

Integrated and shared education: Sinn Féin, the Democratic Unionist Party and educational change in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

There is a considerable literature concerning divided societies and the role of education in such societies. In the case of Northern Ireland, education is characterised by a largely separate system of education for its two main communities. There is also a considerably smaller integrated schools sector, where the two communities learn together. A more recent intervention is that of shared education where separate schools are retained but shared classes and other opportunities for sharing are offered. Politically, there has never been extensive support for integrated education, particularly from the two largest parties in the Assembly and power-sharing Executive: The Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin. While not active proponents of integrated education the two parties have embraced shared education and with their own interpretation of its implementation. The introduction of shared education can be seen as a triumph as the two main parties in the coalition have agreed on a policy designed to bridge the gap in education. An alternative view is that shared education is the least-worst option for these two parties but may do little to advance reconciliation.

Keywords

Northern Ireland, segregated schools, shared education, integrated education, DUP, Sinn Féin, power sharing

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Introduction

Guelke (2012: 30) has described divided societies as places where ‘conflict exists along a well-entrenched fault line that is recurrent and endemic and that contains the potential for violence between the segments’. One manifestation is where there might be a difference of faith or as what Guelke (2012: 18) refers to as ‘branches of the same faith . . . The most obvious case of a society divided along sectarian lines is Northern Ireland’. Northern Ireland, a largely divided society, is geographically part of the island of Ireland but politically part of the UK. The main social cleavage is ethno-sectarian which can crudely, and which misses many of the nuances, be characterised as between Catholic, Irish-oriented, Republican Nationalists and Protestant, British-oriented, Loyalist Unionists. Periodically, these divisions have escalated into violence. Most recently, in a 30-year period from 1968, there were more than 3600 deaths and 30,000 injuries in a period of ethno-sectarian conflict known colloquially as ‘the Troubles’; over half of those killed were civilians (Worden and Smith, 2017).

The division in society is also reflected in education and schooling. As Duffy and Gallagher (2017: 108) write

Northern Ireland is a society divided by religious, national and political identities. These divisions are reflected in education as there are parallel school systems for Protestant and Catholic communities, tempered by the presence of a small religiously integrated sector of schools.

Table 1 illustrates the complexity of the education structure in Northern Ireland, a system which caters for almost 320,000 pupils in 2019–2020 (DE, 2020b). With selection at age 11, most children are divided into those who attend Grammar schools, supposedly an academic

Table 1. Main school sectors in Northern Ireland (excluding special schools) 2019–2020.

Age sector	School management	Schools (n)	Pupils (n) ^a	Catholics (n)	Protestants (n)
Primary 4–11	Catholic Maintained	360	78,967	74,699	695
	Controlled	361	79,156	6274	48,290
	Integrated	45	10,547	3724	3346
	Other Maintained (Irish Medium)	25	3241	3031	260
	Other Maintained (Other)	3	344		
	Controlled (non-Grammar)	48	29,467	1235	22,410
	Catholic Maintained (non-Grammar)	57	38,325	36,069	Number suppressed
	Grammar (Catholic management)	29	28,755	27,467	386
	Grammar (Other management)	37	34,668	4361	21,908
	Other Maintained (Irish Medium)	2	895	841	<5
	Integrated	20	12,975	4160	5440

Source: DENI (2020b)

^aTotal enrolments are higher than the sum of Protestants and Catholics as there are ‘Other Christian, non-Christian and no religion’ returns.

route, or non-Grammar schools. The system is also largely *de facto* segregated with most pupils attending either predominantly Protestant ('controlled') or Catholic ('maintained') schools, while a slowly growing minority attend Integrated schools, which cater for both communities. Various pieces of research have highlighted how this ethno-sectarian division in education has had an impact on the lives of children and young people. Studies have referred to the potentially detrimental effect of separate schooling on social attitudes (Hayes and McAllister, 2009; Hughes, 2011; Murray, 1985), while Niens and Cairns (2005) reported that it contributed to the formation of negative intergroup attitudes and perpetuation of inter-group hostility, arguing that the separate nature of the education system prevented the development of inter-communal friendship.

A number of initiatives have been attempted to redress the segregated nature of the education system. In broad terms, these represent interventions in the process of education through increased contact between Catholic and Protestant pupils and/or through curriculum reforms. One of the earliest emerged from the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, which introduced Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural Heritage into the curriculum (DENI, 1990). These curriculum developments centred on self-respect, and respect for others, and the improvement of relationships between people of differing cultural traditions. Despite considerable work by many schools and individual teachers, these creative approaches often deteriorated into partial and tokenistic delivery limiting opportunities for proper integration between pupils from diverse backgrounds (O'Connor et al., 2009; Wardlow, 2003).

This was followed by a parent-led initiative: the introduction of integrated schools, characterised as providing 'constitutional and structural safeguards to encourage joint ownership by the two main traditions in Northern Ireland' (Kilpatrick and Leitch, 2004: 564). The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE, 2012) refer to Integrated schools as places where children from diverse backgrounds are educated together daily in the same classrooms and, under the 1989 Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order, the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI, 1990) has a statutory duty to 'encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education that is to say the education together at school of Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils' (DENI, 1990). There were 65 grant-aided integrated schools in Northern Ireland in 2019–2020 with a total enrolment of almost 24,000, an increase of over 1500 pupils from 2016/2017, and comprising over 7% of the school population (DENI, 2020b). Social attitudes and public opinion data in Northern Ireland have shown that public support for formally integrated schools remains high (see Hansson et al., 2013). However, although opinion polls and surveys have highlighted parental preference for integrated education, this has never been matched by the pattern of school choice. While integrated schools continue to grow in numbers of schools and overall enrolment, recent growth has slowed and their efforts to promote reconciliation have been largely superseded by shared education, viewed by some a 'new way' to deliver reconciliation (Borooah and Knox, 2013). This represents a change in policy and

[a] decisive swing away from integrated education. The idea of shared education, which accepts the reality of the dual system but works to increase cooperation, has eclipsed integrated schooling as an ideal for the Northern Ireland Executive. (Nolan, 2013: 114)

Shared education retains current school structures but commits schools to collaborative partnerships. Learners from different schools are brought together on a regular basis for

joint, curriculum-based classes. In 2019, just under two thirds of schools (61%) and over 80,000 pupils (25%) in Northern Ireland were involved in shared education activities (DENI, 2020a). There is even a vision of shared campuses for separate schools, although none have yet been realised.

The initiative is quite open about foregrounding educational benefits in order to give the initiative a chance of traction for schools and parents who often rejected previous initiatives which were openly focused on reconciliation (Hughes and Loader, 2015) and it has been shown to improve intergroup attitudes and, through increased contact between Catholics and Protestants, to reduce intergroup anxiety (Hughes et al., 2012).

However, research has also highlighted the possible ‘tension’ between educational and reconciliation benefits, as discussed by, amongst others, Loader et al. who write:

As long as securing market advantage through improved academic performance is the main imperative for schools, reconciliation will remain a marginal concern and the ‘especially important condition’ (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006 : 77) of institutional support will be unfulfilled. (Loader et al., 2020:17)

Other studies have also shown evidence of reluctance, in some instances, for some teachers to become involved in cross-community contact (Donnelly, 2012).

A range of reasons have been discussed and presented with regards to the slow progression of integrated education, such as the area planning process (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2015) and the lack of integrated provision in the vicinity for families who would otherwise have used these schools (ARK, 1999). It is, however, also pertinent to draw attention to what Knox (2010) refers to as the ‘lukewarm’ attitude towards integrated education of most political parties in Northern Ireland; he comments that ‘the will, it seems, to move to a post-conflict or reconciled society is not yet present because it threatens the electoral base of the two key partners in a power-sharing devolved government’ (2010: 230). (The exception is the relatively small Alliance Party which has consistently placed integrated education at the centre of its policy platforms; see for example, their 2016 Manifesto (Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, 2016).)

This certainly rings true for the largest parties in Northern Ireland: The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin. The DUP are the archetypal Unionist, British and Loyalist party in Northern Ireland, and would widely be perceived as representing the ‘Protestant’ community. Sinn Féin are equally clearly perceived as a Nationalist, Irish and Republican party, widely viewed as representing ‘Catholic’ interests. After the 2007, 2011 and 2016 elections, these two parties emerged as the largest in the five-party coalition, thus claiming the majority of Ministries in the Executive, Northern Ireland’s governing body. Although a coalition of all-elected parties, the consensus rules meant that the two largest parties dominated decisions. Birrell and Heenan (2013), however, found that that the power-sharing arrangements had led to impasses and stalling rather than consensus, particularly in the field of education. In this paper, however, the emphasis is on how there has been a ‘convergence’ between the DUP and Sinn Féin concerning integrated education and the introduction of shared education.

The two parties have also held the post of education minister and ‘shared’ the chairmanship of the Education Committee following all Assembly elections since the Northern Ireland Assembly was first established in 1999 and up until the last Assembly election in 2017. This reflects well the ‘tradition’ of having the ‘opposite party’ of the Minister of

Education being the Committee chair of the Education Committee. The focus of this paper is set on the DUP's and Sinn Féin's election manifestos between 2001 and 2016. The importance of parties' policy programmes and manifestos are reflected in the attention political science has given to them. Indeed, electoral manifestos have become ubiquitous in political science analyses (see, for example, Rose 1980 and McDonald, et al. 2004). Statements from debates in the Northern Ireland Assembly supplement the analysis of manifestos.

Debates selected have been those in which the concepts of integrated and shared education have featured. However, it is not by any means an exhaustive list of debates between 2010 and 2017.

Thematically the article identifies three areas/foci in which the two parties' approach to education is laid bare. In the first instance, the focus is on the two parties' overall perception and understanding of integrated education and in particular its place in relation to other sectors. The second section focuses on the parties' vision for education in Northern Ireland and in particular the DUP's vision of a 'single education system'. The final section highlights the convergence of the parties with the embracing of shared education and the coming together of formerly implacably opposed political parties to support shared education.

Perception of integrated being favoured: other sectors losing out

The DUP was established in 1971 with strong links to the founder, the Reverend Ian Paisley's Free Presbyterian Church. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the party was critical of the Ulster Unionist Party and any move interpreted as compromise on constitutional matters. The party was adept at mobilising support from the Protestant working class around issues such as the Irish Republican Army's (IRA) reluctance to decommission their weapons (the IRA were a Republican paramilitary group in Northern Ireland's conflict). The DUP also categorically rejected the Good Friday Agreement (and arguably accounted for most of Northern Ireland's 29% 'No' vote in the 1998 referendum). With regards to Sinn Féin, originally formed in 1905, the party reinvented itself many times. It re-emerged in the 1970s closely linked with the Provisional IRA and its campaign to unite Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland through a mixture of violence and political activism. In the 1990s, Sinn Féin ended its support for violence and joined the new Northern Irish Executive (Government) set up under the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement of 1998. Since then, Sinn Féin has become the second largest party in Northern Ireland. The signing of an Agreement in 1998, and its ratification by plebiscite on both sides of the Irish border, promised an end to a 30-year period of violence and the beginning of a new era in Northern Ireland. However, even the name of the agreement is contested. Nationalists tend to refer to it as the 'Good Friday Agreement', while Unionists prefer the 'Belfast Agreement' or the 'Stormont Agreement' (Morgan 2009: 85). However, despite considerable criticism, there is a widespread political 'belief that power sharing is the most viable means of accommodating the conflicting political aspirations of the two national communities' (O'Flynn, 2003: 129).

The DUP has actively and vigorously defended the controlled sector and 'Protestant' schools. Following lobbying by the party, a body representing the needs of that sector was established in 2016, and the DUP celebrated that it had 'ended the under-representation of the Controlled Sector... part of the DUP's broader equality agenda in education' (DUP, 2016b: 14).

However, more critically, the DUP has not supported integrated education and, almost from their inception, saw integrated education as detrimental to Protestant schools (Collins,

1992). Collins also found two aspects of education that particularly concerned the DUP: the funding of integrated schools and the curriculum for all schools (1992). The DUP perceived a 'preferential treatment of Integrated schools' as they received 100% funding from the state, something which they felt led 'inevitably to financial disadvantage to other schools' (Collins, 1992: 108). This was also exemplified by references made to schools in the controlled sector having been forced to close 'because they are said to be surplus to requirement' and as such 'an imposition on parents rather than, as is often claimed on its behalf, a widening of their choice' (1992: 109). With regards to the curriculum, references were made to the introduction of EMU and Cultural Heritage into the curriculum, changes seen as being 'blatant manipulation of children' done without parent's knowledge. Similarly, Richardson (in Richardson and Gallagher, 2011) referred to the DUP being extremely critical of initiatives such as EMU. Collins summarises the DUP stance:

The only circumstances under which Mr Paisley might be seen to countenance a form of integrated education would be in a state system of education, with Catholic children being educated alongside Protestant children, but presumably without any notion of joint cultural heritage such as the Common Curriculum presently requires by law in all schools. (Collins, 1992: 110)

Perhaps this is not that surprising. In their survey of DUP members, Tonge et al. (2014) found that over half of their sample (58%) preferred to send their children to a school with 'only your own religion' rather than 'a mixed religion school' (34%). They also found that, amongst the membership, the preferences for separate schooling tended to be higher amongst working class members of the party and members of the Free Presbyterian Church. The Free Presbyterian grouping within the party is particularly sceptical of mixed religion schools; they run a small number of their own faith schools, sometimes referred to as Christian Education Schools. These schools started in the late 1970s and tend to offer primary and post-primary education to age 16. The Free Presbyterian Church Education Board of Presbytery, on its website, states that it:

is commissioned to promote Christian Education within the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster whilst supervising and regulating the seven existing schools.

The Board endeavours to highlight those issues within the state education system that are a threat to the spiritual and moral well-being of our children. (Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, 2014)

In 2010 the then leader of the DUP, Peter Robinson, highlighted the party's opposition to separate education systems, calling them a 'benign form of apartheid' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 2010). Robinson emphasised the duplication within the system, and in particular the funding of Catholic schools alongside state schools, as well as the social impact of a divided system. Starting with the duplication argument, Robinson referred to 'wasted money' and, while not objecting to church and faith schools, voiced an objection to the fact that the state funded these schools. Robinson also questioned the morality of the system. This speech could demonstrate a marked difference in the DUP approach towards education policy, as illustrated in its 2011 Assembly Election manifesto. Under the heading 'SHARING', the DUP affirmed that it was determined to

work towards creating a single education system...[and] establish a Commission harnessing international expertise to advise on a strategy for enhancing sharing and integration within our education system. (DUP 2011: 12)

Presciently, Collins also spoke to Sinn Féin in his 1992 study. They too complained of what they saw as ‘unjust and discriminatory’ funding of integrated schools. More than that, they saw the sector as ‘propagandistic... [with its main purpose] to promote the British government’s presentation internationally... as a religious one... to deliberately mislead people about the real sources of the problem’ (Collins, 1992: 111) which they believed were to do with colonialism, partition and discrimination. The party also complained that schools controlled by the state, including integrated schools, had ‘traditionally been hostile to Irish culture and nationality’ (p. 112) and referred to the first integrated post-primary school not having a strong emphasis in its teaching of the Irish language. The party in 1995 stated their preference lay in secular education but that there also was a role to play by multi-denominational schools. Concerning integrated education, the party was somewhat critical:

However, we believe it would be mistaken to confuse these norms with how the British government handles integrated education in the Six Counties [the Nationalist term often used to describe Northern Ireland]. We have no quarrel whatever with those parents who choose to send their children to these schools, nor with those teachers who teach in them. They do so for the best of reasons. We can see some advantages and we are in favour of their being there as an option for parents. (Sinn Féin, 1995)

The DUP continued to be critical of integrated education also, perceiving that these schools were ‘treated differently’ (DUP 2001: 10). This stance was repeated in the 2003, 2005 and 2009 manifestos (DUP, 2003, 2005, 2009). In 2009 the party complained about what they saw as ‘preferential funding’ for integrated schools (and Irish medium schools, a small but growing sector of schools) and referred to the consequent ‘detrimental impact on other schools’ and ‘special privileges for integrated’ schools which consequently drain resources away from other sectors (DUP, 2009: 32). This theme continued in the 2010 and 2011 manifestos, and was emphasised in the party’s 2016 education document when they argued that

no school sector or ethos should be afforded extra statutory protection within the law. All types of schools are grant-aided within our system and should be afforded the same rights and privileges. (DUP 2015a: 6)

In the case of Sinn Féin – and as highlighted above – the party has had an almost indifferent approach to integrated education and does not explicitly refer critically to integrated education along the lines of the DUP but argues for parental choice, whilst maintaining that the integrated sector should be properly resourced (Sinn Féin, 2007). Since then, Sinn Féin has focused on issues such as academic selection and continued its argument for retaining parental choice alongside vigorous support for Irish Medium education and a more cautious and implicit support for integrated education (see the Local Government Manifesto 2014 and Assembly Election Manifesto 2016 (Sinn Féin, 2014, 2016)). While the DUP could be perceived as defender of the Controlled Sector, Sinn Féin has expressed support for the

Maintained and Irish Medium sectors as well as parental choice, and Sinn Féin has also focused extensively on ending academic selection at age 11. The Sinn Féin politician, Martin McGuinness, as Minister for Education, also moved to address some parents' fears that his party favoured the ultimate integration of all Catholic and Protestant schools and referred to being in favour of choice: 'If people want to educate their children through the medium of Catholic education or Protestant education or integrated schools, I believe that they have the right to do that' (BBC, 1999).

Sinn Féin's official party policy on integrated education has been to endorse multi-denominational schools while pushing for a change in the school curriculum as well as increased collaboration between schools (see for example Sinn Féin, 1995, 2011). The main thrust of their education policy seems to stem from the commonly-held conviction that the educational system, in its current form, is unnaturally enforcing a sense of 'Britishness' onto Northern Ireland's youth (Sinn Féin, 2017).

The DUP, Sinn Féin and Integrated Education: a single education system – the vision of education in Northern Ireland

The DUP have repeatedly referred to the need to work towards 'a single education system' but without much elaboration on what such a system would resemble. It appears not to be a vision of integrated schools such as those which exist today. One DUP education spokesperson was clear that

we do not mean the current system of integrated education, because that was the creation of another sector. We mean a genuine, single system that respects rights, privileges and having a Christian ethos in schools, and we need to continue to work towards that. (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2010: Storey)

There remains a recognition that the status quo of segregation cannot be sustained. One DUP politician referred to the significant cost of 'supporting multiple education sectors', arguing that

We must accept that we cannot keep schools open while losing money on expensive administrative structures. Nowhere else in the United Kingdom or anywhere in the world can match the number of different school-management types in Northern Ireland. (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2007: Spratt)

The vision seemed to be to encourage everyone to attend Controlled Schools, which DUP politicians argued were already open to all.

their door is open, whatever religious denomination or persuasion children are. There is no sign across the door of a controlled school that says that Catholics need not apply. In the voluntary sector and in the controlled sector, there is a mix of children from different religious persuasions. (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2013: Storey)

While the vision of a single education system seems attractive to the DUP, it seems that achieving it means Catholics giving up their faith schools. O'Connor (2002: 72) makes the

point that while the DUP consider controlled schools as open to anyone, they are also ‘clear that audible and visible Catholicism in Controlled Schools is not an option, though without ever saying so’. Similarly, Gardner comments that the DUP’s solution for ending separate education,

that the government should stop funding Catholic schools...was unlikely to find favour with many people beyond [the] party faithful. (2016: 352)

With regards to Sinn Féin, Collins (1992) states that for them the emphasis lay on education within a larger all-Ireland context, emphasising ‘a secular, state-run education system’. The party was critical of the state-controlled system as it ‘has traditionally been hostile to Irish culture and nationality’ (1992: 112). Although the party was in favour of the concept of integrated education, seeing some advantages and allowing parents to choose, that preference was in an all-Ireland context. Sinn Féin also saw the introduction of integrated schools in Northern Ireland as not consonant with the aim of a united Ireland, and as a way for the British government to divert attention from the situation in the ‘six counties’. Bringing together pupils from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds in Integrated schools was being pursued by the British Government ‘not simply...to narrow the picture excessively but to distort it, or even present an alternative and false picture’ (Collins, 1992: 111).

For Sinn Féin, a single education system is a challenging prospect, as highlighted in various debates such as in 2014 and where the party expressed ‘concern’ over such an approach and where the party were critical of what it perceived to be ‘one size fits all’ and where the points was made that:

The Catholic maintained sector is outperforming every other sector at the minute on educational outcomes. Why on earth would it agree to go into a single education system? Why would the Irish-medium sector do so? Why would people who want to play Gaelic sports go into a system in which they might not be catered for? All those issues have to be teased out. (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2014: Sheehan)

Embracing shared education

Research such as Hansson et al. (2013) and Fontana (2017) has highlighted how integrated education, despite being a feature of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, fared badly in subsequent policies. Instead, in much public policy the emphasis is placed on shared education, which allows schools to maintain their distinct and separate identities whilst entering into an interdependent, collaborative relationship (Duffy and Gallagher, 2014). Shared education, its proponents say, does not replace integrated education and involves all sectors, including integrated schools, and as a policy aims to allow for further collaboration and co-operation (Brown et. al. 2020), making the existing boundaries between sectors and schools more porous (Borooah and Knox, 2015). The Department of Education (DENI, 2015: 4) referred to an all-encompassing vision for

Vibrant, self-improving Shared Education partnerships delivering educational benefits to learners, encouraging the efficient and effective use of resources, and promoting equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion.

The shared education initiative has gained considerable political backing including from the DUP and Sinn Féin, with a Shared Education Bill (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2016: 1) emphasising the education together of ‘those of different religious belief, including reasonable numbers of both, Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons; as well as those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation . . .’. The Bill also refers to the duty of the Education Authority, the body that runs state schools, to encourage, facilitate and promote shared education. However, even some of the proponents of shared education voice concerns that during shared experiences ‘there is little enthusiasm for the type of deep engagement with difference that can engender long-term social transformation’ (Hughes et al., 2016: 1096). Also, political support for shared education from parties who originally had little in common in relation to education has engendered some scepticism (Roulston and Hansson, 2019) but, while the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement referred to the need to ‘to facilitate and encourage integrated education’, the focus has now shifted to shared education.

While integration is mentioned by Robinson (Belfast Telegraph, 2010), the party advocated that school development proposals should ‘demonstrate that options for sharing have been fully explored’ (DUP, 2010: 12) and the emphasis has been on ‘sharing’. The party also referred to schools to be established as ‘shared spaces’ with the sharing of resources and assets. Also emphasised was cross-sectoral work and further exploration of sharing between and across sectors. The lack of appetite for a unified system of education was clear when the DUP in its 2015 manifesto referred to what it saw as a

limited appetite for a single type of school . . . that purports to meet the needs of all children . . . Our diverse schooling system reflects the wishes of our society. (DUP, 2015b: 4)

Nonetheless, the party has moved from outright criticism of integrated education towards a stance embracing shared education. They argue that this brings benefits:

Educating our children together is the key to transforming society for generations to come. Parents and communities tell us that whilst they want greater sharing they still wish to retain their distinctive school ethos and identity. This is a reality that we have to accept and we believe that piloting greater sharing within our system will do much to build confidence within communities to break down barriers. (DUP, 2015b: 7)

By 2016, in its then election manifesto, the DUP did not explicitly refer to integrated education at all, but rather to shared education including the £500m Treasury commitment towards the funding of shared education. Reference was also made to the DUP support for the Shared Education Bill. In its education manifesto the party refers to sharing in education producing ‘educational, societal and economic benefits, without undermining sound academic standards or the values of schools’ (2016b: 15). Its 2016 manifesto further stated that:

Sharing provides clear community benefits, not only from an educational point of view, but socially and economically. Sharing with pupils from different religious and socio-economic

backgrounds will increase understanding and appreciation of our varied culture. Sharing can foster respect, tolerance and understanding in our young people. (DUP, 2016a: 8)

The DUP has been clear that moving towards shared education did not equate with integrated education. In 2017, integrated education was again not mentioned in the manifesto, but support for ‘increased shared education across all education sectors’ was articulated (DUP, 2017:15).

As with other parties, in its manifesto for the UK General Election in 2010, Sinn Féin refers to the Lisanelly educational village, a proposed shared education campus at the former British military base in Omagh (Sinn Féin, 2010: 23), and in its Assembly Election Manifesto in 2011 to the promotion of ‘collaborative schools’ (Sinn Féin, 2011: 16). Sinn Féin (2016) in its assembly election manifesto stated that the party would

Continue to encourage and facilitate the growth of Irish Medium; Integrated; and Shared Education.

In various debates, Sinn Féin has referred to increased sharing between sectors and, while being critical of academic selection and grammar schools, expressed support for ‘greater integration’ and ‘greater sharing of resources’. One Sinn Féin politician stated:

Greater sharing of resources and greater co-operation is clearly desirable, but that should not be misrepresented as integrated education. No one seems to be arguing against parental preference – rightly so. When we give such importance to parental preference, we will always end up with a diverse school sector. (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2013: Sheehan)

Whereas the DUP has – as seen above – stressed and welcomed shared education it has also as a party focused on what it calls ‘social segregation’ – often underlining the need to move beyond ‘narrow religious parameters’. Examples used here are, for example, the need for Grammar schools to work with non-selective schools.

The DUP has also put forward the need for the streamlining and management of resources, and in the light of shared education referred to in 2011, when the party referred to the promotion ‘sharing of resources and assets between schools’ (DUP, 2011:12). A connecting thought here has been the criticism of the ‘multiple sectors’ and ‘administrative structures’. In the context of shared education, this has manifested itself by referring to the need for sharing of resources, such as in 2015 when a DUP politician stated:

resources – or the lack of resources, if we are being honest about it – will drive us down that route no matter what . . . If there is not enough finance there to provide two separate schools and there is only enough finance to provide one single building, and you have a maintained school and a controlled school, the answer is staring us in the face. That is where shared education is driving this. The resources may well bring about the shared educational experience that we are talking about.

The paradox is that shared education will preserve the two separate schools.

Conclusion

Birrell and Heenan refer to impasse after impasse in education policy due to the lack of a consensual policy style, which has worked to block the implementation of policies in education. They identify three determinants or contextual factors that influence educational policy in Northern Ireland: the salience of communalism, the significance of the ideological policy positions of the parties and the nature of policy communities and networks. The salience of communalism is particularly influential as political parties reflect the ethnic and religious divisions in society, and as a result, policies are ‘interpreted within a calculation of sectarian interests or crude views of which community might benefit or be disadvantaged’ (Birrell and Heenan, 2013: 777). They note that this is pertinent in the context of education policies where, rather than a consensual policy, the decision-making process has been characterised by a culture of top-down unilateral decisions by ministers and policies characterised by political stalemate and often based on the communal divisions of Northern Ireland. This ‘salience of communalism’ may have influenced the DUP’s and Sinn Féin’s stance on integrated education and shared education.

This short paper has attempted to show a shift by Sinn Féin and the DUP from criticising integrated education to welcoming shared education, leading to a situation where the result has been – in the context of impasses – a successful implementation of a shared education policy. It is possible to trace this development through the policies and statements of the political parties and, as Knox (2010) so correctly identifies, a lukewarm attitude towards integrated education as parties protect their own sectoral interests. There has been an agreement and consensus between the two largest parties through the introduction of, for example, the Shared Education Bill. However, it is clear that the ‘salience of communalism’ remains; despite the rhetoric, the DUP has advocated and emphasised separate education, and fought the corner of the controlled sector while Sinn Féin have done little to promote integration in education. It is not entirely clear what the end-goal of such policies are, and it is hard to envisage Sinn Féin – as the party currently stands – agreeing with the DUP that shared education is a route towards a single state education system, albeit not using an integrated model. While the DUP has been critical of the state funding of Catholic schools, this policy is unlikely to receive wide support (Gardner, 2016). Rather, the emphasis for the DUP has been the protection of the Controlled Sector, addressing its perceived mistreatment. The espousal of shared education might be a response to the need for the challenges of duplication to be addressed. The DUP has also advocated the role played by the controlled *de facto* Protestant sector as a sector with schools ‘open to everyone’, thereby failing to acknowledge the perceptions amongst the Nationalist and Republican communities that state schools have a British and anti-Irish agenda.

For many of them, even integrated schools emphasise a Unionist narrative and thereby act as a hindrance for any form of integration and inter-group contact (McDaid, 2015). The implementation of the shared education policy also plays well with the DUP’s ‘governmental counterpart’, Sinn Féin, which as a party has tended to emphasise parental choice and, in the case of shared education, aspects of socio-economic mixing rather than addressing the divide between Protestants and Catholics.

The UK Government’s *New Decade, New Approach* document (2020) was designed to get politicians in the devolved assembly back to work after a three-year hiatus. It explicitly committed the Executive to establishing

an external, independent review of education provision, with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and the prospects of moving towards a single education system. To help build a shared and integrated society, the Executive will support educating children and young people of different backgrounds together in the classroom. (UK Government, 2020: 7)

This was endorsed in the newly reformed Assembly on 10 March 2020 with support from all parties (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2020). While the current solution favouring shared over integrated schools would be appealing to some political groups as the various sectors would remain unchanged, it is unclear how much that would satisfy the commitment to educating children and young people together. Despite agreeing to an independent review, many of the arguments in the debate were careful to highlight the importance of parental choice, and the need not to abandon faith-based education - the 'salience of communalism' was never far away. Given the long-standing absence of political support from the two main parties, integrated education may be unlikely to gain the wholehearted support of the DUP and Sinn Féin. While there may be increased opportunities for closer co-operation and collaboration, the fundamental structure/system of education, with all its flaws, may not be fully addressed.

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