**Isolated together: proximal pairs of primary schools duplicating provision in Northern Ireland.**

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**Abstract**

Divided societies emerging from conflict are found around the globe, and these divisions can cause, and may be perpetuated by, disunity in educational provision. Establishing sound and equitable education is considered vital in promoting reconciliation in places with apparently intractable conflict. Northern Ireland was involved in ethno-sectarian violence for 30 years. Society there is still fundamentally divided and there is considerable duplication of services supplying the needs of each community. This is true also of education with multiple schools each catering for ‘their own’ population. Sometimes these can be too small to be sustainable and/or may be inefficient. In this research GIS analysis is used to identify 32 pairs of primary schools and their levels of sustainability are estimated, alongside some additional cost of the duplication, although this can be difficult to quantify. Bringing schools together in a society emerging from conflict will not be easy for communities. However, economic costs may drive difficult structural change. Perhaps an even more important driver, in addition to financial costs, is the less tangible but even more important costs to future social cohesion should separation continue.

Key words: divided societies; rural schools; sustainability; duplication; Northern Ireland; isolated schools

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**Introduction**

Education is internationally recognised as a key element in peace building and reconciliation, particularly in divided societies (Horner *et al*., 2015, Novelli *et al*., 2017). A multicultural educational approach to education policy in divided societies can be argued to be contributing to social cohesion by breaking down social barriers, improving intergroup relations and allowing all communities to become full members of society. Alternatively, conservative multiculturalism can be resented as ‘…a cover for an ideology of assimilation’ (Al-Haj, 2002), with just one worldview accepted. As agents of interventions, education systems can ‘…influence situations of conflict—either contributing to violence or working against it’ (Novelli & Lopes Cardozo, 2008:478).

Educational policy may prioritise the provision of schools where children from different communities are educated together. Merely bringing the learners together into the same building may not address differences, and Bekerman *et al*. (2011) suggest that schools where children from different communities are educated together should be

…spheres in which the curriculum and the school ethos deal directly with areas of diversity while being committed to addressing cognitive and affective issues over behavioural ones (2011:391).

In some countries this poses a considerable challenge.

This paper will examine the contested educational landscape of Northern Ireland by addressing an aspect of educational provision which does not appear to have previously been researched: how common are isolated pairs of rural schools duplicating the provision of almost identical education for divided communities and what challenges do they face? A Geographical Information System (GIS) was used for collation and analysis of data on educational provision. While this study is of particular importance to educational structures in Northern Ireland, it also may contribute to an understanding of educational provision in divided societies around the world.

**Context: Northern Ireland**

While geographically part of the island of Ireland, Northern Ireland (NI) is politically part of the United Kingdom. Socially divided since its inception, the major cleavage is characterised as ethno-sectarian. There are two main communities: one can be characterised as Nationalist and Irish, as they generally wish for the re-unification of Ireland, and the other as Unionist and British, desiring to remain part of the United Kingdom. While far from representative of the complexities of allegiance and political affiliations, and not necessarily implying theological adherence, the shorthand of ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ is often used for these opposing communities. Many divided societies around the world such as Belgium and New Zealand have managed to develop amicable intergroup relationships and effective political structures, avoiding violence, but conflict in Ireland has seemed ‘intractable’ (Bar-Tal, 2007). Ethno-sectarian identities remain strong and Northern Ireland experienced a 30-year conflict until the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1998. More than 3,600 people were killed and 30,000 injured (McKittrick *et al*., 1999) which, scaled to the population of Great Britain, is the equivalent of 126,000 dead and 1.8 million injured (Horgan, 2006:659). Despite the agreement being signed over 20 years ago, NI society can still be characterised as emerging from conflict (McQuaid, 2017) and remains fundamentally divided economically, socially and politically (Ramsey and Waterhouse-Bradley, 2018). This is highlighted in the fact that there was no devolved government in NI for a three-year period from January 2017 after disagreements in the regional parliament between political parties representing the two opposing communities. It is that divided society and the impact of that division on educational provision that provides the focus of this paper.

While the 1998 peace agreement may have heralded an end to the large-scale conflict, many communities continue to live apart and socialise separately (Roulston *et al*., 2017). In general, they are also educated separately. In Northern Ireland

…the basis of enmity and territoriality remains largely undiminished and … fear and prejudice are both enduring edifices of ethno-sectarian practice [creating a] …burden that remains embedded in the segregated spaces that are a legacy of Northern Ireland’s distinctive sectarian history. (Shirlow, 2016)

While so-called ‘Peace Lines’ – fortified structures dividing communities – are restricted to Belfast and a couple of other urban areas, even small villages may be divided into areas perceived as ‘Protestant’ or ‘Catholic’. Harris (1972, 1979) brought an anthropologist’s viewpoint and described the dual nature of service provision in small town Northern Ireland with ‘Catholic’ shops and ‘Protestant’ shops, for example. Such divisions are still current today; Hamilton *et al.* (2008) describe one small settlement with ATM machines at different sides of the village, each used by one of the two communities.

In 2013, the Northern Ireland Assembly committed to ‘…continuing the journey towards a more united and shared community…[providing a] platform for us to continue to address the deep-rooted issues that have perpetuated segregation and resulted in some people living separate lives’ (NIA, 2013:11-12). The desire to create some version of a ‘shared future’ remains the stated goal for NI’s political classes. However, some commentators have doubts about the sincerity of this aspiration. Herrault and Murtagh (2019), discussing shared space in Belfast, cite Bollens’ (2018) argument that the political commitment to sharing space was ‘ambivalent and contradictory’ and quote one Community Relations Consultant’s view that

…if [the main political parties] were able to commit themselves to reconciliation, there would be no reason for their existence. That’s the problem (2019:7).

In this view, the two main political parties in Northern Ireland (the ‘Protestant’/Unionist Democratic Unionist Party or DUP and the ‘Catholic’/Nationalist Sinn Féin) have a vested interest in retaining separation of the communities as an electoral mechanism to maximise support (Herrault and Murtagh, 2019:7). If true for shared space, this may equally have resonance in an education system which is already fundamentally divided.

Educational division in NI stems from a period following the establishment of National Schools in Ireland from 1831, one of the first systems of universal education in the world (Akenson, 2012). Initially integrated, most of these schools eventually became reflective of the majority population of the areas in which they were located (Hyland, 1988). When the Northern Ireland state was established in 1921, the first Education minister attempted to re-establish an integrated education system, but pressure from the churches, both Protestant and Catholic, led to an abandonment of that policy in favour of a divided system (Gardner, 2016:349). Those schools dominated by Protestant churches eventually accepted government control, albeit retaining a strong church influence, becoming Controlled schools. Catholic church schools did not cede control to the state and became Catholic Maintained schools (Milliken *et al*., 2019). As the Northern Ireland government were explicitly establishing a ‘Protestant Government for a Protestant People’ from 1921 (Craig,1934:73), it is unsurprising that the Catholic Church wished to preserve control of their schools. However, while the Protestant hegemony may have largely faded, Church control of schools is still held tenaciously in Northern Ireland. Gallagher (2019) notes ‘the role of the Churches remains strong in school level education, as does the level of religious separation’ (2019:3); the divisions are such that the education system in NI is widely described as ‘segregated’.

The last thirty years have seen a range of formal and informal initiatives aimed at breaking down barriers in the school system. These included the Schools Community Relations Programme and curriculum initiatives such as Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural Heritage and Local and Global Citizenship (McGuinness *et al*., 2018), primarily designed to increase understanding between pupils from the Controlled (*de facto* Protestant) and Catholic Maintained schools. Despite considerable commitment from numerous teachers over many years, the impact of those initiatives was limited (Richardson and Gallagher, 2010).

The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order (HMSO, 1989) committed the Department of Education to encourage the growth of Integrated schools, which educate Catholic and Protestant children together. Initiated by parents, this sector witnessed rapid growth initially, but this has slowed in recent years. There is evidence that integrated education has benefits in developing more moderate political views (Tausch *et al*., 2010) and an increase in mixed friendships (McGlynn *et al*., 2004). These positive impacts have been found to extend into later life and ‘these individuals have the potential to create a new common ground in Northern Ireland politics’ (Hayes *et al*., 2007:477). However, notwithstanding its initial rapid development and its continued growth, it still comprises only 7% of the school-aged population, with the remainder of learners educated in largely segregated settings (Bates *et al*., 2017).

A more recent initiative has been Shared Education. Hughes and Loader (2015) define this as a curriculum-based initiative promoting interaction between pupils from schools of all management types, aimed at contributing to social harmony, and Shared Education has been shown to have success in promoting social cohesion (Hughes *et al*., 2012; RSM McClure Watters, 2014). However, despite getting considerable political support, even one of the architects of the initiative candidly concedes that

…there are concerns by some that it represents little more than an enhanced version of the discredited contact programmes run under the Education for Mutual Understanding initiative and that the spirit of innovation present in its genesis may be dissipating (Gallagher, 2019:32).

Hughes *et al*. (2016) are concerned that ‘there is little enthusiasm for the type of deep engagement with difference that can engender long-term social transformation’ (2016:1096) and teachers leading Shared Education programmes have been found to be averse to exploring themes related to the conflict and community division with learners (ETI, 2018).

Shared Education prioritises educational benefits over addressing reconciliation, a pragmatic approach to ensure more acceptance by parents and schools. It does not ‘…require any changes to existing school structures in order to achieve its twin objectives’ (Hughes *et al*., 2012:530) and Shared Education retains separate school buildings, school grounds, staff and uniforms. Even if this initiative were to achieve its reconciliation goals, in structural terms educational provision in Northern Ireland would be little changed. Thus, it can be argued that Shared Education will not address the economic consequences of school duplication and its impact on systemic change in Northern Ireland may be negligible (Roulston and Hansson, 2019).

Some hope may rest in the New Decade, New Approach document (UK Govt and Irish Govt, 2020), co-written by the British and Irish Governments to restore regional government in Northern Ireland in January 2020. Securing the support of the main parties, it commits the newly reinstituted devolved Assembly, *inter alia*, to the establishment of ‘…an external, independent review of education provision, with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs … and the prospects of moving towards a single education system’.

**Primary schools and small schools**

Catholic Maintained and State Controlled (effectively Protestant) schools make up 89% of all primary schools. Theoretically these schools have a non-denominational intake as ‘…few schools operate formal religious tests for admission’ (Gallagher, 2019:3); nonetheless Catholic Maintained schools generally have a Catholic, Nationalist, Irish ethos and Controlled schools a Protestant, Unionist, British one. This is reflected, for example, in iconography found around the school, the sports that are played and the adherence or otherwise to religious holidays (Murray, 1985). They also differ in terms of ownership, funding arrangements, governance and employment. In 2018-19, there were 362 Catholic Maintained primaries and 363 Controlled primaries in NI, spread across the country. Many services are duplicated in NI as a result of community divisions (Knox and Quirk, 2016) and it is not uncommon to find neighbouring primary schools, each serving their particular ethno-sectarian community, in small settlements or rural areas. In a review of education in Northern Ireland, Bain (2006) noted the large number of small schools and suggested sustainability limits for primary schools as a total enrolment of 105 in rural and 140 in urban areas, and deemed schools with lower enrolments than this as unsustainable. While consideration of the closure of a school does not just take into account enrolment numbers, it is still concerning that in 2018-19, 29% of all primary schools were below Bain’s enrolment thresholds (DENI, 2019).

Internationally, primary schools have been defined as ‘small’ by their teacher numbers (four or fewer teachers: Caul and Harbison, 1989) or enrolment (less than 120 pupils: Wilson and McPake, 2000). However defined, NI has a lot of small schools, largely serving rural populations. Small schools and their impact especially on academic outcomes have been the subject of considerable research in the UK and further afield. Back in the 1960s, the Plowden Report (CACE, 1967) raised concerns that small schools have a narrower curriculum than larger schools and lack some specialist staff. Staff in schools like these have to adopt multiple roles, particularly as teaching principals. Additionally, the prevalence of composite classes of learners of different ages in many small schools can be viewed as ‘inferior to more homogenous age grouping’ (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009:102). Furthermore, small schools often draw pupils from a tightly defined locality, reducing social mixing and exposure to diversity which a larger school might provide (Smith and DeYoung, 1988). Costs are also a concern with some research suggesting that expenditure per pupil is highest in schools in cities and more remote rural areas (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009:103)

Other research emphasises the advantages that small schools can provide. In a meta-study of 57 papers, Leithwood and Jantzi (2009) find that ‘smaller schools are generally better for most purposes’ (2009:484). Having smaller and less dispersed staff teams, these schools may find communication internally and with the local community easier, and this has been suggested as an explanation for the relative success and high educational outcomes of small schools (see Hopkins and Ellis, 1991). Opportunities arising from composite classes for reciprocal learning and peer tutoring across age groups challenge the idea that composite classes are necessarily inferior (Raggl, 2015). Despite poorer extracurricular provision being supposed in small schools, Feldman and Matjasko (2007) found that the larger the school, the higher the rates of non-participation in extracurricular activities. Additionally, small rural schools play a vital role as the ‘…heart of the villages …[involving] the entire community’ (Autti and Hyry-Beihammer, 2014:8), particularly important in rural areas where there may be fewer opportunities to bring communities together. Some research even challenges the idea that smaller schools are more costly showing that they are at least ‘competitive’ with larger schools in terms of cost (Flecknoe, 2003:59).

Arguments could be advanced for retaining small schools or for moving to larger units but here the case is not the advantages or disadvantages of larger schools, but whether small communities can continue to sustain two neighbouring schools given the cost of duplication of resource and the potential impact on social cohesion.

**Methodology**

This study uses GIS analysis of 2018/19 education data in the public domain to identify pairs of primary schools consisting of one Controlled and one Maintained school, located in close proximity to each other but not in the vicinity of other schools of the same management type[[1]](#footnote-1). The focus of the study is to examine whether the isolated pairs are examples of inefficiencies in the system and whether, if combined, there would be savings and other benefits.

Locational data for primary schools were downloaded from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) Neighbourhood Information Service website (NINIS, n.d.). This data provides accurate locations in the form of x, y coordinates (Irish Grid eastings and northings), created using Ordnance Survey large scale vector data and the LPS/OSNI Pointer address database (NIDirect, n.d.). Data on enrolments (2018-19) were obtained from the Department of Education website (DENI, 2019). School locations were mapped using ArcGIS, and enrolment figures joined using the Department of Education NI school reference ID.

To identify schools that could be considered ‘isolated’ from schools in the same sector, all Maintained primaries that were not within one mile of another Maintained primary, measured as a straight-line distance, were identified. This was achieved by generating one-mile buffers (circles of one mile radius centred on each school) and carrying out a point-in-polygon overlay between the Maintained schools and their buffers, producing a count of the number of schools falling within each buffer; those with a count of one identified the schools that do not have another school of the same management type within a mile. This was repeated for Controlled schools. These isolated schools (264 Maintained and 226 Controlled) were then further examined to identify pairs consisting of a Controlled and a Maintained primary, by placing a buffer (0.5 mile) around each of the schools and carrying out a spatial selection to locate buffers that intersected. This identified 69 pairs within a mile of each other, and two clusters with three schools, which were discarded.

The ArcGIS network analyst extension was used in conjunction with the OSNI large-scale road network to create three-mile travel catchments around all schools that were not part of a Controlled-Maintained school pairing. The 3-mile distance was selected to be representative of average travel to school by primary-aged children.[[2]](#footnote-2) Schools belonging to a pair but located inside a three-mile catchment of the same management type were identified using ArcGIS spatial selection tools and eliminated from the analysis. This left 32 ‘isolated pairs’, all of them in rural areas, catering for two different communities and isolated by at least 3 miles by road from a similar Maintained or Controlled school but located often only yards apart.

**Results and discussion**

The results, shown in Table 1, indicate the 32 pairs identified. Despite being an average of just 670 yards apart, it is clear that these schools are serving the needs of two different communities. Except for four instances, the proportion of Catholics in the Controlled schools is less than 10%[[3]](#footnote-3), while Maintained primaries have 98% Catholic enrolment, on average. The shaded cells indicate those schools that are below Bain’s sustainable enrolment threshold. In six cases neither of the paired primary schools are sustainable, and in 20 cases one school is not sustainable (8 Maintained and 12 Controlled). In the remaining six cases, both of the paired schools are sustainable, but barely so in some cases.

Insert Table 1 close to here

Map 1 shows all Maintained and Controlled primary schools and their 3-mile catchment areas, and the distribution of the 32 isolated pairs of primary schools. While eastern counties have four isolated pairs, most of them are in the more rural and less densely populated south and west of Northern Ireland, in Counties Tyrone, Derry/Londonderry and Fermanagh. Some schools are located close to the border with the Republic of Ireland. Even with an open border for the last 20 years, a review of School transport found that ‘relatively few pupils travel between home and schools across the border on a daily basis’ (Thornthwaite, 2014:197), although a former Principal of a post-Primary school close to the border estimated that hundreds of pupils cross into NI each day (Moore, 2019). It is possible that increasing the numbers of pupils attending NI schools from the Republic might be enough to influence the sustainability of a school, and this is something which deserves further research. However, formal collaboration between neighbouring schools across the border would be challenging given differences in funding and in curricula, and Brexit and a harder border between the UK and the EU may exacerbate the challenges of cross-border collaboration still further.

Insert Map 1 close to here

**The cost of duplication**

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2019) acknowledged ‘…a large amount of wasted capacity in the [education] system’. In his submission, Sir Robert Salisbury contrasted duplicated provision in his local town in NI with a similarly sized town in England, and concluded ‘…because of the nature of the schools in Northern Ireland and the historic structure, the money is spread too thinly’ (NIAC, 2019:19).

To deliver the mandatory NI Curriculum (CCEA, 2007) to 4 to 11-year olds in their community, each of the 32 pairs of schools identified here requires sufficient teachers. Even in very small schools, and 14 of these schools have fewer than 60 pupils, there must still be a Principal with responsibility for running the school, for instance. Additionally, of those schools with unsustainable enrolment figures on Table 1, the ratio of pupils to teachers is lower than the Northern Ireland primary school average of 22.3 (2018-19) in 94% of cases, suggesting an excessive duplication of teaching across schools. In one case, the ratio is 1 teacher for 8.2 pupils. The neighbouring school just a few hundred yards away is just over the average. In another case, both schools in the pair are below the average by a large margin (with ratios of 17.0 and 12.3) again suggesting inefficiencies through duplication of teachers delivering the same curriculum.

Ancillary staff are also duplicated. Where on-site catering is available, a cook and other staff are required. Almost invariably schools will have a number of classroom assistants, a secretary, a Building Supervisor/caretaker and a range of other staff. School websites[[4]](#footnote-4) indicate an average of over 11 ancillary staff, including 6 classroom assistants, in each of these 64 schools. Many of these staff may be part-time, particularly in the smaller schools, but there will inevitably be duplication. Small schools could not fully support the operation of the school without these ancillary staff who are essential to the effective delivery of the curriculum as well as pastoral and other support, but these schools have very close neighbouring schools offering identical services.

Since the Education Reform Order in Northern Ireland in 1989, schools in Northern Ireland have had delegated budgets, including for staffing costs, with schools’ funding calculated using a Common Funding Formula. How the funding is calculated and the amounts which each school receives is transparent and published annually (DENI, n.d.). A wide range of social and other measures are used to determine the funding to individual schools including social deprivation, age weightings for pupils and provision for pupils who are newcomers or Travellers. As there are a larger number of individual schools to support the range of school management types than would otherwise be necessary, this may partly explain the need for a Small Schools’ Support factor in the Common Funding Formula. The equivalent of an additional teacher salary to each school up to 100 pupils, tapering to zero for a school of 300 pupils, is provided as a lump sum to all small primary schools through this Small Schools Support (DENI, n.d.).

Insert graph 1 close to here

Graph 1 shows the funding for the 32 pairs of isolated schools and the average given to single schools of a similar size. It is clear that pairs of schools, when their funding is aggregated for the purpose of comparison, receive higher overall funding than unitary schools which are comparable in size. This is unsurprising given the Small School Support Factor in the funding of school budgets. In the smallest of schools, the difference in proportional terms is greatest. Two schools with combined enrolment of 119 were allocated funding, if added together, of £510,000 (DENI, n.d.) in 2019-20 with each of the 2 schools getting the equivalent of an additional teacher salary. We can compare this to the funding provided to single schools with an enrolment of 119. Five schools, in this case each with exactly 119 pupils, received an average funding of just £386,000[[5]](#footnote-5). Two schools with a combined enrolment of 292 received funding, if it were combined, of £989,000, compared to an average of five single schools of this aggregate size getting, on average, just £761,000.

However, the difference in funding becomes negligible in larger schools, with the tapering of the Small School Support Factor, as the trend lines show. This might be thought to challenge the perception that duplication of provision, whether from having two Principals or two sets of catering and other ancillary staff, would have an impact whatever the size of the schools. However, we can compare the case of two schools with an enrolment of 300 pupils (and so just outside eligibility for Small School Support) and a single school with 600 pupils. The funding for these schools will be identical, all other things being equal. However, as the unitary school does not have to fund duplication, it is likely that it has more to spend on pupil education and on specialised staff, not possible in two 300 pupil primary schools. Smit *et al*. (2015) note that, in smaller schools, ‘…it is not possible to specialise in a subject and subject specific exchanges within a school are limited’. While smaller schools of 300 might be able to provide some specialist teachers, most are likely to be generalists and they will have less access to school-funded professional development, even with exactly the same formula funding. If that is the case, the apparent similarity in funding for larger duplicate and unitary schools found in this sample might disguise varied impact on learning for pupils and career opportunities for staff. More research is required to investigate this.

Overall, these 32 pairs of schools received an additional £2.3M each year, compared to the average cost to support the same pupils in combined schools of the same aggregate size. The Small Schools’ Support factor, calculated as 3.82% of the overall budget to schools across Northern Ireland (Education Authority 2017), cost more than £44 million in 2018-19. While this regional cost could be argued to be merely a reflection of the relatively high number of small rural primary schools in Northern Ireland, it is likely that duplication contributes in large part to the persistence of small schools as each of the two main communities tries to retain the schools that serve their ‘people’. These costs are simply those that are required to sustain a network of small schools across Northern Ireland.

Calculating precise savings from combining duplicated primary schools is difficult. Only one principal would be required, but if the ‘surplus’ principal were redeployed, or offered a financial package, the savings might be reduced somewhat. Fewer teachers will be required and teaching staff costs will be reduced but the degree of savings is difficult to quantify and will depend, for instance, on the size of classes in any combined school or on the career stage, and thus salary band, of the ‘surplus’ teachers. Similarly, reducing ancillary staff will lower costs, but quantifying those too is problematic. Having one building will be much more efficient to run, but the overall savings would vary according to many parameters. What is evident is that the present duplication of provision is unnecessarily expensive. It has long been accepted that calculating the overall cost of educational division in Northern Ireland is challenging (Deloitte, 2007:61), but nonetheless it is clear that ‘the divide has resulted in an inefficient schools system’ (Ibid.:61). An independent review estimated the overall cost of division in education in Northern Ireland to be between £16.5M and £95M (Ulster University, 2016). Despite the challenges in identifying actual figures, were schools to join together there would be considerable savings in the reduction of duplication, particularly for these schools that are already close together. In any case, the prize may be greater than reducing waste by eliminating duplication, as continued segregation and reduced community cohesion could bring even greater social costs in the long term.

In the context of a divided society emerging from a period of social unrest and community division, the prospect of schools joining together will not be straightforward. Communities which have lived through intense intercommunal violence are likely to find the concept of sharing a school building challenging to their cultural affiliations and identity; the difficulties that poses to social structures in other places which are emerging from ethno-sectarian violence such as Bosnia and Herzegovina are clear (Bozic, 2006, Palmberger, 2018). Encouragingly, there is some evidence of successful efforts to promote community engagement to secure long-term viability of schools in Northern Ireland. Hunter *et al.* (2012) showed how staff, school governors, parents and pupils from neighbouring rural schools can work together effectively, albeit on a shared rather than a combined basis. Shared education cannot address the cost of duplication in any meaningful way, nor guarantee long-term sustainability for schools, but it can play an important reconciliation role. Bates and O’Connor-Bones (2018) have shown that structures can be developed which will allow long-divided communities in Northern Ireland to collaborate and decide together what model of future educational provision they prefer in their area. Sometimes this may result in more young people from both communities being educated in the same building with a common uniform and staff group, and with a shared purpose, an outcome likely to contribute to social cohesion. Additionally, such community engagement will make it more likely that currently unsustainable duplicated educational services can be retained and provide an ongoing community facility for all of the people in those communities.

**Conclusion**

There has been a period of continued rationalisation of provision of small primary schools in NI. That Area Planning process is cognisant of enrolment numbers, but also trends in those numbers, the school's financial situation, school leadership and management and the school’s location and the potential impact on the community should a school close. It is stressed that the quality of the educational experience for learners is paramount and, even a school in a sound financial position with sustainable enrolment figures, would not be ‘…considered viable if the quality and breadth of the education it provides is less than satisfactory’ (DENI, 2009).

In their Strategic Area Plan for School Provision, the Education Authority (2017) is clear about the requirement

to ensure that all pupils have access to a broad and balanced curriculum that meets their needs in sustainable schools … in particular the need to raise standards and close the attainment gap through a network of sustainable schools (EA, 2017).

There is a strong suggestion here that smaller schools may not be able to offer ‘a broad and balanced curriculum’, and that only larger schools are needed to address the attainment gap.

Despite the advantages of composite classes highlighted in some research, the Department of Education are clear that ‘Primary schools with fewer than seven classes [one for each year group] often encounter problems’ (DENI, 2009:22) and that there are additional challenges in meeting educational requirements of children when there are composite classes. The literature suggests that small rural schools can actually be quite efficient, and that educational outcomes from such schools can be excellent. The case here is not that small schools should necessarily close, but that more effective local arrangements could be made, particularly in situations where schools are located very close to each other and are duplicating what they do.

The promised independent review of education in the New Decade, New Approach document (UK Govt, Irish Govt, 2020) commits politicians in Northern Ireland to seek greater efficiency in school provision while delivering a single education system. However, it is important to recognise that this is not just about funding and efficiency savings. Northern Ireland’s Area Planning authorities for both Maintained and Controlled schools will be very familiar with the schools in these 32 pairs, and with the often deeply divided communities that they serve. There may well be a strong desire for choice in education, including faith-based provision and other factors. Nonetheless, in a period of budget cuts to schools and concomitant pressures on education budgets, the financial benefits of combining isolated pairs of schools are clear. There are also considerable social benefits in ensuring that a local hub for communities is retained. Furthermore, and arguably most important, bringing communities together may result in moves towards reconciliation and peace building, which can work to reduce the potential of renewed conflict in the future.

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*Table 1: Isolated Pairs of primary schools (2018-19 data)*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Location of schools (Counties) | School enrolment (full-time equivalent) | % Catholic pupils  | Teacher Numbers full-time equivalent (pupil/teacher ratios) |
| Maintained primary | Controlled primary  | Maintained primary  | Controlled primary | Maintained primary  | Controlled primary |
| Antrim  | 87 | 89 | 100 | \* | 4.4 (19.8) | 3.8 (23.4) |
|  | 58 | 89 | # | \* | 3.0 (19.3) | 4.8 (18.6) |
|  | 239 | 81 | 98 | \* | 9.8 (24.4) | 4.4 (18.4) |
| Armagh | 33 | 88 | 100 | 0 | 2.4 (13.9) | 4.4 (20.0) |
| Down | 77 | 722 | 94 | 3 | 5.8 (13.3) | 30.0 (24.1) |
|  | 127 | 120 | 100 | \* | 6.0 (21.2) | 5.4 (22.2) |
|  | 46 | 429.5 | 100 | 11 | 3.0 (15.3) | 16.2 (26.6) |
| Derry/Londonderry | 203 | 51 | # | 0 | 9.2 (22.0) | 3.0 (17.0) |
|  | 250 | 158 | 96 | 4 | 10.8 (23.1) | 6.8 (23.2) |
|  | 415 | 68 | 98 | 65 | 18.0 (23.1) | 3.4 (20.0) |
|  | 445 | 175 | 94 | 10 | 18.0 (24.7) | 8.4 (20.8) |
|  | 174 | 89 | # | \* | 8.6 (20.2) | 4.4 (20.2) |
|  | 263 | 105 | 96 | 0 | 11.5 (22.8) | 4.6 (23.0) |
|  | 160 | 264 | # | 6 | 8.0 (20.0) | 12.2 (21.6) |
|  | 79 | 243 | 100 | 2 | 4.4 (18.0) | 9.6 (25.5) |
|  | 70 | 193 | # | \* | 3.0 (23.3) | 8.6 (22.5) |
| Fermanagh | 92 | 27 | # | \* | 5.4 (17.0) | 2.2 (12.3) |
|  | 53 | 73 | # | \* | 3.0 (17.7) | 3.6 (20.3) |
|  | 225 | 168 | 95 | 17 | 9.4 (23.9) | 7.6 (22.1) |
|  | 129 | 68 | 95 | 0 | 6.6 (19.6) | 4.0 (17.2) |
|  | 73 | 201 | # | \* | 4.0 (18.3) | 8.5 (23.7) |
|  | 172 | 41 | # | 0 | 8.0 (21.5) | 3.0 (13.7) |
|  | 113 | 46 | 100 | 0 | 5.2 (21.7) | 3.6 (12.8) |
|  | 136 | 102 | # | \* | 6.0 (22.7) | 5.0 (20.4) |
| Tyrone | 92 | 145 | 94 | 0 | 5.0 (18.4) | 6.4 (22.7) |
|  | 118 | 35 | 100 | 0 | 4.8 (24.5) | 2.3 (15.2) |
|  | 34 | 110 | 100 | \* | 2.4 (14.2) | 6.6 (16.7) |
|  | 28 | 187 | # | 9 | 3.4 (8.2) | 8.0 (23.4) |
|  | 82 | 55 | # | \* | 4.6 (17.8) | 3.0 (18.3) |
|  | 135 | 21 | # | \* | 5.5 (24.6) |  2.2 (9.6) |
|  | 119 | 63 | # | 0 | 6.0 (19.8) | 3.0 (21.0) |
|  | 178 | 40 | 100 | 0 | 8.0 (22.3) | 2.4 (16.7) |

Sources: DENI (2018) Teacher Workforce Statistics 2018/19

\* Less than 5 cases where data is considered sensitive

# Figures suppressed under rules of disclosure (although 2016-17 data shows figures in these cells averaging 97.3%)

Shaded cells are unsustainable in terms of enrolment



Map 1: Isolated Pairs of primary schools 3 miles or more from similar schools



*Graph 1: Formula funding to pairs of isolated primary schools combined, compared to funding given to unitary schools of similar size.*

1. The rationale was that schools under the same management authority (Education Authority for Controlled Schools and Council for the Catholic Maintained Sector for Maintained schools) will already have rationalised, where possible, duplicate schools, but that schools under different management authorities may not have been rationalised vis-à-vis each other. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. While many sources suggest that less that 2 miles may be more representative (see DfT, 2014 and Owen *et al*., 2012), Kelly and Fu (2014) cite 4.88km (3.03 miles) as the average travel distance for Irish primary school pupils. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There are four anomalous Controlled Primaries with 10% or more Catholic learners, most in locations close to the border with the Republic of Ireland. This is often a consequence of selective population migration from these areas. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is not an unproblematic source. School websites may not be up-to-date or reliable for this type of information. Additionally, larger schools generally have websites while a few very small schools do not. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. School budgets are published each year providing details of the overall funding made available to each school (DENI, n.d.). For this exercise a comparison was made between the combined funding of isolated pairs of schools compared to average funding to five schools with the same overall enrolment. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)