

INTEGRATED AND FAITH-BASED SCHOOLING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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Issues are explored relating to the diversity of schooling provision in Northern Ireland in the context of the debate around faith-based schooling in England and elsewhere. The benefits to individuals from a religious point of view are off-set against any potential impact on social cohesion. Integrated schools as models for shared education are considered, as are innovative methods of co-management that may emerge in the future. In the context of a fragile society emerging from conflict and yet apparently more polarized than ever, it is argued that choices inevitably have consequences and that the long-term price of separate schooling may be further division.

In Northern Ireland, all state schooling is predominantly Christian. However, the most apparent example of faith-based schools (that is, state-funded with a distinctive religious character) are Catholic ‘maintained’ schools provided by diocesan authorities, which aim to educate children within and through a Catholic ethos. As the majority of Catholic children attend maintained schools, by default the non-denominational state or ‘controlled’ schools are populated primarily by Protestant children and staff. The Boards of Governors of controlled schools include members nominated by the main Protestant churches. In recent years, this dual denominational system has been challenged by the emergence of integrated (mixed Catholic, Protestant, and other) schools, although these currently account for less than 6% of the pupil population. There has also been recent growth in the small Irish-medium sector which is independent of Church control but is funded by the state. A few Evangelical Protestant schools linked to the Free Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, and the New Church movement exist outside state control.

Integrated education is relatively new and was established in Northern Ireland with the opening of the first planned integrated post-primary school by parents in 1981. A further 57 primary and post-primary schools have since been established either by parent groups or by parental ballot. Under the 1989 Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order, the government has a duty to meet the needs of parents requesting integrated education where it is feasible. Only 18,000 children attend integrated schools and the phenomenon has been described as voluntary integration by parental consent rather than compulsory

desegregation (Gallagher & Smith, 2002). Integrated schools are essentially Christian in nature, although in practice there may be variation between schools in this emphasis (McGlynn, 2001).

The context for education in Northern Ireland is challenging. Although considerable time has elapsed since the first IRA ceasefire of 1994, progress towards a more peaceful and democratic society has been painstaking, characterized by a lack of trust on all sides and a struggle to reinstate local government rule. Indeed some commentators have observed that the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 has served to institutionalize sectarianism, resulting in greater political and social segregation. Gallagher (2005a) argues that the overprivileging of difference by the peace process has left little space for a discourse of the common good.

At a time when major changes such as the abolition of academic selection, the introduction of substantive curriculum review, and the development of new models of co-operation between post-primary schools have all been indicated (see NICCEA, 2002, 2003; DENI, 2004), it is pertinent to consider the possible implications of the plurality of educational provision. The Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland, *A Shared Future*, has the potential to provide a new vision for Northern Ireland, aiming to establish 'a normal, civic society in which all individuals are considered as equals' (OFMDFM, 2005, p. 8). Recognizing that a key challenge of new policy is the building of cohesive communities, and the unsustainability of parallel services, *A Shared Future* states that 'separate but equal is not an option' (OFMDFM, 2005, p. 20). This would appear to have implications for an education system segregated along denominational lines, not least in the current climate of economic cutbacks and demographic decline. As Northern Ireland becomes increasingly multicultural, one might also question the appropriateness of Catholic, de facto Protestant, or integrated Christian education for children of other world faiths and for those of no faith. Thus, in a society moving slowly out of protracted ethnic conflict, debate around faith and schooling provision arguably takes on additional importance.

A number of academics have entered the debate around the provision of faith-based schooling in England (e.g., Burtonwood, 2003; Gardner, Cairns & Lawton, 2005; Judge, 2001), where the willingness of the British government to extend state funding to a wider range of faith-based schools in the late 1990s has resulted in growth of the sector, including new Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Seventh Day Adventist and Jewish schools (Parker-Jenkins, Hartas, & Irving, 2004). More recently, however, it would appear that due to concern over inter-ethnic tension, the government is now encouraging faith schools to be more inclusive in

their admissions policies. Teachers also have expressed their worries about the potential impact on social division of such schools (Burtonwood, 2003). The issue of faith-based schools has been much considered not least as the debate ‘leads into fundamental questions about the aims and purposes of education, the human rights of parents and children and the inherent tensions in education policies’ (Cush, 2005, p. 436).

This paper will explore some of the main arguments for and against faith-based schooling presented in the literature and consider their implications for Northern Ireland where integrated schools have emerged as potential models of shared schooling. Issues considered are the mission of faith-based education (nurturing children in their faith); the danger of social fragmentation; the limited evidence relating to the effects of integration and segregation; and prospects for the future.

THE MISSION OF FAITH-BASED EDUCATION: NURTURING CHILDREN IN THEIR FAITH

Much has been made of the academic success of faith-based schools in England and Wales (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2003; Schagen & Schagen, 2005). While Grace (2001) also claims Catholic schooling as an academic success story, he encourages the reader to resist the lure of market values and dwell first and foremost on the distinctive religious mission of Catholic schools. In Northern Ireland, the Catholic Church has emphasized the unique role of Catholic schools in nurturing children in the understanding and practice of their faith. In a comprehensive definition of the ethos of these schools, the document *Life to the Full; A Vision for Catholic Education* includes the following statement to demonstrate the distinctiveness of Catholic education: ‘At the core of our system is the nurturing of each person’s spiritual and personal development...our schools share in the mission of the Church to bring Christ to the world’ (Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland, 2001b, p. 5).

The Church has been keen to demonstrate that rather than contribute to social division, Catholic schools can do much to promote reconciliation by their teaching and by community outreach. Education for Mutual Understanding [EMU] is seen to be at the centre of the Catholic education process: ‘we see our schools as being ideally placed to assist our society to move beyond its deeply-ingrained divisions’ (Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland, 2001a, p. 5).

Defensive strategies are also apparent elsewhere. Conroy (2001) defends Catholic education in Scotland against what he describes as ‘renewed clarion calls for the closure of Catholic schools’ (p. 549) since the advent of the devolved Scottish parliament. He argues that the state should reflect the diverse

needs of its population, an argument that has also been put forward to support denominational segregation in the Northern Ireland education system, where much is also made of parental choice (Richardson, 2002).

Defenders of the educational status quo in Northern Ireland often state that diversity of provision should be a given in a pluralist society and that parental choice is paramount. It could be argued that the former does not help division and that the latter may be fundamentally flawed as it implies that all parents are equally knowledgeable and able to discern the options open to them. McAndrew (2004) demonstrates the dangers of such an assumption:

(the) liberal perspective assumes the existence of rational and informed choice among all categories of parents, while it is only a few of them...that actually exert such strategies...a passive strategy of allowing choices between multiple options may (favour) the maintenance of traditional power-relationships within the society. (p. 37)

Parental choice is of course only a legitimate argument if real choice exists. The majority of parents may wish their children to be educated in grammar schools, but as only one third of places are available in these schools, that choice clearly is not a real one. Surveys have indicated a parental preference for integrated school places that far exceeds the 6% currently attending. More parents request integrated education than there are places available; despite the demographic decline, around 500 applicants to integrated schools had to be turned away in September 2005 due to lack of places and four proposals for new integrated schools were turned down in 2006.¹ It would appear that for some parents choice is very limited.

The key question is the extent to which faith-based education may be able to overcome the lack of opportunity for social contact with 'others'. Conroy (2001) dismisses the accusation that segregated schools are divisive by pointing out that children are only separated for part of their daily existence. In Northern Ireland, however, a combination of residential, social, and educational segregation may mean that many children do not have any opportunity to engage in meaningful contact with children from backgrounds different from their own (Tomasevski, 2003). Writing about 'moderate' Jewish schools in England, Short (2002) suggests that faith schools need not be socially divisive if the curriculum compensates by teaching about other cultures. However, Burtonwood (2003) counters that the more orthodox Jewish schools actively resist multiculturalism

¹www.nicie.org.uk

and deliberately serve to perpetuate cultural and religious insularity. Indeed, '(f)ull-time Jewish schooling has emerged as key to the communal strategy to promote Jewish identity and ensure Jewish continuity' (Miller, 2001, p. 512). A theme common to faith schools may then be a resistance to secularization in the interest of religious continuity. The Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland (2001c) are very much aware of the danger of secularism: 'Traditional attitudes, models of authority and ways of looking at the world have been weakened by the rise of secularism and individualism' (p. 5).

Burtonwood (2003), however, suggests that it is this desire to self-replicate that leads religious communities to take whatever steps might be required, including establishing their own schools, to transmit their way of life to their children. Walford (2001) has extensively studied the diversity of state-funded schools in the Netherlands, including the Evangelical Christian schools, which he has contrasted with similar schools in England. Although legislation would allow such schools to become funded, the English Evangelical schools have remained independent. Walford suggests that this is mainly due to concerns that the government would both restrict the curriculum and limit the freedom of action of the school with regard to matters such as the recruitment of teachers. In Northern Ireland, a small Evangelical Christian sector also remains independent of state control (Smith, 2001), presumably for similar reasons.

The number of state-funded Muslim schools in England is set to increase in response to demand from parents. Hewer (2001) gives four main reasons for the particular appeal of these faith schools. Firstly, they provide a safe environment for adolescent Muslim girls. Secondly, they ensure a holistic Islamic education. Thirdly, they can commence specialist training for boys towards becoming religious leaders. Fourthly, and perhaps most controversially, they are perceived to set higher expectations for pupils. Parker-Jenkins et al. (2004) suggest that the academic success of Muslim schools may have helped the government to justify state-funding, while Hewer (2001) argues that the precedent established by political investment in the Church of England and Roman Catholic schools in England would make it hard now to reject the case for supporting Muslim and other single-faith schools. In Northern Ireland, one could certainly argue that as Catholic, integrated, and Irish-medium schools are fully state-funded, any new interest group, faith-based or otherwise, may have a justifiable claim on the funds required to establish its own school.

THE DANGER OF SOCIAL FRAGMENTATION

Criticism of faith-based schools outside Northern Ireland has been uncompromising in tone and has suggested that extension of state funding to

develop more such schools may fragment society (Judge, 2001). Parker-Jenkins et al. (2004) go further and express concern that segregated education in England may insufficiently challenge racism, islamophobia, and xenophobia. Although minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland constitute only 1% of the population, there has been a 900% increase in the number of racial incidents since recording began in 1997. This means that Northern Ireland may have a higher level of racial attacks than England and Wales and it is becoming acknowledged that the level of racism is higher than the level of sectarianism in society (CRC, 2004).

It is clear that the shared future agenda for schools must include robust consideration of a diverse as well as a divided Northern Ireland. Although society as a whole has a responsibility to combat hate crime, it is critical that the education system play its part by sending out a powerful message to reject both racism and sectarianism. While denominational schools might strive to achieve this through their curricula and policies, integrated schools suggest that this is at the heart of their very ethos and can be practised on a daily basis in the classroom by children from diverse backgrounds. Indeed Judge (2001) uses Northern Ireland as a warning to England of the danger of linking schools to sections of a divided community: 'faith-based schooling quite obviously did not of itself manufacture the tragic divisions of that society: but nobody has yet argued that it has in any sense helped' (p. 471).

The Catholic Bishops (2001a) would counter by claiming that Catholic schools nurture concern for others and that they strongly encourage community outreach from their schools to create friendships across social and religious divides. Indeed Flanagan and Clarke (2006) claim that 'Catholic schools...enjoy...an agreed mission statement which actively promotes social justice, inclusion, respect for diversity and reconciliation' (p. 150). While such aims are, of course, desirable, the question remains as to whether inter-community relationships can be developed in any meaningful sense when children are educated separately. However, Halstead and McLaughlin (2005) argue that separation by faith may in fact be no less socially harmful than any other sort of educational separation, namely by gender, class, or age.

A key issue is the extent to which the curriculum may fully compensate for the absence of certain social groups. If not, the promotion of religious continuity in single-faith schools may come at the expense of developing social cohesion. Indeed, the continuance of strong faith communities may depend to some extent on remaining immune to cultural assimilation. Miller (2001) describes Jewish faith-based schools as intentional cultural 'thickening agents', while Walford (2001) warns that the reproductive purpose of faith schools may also imply an inherent lack of critical examination, and that children may thus be denied the opportunity to

develop their faculties of critical thinking. As such, it has been claimed that faith-based schools may inhibit the development of individual autonomy.

The issue of funding faith-based education is also contentious. In the United States of America, Underkuffler (2001) argues that the First Amendment to the Constitution discourages state-funding for religious schools, not least because it violates the conscience of those citizens obliged to fund religions with which they strongly disagree. She vigorously defends such restraint by contending

that religious differences in pluralistic societies are often deep, divisive and volatile, and that the financial enmeshment of religion and government serves neither religion, government, nor the atmosphere of tolerance upon which diverse societies depend. (p. 577)

In Northern Ireland and England, of course, such restraint has not been shown historically, and it is difficult to imagine a scenario whereby the current trend towards financing faith-based schools could or would be reversed.

A compelling argument for further integrated education comes from young people themselves, a voice that has often been absent from decisions regarding education in Northern Ireland. A number of recent studies demonstrate the needs of young people. Firstly, based on talkshops with 194 16- to 17-year olds, Ewart and Schubotz (2004) report that the number one request to improve community relations from young people was for more formally integrated schools. Secondly, in a recent review of educational responses to the conflict in Northern Ireland, Kilpatrick and Leitch (2004) report the preference of pupils for the 'challenge of encounter with real opportunities to air and hear genuine points of view' (p. 28), although they found that this rarely happened in school-based situations which are, of course, predominantly segregated. It has been suggested that the benefits of this kind of exchange, which is actively encouraged in integrated schools, may be long-term (McGlynn, 2004). Indeed, Kilpatrick and Leitch (2004) propose that children themselves consider sustained long-term contact to be key to the success of cross-community initiatives. The issue of children's rights is important here and questions the extent to which children have a right to be educated in a way that 'encourages freedom of belief and understanding and tolerance between national, racial or religious groups' (Cush, 2005, p. 439).

THE EFFECTS OF INTEGRATION AND SEGREGATION

Montgomery, Fraser, McGlynn, Smith, and Gallagher (2003) describe three general ways in which integrated schools approach the concept of integration: passive (do little because it will occur 'naturally'), reactive (do something if the need arises), and pro-active (consult staff, agree policy and establish structures

such as the appointment of an integration co-ordinator). It has been claimed that integrated schools have been 'remarkably successful at creating institutions which are neither denominational or secular' (Smith, 2001, p. 573). However, the question remains: to what extent do they impact on community relations?

Due to methodological, logistical, and ethical difficulties, research into the impact of integrated education in Northern Ireland has been limited. McMullan (2003) carried out ethnographic research in an integrated post-primary school in a volatile interface area in north Belfast. While acknowledging that in the circumstances it is difficult for the school to build a bridge to the community outside, he pays tribute to its efforts to promote integration despite local unrest. It is apparent from this study that the school provided the opportunity for young people to hear alternative viewpoints at first hand and to experience a model of peaceful integration.

McGlynn (2001) describes the results of the first study into the long-term impact of integrated post-primary education. For two populations of past integrated pupils, the benefits included an increased respect for diversity, an increase in mixed friendships, a greater degree of comfort in a plural environment, a greater empathy with different cultures, and a tendency to perceive personal identity as a multi-faceted rather than a monolithic concept. This suggests that integrated education may impact positively on identity, outgroup attitudes and forgiveness, with the potential perhaps to help rebuild the social cohesion fragmented by protracted conflict (McGlynn, Niens, Cairns, & Hewstone, 2004; Montgomery et al., 2003). There is evidence, however, that sensitive issues around religion and identity are actively avoided in some integrated schools and that opportunities for prejudice reduction may be missed (Donnelly, 2004; Hughes & Donnelly, in press). In a further study of integrated schools, Loughrey, Kidd and Carlin (2003) suggest that community relations practices are more substantial and sophisticated in newly planned than in transformed controlled integrated primary schools.

Smith (2001) suggested that integrated schools have challenged the existing system of segregated schooling in a number of ways as they

raise fundamental questions about the importance of parent, rather than church involvement in the management and control of education; about the place of religion in schools; and about the challenges of transformation facing all institutions in Northern Ireland.... (p. 565)

Carter (2004) went a step further to categorize the integrated schools of Northern Ireland as an 'ongoing peace intervention' (p. 4). O'Connor (2002) simply questioned how it can be bad to educate children in Northern Ireland together. What is not yet available are any studies of the long-term impact of

denominational schooling on pupil attitudes and identities that would allow for empirical comparison with integrated schooling. Thus, a debate around faith-based schools in Northern Ireland can continue only at the level of exchange of opinion until such time as the findings of comparative empirical research addressing the impact of different school types begin to emerge.

While faith-based Catholic schooling in Northern Ireland aims to safeguard the Catholic faith, it is possible that there may be a price to be paid by society as a whole as a result of the segregation engineered to achieve this. In divided societies, actions, even those taken with the best of intentions, may have consequences for all. This should have particular resonance, not just with educational providers in Northern Ireland, but also with parents who select from the diversity of provision on offer, lest division be inadvertently reinforced. It may be that the affirmation of pluralism since the Good Friday Agreement has actually reinforced traditional forms of difference in the Northern Ireland education system (McKeown, Donnelly, & Osbourne, 2006).

THE FUTURE

There would appear to be some recognition that changes to Catholic education in England are inevitable, with the Director of the Catholic Education Service herself declaring that 'fortress Catholic education is not a tenable policy' (Pyke 2004, p. 14). In Northern Ireland, Linehan (2003) proposes that the Catholic Church can assist further by adopting a more open and inclusive approach to education. She suggests that co-operation between controlled and maintained schools has been an inadequate way of healing the divisions of the past 30 years and points to successful models of inter-church schooling in England (Anglican/Catholic), the United States (Catholic/Episcopal) and Australia (Anglican/Catholic) as evidence that it is not only single-faith schools that can deliver a sound Catholic education. She urges three practical steps from the Catholic Bishops that might aid reconciliation. Firstly, she asks for Catholic appointments to the two available seats on the Boards of Governors of controlled integrated schools (those that have transformed to integrated from controlled status); secondly, for the Catholic Church to extend its pastoral care to children in integrated and non-Catholic schools; and thirdly, for formal Protestant representation in Catholic schools.

Proposals for the implementation of the Pupil Entitlement Framework on the future of post-primary education include the replacement of conventional management structures by new models including 'combination institutions' where a number of schools may combine to act as a single institution or 'confederations' of schools of differing management types (DENI, 2004, p. 42).

New forms of shared schooling such as these could provide both the controlled and maintained sectors with the opportunities to create the meaningful contact between children that the DENI-funded cross-community scheme has struggled to provide (O'Connor, Hartop, & McCully, 2002). It is critical that such sharing of resources is planned to maximize the benefits to community relations. Teacher education in preparation for teaching in shared classrooms is, of course, most important. Kilpatrick and Leitch (2004) emphasize the importance of encouraging culturally responsive teachers who 'are confident and secure in their own identity and are able to be responsive to children and young people from culturally diverse backgrounds' (p. 31). It would appear doubtful that this need is at present being fully met by initial teacher education providers (Elwood, McKeown, Gallagher, Kilpatrick, Murphy, & Carlisle, 2004; Hagan & McGlynn, 2004) and that much remains to be done in this area.

Hope may also be attached to the potential of citizenship education to challenge division and support cultural diversity in Northern Ireland. A significant review of the Northern Ireland curriculum (NICCEA, 2002, 2003) leaves citizenship poised to be introduced into primary schools through the statutory area of Personal Development [PD] and in secondary schools through Local and Global Citizenship [LGC]. Following a successful post-primary pilot scheme led by the UNESCO Centre at the University of Ulster at Coleraine, a widespread initiative funded by DENI to train a number of teachers from each school to deliver LGC is currently under way. Though potentially helpful, supporters of integrated education suggest that it is more effective to learn citizenship in practice than in theory in a shared school rather than in a segregated one.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it should be acknowledged that faith-based schooling may uniquely nurture children within their faith, allow for specialist religious teaching, and provide for cultural and religious continuity between generations. However, concerns exist about the fragmentation of society that this may inadvertently create, perhaps damaging social cohesion. Integrated schools in Northern Ireland can be seen as exemplars of inter-community schools that provide young people with the opportunity to explore a range of viewpoints at first hand. Since the choice of integrated education may advantage both child and society, it should be the responsibility of DENI to more actively plan and provide for it. It is suggested that, in the spirit of the Costello Report (DENI, 2004), education providers might also seek to work together with the various

churches to find creative new shared management structures for schools that could potentially deliver excellent inter-community education.

To attempt to evaluate faith-based schooling in Northern Ireland is challenging as the arguments pertain not only to potential impact on social cohesion but also to the rights of religious groups in a pluralist society. However, while faith-based schools and integrated schools evidently have much to offer their respective communities, it could be argued that, in a society moving out of conflict, the debate takes on a greater urgency. Schools ‘could and should do more’ to improve community relations (Gallagher, 2005b, p. 164), but it is also important that individuals develop an understanding that choice regarding schooling may have consequences beyond their own faith communities. Somehow, attention must be given to the needs of society as a whole, while also dealing equitably with the rights of religious communities. In Northern Ireland, whether via the separate or integrated schooling route, ‘could it be that for people of faith the best defence of the integrity of any religious tradition in this undeniably plural world is in their willingness to engage enthusiastically and creatively with the religions of others?’ (Richardson, 2002, p. 3).

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