

Sharing Education through schools working together

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Introduction

Northern Ireland's education system has always operated with de facto parallel systems for Protestants and Catholics, tempered only by the development, since 1981, of a distinct sector of Integrated and, more recently, the much smaller sector of Irish Medium schools. Currently, over 95% of pupils in Maintained or Catholic Voluntary primary, secondary or grammar schools are Catholic, while less than 10% of pupils in Controlled or Voluntary primary, secondary or grammar schools are Catholic. The enrolments of the Integrated schools are more mixed, although even here the proportion of Catholic pupils in Grant Maintained Integrated schools is more than twice that in Controlled Integrated schools.

At the outbreak of political violence at the end of the 1960s many commentators suggested that the separate schools may have contributed to societal division and ought to act to mitigate these divisions. There was a contrary view which argued that the issue of separate schools was largely irrelevant to political divisions as these were more accurately attributable to issues of inequality. There was no resolution to this debate on the consequences, if any, of separate schools, but many educators felt that something should be done through schools to promote improved community relations, a sentiment reinforced by a Department of Education Circular in 1982 (circular 82/21) which explicitly identified this as a priority issue for all teachers.

Over the next quarter century three main strategies were pursued through education aimed at improving community relations. These included curricular initiatives to produce new education programmes and common textbooks; contact initiatives to promote opportunities for young Protestants and Catholics to cooperate in joint activities; and the development of new

Integrated schools in which all young people could receive their education together.

The evidence of the impact of these three strategic approaches has been, at best, mixed (Gallagher, 2004). Some of the curricular initiatives, such as the Education for Mutual Understanding programme, were given a low priority by schools and teachers (Richardson and Gallagher, 2011). Other initiatives, such as the development of innovative approaches to the teaching of history or religious education, suffered from the unwillingness of many teachers to deal with difficult or controversial issues (Arlow, 2004). The Department of Education invested significant funds in contact initiatives, and linked this to areas of the curriculum, but the best evidence suggests that much of this work was of limited value (O'Connor et al., 2002).

On one level the development of the Integrated sector is an undoubted success story: there are few examples anywhere in the world where an entirely new sector of schools has developed, largely as a consequence of the efforts of groups of parents and often in the face of opposition from established interests (Moffatt, 1993). That said, while there is some evidence that students in Integrated schools do develop distinctive approaches to issues of identity and attitudes (McGlynn et al., 2004), there is also some evidence that the schools are characterised by weak systemic links (Milliken and Gallagher, 1998), and a lack of any common vision of what integration should mean or how it can be realised.

This paper is concerned with a fourth strategic initiative in education based on the promotion of collaborative networks of schools. Part of the motivation for this approach was provided by the limited evidence of success in other approaches. In addition, there was some evidence of zero-sum processes emerging when proposals for new Integrated schools were being pursued, particularly at a time when school enrolments generally were falling. This had the unfortunate consequence of diverting attention away from the potential contribution of education to improving community relations, in favour of a debate over the legitimacy or otherwise of sectoral pluralism.

Sharing education and collaboration

There were a number of other factors that made timely an approach based on collaboration: although the debate over the reorganisation of post primary education and the future of academic selection at age eleven years had produced a policy impasse, the idea of schools working together had emerged as a viable policy priority; this had been reinforced by the revised Northern

Ireland Curriculum and entitlement framework which encouraged schools to collaborate to ensure all students had access to the full range of curricular options; the Bain Report (2006) on the schools estate had highlighted the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration, both for economic and social purposes; and a recent paper from the Good Relations Forum, endorsed by the Equality Commission and the Community Relations Council, had commended school collaboration (Good Relations Forum, 2010).

The key issue was whether effective collaborative networks of schools could be established in a context where schools had long valued their autonomy and where local authority influence was fairly limited. A proposal to promote the establishment of school networks and explore effective models of collaboration was supported by Atlantic Philanthropies and the International Fund for Ireland. The project would invite schools to participate in the project by establishing networks on the basis of the following parameters:

The network had to work towards sustained, regular engagement between the schools

This engagement would focus on core curricular activities

It would involve relatively large numbers of students, or focus on groups of students who could act as models within their respective schools

Preferably it would develop towards students working together, in shared classes, in each other's schools, on core examination subjects

If the schools were prepared to accept those outline parameters then they would be provided with significant latitude in developing plans tailored to their local circumstances. The project was concerned with two main outcomes: first, identifying models and practices of collaboration that were effective, and second, supporting the schools in dealing with issues related to denominational difference. The logic model for the project therefore had four main steps:

- establish partnerships (input);
- build collaborative links (output);
- run shared classes and activities (short-term outcomes);
- promote reconciliation (long term outcomes).

The first cohort (SEP1) involved invitations to the first twelve schools in Northern Ireland to achieve specialist status, partly because they were already involved in partnership links with other schools. All twelve schools agreed to participate and worked on partnership development between 2007 and 2010:

over these three years the twelve partnerships have involved a little over sixty schools. A second cohort (SEP2) of schools have been recruited to operate between 2010 and 2013, but this time selection was based on an open competition to which all post-primary schools were invited to participate: note that primary schools could be involved in a partnership proposal, but all proposals had to be led by at least one post-primary school. Parallel, but independent, collaborative projects have also been started in the north eastern region, mainly focused on primary schools, and in the western region, mainly focused on rural schools.

Activity indicators

The data here relate to the experience of the first cohort of SEP schools. During the first year an average of just over 2,000 pupils across all twelve partnerships were involved in shared activities across each of the three school terms; an average of 500 shared classes were run across the schools. During the second year the average number of students per term involved in shared activities increased to a little under 4,000 and the average number of shared classes increased to a little under 700. By the third and final year of the partnerships the average number of students per term had reduced to around 3,000, but the average number of shared classes continued to increase to almost 800 per term.

A couple of points are worthy of note from these basic activity indicators: first, it was easier than had been expected to get students involved in shared activities during the first year, although this, in significant part, reflects the level of commitment and support provided by teachers in the schools. This is important, not least since there have been very limited examples of routine, cross-sectoral, shared classes between schools in Northern Ireland, despite significant public funding being invested in the contact programme. In part this may have been the case since there appeared to be a view in the education system that while routine shared classes were a good idea, they were impractical to achieve: in this instance the provision of focused and significant funding seems to have incentivised schools and teachers to engage in activities that had rarely been previously tried. We concluded from this that the previous pattern had resulted from a combination of reticence (that it could not be achieved for practical reasons) and concern (it might lead to sectarian clashes between pupils) that combined to produce a self-fulfilling prophecy such that the absence of routine shared activities comes to be taken as evidence that such activities are not possible. The use of focused funding, linked to training and other supports, and clear aspirational targets, appears to have proven that it is possible to break through the barriers caused by reticence and concern.

A second important point to emerge from the activity indicators related to the drop in the number of students involved in year 3, allied with the increase in the number of classes. We concluded that this reflected a shift away from activities involving large numbers of students meeting on an irregular basis towards a pattern whereby students were more likely to take routine classes on a regular basis: this shift is exactly what we would have hoped to achieve if collaborative activity and shared classes were going to become a matter of routine.

One further activity indicator related to the use of virtual classes, either to overcome problems associated with distance or as an ice-breaker until such time as teachers and students felt comfortable going to each others' schools. A further factor here was that Northern Ireland schools have been equipped with a comparatively good information technology infrastructure which should, in theory, make virtual connections relatively straightforward. In fact, across the three years of the first cohort only half the partnerships used the technology framework to promote shared activities and, in the main, the level of shared virtual classes was very much less than the number of actual shared classes undertaken across the schools. Our main conclusion here was that we had failed to identify the most effective means of using technology to support shared activities.

It should be noted that the level of involvement of students and the number of classes varied widely across the partnerships. This reflected the different circumstances of the partnerships, and the varied level of their plans and ambitions. Thus, for example, the partnership which had the largest quantum of activity had, at one stage, over 1,000 pupils involved in shared classes across four post-primary schools; by contrast, one of the partnerships with relatively small levels of activity had, at its peak, just over 100 students involved in shared classes. This variation was seen as desirable in order to gain better insight into what were the most effective ways of engaging in collaborative sharing across the widely differing contexts for schools in Northern Ireland: in some contexts the nearest school from a different sector was a considerable distance away, while in others the schools were, literally, cheek-by-jowl; in some contexts the legacies of local violence, or even contemporaneous patterns of sectarian violence, meant that teachers and schools had to tread slowly and carefully in order to develop and maintain support for collaborative activities; and the local balance of religious demographics also varied widely, from areas where one or other community was numerically dominant, to other areas where reasonable balances of populations existed. Across such different contexts it was taken for granted that no single model for collaboration would exist, hence the desire to allow

schools some autonomy to develop their own proposals within fairly broadly defined parameters.

Outcome indicators

In line with the logic model outlined above we are collecting outcomes data in three main areas, that is on educational, economic and reconciliation outcomes. What we want to test is whether we can find effective models for cross-sectoral school collaboration which promote improved educational outcomes, do so more cost-effectively and promote reconciliation outcomes. Data on all three areas are being collected in a variety of ways. In this paper we will provide an outline of some of the main findings from the first survey of students and teachers. In addition, we have provided a series of residential workshops and training seminars for teachers, and worked closely with the partner schools: this has provided some qualitative data on the issues and challenges of implementing shared education, although this is being supplemented by independently collected interview and focus group data (further details can be found on the project website at www.schoolsworkingtogether.co.uk).

In the second year of the SEP1 activities a survey was carried out of students and teachers across the project schools. The student survey comprised 821 students, all of whom had been involved in Sharing Education activities of one kind or another. The teacher survey comprised 59 teachers, 33 of whom had been directly involved in supporting Sharing education activities.

Among the pupils surveyed, as many as two-in-five had never met someone from a different religious community prior to their involvement in the Sharing Education activities. All of those surveyed had been involved in some Sharing education activity, and most had visited other schools and hosted students in their own school. The majority of the students said that they found the Sharing Education activities to be enjoyable and positive: they enjoyed the opportunity to meet with students from other schools; they reported that their confidence had increased and they had become more comfortable with the idea of contact with students from other communities; and they said that they felt they had gained new skills and experiences as a consequence of their involvement in SEP. Despite the overall positive assessment by the students, however, there was a persistent minority of around 10% who said that had not felt comfortable with the experience of contact: the data from this first survey did not allow for a deeper analysis of the reasons for this reticence.

Among the teachers surveyed, 33 had been directly involved in Sharing Education activities; the remaining 26 worked in schools involved in the project, but had not themselves been involved in supporting or teaching shared classes. Overall about 40% of the teachers said they had previously worked with schools from other denominational backgrounds. As with the students, most teachers were very positive about the Sharing Education experience, and felt it had been positively embraced by teachers and students alike. A majority of the teachers agreed that the three main aims of the project had been achieved, that is, promoting wider access to resources, building positive relationships between schools, and promoting knowledge sharing across the sectors. In addition, the teachers also identified a range of other benefits they felt had emerged from the Sharing Education work. This included a greater awareness of different cultures among students and enhanced sharing of expertise among teachers. In addition, most of the teachers surveyed were very keen that the links developed through the Sharing Education work should be maintained into the future.

The teachers did highlight a number of concerns, but they tended to focus on practical constraints they had come up against while implementing sharing education activities: these included difficulties in creating enough time to engage in effective planning across the partner schools; aligning the timetables of schools to enable shared classes to take place on a regular basis; and time involved in transporting students between schools, and in organising transport. These practical challenges identified in the survey had previously emerged in our meetings and training workshops with teachers, although it is important to note that the teachers involved in the project had started to develop and test innovative solutions to these challenges, the results of which we will compile and publish in due course.

Conclusions

At present we have just reached the end of the first three years of sharing education activities with the first cohort of twelve anchor schools and their fifty or so partner schools. Given that we were advised by key figures in education at the start of the project that cross-sectoral collaboration on any meaningful basis was either impractical or risky, perhaps the most important finding to emerge over those three years is that collaboration is both possible and positive. Certainly, the qualitative and survey data collected so far suggest that teachers and students are very positive about the benefits from the sharing education activities, and value the sustained, regular engagement the project sought to encourage. It is important also to note that a relatively high level of

regular activity was achieved fairly quickly, and then developed further by the partner schools.

The biggest challenges faced by the schools in developing effective partnership work have been the practical challenges of planning, timetabling and transport. At one level the project was able to 'solve' some of these challenges by allocating resources, but in the longer run, if sharing education is to be sustainable then methods will need to be found to address these challenges without the need for additional resources. Interestingly, there is some evidence already that this can, to some extent, be achieved: a number of the partnerships, for example, have developed innovative approaches to the alignment of school timetables through block-timetabling of shared education work or other ways of breaking from the traditional timetable model. In the same vein, some aspects of the problems associated with transport can be solved by amending existing rules on transport which, because they have worked on the assumption that students only attend one school, have served to constrain collaboration.

There had been some concern expressed at the start of the project that bringing large numbers of young people, from different schools, together on a regular basis might simply provide opportunities for sectarian incidents or problems. In response to this, part of the training we provided for teachers was to address issues related to diversity and classroom management. In the event the number of such incidents was very low (we are aware of less than five incidents across all schools in the three years, but we are collecting data on this more systematically), and when they occurred they were handled in a constructive and positive way by the schools. In the past, it is probably more likely that such incidents would have been 'brushed under the carpet' and any collaborative work halted: during the project the very small, number of incidents that did occur were addressed directly and publicly, and the collaborative work continued.

In the longer term, the bigger challenge for the project is whether it is possible to align our experience with policy to the extent that the education system encourages and promotes greater levels of collaboration. We noted above that the idea of collaboration as a strategy for reconciliation had emerged at a time when collaboration was coming onto the policy agenda in Northern Ireland for a variety of reasons. Given that one of the stock responses to diversity in Northern Ireland over many years had been one of avoidance, or taking the line of least resistance (Gallagher, 2004), there was a possibility that any collaborative networks that emerged might be mainly within the different sectors, rather than between them, and, in that way, reinforce existing

institutional barriers. A key part of the reason for the Sharing Education project was to test whether or not it was possible to establish cross-sectoral networks that were educationally effective and promoted reconciliation. The evidence to date clearly suggests that such collaborative networks can be established, and that they are deemed to be both effective and positive by students and teachers. As the projects moves forward the remaining challenges are to drill down to test the sustainability of reconciliation outcomes, establish which aspects of the work that has emerged so far can be sustained in the longer term and without the provision of extra resources, and to explore whether it is possible to bring the this type of sustained, regular engagement to scale across the education system as a whole.

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