resources I need... the curriculum I want to deliver, I can't. The amount of care that I want our children to receive is increasingly difficult, because the staff themselves are overstretched* (D)

Despite help with Shared education expenses, there is still a cost to the school. As one school leader said

> *...yes it is expensive to do the travelling [to partner schools] but I suppose it's how useful you make the travelling when you do it ...we are part of the Shared education and there is a programme of partnership with [name of two schools] so we have some funding to enable us to pay for the travel and so on ...travelling across the town costs money and costs time, but ...if you make the experience worthwhile it's good* (G)

Shared education could be threatening for some schools, and for some parents. One principal emphasised the benefits and felt that it did not threaten the ethos of his school. He said '…*one of the big benefits I see of this partnership is, there's ...a pride in your own identity and yet a pride in the partnership*' (C), although he conceded that his school's decision to partner with another school was pragmatic rather than aiming for a higher social good:

> *I think would be wrong to say that the motive is some altruistic move to drive*
>
> *for society in terms of Shared education… more practical reasons ...[from the] pupils perspective they get a much broader range of courses between the two schools ...outcomes at GCSE level particularly and at A level to an*
>
> *extent have improved the basis of our closer collaboration, so ...parents have bought into it for that reason as well, because outcomes have been better through greater choice* (C)

An issue raised by some principals was the tension between operating in a system which encouraged competition between schools, epitomised by the competition for enrolments as pupil numbers are the main determinant of a school's delegated budget, and the encouragement for schools to work together in collaborative networks. One principal put it pithily, arguing

> *...you are asked to collaborate and work together with schools often when you are competing with them and the reason you're competing with them is because there's fewer pupils and pupils mean money, and money means security in terms of curriculum offer ...it's mad ...there's a system that is based on competition that is telling you to collaborate* (G).

Paradoxically, the divided system of education mitigates the worst excesses of this conundrum. A Maintained school will not be the normal destination for young people from a Protestant background, for instance, and the same can be said of Catholic pupils and Controlled schools.

These schools are largely not in competition. The same cannot always be said about selective and non-selective schools and there remains a contradiction of creating a quasi-market in education while asking schools to work more closely together.

There was much which was encouraging in the interviews. One was the sense that normal relationships were developing between some of the young people. Reflecting on sectarianism issues that occurs outside school over the weekend, there was a sense that this did not intrude too much into divisions between the schools and '*...more often than not, where there are issues it's around boyfriend and girlfriend and things like that*' (C). In the context of a more sustained cross-community engagement of an Integrated school, that Principal commented that

> *when our children do fall out, it's over the same boring old stuff, like a bad tackle on the football pitch or something that someone said on Snapchat, but it is almost never over sectarian issues. And yet they're sitting side-by-side in the classroom here every day* (D).

The school leaders were very clear about the role that schools have to play in modelling collaboration and sharing, and of showing it as 'normal':

> *in our generation that wasn't as easy and I think that has changed, the young people in our schools now are all children who are post the Good Friday Agreement so, that need for them to see what more normalised relationships can be ...we have a good opportunity in our schools to shape that ...and to role-model it in terms of*
>
> *them seeing us, the leaders in these schools, forming good relationships and natural, just natural, the way it would be with any other school. And also ...we have the Entitlement Framework and the Area Learning Communities so there's children*
>
> *moving in and out of all our schools ...so the uniform matters less now and it is less of an issue when they see a different uniform* (G).

School leaders also recognised the need not to be complacent. Describing some sectarian vandalism in the school, apparently by members of the community, Interviewee C commented that

> *...you could see the tensions rising. So you've got to keep being mindful of that, no matter how forward-thinking you think society is in Northern Ireland now, it's still bubbling below the surface* (C).

There also remained a sense that more needed to be done. '*I just think we need a different language, to be more inclusive, to be more respectful and it is about equity*' said Interviewee G.

These school leaders recognised that schools needed to support themselves and each other in the midst of such turbulent times:

instead of volatility you need vision, and instead of uncertainty you need
understanding, instead of complexity you need clarity, and instead of ambiguity you
need agility. In other words, as an organisation we must develop our own strength,
our ability to fulfil our own vision, to be very clear on what it is we trying to achieve
because we have limited resources (D).

It was clear from all of the interviews that principals felt empowered by strong relationships with their governing bodies, their teaching colleagues and in formal and informal groupings of other school leaders. It was these mutually supportive relationships which tended to dominate those positive aspects of school leadership which were articulated. It is challenging to establish trust between communities in a post-conflict but still divided society; developing trust between schools which represent the two opposing communities is no less difficult. And yet trustworthiness is essential to effective leadership especially in establishing interdependent relationships (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015; Holmes and Parker, 2018).

Different examples of turbulence were apparent. Some would suggest comparatively light turbulence, for example dealing with timetabling issues to allow pupils to attend other schools, to more severe turbulence caused by insufficient funding to deliver the curriculum and provide care for learners and staff and threats from paramilitaries. Some turbulence led to school-wide structural changes in approaches to conflict, such as those prompted by Remembrance in one school. Collaboration, alongside strong relationships, was seen as useful in coping with excessive turbulence, but establishing and building that collaboration is complex, particularly when schools are in competition for often dwindling numbers of students, and when losing students means cuts in funding. Shared education expects schools to collaborate but in a context of competitive enrolments, and this remains a challenge

Conclusion

Turbulence theory gives us a useful lens through which to examine the challenges for school leaders working in a divided society. Considering how best to manage turbulence will help school leaders to be empowered so that they, in turn, can empower their staff and young people. Those young people may ultimately act as key agents of change within their communities, helping to create an inclusive society based on respect and equity. It will be challenging to desegregate schooling in Northern Ireland or to move from a selective system in the short term, and the turbulence that those divisions cause is likely to continue, particularly as the political will to integrate schools or remove selection has been largely absent. Shared education has built on many years of cross-community contact, but the impact of many of those initiatives has been limited (Richardson and Gallagher, 2010). While Shared education is supported by more than £25 million from philanthropy and the NI government, making it work across the whole education system would be extremely costly. Even to sustain current sharing policies, including empowering principals, once the present funding disappears will be challenging.

As we have seen, the principals in Northern Ireland in this study identified many benefits through collaboration between schools with advantages for building capacity (Ainscow

et al., 2006) and greater benefits for wider society. Unlike the findings of Hall and Wallace (2006), there is pressure to collaborate in NI, albeit set uneasily within a competitive environment. Northern Ireland continues to be a deeply divided society emerging from a traumatic conflict. Community and tensions remain. Clarke and O'Donoghue argue that

> *...while the overall culture of schools in post-conflict settings can be fractured by deeply embedded cultural and tribal priorities, which debilitate the effectiveness of the organisational learning agenda, education can continue to play its part in alleviating the situation* (2013, p. 195).

Schools and school leaders have a pivotal role to play in developing a society which embraces diversity, and they need to be equipped to help to make those changes as widely as possible. There remain considerable challenges ahead.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

Note on contributors

Removed for anonymity

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[1] For details of the factors determining school budgets, see Part 4 for details of criteria applied at primary school level and Part 5 for the funding formula factors for post-primary schools: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Final%20Version%20of%202018%202019%20Scheme.pdf

[2] The term used for 11-18 grammar and non-grammar, secondary schools in NI

Table 1: School numbers and religious composition in Northern Ireland, 2019–20.

School type	School Management	Number of schools	Number of Catholics	Number of Protestants
Primary Schools (5-11 year olds)				
	Controlled	361	6274	48290
	Catholic Maintained	360	74699	695
	Controlled Integrated	22	1187	1501
	Grant Maintained Integrated	23	2537	1845
	Other Maintained (Irish Medium)	28	3724	260
	Other Maintained (Other)	3		
Post-Primary Schools (11-18 year olds)				
Non-Grammar schools	Controlled	48	1235	22410
	Catholic Maintained	57	36069	#
	Controlled Integrated	5	464	1632
	Grant Maintained Integrated	15	3996	3808
	Other Maintained (Irish Medium)	2	841	*
Grammar schools	Controlled	16	1469	9626
	Voluntary (non-Catholic ethos)	21	2892	12282
	Voluntary (Catholic ethos)	29	27467	386

Note: total enrolments are higher as there are "Other Christian, non-Christian and no religion" returns, and numbers can be suppressed or withheld if less than 5 individuals. Key: # Number suppressed; * Less than 5

Source: DENI, n.d. Available at https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-201920-statistical-bulletins

Table 2: Profile of study participants

Interviewee	Gender	Years as Principal	Primary/Post-primary	School sector	School location	Enrolment	Free school meals (%)
A	Female	≥10	Primary	Other ('Protestant')	Rural	<100	60-70
B	Male	0-4	Primary	Maintained	Rural	<100	10-20
C	Male	5-9	Post-primary	Controlled	Urban	300-400	30-40
D	Male	≥10	Post-primary	Integrated	Urban	600-700	40-50
E	Male	≥10	Post-primary	Voluntary Grammar	Urban	900-1000	20-30
F	Female	0-4	Post-primary	Maintained	Urban	700-800	40-50
G	Female	≥10	Post-primary	Maintained	Urban	800-900	50-60
H	Female	5-9	Post-primary	Voluntary Grammar	Rural	1300-1400	20-30

Source: Data on schools from 2016_17 Department of Education NI school statistics. Retrieved from https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolmentsschool-level-data-201617.

2